

THE USE OF RHETORIC IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS: AN ART OF PERSUASION

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Abstract:

This research paper aims at exploring the elegant employment of rhetoric in the autobiographical works of Frederick Douglass, particularly emphasizing on three of his texts: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, later revised in 1892). In these narratives, we can find a masterful use of rhetoric by Douglass not only as a literary tool for persuasion but also as a technique for self-representation and resistance against the dehumanizing effects of systemic slavery. The rhetoric of Douglass deals with three classical approaches – ethos, pathos and logos. He uses ethos to establish his credibility as a slave as well as an intellectual, pathos to attract the emotions of his readers towards the conditions of the slaves and logos for logic and reason by depicting the brutalities of slavery in contrast with the ideals of equality and freedom. He also uses repetitions, biblical references, imagery, antithesis and irony to support his ideals and to arouse the sentiments of a diverse audience ranging from general public to policy makers. This paper also shows the voice of Douglass as an abolitionist against slavery and as an advocate for freedom and equality. Although his earlier works focus more on his personal experiences, his later works deal more vividly with the subjects of citizenship, racial justice and civil rights. This study will focus on the oratory and writings of Frederick Douglass in the light of his using the rhetoric techniques for persuading his readers which has ultimately made him an influential leader in the struggle against racial inequalities and social injustice.

Key Words: Frederick Douglass, rhetoric, slavery, persuasion, struggle

Introduction:

Frederick Douglass is regarded as one of the most influential leaders in the abolitionist movement not only for his active engagement in the struggle for equality and justice but also for his narratives in which he has shown his mastery of writing. His three autobiographies - *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, later revised in 1892) – are famous for life writings in the history

of American literature. His artistic use of rhetoric in his autobiographies not only describes his personal journey from bondage to freedom but also creates an appealing effect on the readers of America at that time for the cause of abolition. The deliberate and masterful use of rhetoric by Douglass is intended to have an appeal to the logical, emotional and moral sentiments of the Americans. The classical use rhetorical approach, ethos, pathos and logos, makes the narratives of Douglass intensely personal and politically motivating. His credibility in his writings has

emerged from the personal experiences providing an authenticity about the brutal effects of slavery. His use of pathos in the form of vivid imagery and emotional language attract the sympathy and a deep reaction of his readers towards the painful conditions of the African Americans. The use of logos or logical reasoning is meant to dismantle the supportive arguments of slavery by exposing the duality of people who advocate for liberty and equality but permit slavery to exist. The autobiographies of Douglass show his deep understanding of his readers that includes people from all sections of America – the abolitionists, intellectuals, supporters, opponents and those who were indifferent to the movement against slavery. His early autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) approaches the moral sensibilities of the readers by the depiction of personal experiences arising out of the physical as well as psychological brutalities of slavery. He masterfully draws a contrast between the moralities of Christianity and the barbaric activities of the Christians. William L. Andrews has rightly puts this contradiction as “rhetoric in the truest sense, appealing to both the emotions and reason of his readers to achieve the goal of persuasion.” In his later autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), we can find a remarkable shift in the use of rhetoric. Here, Douglass shows his intellectuality and statesmanship by using his personal life story to highlight broader political and social issues like the failure of Reconstruction and the struggle for civil rights. The use of rhetoric in the autobiographies of Douglass not only reveals the power of persuading the general public but also shows the remarkable place that Douglass holds in the struggle against racial inequalities. The technique of using the language has made these texts a tool for the collective urge of people against the tyranny of slavery and in support of equality and justice. This research paper will reveal the use of rhetoric by Douglass in his autobiographies as a means to persuade the American mass to support the movement against slavery.

Literature Review:

The use of rhetoric by Frederick Douglass in his three autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Fred-*

erick Douglass, an American Slave (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, later revised in 1892), and his masterful presentation of his life experiences have made these texts remarkable during the movement against institutionalized slavery. These autobiographies have also drawn the attention of several scholars for Douglass’ use of the language as a tool of persuasion which converted a personal life story to a collective response against the cruelties of slavery. Robert S. Levine (2007) highlights the use of ethos, pathos and logos in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) for creating a sensibility among the White abolitionist readers with his captivating moral arguments against systemic slavery. He says that Douglass has used ethos to develop his credibility by presenting his life experiences, pathos to create empathy among its readers by providing vivid images of the brutalities of slavery and logos to advance logical arguments against the institution of slavery by making a collective urge. John Stauffer (2008) emphasizes the evolution of the rhetorical strategies of Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) by contending that due to the use of excellent rhetorical approach in showing complex moral arguments about equality, freedom and identity, he could shift the focus of the narrative from personal experiences to a broader theme of racial injustice and civil rights. He also highlights on the use of irony as a rhetoric tool by Douglass to subdue the expectations of the Whites and to challenge the concept of racial stereotyping. Kirt H. Wilson (2002) focuses on the masterful use of prophetic rhetoric in the speeches of Frederick Douglass by asserting that Douglass maintains the personality of a prophet for having a moral authority by citing biblical instances and religious imagery to establish that slavery is against divine justice. This use of religious rhetoric not only defies the Whites who practise slavery but also appeals to the Christianity sentiments of general public.

Several other scholars also commented on this rhetoric aspect in the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass. James Jasinski (2001) has pointed out that the use of rhetoric in the narratives of Douglass is intentionally changed so that it will suit the audience by

the employment of persuasive elements as well as logical arguments wherever necessary. This shifting of technique has helped Douglass to maintain a rapport with his readers and build credibility across the various sects in the society. Kristina Bross (2010), another notable scholar of African American literature has highlighted the fact that the use of silence as rhetoric technique by Douglass is very meaningful in depicting the suppressed voice of the slaves and has proved to be powerful as it has forced the readers to act against the horrors of slavery. Bross argues that this technique emphasizes untold turmoil of slavery and the limitations of the use of language that the slaves have faced in describing their experiences. Maurice S. Lee (2004), an American literary critic and scholar specializing in African American literature and culture, has explored that the use of education and literacy in the narratives of Douglass can be considered as rhetoric tools as he has presented these as tools for transformation so as to achieve collective freedom. Douglass has tried to convince the readers that the power of knowledge can break the chain of slavery. Another notable scholar, Deborah E. McDowell (1999), has presented the use of gender in his narratives as a rhetoric tool to show the drastic condition of slaves and especially the condition of women. Douglass intentionally presented the tormented condition of women to persuade the readers by eliciting emotional response. Shirley Wilson Logan (1995), an American scholar and educator renowned for her work on rhetoric and composition, is of the opinion that Frederick Douglass has adopted the classical rhetorical tradition by the use of debate and oratory to become easily accessible to a wide range of readers that includes both the Blacks and Whites. More recently, Ibram X. Kendi (2016), an American author, historian and scholar famous for his work on racism and anti-racism, has argued that the use of rhetoric in the narratives of Douglass has reflected an optimistic belief in the advancement of the freedom movement. Kendi has also emphasized on the balance in the use of rhetoric to depict a balance between hope and realism.

Development of Thought:

The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass are exemplary due to the powerful use of rhetoric to per-

suade the readers to bring a social change in the United States of America where the Blacks and Whites are supposed to be treated equally. Although autobiographies depict personal life story, Frederic Douglass uses them for the abolition of slavery and racism by amplifying the sentiments of the readers. He incorporates several strategies of using the rhetoric to evoke empathy, arouse the public sentiment and motivate the public to act against the institution of slavery. He follows Aristotle's three traditional approaches of persuasion – ethos, pathos and logos to justify his credibility, to evoke emotional response in the readers and to provide logical arguments about his life narratives. He could establish his credibility by the use of ethos in his narratives by presenting his personal experiences as a slave and by depicting intimate details of his life; he could establish his moral authority. Douglass, in his autobiography *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, states, "I was a mere boy, and I had no thought of being a man." This credibility leads to his transformation from a slave to an advocate of human rights, which helps in motivating the Whites against the system of slavery and validate his claims against the brutalities of slavery. Douglass also uses pathos as a tool to evoke the emotional response of his readers by portraying the horrors of slavery vividly and thus draws sympathy and anger of both the Whites and the Blacks. He vividly shows the brutalities of slavery when he says, "I have seen the most unfeeling, heartless, and cruel slaveholders, whose hearts are harder than the iron shackles which they use to bind their victims." His presentation of the physical and psychological abuse of the African Americans aims at pragmatic understanding of the trials and tribulations faced by the slaves due the system. He could gather support from his readers towards the abolition movement with such type of rhetorical uses. His employment of logos in his narratives is based on the logical inconsistencies of slavery. Douglass uses logic when he argues against the institution of slavery by asserting, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men". His technique of using clear arguments highlights the differences between the American democratic ideals and the stark realities associated with slavery. The logical arguments support his claims and do not

allow his readers to ignore the oppressive conditions of the slaves. Douglass also uses a structural strategy in his autobiographies by maintaining a chronological narration to show his personal evolution from bondage to freedom, which helps the readers to find his growth and transformation in a lively manner as if all the events have taken place before their eyes. Moreover, Douglass has also employed other rhetoric strategies like the use of repetitions, metaphor and parallelism to show his unquenchable desire for freedom. These literary devices increase the persuasive and emotional factor of his autobiographies and make them more compelling and memorable.

Frederick Douglass is very much aware of the fact that his rhetoric will engage his readers and challenge their non-responsive attitude. The language that he uses to address the White abolitionists has been premeditated. He intentionally uses the language that evokes a strong emotional response with regard to their beliefs and values based on justice, liberty and equality. He, through the use of language, urges his readers to take actions against the institution of slavery. Moreover, Douglass makes a direct approach to the conscience of his readers through his writings and speeches. In his iconic speech of 1852, he criticizes the celebration of American independence by telling, "This Fourth of July is yours, not mine... You may rejoice, I must mourn." Here, he asserts that the independence of America from the British rule has not changed the condition of the slaves and the Whites must be aware that when they are rejoicing freedom, millions of African Americans remain as slaves. This rhetorical strategy is used to attach their morality by not only challenging their concept of social justice but also compelling them to reconsider their notion about racial equality. Frederick Douglass' rhetoric is largely influenced by the historical context of that time. His autobiographies are published at such a time when there are severe debates over civil rights and abolition of slavery. Douglass tries to justify his stance against the institution of slavery on the face of the White masters of the American society. So, he requires the apt language that will describe the social environment in which the African Americans are leading a very painful and tormented life. His use of rhetoric has not only contributed highly to the abolitionist

movement but also become a legacy as a tool of persuasion which is used by the later Black leaders like Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr.

Critical Analysis:

The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass are notable texts for analysing the use of rhetoric as a device for social change. The mastery of Douglass in intersecting personal experiences with a larger interest for abolitionist movement demonstrates the skill of powerful persuasion that makes his narratives not only autobiographical but also an exemplary tool for propagating abolition of slavery and establishment of racial equality. The rhetoric strategies of Douglass include various techniques to enhance the persuasive approach of his narratives. He intentionally uses the first person narration to acquaint his readers about his personal hardships and thus creates an intimacy in his approach. His story as a slave presents a real and instinctual account which challenges the existing perceptions of the African Americans. This type of personal touch in his narratives creates a strong and emotional bonding with his readers and further creates empathy and understanding. Moreover, Douglass uses figurative language and vivid imagery to show the horrors related to slavery. The way he describes the physical violence and mental agony of the slaves disturbs the sentiments of his readers who could recognise the brutal reality involved in the institution of slavery. Such use of language and imagery not only attracts emotional response but also compels the readers to act against the moral implications. The strength of his rhetoric is in his ability to convert abstract ideas to concrete experiences. Although Douglass is capable of using the traditional rhetoric techniques, ethos, pathos and logos, effectively, the inherent contradictions in his narratives can easily be traced. On one hand, the use of ethos by describing his personal distress establishes his credibility as an advocate for the abolitionist movement. He can speak with authority on the topic of slavery due to his status as a deprived slave and thus is able to counter the prevalent notion about the capabilities of the African American individuals. On the other hand, too much reliance and description of personal incidents raise valid arguments regarding the universality of the conditions.

His description of personal journey increases the risk of stereotyping and thus reduces his appeal for a collective issue. His use of logos always presents a logical reasoning to emphasize the contradictions between the ideals and actions within the American society. This technique effectively puts forth the disparity between the democratic ideals of America and the harsh treatment to the slaves. His arguments are a combination of rational arguments and emotional appeals.

The rhetoric strategies of Frederick Douglass have proved to be effective because he understands his audience very nicely. His autobiographies are primarily designed for the White abolitionists and emotional readers who could immediately react to the tone adopted by him. His arguments are always logical and are framed on the basis of American values such as equality, justice and freedom. So, he is able to draw the attention of his readers towards the complexities involved in the system of slavery and evoking in them a sense of urgency to act against racial inequalities and a sense of responsibility to work for the emancipation of the slaves. The historical context in which Douglass has written his autobiographies also plays an important role in this analysis. He has written his narratives within a political turmoil when Abraham Lincoln was almost set to become the sixteenth President of America in 1861. It was expected that Lincoln might declare the Emancipation Proclamation that would free all the slaves in Confederate territory. Besides, there were other White abolitionists whom Douglass wanted to motivate towards the Emancipation Proclamation by arousing their emotional instincts with a vivid presentation of the personal experiences as a slave. He wanted to propagate the brutalities of the Whites on the slaves in a highly dominated White society which was very much challenging. So, he has adopted the technique of using language and tone to motivate the White abolitionists to fight for the cause of the African Americans. The legacy of Douglass' rhetoric is quite captivating during the latter days when several other Black leaders like Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr adopted the same technique to fight against racial injustice even after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. His emphasis on self-advocacy, education and moral imperatives to challenge

against racial injustice and inequality still continues to inspire Black leaders and activists. The rhetorical strategies of Douglass can be considered as a model for contemporary movements fighting against systemic racism. The writings of Frederick Douglass present an appropriate balance between his personal experiences and collective advocacy to depict his efforts in elevating the voices of the marginalized race and in challenging the oppressive system of slavery. His use of effective rhetoric is considered as a profound tool for social change.

Conclusion:

The use of rhetoric by Frederick Douglass in his autobiographical narratives is a profound evidence of the use of language and tone as a means for persuasion and social change. He does not use this technique as a means of storytelling, rather to mobilize public sentiment in favour of the abolitionist movement by presenting the harsh brutalities associated with the institution of slavery. The use of traditional approaches like ethos, pathos and logos, he has maintained an emotional relationship with his White audiences who could confront with the moral and ethical implications. Through the use of vivid imagery and personal anecdotes, Douglass made the suffering of the slaves lively before the eyes of his readers. They could feel the brutalities and dehumanization of the slaves and became more and more sympathetic towards their oppressive conditions and were compelled to act against the system of slavery to eliminate racial inequalities and injustice. Douglass understood his readers so well that he used the rhetoric to draw their attention towards his logical arguments and emotional appeals. His credibility and his moral integrity helped him to become an advocate for the abolitionist movement as people had shown genuine trust which he could gain by the use of appropriate language and style of appeal. He not only motivated the abolitionist during his time but also created a long lasting legacy of rhetoric which was very masterfully used by latter activists and leaders to claim the rights. Hence, the masterful use of rhetoric in the works of Frederick Douglass is not only used as a tool of persuasion but also a means to strengthen the movement against racism, social inequality and injustice that the African Americans

were facing at that time in America.

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