ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol.10 No.4 December 2025

Editor-in-chief: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

A (Re)Reading of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself,* as a Text of the Romantic Ideal

Dr. Shimi Moni Doley
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Jamia Millia Islamia
New Delhi, India

Received- 14/08/2025, Revised-15/11/2025, Accepted-28/11/2025, Published-31/12/2025

Abstract: The enduring impulse of the Romantic sensibility is of new beginnings and high possibilities; an envisioning of the human being as endowed with limitless possibilities. Thus, the Romantic sensibility included an articulation of a consciousness that strongly opposed oppression and injustice i.e. an indomitable spirit of resistance to human tyranny. African American Slave Narratives, with their compelling account of inhuman ordeals faced by the protagonist and the subsequent arduous quest for freedom, belongs to the realm of the Romantic ideal as the sustaining spirit of these Slave Narratives is an articulation of upholding human dignity and resistance to human tyranny. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*'s journey from bondage to freedom as articulated in the text is symbolic of the Romantic artist longing to break free and cast off the yoke of oppressive societal constraints. The achievement of this dream demonstrates the ultimate triumph of the human spirit; the germination of this idea and the documentation of this journey through the written word can be considered as the creation and expression of the "Romantic thought".

Keywords: Slave Narrative, Romantic Sensibility, Oppression, Resistance, Heroic Ideal.

Introduction

Romanticism as a movement was akin to a revolutionary energy that transformed the way mankind perceived the world. Romantic idealism was truly a liberating force, it frankly embodied a political vision that challenged authoritative societal structures with its emphasis on individualism and the right of the individual to develop himself/herself to the maximum of his/her potential. Wordsworth's and Coleridge's publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 heralded the Romantic movement in literature in England, and in America it spanned from 1828 – 1865 which F.O. Matthiessen termed as the "American Renaissance" and was also the title of his influential book. The selection of writers in this text included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne which is representative of the dominant culture's canon construction.

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

Due to the continued agitation by antislavery forces in America during the latter part of the eighteenth century, many colonies like Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia temporarily outlawed slave trade during 1774 and 1775 and Vermont became the first state in the nation to abolish slavery within its borders. The Northern states, under continued pressure from antislavery arguments of slaves and their abolitionist allies that slavery was inconsistent with both Christianity and the principles of the American Revolution, abolished slavery "through strategies of gradual emancipation that were less economically and socially disruptive".(Horton, 73)The institution of slavery continued to grow in the new nation of the United States of America, especially in the South, despite a constitutional ban on the African slave trade, to cater to the expanding needs of the new nation following the westward expansion of the plantation South. By 1810, the slave population had increased to more than one million compared to fewer than seven hundred thousand in 1790. This resulted in the changing character of the slave population, whereby an increasing proportion of the American slaves were born in the United States of America. The American-born slaves had a greater knowledge of European ways, a sophisticated understanding of the slave structure and wider support system which equipped them to cope with their situation better. Many of the slaves were converted to Christianity by the mid-nineteenth century at the insistence of the slavemasters to inculcate obedience, virtue and gentleness among the slaves but the slaves adapted these Christian beliefs to their own African cultural and spiritual traditions and were more drawn to the Old Testament stories from Exodus, featuring themes of escape from bondage and freedom from oppression. They privately rejected arguments that slavery was the will of God to punish the Africans for an ancient sin.

Slave Narratives were the earliest examples of attempts by African Americans to articulate a "Self" that contested the de-humanising and de-individualising nature of the institution of slavery. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, published in 1845, and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself,* published in 1861, were the earliest Slave Narratives written by the protagonists without the help of a white amanuensis. These two texts were not only a compelling firsthand testimony against slavery but, also, explicitly brought to the fore an experientially based history of the body. The addition of a subtitle *Written by Himself/ Written by Herself* indicates the sceptical attitude of the white public these narrators addressed and the voicing of an authentic African

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

American voice independent of external inputs.

Studies of Slave Narratives conducted by William L. Andrews, Marion Wilson Starling and Stephen Butterfield inform us of its complex artistry and aesthetics. Over a period of time Slave Narratives as a genre has undergone critical, ideological and structural shifts, yet the enduring impulse in these narratives is a resistance to tyranny and a quest for human dignity. The cultural notion of race supporting the oppressive framework of slavery regarded the African at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder in a hierarchy of races ranging from the "atavistic" to the "civilised". The writing of the "Self" through these Slave Narratives, thus, served as an oppositional discourse which recreated the image of the race and was the voice of deliverance in reclaiming their humanity. These narratives signaled a new beginning with a promise of high possibilities towards breaking the barrier of prejudice. One of the enduring motif of the ante-bellum Slave Narratives was the protagonist's quest from bondage to physical freedom and this quest often involved the protagonist's symbolic journey from ignorance to enlightenment – an intellectual exploration in the metaphors of the Self. This served as an oppositional gesture to the hegemonic discourse of race ideology whereby their very humanity remained problematic. For the slave narrator, the acquisition of literacy, the power to read books and discover one's place in the scheme of things held equal importance to the acquisition of physical freedom. The quest of the slave narrator parallels the Romantic artist's journey of the Self into self-knowledge and self-awakening. The fierce purposefulness of the slave narrator's efforts to escape his/her bondage and to establish his/her full humanity is central to the narrative purpose of the genre of Slave Narratives and links it to the tradition of the Romantic hero-artist in his/her noble defiance and the Romantic paradigm that each person or humankind collectively must create the system by which to live.

Being vs Becoming in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Romanticism, according to Isaiah Berlin, represented "a new restless spirit, seeking violently to burst through old cramping forms, a nervous preoccupation with perpetually changing inner states of consciousness, a longing for the unbounded and the indefinable, for perpetual movement and change, an effort to return to the forgotten sources of life, a passionate effort at self-assertion both individual and collective, a search after means of expressing an unappeasable yearning for unattainable goals." (*The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, p. 92) The nineteenth century was an epoch-making time in American history as this period was enmeshed in the

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

endeavour of forming a unique American identity and culture of its own and is historically remembered as the Romantic era. This era greatly effected American thought and can be credited with the birth of the idea of "what it means to be an American".

The writers of the Romantic period reflected on the modern sensibilities of the day and tried to capture the energy and immense potential of their newly emancipated country. They celebrated the glories of the individual spirit, the emotions and the imagination as the core characteristics of human nature. This spirit of national pride was challenged by the prevalence of the institution of slavery in the backyard of the first modern democratic state. By the mid-nineteenth century, many writers and poets of the Romantic movement became outspoken critics of slavery and other social ills of the time. Many of them, William Cullen Bryant and James Russell Lowell, for instance, supported the Abolitionists and dedicated themselves to work for the emancipation of the enslaved African Americans. It is against this backdrop that a young slave boy named Frederick Bailey was born at Holme Hill farm near the Tuckahoe Creek in Talbot County, Maryland in 1818. He grew up to be the legendary Frederick Douglass, ex-slave, orator, journalist and political organiser who resisted both slavery and institutional racism in America. He mentions in the beginning of his narrative how inconsequential the birth date and age of a slave was and it was akin to the birth of domestic cattle in the farm/plantation of a white master: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. … I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time." (Douglass,p.17) A later discovered birth record kept by Aaron Anthony (now held at the Maryland State Archives) confirms his birth year was 1818 and that his mother's name was Harriet Bailey. Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself,* published in 1845, is the most well-known example of the Slave Narrative genre. In 1825, when Frederick was six or seven years old, his master selects him out to leave the farm and work as a caretaker of a toddler in a white household, the Aulds, in Baltimore. Douglass narrates that the turning point of his life came when he was hired out to his master's brother Mr. Hugh Auld in Baltimore, "Going to live in Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity." (Douglass, 31) While in Baltimore he had had an inkling of a different life that education could provide him. His mistress was kind at first and introduced him to the alphabets, spellings and the rudiments of reading. When Mrs. Auld started

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

teaching Douglass, her husband vehemently objected to it when he found out about it: 'A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning should spoil the best nigger in the world…if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." (Douglass, 45) He speaks of his surreptitious ways of acquiring literacy as his way of defining himself via defiance of his master,

> … From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it…I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read….That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. (Douglass, 45 - 46)

Douglass' subversion of everything his master willed stands for more than just intractableness but a literal and figurative wresting of agency from his master to affirm his individuality and outwitting and beating the master at his own game. As he was growing up to be a teenager, he was hired out to work with Baltimore shipbuilders on the docks and learned the trade of caulking (sealing) ships. During the early nineteenth century, Baltimore was an urban centre brimming with merchants of all kinds and the city exploded with energy. It's advantageous location as a port city alongside a vast wheat and tobacco growing countryside contributed to its economic enrichment as Baltimore ships sailed beyond domestic harbours to ports in Europe, the Caribbean and South America. The location of Baltimore as a border state between the North and South facilitated the possibility for enslaved people in the city to run away and find freedom in the North. Slavery in Maryland declined steadily after the 1810s as the state's economy shifted away from plantation agriculture and it became cheaper to hire a free worker for the day with the option of not hiring him or replacing him with a better worker rather than indulge in the expenses of maintaining people for a lifetime and, also, run the risk of a runaway slave. In 1830 Baltimore had the largest African American community of more than 28,500 (including free and enslaved) in America and Baltimore's docks, alleys, churches and rowhouses became places where black people were able to organize and resist slavery. Douglass lived in the bustling port area of Fells Point where travellers whose freedom took them around the world shared streets with men and women shackled by slavery. In his efforts to

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

learn to read he struck upon an ingenious plan to barter his bread for reading lessons. He befriended a group of poor Irish immigrant children known as the "The Point Boys" and requested them to teach him to spell a word or read a sentence for which he paid with bread. When he went outside to run errands for the Aulds, he would stuff his pockets full of bread and would seek out the Irish boys to teach him a word or phrase in return for a piece of bread. One book that these boys recited from was *The Columbian Orator,* a collection of political essays and dialogues designed to inculcate civic values and patriotism in white American schoolchildren, which also questioned the ethics of slavery. Douglass somehow got hold of a copy of this book and studied the speeches with enjoyment and during this process he was most touched by a chapter dealing with a dialogue between a master and his slave. This Dialogue involved the master presenting the reasons for slavery, each of which was rebutted by the slave and the dialogue ending with the master admitting the unethicality of this whole business and freeing the slave from bondage. He also came across the word "Abolition" and resolved to enlighten himself further on it and explored for ways to gain his freedom. One can say that reading and acquiring knowledge emancipated him from mental enslavement and paved the path for his physical freedom. Once initiated to these emancipation ideals, Douglass became a threat to his white master and on his return to his legal owner Thomas Auld, due to Thomas' quarrel with his brother Hugh Auld, results in his master hiring him out to Edward Covey, a local slave breaker, as he was unable to manage the recalcitrant young slave. This marks another turning point in his life when in one subsequent beatings Douglass physically intimidates Covey to prevent future attacks. Recounting that experience Douglass states,

> …This battle with Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. (Douglass, 78)

Douglass assumes heroic stature through this projection of a heroic image of himself and much of it is due to the compelling and sophisticated rendition of an individual selfhood which uses words as a weapon in the struggle for selfhood. The narrator protagonist equates the achievement of his freedom with the wresting of his

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

manhood from the oppressive white patriarchy and upholding his human dignity through the resistance to tyranny. This articulation of the bondaged self's celebration of freedom aims at sympathy as an arena for communication across divisions. His narrative, thus, becomes the site for the African American to wage a moral and political struggle against the oppressive societal structure. Douglass's narrative becomes a mediative instrument not only between an African American narrator and the white reader but also between alternative ways of encoding reality.

After an unsuccessful plan to run away, Douglass was hired out to his former master in Baltimore where he worked as a dockworker. Douglass negotiated terms of earning extra money by hiring himself out to other employers with Mr. Hugh Auld, his current employer, whereby he would pay three dollars to his master at the end of each week and the expenses for calking tools, his boarding and clothing would be borne by Douglass himself. Before he could buy his freedom, Douglass had an altercation with his master about an unapproved absence in the farm due to his presence at a religious camp meeting and this incident made him more determined to run away from his master. He mentions the pain and despair that he felt when planning his second escape from his master,

> The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend… Besides the pain of separation, the dread and apprehension of a failure exceeded what I had experienced at my first attempt. The appalling defeat I then sustained returned to torment me. I felt assured that, if I failed in this attempt, my case would be a hopeless one – it would seal my fate as a slave forever. I could not hope to get off with any thing less than the severest punishment, and being placed beyond the means of escape. It required no very vivid imagination to depict the most frightful scenes through which I should have to pass, in case I failed. (Douglass, p. 104)

The determination to be a freeman at any cost gave him the impetus to go ahead with the plan to escape and, eventually, he did succeed and the details of this is not divulged in the narrative so as not to jeopardise the lives of those who had helped him in this endeavour. The call for freedom which arose from deep within the recesses of his heart, he expresses thus: "The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

any kind. How I did so, - what means I adopted, - what direction I travelled, and by what mode of conveyance, - I must leave unexplained, for the reasons before mentioned."(Douglass, p. 104-105) At the core of Douglass's quest for freedom from bondage is his determination to figure life on his own terms, and, the writing of it, to intervene in the constraints of generic expectations and to give voice to himself and the enslaved African American people. By presenting himself as a resisting victim to his white slave masters' oppression, he traces his struggle for mental and physical emancipation as a struggle to achieve bodily integrity in the face of unremitting emotional and physical abuse. As Isaiah Berlin quotes Johann Gottlieb Fichte in "The Restrained Romantics" - 'To be free is nothing, to become free is very heaven.' (*The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 89) Thus, the Romantic Ideal entails action and is not meant to be a passive state as Isaiah Berlin further elaborates, ' I do not simply register what occurs like a kind of machine – that is what Locke and Descartes said human beings do, but this is false. I do not accept what nature offers because I must, I believe it because I will.' (*The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 89) The grail of the Romantic ideal is the individual's active pursuit of what the world unjustly prevents him from acquiring and 'inorder to rise to his full height he must constantly go on generating and creating.' (Berlin, p. 90)

Frederick Douglass as a Shelleyan Prometheus

In Greek mythology, Prometheus with his gift of fire to humanity represented not just physical illumination but also illumination of the mind and the act of rebellion – the stealing of fire – was a catalyst for societal and intellectual progress. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* continues and diverges from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and deals with the unshackling of the saviour of mankind which is not merely physical but also metaphorical. Carol Dougherty explicates that, 'the image of Prometheus' liberation from Jupiter's chains to represent the forces in man's soul that combine to release his creative power and restore his imaginative freedom.' (p. 108) The initial Chapters of the *Narrative* portrays the vivid suffering of Douglass and the slave community and his pursuit of knowledge and hope of emancipation leads to a struggle which becomes almost Promethean in nature. His relentless pursuit of freedom and his resistance to all forms of oppression and becoming an inspiration for his folks align with the Romantic Promethean archetype. Douglass escaped enslavement, became a staunch abolitionist and used his oratorical skills to challenge the system of slavery and its justifications. Just as Prometheus's act of defiance spurred others to challenge the status quo, Douglass's

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)
www.daathvoyagejournal.com
ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

powerful speeches and writings inspired countless enslaved African Americans and white people to support the Abolitionist Movement and initiate vigorous action to annihilate slavery as an institution.

Besides the defiance, Douglass embodied the Promethean spirit of relentless hope against all odds. His challenge to the white supremacist societal order often at a great risk to his own well-being for a greater goal draws parallels with the Romantic Hero. He embodied the Shelleyean Prometheus whose actions to overcome the powerful elite leads to a visionary state. When Douglass succeeds in wresting his freedom from slavery by breaking the laws of the land, he held this belief that it was justified for ushering in a new dawn of emancipatory politics for the enslaved African Americans. Douglass later on did not become an Abolition activist to wreak vengeance on his oppressors but, through his experiential history and introspection, felt the necessity of transforming certain values to a profound degree.

Conclusion

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass articulated the spiritual and political ideals on which America prided itself – the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, the very expression and creation of Romantic thought and the foundation of the American nation and demanded fidelity to those same ideals from the whites in their attitude towards the African Americans. This narrative reflected a central core of Romantic thought and rightly deserve a place in the canon of Romantic literature in American. The perilous quest for freedom for the slave meant a great hazard to life and limb, and the fact that it did not act as a deterrent testifies to the iron will, intelligence, courage, perseverance and moral purposefulness of the subject. It embodied a personal and social heroism despite the degrading circumstances of slavery. Slavery demanded extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation and the slave narrator's determination to acquire literacy and freedom from oppressive circumstances and achieving it, demonstrates the ultimate triumph of the human spirit and is symbolic of the resilient Romantic spirit.. As a noted Transcendentalist Theodore Parker noted that "all the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man's novel." (Parker, p.37)Arising out of, and addressing the social and political concerns of eighteenth and nineteenth century America, this narrative represented a discourse of resistance to totalising schemes. It is representative of the revolutionary Romantic spirit which sought to question and subvert the oppressive societal framework.

Works Cited

Andrews, William. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography,*1760 – 1865. U of Illinois Press, 1986.

Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound.* Translated by James Romm. Edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm. Modern Library, 2017.

Berlin, Isaiah. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas,* edited by Henry Hardy. John Murray, 1990.

---. *The Roots of Romanticism*, edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

Butterfield, Stephen. *Black Autobiography in America.* Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 1974.

---. *Lectures 1808 – 1819 On Literature*, edited by R. A. Foakes. Princeton UP, 1987.

Coleridge, S.T. and William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1800*, edited by M. Gamer and D. Porter, Peterborough, Broadview, 2008.

Dougherty, Carol. *Prometheus*. Routledge, 2006.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself.* The Modern Library, 2004.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. "To Write My Self: The Autobiographies of Afro-American Women *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship,* ed. Shari Benstock. Indiana, U P, 1987.

Gates Jr, Henry Louis and Nellie Y. Mckay. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* W. W. Norton & Co., 1997.

Horton, James Oliver & Lois E. Horton. *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America.* Rutgers UP, 2001.

Lauter, Paul and John Alberti. Ed. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature.* D.C. Heath & Co., 1994.

Parker, Theodore. *The American Scholar*. American Unitarian Association, 1907. Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2011.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Prometheus Unbound*. Leopold Classic Library, 2022.

Sidonie, Smith. *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century.* Indiana UP, 1993.

Smith, Sidonie & Julia Watson. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader.* U of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Sundquist, Eric J. 'Slavery, Revolution and the American Renaissance." *The American Renaissance Reconsidered,* ed. W.B. Michaels and Donald E. Pease. John Hopkins UP, 1985.

Watson, David. "The Original Romance of America: Slave Narratives and Transnational Networks in Theodore Parker's American Literary History". *World Literatures: Exploring the Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Exchange.* Stockholm UP, 2018.