

The Radical Thought and Autobiography in American Literature

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الملخص

يهدف المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على العلاقة بين السيرة الذاتية كنتاج أدبي و الفكر الراديكالي كسبب للتغيير الاجتماعي و ذلك في الأدب الأمريكي. لدراسة هذه العلاقة، رأينا أن يركز المقال على أربع سير ذاتية لكتاب أمريكيين و هم "السيرة الذاتية لفريديريك دوغلاس" لفريديريك دوغلاس، "الطفل الاسود" لريتشارد رايت، "إمرأة لاكوتا" لماري كرو دوق و "والدن" لهنري ديفد ثورو. في كل واحدة من السير المذكورة يطرح الكاتب فكرة راديكالية من خلال سرد تجاربه معطيا تبريرات لهذه الفكرة فدوغلاس و رايت دافعا عن حقوق السود في المجتمع الأمريكي ذو الأغلبية البيضاء ماري كرو دوق دافعت عن حقوق المرأة الهندية في المجتمع الأمريكي و ثورو طرح ما يدعى اليوم بالبيئة. نخلص في بحثنا إلى أن السيرة الذاتية يمكن أن تكون منلحا أدبيا مناسبا لطرح الفكر الأيديولوجي.

The major purpose of this article is to throw light on the contribution of autobiography to the struggle against racism and discrimination in the American society on one hand and to the promotion of some radical thoughts that changed life in the American community.

As a literary genre, autobiography is often defined as one's writing his life story. This writing about oneself makes subjectivity a major characteristic feature of every autobiography.

In writing an autobiography, the author often redefines himself and recreates his past lived experiences.

Here, I should stress the fact that writing about one's history never means that autobiography is a non creative work of art because the author of the autobiography does not narrate all the events of his life and all the experiences he has gone through but rather, he rather he is often very selective. He selects only the worthwhile episodes of his life, and in narrating these episodes, he often tries to achieve continuity through constructing them in a way that they seem coherent and forming a whole. In fact, he also selects the experiences that have a deep social implication; experiences that really represent his society because no writer can escape from the influence of his society.

Concerning the social message of autobiography, it is agreed upon among critics that no autobiography is written for purely aesthetic aim. Every writer of autobiography must have an apologetic aim behind writing his own life story. He often tries to testify to something, to convey a social message or to defend a social belief or thesis. In other words the author of the autobiography is always concerned with the sociological interpretation of the events of his life because he often does not see any conflict between self revelation and the social message in his autobiography. Some writers try to make their radical ideas known to the public through literature. Being radical often means favouring or effecting fundamental or revolutionary changes in current practices, conditions, or institutions (Dictionary of the English Language) So, to which extent autobiography can be expressive of a radical conviction or thought?

As an attempt to answer this problematic I have shall try to throw light on four autobiographies whose writers are like any other authors in their view of the self revelation and the social message as innately and intimately linked as major elements of autobiography.

To substantiate this opinion, I have chosen writers from main stream and ethic American literature and I will try to discuss

their autobiographies throwing light in the relationship between their personal revelation and the social message and therefore the radical thought they wanted to convey to the reader .The works selected are: Fredrik Douglas *The Life of F.Douglass*، Richard Wright's *Black Boy*،Mary Grow Dog Lakota *Women*، and Thoreau's *Walden*.

In writing his life story، Frederic Douglass was concerned more with the social implication of slavery in the American south. The natural result of that was an auto autobiography that documents the social life of the black community in a specific period of time and in a partial place in the American nation Frederic Douglass's major aim was certainly to Dramatize the life of the Negro in a white dominated society and probably to picture the nightmare of slavery in modern America?

Douglas provides a detailed description of life in the slave holder 's plantation and he emphasizes more the relationship between himself and his white master" Covey" who is portrayed as cruel and domineering man whose major goal in life is to achieve material success:

"But، alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands، and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye، under the influence of slavery، soon became red with rage; that voice، made all of sweet accord، changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon." (*The Life of F.Douglass*، chapter 6، pp. 77-78).

That is why he despises the slaves and exploits theme despite their weakness. In Douglas's autobiography Covey can be taken for an emblematic figure for slavery as a social and economic system in America.

To show the Negro dilemma in a white dominated society، Douglas portrays a great deal of his social experiences that can be taken as representatives of the social life of the African American city en in general for instance، in an early stage of life:

“Hunger has always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at my gauntly. Douglas loses his mother, but in his autobiography, he clearly says that after her death, he was not bothered in the least and her loss did not stir any emotion sadness and regret in him. So, this psychological experience illustrates the devastating effects”.(ibid)

By narrating this psychological experience, Douglas wants certainly to convey the idea that slavery as a social institution aims at disrupting the ties among the slave family. Douglas did not feel sad for having lost his mother supply because from the very beginning of his life, he did not get the habit of having her with him. So, that is why her life or death is alike to him. Douglas, the child and Douglas be going who has spent his time in the plantation that did not belong to him and whose fruits went to the white slaveholder is without a familial affiliation:

“I knew that I lived in a country in which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked-off. Yet I felt that I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive.” (ibid).

Douglas also speaks with a psychological bitterness about the everlasting absence of his father. For sure, by informing the reader of the gap left by the father, Douglas wants to end slavery as a social system which always sends the father of the slave elsewhere in order to disrupt the slave of family. Probably, Douglas wants here to suggest that one of the major aims of slavery is to create a matriarchal slave family in which the mother plays a major role and assumes all the responsibilities.

Frederic Douglas is then, showing the social impact of slavery and its far fetched aims at dismantling the ties among the slaves, so that they can not be united and before can not struggle against the white southerners:

"The whisper that my master was my father, may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the

children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slave the double relation of master and father." (*ibid*, chapter 1, p. 49)

And in another passage he added:

"It was considered as being bad enough to be a slave; but to be a poor man's slave was deemed a disgrace indeed!" (*ibid*, chapter 3, p. 63).

Now, if we look at Richard Wright's painful autobiography, *Black Boy*; we find that Wright's life although, less stable and more fragmented than all the African Americans in the South, is representative of the life in the American South and it can be taken as a microcosm of the Negro life in twentieth Century America.

In writing his autobiography, Wright redefined two important episodes of his life, his painful childhood and his experience and involvement in the Communist Party as an intellectual adult. Wright was very selective in narrating his past experiences concentrating more on those that can represent the social life in the South, and used irony as a way of critiquing the discriminatory society of America.

"It is better that a dozen slaves suffer under the lash, than that the overseer should be convicted, in the presence of the slaves, of having been at fault." (*Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, chapter 4, p. 65).

In an attempt to argue for antislavery ideology, Douglass attacks slavery as an American social institution in his autobiography:

"From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me

through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise." (*ibid*, chapter 5, p.75).

He shows how he, as a colored person, is deprived of his right to be considered as respectable American citizen in a society that pretends to apply social justice and protects the freedom and the individual opinion of every citizen:

"If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master-to do as he is told to do." (*ibid*, Chapter 6, p.78).

In other words, Wright seems to question the major principals upon which the American society is built such as equality, freedom, justice and the pursuit of happiness. His maternal grandfather is deprived of his mansion by a beaurocratic error despite his brilliant career in the American navy and Dunt's husband is murdered by the whites only because he is proved to be successful in his liquor business. Certainly, Wright did not choose to narrate these experiences just haphazardly, but rather because he is quite aware that though, are personal they can convey a very meaningful social massage.

"I did not know if the story was factually true or not, but it was emotionally true [...]." (*ibid*).

Wright also speaks about his mother and her role in educating him and giving him the energy to fight the whites and to stand a faint to their humiliation. Here, Wright wants to refer to the role played by the African American woman, in general, in protecting the Negro culture. He portrays his mother as well as his grand mother as real guardians of culture and tradition in the family:

"My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, and conditioned my relation to events that had

not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face. A somberness of spirit that I was never to lose settled over me during the slow years of my mother's unrelieved suffering, a somberness that was to make me stand apart and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me keep forever on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me".(ibid).

What can I say about *Black Boy* as an autobiography is that it has a continuing value because of its providing engaging ways for us to know how our lives can be shaped by our race, gender, and even country and how the conflict between devise and hindrance can cause a psychological defeat :

"A single word from the white men was enough-against all our wishes, prayers, and entreaties-to sunder forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings." (ibid., chapter 8, p. 90).

Another brilliant autobiography whose writer does not see any conflict between self revelation and social message is that of the Indian author Mary Crow Dog. The autobiography is untitled *Lakota Women*. In her narration of her life story, Mary Crow Dog considers herself as the representative of all Indian women.

She identifies herself with the past Indian woman as well as with the present Indian woman. She gives an excessively detailed account of her life in the reservation and sure witting enough managed to portray the oppression and the humiliation suffered by every Indian whether he is a man or a woman.

In recreating her history, Mary crow Dog, wanted to redefine the social history of all the Indians, how they lived and how they have been heated as well as how they reacted to the modern way of life. She also could show the psychological defeat that all the Indians feel after their subjugation by the whites. To give an example, she compared between the Indian man who used the feed his family the meat of buffallo, and the Indian of her time

who feeds his children span the cheapest type of food in the American market.

"If you plan to be born, make sure you are born white and male. It is not the big, dramatic things so much that get us down, but just being Indian, trying to hang on to our way of life, language and values while being surrounded by an alien, more powerful culture. It is being an *iyeska*, a half-blood, being looked down upon by whites and full-bloods alike. It is being a backwoods girl living in the city, having to rip off stores in order to survive. Most of all it is being a woman. Among Plains tribes, some men think that all a woman is good for is to crawl into the sack with them and mind the children. It compensates for what white society has done to them." (*Lakota Woman*. 4,5).

This quotation is important because it sums up most of the conflicts that Mary Crow Dog faces in the book. She goes through many incredible hardships; such as being raped at fifteen, giving birth during a war, being arrested for being American Indian, growing up in poverty, and so many more. She has to deal with being separated from her family and her culture to end up in a boarding school where she is punished for holding hands with boys and abused by priests. On top of all of that, Mary has problems fitting in with her own culture, since she is only half American Indian. Even if she was full Lakota, she would not have been taught the full richness of her background since both her mother and her grandmother were converted to Catholicism by the boarding school.

Mary has to try to accept all of these issues and rise above them in order to work against them—not only for herself, but for her people as a whole, and the friends that she sees fall before her. Her sister Barbara is sterilized against her will and later murdered by a drunken boyfriend. Her death is never investigated. Her best friend, Annie, is pursued by the law, and when found dead in the wild, has her hands cut off for identification instead of simply having her finger prints taken. Then, the law rules Annie's death accidental due to exposure, but when her body is later exhumed

by lawyers hired by the Lakotas, it is found that she had a bullet in her brain—she was murdered, and the law blatantly ignored it.

Mary has to deal with all of these hardships because of the reasons stated in the quote — her gender, her race and her “inferior” culture. This quote is extremely powerful and touching. With a lot of emotion it illustrates everything that we have been studying up to this point—the cost of privilege on unprivileged groups:

“For somebody to say that the only way to succeed in our society is to be born white and male is a heartbreaking statement, and one that we, as future teachers, need to work toward proving wrong. This quite points to the social injustices that we will be battling on a daily basis in order to empower our students and help them develop a positive sense of self”. (ibid. P. 44)

Mary Crow also shows how it is difficult for the Indian to assimilate the white picture by describing her experience which the Christian religion and her education in white institution. She by the end decided to go back to her original Indian culture.

I can say that Mary Crow Dog’s autobiography is a good example of social documents about the Indian’s development from hunters into ordinary American citizen.

“I asked him, ‘What do you expect of me?’ He said, ‘You are the medicine man’s wife. You are the water, you are the corn. You are the growing generation that you carry in your womb. I have a role and so do you. At the next Sun Dance you will stand there with the pipe representing Ptesan Win, the White Buffalo woman,’” (ibid, 246).

This passage was spoken by Leonard to his wife, Mary Crow Dog, near the end of the book. This quotation is important because it emphasized the new and important role that Mary took when she married Leonard Crow Dog. She was no longer the wild girl at the beginning of the book, but a mature woman who ran a household, and played an important part in the progression of American Indian social rights. It also pointed out how important birth was to American Indian culture. Native Americans did not

believe in birth control, because their people were so few already, resulting from forced sterilization and people abandoning the culture in hopes of “White” success. Hence, any pregnancy was considered important and valued, no matter the circumstances. For example, Mary’s first pregnancy was out of wedlock, but it was highly celebrated.

This quotation also emphasizes the important steps that American Indian culture had taken through the course of the book. At the beginning of the novel, American Indians were a fractionated group that was plagued by racism, poverty, and a disconnection from their culture. Those issues had not been entirely resolved by the end of the novel, but the American Indians as a people had come closer together, established themselves as a unified group, and had revived many of their old ceremonies and cultures. The fact that Leonard says, “At the next Sun Dance,” showed that American Indians had a future now, and it was one that has revived their old traditions.

This quote clearly shows the roles of an Indian wife and caretaker of the home. Mary was so unfamiliar with this role that she had to ask her husband what was expected from her. While such a role may seem constricting based on some current feminist ideals, it was highly valued. Leonard actually shows Mary how important she is to the future of the Indian people and to him, making this a touching sentiment.

In 1854, Henry David Thoreau published *Walden*, a book about living simple in a natural setting. During the same time period, Ralph Waldo Emerson began writing about nature. One major theme of Thoreau's work is getting back to nature, focusing less on what we have and what we can buy, and returning to our roots:

“Relying on self, getting in touch with nature, listening to one's one voice rather than the clamor of the crowd, living a simpler life are all good things for any time and place. Certainly in our high-tech, materialistic, this is a voice of reason and caution and individuality. I think the whole idea of just going away

somewhere and leaving behind all the "trappings" of civilization is appealing today. Thus, the commercials are featuring vacations in secluded spots and throwing away the blackberry. (*Walden*, p.5)

And he added:

“It's a romantic concept, I think, and there is plenty of validity to it. I do, however, find it ironic that most people think Thoreau lived in complete isolation and contemplation on some pond. He actually walked into town (Concord) every day and was visited by plenty of people regularly during his time at Walden. In fact, he says he left, in part, because he and others had worn a recognizable path, the beginning of a rut, and his time there had served his purpose.” (ibid).

Thoreau's autobiography, *Walden*; in which he narrates his experience in Walden Pond far from the modern American society, gives the reader a detailed account of Thoreau's day's experiences. Despite its personal characteristics, *Walden* can be taken as work of art that has a meaningful social message. It is a document that provides the reader with a view about America in a specific place and a particular period of time» New England in which people were trying to search Goal a head in nature. It also makes the abstract ideas of transcendentalism as a philosophical movement concrete and clear to the reader because Thoreau's major aim from his experience in Walden was to practice all the theories that he read in books. So his ideas are pretty timeless in *Walden*, and they offer lessons and directions:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die to discover, that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to

be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it. "(ibid).

It is a pretty popular theme in modern times too, given our current economic troubles, and how the environment has become a more frequent topic of discussion and education. One major theme of Thoreau's work is getting back to nature, focusing less on what we have and what we can buy, and returning to our roots. This is a pretty popular theme in modern times too, given our current economic troubles, and how the environment has become a more frequent topic of discussion and education. For this reason, Thoreau is regularly associated with the environmental movement and such popular culture movements as rock-singer Don Henley's Save Walden Woods Project. (*The American as Reformer*)

Finally, after studying the works of all the writers that I have mentioned in the article I can say that any writer of autobiography does not restrict himself to the esthetic aspect of the autobiography but can through narrating his personal self revelation convey to the reader some radical views since he often does not see any conflict between the two. Therefore, it is obvious that autobiography is a very appropriate literary genre to convey the author's radical thought.

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