

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Learning to Read*: A Voice of Enslaved

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Abstract-

Study of the social, political, and economic environment is the focus of the multidisciplinary area called as cultural studies. It mostly uses an interdisciplinary approach to study global studies. This global agenda includes the problems of the people with regards to race, class, caste, gender, and even nation. The current study focus is placed throughout the study on the notion that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a key voice for the voiceless, as expressed in her writings. The voice that Frances Harper developed both during and after the Civil War continues to be vital to comprehending the nation and finding solutions for its problems. This essay attempts to illustrate Frances Harper's relationship to society and its significance for the nation's growth, with cultural research serving as one of the key components of comprehending society. The author of *Learning to Read* describes the state of Black people and their never-ending efforts for education and social rights.

Key Words- Frances Harper, Cultural Studies, *Learning to Read*, voiceless, Black Art Movement.

Cultural Studies and Power Dynamics-

An interdisciplinary academic discipline called "cultural studies" focuses on the investigation of culture in all its manifestations, including- literature, art, media, language, music, film, popular culture, and daily life. In the middle of the 20th century, it arose as a separate academic study, relying on sociology, anthropology, literary criticism, media studies, and philosophy. Cultural studies look at how culture is created, shared, and consumed as well as how cultural practices and representations influence who we are and how we view the world. It frequently adopts a critical stance, challenging dominant beliefs and hierarchies that both influence and are influenced by culture. Cultural studies investigate the ways social, political, and economic environments influence and are influenced by cultural practices,

beliefs, and values. It evaluates a range of cultural expressions, including literature, film, television, art, music, advertisements, fashion, and popular culture. Critical analysis of power dynamics, socioeconomic disparities, and the effects of prevailing ideologies on various cultural groups are goals of the field. The production and reception of cultural texts, the construction of meaning and identity, the effects of globalisation and cultural imperialism, the interaction between culture and power, and the function of cultural institutions and industries are just a few examples of the wide range of cultural phenomena that are the subject of cultural studies research.

Cultural studies are distinguished by their multidisciplinary approach and dedication to researching culture in its social, political, economic, and historical aspects. It aims to comprehend how culture both reflects and shapes social relations, identities, and power structures. By highlighting the significance of inclusivity, diversity, and social justice in cultural research, cultural studies also strive to challenge and disrupt traditional ways of thinking about culture.

Status of Enslaved-

The migration of blacks in North America through slavery created an entire new culture. The black culture which was created elevated by tradition, and generated hope to determine their personal freedom to escape from the conditions like- poverty of enslavement and tried to establish a way of life through their own culture. This personal freedom was attended through education that led a better way of living their life. In this entire process the African-American literature played a major role that explores the issues of freedom and equality that was long denied to Blacks. The writings of the African American presented the themes such as African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, sense of home, segregation, migration, feminism, etc...

The cultural tradition was a difficult part to be followed for the African Americans within the American civilization. As this slavery greatly restricted the ability of Africans in America to practice their cultural traditions, many practices, values, and beliefs survived with the knowledge which was generated and obtained by the people with time. This was later incorporated within the European American culture, resulting in dynamic changes among the society (community) and their fight for their own rights. This creative culture that started in the 1960's continues to have a profound impact on mainstream American culture and on

world culture even today. This cultural change can be seen through the rise of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s followed in the wake of the non-violent American Civil Rights Movement. The Black movement created and promoted racial pride and ethnic organization in contrast to the focus on incorporation of the Civil Rights Movement. It also inspired a new renaissance in African-American literary and artistic expression generally referred to as the African-American or 'Black Arts Movement.'

Importance about Francis Ellen Watkins Harper's work-

Francis Ellen Watkins Harper works were used to encourage change and portray the capabilities of the black people, which were limitless. In this paper the features of the writer can be seen to be mentioned through her writing, '*Learning to Read.*' The poem was published in Philadelphia, which was a major part of black education. Also, it was the place where the college for African American was established for the first time, which made the poem more important among the People's community. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper through the poem mentions about the condition of the black people and their endless efforts for education. The efforts of the black society to read and write and get knowledge is being presented through her writings.

Francis Harper through her writings, created a legacy among the country people of America. She worked as a socialist poet, orator, activist, and a role model for the people of the country that inspired people from generations to generations. She worked as a pioneer for the African American people and the voice of the people to mention their sufferings. This caused her to understand and put forward the problems of wounded people. Though she started her work with more emphasis on the northern part region, but the southern part region was also covered by her writings, which mainly included her speeches. Harper was much popularly known for her speeches, which presented the suffrage of the society and fought for the right of people on all sectors, founding the ideas for the equality among people.

Harper took charge of spreading the knowledge about the suffrage and the voice of people for their rights over the entire country and she travelled widely. Her ideal to build an entire new country and develop a very different America created modernist activity among the people which even continues today. Her very famous statement during the speech. "We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity," even today, allows the people to work as one community and find their justice.

After Phillis Wheatley, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is one the widely read African American Female but, her work has been unduly neglected. The reason lies in the vagueness of Harper's place in the modern literary canon. The critics devalue the simple, vernacular phrasing and oral poetry qualities that could have endeared her to a nineteenth-century audience. On the one hand Harper's used the language of sentimentality that press for political ideals—abolition, temperance, and Christian humanism and enables her to be associated with writer Mary Kelley, while on the other part Harper's poems interrogate the class structure and economic problems of society underlying racial oppression among the society. Her work reflects her incomparable success in speaking to her audience on political questions that were fiercely discussed during the process of reconstruction.

About Frances Ellen Watkins Harper-

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, born on 24th of September 1825 in Baltimore, Maryland, and was the only child born to free parents. By the age of three years, Harper was orphaned and was later reared by her uncle and aunt. Her uncle William Watkin was an active suffragist and a minister who influenced Francis Harper in her later stages of writing and speeches. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper attended the academy where she studied Bible, Grammar, Elocution, Classical literature, music, philosophy, mathematics and reading and writing. The academy was directed by her uncle named 'Academy for Negro youth.' Later, Frances Ellen Watkin Harper took work of teaching, for which she left Baltimore and travelled to Ohio, and later to Pennsylvania. She even worked as an abolitionist after the bitter incident of killing of an innocent man. In a letter to her good friend, William Still, Francis Ellen mentions to work as an abolitionist and fight for the right of the people, as she writes-

“Upon that grave, I pledge myself to the anti-slavery cause”

Frances Ellen Watkin Harper with her work as abolitionist also did a travelling lecturing which could make her ideas reach more people. Frances Ellen married Fenton Harper in 1860 and had only daughter. But soon her husband died and later, she continued with her work of travelling and lecturing. During the same Frances Ellen Watkin Harper gave speeches, which mentions about the sufferings of black people, especially the black women, where they were doubly troubled 'As women and as being black women.' Harper through her

speech ‘We are all bound up together,’ gave example about the problem she faced after her husband’s death and being only mother and women to look at her children.

As her role of abolitionists, she later worked with the idea like reconstruction of entire new America, education, and women’s right. Francis Harper did not work for one society that is only blacks, but rather her approach towards the right of white people was also important. During her travel and through her speech, she specially mentioned about the equality and rights of blacks and whites as she considered the ‘community interest in common.’ Her letter to William Still, mentions about the equal and collective action which needs to be taken among the society as she mentions-

“I hold that between the white people and the coloured there is a community of interest, and the sooner they find it out, the better it will be for both the parties; but that community of interest does not consist in increasing the privileges of one class and curtailing the rights of other, but in getting every citizen interested in the welfare progress and durability of the state. I Do not in lecturing confine myself to the political side of question”

Writing of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper-

Frances Harper can be believed to be working with the central idea of ‘community’ and ‘its interest.’ For representing the interest of community Francis Harper mentioned about the convergent and divergent philosophy that can be seen among the people. Her ideas included the mention and study about the slaveholder and enslaved between women’s right and the rights of newly formed enfranchised black men, which can be seen to have mentioned in her speech and works, between middle class blacks and poor and the enslaved blacks. Her ideas can be studied multiculturally as she speaks about intersectionality, race, gender, class, community, rights that were prevalent among the society. Frances Harper even realised about her audience being diversified and having varied cultural experiences. She through her writings and speech clearly mentioned about the divergent ideas the two cultures had but at the same time pointed out the common interest among the community. Francis Harper being a proliferate writer, published eight volumes of poetry, and credited many proses. Her popular novel is *Iola Leroy, or Shadow Uplifted* (1892), and other writings like- *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1868), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876) and *Trial and Triumph* (1889). Francis Harper continued to travel and give speeches, which even today helps in understanding the rights and fight for

the self. She also helped in establishment of the 'National Association of Colored Women' in 1896.

Learning to Read-

In the poem, *Learning to Read* the writer advocates the importance of education to African American people, and how the change overtook place before and after the slavery. Through the poem, Harper describes that education (able to read and write) is one of the most important desires of enslaved people. This education for them is the key to free themselves. For this purpose, many enslaved have tried hard in all possible manner for which the poet describes their intelligence of tricking the whites. The condition of enslaved people described through her poem also mentions about the problems of women who were double sufferer and education for them was the only source of freedom. This freedom was from whites and from men (blacks). Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative* can be seen to be speaking about conditions created due to education, which meant giving them was considered as a danger. He mentions-

“Nothing seemed to make her [his mistress] more angry than to see me with a newspaper”

With reference to the education, we also find during 1830, a law was passed in North Carolina, which mentioned that teaching slaves was forbidden. This law was imposed because it was the known fact that literacy created dissatisfaction in the minds of the people, and they start to rebel for their justice. Also, with this, the world would come to know the cruelty against the enslaved, which could again raise their voice to a greater extent.

Through the poem *Learning to Read* Harper has tried to put forward the situation where the enslaved could raise their voice. Also, she mentions that the enslaved people were creative and could find new ways of learning to read and write, because it was literacy that led to the knowledge, and that could lead to freedom. Few of the important characters portrayed in the poem by Harper depicts that the enslaved characters are already expert in reading. Also, she mentions the desire of the black woman to get education, that is, to read and write, with the mentioning of Aunt Chloe. She being a woman in her 60s was criticised because of her age and in connexion to learning to read. But Harper mentions that she represented a completely new culture. The very start of the poem with reference to Aunt Chloe, mentions her account of explaining that learning to read for the enslaved people requires lot of 'tricks' and 'craftiness.'

Frances Ellen Watkin Harper mentions the historical context with the very start of the poem where she mentions the ‘Yankee teachers’ have arrived from the north and are trying to establish in South, which was the condition that took place after the Civil War. But at the same time, the rebels from the South, especially the whites, oppose the idea of educating the enslaved people. This is done for the reason, because whites considered themselves as Masters, and they had a very clear idea that education could give the enslaved voice and keeping blacks ignorant would only make them masters. But the thirst of the enslaved to learn to read was at a greater extent where they could collect small information or knowledge. We find this through the lines of the poet-

“ But some of us would try to steal

A little from the book.

And put the words together,

And learn by hook or crook”.

This implies the strong will of the enslaved to take education, and are willing to do anything. For more emphasis about the problems and fight back of the black for their rights Uncle Caldwell is being introduced. Uncle Caldwell is a representation of the people or community where the resourcefulness exemplifies the power of knowledge which the people carried for getting education. As he used to grease the paper with ‘liqor fat’ so that he could hide the reading material in his hat without getting known to his master. For this Harper further explains that he used to risk his life, as for the reason, if any time it was discovered by his master, he would have received the punishment. But here, Harper also tries to mention the curiosity and the sharpness of the enslaved, while ignorance of the whites towards understanding the black people. Harper mentions the problem of getting education was so hard that even some characters learn to read and spell towards by listening to the children spelling. Again, the attitude of enslaved with good memorisation quality is being displayed by the poet. Francis Harper being one of the major speakers about rights of people and knowing the importance of Education, mentions through her poem the role of Education for freedom and equality, had a major part. This was because of the determination of the teacher who came from north to South regardless of all oppositions, and resistance of enslaved people to get educated. This possibility presented by Harper of enslaved people through her character to learn, regardless of their class, work, or age, mentions that this condition could

only be able to let the people pursue their life and interest. This represents the strength, dignity and confidence created among the people which creates a whole new civilised culture.

Francis Harper, through *Learning to Read*, decentralises the idea of education and explains that reading does not only mean to be mastered by whites. Through the mouth of Aunt Chloe, Harper tries to put the features of the people for being able to learn to read and write. The people were curious to get the knowledge which enables them to do all creative acts as possible. While through the character of Mr. Turner Ben she also explains that literacy of word was not always the requirement for getting education. The character's ability to listen carefully and memorise the idea creates the dominance of oral language against written language.

Learning to Read gets to know the original way Harper's presentation of ideas. Harper was a person who gave travelling lectures, and at the same time, she wrote many poems, novels for the people. During her travel lectures, it includes her popular speeches, which explains her knowledge of both spoken and written culture. This knowledge enabled her to broaden her perspective. And it was done to include even the non-reading community (people). Frances Smith Foster, an eminent scholar had very well demonstrated the idea of oral and written culture, where he says that print culture during the 19th century, especially in African American culture, invited the participation from non-reader as well, was benefited by the people who could read and write. Francis Harper used the similar method of propagating knowledge among the people (read and non-reader). This community was provided with public recitation and at the same time, printed material. With reference to learning to read, one only needs to read the poem aloud, so that even the non-reader will understand it, which can be said to be the speciality of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

The value for the oral connection of knowledge, which Harper provided through her speech, does not mean her lower buildup towards reading, as she is popularly known as first African American women writer, to have published her work. Also, she is popular with her writing in newspaper pamphlets, etc... which meant spreading of knowledge was much important for her. Her idea of knowledge is also seen when she mentions the idea that the old lady of 60 years old could finally read the Bible. And now, when she can finally read, she feels she as the queen upon her thorn.

As a writer who wrote for the people, Harper's wide idea through her message created a social transformation. Harper threw her poems use the technique which portrayed her message to both blacks and whites. She has used the black folk element into white tradition, poetic form that created a blend of traditional and subversive factor. We find that Frances Harper promotes political harmony among freedmen and the grass-roots working of democracy. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper rather than adhering to typical tradition of 'Art for Art Sake,' but followed the pattern of writing as 'Art for People's Sake.'

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