

# The souls of black folk



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The Souls of Black Folk is a work published by an American political activist W. E. B Du Bois in 1903. The book lays down a strong foundation in the understanding of the African-American history considering that no other literary work has placed such an importance on the historic theme of racism in America. Guided by his own experience of slavery in the United States of America, Du Bois developed a groundbreaking literary work on what it actually meant to be an African-American within the American society at those times. The book gives a complete description of the nasty experiences black people had in the American society on the basis of their race. The ‘Black Folks’, the historic term that denotes African-Americans in the post-modern America, were openly discriminated in all spheres of the society and were largely regarded as non-citizens whose proper places were the expansive American agricultural plantations and processing industries where they provided free labor for their white masters and slave owners. Therefore, The Souls of Black Folk is a chronicle of the sociological, economical and political factors that beleaguered the African-Americans in the history of the racially discriminative American society of the 20th century as well as the author’s advocacy for racial equity. In his political and advocacy campaigns, Du Bois is assertive that all African Americans in the southern America deserved the right to be treated with justice and equality, should have been granted proper education and the right to vote.

The first chapter of the book, the metaphor of the veil worn by the blacks used by Du Bois, is an implication that the African Americans were literary discriminated in the American society and that they were not regarded as a rightful part of the larger civil society. The author goes in ‘Of Our Spiritual

Strivings' to add that the political, economic and social opportunities' worldview of the discriminated lot was totally different from those of the white society. In his own assessment, Du Bois speculates that the racial discrimination was at its peak in the 20th century taking into consideration that the African Americans were grossly neglected throughout the white society following the prevailing master-slave relationship between the two conflicting races. Political suppression, economic exploitation and social abuses of the 'Negroes' and the much desired feelings of liberation form the central theme of the essay 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings'.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that the claims made by Du Bois under the literary section 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings' are largely a creation of the author. It is imperative to note that slavery was only a common practice in the Southern America up to the last quarter of the 19th century immediately after the American Civil War but not beyond as portrayed by Du Bois. The period that spanned the 20th century was characterized with freedom and liberation of all slaves across the USA following the implementation and Thirteenth Amendment of the Emancipation Act in 1865 which declared slavery illegal in any part of the United States. Which slavery then does Du Bois grossly refer to in the 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings'? Definitely, the America Du Bois discussed in this essay is not the America other historians know over the stipulated period of time.

As much as the African Americans were enslaved and their lives were never made easy in America, particularly the Southern states where slave owners lived, African Americans were still all liberated towards the end of the 19th century and none of them was still subjected to the bondage of slavery in the

20th century contrary to the author's claims. It is most important to note that there is a number of inconsistencies in the historical facts between the literary work of Du Bois and those of other independent history scholars with high reputation such as Professor Gary Nash and the American historian Edmund Clarke. In their own assessment, the so called Black Folks, advanced by Du Bois in 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings', never existed in the American society after the American Civil War even though they had not been perfectly integrated in the white society at the time the work was written. The scholars dismissed the purported poverty of the 'Black Folks' as mere impacts of economic factors independent of racial discrimination.

The tenth chapter of the book is entitled 'Of the Faith of the Fathers'. It gives a descriptive account of the black church in the 20th century in America along with the huddles it faced in the history of the USA. In the essay 'Of the Faith of the Fathers', Du Bois provides an elaborate account of spiritualism and religion among the African Americans that proved very instrumental in the establishment of the white society's perspective in regard to the African religions widely practiced among the slaves. According to Du Bois, the African faith and religions were highly despised by the white Americans and the subsequent practices of such faiths were admonished. Their worrrship and sermons were literally termed 'demonized' by the whites drawn across the world's mainstream churches such as Church of England, Orthodox, Catholic Church and Judaism.

That fact that the Black Americans were discriminated against is evident and many advocates have brought this on the spotlight. Du Bois has done this in his book The Souls of Black Folk either. In chapters four through six of the

book he tackles the issue of African American education. He criticizes Booker T. Washington's proposal of the black men's industrial education. He says, 'It startled the nation to hear a Negro advocating such a program after many years of bitter complaint; it startled and won the applause of the South, it interested and won the admiration of the North; and after a confused mummer of protest, it silenced if it did not convert the Negroes themselves.' (Du Bois 2008 p. 36).

To some extent, Du Bois's concern about the plight of the Black Americans' education is valid. For a while, segregation of the African Americans was a normal practice in the American society, especially in the South. Poverty made it impossible for the black communities to raise funds for maintenance of schools and payment of salaries. The representation in most of the school boards was unfavorable to the Blacks and as a result, they could not be able to champion for proper funding of their schools. There was a belief that advanced education was beyond African Americans, and consequently, the idea of industrial education was born. As aforementioned, some African American activists like Booker T. Washington, backed this idea to the chagrin of many African Americans.

On the flip side, the claim that the Black populace lived being the veil of race even in the 20th is an exaggeration. This is so because the African Americans embarked on construction of their own schools which received funding from some white philanthropists. Besides, the political activism by various African American advocates lead to a change in status quo which enabled incorporation of the Blacks into the education boards.

Nonetheless, the Du Bois' account of the African religion is raising a number of questions. Though, he depicted America as one of the few states that provide for the freedom of worship – a phenomenon that led to the rise of various African religions across the United States of America. In conclusion, Du Bois tends to force readers to view the lives of the ' Black Folk' in the USA through his biased perspective.