



Afsana Asha

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: Fordham University

Texts: Toni Morrison, *Beloved* and W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*

Bio: Afsana Asha is of a South Asian descent, raised in New York City. She participated in Columbia University's Freedom & Citizenship program in 2017 and graduated from Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics in 2018. Afsana is currently a rising junior at Fordham University majoring in Integrative Neuroscience. She enjoys reading books by Najwa Zebian and visiting cozy coffee shops.

Profile: Coming into the Teagle Humanities Fellowship, Afsana Asha was interested in morality and social conflict. In her application essay, she wrote passionately about Michelle Moody-Adams' article, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance" and how it changed her perspective on responsibility. "Prior to reading Moody-Adams' text," Afsana wrote, "I thought that as long as I wasn't directly performing unjust behaviors, I wasn't responsible for the wrongs that were taking place." This text changed the way she understood her own morality, and as she said, "allowed me to reform my perception and understand that not taking steps to eradicate societal conflicts makes me a part of the problem."

Afsana chose to center her Teagle Humanities Fellowship on the relationship of the Coronavirus pandemic to racial injustice. Her mentor Benji de la Piedra helped her select Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* for her fellowship readings.

Afsana was particularly interested in the experiences shared between these two texts, written a century apart, and how they reflect the very same social issues she wrote about in her application essay. In reading *Beloved*, Afsana noticed the relevance of Morrison's fictional work to the contemporary experiences of Black people. Their experiences with the educational system especially touched Afsana who noted that Denver's education at the hands of a white family made her feel "experimented on." Afsana also saw how Du Bois experienced education inequality when he described feeling "haunted" by the differences in classrooms for white and Black students.

Recognizing the historical inequalities in education, Afsana tied the themes in these texts to the modern day, writing, "The elements of inequality described by Morrison and Du Bois—the lack of opportunities for racial minorities—may appear to be a matter of the past, but it's actually visible today in the way education is going to be formatted with the ongoing pandemic." Afsana drew on contemporary statistics to show how disparities in funding between predominantly white and minority school districts still exist. She wondered, "How can students from such under-resourced schools trust their leaders to keep them safe from the Coronavirus when they reopen?" As the ethic in her application essay so thoughtfully illuminates, Afsana is dedicated to understanding where action needs to be taken.