

## VOICING HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICAN AMERICA: A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND MAYA ANGELOU

**Rosali Thomas**

Research Scholar, Bharathiar University  
Coimbatore , Tamil Nadu, India.

**C.S. Biju**

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor,  
Dept. of English,  
St. Thomas College, Thrissur,  
Kerala, India.

### Abstract

*Human rights literature is a literary genre that deals with human rights themes. This paper investigates the representation of human rights in African American literature particularly in the slave narratives by Frederick Douglass and the autobiographical fictions of Maya Angelou. Douglass, brought out his first autobiography A Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave which was a slave narrative. Written as antislavery propaganda and a voice against the denial of human rights through personal revelation, it is regarded as a unique voice for humanism, human rights and social justice. His narratives provide an unfiltered insight into perhaps the darkest chapter of American history. This paper also examines the experiences of marginalized women and explores the infringement of human rights of African-American women by bringing in focus Angelou's fictional autobiographies . Angelou challenged both the white and the black society that oppressed them. Angelou and Douglass convey the message that people have the power to shape their own future and they prescribe education as the remedy to fight the malady of the abuse of human rights*

**Key words:** *Human rights , slave narrative , autobiographical fiction , oppression , antislavery propaganda , social justice*

## VOICING HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICAN AMERICA: A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND MAYA ANGELOU

- Rosali Thomas  
- C.S. Biju

**H**uman rights are basic privileges to which all individuals are considered eligible and therefore they cannot be granted or taken away. Human Rights issues need to be understood from historical and legal perspective. Literature of a particular region may offer invaluable insights enabling the readers grasp a richer and more intricate situation.

Human rights literature is a literary genre that deals with human rights themes and thus promotes human rights values explicitly or implicitly creating the literary momentum with stimulus for action. This genre of literature is dedicated to society and believes that each one of us has a moral obligation and power to contribute to societal transformation. It is based on the belief that literature has tremendous power to cause a change, and that the author has a responsibility towards readers both on the social aspect and the artistic one. Human rights Literature does not believe that writing is solely an artistic and aesthetic exercise; it calls on authors to become conscious of the social commitment under the power of their literary creation as its effect on the public is enormous and does not come to fruition often. Thus, human rights literature manifests the unique and close links which exist between literature and human rights campaign. Different literary works in human rights across the globe with its contradiction and convolutions of principles will form the base of the human rights literature in general.

In her essay "The Tremendous Power of Literature" Vered Cohen Barzilay the founder of 'Novel Rights', a social enterprise which recognizes the power of art, especially literature, writes thus: "Literature can be as powerful as life itself. It can be like prophesy. It can inspire us to change our world and give us the comfort, hope, passion and strength that we need in order to fight to create a better future for us, as well as all humanity. We just need to keep on reading and

to allow the tremendous power of literature to enter our hearts and lead us to our own path." Indeed, Human Rights Literature does not impose on the author the actual call for action, rather, the writer's task ends as soon as he completes the writing process. Only the readers' response can answer whether the creation inspires social change or motivates for action.

The history of African American literature, fraught with violence of racism and cruelty dates back to eighteenth century. Du Bois a leading African-American sociologist questioned how a government, determined to lead the free world, could turn a blind eye to daily acts of racist terror. He argued that segregation—a practice taken for granted by most white Americans—led to a gross violation of the human rights of African Americans.

African American literature focuses on themes of particular interest to Black people, for example, the gross violation of human rights only on account of the colour of the skin, the role of African Americans within the larger American society and issues such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom, and equality. Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes, Native Son and Black boy of Richard Wright How To Kill a Mocking Bird by Nelle Harper Lee , Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, Beloved of Toni Morrison ,the Works of Frederick Douglass as well as the autobiographies of Maya Angelou have been powerful voice that created a deep impact on public opinion on the issue of slavery and are seen as one of the triggers to the Abolitionist movement in nineteenth century and Civil Rights movement in twentieth century making a great impact on issues of and struggles for Human Rights. issues related to slavery and civil rights have had an enormous impact on African – American life, therefore these concerns have also been prominent in their literature. Many African-American authors have used their creative skills to imagine life during slavery.

This paper investigates the representation of human rights in African American literature particularly in the slave narratives by Frederick Douglass to analyze the male perspective of the violation of human rights and the autobiographical fictions of Maya Angelou to examine the female standpoint with regard to denial of human rights with double marginalization in the case of women of colour.

Conditions of slavery produced a certain genre of writing called slave narratives providing significant evidence for political advocates. As historical sources, slave narratives

J  
H  
E  
R  
S  
O

document slave life primarily in the American South from the invaluable perspective of first-hand experience. After the Civil War, former slaves continued to record their experiences under slavery, partly to ensure that the newly-united nation did not forget what had threatened its existence, and partly to affirm the dedication of the ex-slave population to social and economic progress. In the beginning, though these slave narratives stirred anti-slavery sentiments, slavery continued unabated with no clear signs of decline.

Frederick Douglass, one of the most renowned writers in the African American literary tradition, brought out his first autobiography *A Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) which was a slave narrative. The book had a deep impact on struggles and the issue of slavery and is seen as one of the triggers to the Abolitionist movement in the 1850s. Frederick Douglas' most important legacy was the use of his words to fight for the freedom and rights of African American slaves through his books. Two subsequent autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* mark his greatest contributions to American culture being one of the strongest influences in the slave narrative literary genre. Written as antislavery propaganda and a voice against the denial of human rights through personal revelation, they are regarded as the finest examples of the slave narrative tradition and as a unique voice for humanism, human rights and social justice. Through his writings he imposed a powerful charge against slavery and racism, attacked violation of human rights, provided an indomitable voice of hope for his people, embraced antislavery politics and preached his own brand of American ideals exposing the violation of human rights.

Douglass's *Narrative* reveals how white slaveholders perpetuate slavery by keeping their slaves ignorant. The narrative explains the strategies and procedures by which whites gain and keep power over blacks from their birth onward by keeping slaves ignorant of basic facts about themselves, such as their birth date or their paternity. This enforced ignorance robs children of their natural sense of individual identity. As slave children grow older, slave owners prevent them from learning how to read and write, as literacy would give them a sense of self-sufficiency and capability. Slaveholders understand that literacy would lead slaves to question the right of whites to keep slaves.

Douglass describes typical behavior patterns of slaveholders to depict the damaging effects of slavery. He recounts how many slave-owners have been tempted to adultery and rape, fathering children with their female slaves. Such adultery threatens the unity of the slave owner's family, as the father is forced to either sell or continuously punish his own child, while the slave owner's wife becomes aggrieved and merciless. By showing the damaging effects of slaveholding Douglass implies that slavery should be abolished for the greater good of all society. Women often appear in Douglass's *Narrative* as vivid images—specifically, images of abused bodies that make obvious their masters' abuse of them. Douglass' portrayal of the women's mangled and shrunken bodies are meant to rouse pain and outrage in the reader and point to the unnaturalness of the institution of slavery and how the inhuman practice of slavery is a clear breach of human rights.

Throughout his book the *Narrative*, Douglass is concerned with showing the discrepancy between the fact that slaves are human beings and the fact that slave owners treat them as property. Douglass shows how slaves frequently are passed between owners, regardless of where the slaves' families are. Slave owners value slaves only to the extent that they can perform productive labor; they often treat slaves like livestock, mere animals, without reason.

In his own words he expresses the infringement of human rights, the treatment meted out to him as a slave boy in the hands of heartless master. 'When he did not prove to suit Thomas's purpose he was sent "to be broken" by Edward Covey, working in his fields for a year, and for the first six months was beaten and whipped severely many times". Frederick Douglass continues, "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!"(10.5) Covey transforms Douglass from a human into an animal by breaking his spirit. All of the defining characteristics of a human being get crushed out of Douglass by force until he starts to act as mindlessly and thoughtlessly as a beast in the fields. Thus he shows that Covey's brutality causes Douglass to lose intangible parts of him, including his ambition to become educated.

J  
H  
E  
R  
S  
O

In the course of his Narrative, Douglass relates two instances of murderous cruelty—in one of which a planter deliberately shot a slave belonging to a neighboring plantation, who had unintentionally gotten within his lordly domain in quest of fish; and in the other, an overseer blew out the brains of a slave who had fled to a stream of water to escape a bloody scourging. Mr. Douglass states that in neither of these instances was anything done by way of legal arrest or judicial investigation.

WM. Lloyd Garrison in his preface to *'The Narrative of Douglas'* raises his voice thus:

'Let it never be forgotten, that no slaveholder or overseer can be convicted of any outrage perpetrated on the person of a slave, however diabolical it may be, on the testimony of colored witnesses, whether bond or free. By the slave code, they are adjudged to be as incompetent to testify against a white man, as though they were indeed a part of the brute creation. Hence, there is no legal protection in fact, whatever there may be in form, for the slave population; and any amount of cruelty may be inflicted on them with impunity. Is it possible for the human mind to conceive of a more horrible state of society?' According to the fiction writer Ralph Ellison 'racism is not geographically confined, but rather pervades the American consciousness.'

These slave narratives do not simply function as accounts of endurance and survival, but are a powerful voice against injustice meted out to other human beings by adopting a distinctive authorial voice which contributes to their persuasive power. As African-American abolitionist, Douglass would have felt the dual pressures of remaining true to his slave backgrounds whilst presenting a voice which could arrest the attention of and sway white audiences. Douglass addresses the readers directly at certain points in his narrative, forcing them to imagine the suffering they could bear if they found themselves in the author's position. These narratives provide an unfiltered insight into perhaps the darkest chapter of American history. Slave narratives served the purpose of eliciting the sympathy of northern readers to the predicament of southern slaves as well as to publicize the abolitionist movement. That is how it served as a catalyst for civil rights movement.

Of course, Slave Narratives were not the only form of anti-slavery literature which found success as a voice against the atrocities against Blacks. African American autobiography is another distinct genre of powerful literature. The experience of Black women is conditioned by

race, gender and class. Women writers through their powerful works broke down barriers, stood up for their own gender, challenged the prevailing views, became trailblazers to take a stand and campaign for equality for women. Many African American women have left their indelible mark and were successful in making an impact on society. Significant female voices that have emerged powerfully on the literary scene are that of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and many others.

This paper therefore examines the experiences of marginalized women and explores the infringement of human rights of African-American women by bringing in focus Angelou's fictional autobiography 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' which is similar to the famous works of Douglass in its techniques of storytelling and plot development. This study will initiate readers to know more about Black female experience in America, and also to think about combating abuses against women in their respective settings. Maya Angelou's autobiography embodies the role central to feminine experience and an escape into freedom.

Angelou was able to reflect the multiple oppressions of black women in America through her autobiographical fiction and has presented herself as a role model for African-American women by reconstructing the African-American woman's image through her works. Maya Angelou addressed the issues of racial prejudice and segregation through a prominent genre of human right literature -- autobiographical fiction and poetry. Angelou was one of the most powerful black women who challenged both the white and the black society that oppressed them and made them feel inferior and ashamed of their black color even though it was not their fault. Her first autobiographical book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* portrays incidents that hold many traumatic experiences that overshadowed her childhood, and depicts her struggles to cope with hard situations. The worst thing that can happen to a child is rape, especially if this rape was committed by someone inside home. She was confused and puzzled as her mother's boy friend Freeman molested and sexually abused this eight year old little girl. She writes "The act of rape on an eight years old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't" (84). More over Freeman threatened little Maya of dire consequences if she disclosed this. "If you ever tell anybody what we did, I'll have to kill Bailey" (80). Thus this incident coupled with many other harrowing experiences makes Maya a victim of fear psychosis. The brutality and unresolved

J  
H  
E  
R  
S  
O

trauma resulting from that early sexual violence stole her voice and shaped her young adulthood. Eventually she became an unwed teen mother.

Arkansas where she lived as a little girl under the care of her grandmother was a very racist and prejudiced place, so during the time she spent there, Maya experienced great discrimination, not only for being African American, but for being a female as well. Angelou states: “In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most of Black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like.” (27) Black Americans were treated badly, humiliated, tortured brutally, and murdered without any pity under the political, economic and social white power. Most of them were traumatized and psychologically very sick. Although African Americans at that period were unfairly treated with hardly any regard for human rights, Blacks did not give up their dream of being free, and struggled challenging all the suffering and the ache of discrimination in order to impose their existence and to have the rights that they deserve as a human being.

The book concentrates on the psychological state of Maya Angelou as undergoing her terrible trauma and how literature, studies and graduation played an important role at giving a ray of hope to Maya the little black girl who suffered in a segregated American society. Poverty, disruption in families, sexual assault, lack of education, and early pregnancy, unwed motherhood remain key barriers facing black girls in America’s cities, towns, and rural communities even now.

Angelou's series of autobiographical works is distinctly seen from the female African American experience. She "... writes for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it" (Angelou in Evans, p.3). Maya Angelou, a notable change-agent used her artistic voice to speak on behalf of women and African-Americans alike. Her voice in her writing is strong and wonderfully unapologetic. Her works convey a message about having the courage to persist and to overcome, and for women to “refuse to be reduced” by what unwillingly happens to them. Her works continue to inspire millions of women as they encourage women to open themselves up to the public without shame, and her life story inspires women to be resilient and to pursue their dreams with a fiery passion. Her autobiographical fictions are a garbed attack against the outright violations of human rights. Reading her works will definitely stir the souls of the perpetrators and promote introspection. Maya Angelou’s words continue to endorse self-examination, equality and amity. Impressing upon the truth that “we are more alike than unlike”, Maya

J  
H  
E  
R  
S  
O



Angelou would say that as a child of God it was her duty to recognize that everyone else was also a child of God, “Everybody born comes from the Creator trailing wisps of glory.”

Her “Still I Rise” is an inspiring piece in which she celebrates the courage of the human spirit over the harshest of personal and social obstacles. The poem is a testament to the power that exists within all human beings to rise above the most challenging circumstances. Frederick Douglas has used his powerful slave narratives to communicate his desire to free African American slaves and to address the issue of the dehumanization of human race leading to the Emancipation Proclamation. Without his contribution, the dark and savage days of slavery could have lasted longer than they already did.

Angelou’s contributions to literature and Civil Rights Movement will remain as an inspiration to today’s youth as well as to posterity. One of the most relevant messages of Angelou and Frederick Douglas may be their belief that people have the power to shape their own future. They believed that positive changes have cumulative effect and individual transformation would positively benefit society as a whole. Both Angelou and Douglass prescribe education as the remedy to fight the malady of the violation of human rights in discriminated America.

#### Works Cited:

- Douglass, Frederick. *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Anti slavery Office 1845
- Evans, M. *Black women writers (1950-1980): A critical evaluation*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday 1984
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House 1952
- Angelou, Maya. *Phenomenal Woman*. New York: Random House 1995
- Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Maya Angelou*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004.
- ‘Freedom’, *short stories celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*’ compiled by Amnesty International UK (copyright Individual Contributors 2009). Great Britain: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2009.
- Andrews, William. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986

- The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series Two, Vol. 1, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999
- Douglass, Frederick, *Autobiographies*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1996
- McCoy, Beth A. "Race and the (Para)Textual Condition," *PMLA* 121:1 (Jan 2006) : 156-169.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Web. 27 Apr. 2014.
- Kent, George. *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* " *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Maya Angelou*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie Ann. *The Song of a Caged Bird: Maya Angelou's Quest after Self-Acceptance*. Detroit: Gale, 2003
- Angelou, Maya. *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House 1969
- Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Collier Books, 1962
- Foner, Philip S. *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Reconstruction and After*. New York: International Publishers, 1955
- Williams, M.E., Ed. *Readings on Maya Angelou: Literary companion series*. San Diego: Green haven Press. 1997
- Whiting, Charles G. *The case for engaged literature. Yale French Studies*, 1: 84–9. 1948

#### Web sources

- <http://www.novelrights.org/2011/07/13/the-tremendous-power-of-literature>
- <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/mask-maya-angelou>
- <https://blog.booktellsyouwhy.com/a-brief-history-of-african-american-literature>
- <http://www.biography.com/blackhistory/featured-biography/maya-angelou.jsp>

J  
H  
E  
R  
S  
O