# **The Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States: Contributions of Fredrick Douglas and Harriet Beecher Stowe**

American history has been aptly narrated in not only history books but in literary works too. Looking back at different events that took place in past, we realize that literary works published before the events took place do influence the events. I find it interesting that even though literature has profound influence on people's lives and their history, it has not been widely thought of, as a tool of defense or much less, a driver of change in the society as have other forms of popular culture. Mostly, literature is described as a mirror, which reflects on a community as it was at the time the piece was written. Rarely has it been thought of as an influencing factor of the society's future. In this paper, I take a different perspective, where I will look at literature as a forecast of the future rather than a reflection of the history. I will compare two literary works; Fredrick Douglas's Narrative (1845) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and examine the roles these writings played in the anti-slavery movement in the United States. Through a critical analysis of these two pieces of literature, I will defend the argument that writing has been used as a tool to drive change in a society and to influence a society's future.

**Narrative of the Life of Fredric Douglas (1845)**

Fredrick Douglass' Narrative was written in the year 1845. In this narrative, Douglass gives a recount of his life as a slave from birth to the time he escaped captivity, earning himself freedom in the north. In a nutshell, the book was an autobiography narrating events that took place in the author's life as a slave. Douglas hoped that through this narrative, he would pass a message to other people; to make them understand the evils of slavery and why it had to be abolished.

In the beginning, the author describes his separation from his mother at a very young age and the fact that he did not know his father. This knowledge was hidden from him in a bid to deny him the chance to enjoy familial affection. (Douglas, 1895). He continues to narrate about his first master who was ruthless and enjoyed whipping his slaves, especially the author's aunt.

The author served two masters in his life as a slave and felt that both of them were equally cruel and ruthless. With all the masters, there was limited time to rest, let alone to sleep. There was not enough food or a warm place to sleep. Slaves were never allowed to say anything in front of the master and whipping was the order of each day. The author was lucky to escape slavery and enjoy freedom, but he also acknowledges that more people did not have the courage to do so.

Throughout the book, he bitterly condemns slavery and how the political class was ignoring the plea of slaves. He discredits the description of America as "the land of the free," showing that the freedom was only for the white people and not for the people of color. He gets the reader thinking about what freedom is. In the context of which the book was written, it seemed that liberty had no real meaning. Slaves were given short breaks on the ‘freedom day' celebrations, and required to compensate for the lost time after the holidays were over. Douglas describes this as virtual freedom, which is part of the inhumanity that came with slavery (Douglass, 1895).

This book was written in a time context when slavery was legal in most parts of the United States of America. People were allowed to purchase, sell and use slaves at their discretion. The slaves were ill-treated by their owners, who made them work for long hours without food or water. Their working conditions were deplorable, and their masters did not care what happened to them during work, provided they delivered on what they were required to do.

The book was written around a time when the anti-slavery movement in the United States of America was taking form. With only a few members, the movement was formed in 1833 after slaves in Britain were set free (Bolt, 1969). By writing this book, Douglas sought to vocalize his opinions about slavery and why it had to be abolished. His writings together with other people's writings against slavery gave people points to argue around and made the movement strong.

**Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin**

Stowe's book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" narrates a story of life in slavery through the eyes of Josiah Henson, a former slave. In this book, she recounts how the protagonist, Tom, together with other black slaves suffered at the hands of cruel masters and how he eventually died as a result of the brutal beating. The protagonist was a firm believer in the Christian faith, and he did not support slavery at all. He was lucky to be owned by a friendly and humble couple who treated him and his fellow slaves kindly. However, the couple experienced some financial problems and had to sell them off to another master (Stowe, 1852).

The second master was prejudiced against black people and did not see them as being equal to whites. He, however, condemned slavery even though he owned some. He treated them kindly, even though he did not extend the same kind of respect he did to fellow white men. Tom's second master had pledged to free him before his death after he was told of a vision from heaven which disapproved of slavery and discrimination against blacks. Before he could release Tom, he was stabbed to death, and Tom was sold off to a new master (Stowe, 1852).

Life with the new master was worse for Tom than any other experience with other masters. He was whipped for no apparent reason and denied the freedom to read the Bible. Whenever he got a chance, he would sneak to read his Bible but was punished severely for that. The brutal whipping made Tom very ill, and he died before he could be bought off from his cruel master (Stowe, 1852).

The author of this book is considered as one of the most outspoken abolitionists and a foundation layer of the anti-slavery movement in the US. Through her book, she managed to appeal to several Christians to speak against slavery. Her core message was that since Christianity encouraged brotherly love, no Christian should support slavery. Since Christianity was the most widespread religion in America by that time, her word spread like wildfire, with her book selling almost as much as the Bible.

**A Comparison of the Two Books**

The two books influenced the formation and the development of abolitionism and the anti-slavery movement in America. Both authors vocalized the plight of the slaves during a period when slavery was legal in most parts of America. Although they took different approaches, they got they engaged people in thought, encouraging them to end slavery by first changing their attitudes. Instead of condemning the slave owners outright, they narrated to the world how slaves suffered, showing everyone how dehumanizing slavery was. They called upon political and religious leaders to do something to end slavery and discrimination against people of color in America (Sewell, 1976).

Much like Douglas, Stowe took an approach of compelling people to change from within themselves. By exposing how dehumanizing slavery was, she urged people to improve and treat others with love as is required of Christians. The only difference is that while Douglas took a philosophical approach to compel people to change, Stowe took a religious approach. Douglas managed to get slave owners to ask themselves hard questions about freedom and equality. Through narrating his escape, he also encouraged people to escape from slavery. He portrayed a message that freedom is not given but rather, it is taken. He was never given the freedom he enjoyed, but he took it by escaping.

The difference between the two authors' approaches can be explained by the timing of the books. Stowe's book was written a few years after Douglas' book. During this period, more people were starting to embrace abolitionism unlike in 1845 when Douglass wrote his book. Douglass seemed to be targeting the slaves more than the masters and asking them to fight for their freedom. At the time Stowe wrote her book, more masters, especially Christian masters were starting to see the evils of slavery. She was calling out to the masters who were still cruel to their slaves to follow the example of the good ones. At this time, slaves were already fighting for their freedom and the masters were being called upon to act in love and free their slaves.

**Reflection**

From this analysis, I have learned a lot that I did not know about slavery in America. Reading from those who experienced it first hand, I found that there was so much to be fought for and through the efforts of the anti-slavery movement, many were liberated. I, however, feel that full equality has not been achieved yet. There are cases still several cases of indirect discrimination against African Americans. This is evidenced by the increased mass incarceration of black people. It makes one wonder whether the full equality which was fought for by people like Douglas and Stowe will ever be achieved in America. Affirmative action has only been successful in creating an even more significant racial rift.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, these literary works show that literature can and has been used to influence action for change in the society. These two authors are among those who used writing to call upon people to act against slavery. The changes that happened after the books were written are enough to show how important literature as a tool for driving change can be. In a short span of time after the abolitionism was started, it gained a lot of influence, forming the currently famous Republican Party. This party committed to fighting for equality and freedom for all. The great success of the anti-slavery movement can be attributed to the outspoken writers who took the obligation to spread the message to all comers of the world. These books serve as evidence of the contributions made by writers at that time and the impact they had on slavery.

References

Bolt, C. (1969). The anti-slavery movement and reconstruction: a study in Anglo-American co-operation, 1833-77. Oxford University Press.

Douglass, F. (1895). Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection with the Anti-slavery Movement... De Wolfe, Fiske.

Sewell, R. H. (1976). Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860. Oxford University Press.

Stowe, H. B. (1852). Uncle Tom's cabin (Vol. 23). Oxford University Press, USA.