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Developing Emancipatory Thinking through Narratives in Antebellum America

Abstract

Literature has served as one of the most convincing tools for developing emancipatory thinking among Americans, particularly the colored people in the antebellum period. The current research paper is an attempt to study and explore how emancipatory thinking was developed through literature which is, generally considered to be more fictional than factual. Through the close reading of the selected narratives written during the period, the researcher has attempted to unearth various aspects and relate them with the factual accounts of the time in order to investigate their closer relationship with each other. This required a theoretical framework that would enable us to juxtapose the literary and non-literary texts to have an actual picture of the situation; therefore, the non-literary journalistic writings during that period have been studied parallel to the literary narratives. The findings and discussion developed in this study also suggest that further studies may also be conducted in order to dispel the misconception ascribed to narratives of the antebellum period that narratives are imaginary scattered accounts of the authors which are much exaggerated than to have elements of realism.

Key Words: Antebellum, Close Reading, Narratives, Emancipatory Thinking, New Historicism.

Introduction

One of the significant characteristics in the history of American literature is the development, projection, production and dissemination of anti-slavery literature in the 19th century, specifically the first half is known as an antebellum period. Deprived of the formal education to be able to read and write, the coloured community had to work very hard through the formation of societies to create awareness among the masses for their just and equal rights. However, from the beginning of the antebellum period in America, there had started emerging a consciousness among the coloured people to develop their personal libraries and reading rooms (McHenry, 1999). By 1836 there were around 527 registered anti-slavery societies of the coloured people to promote the political, social and ideological consciousness of the rights of the colored people; the number had increased to 1300 by 1838 in America (Mintz, 1995). These societies collected and utilized tangible as well as intangible resources to promote the anti-slavery movement throughout America. By the coming of the constitution of the coloured reading society in 1821 in Philadelphia, a significant focus was given to the literary works that addressed the issues of the black community with the sole purpose of projecting and perpetuating their rights, problems and desires in the dominated white society. Therefore, this period also envisages the speedy growth of the literary works solely for other books of general and specific interest were not paid much attention by anti-slavery societies (Porter, 1971).

Special funds and resources were allocated for the production and dissemination of such literary works that promoted the cause of the anti-slavery movement. Although these societies not only worked for holding the protests and processions all over America for their movement (Tarrow, 1998) but also considerable attention was given to literary works and their dissemination because these works were considered to motivate and develop the kind of consciousness and awareness required for the movement. Literature was used as a powerful tool that helped in spreading the anti-slavery movement all over America in the antebellum period (King & Haveman 2008). An important aspect of these efforts is that although the initial works were started by the male member of the movement, soon, female writers also joined the movement by forming such societies as A Society of Young Ladies in 1828 (McHenry, 1999). Therefore, during this period, there are not just the writings of the males but of the females as well, with some names being exceedingly notable and popular in American literature.

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Entailing so much power to influence the whole community and motivate them to struggle and fight for their just rights, literary works need to be explored to understand and study the use of various strategies, techniques and contents. Although there are conflicting views about the literary merits of the anti-slavery literature, there is a need to study the actual works in order to establish and investigate their role in the development of the anti-slavery movement, specifically the emancipatory thinking of the black people for whom slavery had become an accepted norm of the society for the past few centuries in America. The change in the consciousness that occurred through the inspiring literary works becomes an interesting perspective to look at the actual writings specifically in juxtaposition with the actual conditions of the time and other non-literary writings. Owing to the restraint of time and space of research article, this paper focuses on one important anti-slavery writing from antebellum America, i.e. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher [Stowe \(1852\)](#).

Aims and Objectives

The aims of this research paper include:

- To study the literary works from the perspective of developing emancipatory thinking among the coloured people in the antebellum period
- To juxtapose the literary and non-literary writings in order to understand the real picture of the anti-slavery movement and discern the influence of literature on the movement from other impacts of the time

Research Question

The current study is based on the following overarching research question:

- How did *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe develop emancipatory thinking among the coloured community in the antebellum period?

Literature Review

The antebellum period is also regarded as the age of reformation of the coloured people in which popular writers like Frederick Douglas, Lydia Child, Angelina Grimke, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Carolina Harriet Jacobs produced effective literary pieces ([Liedel, 1971](#)). In their writings, such topics which were of great concern for the society, like the abolition of slavery, rights to education and voting, public speaking, and ownership of properties, equality and justice, had been discussed. The lives of these writers are also interesting in another sense that most of them were slaves and had to get rid of their slavery with the passage of time. Moreover, their narratives are also regarded to be first-hand accounts of the real situations and conditions of slavery in America. There are a lot of biographical elements in their narratives ([Newman, 2002](#)). Although the origins of the literary writings produced by Black Americans can be traced back to the 1760s (Carreta, 2010), anti-slavery literature is the marked feature of the antebellum period that had its significant impact on the anti-slavery movement.

The critics like [Canaday \(1973\)](#) argue that anti-slavery literature is a specific genre that mainly focuses on the issues of slavery through literature. He also argues that anti-slavery literature written during the antebellum period is incoherent with scattered accounts of slavery and its conditions in America. [Sherrard-Johnson \(2004\)](#) also seems to propagate a similar kind of criticism, suggesting that anti-slavery narratives are mainly scattered and exaggerated accounts of the slaves in order to develop a specific empathy and sentimentality among the people. They also seem to assert that anti-slavery literature mostly consists of fiction than facts. However, researchers like [Newman \(2002\)](#) seems to emphasize that these writings contain the elements of realism and marking them as just fictional accounts of the characters would be unjust and delimitation of the scope of literary works which were so much popular and esteemed by the people during the anti-slavery movement.

There have been various researches conducted on the literature produced during the antebellum period from different angles. [Gould \(2010\)](#) has tried to explore the literature written during the antebellum period from capitalistic and economic perspectives by suggesting that there was a significant moneymaking activity involved in the acts of buying, selling and maintaining slaves.

However, he agrees that there was a significant body of literature available in the market before the American Civil War of 1861, focusing on the issue of slavery. With such a large number of literary writings, the antebellum period is thus rich in anti-slavery literature. One of the most influential writings has been that of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which has undergone research from different perspectives.

[Wilhelm \(2020\)](#) explores *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the perspective of race and revivalism. He seems to suggest that though emotionalism is the overshadowing trait of the work, there are also significant elements of race and revivalism in the novel. Wilhelm opines that camp meetings are the central points from where Stowe engages the readers with moral intents by motivating them to look at the coloured race from the view of morality. [Ferretti \(2020\)](#) investigates the novel from the perspective of its reception in Brazil. He conducts the refractory, ambiguous and enthusiastic reading of the novel deriving from the concept of Michel de Certeau. The conclusion drawn from this type of readings suggests that this work mediates between the fact and the fiction depending upon the perspectives of the readers. The positioning of the readers is important in verifying the originality and reality of the novel. His attempt also implies that the elements of realism can be explored from the novel if one is willing to find them, but it depends upon the intent of the reader.

[Dinius \(2020\)](#) tracks the novel's roots to Liberia in Africa and suggests that the focus of the characters in the novel for a nation has its roots in the cultural and political history of Liberia and that the imperialistic designs presented and criticized in the novel have also very much to do with the Liberian history. [Shea \(2021\)](#) conducted an idealist and materialist reading of the novel, suggesting that the novel mediates between the ideal and the real. Shea relates it with the abolitionary movement as it was viewed by the people during the antebellum period. There were people with different views. Some took it from the idealism point of view, while others considered it a materialistic approach towards anti-slavery.

[Smith \(2020\)](#) has tried to explore the novel from a completely different perspective, i.e. its maritime references in the narrative. He has tried to suggest that there are some specific moments in the novel that have been paid less attention but have significance in the working of its main theme, i.e. anti-slavery. Smith argues that the references to sailing and life on the water are basically to invoke maritime sentimentalism in the readers so that they feel attached to the work and are in a position to understand the text from a holistic perspective of domesticated work. Park (2020) has also adopted a different angle to study the novel, i.e. kitchen space as presented in the novel. Park suggests that there are at least three kitchen spaces used in the novel where characters seem to manifest themselves. Their manifestation gives a domestic understanding of the household as it was in the antebellum period, and it also signifies the places where issues of the outer society were deliberated upon. Hence, these kitchen spaces are not just the windows to look at the inner conditions of the houses but also the outer conditions of the society.

In order to explore the relationship between race, slavery and sentimentality, [Urakova \(2020\)](#) tries to study the novel's commodities, gifts and poisonous gifts. She argues that various things, material objects, in the novel are actually symbols that suggest how American society was interwoven. The issues of slavery and racism were on the ripe, which were given a specific sentimentality by Stowe in the novel so that the effect of the writing may be at a higher level.

The labelling of this novel as being sentimental is a way of conveying to the readers that these works were more fictional than real. But there are also researchers like [Halpern \(2018\)](#) who argues that the readings of this novel can be done in many ways. All of these ways would be effective in understanding the work from a different viewpoint. Halpern also suggests that Stowe, like other female anti-slavery writers, was a sentimentalist but did not have a room of its own in the field of rhetoric. Rather, she seems to solve the problems that other male writers could not, i.e. influence the masses emotionally. There is not much logic required from the writers in influencing the emotions of the readers. This is what has been done by writers like Stowe than the other popular anti-slavery male writers of that time.

The researches conducted on this novel seem to agree upon one thing at least, i.e. the sentimentality in the novel. This kind of labelling of the novel allows the researcher to investigate the novel in a different manner, i.e. juxtaposition of other factual accounts and the novel to see how much is real or fictitious. With this research gap, the researcher has conducted a new historical analysis of

the novel. New historicism is the theoretical perspective that gives equal weightage to literary and non-literary texts and suggests that both these types of texts can be studied in parallelism to each other. Therefore, the researcher has taken up the novel and the journalistic accounts of that time to see how both coincide with each other in narrating the actual condition of antebellum society.

Research Methodology

Following the interpretive paradigm, the research is qualitative in nature, for it relies on interpretations of the selected texts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The theoretical framework adopted for this research is new historicism which focuses on the study of literary text at par with the non-literary one in order to understand the historical condition of a specific period in a realistic manner (Greenblatt, 1980). The close reading of the selected text has been conducted; a method of analysis best suited for the study of literary texts that not only allows the readers to study the art and craft of the work but also the content from different interdisciplinary angles in order to understand it comprehensively (Fisher & Frey, 2014). This method of analysis is very helpful in integrating knowledge and ideas in order to develop meanings. As the researcher wanted to expand the discussion on the selected novel to explore how emancipatory thinking was developed through the work, close reading was the most suitable choice.

Results and Discussion

The novel that had helped in laying the groundwork for the American Civil War of 1861 is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, as remarked by [Kaufman \(2006\)](#). Abraham Lincoln's popular remarks, "So this is the little lady who started this Great War" ([Stowe, 1911, p. 203](#)), suggest the socio-political impact of the novel that stirred American society and also gave a solution to the anti-slavery movement. The debate ensued in the novel revolves around the Christian love and abolition of slavery of fellow human beings. The work is also suggestive that love conquers everything and that slavery, though an extremely painful and despising act of humans, can also be abolished through it. The novel juxtaposes two grand narratives side by side and asks the very basic question of permission of slavery in Christianity.

It is the story of a staunch Christian slave Tom and other characters that revolve around this central character. His master Shelby has to sell him due to his economic needs, and Tom is brought to Mr. Haley's place as a slave. Going on a boat to Mr. Haley, he looks at an angelic girl who falls into the river but is saved by Tom. Eva is the daughter of St. Clare, who purchases Tom from Haley and brings him to his settlement, where he develops a pure and Christian like relationship with Eva for two years till she dies. When Eva is ill, St. Clare pledges to free Tom but is killed, and Tom remains a slave. Tom is further sold to Legree, who is the real test of his faith in Christianity. Listening to the story of a slave woman Cassey, Tom helps her escape and is beaten to death on the orders of Legree. Towards the end of the novel, Shelby's son comes back to his home and finds Tom's cabin deserted. He tells everyone to remember Tom and his sacrifices for others and also resolves to spend the rest of his life as a true Christian. He also frees the rest of the slaves on the plantation. This tragic story shows Tom as the epitome of Christian faith, love, forbearance, sacrifice, tolerance, honesty and piety. In this story, there are black and white people. However, Stowe has shown that evil could also exist in the white people, who are not necessarily a trait of the black people. One of the remarkable things shown in the novel is that piety and Christian faith with its true following can also exist in the coloured people. Tom symbolizes what a good Christian can be in different circumstances. It is a revolutionary story that was never heard of before in literary texts. It was unconventional in the sense that the projection of a coloured person with such high morals was unthinkable in a society that infested in the slavery and abhorrence of the coloured people.

The development of emancipatory thinking is through the description of various situations and events in the novel, which coincide with the real descriptions of slavery in the journalistic writings during antebellum America. The journalistic writings like that of William Lloyd Garrison in his popular newspaper *The Liberator*, founded in 1831, are remarkable in depicting and describing the conditions of slavery in America. His journalistic accounts are among the forerunners of the abolitionists'

movement. His remarks in an address to the Colonization Society in 1829 bear testimony to his views of slavery in America:

I accuse her of suffering a large portion of her population to be lacerated, starved and plundered, without law and without justification, at the will of petty tyrants. I accuse her of trafficking in the bodies and souls of men, in a domestic way, to an extent nearly equal to the foreign slave trade, which traffic is equally atrocious with the foreign and almost as cruel in its operations. (Garrison, 1829)

The same kind of feelings and descriptions can also be found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where Stowe (1852) says, "The most dreadful part of slavery, to my mind, is its outrages of feelings and affections—the separating of families, for example" (p. 150). The trafficking in the bodies and souls within a country where they all live is similar to the foreign slave trading. Families are separated and pulled apart consistently without any consideration for their feelings and emotions. [Todras \(1999\)](#) also recounts the very words of Garrison of his writings in *The Liberator* in 1831 like, "No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;..." (p. 46). The situation of slavery that separates the man and woman from their family is described almost similar in both of these literary and non-literary writings. It is not just the emotional aspect of slavery that has been mentioned in the depiction of its evils; the physical bondage is also a major concern for both the writers.

Slavery is taken as a curse during antebellum time by all abolitionist writers. This view is clearly mentioned by [Stowe \(1852\)](#). "Yes Eliza, it's all misery, misery, misery! My life is bitter as wormwood; the very life is burning out of me. I'm a poor, miserable, forlorn drudge; I shall only drag you down with me, that's all" (p. 18). There is this consciousness among the blacks that they are living in hell and slavery is a curse. There are voices in the story that keeps on resounding that one day they will have to run away from this curse and get rid of the bondage where there are not at all humans. It is the depiction of the humans reduced to deplorable conditions during slavery and this very urge to get rid of this horrible act that develops a consciousness of emancipation among the readers. The resolution to be free one day is resounding in the works, and the readers get a hope that one day they will be saved from their condition.

Garrison is repetitive and determined in his resolve to speak out against slavery. His words in the newspaper that "I am in earnest — I will not equivocate — I will not excuse — I will not retreat a single inch — AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal and to hasten the resurrection of the dead" (as quoted in [Todras 1999](#), p. 46) are similar to the words of Stowe in the novel. [Stowe \(1852\)](#), through a slave character, exclaims, "witness, eternal God! Oh, witness that, from this hour, I will do *what one man can* drive out this curse of slavery from my land!" (p. 418). The resolve of the persons in the real world as well as the fictional world during the antebellum period are evidences that emancipatory thinking was not just developed through the ideas but also through the manifestations of the actions of the people. Garrison was also resolute through his words and actions while the slaves, except for Tom, were also willing to stand up against slavery and get rid of painful condition. These were the very resolutions that instigated the readers to be united and collective for the cause of abolition in the antebellum period.

There were also many other newspapers started by abolitionists during the antebellum period depicting the ills and evils of slavery and calling for its end. *Freedom's Journal* in 1827 was an attempt by Comish and Russwurm, *North Star* by Frederick Douglas in 1847, *Liberty* by Gerrit Smith in 1851, and *Spectator* in 1842 are just a few examples of leading newspapers deploring over the conditions of slavery in America and raising the voice for its end ([Shortell, 2004](#)).

The depiction of slavery and voicing for its end was the very ideas and details that distilled the people's emancipatory thinking and made them stand united. Beyond any doubt, there were also the sufferings of the people who worked for the development of slavery. Popular journalist Garrison was dragged in the streets, and there was a prize on his head as well. Stowe is also said to have worked in close collaboration with Garrison for the cause of the abolition of slavery (Jacobs, 1971). There are similar depictions of the ways and conditions of slaves in the newspapers as well as the narratives. For example, the presentations of sexual and physical abuses in *The Liberator* are similar to those of different characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Stowe. The description of slave woman Emmiline and her sexual abuse by Simon Legree is similar to the descriptions one can find in the newspapers. Even

the newspapers which belonged to different places in Southern America also had homogeneous descriptions of this very evil of slavery. However, one important feature of Stowe's sentimental novel and the non-literary accounts of slavery in the newspapers is that both of these types of writings do not just end up deploring the conditions of slavery, rather these also suggest ways out of these conditions. The novel shows that the characters opt to stand against these by rebelling against slavery. The journalist writings also raise voice and call the people to stand against slavery. This is how the emancipation consciousness is invoked and developed in the literary and non-literary works.

It is also to be mentioned here that literary writings like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* do not just develop emancipatory thinking like the journalists' writings. Rather, there are also other significant aspects of literary narratives. There is aestheticism that can otherwise not be found in non-literary texts. The literary texts ask questions that have not been addressed properly in journalistic writings. For example, the question of morality as it was raised in the novel could not be found in journalistic writing as effectively. The character of Tom was developed to be much more than merely a black slave. He was a voice of the black Christians who could be at a high level of piety even having black skins. The fueling for the emancipation of the blacks came very effectively, however, through literary works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by [Stowe \(1852\)](#).

Conclusion

A new historical analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Stowe suggests that the development of emancipatory thinking was the major concern of the writer. The objective had been achieved through different strategies applied in the novel. Primarily there is a real depiction and description of the conditions of slavery in the antebellum period. These descriptions can also be found in the journalistic writings of that time which attest to the truth of the narratives. Secondly, the writer engaged in raising a voice to get rid of slavery as the only viable option of survival in an antebellum society where all humans are free irrespective of their colours of skin. The characters in the novels are convinced towards the end that freedom of the blacks is the best possible way out of the chaos that had prevailed in American society for such a long period of time. In these efforts, it is not just the black characters involved, but there are also some white characters like Shelby in the novel who finds it the best option to free slaves for peaceful and amicable living. Thirdly, the pitching of slavery against the grand version of Christianity, which guarantees equal rights for all, is the melting point that could not be refuted by the Christian American society. There are such momentous descriptions and arguments presented in the work that makes the readers pause and think over their advocacy for the abolition of slavery. These strategies developed emancipatory thinking among the people that they finally stood united against it. The subsequent events in American history, particularly the Civil War of 1861, testified that the efforts of literary and non-literary writers and other abolitionist's workers bore fruit in acquiring the Emancipatory Proclamation of 1863. Without the development and infusion of this thinking, such historical drafts would not have been possible at all in American history.

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