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Abstract: The two hundred years of American slavery was a system rooted in the severe denial of human rights of the African Americans. In this paper I intend to examine the representations of human rights issues in the autobiographical writings of Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou. Jacobs’ ‘Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl’ and Angelou’s ‘I Know Why the caged Bird Sings’ are two texts written at a very crucial period of American history, - one during the Emancipation and the other during the Civil Rights Movement. Though hundred years separate the publication of the two texts, yet the central concern in both are the same - both recount the story about what it means to grow up black and female in the American South. The blatant suppression of rights during slavery, the failed promise of emancipation as Jim Crow laws are set in place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, are responsible for disproving the American Dream supposedly available to all. The narrators therefore increasingly find themselves imprisoned into a world of humiliation, violation, displacement and loss.

Keywords: Human Rights, Autobiography, Slavery, Reconstruction, Violation

The belief that all humans have rights and an inherent dignity that must be respected is not a concept that originated only in the writings of prominent figures of the European Enlightenment such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Hume and Locke. Human rights discourse has many and varied roots. For a variety of reasons, though, the history of human rights in the eighteenth century is too often limited to the Enlightenment. However, human rights concerns are also discerned in the works of earlier African American writers, because even during the heyday of Enlightenment the abuse of the rights of women, children, indigenous peoples, and the practice of Atlantic slave trade, were still glaringly evident. These concerns were ignored by dominant white culture because in the eighteenth century people of African origins were not even considered participants in the developing human rights conversation. Laurence Moredakai Thomas acknowledges the difficulty that eighteenth century whites may have had imagining blacks as speaking subjects because, “at the time of American Slavery, Africa was not thought to have had a central role in the history of moral and intellectual Western thought—not even, in fact, the role of a substantial footnote”. [1] This is very true from the many observations made by the Enlightenment philosophers. It will suffice to quote David Hume, one of the Scottish Moralists, who wrote in 1753 in his Of National Characters that:

I am apt to suspect the negroes ... to be naturally inferior to the whites ... Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; ... In Jamaica ... they talk of one negro as a man of arts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly. [2]

The long struggle of the African Americans is not only to liberate themselves from the shackles of slavery but also to make themselves heard, because only through the assertion of one’s voice one could hope to be treated as a human and, ultimately, as an American. To a large degree, this struggle is manifested in the literature of African Americans, particularly in their autobiographies. In this paper I intend to examine the representations of human rights issues in the autobiographical writings of Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), (written under the pseudonym Linda Brent) and Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969). I have chosen these two autobiographies because they chronicle the events of two significant historical periods from an African-American female perspective: Slavery, and Reconstruction. To analyze the issues in these two autobiographies by black women one has to keep in mind the thing that links them together: “Their common denominator ... derives ... from the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society at a specific moment and over succeeding generations” [3]. Thus, the discourse in the two texts serves twofold purpose: to persuade readers against forms of oppression relevant to African-American female experience at a specific time in history, and by doing so exposing the inadequacy and biasness of Americas Human Rights tradition.
For the black women, the violence, violation, and degradation possessed its own peculiarities and, as Jacobs testifies in her narrative, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women, Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own”. [4] It is striking that as early as the 1840s, Jacobs recognized the dual nature of her enslavement. It is even more significant that she recognized this duality long before the rise of women’s movement and at a time when African American women were being particularly dehumanized. Similarly, in *Caged Birds*, Angelou expresses her own particular dilemma caused by the triple oppression experienced by all black women, “The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power”. [5]

The laws which existed in nineteenth century American South attempted to deny slaves legal, political, or literary voice. Blacks could not testify against a white person, could not vote or petition the government. State laws varied, but throughout the South blacks generally were barred from learning, teaching, or practicing reading and writing. Under such rulings, many slaves learned to read and write and also taught others to do the same even though it involved physical dangers. In Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography, Linda breaks the law to teach Uncle Fred to read the Bible. She narrates, “I asked if (Uncle Fred) didn’t know it was contrary to law; and that slaves were whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read. This brought tears into his eyes”. [6]

Under slavery, the slave’s body also is regulated by laws involving sex, reproduction and family. These laws prove to be inconsistent and partial. For instance, interracial sex was banned, whereas interracial rape was not. Southern law generally failed to protect slave women from rape committed by fellow slaves, whereas; the rape of white women was punishable by death if the man convicted of the act was a slave. In 1859, the Mississippi court in *George vs. State* case argued that the rape of the black female was essentially not rape. “The crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves. Our laws recognize no marital rights as between slaves; their sexual intercourse is left to be regulated by their owners”. [7] In *Incidents* Linda writes about her plight as she is persistently pursued by her master Dr Flint who tries to possess her sexually:

I was compelled to live under the same roof with him--where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. [8]

Linda’s choice of a free black man as her lover and her wishes to marry him is frustrated because of a slave’s denial of any right to marriage. She mentions:

But when I reflected that I was a slave and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage of such, my heart sank within me. ... Even if (my lover) could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I should have been subjected to. And then, if we had children, I knew they must “follow the condition of the mother”. [9]

Linda questions the significance of a law that denies the African American their basic rights to protect their children and family. Later in the narrative she argues that the “virtue” of a slave woman is different from that of white woman, not because of nature, or essence, but because of legal status. White women have the protection of law, black women might be just as virtuous, but they face laws that prevent their exercise of virtue. When in pursuit of freedom, Linda conceals herself in her grandmother’s tiny garret she addresses the irony of the legal system that allows Dr Flint all freedom, while she who is guiltless of any crime remains confined in a narrow loft for seven years. When Linda relocates herself in the North and is aware of the Southern laws long arm, she exposes the criminal nature of the law. Even in the northern “free states” she becomes a victim of the “Fugitive Slave Act” and has to move from one hiding place to another. She writes, “I knew the law would decide that I was (Dr Flint’s) property, and would probably still give his daughter a claim to my children; but I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect”. [10]

Linda’s freedom at last is bought with money. She questions the compromised nature of her freedom in words which expresses her rage: “The bill of sale!” Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion’ [11]. In the same chapter Linda redirects her anger towards Northern racism and class division. She is made to ride in segregated trains and boats, stays in segregated hotels, and describes racist work rules and places. While travelling with her little charge she enjoys the advantage of the privileged class. She mentions, ‘Being in servitude to the Anglo-Saxon race, I was not put into a “Jim Crow car,” on our way to Rockaway, neither was I invited to ride through the streets on the top of trunks in a truck; but every where I found the same manifestations of that cruel prejudice, which so discourages the feelings, and represses the energies of the colored people.’ [12] She still lives in the position of servitude, even though love, duty, gratitude, binds her towards the woman who purchased her. It is now a lesser version of slavery. Because of poor economic status, she is devoid of a home of her own: “I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a
hearthstone of my own.” [13]. Her initial goal to free herself from the clutches of her licentious master has been achieved, but her right to live on her own terms is still denied.

Published in 1969, on the cusp between the Civil Rights and the women’s liberation movements, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, is one of the many texts that portray the pervasiveness and persistence of oppression in America in the 1940s and 50s. It is important to note that in its most essential aspect, slavery did not differ very much from the “formal freedoms” that were granted to black people in the United States. The full and unencumbered franchise was not granted to African Americans until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. The promises of Reconstruction ended in disappointment as opportunities for southern blacks constrained, Republican power declined, and constitutional guarantees vanished under the power of Supreme Court rulings.

As the nation turned its attention to the more northern concerns of industrialization, urbanization, and European immigration, the South was increasingly free to develop its own policies on race, and southern blacks found themselves isolated in poverty and oppression.

Caged Bird recounts Angelou’s life from the age of three to the age of sixteen; the first ten years of which were lived in Stamps, Arkansas, and the last three in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The world in which Angelou introduces us is one of humiliation, violation, displacement and loss — the deplorable condition into which African Americans were thrust upon due to the failure of the Reconstruction. Even eighty years after Emancipation the condition of the blacks was one of harshness and brutality. Debt bound many sharecroppers to the land almost as tightly as slavery had gripped slaves before the war. Angelou writes:

One man was going to pick two hundred pounds of cotton, and another three hundred. Even the children were promising to bring home fo’ bits and six bits. ... No matter how much they had picked, it wasn’t enough. Their wages wouldn’t even get them out of debt to my grandmother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown. [14]

Jim Crow laws were designed so that black people would never cross the line into white territory unless they were under strict control. Isolated in a racially segregated Southern town, Angelou narrates the innumerable denigration that makes the black man’s life one of humiliation. In chapter three of Caged Bird Angelou demonstrates the fear engendered by the Klux Klux Klan in their wonton killing of blacks and the utter humiliation which leaves her uncle Willie devoid of any agency when the Sheriff comes to inform them of the impending attack of the Klan. With the support of the South’s most influential citizens, the Klan continued its terrorism throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Angelou writes:

(The Sheriff’s) confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan’s coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear. Without waiting for Momma’s thanks, he rode out of the yard, sure that things were as they should be and that he was a gentle squire, saving those deserving serfs from the laws of the land, which he condoned. [15]

No one can deny that American “democracy” was built on the backs of its internally colonized racial and ethnic minorities, especially those of colour. Black Americans were denied rights to their own labour for almost 100 years on the grounds that they were, according to the Constitution, three-fifths of a man. Under such constrained opportunities, Angelou’s grandmother serves as a model of economic success for her to imitate. She owns a store, which survives the Great Depression of 1930’s and she loans money to whites. The judge unknowingly calls her Mrs Henderson because he thinks she is white as she is a store owner, even though as a black, she has no right in his eyes to own the title. The racial and class difference between the Blacks and Whites in the American South is so complete that it provokes Angelou to question the legitimacy of white’s right to property and wealth:

A light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white “things”— white folks’ cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable. ... I couldn’t understand whites and where they got the right to spend the money so lavishly. [16]

Angelou describes black rage in particularly powerful and compelling ways when during her graduation from eighth grade the black children as well as the entire black community are subjected to utter humiliation. Angelou believed that education is the key to success in the material world. But her dreams are shattered with the appearance of the visiting white commencement speaker from Texarkana. He promises the white children, though none were present in the audience, the most advanced educational opportunities. But he praises the black children for their excellence in basketball and football. This representative of American supremacy, informs the children of their predetermined destinies. Angelou writes:

The White kids were going to have the chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Garguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises. ... We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was fanciful and presumptuous. [17]

Angelou realizes the disparity between her desire to participate in the American Dream and the denial of her right by a society that defines her as inferior. A package for a utilitarian education is not what she aspires for, and it can only lead to despondency: “It was awful to be a Negro and have no control over my life”. [18] Angelou believes that the major crime of the dominant white society resides in its attempts to reduce all the
black community to a sense of impotence and nothingness. In Cudjoe’s opinion, ‘this is the internal “rust” that threatens the development of the personal identity of all black people in America. It is this internal suicidal tendency of an oppressive and racist society that pushes these young people to the brink of spiritual waste and physical destruction’. [19] For Angelou, a departure from this situation comes when her grandmother sends away Bailey and her to California to live with their mother and stepfather, and alternately with their father. The incident responsible for their final displacement from Stamps was Bailey’s discovery of the drowned black man. The scene traumatized Bailey so much that Momma realizes her beloved grandchildren are not physically safe in the explicitly racist South.

The last section of Caged Bird demonstrates Angelou’s development from innocence to awareness. As she becomes an adventurer in California, she reveals in the “air of collective displacement, the impermanence of life in wartime” [20] that allows her to overcome certain ideological values that were inscribed within the social fabric. By and by she learns to overcome the pervasiveness and naturalizing tendencies of these values. She adopt the strategies to subvert those institutional values and discourses that were meant to ensure her mental enslavement, and gradually gains access to the forbidden American Dream and on her own terms.

While the founding fathers of American Democracy were speaking about “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, in the same breath they were also speaking of African Americans as aliens and inferior. [21] [22] While the founding fathers of American Democracy were speaking about “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, in the same breath they were also speaking of African Americans as aliens and inferior, and thus unfit to enjoy the basic rights of a human being. An examination of the two autobiographies depict the individual’s and the community’s struggle to assert their human rights. When Jacobs retorts against her lecherous master, “Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?”, [21] she is actually subverting the dominant discourse about blacks being inferior and powerless. She is also constructing a new discourse on human rights which white hegemonic society have always disregarded. In a society based on human rights, human dignity consists not of acquiescence to hierarchical order but of equality and assertion of one’s claims to respect. Genuine democratic citizenship and human rights can only be established when differences are no longer the basis of subordination.

References

[10] Ibid., p. 145.
[12] Ibid., p. 137.
[13] Ibid., p. 156.
[16] Ibid., p. 49.
[17] Ibid., p. 179-180.
[18] Ibid., p. 180.