

## **Crusade Against the Wrong: Abolitionist Rhetoric in Anti-Slavery Speeches**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The abolitionist movement sought abolition of slavery in America. The movement made use of various means and strategies to circulate its anti-slavery views and enforce an immediate abolition of the inhuman system. Ranging from famous abolitionists and former slaves like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth to great political leaders like Abraham Lincoln, these people have brought their views to the large audience through their highly eloquent speeches. The abolitionists made frequent use of their oratory skills through their speeches. The present paper is an attempt towards an analysis of various facets of some of the famous speeches by well known abolitionists like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and William Lloyd Garrison. The paper will examine speeches like “Ain’t I a Woman”, “No Compromise with the Evil of Slavery” “What to the Slave is Fourth of July” and others. The anti-slavery rhetoric used by these orators to further the abolitionist cause will also be analyzed in the paper.

### **Key Words:**

Anti-slavery, abolitionism, Slave, Rhetoric, Pathos

Social change and literature share an intricate bond. One has been available for the service of another from time immemorial. Literature has often been an active means for the propagation of any changing perspective due to the performative aspect of language. It is in similar way that literature has served the anti-slavery cause throughout the world since the eighteenth century. Abolitionism, a movement solely dedicated to the eradication of slavery began in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Abolitionists sought to persuade general public against slavery, to hasten its abolition. Speeches, pamphlets, newspapers, and books play a significant role in social movements and were similarly employed in the abolitionist movement. The contemporary times which lacked the sustainable means of propaganda

like the present-day social media, made frequent use of public platforms through their highly eloquent oratory powers.

The Nineteenth century slave narratives were one of the crusaders of the anti-slavery drive in America. The genre motivated a vast number of fictional literatures on the topic. Neo-slave narratives are the literary upshot of slave narratives which keep on making a mark on the literary scene till the present. The supporters of slavery equally manifested the cause through literature. However, the propagators of slavery were met with an equally determined opposition from the anti-slavery fraction of the society.

A large scale institution like slavery had an impact on every aspect of

American society. In order to persuade people towards the abolition of slavery, abolitionists appealed to the various facets of slavery which impinged on the life of a slave. Addressing public through speech was a direct means to fight against slavery. Women rights activists and fugitive slaves also joined this crusade against slavery and appealed against the atrocities of slavery shared by slaves and specifically the plight of slave women by speaking at various platforms. The present paper takes into consideration four anti-slavery speeches which pleaded the anti-slavery cause. The four speeches taken for deliberation are by Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, and Abraham Lincoln.

Rhetoric plays an important role in any social movement. Classical Greek Philosopher Aristotle in his work "Art of Rhetoric" deals with the art of persuasion. In the work he claims that ethos, pathos, and logos are the prominent means of persuading people. The philosopher describes ethos, pathos and logos respectively as credibility of the speaker's character, the emotional plea, and the logical facts or arguments respectively. The importance of Aristotle's postulation has been uncontested throughout centuries. Every oratory and literary work makes successful use of the trio to win over an argument. Modern day scholars and philosophers have further explored the importance of rhetoric. It is in keeping with it that J. A Herrick postulates the power of "rhetoric to assist advocacy" (16). It is a means through which we propagate our beliefs. James Herrick holds that power and rhetoric share an important relationship. To him rhetoric is a source of personal, psychological and political power. In relation to African Americans these speeches provided them not only a platform but were also a means of empowerment against the helplessness of slavery. Through

their speeches they indirectly inspired the Black slaves toiling in servitude and racism, as Herrick says, "In addition to its capacity to affect action, rhetoric is a means by which one person alters the psychological world of another" (18).

"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" is an epitome of anti-slavery speech in the abolitionist circle. It was delivered by Frederick Douglass on 5th July 1852 in New York. As the title of the speech asserts, Douglass illuminates the connotations of America's Independence Day to a slave. He very specifically says that it's a day "that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim" (68). Douglass in his speech addresses the issue of atrocities of slavery as witnessed by him. The whole speech of Douglass hinges upon two words, freedom and liberty. Douglass starts his address with an expression of his oratory incapacity due to a slave's illiteracy. Through it he emphasizes the deprecating impact of slavery as he says that his speech evinces "no elaborate preparation, nor... any high-sounding exordium..." as he has put his "thoughts hastily and imperfectly together" due to "little experience and... less learning" (58). It comprises of his first argument against the atrocities of slavery. This assertion works in the favour of the speaker and tries to appeal to the audience emotionally.

Furthermore, in order to rouse the sympathy of White public against the oppression of slaves, Douglass employs the discourse of oppression and oppressed very wittily on the event of Independence Day of America. What could be more appropriate platform for the enunciation of the cause of liberty of the oppressed than Independence Day? He tries to equate the present injustices meted out on slaves to the oppression faced by colonial America under the foreign reign of England. The cause of

emancipation of slaves is espoused through the motif of America's political freedom. His appreciation of change and revolution paves the way for the much anticipated cause of abolitionist action on slavery.

In his speech Douglass presents slavery as a blotch in the country's fame. While on the one hand Douglass praises the nation for its progressive journey from the prerevolutionary period to the contemporary times, on the other hand he terms the present as "degenerate times" for its "sin of slavery" (62). Douglass also does not refrain from the use of Biblical references like other abolitionist discourse. He puts Bible and Constitution on the same pedestal to enforce his claims to freedom both from political as well as spiritual stand point. He indirectly compares the present American generation to biblical Jacob who boasts having Abraham for the father "when they had long lost Abraham's faith and spirit" (64). Douglass claims the difference between White Americans and Black slaves, where the latter do not share the spirit of independence of the rest of the nation. He stresses his inability to join the celebration of the nation's independence when his brethren are struggling in the chains of servitude.

In keeping with Aristotle's tradition Douglass makes elaborate use of logos or facts to emphasize the injustices suffered by a slave. As a perfectly rational man his pleas do not lack logic and reasoning. The pronouncements of state laws serve as his witness to the elaborate oppression of the slave. He says "There are seventy-two crimes in the state of Virginia, which if committed by a Black man, (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of the same crimes will subject a White man to the like punishment" (66).

In order to break the myth

of savageness and lack of reasoning in Africans, he elucidates several fields of learning where Blacks have proved their mettle. It serves as his rational argument for granting Blacks with liberty. The elaborate picture of slave market in his speech emphasizes the pathos of slavery as he elucidates "There see the old man, with locks thinned and gray. Cast one glance, if you please, upon that young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun... See, too, that girl of thirteen, weeping, yes! Weeping, as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn!" (69).

The oratory at times takes the form of religious sermon with several prophetic quotations and sayings of several religious leaders. He tries to encourage and persuade with his enthusiastic words every religious institution to stand against slavery, "Let the religious press, the pulpit, the Sunday school, the conference meeting, the great ecclesiastical, missionary, Bible and tract associations of the land array their immense powers against slavery and slave-holding" (75).

He makes use of literary works to enforce his cause and like a perfect orator, quotes from famous contemporary poets. He forms several analogies in the process of his speech. He compares a nation to a river which though exuberant with energy and force, dries up with time. His comparison asserts the "departed glory" of America which is engulfed in the clutches of slavery. Douglass also makes use of the colonizer-colonized binary to persuade his audience of the injustices of the system of slavery. The elaborate use of poetic language marks Douglass rhetoric separate from other abolitionists. Douglass through his speech makes an elaborate display of his knowledge and intellectual exuberance.

Arthur L. Smith in *Rhetoric of Black Revolution* shares four strategies associated

with Black movements. These are Vilification, Objectification, Mythification and Legitimation. i.e., “vilifying their oppressors, objectifying their enemy as a specific person or institution, mythifying their positions through reliance on Black assimilation of the biblical themes of oppression and redemption, and legitimizing their aggressive actions to counter oppression” (Kent 51).

These strategies are also visible in Douglass’s address. Douglass here condemns slavery as their oppressor, as he states that his subject is “American Slavery” the “great sin and shame of America” (66). The second stage of objectification corresponds with his condemnation of racism and other factors which are the enemies of Blacks. In his criticism of slavery, the nation USA does not escape the rebuke. He daringly exposes America’s hypocrisy and barbarity saying, “America reigns without a rival” amongst “all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world” (68). Internal slave trade which flourished during the period is also at the target of his rebuke. He calls it against the laws of nature. He calls the southern states as “man drover” which robs a human being of their humanity. He attacks the fugitive slave laws passed by American Congress. American legislation is also at his target. Religious bigotry of racist population who justify slavery for Africans is shamed. He holds American church guilty for its validation of slavery. At several occasions he makes use of bible to validate his stance which highlights the ‘Mythification’. He says that any “business, if I have any here to-day, is with the present. The accepted time with God and his cause is the ever-living now” (63). And the final stage is evident in his legitimization of his actions as he very tactfully validates his stance asserting that the oppression of slaves need no elucidation as “what, am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to

rob them of their liberty... to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh... Must I argue that a system thus marked with blood and stained with pollution is wrong? No, I will not” (67).

He further uses “Declaration of Independence” to assert the emancipation plea. He implores the audience that constitution is misinterpreted by people and questions its sanction of slavery. He calls it a “GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT” (79). He avers that slave and slaveholding have no mention in the highly esteemed document. Through his statement he presses the charge of unconstitutional nature of slavery in the nation.

Douglass ends his speech on the optimistic note saying “I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery” (73) and claims that in order to move on the path of progress it must discard old practices. The speech follows a cyclical pattern and ends on the similar note of elucidation of the progress of the world and anticipates a brighter future filled with emancipating freedom.

The often-sidelined experience of slave women was also an important part of the abolitionist drive. One such prominent voice looking for the upliftment of women of colour and slaves was Sojourner Truth. Truth whose entire life in slavery was marked by her resolute will and audacity, left an indelible mark in her abolitionist fight as well as in her struggle for women’s rights. Sojourner Truth’s role as an activist has been applauded by famous abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips and Harriet Beecher Stowe (Patton 2).

The role of women in abolitionist movement cannot be ignored even though the field of public speaking was dominated

largely by males (Books 254). The social environment as well did not work in the favour of women abolitionists. As Books states "Abolitionist women faced a 'status bind' arising from nineteenth-century gender beliefs and practices" which demanded that women should be silent and subordinate and if they "raise grievances in public" they risked becoming "immodest and unbecoming" (239).

Sojourner Truth irrespective of all the limitations made profound use of this platform to voice the anti-slavery cause. She belongs to that class of women who was herself a fugitive slave and an activist for the rights of Black women. Her widely known speech titled "Ain't I a Woman" addresses the similar issue. Sojourner Truth in her well-known speech "Aint I a Woman" addresses the cause of coloured as well as slave women. The much sought-after notion of womanhood and femininity of the nineteenth century finds an echo in her address. Truth's assertion that "twixt the negroes of the South and women at the North all talking about rights" (48) suggests her questioning of the absence of the voices demanding the rights of Black women. She questions the prevalent notions of womanhood in the light of the inhuman treatment of slave woman. The lack of concern for the condition of African American women is interestingly brought forward by Truth when she says "Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or give any best place! Ain't I a Woman" (48). Truth uses her personal life to espouse the cause of women's rights and abolition of slavery. Through brilliant use of pathos and logos Truth seeks to further the cause of coloured women. Truth in her espousal of the women's rights brings attention to the three layered oppression of Black women. Through a single platform she raises the issue of the triangle of the oppression of race, gender and class.

The religiosity of Truth's conduct finds a vivid manifestation in her speeches. Feminist voice of Truth also inverts the ancient stigma and taboo attributed to Eve since time immemorial. She says "if the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them" (48). Truth here not only uses bible as her reference but also tries to instill courage in the drooping spirits of women around the world. Such perception was unprecedented at the time. Neil A. Patton underscores the role of spirituality in the speeches of Sojourner Truth. He avers that "system of slavery as a violation of scriptural law" (3). Her rhetorical powers show her conviction (Patton 3).

Truth in her speech questions the gender essentialism and age-old orthodox notions of femininity through her own example. Being a slave, she cites her own example and very powerfully vindicates her position. Her rhetoric is quite distinct from other Black and White abolitionists. Truth's individual personality lent a distinct appeal to her public speaking despite her illiteracy. Her colloquial and straight forward manner of speaking is the highlight of her oration. Parker Pillsbury highlights it as her "rude eloquence" (qtd in. Patton 3).

Books in his study "Angry Abolitionists & the Rhetoric of Slavery" asserts that three common rhetorical frames are found in abolitionist writing namely sentimental frame, republican frame and protestant frame. He describes sentimental frame as that which "problematizes slavery because of its cruelty and inhumanity" (94), the republican frame according to him "presents slavery as a social problem because it goes against values of equal rights and liberty" and lastly "Protestant frame constructs slavery as a sin...which should

be repented immediately” (95). All of the selected speeches employ these frames to an extent to enforce the eradication of slavery.

William Lloyd Garrison was one of the crusaders of the abolitionist movement in America. He was an important link in the abolitionist movement. His importance in the anti-slavery movement can be estimated from Eugene V. Debs’ assertion who says “When Garrison demanded the abolition of the African — the negro slaves — in the United States, ‘public opinion,’ to an extent a defying exaggeration, was against him. He had no support from church or press, except to an extent too limited to command any respect whatever.” (491)

“No Compromise with Slavery” is Garrison’s one of the famous speeches furthering the similar cause. Garrison begins his speech claiming his belief in the inalienable right of every human being to freedom. In his sentiments we find an echo of the indefensible nature of slavery as asserted by Douglass. Declaration of Independence forms the crux of Garrison’s speech as he validates its claim “that all men are created equal” (n.pag). Majority of abolitionists made use of the declaration of independence in order to justify or discard slavery. Some of the abolitionists believed in the pro slavery character of the US constitution while some were against it. It was the similar ideology which was the cause of rift between Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison in the later years of their career (Smith).

Garrison derides the inhuman treatment of slaves in his speech. He gives spiritual value to the abolitionist movement saying that by not following the cause “he will degrade [his] manhood and stain... soul” (n.pag). His oration has a religious and spiritual overtone. He metaphorically compares freedom to God and slavery to sin, a highly frequent comparison in

the abolitionist circles. It is the spiritual connotations of his speech which he knew would definitely persuade the audience. By placing slavery in equality to a sin the abolitionist sought to persuade the audience that “It [slavery] broke the laws of God” (Matthews 168). He like Douglass invalidates the church and institutions which sanction slavery and makes use of “protestant frame”. He also brings about the topic of antagonism between the North and the South over the issue of slavery. He blames the lack of commitment of the North to the issue of slavery, whose sole concern is to maintain the union and not the abolition of slavery. The political aim for the nation is part of Garrison’s critique. In the tone of a perfect politicians, he calls himself and others “Friends of the slave”, who will try to abolish slavery through the best of their efforts. Garrison compares slavery indirectly to anarchy or madness when he says that if slaves are not human beings, then he is “undeniably mad” (n.pag).

His speech provides a picturesque description of the agonies of a slave, and enriches its appeal through pathos. His speech not only has the element of sentimentalism but also rationalism. The reference of slave codes which make a slave liable “reputed and adjudged in law to be chattel personal in hand of their owners and possessors”(n.pag) serves as the logos.

Garrison builds his argument with the support of religion as well as spirituality. In order to persuade the audience about common humanity of slaves he makes use of Christian theology. He says “Christ is within many of them ‘the hope of glory’; then, when I claim for them all that we claim for ourselves, because we are created in the image of God” (n.pag). His speech ends on an exuberant note with a cry for abolition of slavery, their love and preference for humanity, “No compromise with slavery! Liberty for each, for all, forever! Man

above all institutions! The supremacy of God over the whole earth!" (n.pag).

Abraham Lincoln, the president of the U.S.A, under whose presidency the country abolished slavery, was also an important part of the abolitionist movement. Though the opinions of scholars are divided on the subject, but Lincoln consistently made use of anti-slavery oratory to further his political cause. A large number of his speeches have interestingly dealt with the issue of slavery especially when the nation was on the brink of the Civil War. Slavery makes a viable presence in his speeches as a part of his political manifesto as well. And the political strain is ever present in his denunciation of slavery.

Lincoln's speech on slavery of 1858 highlights his preoccupation with the cause of slavery. The ever present religious sanction to the anti-slavery cause begins Lincoln's address with the mention of our "Father in Heaven". He intersects his speech with a fable like analogy where ants defend their product of much toiled labour. However, the religious and spiritual motif that is ever present in the denunciation of slavery by abolitionists and fugitive slaves fades away in his rhetoric. He tries to persuade his audience in the name of the unity of the nation. Even his house divided speech makes use of slavery as a cause for the instability of the nation, and his nationalist sentiments take predominance over his disapproval of slavery and evils pertaining to it are sidelined. The declaration of independence which asserts the rights of every citizen in the country is used as primary weapon by Lincoln. Propensity for a welfare state is one amongst his chief arguments. This individual trait in Lincoln's anti-slavery rhetoric can be deduced to the fact of his position of a political representative. Lincoln also tries to have a sway over the audience through use of emotional appeal.

However, the emotional content in his speech has much less presence and sway.

Scholars of abolitionism insist that there exists difference between the rhetoric of Black and White abolitionists. The appeals of Black abolitionists were highly subjective and credible due to their firsthand experience of racism. Benjamin Books highlights the basic differences between the Blacks and Whites abolitionism stating that the former devoted to the cause of elimination racial prejudice as well as slavery while the latter at times values abolition of slavery but not the racism (135). This variation of point of view can be perceived in Lincoln's speech as well.

The majority of abolitionists in their speeches disapprove of racist claims like the lack of cognitive skills in slaves. However, Lincoln doesn't refrain from hypothetically assuming the racial character of Black slaves. Even though for a moment only but Lincoln hypothetically takes into consideration the racist claims regarding the ignorance of slaves and their much-deprived state in slavery. The pernicious influence of slavery is asserted by Lincoln as the sole cause of all the depravity of slaves.

Throughout his speech Lincoln supports the cause of abolition of slavery. However, he also keeps in sight the lingering presence of the institution throughout his oration. The most appealing argument put forward by him is the questioning of slavery from a subjective position. He avers "though volumes upon volumes is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it" (n.pag). Much of his argument centers on the deprivation of the slaves from the fruits of their labour. Here Lincoln's passion for economic rights and accessibility to the fruit of one's labour finds vibrant manifestation. These Marxist echoes at time overpower the pathetic

and sentimental appeals so evident in Black abolitionism. Lincoln's appeal has a rational base and is firmly rooted on logos.

The trait of a politician is not absent in Lincoln's speech. His arguments against slavery lack the enthusiasm found in other abolitionists. Historians like Norman A. Graebner and Gerald Sorin were of the view that Lincoln and others did not share the zeal of the abolitionists. As we can see in his speech that he nowhere condemns the slave owners but all his criticisms were directed to the institution. All this is done to avoid angering a section of the population.

These speeches along with "freedom suits" worked as a part of "non-violent tactics" employed by abolitionists and characterized their protest ("African

American Abolitionists Tactics"). All the four abolitionists i.e., Garrison, Truth, Douglass, and Lincoln make brilliant use of emotional as well as logical arguments in their abolitionist discourse. The eminent characters of the speakers characteristically serve as ethos in their rhetoric. Spiritual life which was at the heart of the nineteenth century life also has extraordinary presence in their orations. The profession of abolitionists demanded them to speak in the words of their individual audience that would rouse favorable response from them (Matthews 167). Though the core of their arguments remains the same the intensity of their assertion depended on their personal conviction to the notion that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" ("Universal Declaration of Human Rights").

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