
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

African-American Literature and Slavery in Saudi Arabia: A Literary-Historical Analysis Using Critical Race Theory

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| ABSTRACT

Literature and life influence and mirror each other so profoundly that the line between fact and fiction is often blurred. This study examines how the anti-slavery literary tradition of mid-twentieth century shared a complimentary relationship with international slavery abolitionist efforts, most notably the transnational efforts of the British Anti-Slavery Society to abolish Saudi slave trade during the 1950s taking vantage of Bell's Critical Race Theory. Decolonization of Saudi Arabia at this time led to sustained tensions between human rights advocacy and assertions of national sovereignty which sparked a global humanitarian debate. The primary data in the study comes from two narrative sources: One, archival texts including Saudi diplomatic correspondence, United Nations records, consular reports, and contemporaneous government statements. Two, three contemporary novels viz., *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*, and *Black Boy* are included as samples of a parallel literary tradition in African-American literature within which these political efforts are mirrored. With articulations on racism, bondage, and morality, these texts are treated not merely as socio-cultural artifacts but also as theoretical interventions that informed social and political interpretations of slavery. Analyses indicate collapse of anti-slavery mechanisms despite freedom of Saudi Arabia until transnational and inter-racial coalitions mediated through literary imagination to construct human rights narratives that influenced policy debates on abolitionism an eventually enforced abolition of slavery.

| KEYWORDS

Critical Race Theory, Saudi Arabia, African-American literature, Critical narrative, British Anti-Slavery Society, Transnational activism, Human rights

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 18 December 2024

PUBLISHED: 30 December 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.12.30

1. Introduction: Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory was founded by Derrick Bell in the 1970s and 80s who propounded that racial progress is an exclusive outcome of gains for white elites. Through groundbreaking works such as *Race, Racism, and American Law* (1973) and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), Bell critiqued the limits of civil rights legal reforms. The angle of intersectionality was added to this potent theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw who established the cross-connections of race, gender, and class in systems of oppression. These and theorists such as Richard Delgado used storytelling and counter-storytelling as methods in legal scholarship. The hate speech law and social justice were taken up by Mari Matsuda who is among the first generation of CRT scholars. In exploring race through law, culture, and lived experience Patricia Williams introduced personal narrative into legal scholarship, combining legal theory, autobiography, and narrative. Together, these activist-theorist-writers brought about a major intellectual movement in law, sociology, education, and cultural studies.

Mid-twentieth century witnessed rapid expansion of a global human rights framework founded on principles of universal dignity and freedom. Following World War II, international organizations such as United Nations institutionalized prohibition of racial discrimination, forced labor, and other prevalent injustices. But implementation of this moral order worldwide was politically confined and not uniform (King, 2021). Although waves of decolonization were gaining momentum and civil rights movements were becoming more powerful in the United States, slavery and bonded labor continued to exist unchallenged in some regions of the Arabian Peninsula such as Saudi Arabia, where it was not formally abolished until much later in 1962 (Craemer et al., 2020). Lack of universality in rights and freedom were signs of contradiction in the geopolitics of postwar internationalism. Abolition of slavery was made possible with the help of certain instruments such as Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery in 1956. This broadened the scope of previous anti-slavery commitments and aimed to combat new, legal and economic forms of slavery. Nevertheless, enforcement mechanisms were still weak particularly where strategic interests and alliances mandated by the Cold War curtailed external influence (Maulana, 2025). Increasing geopolitical significance of Saudi Arabia made abolitionist intervention more complex and revealed the weakness of international law when faced with the issues of sovereignty and energy politics. At the same time, African-American authors were producing literature that challenged modern racialism, structural violence, and subjective experience of limited citizenship. Works like *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*, and *Black Boy* expressed potent issues of invisibility, institutional oppression, and delayed justice in the U.S. (Rahim et al., 2023). These writings occurred during a historical period when local civil rights movements were becoming more connected with debates on issues of colonialism and freedom in the world. The ethical discourse that was produced as part of the African-American literary culture not only stirred domestic political circles but also influenced the interpretation of injustice in other countries (Challenger et al., 2020).

This study's hypothesis is that African-American literature produced in the middle of the 20th century was not only a cultural repository but also a theory in human rights. These novels, the study argues, generated analytical vocabularies for understanding social invisibility, systemic violence, moral witnessing, and constrained agency. This conceptualization also shaped transnational interpretations of Saudi slavery in the 1950s. Moving beyond a narrowly diplomatic history of abolition, the study establishes African-American fiction as an interpretive lens through which American activists and journalists perceived Saudi slavery. By combining close literary analysis with archival research these novels operated as theoretical interventions that shaped abolitionist narratives and coalitional human rights visions.

1.1 Research Questions

- How do African-American novels of the mid-twentieth century conceptualize freedom, racial violence, and moral responsibility?
- How are freedom, racial violence, and moral responsibility mobilized in discussions of Saudi slavery in African-American novels?
- In what ways do African-American literary frameworks influence press coverage and activist interpretations of the Saudi slave trade?
- Why did the British Anti-Slavery Society's diplomatic campaign succeed symbolically but failed institutionally?
- What was the role of literary-inflected critical narratives in sustaining abolitionist momentum?
- How do African-American and American-Jewish activists deploy literary conceptions of visibility and injustice to challenge U.S.-Saudi political alignment?
- What does the convergence of literature and activism reveal about the formation of global human rights consciousness in the postwar era?

2. Related Works

This section presents a literature review of three overlapping academic disciplines, including histories of abolition from diplomatic archives, African-American literary criticism, and Black internationalism. Collectively, the works indicate how slavery and its legacies were/are formulated by legal definitions, imperial rule, racial capitalism, and epistemic power. They all conceptualize abolition and human rights not as a progressive process but as a political, cultural, and transnational contestation.

2.1 Diplomatic Histories of Abolition

The 1926 Slavery Convention viewed through the prism of feminist law the claim of its authors that gendered and sexualized aspects of slavery were initially more broadly reflected in international law and only later enforced by other methods. Sellers and Kestenbaum (2020) emphasized that sexual violence and forced reproduction were part of slavery and these acts were pushed to the periphery of jurisprudence. In this study, abolition is interpreted as a juridical matter confined to institutional and definitional politics.

Gevers (2022) placed the 1926 Convention in the context of colonial rule and racial capitalism saying that international law re-created slavery to justify imperial rule. The author connects the native labor code of the International Labour Organization (ILO) with abolition by showing how forced labor continued under colonial rule. Abolition, therefore, seems to be part of the imperial economic organization rather than a moral development.

2.2 African-American Literary Criticism

Stéphane (2020) analyzed *Invisible Man* in terms of visibility and perception. This study states that it is the white supremacist distortion that makes people racially invisible, and not the lack of it. Racial hierarchy imposes an ontological crisis that is revealed in the novel.

Based on Du Bois's concept of doubled consciousness, Mustafa (2024) examined how identity is formed in African-American literature as a conflict between conceptualization of the self and racial identity. Through the agencies of memory and trauma, these texts bargain with the historical past of slavery. In this sense, literature becomes a source of rediscovery of agency in structured oppression.

Lupino (2024) studied the *Invisible Man* from a "trickster approach" against the portrayal of a nobler man in the protagonist. He treats invisibility as strategic resistance based on irony and evasion. The novel is therefore, associated with democratic improvisation and political agency.

2.3 Black Internationalism and Human Rights

El Zein (2021) analyzed racial constructions in the MENA/SWANA region and related anti-Blackness and migrant exploitation to the aftershocks of slavery. This contextualizes territorial racial order in an imperial world history. Black internationalism is extended to Middle East settings in this analysis.

Gyamfi (2021) followed the intellectual impact of Ghanaian scholars on U.S. Black Studies who focused on Pan-African perspectives of thought in the context of Cold War. They established networks that connected local civil rights movements to anti-colonial movements all around the world. They shaped the trajectory of Black Studies, enabling an international understanding of the Black diaspora.

Based on disability studies and African Renaissance, Ned (2022) criticized the Global North epistemological dominance. This study focused on African theorization and attacked neo-colonial knowledge formations. The discussion of justice is restructured as an epistemic sovereignty struggle in the inequity of the world in this study.

3. Methodology

This research combines comparative literary analysis and archivist historical analysis in a transnational paradigm. The study identifies common moral vocabularies across cultures and geopolitics from conceptual categories within the African-American novels and maps them on the diplomatic and institutional records. Simultaneously, abolition is conceptualized as a narrative construction as well as a process of strategic politics.

3.1 Comparative Literary-Archival Design

The study is organized in an interdisciplinary qualitative framework which juxtaposes literary criticism with diplomatic and archival history. African-American novels and political and institutional documents of the mid-twentieth century are shown to have commonalities. In doing so, archival texts like diplomatic letters and foreign documents are analyzed in their historical context conditioned by Cold War geopolitics and postcolonial sovereignty of nations. This facilitates determination of common conceptual vocabularies between aesthetic and political discourses. The method thus transcends disciplinary limits in following

the flow of moral language manifested in cultural and diplomatic texts. This comparative framework forms the basis of transnational understanding of abolition and human rights (Goodwill et al., 2021).

3.2 Literary Concept Extraction

Close reading serves as the primary method for extracting recurring concepts from selected African-American novels, approaching these texts as theoretical frameworks rather than solely artistic expressions. Through careful attention to narrative voice, symbolism, characterization, and thematic development, core structures of racial experience and moral critique become visible. Five interrelated conceptual categories emerge: *invisibility*, *systemic violence*, *constrained agency*, *moral witnessing*, and *deferred justice*. Invisibility denotes the condition of being socially present yet institutionally erased; systemic violence identifies harm embedded within legal, economic, and social institutions; constrained agency captures the limited range of action available within racial hierarchies; moral witnessing frames narration as ethical testimony; and deferred justice reflects the enduring gap between democratic promise and material equality.

Native Son describes structural entrapment resulting in the creation of limited agency and normalized violence as the logics behind deferred justice. *Invisible Man* defines invisibility as a systemic misrecognition that demonstrates how democratic inclusion is an unstable phenomenon. *Black Boy* anticipates institutional violence and epistemic limitation, treating autobiographical narration as the act of witnessing racism. Literature of the period does not stop being didactic with these three works. *The Street* discusses gendered "constrained agency" under the oppression of racism, capitalism, sexism whereas *Go Tell It on the Mountain* ties the struggle of the spirit to the overall history of race. Lastly, deferred justice in *A Raisin in the Sun* is expressed in the form of segregation of housing and economic marginalization of Blacks while upholding the importance of dignity despite structural oppression. Together, these readings produce a conceptual tool to analyze racism at historical and transnational levels (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020).

3.3 Archival Historical Analysis

Archival historical analysis in this study uses primary diplomatic and institutional sources to re-create the ways in which Saudi slavery was presented in the international discourse in the middle of the twentieth century. By conducting a qualitative analysis of rhetoric, silence, and justification strategies, archives can be analyzed as narratives influenced by Cold War geopolitics and postcolonial sovereignty.

Saudi Diplomatic Correspondence: Saudi diplomatic correspondence was examined to find the state's position and interpret the defensive language of rhetoric and reform discourses. These texts demonstrate the way sovereignty and modernization were used in response to foreign criticism. They shed light on the internal and external stresses of diplomatic communication.

United Nations Records: Resolutions, debates, and committee discussions on slavery and human rights were analyzed to place Saudi abolition of slavery in the context of international law. They are part of the way in which global institutions conceive moral responsibility.

British Consular Reports: These were studied to evaluate external observations and colonial intelligence appraisals of the time. These reports give an idea of geographical interests and strategy analysis. They also demonstrate the connection of abolition to the issue of regional stability.

Government Statements: Governmental declarations and policy announcements were examined to trace changes in the official discourse. These writings portray the way in which reform was being projected both locally and abroad. They show the performative aspect of abolition.

African-American Press Coverage: Press coverage was explored to establish how Saudi slavery was talked about in the black community of the US. These sources demonstrate links between local criticism of racism and international problems of human rights. They show how the events that happened around the world were perceived in terms of racial justice.

American-Jewish Congress Publications: These were read to understand the existence of slavery against the wider human rights movements and advocacy. These sources put Saudi slavery in perspective in terms of world moral activism. They demonstrate that transnational networks magnified the problem in the discourse of the U.S. (Dhahir, 2023).

Discourse Mapping

Discourse mapping represents a method of establishing an analytical relationship between literary understanding and archival research by following conceptual intersections between African-American fiction and political rhetoric. The fundamental themes of invisibility, systemic violence, limited agency, moral witnessing, and delayed justice are followed throughout novels, activist literature, diplomatic speeches, and international discourses. Literary commentaries on structural injustice in the novels included in this study are discussed along with diplomatic rhetoric of sovereignty, reform, and humanitarian accountability. This comparison explains how political rhetoric reproduces, recreates, or silences literary critiques. Through this identification, discourse mapping reveals the conflict between moral attribution and strategic politics on the domestic and transnational levels (Alderman et al., 2021).

3.4 Transnational Analytical Application

Certain conceptual categories are generated as a result of the analysis of the African-American literature. These include invisibility, systemic violence, and deferred justice, attributable to the Saudi archival resources. As a tool in historical analysis, literary theory can merge aesthetic criticism and geopolitical rhetoric in a single framework and allow a cross-border understanding of abolition as both a narrative composition and a political episode. Following the similarities between segregation back home and lack of freedom overseas, the analysis of U.S and Cold War human rights politics shows how the discourse of civil rights was used to guide international moral activity (Gradszkova, 2020).

4. Results and discussion

Results indicate that relations between diplomacy, literature, and transnational activism were dynamic in the middle of the twentieth century and instrumental in organization of abolitionist discourse at that time. Although international conventions denounced slavery, geopolitical and sovereignty factors reduced this denunciation to being largely symbolic. At the same time, African-American literary patterns provided ethical lexicons that kept the masses engaged. These accounts were transferred into activist language, repositioning Saudi slavery as part of global racial justice mobilization and adding to more general human rights awareness.

4.1 Symbolic Success, Institutional Failure

The move towards adoption of the 1956 Supplementary Convention was a formal milestone in the internationalization of the issue of Saudi slavery. With slavery and slave trading being a part of the growing postwar human rights sensitivity, the Convention made what has traditionally been a domestic or regional issue an international one. The presence of advocacy networks between the British Anti-Slavery Society, the African-American press, and the American-Jewish Congress was a key element that helped to push this reframing. According to DeAntonis (2020), long-term transnational pressures served to place Saudi slavery on the agenda of international institutions' universal norms against slavery. In this regard, the Convention was symbolic: it enshrined the moral consensus of the world's countries and officially stated that slavery in any place could not be reconciled with the new legal practices of the postwar world.

Nevertheless, the institutional structure of the Convention constrained actual implementation of these norms. Although it expressed an explicit ban, it did not have effective enforcement procedures, surveillance, or effective punitive sanctions to implement it. As the example of the involvement of UN human rights agencies in the problem of trafficking and modern-day slavery in Saudi Arabia (Alkharji, 2023) demonstrates in the context of the larger picture, international control had to rely on the collaboration of the states and international persuasion, instead of mandated regulation. The weakness of this structure implied that, as much as there were condemnations of Saudi slavery internationally, abolition had to be based mainly on political will, not as a binding obligation on the state. In this way, the 1956 framework was rather a normativity than a functional regimen of enforcement.

4.2 Literature as Critical Infrastructure

The African-American literature did not just act as an artistic expression of brutal realities but as a kind of critical infrastructure that maintained the system of moral argument around dignity, liberty, and racial equality. Narrative reconstruction of slavery, segregation, and systemic exclusion in novels and cultural memory practices described claims concerning personhood that were similar to and even prefigured official human rights discourse. The re-appropriation of African-American heritage is, as Apaydin (2020) points out, a counter-narrative to traditional, often white-centric, heritage structures, aiming to correct historical inaccuracies and address systemic racism. Bogdandy et al. (2024) underline that human rights regimes are effective not just in

terms of the court decisions but also in the transformation of norms on the ground in terms of social understanding and changes in political expectations. The African-American novels provided a structural framework for understanding inequality and changed cultural conversations to include human rights vocabulary. Thus, literature served as an unofficial human rights theory generating ethical models and interpretive resources which were subsequently replicated in activist discourse and institutional advocacy.

4.3 Narrative Transmission into Activism

The shift from literary narrative to political activism did not involve institutional mediation; instead, it took place within the common discourse of rhetoric and cultural memory. Themes created in the African and African-American literature tradition such as dispossession, racialized violence, dignity, and moral opposition, moved beyond the novel and into the diasporic political narrative. As illustrated by Ojuola (2024), African diaspora literature served as a cultural resistance tool around the world in forming political consciousness by reestablishing the manner in which oppression is portrayed and challenged. These representational tactics, which preempt lived experience, reclaim agency and make injustice a structural, not an incidental part of advocacy writing and press campaigns.

Moreover, literary production has never been isolated from the general forces of social and economic life. Nishikawa (2021) showed how African-American literature, despite market forces, negotiated the issues of authenticity, race, and power by speaking to the masses. This dynamic assists in understanding that the concepts of literature found their way into African-American press reporting and lobbying over international slavery: the tropes of enslavement, racial superiority, and moral responsibility were borrowed by political speech. Literature was not limited in this process to the space of cultures, it offered a set of vocabulary by which activists understood the existing injustices in contemporary life and designed a transnational critique on the same.

4.4 Cross-Racial Coalitional Advocacy

African-American and Jewish groups did not regard Saudi slavery as a remote and far-off form of injustice; instead, they placed it in the wider moral and political battle against the larger wrong of racial subjection. The African-American press, the American-Jewish Congress, and British anti-slavery lobbyists had networks that liaised between the years 1953 and 1960 to sensitize the world to the existence of slavery in Saudi Arabia. This connection between anti-slavery and domestic civil rights campaigns helped activists establish a transnational ethical connection: racial injustice in other countries was seen as a subset of the same international system that perpetuated segregation and discrimination in the US.

Framing of such a coalitional was also reinforced by the discursive focus on the racial hierarchy inherent in the process of slavery itself. Dhahir (2023) demonstrated how the process of Blackness racialized by medieval Saudis was interconnected with historical practices of enslavement and discrimination. This interpretation supports the idea that slavery was not merely an economic institution per se but a racialized power structure organization. The outcome was a kind of cross-racial advocacy that turned a local issue into a global iconic vanguard against racial justice and for human rights.

4.5 Human Rights Consciousness Formation

Although diplomatic interactions on Saudi slavery became limited because of geopolitical boundaries enforced by political alliances, human rights discourses never ceased. Rather they were maintained and reproduced in cultural, intellectual, and advocacy spaces. The narrowing of the interest brought about a gap between normative commitment and political action but this gap was repaired by sustained moral talk within civil society and the press. The human rights consciousness developed beyond state mechanisms and was institutionalized in the practices of masses in terms of argument, memory, and networks of activism. This historic persistence of anti-slavery rhetoric proves that the concept of human rights can be sustained even without active institutional implementation.

In his discussion of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in American Foreign Policy Towards Africa, Dongmo (2024) speaks of the conflict between normative commitments and strategic interests. This conflict shows that in many cases human rights principles can be maintained at discourse level when political factors restrict their application. In the context of Saudi Arabia, this dynamic implies that whereas the mechanisms of diplomacy might have been constrained or diluted under the influence of geopolitical forces, cultural reaction to slavery as a breach of human rights remained a factor in how people perceived it.

The results reveal the limitations of the structure of postwar legal universalism. Cold War geopolitics and strategic alliances limited effective enforcement of norms despite the abolition treaties broadly viewing slavery as an offense against human rights. This gap between normative commitment and political action is common, as legal condemnation frequently co-exists with diplomacy. In the case of Saudi slavery, general principles were espoused symbolically and selectively not applied in practice. Meanwhile, African-American literature served as some kind of political epistemology that transcended institutional law. Fiction produced instruments for analysis of invisibility, systemic violence, and deferred justice which helped to bring to light the structural injustice more broadly than the language of diplomacy could have done. These literary structures provided conceptual elucidation when legal discourse was either reserved or repressed.

Transnational moral interpretation was further influenced by domestic criticism of racism in the United States. The comparison between civil rights struggles and slavery in Saudi Arabia highlights a transnational perspective on "unfreedom" in the 20th century. This relationship strengthened abolitionist arguments by placing them against wider democratic contradictions. Lastly, the study highlights that narrative can play a central role in influencing public and policy discussion.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that abolition of slavery in Saudi Arabia was a complex and conflict-ridden process influenced by diplomacy, storytelling, and moral imagination. Postwar treaties proclaimed universal anti-slavery postulates but could be implemented only marginally due to the geopolitics of Cold War and the claims of sovereignty by Saudi Arabia. Legal universalism was symbolically strong but limited within political boundaries, narrowing its transformational possibilities. Abolition cannot be understood, however, solely in terms of institutional systems but should also be examined in terms of discursive and cultural pressures that upheld its moral urgency. African-Americans fiction played a key role in producing the vocabulary of discrimination and injustice in concepts such as invisibility, systemic violence, and deferred justice that became instrumental in framing of critical human rights theories. Such conceptual instruments directed activist discourse and redefined Saudi slavery as part of a wider movement against racial oppression in the world. Cultural production therefore, contributed to political imagination and cross-racial coalitions became central in maintaining human rights consciousness across boundaries.

7. Recommendations and scope for future research

This research on African-American critical theory, transnational activism, and human rights recommends directions for future studies on human rights. Investigating how African-American literature served as a torchbearer for activism in certain political movements worldwide would yield interesting information about the effects of literature on policy formulation and changes. Future research may find basis in transnational cases to examine the impact of literary texts on abolitionist movements in non-Saudi Arabian territories like Sudan or Mauritania to gain a broader insight into the effect of cross-cultural discourses on human rights.

Second, analyzing the documents of the British Anti-Slavery Society and literary works of other authors can provide additional insights into the connection between activism and projection of culture in literature. Further research could explore how contemporary writers draw on historical events of abolition and civil rights movement to connect historical conflicts with contemporary sociopolitical environments particularly in the era of global migration and contemporary slavery.

Finally, combining narrative theory, human rights laws, and postcolonial studies may yield new insights into how literature shapes ethical frameworks and vice versa. By amplifying the voices representing marginalized communities, it will be possible to gain an understanding of the concept of intersectionality in human rights discourse, painting a more comprehensive picture of current struggles with systemic oppression worldwide. These emerging areas of study have the potential to play a significant role in transforming the discourse on cultural representation and moral accountability.

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