

Slavery, Christianity and Racism in Uncle Tom's Cabin

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Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe can be seen as a picturesque illustration of the struggle of slaves in 1850s in America. Stowe wrote the novel in response to the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850. It made slavery worse by legalizing the capturing and return of the run-away slaves to their masters. In 1850s, Emerson called it a novel that "encircled the globe". Some of Stowe's contemporary writers criticized the novel by saying that the events of brutality in the novel are falsely conceived and exaggerated. Stowe wrote *A Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin* to highlight the authenticity of the narrative which just like Uncle Tom's Cabin was popular with the masses. The novel is celebrated as a "moral battle cry" by Hughes who wrote an introduction to the book. Baldwin writing at the same time as Hughes attacked Stowe's racism. Modern critics like Baldwin are usually skeptical of Stowe's treatment of black Americans. They consider the novel a "sentimental melodrama". Contemporary scholars like Jane P. Tompkins find Stowe's use of sentimentality as a technique of "careful artistry". The novel's depiction of women in domestic roles limiting their role to the "home" sounds problematic to the feminist readers.

Jane P. Tompkins argues that reading the novel just as a sentimentalist novel as many critics did would be a misreading of the novel. Most critics who rebuff the novel as a sentimentalist novel argue that little Evangeline's and Tom's death, although, are successful in arousing pity and sympathy in the heart of the readers, they fail to provide a solution to the problem of slavery. According to Tompkins, "In Uncle Tom's Cabin, death is the equivalent not of defeat but of victory" (Tompkins 506). Tompkins puts the notion of death in the novel within the redemptive framework. Eva's death just like Christ's death is redemptive for mankind. Stowe makes her as much immortal as Christ is. Tompkins says, "At the moment when she passes "from death into life", she exclaims, "O, love!--joy!--peace!" (Tompkins 508) Eva's death can be seen as a sacrifice for the sake of slaves.

Stowe was not the first novelist to follow such a path. The tales showing the death of a child in redemptive framework were in circulation at the time Stowe wrote the novel. It can be validly argued that the prominence of such tales cannot be cited as an evidence to prove the strength of the novel. Even though, Eva's death fails to provide a remedy to slavery, it aids in improving the condition of Topsy. Miss Ophelia after the death of Eva with the help of the advice of Eva becomes a mother figure to motherless Topsy.

Just like Eva, even Tom's death can be seen as victorious. Tom at the time of death says to Master George, "I've got the victory!" (Stowe 362) Tompkins says, "This novel does not simply quote the Bible, it rewrites the Bible as the story of a Negro slave" (Tompkins 512) George F. Holmes in his review of Uncle Tom's Cabin points out that the lack of connection between the events of the novel is one of the flaws of the novel. But, the point of commonality between the characters and the events of the novel comes with their correspondence to Christ. Eva can be seen as re-enacting the scene of the Last Supper. Tom can be seen as re-enacting the scene of crucifixion of Christ. Eva's full name is Evangeline, which has the name "angel" in it and she has been called an angel many times in the novel. Eva mostly wears white and it is suggested that she will join her paternal grandmother (after whom she is named) in heaven.

William J. Wilson in *Ethiop* criticizes Uncle Tom's Cabin as "a white phenomenon- a white author appropriated by white businessmen for white consumers" (Levine 528) Leslie Fiedler claims that "for better or worse it was Mrs. Stowe who invented American Blacks for the imagination of the whole world" (Yarborough 47). The basic question that Wilson and Fiedler are asking is - Is it possible for a "white" writer without the firsthand experience of slavery to show the real struggle of slaves? This was not a rare question to be asked to a white writer writing about blacks. For instance, Nadine Gordimer was asked a similar question regarding her characterization of Aila in the novel *My Son's Story*.

Although, the novelist seems to be sympathetic towards the slaves, her depiction of slaves seems to be problematic. The novel does not focus on their rebellion against slavery. Sam and Andy, for instance provide comic relief in the escape of Eliza and her son Harry from Haley. Although, both Sam and Andy play an important role in Eliza's escape, they seem to have no desire to help a fellow black. They are simply seen as following the wish of their mistress. Negro children provide humor in the novel. Except for Topsy, all Negro children especially Uncle Tom's children are portrayed frivolously by Stowe. Aunt Chloe casually reprimands her own children in the presence of Master George. She says, "Can't ye be decent when white folks comes to see ye"? (Stowe 22) Master George tries hard to help Uncle Tom whereas Uncle Tom's own children do nothing to help their father.

Stowe's depiction of Sambo and Quimbo is noteworthy. They seem to be the black "villains" of the novel. They not only mock Uncle Tom but beat him to death under the commands of their master Legree. Tom's suffering fills them with remorse and leads to their transformation. Stowe highlights Topsy's African traits. Richard Yarborough says, "If Eva is the 'fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her noble brow and prince-like movements', Topsy is her 'black, keen, subtle, cringing' yet acute neighbor". (Yarborough 49) Although, Topsy is critical of Eva in the beginning, but Eva's statement "O, Topsy, poor child, I love you!" (Stowe 245) changes Topsy's attitude. Topsy is transformed with the combined efforts of Eva and Miss Ophelia. In the world that Stowe creates, blacks are always in need of a Christian redemptive framework.

There is a stark distinction between Stowe's treatment of blacks and mulatto in the novel. George and Eliza (mulattos) are shown to be so fair that they will easily pass to be white. Stowe in *A Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin* writes that "It must be remembered that the half breed often inherit the traits of their white ancestors." (Yarborough 59) Stowe believes that mulattos like George Harris have rebellious streak because of the infusion of white blood. This clearly that Stowe believed that whites were superior to blacks. As opposed to revolutionary radicalism practiced by George who says, "I'll be free, or I'll die!" (Stowe 16), we have passive martyrdom of Uncle Tom.

George questions the very existence of master-slave relation by saying "My master! And who made him my master?" Christianity was used by whites to justify slavery. The slaves were asked to obey their masters in the name of religion. George questions it. When Mr. Wilson quotes Bible to encourage George to go back to his master, George replies by saying that in case Mr. Wilson was put in the circumstances faced by George, he would not say the same thing. A similarity here can be traced with Huck who at the end of the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* realizes that religion is of no use if it justifies slavery.

Eliza is symbolic of the "mid-nineteenth century ideal of femininity". Eliza's attempts to save her child, especially her crossing of the ice shows that the female slaves possess as much maternal love as any of their white mistresses. This notion of slaves is against the white understanding of slaves who unsympathetically separated slave mothers from their children. Until her escape, Eliza can be seen as advising her husband to obey his master in order to be a Christian.

George's position as a Christian in the novel is an ambiguous one. In chapter 3, he says to Eliza, "I ain't a Christian like you, Eliza; my heart is full of bitterness. I can't trust in God". (Stowe 15) In the progressive chapters, we find a rebirth of Christian faith in him. He along with others takes wounded Tom (slave catcher) to the hospital to fulfill his Christian responsibility. Baldwin says that the novel "is activated by what might be called a theological terror" (Baldwin 498). Stowe's characterization of George shows that she cannot portray even a courageous mulatto like George outside the realm of Christianity.

Tom as opposed to rebellious George is passive. Tom refuses to break the trust of his master. George detests the control of his master. There are few occasions when Tom's faith shakes and he wants to be free. But, such occasions are not enough to take form of a revolution. Stowe makes Tom almost a Christ like immortal figure, stripping him off human imperfections.

When Tom chooses to be faithful to Cassy and Emmeline, he endures the suffering in the name of Christianity without any feeling of racial solidarity towards them. This makes him a martyr but we cannot call him a role model for blacks. He resists Legree because Legree is offensive to Christianity. Tom fails to understand what George aptly knows which is that no master owns him.

Another controversial feature of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which irked many critics is Stowe's support of migration. George and Eliza after shifting many places finally settle in Liberia. George in chapter 17 says to Mr. Wilson, "We don't own your laws; we don't own your country..." (Stowe 172). Topsy, reformed by combined efforts of Eva and Miss Ophelia also decides to become a missionary in Africa. Uncle Tom dies. George, Eliza and Topsy leave the country. The only solution imagined by Stowe in the novel is either death or emigration. Stowe fails to imagine the freedom of slaves on the American continent.

Stowe's novel unlike the slave narratives like *The Life of Frederick Douglass* which shows the struggle of the blacks for emancipation, shows the dilemma of the white Americans, especially white women with regard to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. The white American women like Emily Shelby, Marie St. Claire and Mary Bird face the moral dilemma which as pointed out by Jean Fagan Yellin is whether to be a good Christian and help the escaped slaves or to follow the law and return them to their masters.

Stowe domesticates the white American women in her novel. Their involvement in the issue of slavery is limited to the space of home. Emily Shelby is disturbed after hearing the news of the sale of Tom and Eliza's son Harry from her husband. She aids Eliza's escape and sobs at the farewell of Uncle Tom. But, she cannot intercede into the financial matters and cannot buy back Tom. Eva, although is responsible for the transformation of Topsy, she is as powerless as any other white female in the novel. Miss Ophelia criticizes slavery. But, she does nothing to abolish the institution of slavery.

Mary Bird may serve as a crucial role model for white American women in moral paradigm. But, just like Emily Shelby, she is denied participation in political space. Mary Bird is critical of the decision of the aid Eliza in her escape. Although, her efforts are limited to the domestic space, but her acknowledgement of the Fugitive Slave Law as unjust law in front of her husband and her attempts to help Eliza are praiseworthy. Stowe denies political power to women. Women do appear to be morally superior to men. But, they do have as much agency as men have.

According to Baldwin, "Uncle Tom's Cabin is a very bad novel"(Baldwin 495). Baldwin rather than calling Uncle Tom's Cabin a novel, calls it a pamphlet. Although, Stowe acknowledges that slavery is a sin, she fails to go beyond this acknowledgement. Baldwin thinks that Stowe fails to fulfill the "responsibility" of the novelist. Stowe imagines the metaphysical triumph of the blacks. But, blacks like Tom cannot have access to triumph in the material world. Tom's survival is guaranteed by his servile and tolerant nature because he is black. Baldwin says, in the novel "black equates with evil and white with grace". (Baldwin 498) The novel seems to advocate that the slaves cannot function without the protection of whites. In the end when George Shelby frees the slaves of his family, they are not actually set free. They say, "We don't want to be no freer than we are."(Stowe 379)George Shelby keeps his old slaves as wage laborers. The novel is unable to change the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Baldwin in the essay "My Dungeon Shook- Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation" opines that the root cause of the defeat of blacks is their passive acceptance of white people's opinions. Therefore, we can say that Tom's passivity is a sign of defeat in Baldwin's views. Baldwin traces the history of blacks whereby blacks were made to feel inferior to whites. Although, blacks might be superior to white, there were never allowed to acknowledge their superiority. George invents the machine for cleaning of hemp in the factory. His master, jealous of George's achievements, takes him out of the factory. He puts him to mean labor at home. George is not allowed to enjoy his success at the factory by his master. George, because of the white blood in his veins realizes that he is better than his master and runs away. Tom, the black hero of the novel is unable to acknowledge his superiority over whites.

Nehemiah Adams is of the opinion that Tom is a positive result of slavery. He believes that without slavery Tom would have remained a barbarous, savage African. Such views raise questions on Stowe's intentions. Charles Whipple is critical of Uncle Tom's obedience, passivity and submission to the system of slavery. The duty of a Christian as many would agree should be to protest against injustice rather than to suffer passively. The fact that Stowe attributes "heroism" to George and Eliza and not to Uncle Tom suggests her limited imagination which can attribute revolutionary heroism only to whites. Stowe's argument to depict blacks as spiritually superior is not enough to improve the situation of blacks in America. Stowe fails to depict the appropriate black heroic figure. Her strikingly different characterization of Tom and George put moral limitations to the notion of the appropriate black behavior. Although, George Harris would appear as heroic as Tom to many of her modern readers, many of Stowe's contemporary readers as well as critics considered the behavior of George Harris as questionable both to American patriotism and to Christianity.

Therefore, we can say that although Stowe is critical of the condition of slaves in the novel, she is unable to provide a remedy to the problem of slavery. Stowe is unable to imagine a new society which will thrive on equality. We rather find the acceptance of the prevalent norms by the passive hero of the novel. Black remains the symbolic of evil in the novel. Stowe's imagination of black heroism is faulty. To be called an "Uncle Tom" is an insult to most blacks which arises from the types of humility preached by Uncle Tom.

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