

REVIEW ARTICLE

A FEMINIST READING OF *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

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ABSTRACT

Published in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or *Life Among the Lowly*, introduces the world to the tribulations of the enslaved African Americans. While as a woman writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe also pays close attention to female power and consciousness apart from the abolitionism in her work. Through the analysis of women's domesticity and women's strength in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this paper attempts to fathom into Stowe's feminist ideas manifested in this book, therefore colors the understanding of this literary canon.

KEYWORDS

Harriet Beecher Stowe; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; Feminist Reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its social writing background

Uncle Tom's Cabin is beyond question a magnum opus since it ranks second only to the *Bible* in global sales in the 19th century, and is presumed to have "helped lay the groundwork for the Civil War" on account of its anti-slavery concern (Kaufman, 2006). Through depicting an array of appalling pictures and dramatizing the precarious living conditions of the slaves, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reveals the brutal and abominable face of the chattel slavery and exposes the sins committed by the slave owners, thus triggering the American Civil War. This anti-slavery work receives much popularity both in the Northern America and around the world with its two plot lines focusing on the tragic fate of the black slave Tom, a dignified and Jesus-like figure, and Eliza, a runaway enslaved mother. The story opens in Kentucky as Tom and little Harry are being sold to pay off the debts of his master Arthur Shelby. Uncle Tom is then ripped from his wife and children, chained, and sent off in a coffin with other enslaved men and women. Upon being transporting to the South, he meets Eva, an angelic white girl who is wise beyond her years; elegant but passive St. Clare, Eva's father; and at last, the cruel and violent Simon Legere who persecutes Tom and whips the poor man to death. Tom is loyal and passive in the midst of white violence and dies as a martyr. Stowe, indeed, imbues Tom's death with echoes of Jesus Christ's. His dying for saving others is soul-stirring, so much so that this scene is immensely evocative of American compassion and indignation, hence accelerates the abolition movement. The other line tells the story of Eliza. With her husband George Harris already escaping, Eliza runs away with her 4-year-old son Harry, reunites with her family and journeys to Canada when the novel ends.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is to a great degree the product that receives influence of the social environment in America. To begin with, the book sets in the mid-19th century, a time belonging to one of the most turbulent periods in American history. Back then, the whole country is on the edge of division over the issue of slavery. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 that

requires all American citizens cooperating in the capture of the escaped slaves to be returned to their owners then undoubtedly adds fuel to this flame. Concomitant with this turmoil are the arisen abolitionist movement and social reforms calling a halt to the slavery practice and aiming at the emancipation of all African slaves. The Seneca Falls Convention held in 1848 also serves as the backdrop of Stowe's creation. This convention marks the peak of the American feminist consciousness which sprouts at the 1930s. During this meeting, feminists like Angelina E. Grimke and Elizabeth Cady Stanton spell out their demands for women's social, civil, and religious rights. Calling for the equal rights of women and men, its manifesto contributes to a large extent the surging of the first wave of women's rights movement in the United States. This feminist movement awakens more and more women and consequently spurs the flourishing of women's literature ranging from the 1840s to the 1860s.

1.2 Harriet Beecher Stowe and her feminist ideas

Uncle Tom's Cabin renders the author Harriet Beecher Stowe one of the most prominent celebrities on the occasion. "The novel by then seemed too monumental even to its author to have been imagined by one woman." Born into a prominent Christian family in Connecticut in 1811, Stowe ranks sixth among the eleven children of Calvinist preacher Lyman Beecher. Stowe's mother dies when she is very young (Fields, 1898). Her male families like her father, brothers, and sons all become ministers, herself might have become a clergywoman if not forbidden by law. This could probably justify the pervasiveness of Christian love in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's families exert great influence upon her, they are all impassioned critics of slavery and support the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and houses used by the African American slaves to escape to free places. In terms of her personal experiences, a thing needs to mention is that the Lane Debates on Slavery, a series of debate between colonization and abolition defenders ending with the win of abolitionists, affects her greatly and shapes her abolitionist opinion. Along with her earliest memories of African American in her household and some first-hand accounts from formerly enslaved people, Stowe writes down this

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classic and says, "my heart was bursting with the anguish excited by the cruelty and injustice our nation was showing to the slave, and praying God to let me do a little and to cause my cry for them to be heard." (Stowe, 1889).

Her sisters have something to do with the moulding of Stowe's feminist ideas. Her sisters Catherine Beecher and Isabella Beecher are both ardent proponents of women's rights with the former the pioneer of women's education and the latter an activist of suffragism. Like her sisters, Stowe emphasizes the essentiality and sacredness of maternal ethics and argues that the maternal values, the morality of women, and motherhood should serve as the ethical model of all American life. There lies in her the rebellious spirit to run counter to the traditional notion of femininity and domesticity which perceive women as being confined at domestic sphere to do jobs like housekeeping and nursing. It is not hard to understand, therefore, why she writes to her husband, a professor of Bowdoin College, that "there is one thing I must suggest. If I am to write, I must have a room to myself, which shall be my room." As a mother herself, Stowe heartily embraces the idealization of motherhood of Victorian era and is said to have loved being a mother and appears to be an "unusually caring one" (Stowe, 2009). After witnessing the death of her 18-month-old son, she feels truly the pain of the enslaved black mothers. These together lay the foundation for her feminist stance in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Sundquist, 1986).

2. WOMEN'S DOMESTICITY

2.1 Glittering Motherhood--- Women as Mothers

As discussed before, a predominant impetus that drives Stowe to write the novel is the maternal love and her pain of loss. As a matter of fact, motherhood is a vantage point for Stowe to push back against the slavery practice. There is a large gallery of mothers in this book, whether they are white or black, young or old, and free or enslaved.

Women are extraordinarily strong after becoming mothers, as Stowe puts it, "sublime is the dominion of the mind over the body, that, for a time, can make flesh and nerve impregnable, so that the weak become so mighty." (70) Eliza's reaction on learning of the selling of little Harry is the best illustration of maternal love. Eliza is a young quadroon woman with her appearance engaging and her bearing graceful. Before knowing that her son is to be sold, she is submissive, tender, and grateful for the rather agreeable life the Shelys provided for her family. However, things change. Which mother could bear the anguish of being separated from her children forever with nothing to do? Realizing the irreversibility of her master's decision and the evils her son might encounter, she rests no hopes on others and determines to carry Harry to flee overnight. There is in Eliza the glory of motherhood and brilliance of humanity as a woman. Her incredible leaping over the floating ice floes in the Ohio river with baby in arms in order to get rid of the clutches of slaver hunter Tom Looker is depicted prominently by Stowe, "with wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake; stumbling--- leaping--- slipping--- springing upwards again! Her stockings cut from her feet--- while blood marked every step." (82) This classic scene in American literary history has also inspired many artists' creation. Seemingly improbable, the miracle Eliza performs shows how much a mother can do for her child in times of crisis. Supporting Eliza's decision, Tom's wife Aunt Chloe willfully poses obstacles in the process of cooking and buys much time for Eliza. This is the empathy between mothers and the exhibition of motherhood as well. By comparison, Eliza's husband George Harris, displays little attention to both Eliza and his son Harry. He escapes earlier for the sake of ducking out of his master's persecution without taking his families into consideration.

Motherhood is also manifested in the white women. Mrs. Shelby is a religious, benevolent, and soft mother; she nurtures and educates her son George Shelby into a liberal-minded and sympathetic person who develops a strong friendship with Uncle Tom. George makes every effort to find Tom and when he sees the heartbreaking death of poor Tom, he resolves to liberates all the slaves on his plantation. Mrs. Bird is the wife of a senator and a newly bereaved mother. This figure, actually, resembles Stowe herself as they are traumatized by the same pain. When Mrs. Bird bestows the clothes of her departed boy, she utters, "I could not find it in my heart to give them away to anybody that was happy; but I give them to a mother more heart-broken and sorrowful than I am; and I hope God will send his blessings with them!" (117) This is exactly the mutual

motherhood existing within Mrs. Bird and Eliza. It is upon arriving at the Quaker settlement, a haven of cleanliness and warmth, that the fugitive woman Eliza finally soothes her strained nerves after weathering the peaks and valleys of life and sleeps soundly. The hostess Rachel Halliday is viewed as a mother-goddess with her beauty issuing from her perfection as an affectionate mother. Even the rocking chair embodies her "motherly loving kindness" for her sons. Rachel Halliday's motherly love extends to Eliza as well through calling her "my daughter". For Stowe, these two words sounds naturally from Rachel's lips because her face and form made the word 'mother' the most natural word. From the above character analysis, we can see that Stowe hymns mothers and motherhood, and proposes her feminist solution for the predicament that America was dragged into by slavery. No wonder Alice C. Crozier deems that this novel characterizes mothers "as the real saviors of society." (Ammons, 1977)

2.2 Female Moral Superiority--- Women as Wives

According to the ideology of femininity, men are in charge of the outside affairs, while women are responsible for the domestic errands. This standard definition of women confined to the domestic sphere is accepted by Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Whereas, different from the stereotypical images of women who are repressive, obedient, and voiceless, Stowe writes in this book that women treat home as their field of battle and endeavor to influence the domestic sphere. Under Stowe's pen, women obtain moral superiority over men to the effect that they have greater moral strength than men. Unlike the either too weak or too rational husbands whose lacking of sympathy and compassion for others tends to cloud their judgement in regarding to morality, wives are brave and righteous enough to challenge the system of slavery. They are always ready to stand up and offer help to the wretched slaves. That is, by using their power of love, care, and domestic management, they employ their influence as wives to save the world. Typical examples of these women are three of them, namely, Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird and Rachel Halliday.

Eliza's flight is assisted by Mrs. Shelby who influences her family positively. She is a capable and intelligent woman, as the narrator says, Mrs. Shelby "had a clear, energetic, practical mind, and a force of character every way superior to that of her husband." (330) She is also portrayed as one who significantly understands the underlying moral issues above her husband. As a pious Christian, she is very kind to her slaves and inculcates them with Christian values. When the good-natured Shelby has no way but to fill up the financial gap through selling the honest Tom and innocent Harry, she is totally stunned. She then applies herself to the revocation of this decision and persuades her husband to pawn her belongings in exchange for at least little Harry. The accusation that "this is God's curse on slavery! --- a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing! --- a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil" (48) reveals her indignation and desperation after her hope extinguishes. The sale of Tom and Harry makes her fully recognize the weakness of her husband and aware that it is futile for an individual to eradicate the deep-rooted slavery system, a grave sin committed by the Americans. Although she is powerless enough to overrule her husband, she stealthily endeavors to encourage the slaves of their plantation Sam and Andy to sabotage the pursuit of Eliza.

Another female figure possessing feminine virtues and the power of moral strength is Mrs. Bird, an angelic woman with healing power. She not only manages her family in good order, but lends spiritual support to her families since her husband believes that his headache could be alleviated by a cup of good hot tea made by her and some of their good home living. When she learns the passage of the law that prohibits people to aid those fugitive poor people, however, she turns from a timid and domestic wife to a warrior, and plunges into an argument with her impersonal husband. She deems the law as "downright cruel and unchristian" and accuses Mr. Bird's approval of it. Her vehement but reasonable utterance makes her husband speechless and illuminates him in his wrong voting. Her courage and readiness to help comes from her natural power of empathy and female moral values. When Eliza and her son appear in front of their door, Mrs. Bird shows no hesitation in accommodating them. At her insistence, her husband is convinced out of rational thinking and escorts Eliza and her son in their arduous way to John Van Trope's. In this case, the feminine sensibility wins over masculine rationality and female moral power is thus presented.

The Quaker Community is "anti-patriarchal" in its pacifism and its

matrifocal social structure, and that is its beauty for Stowe." Different from the traditional patriarchal concept which holds that women are marginal and insignificant in comparison to men, the Quaker community believing in egalitarianism and non-violence is likened to a motherly paradise by Stowe and represents Stowe's ideal of women community (Ammons, 1977). In the house of Halliday's, a harbor surrounded by mutual respect and love, the patriarchal authority of Mr. Halliday does not dominate the whole family with the loving and magnanimous wife Rachel as the moral center of the family. The scene of Rachel's allocating food at the head of the table is reminiscent of that of the Last Supper, and Rachel herself is compared to Jesus Christ.

3. WOMEN'S STRENGTH

3.1 Women's Consciousness

3.1.1 Revolt of Topsy

Most of the female characters exhibit subversive power towards the slavery practice as well as the patriarchal society. They are having a certain degree of independence in thought and display their rebellious spirit by using their own way. Topsy and Cassy are the spokesperson of this type. The eight or so years old black slave girl Topsy is one of the characters who have a long afterlife in popular culture. Not playing by the rules, Topsy is a typical representative of feminist resistance in this novel. Her owners beat her routinely with chains and pokers, starve and lock her for years until she could respond to nothing but physical anguish and psychological abuse. This leads to the crippling of her by the evil social structure purposely designed to strip her and her kind of all their humanity. Treating as a commodity and even a herd animal and not knowing who her mother is, Topsy enters the book bruised, filthy and scarred. It is St. Clare who saves her from the hell-like life and gives her to his cousin Ophelia in order that she might raise and educate Topsy with Christian and intellectual values. Topsy has "an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning" and "something odd and goblin-like about her appearance." (310) She seems completely perverse and corrupted at the beginning, that is, she lies, steals, disobeys, and lazes about. No warning and punishment work on this mischievous girl as she has got used to malicious words and numerous beatings. Topsy is so unruly that she would break her needles and throw them slyly out of the window simply because she loathes the needle work. When she is in a good mood, she would tidy the room in accordance with Miss Ophelia's order, but she would mess things up in a moment.

Nonetheless, these are all the demonstration of her self-protection. On the other hand, the smart and energetic Topsy embraces enough innate intelligence to be a very quick learner when she wants to be. Moreover, after befriending Eva and learning to love others and to be loved, Topsy gradually accustoms herself to the Christian teachings Miss Ophelia and Eva have imparted her and ends in moving north with Ophelia who purchases and frees her, treating her as daughter. In the 19th century, the slave owners always intend their slaves to be depraved which is a vile excuse for their justifiable exploitation, Stowe, however, does not follow this trend in her story with the chicken-and-egg problem, that is, the more masters abuse the slaves, the worse the slaves become, and then the masters claim that the slaves cannot be freed in account of their wickedness. Therefore, Stowe satires the slave owners of their plausible logic. She shows the readers instead that whites should treat the blacks as equal and love them as they are their Christian fellows if they want to bring out the best in the blacks. In addition, Topsy also functions as a contrast to the saintly and obedient man Tom who "complies with a system that he judges unfair and unreasonable." (Anderson, 1991)

3.1.2 Self-emancipation of Cassy

Cassy is another minor but important character in the book. She grows up as a princess and becomes a common law wife, she descends, whereas, to a sexual slave fallen prey to the evil slave owner Simon Legere. She is a pitiful woman with two of her children being sold. Refusing to let her third child endure the same fate, she kills this new-born baby by herself. From her personal experiences, we can catch a glimpse of the evil face of some white men who make use of her female identity to squeeze her. She is bitter and desperate as a result of a lifetime of betrayal and sexual abuse.

Although being a slave, she has her own pride and behaves nobly, and thinks of fleeing all the time. She once considers murdering Legere, but

inspired by Tom's nonviolent resistance, she conspires a clever strategy to save herself and Emmeline, the newly sexually mistreated young girl. By taking advantage of Legere's fear of the supernatural power, they turn the garret into a supposedly haunted place. When Legere finds out that they have escaped, he is exasperated and dispatches all his men to track down the two women in all directions, they are, in fact hide at the garret in Legere's own house. Pressed to debunk their hiding places, Tom admits that he knows the exact spot but will not impart it to Legere, he then being whipped and beaten to death. Cassy then risks everything to visit him on his deathbed. She is courageous enough to revolt against the system and strives for self-emancipation, and fortunately, she finally joins her long-lost daughter Eliza and gains family reunion.

3.2 Change of heart by Christlike love

Women do not resort to command or violence as their weapons to redeem the world, their strength and methods could boil down to one thing in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that is, the change of heart through Christian love. Christianity or Christian love, a prevailing theme in this novel, is the sole answer to the reformation of the fallen society. As Stowe's son says, "this story is to show how Jesus Christ, who lived and was dead, and now is alive and forever-more, has still a mother's love for the poor and lowly." In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the white male adult savior Jesus is replaced by two figures, Tom and Eva St. Clare with Eva the embodiment of "mother's love" of Christ (Stowe, 2009).

Eva is an angel-like girl in appearance as Tom supposes, "she seemed something almost divine; and whenever her golden head and deep blue eyes peered out upon him... he half believed that he saw one of the angels stepped out of his New Testament." (227) Her divinity rests largely on the fact that she is raised up not in a positive atmosphere. There is in her the benevolent Christian love and power as well. She thinks of the black as equal beings because she holds that everyone is equal in God's eyes. "I want you to remember that there is a beautiful world, where Jesus is. I am going there, and you can go there. It is for you, as much as me." (377) She gives people, not only her candy and nuts, but also her hair as symbols of love and hope of salvation. Not only her selfless benevolence converts Topsy and changes Ophelia who witnesses the scene of redemption, but also her voluntary martyrdom eventually helps to reinforce her father Augustine's admirable stance towards his slaves and instill a religious passion within him. When Eva is dying, she bids farewell to Tom by saying that "I've felt that I would be glad to die, if my dying could stop all this misery," (394) her Christian love is thus manifested. In fact, her self-sacrifice resembles that of Jesus Christ who dies for the sake of happiness for the whole beings in the world. Along with Tom Looker who is converted away from slave trade by the Christian love of Aunt Dorcas, Stowe shows us what women can do in changing people's heart and the entire world through their Christlike love.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Uncle Tom's Cabin is undoubtedly a work shining through the mists of time in that it does not only speaks to its own time, but to the time of the reader. Through the feminist reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we see Stowe's abundantly elaboration of feminine strength and moral superiority. Stowe emphasizes in her writing that it is no other than the courageous, benignant, and tough-minded women possess the power to better the social circumstances through shaping the morals, values, and actions of the men around them as mothers and wives and through influencing others via their Christian love. By doing so, she depicts the female characters as moral anchors and gives women the central position of power and authority. To conclude, apart from its significance in the abolitionist movement, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also serves as a feminist work which plays its part in the 19th dialogue concerning the domesticity and status of women in America, and brings about the rethinking of women's roles.

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