

A Critical Appraisal of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin

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Abstract:

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Negro Life in the Slave States of America*, has been hailed as an anti-slavery novel that helped to lay the groundwork for the Civil War in the US. The novel was published in 1852, and was originally serialized in an anti-slavery newspaper, *The National Era*. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been considered the best-selling novel and the second best-selling book of the 19th century, following the *Bible*.

In literary studies *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been hailed as an example of the significance of the role of literature as an agent of social change. The novel has helped popularize a number of stereotypes about Blacks. These include the dutiful, long-suffering servant, “Uncle Tom,” who is always faithful to his white master or mistress; and the affectionate and loyal Black woman servant “Mammy.”

In this article an attempt is made to look into the portrayal of the Black experience in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, through the depictions of the Black minor characters in general and of Black women’s experience in particular. This article argues that these “minor characters” are not “minor” as far as the Black experiences depicted in the novel are concerned. And since a number of studies have been done on major characters like Uncle Tom, and even on significant characters like George, Eliza, and others, an attempt is made here to ‘foreground’ the minor Black characters in the novel. Moreover, since the novel is written by a White lady, basically from Ohio, a free state, about the Blacks in the South, an attempt is also made to look at the portrayal of the attitudes of the North and the South towards slavery.

Key Words: Slavery, Race, Mammy, Mulatto, Black Motherhood, Economic Exploitation, and Sexual Exploitation.

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*"It is a sin to hold a slave under laws like ours.": Christian Redemption, and the Depiction of Minor Black Characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe's **Uncle Tom's Cabin***

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Introduction

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* deals with the story of the life and vicissitudes of the protagonist Uncle Tom [Tom Lincon], a Black slave whose "good" behaviour, staunch belief in Christianity and its application in his day-to-day life, even at the most severe and critical moments, transform him at the end into a martyr. The novel was published in 1852, and was originally serialized in an anti-slavery newspaper, *The National Era*. In this paper an attempt is made to look into the portrayal of the Black experience in the novel, through the depictions of the Black minor characters in general and of Black women's experience in particular. In my view these "minor characters" are not "minor" as far as the Black experiences depicted in the novel are concerned. Since a number of studies have been done on major characters like Uncle Tom, and even on significant characters like George, Eliza, and others, I here make an attempt to 'foreground' the minor Black characters in the novel. Moreover, since the novel is written by a

White lady, basically from Ohio, a free state, about the Blacks in the South, an attempt is also made here to look at the portrayal of the attitudes of the North and the South towards slavery.

Analysis and Discussion

Among the depictions of minor male characters, what makes the portrayal of Scipio something different is that he shows the resistance of the Blacks to force slavery on the one hand, and on the other hand, he later proves his loyalty to his kind master. He is presented to us as a powerful, gigantic fellow (a native born African (with a powerful longing for freedom. He is sold around from overseer to overseer till Alfred, St Clare's brother, buys him. That shows that he is untameable and is a rebel. He, after knocking down the overseer, attempts to escape from Alfred's plantation, and during the slave hunt he kills three dogs with his fist. He fights back for his escape till a shot brings him down. Such a daring resistance shows his unquenchable thirst for freedom.

On the other hand, Scipio, the powerful man with an ardent desire for

freedom, refuses to leave St Clare, when St Clare makes out free papers and tells Scipio to go wherever he likes. It is precisely because his master has shown compassion towards him by taking care of him, nursing him and treating him as a man. St Clare's kind deed of taking Scipio to his own room to dress his wounds up and of preparing free papers, add much to Scipio's unexpressed gratitude for saving his life during the slave hunt. These acts convey the message to Scipio that the master is compassionate, and capable of understanding and sympathizing with the Blacks. St Clare's display of love, compassion and sympathy by nursing him wins his heart. St Clare has this to say about Scipio's trust and dedications: "I lost him the first cholera season. In fact, he laid down his life for me. For I was sick, almost to death; and when, through the panic, everybody else fled, Scipio worked for me like a giant, and actually brought me back into life again. [...] I never felt anybody's loss more" (218). This seems to prove the Black's saying "Treat us like men, and we will be your friends." Moreover, such a portrayal underlines the fact that Scipio is reliable, grateful, dependable and loyal.

However, these features stand as a contrast to that of two other Black "hands" in the novel, namely Sambo and Quimbo, the two principal "hands" on Simon Legree's plantation. The author presents them to us thus:

Legree had trained them in savageness and brutality as systematically as he had his bulldogs; and by long practice in hardness and cruelty, brought their whole nature to about the same range of capabilities [...] Sambo and Quimbo cordially hated each other; the plantation hands, one and all, cordially hated them. (320)

It is, however, interesting to observe that it is more their own nature than Simon Legree's training that makes them diabolically cruel. For example, the novelist says,

[...] They seemed an apt illustration of the fact that brutal men are lower even than animals. Their coarse, dark, heavy features; their great eyes, rolling enviously on each other; their barbarous, guttural, half-brute intonation; their dilapidated garments fluttering in the wind—were all in admirable keeping with the vile and

unwholesome character of everything about the place. (321)

The author, however, uses here the physical feature of Black men to show us the intensity of the cruelty in the mind of a wicked and cruel man, and while doing so, the novelist in a way equals a “Negro’s” physical features with barbarity, brutality and cruelty. Such an observation also illustrates the notion that Stowe is either prejudiced against those Black slaves, who do not have any drop of “White-blood” in their veins, or uses the stereotypical image of a “Negro”. It is also here that Stowe’s depiction of the Black is different from that of Black writers of her time like Harriet Jacobs and Harriet E. Wilson, who do not go for stereotypical representations of a “Negro.”

It is due to the use of stereotypes that we are told that unlike Scipio, Sambo and Quimbo are not Christians. They leave their master when he needs their presence. Moreover, they wash their sins away by confessing to Tom: “satin, we’s been doin’ a drefful wicked thing! [...] hopes mas’r’ll have to count for it, and not we” (384), and hence, unlike their master Legree, they lean towards Christianity, for the fear of eternal punishment.

Regarding the portrayal of minor, Black women characters, even a brief description of the life of a Black woman tells a touching and poignant story. It is moving, for example, when the novelist says, “the story of ‘old Prue (chapter xix) was an incident that fell under the personal observation of a brother of the writer [...]” (407).

Prue, “a tall, bony coloured woman [...] [with] a peculiar scowling expression of countenance, and a sullen, grumbling voice” (198), had been used to breed children for market by a White man in Kentucky. It implies that she has been used both as a sexual object and as an instrument to produce new slaves. Thus, she is forced to sell her motherhood for the benefit of her master. The economic as well as sexual exploitation of the Black mother is clearly visible here. Nobody cares for the plight of the mother, and when later at New Orleans her last child dies due to starvation and neglect, she is quite unable to cope with the situation. She starts drinking alcohol to keep the child’s last crying out of her mind. But White society does not care for her misery. They brand her a drunkard and a thief, and finally, “those folks have whipped Prue to death!” (204). Nobody comes forward to

look at and interfere in such matters. She is considered a *thing*, a property and a possession, and it is up to her owner to decide what to do with her. White people are very comfortable with shutting their eyes and ears against such incidents and letting them alone.

Nobody says any good word about old Prue, and if at all anybody in the novel sympathizes with her, it is Miss Ophelia for a while, and Evangeline. Moreover, even the Blacks do not understand her plight. For example, Miss Jane, one of the mulattoes in St Clare's household says, "I think such low creatures ought not to be allowed to go around to genteel families", and another mulatto, describes Prue as a "disgusting old beast!" (199). That also implies that even among the Blacks there is a notion of the inferior and the superior based on external, physical features like complexion. And when Miss Jane and Adolph address and greet each other calling, "St Clare" and 'Miss Benoir' they exhibit their desire to be known more as White than as Black. Perhaps, such a construction may be deliberate on the part of the author to show that even the Blacks accept the superiority of White complexion and the Whites.

Prue used to say that she drinks alcohol in order to forget her misery. This is exactly what, in another episode, Cassy, a mulatto woman under Simon Legree, advises Emmeline, a teenage, quadroon girl, when the latter secretly expresses to Cassy her unwillingness to yield to her master's wishes. Cassy advises her, "I say, drink brandy, drink all you can, and it'll make things come easier" (349).

The depictions of slave women's lives, like that of Emmeline, bring to light the fact that slavery, for the White master, is a convenient institution for licensed misbehaviour which, however, promotes immorality, and sexual abuse and assault of slave women. In the slave market, for example, while a Black man is rated according to his physical strength and stamina, slave women are rated according to their beauty. For instance, when Emmeline, the young girl of fifteen, a beautiful quadroon, is going to be sold in the slave auction, Mr. Skaggs, the keeper of the slave warehouse, asks her, "[w]here's your curls, gal?", and tells her, "[y]ou go right along, and curl yourself real smart!", and then adds to her mother Susan, "Them curls may make a hundred dollars difference in the sale of her" (308).

We see such auction scenes in Lydia Maria Child's short story "The Quadroons" where Xarifa, a beautiful quadroon is placed on the public auction stand, and a middle aged White man buys her for a moderate sum of five thousand dollars and in William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel* where Culler and her two teenage daughters, Clotel and Althesa are sold in Richmond. Even though Emmeline despises Legree, as she tells Cassy, "I'd rather have one [snake] near me than him" (348), she is quite helpless under the institution of slavery.

It is the same system of slavery which has prevented Cassy from having a legal marriage with Henry, has made her and their children his property that can be sold to clear off his gambling debts, and has made her a possession of Henry's cousin, who has actually drawn Henry on and got him in debt on purpose to make him willing to sell Cassy. A similar kind of Black woman—White man love relation can be seen in Lydia Maria Child's short story "The Quadroons" where Rosalie, the quadroon, falls in love with Edward and marries him, but the marriage has no legal sanction. At the end, out of ambition and selfishness, Edward deserts Rosalie and marries Charlotte, a wealthy White woman.

These two examples show the insecurity of a Black woman as a White man's wife. The Black women are ultimately valued in terms of market economy. But it is interesting to note that Cassy and Rosalie do not accuse their White "husbands"; instead they find fault with the White law. And it is a protest, in her own way, against such a system that makes Cassy kill her own little baby thinking that it should not face the fate of her other two children who have been sold by her previous owner, the cousin of Henry. The degradation of Cassy begins with the White lover's sale of her two small children. She later becomes Simon Legree's chattel concubine. Cassy spared her next baby. In her own words: "I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death[...] I am not sorry, to this day; he ay last, is out of pain" (340).

The killing of her own baby, however, does not mean that she does not love her children, for it is for her two children that she becomes submissive to Henry's cousin, as she says, "well, you can do anything with a woman when you've got her children" (338). Hence, it is not her

cruelty but utter helplessness under such a system which prompts her to do such a desperate deed. Joshua D. Bellin has this to say of Cassy's depiction:

In Cassy, too, we see a figure who, like St Clare, could combine attributes Stowe normally compartmentalizes: the aggressiveness of White man and the maternal instinct of the Black woman. Significantly, Stowe shies away from the "kill the master" plot which is brewing; Cassy escapes with her surrogate daughter Emmeline and is soon leached of her dangerous tendencies. She journeys to Africa, where, under the care of the woman whom she discovers to be her daughter Eliza, she "yielded at once, and with her whole soul ... and became a devoted and tender Christian" (607). Thus, Stowe's favourite constellation of traits—woman, mother, Black, Christian — has been filled. (294)

A different kind of motherhood and love for one's child can be seen in one of the other episodes in the novel, where Lucy, a slave woman along with her child has been sold, without even letting her know of it, by her master Jon Fosdick. And during her boat journey, Haley, the slave trader sells her boy

to another White man, while she has fallen asleep. But, when she comes to know of the transaction, the desperate slave mother commits suicide by throwing herself from the boat into the river. For her, she might have thought, death is better than a living death. However, the novelist tells us, "[t]he trader was not shocked nor amazed [...] [he] therefore, sat discontentedly down, with his little account-book, and put down the missing body and soul under the head of *losses!*" (123). It also indicates, as in the case of old Prue, the fact that the Whites take the death of Blacks very lightly and they measure a slave in terms of her market value.

The death of Lucy has some similarity to that of Clotel, the title character in William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel*. Clotel kills herself by jumping from a bridge over the Potomac River while being pursued by slave catchers. Again, for example, we have in the novel, yet another episode of a slave woman's death in which Simon Legree has confined a "negro woman" who has incurred his displeasure, in the garret of his house for several weeks, till her death. Interestingly, the first slave auction in the book focuses on an aged mother and a teen aged son who are sold apart over the old

mother's pleas and sobs. It is also interesting to observe that even in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the separation of Jim, the middle-aged slave from his wife and children who have been sold to different slaveowners, is a passing reference. It is precisely the passing references of such incidents which tell innumerable stories of the real plight and misery of Black women under slavery in nineteenth century America.

Related to this Elizabeth Ammons says:

These cruelly served ties between mothers and children recur throughout Stowe's expose' of slavery for several reasons: to stir Abolitionist passion within parents in Stowe's audience, to assert the humanity of the Black race in the face of racist myths that Blacks do not share the emotions of the Whites, to show that women suffer horrible tortures in the midst of a society boastful about its chivalry toward the "gentle sex," and—important—to dramatize the root evil of slavery: the displacement of life-giving maternal values by a profit-hungry masculine ethic that regards human beings as

marketable commodities. [...] the mothers and motherless children in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* show the human cost of the system. (167)

The pain of separation and suppressed suffering of Black motherhood can be seen in the portrayal of one of Marie, St Clare's domestic servants, a middle aged mulatto woman, Mammy, who is separated from her husband and their two children in order to nurse her mistress. Mammy, however, is presented as affectionate, kind and motherly, a character quite opposite that of Marie. For example, Mammy is introduced thus: "Oh, there's Mammy! Said Eva, as she flew across the room; and throwing herself into her arms, she kissed her repeatedly. This woman did not tell her that she made her head ache, but, on the contrary, she hugged her, and laughed, and cried, till her sanity was a thing to be doubted of [...]" (153).

Interestingly, even when Marie accuses Mammy saying Mammy is selfish at heart, a reader gets the impression which is quite contrary to her claim, and Marie becomes selfishness incarnate, whereas Mammy becomes a silent sufferer and a devoted servant. Mammy's devoted service to her mistress, and hope for her union with

her husband who is a carpenter, have some similarity to that of Aunt Chloe who is, however, allowed to work outside to save money for bringing her husband back. However, the main cause of the difference between the conditions of Mammy and Aunt Chloe is the difference of their mistress's approach towards slavery. Mary says, for example; "I 'm thankful I'm born where slavery exists; and I believe it's right—indeed I feel it must be; and, at any rate, I'm sure I couldn't get along without it" (172). But, on the contrary, Mrs. Shelby holds the view that, "it is a sin to hold a slave under laws like ours; I always felt it was—[...] I thought by kindness, and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of mine better than freedom [...] I never thought that slavery was right—never felt willing to own slaves' (33).

Along with the differences of perception, their ways of managing their household are also diametrically opposite. Mrs. Shelby is good at managing her Black servants without any problem. Her house is very neat and tidy, and her servants behave politely and with decorum. But, on the contrary, though Marie always thinks of putting her servants down and of making them "know their place", she miserably fails

in managing the servants. Marie's kitchen where Dinah rules supreme is an apt example of that. Even Marie "found it easier to submit than contend" (192). On the one hand, Dinah's impudent behaviour, excuse-making and bad ways of arranging the kitchen, proves that Marie cannot control even her domestic servants. But on the other hand, the author seems to suggest that "Negroes" are not cultured enough to keep their things in order and their surroundings neat and clean.

And even though St Clare puts blame on the slave system for the Black's dishonesty, it, in a way, establishes that the Blacks are dishonest. He says, "Such a fellow as Tom here is a moral miracle!" (198). It is here that Stowe's depiction of the Blacks is different from that of Mark Twain. Even though Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* depicts Jim, Miss. Watson's house slave, as uneducated, superstitious and naïve, he is shown as intelligent, honest and resourceful. But when St Clare says, "[...] we masters are divided into two classes, oppressors and oppressed" (196), he implies that his family is oppressed by their Black servants. That may be the reason why one of the White men at the slave auction premises, says,

“Catch me ever buying any of St Clare’s people! Spoilt niggers, everyone. Impudent as the devil!” (308). However, the depiction of Marie’s kitchen may be a deliberate endeavour to prove that the Blacks need proper instructions and control to make them refined and cultured.

Similarly, the picturing of Topsy may have a similar purpose. However, the issue of how the system of slavery affects Black children can be best seen in the depiction of Topsy, the Black child who is bought up and raised for the market by a speculator. The author here, as in the case of Uncle Tom, Emmeline and Cassy, emphasizes that slaves are commonly sold and families commonly separated purely for the sake of money. When Topsy, the “negro” girl, about eight or nine years of age, says, “Never was born [...] never had no fathers, or mothers or nothing [...] I grow’d” (224), it implies a touching story of slavery’s casual disregard for basic human relations. It is the degraded system of slavery which has kept her an orphan, and which had kept her in ignorance and darkness.

Topsy’s opinion about herself, “I’s so awful wicked there can’t nobody do nothing with me [...] I ‘spects I’s the

wickedest critter in the world,” (232) can be seen as a psychological impact of the slave system on her in the sense that she may not have heard anybody talking anything good about her. Instead, she is habituated to listening to all unhealthy and bad comments about her, which might have filled her mind with a negative image of herself. The Topsy story also illustrates her insight into the subtleties of racial oppression, for Topsy’s predicament is not simply a result of brutal oppression. It is also caused by her internalization of the master’s evaluation of her. When St Clare asks Topsy, “Don’t you see how much Miss. Ophelia has done for you?” Topsy replies,

Lor, yes, mas’r! old missis used to say so, too. She whipped me a heap harder, and used to pull my har, and knock my head agin the door; but it didn’t do me no good! I ‘spects, if they’s to pull every spear o’ har out o’ my head, it wouldn’t do no good, neither—I’s so wicked! Laws! I’s nothing but a nigger, no ways! (260)

As Stowe explains in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Topsy understands the stigma of her Black skin and tries to play the role expected of her. Topsy’s notion that she is “nothing but a nigger” prohibits her from

any effort to be anything else. She says, “If I could be skinned, and come White, I’d try then” (261). She thinks that that is the way to overcome her “wickedness.” Stowe says in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that this inculcation of self-hatred in the “negro” is responsible for stunting his mental and moral development in the North as well as South (50).

Topsy, “one of the Blackest of her race” (222), is a representative of her race; others’ comments about her can be considered a general response to the Black race. When Jane and Rosa despise her, saying, “[L]et her keep out of our way! What in the world mar’s wanted another of these low niggers for [...]” (223), it implies that mulattoes consider themselves to be superior to “the Negro”. Similarly, Miss Ophelia’s—the Northern lady’s—prejudice against the Black will not get a better example in the text than her first impression about, and approach towards Topsy. About Topsy’s appearance, Mrs. Ophelia says, it is “so heathenish” (221); though Miss Ophelia, initially expresses her unwillingness, she accepts the task as a missionary worker to give the child a good upbringing. But, even then, at first she does not consider the girl a human being. For example, “[...] she

approached her new subject very much as a person might be supposed to approach a spider [...]” (222). She says in another context, “I know I’d never let a child of mine play with Topsy” (230). It in a way shows the White’s tendency to segregate the Black. The picture is clear when she, after two years of experimenting with Topsy, acknowledges her prejudice: “I’ve always had a prejudice against Negroes [...], and it’s a fact. I never could bear to have that child touch me; but I didn’t think she know it” (262). This shows that White women from the North are not free from prejudice against the Blacks in the South. It is interesting to remember here that Harriet Beecher Stowe is also from the North.

Stowe in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* defends Topsy as a credible character:

Does anyone wish to know what is inscribed on the seal which keeps the great stone over the sepulchre of African mind? It is this, ---which was so truly said by Topsy, --- ‘NOTHING BUT A NIGGER!’ It is this, burnt into the soul by the branding-iron of cruel and unchristian scorn that is a sorer and deeper wound than all the physical

evils of slavery together. There never was a slave who did not feel it. (51)

The depiction of Topsy and her behaviour if it is taken as a representation of the behaviour of Black race may create a notion that the Blacks are by their birth, cunning, dishonest, shrewd and heathen. A comparison between Topsy and Eva adds much to it:

There stood the two children, representative of the two extremes of society. [...] They stood, the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, 'born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil and vice! (228)

Here, in addition to the description of Topsy's features, Eva's features and qualities stand for, in a way, what Topsy lacks, and her entire race lacks, the refinements to consider the Black the White's equal. And though Miss Ophelia ultimately fosters Topsy and takes her to the North, the way she has behaved with Topsy is example enough to make out how the North considers and approaches Southern slaves, that is, the Blacks. Miss Ophelia "took Topsy home to Vermont with her,

much to the surprise of that grave deliberate body whom a New Englander recognises under the term *Our folks*" (403), however, "at the age of womanhood" Topsy leaves *Our folks*, and becomes a missionary. "[S]he was at last recommended, and approved as a missionary to one of the stations in Africa". She devotes her life to "teaching the children of her own country" (403). Here, Topsy is African simply because she is Black. Although Topsy grows up in the South and is educated in the North, the author imagines that Topsy has more in common with Africans than Americans. Does it suggest that Topsy never becomes part of *Our folks*?

In relation to this, the portrayal in the novel of the Northerners' approach to the Blacks requires special attention. Lisa Whitney says: "In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe had uncritically presented the escape route to the North as a response to slavery; Eliza and George had fled from the dangers of a failed Southern patriarchy into the welcoming maternal arms of Rachel Halliday and other White Northern abolitionists" (568).

The novel categorically says that Northern people are prejudiced, for as St Clare says: "I have often noticed, in my travels north, how much stronger this [the

feeling of personal prejudice] was with you [the North] than with us [the South]" (166). St Clare reasons out the question as to why Northern states are always more virtuous than southern ones by taking his and Miss Ophelia's fathers as examples. He says, "[Y]our father settled down in New England, to rule over rocks and stones, and to force an existence out of nature; and mine settled in Louisiana, to rule over men and women, and force existence out of them" (208). He continues, "If both had owned plantations in Louisiana, they would have been as like as two old bullets cast in the same mould" (212).

Conclusions

It implies that Northern states are more virtuous only because of the mere fact of the absence of such a situation. It is also interesting to note that the notorious slave

owner in literature, the villainous character in the novel, Simon Legree is from the North of America. Similarly, St Clare Augustine's father who has owned five hundred slaves, and his cruel Overseer are basically from the North. And in the slave auction scene, for example, where the beautiful mulatto and quadroon women, namely, Susan and Emmeline are sold, the money of that sale is transmitted to the owner of that "property". He is a gentleman, who is a member of a Christian church in New York. The author's stand on the Northern approach to the Black can be summarised in her own words: "Northern men, Northern mothers, Northern Christians, have something more to do than denounce their brethren at the south; they have to look to the evil among themselves" (411). Thus this novel about Southern racism written by a White woman from the North suggests that attitudes of Northerners to slavery are not altogether proper.

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