



APPRAISAL OF INDIVIDUAL SUFFERINGS IN H. B. STOWE'S "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN"

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ABSTRACT

In her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), H. B. Stowe, an African-American black writer, has drawn the issues of enslavement, individual sufferings and the plight of black slaves of the 19th century America in its full profundity. Stowe portrays a vivid picture of how black slaves have been maltreated socially, physically, and sometimes psychologically by the oppressive and tyrannical white slave traders in 19th century America. She not only depicts the wildest and dehumanizing nature of slavery but also postulates "the mildest form of the system of slavery" (Stowe 10) through the graphic portrayals of black slaves' sufferings. Stowe does not accept such brutality against humanity yielding her voice against 'The Fugitive Slave Act' (1850). In order to efface the evil and immorality of slavery from the American white centered society, Stowe comes forward intellectually revolting against the class bigotry throughout her life. Without harming anyone, Stowe tries to heal and solve her contemporary problems with the Christian ideologies embedded in black slave Uncle Tom and white child Eva St. Clare. Stowe believes that only true Christian faith can bring balance and integrity in a degraded or spiritually dead society.

Key Words:19th century America, individual sufferings, blackslaves, The Fugitive Slave Act, immorality, Tom,spiritually dead.

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The white man is sealed in his whiteness.
The black man in his blackness ... white men
consider themselves superior to black men.

Frantz Fanon

Black Skin, White Mask

Establishment of any unethical code and custom like slavery can't bring any fruitful basis and benefit to a society. When physical force stays behind to efface the evil and immorality of slavery from the white centered society of America, an Afro-American black writer H. B. Stowe comes forward with a view to revolting against such class bigotry through her writings. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), an

anti-slavery novel and an agent of social change, explores the stumpy and angst-ridden slave-life of the black people in the 19th century American society. Frederic Douglas (1818-1895), an African-American renowned writer and critic, highly hails the novel as an addressed to the soul of universal humanity. According to Stowe "enslaving of the African race is a clear violation of the great law which commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves" (Stowe 623). Later, it gains a wide prop up and recognition from two other American critics Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) and Lionel Trilling (1905-1975) who concede it as an influential book in American history, concluding slavery as evil both in

its nature and practice. On the other hand, Uncle Tom's Cabin also has its share of brickbats William Lloyd Garrison thinks that the novel is not an actual portrayal of slavery and, James Baldwin defines it as a "very bad novel, having its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*" (quoted in Gillespie 198), a novel by American author Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888).

During the American Civil War (1861-63), H. B. Stowe meets Abraham Lincoln in 1862 at the White House where Lincoln openly remarks "So this is the little lady who made this great war" (quoted in Rushing 8). With her novel, she strives to disclose the horrors and brutality of the slavery in the Southern part of the United States of America contrasting to that of the Northern zone. Stowe does not craft any war rather she establishes the factual basis just to emancipate the downtrodden slaves from the hands of the Southern slave holders and their unjustifiable Fugitive Slave Act (1850). Though she does not experience it personally, but she is one of the first few writers who edifies such specific evil and bigoted treatment of slaves.

The novel opens with a crisis and ethical dilemma of a slave-master Shelby who ponders whether he should sell Eliza's son Harris or not to Mr. Haley, a cruel slave trader and crass materialist, in order to pay his borrowed money. Finally, he conforms to his confusion and sells Eliza's son and Uncle Tom to Haley who sees all the slaves as objects of profit and loss. Haley alleges that the black slaves, thought to be feeble, sinful and fatigued, have no right to keep their children with them. The callous trader like Haley has no knowledge that the most dreadful part of slavery is the separation of a family member from its family. The slave traders like Haley attempt to reduce all the slaves, thought to be exotic others, to material objects in order to fulfill his material gain. These others become nothing but commodities only to be consumed by dominant white slave holders. According to Langston Hughes (1902-1967), an American poet and novelist, the novel is "a moral battle cry for freedom" (9).

Black woman Eliza rejects Haley's clasp and successfully flies from Kentucky to Canada in search

of new home. Later, she joins with her husband George who flies away from the clutch of his master and finally reaches in Canada, a safe place where a slave has a better option to live without any oppression. George, an inventor of a time and labor saving contraption for cleaning hemp by the soul-deadening manual labor, is inertly tolerating his master's advises and torturing, but refuses to ditch his family. George is running through identity crisis; he suffers homelessness and mental slaughtering as he reveals to Wilson, "When I was a little fellow, and laid awake whole nights and cried, it wasn't the hunger, it wasn't the whipping, I cried for. No, sir, it was for *my mother* and *my sisters*, – it was because I hadn't a friend to love me on earth (Stowe 115). Though Wilson, a slave trader, advises him not to break the laws of his country, he has no other option except escaping from the jolt and jaws of the immoral laws. As a result, he decides to move to a safe place like Canada. George also says, "When I get to Canada where the laws will own me and protect me, that shall be my country, and its laws will obey but if any man tries to stop me, let him take care, for I am desperate. I will fight for my liberty till my breath I breathe" (Stowe 115).

The Southern slaves of America generally step to escape to the Northern part of America and then fly to Canada in order to find real freedom. Here, contrastive nature of the North with the South in the 19th century America appears as two separated nations as North stands for freedom and democracy, whereas South stands for tyranny and hypocrisy. Under the legislation of 'The Fugitive Slave Act', it is illegal to give assistance to a runaway slave. So, it stops the Northern people to assist the runaway slaves and warns them not to go against the Act. Once, Stowe and her husband personally assist a woman slave to escape, though it is against the rules of The Fugitive Slave Act. The Act has caused George's mother, sister, and his wife to suffer a lot. The Act is brought in effect "only for the security of the master and not with regard to the welfare of the slave" (Stow *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* 72). Its main concern is to find out the escaped slaves from different places of the America, and then the kind hearted people who have helped them, will be either fined or sent to jail. Playing an

important role in the creation of these injustices and inequalities, the particular institution like government itself passes the Act.

Once, Eliza, wife of George and his child get shelter near Ohio, a state in the Midwestern United State, under the Quakers (Friends) who help and secure a safe place for them. The Quakers generally believe in universal love and good-will toward all people. Throughout the novel, Stowe depicts Quakers as the dauntless and philanthropist community who dares to help the slaves in escaping as well as instigates to fight against the evil practices of the race worshippers. They can sacrifice their lives for the good cause and love for humanity. One such example is presented through the role played by a Quaker Phineas who goes against the governmental codes of conduct and saves Eliza, Harry and George at his own risk. At a time, when he comes to know about the attack of Tom Loker and his gang, he plans all ways for their escape to Canada. "The great ambition of the slaves [is] to be free. They [have] fought and died to achieve it" (Lamming 138). At night, he helps them to escape and on his way he has to fight with Tom Loker who gets hurt in the hands of the Quaker. The merciful and humanitarian Quaker takes the cruel trader Loker with him and nurses his wound.

Such suffering of male and female characters is highly comparable to the plight and sufferings of other female characters. Woman character Cassy, the lost mother of Eliza is physically exploited by Simon Legree. It's an oppressor's policy to commodify black woman entailing the colonization of black body. Its mistreatment exposes the obnoxious side of black women's harsh exploitation in 19th century America. "The commodification of Otherness [black male as well as female] has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and felling" (Hooks 21). However, she is finally rescued and reunited with her daughter.

Afro-American pious slave Uncle Tom, a true, steady and honest believer of Christian ideology, struggles till his last breath. Tom who has

been able to acquire the catchphrase "Uncle Tom", is fervent to please his white masters by sacrificing his own life happily admitting himself as an inferior being. For Haley, it is unjustified to think a Negro slave like Tom to be a pious Nigger. Once, Simon Legree is unconditionally compelling Uncle Tom to beat a slave girl. Standing obdurate in his beliefs and values, Tom refuses the proposal. Uncle Tom though is treated very badly from the beginning till the end; he never loses his faith and belief in God. Here, Stowe's foremost endeavor is to exterminate evil mores from the society through the moral and religious ideologies. James Baldwin in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" delineates Uncle Tom spitefully as "[he] ... is jet-black, wooly-haired, [and] illiterate; and he is phenomenally forbearing. He has to be; he is black; only through this forbearance can he survive or triumph". He is beaten harshly, but he does not cede to the power of villainous white slave holders or run away from them. Tom worships the belief that today's hardship and sufferings will bring tomorrow's salvation. He never tries to save himself at the cost of other slaves. "Honourable in all, Tom will not ruin his master's credit with the slave trader by running away" (Bloom 26). Frederic Douglas (1818-1885) remarks that Uncle Tom is a forgiver and Christ like figure who forgives all his overseers and torturers. The novel explores the Christian ideals and the cruel inhumanities of slavery in parallel way and with immense profundity. When Tom and other purchased slaves are taken away by Master Haley onto a riverboat, Stowe compares Haley with Uncle Tom in general as "two men sitting side by side ... on the same seats, having the same eyes, ears, hands and organs of all sorts, and having pass before their the same objects, - it is wonderful what a variety we shall find in the same reflection" (Stowe 119).

While crossing through river Ohio, a lady remarks, "what a shame to our country that such sights are to be seen!" (124). But later, another genteel woman is shown supporting the very shameful custom by saying "I've been South, and I must say. I think the Negroes are better off than they would be to be free" (Stowe 124). Accordingly, a clergy thinks "it's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants,

—kept in low conditions,” (Stowe 125). This insolent judgment is just a wrong manipulation of scripture to justify slavery and crime against God. Religion’s concern is not to support the slavery at any cost; it’s just a creation of men to prove themselves superior to black in a society. While this debate is going on in a boat on river Ohio, a woman slave who cannot tolerate any more draws herself away when her child is being snatched away to sell. Stowe draws a question— who is responsible for that? Of course, “the enlightened, cultivated, intelligent” (Stowe 134) white people who support the systems of slave trading and traders of slavery.

While Tom departs for the South in a boat through river Ohio, he meets with an innocent white child Eva, daughter of Augustine, whom he gets a chance to save from an untimely watery grave. Eva like Tom is a religious figure conscious of the practice of slavery as inhuman and disharmonious for a society. The white girl sympathizes with and defends Dodo, a mulatto slave and servant of Augustine, and is struck by Henrique who holds his “face with his riding-whip, and, seizing one of his arms, forced him on to his knees, and seat him till he was out of breath” (Stowe 267). Henrique, son of Alfred, asks him to hold his tongue till he is asked to speak—a contradictory to Augustine who thought “all men are born free and equal” (Stowe 264). But Alfred objects Augustine, “all men are not born free, nor born equal; they are born anything else ... we must set our face against all this educating, elevating talk, that is getting about now lower class must not be educated” (Stowe 269).

In spite of being a white master, St. Augustine steps out to protest against the evil and immoral practice of slavery. He says, “Our system is educating them in barbarism and brutality...and making them beasts” (Stowe 269). He believes that black slaves “[would] not always be bought, sold and traded” (Stowe 270) rather one day they will rise and raise their voices against white masters and also will prove Alfred’s belief wrong that “the Anglo-Saxon is the dominant race of the world, and is to be so” (Stowe 270). The romantic assumption of white master like Alfred will be proved as an illusion as he

thinks “[white] got the power. This subject race is down, and shall stay down!” (Stowe 270). Augustine defends the black slaves. He says that the white masters have no authority and power as “they...cannot govern themselves cannot govern others” (Stowe 270).

Next, the hard blow also falls upon black female slave Susan, mother of Emmeline, who wishes to protect her daughter from the clutches of slave traders by disguising her daughter’s beautiful look by displaying her worse look. She combs her hair straight to make her less attractive. This is the only way to escape from the traders’ notice. But, a tyrant seller orders her mother to curl Emmeline’s hair which will attract the female slave traders and will benefit him by getting a hundred dollar more. All her attempts go in vain and Susan gets separated from her beloved daughter. She remains faithful to God in spite of all strife which proves her a strong character.

Another character Topsy who is considered to be immoral and mischievous, is not actually responsible for anecdotes, rather the white dominated society does not give any permission to be a good one. She is taught by her previous masters as wicked, odd and goblin-like. Indeed, later, she is strangled, deceived and dominated in regular basis by Augustine St. Clare, though earlier he saves her. But, now he mistreats her in his own way like a dog. St. Clare saves her and places her as a gift to Miss Ophelia who also treats her inhumanly, but is not ready to touch her. Stowe wishes that unlike St. Clare and Ophelia’s treatment of black, they (the black) should be respected and loved by the white slave holders like white Eva. Stowe does not only depict the wildest nature of slavery and slaveholders but also postulates “the mildest form of the system of slavery” (Stowe 10) through the characterizations and slave treatment of Mr. and Mrs. Shelby. The affectionate relationship between Tom and Eva is also a proof of that. Despite diverse cultures and racial origin, they can love each other.

So, Stowe tries to create a united society with diversity where slavery should be erased and harmony should be maintained. The lowly slaves are

not low in humanitarian sense rather a man created hierarchy especially it's a creation of white people. Therefore, Stowe gathers authentic information of her contemporary America in order to highlight the worst possible treatment of slaves by white people. She has proved it in her another book *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853). Stowe does not lie the predicament of the enslaved people, rather she tries to bring back white people in its moral track as well as paves the way to draw a slave-less society in America. This paper has also tried to highlight the life of the lowly people and their faith on God's angelic love. In such context, it is better to end the paper with a quote from W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, "slavery [is] indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, [and] the root of all prejudice" (14).

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