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“UNCLE TOM’S CABIN” – THE GREATEST NOVEL ON AMERICAN SLAVERY

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Abstract

Uncle Tom’s Cabin is sentimental novel on slavery authored by Harriet Beecher Stowe, in 1852 a well-known American novelist. The main theme of the novel is Blacks slaves, quest for freedom and their fight against slavery, and how to hold on to hope when all seems to be lost. Uncle Tom is the main character and the actions of all characters revolve around him. His gentle fight against slavery is appreciated by everyone. The novel details various issues pertaining to Christianity, Slavery and the Human Rights. This articles mainly focuses on the greatness of the novel and it’s artistic portrayal by the novelist and its vigorous fight against slavery the main reasons for accepting the novel as the greatest one by contemporary Americans.

Keywords - Uncle Tom, Slavery, Freedom, Struggle, American Literature, Greatness

Uncle Tom’s Cabin is one of the greatest novels of American literature, particularly the Novelist’s artistic Portrayal of slavery and sentiment is commendable and the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe instantly became very famous among the American literary figures. In the contemporary American literature, the puritan temperament that has been at the root of American character and literature from the beginning was present in the great novelists also. In Nathaniel Hawthorne the traits of the puritan temper were obscure. But in the woman novelist particularly in Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) these were very conspicuous. She was one who scorned evil and denounced it loudly, at the same time she was equally ready to praise righteousness. That is why her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became an influential house hold book in American literature. This facts has been rightly observed by R.J.Ellis and Sara Griffith when they laud the book calling it is as, “One of the most influential

books ever written, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; was also most popular in American literature”⁻¹

The life of Harriet Beecher Stowe was such as to bring her puritan heritage into prominence, being daughter, sister, wife and mother of a minister and was steeped in the spiritual life of New England from childhood. The literary influences on her were those of Jonathan Edwards, who was her hero and John Bunyan and Cotton Mather, Million and Shakespeare. At a time when novel-reading was frowned upon, Harriet’s father encouraged his children to read the historical novels of Walter Scott. One may trace in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the influence of Scott, especially the gothic elements may be attributed to the influence of Harriet’s early reading. Because of this influence and passion towards Scott, Harriet calls his influencer as, “Waller scolt is wonderful though he belonged to a past yet he is of this age”²

Harriet had a penchant for literature is evident from her husband's letter written in 1842 where he fondly calls her, "My dear, you must be a literary woman. It is so written in the book of late."³ Her dormant literary flair got its awakening when the issue of slavery won the attention of all sensitive people. Though Mrs. Stowe was religious by temperament and though religion is often a theme in her novel, it was not the first awakener of her crusader's instinct. Slavery was a current and increasing problem and this soon roused her emotional nature. She was an eye-witness to the horrors of slavery. She had already seen much of the institution and its effects. She had the occasion not merely to hear of ill-treatment of the slaves, but had actually seen it, when slaves were flogged to death abolitionists tortured and hanged, fugitive slaves cruelly punished. She was troubled that the Church condoned all this while it was busy denouncing dancing and card playing. And thus, she could not bear all these atrocities. She wanted to do something and that is why she pictured all those heart moving facts in her novel and that in fact moved even the cruelest Lords. This facts was well put by Anon as, "The novel artlessly pictures facts, and the facts make us feel. We have never read a story of more power. We doubt if anybody has. The righteous human being, who can read it through with dry eyes, is commended to Barnum".⁴ It was in 1850 that Mrs. Stowe became an acknowledged abolitionist though as early as 1836, she had published her first reflections on slavery.

In 1851 appeared "Uncle Tom's Cabin", published serially in the "National Era" Though at first she had intended that her story should run to only three or four periodical installments, her emotional momentum carried her far beyond such limits. She wrote that novel more in love than in hatred. The book was so profoundly moving that it appealed to thousands and thousands of people, and gave momentum to the anti-slavery cause.

The chief character in the novel is Uncle Tom a very gentle, principled negro owned by Mr. Shelby of Kentucky, the most kindly of slave-owners. He was a large, broad-chested, powerfully made man of full glossy black, whose African features held an expression of steady good sense and kindness, in

him self- respect and dignity combined with humble simplicity. He and his wife Aunt Clove lived on Shelby estate in contentment another slave owned by the Shelby's was the attractive slave girl Eliza, who had a baby and whose husband George Harris was owned by a vulgar narrow-minded master.

Tom's pious, loyal and kind nature won him admiration and thus he became a noble character in American literature. This truth has been nicely expressed by Michael Winship when the famous literary critic calls Tom as, "Uncle Tom is an admirable and noble character. His name could epitomize dignity, self respect, and have for all mankind"⁵

Sheer necessity compels Mrs. Shelby to sell Eliza and her child and Uncle Tom to a trader. Eliza takes to a desperate flight to Canada, but Uncle Tom refuses to run away. "No, I ain't going," he says. "If I must be sold, or all the people on the place. Why let me be sold ! I suppose I can bear it well as any. Mas'r always found me on the spot- he always will"⁶.

Uncle Tom is chained and led away by Mr. Haley the slave trader, while Mrs. Shelby and her son George are plunged, into unbearable grief on the way to New Orleans, Uncle Tom witnesses many of the horrors that his people are subjected to – solves being sold, families being parted, some being whipped. A kindly but cynical planter St. Clare who happens to be fellow-passenger buys Uncle Tom as the strong and kind Negro saves his daughter Eva from drowning Uncle Tom has a spell of happiness with St. Clare and his family. But St. Clare's good intention of setting Uncle Tom free does not come into effect for St. Clare dies in a brawl at his club. Uncle Tom is then purchased by Legree, a monster of cruelty. He feels an instinctive dislike for Tom, which is nothing but the native antipathy of bad for good. Uncle Tom resolutely withstands all the ill-treatment of Legree. When he refuses to reveal the whereabouts of two slaves Cassy and Emmeline who have escaped, the cruel maser gives an inhuman flogging to the old slave which kills him. George Shelby from Kentucky comes to buy Uncle Tom only to be told by Legree that he does not sell dead niggers. Things turn out to be happier for some of the other characters. Eliza and George Harris are

together at last and the Negro Woman Cassy discovers to her joyous surprise that Eliza is her own daughter.

The power of the book is explained by its tremendous realism. It does great credit to Mrs. Stowe that she has frankly given a portrayal of the kindly as well as cruel slave owners. While Haley and Legree represent the inhumanities practiced by slave dealers and slave-owners, there are people like the Shelbeys and St. Clare and little Eva in whom there is kindness and humanity.

No doubt the book is sentimental. Mrs. Stowe's portrayal of suffering of the negroes, the young wife being separated from the husband, the child being torn from the arms of the mother, above all her portrayal of Uncle Tom are all sentimental. But sentimentalism was essential for making more effective the cause that she was serving. Moreover sentimentalism was a demand of the times. The sighing, sobbing, weeping and earnest exhortation and talk of angles and glory that we get in. "Uncle Tom" may not be relished by twentieth century readers who are used to the emotional understatement of modern writers. But the time in which Mrs. Stowe wrote her novel was one of sentimentality in life and in literature and what now seems mawkish was then regarded as real pathos. If we accuse Mrs. Stowe of mawkish sentimentality, we must remember that the charge is one of which the great Dickens is also accused.

Moreover she used sentimentality to change the mood and the thinking style of the Nation. This phenomena was well opined by Peter N Streams when he put it as, "Harriet Beecher Stowe used sentimentality to change the ongoing debate about slavery in Antebellum, America, and how her own personal world was transformed by its success, not unlike the millennial expectations to which she was alluding".⁷

It is Mrs. Stowe's warm humanity that made the book immensely popular, Though there were technical defects. The virtues of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as a novel arise from Mrs. Stowe's humanity her ardent imagination, and her ability to finger detail sensitively, its faults are mainly attributable to the author's unwillingness to let the objective facts

speak for themselves and to her always inadequate control of structure. Stowe knows pretty well she is writing to reform but not to defame her people. Humanity in her made this. This meek nature in her of course got a bad name of being selfish. The truth is that her motive in writing the novel was to promote humanity. This truth was well said by Davis S.Reynolds when he says it as, "However, despite the strong opinions expressed in Uncle Tom's Cabin about reform topics, Stowe is careful to work within the accepted social boundaries. Thus making her novel more acceptable and more human."⁸

The changing locale of the action made breaks in the narrative which Mrs. Stowe spiced with so little skill that the whole structure seems to sprawl. This, however, was common enough in American fiction before the time of Howells and James. More serious is the violence done to the story by Mrs. Stowe's doctrinaire method. Time and again she interrupts the narrative to press home a moral which the action itself has spelled in large enough letters. Her apostrophes to the reader, though precedented in Dicken's similar exhortations, do not strengthen the novel. Though in characterization Mrs Stowe has at time made use of exaggeration, many of her characters are not altogether real, for the saintliness of Uncle Tom or of little Eveseens a title too facile. But there are other characters who illustrate her great ability of character delineation. The amiable but vacillating St. Clare is a splendidly drawn character and there is a great deal of realism in the depiction of Legree. In spite of her great style and prolific writing she humbly confessed saying it as, "I fear I did wrong in coming forward to indicate these horrid incidents"⁹

The book may certainly be labeled as propaganda literature on slavery. Of literary art in any superficial sense Uncle Tom's Cabin has very little. It has the extreme simplicity of great art however, and it imparts that confidence that the reader is seeing the truth which only a great book can impart. In this regard Carlyle wrote to its author that he knew the story represented the facts truthfully, although he had never seen the life it recorded. This self evident veracity gave the novel its power; against-charges and contradictions innumerable, its testimony was unshaken. And

beyond the immediate cause which it served, it has become the one widely known record of the South before the war, as Cooper's novels rightly or wrongly, have become the world record of the American India and as Bert Hart's stories have become the world memory of the California miners. Considering the passion it stirred and the reform it heralded this book may rightly be called the greatest novel of American slavery, which caused the American Civil War and strife. This fact is well attested by Abraham Linclon's statement when he called Harriet as, "So this is the little lady who made this big war."¹⁰

. Accepting the truthful complimentary comment from the then American President in the White House, Stowe boldly said as, "There are some occasions where a true lady must and will be unladylike".¹¹

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