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Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as a universal protest against racism and oppression

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Abstract

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a story about the brutality and absurdity of racism and slavery of African Americans. The novel transcends the limitations of a temporal framework and becomes universal and timeless especially as a protest against the institution of slavery, racism and the pervasiveness of human evil. This paper throws light on how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stands out as a distinct universal voice against racism. It reflects the society infested with racists who lack the basic concern and respect for fellow-beings. It focuses on how the victims desperately try to claim their rights to freedom and to live secure without being intimidated by the intense pangs of racism. It also focuses on how a few other victims echo the indomitable powers of hope and their belief in human goodness and God, despite the oddities, torture and cruelty towards them. Key words: racism, slavery, freedom, Uncle Tom

Introduction

A work of art comes as a tool to entertain, instruct, educate and elevate. It reflects the culture, sentiments, tendencies, morals or grotesqueness of the society. A civilized society reflects the virtues of the people and is at the very base of humaneness. Any society that encourages humiliation or persecution of an individual at the hands of yet another individual on the basis of color, caste or religion is said to die a faster death. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* makes a bold entry into American society, uncovers the immorality of the institution of slavery and thereby seeks to end it. It stands as a universal condemnation of the society that questions an individual's self-respect and his or her very existence. The world could connect itself and sense the fast fading humanism in people not only in America, but across the globe. "The success of Uncle Tom's Cabin was due in large part to timing and to how Stowe's vivid depiction of the plight of American slaves could be read as an allegory for the troubles of exploited workers and oppressed people everywhere." (Diller, 14). The African Slave trade had been abolished three years before Stowe was born. But there was in fact an internal trade still: the slaves were bred from slaves for the market. The Northern states had liberated all their slaves by 1776, the year of American Independence. And in 1833, Britain also declared the freedom of the slaves in the West Indian Plantations. In the same year Harriet visited a plantation at the age of 22. There she was deeply engrossed in observing the black boys and girls, black uncles and aunts, who were later described as thronging around their weak, but well-intentioned white master, Mr. Shelby, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her work won her great fame across Europe. Even Abraham Lincoln was very much influenced by this book and greeted Stowe as "the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war (Kazin, 8). And Stowe did succeed in influencing the abolition of slavery and it still continues to be the most influential book against racism and oppression.

Freedom cannot be more precious to anyone than to those men and women to whom slavery was synonymous with death. George and Eliza represent those 'rebellious slaves' who defy the cruel system that crushes them to nothing. They choose to become free individuals with loving families. The forcible breaking up of families, tearing of child from mother, husband from wife, disturbed and enraged Stowed very much. Such acts exposed the heartlessness and hypocrisy of the Christians, slave-owners and slave-traders. Mrs. Stowe's indignation is very much stirred by the common saying- "they don't have same feeling that we do"-among slave-owners, slave-traders and slave-catchers, that gets repeated by selfish women like Marie St. Clare and wives of other slave-owners. In the early chapter, "The Husband and Father", George meets his wife Eliza and tells her that he has planned to flee to Canada. He can no longer bear the torture of his master.

"but after all he is your master, you know."

"Who made this man my master? That's what I think of-what right has he to me? I'm a man as much as he is. I'm a better man than he is" he said. (Stowe, 17)

He recalls the brutality and the lack of sympathy in his master.

He says, "It was only yesterday," said George, "as I was busy loading stones into a cart, that young Mas'r Tom stood there, slashing his whip so near the horse that the creature was frightened. I asked him to stop, as pleasant as I could, - he just kept right on. I begged him again, and then he turned on me, and began striking me. I held his hand, and then he screamed and kicked and ran to his father, and told him that I was fighting him. He came in rage, and said he'd teach me who was my master, and he tied me to a tree, and cut switches for young master, and told him that he might whip me till he was tired, - and he did do it! If I don't make him remember it, some time!" and the brow of the young man grew dark, and his eyes burned with an expression that made his young wife tremble. (Stowe, 18)

One wonders how such acts of ruthlessness, insensible and insensitive acts of barbarism could thrive for centuries.

”Don’t you know a slave can’t be married? There is no law in this country for that; I can’t hold you for my wife, if he chooses to part us. That’s why I wish I’d never seen you, - why I wish I’d never been born; it would have been better for us both, - it would have been better for this poor child if he had never been born. All this may happen to him yet.”(Stowe, 18)

Though George and Eliza believe in Christianity, they do not yield to the ways of their masters and to slavery. They do not rest until they reach their freedom. In this novel, one comes across the white Americans who treat their slaves as animals. They are plagued and possessed by the evil spirits of slavery and hostility. Uncle Tom becomes a victim of slavery, who is a staunch believer in God. He endures every torture inflicted on him by his masters, with moral strength and courage, uncomplaining. Uncle Tom lives according to the principles of Christianity. He remains loyal to his “maker” and to his master, Shelby. When he learns that he is to be sold down the river, he is a little disturbed about being separated from his humane master Mr. Shelby and from his own wife and children. But then he regains his moral strength and obeys his master’s “will” and then moves to the hands of the cynical slave-trader Hayley.

“Mast’r always found me on the spot- he always will. I never have broke trust, nor used my pass no ways contrary to my word, and I never will. It’s better for me alone to go, than to break up the place and sell all. mast’r ain’t to blame, Chloe, an he’ll take care of you and the poor (Stowe, 37).

Uncle Tom remains true and loyal to all his white masters. In an attempt to bring solace to the much-bereaved master St. Clare, he asks him to believe strongly in God. “...Mas’r, -feel Him now! O Mas’r, when I was sold away from my old woman and the children, I was jest almost broke up. I felt as if there wasn’t nothing left; and then the good Lord, he stood by me..... I’s so happy.....and have the Lord’s will done” (Stowe, 300)

Tom is very humble and at the same time very profound in his utterances. When he gets into the hands of the sadist Simon Legree, as Elizabeth Longford says, “the crucifixion of Tom by Simon Legree” (189) begins. When the negro girls Cassy and Emmeline run away, the enraged Simon Legree attempts to torture him to extort the truth. But Tom obstinately refuses to tell the truth and says he would rather prefer to die. When Legree orders his black attendants to whip Tom, he says, “Mas’r if you are sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save you, I’d give you my heart’s blood; and if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I’d give’em freely, as the Lord gave his for me. O Mas’r! Don’t bring this great sin on your soul! (Stowe, 410). These words of Tom are the most moving when he appeals to his master not to bring the sin of shedding blood on his soul. But the blood thirsty Legree would not hear his appeals. Tom is consequently beaten to death by fellow slaves on Legree’s orders. Dying, he forgives all three, converting the repentant black persecutors to Christianity. The richness and beauty of Uncle Tom lies in Tom’s virtue of endurance linked with his strong belief in God. He endures stoically all persecutions- unjust, inhuman and cruel and finally dies Christ-like upholding the sacredness of every life which has a right to live freely and to be treated justly by others. Stowe is not unaware of the presence of good whites who sympathize with their slaves. Stowe presents selfish and self-complacent white Americans like Marie St. Clare and monstrously evil men like Simon Legree. She also presents noble-minded Christians like the Shelbys, St. Clare, Miss. Ophelia and others, who treat their slaves kindly, educate them and are willing to free them. Stowe created little Eva who sees the immorality of slavery, but faces the awfulness of the system with a heart that bleeds. Uncle Tom perceives and feels the angelic goodness in Eva. The little child cannot bear the horror of one individual ill-treating another. When she returns home after a brief absence, she embraces all the slaves in the house one by one which is so revolting to her aunt from the liberal anti-slavery North. She says, “Well, you southern children can do something that I couldn’t do” (Stowe, 162). But even aunt Ophelia is bettered by the little angel Eva and takes charge of refining the negro girl, Topsy. Stowe also seems to suggest that the negroes should get over the indoctrination that they are slaves, that they are inferior, that they deserve to be treated cruelly and that they do not deserve the “wine of freedom”. When the little girl Topsy is given a chance to correct herself, her reaction is “I’s so wicked... I ain’t used to working unless I gets whipped” (Stowe, 248). But such a pitiable condition was brought about by the white Americans who tortured their fellow human beings and treated them no better than animals. So Stowe believed that both the persecutors and their victims should wake up to their indoctrination and work for the liberation of the slaves. Harriet shows how racism is entrenched in our society and into our very being itself. She has, to a greater extent, tried felling the gory hands of racism that scourges humaneness. She uses her work as a medium to effect ameliorating changes not only in America, but also far across the globe. It is well-balanced with the revolting characters like George and Eliza who fight their way to freedom and the highly loyal and pious Christian like Uncle Tom, who believes in the goodness of human and the Supreme Force.

As Emily Dickinson says,

“Hope” is the thing with feathers- That perches in the soul- And sings the tune without words- And never stops- at all-”,
The world still awaits the day, when it can breathe equality, freedom and justice in equal measure.

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