
Africa and Africans in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Introduction

This paper will examine closely a number of passages from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that describe Africa and talk at length about the sufferings of Afro-Americans. This close analysis is essential for the paper's argument that there is a movement in the novel from a diaspora of the African race in the beginning to unity toward the end, from slavery to freedom and from rootlessness to a discovery of identity and origin. Of equal interest to the paper is the exploration of what the novelist has accomplished by her inclusion of such descriptive passages that have contributed a great deal to changing the white man's perspective toward blacks in particular and the downtrodden in general. It is my contention that the powerful impact of the novel and its success in getting the message across are attributed to the moving passages that delineate the miseries and misfortunes of the slaves. It is also my observation that none of the black characters, particularly females, are introduced without a special focus on distinctive facial features and a thorough survey of origin and background as if the author takes it upon herself to speak for Africans whose rights have to be protected and whose smothered voices have to be heard. What accounts for the everlasting influence of the book that brings about an awareness of the deplorable and appalling conditions of slaves who have suffered tremendously under the tyrannical institution of slavery is its documentary nature and its authenticity. As Jane Tompkins rightly maintains, the novel is possibly "the most influential book ever written by an American".¹

A Powerful Book

This is a book that proves beyond the slightest doubt that written words are strong instruments that can bring about change as they portray very faithfully the shocking plight of the oppressed who are rendered powerless but in spite of their weakness, are bound to resist and then revolt. The novelist, through her powerful language and accurate presentation of the predicament of blacks, can do the job better as she transmits a true picture of what slavery is like. For this reason, the novelist is seen as probably the first writer who helped in getting the real war against slavery started. What the oppressed cannot voice with the cane or lash that whips them day and night for failure to keep up productivity in the cotton plantations of the south, the novelist can achieve through influential words. While the slave is powerless to seize the whip from the hands of his despotic master to be the 'knouter' who has the right to self-defense and protection if not retaliation, the novelist can transform the lines into revolution. The credit for launching the war against slavery certainly goes to Harriet Beecher Stowe who was greeted by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 as "the little lady who made this big war"² through the powerful medium of words. By this achievement, all Americans have come to view the history of slavery from the author's angle of vision. It is only when the addressed audience sees such a repulsive institution from the author's perspective that a genuine and profound insight into the horrors of slavery is reached. By exposing the viciousness and ruthlessness of such a barbarous institution that degrades man and denies him his essential rights and by bringing Americans to see slavery in its true light, Stowe, in the words of Moira D Reynolds, "was a pioneer in using fiction for a constructive and "profound criticism of American society, especially its failure to live up to the promises of democracy"³

Stowe intended her book to be moving and effective. To achieve that goal, she substantiates her evidence that

The separate incidents that compose the narrative are, to a very great extent, authentic, occurring, many of them, either under her own observation, or that of her personal friends. She or her friends have observed characters the counterpart of almost all that are here introduced; and many of the sayings are word for word as heard herself, or reported to her. (p.618)

An Ancient Picture

Before we delve into the book, it may be appropriate to talk about the ways the image of Africa has been projected. This short historical survey enables us to understand the situation blacks are portrayed in Stowe's novel. Ever since Medieval times, Africa has been viewed as a vast continent of unfathomable natural resources and endless riches. It is interesting that such an image is also confirmed by Stowe's novel as its analysis reveals later on. European and Arab travellers alike have been struck by the hectic commercial activities in numerous African ports. Salt was dug out of its pits in Taghaza and sold to merchants. Al-Idrissi confirms that the inhabitants of Taghaza used salt as others used gold. They broke it into pieces and offered it for sale.⁴ But what affirms Africa's strong link to wealth, and gold in particular, may be attributed to Mandeville, who according to Eldred D. Jones "introduced Englishmen to the legend of Prestor John.... [described] as a fabulously wealthy Christian king living in a land full of precious stones".⁵ Several travellers asserted that Mali was the main centre for gold mining. Al-Qazwini, as an example, reports that Mali's gold "grows in the land as carrots grow in our land"⁶. Stowe, too, refers to Africa as "that far-off mystic land of gold, and gems, and spices" (p. 275).

This image of opulence and abundance attracted early travellers who reported their observations about a distant and exotic land. Consequently, the desire to invade and domesticate Africa became the ultimate goal of the West. But the journey to Africa was not without horrors and painful discoveries. "Africa" is the title of a poem by Maya Angelou⁷ that exposes evil imperialistic intentions behind the facade of a Western claim that Africa needs Western enlightenment and civilization to rise out of its hibernation. The poet asserts the blackness of Africa, its vastness and its sufferings as the "two Niles" that run through it are imagined to be "her tears". Maya Angelou and Stowe affirm certain distinctive features of the black continent and probably their awareness of the sufferings of its people is the common ground that unites them and brings them to feel for Africans. In "Africa", the "brigands ungentled" have sailed across oceans and have undertaken arduous voyages to reach the vast continent. Upon arrival, they "took her young daughters / sold her strong sons / churched her with Jesus / bled her with guns". These are among the atrocities that the white man has done to Africa that will always "remember her pain / remember her losses / her screams loud and vain / remember her riches / her history slain". Similarly, Stowe is primarily concerned with the agonies and painful experiences of the African race.

Point of View of Blacks Observed

Stowe took upon herself the challenging task of familiarizing the whole world with the agonies of the enslaved. As one starts reading the book, one is immediately aware that the novelist is talking about serious problems within a dual society with the sharpest polarization between the two distinct ethnic groups: blacks and whites. As Andrew Hacker maintains, this is polarization in colour, incomes, lifestyles, power, and attitudes toward each other.⁸ Human rights and social justice are often at the core. Stowe is concerned with these two issues. It is her objective to discuss human relationships in a pluralistic society. As she sees the injustice done to blacks, she feels it is her right to represent them. Her call for justice and understanding is bound to be heard. They have reaped their fruits by drawing attention to calamities and misfortunes that can no longer be endured. The white man has to listen to grievances and it is only when such grievances are written from the African or black man's point of view that they gain weight and get attention. Throughout history, the white man, as a historian, has decided what should be included or deleted from the annals of history. He will only allow what is in his favour to be published. He will suppress the voice of the oppressed because as Homi K. Bhabha argues, we live in an era where the "white sky [is] all around us"⁹. If that is so, who will record the miseries of the blacks particularly if they are inflicted on them away from the vigilant eye of a just state and in a southern cotton plantation cut-off from the rest of the world? Simon Legree has committed a terrible crime as he beats the innocent and submissive Uncle Tom to death just because he refuses heroically to betray two black female fugitives: Cassy and Erameline. Tom remains loyal to their memory to the last minute as he adamantly refuses to reveal what he knows about the women's disappearance. When George Shelby confronts Legree with his heinous murder, the perpetrator finds refuge in Bahaba's above remark. Since no white man was present at the time of the atrocious deed and since the testimony of blacks was not accepted by the courts, who could bring the charge against the evil-doer?

The following conversation takes place between the two men:

George: But, sir, this innocent blood shall have justice. I will proclaim this murder. I will go to the very first magistrate, and expose you.
"Do!" said Legree, snapping his fingers, scornfully. "I'd like to see you doing it. Where you going to get witnesses? - How you going to prove it? Come, now!" (p. 592)

But Stowe's novel proves it. She confirms the charge against the white man. Since she writes history from the black man's perspective, she must bring out the atrocities committed against him. The authorial voice is needed here to lay hands on the criminal and assert the accusation of a deliberate murder. She is present with her pen and heart. She sees it and she will bring the white man to see it. While George is almost dumbfounded since he knows full well the weakness of his position vis a vis the credibility of his evidence against Legree since "There was not a white person on the place; and in all southern courts, the testimony of colored blood is nothing". Stowe supplies the evidence that convicts the criminal. By presenting this evidence, she allows the smothered voice of a lady that cries "What a shame to our country that such sights are to be seen!" (p. 199) to be heard, though both the lady and George feel powerless to stop such atrocities. The helplessness that George experiences is the

moment when his tongue and hands are tied does not mean that the novelist is similarly restricted. Stowe transforms this moment of utter passivity and inability to bring criminals to justice into a moment of strength. The cries of the aggrieved will be answered in the long run for George "felt, at that moment, as if he could have rent the heavens with his heart's indignant cry for justice, but in vain" (p. 592). But in the hands of Stowe, nothing is recorded in vain.

The above incident could have been dropped had a Western historian been writing history. Such historians write the whole history of the oppressed from their particular perspectives and re-fashion their post-colonial views. But as Bhabha asserts:

What is crucial to such a vision of the future is the belief that we must not merely change the narratives of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different places, both human and historical. (LOC, p. 256)

Thus blacks and all others who fall into their category have the right to write history from within, not with a Western eye dictating their perspectives and re-defining the way history should be viewed, but from the point of view of the oppressed who have felt imperial injustice in its most heinous shapes. Stowe therefore writes the history of blacks as she actually observes it. She is in a position to document her observations as she exposes the whole truth for the entire world to see. The book therefore owes its success to a number of reasons, including its authenticity.

A Feminist Book

Being a feminist book, it enables people to appreciate the sufferings of mothers who face the ultimate fate of being harshly separated from their offspring. Eliza whose four-year-old quadroon boy Harry is to be sold by the slave owner Mr. Shelby to the slave-trader Haley, Mammy who works as a nurse for the inconsiderate hypochondriac Marie St. Clare and Emmeline who is bought by the ruthless Simon Legree are among females who are separated either from spouse or child. Stowe describes genuine emotional feelings and instinctive female reactions that a male novelist could not have possibly done. She is a background influence on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as a feminist novel. Hence, if Woolf is considered to be the founding mother of the contemporary feminist debate, she had an archetype in the person of Stowe. Hence, Stowe's novel enters the 'private chambers' of females to give a genuine picture of what lies inside. These are the 'private chambers' or 'quarters' that Virginia Woolf insists that a lady must have in addition to an independent income if she is to write fiction that plays a role in the imaginative territory of the women novelists.¹⁰ As a feminist writer, Stowe has access to these private chambers to describe what she observes from a feminist perspective. The argument that women write about different things from men and also in a different way while adopting a feminist viewpoint lies behind feminist literary criticism. Such a difference between genders can be evident not only "in the images which are used in literature, but in the actual use of language itself". Woolf also asserts that even the subject matter of women's novels is different from that of men's where "the essential difference lies in the fact not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each

sex describes itself. The first words in which either a man or a woman is described are generally enough to determine the sex of the writer".¹¹

Females Manipulated

By focusing her attention on women's problems, insights, emotions and special adventures in a way that exhibits a uniqueness of vision and a skill of representation, Stowe is able to let the feminist voice be heard and recognized independently as it is capable of transmitting an authentic picture and of sending a particular message. In fact, a feminist like Iris Marion Young insists "on the need for proper representation of social groups, such as ethnic and racial minorities, as well as women and other disadvantaged groups".¹² This is exactly the task that Stowe accomplishes. From the women's private chambers, she offers numerous examples of how females writhe in pain as they are victimized by slavery. The heaviest weight unfortunately falls on them and in accordance with their weak and submissive natures, they have to bow their heads and suffer the most. As the novel begins, women are entirely excluded from the harsh realities of a masculine world that decides their fate in their absence. Stowe depicts a world where a woman is the 'Other' who is robbed of her distinctive identity. She is marginalized and forced to play a subliminal role just as the blacks are excluded from the contemporary scene. Both females and blacks are therefore the victims of a masculine white world that pushes them to the fringes of public action. In such a world, gender is not biologically determined but rather culturally constructed to allow the male the upper hand over the female just as the history of colonization allows for an exhibition of the white man's cultural superiority over the black.

The introductory scene where "two gentlemen were sitting alone over their wine.... discussing some subject with great earnestness" (p. 41) foreshadows the numerous incidents at auctions and the slave-warehouse where men determine the destiny of females and force them to accept social injustice. The fact that Eliza overhears the whole conversation which men do not expect a concerned lady to overhear let alone comprehend immediately establishes the tyrannical nature of a masculine world that denies women admission into matters where they should have a say or where their voice ought to be freely expressed. Eliza is transformed into a silent object hidden behind bars to eavesdrop on the men. But by denying her admission into a ruthless masculine world, Stowe allows us to enter into a private affectionate feminine world where we see females undergoing tremendous pain and anguish. Even Mrs. Shelby, in whom Eliza confides, has been "entirely ignorant of her husband's embarrassments,", had been quite sincere in the entire incredulity with which she had met Eliza's suspicions. In fact, she dismissed the matter from her mind, without a second thought" (p. 53).

This scene therefore establishes the fact that genders operate in two opposite spheres: women are more concerned with household duties and trifles, and men decide cruelly on matters that need firm action, actions that come at the cost of denying females their freedom in personal matters. And even if females raise their voice in objection out of humanitarian concern, Haley thinks that women are gullible as their love for "watches, feathers, and trinkets, one's weight in gold would buy" (p. 46) could alter the case and talk them into positions they initially oppose. The rift between the two worlds where each sex plays a different role is essential. This allows

the feminist novelist to get into the hearts of her heroines and attempt to express their suppressed voice. Here we enter the harem world through the novelist's eyes to listen to grievances poured out of laden hearts. What is being exposed is the utter nonchalance and despotism of the masculine world. We come to share the novelist's views and consequently express sympathy for victimized females. But the difference between males and females is not only defined by a difference in subject-matter. Each group manipulates a different language more suitable for its needs: females use a meek language characterized by sobbing and complaining or a thorough disregard of the evil intentions behind men's words; while men employ a harsh language that even the external severity of the "chilly day in February" of the first sentence establishes. It is quite evident that the two men manipulate a language completely devoid of affection. In their view, human beings are reduced to mere objects who must be sold. As Shelby explains later to his wife about the intended sale of Eliza's child, Harry, and Tom:

Either they must go, or all must. Haley has come into possession of a mortgage, which, if I don't clear off with him directly, will take everything before it. I've raked, and scraped, and borrowed, and all but begged,— and the price of these two was needed to make up the balance, and I had to give them up. Haley fancied the child; he agreed to settle the matter that way, and no other. I was in his power, and had to do it. (p. 84).

The tone of Shelby's speech is authoritative, calculating and business-like. While he pretends in the introductory chapter that he is "a humane man [who] hate[s] to take the boy from his mother" (p.46), yet, he must pay his debts. In an attempt to justify slavery and smother any human affection, Haley draws the contrast between 'white folks' and niggers who are not

brought up in the way of 'spectin' to keep their children and wives, and all that. Niggers, you know, that's fetched up properly, ha'n't no kind of 'spectations of no kind; so all these things comes easier.

Once their loved ones are taken away, Haley believes that "out of sight, out of mind, you know,—and when it's clear done, and can't be helped, they naturally gets used to it" (p. 49). But Stowe proves that such an argument is false and deceptive. She includes such details to bring white people to an awareness that blacks are capable of expressing deeply genuine and profound feelings. It is out of love and concern that Eliza endures the hardship of the journey across the Ohio river to keep her child with her. Thus Stowe takes care to record that

With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another [i.e., piece of ice]....; stumbling- leaping-slipping-springing upward again! Her shoes are gone- her stockings cut from her feet- while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her to the bank. (p. 118)

Sufferings of Black People

Thus blacks are denied one of the basic rules of existence and forced to brush aside what confirms their humanity and superiority. By taking young children away from parents, the white man proves his insensitivity and callousness. He thinks that once children are away from the parents' sight, they are forgotten as the parents, by their nature, have hard hearts. By denying blacks affection and love once they are removed from their parents, the white man expects blacks to obey their masters. Stowe however is adamant in her view that the negro race is bound together, that they share a common destiny and that they present a united front. They resemble an inter-woven tapestry whose threads cannot be undone. Human relations are therefore very strong and blacks are almost treated as one large family that cares and shows concern for all its members.

There is no better example to illustrate how closely tied blacks are, as if they are weaving an inseparable social fabric, than in chapter 42. There we meet the two fugitives Cassy and Emmeline who leave the plantation and board a riverboat heading north disguised as "a Creole lady [and] her servant" (p. 597). It is a mere coincidence that "the next state-room to Cassy's was occupied by a French lady, named De Thoux" (p. 599). In this chapter, we learn of the long chain of coincidences that unite many of the novel's characters whose familial relationships have been harshly severed by slavery. Madame de Thoux is revealed to be George Harris's sister. She had resided in Kentucky in a former period of her life. She was sold to the South when George was a boy. Then "she was bought by a good and generous man. He took [her] with him to the West Indies, set [her] free, married [her]. It is but lately that he died; and [she] was going up to Kentucky, to see if [she] could find and redeem [her] brother" (p. 600). In the same chapter, Cassy learns too what has become of her long-lost daughter, who is none other than George Harris's wife, Eliza, whom he married in the Shelby's house early on in the novel. As George Shelby informs the group on board of the name Simmons, Cassy faints and falls "insensible on the floor of the cabin" (p. 601). Simmons is the name of the people who sold Eliza to George's father as this is confirmed by 'the bill of sale' (p.601) that George came across during his search into the dead man's papers.

The objective of such a scene is to bring blacks who suffered disconnection into unity. A family reunion is going to be witnessed next chapter in Canada where the Harris household is together enjoying liberty and transforming their residence into a fine place of education and warm feelings. After family members have been scattered as "the wind whirls and scatters the leaves of autumn" the "shores of refuge, like the eternal shore, often unite again, in glad communion, hearts that for long have mourned each other as lost" (p. 606). By unifying the Harris Household, Stowe directs a severe blow at slavery that scatters family members and cuts ties among family relations because she believes that, "The most dreadful part of slavery, ..., is its outrages on the feelings and affections, - the separating of families, for example" (p. 200). To counterbalance such activities conducted by the ruthless white man, Stowe shows the blacks as one consolidated front who face one destiny, undergo the same painful experiences but triumph once they are united. Thus the repeated stories of family break-ups throughout the novel and the continuous attempts of the white man to tear at the heart as he resorts to violence to sever relations between family

members who are forced into a diaspora, end in failure. What Stowe shows is that whatever the white man does to disperse the African race and cut it off the continuous cycle of history is not entirely successful. The family reunion defeats the purpose of the white man that desires to keep a diaspora going because with it no aspirations to form an independent African nation can ever come true.

The white man is exposed as utterly ruthless in the novel because he does not accept that what he does to the African people could also be done to him. He gives himself the full right to disconnect relations among family members but demands his family unit remain inviolable. Stowe gives blacks the right to feel close. She creates this milieu on board the riverboat and then in Canada. By doing so she thwarts the white man's plans for diaspora. She destroys evil schemes to keep family members apart. When the disguised and runaway George Harris meets his former employer Mr. Wilson in the tavern where a note has been posted asking to have George handed over to his master either alive or dead, Wilson cites religion as an institution that teaches people obedience. As the "apostle says, 'Let everyone abide by the condition in which he is called.' We must all submit to the indications of Providence, George, - don't you see?" (p. 184). This is the same lesson that the hypocritical clergyman teaches the slaves. Stowe directs her attack at the church for remaining silent on the whole issue of slavery, and rather than encouraging the oppressed to defy such an institution, religion ironically becomes a means of reinforcement and legalization. Thus the clergyman says "It's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants, - kept in a low condition" (p. 200) The Scripture is manipulated to talk blacks into accepting their lot as "It pleased Providence, for some inscrutable reason, to doom the race to bondage, ages ago; we must not set up our opinion against that" (p. 200).

Later on Marie St. Clare cites from a sermon of a Dr. G to prove the point that the Bible allows slavery since "all orders and distinctions in society came from God" and therefore "some should be high and some low, and that some were to rule and some to serve,..., and he proved distinctly that the Bible was on our side, and supported all our institutions so convincingly"(p. 279) . But to return to George Harris who is advised by Wilson to go back to his master as Providence intends him to accept his position as a slave, George cites an example to illustrate that were the white man to fall into servitude to "Indians (who) should come and take [him] a prisoner away from [his] wife and children, and want to keep [him] all [his] life hoeing corn for them", would he "abide in the condition in which [he is] called"? (p. 184) Only those who are flogged feel the pain and it is easy for a free man to exhort a nigger to accept slavery because he does not know the agony a black man goes through. Ophelia tries to make St. Clare see the horrors of slavery as she says:

Tell me that any man living wants to work all his days, from day-dawn till dark, under the constant vigilant eye of a master, without the power of putting forth one irresponsible volition, on the same dreary, monotonous, unchanging toil, and all for two pairs of pantaloons and a pair of shoes a year, with enough food and shelter to keep him in working order! Any man who thinks that human beings can, as a general thing, be made about as comfortable that way as any other. I wish he may try it. (pp.339-340)

Moving Scenes

This is what Stowe intends the white man to see. She aims at creating sympathy with the downtrodden who feel as much pain as any human being when they are dragged away as prisoners from the very presence of their parents. When Marie St. Clare is confronted with Ophelia's criticism that she has separated Mammy from her husband and children and therefore blacks are equal to whites in terms of feeling loss as "the Lord made them of one blood with us", Marie retorts that blacks are "a degraded race" who cannot be put "on any sort of equality with us, you know, as if we could be compared, why, it's impossible.... Mammy couldn't have the feelings that I should. It's a different thing altogether, -..... And just as if Mammy could love her little dirty babies as I love Eva!" (p. 268). What in fact troubles Marie is that her daughter Eva "seems to put herself on an equality with every creature that comes near her. It's a strange thing about the child" since she knocks down social barriers and acts in a way that shows love and affection. While Marie thinks that servants must be made to "know their place, Eva never does; there is no getting into the child's head the first beginning of an idea what a servant's place is!" (p. 265). However because of her kindness all the servants weep at her death. It is because she feels for others that they in return feel for her. She expresses a tremendous concern for the plight of slaves and she wishes to free them all and teach them to read and write. When she falls sick, she reminds her father of the sufferings of blacks and implores him to set them free as "these poor creatures love their children as much as you do me. O! do something for them! There's poor Mammy loves her children; I've seen her cry when she talked about them. And Tom loves his children; and it's dreadful, papa, that such things are happening, all the time!" (p. 403).

The little child awakens in her father's heart feelings of concern and love and had he not been stabbed in the cafe by the stranger, he would have acted on Eva's words and freed Tom. Eva develops a close affectionate relationship with the neglected and unloved slave girl Topsy that the mother fails to understand. She says to Topsy "I love you, because you haven't had any father, or mother, or friends; - because you've been a poor, abused child!" (p. 409) Eva tries in vain to convince Marie that Topsy is not inherently wicked and that all she requires is love. When Eva dies, her loss is profoundly felt by Topsy and all others who assembled in the parlour to receive a token of love, "a curl of [Eva's] hair" that symbolizes attachment and connection to the cause of blacks even after death (p. 419). Thus Eva's death becomes the vehicle through which her father is able to experience the sufferings of the oppressed. It is only when he loses her that he is aware of the anguish of blacks who have had to endure separation and family break-up. Similarly, it is only when Tom is gone, that the predicament of blacks is likely to change. The death of an individual signals the freedom of a group. Thus when George Shelby becomes the master of his father's plantation, he frees all the slaves attributing his change of feelings to the heroic life and cruel death of Tom. In his loving farewell speech to servants in the plantation, George says:

that [he] resolved, before God, that [he] should never own another slave, while it was possible to free him; that nobody, through [him], should ever run the risk of being parted from his wife and friends, and dying on a lonely plantation. He would do it all when you received your freedom, think that you own it to this

good soul, and pay it back in kindness to his wife and children. Think of your freedom, every time you see Uncle Tom's Cabin; (p. 617)

Tom dies to give slaves their freedom. His victory over Legree comes in his acceptance of his fate and his refusal to yield to his behests because Tom's soul is free. When Legree forces him to comply with his orders by citing the words of the Bible "servants, obey yer masters", Tom tries in vain to explain that obedience to the master is not absolute since his "soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought, - ye can't buy it!" (p. 508). Thus he emerges victorious because he remains faithful to his people till the last minute. By offering his life, he gives Africa its freedom, "oh Africa! latest called of nations, - called to the crown of thorns, the scourge, the bloody sweat, the cross of agony, - this is to be thy victory" (p. 562). This is the real source of consolation for blacks who are free and reunited rather than enslaved and dispersed toward the end of the novel. They want to seek a return to their African origin to build a nation. What the white man desires as he splits the African race apart and divorces mother from child or husband is ultimately thwarted as Africans assert their freedom and reinforce their family union. The attempt at diaspora has failed because Africa has every right to become an independent nation that stands on equal footing with any other free nation.

A Bright Future For Africa

Stowe takes pride in the fact that Africa is rising even though at that time it was not. But she foresees its rise as a nation as Africa's turn is bound to come when it will play a role in history. Furthermore, she expresses the belief that:

If ever Africa shall show an elevated and cultivated race, - and come it must, some time her turn to figure in the great drama of human improvement, - life will awake there with a gorgeousness and splendour of which our cold western tribes faintly have conceived. In that far-off mystic land of gold, and gems, and spices, and waving palms, and wondrous flowers, and miraculous fertility, will awake new forms of art, new styles of splendor; and the negro race, no longer despised and trodden down, will, perhaps, show forth some of the latest and most magnificent revelations of human life. Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childlike simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness. In all these they will exhibit the highest form of the peculiarly Christian life, and, perhaps, as God chasteneth whom he loveth, he hath chosen poor Africa in the furnace of affliction, to make her the highest and noblest in that kingdom which he will set up, when every other kingdom has been tried, and failed; for the first shall be last, and the last first. (p. 275)

It is interesting that the above quotation confirms the image of Africa alluded to earlier in the discussion of European and Arab travellers' conceptions of the vast continent. Writing about Marrakesh in West Africa, al-Qazwini has this to say:

it has many gardens and orchards. Its borders are indented with numerous gulfs. Goods come to it from other regions and through caravans, in addition to what it contains of trees and groves 13.

Because of its treasures and hidden natural resources, Africa is bound to be self-sufficient. Africa's fertile and expansive land can be used to supply a large proportion of the world with its basic needs in food and agriculture. In fact many African countries have recently evolved beverage economies producing elements of incidental consumption in the Northern hemisphere.¹⁴ While Africa still imports the fundamentals of its existence such as industrial and advanced scientific equipment, African intellectuals manage these Western firms, labs and establishments. Stowe gives George Harris the credit for having invented an agricultural device for "the cleaning of the hemp, which, considering the education and circumstances of the inventor, displayed quite as much mechanical genius as Whitney's cotton-gin" (p. 54). George's employer is so struck by the high performance and "superior qualifications" that the black man has that he congratulates George's master who comes to visit the factory "on possessing so valuable a slave" (p. 55). But envy consumes the heart of the white man as he feels an "uneasy consciousness of inferiority. What business had his slave to be marching round the country, inventing machines, and holding up his head among gentlemen. He'd soon put a stop to it. He'd take him back, and put him to hoeing and digging, and "see if he'd step about to smart"" (p. 55). It is therefore out of jealousy and fear that the black man is denied a fair chance to play a major role in history. Stowe is certain that such an opportunity is coming no matter how hard the white man strives to exclude the black and dismiss him to the periphery. In spite of a deliberate marginalization of the black man out of fear, his genius has to be acknowledged.

Stowe refutes the argument that blacks are culturally inferior. On the contrary, she presents them on equal footing if not on a higher level than their 'masters'. George in fact asks in amazement what right the white man has above him: "Who made this man my master? That's what I want to know!" (p. 61). What is the criterion that determines whether one should be the master or the slave? If the hypocrites' viewpoint that the so called evidence for that position is taken out of the Bible, then that evidence is against them as no religion at all accepts that man should be denied his freedom and tortured by another. George makes a number of comparisons that prove his superiority to his master. Thus he says:

I'm a man as much as he is. I'm a better man than he is. I know more about business than he does. I am a better manager than he is. I can read better than he can, I can write a better hand, - and I've learned it all myself, and no thanks to him, - I've learned it in spite of him, and now what right has he to make a dray-horse of me? (p. 60)

This is the new African with all the abilities to build a new nation. Here is Stowe's conception of the free man who opposes tyranny, possesses talents and fights for true freedom only attainable in another country. This is the African who questions and never lowers his head in subservience. He holds the pistol high when he needs to frighten his pursuers. He accepts no defeat. With him Africa is bound to rise and have a future. He possesses that spark of

defiance that gives him physical and spiritual strength to fight against injustice and also the intellectual stamina that puts him on an equal footing with the white man.

If Conrad tells us in *Heart of Darkness* that Western "strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others"¹⁵, here is an example of a man who refuses to be in a position of weakness by running away for his freedom and by refusing to comply with unjust laws. In the character of George, Stowe sees signs where resort to resistance is required if man is to gain his freedom. She also shows in the character of the submissive Tom that such hopes can be reached through the death of an individual which gives life to a whole race. Both George's struggle and resistance and Tom's submissiveness are needed to attain freedom. Each can be used at a different stage and under different circumstances since both try to reach the one goal: to cast slavery aside and assert the original freedom of the African race.

The above characterization defines Stowe's belief that a change of circumstances will bring Africa to a leading position. Africans are destined to exhibit their talents, productivity, efficiency and power to lead and make decisions concerning their own affairs. Sufficient time is all that is needed before their destiny will come to pass. Stowe's belief in the inherent good nature and outstanding qualities of blacks is expressed throughout the novel. In their capability to show love and affection and in their care for their families and children, they surpass whites. By the end of the novel, George Harris informs a friend in a letter that he must seek a return to his roots back in Africa. His desire for political dialogue and power lies behind his determination to move with his family to Liberia. He feels obliged to go to "form part of a nation", particularly a new one like Liberia that had recently come into being. George believes that such an African nation with modern ideas and aspirations shall "have a voice in the councils of nations, and then we can speak". He goes on to define what a nation is and what its rights are: "A nation has a right to argue, remonstrate, implore, and present the cause of its race, - which an individual has not" (p. 610). George so identifies himself

with the oppressed, enslaved African race that [he] cast[s] in [his] lot; ... The desire and yearning of [his soul] is for an African nationality. [He] want[s] a people that shall have a tangible, separate existence of its own, and where [is he] to look for it? Not in Hayti; for in Hayti they have nothing to start with.... Where, then, shall [he] look? On the shores of Africa [he] see[s] a republic, - a republic formed of picked men, who, by energy and self-educating force, have, in many cases, individually, raised themselves above a condition of slavery. Having gone through a preparatory stage of feebleness, this republic has, at last, become an acknowledged nation on the face of the earth, - acknowledged by both France and England. There it is [his] wish to go, and find [himself] a people. (pp.608-9)

Conclusion

George repeats his request that he "want(s) a country, a nation of [his] own" (p. 610). He believes that once Africans unite and as "the whole splendid continent of Africa opens before [them] and [their children] they will rise to great heights. The African nation shall fill the eye of our heaven with its star, to shine as a fire"

plant there mighty republics, that, growing with the rapidity of tropical vegetation, shall be for all coming ages" (p. 609). By connecting Afro-Americans to their homeland and by asserting their deep and original roots, Stowe does exactly the opposite of what the Western world desires and that is to cut off Afro-Americans from their past and heritage. These give them a sense of belonging and security. A homeland where human rights are granted is what the oppressed minorities of today seek and call for because without it they live like fugitives or nomads. With it, they have what Bhabha calls "secure point[s] of identification"¹⁶. A homeland is therefore a must to assert one's freedom, to connect with roots and preserve identity. The past is also important in the process of preservation and arrival at a distinct identity. That cannot be done unless Afro-Americans have a thorough knowledge of their painful history of slavery. It is only when they know how they were rejected, alienated and deprived of basic human rights that they will discover who they are.

A black writer like James Baldwin sheds light on the painful reality that Afro-Americans should be constantly aware of. In "Stranger in the Village", he speaks of the black man whose "past was taken from him, almost literally, at one blow". Baldwin sees the possibility of Haitians "to trace their ancestry back to African kings, ...any American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor"¹⁷. By returning to roots in Africa, Stowe and Baldwin find a solution for that feeling of rootlessness and absence of a centre of attachment to which blacks should hold. The journey into Africa becomes a search for the self and an exploration of a stable identity. By connecting Afro-Americans to Africa, they discover their past and hence find meaning and order in their lives. Africa therefore holds a deeply significant location in Stowe's novel because she regards the continent as a home that offers stability, comfort, warmth, freedom and identity. Without it, blacks will still face the disastrous consequences of a diaspora. In Africa they are united to build a separate nation that is bound to have its chance and play its major role on the stage of world events. By emphasizing the importance of origin, Stowe's writing has all the warmth of the human voice that speaks up loudly to bring Americans to an awareness and understanding of Afro-American history. While the novel starts with the white man's attempt at a dispersal of Africans in auctions and in a remote God-forsaken wilderness and in a disconnection of ties among members of George Harris's family, it ends with a family reunion in a free land first and then a desire to return to their roots in Liberia. The novel witnesses a movement from tyranny at the hands of the white man to an escape from the clutches of despotism and the attainment of liberty. It also moves from the painful history of the Afro-American fixed only in rootlessness into a brighter future where the Afro-American finds roots and origin which are important to the process of self-discovery. Throughout the novel, Stowe does the job of historian and feminist to approach the issue from the black man's perspective. The success of the book lies in the brilliant handling of the dual task of the historian and the feminist. It is this melding, it is unanimously acknowledged, that has so pertinent a bearing on changing the predicament of blacks and by implications all others who fall in their category.

Notes

1) Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 179-1860 (New York, 1985), p. 122.

2) Anne Douglas, "Introduction," in Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly by Harriet Beecher Stowe (New York: The Penguin American Library, 1852), p.19. Further references to the text are to this edition.

3) Moira Davison Reynolds, Uncle Tom's Cabin and Mid-Nineteenth Century United States: Pen & Conscience (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985), p. 156.

4) Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Idrissi, Wasf Afrikya al-Shamaliya wa al-Sahrawiya, ed. Henri Peres (Algiers: Maktabat Ma'ahad al-Durous al-Ulya, 1957), p. 91.

5) Eldred D. Jones, The Elizabethan Image of Africa (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), p. 5.

6) Zakariya ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini, Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-Ibad (Beirut: Dar Sadr lil Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 1960), p. 163.

7) "Africa" by Maya Angelou in Carl E. Bain & others, eds, The Norton Introduction To literature, 5th edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 704.

8) A compelling portrait of this situation is presented by Andrew Hacker, Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal (New York & Toronto: Scribner's and Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992).

9) Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p.237. All subsequent references are abbreviated LOC.

10) Mary Eagleton, ed, Feminist Literary Criticism (London & New York: Longman, 1991), pp.26-27.

11) Michele Barrett, "Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing," in Mary Eagleton, ed. Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (Cambridge & Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 224-225.

12) Will Kymlicka, The Rights of Minority Cultures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 17.

13) Al-Qazwini, p. 112.

14) For a discussion of African economic conditions, see, for example, Prakash Singh, The Economy of Africa (New Delhi: Kalunga Publications, 1992).

15) Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1902), p. 10.

16) Quoted in Rosemary Jolly, "Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa," *P.M.L.A.* 110 (1995), p. 21.

17) James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," in *Notes of a Native Son* (New York, 1955), p. 144.

Bibliography

- Bain, Carl E. and others, eds. The Norton Introduction to Literature. 5th edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.
- Baldwin, James. "Stranger in the Village," in Notes of a Native Son. New York, 1955.
- Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. London & New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness. New York: Penguin Books, 1902.
- Eagleton, Mary, ed. Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader. Cambridge & Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Feminist Literary Criticism. London & New York: Longman, 1991.
- Fluck, Winfried. "The Power and Failure of Representation in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin." New Literary History 23 (1992): 319-38.
- Hacker, Andrew. Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal. New York & Toronto: Scribner's & Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992.
- al-Idrissi, Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Muhammad. Wasf Afrikya al-Shamaliya wa al-Sahrawiya, ed. Henri Peres. Algiers: Maktabat Ma'ahad al-Durus al-Ulya, 1957.
- Jolly, Rosemary. "Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Post colonial Discourse and the New South Africa." P.M.L.A. 110 (1995): 17-29
- Jones, Eldred D. The Elizabethan Image of Africa. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971..
- Kymlicka, Will. The Rights of Minority Cultures. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- al-Qazwini, Zakariya ibn Muhammad. Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-Ibad. Beirut: Dar Sadr lil Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 1960.
- Reynolds, Moira Davison, Uncle Tom's Cabin and Mid-Nineteenth Century United States: Pen & Conscience. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985.
- Singh, H. The Economy of Africa. New Delhi: Kalinga Publications, 1992

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly with an introduction by Anne Douglas. New York: The Penguin American Library, 1852.

Compkins, Jane. Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790 - 1860. New York, 1985.