

**Literature as an Enquiry into Hidden Histories: A Study on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and
American History**

Brighton.A.Rose

PhD Scholar, PG & Research Department of English,
V.O.Chidambaram College, Manonmaniam Sunderanar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, India.
brighton.rose29@gmail.com

Dr.V.Chanthiramathi

Research Guide & Associate Professor,
PG & Research Department of English,
V.O.Chidambaram College, Manonmaniam Sunderanar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, India.

Abstract: Literature and History are two branches closely related to each other. Literature has always been the tool of bringing out the outcry of the oppressed class of people whose histories were little known of. History was never real. It is just the manipulation of facts and events by those holding thresholds of power in the society, in order to maintain their unquestionable power over those people subjugated by them. But still the manipulation of histories can be understood by a parallel study of a non-historical text published during the same period, which is brought out in the theory of New Historicism. In a similar way the historical texts written during the period of the American Civil war will bring out the pain and suffering of the oppressed, the blacks in the hands of the subjugators, the whites in a more sophisticated way. But the exact pain of not only the blacks but also the mulattoes can be studied in the light of another text. In this research, the literary text employed is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Thus the exact history of a period can be learned, not only by means of a history text, but also by means of a literary novel and even be visualized in the form of a movie.

Key words: History, Literature, Manipulation, oppressed, oppressor, New Historicism, Whites, Blacks, Mulattoes, movie.

History is a manipulation of facts and events by those in the thresholds of power. It was never truthful, but builds an illusion of truth to the readers. The genuinity of History to

an extent can be studied by a parallel reading of a literary text of the period. This research work is mainly focused on the exact crisis faced by the blacks and the mixed race and the dominant white race in America. Since the topic is related to a group of people who are secluded and suppressed, the research could be made more effective if it goes alongside the historical events of the time. The theory of New Historism has been employed as a tool for this research project. New Historicism tends to look for the unconscious truth. John Brannigan defines New Historicism as “a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kind. As a critical practice it treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible.”(6). Foucault, the famous New Historian viewed history in terms of power. Knowledge gives one power and power implies knowledge, which serves to control the world by imposing limits on its subjects. For the prospect of a parallel reading, the text I have employed is *As it is: A Testimony of a Thousand Witness* by Theodore Dwight Weld, co – authored by the wife Angelina Grimke and sister – in – law Sarah Grimke written in the year 1839. A true historical document of American slavery and it further focused on the afflictions faced by the black community such as their diet, clothing, housing, and working conditions.

Racism – the belief that a person because of the colour of their skin are superior to those of a different color and therefore are justified, through manipulation and control of the power at their disposal, in having superior economic, social and political positions. So strong was the feeling among the great mass of White people that they are superior to the blacks. The United States Census Bureau defines white people as those "having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa." Whites were not even the natives of land, but they recognized themselves as the superior race in America and have always indulged in the process of subjugating the blacks and the mixed races. The innateness of the Whites to dominate and subjugate others is inborn, and the state of responding to the needs of the needy is limited. The attitude of ownership, of holding an almost divine right over the destinies of Black people, seemed to have become deeply rooted in White American individual, which still continues to an extent.

Black people who came to the new world did not come from societies barren of culture and achievement, they were torn from their tribal moorings, branded, and made to undergo the additional horrors of being stuffed into ships and forced to cross the ocean under the most inhuman circumstances. When the blacks arrived in America, they were made to

undergo the process of “seasoning” with its unbelievable cruelty. This activity was designed to make them servile dependents, to break hold which Africa held over her scattered children. The blacks were killed without any formal enquiry. Lynchings was a social form of entertainment that often attracted thousand of white spectators. “The burned, tortured, and mutilated body of the Black male would be torn apart by the crowd as battles broke out over body parts as souvenirs” (Booker, 142). The most shocking news is the experimentation of 399 Black men who were “used as laboratory animals in a long and inefficient study on how long it takes syphilis to kill someone” (Jones, 1993).

Blacks were the foremost and the direct victims of American Racism. In *Uncle Tom’s cabin*, the state of blacks is well explained as “They are all labour – saving machines themselves, every one of them.”(14) and the words will state their status in the society. Cassy, being a Black slave, and the mother of three, is sold and resold which results in losing all her children, and is deceived many a times. She is exploited by her owner Butler and then by another white master in the novel. The worse scenario is the loss of Identity, which in other words in the loss of his/her own existence. The American slaves did not even exist, as they have no identity within the nation, as they have always been victims of suppression, both by their White masters and also by those superior within.

Blacks were not the only victims of slavery, even the mixed race individuals endured the same fate as the blacks. Black people and the White people have intermixed in Africa and Europe long before the continent of ‘America’ was discovered. The one - drop rule has made it possible for historians writing about African Americans to ignore and largely gloss over the topic of racial mixture and speak about all those of African descent simply as “black.” The American mixed race or the Miscegenated race in modern term ‘New People’, are the set of people who are not a part of any race. In 1705, the Virginia Legislature defined a mixed race individual as “the child of an Indian, and the child, grandchild, or great grandchild of a Negro.” (Williamson 10). The term itself is a sense of pain.

The Mixed race or in particular the Mulattoes are not only victims of physical oppression but also psychological oppression. Though the sophisticated group of people considered this a privilege, for many others it is a burden. This can be studied in the light of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in particular with the characterization of George Harris and Eliza, who are Mulattoes without a glimpse of their parentage and their suffering in the hands of different masters. George, is an important character in the novel

Uncle Tom's Cabin. He is educated and is considered a mechanical genius and had invented a machine for the cleaning of the hemp, but is not even given the recognition as an inventor and the patent in name of his master, but to the contrary he is treated worse than a slave. When his invention is displayed, a White master comment, "What business had his slave to be marching around the country, inventing machines, and holding up his head among gentleman?"(15). In the poem titled *Mulato* by Aldo Kraas, he brings forth the state of Mulatto as being in a state of dilemma between a suppressor and suppressed,

Not White

Not Black...

Half of me is subject to discrimination

Half of me does the discriminating...

The Poor whites were the category of people who acquired lower social status among the elite whites. The poor whites among the native blacks despite their low-class standings as they were suppressed by the Whites, still enjoy the privileges of being a White. In the movie *Django Unchained*, the white characters John, Ellis and Roger are portrayed to do mean jobs, mostly serving their white masters. Mr. Shelby, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to avoid the status of being a poor White in the play *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reluctantly agrees to sell little Harry to the slave merchant. Du Bois in his *Black Reconstruction in America*, brings out their state as,

They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best public schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. (13).

Racism and Sexism were the controlling agents in the American system. The White women were victims, though they were not victims of racism to a greater extent, were victims of sexism, as they are dominated by their white men and even at times by their black slaves. Harriet Jacobs in his *Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl* brings out the intensity of the slaves, slave trade and most importantly their inner urge of the slaves for survival. "Slavery is

terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.”.(86) To an extent, the status of white women in the American society was also questioned.

Abraham Maslow’s Theory of Human Motivation as stated in his text book *Hierarchy of Needs: A Theory of Human Motivation* clearly points that human beings have innate needs which have to be fulfilled in order for them to feel secure and satisfied. This being the case, the connection between the fact that the blacks were enslaved and their desire to attain liberty is firmly attached to their means for survival. The race for survival makes more sense to the Blacks who had no other choice but to employ all their means at their disposal to live as free human beings. This is an essential motivator of their survival.

Thus, the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, considered as one of the reasons for the American Civil War makes deep insights into the Histories of the Blacks and the Mixed race that were denied from the world in the form of her novel.

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