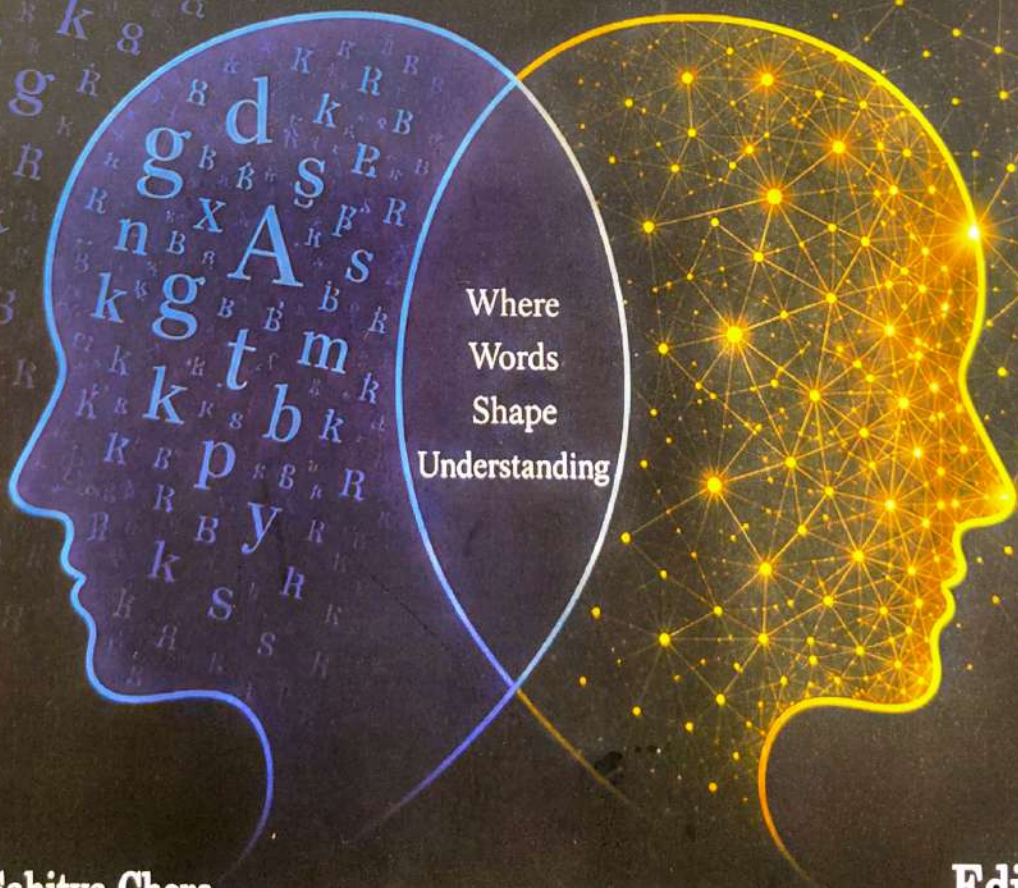


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Volume - I



Srijon Sahitya Chora
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Stowe's Language of Genders in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: An Analytical Study

Nucilu Shijo
Dr Anjan K Behera

Introduction

Published in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became one of the most influential works of nineteenth-century American literature, galvanising abolitionist sentiment and shaping public opinion on slavery. Written in response to the 'Fugitive Slave Act of 1850', the novel dramatises the cruelties of slavery through characters such as Uncle Tom, Eliza, George Harris, Eva, Cassy, and Simon Legree. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is primarily recognised for its abolitionist message, it also offers a nuanced depiction of gender dynamics, especially in the ways that women are both exploited and valorised. The portrayal of female characters such as Eliza, Aunt Chloe, and Eva invites readers to examine the intersection of gender, race, and class in a society where patriarchy and capitalism are intricately woven together. This chapter seeks to explore Stowe's representation of gender through a Marxist feminist lens, which examines how women's roles are shaped by economic and social systems. The Marxist feminist framework allows for an analysis of gender within the capitalist structures of slavery, revealing how the novel not only exposes the dehumanisation of enslaved people but also critiques the exploitation of women's labour.

By analysing Stowe's representation of black and white women, this study argues that while *Uncle Tom's Cabin* often upholds traditional gender roles, it also critiques the economic system that perpetuates women's oppression. Furthermore, the chapter explores how characters like Eliza and Aunt Chloe embody resistance through maternal and domestic labour, emphasising the transformative potential of women's roles in a capitalist society.

Theoretical Framework: Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism argues that women's oppression is rooted in the dual forces of capitalism and patriarchy. Building on Karl Marx's critique of

class exploitation and Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). Marxist feminists assert that women are oppressed both as workers in the economic sphere and as reproducers within the family. Later thinkers such as Silvia Federici and Angela Davis extended this view, showing how women's unpaid domestic labour and reproductive capacities have historically been exploited to sustain capitalist systems, particularly in racialised contexts (Davis, 1981; Federici, 2004, 2012).

Applied to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this framework reveals slavery as a system where economic and patriarchal oppression intersect. Enslaved women were commodified not only for their labour but also for their reproductive ability, since children born into slavery became property. Characters such as Eliza and Cassy illustrate this exploitation: Eliza resists the commodification of her son by fleeing, while Cassy embodies the trauma of repeatedly losing children to the slave market. White women, such as Mrs. Shelby and Ophelia St. Clare, are portrayed as morally aware yet structurally powerless within patriarchal constraints, reflecting the limited agency of bourgeois women.

Male characters further demonstrate gendered dynamics. Simon Legree embodies capitalist-patriarchal domination, while Uncle Tom represents an alternative masculinity rooted in moral endurance rather than violence. Thus, Marxist feminism helps uncover how Stowe portrays slavery as both a racial and gendered system of exploitation, where class, gender, and race intersect to sustain oppression.

Gendered Representation of Black and White Women

One of the most striking features of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the way she centres women, both enslaved and free, in her critique of slavery. The novel foregrounds black women as sites of resistance and suffering, while also depicting white women as moral voices caught within the limitations of a patriarchal society. By contrasting these two groups, Stowe highlights the gendered dimensions of slavery, illustrating how it destroys motherhood, corrupts womanhood, and reconfigures the domestic ideal.

For the black women, the novel emphasises the maternal instinct as both natural and heroic. Eliza, for instance, is depicted as a devoted mother whose love for her child drives her to make the harrowing escape across the frozen Ohio River. Stowe describes her flight in dramatic, sentimental language, designed to evoke sympathy from her white readership. Eliza's character demonstrates the moral strength and courage of enslaved mothers, while at the same time exposing the cruelty of a system that threatens to sever maternal bonds for economic profit. In Eliza, Stowe portrays the enslaved Black woman not as a passive victim

but as an active agent of resistance, a representation that destabilises prevailing racist stereotypes of black women as submissive or lacking maternal feeling.

Cassy, another enslaved woman, offers a contrasting representation. Unlike Eliza, who resists by escape, Cassy represents the psychological devastation inflicted by slavery. She has endured the repeated loss of her children, sold away into slavery, and this trauma leaves her deeply embittered. Cassy's voice articulates the emotional and mental toll of slavery on enslaved women, dramatising the impossibility of sustaining maternal identity in a system that commodifies children. While Eliza embodies hope and maternal strength, Cassy represents despair and brokenness; together, they highlight the range of experiences of enslaved Black women under slavery.

By contrast, Stowe's portrayal of white women situates them as moral arbiters, yet often powerless within patriarchal structures. Mrs. Shelby, for example, sympathises with Tom and Eliza and quietly disapproves of slavery, yet she lacks the authority to prevent her husband from selling them. Similarly, Ophelia St. Clare, Augustine St. Clare's cousin, embodies the Northern Protestant woman who intellectually opposes slavery but struggles to overcome her ingrained racial prejudice. She eventually learns to educate and nurture Topsy, a young enslaved girl, suggesting that moral reform is possible for white women. On the other hand, Marie St. Clare epitomises selfishness, vanity, and maternal neglect, serving as a foil to the virtuous female figures.

The portrayal of these white women underscores the tension between moral awareness and structural constraint. Stowe positions them as figures with the capacity for compassion and reform, but their lack of economic and legal power reveals the patriarchal limits of their agency. Through these contrasts, Stowe suggests that while white women can be complicit in slavery, they also hold potential as agents of abolitionist change, if they mobilise their moral authority to resist the institution.

Economic Commodification of Enslaved Women's Bodies

The commodification of enslaved women's bodies is perhaps the most direct way Stowe exposes the intersection of gender, race, and capitalism. Enslaved women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are not only exploited for their physical labour but also for their reproductive capacity. Their ability to bear children becomes an economic asset, increasing the wealth of the master, and their maternal relationships are consistently violated by the logic of the slave market.

Eliza's flight is sparked by the looming sale of her son, Harry. In this moment, her child is not viewed as a human being but as property whose value can resolve Mr. Shelby's debts. Stowe's sentimental rendering of

Eliza's desperate escape is designed to confront the reader with the horror of treating a child as a commodity. Her narrative insists that enslaved women's maternal love is as natural and powerful as that of white mothers, directly countering proslavery arguments that enslaved people were incapable of familial devotion.

Cassy's story takes this commodification further, dramatising how repeated reproductive exploitation leads to psychological devastation. Her children are consistently taken from her, each loss reinforcing the inhumanity of a system that transforms the most intimate of human relationships into economic transactions. Cassy's pain reflects what Marxist feminists such as Angela Davis describe as the denial of motherhood under slavery: enslaved women were systematically denied the right to raise their own children because their reproductive labour was subordinated to economic profit.

In addition to reproductive exploitation, enslaved women are also subjected to sexual exploitation. While Stowe does not always depict this explicitly, the novel strongly implies that characters like Cassy and Emmeline are vulnerable to their master's sexual demands. Simon Legree's household represents this dynamic most clearly: women are reduced to sexual property, reinforcing the connection between patriarchy and capitalism in the institution of slavery. The commodification of women's sexuality, combined with their reproductive capacities, underscores how slavery transforms Black women's bodies into sites of profit, stripping them of autonomy and subjectivity.

Through these portrayals, Stowe exposes slavery as a system that desecrates the sanctity of motherhood and turns women's bodies into commodities. While her representation is at times sentimental and shaped by her white, middle-class perspective, her emphasis on maternal suffering and commodification provided a powerful critique for her contemporary audience.

Masculinity Under Slavery

While Stowe places women at the centre of her narrative, she also critically examines masculinity under slavery. Male characters embody different forms of manhood, each shaped by their relation to power, race, and economic structures. Through figures such as Uncle Tom, George Harris, and Simon Legree, Stowe contrasts alternative masculinities, critiquing those rooted in domination and profit while valorising those grounded in morality and endurance.

Uncle Tom is portrayed as the moral centre of the novel, embodying a form of Christian masculinity rooted in humility, endurance, and forgiveness. His refusal to compromise his faith, even under brutal conditions, represents a spiritual resistance to slavery. Unlike Legree,

Tom refuses to exercise violence or domination, instead practising a masculinity that emphasises moral strength and self-sacrifice. From a Marxist feminist perspective, Tom subverts patriarchal expectations of male authority by embracing values traditionally coded as feminine, such as compassion and care, yet his quiet endurance becomes a radical act of defiance against the dehumanising logic of slavery.

George Harris, Eliza's husband, represents another form of resistance. His escape from slavery and assertion of his dignity highlight a masculinity defined by intelligence, self-reliance, and resistance to racial oppression. While Tom represents passive resistance, George embodies active defiance, demonstrating the multiple ways enslaved men challenged their subjugation.

In stark contrast, Simon Legree epitomises violent, patriarchal masculinity intertwined with capitalist greed. He reduces both men and women to tools for labour and pleasure, asserting dominance through cruelty and sexual coercion. Legree's masculinity is toxic in the truest sense: it thrives on violence, control, and the exploitation of others, dramatising how slavery distorts not only its victims but also those who perpetuate it. Stowe uses Legree to show how patriarchal capitalism dehumanises men by equating masculinity with domination, turning cruelty into a form of economic and gendered power.

By juxtaposing these models of masculinity, Stowe critiques the alignment of manhood with patriarchal domination, suggesting instead that true masculinity lies in moral conviction and resistance to oppression.

Intersection of Race, Gender and Class

The intersection of race, gender, and class is central to understanding *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe demonstrates how these categories overlap to produce unique forms of oppression, particularly for enslaved black women. Enslaved women like Eliza and Cassy suffer not only because they are enslaved (a class position) and Black (a racial identity) but also because they are women, vulnerable to sexual exploitation and reproductive commodification (Davis, 1981; Morgan, 2004). Their oppression cannot be understood through any single category but only through their intersection.

For white women such as Mrs. Shelby and Ophelia, gendered subordination is mitigated by race and class privilege. While they lack legal and economic power, their whiteness and social standing insulate them from the brutalities endured by enslaved women. They are positioned ambiguously: oppressed within patriarchy yet complicit within slavery. This duality reflects what later feminist theorists identify as the uneven distribution of oppression across intersecting social categories.

Male characters also reflect this intersection. Tom, as a Black enslaved man, experiences both racial and class oppression, yet his gendered identity as a man shapes his experience differently from that of enslaved women. His suffering is marked more by forced labour and physical punishment, whereas women like Cassy endure the additional trauma of sexual and reproductive exploitation. Legree, by contrast, embodies the privileges of whiteness, masculinity, and class, using them to dominate others without restraint.

Stowe's narrative thus anticipates an intersectional understanding of oppression, even before the term existed. By portraying how race, gender, and class converge under slavery, she reveals the institution's comprehensive dehumanisation of its victims while also exposing the corruption of those who benefit from it.

Through her representation of Black and white women, the commodification of enslaved women's bodies, the reconfiguration of masculinity, and the intersection of race, gender, and class, Stowe portrays slavery as a patriarchal-capitalist system that exploits human life at every level. A Marxist feminist reading uncovers how the novel critiques not just racial injustice but also the broader structures of capitalism and patriarchy that sustain it.

Conclusion

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* emerges from this study as a text whose critique of slavery extends beyond the familiar opposition between freedom and bondage. Read through a Marxist feminist framework, the novel reveals slavery as a system in which economic exploitation, racial domination, and patriarchal authority operate together. Stowe's representation of enslaved women is particularly important in this regard. Through Eliza and Cassy, the novel shows that enslaved women were denied control not only over their labour but also over their motherhood, sexuality, and family relationships. Eliza's flight to save Harry and Cassy's repeated experience of losing her children expose the violence of a system that converts intimate human relationships into economic transactions.

The study also demonstrates that Stowe does not present women as a uniform category. Black and white women occupy markedly different positions within the social order of slavery. Eliza and Cassy experience the direct violence of racialised slavery, whereas characters such as Mrs. Shelby and Ophelia possess forms of social and racial privilege even while remaining constrained by patriarchy. Their positions therefore reveal an important contradiction: white women may be subordinated within a patriarchal household while simultaneously benefiting from, or remaining entangled with, the institution of slavery. This distinction

is essential to a Marxist feminist reading because oppression cannot be understood through gender alone; economic position and racial identity alter the nature and extent of that oppression.

The novel's treatment of masculinity further complicates its critique of gender. Tom, George Harris, and Simon Legree represent contrasting models of manhood shaped by slavery and power. Tom's endurance and moral conviction challenge the association of masculinity with domination, while George's escape represents active resistance to racial and economic subjugation. Legree, by contrast, embodies a form of masculinity grounded in violence, possession, and economic power. Stowe consequently exposes the ways slavery damages not only those subjected to it but also the social and moral structures of those who exercise power.

At the centre of these representations lies the intersection of race, gender, and class. The experiences of Eliza and Cassy cannot be adequately explained by any one of these categories in isolation. Their oppression is simultaneously racial, gendered, and economic, while the experiences of white women and enslaved men demonstrate that these categories produce different forms of vulnerability and privilege. In this sense, Stowe's novel anticipates questions that would become central to later feminist scholarship, even though the theoretical vocabulary of intersectionality did not yet exist.

At the same time, Stowe's limitations should not be overlooked. Her sentimental treatment of suffering and her position as a white, middle-class writer shape the ways in which Black experiences are represented. The novel therefore deserves to be read both as an important abolitionist intervention and as a text marked by the racial and cultural assumptions of its historical moment.

Further studies could extend this argument by placing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* alongside novels by Black women writers such as Harriet Jacobs and later African American women novelists. A comparative study could examine whether representations of motherhood, sexuality, labour, and resistance change when enslaved women speak from their own autobiographical or fictional perspectives. Further research might also investigate Stowe's treatment of masculinity alongside contemporary theories of Black masculinity, or examine the novel through the combined frameworks of Marxist feminism, intersectionality, and critical race theory. Such approaches would deepen our understanding of how nineteenth-century American literature represented the relationship between economic power, racial hierarchy, gender, and the human body. Ultimately, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains significant not simply because it condemned slavery, but because its characters reveal the intimate ways

in which systems of power enter the family, the workplace, the body, and everyday human relationships.

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