

Fictional Authority: Gender Criticism in Narrative Tension of Uncle Tom's Cabin

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Abstract: Harriet Beecher Stowe utilizes many unique narrative techniques in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to articulate female voices. Based on Susan S. Lancer's theory of narrative voice, this essay intends to reveal the author's intention of using authorial, personal, and collective voices to give many female characters the right to express themselves, to speak for women group, to show predicaments of female groups in real society, and to construct female discourse authority. It also further indicates that Mrs. Stowe was constrained by her social environment which made her have to blur the authorial gender until the final chapter, express female personal voices through male groups, and blur the range of the collective to gain the acceptance of male readers. This fictional discourse authority is in tension with the limitations of female real-life marginal situations, thus further satirizing the circumstances where female authors wanted to change but could not break the restrictions of male authority.

Keywords: Uncle Tom's Cabin, female narrative voice, Susan S. Lancer, gender criticism, authority

1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has received widespread attention for its critique of slavery. Not only does the book directly show the tragic fate of black slaves in the 1850s, but it also unabashedly attacks the superior white community. The novel consists of two interwoven plot lines: the main character, Uncle Tom, who is continually trafficked and eventually martyred; and Eliza, who manages to escape slavery with her husband, George, and their son. In addition to slavery, racism, and other hot research topics, many scholars in recent years have also paid attention to the achievements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in terms of feminism and narrative techniques. Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins have regarded it as a subversive feminist work, pointing out that it tries to “reorganize culture from a woman's point of view” [1,2]. In China, scholars such as Zhu Yuanyuan, Lu Yang, and Zhao Xinyu have also paid attention to the uniqueness of Mrs. Stowe's portrayal of female characters, not only analyzing her feminist ideas but also noticing the author's deliberate setting of feminizing Tom [3,4]. In terms of narratology, Sarah Robbins notes that the author uses the voice of motherhood throughout the story's narrative [5], while Wang Xia points out that the novel uses historical narrative to reproduce the trauma realistically [6]. However, there are few articles that combine feminism with narratology to analyze this classic novel.

Feminist narratology provides a perspective that integrates feminism and narratology to analyze the content and structure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was first proposed by Susan S. Lancer, who

“focuses on the formal differences in the writing of specific writers, especially female writers, and explores the relationship between gender and art in terms of form universality versus the differences, and the contrast between the narrative text and the social context, from which she derived theoretical discourses that can account for formal difference” [7]. Voice is an extremely important aspect of both feminist criticism and narratology. In the field of narratology, voice is considered to be a specific narrative structure that is completely unrelated to content, whereas, in feminist criticism, voice is important for women, a marginalized group that has long been oppressed, to dare and be able to express their true thoughts [8]. Lancer combines social significance with literary studies in analyzing narrative voice, giving narratology social, economic, and literary conditions to further explore text composition [9]. In addition, based on two important components of the narrative voice, the social identity of the narrator and the ideology of the consciousness, Lancer classifies the narrative voice into three categories, including the authorial voice, the personal voice, and the communal voice [10]. These three types of voices follow their own rules and embody different types of consciousness, forming a network of power relations [11].

Based on Susan S. Lancer's theory of narrative voice, this essay will explore the authorial, personal, and collective voices in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to demonstrate Mrs. Stowe's intention to speak for women, uncover the plight of women's groups and construct women's discursive authority, and highlight social environment compelled Mrs. Stowe to avoid male readers' rejection by blurring the gender of the author, utilizing males to give women chances to express their voices, and blurring the scope of the collective definition. The tension between the fictional discourse authority in the novel and the limitations of women's real living situation further deepens the author's critique of social reality.

2. Fictional authority of Mrs. Stowe

Mrs. Stowe as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* conveys her own authorial voice through the narrator. The authorial voice is a “heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential narrative situation” and is divided into two categories, the overt and the covert authorial narrative voice [10]. Overt narrators “undertake ‘extrarepresentational’ acts [...] about the world ‘beyond’ the fiction, direct addresses to the narratee, comments on the narrative process, allusions to other writers and texts” [10]. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contains many ‘extrarepresentational’ behaviors that intervene in the story's narrative to express the author's own point of view. In the last chapter of the novel, “Concluding Remarks”, the narrator takes a complete break from the virtual story of the narrative and directly points out the context in which the novel was created, “The slave-trade is now, by American law, considered as piracy” [12]. Meanwhile, the author gives examples of inspiration sources for the creation of the novel, the real society tragedies under the slavery system, and even more bluntly emphasizes the real-life situation of black women: not having the right to decide the fate of themselves and their children, “the mothers whom this accursed traffic has driven to the murder of their children; and themselves seeking in death a shelter from woes more dreaded than death” [12]. Then, she further specifies the composition purpose of the novel, “a desire to exhibit it in a living dramatic reality [and] show it fairly, in its best and its worst phases [12]. These ‘extrarepresentational’ acts seem to be irrelevant to the content of the story but are beneficial to construct the “maxims” for the novel, emphasizing to the readers the authenticity of the story being depicted in the novel, which makes it easier for the reader to accept the plot they have read.

In addition, Mrs. Stowe begins some chapters with epigraphs, sentences taken from other literary works, whose deeper meanings are often related to the content of the corresponding chapters. The epigraph of chapter fourteen, “A young star [...] A lovely being” [12], perfectly corresponds to the main character of the chapter, Evangeline Claire's character and appearance. Through this form, the author can let readers know in advance that Evangeline has a kind and innocent nature, and it also

enables readers to understand the author's view on the characters or events presented in the chapter and the hidden value system. Also, the novel's narrator often gives direct comments on the people and events in the story. When describing the financial situation of the Shelby family, the narrator comments, "that though her husband had stated she was a woman, she had a clear, energetic, practical mind, and a force of character every way superior to that of her husband" [12]. The seemingly casual sentence not only shows the difference in the ability of this couple to manage their business but also hints at the inequality that "white men buy and sell black people while the white woman stands by powerless to intervene" [13]. It is clear that many women have superior talents to men, and have more compassion and a sense of salvation for the plight of black people, but they can only unilaterally follow men's decisions, and try their best to make some changes in very secretive ways. In Chapter Eighteen, the narrator directly steps out of the story again and uses the authorial voice to contrast Mrs. Shelby with Mary St. Clair, further highlighting the superior talents of some women and the limitations of social perceptions of female groups. This kind of overt authorial narrative voice can give readers more direct admonition and feedback by constantly intervening to comment on the content of the story through 'extrarepresentational' acts. In the last chapter of the novel, the narrator reveals her woman identity, making these seemingly irrelevant comments and interpretations part of the female voice, which constructs the female discourse in a straightforward manner and gives the novel a chance to express the female voice in the public sphere.

In the narration process, the narrator sometimes does not engage in 'extrarepresentational' acts but "simply predicate(s) the words and actions of fictional characters" [10], indirectly expressing the author's value system through symbols, metaphors, and irony. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the technique the narrator uses mostly is symbolization, the most obvious of which is the narrator's carefully chosen names for female characters with deep meanings. These unique titles for female characters, both white and black, symbolize their distinctive character traits and reveal their roles in the family and the nation. The little black girl who is bought by Augustine St. Claire has a seemingly insignificant but actually meaningful name, Topsy. The word has a topsy-turvy connotation, which corresponds to her rebellious spirit. It is the original meaning of "Topsy" that subtly suggests Mrs. Stowe's intention to present to readers a female character who boldly breaks away from the norm.

In addition, Evangeline and her initials, Eva, are also clearly symbolic. Anyone familiar with the *Bible* will immediately associate the word Evangeline with Christianity, as the word means the gospel of God, implying that the owner of the name in the novel is the embodiment of the gospel of God. Another manifestation of Evangeline, Eva, can also be interpreted based on the *Bible*, where Eva is the wife of God and the mother of human life. This deeper meaning increases the maternal splendor of the female character. By choosing symbolic titles, Mrs. Stowe elaborately conveys to the readers the fact that Evangeline is actually an angelic incarnation sent by God to spread the gospel before introducing her in detail, thus providing a reasonable basis for Eva to always arouse people's conscience and purify the human heart in the subsequent plot of the story. Furthermore, the fact that the angelic incarnation is portrayed as a girl rather than a boy indirectly emphasizes the independence and exemplary role of women, that women do not need to rely on others to change their marginalized status, because they have their own unique advantages. While this symbolic covert authorial narrative voice limits the scope of Stowe's construction of fictional authority to some extent, if the narrator is too overt, "his chances of being fully reliable are diminished" [10]. Therefore, Stowe intends to maintain a balance between the two for the dual purpose of expanding the scope of fictional authority and constructing authenticity.

Actually, "since a heterodiegetic narrator need not be identified by sex", Mrs. Stowe can participate in male authority through this mode of narration [10]. But while the use of a narrator with an ambiguous gender loads literature with a more effective public authority, it also inevitably reinforces male narrative authority. Mrs. Stowe does not reveal the explicit gender of the narrator,

“she,” until the final chapter of the novel, and before that, the author has blurred the gender of the authorial narrative voice to avoid the potential rejection of female voices by social readers and make more readers accept the story and value system in the novel. This narrative way suggests that Mrs. Stowe was forced to make a makeshift choice, hiding the fictional authority constructed in the story under the protection of an unknown gender in order to develop her own voice and gain narrative dominance.

3. Self-salvation of Topsy and Cassy

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Topsy and Cassy, as black women, speak of themselves as “I”, expressing their personal voice. This kind of narrative voice refers specifically to “narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories” and “only those Genette calls “autodiegetic” [10]. In the novel, to realize self-salvation, Topsy and Cassy create narrative voices full of resistance and fighting.

Originally, Topsy has gotten used to whipping and torture, but Mr. St. Clair's purchase of her for his cousin, Ophelia's “experiment” brings her a new opportunity in life. Due to her tragic past, Topsy is extremely rebellious, and even under Ophelia's patient tutelage, she often speaks out of turn and acts in her own way. In the first conversation between Topsy and Miss Ophelia, Topsy's irrational answer reveals her rebellious nature. Also, Topsy tells the other slaves, “I used to keep old Missis a swarin’ at me half de time. I spects I’s the wickedest critter in the world”, which directly indicates her past encounters and the cause of her rebellious thoughts [12]. It is this rebellious quality that enables Topsy to show her true desires freely in front of the St. Clare family, which attracts their attention, giving her a chance to become a good girl with the help of Ophelia and Eva. One of the reasons why Topsy expresses the narrative voice with a rebellious quality is that she deliberately turns her voice into a tool for self-protection [14]. From her past life full of torture no matter what she did, Topsy has learned to hide her soul and use rebellion to justify her master's whipping to avoid further blame. Besides, Topsy's narrative voice with rebellious qualities also greatly challenges the social reality that women are doomed in a submissive position [15]. In the 1850s, women could only follow the instructions of their fathers or husbands and did not have any decision-making power over their own lives. Therefore, being submissive was considered one of the important qualities of a good woman. It was under this kind of thinking atmosphere that almost all women only knew how to be submissive and had no sense of resistance even when they were mistreated. However, Mrs. Stowe's Topsy, a girl who narrates her experience and displays her own personality with a strong voice of defiance, uses her narrative voice to boldly break through the traditional constraints on women and manifests women's self-will [16]. The author constructs Topsy's personal narrative authority over women's encounters through Topsy's unbridled speech of her own experiences and views.

In the second half of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Cassy is also an important female character who cannot be ignored. She is a black woman who suffers from her superior appearance. Initially, Cassy's life is characterized by mystery, making readers wonder about this woman with her unique demeanor. It is not until Cassy talks with Tom that she tells, in her own unique, struggling narrative voice, of her past tragic fate due to her complexion and appearance. In her self-narrative, readers can know all of Cassy's experiences of being bought and sold, humiliated, and wantonly toyed with from her childhood. As the plot of the novel comes to a standstill due to Cassy's self-narrative, Mrs. Stowe deliberately emphasizes Cassy's tone and demeanor when she expresses her personal narrative voice. “She had hurried on through her story, with a wild, passionate utterance [...]. So vehement and overpowering was the force with which she spoke [...] (and) she paced restlessly up and down, her long black hair swaying heavily about her, as she moved” [12]. By showing Cassy's agitation, anger, and sadness, the author demonstrates clearly the struggle meaning in Cassy's narrative voice, and also directly figures out the power of Cassy's self-narrative. Meanwhile, in order to further reinforce the

sense of fighting hidden in Cassy's narrative voice, Mrs. Stowe employs dashes and exclamation marks which can enhance the narrative emotion when presenting Cassy's narrative. This usage of punctuation marks is even more obvious when Cassy talks about how she once killed her own child with her own hands: "But I had made up my mind, —yes, I had. I would never again let a child live to grow up" [12]. Such a presenting form allows readers to feel Cassy's pauses, choking, and helplessness in her narrative, and to be informed of Cassy's intention to fight back. Despite Cassy has relatively pessimistic attitude toward her life and repeatedly denies God's role, she does not completely obey Legree's commands, stating bluntly, "[...] and I'll do it, too, some of these days!" [12]. It is thus clear that Cassy's narrative voice has been filled with a strong sense of resentment as well as rebelliousness with the extreme unwillingness to succumb to fate.

Furthermore, Mrs. Stowe, through Cassy's personal narrative, emphasizes the pains and oppression that the black female community suffered in the 1850s, often more severe than that of black men: not only were they bought and sold, but they were constantly raped for their beauty, and even tried to let their children escape from the doomed tragedy by killing them. Also, the author also implies that the male group plays a decisive role in each of Cassy's great fatal twists, showing the grief of the female group, that their only way to change fate is to pin hopes on the male group who stay in positions of authority. In this way, Cassy's fighting narrative voice establishes the narrative authority of self-narrating the tragedy of the female group and becomes a powerful voice calling on women not to be resigned to fate, not to submit to the authority of the male discourse, and to fight against the constraints of traditional values.

In utilizing the personal voice in storytelling, the author is no longer able to gain the support of readers by blurring the gender of the narrator but rather constructs the female discourse authority more directly. While personal narrative has some advantages, it is still slightly inferior to the authorial voice, because it "claims only the validity of one person's right to interpret her experience" [10]. In order to reduce the likelihood that such narratives will meet with resistance from readers, Mrs. Stowe actually adds a prerequisite to the female voice expression, conversations with men. The opportunity for Topsy to be able to make her voice is indirectly given by Mr. St. Clair. Without being bought back into the St. Clair household, perhaps Topsy would never have had the chance to tell her story. The same is true for Cassy. Without Tom's initiative to talk with her about the *Bible*, Cassy would not have been able to speak openly about her tragic past. By constructing this premise, it seems acceptable that women's personal narrative voices can be voiced within the authority system of the 1850s.

4. The collective sense in "we"

In addition to the above two common types of narrative voice, Lancer was the pioneer to discuss a third possible narrative mode: the collective voice, in which "narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community" [10]. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the collective sense of the female group is mainly manifested in the narrative persona, "we", while Mrs. Stowe also highlights the commonality of the female group, motherhood, to further enhance this collective sense. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mrs. Stowe mainly uses the first person plural form, "we", to narrate the story, which entails the identity of the narrator as the representative of the group in the narratological sense, so the voice it produces naturally becomes the collective narrative voice. When "we" narrate, she or he usually expresses the ideas of a particular group. The "we" not only effectively reduces the distance between the narrator and readers, but also makes readers more deeply involved in the plot and more receptive to the ideas conveyed in the novel.

As a novel with the intention to oppose slavery, this plural form can let more people take up the mission of fighting against slavery. In this sense, "we" seems to contain all Americans, all those who

can contribute to the cause. However, in some scenes, “we” actually refers only to the narrator himself, but the author still uses “we” rather than the exact “I”. Although in these cases, “we” is a superficial and feigned plural form, it also creates a sense of community, as it is difficult for readers to recognize the spuriousness of the community when first reading the novel. In this way, readers do not immediately realize that some of the views expressed by the narrator are just the author’s own opinions, and with Mrs. Stowe interspersing her own views with those of the general public throughout the novel, “we” leads the reader to subconsciously believe that there are a large number of people who share the narrator’s views. As a novel whose main purpose is to appeal the public to improve awareness of equality, “We” inadvertently enhances the influence of the entire story.

Although “we” seems to encompass all the anti-slavery people in the world, this persona in the novel sometimes carries an obvious sense of feminized speech, which makes readers unconsciously speculate about the real gender of the narrator, who calls herself “we”. This makes the reader wonder about the real gender of the narrator, the “we”. In the novel, certain words are often more in line with the daily discourse of women in the society at that time. In the sentence “we must beg the world not to think that American legislators are entirely destitute of humanity”, the narrator uses the word “beg” [12], which often suggests the speaker’s inferiority, and is usually regarded as the exclusive term for the disadvantaged group of women in the discourse of the gender sphere. At the same time, this way of using words also reveals that the actual position of the narrator does not allow her to easily express her ideas in front of the public as an authoritative figure and that she has to make her readers accept her ideas through using words with subordinate connotations, such as “beg”. Therefore, when the author directly figures out the narrator’s female identity in the final chapter, Mrs. Stowe has already made some preparations, speaking for the female group in the name of “we,” forming a female collective narrative voice.

This kind of narrative not only indicates again the real dilemma of women’s existence in the 1850s, that they were in a subordinate position in the field of gender discourse and it was difficult for the public to hear their voices, but also strengthens the power of their narrative voice, suggesting that the female group actually had a strong discursive power. Mrs. Stowe succeeds in bringing readers together with her through this narrative persona, “we”, so that they can have a closer look at the situation of the female group, being forced to be submissive and better accept the feminist ideas shown in the novel.

Besides, Mrs. Stowe also emphasizes the maternal voice, which is widely shared by women, i.e., the gentle, loving, educational narrative voice full of salvation meaning. Eva, Mrs. Bird, Mrs. Shelby, and St. Clare’s mother all have this kind of narrative voice, and all of them show deep sympathy for the misery of the slaves and try their best to help them to achieve the purpose of Christian salvation. The repeated emphasis on this commonality lets readers unconsciously associate these female characters together, further reinforcing the collective sense of female narrative voice.

Although Mrs. Stowe reveals the narrator’s female identity in her choice of words and directly makes clear the narrator’s female identity in the final chapter, “communal voice might be the most insidious fiction of authority” [10]. Without readers deeply analyzing the actual reference behind “we”, it will be difficult for them to categorize the collective narrative voice in the novel into the narrative voice of female population. This kind of collective sense that blurs gender differences still increases the public’s acceptance of the collective narrative voice, even when Mrs. Stowe deliberately reveals the gender identity of the narrator, thus freeing the novel from the risk of limiting its readership to only the female group.

5. The tension between fiction and truth

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Mrs. Stowe uses various types of narrative voices to construct female discourse authority. Whether it directly states the gender identity of the narrator, generates personal

female voices through female characters, or uses “we” to create a collective female group’s voice, Mrs. Stowe has integrated female discourse into the novel, increased the possibility of the public hearing female voices, and given fictional authority to the female characters in the novel. This kind of fictional authority forms a great tension with the predicaments of women presented by many narrative voices in the novel and the reality that Mrs. Stowe has to adopt an eclectic narrative strategy to gain the support of male readers.

The authorial, personal, and collective narrative voices in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are all filled with women’s confessions, complaints, and anger. It is through these voices that Mrs. Stowe can show many dilemmas of the female group in their real lives: not knowing how to fight back, having no power to fight back, and not being able to fight back against social constraints. In these voices, the author not only succeeds in deconstructing the traditional image of submissive and humble women but also tries to shape a new and ideal image of women. At the same time, she also puts her imagination and hopes for the future of women in the novel, and by presenting the common tragedy of the female group to awaken women’s consciousness of resisting male authority, she spares no effort to let society hear female voices and thoughts as much as possible. The narrative voice in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as one of the pioneer female voices to the public, is also a powerful tool to make the originally marginal female group establish consciousness of identity construction [3].

While women’s voices are heard and women’s fictional authority is successfully constructed, these voices convey the real condition that no one listens to women, that no one cares about their lives, and that no one believes in female authority. The tragic experiences narrated by the women in the story precisely show the vulnerable and marginalized state of women in society, which sharply contrasts with the female discourse authority constructed by Mrs. Stow through the narrative voices. At the same time, Mrs. Stowe, in the process of choosing narrative strategies, had to blur the gender identity of the narrator, imply that men give women the opportunity to express themselves, and blur the scope of the definition of “we” in order to yield to the male group in the society, to seek more their acceptance. This indirectly indicates the invisible constraints on Mrs. Stowe as a female writer who expresses her standing and thoughts through her writing: when people learn that it is a woman who is speaking, this fact not only reduces the credibility of the novel, but also limits its dissemination range, and even the novel risks readers’ boycott. These constraints on women’s writing again juxtapose the fictional authority of women in the novel with the powerlessness of women in real society, enhancing the tension throughout the novel.

This kind of contrast further enhances Mrs. Stowe's critique of society in the 1850s. The author, who focused on the domestic sphere to solve the slave problem, in the novel repeatedly emphasizes the irreplaceable and important role that women’s maternal qualities will play in saving the whole country [4]. While the author also carefully constructs the female discourse authority to penetrate the women’s miserable fate in the novel, the contrast between the real and the fictional satirizes the phenomenon of gender inequality in real society. When readers see the helplessness at the time of Mrs. Stowe’s composition through these narrative voices, they can better understand the gap between the discursive power that women want to have and the constraints and neglect they are actually subjected to, further strengthening the author’s criticism of the unequal discourse phenomena in the society, such as ignoring women’s voices, restricting women’s expression, and the rampant authority of male discourse.

6. Conclusion

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has received much attention for its strong anti-slavery ideology, since the end of the American Civil War, the feminist ideology and the beauty of its form have also received sustained attention from literary scholars. Lancer’s theory of narrative voice combines the two notable aspects, revealing Mrs. Stowe’s intention of giving many women the right to express

themselves in order to speak for women, to show the predicaments of the real female group, and to construct the female discourse authority. The tragedy of women in narrative voices and the author's eclectic narrative strategies, including blurring the gender identity of authorial voice, implying that men give women the opportunity to speak out, and blurring the definition scope of collective to avoid male readers' rejection are all in tension with the fictional discourse authority of female group in the novel, further deepening the novel's critique of the phenomena of gender inequality in the society. Through *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mrs. Stowe not only expresses her own thoughts on the slavery issues but also demonstrates the predicaments of female writers who have to hide their female voices while writing. The author further juxtaposes the real dilemmas of the female population with fictional female discourse authority in the novel to form tension, satirizing the situation of female writers who vainly want to change but cannot break through the constraints of male authority. As for male characters in the novel, Mrs. Stowe also gives them distinctive narrative voices, so subsequent research will continue to focus on this aspect to highlight the combining beauty of the novel's content and form.

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