

# African-American Slave or Subject of the Italian Colonial Empire? The Trajectory of Uncle Tom in Italy during the Fascist Ventennio

Valentina Abbatelli  
University of Warwick

## *Abstract*

*This paper aims to illustrate how the Italian reception of Uncle Tom's Cabin during the Italian Fascist regime (1922-1943) can be interpreted as a way to reinforce Italian national identity while establishing hierarchical bonds with the US and Africa. This article analyses the book covers of several Italian editions of Uncle Tom's Cabin issued under the Fascist dictatorship and concentrates on the close reading of two editions of the book: the 1928 Nerbini abridgement and the 1940 Hoepli edition for children. This paper argues that certain translations issued under the Fascist regime appropriate the character of Tom, an obedient African-American slave who remains entirely subservient to his masters, and make this figure correspond with the proposed subject of the Italian colonial empire. In doing this, these translations achieve a seemingly paradoxical aim: they reinforce the positive Italian identity as colonisers in Africa and simultaneously challenge the United States on the issue of racism and segregation of the blacks.*

Keywords: Translation History, Publishing History, Italian Colonialism, Identity, Fascist regime

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* first appeared in serial in *The National Era*, an anti-slavery newspaper, in 1851. However, it was only after its publication in single volume

format in 1852, that the book achieved significant success worldwide. In the US alone it sold over 10,000 copies in the first week. It was also immediately translated in Italy and France and its influence extended in Europe as far as Russia. Beecher Stowe's book is generally characterized as an antislavery tale. She wrote it after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), which established that all free people, both from the North and from the South of the US, were required to turn in escaped slaves to slave agents. Inhabitants of Northern states were for the first time directly involved in the slavery issue. Beecher Stowe felt personally involved and wrote to Gamaliel Bailey, editor of *The National Era*, that the time was come 'when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak' (Beecher Stowe 1851). The novel tells the story of a black slave, Tom, who, because of his master's economic problems, is sold to a slave trader. A new master, Augustine St. Claire, buys him, in accordance with the wishes of his young daughter, Eva, who soon grows fond of Tom, and also grateful to him for saving her from drowning. After St. Claire's death, Tom finds himself in a cotton plantation where he eventually dies. Due to its anti-slavery theme - which, however, does not exclude racist elements - the book was subject to different interpretations during its US publishing history. While initially it was considered to be a powerful instrument against slavery, from the 1920s onwards it was regarded as an influential source of racism against African-Americans. This essay hopes to demonstrate that Italian translations published during the Fascist regime (1922-1943) interpreted the character of Tom as a subject of the Italian colonial empire. The reshaping of Beecher Stowe's character functioned to stabilize the reputation of Italians as colonisers, reinforcing hierarchical bonds with Africa, and to oppose American politics on the issue of their perceived racism. The essay firstly traces a brief history of publishing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Italy between 1922-1943 and broadly analyzes book covers of several Italian translations; secondly, it zooms in on the close reading of two specific editions, Nerbini 1928 and Hoepli 1940.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* enjoyed immediate success in Italy. It was translated in the same year as its US publication, 1852, and simultaneously appeared in serialized versions and in single volume format. During the nineteenth century the book was published and re-published in all major Italian cities, where the book was read as a political allegory. In the period preceding 1861 - the year of Italian national unification - it was, in fact, interpreted as a symbol of struggle against foreign domination. During the 1850s, even though slavery was not considered a problem for Italians, since the country by then 'had only limited experience of colonization, the slave trade, or the slave economy' (Körner, 2011: 722), they sided - and to a certain extent identified - with the character of Uncle Tom. From the Congress of Vienna of 1815 until 1861, Italy, which had previously experienced the Napoleonic rule, was divided in several realms 'directly or indirectly under Austrian control' (Gemme, 2005: 8), while only the kingdom of Sardinia (Savoy, Piedmont, Liguria and Sardinia) was independent from Austria and ruled by a domestic dynasty.<sup>1</sup> Therefore Italians, as a dominated community, empathised with the figure of the black slave. At the same time, however, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a significant source of information about the US for many Italians and this information was not always of a positive

nature. Particularly in the 1860s, for a post-unification Italy, the US were fighting a Civil War that started to reveal their 'dark side' to the Italian audience. In this respect, a ballet entitled *I bianchi e i neri* by Giuseppe Rota, adapted from Beecher Stowe's book, played a primary role in this reconsideration of the US image. First staged in 1853 in Milan, it toured throughout Italy for twenty years, and it has been said that the ballet showed 'the dehumanizing brutality of a slaveholding society with unfailing clarity' (Körner: 722).

In spite of this early reception, in the Italian context, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a book belonging to the twentieth century, with 68 editions issued between 1900 and 1943, compared to 25 in the previous period. During the first half of the twentieth century the number of editions steadily increased. The two decades in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published more often in Italy were precisely those of the Fascist *Ventennio*: 25 editions appeared in the 1920s and 22 editions in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> The Fascist regime, headed by Benito Mussolini, was in power from 1922 to 1943. The nationalistic matrix of this totalitarianism is the reason for the colonial enterprise that was launched by the regime and which justified as a civilizing mission. Numerically speaking, the regime marked the zenith in the history of publishing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Italy. Moreover, the success of the book is representative of the fact that this was a thriving period for translations - above all from English and American literature into Italian. Looking at the translations' prefaces, it is evident that the book was considered a classic (Fabietti 52). It was acclaimed for its ethical and universal values in facing every kind of oppression and for its effective power in the abolition of slavery.

Because they can address an audience much wider than the actual readers of a given text, book covers are an extremely effective paratextual element in spreading a specific image of a text. From the book covers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published during the *Ventennio*,<sup>3</sup> it seems that Tom's identity boundaries are stretched to provide him with multiple identities for the Italian readership. Some editions erase his presence from the covers irrespective of their theme. He was, for example, absent from the cover of an edition (Sonzogno, 1930) which was recast as an adventure book depicting the spectacular fall in a ravine of one of Tom's slave traders. In another example, however, the theme of slavery is deliberately stressed and a red chain is placed in the foreground (Paravia, 1940). In other cases, the black slave is seen to play a different role. He is depicted variously as Eva's playmate (Salani, 1940); as a man who wants to learn to read and write (Bietti, 1934); as a family man who plays with his children (Salani, 1922); as a religious man who prays for salvation staring at the sky (Salani, 1927); and as a martyr (Bemporad, 1920).

Leaving the visual surface of the book and delving into the pages of the text itself, I will in the following section analyse two scenes of the novel which revolve around the representation of black literacy. Passages from the 1928 popular abridgement of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published by Nerbini and the 1940 Hoepli edition for children will highlight the overlap between the character of Tom and the proposed subject of the Italian colonial empire. The representation of black literacy - or to be precise, the absence of black literacy - was the most important topic around which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was repackaged as a virulently racist book in the US. In some American editions which date from the end of

the nineteenth century, none of the passages in which Tom reads and writes (alone, or accompanied by white children) were illustrated.

The first scene I want to analyse introduces Tom to the reader for the first time and depicts him sitting at the kitchen table in his cabin with the son of his master, George, who is teaching him to read and write. The narrator describes Tom as ‘Mr. Shelby’s best hand’, ‘a large, broadchested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black’ whose face displays ‘truly African features’ (28). During the lesson the slave makes a mistake when writing some letters but ‘then, taking the pencil in his big, heavy fingers, he patiently recommenced’ (29).

Hoepli omits the qualification of Tom as ‘Mr. Shelby’s best hand’ and stresses Tom’s lack of familiarity with the act of writing instead, translating the references to Tom’s fingers with ‘dita inesperte’ (27) [inexperienced fingers]. In addition, it emphasizes the visible racial elements of Tom’s identity in the passage. The translator reifies Tom’s complexion through the simile ‘nero come il gajetto’ (27) [jet black] and introduces in this passage the word ‘razza’ [race]. According to this translation, Tom displays ‘lineamenti di vera razza africana’ (27) [genuine features of African race]. The reification of Tom’s complexion helps the reader to visualize more immediately his blackness, while the addition of the word ‘race’ underlines the biological and inherent difference between the reader and the character.

In another episode, Tom is depicted writing a letter to his wife. Eva finds him at the desk and asks: ‘Oh, Uncle Tom! What funny things you are making, there!’ (298). Hoepli translates the passage with a neutral ‘che cosa fate?’ (220) [what are you doing?], but soon after it reinforces the contrast between the two characters: ‘E la testa bionda della bimba, si curvò accanto a quella nera’ (221) [And the child’s blonde head bent towards the black one]. This stress on the opposition between the black and the blond head - inserted by the translator - can be read in terms of an opposition between light and darkness. Travel accounts written during the Fascist colonial empire relied on the same metaphoric opposition of light and darkness. The Italian colonial empire was officially established in 1936 and encompassed various regions, including several in Africa, namely Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. According to these accounts, Ethiopia, before conquest, was a country ‘immersed in centuries of darkness’, while the ‘imperial reality shone on the daily life of Italy’ (Burdett, 2007: 126). Indeed, this inference is first seen in the translator’s preface to the first Hoepli edition. The Hoepli edition was published for the first time in 1912, the year of the Italian war against Turkey over the possession of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. At that time, Italy also owned colonized land in the Horn of Africa (Somalia and Eritrea). The translator’s preface refers to this colonial accomplishment and underlines that slavery was still affecting most of Africa, while that continent perhaps deserved a better fate. Moreover, the preface, significantly, directly addresses the white child, Eva. Explicitly presented as the white saviour of black people, she is described as an angel of salvation and pity, and the translator narrates his desire for her to offer a word of hope and salvation to suffering Africans.

The second edition analysed here – the 1928 Nerbini abridgement – also introduces the character of Tom with a reductive description: ‘Lo Zio Tom apparteneva ad una meravigliosa razza di negri africani (...) Il viso simpatico e dolce era nero. Quando sorrideva aveva del fanciullo, mostrando una fila di denti bianchi come perle’ (4) [Uncle Tom belonged to a marvellous race of African blacks (...) His nice face was black. When he smiled he was like a child, showing a line of white teeth akin to beads]. In addition, further on, he is depicted not only as ‘uno schiavo ideale, ma un uomo esemplare’ (21) [an ideal slave, but an exemplary man]. According to this edition, however, Tom’s teacher, George, is not in the cabin and Tom is not reading nor is he writing. Moreover, the second episode that depicts black literacy – the one depicting Eva and Tom as the protagonists – is completely omitted. Like some of the nineteenth-century American editions, this popular abridgement leaves out any reference to black literacy, further highlighting the perceived inferiority of the black race. Furthermore, in other scenes within the tale, this edition accentuates Tom’s status as an inferior slave and the patronizing role of Eva through sentences added to the original text. Tom himself openly admits the necessity of the subjection of slaves uttering that the slave ‘deve essere fedele e sottomesso come un cane’ (5) [must be loyal and submissive as a dog]. Moreover, in this version by Nerbini, the first dialogue between Tom and Eva is much longer than the original text and it stresses the child’s role as Tom’s saviour. The child caresses Tom’s hair ‘come avrebbe fatto con un ragazzino della sua età’ (43) [as she would do with a boy of her age] and reassures him that he will become ‘sorridente e allegro’ (43) [smiling and happy]. As a result, Tom ‘alza gli occhi al cielo a ringraziamento di quella insperata fortuna’ (43) [raises his eyes up to heaven thanking for that unexpected fortune]. Not only is Tom implicitly compared to a child, but Eva seems to the reader a gift of heaven sent to earth to save the black slave.

The character of Tom seems to play the role of the ‘ideal’ colonized subject in the Italian empire, and the ways in which he is represented are tightly interwoven with colonial discourse. Just as the Africa represented in colonial fiction is turned into an iconic Africa depending on Italian adventurers’ needs, so Tom is an iconic figuration open to the projection of multiple identities according to publishers’ needs. An emptiness or hollowness allows the reshaping of his identity. The same emptiness is found, for instance, in the novel *Somali woman. Colonial novel from the Benadir* published in 1933. The protagonist of this book – an indigenous woman – is compared to a ‘cane fedele [che] vivendo da bestiola non conosceva altro che la monotonia di quel vuoto’ (163) [loyal dog who living as an animal did not know anything but the monotony of that emptiness]. The simile of the slave and the dog recalls the passage from the Nerbini popular abridgement of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that we read before. The second extract we have seen also stresses the extreme gratitude that Tom feels towards Eva and echoes a note of the 20th May 1936 by the then governor of Ethiopia Giuseppe Bottai. The protagonist of this episode is an Ethiopian boy, Tesfaix, who follows the Italian army during the march to Addis Ababa, like a ‘bestiolina grata di uno sguardo, di una carezza’ (Spagnolo, 2012: 128) [a little animal grateful for a look, a caress]. According to this anecdote, as soon as the boy understood that Bottai was taking him to Italy he fell at his feet

kissing the ground. In this respect, the omission of the episode in which Tom learns to read, is potentially significant. Put very simply and all too succinctly: dogs do not have to be able to read, they need only be smiling and happy.

However, parallel to the colonial interests of the Fascist regime, Anti-Americanism plays an important role in this political appropriation of Tom. As previously mentioned, since the second half of the nineteenth century in Italy the myth of the US as a country of freedom had crumbled under the weight of the Civil War and the discovery of the brutality of slavery. However, a paradoxical attitude towards the US persisted until the Fascist regime took over in Italy. Although the dynamism and the pragmatism of the US fascinated Fascist Italy, American society was considered oligarchic and materialistic. One point remained clear within Italy, however: notwithstanding the abolition of slavery, Americans were still racist. The particularly harsh criticism levelled at the US was clearly expressed in some articles published in 1938 in the newspaper *La Difesa della Razza* which recalled episodes of lynching happening in the US. In this, Americans were described as false Puritans who were ultimately the most violent types of racist.

Americans were still associated with slave drivers, but now they were also named as traders of European migrants. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards the US had been a major destination for European migrants. The Fascist regime opposed Italian emigration abroad – including that to the US – while fostering migration to the colonies in Africa. Not only were the Americans accused of exploiting European migrants – and therefore also Italian migrants – but they also wanted to prevent Italians from abolishing slavery in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The abolition of slavery in Africa was one of the reasons given to justify Italian colonisation and the US condemned the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. The Fascist regime denied the presence of any sort of slavery in Italy's African territories and affirmed that Africans were well-treated, under Italian rule, unlike the 'davvero bestiale trattamento da parte dei coloni inglesi in America, così efficacemente descritto, in veste senza pretese, nella "Capanna dello zio Tom" (truly bestial treatment of the Negro by the English colonizers in America, so effectively described without pretence in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) (Ebner, 1940: 15).

In Italy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was read as a politically resonant text throughout the first half of the twentieth century. However, a shift in the historical and cultural context in which the book was read occurred from the nineteenth century onwards, consequently affecting the interpretation of the book. Whilst Rota's nineteenth-century balletic adaptation of the novel by Rota made Italians reflect on their dominated status before the unification of the country and conveyed an image of barbarous America, the new political interpretation allowed Fascist Italy to establish political and cultural bonds with Africa. The Fascist regime metaphorically invaded Tom's identity boundaries and adjusted them to the models of the colonial literature. Through this alteration the regime strived to strengthen its position of superiority in relation to colonized Africans. The translations discussed in this article bespeak Italian colonial interests in Africa and make the African American slave Tom acquire the features of Africans as portrayed in Italian colonial literature.

However, the numerous editions of Beecher Stowe's novel issued during the *Ventennio* reach another conclusion around the relationship between Italy and the US. On one hand, these editions functioned to remind Italians of the slave-trading past of the Americans. In this way they reinforced the negative image of the US, strengthening the idea that racism and segregation were specifically American issues. On the other hand, these editions also helped to justify the racism inherent in the colonial adventure and the segregation that Italy practiced in the colonies.

### Endnotes

- 1 The Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia was governed by an Austrian viceroy, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany was personal possession of the member of the Austrian reigning family, the Kingdom of the two Sicilies was formally ruled by the Bourbons of Spain, but Austria had the right of intervention in the country to avoid any political change and Austrian troops stationed the city of Ferrara, at northern border of the Papal State.
- 2 These figures are the result of my research on the Italian history of publishing of Beecher Stowe's novel. The research was conducted comparing archival sources of the National libraries of Rome and Florence, with the online catalogue of Italian libraries available at <http://www.sbn.it/opacsbn/opac/iccu/free.jsp>.
- 3 This paper originates from one part of my PhD project for which I selected a corpus of 18 editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – more than a third of the total of the editions produced during the *Ventennio* – published by the most important firms of the period.

### Works Cited

- Beecher Stowe, Harriet. *Letter to Gamaliel Bailey*, 9 March 1851.
- . *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. London: Collins, 2011. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Florence: Bemporad, 1920. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Florence: Salani, 1922. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Florence: Salani, 1927. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Florence: Nerbini, 1928. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Trans. Palmiro Premoli. 1930. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Milan: Bietti, 1934. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Trans. Fulvia. Milan: Hoepli, 1940. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Trans. Luigi di S. Giusto. Turin: Paravia, 1940. Print.
- . *La capanna dello zio Tom*. Florence: Salani, 1940. Print.
- Burdett, Charles. *Journeys through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing between the Wars*. New York; Oxford: Berghan Books, 2007. Print.
- Ebner, Giacomo. *Inchiesta sulla schiavitù*. Rome: Società italiana arti grafiche editrice, 1940. Print.
- Fabietti, Ettore. "Del tradurre." *Pegaso* 4.1 (1932): 48-59. Print.
- Gemme, Paola. *Domesticating Foreign Struggles: The Italian Risorgimento and Antebellum American Identity*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. Print.

Körner, Axel. "Uncle Tom on the Ballet Stage: Italy's Barbarous America, 1850-1900." *The Journal of Modern History* 83:4 (2011): 721-52. Print.

Mitrano Sani, Gino. *Femina somala. Romanzo coloniale del Benadir*. Naples: Libreria Dekten e Rocholl. 1933. Print.

Spagnolo, Stefanelle. *La patria sballiata di Giuseppe Bottai: dal razzismo coloniale alle leggi razziali (1935-1939)*. Rome: Aracne, 2012. Print.

Ungaro, Daniele. "Razzismo e civiltà." *La Difesa della Razza* 2.9 (1938): 32-33. Print.

## Biography

Valentina Abbatelli is PhD candidate and part-time teacher at the School of Modern Languages of the University of Warwick, where she teaches modules on Italian language and culture. Her research interests include Translation Studies, national identity, visual culture, children's literature, history of Italian language, epistolary writing and Teaching Italian as a Foreign Language.