

**“(…) STRUGGLING ALONE IN THE POWERFUL GRASP OF SLAVERY”:  
HARRIET JACOBS’ *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL***

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**ABSTRACT**

The following article is going to analysis Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* with a focus on how she reshapes the slave narrative genre (previously defined through male author texts) using seduction and sentimental novel genre, albeit reworked to address race and gender issues. At the same time, she uses motherhood as the lens to analyze gender and race. In this process, she reaffirms and rearticulates legal and cultural discourse of slavery and womanhood to uncover their fictive construction. By this, she on one hand claims the title of both ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ for black female slaves and on the other hand, questions the appropriateness of society’s definition of womanhood.

**KEYWORDS:** Slavery, Female Slave Narratives, Motherhood

Slavery is a terrible thing for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own. (Jacobs 86)

The experience of slavery shaped the experiences of slaves long after slavery was abolished which can be seen in the slave narratives. By middle of the nineteenth century one sees many fugitive slaves penning down their experiences but the voice of female fugitive slaves<sup>1</sup> was marked by reticence which in part was due to the gender expectation of that time which demanded submissiveness and implied silence for women. Gwin suggests that the black women’s telling of their experience was often a vivid testimonial of sexual exploitation and disruption of family ties, the greater of the two evils for the American Victorian mind. Further for many females, a truthful chronicling of their experiences would often involve the revelation of incidents that would question their purity and chastity and thus unsex them before their readers.

The following section is going to begin with an analysis of Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (henceforth *Incidents*) with the focus on how she reshapes the slave narrative genre (previously defined through male author texts) using seduction and sentimental novel genre, albeit reworked to address race and gender issues. At the same time, she uses motherhood as the lens to analyze gender and race. In this process, she reaffirms and rearticulates legal and cultural discourse of slavery and womanhood to uncover their fictive construction. Though denied a “legal voice”, she “prosecutes the perpetrators through her literary voice”(Accomnado 3). By this she on one hand claims the title of both ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ for black female slaves and on the other hand questions the appropriateness of society’s definition of womanhood. As Xiomara Santamarina observes:

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<sup>1</sup> Sojourner Truth (1797 – 1883) is perhaps the best known of slave women for her activism on behalf of women’s right and abolition. Born Isabella Baumfree in New York, Truth worked as a slave until age thirty. A famous and charismatic speaker, Truth is well – known for her 1851 Akron, Ohio “Aren’t I a Woman?” speech that marked her entry twenty – four years after her emancipation, into the antebellum public realm.

Despite what Jacobs's readers would have seen as the clear racial and sexual illegitimacy of her children, it is as a slave mother who overcomes immense odds that Jacobs succeeds in establishing her rhetorical authority. Combined with the obvious risks she assumes in publishing her history, Jacobs's authority as a mother embeds her text in a selfless and activist vein that links her individual history to the greater cause of abolition [...] As such a slave mother, Jacobs persuasively revises antebellum norms for womanhood so as to include a formerly enslaved woman and position herself as her readers' equal rather than as their social inferior. (242 – 243)

For this the slave narrative genre as practiced by Brown and Douglas<sup>2</sup> was reconstructed. Male narrators often referred to the sexual victimization of female slaves, but then quickly moved on to another subject<sup>3</sup>. Thus, when blacks began to write, they wrote in an atmosphere in which they had to prove their humanity. In response to slave economy that de-genders slaves and relegates them to the condition of chattel, male slave narratives assert manhood and female slave narratives womanhood.<sup>4</sup> The exclusion of black females from the cult of true womanhood is directly related to slavery. The slave experience influenced the way slaves and free blacks were seen by the dominant society. Female slaves and even free black females were not regarded as gendered females<sup>5</sup>. It is this denial of womanhood that separates Jacob's from male authors. By disclosing her sexual experience, Linda reveals that she does not meet the definition of a true woman, but then goes on to question this definition as it pertains to black females.

For this, she takes recourse to the genre of sentimental novel but at the same time alters it to faithfully render the condition of the women under slavery and the fragile position they occupied vis-à-vis their sexuality. Jacobs questions and addresses gender expectations of the times by illustrating the inter connection of gender and race, sexism and slavery from a black female point of view thus resulting in her successfully questioning the definition of womanhood and motherhood. At the same time, her narrative also serves the purpose of a political discourse as it also functions as an act of persuasion aimed at emancipation of slaves, a goal made clear in her preface itself, "I do earnestly desire to arouse

<sup>2</sup> Male slave narratives focused on black men's capability to read, work hard and defend himself physically. By stressing these qualities, they wanted to show that they had the qualities valued and respected by other men – courage, mobility, rationality, and physical strength. So, although both slave narratives – male and female – focus on power relations between master and slave, male slave narratives describe them in terms of physical power. The difference in the representation of power relation appears to be at least in part attributable to gender difference. Not only do they use different methods to resist their master's power, but there are different issues at stake as well. Both slave narrators are seeking the right to self – definition, but it is a gendered definition.

<sup>3</sup> Their reticence in to openly engage with the subject may in part have been in response to its painful nature, but perhaps they also viewed it as a lesser issue in that it did not directly affect them. This is not to say that male slaves were not concerned about the treatment of female slaves, but this would be more significant issue for female slaves who lived with the continual threat of victimization

<sup>4</sup> Harriet Beacher Stowe, a white woman was the first to bring the slave narrative and the sentimental novel genres together and in many ways served as a precursor for black women writers There is a direct relationship between Stowe and Jacob's since Jacob's initially sought Stowe's aid in producing a dictated text. Stowe instead proposed to include *Incidents* in A Key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But things did not work out between the two after which Jacob's decided to write her own narrative.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Y. Davis, in her works, *Women, Culture and Politics* and *Women, Race and Class* argues that slave women were alternately gendered and de-gendered depending on what suited the owner. Spillers, talking in the same vein as Davies, highlights the de-gendering of slaves through the metaphor of 'flesh' and 'body' which according to her, also marks the central distinction between the captive slave and the free person. The slave is relegated to mere 'flesh' while the free subject maintains a 'body'. Spiller goes on to use this metaphor to analyze the figure of the slave mother to illustrate the disjunction between biology and gender, between flesh of female slaves and the bodies of the white gendered females.

the women of North to a realizing sense of the condition of two million of women at the South, still in bondage suffering what I suffered, and most of them feel far worse” (6).

Although the sentimental novel tradition is important to Jacob’s text, Linda’s confessional account of sexual abuse and guilt also links *Incidents* to the seduction novel<sup>6</sup>. When Linda describes her interaction with Flint and Sands, the narration becomes that of the seduction novel, though with a difference. Through her narrative Jacobs seeks to challenge his modal of ‘true womanhood’ and show its inadequacy regarding black females and slaves.

From the very beginning, Jacob’s shows the non – availability of this modal for black women. She points out that while white women were governed by these norms, black women were denied the possibility of being virtuous. In fact, “it is deemed a crime in her wish to be virtuous” (49). When she reveals he planned seduction of Sands, Jacobs calls upon her readers to understand the very different way in which a slave woman experiences her world, thus suggesting the need to judge people within their contexts and not by rigid expectations and definitions. Jacob’s through all this then goes on to imply that a woman’s self – esteem is not the same as her virtue and that a woman should be judged by more than her sexual purity.

At the same time, as Jacob’s provides an alternative to the cult of true womanhood, she challenges readers to question their own assumptions, ideology and racism, Jacob’s points out through her narrative, “although all women are subjected to patriarchy in such a way that feeling of solidarity might be formed, when one woman is empowered over another because of race or class privileges, she is equally likely to betray as to support her fellow women”. This breakdown of sisterhood is evident in Linda’s description of the relationship of her mother and mistress. She describes the two as foster – sisters since they both were nourished by her grandmother. But as the story reveals, that rather than producing social equality, sharing the same breast becomes itself a means of imposing the hierarchy of slavery as the female slave must give up not only her body but its products as well to sustain the master’s family thus turning the relationship into a “parasitic one and undermining all claims of paternalism”. As Linda says, “in fact my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food” (14).

By destroying the family metaphor, Jacobs’s reveals the falsehood behind the slaveholder’s claim of benevolent paternalism. Although Linda’s family is intertwined with that of the Flint’s, Linda is in an adversarial position, rather than a familial one, both in her relationship with Dr. Flint and Mrs. Flint<sup>7</sup> who should be an aunt per the foster – sister relationship. In fact, while Linda is touched by Mrs. Flint’ pain and sympathize with her, Mrs. Flint is unable to see beyond her pain and sees Linda not as a sister but as a competitor: “She pitied herself as martyr; but she was incapable of feeling

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<sup>6</sup> Tales of seduction portray a helpless, virtuous woman pursued by a man until she gives into his demands and inevitably dies. As with the sentimental novel, the seduction novel’s focus on the preservation of virtue reveals its relation to the cult of true womanhood through its emphasis on sexual purity. During this time, the concept of true womanhood was based on four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity with purity being the foundation stone for the rest three.

<sup>7</sup> It is ironical that while the black woman was identified with her sexuality, the white woman was denied hers. The virgin/whore dichotomy imposed upon black and white females demanded, on one hand, the white woman’s moral superiority and from the black woman, sexual availability. On the other hand, it was expected that the mistress and the slave woman would live and work in intimate physical proximity, without considering the psychological realities of the relationship between them. In the process, the black woman suffers double victimization, both at the hands of the lecherous master and the jealous mistress. This, in turn, made the black woman despise the white woman for the material comforts she enjoyed and her refusal to understand the slave woman’s lot.

for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed” (53). Later Linda talking of her mistress again points out: “My mistress, like many others, seemed to think that slaves had no right to any family ties of their own; they were merely created to wait upon the family of their mistress” (60). On hearing of Linda’s love for a free black carpenter Mr. Flint says: “I’ll teach you a lesson about marriage and free niggers! Now go, and let this be the last time I have the occasion to speak to you on this subject” (63). Linda’s desire for freedom and home are directly countered by Flint’s desire to dominate her sexually and claim as alienable property any “chattels” they may produce. When Linda says “and he would not love me if he did not believe me to a virtuous woman” (61) Flint leaves aside his “tactic of distant interpretative authority” and resorts to physical violence (Hauss 150).

Mr. Flint thus turns around the planter mythology that saw the master as a father – figure who provided paternal protection, but he instead plays the sexual predator with his incestuous desire nullifying him as a suitable father. And later Sands are merely a shade better. Although he doesn’t harass Linda, he clearly fails her and her children. Thus, the two main ‘protectors’ in Linda’s life are proven to be in-effective protectors.

Throughout the *Incidents*, Jacobs focuses on the degradation of female slaves. In fact, Jacobs at once reveals and conceals Linda’s sexual abuse. The limitations of Jacobs’ revelations are foreshadowed by the title itself which asserts that “incidents” will be shared, not her entire life story. Jacob’s selectiveness is apparent in her interactions with Dr. Flint. She makes it clear that he made unsolicited advances, but the reader is not given the contents<sup>8</sup>.

This one instance of sexual abuse is an example of how many female slaves fell victims to sexual exploitation by the hands of their masters. But *Incidents* also shows us the second side to all this when it focuses on female slave’s ability to restrain sexually aggressive masters. Linda manages to enter her master’s heart and mind in such a way that she ‘emasculates’ his patriarchal owner (Patton 63). Linda challenges the domination of her master when she says, “You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as like with me” (62). Linda thus refuses to recognize Flint’s power over her. It is this trait of her combined with her defense through verbal warfare which marks her difference and thus separates her from the passive heroines of sentimental literature. Instead of collapsing in the face of Flint’s attacks, and look for help from other quarters, Linda plots and plans counter attacks. When she hears of his plans to move her to Louisiana, where as she realizes he can pursue his desires without anyone’s hindrance, Brent answers with an unexpected show of faithful servitude: “I am your daughter’s property, and it is in your power to send me, or take me wherever you please” which helps her deflect Flint’s aggression and plan her counter – attack in the form of Sands. Hauss sees this as a successful example of Flint’s “own lexicon of white “power” and “property”, a hegemonic language appropriate to the social order which secures Flint’s prerogatives” (153). She becomes the pursuer rather than the pursued when she plans her own ‘seduction’ by Sands. She returns his attentions, opening a passage “simultaneously cultural, political and sexual – across this apparently “impassable gulf” (154). Sands thus becomes her tool to enrage Flint. Since all this goes against what is expected from “true woman”, Jacob’s justifies her actions by acknowledging the impracticality of a slave exercising moral principles. This acknowledgement supports the fact that the cult of true womanhood is not available to female slaves: “But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too

<sup>8</sup> The readers are told that Dr. Flint whispered awful things to her, but Linda does not reveal the actual word leaving it to the reader to fill in the blanks.

severely...I Wanted to be pure...but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of Slavery” (83 – 84). The exclusion of female slaves from the cult of true womanhood is partly due to the, fact that true womanhood is constructed in relation to its opposite<sup>9</sup>. All this plotting and planning suggests that Linda is no passive victim and exercises agency no matter how limited. Linda’s agency comes not just from rebelling, but from her refusal to be co – opted by a system that so clearly excludes her. Thus, although she borrows the elements of sentimental fiction, she refuses to be the traditional sentimental heroine.

According to Patton, Jacobs not only reconfigures sentimental heroine but also “sentimentality” to draw attention to the inhuman system of slavery. Jacobs from the very beginning seeks to evoke the reader’s sympathy, “I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered”. She then follows this appeal with a story about two sisters – one dark and one fair. She shows the fair sister following the path of womanhood while the ‘dark’ sister is being dragged into shame, misery and sin. Jacobs by pointing to the separate destinies of the two “sisters” successfully points to the way at times characters were determined by racial heritage. Jacobs through all this then also forms an argument against the dominant Southern stereotype that blacks were inherently inferior and therefore should be enslaved. After describing the different life awaiting these sisters she condemns the silence of the North in the face of the evil of slavery. One should remember that Linda is not addressing a white audience but a free audience. It is the lack of freedom that makes all the difference, not one’s racial heritage. But readers at the same time should be skeptical of this claim of Jacobs keeping in mind her experiences in the free North and racial discrimination she must face there.

Linda during her narrative goes on to expose the double standards of slave owners. She talks about the various sexual improprieties of slaveholding men and women. She talks about the shame heaped on white women when such liaisons<sup>10</sup> were discovered but not on white fathers of racially mixed offspring. Despite the intermixing of white and black and the increasing difficulty of distinguishing white from black, attempts were made to reify the racial category. The most salient attempt to retain the categories of white/free and black/slave was the determination that the child would follow the condition of the mother. This reveals the capricious nature of slavery as well as the power of patriarchal authority. She talks about how black women were seen as ‘free’ and ‘available’ due to the Jezebel stereotype. Referring to the law, which made the condition of children depend upon the status of their mother, she points to the fact that black women were seen as breeders and not as mothers. As high premium was placed on children – a case in point being Linda herself and the fact that even after Flint’s death the whole family takes recourse to various subterfuges to have her in their power again<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> So, her affair with Sands is one that is utilitarian in motive with Linda in control and unlike the affairs in sentimental literature not an affair gone bad. Similarly, while hiding at her grandmother’s place she sends Flint on wild goose chases of her by sending letters dated from New York. She constantly thinks of ways to free her children from bondage.

<sup>10</sup> This points to the high premium placed on white women’s purity. Although Jacobs does not devote much attention to this aspect of slavery, the importance of white women’s purity is evident in the post – bellum lynching phenomenon and in the rise of various white supremacist organizations who justified their acts of violence against blacks through accusations of rape or attempted rape of white women by black licentious men.

<sup>11</sup> This evokes the fact that the institution of slavery depended on black women to supply future slaves. By every method possible, black women were ‘encouraged’ to reproduce. In fact, in the eyes of the slave holders slave women were not mothers at all. They were ‘breeders’, animals. Spillers, in her seminal work points out, that the children followed the

Her pursuit of freedom ends when she is finally purchased by Mrs. Bruce. But this freedom is a conventional one. Linda had made it clear to Mrs. Bruce that she did not wish to be bought as she already considered herself free and such an act on Mrs. Bruce part would create a tremendous obligation that could not be easily repaid. By not respecting Linda's wishes, Mrs. Bruce violates Linda's personal autonomy and despite the benevolent relationship between the two, Linda cannot experience true freedom. Linda continues to serve another's family.

Although Linda cannot completely escape the bonds of the sentimental heroine, she successfully departs from her at certain points. The text does not end in marriage, "Readers, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way with marriage" and Linda till the end is unembarrassed about her single motherhood. It is significant that Linda in the end longs for a home of her own and not a home and a husband. The fact that Linda does not foresee nor desire a male provider implies a critique of traditional gender expectations. At the same time, it also suggests a reworking of the idea of 'true womanhood' at yet another level. Linda leaves the domestic realm to seek work instead of relying on a man to provide for her suggests a different notion of domesticity and the other's role. While some people may argue that the ending of the text is merely a reflection of the author's circumstances, one should not forget that she consciously highlights the protagonist's diversion from the he norm and suggest that marriage should not be expected by the society. Both authors seem to apply that the society should have room for independent women and mothers rather than assert the necessity of a husband and father.

*Incidents* then come across as a text which is critical of patriarchal role, whether black or white. Abolitionist and slaveholders alike claimed the institution of the family as the guiding ideal; and the protection of the domestic well – being of the black slaves as their main concerns. According to this ideal, Dr. Flint should have been a father – figure for Linda. However, his incestuous suggestions clearly nullify him as a suitable father – figure. And Sands is merely a shade better. Although Sands does not harass Linda, he clearly fails her and her children. Thus, the two main "patriarchs" in Linda's life are proven to be ineffective protectors.

To conclude by what Yellin said about *Incidents*, "What finally dominates is anew voice. It is the voice of a woman who, although she cannot discuss her sexual past without expressing deep conflict, nevertheless addresses this painful personal subject in order to politicize it, to insist that the forbidden topic of the sexual abuse of slave women be included in the public discussion of the slavery question" (qtd. Smih 193 – 194).

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condition of the mother, thereby displacing the role of the father and thus suggesting that females as well as male slaves had no parental rights; they were breeders, not parents.

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