

HARRIET JACOBS'S INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL - "THE EXPERIENCES AND CONCERNS OF A BONDWOMAN"

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Abstract

"Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women" (Harriet Jacobs 48) From the words of Harriet Jacobs, it is clear that slavery seems to be a perilous passage in the slave girl's life, full of struggles and concerns. Incidents in the life of a slave girl by Harriet Jacobs is a complex, contemptuous and often brilliant description of the disintegration of black people's familial relationship and the resistance of the black female against her cruel master. It was one among the first fictional works by a black woman to focus directly on the bitter faces of slavery. Because of its truthfulness, and liveliness, it has become much more evident for the ill effects of slavery. As it has more openly explored the cruelty of the individual slave owner in the woman point of perspective, it received more attention, appreciation, condemnation altogether. It tried to expose the violent interaction of the cruel masters over the black females and portrayed them as oppressors of black women. When a black woman writes about the incest, rape, sexual violence, and abuse committed by the slave owners against the black females of all ages, it was very much criticised. This article tries to analyze the various experiences of Harriet Jacobs as a bonded woman in slavery and the concerns which motivated her to escape slavery.

Keywords: Women in Black History, Slavery, Cruel Master, Jealousy Mistress, Experiences, Concerns, Motherhood, Escape, Bondage, and Emancipation.

Article

Prominent Women in Black History

Enslaved Africans were brought to the North American colonies as slaves as early as 16th century. During this era, the African-Americans both men and women lived in the U.S.A as slaves were sharply limited in most states. The enslaved Africans served as skilled labours, field labours and, domestic servants. They were mostly enslaved or captured Africans or born to slave mothers. African women slaves also worked equivalent to the enslaved African men. When indentured servitude was practiced for a certain amount of time before having independence, the enslavement continued for generations. Black women have played many prominent roles in American history. They were not only active in the struggle for civil rights, but also made major contributions to the literature, to arts and science, and to the society

Some of the prominent women in Black History are Lucy Terry (1730-1821) was the author of the oldest known work of literature by an African American, Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) was the first African-American poet and first African-American woman to publish a book in the pre-colonial era, Margaret Garner called Peggy was an enslaved African American woman in the pre-Civil War United States. She was one of the notable writers. She killed her own daughter rather than allowing the child to be returned to slavery, Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) was an African American abolitionist and a women's rights activist. She was born into slavery in Swartekill, Ulster County, New York. In 1826, she escaped with her infant daughter from slavery to freedom. After her escape from slavery, she approached the court to recover her son. She became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man. Her best-known courageous speech on gender inequalities, "Ain't I a Woman?" was delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. During the Civil War, Truth helped the Union Army to recruit black troops for the war

and after the war, she helped to grant lands to the participants in the Civil war, Harriet Tubman (1820-1913) was an African-American abolitionist, humanitarian, and Union spy during the American Civil War. Born into slavery, Tubman escaped and rescued more than 70 slaves. She guided refugees along the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad and in the post-war era struggled for women's suffrage, and Ellen Craft (1826-1897) was a slave from Macon, Georgia. She disguised herself as a white male planter to escape from slavery. She escaped to the by traveling openly by train and steamboat with her husband. He acted as her slave servant; they reached Philadelphia and attained freedom. Harriet Jacobs is one among them.

An Introduction to Slave Narratives

The slave narrative genre captured the personal experiences of formerly enslaved African Americans in the United States. It describes the life of an enslaved person in bondage in the narrated forms and non-fictional records. The stories were all about the runaway slaves who had found their way to attain freedom in the North. These narratives link the slave's life with the historical events like Underground Rail Road, Civil War, Nat Turner's Rebellions, etc. It proved to be a powerful tool in contrast to the pro-slavery rhetoric tactics used by slaveholders. Most slave narratives described the stories of the individuals, their personal experiences, and struggles in the dreadful circumstances. It also offered the accounts and brutal details of slave life with the purpose of provoking support for the anti-slavery cause by shocking the public with the unexposed part of slavery. Therefore slave narratives served as a powerful weapon of anti-slavery propaganda to evoke the awareness of slavery and to state the need of emancipation for the enslaved people among the public.

Olaudah Equiano is believed to be the first former slave to write slave narrative. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, which was published in 1780, was considered as the first slave narrative. It offered the story of Equiano, right from his birth to his emancipation, and his efforts in abolishing the slave trade. It also exposed the abuses and sexual harassment of women in this way

"When we have had some of these slaves on board my master's vessels to carry them to other islands, or to America, I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practised to such scandalous excess, that one of our captains discharged the mate and others on that account" (Olaudah Equiano quotes) Another eminent writer was Frederick Douglass. He wrote one of the famous books about an escaped slave, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, which was published in 1845. Douglass became one of the influential abolitionists of his time. He raised voice for women freedom, as he himself victimized women suffrage. He had never seen his mother during daylight, as he was separated from his mother when he was too young as a result of slavery

He writes, "Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with the much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger" (Fred. Doug 1.4).

Douglass says that slavery not only just takes people away from their families but also it prevents them from even having families in the first place. Although slave narratives significantly varied in the form and style, their structure had several common elements. It includes the chronological narration of the author's life, their family history, the way they were subjugated, cruel masters, plantation life, unknown birthdates, starvations, fractured families, accepting religion, learning how to read and write and achieving freedom Therefore primary slavery documents, such as memoirs and narratives, offered the readers with the deep look over the slave's life in bondage. Through their autobiographies, escaped slaves like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northup, Moses, etc provided the records of their difficult times in slavery. Harriet Jacobs' narrative *The Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* depicts her time spent in slavery and exposes the particular burden placed on enslaved women. Jacobs writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent describes the agonies of a woman being raped and over having her

children caught up in slavery for the single reason they had born to a slave mother. Torn apart from her children repeatedly, she finally liberates herself and escapes slavery. The start of the Civil War overshadowed the publication of the book but later it remains a significant primary document for understanding the history of slavery and its impact on African-American women

Slavery: A Nightmare of Abuse and Cruelty

Women slave endured far worse punishment and cruelty than men ever did. Their duties consisted of two parts. The first part was that of being a household servant. They did the cleaning, cooking, cared for the white children of their Mistress and Master, and other household duties. Secondly, slave women had to not only maintain the household, at the same time they were also expected to work on the fields and plantations like the men. Things like picking cotton, cleaning outside, feeding animals, and hoeing the grounds for planting crops. Slave men were never made to perform women duties whereas women were assigned all types of hard works. Even though slavery was common throughout the human history, its peculiar phase has generally been kept veiled. The public was unacquainted with the monstrous features of slavery, slave narratives did the job of exposing them with the veil withdrawn. Especially, Harriet Jacobs wrote her narrative for the sake of the bonded women, suffering in the slavery, whose stories were too delicate to listen. The editor of *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* L. Maria Child writes “I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has the power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty” (Harriet Jacobs 5).

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born in slavery to a mullato parents. She and her younger brother, William, were raised by their maternal grandmother, as their parents died during Jacobs's youth. After her parent's death, Jacobs was sent to stay with her first mistress. Jacobs learned to read, write, and sew under her first mistress, and hoped to be freed by her. Unfortunately, when Jacobs was eleven years old, her first mistress died. As soon as the mistress died her slaves were distributed to among her relatives. Both Jacobs and Willie had become the property of Dr. Flint family. Especially, Jacobs became the property of the little daughter of Dr. Flint. They were taught to “learn their first lesson of obedience to a master” (Harriet Jacobs 7). In their new home they “encountered cold looks, cold words and cold treatments” (Harriet Jacobs 7). The lifetime of sufferings and hardships for Jacobs initiated there. Jacobs states, “My master began to whisper foul words in my ears” (Harriet Jacobs 18). The young teenaged Jacobs was continuously harassed and abused by her master Dr. Flint until she was a servant in his household. She was tormented physically and sexually. She was disliked by her jealousy mistress Mrs. Flint. Jacobs says “ Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. She will become immaturely knowing things” (Harriet Jacobs 19).

Escaping Slavery-a resolution to make a break for freedom

Jacobs resisted Dr. Flint's advances in many ways. At last, she entered into an affair with a prominent white man named Mr. Sands. She became the mother of two children. Constant sexual threats and fear about the cruel master that he might extend his hold over her children made Jacobs to concern more about her children. She did not want her children to experience slavery. When Jacobs father's old mistress gifted her baby girl with a gold chain. Jacobs did not want any chain to be fixed firmly on her daughter, even if it was gold. Jacobs prayed “she might never feel the weight of slavery's chain, whose iron entereth into the soul!” (Jacobs 49). So, she decided to liberate herself from slavery. After a long assessment, she carried out her plan. She resolved herself that, no turning back, “Give me liberty, or give me death” became her motto (Jacobs 60). She hid in the storeroom attic at her grandmother's house for seven years. She could do only little

more than sit up in the confined space. During those years she read, sewed, and watched over her children from a crack in the roof waiting for an opportunity to escape to the North.

Jacobs was finally able to make her way to New York City by boat in 1842, with the help of her faithful friends and relatives. And she was eventually reunited with her children there. Even in New York, Jacobs afraid of the Fugitive Slave Law. Because according to that law wherever Jacobs lived, she could be reclaimed by Dr. Flint family as she was the legal property of them, and could be returned back to slavery at any time. So, she hid herself without showing her identity and worked in several places to raise her children. Around 1852, her employer, Mrs. Bruce, and her friends purchased her freedom from Dr. Flint family. At last, the narrative ends with the note that Linda alias Jacobs had become free with her two children. Jacobs expresses her gratitude like this “It is a privilege to serve those who pities my oppressed people, and who has bestowed the inestimable boon of freedom on me and my children” (Jacobs 119).

Autobiography as a Slave Narrative

Jacobs's decision to write her autobiography was encouraged by her friend, Amy Post, a member of the Society of Friends in the State of New York. Although several male authors of slave narratives had portrayed the trials of enslaved African American women by white men, none had focused the subject as directly as Jacobs did. She not only documented the sexual abuse and harassment she had experienced but also explained how she had resisted the exploitation of her master. Amy Post writes, “You know a woman can whisper her cruel wrongs in the ear of a dear friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read” (Harriet Jacobs 120). Amy insisted the importance of writing the experiences of Jacobs as a narrative to seek the sympathy of the readers and to inspire the abolitionist movements. Jacobs understood the necessity and undertook the task and traced the truthful record of her eventful life.

Amy Post also adds, “Having been a slave so large a portion of her life, she is unlearned; she is obliged to earn her life by her own labour, and she has worked untiringly to procure education for her children; several times she has been obliged to leave her employment, in order to fly from the man-hunters and woman-hunters of our lands; but she pressed through all these obstacles and overcame them” (Harriet Jacobs 120).

Thus throughout her narrative, Jacobs accommodates the issues of motherhood and sexuality. She details the ache of being separated from her grandmother and two children during her seven years of concealment in her narrative which occupies a significant place in African American literary tradition. Later, she entered into public service with her daughter, aiding refugees during the Civil War and established herself as an abolitionist and a relief worker in Washington.

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