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## The Saga of Endurance: Dual Slavery as Experienced by a Woman Slave in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Anu Paul

St. Thomas College (Autonomous),  
Thrissur, Kerala, India.

### Abstract:

Slave Narratives presents the firsthand experience of slaves in slavery and their pathways to emancipation. This paper tries to differentiate between the expression of this experience in male and female narratives. It focuses mainly on the experience of female slaves, how being slaves as well as women made it double hard for them. A female slave finds it almost impossible to lead a morally secure life and how she is always excluded from the security of a family life. The life of Harriet Jacobs is an apt example of the turbulent life of a slave woman and how she has to even fiercely fight to be with her children. This female experience served as a perfect base for the later Afro American female writers. As the only existing complete female slave narrative Jacob's story portrays the depth of a woman's experience.

**Keywords: Harriet Jacobs, Slavery, Bondwomen, Narratives.**

Ex slaves, penned their personal experiences of slavery and contributed to the creation of a new literary genre namely the slave narrative. The importance of slave narratives in modern African American literature is such that the latter could not be understood without an analysis of the literature written by ex slaves. Slave narratives played an important role in the genesis of Afro American literature. As seen in any other genre, in slave narratives too there can be seen some differences between slave narratives written by men and slave narratives written by women. In the case of bondwomen they lived through two-fold submission. Despite of being owned by white men as slaves they were also subject to the sexual claims of white masters. Added to the hardships that derived from their condition as slaves, which their male counterparts also endured, they had to suffer the consequences of being slave *women*, which involved experiences that were specific to their own kind.

Jacobs going through the bitter spell of slavery delivers a baby girl. It is interesting to quote her when she knew that her baby was a girl. She says "Slavery is terrible 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" (*Incidents*, 77). The depth of the experience of slavery in females varies from that of males. It is interesting to analyze how this double discrimination influenced female slave narratives. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is one of the most significant slave narratives ever published because it is the only full-length autobiographical female slave narrative available. It discloses typical aspects of black women's experience such as freedom, motherhood, and sexuality, which would be revisited by twenty-first-century black women writers in America.

In civilized societies rape is considered as an offensive as well as punishable crime. The slave codes also considered rape, but in a very biased manner. Rape was understood as the

rape of a white woman, and that was usually punished with death. In female slave narratives we come across several episodes of rape and it was almost impossible for a slave woman to preserve her virtue. Masters often treated them as instruments for the satisfaction of their perverted sexual desires. These forced relationships would result, in many cases, the birth of mulatto slaves which was also considered very beneficial by the masters. Apart from the sexual satisfaction from these illicit encounters the children born of it will be a source of economic profit for the masters. These children will automatically become slaves and will be a reliable source of profit for them, for the rule that “the child shall follow the condition of the mother” was enacted in all slave states.

The wives of the slaveholders’ did not see such encounters in such a favorable light but they couldn’t prevent their husbands from abusing the female slaves. When southern mistress learned what happened on the plantation, they either feigned ignorance of the situation fearing the scandal or made the female slave’s life miserable through psychological and physical abuses. In Jacobs’s *Incidents* we see the female slave resorting to various tricks to escape from the clutches of her master. His offer to make her his mistress and to provide a house is spurred by her. It was not always easy to escape the master and as a way of possible protest she enters into a liaison with a married white man. Rather than succumbing to the master she found it appealing to enter into a relationship of her choice. To quote her, “When I found that my master had actually begun to build the lonely cottage, other feelings mixed with those I described...I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way” (*Incidents*, 55). For us it may seem as an adulterous relationship but for her it was a way of protest and living in twenty first century it won’t be easy to relate to her vulnerable position.

As previously mentioned, the slave codes regulated every aspect of the life of slaves but it conveniently omitted any regulations on slave marriage. Being treated as the property of whites they didn’t have any right to lead a secured family life. Marriages or relationships between slaves of the same plantation were encouraged because the masters could own the children born from these relationships. But it always challenged the pride of a black slave that his wife was more loyal to the master and he had only second claim on his wife. If any slave protested against master he was sold out to a distant plantation thus breaking families forever. Inter plantation marriages were never encouraged because travelling and meetings consumed the productive time of the slaves. “Slaves were, therefore, encouraged to marry on the plantation, if at all possible; and when this was not possible masters sought either to purchase the spouse of his slave or sell his slave to the owner of the spouse” (Franklin, 147). Thus marriage among slaves did not provide any security to the women and they always lived under the threat of separation from their husband and children.

In Jacobs’s *Incidents* we can see how clearly she states about the helplessness of a female slave. How repugnantly she remembers the advancements made by her master and how she faces it in terrified silence. To Quote, “When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *everything*; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong” (*Incidents*, 18). When her brother asks her later about this incident and says it is a bad world around, she bitterly admits that it is only bad for slaves like them. People with good friends and relatives are actually leading a pleasant life.

In some cases masters forced their slaves to marry many a times against their wish so as to increase the number of slaves. Later they sold the man of the family to a distant plantation to take whole control over the Woman and children. Consequently children were also sold away

from their mother because the duties of motherhood made woman slaves less productive. Slave mothers may not see their children for their entire life. Thus motherhood was also commoditized by the masters and the female slaves satisfied themselves by acting as nannies to the white master's children. In Jacobs's *Incidents* we see how Linda fights for the custody of her children and how the lonely life led by Linda in the attic is only colored by the rare glimpses she has of her children. Her master tries to use her children as a bait to claim her back and the fear that her children will be sold to distant places haunts her.

Slave narrators present themselves as normal human beings and genuinely present their experiences in front of the readers. They don't add any special aura associated with the heroines generally. Hence it was a real challenge for them to reveal their tumultuous life in front of their morally upright audience. May be that is a reason why there are not many female slave narratives. They were ashamed to present their sexually exploited life in front of others. In Jacobs's narrative many a place she tries to justify herself in front of the readers. To quote her, "...I shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. Alas! Slavery still held me in its poisonous grasp. There was no chance for me to be respectable. There was no prospect of being able to lead a better life" (*Incidents*, 76). Always being master's property they could hardly lead a sincere life and find it real hard to protect their honour.

Harriet Jacobs doesn't fit into the slot of a typical heroine because she cannot conform to the ideal of chastity. Hazel V. Carby expresses Jacobs's rupture with the typical heroine of the sentimental novel arguing that "Linda Brent's decision as a slave, to survive through an act that resulted in her loss of virtue, placed her outside the parameters of the conventional heroine" (*Reconstructing Womanhood*, 74). A conventional heroine would never resort to the ways adopted by Jacobs. She would never surrender before another man just to take revenge on master. Thus, Harriet Jacobs's journey is very special because her decisions have individuality rather than the general succumbing to the set pattern of a system. At the end of *Incidents*, Jacobs obtains legal freedom, which can be understood both literally and metaphorically. She attains physical freedom from bondage and spiritual freedom from sin.

Slave narratives support the belief that black men and women held in bondage should have a different set of moral values from those professed by white people. Nevertheless, Jacobs wants to justify her loss of virtue to her audience because at the time of publication of narratives she was a free woman and wanted to be considered as an equal member of the American society. She wants to state that it was slavery which took away her innocence and people who were always protected in their life may not understand her plight. To quote her, "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 severely!" (*Incidents*, 54). She feels obliged to lose her virginity in order to survive in a society dominated by the institution of slavery. Joanne M. Braxton observes, "*Incidents* demonstrates that it is impossible for true womanhood to flourish under slavery because slave women are not allowed to practice the virtues of modesty, chastity, and domesticity" (*Black Women*, 26).

Harriet Jacobs is aware that her extramarital sexual relationships would disconcert and perturb the virtuous women of the North to whom the book is addressed, and may arouse their disrespect for her. Consequently, after confessing her sexual transgression, Jacobs writes:

"Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel,

entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (*Incidents*, 86).

Slavery forced her and other slave women to act against the standardized morally good principles. According to her there should be two different moralities: the morality of women slaves and the morality of free white women. Rather than keeping her experiences as her dirty secrets, she brings it out in front of the society. The issue of slavery was thus discussed and her personal experience coincides with the experience of many other women slaves. She narrates her life in the name Linda Brent and the anonymity of the writer somehow helped the readers to identify her plight as that of any female slave. “In and through her creation of Linda Brent, who yokes her success story as a heroic slave mother to her confession as a woman who mourns that she is not a storybook heroine, Jacobs articulates her struggle to assert her womanhood and projects a new kind of female hero”(*Incidents*, Introduction xiv )

Considering all this points one can easily recognize *Incidents* as one of the first works that represents the feminist movement in the United States. Thus we can consider Jacobs as the first African American feminist theorist. In her narrative we can see several incidents where the white woman helped her out of great dangers. In the end a white woman Mrs. Bruce buys her from her owners and gives her freedom. It is even more surprising that this white lady helped her to hide with her ward because she trusted Jacobs only for looking after her child. How these women betrayed their race to help Jacobs can be explained thus, “...women are responding to Linda Brent’s oppression as a woman exploited sexually and as a mother trying to nurture her children. A central pattern in *Incidents* shows white women betraying allegiance to the sisterhood of all women”. (*Incidents*, Introduction xxxiii).

From all sides slavery was a negative institution but we can say that slavery and the resultant slave narratives aided in unifying the sensibilities of women above the concerns of race and status. Jacobs also thwarted the conventional status of a heroine by introducing a black woman at the center of the narrative, as the heroine of a life full of struggle. She reverses the traditional role of women as domestic and passive creatures presenting a strong courageous black woman subdued by the system of slavery. She reverses the ideals of piety and chastity in her autobiography, something which might shock her readers, but something that is understood and supported by leading white women like Lydia Maria Child. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* leads, in this way, a feminist sisterhood between black women who were enduring terrible treatment under slavery and white women who wanted to fight for their own rights and who joined Jacobs in her struggle to change the idea of true womanhood.

This new heroine introduced by Jacobs does not only belong to a lower social class, but further belongs to her seducer/master, Dr. Flint, as property, as a slave. Thus, he has an absolute control over her life and, at least legally, can do whatever he pleases with her. Jacobs resists to being seduced instead, she rebels in different ways, and inflicts a painful chastisement to Dr. Flint when she finds herself a lover and has two children with him. It is a way of rebellion from the part of a vulnerable female slave. Moreover, the villain does not become a reformed man, but persists in making Jacobs’s life as hard as he can till his death. He never leaves and follows her as a shadow even after his death. His predecessors come searching for her to reclaim her and her children as their property.

Narrative ends by presenting before the readers an enlightened woman in Jacobs. After all her hardships when she finds that her freedom is still in question and her present benefactress is trying to buy her from her owners she tries to stop her by saying, "...being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery; that such great obligation could not be easily cancelled; and that I preferred to go to my brother in California" (*Incidents*, 300). Without her permission her benefactress buys her freedom and Jacobs felt as if a heavy burden was lifted from her shoulders. She acknowledges her gratitude in these words: "Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend; the word is sacred" (*Incidents*, 301).

Jacobs makes it clear to her readers that her Autobiography belongs to a different genre when she says, "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slave holders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition" (*Incidents*, 302).

Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* have conditioned modern African American women's writings in the sense that topics already present in *Incidents*, like freedom, motherhood, and sexuality, constitute the main element of present day black women's works. If we analyze the twentieth and twenty-first African American women's literature we can easily trace the influence of Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in them. Black women authors have revisited the experiences of female slaves in their works and we can see an example in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Secondly, contemporary African American women writers like Maya Angelou have very adeptly used the autobiographical mode of narration as a sense of identity. To top it all topics dealt by Jacobs like freedom, sexuality, and motherhood, still runs as dominant themes in the writings by black women writers.

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