

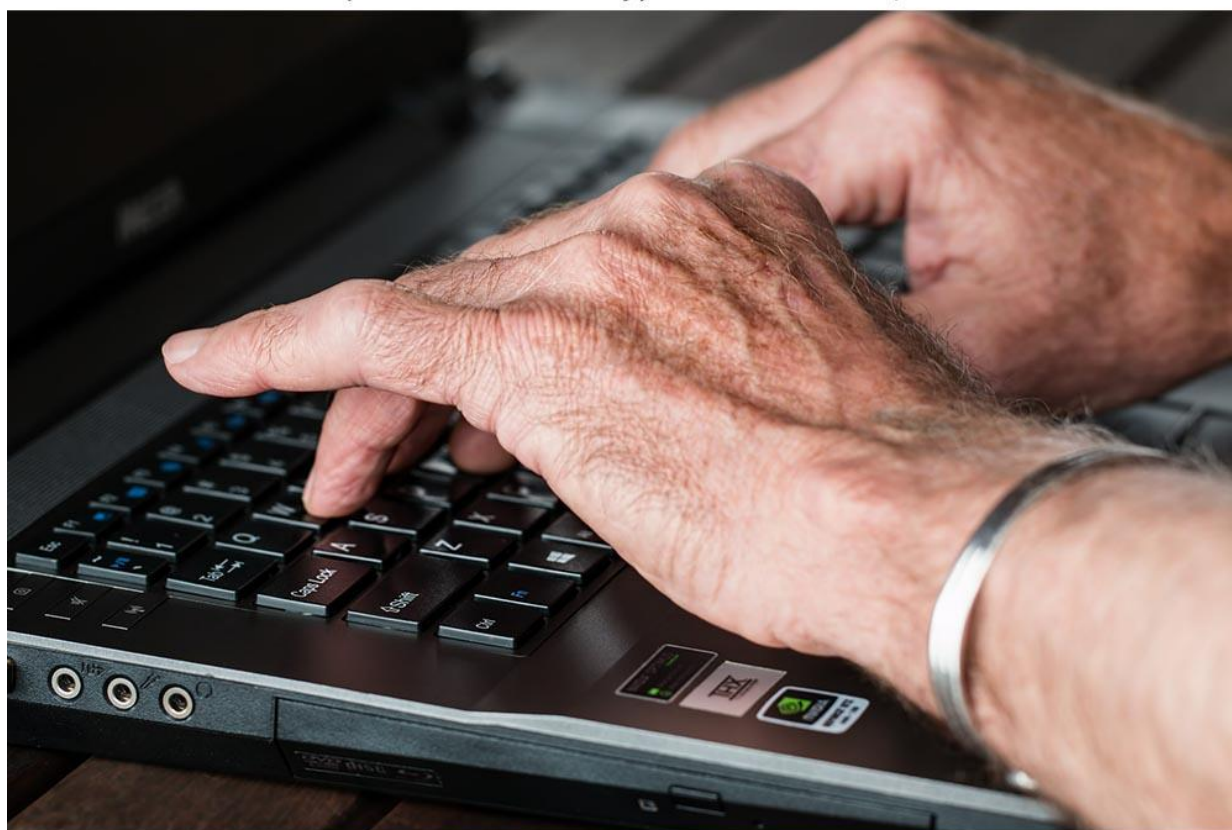
ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Peer-Reviewed (Refereed/Scholarly), Indexed and Open Access Journal



Volume 7, Issue 8, August 2019

www.ijellh.com

Miss Simran Sodhi

Research Scholar, Dept. of English

Singhania University

Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

simransodhi1993@gmail.com

Dr. Pramila Gupta

Principal, S D Institute of Education for Girls,

Ambala, Haryana.

Victimisation of Black women as slaves in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Abstract

Harriet Jacobs' narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an autobiographical account of her struggles as a slave in North Carolina and her journey towards achieving ultimate emancipation. She buys freedom for herself and her children. This slave narrative was published in the year 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Harriet Jacobs, through her work, not only questions the dehumanising institution of slavery but also desires to abolish it entirely. She wants to arouse the sentiments of women so that they free themselves from this eternal bondage and realise their true worth. She very powerfully addresses her readers and makes them aware of the existing double standards in society. She writes, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (Jacob,64). The condition of women is worse because of their gender. They are oppressed racially, socially and sexually. In addition to being 'women', they are black, poor, uneducated and only at the mercy of white male slaveholders.

Keywords: Slavery, Black women, Struggle, Emancipation.

Linda Brent opens the narrative recounting the days of her childhood as a slave. She begins her story saying "I was born a slave". She realises her status as a slave at the age of six when her mother dies. She spends the next few years with her mother's mistress, who is a caring woman and treats her well. After the death of her mistress, she is sold off to her new master, Dr Flint who is an evil man. It is from here that her true sufferings begin. She is sexually harassed, assaulted and beaten up. She endures all kinds of tortures be it physical, psychological or sexual. She always felt that "was made for his use, made to obey his command in *everything*." In order to protect herself from the advances of lustful Dr Flint, she has an affair with Mr Sands, a white man who is kind towards her. She has two children with him who are extremely dear to her. Her relationship with Mr Sands depicts the condition of enslaved women who were unable to live up to the ideals of morality set by the society because they were powerless and vulnerable against the sexual advances of white men. During this time, Linda has a significant realisation that she is only a 'property', a 'thing' that can be bought or sold. She is only at the mercy of her 'masters' who are holding the position of power and misuse that power whenever they desire.

Linda's story is the story of her pain and anguish. She constantly worries about her children, Benny and Ellen and is determined to herself and her children from this eternal bondage. As soon as she learns that her children will join her to become plantation slaves, she immediately decides to plan for their ultimate escape. Harriet runs away to her friend's house where she stays in a small room for some time. Meanwhile, Dr Flint frantically tries to find her thinking her to be in New York and enslave her again. She realises that she isn't safe and should shift to a safer place. Betty, a woman slave and Peter, a black man, come to her rescue. She spends a night in a dingy place from where she is transported to her grandmother's house. Living all cramped up in a small attic above her grandmother's house makes her almost

crippled. Braving all odds for her children, she never gives up. She makes a small hole in that attic from where she can hear the voices of her children. She is eager to tell them that "your mother is here" (Jacobs, 82). Her love for Benny and Ellen is immense and beyond description. She then moves to Philadelphia with the help of a trusted friend and sends her daughter to Brooklyn with a relative. Her son is also sent to the north, where she meets him later. She eventually goes to New York, where she finally secures her freedom. She ends her narrative on a positive note recalling the death of her loving grandmother and her, who fortunately lived to witness her freedom.

The theme of motherhood runs throughout Harriet's narrative with many instances of love, sympathy and nurturance. She dedicates first few pages of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to the powerful relationship that Linda shares with her mother. The bond that they share is pure, loving, caring and nurturing. Later, she shares the same bond with her grandmother, who takes care of her and protects her. Her grandmother is an embodiment of true love and sacrifice. She extends the same unconditional love towards her children and is ready to do anything for their well being and freedom. She endures all kinds of tortures for their sake. It is this power of her personal narrative that immediately connects with the readers and resonates with them for a very long time. It is, in fact, a testimony of her journey from slavery to freedom.

Harriet uses many symbols and motifs throughout her work to emphasise her disgust for the institution of slavery. Dr Flint is based on Harriet's real-life master who was monstrously evil. He represents all that is cruel and disgusting in human nature. He symbolises cruelty, brutality, moral degeneration and lust for power. On the other hand, Jacobs contrasts his character with that of Aunt Martha, who is a domesticated and a religious woman. She is a true symbol of womanhood. She is pious, virtuous, humble and patient. She is one of those women who never question their fate and are conditioned to believe that God has made them slaves for their own good. Another important symbol in the narrative is of Linda's hideout in her

grandmother's attic. The place that she lives in for seven years is so restricted that she is unable even to sit or stand properly. The place represents confinement, restriction, and limitation. It is anything but free and open. However, she prefers this tiny space over Dr Flint's luxurious house because here she is able to feel free and liberated. She creates for herself a place where she is the master of her life and actions. She rejects Dr Flint's claim over her body and soul. The attic hideout symbolises Linda's struggle, hardships and at the same time represents emancipation from the clutches of slavery.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl contains strong ridicule and critique of the institution the Slavery and its corrupting influence on the people. The narrative brings out issues that were extremely controversial and crucial in the mid 19th century. She says, "slavery is damnable" (Jacobs, 22) and it corrupts both blacks and whites. The whites had lost their morality completely, and the blacks were treated as mere 'objects' or 'goods' to be used heartlessly. Slave owners like Dr Flint, who had no fear of any punishment and they kept carrying out their disgusting activities without any remorse. Even those slaveholders who appeared to be kind such as Mr Sands lacked conscience and were quite capable of betrayal. Despite the promise of freeing his children, Mr Sands was even ready to sell them for his benefit. Thus, in the end, slavery corrupts and distorts basic human emotions of love and sympathy.

Slave narratives written during that time, emphasised the physical torture that the slaves faced. It had descriptions of beatings and killings that shook the readers tremendously. Jacobs addresses the issue of physical violence as well as focuses on their spiritual and psychological anguish. She, along with many other slaves, terribly suffered because they were not given any legal protection or basic human rights. During those times, men and women were not allowed to marry according to their choice. Women were in the worst situation because of the patriarchal society subjugating them in every possible way. She stated that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs, 56). Women suffered various

degradations and humiliations for their survival. They were forced to sleep with men they loathed. They were impregnated by their masters and later, forced to fend for themselves. Families got torn apart as the children were sold to a different place away from their mothers. Linda makes a very important statement in the narrative, where she states that she would rather prefer to be a poor labourer than be a "pampered slave" of a slaveholder. Thus, every human deserves respect, and dignified living. Mental enslavement is as devastating as physical enslavement.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is one of the most controversial and ground-breaking works of all times. It talks about women's freedom under the institution of slavery. Women need to be liberated physically, mentally and sexually. The narrative focuses on the sexual exploitation of women by white men during slavery and exposing the hypocrisy existing within society. A woman's struggle for freedom and complete emancipation is directly linked to her control over her own self, her decisions and most importantly, her sexuality. Depiction of her story is honest as she is determined to draw the attention of white men and women towards the sexual oppression and victimisation of black women as slaves where they had no choice but to surrender themselves to their cruel slaveholders.

Harriet Jacobs has broken all kinds of stereotypes and taboos prevalent in the nineteenth century with her powerful narrative. Earlier, the texts were written from a man's point of view, but she incorporated a woman's point of view and completely reshaped the genre of a slave narrative. None of the previous works had depicted the plight of poor, uneducated and oppressed slave women the way she did in her narrative. Many critics refused to believe that the stories narrated by her in the narrative were true as it was nearly impossible for a woman to live in a small attic for seven years. However, the narration of her story is so powerful that we, as readers, are immediately drawn towards her and sympathise with her. Sorisio states "Jacobs's text is powerfully written, wonderfully articulated, and enormously complex"

(Soriso,1). Harriet' purpose in writing this narrative was to arouse the sentiments of her readers and draw their attention towards the miserable state of black slaves, especially women slaves.

References

- JACOBS, H. A. (1973). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York.
- GWIN, Minrose C. (1985). "Green-Eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, Indiana University Press, pp. 39-52.
- MILLS, Bruce (1992). "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," in *American Literature*, Vol. 64, No. 2, June, pp. 255-72
- SHERMAN, S. W. (1990). Moral Experience in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *NWSA journal*, vol.2, No.2, spring.
- SORISIO, Carolyn. (1996). "'There is might in each': Conceptions of Self in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave*