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Reading Race, Class and Gender in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl*

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century African American women were faced with the formidable task of dismantling the negative connotations that the constructs of race, class, and gender placed on them. Harriet Jacobs in her narrative, Incidents *in the Life of a slave girl,* (1861) subverted these challenges and proceeded to re-shape the autobiographical form, thereby denying the power of race, class, and gender. Whatever may be the limitations of the form she chooses to represent her story, it is based on her experience of triple marginalization.

Keywords: Race, Class, Gender, Autobiography.

Introduction

Though much has been written about Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a slave girl,* since its 1973 edition appeared, relatively little critical attention has been given to the concept of intersectionality in the text. This chapter considers the ways how the first African American narrative written by a slave woman in the nineteenth century could identify the triple system of oppression in the lives of African American women. Written by Harriet Jacobs under the pseudonym Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a slave girl* (hereafter referred to as *Incidents*) testify to the peculiar nature of the violence, violation and degradation slavery can perpetuate on black women. It is remarkable that as early as 1840s, and even before the rise of the women's movement, Jacobs could distinguish the triple nature of the black woman's enslavement.

Like her contemporary male narrators, Harriet Jacobs also adopted the already popular nineteenth century literary conventions, and made little attempt to create new forms or standards. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, writing about black women's autobiographical tradition, has insisted that black women's autobiographies reflect a tension between the author and various dominant discourses. She mentions Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson who "self-consciously sought to work within bourgeois women's domestic discourse, even as they subverted its deepest premises about the relations between the female self and gender." This concern is due to their demand for "discursive respectability" and "should be understood in the context of black people's struggle for respect within the confines of dominant American bourgeois conventions, even if the female embodiments of the tradition invariably, if covertly, challenged its stereotypical views of gender relations and gender identity." (198)

The Generic Conventions of *Incidents*

The complex experience of the black woman in slavery makes it difficult to focus on any one of the variables of race, class, and gender alone. For enslaved black women, the issues of class and race alter one's experience of gender, just as gender alters the experience of class and race. Chapter I of *Incidents* give details of Jacobs's life that makes her experience as a slave more comfortable than most of her lot. Jacobs's father and mother are mulattoes who live in a model of conjugal domesticity. She has some free relations also. Her maternal grandmother is the daughter of a South Carolina planter who lives in her own house and has her own sense of honour. Jacobs notes that she and her brother are indebted to her grandmother for more than one reasons, ─ "To this good grandmother I was indebted for many comforts." (10) Jacobs is also privileged to have some education. She is taught to read and spell by her first mistress ─ a rare benefit bestowed on very few slaves She is not like the other slaves among whom she lives as she is provided with a pedigree of physical, mental and moral attractiveness. She has the capacity to rise above her condition. She herself is aware of her privileged position, ─ "Such were the unusually fortunate circumstances of my early childhood." (10) It is easier for Jacobs to locate a point of identification both with her readers and with the protagonist of sentimental fiction due to her class affiliation and the fact that she is subjected to relatively minor forms of abuse as a slave. Jacobs's gender identity becomes problematic here: being a slave she enjoys few of the dubious benefits of the ideology of womanhood. Most nineteenth century white women accepted their society's view of gender which defined the role of the woman as one of nurturing mother, gentle companion and housekeepers for their husbands. Compared to these black women were practically anomalies. A slave woman was first a full time worker and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker.

Therefore, Jacobs's experience of patriarchal and racial oppression is significantly different from that of her white sisters. Her experience had left her simultaneously alienated from and bound to the dominant ideology. Like her black sisters slavery left a double view of gender relations that fully exposed the artificial or problematic aspects of gender identification. But still she chose to follow the model of the sentimental domestic fiction and like white women writers aspired to chastity and piety as the ultimate feminine virtues. Jacobs, therefore expresses her story in the rhetoric and structures of popular fiction. True to the convention of the sentimental novel, Jacobs presents Dr. Flint as a jealous lover and herself as a feeble, young woman undergoing a "perilous passage" (45). Instead of sexually violating her, her master pleads with her and tries to bribe her to submission. He repeatedly offers to make a lady of her, takes initiative to place her in a cottage of her own if she will grant him what he desires.

The Economics of Slavery

However, beneath this more orthodox, public plot of weakness and vulnerability lies a subversive plot which rejected the self-destructive prevailing model of White womanhood, characterized by self-sacrifice. *Incidents* is first and foremost the testimony of a slave woman written "to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what [she] suffered, and most of them far worse." (5) Though a little more privileged than most of her race, Jacobs is fully aware of the consequences of this "peculiar institution" on herself and on her people. Her narrative opens with a discussion of the dysfunctional dynamics of her family which is the result of a system based on racial and class oppression: "My father was a carpenter, and considered [so] intelligent and skilful in his trade…His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded" (5). The institution of slavery sanctioned the right of whites to own and sell black people as property. Jacobs exposes the absurdity of this concept of whites allowing black parents to buy back children who were robbed from them in the first place.

Jacobs's also describes an occasion when her father and mistress both happened to call her brother William at the same time. William, after a moment's hesitation, went to the mistress. When his father reproved him for it, he said, "'you both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first.' 'You are *my* child,' replied Jacobs's father 'and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water.' Poor Willie! He was now to learn his first lesson of obedience to a master.'" (9) Even a free father could not command the primary obedience of his child by a slave wife, for the child following the condition of the mother, was a slave too. Such a situation strips black men of fatherhood and destroys the filial bonds between black children and their parents. A class system based on motherless, fatherless, childless culture wherein blacks would be misplaced, confused, and alienated was what the ruling class strived for. By creating this unnatural culture, slaves are excluded from forming any filial ties, except those that would tie them to their slave masters. As Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay argue:

> "Although much evidence demonstrates that some African religious beliefs, cultural practices, and linguistic forms survived the Middle Passage, the system of chattel slavery was designed to prevent Africans and their descendants from building a new identity except in accordance with the dictates of their oppressors. Instead of an individual, slavery devised…a being that by legal definition could have no family, no personal honour, no community, no past, and no future. The intention of slavery was to create in the slave a sense of complete alienation from

> all human ties except those that bound him or her in absolute dependence to the master's will." (Gates and McKay 155)

Families were allowed to thrive only when they fulfilled the economic desires of the slave-owners.

With the death of her parents, Jacobs was devoid of immediate family relations. However, she was fortunate to have the support of a kind grandmother, eager assistances from uncles and aunts, until she escaped to the North. Dr. Flint, to whose five-year old daughter Jacobs was bequeath by her "good mistress" "was the owner of a fine residence in town, several farms, and about fifty slaves, besides hiring a number [of slaves] by the year." (16) He wields added power within his community because he is a doctor, occupying a high rung in the American class structure. All kinds of conceivable cruelty were practised in his plantation. In Chapter II, Jacobs mentions that, "Little attention was paid to the slaves' meals in Dr. Flint's house. If they could catch a bit of food while it was going, well and good." (13) She describes the sale of her grandmother by Dr. Flint when her mistress wanted her to be free. The doctor's lecherous nature is also obvious from the eleven slave children he fathered. Sexual persecution is common in a slaveholder's household or plantation and no black girl is exempted from it. According to Jacobs, "No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence." (26) The more beautiful she is, the speedier is her violation in the hands of masters and overseers. The qualities which are cherished by white womanhood become a liability for the slave woman. She narrates incidents of rape and miscegenation from neighbouring plantations in Chapter IX. Angela Davis while examining the history of black women in slavery notes that, "Rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholders' economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers." (7)

That slavery is fundamentally an economic phenomenon based on the chattel status of Africans and African American is obvious from Jacobs's *Incidents.* Jacobs herself was aware of her chattel condition, and of the status of slave women as 'breeders'. While giving sketches of neighbouring slaveholders she says: "Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock, (43) and afterwards when her son was born: "Dr. Flint continued his visits, to look after my health; and he did not fail to remind me that *my child was an addition to* *his stock of slaves*" (52) (emphasis added). Davis explains: "in the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. They were 'breeders' ─ animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers." (7) Therefore slave women who have crossed their reproductive and productive period of service were abandoned. As was the case with "an old woman, who for seventy years faithfully served her master" but was "left to be sold to anybody who would give twenty dollars for her" when she becomes unproductive (Jacobs 17). The most poignant statement was made by Jacobs when she questions the compromised nature of her freedom in words which expresses her rage towards her chattel status: '"The bill of sale!" Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion"'(155)

Meaning of Black Womanhood

In an essay titled "*Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle*," Kollontai explains: "every new class that develops as a result of an advance in economic growth and material culture offers an appropriately new ideology. The code of sexual behavior is part of this ideology" (249). Similarly, the nineteenth century ideology of white womanhood is the by-product of industrial capitalism. This ideology sought to assert that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. These characteristics were seen as so crucial to promoting a woman's "proper role," and how such assertions about the roles of women might have served as a response to the growth of industrial capitalism. The middle-class American women saw their behaviour regulated by this social system created by white patriarchy, which was designed to limit their sphere of influence to home and family. Anyone outside this sphere was less than a woman. A female slave, who is economically and sexually exploited, is devoid of any masculine protection, home, and family, was considered a deviant from the norm of true womanhood. Coupled with the white patriarchal construction of the myth of black women's sexual promiscuity or immorality, the black woman's inferior status was consolidated. The white capitalist institution of slavery sought to eliminate all traces of the slave woman's self─ her very urge to resist her oppression ─ in order to propagate and preserve its domination and hegemony.

“*Incidents”* deals with sexual exploitation of slave women by white masters told from a black woman’s point of view, a subject considered as taboo according to nineteenth century moral standards. Jacobs as well as her editor L. Maria Child was aware that the story they intended to represent might violate the rules of propriety in the genre. Keeping with the contemporary white women author’s method of employing a certain degree of circumlocution and euphemism in their works, Jacobs’s narrates her story against the institution of slavery that permitted black men and women to be treated as less than humans, and subordinated black women to the sexual whims of white men. But Jacobs’s narrative significantly differs from the standard sentimental plots and the facts of her life. At least in three different situations, Jacobs assert her preference: the first being her decision to choose a free black man as her lover. The second is her deliberate choice of sexual relation with Mr. Sands which led to the birth of two children out of wedlock, and the third is her statement about the impossibility of her story ending in marriage and her assertion that “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.” (48)

Dr. Flint, a representative of the ruling white patriarchy, tried to control and violate Jacobs’s body for his own sexual and economic desires. At the age of fifteen Jacobs is confronted by the base motives of her master who asks for sexual favours, threatening her with dire consequences if she does not submit to his wishes. The doctor does not fail to call her his property, thereby laying down the injunctions on Jacobs in terms of profit and loss. To forfeit such a cherished property is beyond question and must necessarily be guarded. Jacobs meets him at every turn, who reminds her that she belonged to him, and “swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel [her] to submit to him” (27). For similar reasons Dr. Flint does not allow Jacobs to marry the free black man of her choice, for he fears her lover might buy her off. He even suggests her to choose a husband from one of his slaves to which Jacobs rebels, saying: ‘Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?’ (35). She is struck by Dr. Flint for answering back.

Jacobs realizes that white supremacy as well as the economic value placed on her body would not allow her to form bonds of love according to her preference. Rather than surrendering to the demands of Dr. Flint, to become his sexual partner, she chooses a young, successful, unmarried white man as her lover, because she wants to claim the full ownership of her body and the dignity of an autonomous self. Jacobs reasons,

> ‘It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment’ (47).

By choosing Mr. Sands as her lover Jacobs transgresses the conventional sexual morality codes. However, she takes the full responsibility of her actions, ‘I know what I did and I did it with deliberate calculation’ (46). She reasons that, “I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favoured another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in the small way’ (47). At midlife, reflecting on her moral concessions, she writes: “I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (48) Jacobs thus offers a new definition of morality and womanhood based on her own experience as a black female slave. In the words of Angelyn Mitchell,

> ‘Understanding herself in relation to her world and the limitations of that world, Jacobs repeatedly asserts her human rights ... ... in two ways: by reappropriating her sexuality as a weapon of resistance and by repossessing her body from (Dr. Flint’s) control’ (36).

Jacobs is a clear victim of her society’s hierarchies of race and gender. Even Mr. Sands, the white father of Jacobs’s children does not keep his promise of freeing their children. His positions of attorney and, later, United States congressman give him the power to seduce a poor black girl, to become the father of her two children, and eventually instead of freeing them leave the girl child to the care of his cousin to be further exploited, and the boy child to an uncertain future. Class, race, and gender protect both Dr. Flint and Mr. Sands, even from each other. For instance, after Dr. Flint learns that Mr. Sands has fathered Jacobs’s children, he cannot punish Mr. Sands as he could have retaliated against a lower-class white man or against any black man.

The experiences of motherhood makes Jacobs understand her peculiar situation in a better light. After her daughter is born, she concludes that “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 64). Her children now legally belong to Dr. Flint and she gets ready to pay any prize for their freedom. The doctor renews his abuse on Jacobs and attempts to tempt her into submission by offering a home for her and her children ─ clearly indicating that her slave status can be improved in exchange of sexual pleasure. However, Jacobs “had a determined will” and prepared to resist the doctor’s evil motives. In order to frustrate Dr Flint’s new plans to abuse her, and to see her children in safe hands, Jacobs conceals herself in her grandmother’s tiny garret for seven years until she can escape to freedom with the support of a clandestine community of black people.

Experiencing Colour Prejudice

In the North, Jacobs worked as a nursemaid in the house of Mr. Bruce and her relationship with his family became permanent. Sympathetic to Jacobs’s fugitive status Mrs. Bruce played the most significant role in Jacobs’s life when she took the initiative to buy off Jacobs from her mistress. Though some kind of solidarity can be discerned between Jacobs and a few white influential women, her experience of North is mostly rife with racial segregation and humiliation. In chapter 31 and 35, Jacobs narrates how she is made to ride in segregated trains and boats, stays in segregated hotels, and describes racist work rules and places. Jacobs first experienced Northern racism when she was made to travel in a “dirt car”. She had not known that black passengers, denied the right to travel first-class, were relegated to “a large, rough car, with windows on each side, too high for us to look out without standing up,” where drinking and smoking were permitted.(128). However, while travelling with her little charge she enjoys the advantage of the privileged class. She mentions, ‘Being in servitude to the Anglo-Saxon race, I was not put into a “Jim Crow car,” on our way to Rockaway, neither was I invited to ride through the streets on the top of trunks in a truck; but every where I found the same manifestations of that cruel prejudice, which so discourages the feelings, and represses the energies of the colored people.’ (137). When in Rockaway the hotel staff told her she would have to eat in the kitchen, she refused to comply. Mr. Bruce ordered room service, and this went on for a few days when the white staff complained that they would not “wait on negroes,” Jacobs stood her ground, and ultimately she was allowed to eat in the dining room. “Finding I was resolved to stand up for my rights,” she writes, “they concluded to treat me well” (138). In chapter 37, Jacobs describes her visit to England where: “For the first time in my life I was in a place where I was treated according to my deportment, without reference to my complexion” (142). The English people, never having experienced institution of slavery, treat her based on her position, not the colour of her skin. Her history as a slave does not follow her around, during her time in England and because of this, she feels more comfortable with her surroundings.

Incidents record tremendous magnitude of race violence which erupted in Edenton, Jacobs's hometown, as an aftermath to Nat Turner rebellion.[1] In Chapter XII, Jacobs describes how both rich and poor whites equip themselves with muskets and bloodhounds to unleash a reign of terror in South. When night fell, alarmed by the shouts and screams coming from outside, Jacobs peeked under the window curtain and saw that her people were being dragged to the Court House Green to be shot by the armed men. Racial violence against blacks was a tool used by white supremacy to maintain its hegemony and it emerged as the primary qualification for the oppressive master/slave relation and was superimposed upon class and property conditions (Higginbotham, 256-257).

CONCLUSION

Incidents end in freedom. But not in a freedom which Jacobs can triumphantly claim for herself and her children. The freedom she experiences in the North is a compromised one based on racial discrimination and poverty. Without a home of her own and relegated to "Jim Crow" spaces on trains and in hotels, she still apparently awaits full recognition of her equality. Freedom in the North, Jacobs writes, is "a vast improvement in *my* condition," though it says little for the standards of justice in the country as a whole. Jacobs purposefully chooses to end her narrative with "freedom"- which she aligns with economic independence and material space where she can reclaim her personal autonomy. She concludes, "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage."(156) Freedom for her does not end in marriage, as understood by nineteenth century middle class white women as the means of personal fulfilment and the proper end of life. Jacobs thinks of freedom as specific and contextual, rather than abstract and universal.

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[1] Nat Turner was the leader of an 1831 insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, during which several whites were killed. In the aftermath, Turner and his allies were tried and executed, and in a flood of retaliative violence all across the South, dozens, maybe hundreds, of black people were killed.

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