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The Way to Freedom in Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents In The Life of A Slave Girl*

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Abstract

This study is about the tragic life story of a slave, Linda Brent. Linda Brent is the pseudonym that Jacobs used in order not to reveal the real identity of character mentioned in the novel. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the real life story of Jacobs. Linda Brent is born a slave but she is not aware of this fact because of her kind owners. After her mother's death, the sufferings start. She experiences all evils that slavery entails. She is sexually abused, mistreated, assaulted and beaten. When the sufferings get unbearable, she decides to run for freedom. This study focuses on her experiences and adventures on the way to freedom.

Key Words: Slavery, Escape, Freedom, Struggle.

Born to North Carolina slaves in the early 19th century, Harriet Jacobs experienced all of the evils of American slavery. She was abused, mistreated, assaulted, and beaten. She lived with her mother who was owned by the Horniblow family, and by luck she was taught to read and write by Mistress Horniblow. Jacobs' life changed from tolerable suffering to unendurable abuse when she was passed to a new master, James Norcom who subjected her to psychological and sexual abuses of all kinds. At the age of twenty two, the abuse became too much to bear, and Jacobs went into hiding in a small attic in her grandmother's home, where she hid and watched her children and her former life through a small crack in the wall. She eventually went to Philadelphia, and finally made her way to New York where she ultimately secured her freedom. She worked as a nursemaid, and wrote on the side, publishing some of her slavery experiences in the New York Tribune until her serial story was cancelled

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because it was too shocking to some readers. She continued to write and work, and her book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was published in Boston in 1861.

It was not inherent in Harriet Jacob's nature to give up without a fight. Born into slavery, Harriet Jacobs would thwart repeated sexual advancements made by her master for years, then would run away to the North. She would later publish an account of her anguished life in her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This is the fitting life of a woman whose soul burned for freedom, and whose heart was steeled to suffer even death in the pursuit of liberty and equality for African Americans and women.

This paper focuses on the analysis of this novel by Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which is an autobiography. This study argues that this novel is actually beyond the mere story of a woman but a tragic adventure of sufferings and painful struggles experienced to gain freedom.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl carries the reader through the events of one woman, Linda Brent, from birth into slavery, her sufferings, and the manner in which she eventually attains freedom, and hence saves her family from bondage by starting a new life in the North.

The novel, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which consists of thirty nine chapters is a portrayal of slavery, and discusses the topics that were important and controversial in the mid 19th century. The novel is an exploration of slavery as it exists in a corrupted period of history. The main themes of the book are the bond of motherhood and abandonment, the quest for freedom, pain, physical and emotional suffering, community support and family loyalty:

Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrists; could you have heard her heart –rending groans, and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly bleeding for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, Slavery is damnable. (Jacobs, 1973: 22)

The treatment of the slaves is not humane; they are considered as goods to be traded. Other themes include moral conflict between slavery and Christianity, the economy that slavery brings into the financial world, color prejudice and racism:

There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south. If a man goes to the communion table, and pays money in to the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of the blood, he is called religious. (Jacobs, 1973: 76)

Beginning in colonial times and continuing to the end of the civil war, hundreds and possibly thousands of biographies and autobiographies of slaves and former slaves appeared in print; some of them are brief, others are long. In this respect, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a distinguished study which represents the life of slaves in a very detailed approach. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* deals with the torturous treatment of slave men and women, the sexual exploitation of slave women, and it also points to the punishments that slaves have to endure. All these misfortunes

are elaborated on through the real life story of Jacobs. Since Jacobs' purpose is to attract attention to the hard life conditions of slaves, especially women slaves, she used pseudonyms in order not to reveal the true identities of the slaves. Jacobs' pseudonym in the novel is Linda. Linda was born a slave. But because of her kind mistress, and the peaceful and comfortable environment, she did not know she was a slave. After only her mother's death that she found out she was a slave. But it was just the beginning. Life became more miserable after her mistress' death. "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 standards as others" (Jacobs, 1973: 56). She had to face unendurable experiences. She faced various humiliations but she had to struggle for survival.

For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls. (Jacobs, 1973: 54)

The age of fifteen is the time when the sorrow of a slave girl starts to increase. The slaves at this age are mature enough to be abused sexually by their masters. Barbeito stated that,

Harriet Jacobs's ground-breaking slave narrative, which was enlisted in the abolitionist effort, focuses on the sexual exploitation of women during slavery and directly associates the woman slave's struggle for freedom with the freedom to control her own sexual activity. (Barbeito, 1998: 365)

Harriet Jacobs' life story is full of pain. She was born to a slave family. She enjoyed happy family life until the death of her mother. At the age of six, she was taken into the home of her mistress, who taught her to read and to sew. "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away" (Jacobs, 1973: 3). At adolescence, she was sent into the home of Dr. James Norcom, whom she characterizes as the licentious "Dr. Flint", by whom she was subjected to unrelenting sexual harassment. Linda was deeply unhappy, and after her father's death, the Norcom's residence seemed more unbearable than ever. Over the years, Dr. Norcom's sexual abuses and the jealousy of the doctor's wife tormented the little girl. "The wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery are more than I can describe" (Jacobs, 1973: 27).

When Dr. Norcom forbade her from marrying a free black carpenter, Linda entered into a liaison with Samuel Sawyer, an unmarried white lawyer. Their union produced a son and a daughter. Before the birth of her first child, Linda moved to her grandmother's home- where Dr. Norcom continued to stalk her for several years. When Linda refused to obey doctor's sexual desires, she was banished to the plantation of Dr. Norcom's son to work and serve in their house. Gwin suggested that, "In the mistress-slave relationship, the white woman exerted ultimate power, and that power could transform sexual jealousy into intense cruelty" (Gwin, 1985: 39). When she found out that her young children would soon join her, to be brought up as plantation slaves, Linda quickly plotted her escape. Linda ran away and hid first at the houses of friends,

and later in the house of her grandmother, above a storeroom where she hid in a small garret.

Under stifling conditions, with no room to stand or exercise, Linda stayed in that small space for nearly seven years in her self-contained prison until she availed herself with the opportunity to escape.. While Linda was hiding, the children's father, Samuel Sawyer, purchased the children and Linda's brother, John, Sawyer promised Linda that they would be freed. "Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say: 'Your mother is here.'" (Jacobs, 1973: 82).

With the help of a trusted friend, Linda secretly boarded a boat bound for Philadelphia. After disembarking, she traveled by railway to New York, where she met her daughter and her brother John. Linda traveled between New York and Boston, working as a nursemaid for a family. Even though Linda was miles away from the Norcom family, they went on looking for her in order to enslave her.

In 1852, Linda's employer, an anti-slavery sympathizer, arranged for Linda's purchase and freed her. For a short time, Linda and her brother worked in New York in the Anti-Slavery Office and Reading Room, where they became acquainted with the Amy Post and other abolitionists.

In late 1852 and early 1853, the Amy Post suggested that Linda should write her life story. She also suggested Linda to contact with the author Harriet Becher Stowe, who was working on *A Key to Uncle Toms Cabin*. When Stowe wanted to use Jacob's history in her own book, Jacobs decided to write her own account. So Jacobs decided to write her life as an autobiographical work. We see from their works that both Stowe and Jacobs were affected by each other.

The most dreadful part of slavery, to my mind, is its outrages on the feelings and affections, _the separating of families, for example.' (Stowe, 1995: 124)

If I had slaves (as I hope I never shall have), I'd risk their wanting to run away from me or you, either, John. (Stowe, 1995: 82)

My country again! Mr. Wilson, you have a country; but what country have I, or any one like me, born of slave mothers? What laws are there for us? We don't make them, __we don't consent to them, we have nothing to do with them; all they do for us is to crush us, and keep us down. (Stowe, 1995: 112)

In spite of her embarrassment, Jacobs insisted on telling her story honestly and completely, and determined to make white Americans aware of the sexual victimization that slave women commonly faced, and to dramatize the fact that they often had no choice but to surrender their 'virtue'.

Shermen stated that,

'Slavery is terrible for men', Harriet Jacobs wrote in 1861, 'but it is far more terrible for women. Citing this passage from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jean Fagan Yellin argues that Jacob's book was the first book to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery. (Shermen, 1990: 167)

Breaking the taboos to present her sexual history in slavery, Jacobs wrote a woman-centered slave narrative that while emphasizing family relationships and incorporating the forms of the domestic novel, reshaped the genre to encompass female experiences.

Accomando comments on the story saying that :

As a literary text, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has helped to reshape the genre of the slave narrative, previously discussed and defined primarily through male-authored texts. (Accomando, 1998)

In 1861, when Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, where she used the name Linda Brent to disguise herself, the Civil War began. During the 1850s, when Jacobs was writing her book, Slavery was a highly explosive issue, and it was receiving attention all over the United States. Americans argued bitterly on this case. The discussion topic was whether the slavery should be allowed in new territories like California, Kansas, and Nebraska or not. As the war continued, both *A true Tale of Slavery* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* became more and more popular among abolitionists, though both books were more popular in England than United States. The narratives encouraged the war as a fight against slavery.

Until Jacobs started to write *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, many writers had written some works about slaves but no one had written so effectively about the tragedy of slaves. Some critics argued that this work was a product of Jacobs' imagination. Actually they are not wrong in their assertion, because even some characters in the book found it hard to believe that Linda had really hidden in a small garret for seven years. But she used such a great dialect and strong dialogues that it is quite obvious she had written her own real experiences which she faced when she was a slave. Although Jacobs is a slave, and she does not have a good educational background, she has written a highly effective and impressive work. Sorisio suggests that, "Within the scarcity of the slave woman's word, we find Jacobs's text—powerfully written, wonderfully articulated, and enormously complex" (Sorisio, 1996: 1). This strong use of language makes the reader understand more clearly how much slaves, especially the women slaves suffered. Mills claimed that, "*Incidents* fits in with this sort of advocacy" (Mills, 1992: 255). Jacobs wants the novel to receive the attention of the Northern people. "Jacobs believed that a moving representation of her afflictions and her grandmother's dedication to her children would encourage Northern women to "feel right" and to take their abolitionist duty to heart" (Mills, 1992: 255). In this sense *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has a crucial importance. As mentioned previously, Jacobs did not write for the sake of economical concerns. Jacobs's main concern was to pull the attention of her readers to the harsh , brutal, demeaning conditions slaves ,and especially the women slaves, were exposed to during those years,

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