



## REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD, RACISM, AND GENDER OPPRESSION IN JACOBS' INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL

RAJENDRA PRASAD BHATT

Research Scholar, Tribhuvan university  
Kathmandu, Nepal

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RAJENDRA PRASAD BHATT

### ABSTRACT

Harriet Jacobs is a famous name among African American writers. Her works represent the lives of black slaves, especially the lives of black women slaves, who are the victims of hopeless slavery. Motherhood, racism, slavery, and gender oppression are the central area of concern in her narratives. The present paper attempts to explore the experiences of black women especially, the experiences of black mothers in Jacobs' work *Incidents in the life of a slave girl* and their relationship with their children, who are the victims of brutal slavery and racism. It focuses on the struggle of a mother and female slaves' oppression by their white masters as well as mistresses in the Antebellum American South. The emphasis of this study is on Black mothers and the assertive deeds they perform to cope with the challenges of hopeless slavery. It also examines gender disparity concentrating on the various facets of motherhood, displayed by the assertive mother figure Linda, who plays the roles of a life giver, nurturer, protector, and a path finder for her children in the narrative.

**Key Words:** Motherhood, Slavery, Racism, oppression, Victims.

### Introduction

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is Jacobs' multilayered slave narrative. It depicts many serious issues such as mother's innate role in the life of her children, violent behavior of white middle class men and women towards slaves, gender and race conventions in peculiar institution of slavery, and the protagonist's struggle of gaining true womanhood. Linda Brent is the pseudonym that Jacobs uses to hide her real identity. The protagonist Linda Brent, who born a slave, is unaware of this fact because of her kind owners. After her mother's death, she faces difficult problems. 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. The focus of this work is on her experiences and adventures on the way to freedom. It exposes a detailed description of a slave's struggles with abuse, sexual harassment, and her role as a woman and mother.

### Analysis

Jacobs delineates the female experience of slavery primarily through images of motherhood. Linda Brent and Aunt Martha are the prominent mother figures. They bear painful experiences and negotiate skillfully. Through a consensual sexual relationship with a white man, Linda manages to bring freedom for herself and her children. Linda spends miserable time at Dr. Flint's house. The events at Flint's household involving Linda have not

gone unnoticed for the town members. This also sparks the attention of Mr. Sands, who is actually a friend of Linda's grandmother, Aunt Martha. Linda believes that Dr. Flint will sell her, if he knows that she favors another white man. As she narrates, "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. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend Mr. Sands, would buy me" (61). Using her strategies, she makes a desperate attempt to escape from Dr. Flint by making relation with Mr. Sands. Her plan is to confirm Dr. Flint with the news that she has chosen another white man over him, thereby hopefully ending his interest in her. Candice Pipes in his work "It's Time To Tell: Abuse, Resistance, and Recovery in Black Women's Literature" writes that Linda wants to escape from her master's sexual violation so she "chooses to have sex with a kinder, less predatory white man ..., as an act of agency and self-protection" (26). It is also an act to prevent further suffering of her. The plan Linda makes to escape from Dr. Flint makes her a strategic mother.

Linda loves her children from the core of her heart. Every moment she thinks about their safety. When she gets informed that her newborn is a girl, she becomes upset. As she says, "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women"(86). Linda knows that slavery is terrible for men but it is far more terrible for women. It brings double oppression for them. Therefore, she makes a secret plan to save her children from the destructive effects of slavery.

To save herself and her children from the cruel slave owners, she stays in a small room at the top of her grandmother's house for seven years. As she describes, "The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air, and she continues to describe the attic room as following, 'The air was stifling; the darkness total" (128). It is her deep attachment to her children that makes her stay in an inconvenient place for a longer period of time. Like a caring mother, Linda knows

her presence is essential for the physical and emotional well being of her children. Adrienne Rich expresses the view that the human species are more dependent on mother care during infancy than any other species of living creatures. In her work *Of Women Born* she writes, "The human species is dependent on maternal care in infancy much longer than any other animal species" (101). Linda understands it so she faces the unbearable conditions every day. She is well aware with the responsibilities of a mother so she copes with all these challenges. This all brings happiness and satisfaction for herself and her children. As she says, "At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to tell them I was there!" (129). She feels satisfied when she sees and hears her children playing happily in care of her grandmother Aunt Martha.

Linda is a sacrificing mother. She sacrifices her comfort and happiness for the sake of her children's safety. Before Linda sees an opportunity to escape, she hides herself for seven years in such a tiny hole as if she is a prisoner. Angelita Reyes in her book *Mothering Across Cultures* opines, "...in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs (Linda Brent) postpones her actual escape from the south for seven years because of her children. Her role as a mother at that time is more important than escape"(17). She no longer wants to submit herself to Dr. Flint and does not want to abandon her family. As she says, "I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow" (128). This shows the devotion Linda has to her children and family. To keep her children safe from their slave master and to keep her family together, she sacrifices her comfort and happiness by hiding out in a crawlspace.

Motherhood is an important aspect of the female slaves' experience which this narrative reveals explicitly. It exposes that slavery limits the role of the slave mother and affects the lives of her children. The slave mother has to rely on the extended family, and in some cases, the community

as it happens in the case of Linda. Because of the threat of sexual exploitation and further becoming a commodity, Linda refuses to allow herself to become a producer for the slave market, as slave women do. Joanne Braxton in her work *Black Women Writing Autobiography* argues that slave women are "objects of sexual desire" as well as "profitable commodities . . . considered valuable only when increasing their owner's stock" (20). As a result of her refusal to assume this role, Linda is forced into hiding thus, limiting her role as mother allowing Aunt Martha, her grandmother, to assume the role of big mama.

Like grandmothers in modern African-American culture, Aunt Martha in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* serves as a big mama. She is a care taker, guide, guardian, and future shaper of her children and grand children. Gloria Thomas Pillow asserts that Linda gets parental care from her grandmother. In her work *Mother-love in Shades of Black* she writes, "Without either parents, Brent finds sanctuary with her maternal grandmother" (14). Aunt Martha is a strong and courageous mother figure. She serves Linda and her children as a mother in absence of their parents. Aunt Martha prepares Linda for the world following her mother's death and Linda's children for her absence. She plays a crucial role in the family as surrogate mothers, including cooking, housekeeping and disciplining. More importantly, she is the link between the generations helping to instill values and impart history to the younger generation. Aunt Martha is a representative of the grandmother who is to Linda's children what she was to Linda following her mother's death. She is a disciplinarian and historian.

The circumstances in which Linda becomes a mother offer the reader the first hint of the perversion of motherhood. It also emphasizes that for the female slave the journey to motherhood is complex from the very moment of her baby's conception. Linda enters womanhood unwillingly. Such violation leaves her in desperate state of mind. As she says:

If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could

have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I want to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair. (60)

It is very difficult for slaves like Linda to make any decision about their future because they are the property of their masters. Linda wants to marry and have a family but her prospects have been ruined by slavery. She desires to keep herself chaste and preserve her self-dignity so she struggles all over her life.

Linda wants to preserve her self-respect that is the reason she chooses Mr. Sands as the father of her children. She believes that Mr. Sands, a free man, will free their offspring from the shackles of slavery. Later Linda realizes that the status of a child is derived from its mother. Pillow explains this fact saying that in slavery the child follows the condition of the mother. In her work *Mother-love in Shades of Black* she writes:

The powerful and profoundly perverted institution of slavery defined life for the Africans brought to America and for their descendants. One of its basic tenets was that "the child shall follow the condition of the mother", which insured that, through the matrilineal line, their debased status would continue into perpetuity, providing an infinite supply of free labor for the developing new territory. (10-11).

This principle is widely adopted into the laws of slavery in the United States. Therefore, the children of Linda and Mr. Sands are seen as mixed-race slaves. Even then Linda makes constant efforts to save them from the devastating effects of slavery.

Linda is a strategic mother. Though she feels extremely bad about her pregnancy because she knows slavery is no way good for herself and her children, she accepts it. She believes having children and an illegitimate relationship will anger Flint so much that he will want to get rid of her by selling her to Mr. Sands, but her plan fails. Instead, Flint demands Linda to stop seeing Mr. Sands ever again, because he is a white man. As he says, "On one condition I will forgive your insolence and crime. You must hence forth have no communication of any kind with the father of your child" (66). Slavery constantly hunts Linda. In this way Linda becomes an epitome because she represents the struggle for freedom, the preservation of family, and the plight of black African American woman. Henry Louis Gates in his work *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* states that Linda Brent is an icon because she "represents the struggle for freedom, the preservation of family and the plight of black African American women"(279).

Finally, a network of friends, family members, and abolitionists helps Linda escape to New York. At this point Mrs. Bruce, a former New York employee's daughter, meets her and secretly arranges to buy the freedom for Linda and her kids. It brings decades of bondage over for Linda's family. Linda is free at last. She is unconditionally grateful to Mrs. Bruce and all those who helped her to get through all the obstacles. Linda is surprisingly very happy. Due to her persistent struggle, eventually, she becomes able to save her children from the devastating effects of slavery. Jean Fagan Yellin in her work "Harriette Ann Jacobs 1813–1897" writes that Jacobs's *Incidents* is a "first-person tale of a heroic mother who rescues her children from slavery"(2030). Yellin further states that "it presents a brave protagonist and her devotion to family relationships, her quest for freedom and independence, which represents the quest of the entire black community, as well" (2030). The novel presents a mother Linda's struggle and devotion to protect her family.

Racial discrimination is another clearly visible aspect in the narrative. Linda, a happy child, living with her parents faces a lot of problems in her life because of her color. When she is six, her

mother passes away and Linda has to live with her mother's mistress Ruth Nash. The new mistress treats her as her own child. Linda enjoys good time with her. As she says, "When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump; and away I bounded, together berries or flowers to decorate her room. Those were happy days—too happy to last"(9). Her new mistress Mrs. Ruth Nash teaches her to read, write, and sew. As she says, "While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory" (10). This is remarkable, because slaves generally are not allowed to read or write, as it is seen as a form of freedom. Wilma A. Dunaway, a sociologist believes that slave owners are always suspicious to their slaves' activities. In her work *Slavery in the American Mountain South* writes, "Slave-owners afraid that slaves might spread messages to slaves on other plantations and start a revolt against their masters" (227). In addition, slaves are considered property and therefore are not allowed to enjoy the same rights as other human beings, such as the right to marry.

When Linda turns twelve, Nash dies and her niece Emily Flint becomes Linda's new legal master. After her mistress' demise, twelve-year-old Linda goes to work in a new family where she faces various difficult problems. She gets tortured by the new family. Emily Flint's father Dr. Flint, a doctor by profession, is cruel, vicious, and careless. As she narrates, "The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence, . . . cramming it down her throat till she choked" (15). Flint takes pleasure in having absolute power, forcing his will on his servants. He tortures them for no reason because they are black. Like her husband, Mrs. Flint is also mean and vengeful and often takes advantage of her dominance. She spits in the pans to prevent the cook and the other slaves from eating the leftovers.

Linda also gets punished when she wears a new pair of shoes. Mrs. Flint asks her not to wear her new shoes again and orders her to go on an errand barefoot, in the snow. As she narrates:

I remember the first time I was punished. It was in the month of February. My grandmother had taken my old shoes, and replaced them with a new pair. I needed them; for several inches of snow had fallen, and it still continued to fall. When I walked through Mrs. Flint's room, their creaking granted harshly on her refined nerves. She called me to her, and asked what I had about me that made such a horrid noise. I told her it was my new shoes. "Take them off," said she; "and if you put them on again, I'll throw them into the fire."

I took them off and my stockings also. She then sent me a long distance, on an errand. As I went through the snow, my bare foot tingled. That night I was very hoarse; and I went to bed thinking that next day would find me sick, perhaps dead. (21-22)

Linda can remember the cruelty of her mistress. She remembers the time when she is punished by her new mistress Mrs. Flint for no fault. She asks her to walk on snow bare foot which is a very terrible and awesome task for her. She obeys the command of her cruel mistress and the same night she gets sick. The punishments that blacks get at white families are inexpressible.

In portraying the master-slave relationship, Jacobs shows the dehumanizing effect of slavery on both slave and master; the slave due to his being oppressed, the master due to his power to oppress. Once at Mr. Flint's plantation, when the slaves are being distributed their weekly food allowance, Mrs. Flint prevents a very old slave from getting his food, because she thinks him useless. As the narrative reveals, "he was too old to have any allowance; that when niggers were too old to work, they ought to be fed on grass" (104). Mrs. Flint, the second wife of Linda's oppressor Dr. Flint, is a heartless woman. She is no less of an oppressor than her husband. Linda tells in her usual ironic tone that she "did not mind sitting in an easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash" (18). Mrs. Flint also spits in the kettles and the pans that have been used by her maid to cook the Sunday lunch. She also knows exactly how much

food slaves would need to just sustain themselves so, she does not give them even an ounce more than they are permitted.

Gender oppression is one more aspect explicitly revealed in the novel. When Linda turns fifteen, her master Dr. Flint begins to whisper vulgar words into her ear. As she says, "But I now entered on my fifteen year- a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt" (30). Linda understands the intention of her lascivious master. She hates such words but keeps herself indifferent. She understands if she shows any reaction it might have harmful consequences.

Linda understands his intentions but does not oppose him, as she fears of the possible consequences. Flint frequently tortures her and reminds her that she is his property. As she narrates, "He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things" (30). Flint also sends notes to Linda. Mrs. Flint senses something is going on between her husband and Linda, which further gives rise to her feelings of jealousy. Minrose C. Gwin in her work "Green-Eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy" opines that, "In the mistress-slave relationship, the white woman exerted ultimate power, and that power could transform sexual jealousy into intense cruelty" (39). Mrs. Flint often has heated arguments about Linda with Dr. Flint because she believes Linda is not punished enough. As she narrates, "I had entered my sixteenth year and every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint. Angry words frequently passed between her and her husband. He had never punished me himself, and he would not allow anybody to punish me" (35). Linda knows the reason behind their quarrel but pretends as if she is unaware. Besides the constant risk of sexual abuse and bodily threats, Linda also has to deal with jealous mistresses.

When Linda grows up, Dr. Flint forces her to have a sexual relationship with him. To fulfill his intention, he builds a secret house for Linda in a hidden place. As she narrates, "He told me that he

was going to built a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town" (59). However, Linda finds ways to escape his attentions and thus gets into a relationship with Mr. Sands, a free white lawyer, hoping that this will hold back Flint. Grace McEntee in his work "The Ethos of Motherhood" Writes that Linda decides to become a mother "not because motherhood is "the most important symbol of womanhood" but for the protection against rape it could give her" (211). This all shows that Linda uses various strategies and takes vital decisions in her life to save herself from racial and gender oppression. Linda's declaration not to become a concubine in the slave system acts as a turning point in the narrative. She oversteps Dr. Flint and risks compromising her reputation by entering a sexual relationship, with Mr. Sands, in hope of her future children's safety and freedom. bell hooks in her work *Ain't I a Woman* describes it as "black women who resisted sexual exploitation directly challenged the system" (27). In doing so, Linda not only avoids sexual abuse, she also challenges the system of slavery which might create unexpected consequences for her.

When Linda is nineteen, she gets pregnant second time. After Flint is informed of her second pregnancy, he gets infuriated and cuts off all her hair. As she states:

When Dr. Flint learned that I was again to be a mother, he was exasperated beyond measure. He rushed from the house, and returned with a pair of shears. I had a fine head of hair; and he often railed about my pride of arranging it nicely. He cut every hair close to my head, storming and swearing all the time. I replied to some of his abuse, and he struck me. (86)

Dr. Flint cannot tolerate the message of her second pregnancy. He is infuriated by the message. He abuses her, beats her, and cuts off all her hair to demoralize her. It shows how pathetic the lives of black women are in a racist society. They have no rights even they cannot conceive a baby against their masters will. Flint also gives Linda an ultimatum; either be his mistress or get sent off to his son's plantation, where she will have to endure

hard labor. Despite Flint's threats Linda chooses to go to the plantation.

Finally Linda flees from the plantation and goes into hiding. Dr. Flint is destined to find her and get her back. One of his strategies is throwing her brother and her children in jail, but Linda keeps quiet about where she is. In the meantime, a speculator, who secretly represents Mr. Sands, buys Linda's children and Mr. Sands promises Linda that they will be free. Dr. Flint agrees to sell them, because earning money from it would be better than the risk of them escaping too, as he believes that Linda has fled to the North. However, once he finds out it is Mr. Sands who now owns the children, Dr. Flint is outraged. As she narrates, "Dr. Flint went to my grandmother's to ascertain who was the owner of my children, and she informed him" (122). For Linda, this act of her children being freed, brings her real happiness, something she has not experienced since her childhood.

### **Conclusion**

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* focuses on a slave woman's desire to control her body and care for her children. It comments on the female slave's experience and exposes the difficulties that the slave mother faces in trying to mother her children. Linda is forced to enter hiding in the crawl space above her grandmother's cabin. Slavery creates a barrier for the slave mothers. Caroline Levander believes that Jacobs performs her motherly responsibilities in spite of the various barriers of slavery. In her work "Following the Condition of the Mother" she asserts that "Jacobs is able to negotiate her own motherhood within the confines of the slave system" (33). Linda loves her children so she does not allow slavery to blunt and destroy her natural affection for them. Every moment her separation intensifies the desire for her and her children's freedom. Her grandmother Aunt Martha assists her at every step. The role of the grandmother in Linda's life is crucial. The grandmother is free and is motherly. She is taking on a paternal role. Linda's parents are no more so her grandmother is the lone elderly figure in her life. She is a good caretaker and mentor for her. Though Linda lacks strong male figures in her life, the

grandmother takes responsibility for keeping an eye over her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She is really the glue that is keeping the family together.

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