

Tribhuvan University

Narrating the Historicity in Harriet's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Department of English, Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English

by

Devi Pokharel

Registration No. 9-2-21-284-2009

Exam Roll No. 400275

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis/research/term paper entitled.

"Narrating the Historicity in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*"

is my own original work carried out as Master's student at the Department of English at Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus except to the extent that assistance from others in the thesis/research/term paper's design and conception or in presentation style, and linguistic expression are duly acknowledged.

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Devi Pokharel

Student's name

September 2017

Date

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Humanities

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Narrating The Historicity in Harriet's *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*" submitted to the Department of English, Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Motikala Subba Dewan

Supervisor

Pradip Sharma

External Examiner

Pradip Sharma

Head, Department of English

Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus

Date: _____

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Devi Pokharel

Abstract

This research writing "Narrating the Historicity in Harriet's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" focuses on the history of America. In 1861, over 3 million African American were slaves in the south. This research work will attempt to analyze how a minor age black girl is exploited in African American society. In this study, the novel is analyzed through the perspective of Afro American feminism or feminism. The main issue in this writing is the prejudice of white men and their inhuman behaviour toward black. In the novel Linda uses her sexuality to liberate from the exploitation and separate from Flint. An autobiographical novel is similar with the life events of the writer Harriet Jacob. As in past, black African Americans worked for white people and received no money for their works which makes the term slavery clear. Harriet Jacobs's autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), is one of the widely-read female antebellum slave narratives.

There were few slave rebellions against slavery including Nat Turner as well as Harriet Jacobs herself but all the rebellions failed. In recounting her life experiences before she was freed, Jacobs offers her contemporary readers a startlingly realistic portrayal of her sexual history she has undergone during her slavery. Linda the main character of the novel narrates her autobiography which is concentrated with the sexual exploitation. The main concern of this research is abuse of the white toward the African American girl and her struggle for liberation. Harriet is both sexually and physically exploited from the white men. In America around 1840s and 1850s people in the north and south didn't like each other due to the issues of slavery. Frederick Douglass was famous abolitionists who was former slave at that time.

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Narrating the Historicity in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

This research work focuses on Linda, the main character of the novel who narrates her life story which is full of sexual exploitation. The main concern of this research is to show how an African American girl is exploited by white male and how she struggles for liberation. This writing tries to excavate the protagonist's aspiration for getting social identity despite her gender and economic class including how slaves of America rebel against slavery.

The prejudice of white men and their inhuman behaviour toward black is guided by sex and colour which Harriet highlights in this writing which many black African American has faced. She is both sexually and physically exploited from the white men. It does not only document the sexual abuse and suffering, but also explain how she has devised a way to use her position as a means of resistance. Further her fighting back and tolerance both justify her identity.

Harriet Jacobs was born into slavery in 1813 near Edenton, North Carolina. She enjoyed a relatively happy family life until she was six years old, when her mother died. Jacobs's mistress, Margaret Horniblow, took her in and cared for her, teaching her to read, write, and sew. When Horniblow died, she willed the twelve-years-old Jacobs to her niece, and Jacobs's life soon took a dramatic turn for the worse. Her new mistress's father, Dr. James Norcom ("Dr. Flint" in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), subjected Jacobs to aggressive and unrelenting sexual harassment.

At age sixteen, afraid that Norcom would eventually rape her, Jacobs began a relationship with a white neighbour, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer ("Mr. Sands" in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), and with him she had two children while still in her teens. Instead of discouraging Norcom, Jacobs's affair only enraged him. In 1835, he sent her away to a life of hard labor on a plantation he owned, also threatening to break in her young children as field hands.

Jacobs soon ran away from the plantation and spent almost seven years hiding in a tiny attic crawl space in her grandmother's house. She was unable to sit or stand, and she eventually became permanently physically disabled. In 1842, Jacobs escaped to New York and found work as a nanny in the household of a prominent abolitionist writer, Nathaniel Parker Willis.

She was eventually reunited with her children and later joined the antislavery movement. In 1861, the year the Civil War began, Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, under the pseudonym Linda Brent. During the 1850s, when Jacobs was writing her book, slavery was a highly explosive issue in the rapidly expanding United States. Americans argued bitterly over whether or not slavery should be allowed in new territories like California, Kansas, and Nebraska.

The Compromise of 1850 sought to hold the Union together by designating California a free state, but it also enacted the Fugitive Slave Act, which facilitated the recapture of runaway slaves. The solution was only temporary, and the divisions that led to the Civil War continued to deepen. In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act led to bloody confrontations between pro- and

anti-slavery settlers in those territories. In response to these conflicts, the Underground Railroad became more active and abolitionists increased their propaganda efforts, in which slave narratives such as *Incidents* played a crucial part.

Slave narratives were the dominant literary mode in early African-American literature. Thousands of accounts, some legitimate and some the fictional creations of white abolitionists, were published in the years between 1820 and the Civil War. These were political as well as literary documents, used to promote the antislavery cause and to answer pro-slavery claims that slaves were happy and well-treated. Most slave narratives feature graphic descriptions of the violent whippings and severe deprivation inflicted on slaves, attempting to appeal to the emotions and conscience of white readers.

Some of the most famous narratives, such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, also tell the inspiring story of a brutalized slave's journey toward self-definition and self-assertion. Like other slave narratives, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* chronicles the abuses of slavery, the slave's struggle for self-definition and self-respect, and the harrowing details of a dangerous escape.

However, Jacobs's story also emphasizes the special problems faced by female slaves, particularly sexual abuse and the anguish of slave mothers who are separated from their children. Because of its unique point of view, and because of the skilled, novelistic way Jacobs tells her tale, the book has become one of the most celebrated slave narratives of all time.

Critics have compared the style and structure of *Incidents* to the hugely popular "sentimental novels" of the nineteenth century, many of which tell the story of a young girl fighting to protect her virtue from a sexually aggressive man. Jacobs knew that her contemporaries would see her not as a virtuous woman but as a fallen one and would be shocked by her relationship with Sawyer and the illegitimate children it produced. In spite of her embarrassment, Jacobs insisted on telling her story honestly and completely, 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."

During the 1850s, when Jacobs was writing her book, slavery was a highly explosive issue in the rapidly expanding United States. Americans argued bitterly over whether or not slavery should be allowed in new territories like California, Kansas, and Nebraska. The Compromise of 1850 sought to hold the Union together by designating California a free state, but it also enacted the Fugitive Slave Act, which facilitated the recapture of runaway slaves. The solution was only temporary, and the divisions that led to the Civil War continued to deepen. In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act led to bloody confrontations between pro- and anti-slavery settlers in those territories.

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When it was published, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was well-received and accepted as a legitimate documentation of the horrors of slavery. For most of the twentieth century, however, scholars believed the book to be a fictional tale written to further the abolitionist cause, and that "Linda Brent," its protagonist, had never really existed. They speculated that Lydia Maria Child, who was a successful novelist as well as an activist, must have been the memoir's real author. Not until the 1980s, when the critic Jean Fagan Yellin

discovered a cache of letters from Harriet Jacobs to Lydia Maria Child, did Jacobs again receive credit for her work. Yellin went on to research Jacobs's life and verify that the events of *Incidents* are true and accurate.

After writing her book, Jacobs continued to work to help those she had left behind in slavery. During and after the Civil War, she aided black refugees behind Union lines and nursed African-American soldiers. After the war, she returned to the South and worked for many years to help freed slaves, founding two free schools for blacks and traveling to England to raise money for the freedmen. Jacobs died in Washington, D.C., in 1897.

The main issue of this research is to analyze the abuse of African American girl by white Americans and her struggle for liberation in the novel Harriet's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Linda Under Veil of Afro American Feminism

In any study about the history of America, one is certain to be introduced to the subject of slavery and varying accounts of the horrifying tales associated with it. The reader of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is taken on a personal odyssey through this most horrific and uncivilized period of American history from the viewpoint of a female slave. What makes *Incidents in the Life of a slave Girl* exceptional to any other slave narrative is that, with the hesitant and apologetic voice of an enslaved black American woman, the story expressly deals with racism, as well as sexism. Both acts are manipulated through the mechanics of "legal slavery."The

resulting consequences from this demoralized institution have continued to divide the black and white races in America, even to this day.

All incidents related in the story of Harriet Jacobs's life seem to touch on three recurring themes: the struggle for freedom, the preservation of family, and the plight of black American women. It is interesting to note that the author refers to herself as a "slave girl," although the book was written when she was a forty-year-old woman. And, as if to distance herself from the emotional ties to the story she is about to tell, Harriet chooses to become a spectator in her own life, casting the persona "Linda Brent" in the starring role. The issues of freedom versus slavery, white versus black, and men versus women are interwoven within the fabric of American society during the 1800s—the period in which Harriet lived.

These issues become the target of her struggle for self-identity, self-preservation, and freedom. She sought release from a cruel, sadistic white plantation owner; she longed for the same dignities afforded other American citizens; and she dreamed of life as a woman who could love and be loved by the man of her choice, as well as being a mother who could raise her children in a secure and caring environment. The uniqueness of this narrative is that Harriet Jacobs, by her own account, was never brutalized physically in the manner that is commonly portrayed in stories about life as a slave. This in itself could have hindered her from seeking freedom at such a high cost—loss of her life, or loss of her children's lives. She did experience some "blows," which were mild when considering the standards of the life-threatening beatings received by slaves under similar circumstances.

Harriet muses that she did not know she was a slave until she was six years old. The life of Harriet Jacobs as narrated in the person of "Linda Brent" at that point had been as idyllic as any other child's, regardless of race or social standing. It is vitally important for the reader to understand the bond between Harriet and her relatives, and to recognize that her family unit was intact up until the time of her mother's death. Harriet's grandmother, who was a respected woman in the black and white communities, made a modest living by baking goods for the townspeople. Although she was eventually successful in using her income to secure the freedom of her son, Philip, she was unable to purchase her own freedom.

Instead, at the age of fifty, she became a free woman due to the kindness of an elderly white woman, who could neither read nor write her own name to the bill of sale—the official mark of a "cross" freed Harriet's grandmother. Harriet's father was a skilled carpenter who was treated as a free man and was given the "privilege" of paying his master for the "right" to earn his own income. This payment totaled approximately half of his yearly earnings. Her father made many attempts to pay for his family's freedom, but as a slave, he was limited in his purchasing power. While her mother was alive, Harriet's family maintained the appearance of a traditional patriarchal household, but after her death, the father virtually disappeared from his children's lives as they were entrusted to the white mistress of the house.

Harriet's father was actually more than capable of caring for his own children after the mother died. However, as a slave, he was rendered powerless in their upbringing. It was almost as if his children became "wards of the state." Harriet and her brother were moved into the household of the

master and mistress after the mother's death, thus making it virtually impossible for the father to participate in the rearing of his own children. He did attempt to exercise parental guardianship on whatever occasion and to the best extent possible. An incident arose that involved the matter of his son, William, and William's attitude toward slavery.

Although the death of Harriet's mother brought about a change in the family's living arrangements, Harriet lived a fairly decent life for the next few years, as her mistress treated her as her own, teaching her to read, spell, and sew. However, when she reached her twelfth birthday, the bondage of slavery became a reality, as her kindhearted benefactor succumbed to death. Ironically, the blessing of being owned by a "kind" mistress or master became an unrelenting curse that formed Harriet's view of herself and all human beings in the eyes of God. For, by having the knowledge of the letters, she was able to read the disciplines set out in the Bible, the same book that shaped the moral fiber of the Christian slave owners. How could slavery be justified, when God's Word admonished, "Love thy neighbor as thyself"? Of course, slaves were not viewed as human beings; therefore the observance of Christian principles was not binding upon the "kind" white slave owners. This agonizing paradox wreaked havoc with Harriet's soul as she tried unrelentingly to cling to the high moral standards of purity and chastity. This struggle imminently manifested itself under the brutal harassment received from her new master—Dr. Flint.

This is a story of the struggles endured by one woman as a slave, but it also reveals the mysteries of the human spirit and inspirationally redefines faith. It is a story of a woman whose life can be paralleled to that of so many

in this twentieth century: women who were too afraid to leave an abusive mate now finding the courage to say "no more": women whose financial limitations were traditionally bound by the husbands incomes, now becoming entrepreneurs and decision makers in the economic arena; grandmothers raising the children of their children for the sake of future generations. The name of Harriet Jacobs is not one that comes readily to mind when exploring heroism of the nineteenth century—or any century, for that matter. But her actions speak encouragingly to any who have been faced with insurmountable problems, with seemingly no way out. There is always a way out. It is up to us to choose the best method of escape.

Many critics have compared the style and structure of *Incidents* to the hugely popular "sentimental novels" of the nineteenth century, many of which tell the story of a young girl fighting to protect her virtue from a sexually aggressive man. Jacobs knew that her contemporaries would see her not as a virtuous woman but as a fallen one and would be shocked by her relationship with Sawyer and the illegitimate children it produced. In spite of her embarrassment, Jacobs insisted on telling her story honestly and completely, 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." When it was published, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was well-received and accepted as a legitimate documentation of the horrors of slavery.

Since , *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has been published many critics and writers write about the novel. Jean. F. Yellin states :

Jacobs's slave narrative is similar to other narratives in its story of struggle, survival, and ultimately freedom. She also reworks the male-centered slave narrative genre to accommodate issues of motherhood and sexuality. By confronting directly the cruel realities that plagued black women in the nineteenth century, Jacobs's work occupies a significant place in American literary tradition. (12)

These lines reflect the reality of racial struggle and its hidden politics which Jacob presented in her novel through the narratives of slave girls. Born into slavery, Harriet Jacobs would thwart repeated sexual advancements made by her master for years, then 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 novel covers the experiences of a slave girl whose activities resist the sexual politics of male ideology. Alice Walker States:

It is critical to see the hidden messages and feminist position Harriet takes in her narrative to understand how the critique of slavery worked. Harriet's critique on slavery was not only an account of her life it was a plea to all women to make a stand. It was also helpful in understanding the author to know slightly more about her family and reemphasize the major events in her life. Additionally this source was an extra tool to see where Harriet creates her identity from and visualize the setting in which Harriet hides for seven long years. (32)

The above lines compare Jacobs's life with her novel character Linda's life. Both her character and she face the same problems in their life. Jacobs's writing touches issues of the black rights movement which has been started in the mid of the nineteenth century on the periphery of the northern part of the USA, mainly in New York and Washington. She artistically writes many stories and novels concerned with the issues of racism and feminism. Ruth, Sheila states:

Harriet Jacobs wanted to tell her story, but knew she lacked the skills to write the story herself. She had learned to read while young and enslaved, but, at the time of her escape to the North in 1842, she was not a proficient writer. She worked at it, though, in part by writing letters that were published by the *New York Tribune*, and with the help of her friend, Amy Post. Her writing skills improved, and by 1858, she had finished the manuscript of her book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. (23)

Sheila focuses on the historical background of Harriet's writings. Harriet concentrated her writing on the exploitation of white people by the black. In this context, Dalton examines, "Tensions between what Jacobs literally states and metaphorically suggests about sexual exploitation, pointing to the parallels between the way in which Jacobs, through Linda Brent, describes her sexual exploitation and twentieth-century studies on the effects of molestation on girls and women" (44). In the same way, Helen Mary explores the influence of the nineteenth-century conception of "true womanhood" on *Incidents* and contends that Jacobs used the events of her life to "critique conventional standards of female behavior and to question their relevance and applicability

to the experience of black women"(5). The story now takes on some qualities of a conventional seduction novel. Scott. S. Daniel states that:

A sentimental story of innocence pursued. Linda is not physically coerced, but she is, from puberty onward, relentlessly harassed by Flint, her master until Emily's majority. The language and plot of these sections led some critics, such as John Blassingame, to suspect that Jacobs's white editor, Lydia Maria Child influenced the text. Yellin's research, however, has shown that Jacobs herself was responsible for the text. (34)

While Linda's awareness of slavery begins at age six, with her mother's death, her moral education begins at twelve, with the death of her mistress. F. Cott Nancy highlights, She is not freed as she had come to expect but is "bequeathed" to her mistress's little niece, Emily Flint."This shock destroys whatever illusions Linda might have had about her actual condition. Not long after this first "fall," Emily's father, Dr. Flint, begins to make sexual advances" (222). While the hesitations and expressions of shame associated with Linda's sexual history may be explained by her need to appease white middle-class readers, I believe they also result from Linda's own education in genteel codes of female behavior. Blassingame John indicates, Even if he had permitted it, the marriage would have had no legal existence because of her status as a slave. In Samuel Richardson's classic seduction novel Pamela, the chaste heroine triumphs when her employer and would-be seducer finally proposes marriage. But, as critic Valerie Smith points out, " The happy endings of

sentimental novels do not apply to a young slave girl's story" (131). As the text clearly demonstrates, Linda has no ideology or language to justify her choice. After her escape she tells the people sheltering her that she is a mother but not a wife. Although they understand, they caution her against such honesty in the future; it could expose her to contempt. She herself as the black women so, she has self experience of being a black woman. In this context, she herself writes:

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. (3)

Harriet Jacobs doesn't have nature to give up without a fight. She was born into slavery and thwart repeated sexual advancements made by her master for years and later on run away to the North. Afterwards she publish an account of her anguished life in her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. She thought that many will blame her for presenting these pages to the public.

Sexuality and Self Ownership for the Slave and Object Property for the Master

Jacobs takes great pains to prove that there can be no "good" slave masters. She argues that slavery destroys the morality of slave holders, almost without exception. Slave holders such as Dr. Flint become inhumane monsters. With no legal checks on their behavior, they inflict every conceivable kind of torture on their servants. Most slave masters view slaves as little more than animals or objects, never acknowledging their humanity. But even "kindly" slave holders, such as Mr. Sands, show themselves capable of betraying their slaves when it is convenient or profitable.

Mr. Sands promises to free his slave children and may even intend to do so at first. However, in the slave system, such good intentions are easily forgotten. If a slave owner such as Mr. Sands encounters financial problems, he will likely be tempted to sell his own children to get himself out of trouble. Thus, slavery distorts even the most basic emotional instinct: the love of a parent for a child. Jean Fagan Yellin one of the critics says that Jacobs slave narrative is similar to other narratives in the story of struggle.

"Reader it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage" (67). With these words, Harriet Jacobs, speaking through her narrator, Linda Brent, reveals her reasons for deciding to make her personal story of enslavement, degradation, and sexual exploitation public. Although generally ignored by critics, who often dismissed Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* as a fictionalized account of slavery, the work is heralded today as the first book-length narrative by an ex-slave that reveals the unique brutalities inflicted on enslaved women.

As such, it is often cited as the counterpart to the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself. First published in 1861 in United States, Incidents was "discovered" in the 1970s and reprinted in 1973 and 1987. Since then, several editions of Incidents have been published. The most complete and comprehensive version of the narrative is the 1987 Harvard University Press edition, edited by Jacobs' biographer, Jean Fagan Yellin, a professor at New York's Pace University.

In addition to her efforts to establish the authenticity of Jacobs' narrative, Yellin also brought Incidents to the attention of readers, scholars, and critics who had long ignored or dismissed the work because it failed to meet the standards of the male slave narrative, as defined by male critics such as Robert Stepto and James Olney. Scholars who dismissed the work as a fictional slave narrative often pointed out issues such as the following.

Unlike conventional slave narratives, Incidents does not acknowledge Harriet Jacobs as its author. Instead, the narrative was published under the pseudonym "Linda Brent." The narrative's formal, sometimes melodramatic style that emulates the style of 19th century romantic novels seemed totally inappropriate for its "delicate" subject matter: the sexual abuse of enslaved black women.

Its stranger-than-fiction account of a woman who spends seven years hiding in her grandmother's attic to escape her master's insatiable lust seemed too fantastic to be believed. The primary goal of slave narratives was to arouse sympathy among whites and gain their support for the anti-slavery movement led by abolitionists. Because the publication of Incidents coincided with the

beginning of the Civil War, it was seen as being published too late to have any social or political impact.

The majority of slave narratives were written by men who documented their daring escapes and heroic actions, many of whom — such as Frederick Douglass — went on to become spokespersons or political leaders. In contrast, Jacobs' story — which focused primarily on her family — was viewed as less important than the stories of her male counterparts.

Male narratives generally followed a strictly chronological format, focusing on the narrator's life as he relates the story of his journey from slavery to freedom. In contrast, Jacobs' narrative focuses on "incidents" in her life. Moreover, instead of following a strictly chronological pattern, Jacobs often interrupts her narrative to address social or political issues such as the church and slavery or the impact of the Fugitive Slave Law on runaways. Consequently, her narrative did not fit the pattern of the "authentic" (male) narrative.

However, Yellin's discovery of letters documenting the correspondence between Jacobs and several prominent 19th century figures — including abolitionist Amy Post, author Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Jacobs' editor Lydia Maria Child — has established the authenticity of Jacobs' narrative and distinguished it as one of the most powerful and courageous works of its time.

For contemporary readers, skepticism generally revolves around the use of language. Critics have pointed out that Jacobs' narrative often depicts Linda as the tragic heroine of British romance novels rather than as an enslaved black woman fighting for survival. They also note that Dr. Flint is

sometimes depicted more like a suitor or persistent lover determined to win the hand of his "lady," rather than as a slave owner determined to hold on to his "property."

Readers may also get this idea because Linda, rather than trying to escape, chooses to have two children by Mr. Sands, another white man, a decision that she sees as the lesser of two evils. So readers may conclude that she contributes to her own bondage. Thus, although she uses her sexuality to try to escape her fate, she is ultimately trapped by it.

In many ways, the structure of *Incidents* is similar to that of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, an epistolary novel (a novel written in the form of letters) published in 1740 and based on a story about a servant who avoided seduction and was rewarded by marriage. It also bears some similarities to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, first published in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell.

Slaves also suffer from the influence of the slave system on their moral development. Linda does not condemn slaves for illegal or immoral acts such as theft or adultery, saying that they usually have no choice but to behave this way. However, she also points out that slaves have no reason to develop a strong ethical sense, as they are given no ownership of themselves or final control over their actions.

This is not their fault, but the fault of the system that dehumanizes them. Slaves are not evil like their masters, but important parts of their personalities are left undeveloped. At the end of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda states that she is still waiting to have her greatest dream

fulfilled—that of creating a real home for herself and her children. The desire for a comfortable and safe home runs throughout this book, reflecting the cult of domesticity that would have been familiar to Jacobs's mostly white female readers in the nineteenth century.

During Jacobs's time, women were relegated to the domestic sphere and expected to find all of their fulfillment in caring for their homes and children. Women were considered to be housewives by their very natures, unfit for any other kind of life. As a black woman excluded from this value system, unable even to live with her children, Linda's longing for a home is understandable. Ruth, Sheila states that Harriet wanted to tell her story but she lacked the skills to write the story herself.

Jacobs does not always present the domestic sphere as an uncomplicated good. Aunt Martha, the book's representative of domesticity and the only black woman Linda knows who has a real home, is both a positive and a negative character. She is caring and stable, the backbone of her family and a paragon of domestic virtue. Her tidy home is a refuge and a lifeline for Linda from the time her own mother dies.

But at times in which Linda needs encouragement in her quest for freedom and independence, Aunt Martha and her house become a discouraging, even confining force. Placing her children's needs above her own, Linda remains a virtual captive in Aunt Martha's home until she is permanently crippled. Hence, home and family are valuable, but they must be balanced with personal freedom. Otherwise, they may overwhelm a woman's

individuality. Alice Walker argues that Harriet's critique on slavery wasn't only an account of her life . It was a plea to all women to make a stand.

Is slave narrative a fact or merely a propaganda?

Slave narrative is an account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally. Slave narratives comprise one of the most influential traditions in American literature, shaping the form and themes of some of the most celebrated and controversial writing, both in fiction and in autobiography, in the history of the United States. The vast majority of American slave narratives were authored by African Americans, but African-born Muslims who wrote in Arabic, and a handful of white American sailors taken captive by North African pirates also penned narratives of their enslavement during the 19th century.

From 1760 to the end of the Civil War in the United States, approximately 100 autobiographies of fugitive or former slaves appeared. After slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865, at least 50 former slaves wrote or dictated book-length accounts of their lives. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the WPA Federal Writers' Project gathered oral personal histories from 2,500 former slaves, whose testimony eventually filled 40 volumes.

The first slave narrative to become an international best-seller was the two-volume *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or,*

Gustavus Vassa, *the African, Written by Himself* (1789), which traces Equiano's career from boyhood in West Africa, through the dreadful transatlantic Middle Passage, to eventual freedom and economic success as a British citizen. Introducing the slave ship through the innocent perspective of an African captive, he wrote: The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me.... When I looked around the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little I found some black people about me.... I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair.

With the rise of the abolition movement in the early 19th century came a demand for hard-hitting eyewitness accounts of the harsh realities of slavery in the United States. In response, the narratives of Frederick Douglass (1845), claimed thousands of readers in England as well as the United States. Typically, the American slave narrative centres on the narrator's rite of passage from slavery in the South to freedom in the North . Slavery is documented as a condition of extreme deprivation, necessitating increasingly

forceful resistance. After a harrowing and suspenseful escape, the slave's attainment of freedom is signaled not simply by reaching the "free states" of the North but by taking a new name and dedication to antislavery activism.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1845), often considered the epitome of the slave narrative, links the quest for freedom to the pursuit of literacy, thereby creating a lasting ideal of the African American hero committed to intellectual as well as physical freedom. In the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, American slave narratives contributed to the mounting national debate over slavery. Revising and expanding his original life story, Frederick Douglass wrote *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, partly to recount his continuing struggle for freedom and independence against Northern racism.

In 1861 Harriet Jacobs, the first African American female slave to author her own narrative, published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which depicted her resistance to her master's sexual exploitation and her ultimate achievement of freedom for herself and her two children. The *Bondswoman's Narrative*—published in 2002 but written in the mid-1850s, apparently by an African American woman who signed herself Hannah Crafts—purports to be the autobiography of a fugitive slave from North Carolina. This unique manuscript, however, is also highly fictionalized, making it an important contribution to the novelization of the slave narrative signaled by the complex authorial voice in Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* and the extensive use of dialogue in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

During the last three decades of legal slavery in America, from the early 1830s to the end of the Civil War in 1865, African American writers perfected one of the nation's first truly indigenous genres of written literature: the North American slave narrative. The genre achieves its most eloquent expression in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave* and Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Like all slave narratives, Jacobs's and Douglass's works embody the tension between the conflicting motives that generated autobiographies of slave life. An ironic factor in the production of these accounts can be noted in the generic title "Fugitive Slave Narrative" often given to such works. The need to accomplish the form's most important goal—an end to slavery—took narrators back to the world that had enslaved them, as they were called upon to provide accurate reproductions of both the places and the experiences of the past they had fled.

White abolitionists urged slave writers to follow well-defined conventions and formulas to produce what they saw as one of the most potent propaganda weapons in their arsenal. They also insisted on adding their own authenticating endorsements to the slaves' narrations through prefaces and introductions. Yet for the writers themselves, the opportunity to tell their stories constituted something more personal: a means to write an identity within a country that legally denied their right to exist as human beings. Working cautiously within the genre expectations developed by and for their white audiences, highly articulate African American writers such as Douglass and Jacobs found ways to individualize their narratives and to speak in their own voices in a quest for selfhood that had to be balanced against the aims and

values of their audiences.

A comparison of the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs demonstrates the full range of demands and situations that slaves could experience. Some of the similarities in the two accounts are a result of the prescribed formats that governed the publication of their narratives. The fugitive or freed slave narrators were expected to give accurate details of their experiences within bondage, emphasizing their sufferings under cruel masters and the strength of their will to free themselves.

One of the most important elements that developed within the narratives was a "literacy" scene in which the narrator explained how he or she came to be able to do something that proslavery writers often declared was impossible: to read and write. Authenticity was paramount, but readers also looked for excitement, usually provided through dramatic details of how the slave managed to escape from his/her owners. Slave narrators also needed to present their credentials as good Christians while testifying to the hypocrisy of their supposedly pious owners. Both Douglass and Jacobs included some version of all these required elements yet also injected personalized nuances that transformed the formulas for their own purposes.

Some of the differences in the readership and reception of Jacobs's 1861 narrative and Douglass's first, 1845 autobiography (he wrote two more, in 1855 and 1881, the latter expanded in 1892) reflect simply the differing literary and political circumstances that prevailed at the Prescribed formats governed the publication of slave narratives time of their construction and publication. When Douglass published his *Narrative of the Life*, the

Abolitionist movement was beginning to gain political force, while the long-delayed publication of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1861 was overshadowed by the start of the Civil War. Douglass was a publicly acclaimed figure from almost the earliest days of his career as a speaker and then a writer. Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, was never well-known. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* disappeared from notice soon after its publication, without a large sale, while Douglass's first book went through nine editions in its first two years and eventually became the standard against which all other slave narratives—even his own later ones—are measured.

Douglass's 1845 narrative grew out of the story of enslavement that he was honored as a speaker for the Massachusetts Antislavery Society.

"Discovered" and hired to lecture on the abolitionist circuit by William Lloyd Garrison in 1841, three years after he had made his escape from Baltimore, Douglass developed rhetorical devices common to sermons and orations and carried these over to his narrative, which abounds with examples of repetition, antithesis, and other classical persuasive strategies. His narrative was the culmination of Douglass based his narrative on the sermon. His speech-making career, reflecting his mastery of a powerful preaching style along with the rhythms and imagery of biblical texts that were familiar to his audiences.

Douglass also reflected the Emersonian idealism so prominent in the 1840s, as he cast himself in the role of struggling hero asserting his individual moral principles in order to bring conscience to bear against the nation's greatest evil. In addition, his story could be read as a classic male "initiation" myth, a tale which traced a youth's growth from innocence to experience and from boyhood into successful manhood; for Douglass, the testing and journey

motifs of this genre were revised to highlight the slave's will to transform himself from human chattel into a free American citizen.

Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, began her narrative around 1853, after she had lived as a fugitive slave in the North for ten years. She began working privately on her narrative not long after Cornelia Grinnell Willis purchased her freedom and gave her secure employment as a Jacobs modeled her narrative on the sentimental or domestic novel. domestic servant in New York City. Jacobs's manuscript, finished around four years later but not published for four more, reflects in part the style, tone, and plot of what has been called the sentimental or domestic novel, popular fiction of the mid-nineteenth century, written by and for women, that stressed home, family, womanly modesty, and marriage. In adapting her life story to this genre, Jacobs drew on women writers who were contemporaries and even friends, including well-known writers Lydia Maria Child and Fanny Fern (her employer's sister in law), but she was also influenced by the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which appeared in 1851. Stowe's genius lay in her ability to harness the romantic melodrama of the sentimental novel to a carefully orchestrated rhetorical attack against slavery, and no abolitionist writer in her wake could steer clear of the impact of her performance. Jacobs, and also Frederick Douglass in his second autobiography of 1855, took advantage of Stowe's successful production of a work of fiction that could still lay claim to the authority of truth.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl did not fictionalize or even sensationalize any of the facts of Jacobs's experience, yet its author, using pseudonyms for all of her "characters," did create what William Andrews has

called a "novelistic" discourse,¹ including large segments of dialogue among characters. Jacobs used the devices of sentimental fiction to target the same white, female, middle-class, northern audiences who had been spellbound by Uncle Tom's Cabin, yet her narrative also shows that she was unwilling to follow, and often subverted, the genre's promotion of "true womanhood," a code of behavior demanding that women remain virtuous, meek, and submissive, no matter what the personal cost. Gender considerations account not only for many of the differences in style and genre that we see in Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives, but also for the versions of slavery that they endured and the versions of authorship that they were able to shape for themselves in freedom.

Douglass was a public speaker who could boldly self-fashion himself as hero of his own adventure. In his first narrative, he combined and equated the achievement of selfhood, manhood, freedom, and voice. The resulting lead character of his autobiography is a boy, and then a young man, who is robbed of family and community and who gains an identity not only through his escape from Baltimore to Massachusetts but through his Douglass focuses on the struggle to achieve manhood and freedom. Jacob focuses on sexual exploitation, ability to create herself through telling her story.

Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, was enmeshed in all the trappings of community, family, and domesticity. She was literally a "domestic" in her northern employment, as well as a slave mother with children to protect, and one from whom subservience was expected, whether slave or free. As Jacobs pointedly put it, "Slavery is bad for men, but it is far more terrible for women." The overriding concern of Jacobs's narrative was one that made her

story especially problematic both for herself as author and for the women readers of her time. Because the major crisis of her life involved her master's unrelenting, forced sexual attentions, the focus of Jacobs's narrative is the sexual exploitation that she, as well as many other slave women, had to endure. For her, the question of how to address this "unmentionable" subject dominates the choices she delineates in her narrative—as woman slave and as woman author. Like Douglass, Jacobs was determined to fight to the death for her freedom. Yet while Douglass could show "how a slave became a man" in a physical fight with an overseer, Jacobs's gender determined a different course. Pregnant with the child of a white lover of her own choosing, fifteen year old Jacobs reasoned (erroneously) that her condition would spur her licentious master to sell her and her child. Once she was a mother, with "ties to life," as she called them, her concern for her children had to take precedence over her own self-interest.

Thus throughout her narrative, Jacobs is looking not only for freedom but also for a secure home for her children. She might also long for a husband, but her shameful early liaison, resulting in two children born "out of wedlock," meant, as she notes with perhaps a dose of sarcasm, that her story ends "not, in the usual way, with marriage," but "with freedom." In this finale, she still mourns (even though her children were now grown) that she does not have "a home of my own." Douglass's 1845 narrative, conversely, ends with his standing as a speaker before an eager audience and feeling an exhilarating "degree of freedom." While Douglass's and Jacobs's lives might seem to have moved in different directions, it is nevertheless important not to miss the common will that their narratives proclaim. They never lost their

determination to gain not only freedom from enslavement but also respect for their individual humanity and that of other bondsmen and women.

Lastly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, slave narratives were an important means of opening a dialogue between blacks and whites about slavery and freedom. The most influential slave narratives of the antebellum era were designed to enlighten white readers about both the realities of slavery as an institution and the humanity of black people as individuals deserving of full human rights. Although often dismissed as mere antislavery propaganda, the widespread consumption of slave narratives in the nineteenth-century U.S. and Great Britain and their continuing prominence in literature and historical curricula in American universities today testify to the power of these texts, then and now, to provoke reflection and debate among their readers, particularly on questions of race, social justice, and the meaning of freedom.

Close to two million slaves were brought to the American South from Africa and the West Indies during the centuries of the Atlantic slave trade. Approximately 20% of the population of the American South over the years has been African American, and as late as 1900, 9 out of every 10 African Americans lived in the South. The large number of black people maintained as a labor force in the post-slavery South were not permitted to threaten the region's character as a white man's country, however. The region's ruling class dedicated itself to the overriding principle of white supremacy, and white racism became the driving force of southern race relations. The culture of racism sanctioned and supported the whole range of discrimination that has characterized white supremacy in its successive stages. During and after the

slavery era, the culture of white racism sanctioned not only official systems of discrimination but a complex code of speech, behavior and social practices designed to make white supremacy seem not only legitimate but natural and inevitable.

Conclusion: Quest for Freedom

In conclusion, mostly slave narratives emphasize the physical brutality and deprivation that slaves were forced to endure, presenting glory descriptions of beatings to shock the reader. Jacobs does not ignore such issues, but her focus on slaves' mental and spiritual anguish makes an important contribution to the genre. As a slave with a relatively "easy" life, Linda does not have to endure constant beatings and hard physical labor.

However, she and many of the other slaves around her suffer greatly from being denied basic human rights and legal protection. Men and women are not permitted to marry whoever they choose—they often are not allowed to marry at all. Women are frequently forced to sleep with the masters they despise. Worst of all, families are torn apart, with children sold to a place far away from their parents. Thus, even slaves who are not beaten or starved are stripped of their humanity. When Linda states that she would rather be a desperately poor English farm laborer than a "pampered" slave, she underscores the point that slavery's mental cruelty is every bit as devastating as its physical abuses.

There is only one intact black family in this book, and it does not live in the South. The happy Durham family, whom Linda meets in Philadelphia, contrasts starkly with the situation of black families living under slavery. Aunt Martha struggles to keep her family together, but sees nearly all of her children sold. Linda is taken away from her father at age six to live with her mistress. Her mistress acts as a sort of mother to Linda, but she shows how little this relationship means to her when she treats Linda as property in her will.

Linda is also denied the right to raise her own children and meets many women who will never see their children again. Slaves are often not allowed to marry, and if they are, husband and wife cannot always live together. White men father children with black women but feel no parental obligation to them, and they abuse them or sell them as if they were unrelated. If a white woman and a black man have a child together, the woman's family will frequently have the infant killed. Even privileged white families do not care for their own children, fostering them out to slave wet nurses.

Finally, pseudo familial ties that develop between white and black half-siblings and foster siblings are broken as soon as the whites deem it appropriate. Normal human relationships simply cannot survive the disruptions of the slave system. Linda's seven-year imprisonment in Aunt Martha's attic may be the narrative's most spectacular example of confinement, but it is not the only one. Dr. Flint seeks to lock Linda up in an isolated cottage in the woods so he can sleep with her freely. Linda's Uncle Benjamin is jailed for six months before he finally escapes. Dr. Flint imprisons Linda's brother and small children when he finds that she has run away.

Linda herself is confined in several places, including under the floorboards of her the house of her "white benefactress." She continues to feel circumscribed by slavery even after she reaches New York. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, she becomes a virtual prisoner in her employers' home. The greatest confinements of all, though, may be mental. Masters keep slaves trapped by ignorance: unable to read, they cannot question the pro-slavery claims that the Bible dictates their condition. They know nothing of life beyond their immediate surroundings, and many believe that free blacks in the North are starving in the streets and begging to return to slavery.

Violence is a motif common to all slave narratives, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is no exception. One of Linda's earliest memories is hearing Dr. Flint brutally whip one of his plantation slaves. She recalls seeing the blood and gore on the walls the next morning. Mrs. Flint, a supposed Christian, orders slaves whipped until they bleed and spits in their food so they will have to go hungry. She forces Aunt Nancy to sleep on the floor outside her room, continuing this practice even when Nancy is pregnant, causing her to give birth to many stillborn babies.

Mrs. Flint's treatment of Aunt Nancy, as Linda points out, amounts to murder committed very slowly. Slaves are burned, frozen, and whipped to death. Their wounds are washed with brine for further agonizing torture. Jacobs includes such accounts throughout the book, narrating them in detail to shock the reader into sympathy for slaves and to goad him or her into joining the abolitionist movement. Such stories of violence also counteract the common proslavery claim that most slaves were well cared for and led happy, peaceful lives.

Linda's attic hideout, a place where she is so restricted that she cannot sit or stand, represents all of the forces that keep her from being free. Conversely, it also represents the space of freedom she creates for herself in her own mind. Like slavery, the attic confines Linda's body in terrible ways. She suffers physically and psychologically, losing her ability to speak and walk and becoming despairing and depressed. Her time in the attic almost kills her, which causes the reader to recall how Dr. Flint had claimed his right, under the laws of slavery, to do so himself.

However, the attic is also a prison of Linda's own choosing, and in this regard it differs from the imposed confinement of slavery. By going into hiding, she rejects Dr. Flint's claim to own her soul as well as her body. Just as she decides to have consensual sex with Mr. Sands to avoid forced sex with Dr. Flint, she chooses the tortures of the attic over Flint's luxurious cottage in the woods. She may have replaced one set of physical and emotional hardships with another, but she has claimed her mind and spirit as her own. The "loophole," a peephole, through which she can watch the outside world, symbolizes the spiritual freedom Linda finds even in seemingly restricted circumstances.

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