

The Images of White Womanhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Shahila Zafar¹

Zaved Ahmed Khan²

Abstract: Black women's literature especially, slave narratives, are generally considered as a resistance against the white male hegemony. But, if we go deep into it we notice, woven in the intricate weave of the narrative, the stories of the white women as well. Complex relationships between black and white women and between white men and white women are depicted in these records of American history. The present paper is an analysis the relationship of the white women to their circumstances as depicted in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents* is a compelling true story about the physical and psychological oppression of the black slave women in the south but it is also a story that breaks many a myth about the southern white women as well.

Key words: Slave Narrative; Black American Literature; Slavery; Cult of True Womanhood; Oppression; Racism; White Male Hegemony; Deep South

"Slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks."

(Harriet Jacobs)

The slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* revolves around the life and experiences of Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent in the narrative) and her struggle for freedom from the bondage of slavery during the middle of the 19th century. It depicts a black woman's resistance against the white hegemony and her almost supernatural efforts to free herself and her children from enslavement. But, in the intricate weave of the narrative is also woven the story of the white women of the antebellum south as well as the north.

¹ Asst Prof in English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University. Academic Degree: MA (English), MPhil (English), PhD.

Address: Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India- 632014.

Email: shahilazafar@vit.ac.in; shahelazafar@yahoo.co.in

² Asst Prof, School of Bio Sciences and Technology, VIT University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India- 632014. Academic Degree: MSc(Neurosciences) PhD

Email: zavedkhan@vit.ac.in; khan.zaved@vit.ac.in

*Received 05 September 2010; accepted 20 November 2010.

If we look underneath what Gloria T. Randle calls the “the picture of security that surrounds white women - which Brent underlines with descriptors such as ‘sheltered,’ ‘protected,’ and ‘purity,’” in the narrative, we come across white women who don’t live the perfect feminine lives as propagated by the Cult of True Womanhood prevalent in the 19th century. This concept of True Womanhood has its origins in the Victorian notion of the perfect woman, wherein, white women were idealized as, or, at least were expected to be pure, chaste, angelic and pious upholders of moral values. In contrast to this, black women were stereotyped as promiscuous and overtly sexual in nature, suffering from moral corruption. The narrative is a unique analysis of the true nature of the Cult and exposes the impossibility of women achieving the ‘ideal’ put forth by the dominant society.

The relationship between Linda Brent and Mrs. Flint is an important instrument to understanding the status of women –both, black as well as white-during the times of slavery. Apart from the grandmother, who Hazel Carby characterizes as embodying “aspects of a true womanhood” (345), Mrs. Flint, the second wife of Linda’s oppressor Dr. Flint, apparently fits perfectly in the Cult of True Womanhood by being delicate and “totally deficient in energy” (10). But, as depicted in the novel, she herself is no less of an oppressor than her husband. Linda tells us in her usual ironic tone, she “did not mind sitting in an easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash” (10).

Mrs. Flint is also pious; being a member of the church. But, she can also spit in the kettles and the pans that have been used by her maid to cook the Sunday lunch, lest the cook and her children eke out the remains of the gravy and other scrapings (11). Mrs. Flint also knows exactly how much food slaves would need to just sustain themselves. So, she would make sure that they don’t get even an ounce more than what she would give them (11). This pattern of cruelty is repeated by her daughter- in- law at their plantation when she refuses to let an old slave have his bit of meat saying, that “when niggers were too old to work they ought to be fed on grass” (96).

These complex relationships between black and white women and between white men and white women are further depicted in Chapter 6. Jacobs shows how both black and white women are dependent on the mercy of the white patriarchal system that enables white men to exercise complete control over their wives and, of course, over the black slave women. The wives, like Mrs. Flint, would rather torture their female slaves and vent their anger on them than confront their husbands for their sexual promiscuity. They would tolerate their husband’s behavior for they have no option of coming out of trustless marriages; divorce being a social taboo.

Seeing her husband, the middle aged Dr. Flint, pursuing Linda, Mrs. Flint starts suffering from helpless jealous rage and Linda has to bear the brunt of its consequences. Mrs. Flint, instead of protecting Linda, sees her as the one responsible for arousing her husband’s lust. Linda says, “In her angry moods, no terms were too vile for her to bestow upon me” (31). Despite being Dr. Flint’s wife and the mistress of her house, she cannot blame her husband directly and stop him from pursuing a teenager, fearing that her pride and dignity are at stake. Despite what Randle calls “Mrs. Flint’s life- threatening jealousy”, she herself has no power over the ‘Man’ in the house. Even though she knows of her husband’s escapades and “watched her husband with unceasing vigilance”, “he was well practiced in means to evade it”(30). In this manner white women are depicted as both the sinning and the sinned against; victims as well as accomplices in their husbands’ sexual exploitation of the enslaved black women.

On page 35, Jacobs totally exposes the reality of the southern households as opposed to the “imaginary pictures” of them prevailing in the minds of the northerners enchanted with the prospect of marrying their daughters to wealthy southern landowners:

The poor girls have romantic notions of a sunny clime, and of the flowering vines that all the year round shade a happy home. To what disappointments are they destined! The young wife soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto him of his own household. Jealousy and hatred enter the flowery home, and it is ravaged of its loveliness. (35)

Even if slavery destroys the notion of a black family, the white family itself does not go undamaged; white wives have to accept patriarchy and put up with their husbands' adultery in the slave quarters, while white children grow up watching scenes of violent abuse and, as adults, repeat the patterns they have been taught. About the young white girls, Jacobs says, "They know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things; and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves" (52). She further narrates an incident in which a white girl makes advances towards her father's slaves and "selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure" (52).

We have a few more glimpses of the cruelty of the southern white mistress in the narrative. Jacobs draws a nearly satanic figure in her description of a mistress who instead of comforting her poor slave, impregnated by her lusty husband, is blinded by jealousy and anger. The dying girl says:

"O Lord, come and take me!" Her mistress stood by, and mocked at her like an incarnate fiend. "You suffer, do you?" she exclaimed. "I am glad of it. You deserve it all and more too."

The girl's mother said, "The baby is dead, thank God; and I hope my poor child will soon be in heaven, too."

"Heaven!" retorted the mistress. "There is no such place for the like of her and her bastard."
(12)

This rage at a dying woman and her prophetic retort at the impossibility of a black woman and her child ever entering heaven is partly out of her religious convictions but mostly out of her frustrating sense of helplessness at her own inability to control the circumstances that led to this situation. Her cursing and blaming a dying girl and her infant baby are signs of the level of insensitivity that the white women are pushed towards in their self – defeating efforts to establish an ideal family in the times of slavery.

Jacobs does acknowledge that there are few women who did speak up and shame their husbands into freeing their slave children. She tells us these women often "commanded their [husbands'] respect" (35). But, she also points out that, in general, white women are just as responsible as white men for perpetuating the institution of slavery.

It is near the end of the narrative that Linda has a somewhat comfortable relationship with a white woman. After her escape from the "loophole", she is helped by Mrs. Bruce, an Englishwoman, who is "a kind and gentle lady, and proved a true and sympathizing friend" (173). Linda's friendship with her helps her adjust to the new life. She also gives Linda her first true 'job' where she is actually paid for her labor. Through her role as a nurse to Mrs. Bruce's daughter, Mary, Linda begins to live again and experiences a kind of relationship with a white woman she has never had till now.

Mrs. Bruce is also indirectly responsible for expanding Linda's horizons. After her death, Linda goes to England as Mary's nurse with Mr. Bruce. During this trip Linda notices the differences between the poor laborers of England and the chattel slaves of America "the condition of even the meanest and most ignorant among them was vastly superior to the condition of the most favored slaves in America" (188). She also observes, "During all that time, I never saw the slightest symptom of prejudice against color" (190).

Mr. Bruce's second wife is a southerner but she is nothing like a southerner. She is a 'True Woman' in many respects. She is brave and principled. Linda is all praises for her, "For the system of slavery, she had a most hearty dislike of it. No sophistry of Southerners would blind her to its enormity. She was a person of excellent principles and a noble heart. To me, from that hour to the present, she has been a true and sympathizing friend" (195). Linda's friendship with the second Mrs. Bruce is just as strong as, if not stronger than, her relationship with the first Mrs. Bruce. The second Mrs. Bruce does everything she can do to help Linda maintain her freedom from Dr. Flint. Even after Linda confesses that she is a fugitive, Mrs. Bruce risks her own safety and the safety of her infant daughter to help her. She is, in all aspects, a true woman except for the fact that she is not submissive. She defies Linda's hunters by maintaining her silence about Linda's location. Even when Linda is nearly found she never turns her over to her master.

She also takes a slave's side over a white man of her own kind. So, she is a good woman but not a 'true' woman. When reminded of the fact that by helping a fugitive slave she was jeopardizing her own status as a law abiding citizen, she says, "I am very well aware of it. It is imprisonment and one thousand dollars fine. Shame on my country that it is so! I am ready to incur the penalty. I will go to the state's prison, rather than have any poor victim torn from my house, to be carried back to slavery"(199).

Ultimately, Mrs. Bruce purchases Linda's freedom, demonstrating not only her unconditional commitment to Linda's welfare, but also her dedication to the principle of freedom. Through Mrs. Bruce, Jacobs "rewrites" what Christina Accomando calls "virtue as a legal construction, as opposed to a racialized, naturalized fact."

It is interesting to note that only after *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was endorsed by a *white* woman, Lydia Maria Child, was there any attention paid to this historically precious document, one of the primary goals of which was to gain the sympathy of *white* women readers and gain support for the abolitionist movement. And, it was another *white* woman, Amy Post, a well-known anti-slavery advocate who encouraged Jacobs to write her autobiography.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is a compelling true story about the physical and psychological oppression of the black slave women in the south but it is also a story that breaks many a myth about the southern white women as well. Even if we have only a few glimpses of the white households, they are enough to make us aware that the white households during the period of slavery were not only about what books and movies like *Gone with the Wind* would like to have us believe.

REFERENCES

- Accomando, Christina. (1998, Summer). "The Laws Were Laid down to Me Anew": Harriet Jacobs and the Reframing of Legal Fictions - African American Woman Author and Former Slave. *African American Review*. findarticles. Web. 10 September 2010.
- Carby, Hazel V. (1987). *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Jacobs, Harriet. (1973). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Ed. L. Maria Child. New York: HBJ Books.
- Randle, Gloria T. (1999, Spring). Between the Rock and the Hard Place: Mediating Spaces in Harriet Jacob's 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl' . *African American Review*. findarticles. Web. 5 September 2010.