

Moral Experiences in Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

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Abstract

Black women slavery was an equally devastating experience. They were torn apart between family and duties. They were forced to perform grueling labor, subjected to mental and physical degradation. They were also deprived of their basic necessities. Enslaved women were beaten mercilessly, separated from loved ones arbitrarily and treated as mere properties.

The slave owner's exploitation of the Black women's sexuality was one of the most significant factor. The white man's claim to the slave body was inherent in the concept of the slave trade. Throughout the period of slavery in America white society believed Black women to be innately lustful beings. Within the bonds of slavery, master often left in their right to engage in sexual activity with Black women. Sometimes, female slaves acquiesced to advances hoping that such relationships would increase their chances that their children would be liberated or set free by the masters. Sometimes they took them by force and enslaved husband cannot protect their wives. So, for Black women it was double oppression ie; of being women and being Black.

Keywords: Moral Experiences, Transcendence.

Introduction

Slave narrative is a distinct literary genre which comprises of autobiographies and memoirs written by enslaved Africans in different parts and includes Abolitionist tracts and sermons. These pieces of work highlights the horrors of slavery and other aspects as well –they are psychological bildungsromans illuminating the struggle for selfhood as much as for physical freedom and many of them are deeply religious in their quest for spiritual transcendence of their agony through Christian redemption.

"Incidents in the life of a slave girl" is a novel by a fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs, considered as one of the best known female slave narrative. It is an autobiographical novel of her, a collection of her past experiences and traumatic incidents of her life. It is the story of Linda Brent a chilling account of sexual harassment that lasts for many years. Dr. Flint constantly tries to make sexual advancement with her. Despite repeated attempts Dr. Flint is unable to make her a sexual slave. She decides to sleep with a white man hoping that would decrease Dr. Flint's desire. White people occupy the top of the pyramid and they are privileged. So to her it gives a sense of safety and assurance that he will protect her in any way. So the story takes turns towards sentimental and seduction novels. Moral codes are also decoded on grounds of the incidents that take place.

Discussion and Interpretation

"Slavery is terrible for men" Harriet Jacobs write in 1861, "but it is far more terrible for women". Citing this passage from *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, Jean Fagan Yellin argues that Jacob's books was the first to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery. The thrust in the novel comes from an unequivocal denunciation of an evil system, its tension comes from a painful confrontation with moral conflict and moral ambiguity. The pseudonymous narrator, exploitative bonds of slavery and idealized altruistic bonds of true womanhood.

The text opens with the lines "I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away". Linda and her brother were raised as indulgent owners. Linda's mistress taught her to read and write and treated her as her own daughter. She was considered as a "foster sister" of Linda's own mother. Not only they were taught to read and write but were also protected from the cruel reality of slavery.

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Martha, their Grandmother obtained her own freedom, owned her house and was keen enough in getting freedom of Linda and William. She can be seen as a lady of high morale with high middle class standards- moral codes of conduct of free people. She left no stone unturned to inculcate in them the moral and manner with which one should behave.

Aim of the Study

The imperatives of racial imperialism instigated the formation of a cultural cult of the true womanhood that idealized the White woman as the saintly complement to male. The Black female became the anti-thesis to the ideal womanhood as they were a treat to racial and sexual imperialism. Therefore Black woman were vulnerable to all kinds of sexual, psychological and physical abuse without any provision for their protection from White or Black society.

The main aim is to unleash the strings and expose the cruelty in the underbelly of the slave rituals that exist in the society and proves as a curse for female black slaves.

Linda, for example describes the difference when William is called by his father and mistress at the same time. Whom should he obey? The ideal perspective of moral claim of father should be superior to that of the mistress. His father should be his first priority and should obey his call first. But in the fallen world of slaveholding the father's voice is silenced. William helps the mistress rather than his father. Though he had to compromise on grounds of his father's requirement on moral grounds.

When we compare it with Fredrick Douglass's "Narrative of the life of Fredrick Douglass" it begins with a slave who is not aware of his true identity of being a human; but in the other case the true identity of her being a slave is unknown. If she is to survive in the corrupt world she must learn to hide her humanity rather than to express it. She shouldn't have the power in the tongue but to bite it. The moral codes become powerless here in the white society.

Slavery's threat was sexual for women and the genteel and moral codes were more strict. It differed for free men and women and enslaved men and women. Linda's awareness of slavery began at the age of six, but her moral awareness began at twelve when her mistress died who was a mother figure to her. After the death of her mistress she was not free as per her expectations, but was "bequeathed" to her mistress's little niece Emily Flint. All her hopes, illusions were shattered once for all. Not long it took for Dr. Flint, Emily's father to make sexual advances. The story now takes the qualities of sentimental story and seduction novel. Linda was continuously harassed by Dr. Flint.

Martha in many ways is a model of womanly strength and integrity. She had earned the respect in both the communities of black and white by her good behaviour and a model of livelihood and strength. She served as a cook, nurse and mammy to Dr. Flint's mother for many years. Dr. Flint's continuous advancements made Linda more rebellious and determined to escape the ruthless

world of slavery's sexual harassment. Linda like Richardson's "Clarissa" could choose to die rather than to live an impure life- she chooses survival; selfhood and self determination. Through her relation with Mr. Sands who could have control over her body with her own free will. If she didn't have the authority to marry because such relations between a slave and a white was not legalised or legitimised, she could reproduce with her own choice. But when she talks about her pregnancy to her Grandmother she was disgusted and looked down upon her as fallen women. Here again the moral code of conduct of Linda is questionable. Then again events of her escape from this ruthless world slavery took place to save her own moral self. At the end the story ends with freedom with marriage. Linda's narrative ends with her recovered children Benjamin and Ellen. Although her family was not entirely intact and free but with her strength and determination and the morality she was able to overcome the strings of slavery.

Results of the Study

Throughout the nation's history, African women have struggled with white women on many political fronts. For example, In 1921 at the National Women's Party Convention, Alice Paul received Black delegates complaints over disfranchisement with indifference. On another occasion In 1970 white feminists reluctance to aggressively organize against the political persecution of Angela Davis continued this legacy of white women rejecting and alienating Black women.

Black feminism emerges with two –pronged agenda, to

1. Question the masculinist-patriarchal ideologies of the black movement,
2. Question the racism in feminist movement.

Du Bois coined the term 'DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS'

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder".

(W. E. B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folks*, 1903). The term originally referred to the psychological challenge of always looking at one's self through the eyes of a racist white society and measuring oneself by the means of a nation looked back in contempt.

Conclusion

Wilson's works of antebellum literature are indeed sentimental novels and narratives about women, mothering, children and humanity; but they are works about hatred, anger, bondage and inhumanity as well. By intimately and carefully exposing the moral complexities of their words they show new domesticity where black female slave can at once be pure and pious while expressing anger at her circumstances as a slave. Black women has

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always been subjected to live in adverse conditions. Slavery destroys the morality of slave holders. They show inhumane behaviour towards them. They are in constant struggle of mind and body to make their ends meet.

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