

Yisel Morales

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Critical Essay

Morales 1

The Definition of a Woman

“No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men" (Jacobs, 27). Harriet Ann Jacobs’ *Incidents*, is one of the most influential autobiographies in the slave narrative genre of American literature. Published by Lydia Maria Child in eighteen sixty-one, Jacobs recounts her life as a slave and showcases the evils slavery pursued by it. Writing in a realistic alter ego persona, Linda Brent, Jacobs embodies what it meant to be a black female writer in the nineteenth-century. Most importantly, her work unveiled what it meant to be a rising conscientious woman in this era while also facing the constriction from slavery’s anaconda. Three crucial moments of Jacobs’s transition in womanhood to motherhood showed this at large. The first moment was Jacobs’s decision to sleep with a white man named Mr. Sands. The second was when she confined herself to a garret for seven years. The third was when Jacobs was free at last in the North with her children. Jacobs wrote the definition of womanhood through the primary lenses of gender. Jacobs then exemplified the idea of womanhood to that of motherhood in order to analyze the social constraints and feminine power in reform. While also entirely appealing to her own sex at the same time.

In Jacobs *Incidents*, she highlights the social constraints and feminine power through the primary lenses of womanhood in hand with that of motherhood. Although there are many elements that define a woman. For Jacobs *Incidents*, this appeared a lot more evident in her

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journey into and during motherhood. Jacobs wants to show motherhood as a key element of womanhood because the challenges of motherhood are what accentuate the traits of a strong womanhood. Thus, the first stages of pre-womanhood are as proceeds. For instance, after being taunted with her master's vile lustful eyes at the age of only 15. Jacobs in an omniscient narrative voice explains a turning point for girlhood into womanhood. "Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (28). Likewise, this teaches the readers multiple points. The first, Jacobs shows where the psychological switch in an innocent young girl's life happens into that of an awakening to the objectification of a sexual being. This is one of the first social constraints that Jacobs argues faces many young black girls. The second, Jacobs demonstrates to the readers how beauty in a white woman's physique is to be 'admired' upon. Whereas beauty in a black female is to be regarded as nothing near as pure as the white woman. But rather that a black female beauty is a sexualization a master must and will act upon. Lastly, Jacobs lightly pokes at her woman readers by concluding with the fact that the mistresses are of no aid in helping the black female. If in any case, these southern women make their situation much worse. This is the one of the first stages that led into her transitioning into womanhood as a young slave girl. This leads into the other imperative incident which leaves young Jacobs even more aware of herself. Jacobs realizes there is nowhere to seek help for, not even to her own 'fair' mistress in regards to her master's sexual harassment. Jacobs states the following to her readers after showing them her situation with her mistress's selfish jealousy' "At last, I began to be fearful for my life. It had been often threatened; and you can imagine, better than I can describe, what an unpleasant sensation it must

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produce to wake up in the dead of night and find a jealous woman bending over you. Terrible as this experience was, I had fears that it would give place to one more terrible” (32). Surely, this is something a northern woman would frown upon their southern sisters. That a ‘woman’ figure was not doing her part in giving affectionate love to that of their own sex regardless of skin tone. It should be noted that her mistress, Mrs. Flint, is a mother too. A mother is supposed to step up to her husband’s ill manners if she is to be a woman at all, regardless of the consequences she may face as a result. This because, ultimately when it comes to real motherhood it no longer is about the husband, but about safeguarding the children. If this is the way she portrays herself, how is this as a mother, showcasing herself to the woman of the north? Not only can this be read as another social constraint Jacobs faces. But also, as an example to the northern women of what a ‘mother’ in the south is and is capable of. Furthermore, Jacobs can’t appeal to a ‘woman’s help. Here, Jacobs finally awakes to her conditions leading into the first step before submerging fully into womanhood. That is, to only count on herself only. Arguably, this seems to be where Jacobs mostly asserts her full individual woman strength and power. Depending on herself and nobody else given all the terrible circumstances she was within her narrative. Beginning with the realization that she no longer is viewed as a little girl but is seen as an adult—is the first rude awakening to Jacobs ruined innocence—shattered with the fact that she can’t ask anyone for help with this psychological trauma of both the mind and the body. Both conditions combined thrust her into womanhood completely.

Jacobs taking back control of her own body in her decision to sleep with Mr. Sands was one of the turning points that led into her motherhood. For instance, after many of Dr. Flint’s clear repetitive outbursts to Jacobs that he owned her as a body. Jacobs finally stood up not just through self-defense of words but rather actions. Admittedly, some critics have argued that her

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decision in sleeping with Mr. Sands was what restrained her to even more misery and psychological abuse from Dr. Flint. However, this was Jacobs's rightful decision. Her pregnancy could have ultimately resulted from her culprit's desire. Essayist Stephanie Li states the following on Jacobs, "Converting her body and reproductive abilities from sites of exploitation to vehicles of resistance, Linda undermines the authority of the slave master and works to liberate her children" (Legacy, 15). Jacobs was able to make a choice in her predetermined fate that nevertheless gave her life and a refreshed sense of purpose; motherhood. Jacobs commences with the following address towards her readers, "Do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! I wanted to keep myself pure; I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and I became reckless in my despair" (49). This clearly marks a couple of notes. Although Jacobs seems to be asserting her action of sexuality as the most horrid thing a woman could commit to by saying she became 'reckless'. This is not so in her case. In this passage she apologetically has to beg her readers to see her suffocated situation in order for them to really understand what led her to commit the most 'sinful' of sins a woman could possibly do. Give herself up to another man without a marriage and what not in order to justify her control over her own body. This itself, is female power in reform. To add on to this idea, Li states the following about Jacobs decision to take control over her body and sexuality, "Jacobs's reliance upon the trope of motherhood capitalizes on the political import of prevailing beliefs in the sanctity and power of the mother and suggests that a woman's sexuality offers a vital means of resistance against patriarchal oppression" (Legacy, 15). This supports the ideas mentioned previously, Jacobs used the social constraint of Dr. Flint's ownership of her body. In order to pass it into her own ownership of her body as a feminine power of the rising conscientious feminism. Continuing on a bit ahead, Jacobs begins to

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realize what her value was in regard to the beginning stages of her motherhood. Jacobs states the following in conversation about her pregnancy with Dr. Flint, "I said something about being unwilling to have my child supported by a man who had cursed it and me also. He rejoined, that a woman who had sunk to my level had no right to expect anything else. He asked, for the last time, would I accept his kindness? I answered that I would not" (54). Although pregnant and morally dehumanized by everyone's social constraints around her. Jacobs continues to reassert her independence and dignified stance on Dr. Flint. No matter what consequences she could possibly receive. Jacobs seems strengthened by the idea of motherhood as she is willing to protect her baby and herself. She does not allow her pregnancy to wane her down but rather lift her self-worth. Which was her crucial intention from the beginning anyways. For instance, when Jacobs is thinking about what Dr. Flint might do to her newfound babe, she states the following, "The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant" (50). Jacobs's pregnancy marked not only her desire of reclaimed ownership over her body leading into motherhood. But rather was an example too of a feministic outcry of moral dignity against the oppressor with new support; a son and daughter. All the while showing the delicate reader the further injustices of slavery.

Motherhood made the womanhood out of Jacobs all the more evident. During Jacobs's motherhood, her womanly virtues are seen consistently when threatened from Dr. Flint to have her children removed from her arms. Jacobs states the following after Dr. Flint gives her the choice of either going to the cottage he made for her and the babes or the plantation where she wouldn't see her children. "But I must fight my battle alone. I had a woman's pride, and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will.

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There is might in each” (75). Clearly, Jacobs choose the plantation for the sake of her children.

Here, Jacobs most honorably exhibits her womanly virtues of unselfish love and passion. She would much rather suffer in the plantation willingly. While knowing that her children weren't exactly guaranteed to be safe from the master's abuses in her absent presence. Likewise, this seems to be intended towards the woman readers of the north. She is showing them here not just what a woman's virtues are but rather what women were meant to be like, a mother. A mother willing to give herself up again, not just by the body but by the mind for the sake of the slightest possible liberty of her children. Another major moment which showcases her strong affection towards her kindred is when Jacobs proceeded to escape the plantation. For seven years, Jacobs endured all the harshest conditions imaginable in the tiniest garret that confined her. Jacobs states the following, “I had tried various applications to bring warmth and feeling into my limbs, but without avail. They were so numb and stiff that it was a painful effort to move; and had my enemies come upon me during the first mornings I tried to exercise them a little in the small unoccupied space of the storeroom, it would have been impossible for me to have escaped” (111). Here, Jacobs herself shows the readers the dangers she was exposed to all for the devoted love of her children. Once more, she isn't forced to stay confined and suffer horrendously as she is. She is there by her own choice relying not so much abstractly on the help of others. Rather, by her own faith and courage. Exemplifying the feminine power of control she had upon herself in defying her enslaved body. Another instance in which Jacobs highlights her motherly mission and womanly virtues is towards the ending with the last address to the reader, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! Though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I wish it for my children's sake far more than

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for my own” (167). Similarly, Jacobs asserts once again what made her a woman. Motherhood.

She acknowledges her imperfection in that she couldn't gain the typical happy ending with the joys of marriage and security. But rather her mission as a woman tended towards taking care of her own family. And even then, here, she states she wants the security for them and not so much of her own. Stephanie Li states, “Jacobs presents freedom not as a condition of individual liberty, but rather as the ability to provide for and protect one's children” (Legacy, 23). This is ultimately Jacobs's message to the readers. By undergoing motherhood, Jacobs constructed the most important virtues a nineteenth—century woman can exhibit such as passion, faith, courage, strength, imperfection, overcoming adversity, loyalty, and finally a woman's love.

Indeed there seemed to be no law in both heaven and earth instilled to protect the young enslaved girl's life but that of her own nature. Maturity and strength from motherhood transformed Jacobs into the strongest woman figure of the nineteenth—century. Jacobs tirelessly emphasized this idea in depth with the ideals of womanhood. Magnificently, Jacobs was able to transform the atrocious social constraints of both the mental and psychical abuse she received in bondage into methods of feminine power in reform. All this in hopes that she would gain empathy and a compassionate sentiment from a woman's southern heart to another woman's heart in the North.

Works Cited

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