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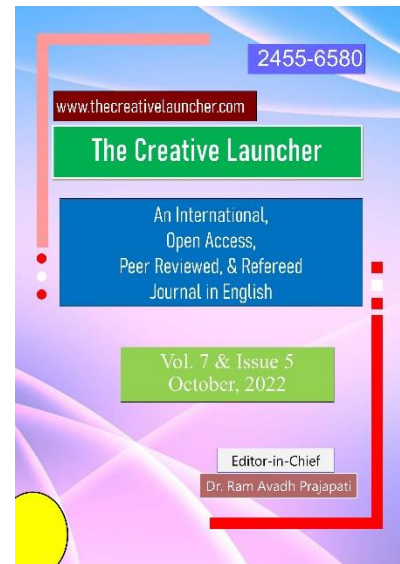
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Self-Making Without Inheritance: Harriet Jacobs's *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl*

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Abstract

The slaves, especially women, are more vulnerable than the men to the oppressive system of slavery. It does not only seize the idea of self from a slave (which constitutes a human being, and slavery seeks support from and utilizes the existing laws by which all the legal rights of the slaves are hijacked) but also it puts them (women) into a constant struggle to negotiate, not

just for the construction of their 'selves' but for their motherhoods and the right of being called wives of their husbands and so forth. The masters, the white, adopt numerous evil strategies which sabotage the slaves forming strong bondage between husband and wife; and parents and children. The masters and slaveholders separate the slaves to run slavery smoothly; for if they are kept together, there will grow a strong relationship among the slaves as they will share feelings, emotions, and sentiments, which may result in gathering a possible resistance against the entire slavery. In such a heavy check on the formation of family bondage, Jacobs's spoke persona, Brent adopts several strategies, which not only help but also construct her identity and liberate herself as well as her children from the claws of slavery. Thus, this paper examines how the emergence of motherhood becomes the prime factor for negotiating and constructing self-identity, not for herself– Brent but also for her children, out of nothing– inheritance. Moreover, it has created awareness among the communities that despise slavery against slavery, afterward uprooting slavery forever.

Keywords: Slavery, Masters, Unqualified-Voice, Motherhood, Sisterhood, Self-Making, Strategies, Playing Dead, Resistance, Negotiation, Freedom, Agency, Owning

Slavery is a site of endless suffering and a lawless apartheid regime for the black people, where there is the existence of laws, of course, but only to hijack the legal rights of the colored people, who and whose lives are nothing but equated with economic values just like domestic animals: cows, goats, buffaloes, etc. These domestic animals are nothing to the owner unless they have any economic value (though religiously, the cow, in the animal category contextually in India, upholds a high position to some extent, even better than a human being, because people kill each other for the cow. Hence, the value of a human being is considered less than the value of a cow). Thereby, the slave remains outside of the law and does not qualify for human rights within the framework of slavery. Both males and females cannot construct any form of agency and authoritative subjectivity, which makes them docile subjects. What makes the slaves more vulnerable is that they do have a lack of cultural heritage and of an established family linkage, which generally turns out to be a source of the power of resistance against any form of tyranny or oppression, because it does not stand only as a source of power but as a space that accommodates all the oppressive subjects for a union to fight against any form of oppression collectively. Despite having a narrow space and a narrow escape from the claws of oppressive slavery and despite not having cultural inheritance, *this* article *argues* how Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs's spoke persona, reclaims and reconstructs a self– a self eventually rolls with freedom and smiles with freedom:

The word family is laden with imagery. For some, it brings to mind warm, supportive thoughts scenes of chatty dinners, laughter-filled holidays, and comforting embraces...For some, the term family suggests a motto or a call to action – family members work hard, they stick together, or they prioritize the well-being of the group over the individual...When family members communicate, they enact their relationships. It is through communication that family members create mental models

of family life and through communication that those models endure over time and across generations (Vangelisti 1).

The idea of the family laid out by Anita L. Vangelisti in her book *The Routledge Handbook of Family Communication* is largely missing in the slave families. The slaves are made too penurious to afford such chatty dinners and the supply of warm support to each other among the family members within the framework of slave families. The slaves themselves cannot afford to take care of their own well-being, let alone take care of their children and wives, and establish communication, which is responsible for developing good bondage among the family members. Vangelisti argues, “communication is the vehicle through which family members establish, maintain, and dissolve their intimate relationships...Children’s relationships with their parents are influenced by both the amount and the type of interaction that takes place in those relationships” (qtd. In Vangelisti 2). The slaveholders rigidly control the communication among the members of the slave families so that good bondage cannot ever grow among the slaves, which is also a strategy for the White slaveholders to maintain slavery for so long because any form of suppression whether physical or mental keeps coming from the oppressors until sufficient resistance is deployed against it and halt it completely. Thereby, the slaves are barred and thrown away in different plantations before they can form the idea of a family, which also leads to the discontinuity of their families’ development, and eventually results in the exiguousness of the cultural heritage in the slave colonies.

For slave children, since they are the byproducts of slavery where the slaves do not legally possess their bodies, the children are soon informed about their enslaved subjectivity once their childhood is over. As in the novel, Brent suggests that she has come to know that she is a slave only when her mother dies, “When I was six years old, my mother” died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk about me, that I was a slave” (Jacobs 9) The same case may not be applicable, as it remains in imagination while coming to a consensus idea, whether, at all, all the slave children experience the same treatment as Brent did. But still, her hardship starts at six, which is not the age of accumulation of noxious experience of slavery, and it is the age of playing with her friends and cherishing memories, which would help her construct the later phase of her life, as is seen in William Black poems *Song of Innocence* where the child cherishes his childhood and collect memories rolling at the lap of nature. So, Brent’s experience of childhood (when her mother dies) has been as perilous as the rest of the other slave children because (i) first, they do not have a stable family culture, and (ii) second, the father does not have much to play within the domain of a slave family, and (iii) third, the economic role of the fathers has been robbed and labelled as equal as female. The family culture of a slave is not a general idea of a family as we generally conceive, for instance, parents living with their children where everyone uninterruptedly plays each role: a husband supports his family by playing his economic role as well as offering parenting love to children, a mother connects the whole family with the thread of love and care, and children to play their role being the epitome of the outcome of a healthy relationship cultivated in a good family. In other words, reciprocity and a supporting system are ubiquitous and unavoidably necessary things to formulate a good family. However, all such required elements are abundantly missing in the

slaves' families; Linda Brent also says, "...that slaves had no right to any family ties of their own; that they were created merely to wait upon the family of the mistress" (Jacobs 42). The slaves' legal status has compelled them to be ad-hoc role players – serving their White masters only; other than that, the slaves are forbidden to have any wish for other roles, which occludes the slaves constructing a bonding family, and even the slaves are scattered from one plantation to another, especially the male slaves which separates the entire construct of a family (husband, wife and children). Jacobs writes, "And now came the trying hour for that drove of human beings, driven away like cattle, to be sold they knew not where. Husbands were torn apart from wives, parents from children, never to look upon each other again this side of the grave. There was wringing of hands and cries of despair" (Jacobs 119). Morrissey writes, "slave's legal status as property and the master's as owner that finally undermined marriage and family formation". After the birth of a slave child, the father has no role to play in the family, "Lacking a basis in social and economic exchange, marriages failed to form or endure" (Morrissey); as the father is barred from performing his economic, protective, and caring role, it attenuates even the minimum importance of a father other than the sex in the framework of a slave family. Brents also mentions, "...for the husband of a slave has no power to protect her" (Jacobs 42). The development of a caring father role between a father and a child is even absent in imagination, let alone happen in real in the slave colony, "Slavery destroyed males' marital "authority", leading to demoralization and continuing irresponsibility of West Indian men" (qtd. in Morrissey).

The identity of a slave as well as a mother contests and struggles exhaustively because a slave is someone who is lawfully not his/her own and subjected to his/her master's wish, whose self is legally withdrawn from the concept of a human being and reduced to mere economic values. In other words, human values are empty in the idea of a slave but an economic equation. On the contrary, a mother is someone who is a woman first, and then the ownership of children either biologically or non-biologically. The idea of a mother does not come alone with biological ownership or end at just giving birth to children; it mostly comes with the holy responsibilities of upbringing and protecting children from any harm. It is a motherly instinct to shield her children from any danger. However, a slave woman cannot uphold two identities—slave and mother simultaneously; even if she does, does with perpetual struggles and sufferings— a disavowal of motherhood must yield to the idea of a slave; she cannot perform her motherhood role always— protecting her children from the masters, who own her. Jacobs's spoke persona Linda Brent delineates one of the slaves, a wretched mother who has seven children— all of her children are put on the auction block and sold away to different slave traders. At last, the unfortunate slave mother, who biologically owns seven children, though not by the law, now has none but only a desperate wish to die. Jacobs writes, "On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her, but they took all...She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?" (18)". No words or wishes can be more soothing and blessing than a straightforward wish to God to grant her death because once she dies, she will not have to watch her children being tortured or sold away from one master to another.

What is more tormenting for her is that Motherhood cannot perform her holy role – protecting her children from the white masters. The thing that must be comprehended here is that the self (she), who does not even own herself if she still breeds anything, must also not have legal rights. Within the framework of slavery, the idea of motherhood does not exist either by the law or the custom of slavery: first, slave women are mere products of sexual pleasure for both the white masters and the black slave men (because the slave men are forced not to be able to perform their fatherly roles). Second, even sex with black is illicit and prohibited until their masters grant them to have it with the black slave, or the white masters make it either by manipulating or threatening. Still, the masters prefer their slave women to marry within the same master's slave stock. That is why Dr. Flint recommends Brent to be married to one of his slaves when she tells about her lover—a free colored man, “If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves” (Jacobs 43). But it is done with an evil aim to keep slavery perpetually alive by expanding their slave stocks, and also the slave children make their masters' pockets heavy since the slaves are considered property only. Jacobs writes, “Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals” (55). The slave women are more useful than the slave men for two reasons: first, in general aspect, all slaves regardless of their gender identities are only considered from an economic point of view; second, the slave women are useful to their masters in satisfying their (white) sexual pleasure, whereas the slave men are beneficial only for physical labor. Since the act of sex for slave women is illicit and lawfully illegal, the outcome of it is also regarded as sinful as hell. Amid such narrow space and a narrow escape from the regime of slavery, Linda channelizes and weaponizes her weakness into an indomitable spirit, where her motherhood becomes an endless source of power to fight until she eventually embraces the long-awaited freedom.

The entrance of motherhood is a period of negotiation for freedom, not only for herself but also for children, because, for Brent, she realizes the gravity of her freedom only when she becomes the mother of her first child – Benjamin, “[M]otherhood becomes the means by which Jacobs represents both her evolving understanding of her identity as a slave and the extreme violence to which she is subjected because of that identity” (qtd. in Li 20). Before the birth of Benjamin, the conception of death has been a celebrated idea for freedom in the slave colony; they (the slaves) believe that if anything makes a slave free from deadly suffering, it is nothing but death because, after death, a slave's body becomes of no earthly use (since the productiveness of the black bodies flaw) to the White masters. The currency of death has not been considered the end of life but rather the beginning of freedom. Just like what we have seen in “The Rime of Ancient Mariner,” the mariner cannot but consume the unutterable suffering and go through life in-death experience, which verdicts that death is clinically (Assisted Suicide)¹ preferable to paddling life with the hellish sufferings. Thus, the mariner writes his experience:

An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that

Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die (Coleridge).

However, the emergence of Benjamin changes the premeditated conception of death—finding freedom in death; rather, Brent bypasses death for a substitute, which is fighting and resisting the oppression of slavery. A form of energy erupts out of the appearance of her child, Brent says, “I heard the doctor say I could not survive till morning. I had often prayed for death; but now I did not want to die, unless my child could die too” (Jacobs 68). The factory of all Brent’s resisting power is “motherhood and her children”. Now, her children have become the source of power to struggle for a life to live and freedom to achieve. The same thing we have noticed in D.H. Lawrence’s novel *Sons and Lovers* of how Mrs. Morel shifts her focus on life from her husband, Morel, a miner, to her sons, especially William – the oldest son and later Paul when William dies, when she becomes embittered with her drunken and obdurate husband.

The critics argue that Brent must have a clear mapping of her sexual advances with a white man, who has sufficient influence to change the game of her enslavement; she uses one White (Mr. Sands) to liberate herself from another white man (Dr. Flint), “The central incident in Jacobs’s narrative is her choice to have a relationship with Mr[.] Sands, a white man she loves; this choice paradoxically makes her both a victim and a heroine” (Emsley). Her (Brent) first lover is a free colored man whom she loves and wants to marry, but Flint’s intervention has failed her in giving meaning to her first love, and the failure of her first love leads Brent to the realization of her sexual autonomy, which results in improvisations: i) it can perhaps be used to meet her sexual appeal, ii) it will help to unlock her freedom as well as her children’s freedom because Brent clearly mentions it that Mr. Sands promises whatever will happen in future, he will make the children free, “ He [Mr. Sands] promised to care for my child, and to buy me, be the conditions what they might” (Jacobs 65). Brent knows that her advances to Mr. sands will serve the purpose; thus, she indulges not only her sexual appeal but also perhaps a possible way to negotiate her freedom; and iii) it is an act of probable sweet revenge against Flint; Brent knows that if she does love and marries anyone other than a White man, she and her children are sure to doom in slavery forever because the slave does not have authoritative agency as well economic stability and they are legally subordinated to the White, but if she carries her sexual advances with a white man, then there is a chance to extract her purpose – to buy her Children who will be her inheritance. Moreover, Flint cannot threaten Mr. sands the way he has threatened her first lover, a free colored man, and further, Mr. Sands is an unmarried man, which discharges the probability of betrayal because if he had a wife, due to his wife’s pressure, Mr. Sands would not stick to his given promises; then the act of Brent’s sexual advances with Mr. Sand would have been for mere pleasure.

Harriet Jacobs uses the strategy of the underground hideout, which makes Brent’s survival technique ostensibly unique and effective, which perhaps can be even compared with an ambush fight technique used by the soldiers to sabotage the enemy's attack and change the climate of the war. She has stayed in the garret for seven years just to wait for the finest and

the most convenient moment to flee to the North; Jacobs writes, “HARDLY EXPECT THAT the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years” (166). Brents makes her invisible by hiding in the garret, which offers her advantages— she can hear everything and decode almost all the plans that come out from Flint’s family as the location of the garret is near the street, which allows Brent to hear everything when people talk about the issue vis-a-vis Flint and her. Therefore, she has been in an advantageous position in the battle of self-making and resisting white power. The entire journey of Brent to freedom is accompanied by anxiety and fear, as it is uncertain whether she will outfight or succumb to her old master. The anxiety and fear are not just about winning victory over her master— Dr. Flint but the slavery itself as a whole; by doing that, she believes that all black men and women, along with her children, will be free from the claws of slavery. What drives Brent most is the wild wish to live with her children above the law of slavery, “She equates freedom with an ability to love her children” (Li). The constant anxiety revolves around the idea of being able to love her children, where Brent exerts her feelings, “I thought to myself that I might perhaps never see my daughter again, and I had a great desire that she should look upon me, before she went, that she might take my image with her in her memory” (Jacobs 155). Her children, both Ellen and Benjamin, are a ready-made source of tension because, in slave colonies, the children sometimes become the whole economy of emotional hijacking. Flint threatens Brent several times that he will sell away her children if she does not comply with his offer. Thus, the children for Linda Brent are not only a source of power to continuously fight for freedom but also a source of tension as they— her two children— Ellen and Benjamin, and Brent herself – are parted in three directions: Ellen has been taken by Sands’s cousin, Benjamin lives with Brent’s grandmother and Brent in New York. To be together in one place is considerably challenging for Brent, which results in unrest and uncertainty.

Georgia Kreiger compares Brent’s playing dead with Jesus Christ's resurrection, “the trope of Christian death and resurrection was a common model of self-transformation in slave narratives. The condition of the slave is portrayed as a death from which the individual eventually arises to a new life in freedom. Speaking as a new, resurrected self, the narrator consigns the past to a metaphoric grave” (609). Self-sacrifice is associated with Jesus Christ’s resurrection because Christ sacrificed himself for the sake of humanity to save his people. Thus, the death that Christ embraces by relinquishing his life is the embodiment of a new life, a new self, and a new entity. Similarly, after 7 years of playing dead, Linda Brent decomposes her spirit in the South so that a new life with meaning can be found in the North. Undoubtedly, the South is a battlefield from where Linda spoke person of Jacobs must survive to outfight, not just by escaping from the battlefield – South but by abolishing slavery well and through.

Brent’s mother becomes more concerned and wearier when she learns that her second child – Ellen is a girl, “When they told me my new-born-baby was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women” (Jacobs 86). From her experience, Brent knows how terrible slavery is for a woman. Once the slave girls enter their womanhood, they then become prey to their masters and their master’s

sons. When the slave women grow young, their bodies become the avenue of extended vulnerabilities. Their bodies turn out to be their enemies. All these attributes Brent steering her plan to liberate herself and her children from the tyranny of slavery. Even after stepping into the Freeland – the North, she is reminded that she and her children are yet to be free completely, which leads her to earn herself (her freedom owning legally) first so that she can earn her children’s freedom as well. Ellen says, “When will you take me to live with you...In order to protect my children, it was necessary that I [Brent] should own myself” (Jacobs 186). After meeting her daughter several times, Brent is thrown that drilling question, for which they have been lingering and longing, when they can live together because when she comes to the Freeland, Brent learns that her daughter is not completely free– first, she is yet to be able to support her children financially and second, Mr. Sands has not completely freed Ellen. Brent says, “Mr. Sands had not kept his promise to emancipate them. I had also been deceived about Ellen. What security had I with regard to Benjamin? I felt that I had none. In order to protect my children, it was necessary that I should own myself. I called myself free...” (Jacobs 187).

Jacobs’s self-making strategy is taking a step back and returning with the expounding power to keep fighting again until another moment comes to do the same and, finally, becomes a free woman. Jacobs’s demonstrated strategies are no less than guerrilla strategies². She gathers support from the locals, especially First and Second Mrs. Bruce, to fight with Flint, mostly the whole slaveholders and slave-traders community of the South, and she keeps negotiating with Flint to buy her Freedom, which she has succeeded at last and has marked her self-making journey.

To speak from the position of the not supposed to speak is to submit to an even more fundamental disqualification: that in speaking from that position one relinquishes the possibility of thought or of being thought insofar as one (merely) provides the material conditions (in speech that is, as it were, beneath speech; speech borne in a somasonority that refuses to disavow itself) for another’s thought and for another’s being thought (Moten 217).

Jacobs is well aware of her position (which is an unrecognized and unqualified voice that lacks even the materiality of speech) even in the North from where she constructs her autobiographical voice, which is, to some extent, dependent on her targeted readers – the White people, especially the White women. First, she must make her narrative accounts authentic by positioning herself in a neutral stance. Brent also has to make sure that her narratorial voice must not fail her purpose because her central aim is not just telling her accounts of life. However, the core objective is to uproot slavery from the South and save humanity from the claws of the slaveholders. Thus, Brent must improvise some strategies that may serve her purposes well; among other strategies that I have already discussed, one strategy is a sentimental autobiographical narrative to fit in the larger context of conversations. Sarah Emsley writes, “Jacobs employs a number of narrative strategies in order to convert her readers to her cause and to maintain her own position of authority. She chooses the genre of sentimental domestic fiction as a way of organizing her autobiography” (146). The sentimental domestic narrative establishes an effective communication between the author and the audience, which

offers an advantage to the author to steer her narratorial voice accordingly; However, Emsley argues that it problematizes Jacobs because her narrative often shifts from personal experience to the general problem of the slaves (146). Her personal accounts of Jacobs also amount to the whole economy of slavery and slave's life experience. However, the point here is to note whether her personal accounts dominate and overrule the general problem of slavery because it raises two doubts: first, it is an autobiographical narrative; thus, "I's" experience is also necessary and summoning. Second, the ultimate objective of her writing is to abolish slavery where "I's" experience, along with other general black slaves' experiences too, is a required thing.

Another unique use of language is Brent's sisterhood. The application of sisterhood is not just assimilative but also effective because it places others on the subjective experience. In other words, the term "Sisterhood" encompasses the concern of women in a common ground, and thus, it offers a shared space to communicate. Further, it creates a sense of belonging (relationship); when Jacobs addresses her readers as sisters, she establishes a relationship between herself and her readers. Emsley writes, "As a political writer, Jacobs needs not only to capture her readers' attention but to establish a sisterhood of sympathetic women and to inspire them to act in aid of abolition. Jacobs states that she desires to make "the women of the North" realize the condition of "women in the South," and to convince "the people of the Free States what slavery really is" (qtd. In Emsley 148). Jacobs is also concerned about her private and public life— veiling and unveiling. The autobiography demands certain accounts of "self" to be public so that it can claim its purpose, "one's reflections on both one's self and one's world cannot be one's own alone: you and your version of your world must be public, recognizable enough to be negotiable in the 'conversation of lives'" (qtd. in Emsley 145). Jacobs confesses her shameful action— sexual advances with Mr. Sands, and she writes, "And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may" (Jacobs 59-60). The veracity and courage for avowal of the accounts of "self" necessitate to make the autobiography stand. Hence, Jacobs's confession testifies to the authenticity of her autobiographical voice to mark its claim, though, to some extent, she also maintains veiling. However, some critics argue that the way Brent gives the accounts of Dr. Flint's seduction is an ambiguous testimony where Jacobs says, "foul Words" in her ear (30). She also mentions how divisive Flint is to take his job done. "He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes" (Jacobs 30). Jacobs has never been articulative explicitly about Flint's sexual assault. However, only verbal abuse is mentioned, which leaves the readers on a suspicious note that Jacobs may hide some of her secrets, especially related to Dr. Flint's sexual outfight over her pride of being able to eschew Flint's motive successfully. Jacobs perhaps hides secrets about Flint's sexual assault because her entire economy of woman's empowerment stands on the idea of being able to resist Dr. Flint (the patriarchal agent) and the tyranny of slavery of white supremacy in the South as well.

However, Jacobs sticks to her self-making journey despite all perilous suffering and the constant test of her motherhood. All the strategies she has adopted and the support she receives from the white women in the North, especially first Mrs. Bruce and second Mrs. Bruce, without their help, maybe Brent may not have become a free woman and may not have gained her agency, have contributed to her self-making journey and have made it possible without inheritance— cultural, social, and family.

Endnotes

1. According to Wikipedia, generally the term refers to “PAS or Physician-Assisted-Suicide”. It is done, when a person has a terminal disease, which will cause certain death soon or may be quite later and is causing unendurable pain and sufferings, by providing lethal dose of drugs to halt further sufferings of the patient.
2. For details, see wikipedia

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