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Harriet Jacobs happened to be the very first woman to author a slave narrative in the United States (Harriet 279). Before the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, several African-American women, born free, portrayed their struggles and journeys in autobiographies, which also featured the trials and triumphs of other women during that time period (Harriet 279). Harriet Jacobs was born a slave in a small town in North Carolina around 1813 (Harriet 279). During her early teenage years Jacobs begin to realize that puberty and becoming a woman wasn't going to be something to embrace and cherish, it was almost considered the beginning of a nightmare. Her master, Dr. Flint begin to sexually harass and abuse Jacobs during these years, which made Jacobs desperate and she knew she had to find a way out (Harriet 279). Although gender started off as being a sort of antagonist for her situation, Jacobs quickly turned it around, and in turn decided to embrace her sexuality, and used it to assist her in various ways throughout the narrative.

Jacob's, being that she was the narrator of her story, gave almost a front seat view or look into not solely the world of slavery, but specifically, life as a female slave. Slavery for females had almost a whole different meaning than it had for males. Granted, both genders had no freedom, but for females it was sometimes more than that and much deeper. At one point in the narrative Jacobs clearly stated, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications

peculiarly their own” (294). Jacobs devoted a whole chapter named, the trials of girlhood, in her narrative very early into the narrative, probably because she wanted her readers to know that girlhood was the beginning of her trials, and it would be the start of her struggles.

It was when she turned fifteen years of age, which she said was a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl, her master begin harassing her sexually (Jacobs 287). Although she was still young, she was no longer a child, and she wasn't ignorant to the implications of the foul words he would say to her (Jacobs 287). She had to live under the same roof with the man who was violating her daily and slowly carving away at her innocence. This made the situation a lot worse because in reality, and in that time period, she technically was Dr. Flint's "property" and like he would tell her, she had to subject to his will in all things (Jacobs 288). Jacobs said, "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 from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men" (288). This statement was very profound, because in it Jacobs plainly stated that it really didn't matter what the color or shade of her skin was, she was in her masters control, and she even made it more broad at the end, and touched on the use of gender. She stated that these things "bear the shape of men." I noticed that Jacobs was very general when she said men, and she didn't choose to say white men; she solely said men. This was interesting because it showed how although her master, who was also the one abusing her, was white, she felt that it was a violation or disgrace to men of any race, and that during that time women were lower and less than males, whether the male be white or black.

Jacobs also explained that sexuality and being a female is also the cause of some of the hatred that the Mistresses possess for young slave girls. She said that by the time the girl is twelve, it is around that age when she begins to gain an understanding of the underlining

meanings of things, and hidden messages. The child will become prematurely knowing in evil things (Jacobs 288). After knowing all of this and having to learn each bit of it on her own, Jacobs knew she had to do something. She called this period of her life, one that she would gladly forget if she could (Jacobs 290). “The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world (Jacobs 290). After that statement, she concluded by boldly saying, she knew what she did, and she did it with deliberate calculation. Although much of the talk about how she used her sexuality in different ways, was talked of in a way that left a lot to the imagination, those two quotes basically affirmed that she indeed knew exactly what it was she did, and in her mind she felt she had no other way around it. She met a gentleman by the name of Sands, who showed a bit of affection towards her, which led to courting, which led to Jacobs getting the idea of having children by this man, in hopes that he’d purchase her from her master. The language used throughout Jacobs’s explanation of these accounts was very hard to understand at first, and I wasn’t quite sure why she was so reserved in the way she was telling the reader what all she had did. Toni Morrison did an excellent job in *Rootedness* explaining some of the reasons Jacobs, and other authors chose to narrate occurrences in this way. Jacobs described all the sexual scenes in a way that Morrison said “are not clinical, or explicit- so the reader can bring his own sexuality to the scene and participate in it personally” (2288).

In Jacob’s autobiography that preceded her narrative, it said that she felt obliged to disclose through her firsthand example the instances that woman suffered in slavery. Many men, such as Frederick Douglass, had called attention to the sexual victimization of slave women by white men. But these men didn’t say much about how slave women resisted this type of

exploitation and tried to exercise a measure of freedom within the restrictions of their oppression (Harriet 279).

I amend the fact that Jacobs refused to hide the truth or behind fear and embarrassment. She used her sexuality as a weapon against the violence that took place back then towards her, and so many other women who didn't have the chance to share their stories with the world (Harriet 279).

Works Cited

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