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Degradation of The Female Slave in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs

Introduction

"*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" is a powerful autobiographical narrative written by Harriet Jacobs. The source sheds light on the brutal realities of slavery and sexual abuse in America during the mid-19th century. The story is told through the eyes of Linda Brent, an enslaved African-American woman. Linda uses the injustices and dehumanization inflicted upon enslaved women during this time to serve as a powerful testament to the strength and resilience of the African-American spirit. Despite the horrors she faced, Linda refused to be broken and fought tirelessly for her empowerment and liberation. This research paper will dive deeper into Linda's experience with sexual abuse, exploitation, and usage of power dynamics and control, including how she ultimately found the strength to take control of her own life and achieve freedom for herself and her children. The inconsistent and unequal power dynamics in *Incidents* present themselves in various forms of abuse, control, and manipulation. In the face of these unfortunate events, our protagonist, Linda reverses these roles and acquires her own knowledge, power, and identity while showing her endurance and resilience, ultimately showing readers that knowledge is power.

Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things

Many enslaved individuals would experience sexual abuse, mainly at the hands of their white slaveholders. One of the most significant incidents of control and abuse was when Linda's owner, Dr. Flint, began making unwanted sexual advances toward her when she was only fifteen

years old. Despite Linda's repeated refusal, Dr. Flint continued to harass her, even as far as threatening her and her family if she did not comply with his wishes. Although most readers of *Incidents* would feel that Linda's significant trauma and pain occurred when she became a mother, after closer examination, it shows that while she was very young, she observed many scenes of control and abuse towards other African-American girls and herself. Young girls were constantly seen as "fresh meat" that would have no punishment if a white man were to commit sexual abuse. In *Incidents*, Jacobs mentions, "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"(Ch.17). This phrase implies that enslaved men have more power and autonomy than enslaved women, who are subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation by their owners. Wilma King, the author of "*Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things*," examines historical sexual abuse experienced by African-American women during slavery and freedom in the United States. Throughout her text, she mentions numerous young girls who experience sexual abuse, rape, forced labor in the sex trade, coerced concubinage, and other forms of sexual exploitation. King states, "Enslaved females endured "wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications," which, according to Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, were "peculiarly their own"(King 176). In this quote, King suggests, enslaved women endured many sorrows, torture, and humiliation. She further points out that Jacobs, in *Incidents*, mentions that those women are "peculiarly their own." This quote interprets the gendered portion of black women who were abused while also suggesting that each enslaved girl had individual experiences, feelings, and circumstances that made their enslavement particularly difficult. In this instance, most African American girls and women were subjected to sexual abuse, harassment,

and rape. Each of these experiences created a "peculiarly their own." The phrase emphasizes the experiences of enslaved girls and women while underscoring the inhumane nature of slavery as a system that imposed suffering and hardship on individuals in discount and personal ways. King also points out that the interpretation is more prominent, including those committing senseless evil acts. Moreover, the phrase, "She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. 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" (*Incidents* ch.5). After closer examination; we learn many enslaved girls tried to resist receiving firsthand knowledge about "evil things" by avoiding and escaping potential predators. Jacobs states her circumstances will force her to grow up too quickly and be exposed to things no child should experience. When she says, "prematurely knowing in evil things," She will be forced to learn about the darker aspects of life and the world at a very young age. She will have to confront the harsh realities of slavery, including the cruelty and brutality accompanying it. The passage also suggests that young girls will constantly live in fear at the sound of the slaveholders' footfall. This fear will likely be due to the constant threat of punishment or abuse she may face as an enslaved woman. The final sentence, "If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse," suggests that even if the girl is physically attractive, it will only worsen her situation. She may become the target of unwanted advances or attention from her enslaved, which could lead to even greater suffering and exploitation. In *Incidents*, Jacobs states through Linda, "For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother and the good mistress of my childhood. 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”. This phrase coheres with the previous mention of Jacobs “prematurely knowing evil things”. We see Dr.Flint attempting to make his advances toward Linda and fill her mind with “foul images,” destroying the “old principles” instilled in her. Jacobs shows one of Linda’s first instances of realization of the power dynamics between herself and Dr.Flint. Although she wanted to avoid “prematurely knowing of evil things,” there was only so much power and say she had over whether or not that occurred.

Furthermore, numerous children and teenage girls were cautioned to stay close to older women to deter men from the hunt. Unfortunately, the women could not promise any protection against white predators. Similarly, we see this with Linda and her grandmother and later on with Linda and her daughter Ellen. As a young girl, Linda notices Dr.Flint is scared around her grandmother, and she sees her grandmother as a place of refuge and safety. Similarly, much later in life, she learns Ellen is being pursued in the same notion Linda was with Dr.Flint in her early years. Linda’s motherly instincts want to protect her daughter from the “evil things”: however, she knows her maternal duties will require resistance for survival.

Jacobs also brings to light the unfair and unequal protection against rape that differed between white and enslaved African American women. In “*Interracial Sexual Abuse and Legal Subjectivity in Antebellum Law and Literature*,” Andrea Stone suggests, “Legislation extending protection to female slaves against rape would have undermined their dual role, outlined by Hortense Spillers, as producers and reproducers”(70). This statement expresses enslaved women were only seen as reproducers, so they, in a sense, could be raped and sexually abused. On the other hand, white women were protected by laws, and if an enslaved individual were to rape

someone of white status, they would receive death. In *Incidents*, Jacobs shows that men like Dr. Flint are not punished and have the privilege to walk away without any consequences. When there is no law against raping or sexually abusing African-American women, men like Dr. Flint can easily take advantage of that fact and continue to act viscerally. This blatant use of power shows readers that the utmost protection given to white men was evident, while enslaved African American women had zero protections and ultimately had to find one to protect themselves.

Observation of Power Dynamics

One of *Incidents* central themes is power dynamics and how they shape the lives of enslaved people and enslavers alike. Throughout the source, Linda notices and comments on the different power dynamics between different groups. She is particularly attuned to the power dynamics between the enslaved and their owners. As an enslaved woman herself, she experiences firsthand the oppressive nature of slavery and the powerlessness associated with being someone else's property. She observes how her owners use their power to control every aspect of her life, from her daily routine to her physical and emotional well-being. She also notes how enslavers use violence and the threat of violence to maintain their power over enslaved individuals.

In addition, Linda's experience of black girlhood is evident to be constantly abusive and brutal not just by white men but also by white women, in this case, specifically the Mistress. Linda experienced physical abuse at the hands of Dr. Flint's wife, who was jealous of her husband's attention toward Linda. Mrs. Flint would often slap and hit Linda and even went so far as to throw a heavy weight at her, narrowly missing her head. Mrs. Flint's envy and bitterness toward Linda become apparent as she uses her power to humiliate and degrade her. In *Incidents*, the phrase mentions, "I had entered my sixteenth year, and every day it became more apparent

that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint. Angry words frequently passed between her and her husband. He had never punished me himself, and he would not allow anybody else to punish me. In that respect, she was never satisfied; but, in her angry moods, no terms were too vile for her to bestow upon me” (ch.6). This suggests that Linda was 16 years old and is now observing and understanding the power dynamics between her, the mistress, and Dr.Flint more in-depth. Perhaps Jacobs shows us this narrative of jealousy and spitefulness to incorporate a particular white privilege and victimhood Mrs.Flint portrays. Author Holly Blackford argues that Jacobs uses the figures of the master, the mistress, and the slave mother to convey the different ways orality is used to maintain or resist power within the institution of slavery.

According to Blackford, the master, and mistress use their orality to reinforce their power over enslaved individuals physically and psychologically. Some examples of this assertion of dominance include threats, insults, and other forms of severe punishments in cases of disobedience. We see this with how Mrs.Flint treats Linda privately in a very negative manner. Additionally, they use language to justify their actions, often claiming that the treatment of their enslaved individuals is necessary for maintaining order and protecting their own property. This reinforces the idea that enslaved people are not fully human and do not have the same rights as their white slaveholders (316 - 320). Conversely, Linda uses her orality to resist the slaveholder's power and preserve her sense of identity and agency. Blackford argues that the slave mother is a significant figure in Jacob’s narrative because she represents a form of often overlooked resistance. In addition, the enslaved mother uses her voice to comfort her children and teach them their African heritage values and traditions. By doing so, she can give her children a sense of identity and agency that is not dependent on their relationship with their white slaveholders.

In conjunction with the previous passage, Blackford argues Jacobs's narrative is a powerful example of how language can be used to resist oppression and assert one's own agency. Linda's awareness of these power dynamics is crucial to her journey toward freedom. She recognizes to escape slavery; she must navigate these complex power dynamics and find ways to gain power and agency. She uses her intelligence and resourcefulness to outwit her owners and find allies among other enslaved people and sympathetic whites. Linda's observations of power dynamics in *Incidents* highlight how slavery was not just a system of economic exploitation but a complex social and psychological system that shaped the lives of everyone involved. By illuminating these power dynamics, the source offers a powerful critique of slavery and its enduring legacy in American society.

Knowledge is Power

Linda migrates into motherhood, and the experience of motherhood while being enslaved frequently appears as Linda attempts to figure out her values and beliefs of being a mother and the detrimental effect of enslavement while being a mother had on her. She strives for survival and resilience by incorporating knowledge of power dynamics. Jacobs portrays Linda as very intelligent and tactful with her decisions in her new role as a mother. When experiencing motherhood, she faces a further complex and challenging role for an enslaved woman such as herself. Despite these challenges, Jacobs argues that motherhood was also a powerful form of resistance against slavery. Jacob portrays the idea that Lindas' observations of her past have come to help her when she is experiencing motherhood. Linda mentions, "I pressed her to my heart, then held her away from me to take a look at her. She had changed a good deal in the two years

since I parted from her. Signs of neglect could be discerned by eyes less observing than a Mother's"(Ch.32). This compelling quote represents Linda and her motherly instincts and observations of Ellen. With motherhood comes solid maternal instincts for not just your children but others as well. Jacobs is keen on creating imagery and an adequate tone throughout this passage to represent the concept of her motherly instincts and observations. As soon as she reunites with Ellen after two extremely long years, she embraces her ever so strongly. Jacobs' word choice of "pressed" suggests a warm embrace between the pair. Jacobs uses "pressed" to not sound mundane and generic in her writing but unique and realistic. Like any other mother, she wants to look at her child to see what has changed. Linda could tell she was not adequately cared for and had been "Neglected". Jacobs uses the word "Neglected," which immediately makes us think of "child neglect," however, Ellen is enslaved and is dehumanized, so therefore, in the enslavers' eyes, she was "treated like a slave," Linda's biggest fear, suggesting she was not cared for. The phrase "eyes less observing than a mother" shows Linda was aware a "mother's eye" is keener on their own children than a stranger's. Jacobs emphasizes the power dynamics between Linda, Ellen, and Ellen's enslavers to the readers. Ellen's enslavers have absolute power over Ellen and have disregarded her for the last two years, leaving her unkempt. This realization makes Linda feel powerless regarding wanting to take care of Ellen because, ultimately, it is not up to her now. However, this occurrence empowers her to continue to work towards true freedom and a home for herself and her children.

Jacobs also discusses enslaved mothers' sacrifices for their children, including enduring abuse, risking punishment, and even facing death to protect them. She highlights how enslaved mothers employed various strategies, such as teaching their children to read, passing down oral

histories, and instilling values of freedom and equality to resist the dehumanizing effects of slavery and nurture a sense of resistance and resilience in their children. Linda's grandmother quotes, "Ah, my child," said she, "don't trust too much to him. Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment. If you go, you will make me miserable the short time I have to live. You would be taken and brought back, and your sufferings would be dreadful. Remember poor Benjamin. Do give it up, Linda. Try to bear a little longer. Things may turn out better than we expect"(ch.16). This phrase represents the conflicting dynamics, values, and opinions of both Linda and her grandmother regarding true motherhood. Linda plans to hide, hoping Dr. Flint will sell her children to Mrs. Sands. Linda is packing when her grandma enters and berates Linda for worrying about her and leaving her children. Linda feels her first obligation as a mom is to free her babies from slavery, even with such significant risk. On the other hand, her grandmother views motherhood as lessening the cruelty of slavery as much as one can without taking risks to escape. Linda's grandmother expects Linda to "Bear a little longer". Jacobs argues, not only were there different power dynamics among enslavers and enslaved individuals but among enslaved families and communities as well.

We further see the different dynamics between Linda and her grandmother in "*Motherhood as Resistance*". The author, Stephanie Li, talks about how Linda's grandmother believes slavery was done by the "will of god," They can do nothing about it or, instead, face detrimental consequences. Linda's grandmother feared Linda acted like a child would, reckless and carefree. She accuses Linda of "Abandoning" her children when it comes to Linda going in and out of homes instead of just "standing" with her kids and "suffering" with them. Linda,

however, feels the opposite. Jacobs shows her audience that motherhood is a very empowering part of Linda's life, and her determination to obtain freedom for her children reminds us of such. In addition, it shows her the underlying strengths she acquired her whole life. Linda's external and internal conflict on true motherhood is heightened with this conversation between them; however, she realizes she must make her own motherly decision regarding her children and what is best for them since they have no one to advocate for them. Jacobs showed resistance against patriarchal oppression. Li mentions, "For Jacobs, motherhood is not simply a politically astute literary trope and a means of describing the abuses of slavery specific to women; it is also a crucial form of female empowerment"(pg. 15). This quote represents Jacob's intent behind *Incidents* and her dependency on the concept of motherhood maximizes prevailing beliefs in the devotion and power of the enslaved mother while suggesting that a woman's sexuality offers a vital means of "resistance against patriarchal oppression." In addition, Jacobs argues that an enslaved mothers strength, love, and wisdom were critical in the resistance against slavery and the pursuit of freedom.

Furthermore, one spring, Linda goes to England to accompany Mr.Bruce and Mary to see their relatives since Mrs.Bruce has died. She is saddened by the news and sad to leave her children behind. However, while in London, she feels the sensations of "pure, unadulterated freedom" and "during all that time, I never saw the slightest symptom of prejudice against color. Indeed, I entirely forgot it"(ch.36) for the first time. The trip to England proved to be eye-opening for Linda because it was the first time she felt genuinely secure in her freedom, and it was an opportunity for her to put her intellectual and observation skills to work. At the same time, it's painful that she constantly has to work among other families and leave her children

when she longs to build them a permanent home. Jacob eagerly shows Linda's realization of the different power dynamics in England versus—the United States. Throughout Jacob's images in these scenes, we see Linda's view of England doesn't take into complete account the country's racist advancements that were taking all over the world. However, her viewpoint emphasizes and recognizes that absolute freedom is more important to her as an African-American enslaved woman than any material superiority.

Black Girlhood & Empowerment

Jacobs shows us throughout her narrative that Linda has had her own power this entire time. She overcame adversity by using the one thing enslavers did not want enslaved individuals to learn, which was any source of knowledge. In *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* by Nazera Sadiq Wright, she argues that Black girlhood in the 19th century was shaped by oppression and agency. She states, "Black girls may be subject to harsher disciplinary interventions because they are perceived to be unruly, loud, and unmanageable" (124). This source argues that the notion that black women are viewed in a stereotypical way as "unruly," meaning "wild," and "loud and unmanageable," meaning "unglamorous and troublesome." This assumption of these characteristics deems to be unfair when it comes to saying black women are the embodiment of those descriptions. Perhaps the ideology behind calling black women these stereotypes stems from how their slaveholders' treated black women, and in a means of projection, it had unfortunately fallen upon black women that they were the ones that were "unruly." However, Linda continued to prove this trope to be incorrect. She grew to respect her elders and knew from a very young age what she wanted the most in life and would do anything

in her power she had to receive. She used her knowledge and observations to teach herself how to survive and resist enslavement. Through many setbacks, Jacobs represents a continuous empowerment gained within Linda and the audience to continue to preserve.

Conclusion

The inconsistent and unequal power dynamics in *Incidents* present themselves in various forms of abuse, control, and manipulation. In the face of these unfortunate events, our protagonist Linda reverses these roles and acquires her own knowledge, power, and identity while showing her endurance and resilience, ultimately showing readers that knowledge is power. Jacobs' narrative highlights fundamental power dynamics between women and men, enslaved women and their enslavers, and even within the enslaved communities. Jacobs's experiences as a woman in slavery were shaped by how slaveholders enforced gender roles and expectations. She was subjected to sexual harassment and abuse by her enslaver, and she describes how women were often forced to choose between protecting their virtue and their safety. Jacobs shows how and why the black female body was undermined and defeated by everyone around them. Jacobs aims to teach her audience that historically, African American women have faced unique challenges and obstacles, including systematic racism, sexism, and discrimination, that have hindered their ability to participate and succeed in society entirely.

Despite these power imbalances, Jacobs also highlights how enslaved individuals could exert agency and resist their oppressors. For example, Jacobs was able to resist her owners' power and ultimately escape from slavery with the help of abolitionists and sympathetic white allies and her own empowerment. Empowerment efforts seek to address barriers and promote

more significant equality and inclusion for African-American women. Jacob's goal of *Incidents* is to encourage other African-American women of descent to gain control of their lives and achieve tremendous societal success and influence. By empowering African-American women and all readers of this narrative, she hopes to implement more knowledge and accuracy of accounts (for her white audience) while trying to encourage, build strong communities and create a more prosperous and equitable future for African-American women. Jacob's account provides a powerful insight into the complex power dynamics that characterized the institution of slavery and the resilience and resistance of those subjected to its brutal realities, ultimately illuminating the power enslaved African-American women possessed within themselves.

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