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The Humanizing and Rhetorical Function of Motherhood in the Slave Narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Bachelor's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education -
Master's Programme

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Introduction

Harriet Jacobs' autobiographical slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* highlights the horrors endured specifically by enslaved women. The author's bold depiction of sexual abuse and the experience of motherhood play an important rhetorical role in appealing to female readers in the north, an important group to target for the objective of abolishing slavery. As is exemplified in the narrative, being a slave mother proved to be an emotionally heavy task, although motherhood was coldly exploited by slave holders as a means of sustaining their work force. This inhumane way of looking at procreation was made possible by legislation that stated that the children of enslaved women followed the "condition of the mother" and were by law slaves themselves (West and Shearer 1007). Slave women and their experiences as mothers were thus severely dehumanized by slave owners. Writing under the name of Linda Brent about her experiences as a slave mother, Jacobs nevertheless weaves in the deeply humanizing maternal feelings she possesses not only limited to her own children, but for the rest of the slave community. I argue that Jacobs' narrative of her life as a slave woman defies slavery's materialistic logic of human ownership through its humanizing portrayal of motherhood. Initially a discussion of the relation between the slave mother and her child is central for the substantiation of slave women's maternal sentiments. Furthermore, slave women reclaimed a sense of autonomy through making choices (although severely limited) about their pregnancies, which showcases their longing for human agency. Through Jacobs' reflections, we also learn of slave women's cultural understanding of gender and internalizations of virtue. Denied the chance of the idealized model of motherhood, female slaves instead created an expanded notion of motherhood with a collective upbringing of children. Their capacity to form non-biological maternal bonds demonstrate the deeply humanizing nature of slave women. Through telling her story Jacobs reveal the deeply human qualities that grow inside the possessed bodies of slave women.

The relation between the slave mother and her child

Jacobs's focus on motherhood humanizes slaves by demonstrating their maternal sentiments and the human capability they possess to form attachments. Jacobs thus defies the myths that circulated in this time, that motherhood held no emotional weight among slaves. One of the myths propagated in public discourse to justify slavery was that black women were indifferent to their children (Li 14). The brutal systems in which reproduction happened during slavery

did not, however, result in emotionless creatures unable to feel maternal instincts for their children, despite the pain caused by those instincts. Jacobs recounts, for example, the experience of a slave mother depleted with anguish over losing her children at the market. Jacobs makes clear that this heart-rending scene was a regular occurrence at the slave markets where children were routinely separated from their mothers (19). Jacobs almost longs for indifference, declaring that it would be less painful to not love in an environment where the objects of your affection can be hurt or ripped away at any given time: “Why does slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?” (38). This quote addresses her permeating fear that her children could be ripped away and sold at any time. While indifference might offer respite from the pain of separation, Jacobs emphasizes its impossibility, and thus the strength of the bonds of attachment between mother and child.

Slave mothers, including Jacobs, were significantly impacted by the sorrow of having their children enslaved. One of the ways in which slaves were dehumanized was by denying them the right to make decisions concerning the destiny of their own children (Bercuci 27). In the narrative Jacobs struggles to free her children from the chains they were born into, and thus resists the materialistic view of her children, by wanting them to possess the rights of free human beings. When Jacobs’ baby was christened, and the former mistress of her father placed a gold chain around the baby’s neck, she was not pleased with what it symbolized to her. “I wanted no chain to be fastened on my daughter, not even if its links were of gold. How earnestly I prayed that she might never feel the weight of slavery’s chain, whose iron entereth into the soul!” (76) The notion that even in a significant and celebratory situation such as the christening of your child, she is still haunted by the enslaved faith of her daughter, speaks to the great prominence of slave women’s concern for their children’s enslavement. It also addresses for the privileged non-enslaved reader that might personally associate chains with gold, and prestige, that for a slave it symbolized something entirely different.

Despite the pain motherhood inflicted upon slave women, motherhood could also act as an escape and a shelter from the otherwise arduous environment. Having children provided slave women the possibility to experience the joys of motherhood such as the ability to give and receive affection, and to comfort and nurture (West and Shearer 1009). Jacobs’ first passage in the narrative speaks to the blissful ignorance she was presented with as a young child. “I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise” (9). Slave women’s ability to shelter children from the truth of them being enslaved is a testament to the humanizing effects of their maternal sentiments. Jacobs also passed this motherly love onto

her own children, and she experienced feelings of comfort through her role as a mother, exemplified through this quotation addressing her son. “When I was most sorely oppressed, I found solace in his smiles” (61). There thus existed a profound and loving relationship between the slave mother and child, that to some degree helped mothers endure their oppression.

The relation between the slave mother and father

The sexual and romantic relationships of female slaves were heavily controlled and made complicated by the limitations of slavery. Enslaved women did not usually possess the opportunity to choose the father of their child. Even in situations where there were some autonomous choices made by the women, the background for their reproductive choices were clouded by the situation at hand. Slave women were painfully aware of the value placed on their reproductive abilities, and thus sought ways to resist the procreative plans of the slave owners. This is the case for Jacobs, who sought to take control of her own fertility in order to prove agency over her master and avoid having his children. She therefore began a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, a white lawyer, with the futile hope that he might free the two children they ended up having. It was normal for the enslaved woman to seek this fragment of control over her life, through prioritizing her children (1008). Motherhood could therefore be used to avoid sexual exploitation from slave owners, in addition to pregnancy being used as a way to achieve a sense of autonomy. This need for autonomy among slave women is also deeply humanizing, portraying them as individuals of agency, and with a will to control their own lives.

Although Jacobs’ narrative exhibit women exercising some autonomy over their reproductive choices, this autonomy was primarily motivated by self-preservation, and stripped of any sexual desire. In fact, Linda Brent is prevented from pursuing a genuine romantic attachment (with a free black man) as part of Dr Flint’s control over her sexuality. In order to gain back a modicum of control over her body and sexuality, Linda is driven to the sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, although her encounters with him fills her with a shame she cannot escape. As Linda explains: “I wanted to keep myself pure . . . under the most adverse circumstances” (54). For Linda, it feels less degrading to give herself willingly, even if it is to Mr. Sands, rather than let herself be the prey of her master’s designs. Although she would have preferred “keeping herself pure”, she would rather walk her own shameful path, than a path formed by evil spirited obligation to her master. Her reflections infected by shame

speaks of her longing to be seen and treated as a full woman. She visions a life for herself in which maternal sentiments and marriage would be an expectation, and not something she is declined to experience. Jacobs' insistence on justifying Linda's choice in light of her circumstances makes clear that she is trying to appeal to a readership of free women who would sympathize with her predicament. Passages in the narrative expressing sexual desire are rare to find. Jacobs's avoidance of discussing her own sexual desires can be explained through obvious reasoning such as a wish for privacy, or the lack of desire in her situation. It can, however, also be linked to the virtuous expectations of women at the time.

Experiencing womanhood as a slave mother

Jacobs' reflections in the narrative concerning womanhood and gender differences, resist the idea that female slaves were thoughtless tools for reproduction, through her display of a cultural understanding. Bercuci points out that female slaves were only deemed female in relation to their reproductive function in providing more property for slave owners (27). The experience of femininity and the moral quandaries exclusive to the female slaves were thus mostly linked to motherhood. After giving birth to her daughter, Jacobs' heart weighed heavy with sorrow. She explains in the narrative that this is due to gendered differences found in slavery, in which women are subjected to horrors men are not faced with. Jacobs' opinion of the surpassing hardships of female slaves is clearly expressed in this quote from the narrative: "Slavery is terrible for men; but is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (75). While enduring these sufferings reserved for the female slave, Jacobs also reflects on the shame and degradation she feels by doing the so-called unvirtuous actions she performs. George Cunningham argued that "Within the domain of slavery, gender or culturally derived notions of man- and womanhood do not exist" (Li 14). However, Jacobs's understanding of gender solidifies that culturally conditioned notions of womanhood did in fact exist in the hostile environment of slavery, and reflected the patriarchal society of the 19th century.

The inner monologue of Linda Brent clearly exhibits her internalized expectations of what a good mother is, and the 19th century virtuous expectations of womanhood. Larson points out that the assertion of virtuous womanhood was so powerful in nineteenth-century America that not only did white, middle-class women aspire to this standard, but also many black women (739). The standard definition of the ideal womanhood was however not accessible for black women, especially female slaves, considering that chastity, modesty, and

physical beauty were virtues only accessible to a select few white women (Li 17). Jacobs also points out how traits such as beauty which conjure admiration for the white woman, only degrades the female slave more (30), seeing as they might be more prone to evils such as sexual assault. Despite her awareness of the tough reality, she still expresses her grief of not getting the chance of obeying the virtuous internalized norms of the larger 19th century society, often accompanied with a disclaimer to the reader that if she had the privilege of being able to follow the norms, she would. This is exemplified by a quote from the narrative in which she addresses the privilege of free women to marry, which she gladly would have done if possible. “If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice” (p.54).

Jacobs’s internalization of female virtue can also be traced in her way she chose to write certain aspects of the text, for instance the non-graphical depiction of sexual assault. It would have been deemed scandalous and immoral for a woman to write a detailed account of sexual behavior. Harriet thus revealed the assault to the refined readers using euphemism and innuendo, which is a characteristic of sentimental narration (Nudelman 952). She chose to focus on the verbal assault she was subjected to by Dr. Flint, as a euphemism for the other ways in which she was likely assaulted. “My master began to whisper foul things in my ear. [...] he peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of” (29). Aware of the importance her readers will place on female virtue, Jacobs uses the sentimental apologetic writing style to conjure up sympathy and demonstrate that she is also a woman and a mother. Although she cannot adopt the virtues of free white women, she still desires being seen as a full woman and a true mother. She longs to be defined by her human entirety, and not just by her ability to reproduce.

The relations between mothers in the slave community: expanding the notion of motherhood

Maternal identity is hard to conceptualize when your biological children are being treated as property that does not belong to you, especially if it is to be conceptualized in regard to the idealized model of motherhood. The idealized model of motherhood was an idea based on the white middle-class family unit. It proclaimed the universal expectation that biological mothers had full maternal responsibility for their children (West and Shearer 1007). This idealized model of motherhood was neither a realistic, nor achievable child upbringing model for slave mothers. The reasoning being the heavy workload they were subjected to, despite

slaveholders' belief that slave mothers could both labor and care for their children at the same time (1006). Deprived of the chance to have full maternal responsibility, slave women instead created their own ideas of maternal identity, disparate of the idealized model of motherhood.

Slavery did not allow for the conventional and traditional forms of motherhood, and this consequently resulted in an expanded notion of motherhood, through a collective upbringing of children. To be able to complete the work and child care, slave mothers adopted a communal form of mothering with female-centered systems of support that aimed to look after slave children regardless of parentage (1013). The conceptualization of motherhood in the slave community was thus one of an immense inclusivity, stretching beyond the purely biological, and the contextual background of the pregnancy. It was not made any distinction between children as a result of for instance sexual assault or a loving relationship (1011). The expanded notion of motherhood speaks to the great empathy slaves had for each other, and their ability to create deeply empathetic communities. There is perhaps nothing more humanizing than the ability to form maternal connections outside biological frameworks. This communal form of mothering, may however, have felt very foreign to the white, middle-class mother. She might have difficulty hypothesizing a world in which she is not the primary caregiver of her children. Jacobs is, nevertheless, still able to appeal to white middle-class mothers, by framing herself as the main caregiver of her children. She had a present role in their lives, while also relying on mother figures for support, that are familiar to white readers, such as her grandmother.

Non-biological maternal bonds were not exclusively formed between slaves, but could also occur in other relations determined by slavery, even between slaves and white slave owners. Jacobs described in the narrative her fondness for the mistress she had as a young girl, clearly expressing her sentiments as her mistress laid on her deathbed. "I prayed in my heart that she might live! I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me" (11). As Jacobs prayed for the life of her mistress, she surprisingly described the relation between them as marked by kindness and motherly sentiments. She chose to evaluate their relationship based on the genuine affection she experienced, and not based on the oppressive nature of the relationship (Li 19). This shows how genuine affection can be experienced even in hostile environments. Through the presentation of characters like her old mistress she also avoids villainizing all the white characters in the narrative. Jacobs' ability in seeing the humanizing elements in not only slaves, but also certain slave owners, thus helps gain the empathetic relationship with her white readership. By having this nuanced view, she states that there

should exist feelings of solidarity despite racial differences, while also underlining the powerful nature of human affection.

Solidarity among women

The abolitionist narrative is not only written from a female perspective, but also seeks to reach women as its target audience. The author appealed to a white, female middle-class readership, due to political reasons (Li 17), and in her preface Jacobs writes: “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two million of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (4). The political reasoning behind this specific choice of target demographic, is the fact that women of the north made up a significant percentage of the antislavery supporters. Through antislavery societies they stood up against slavery by means of for instance fund-raisers, sewing clothes to escaped slaves, and publicly speaking up against slavery (Doyle 179). The women thus started a public discourse, and sought to persuade those with legislative power into action.

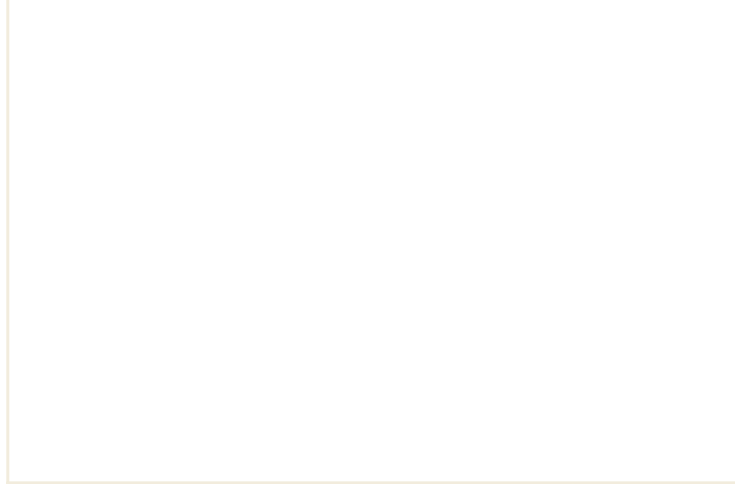
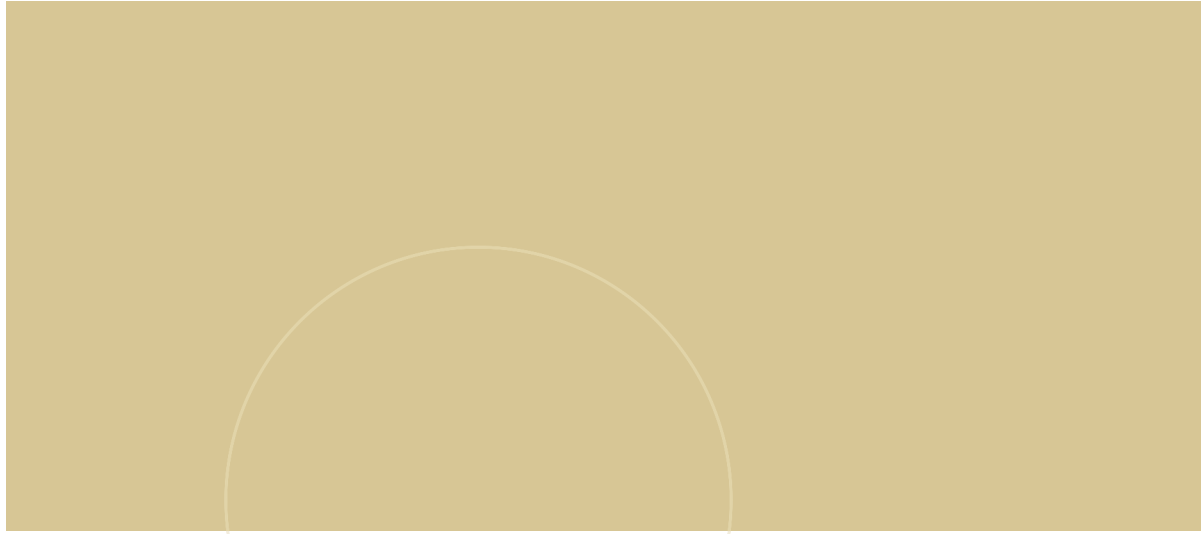
Jacobs expresses a desire for solidarity among women, and by describing negative experiences of slave mothers, uses the common understanding of suffering to convey the repercussions of slavery. The use of suffering is a typical characteristic of abolitionist and sentimental literature, and humanizes both the victim and the reader. The reader is humanized due to the instigation of empathy when they imagine the suffered experiences of the victim (Nudelman 945). Sentimental literature also allows for readers to encounter people that diverge from their own reality, and is thus an effective method of creating political unions and fighting social disparities (944). By conveying hardships that she experienced as a slave mother, Jacobs is able to attain compassion from women who are not enchained. She accomplishes this by targeting the women’s universal maternal feelings. The shared feeling of motherly sentiments creates a common identity between the writer and reader rooted in their shared experience of womanhood and motherhood. The common identity is according to Doyle in theory able to surpass racial differences and social disparities (176). Although the female slave does not experience motherhood in a traditional sense, Jacobs expresses in this quote that she is still born with universal maternal instincts. “She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother’s instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother’s agonies (18). It is these shared mother’s agonies that persuade to a solidarity between enchained and free women.

Incidents in the life of a slave girl stands out from other abolitionist works, and successfully conveys the humanizing view of slaves, through Jacobs' utilization of narration techniques. It is written by her in first person narration, which makes it easier for the reader to empathize with her story. Her direct from the source narration creates a more personal connection with the reader, instead of having the narration told through a white observer's translation. It also humanizes Jacobs, providing her with more agency, and establishing that slaves are not mute objects (Nudelman 942). The relationship mothers have with their children is deeply personal, and it would therefore not be as emotionally powerful coming from an outside perspective, or written in third person. Her call for solidarity and support also feels more natural and authentic coming directly from her. Nudelman notes, that she often uses the greatly stylized and implicit language typical of the sentimental and domestic fiction of the antebellum period (941). She also contrasts this writing style, however, with a more direct and descriptive style. Emerging through the more discreet, and stylized writing is thus a sense of reality. A necessary directness to remind the reader, that the narrative is no fiction, but a recall of reality.

Although the narrative applies many elements of the sentimental model of writing, it also diverges at times from appealing to universal feelings, and creates a distance between the reader and the writer (Nudelman 961). Jacobs did not hide the fact, that slavery was not something that her privileged target audience could easily relate to. "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law and custom [...]" (55) Jacobs signals with the writing of such quotes that there is a great distance between the situation of her readers and herself. Although universal feelings, such as motherly sentiments, can conjure empathy from readers, they are not able to fully grasp the dehumanization and suffering that slaves, and especially female slaves endured. There is still a great value, however, in the readers attempt to grasp the horrifying scope of the situation in this sentimental narrative. A narrative in which human affection truly acts as the driving force, with the purpose of persuading the reader of the great humanity found within slavery. By using typical conventions of the female slave narrative, but with her own voice and agency, Jacobs clearly conveyed to the women in the north, that slaves are not indifferent objects. They are human beings with immense affection, and there are mothers who at times would rather see their children dead, than in the evil hands of slavery.

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