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## **Discourses of Intertextuality in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself***

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The bonded slave mother's identity was built on the concept of chattel slavery. While history focuses on the mere facts, literature brings forth the lived experiences of the people. Harriet Jacobs in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861) narrates the story of the female protagonist, Linda Brent's life in slavery. Linda is not only challenging the traditional stereotypical domination of master over slaves but uses her body as a tool to defy and demolish the enforced gender roles. Jacobs like other African American women novelists offer a reinstating of women in history in order to add the missing female voice in the slave narratives. This paper will not only explore the dominant issues of Harriet Jacobs's autobiography but also place it in a set of cultural contexts by exploring it from an interdisciplinary dimension, revealing in the process that female sexuality, motherhood, individualism, community are themes interwoven to construct the enslaved Black woman's identity and reality.

The history of African American autobiography is very long. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America thousands of former slaves set down to write the history of their escape from bondage to freedom which came to be known as 'slave narratives'. It was during the 1930s, the genre was further expanded. In black autobiographies the



individual and community are not apart, there is an identification of individual with the community within any single autobiography in spite of differences in autobiographical modes and in the autobiographers' visions. Thus LeRoi Jones declared that the black autobiography like the blues expands the solo and through this the single individual retains the tone of the tribe.

During 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, has been viewed as the central text in the genre of African American slave narratives. Critic Robert Stepto has defined Douglass as the male archetype. But he makes no attempt to define female archetype. This female archetype is represented by Harriet "Linda Brent" Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861). Although Thayer and Eldridge published the narrative in 1861 but not until 1981 Jean F. Yellin published the evidences and established Jacobs' historical identity and the authorship of her narrative.

Although other writings appear earlier, this full-length work by an African American woman writing about her experiences as a slave woman is indeed rare. The voice of Linda Brent is polyphonic. It represents the voice of bonded slave women's plights, their oppressions, their unvoiced words. It covers the narrative pattern of the slave narrative genre with the conventional literary forms and stylistic devices of the nineteenth century domestic novel in an attempt to transform the so called 'Cult of womanhood' and to persuade the woman of the North to take an antislavery stance. The dual theme of abolition and feminism are interwoven in Jacobs's text. In this respect Jacobs's narrative has got the way to descend through the lanes of interdisciplinarity and achieve a plethora of success as retaining a text of



woman which also talks about empowerment of woman. Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jacobs does not deny the authorship instead she stressed on it saying “*Written by Herself*”.

Harriet Jacobs wrote in her *Incidents* “Slavery is terrible for men. But it is far more terrible for women” (Jacobs 86). Jean Fagan Yellin states that Jacobs’s narrative was the first to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery. The pseudonymous character of the narrative, Linda Brent, is caught between the exploitative, brutal bonds of slavery and the idealized bonds of true womanhood. The former she resists with great spirit and no ambivalence; the other she resists with great pain and turmoil. These two systems denied her a selfhood. The text opens with the lines, “I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (Jacobs 7). Slavery was acted out on the male bodies and so also for females. The slave woman’s plight was to become a system of reproduction. Therefore the treatment of slavery was more intimate and brutal. After her mistress’s death she became the property of her mistress’s little niece, Emily Flint. Here enter the character Dr. Flint, the source of all trouble in Linda’s life. As a young girl, Linda had resolved that she would be virtuous, though she was but a slave. Here Jacobs is bringing forth two parallel contradictions. On one hand, Jacobs points out the difficulties that a slave woman has to face to retain her chastity and on the other hand she highlights the white woman’s cultural codes. Rather than to submit Dr. Flint’s demand, she subverts not only his authority as a male but also as her master. According to her grandmother’s vision of the cult of true womanhood is ‘beautiful’ but unattainable. But Linda chooses survival, selfhood and determination not through the innocence of the dove but she uses the wisdom of the serpent. Through her liaison with Mr. Sands she gains some control over her body. Both symbolic and literal this choice of Linda raises her from unchaste and defiled object to a virtuous mother.



The black women's writing during the Antebellum and post-bellum remains as a glaring representation of what happens with a mother when she is left with little to no claim over her own life and the lives of her children. Marianne Hirsch said that the economy of slavery circumscribes not only the process of individuation and subject formation, but also heightens and intensifies the experience of motherhood—of connection and separation. It is because of this separation and loss that many literary texts construct the mother's response in this situation. Jacobs presents motherhood as a crucial form of female empowerment. Jacobs represents a significant counterforce to a deeply patriarchal and male-dominated institution. Jacobs demonstrates the need for specific political reforms and goes beyond the abstract rules of teaching her readers the moral and religious lessons. Caroline Levander stated that motherhood 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. For Jacobs motherhood is not simply a biological relation. It encompasses an entire worldview: a belief in freedom of all people, a commitment to human equality and the establishment of viable egalitarian economic opportunities. Linda endures the hardships of her existence especially for her children. By hiding in the garret space Linda was able to keep an eye on her children. As described by Jacobs garret can be seen as an interstitial space and it is undetectable to those who are unaware of its existence. In the garret Linda's life also become interstitial. Linda's garret is startlingly similar to Jeremy Bentham's '*Panopticon*', which Michel Foucault analyses in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Linda's garret may be a physical prison but like the guards of Panopticon, it helps her to keep her vigil on her community and especially on Dr. Flint.



‘Masking’ is a technique which helps the readers to get the double meaning embedded in the narrative. Through employing the ‘masking’ Jacobs is able provide an acceptable explanations of events that she has really experienced. When Linda Brent faced an impending reality of selling her future child by Dr. Flint she used Mr. Sands and made him believe that he is the original father of her child. Linda’s actual dealing with two white male – Dr. Flint and Mr. Sands, would have inundated white female readers’ understanding of what it meant to be a victim of slavery. Actually through her narrative Jacobs is employing the social discourses surrounding race and gender. So Linda declares that, ‘... in looking back, calmly on the events of my life, I feel that the slave ought not to be judged by the same standard as others’ (Jacobs 216). By saying this Jacobs is actually portraying instead of white men being the helpless victims of the lustful black women, white men were revealed to be the predators who had violated black women’s chastity and modesty. Jacobs asserts that a good woman’s task is not to die or succumb to some ideal purity. She must survive. Her black cultural tradition of masking provides an appropriate arsenal to achieve her goal.

Intertextuality as a method enables one to join the present to the past and is central to the theories of African American literature. Transformed by M.M.Bakhtin’s notion of ‘dialogism’, Julia Kristeva’s *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1986) conceptualizes intertextuality as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point, as a dialogue among several writings. *Incidents* intersects at the existential themes of absurdity, anguish, choice, responsibility and freedom. In reflecting the interlocutory, or dialogic, character of literature pertaining to slavery and black maternal subjectivity, ambiguity is a necessary element in the African American literary tradition as it invites intertextuality by transforming and retaining narrative patterns and strategies in endless possibility. Linda is not sorry for her decisions.





Slavery has left no choice for her to opt. Linda is not only representing her own fate but she is representing the thousands and millions of women who has to face the oppression of slavery and have to suffer the trauma of losing one's own self and near and dear ones.

Margaret Atwood in her *Negotiating With Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002) states the role and responsibility of a female writer that pertains specifically to her duty to write as a woman, about women. Thus writing for her is not just a narration of a story or a point of view, she rather has to take up the additional responsibility of representing her writing as a form of mediation in dealing with the female self or selves and to expose the real history and politics of gender in which the female writers are/were actually grounded and simultaneously paying a homage to their accomplishments. A sudden rapture of engagement with women's history in literature with a series of rewriting and rereading of literary texts opens an avenue of literary criticism that was absent from the arena of scholarship before the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As a consequence of this methodology a literary technique seems to get launched by which women writers who have been so long left unnoticed and relegated to the periphery comes to occupy one of the central discourses of the academic sphere. The discovery of the interdisciplinary reliance between feminism, new historicism, reader response theory and the act of writing fiction ultimately combines to culminate in the discovery of a new theoretical approach – that of fictionalizing as a new meta-historicism. Meta-historicism represents the process of creating a female past through the process of writing fiction. In *Incidents* Linda is helping the readers to expand their imaginations to fill the silences and gaps. By describing her story she is actually *reterritorializing* her context. In this way Jacobs is engaging her readers to examine what



history books have never included. Thus meta-historicism is a methodology which is based on this recreation, exactly what fiction does – creating new ways and possibilities.

Linda is part of a continuum. She links the dead, the living and the unborn. Unlike the heroic male slave narratives Jacobs's narrative alias Linda celebrates the cooperation and collaboration of all the people, black and white, slave and free, who make her freedom possible. She celebrates her liberty and the security of her children's fate and life not as an individual effort but out of a collective effort. Thus the outraged mother of Jacobs's master piece emerges as the archetypal counterpart of the articulate hero. Therefore the study of black women's writing helps the readers to transform definitions of genre, of archetype, of narrative traditions, and of the AfricanAmerican experience itself.





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