

# Analysis of Racial Discourse and Gender Oppression in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

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## Abstract

This study examines the discourse of race and slavery in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, focusing on how the text critiques the intersections of race, gender, and power in nineteenth-century American society. Through an analysis of Jacobs's personal narrative, the study highlights the racial and gendered oppression that African-American women endured under slavery. Themes such as sexual exploitation, social humiliation, and the disintegration of family structures are emphasized within the context of the slave system. By analyzing Jacobs's resistance to inhumane systems of racial and sexual domination, the article demonstrates how her narrative contests racist and sexist ideologies. Furthermore, the text foregrounds motherhood as both a locus of suffering and a site of resistance for enslaved women. In doing so, it situates Jacobs's work as a vital intervention in both abolitionist discourse and early feminist thought.

**Keywords:** Resistance; Racism; Female Authority; Slave Narrative; Harriet Jacobs; *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

## Introduction

*Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs is a seminal work in American literature and the slave narrative genre, notable as a pioneering text by an African American female writer. First published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, the book offers a personal and vivid account of Jacobs' life as an enslaved African American woman. The narrative critically examines the gendered dimensions of slavery and the intersection of racial and sexual oppression in nineteenth-century United States society.

Employing distinctive literary techniques such as realistic narrative and literary devices, Jacobs powerfully condemns the exploitation, sexual abuse, social humiliation, and the threat of family disintegration faced by enslaved women.

Jacobs' narrative not only exposes the brutalities of American slavery but also critiques the racist and patriarchal structures supporting oppression. It reveals how these intertwined systems reinforced dominance over Black people. A critical reading of Ja-

cobs' work is essential, especially given the enduring nature of racial and gender discrimination against African Americans in contemporary American society. This continuing strife has roots in the U.S. Constitution, which despite its promises of equality and democracy, has historically been complicit in racial conflicts and discriminatory discourses targeting Black and other minority groups since the nineteenth century. To analyze Jacobs' text from perspectives of racist discourse and the suppression of women in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to consider the wider socio-political context of her time. The nineteenth century in America was marked by intense debates over slavery, where racist ideologies served as justifications for the inhumane treatment of African Americans. However, Jacobs complicates these discourses by highlighting the specific gendered experiences of enslaved women, especially the sexual exploitation they endured. As Angela Davis notes, "sexual abuse of Black women was a cornerstone of the exploitation and dehumanization intrinsic to slavery" (2011, 4), a reality that Jacobs vividly portrays through her harrowing descriptions of ongoing sexual harassment by her enslaver, Dr. Flint.

Jacobs' lived experiences demonstrate that slavery was not only a system of racial oppression but also a gendered regime wherein Black women suffered unique physical and psychological violence not typically experienced by white women, even within America's patriarchal confines. The mental anguish and sexual coercion Jacobs recounts were integral to a system that commodified and exploited Black women's bodies both for labor and sexual servitude. Scholar Deborah White explains that Jacobs' narrative reflects the dual reality of enslaved women's existence as both women and property, with the institution of slavery exercising control over their gender, reproduction, and family life (1998, 27). Jacobs' story is remarkable for its candid revelation of enslaved women's suffering and struggles, calling readers to resist the institution of slavery and its racist ideologies. Much of her narrative details her efforts to maintain dignity and resist the advances of Dr. Flint, a struggle exacting profound psychological and physical costs. Ultimately, to escape Flint's domination, Jacobs strategically enters a relationship with a different white man, Mr. Sands, an act laden with both resistance and the burden of shame prompted by Victorian ideals of "true womanhood" that upheld sexual purity as a woman's highest virtue.

This study first explores the convergence of slavery, racism, and gendered and racial humiliation in Jacobs' narrative. Then, it examines the influence

of her writing on the intellectual foundations of African American women's civil rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Employing textual analysis and critical perspectives from Black literary critics such as Angela Davis, this study reveals how Jacobs asserts narrative authority and voice to challenge racial injustice and patriarchal norms embedded in American society. Her text is a powerful act of resistance that not only exposes racial injustice but questions male dominance and claims of equality within American society. Subsequent section in this study includes a brief overview of the slave narrative tradition, highlighting its role in shaping both nineteenth-century abolitionist movements and later attempts in twenty-first-century United States to reckon with the legacies of slavery. The significance of this section lies in demonstrating how Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* both draws upon and reconfigures the conventions of the genre, thereby positioning her narrative as a crucial bridge between personal testimony, political activism, and contemporary debates about racial justice. Following this, the study offers also an account of African-American literary theory, which establishes the critical framework through which Jacobs's narrative will be examined. This section is significant because it situates the article within ongoing scholarly conversations on race, gender, and power, while also providing the conceptual tools needed to analyze Jacobs's text.

### Literature review Slavery, Racism, and the Emergence of the Slave Narrative Genre

Slavery in nineteenth-century America was a system of forced labor primarily established in the Southern states, where Black people were regarded as property and compelled to work on plantations, farms, and their masters' households. According to John Brannigan, this institution was rooted in centuries of human humiliation and racial inequality and was justified by the belief that people of African descent were inherently inferior to white people (1998, 145). Slavery played a vital role in the economic development of the United States, especially in agriculture, where crops such as cotton, tobacco, and rice heavily relied on slave labor. The moral and political consequences of slavery led to intense debates and tensions between the North and South, eventually culminating in the American Civil War (1861–1865), a conflict aimed at determining the fate of slavery in the country. Throughout this century, many enslaved individuals resisted their conditions, some attempting escape or demonstrating various forms of defiance. These people lived under brutal circumstances with limited access to education, food, or healthcare.

Slaves were frequently subjected to physical and psychological abuse, yet despite these conditions, they found ways to preserve their cultural identity and resist oppression. For many, the desire for freedom was a constant driving force that compelled them to risk their lives to escape via the Underground Railroad or seek refuge in Northern states where slavery was illegal.

Slave narratives represent an important and influential genre in nineteenth-century American literature. These autobiographical accounts were written or told by former slaves who had either escaped bondage or been freed after the Civil War. These narratives offered direct testimony of the inhuman suffering experienced in slavery, presenting realities that profoundly affected many readers. These stories played a crucial role in condemning slavery because they humanized the suffering of slaves and raised awareness of the cruelties they endured. According to William Andrews, prominent examples of this genre include the works of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Solomon Northup. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are among the most significant and impactful writings of the genre, which not only portray the personal struggles of the authors but also offer critiques of broader social systems that allowed slavery to flourish (2011, 7). Frederick Douglass became a leading figure in the abolitionist movement, using his narrative to fight against slavery and advocate for the rights of Black Americans. As Andrews notes in his comprehensive review of slave narratives, Douglass's account addressed both the physical and psychological harms endured by slaves and emphasized the importance of education and self-awareness as tools for the emancipation of African-descended people from racist and enslaving systems (2019, 4). Douglass's story demonstrated the power of self-determination and the transformative role of literacy in breaking the chains of oppression. Similarly, Harriet Jacobs's narrative, which recounts her suffering and escape, illuminates the sexual abuses endured by many enslaved women, a particularly horrific aspect of slavery. These narratives extended beyond personal memoirs they functioned as instruments in the fight against the institution by exposing the illegality of slavery, garnering support for the abolitionist cause, and highlighting the resilience of the enslaved. They played a vital role in raising awareness and influencing public opinion, eventually contributing to the abolition of slavery in the United States through the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

It is worth noting that discourses of racism and racial discrimination have persisted not only in that historical era but also continue into contemporary American society. Therefore, the significance of slave narratives remains visible today in literary criticism and theory. Stories of slavery and the abolitionist movement are foundational for understanding the history of racial inequality in America. The legacies of slavery such as racial discrimination, segregation, and systemic inequality continue to affect the daily lives of Black people and other marginalized communities in the United States. Slave narratives hold particular importance for critical theory and contemporary analysis, as they provide firsthand accounts of the brutal realities of slavery and offer valuable perspectives on race, power, and oppression. These narratives challenge dominant historical discourses while restoring the humanity of enslaved individuals, who were often voiceless. Through the study of these texts, including Harriet Jacobs's influential work, the legacy of slavery is examined within contemporary social, political, and cultural contexts, leading to a deeper understanding of structural racism and resilience in opposition to it.

### Theoretical Framework:

#### African-American Criticism: An Overview

African-American criticism is a branch of literary criticism that examines texts written by African-American authors and the representation of Black experiences in the history, society, and culture of the United States. This mode of criticism does not confine itself to aesthetic or structural analysis of literary texts; rather, it has always been deeply engaged with questions of identity, race, power, language, and history as they pertain to African-Americans. As Bressler notes, at the heart of this critical approach lies an attempt to reclaim narratives that have been suppressed, erased, or distorted in dominant white discourses (2011, 210). While African-American criticism interacts with postcolonial, feminist, and postmodern theories, it possesses distinctive features that mark it as a deeply rooted and resistant intellectual tradition. It emerges from the historical experience of slavery, racial discrimination, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Its earliest manifestations can be found in nineteenth-century writings such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, or *Penelope: The Story of a Fugitive Slave*. In these works, the very act of writing constituted a political intervention, affirming the humanity of Black people against the commodifying and demeaning gaze of white supremacy. In the twentieth century, partic-

ularly during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s in New York, African-American criticism entered a new phase. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay transformed literature into an instrument for expressing racial pride and cultural resistance to institutionalised racism in American society. The artists and writers of Harlem celebrated African American literature and culture, calling for a rebirth of African American traditions in the literary, cultural, and political spheres (Bressler 2011, 213). In the 1960s and 1970s, as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements reached their peak, African American criticism consolidated itself within the academy. A key development during this period was the emphasis on “Blackness” as a structural and social experience reflected not only in language and literary form but also in political and historical content. Concepts such as “double consciousness,” first articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois, profoundly shaped this literary and theoretical approach. Du Bois argued that the African American subject is compelled to view themselves both from within and through the judgmental gaze of white society. This dual awareness produces a complex and sometimes unstable identity that reverberates through many literary works and later critical writings, exposing fractures within American society (2007, 8).

In the late twentieth century, figures such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., Houston Baker, and Barbara Christian played foundational roles in shaping the theoretical and methodological contours of this critical school. For example, Christian critiqued the dominance of abstract, theory-driven criticism produced by white academics, arguing that Black writers and critics must draw upon their lived experiences as sources of literary and critical theory (1987, 52). By doing so, the authentic voices, bodies, histories, and sufferings of African-Americans—long excluded from official discourse—could be expressed. Christian insisted that African-Americans must develop their own critical and theoretical frameworks in order to strengthen and make visible their culture and literature. Within this critical tradition, concepts such as historical memory, lived experience, repetition, and resistance hold central importance. Historical memory goes beyond the simple recollection of slavery; it functions as a political act against institutionalised forgetting. Minority writers and artists, particularly African-Americans, revisit the past to expose the hidden truths omitted from America’s official history. By invoking slavery, racial discrimination, and collective struggles, they rewrite history in order to restore silenced voices. Historical memory

thus operates simultaneously as a tool of exposure, healing, and rights-claiming: it constructs collective identity and restores dignity to those erased from the historical record. Hartman, for instance, reads Harriet Jacobs’ account of slavery, sexual abuse, and concealment as a transformation of personal memory into collective, revelatory memory (2022, 145). Jacobs functions as a political agent, urging readers to resist racism and using her lived experience as a tool for raising consciousness and effecting social change. Her narrative becomes a space of resistance, solidarity, and redefinition of Black identity.

Closely linked to historical memory is the notion of lived experience. Minority criticism redefines the Black subject not as an abstract concept but as a social, historical, and embodied being. Lived experience foregrounds embodiment, mother tongue, and social positioning, placing the knowledge derived from everyday life in opposition to official discourses. Along with repetition and resistance, this emphasis generates alternative forms of narrative. By repeating words, myths, and oral traditions, African-American literature not only sustains collective memory but also resists cultural erasure. As Gates argues, repetition in such texts is not mere reproduction but a resistant act: by continually retelling marginalised histories, it challenges cultural domination (2014, 22). Together, these three concepts provide a critical framework through which the voices of minorities can be heard and recognised within American literature and history. Ultimately, African-American criticism is not simply an interpretive tool for literary texts but an ethical and political stance against a history of violence, silence, and injustice. By restoring voice to the silenced, it contributes to the formation of a participatory and humanising knowledge that both clarifies the past and envisions a more resilient, self-aware future. Within this tradition, works such as Jacobs’ *Incidents* address racial, cultural, and historical issues in nineteenth-century America, revealing how the intersections of racial and gender oppression continue to shape the lives of slaves.

### ***Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Oppression of Gender and Race***

It is highly noteworthy that in the 1840s America well before the emergence of feminist movements Harriet Jacobs was able to identify and narrate the triple oppression based on race, gender, and class in the life of an enslaved woman. Like her contemporary male narrators, Jacobs employed the prevailing nineteenth-century literary conventions (such as realistic narrative style) to reveal the oppression and racist discourse of her era. Fox-Genovese, writing on the

biographical tradition of Black women, asserts that Black women's autobiographies reflect the tension between the author and various dominant discourses. She describes Jacobs's writing as "consciously aligning with the bourgeois discourse of American women" so that the author could convey her dissenting thoughts alongside an explicit depiction of the suffering and terror of slavery to American readers, including white women abolitionists (1990, 198).

From the very first chapter of her book, Jacobs depicts the precise details of her experience as a slave by creating a direct connection with the reader, thus establishing a friendly space from the outset. For example, she devotes several passages to describing her grandmother to forge an emotional bond between the text and reader: "I owe much to my kind grandmother" (2001, 10). Jacobs's emphasis on mother-child relationships (like grandmother-mother-self-children) creates a familiar image for other women readers, since in the nineteenth century motherhood and domestic duties were a common ground shared by both Black and white women. As Davis notes, "motherhood is an area where a number of discourses and practices meet" (2012, 1). This is especially the case of Jacobs as her state of motherhood is shaped by slavery's denial of maternal authority. Jacobs cannot freely guide her children's education, health, or future, since they are legally property. Her maternal role thus becomes both a source of anguish, marked by fear of separation, and a catalyst for resistance, as protecting her children motivates her defiance against the system that seeks to control them.

A key feature in the initial chapters is the construction of Jacobs's identity and voice as an independent woman with firm conviction. For example, she not only resists Dr. Flint's sexual advances and shows no fear of physical punishment at his hands during this "dangerous period" (2001, 45) but her steadfast character and adherence to dignity compel Dr. Flint to persist in his pursuit and even offer money to her. Jacobs transforms her master into a jealous lover desperate for a relationship. Furthermore, in these early chapters, Jacobs exhibits awareness of the subtle and indirect effects of the institution of slavery. She is fully conscious of the destructive impacts of this system and reveals the indirect consequences on family life in her description of childhood and life with her father: "My father was a carpenter, very clever and skillful in his trade... His heart's desire was to buy his children. But despite having saved and spent his hard-earned income several times for this purpose, he was never successful" (2001, 5). Here, it becomes clear that slavery granted white owners the right to

buy and sell Black people, especially their children, treating slaves as property. Jacobs points to this unpleasant truth and the great contradiction that Black parents had no legal rights to keep and raise their children and had to participate in auctions, spending large sums to redeem them.

Throughout the text, economic and financial issues in slavery and the commodity status of slaves receive Jacobs's attention. While she provides descriptions of nearby slave owners, she states: "Women are of no value unless they constantly increase the number of their owner's slaves" (2001, 43). Upon the birth of her son, she writes: "Dr. Flint continued his visits to care for my health; and he did not forget to remind me that my child increased the number of his slaves" (2001, 52). In this regard, Angela Davis explains that "to slave owners, enslaved women were not mothers at all; they were merely tools ensuring the growth of the enslaved labor force. They were producers, animals whose financial value was precisely calculated based on their reproductive capacity" (2011, 7). Thus, enslaved women who had completed their reproductive and productive service were released, such as "an old woman who had faithfully served her master for seventy years" but "when she became unproductive, was sold to whoever paid twenty dollars for her" (Jacobs 2011, 17). One of Jacobs's most painful sentences is uttered when she confronts the unfinished nature of her freedom; her anger at her commodification is expressed as follows: "The sales bill! Those words struck me like a blow. So, I was finally sold! A human being was sold in the free city of New York! The sales bill was recorded, and future generations will learn that women in nineteenth-century New York, under Christianity, were commercial goods" (2011, 155).

As discussed, at the core of Jacobs's narrative lies a profound anguish and condemnation of the institution of slavery and the racism that sustained it. In her writing, she exposes the hypocrisy and violence of a society that dehumanized Black people while simultaneously preaching Christian values. In this connection, Jacobs states: "Slavery is horrible for men, but for women, it is far more terrible" (2011, 86). This assertion represents one of Jacobs's most significant attitudes within the slave narrative tradition because it foregrounds the intersection of race and gender in the life of a female slave. For example, Dr. Flint, exemplifying cruel white owners, uses threats and violence to dominate Jacobs: "He told me that I was his property; therefore, I must obey him in everything" (2011, 11). Yet, Jacobs refuses to accept this situation passively. Her resistance is not overt rebellion

but a firm assertion of her humanity and the right to self-determination.

One of Jacobs's important strategies in the text is her decision to have a child by another white man, Mr. Sands, to prevent Dr. Flint's control and influence over her. For Jacobs, "it is less humiliating to yield oneself voluntarily than to be forced; it is something like freedom if you have a lover who holds no dominion over you" (2011, 61). This complex ethical choice, stemming from desperation and a desire for self-protection, demonstrates her agency within an exploitative and oppressive system. As Hazel Carby argues, Jacobs attempts "to deconstruct the dominant discourse that portrayed Black women as immoral by re-presenting Black womanhood" (1989,55). The goal of this reconstruction is to appropriate and control her narrative to resist the racist and sexist stereotypes that justified the exploitation of Black women, while simultaneously asserting her humanity and moral agency against inhumane conditions.

In addition to physical issues related to slavery, Jacobs also draws attention to psychological harm, particularly through the intentional destruction of the family by slaveholders. She notes the psychological trauma caused by separations of parents, children, and spouses, calling for resistance from parents: "Why do you let the branches of your hearts cling to things that the slave owners may at any moment seize by force?" (2011, 41). This rhetorical question highlights the violence of the system that robs slaves of this basic human experience of stable and loving relationships. Jacobs's narrative is filled with such moments that demand the reader to recognize not only the physical violence but the emotional and spiritual costs of slavery.

One of Jacobs's most remarkable and longest acts of resistance is her escape from Dr. Flint's household and her concealment in a confined space for seven years. To avoid capture and protect the sale of her children, she hides in a small attic room above her grandmother's cellar, living in conditions of isolation, restricted movement, and physical deterioration. She describes this period: "The air was suffocating; complete darkness. A bed was laid on the floor. I could only lie on one side; the slope was so slight no part of my head could be lifted" (2011, 128). This maternal sacrifice, unimaginable to most American readers of the time, signals her strength, resilience, and refusal to submit to racism and slavery. In summary, a key feature of Jacobs's narrative is the simultaneous depiction of oppression and the presentation of strategies and calls for resistance, addressed to both white and Black audiences.

Jacobs's deep love for her children is evident throughout the text and serves as the driving force behind her resistance. It helps her escape the horrors of slavery to protect her children's future. Jacobs's identity as a mother shapes her critical and difficult decisions, making motherhood the heart of her struggle against the slavery system and Dr. Flint's domination. In her study of motherhood, Angela Davis highlights how motherhood is mediated by social and institutional forces rather than existing as a natural, isolated role (2012, 2). Likewise, Jacobs reflects this dynamic under slavery, where the maternal bond is distorted by laws of property and the constant threat of separation, making motherhood both a site of suffering and resistance. Nevertheless, the narrative reveals that separation from her children is a devastating reality and a constant threat, causing Jacobs profound suffering. According to Li, despite these hardships, Jacobs manages to transform her innate maternal instinct into a strategy for liberation and survival, turning it "into a force for resistance against slavery and its supporters" and disrupting the dehumanizing view of Black women as mere reproductive agents (2026, 15). Jacobs repeatedly expresses the psychological burden of this perpetual terror throughout the text. Separation first occurs when she must hide to escape her master's sexual demands and later when her children are sent away to protect them from being sold elsewhere, leaving deep emotional and psychological scars. Many enslaved women suffered the constant fear of their children's sale. This dimension of the narrative shows how slavery dissolves Black families for financial and sexual exploitation, a subject addressed by many scholars including Saidiya Hartman. According to Hartman's interpretation, Jacobs's text reduces family structures and maternal relationships to ownership and exchange; motherhood becomes a tool for the continuation and future sustenance of slavery (2022, 146). On the other hand, Jacobs's portrayal of motherhood is significant in showing how enslaved women's maternal instincts could serve as a source of resistance and evoke readers' emotions. Davis also emphasizes that "motherhood was an important site of resistance for enslaved Black women as they sought to protect their children from the violence of slavery" (2011, 46).

After escaping Dr. Flint's household and moving to the North, Jacobs worked as a nursemaid in Mr. Bruce's household, where her relationship with the family became permanent. This new situation reflects a limited but symbolically significant space available to freed Black women within white private households. Although her relationship with the Bruce

family was affectionate and humane, Mrs. Bruce's act of buying Jacobs's freedom was less a sign of emancipation than a reminder of Jacobs's precarious position and dependency on white benefaction and ownership. This ostensibly charitable act reproduces patriarchal structures that defined Jacobs's life in the North similarly to the South. Despite a degree of solidarity between Jacobs and some influential white women, such as Mrs. Bruce, Jacobs still encountered racism and humiliation in the North.

Her experiences with segregated trains and hotels explicitly show that structural racism was deeply rooted not only in the South but also in Northern institutions. The "dirty" car designated for Black passengers with its tall windows and permissiveness of drinking and smoking served as a metaphor for the marginalization and invisibility of Black life within ostensibly free Northern systems. In the Northern United States, Jacobs faced racism more than slavery itself, especially when compelled to travel in the "dirty war" reserved for Black people, unaware that Black passengers were denied first-class carriage and relegated to a "large, rough car with windows high enough that one could not see outside without standing," where drinking and smoking were allowed (2001, 128). Jacobs's narrative, by comparing treatment in different contexts, underscores the contradictory dimensions of racism. When traveling with the white child of the Bruce family, she temporarily enjoyed privileges of that class. She writes, "Because I was in the service of the Anglo-Saxon race, I was neither sent to the Black car on our way to Rockaway nor asked to ride on crates in the streets. Yet everywhere, I saw the same signs of cruel prejudice that suppressed feelings and destroyed the energies of colored people" (2001, 137). This does not imply freedom but rather that proximity to whites can temporarily act as a shield without dismantling the structures of racism.

Jacobs's resistance to eating in the Rockaway hotel kitchen is another example of her perseverance against racial humiliation. Initially, the white staff wanted to confine her to the kitchen, but with Mr. Bruce's support and insistence on preserving her dignity, she eventually was allowed to sit in the dining hall: "When they realized my determination to assert my rights, they decided to treat me respectfully" (2001, 138). This incident demonstrates that within a racist system, individual acts of power can create cracks in structures of racial humiliation, albeit often limited to the protection of a powerful white ally. Referencing Davis, although the resistance of a Black woman within a powerful slave-owning regime may

appear ineffective, its effects linger in society and inspire other "acts of resistance," confronting slaveholders with a "frightening recognition" (2011, 23).

One of the most thought-provoking events in Jacobs's text occurs in chapter 37 during her trip to England. She describes the experience as "for the first time in my life, I was treated according to my behavior, not my skin color" (2001, 142). People in England, who had never encountered slavery, treated her based on her social position rather than her race. Her past as a slave did not follow her there, offering a sense of comfort. This experience not only provided relief but also implicitly criticized the hollow promises of American democracy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The life events of a slave girl recorded in her narrative reflect the severe and widespread racial violence that erupted in Edenton, her birthplace, after Nat Turner's rebellion. In chapter twelve, Jacobs's recounts how wealthy and poor whites armed themselves with muskets and hunting dogs to enforce a reign of terror in the South. As night fell, she was terrified by screams and cries from a distance and witnessed her people being driven to the courthouse to be executed without trial by armed men. Higginbotham notes that racial violence against Black people was a tool wielded by white supremacists to maintain their dominance and was a key component of the oppressive master/slave relationship, which also intersected with class and ownership relations (1992, 257). This brief section highlights a pivotal moment in Harriet Jacobs's life and reveals the complexities of racism and white power in pre-Civil War Northern America. Although the North is often portrayed as a refuge for fugitive slaves, Jacobs's experience reveals a more nuanced and complex reality. While she found allies, notably Mrs. Bruce, her freedom was not gained through legal or moral victory but through a financial transaction that itself implicated the commodification of Black people even in "free" states. This duality reflects Jacobs's broader critique of Northern hypocrisy: despite anti-slavery sentiments, genuine equality remained unattainable. Ultimately, her writing emphasizes that freedom was often conditional, negotiable, and dependent on white intervention rather than arising from the will and ability of Black individuals. In nineteenth-century American South, the brutality of slavery and the voicelessness of slaves prevailed, while in the North, invisible systems of racial discrimination and humiliation relegated African Americans to a life devoid of legal rights and equality.

## Conclusion

In examining the life events of a slave girl, it is important to consider how Harriet Jacobs's narrative was shaped by the racist and sexist discourses of her time, yet simultaneously challenges those very discourses. By presenting her personal experiences as part of a broader critique of the institution of slavery, Jacobs reveals how race and gender were jointly employed to oppress African American women, highlighting especially the specific violence they endured. The narrative's focus on sexual exploitation, moral agency, and motherhood illustrates the complexities of enslaved women's lives and delivers a powerful condemnation of the racist and patriarchal structures that defined nineteenth-century American society structures whose legacies remain visible today, for example, in the killing of George Floyd by white American police officers in May 2020, which sparked anti-racist protests in the United States and worldwide.

Further analysis of Jacobs's life narrative clearly shows how she employs literary tools and autobiographical structures to evoke the reader's empathy and familiarize them with the horrific realities of slavery. Through candid and precise descriptions of her bitter experiences—including relentless pursuit by her white master, deprivation of agency, and family separations—Jacobs gives voice to the silenced women slaves. Using emotive language and powerful imagery, she addresses not only the physical conditions but also the psychological sufferings of enslaved women. Her narrative exemplifies cultural resistance against dominant discourses by emphasizing the agency of enslaved women, portraying them not as mere passive victims but as individuals who, within oppression, found ways to survive, maintain dignity, and even protest. Jacobs's emphasis on motherhood demonstrates that family bonds were for enslaved women not only a source of pain but also a source of strength.

Most importantly, Jacobs's writing illuminated the theoretical and intellectual formation of Black civil rights protest movements in the 1970s and 1980s, with the Combahee River Collective standing out as a highly influential force in Black feminism. This Collective's theoretical foundations including the intersections of racial, gender, and class oppression alongside personal narratives of racism's victims are deeply influenced by Jacobs's text. Therefore, it is crucial that such works be taught in Persian and English literary departments across academic institutions in the country. This would reveal the structural racism in America and underscore the necessity

of awareness of these historically silenced narratives within the literary and cultural histories of the United States.

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