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**THE CORRUPTING POWER OF SLAVERY IN HARRIET ANN
JACOB'S INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL**

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القوة المخربة للعبودية في رواية " احداث في حياة البنت المستعبدة " لهاريت ان جيكوب

قسم اللغة الانكليزية/ كلية التربية الاساسية/ جامعة ديالى

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفساد ، القوة ، العبودية ، الحوادث ، الحياة ، الفتاة

ملخص البحث:

يقدم المجتمع الأمريكي في القرن التاسع عشر مثالا واضحا للطريقة التي تفاعل بها الظلم والعبودية والرأسمالية لإعادة تعريف وتشكيل وتحديد حياة الأمريكيين السود. تبدأ تجربة الاستعباد السوداء في أمريكا بالنقل القسري لآلاف الأفارقة عبر المحيط الأطلسي إلى أمريكا بشكل رئيسي في الشمال. نجا العبيد على نظام غذائي أساسي للغاية ويمكن وصف ملابسهم وسكنهم على أفضل تقدير. كما عملوا بجهد كبير مع القليل من الفرص للإفراج عن ضغوط حياتهم. إن تجربة العبودية السوداء في أمريكا الشمالية هي واحدة من المعاناة الكبيرة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة كيفية تصوير هاربيت أن جاكوبس بطريقة واقعية لحياتها وحيات العديد من النساء في ظل شر العبودية ، كما أنها تلقي الضوء على جوانب هذه الظاهرة التي تتوازى مع التمييز العنصري والمعاملة السيئة والاعتداء الجنسي. لذا ، من خلال دراسة هذه الرواية الخاصة حول نظام الرقيق الجنوبي ، سيكون لدى البحث فهم جيد ليس فقط لمجتمع العبيد الجنوبيين ولكن أيضا للمجتمع الأمريكي ككل.

Abstract:

The American society during the nineteenth century illustrates in a great picture the suffering of the black Americans due to the oppression, bondage, and capitalism. The

black experience of slavery in America begins with the enforced transportation of thousands of Africans across the Atlantic to America mainly in the North. The slaves survived on a very basic diet and their clothing and housing could at best be described as adequate. Also they worked very hard with little opportunity to release the pressure of their lives. The black experience of slavery in North America is one of great suffering. This study aims to find out how Harriet Ann Jacobs in a realistic way portray her life and the lives of several women under the evil of slavery and it spots light on the aspects of this phenomenon that goes parallel with racial discrimination, bad treatment and sexual abuse. So, by studying this particular narrative about the southern slave system, the research is going to have good understanding of not only the community of southern slaves but also American society as a whole.

1- Introduction:

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Africans and African Americans in the United States were the slave citizens due to the human chattel and enslavement. At the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the British rule enabled the Americans to slave the people since the early colonial days which is continued to be practiced legally in all Thirteen Colonies and it lasted until the end of the American Civil War. The period of slavery was an important period of American history in which slaves had suffered from all the kinds of torture and pain. As a consequence, it seems impossible to grasp today's racial relations and their complexity without learning about the role of black slaves in the life and growth of American people.

As stated Written by Herself:

“Reader, did you ever hate? I hope not. I never did but once; and I trust I never shall again. Somebody has called it "the atmosphere of hell"; and I believe it is so.” (Jacobs, p.65)

Holt Rinehart Winston (1989) states:

Literature has always been a way through which the silent hearts pour their thoughts, concerns, and lives in the form of a liquid substance that drops on those white papers to turn them from a mere blank sheets to memorable and strong messages. For this reason, writing has been taken as a mirror that reflects the adventures of its writer. Talking about all of this, Harriet Jacobs should be deeply taken as an example of an “enslaved life” that is reflected through literature, mainly through her book under the title of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

As stated Written by Herself:

“Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is

of blighted cotton crops--not of the blight on their children's souls." (Jacobs, p.34)

The American black literature shows up a great writers like Harriet Ann Jacobs who is one of the feminist slave narrative. She felt the female slave experience, therefore she puts into words the many facets of slavery as an evident to her struggles. Her strive for authorship enabled her to win the battle of her novel as an autobiography by a female slave. Education for slaves was considered as a very dangerous weapon against slavery in the nineteenth century United States. It was strictly prohibited as it is going to enable the slaves to discover the truth and ask for their freedom.(TasnimBelaidouni, 2017)

Oddly enough, Harriet Jacobs lived with her family which made her contact with her relatives. She did not notice she was a slave until her kind mistress died. Accordingly, Harriet experienced the anxiety and the suffering of a female slave from both man and woman when she witnessed a radical change in her master's house. A master who chiefly wanted Harriet for himself by subjecting her for his sexual harassment. Unlike many of her counterparts, Harriet Jacobs repeatedly rejected her master and resisted his oppression, brutality, and sexual abuse. (Ibid)

As stated Written by Herself:

"My Master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each." (Jacobs, p.21)

The novel presents a very closer examination of the suffering of the slaves in which the protagonist exposed an argument against enslavement basing on her experience as a female slave. Jacobs was suffering and struggling to make a sense for her life and her children among all horrors. She did not write for herself only but for all women in the South who were suffering in bondage. Through her literary work, one can test how deeply the sense of degradation was involved in the story.

As stated Written by Herself:

"There are no bonds so strong as those which are formed by suffering together." (Jacobs, p.72)

To experience humanity is to experience suffering, and to experience suffering engenders the pursuit to alleviate it. All the effort that done to decrease human suffering in a world where relationships are broken, dreams are shattered, wars are fought, crimes are committed, children are neglected, people die slow and painful deaths from diseases and women raped and lived most of their lives in bondage. Bondage is terrible for men but it is more terrible for women. There is a point in every society, and in every life, where it cannot be escaped and

must be faced. Hence, how do slave women respond when they are forced into suffering from which there is no apparent escape? (Harris, 39)

As stated Written by Herself:

“There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (Jacobs, p.50)

Slaves of the Afro American females were facing a lot of difficulties as they were treated socially inferiorly than others. Legally women were considered as human chattel. Escape, cooperation and distraction were used by the women to enable them gain their freedom. When all of these techniques were not useful, they preferred to commit suicide for seeking revenge to accept their pain. (Tasnim Belaidouni, 5)

As stated Written by Herself: “There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury.” (Jacobs, p.48)

On an ideological level, when slaves thought about their suffering, they sometimes became consumed with hatred and anger and other times understood their suffering in spiritual terms and practiced with thankfulness and forgiveness. (Ibid)

Harriet Ann Jacobs was the first slave woman to write her own account of her experiences living under slavery, and is one of many hundreds of slave narratives that were written during the antebellum period. She was treated badly as she was abused, mistreated, assaulted, and beaten. So, she discovered all the black history of the American slavery. Harriet enabled to show in her novel the true meaning of freedom for herself and her children through her decisions which are resulted from her sufferings.

As stated Written by Herself:

“Give me liberty, or give me death.” (Jacobs, p. 52)

2- Slavery:

Slave narrative is a social document about oppressive condition of slavery as an economic and political institution that systematically exploited the slave and reduces him or her to an object. It stands testimony to the traumas and sufferings undergone by the black slaves in the American continent. It makes available the voice of the blacks for the first time in the history of American writing. It raises moral questions that have relevance, because they are concerned with the issue of equality, liberty, social justice and human and civil rights. Social, economic, psychological, racial and cultural aspects of Afro-American community are different from those of White Americans. Their work and environment are completely different. The atmosphere in which they live is not a healthy and conducive for their progress in modern world. This is the reason their voice has not become part of mainstream American life. It is only from the middle of the 20th century that American Blacks have begun to make a mark in the mainstream literary tradition in America. Black American writing has largely been concerned with quest for

black identity along with documentaries.
(http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/150772/7/07_chapter%201.pdf)

As stated Written by Herself:

“No pen can give adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery” (Jacobs 51).

History asserted that slavery was an essential part of this world as it is really examined in the early seventeenth-century America, African slavery which is started for the first time in the works of Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Therefore, when the slave trade spreaded in the world, it enabled the economic, political, social and cultural institutions of Europeans to be developed (Walker, 121). Africans’ slaves were shipping to increase the Northern Colonials wealth’s even the trade of the Southern colonies was basically based on the labor of African slaves who established the infrastructure of the wealthy people like agricultural fields, factories, etc. And finally, even the lifestyle of the southern colonial gentry was depended on “slaves who cooked their meals, served at their tables, and helped to care for their children”. (Harris, 43)

The condition of sex between women and men was an additional factor to the sufferings of slaves at that time. Men were chosen as they are stronger than women and to make sure that they could save them from death during the long trip to America. (Searing, 52). As stated Written by Herself: “They had never felt slavery; and, when it was too late, they were convinced of its reality”

Enslaved women were suffering psychologically and physically because of their pregnancy conditions as they are forced to leave out their children to be taking care of by other people and be back to do their work in fields soon. (Forret, 211).

As stated Written by Herself:

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. (Jacobs, 54)

Using the enslaved women sexually by their masters was the best definition of the bondage as they were treated as tools to their master's sexual pursuits. So, within their controls and dominance over their slaves, “masters often felt it their right to engage in sexual activity with black women” (TasnimBelaidouni, 7)

As stated Written by Herself:

“Cruelty is contagious in uncivilized communities.”

Slaves were thinking to escape whenever it is possible as a result to their master's cruel behaviors toward them. To obtain their freedom, “some were killed; more were

captured; most returned voluntarily when they got too hungry or cold, or missed their families, or heard from a master that they would be taken back with little or no punishment.”(Harris, 46)

As stated Written by Herself:

Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrists; could you have heard her heart –rending groans , and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly bleeding for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, Slavery is damnable. (Jacobs, 22)

Abolitionists exist to prove that life is a relief from obstacles as TasnimBelaidouni examined :

The African and American abolitionists result from their numerous attempts to assert slaves’ lives. As a matter of fact, many women stand on the behalf of their abolitionist mates, not only for the target of ending slavery, but also to change their status as property and spread equal rights in all America. (TasnimBelaidouni, 18)

As stated Written by Herself:

“Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?” "You” (Jacobs, 41)

3- The Corrupting Power of Slavery in Harriet Ann Jacob's Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl:

The tragic life story of a slave, Linda Brent is the study example of this novel as it reveals the wish of any slave girl for freedom.

Bülent C. Tanritanir states:

Linda Brent is the pseudonym that Jacobs used in order not to reveal the real identity of character mentioned in the novel. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is the real life story of Jacobs. Linda Brent is born a slave but she is not aware of this fact because of her kind owners. After her mother’s death, the sufferings start. She experiences all evils that slavery entails. She is sexually abused, mistreated, assaulted and beaten. When the sufferings get unbearable, she decides to run for freedom.

As stated Written by Herself:

“Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals. This same master shot a woman through the head, who had run away and been brought back to him. No one called him to account for it. If a slave resisted being whipped, the bloodhounds were unpacked, and set upon him, to tear his flesh from his bones. The master who did these things was highly educated, and styled a perfect gentleman. He also boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower.”

It is her good luck, Harriet Jacobs enabled to be taught by the help of her mother who was supported by the Horniblow family. As a native girl of the North Carolina, she has tested the life of slavery in America in the early nineteenth century. Looking for freedom was Jacob's main aim as she could not bear the suffering of being slave. Therefore, when she was twenty years old, she hide herself in a small crack in the wall to able to see her complicated life along with her children. Due to her slavery problems in her earlier life, she was forced to work as a nursemaid. To prove that she has the right of feelings as a human, she starts writing the experiences of slavery until she could finish her novel "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl", which was published in Boston in 1861. (Bülent C. Tanritanir, 160)

As stated Written by Herself:

Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrists; could you have heard her heart –rending groans , and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly bleeding for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, Slavery is damnable. (Jacobs, 22)

In the slavery life, girl for instance, needs a permission from slave owner to let her marry. Such kinds of life ruined the basics traditional family structure whom Jacobs reveled in her personal story. Slaves like Jacobs was used as a tool to fed her slave holder's sexual desires. Even the family was not united as their members were threatened by sale the kids of the slave mothers to the rich people. Such kind of behaviors of the slave holders are to gain some wealth by adding numbers of kids to their property. Such themes have been tested by the characters in the novels.Linda has tested the pain of slavery when her relationship with her grandmother has been damaged as a result of her fight for freedom.(Anna Schovanec, 1)

As stated Written by Herself:

"Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women."(Jacobs, 13)

As any slave girl, Linda has almost the same condition as any slave girl. Linda has dual ways of thinking. She first thinks of her independence way of living and secondly the

savages way of living because of slavery. As a result she has no chose but to feel of her identity of true womanhood to live as human. (Sarah Way Sherman,167)

When Dr. Norcom forbade her from marrying a free black carpenter, Linda entered into a liaison with Samuel Sawyer, an unmarried white lawyer. Their union produced a son and a daughter. Before the birth of her first child, Linda moved to her grandmother's home- where Dr. Norcom continued to stalk her for several years. When Linda refused to obey doctor's sexual desires, she was banished to the plantation of Dr. Norcom's son to work and serve in their house. When she found out that her young children would soon join her, to be brought up as plantation slaves, Linda quickly plotted her escape. Linda ran away and hid first at the houses of friends, and later in the house of her grandmother, above a storeroom where she hid in a small garret. So, under stifling conditions, with no room to stand or exercise, Linda stayed in that small space for nearly seven years in her self-contained prison until she availed herself with the opportunity to escape.. While Linda was hiding, the children's father, Samuel Sawyer, purchased the children and Linda's brother, John, Sawyer promised Linda that they would be freed. (Bülent C. Tanritanir, 163)

As stated Written by Herself:

"I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away."

Jacobs starts her story by describing her early childhood. She becomes an orphan when she was a kid and she is forced to live with the mistress of her mother. Her mistress dies and bequeaths her to her relative, Dr. Flint. Dr. Flint is her new master who is cruel, neglectful and forces her to have sexual relationship with him. She has a love event with her neighbor (Mr. Sands) just to make Dr. Flint leave her, and she has two children out of this relationship. She confesses that she is ashamed of her act but finds it preferable to being raped by Dr. Flint. She says that the powerless slave girl cannot be judged with the same standards of morality as those of a free woman. (http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/150772/7/07_chapter%201.pdf)

As stated Written by Herself:

Of virtuous reader! you never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. Still in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others. (Jacobs 59)

Linda spent seven long years in an attic in the house of her grandmother, Aunt Martha. In these years she could hardly sit and stand. She could hardly move, she had to remain in the sleeping position most of the time. The only relief she had in those years was to see her children through a tiny peephole. She had to bear extreme physical pain but she was determined not to return to her master again. She felt guilty that she could give motherly affection to her children. Not only was slavery's threat more sexual for women, but genteel codes for their behavior were more stringent. The standards of free people differed for men and women. With the example of her own mother's chaste courtship and marriage ever before her, Linda is carefully indoctrinated by her mistress and family into the cult of true womanhood.

(http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/150772/7/07_chapter%201.pdf)

The ideology of woman's innate "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" could be a significant weapon against male aggression, but it also opened new areas of vulnerability. As a model for human behavior, it had, as Linda discovers, serious flaws. "Angels in the house" might win self-respect and private influence but only by renouncing self-assertion and public power. (Sarah Way Sherman, 170-17)

As stated Written by Herself:

"I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched."

Jacobs was facing another corrupting power of slavery from the side of the Doctor's wife. She was treated badly as Jacobs seems to be close to the Doctor's wife. Jealousy was the destructive tool used by the mistress to oblige Jacobs to take a vow to say the fact about her relationship with her master. Discrimination between black and white color skin was one of the main reasons to make people act negatively towards her. In the matter of fact, women have various weapons to please this life like beauty, innocence, kindness, ...etc but they are considered as a curse for any normal woman in this life as a result of being enslaved by their masters. (Tasnim Belaidouni, 23)

As stated Written by Herself:

The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves (Jacobs 30-31).

Jacobs shows her deep sufferings when she refers to the time passed without any achievements as any girl who live normally in this life .As stated Written by Herself:

Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say: 'Your mother is here. (Jacobs, 82)

Jacobs even illustrates the suffering condition of anyenslaved girl in this world:

"No, I did not think of him. When a man is hunted like a wild beast he forgets there is a God, a heaven. He forgets everything in his struggle to get beyond the reach of the bloodhounds."

So Jacobs feels as if she is the weakest creature in this world. She stated:

"Would that I had more ability! But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak!"(Jacobs, 79)

On the contrary, Jacob's mother who is one of the bravery enslaved women as she reflects the free voice to protect herself and any other enslaved women. Jacob's mother was considered as the best mother who represents the loyalty and nobility by the witness of her masters. It is even agreed that, not only the white women but the black could also be high in rank and educated. (TasnimBelaidouni, 30)

As stated Written by Herself:

"They all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly." (Jacobs, 68)

Eventually, Harriet's narrative provides much more graphic descriptions about how a huge number of black slaves lived a horrible condition under the life of slavery, controlled by white masters which made slavery oppressive especially for black women, than any of her counterparts. Harriet Jacobs was a good example of an abolitionist black woman who wrote her narrative for antislavery targets. A narrative which was considered later as a weapon against slavery as many slaves nevertheless attempted to eke out a life as best they could by resisting a complete domination of their mind and soul to keep their African traditions and customs alive.

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