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THE “WHITER FOSTER SISTER FAILS”: INTERRACIAL SISTERHOOD IS A MYTH IN HARRIET JACOBS’ INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL

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**The “Whiter Foster Sister Fails”: Interracial Sisterhood is a Myth in Harriet Jacobs’
*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl***

Synopsis:

Harriet Jacobs’ autobiographical slave narrative Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, ostensibly makes tactful use of the widespread assumption of white feminists of the time who believed in interracial sisterhood. This study, however, detects discomfort with this idealistic notion of sisterhood and so focuses on the slips Jacobs makes.

Interracial Sisterhood is a myth in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:

The "Whiter Foster Sister" Fails

"I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and *also her sister*. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight. I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall upon the little slave's heart." *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861 (my emphasis).

In the chapter titled "The Trials of Girlhood" of her autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (hereafter referred to as *Incidents*), the ex-slave black woman writer Harriet Jacobs depicts a scene that brings to mind an image of innocent sisterly love that traverses racial boundaries. However, Jacobs in the same passage also makes clear that this sisterhood is impossible to maintain, due to the forthcoming "inevitable blight" of slavery, which alludes to the sexual molestation many actual slave women went through. This passage suggests that this "fall" is what separates the little slave girl from her fair white playmate, indicating that any sense of estrangement that exists between slave women and white women is not something that is intrinsic but caused. Jacobs, by making this gap one that originates from *loss* of the connection that once existed, effectively makes interracial bonding between women a myth, intensifying the tragedy. In fact, the impossibility of connection among women of different races is a theme that pervades the whole of *Incidents*, which is problematic, as the work's ostensive purpose was to appeal to white women in favor of black slave women.

Many studies have noted how Jacobs skillfully appropriated the literary techniques of her time, especially making tactful use of the widespread assumption of antebellum white

feminists who believed white and black women could relate to each other based on experiences common to their gender. However, the reality was that “the conditions of slavery stripped slave women of most of the attributes of the conventional female role” (Fox-Genovese, 293) and as such, black women were barred from identifying with the typical white model of womanhood.

As Jacobs was well aware of such realities of slavery, having been both a slave and an abolitionist herself, her narrative voice, although it on the surface strives to adhere to white women’s notions of true womanhood, nevertheless seems to be convinced that there exists an insurmountable divide between her and them. Throughout the narrative there is an underlying discomfort with this idealistic notion of sisterhood. The narrative voice of *Incidents* shows doubt, hesitancy, and even indignation by repeatedly inviting the reader to sympathize (“Reader, can you imagine?”) but then also promptly drawing a line the reader cannot cross (“No, you cannot”). This vacillation is the burden of the black sister who, by slavery, has been disillusioned by the myth of sisterhood, must nevertheless appeal to her white sisters’ naive convictions.

In her vacillation Jacobs subtly places the blame of disconnection on the white woman, and places instead the hope for its revival in the black woman. In her descriptions of white and black women Jacobs describes black women as keepers of interracial, *familial* love that white women no longer are capable of feeling, mistresses and abolitionists included. In this situation the loving relationship that once existed among innocent children is mutilated by slavery into either a power struggle between jealous mistress and her husband’s victim or a hierarchy of pitiful victim and condescending savior. As such, although Jacobs sees interracial sisterhood as broken down by patriarchal men, she sees it as *staying* broken because of white women.

This pessimism can be traced back to certain “incidents” of Jacobs’ actual life. As a fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs escaped to the North in 1842. It was not until 1861, however, when she published *Incidents*¹. During this interval Jacobs kept correspondence with prominent abolitionists of the time, and among them was the white female writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, who Jacobs asked for help in writing. However, Stowe proved to be a great disappointment: Stowe failed to recognize that Jacobs wished to write her narrative as an author in her own right, and instead replied that she would use Jacobs’s story in her key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin—*if* what Jacobs wrote could be verified. Stowe’s condescending attitude angered Jacobs, and her reaction to Stowe as revealed by herself to her white friend Amy Post is so indignant that she lashes out her anger at Post also. Her bitter line “Well what a pity we poor blacks can’t have the firmness and stability of character that you white people have” (Yellin, 121) indicates that Stowe had hit a nerve: Stowe had confirmed Jacobs’s anxiety of the racial barrier between women.

However, Jacobs went on to ask Lydia Maria Child, another prominent white female abolitionist, for a Preface. This turned out to be successful, as Child proved to be very willing to help Jacobs by not using, nor proposing to rewrite, but only by editing what she assured Jacobs was a work that was “wonderfully good, for one whose opportunities for education have been so limited.”²

Yet, when closely inspecting Jacobs’s preface and Child’s introduction to *Incidents* alongside each other a divergence in viewpoints emerges. Put simply, the two introductory remarks to the volume differ in their beliefs in the white women of the North—whereas there

¹ All historical facts regarding Harriet Jacobs’s life are referred from Jean Fagan Yellin’s biography *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*.

² Lydia Maria Child, Letter to Harriet Jacobs, Aug. 13th

is only confidence in Child's voice, Jacobs's is relatively tentative. As opposed to Jacobs, Child cannot be more confident about the moral duty and thus capability of the white woman to free the black slave woman. To prove that the role of white women is critical she actually takes Jacobs, the author of the book she is presenting, as an example: Child explains how Jacobs's first mistress was a "kind, considerate friend who taught her to read and spell," which enabled Jacobs to "write so well." Jacobs, however, tells a different story by emphasizing that this same mistress failed her by not freeing the slave she so benevolently taught. Whereas Child conveniently chooses to not mention this fact at all, Jacobs muses over her mistress's choice, denouncing it as the "one great wrong" she committed, and also admits to finding it hard to "think with less bitterness of this act of injustice." (11) A notable rhetorical move Jacobs makes to justify herself in making such an authoritative valuation of her mistress is putting herself forth as an innocent and loving dependent of her mistress. To persuade her readers of the extent of her love Jacobs paints her fictional self as a child who fits the popular image of the happy content slave under the care of a benevolent master promoted by proslavery whites³:

My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit. I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child...When I was nearly twelve years old, my kind mistress sickened and died. As I saw the cheek grow paler, and the eye more glassy, how earnestly I prayed in my heart that she might live!

³ Michael D. Pierson explains: "Americans in the North and South often referred to slavery as "the patriarchal institution," a term that called forth visions of a strong patriarch with dependents (both white and black) who owed him unquestioned obedience in return for his protection and the necessities of life." (386)

I loved her; for she had been like a mother to me. My prayers were not answered. She died, and they buried her in the little churchyard, where, day after day, my tears fell upon her grave. (11)

As can be observed above, in describing her relationship with her first mistress Jacobs makes use of sentimental imagery popularly used at the time⁴. The effect is that the tragedy is intensified, as the slave child who can love so sentimentally is allowed to feel as if she were a “free-born white child” only to be betrayed by a woman she loves as she would her own mother.

In truth, this relationship between the slave girl and her mistress *is* a mother and daughter relationship, or at least one very akin to it, as the girl’s mistress is in fact the foster sister of her biological mother: According to the narrator her mother and her mistress were reared by the same black mother. Their relationship being such, the two women naturally should have been able to form a sisterly bond based on mutual and equal love. However, the narrator affirms that her mother grew up to be “a most faithful servant to her *whiter* foster sister.” (10)

The black mother who reared the foster sisters is Jacob’s grandmother Martha, who stands as the black Mammy figure historically obliged to prioritize her master’s white child over her own offspring. Jacobs makes sure to paint Martha as a loving mother who manages to love them both, and contrasts this love with the white mistress’s cold-heartedness. For example, Jacobs describes how Martha “could not retain ill will against the woman for whom she

⁴ Critics have noted how Jacobs employs “well-tired sentimental forms to apologize for her sexual demise...[endorsing] the shared value of sexual purity as the grounds for communication with her genteel audience“ (Nudelman, 939), but Jacobs also uses sentimental forms to paint herself as a victim of not only her white male master but also of her white mistress. By doing so, she defines the black slave woman as morally superior than her masters.

had nourished with her milk when a babe” when Jacob’s mistress Mrs. Flint, the very babe she nourished, sees treats Jacobs as “an object of her jealousy and spite” (73)⁵. Thus Jacobs paints the black slave woman as a humane lover not loved back by hard-hearted white women.

Jacobs also portrays her persona as another unrequited lover to further emphasize this difference. The narrator states that she “never wronged [her mistress, Mrs. Flint,] or wished to wrong her, and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet.” (29) Here Jacobs makes it more than clear that it is the white woman who refuses to take the hand the amenable black woman holds out to her. Jacobs goes further, showing how Mrs. Flint’s disbelief in interracial bonding is such that it also casts the shadow of doubt in the amenable slave’s heart regarding the affections of her mistress Emily Flint⁶, yet an innocent child at this point in the narrative:

My young mistress was still a child, and I could look for no protection from her. I loved her, and she returned my affection. I once heard her father allude to her attachment to me, and his wife promptly replied that it proceeded from fear. This put unpleasant doubts into my mind. Did the child feign what she did not feel? Or was her mother jealous of the mite of love she bestowed on me? I concluded it must be the latter. I said to myself, ‘Surely, little children are true.’ (20)

Jacobs’ having to doubt a young child’s—a child she loves, moreover,—purity of heart is in

⁵ In the narrative Mrs. Flint is jealous of Jacobs because her husband Mr. Flint wishes to have an affair with Jacobs. The irony is that Mrs. Flint fails to see that this is not what Jacobs wants and that Jacobs is merely a victim of white patriarchy (to which Mrs. Flint is also a victim, as she is also tortured by her husband’s lechery).

⁶ Mrs. Flint’s daughter Emily Flint is the actual (legal) owner of Jacobs.

itself tragic, but that Emily does actually grow up to be a woman like her mother is tragedy at its height. Later, when Jacobs runs away in search for freedom, Emily Flint, having turned into a Mrs. Dodge⁷, tells Jacobs in a letter, claiming to be her “friend and mistress,” that she has “always been attached to you, and would not like to see you the slave of another, or have unkind treatment,” that she can “protect” her now, and so wishes her to come live with her. (145) Of this letter Jacobs simply remarks: “Of course I did not write to return thanks for this cordial invitation” (145), which signals the end of any lingering affection she may have harbored for Emily. The two women are now firmly disconnected.

This underlying sense of emotional and political disconnection actually, after abolition, has surfaced as the main task of feminism. Although black women may no longer serve white mistresses, many contemporary black feminists openly criticize society’s negligence of how black women’s social position is still fundamentally different from white women’s. In truth mainstream feminism has for the longest time been white women’s theory, with which black women have struggled to identify with. Indeed, to this day black feminists are compelled to cry out to their white counterparts “Ain’t I a woman?”⁸ In effect, therefore, Harriet Jacobs’ testimony signals merely the beginning of the challenge of overcoming the problematic conflation of race and gender, a painful legacy of slavery and racism, in the journey to liberty for all.

⁷ Emily’s marrying signals her complete entry into the system of patriarchy; hence she identifies with the ideology of the “patriarchal institution” that is slavery.

⁸ Quoted from Sojourner Truth and bell hooks: In 1981 feminist black scholar bell hooks published *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black women and feminism*, titled after Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech, delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention.

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