

PORTRAYAL OF WHITE WOMEN CHARACTERS IN HARRIET A. JACOBS' *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL, WRITTEN BY HERSELF*, HARRIET E. WILSON'S *OUR NIG* AND HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

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ABSTRACT

An attempt is made in this paper to look at the portrayal of White women characters in Harriet A. Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). This study takes for analysis three White women characters each from the two Black women's works namely, Mrs. Flint, Mrs. Bruce and Mrs. Emily Flint from *Incidents*; Mrs. Belmont, Aunt Abby, and Mary from *Our Nig*; and four White women characters, namely, Mrs. Shelby, Marie, Miss Ophelia and Evangeline from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This paper argues that in spite of the fact that each of these three texts presents different pictures of the nature and character of White women, they together show a picture of the position of White women in 19th century American society.

KEYWORDS: Slavery, Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

Generally, when we look at African American writing and fiction related to African Americans, we tend to concentrate on the representation of African Americans in them. But this paper makes an attempt to look at the representation of whites in an African American autobiographical writing, African American fiction and an American novel in which the protagonist is Black. Moreover, this paper analyses the representation of white women in them. As the three texts, Harriet A. Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), show, White women are marginalized in America in the sense that they have little role to play in decision making. For instance, when Mr. Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, decides to sell Tom and Harry, he does not discuss this matter with his wife. Instead, he takes his own decision. Moreover, he does not disclose this matter to his wife until she asks him about it: "By the by, Arthur, who was that low-bred fellow that you lugged in our dinner-table today?" (Stowe 31). It also clearly indicates that Mr. Shelby has not even introduced Haley to Mrs. Shelby. This episode precisely makes another point: The demarcation between a public sphere and a private sphere is very thick and strong. The public sphere is exclusively meant for White men, where women are not supposed to enter. Yet, Mrs. Shelby works wonderfully in her allowed private space and demonstrates her "power" when she helps Eliza, as much as she can, by deliberately delaying Mr. Haley's lunch. That gives Eliza enough time to escape with her child, Harry. And in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, even though Mrs. Flint has a "say" in the family affairs, the final decision is usually taken by Dr. Flint. Then, in *Our Nig* Mr. Belmont's decision is final. For instance, when the Bellmonts discuss Frado's education, "[at] last Mr. Belmont declared decisively that she should go

to school. He was a man who seldom decided controversies at home. The word once spoken admitted of no appeal” (Wilson 30-31).

The White women know their position in their society in general and family in particular, and are satisfied with their position in the private sphere. They are aware of their legal rights too. For instance, Marie says: “You see, I brought my own property and servants into the connection, when I married St Clare, and I am legally entitled to manage them my own way” (Stowe 161). But she does not challenge her husband. Even after St. Clare’s death, even though she shows her selfishness, Marie communicates with St. Clare’s brother before she determines to sell the place and all the servants.

As these “texts” suggest the condition of White women in the South of America is similar to that of the women in the North. For instance, Mrs. Bellmont is known by her husband’s name, and it seems that the very outlook of the society is that of White men. For instance in *Our Nig* the society treats Mag Smith as a “fallen women”: “Mag’s new home was soon contaminated by the publicity of her fall; she had a feeling of degradation oppressing her” (Wilson 7). It suggests that the morality of the society is that of the White men.

Even when Mrs. Bellmont controls, ill-treats and physically harasses Frado, the entire issue comes under the domestic–private sphere. She does not punish Frado in Mr. Bellmont’s or her sons’ presence. Yet her “power politics” is something which is very interesting to look at. She argues only when she is certain that she will win. She uses both her roles as wife and mother, to maintain her “power” in the family.

Quite surprisingly, even though White women are not as powerful as White men in 19th century American society, many of the White women, as the texts demonstrate, compensate their “marginalized” position by showing and imposing their power on Blacks. For example, Mrs. Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. She is jealous, envious and always taunts her servants, and at times enjoys the visual pleasure of watching her servants being whipped: “[...] she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash” (Jacobs 12)

Then in *Our Nig* we see Mrs. Bellmont who ill-treats Frado and physically harasses her: “[...] Mrs. Bellmont, enraged, approached her, and kicked her so forcibly as to throw her upon the floor. Before she could rise, another foiled the attempt, and then followed kick after kick in quick succession and power, till she reached the door” (Wilson 43-44). This kind of a cruel treatment is a shocking surprise for us, for we know that slavery is not legally permitted in the North. Frado has to do all sorts of work in the household. This indicates that in practice Frado virtually lives a life of a slave girl in North of America.

Similarly, Marie in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* shows her potential for cruelty. She does not like to see anybody treating Blacks with human consideration. This is the only problem she has with her daughter Evangeline. Marie’s attitude towards Blacks is clear when she says, “Now, there’s no way with servants,[...] but to *put them down*, and keep them down” (Stowe 160). She, despite Miss Ophelia’s appeal, sends Rosa to the whipping house to get her beaten up. Interestingly, in connection with this incident, we can suspect that Marie is jealous. She says, “I mean to shame her; that is just what I want, she has all her life presented on her delicacy, and her good looks, and her lady like airs, till she forgets who she is, and I’ll give her one lesson that will bring her down!, I fancy!” (Stowe 298). This also indicates that the White mistress does not like to see the Blacks look beautiful and behave like “ladies.”

Mrs. Bellmont in *Our Nig* also has a similar kind of temperament and behaviour. For example, we are told that when Jack comes home with his wife Jenny, Mrs. Bellmont "wished to make her feel her inferiority; [...] she watched her incessantly, to catch at some act of Jenny's which might be construed into conjugal unfaithfulness" (Wilson 113). But Mrs. Bellmont is not only jealous and egoistic but also materialistic.

Another similarity between Mrs. Bellmont and Marie is that both of them use their complaints and tears as "weapons". An example from *Our Nig* is as follows: "Oh dear! I did not think it would come to this; that my own husband would treat me so. Then came fast flowing tears" (Wilson 47).

Just like this, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, when Miss Ophelia reminds Marie of Evangeline's wish and St. Clare's promise to Free Tom, Marie responds: "Everybody goes against me! Everybody is so inconsiderate. And she sobbed and gasped for breath and called Mammy to open the window" (Stowe 301). Marie "had an indefinite capacity of hysterical fits; and after this, whenever her husband's or Eva's wishes with regard to servants were alluded to, she always found it convenient to set one in operation" (Stowe 302). However, we may feel that Marie is not as bad as Mrs. Bellmont in the sense that Marie herself does not inflict any physical harassment like Mrs. Bellmont. Another thing is that Marie is habituated: she is the only daughter of a plantation owner who has many slaves. She is born and brought up under such a system. But Mrs. Bellmont's behaviour reveals that if she is "genuinely bad and evil," it is not the social system that makes her behave in such a way, instead, it is her "instinct".

Nevertheless, we see in the three texts White female characters who are virtually good and considerate towards Black slaves. For instance, Mrs. Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Even though she is also a part of the institution of slavery, she does not misuse her position and ill-treat her servants. It is quite clear when we see that she is shocked by her decision to sell Tom Loker and Harry. She tries her best to prevent her husband from committing such an act. Moreover, when she knows that she cannot do anything to "undo" the transaction, she does her best to delay Haley's search for Eliza and Harry, and she rejoices when she realizes that Eliza and Harry have escaped. The magnanimity, generosity and nobility of her mind are revealed when she vows to Tom that she will raise money to redeem him. She even tells her husband that she is ready to work for such a cause. Her staunch Christian belief and sound morality are remarkable, yet we may suspect that Harriet Beecher Stowe created such a character to show the world that slavery as such is not altogether a "bad" thing or an "evil" when the slave owners are kind, and true "Christians"; slavery becomes a heinous practice only when the slave owners are cruel, inhuman and "unchristian" as Simon Legree. On the other hand, we may think that Harriet Beecher Stowe tries to show the world that Christian morals and principles and true practice of Christianity are a remedy for the evil side of slavery.

However, we see good and kind White women in Black writers' works as well. For example, Mrs. Bruce an English woman, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Written by Herself*. She is a kind and gentle mistress. She does her best to protect Linda. And we see that Mr. Bruce's second wife, Mrs. Bruce, is from the South. She says,

I am very well aware of it [English slave law]; it is imprisonment and one thousand dollars fine. Shame on my country that it is so!. I am ready to incur the penalty. I will go to the state's prison, rather than have any poor victim torn from my house, to be carried back to slavery. (Jacobs 194)

This shows Mrs. Bruce's courage, nobility, and concern for Linda. Moreover, it is Mrs. Bruce who paid money for Linda's freedom. And in *Our Nig* we have Aunt Abby, who consoles Frado whenever she experiences pain and suffers

brutality from Mrs. Belmont and helps her in many ways. Then again, we see Miss. Ophelia, a Northern lady in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She sympathizes with Blacks. She talks about the moral responsibility of Whites, and the need for educating the slaves. Since she is from New England state, she is supposed to be against slavery and prejudices. Yet, her prejudice against Blacks in her heart of hearts is revealed when St. Clare asks her to take care of and educate Topsy. She does not even touch Topsy once in the initial stages. She says, "I have always had a prejudice against Negroes, and it's a fact, I never could bear to have that child touch me; but I didn't think she knew it" (Stowe 262). It affirms the fact that even though some White people are against slavery, and they sympathise with Blacks and talk in favour of the Black community, White people never consider Blacks equal. In their heart of hearts they do have a dislike for Blacks. If we take this into consideration, we may suspect Mrs. Shelby. We may want to question why she chooses only "light skinned" maids and house servants for her household work.

But, it does not mean that these White women characters are bad. Their friendly behaviour may perhaps be a product of so many other factors. One of the influences is, of course, that of religion. For example, we may feel Mrs. Shelby is considerate to her servants/slaves because of her morality and strong "Christian" belief. Aunt Abby is friendly, sympathetic and helpful to Frado, once Frado starts attending Mass and reading the *Bible*. Mrs. Bruce helps Linda out of her generosity and human concern. Whatever the causes may be, these good White women characters demonstrate the fact that even in such a crooked and evil system of slavery and of forced labour, there are people who are genuinely good and concerned about those people whom the society exploits, considers inhuman or subhuman, "uncivilized" and "uncultured". Even though such good White women characters in these narratives and novel do not work in the public sphere, they do, whatever they can, in the limited private sphere to help and console Blacks in their distress and trouble. This may be considered the victory of humanity and conscience.

We have Mary, Evangeline and Miss. Emily Flint as representing the next generation of White women. But the three "representatives" of the "younger generation" strike different notes. We see Mary as "Little Mrs. Belmont". She seems to have inherited all of her mother's "evil" nature from her mother. She is cruel and racist. She is ashamed to be seen "walking with a nigger". She tells lies, and at times, she behaves like an uncultured person. For instance, one of Mary's deeds is described in this way: "'Saucy, impudent nigger, you! Is this the way you answer?' And taking a large carving knife from the table, she hurled it, in her rage, at the defenseless girl" (Wilson 64). Another way of looking at this is to consider her behavior as a sign of bad breeding. But it is the same Mrs. Belmont who fostered Anny as well. However, it is true that Anny does not have much emotional attachment to her mother. Mary seems to have an instinctive hatred, animosity and malice towards "Blacks". But in the case of Miss. Emily Flint, even though she is a product of the South and she enjoys economic benefits from the practice of slavery, and she legally possesses a slave, Linda, she does not have any malice towards Linda. It is suggested in the narrative that Miss. Emily Flint decides to "sell" Linda because of her economic condition. She still believes that it is her legal right to do so.

Unlike such realistic pictures, we have, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Evangelin. Even though she is a child, she is unusually mature and surprisingly sensible for her age. She influences and inspires others. Her acquaintance with others makes positive changes in them. She sows the seed of goodness in them. However, her behaviour, it seems, is not a product of her experience; rather, it is quite genuine and is an "instinct". It is a kind of divine presence. For Tom, Eva is a living embodiment of Christ. But we know that even her "last wish" is not fulfilled. Finally, while considering the portrayal of White women characters by a White woman from the North, a free Black woman from the North and a

fugitive slave woman from the South, we may consider the differences in their portrayal and may wonder at the intention of the authors.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I would say when we look at the portrayal of White women characters in Harriet A. Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) we see that White women have little role to play in decision making. In the 19th century America, the demarcation between a public sphere and a private sphere is very thick and strong. The public sphere is exclusively meant for White men, where women are not supposed to enter. Yet, White women like Mrs. Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, work wonderfully well in her allowed private space. In the select novels the White women know their position in their society in general and family in particular, and are satisfied with their position in the private sphere. They are aware of their legal rights too. As these "texts" suggest the condition of White women in the South of America is similar to that of the women in the North. The select texts demonstrate that even though White women are not as powerful as White men in 19th century American society, many of the White women compensate their "marginalized" position by showing and imposing their power on Blacks.

However, we see in the three texts some of the White female characters are virtually good and considerate towards Black slaves. Moreover, we see good and kind White women in Black writers' works as well. Above all, these good White women characters demonstrate the fact that even in such a crooked and evil system of slavery and of forced labour, there are people who are genuinely good and concerned about those people whom the society exploits, considers inhuman or subhuman, "uncivilized" and "uncultured." Yet, the three texts written by women reveal that in 19th century America White women were marginalized though they enjoyed several privileges denied to their Black sisters.

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