

## Masculine Power Presented through Rape in Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

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### Abstract

Danger of sexual assault has been directly and indirectly warned as one of crucial problems of women and girls through media in Thailand daily. According to news reported about this kind of crime, mostly women and girls are the main target of it. All women and girls insecurely live in this world. This gender-based violence reflects people's attitudes which pass from time to time toward women's value in society. This research aims to study the use of men's masculine power in the form of sexual violence over women in a slave narrative literature, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs. The result showed that Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl directly portrays sexual coercion and injustice that female slaves had to face under slavery to the world. Masculinity of men was exercised through fierce and coercive sexual actions on slave women as the way to express their power. In addition, men's violence toward women was a relation to gender and power. Power was an individual possession. Sex roles, the influence of patriarchal ideology, income and status inequalities allowed men to exercise their power, violence, and violation.

**Keywords:** slave narrative, masculinity, masculine power, sexual assault, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Nowadays rape become one of crucial problems occurred in Thailand. Pictures and news of the violation on female bodies have been commonly displayed in newspapers and on television screens daily. Danger of sexual assault has been warned through media directly and indirectly. Women and girls are major group of this gender-based violence. Based on news, all male siblings and kinship could even be women and girls' surrounding dangers. Social attitudes about gender and sexuality and media normalize rape as rape myth. People become to develop distorted beliefs and attitudes toward raped victims by blaming the false of raping on them. Consequently, this desperate valuation shows people's traditional attitudes toward women and women's value. The violated female body is a phenomenon occurred for a long time. It has been traditionally and frequently discussed with concern through many ways. Slave narrative is one form that presents sexual assault toward girls and women to the world. Slave narrative is literary form written or orally related by enslaved or former slaves which is considered as one of the most influential works in American literature. Mostly, it is portrayed the harsh and misery lives of slaves in both fictional and autobiographical writing style. Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs under the pseudonym Linda Brent, an enslaved African American woman, is one of famous slave narrative literatures; however, it become publicly remarkable because of its difference. Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl directly portrays struggles including sexual coercion and injustice that female

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slaves had to face under slavery to the world. She dares to write what nobody dares to expose—sexual exploitation. Through her life event in *Incidents in the Life of a slave girl*, Linda Brent, the protagonist, shows that Dr. Flint's rape is the way to show his masculinity and power over his female slaves.

### The History of Slavery

Under the slavery system, African Americans' lives were not bright and beautiful. Both black men and women were mentally and physical faced with degradation. As slaves, black people had extremely limited freedom. Their lives were held and controlled by masters or slaveholders. With scientific and unscientific reasons supported, European Americans thought that they are superior and other races, especially African American people, are inferior. Therefore, black slaves and their descendants were considered as properties that could be traded, inherited and gained advantages with by traders or masters. They forcibly and coercively worked with tightly control as low-paid labors with brutal treatments. Because of the belief that they would not work without forced by beating, black slaves were severely hurt during working day. Various punishments such as whipping, beating, burning, or even hanging were used with slaves depending on their crime that whites themselves decreed (Hine, D. C., Hine, W. C., & Harrold, W. C. 2000) and Yaikong, K. (2004) . Nevertheless, female slaves' fate was more miserable. Black women were unusually grouped in lower position in the society than any other groups. They faced with both racism and sexism. Therefore, even white women victimized by sexism and black men victimized by racism could become as exploiters and oppressors to black women (Hooks, B., 1999). Being black slaves, girls and women were brutally and sexually exploited and dehumanized by white masters. In powerless and inferior position, they had no guard to protect themselves from sexually harassment, rape and sexual exploitation by masters or slaveholders. On the other hand, male slaves were powerless to protect ones who they love. Female slaves desperately endured with harsh treatments and sexual vulnerability daily. They lived with an oppressive force. Hooks asserted that "being oppressed means the absence of choice" (Hooks, B., 1999 : 27). Striping, beating, raping and breeding normally occurred with female slaves. Knowing that the slave status of their mother must inherited to their children, most masters did not feel hesitated to grow a number of properties and wealth in their hands with slave breeding (Collier's Encyclopedia, 1991). In *One Drop of Blood*, Wright stated that with a single drop of black blood, a person would define as a black person. Although they were people of mixed black and white, they were always rejected by whites, but accepted by blacks (as cited in Kromkowski, 1997 : 262). By coercing sexual relation between male and female slaves or between white male masters and female slaves, girls and women, however, were victims of slave breeding production. As a property, from American history, raping a black woman was not a crime.

Because slave were looked as a form of ownership which slaveholders were absolute rulers over their property, raping slave women were constantly considered as a treatment on things. Slaveholders as rulers had the right to use the body of their slaves-thing-like treatment in whatever way they wanted. Although Nussbaum asserted that "human beings have a dignity that deserves

respect from laws and social institutions (1999 : 5). black people regarded as properties were excluded from this idea. Moreover, slave women were constantly subjects of sexual violence. Historically, Brownmiller stated that firstly, rape laws put on books were considered as property laws which aim to protect a man's property value. Rape was considered as action of devaluing a man's property. Wives and daughters as properties of fathers and husbands were not the focus of the protection of laws. He also asserted that the laws would not protect a woman who was not a property of any man (1975). For black women who were not seen as human being, they were treated as things without any protection. While rape cases were seldom brought to justice, black men were innocently always convicted as wrongdoers, rapists (Davis, 1982).

Rape represents men's power and status in the society. According to Hooks, some feminists also asserted that there are relationship between a desire for domination and power and sex in male dominant culture. Evidentially, she maintained that men likely have characteristics of power and dominance more than women. Actually, women traditionally have been subordinated to men. Due to gender inequality and subordination of women, women are always oppressed and exploited by men. The differences in status of sexual harassment victims and offenders are the major cause of the problem (Hooks, 1999). In male dominant society, men decided and valued everything. Their decisions were judged as laws to follow. They rationally describe their aggressive feeling and sexual coercion as the way to express their masculinity. Sex was looked as a quest to conquer. Being as a rapist is a result of sexual natural force of masculinity. They convinced that they are natural actions of men (Dworkin 1999). However, for African American women, Angela Davis, an African American feminist, said that rape is not a sexual violence related only with men's domination over women, but it is a matter of racial and class domination (Ross 2002). Black women realized that they could not oppose their position of sexual victimization. During slavery, rape was one of terribly competent ways of keeping slaves in a track by slaveholders instead of destroying their valuable property with lynching. Sexual coercion was the way of claiming right by slaveowners over their property (Davis 1982).

The Exercise of Masculine Power through Sexual Coercions in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs did not only show her agony life as a female slave in plantation; however, she exposed the cruelty of sexual assault toward female slaves in slavery system through her life events. Linda Brent, as a protagonist of the story, was raised in a happy home with her parents. In her early life, she was a happy kid who knowing a little about her truly enslaved status. When she was six, she had a chance to learn reading after being sent to live with her mother's old kind mistress. She was well treated by the mistress. However, she was in a downhill of life after being sent to the villainous Flint family. She unfortunately learned that a real life as a slave girl without shield was cruel. In ages of puberty, Linda was pleased by her 40 years older master, Dr. Flint. She was pressured to have sexual relationship with the lustful Dr. Flint. As being branded as an intelligence slave because of her reading skill, she got special abusive treatment from Dr. Flint in order to make her mentally and emotionally surrender. She had to

confront with sexual abuse orally and physically which psychologically drove her to a state of hatred as she stated that, “he peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him (Brent, 1861 : 44).” However, because of the status inequalities, she, as a woman and slave, had to submit and leave her dignity behind with this awful condition with no choice. She said that “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own (Brent, 1861 : 119).” She emphasized that male slaves might be brutalized by beating, whipping and starving by masters. They might brutally be forced to work hard; nevertheless, it could not compare with slave women’s suffering. Slave women were not only oppressed, but they were sexually exploited. According to Coryell and Faires, they were seen as “nothing but cattle” which had to breed more slaves (2012). All female slaves had to frightfully endure with the loss of their children. Therefore, slave women’s fate was nothing, but agony. Linda’s fate was not different. She stated that,

He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by friends who bear the shape of men. (Brent, 1861 : 45)

He harassed and threatened her as often as he could in order to exercise his power over his property; while Linda could not do anything to protect herself. As slaves, neither men nor women could go against masters’ power. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, “Powerless” refer to the state that unable to control or influence anything because of less power (1991). At powerless position, no slave dared to give her a hand against whites’ power. Individuals who tried to protect their love would be abused themselves. As she mentioned that,

The other slaves in my master’s house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof; and they were aware that to speak of them was an offence that never went unpunished. (Brent, 1861 : 46)

No one wanted to be in a risky situation anymore. They learned to keep everything in silence in order to avoid problems. Neither men slaves nor slaves’ family members went against white dominant power. They had no power and right to help the one they love. They were put in low status; and started to admit that given position.

I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. They do the work. (Brent, 1861 : 68)

She pointed out that black men were inferior because of the slavery system and the whites. They were legally oppressed in brutal system by the interdependent of the South and the north. They were mentally and physically oppressed, suppressed and forced to know their right place in societies naturally. Their problem including Linda's was they were not the owner of their own life and choices. They had no power.

Although Dr. Flint enjoyed to us his power over slaves, he still concerned of his image as a good Christianity showed in public. To keep the tortured slaves in silence was important to him. Therefore, threatening to kill individuals who try to expose his wicked side was regularly happened. As she stated that, "Dr. Flint swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as the grave (Brent, 1861 : 46)." On the other hand, Linda herself also felt ashamed to tell anyone of this embarrassing occurrence. As being taught to be a self-respected slave girl, her pride and fear forced her to keep it in silence. Kelly and Radford supported this idea that women seem to be encouraged to underrate their experiences of sexual violence, coercion and exploitation, especially if they have close relationship to the offenders (1996). Moreover, according to Hooks, in patriarchal social system, women's speech right was ignored. Their voice was left into the air that no one cared to listen. Therefore, black women's voice was undoubtedly overlooked by society. Societies put no value on their speech ("Talking Black" 1999). With the fear of exposure and the fear of punishment, girls were always taught to be good, submissive and silent. To avoid troubles, they should always say "Yes" even though they did not agree with that. "Silence is power! It is a woman's strength (Thao, 1999 : 17)." As a girl, Linda desperately shielded herself from pain and troubles with the protection of silence.

After struggling against the action of Dr. Flint's sexual violence, she realized that he would eventually get what he wished. Being raped by an individual who she hated, she was preferable to sacrifice her body to the one she decided by herself. Hoping that being pregnant, she would be sold off because of her shameful. However, her way in dealing with the lust of Dr. Flint was not work. She was intensely invaded by the lecherous villain as follow:

As for Dr. Flint, I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling him. From time to time he told me of his intended arrangements, and I was silent. At last, he came and told me the cottage was completed, and ordered me to go to it. I told him I would never enter it. He said, "I have heard such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there." I replied, "I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother." (Brent, 1861 : 86-87)

She still had to face with disgusting things from Dr. Flint including dirty talks and a secret cabin for her as their love nest. His pleasure in controlling others' lives kept him in continuing threatens her. Linda also felt desperate and guilty with what she done; nonetheless, as a female slave, she had no choice. She mentioned that,

O 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. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. 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 standard as others. (Brent, 1861 : 86)

She did not want anyone to criticize her sinful sexual relationship if they were not in the same position as her. They were not the powerless victim of sexual abuse and harassment. They would not understand what she had been through. Since, as slaves, they legally had no right to make their choices and control their lives, their actions also should not be judged with the same standard of civilized people.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, violence is regarded as one component of power and domination. Men's violence toward women is about gendered relation and power. Power is an individual possession. Sex roles, the influence of patriarchal ideology, income and status inequalities encourage the exercise of men's power violence and violation. As women in any race, age, and social status, they are always a target of violence. Being seen as physically weak, easily frightened and silent, their dignity is often violated by men. They are victimized because of gender relation. Nevertheless, colored women are obviously easier to take advantages. As second-class citizens, they get unequal right in everything. With racial prejudice, power and class domination, women of color were a group of people frequently degraded and exploited, and they are still victim today.

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