

**T.C.  
İstanbul Üniversitesi  
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü  
Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Anabilim Dalı  
Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Bilim Dalı**

**Yüksek Lisans Tezi**

**Slave Narratives:  
Constructing the Black Female Self**

**Hayriye Öyküm Kırçuvaloğlu**

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## DÜZELTME EKİ

Eylül 2006 tarihinde teslim edilmiş ve düzeltme almış tezim ile ilgili değişiklikler yapılmış 30 Ocak 2007 tarihinde teslim edilmek üzere hazırlanmıştır. Tezde eksik bulunan siyah köle kadın yazınına ait otobiyografiler eklenmiş ve siyah kadının ‘çifte baskı’ altında olan hayatı çeşitli anlatılarla örneklenmiştir. Ayrıca dil ve yazım konusunda düzeltmeler yapılmıştır.

## Öz

Kölelik dönemi boyunca, siyah kadın beyaz erkek egemen toplum içerisinde çeşitli baskı ve şiddete maruz kalmıştır. Bu baskı altında siyah kadın kimlik arayışını sürdürmüş ve kendi kimliğini bu şartlar altında oluşturmuştur. Bu problemin temel nedeni siyah kadının ‘çifte baskı’ altında yaşamış olmasıdır. Siyah köle kadınlar, hem siyah hem de köle olarak sadece kendi deneyim ve tarihsel gelişimlerine dayanarak, kimliklerini oluşturmayı seçmiştir. Bu çalışmada siyah köle kadının yaşamış olduğu tarihsel sürecin gelişimi, hem edebi alanda hem de sosyal alanda incelenmiştir. Edebi alanda, siyah köle kadınların yazmış oldukları otobiyografilerde Avrupa odaklı yazın geleneğinden uzaklaştıkları belirtilmiştir. Bu noktada evrensel benlikten de uzaklaşarak siyah köle kadınlar olarak kendi öznelliklerine yönelmişlerdir. Bunun nedeni, siyah kadının gerçeğinin ırk, sınıf ve cinsiyet konularının tümünü içermesidir. Siyah kadının yaşamı ve vermiş olduğu savaş, ırk, cinsiyet ve sınıf sorunsallarının biraraya geldiği noktadır. Bu doğrultuda, siyah köle kadın ‘ötekinin öteki’ olarak tanımlanmıştır. Edebi alanın yanı sıra bu problemler kölelik dönemi boyunca siyah kadının sosyal yaşamında ve aile yapısında da gözlemlenmiştir. Bu bağlamda, çalışmada siyah kadının yaşamış olduğu cinsel ve fiziksel şiddetin yanı sıra, kurmuş oldukları ‘siyah anaerki’ düzen ve sahiplendikleri değerler ele alınmıştır.

## Abstract

During the period of slavery, the black woman was exposed to various oppressions in the white patriarchal world. The black woman continued the search for her identity and constructed her selfhood under these conditions. The main reason for this problem was that the black woman had to face ‘the double oppression’. The black slave woman chose to construct her identity depending upon her own experiences and her own historical development both as a woman and a black. In this study, the historical improvement of the black woman’s development is analyzed both in the literary and social contexts. It is mentioned that the black slave woman estranged herself from the Eurocentric literary tradition in the literary field, in the autobiographies that she wrote. In this sense, she also estranged herself from the universal self and remained interested in her own subjectivity. The reason for this was that the reality of the black woman included the issues of race, class and gender as a whole. The life and the struggle of the black woman is regarded as the point at which the issues of race, class and gender come together. Thus, the black slave woman was defined as ‘the other of the other’. In addition to the literary world, these problems can also be observed in the black woman’s social life and family during the period. In this context, along with the sexual and physical assault that the black woman was exposed to, the ‘Black Matriarchy’ and the values that she adopted were also analyzed in this study.

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## INTRODUCTION

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition.... The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that... not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won- not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. (Collins, 2000: 41)

The black slaves who were brought from Africa to be employed in tobacco plantations in Virginia were deprived of all their rights, cultural and social values. In 1600's the destiny of the black race in the United States of America was determined. Laws about slavery were set: Slavery continued to death, A slave had the status of his/her mother's status, Being a Christian did not change this status, Slave owners had the right to make his slave work till dusk, to decide whom to marry, discipline them and to decide the quality of nourishment, housing, medical care.

By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, black men and women were in the status of movable property, which meant that they were chattels. In her book *Black Women in White America*, Gerda Lerner explicates the system of slavery:

The essence of slavery was that the slave was legally a chattel, a piece of property to be bought and sold and disposed of at the master's will. He had no legal rights, could not testify in his own behalf nor bear witness against a white person. As a result of this feature of the slave system, which was peculiar to North American slavery, the slave was subject to the arbitrary will of his master in all matters. His treatment depended on the personality, circumstances and economic condition of his master. (Lerner, 1992: 5)

The black people existed as a social group inferior to the white Americans and were severely discriminated against during and after the period of slavery. The exploitation of black people was regulated through social practices and hierarchies of race, class and gender that already existed in American society. The black people were categorized as the 'other', which located them as the inferior opposite of the white race which was associated with power, dominance and truth.

Accordingly, the construction of the identity of the black race was connected with their struggle for freedom, and they tried to build their identity as a bond that brought them together. Their search for a collective identity involved the history and culture of the black race both before and during the period of slavery: Black people had a common history and a shared common experience as slaves and their identity was based on that common past and that shared experience of slavery and segregation.

As the concept of double-consciousness and in between-ness<sup>1</sup> became the most important element in the formation of identity for the black men, the identity of the black woman was further problematized because it involved sexual as well as racial discrimination. The slave woman's identity was bound with issues of gender, race and class as a whole, making it impossible to locate either of them at the center. The reason for the slippage and confusion of identities was that the construction of the black female self was at once intertwined with racial discrimination and with the prevalent cultural assumptions about women regardless of race. As Elizabeth M. Almquist comments:

The first finding is that, while there are many forces that divide, individual women do not and cannot compartmentalize their lives. They cannot neatly separate their experiences into distinct categories and label some "racial", some "gender", and some "social class". They are not members of minorities first and women second. Nor are they women first and members of minorities second. They are individuals who have incorporated a whole constellation of roles, characteristics, and experiences into their self-concepts. Yet gender and race are master statuses, channeling these women into certain roles and impinging on their lives at every turn.

Second, what is true for the individual is true for the society. The forces of race, gender, and class are inseparable....Yet the experience of racism makes them reluctant form enduring links with white feminist groups, and the experience of sexism often puts them at loggerheads with minority males....Thus gender, race, and class intertwine, weaving patterns that both unite minority women with and separate them from other groups.

Third, minority women must be free to define themselves, their priorities, and their goals based on their own analysis of their condition in American society. In the near future, producing such an analysis requires some separatism. So that various individuals and groups may sort out their unique experiences, reclaim their own identities, and emerge with a fresh perspective on the many forces that shape American society. (as qtd. in Freeman, 1995: 600-601)

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<sup>1</sup> It was defined as a way of living between two cultures, in this case between the white and the black culture. The black man could not be entirely in either culture or in both cultures, he could only exist between the two cultures. In accordance with this, he faced with the double-consciousness that signified the bi-racial and bi-cultural identities of the black race.



The autobiographical writings of black women emerged as one of the most efficient ways to claim selfhood and identity; it was not only a means of self-representation, a coming to voice, but it also meant heroic resistance. As writing autobiographies was considered to be the privileged occupation for the white male, the black woman's autobiography was a revolt against the Eurocentric male culture. The autobiographies written by black women included their life cycle, their struggle to survive and their suffering both physically and psychologically. The black woman wrote about her sexuality and her growing up as a female in her autobiography, enabling her to write her struggle in history.

The difficulty of, and the obstacles encountered in writing autobiography for women in general are discussed in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*:

There are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without recognizing or naming the process.... Women of accomplishment, in unconsciously writing their future lived lives, or, more recently, in trying honestly to deal in written form with lived past lives, have had to confront power and control. Because this has been declared unwomanly, and because many women would prefer (or think they would prefer) a world without evident power or control, women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over- take control of- their lives. (Smith, Watson, 1998: 3)

In addition to the difficulties that all women involved in the literary world encountered, the black woman who attempted at writing her life story was doubly marginalized due to racist assumptions. As she belonged to both groups – women and black – which were considered to be inferior, she was doubly oppressed and made invisible. She met with obstacles in her attempt to write about her own past, and present, as both gender and racial issues determined the black woman's status in historical development.

In the system of slavery, the black woman had to survive in the hardest conditions. Besides the physical conditions of slavery and racial oppression, she had to resist gender oppression. Historically, the place of the black woman was the lowest and her position was the hardest because she was considered 'the other of the

other'. The black woman was not only defined as 'the other' of the white race because of her skin color but she was also the other of the white woman who was the other of the white man. Additionally, as far as the hierarchical relations within the black community were concerned the black woman was placed inferior to the black man.

The black woman was exploited by the white patriarchal system through rape or other sexual assaults. In the face of sexual and racial oppression, she was in need of protection but she was deprived of the support of the black man. Moreover, the slave woman had things to do both inside and outside the house. She had obligations as a slave, and responsibilities as a mother to keep her family together. Deprived of the protection of the black man, the black woman had to build up the 'Black Matriarchy', which may be an ironic term because it implies the power of a dominant group, whereas black women were the most powerless group in society. Despite this extensive exploitation, the slave woman resisted and tried to remain strong in society during the period of slavery.

Her resistance against slavery took many forms. She refused to go to his master's room although she would be whipped the following day. She tried to escape despite the risk of being caught and killed. Sometimes, she resorted to more understated forms of resistance: "The little child minding white babies, who lets them drop out of her lap as soon as she is unobserved; the slave woman shamming illness in order to avoid being sold away from her husband". (Lerner, 1992: 6)

Considering her circumstances, the slave narrative of the black woman served as an example for her resistance by revealing the injustice she was subjected to in her public and private life in the slave community and in the white households she worked for. Her self-narrative proved how she had constructed her ideals and identities under these circumstances.

The two slave narratives selected for analysis in this study are illustrative of the ways in which the black woman's identity was bound with her experiences as a member of the black race and a woman. Harriet Ann Jacobs and Sojourner Truth's self-narratives, written in 1861 and 1850 respectively, have in common a preoccupation with the double-oppression the black woman experienced on which her identity formation was based. These self-narratives reveal the various aspects of

black women's lives and their various ways of coping with the extenuating circumstances arising from their status as women and slaves.

Harriet Jacobs' life story sheds light on the issue of the black woman's isolation. Deprived of the protection of the black man, Jacobs struggled to survive with her children and grandmother. Not only had she to resist the sexual assaults of her white master, but also the jealousy and the cruelty of her mistress estranged her from the sisterhood of white women. Consequently, the concept of black matriarchy referring to solidarity among black women played a major part in her life. Harriet's life exemplified a mother's struggle, who sacrificed her life for her children, her black family. Sidonie Smith defines the life of Harriet Jacobs and her contribution to the slave narratives:

The fierce purposefulness of a slave woman's efforts to escape her bondage and to establish her full humanity, so central to the narrative purpose of the genre of slave narratives, violated the code of submissiveness so central to true womanhood. In various ways Jacobs as narrator assumes certain postures antithetical to the postures of the true woman-her willfulness noted above, her not always suppressed anger, her independent critique of both southern and northern society, and her revelation of sexual concubinage. (Smith, 1993: 39)

Harriet Jacobs' autobiography demonstrated her revolt against the principles of slavery during her lifetime, and it came out as a major contribution to the struggle of the black women. Jacobs was finally given her freedom by a white friend who helped her by buying her from her owner while she was a fugitive slave in New York. In her autobiography she expressed her resentment of the persistence of the conditions that made slavery possible in the first place:

A gentleman near me said, "It's true; I have seen the bill of sale." "The bill of sale!" Those words struck me like a blow. So I [Harriet Jacobson] was *sold* at last! A human being *sold* in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States. (Jacobs, 1861: 6).

Similarly, in Sojourner Truth's life narrative, the double-oppression that the black woman experienced along with the cruelties of the master and the mistress is observed. Hers, too, bears testimony to a life which passed under all kinds of sexual,

physical and psychological abuses. As a devoted follower of Christian faith, Truth had initially internalized her oppression and endured the extreme conditions of slavery for the sake of her children and her family, but when she realized that her children would be subjected to the same abuses, she revolted against her master and the system of slavery.

As a slave woman, Truth struggled hard to break out of the hierarchical structures that placed at the lowest level of the human race. In the Fourth National Woman's Rights Convention in 1853, she declared: " We [the black women] have all been thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again, and now I am here" (Sojourner Truth as qtd. in Lerner, 1992:567). Deriving her strength from her religious belief, Truth continued to fight for the freedom and the rights of the black women during and after slavery.

# **1. Constructing Black Women's Identity Through their Self Narratives**

## **1.1 Black Women's Tradition of Autobiography Writing and the Black Female Subjectivity in Their Narratives**

The genre of autobiography is based upon the Eurocentric tradition.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of the conservatism and strict rules of this tradition, autobiographical works were qualified only in terms of the isolation of the autobiographer's self. At the level of content, the personal narratives of white men were constituted of the success stories and their professional lives. Moreover, they contrived their idealized lives with their 'appreciated' universality by presenting them with linearity, coherence, harmony and orderliness. The autobiographies written by black men, on the other hand, were marked by a concern for collective identity and shared experience. The black self-narrative, such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, subverted the traditional form of autobiographical writing by its emphasis on race and common history. Susan S. Friedman explains the collective nature of the black autobiography:

The self of black autobiography...is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long, historic march toward Canaan. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members. It is a conscious political identity, drawing sustenance from the past experience of the group... the autobiographical form is one of the ways that Black Americans have asserted their right to live and grow. It is a bid for freedom, a beak of hope cracking the shell of slavery and exploitation. (as qtd. in Smith, Watson, 1998:78)

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was also a considerable number of unnamed black heroines who wished to present their life experience. Contrary to the Eurocentric tradition, the black woman formed her autobiography outside of the established rules and standards by focusing her self-narrative on the issues of class and gender, which

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<sup>2</sup> Eurocentric tradition defends the concept in accordance with the White European ideals. It neutralizes itself from the historical evidences. Hence, it supports the historical objectivity, which is based on orderliness, coherence and linearity. It is also considered to be the white supremacy.

were directly related to her personal experiences as a woman, and a member of the black race. Thus, differently from the conventional autobiography's claim to objectivity and universality, the black woman's autobiography became a self-representation that acknowledged its subjectivity with an emphasis on a kind of experience marked by difference.

The concept of experience answers the question of how the self, identity and culture are produced. As it has strict links with social constructions, it becomes a source of human consciousness and a way to categorize the society in social groups such as black, white, man, woman. Joan W. Scott describes 'experience':

Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective those relations-material, economic and interpersonal- which are in fact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical. (as qtd. in Smith, Watson, 1998: 61)

It is clear that there is a crucial connection between experience and identity, which needs to be contextualized. The reader should not only capture the noticeable points, but also the complicated and the repressed processes that include the untold or unspeakable histories. Thus, identity is constructed and takes on a shape in accordance with the period and the ongoing cultural, historical, political developments. Consequently, black woman's self should be apprehended in terms of the parameters of the period in which she lives because the self is also a narrative, a story, and a history on its own.

The black woman autobiographer authenticated herself in her life story, tried to capture self-consciousness and introduced cultural, historical and political specificity that was entirely based on gender, class and race problems. She realized this authentication by using her interrupted and formless life while she was trying to give voice to the formerly silenced female slave. Indeed, the autobiographies of black women should be read in a historical and cultural context and on the basis of debates about gender and race. Thus the black woman's autobiography should not be regarded as different from only the autobiographies of white men and white women, but also from the autobiographies of black men.

Robert B. Stepto who has made the most important theoretical contribution to the study of black autobiographies supports that the roots and the origins of the

lives of slaves should be examined to comprehend the structure of these personal histories. Besides the voice of the narrator, there were other voices that authenticate the tale or the form of the narrative. A letter or a text, which was written by the slave owner or a white man, was needed to accept the narrative as valid. "Authentication is, apparently, a rhetorical strategy designed not only for verification purposes, but also for the task of initiating and insuring a readership" (Stepto, 1991:7). In accordance with that, Stepto handles the genre of autobiography in four phases. In his book *"From Behind the Veil"*, Stepto explains the first phase, which he describes as 'eclectic narrative', in this way:

...These other voices (the voices of the authenticators) may belong to various 'characters' in the 'story', but mainly they appear in the appended documents written by slaveholders and abolitionists alike. These documents- and voices- may not always as smoothly integrated with the former slave's tale, but they are nevertheless parts of the narrative. Their primary function is, of course, to authenticate the former slave's account; in doing so, they are at least partially responsible for the narrative's acceptance as historical evidence. (Stepto, 1991:3)

He exemplifies the first phase with Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*. He concludes that there is a separation between the preface of the narrative, the Introduction and the White authored texts. He also states that these parts are appended to the text although there is no bound between them and there is no control over the text. Stepto concludes the parts that are told by Matlack, who is the publisher, as "guarantee the guarantee" (Stepto, 1991:7), as he is trying to reflect the truth of Bibb's tale. In the first phase, these authenticating documents are only appended to the text, and not included straightly in the narrative. Accordingly, "Bibb's tale proves that he has acquired a voice, but his narrative shows that his voice does not yet control the imaginative forms which his personal history assumes in print" (Stepto, 1991:10).

Stepto names the second phase as 'integrated narrative' and explains it in this way:

When the various forms (letters, prefaces, guarantees, tales) and their accompanying voices become integrated in the slave narrative text, we are presented with another type of basic narrative, which I call an integrated narrative (Stepto, 1991: 4).

This type of narrative is more developed and the connection between the documents and the text is more evident. Stepto exemplifies the second phase with Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. He states that the authenticating documents are more bounded and integrated than the narrative. He traces that the introductory words belonged to Northup and the autobiography starts with a reference to another anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This is a way to advance and authenticate his narrative. However, "Northup's eye and 'I' are not so much introspective as they are inquisitive" (Stepto, 1991: 16).

Contrary to this, Stepto handles Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* in the third phase as the 'generic narrative'. Stepto describes the third phase:

...Authenticating documents and strategies are totally subsumed by the tale; the slave narrative becomes an identifiable generic text, e.g., autobiography (Stepto, 1991: 5).

The main feature of the first two texts is the lack of control over the narratives. Hence, Stepto regards Douglass's narrative as a literary achievement "because of the eye and 'I' shaping and controlling the narration" (Stepto, 1991: 16). Douglass's narrative consists of many arranged texts and there is a strict connection between the tale and the supporting texts. "Douglass's tale dominates the narrative because it alone authenticates the narrative." (Stepto, 1991: 17) According to Stepto, although some texts and voices are appended to the narrative, they should not take the control of the narrative, that is to say the narrator- the former slave- should handle the "authorial control" (Stepto, 1991: 18).

Stepto describes the fourth phase as 'authenticating narrative'. In authenticating narrative, "the tale is subsumed by the authenticating strategy; the slave narrative becomes an authenticating document for other usually generic, texts, e.g., novels, histories" (Stepto, 1991: 5). The authenticating texts of these autobiographies includes in this phase are as important and dominant as the narrative. Stepto exemplifies the fourth phase with William Wells Brown's *Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown*. Stepto concludes his discussion of William Wells Brown's narrative:



...the narrator exhibits considerable control of his narrative by becoming editor of disparate texts for authentication purposes, far more than for the goal of recounting personal history (Stepito, 1991: 5).

Stepito draws attention to the total control and authentication in this kind of narration. Accordingly, personal history is transformed to literary form. For instance, Brown writes the preface of his narrative himself, not by a guarantor so his personal history is accompanied by his own authentication. The authorial control of the text is not given to someone else. Besides authenticating his own personal history, he mentions about the history of slavery. He makes a connection between their past, present and future, which enlightens each other.

Stepito's view of the slave narratives brings out the aim of these autobiographies. From the beginnings of the slave narratives, the genre of autobiography contributed to the development of the black race, black culture and black literary culture. Besides, the black autobiographers benefited from these narratives while they were challenging chattel slavery. This challenge was for the physical and spiritual freedom of black people from the political and psychological bondage of slavery. This liberation of the self from the past enabled them to form an identity and acquire literacy. Nellie Y. McKay points this situation:

...Through a mastery of the literacy and the language of the enslaver group, they (African Americans) anticipated proving their oppressors and to sympathetic white readers that people with black skins were as intelligent and human as other groups. Since then the life story has been the most effective forum for defining black selfhood in a racially oppressive world. (as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 74)

The narratives of black women had to go through a similar process of authentication in order to take place in the history of the genre of autobiography. Although they dealt with black culture they followed the white oppressor's language to uplift the black self, which was considered to be inferior. As these narratives proved the existence of alternative cultures and values, the political and cultural priority of white patriarchal system was shaken. Consequently, the coherence and unity of the self, which were accepted as the immutable ideals of this system were

reevaluated. This is accepted as a challenge of black women to the normative history and its products. These women benefited from the genre of autobiography as a basis for cultural critique and resistance. Their focus was on the points about various identifications like gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, which made them “provided subjectivities” (Smith, 1993: 4). All the same, they were able to reconstruct the black womanhood, which was lost by slavery, and reassemble their motherhood and domestic lives, which were destroyed by the dominance of white man. Sidonie Smith emphasizes the contribution of the genre of autobiography to the identity formation of marginalized groups such as the black race:

[The genre of] autobiography has continued to provide occasions for the entry into language and self-narrative of culturally marginalized peoples, of peoples who are assigned inauthentic voices by the dominant culture. (Smith, 1993: 61)

Another typical mode of autobiographical writing is portraying life stories that proclaim one’s liberation from the bonds of the past. The aim of the women who preferred this mode of self-narration was to escape from the grievous and repressing past without forgetting it. Although the system of slavery burdened them with deep sorrows, they did not want to remain detached from their past experience. This can be regarded as a way of recovering the past in order to reconcile with the present. As Bell Hooks comments on her own childhood:

...By writing the autobiography, it was not just this Gloria I would be rid of, but the past that had a hold on me, that kept me from the present. I wanted not to forget the past but to break its hold. This death in writing was to be liberatory. (as qtd. in Smith, Watson, 1998: 429)

Evidently, the genre of autobiography played a crucial role in the formation of the black woman’s identity. By keeping the issues like race, ethnicity and sexuality, the black woman’s autobiographies helped the black woman to establish her identity and selfhood. She displayed her culture specific features through her self-narrative.

## 1.2 Separating “the Embodied Subjectivity” of Black Women from the Universal Subject

The black female autobiographer constructs her narrative with her own personal experience. As her past is based upon the system of slavery, “the story of the ‘I’” (Smith, 1993: 2) is inevitably determined by racial and sexual parameters. Within the black women’s narrative, these are blackness and female subjectivity. Accordingly, these autobiographies offer two different but interconnected matters. The first one is the subjectivity and the voice gained by this self-narrative, and the second one is the cultural inscription, which is the biological essentialism of the female body and the resistance to this tyranny<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the history of the autobiographical ‘I’ may silence the narrator or support her to speak out, “to struggle to become a subject” (Smith, 1993: 4).

The debate on subjectivity is centered on “the universal or the embodied subject” (Smith, 1993: 5). Western selfhood, as a depiction of universal subject, purified itself from the philosophical, economic, political, scientific and literary influences. This universal self separated itself from all social entities, which were overloaded to the individual by interior or exterior effects. The universal self, who is reflected in the Eurocentric autobiographical works, exists as self-representation, and self-consciousness. It also represents the ‘I’, which is the rational, free, universal self, which has the power and which sets limits and boundaries. However, the lack of personal attributes causes subjectivity to become utterly objective. Sidonie Smith argues:

...to secure the universality of the self, cultural practices set various limits, and those limits are normative limits of race, gender, sexuality, and class identifications. A scrupulous classification of the shades of difference establishes clear boundaries around the neutral self. That which is expelled through classification becomes the socially abject, a cultural gesture that installs itself psychologically in the founding identifications of the universal subject. (Smith, 1993: 10)

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<sup>3</sup> The concept mentioned will be analyzed in detail in the coming sections.

The definition and the employment of the universal subject validate the female subject as the nonuniversal, colorful and/or 'woman'. The exposition of the existing masculine values of the universal sphere is the basis of this validation. Nevertheless, the nonexistent feminine spheres are not mentioned and this constructs the enslaved identities of women. Sidonie Smith exemplifies this through the experience of 'the individual':

Offering an official account for the community, the subject of traditional autobiography marshaled the vagaries of his unique history under the banner of the universal subject. Through this practice he [the individual] reaffirmed, reproduced, and celebrated the agentive autonomy and disembodiment of the universal subject, valorizing individuality and separateness while erasing personal and communal interdependencies. As he did so he reenacted the erasure of the feminine that facilitates male entrance into the public realm of words, power, and meaning. Woman, mother, and the feminine functioned in the text of traditional autobiography to signal the place of lost innocence, the forces of desire pressing upon the individual, or the source of salvation. They were part of 'the mess and clutter' of the nonidentical that the autobiographer had to clear out as he struggled toward self-identity and the narrative of a coherent past. (Smith, 1993: 19)

Contrary to the universal self, the 'embodied subject' is completely based upon the issues of race, class, and gender. Although the self develops in a social environment, s/he is marginalized and alienated from the outer world. Accordingly, when the black woman narratives appear in the literary world as autobiographies, they come out as culturally and historically structured sources. Hence, the 'embodied' subjectivities carry their culturally specific discourses, which were regarded as relational, irrational, dependent, and unconscious.

Black women benefited from the genre of autobiography in a historical context by resisting exclusion as the 'other'. They needed to alienate themselves both from the historically imposed features of the black female identity and from the pejorative points of view of the Eurocentric ideals. They needed to construct their own subjectivity, and in connection with this, the self and the identity in their own narratives and with their own experience. Black women should surmount the social obstacles such as their association with 'evil'. Their color and sex were two other handicaps, which they should overcome. Eurocentric culture associated them with all

kinds of primitive concepts, which were internalized by black women during the periods of slavery and reconstruction. As black women accept the 'embodied subject' and the position that is specified for them by the white world and/or the black men by refusing the 'autobiographical 'I'', they remain silent. Regarded as "abjects" (Smith, 1993: 10) who were both stuck to race and gender issues, they were also stuck into an inescapable embodiment as the 'mules uh de world'<sup>4</sup> who 'carry the entire burden on their shoulders'. In addition to all these disadvantages, the black woman autobiographer was denied the privileges offered to other autobiography writers. Her absence from the written language put her at a distance from humanity. This caused the delay and the difficulty of freedom in her narrative voice.

Consequently, as a result of the impositions of the Eurocentric tradition in autobiographical writing, the black woman becomes obliged to escape from the "encumbered entities" and to be transformed into a rational, ahistorical, and acultural subject. In other words, her identity is composed and shaped through these culture specific features. Nevertheless, what is quintessential to reach the universal self is to be free of the culturally embodied domains, to get rid of 'the other' and to authorize their own selves. In order to be a universal subject and acquire a voice, the black woman had to ignore her culture specific features. However, she had chosen to constitute her identity on her blackness and womanhood.

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'mule' is first used in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, while she was trying to explain the place and the value of black women. It helps to define black women's oppression.

### 1.3 The Construction of Black Women's Identity and Self

The place of the black women's writing in literary tradition is not easily fixed. It is included in the feminist literary tradition because it enables diversity in the feminist agenda. On the other hand, it poses problems for the white dominated feminist theory because of its relations with racial issues. Thus, it can be regarded as both inside and outside the categories of women's writings in the feminist critique, and the categories of the black in the racial critique. Black women writers carry both the racial and gender decodings. According to this, their identities are shaped as 'the other of the other'. In other words, the identities are constructed according to the subjects that are counted as norms. If man, in the patriarchal world, is considered to be the norm, the woman is the 'other' of man. If the white is considered to be the norm, then the black is the 'other' of the white in the patriarchal world. In this case, the black woman becomes 'the other of the other'. So this concept removes us from a simple and reductive form of 'otherness'. Mae G. Henderson describes the concept of 'the other' in terms of the black woman:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'other(s)', but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. The interlocutory character of black women's writings is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or 'generalized other', but a dialogue with the aspects of 'otherness' within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the 'Other' of the Same, but also as the 'other' of the other(s), implies, as we shall see, a relationship of difference and identification with the 'other(s)'. (as qtd. in Williams, Chrisman, 1994: 258)

The concept of 'otherness' expands and becomes a more complex representation with black women. If the black man is regarded as 'the other' of the white man, the black woman becomes 'the other of the other'. If the white woman is 'the other' of the white man, once again the black woman becomes 'the other of the other'. Hence, the issues of race and gender are internalized within the identity and consciousness of the black woman. Apart from the racial relationships, the black female self is defined as a member of a family, as someone's daughter, wife or

mother in her familial relations. Accordingly, her individuality and self disperse into many parts, and this makes the identity of the black woman extremely complex. As a consequence of these issues, the black woman constitutes a social group of its own accord, and forms her own language differently from both black men and white women's.

The language of the black woman enables her to express and share her values and norms based on her identity as a woman and as a black person along with her social identity. Consequently, the clarification of her complex identity and subjectivity becomes possible with multiple voices. The black woman writer both enters into a conflict and an approval with the dominant white fe/male discourses. Mae G. Henderson comments:

As such black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women. (as qtd. in Williams, Chrisman, 1994: 261)

In connection with this, they become multi-voiced and speak their experiences out in a racist and sexist society. They are forced to prove themselves in a white and male centered society where survival is the hardest for them. Mae G. Henderson finds in black women's writing elements of discourse which are indicative of both a multiplicity of voices with an emphasis on difference and a unity based on the common experiences of black women as a community:

It is the first as well as the second meaning which we privilege in speaking of black women writers: the first connoting polyphony, multivocality and plurality of voices, and the second signifying intimate, private, inspired utterances. Through their intimacy with the discourse of the other(s), black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses- discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns. (as qtd. in Williams, Chrisman, 1994: 263)

The construction of the black identity should be treated separately from the construction of the white identity as discussed in W.E.B Du Bois's identification of 'dual consciousness'. Du Bois uses this term to explain the identity of the black man

who is obliged to live in the white dominant culture. This culture renders the internalization of the values of the patriarchal system inevitable for the black individual. As a result of this, he acquires a consciousness, which has two different layers. The black individual carries these layers within his identity, but separately. Although some critics identify the black people's double identity as reconciled in a third space, and argue that with the intersection of these two races a new self, which is neither American nor African, emerges, W.E.B Du Bois does not accept the notion of 'hybrid identity.' He states that the concept of 'merging identities' cannot be valid for the black self because they cannot be reconciled. The black man has two souls, but these two souls form a contrast in his consciousness, not a unity. So the black identity is fluid, it is not fixed. The black self cannot be associated only with white ideals or only with black ideals, as he is associated with both. Because of this, the black self should turn back to his own ideals to construct his own identity. If he acts within the frame of the white norms and virtues, he cannot be successful in constructing his own identity. In the following quotation, W.E.B Du Bois describes the identity of the black man and identifies the black man as the seventh son carrying a veil<sup>5</sup>:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1994: 2)

W.E.B Du Bois's argument is also important for the silenced and speechless black women who are alienated from the WASP society. The identities of these women are shaped as woman in the man's world, and as black in the white's world. Besides this 'two-ness', black women preserve their two-layered identities- black and woman-together in the black woman's self. The development of identity of the African

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<sup>5</sup> The term is the basic sign of being a negro. The veil represents the barrier, which may be a social or a racial wall. The very intimate feelings of the black man can only come out from behind this veil.



American woman takes place along several lines: as a human being, as an African American, and as a woman.

The black woman's sense of collective identity should also be considered an advantage as well as a disadvantage because these cultural representations not only alienate women, but also enable a new consciousness of the self. Through these cultural representations, the black woman develops the 'dual consciousness'; one is defined in the cultural context, and the other outside of it. Black women's narratives can be handled as 'cultural autobiography' because the ways in which they construct selfhood and form their narratives are inseparable. This goes parallel with their sense of collective identity. The slave narratives of black women highlight the personal and domestic subjects in connection with the idea of sisterhood, a point, which marks their difference from white women in the feminist arena.

The difference in the construction of the self and identity between male and female slaves is also traced in the autobiographies of the slave narratives. For example, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Ann Jacobs's narratives are different in the way they construct their selves and in the way they want to be perceived. Douglass declares that he has reconciled with the white power and the fact that he is a slave does not deter him from maintaining his position in the society. With his victory, he expresses his triumph as a male and presents himself as a 'man'. In contrast, Harriet Jacobs, as a helpless slave, can only escape and hide to protect herself from "the sexual harassment of her owner" (Nellie Y. McKay as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 76). She cannot declare herself as a powerful and free 'woman'. However in both texts, there is oppression, resistance and a struggle for freedom. Clearly their genders determine the way they announce their freedom and their development of selfhood; in Douglass's narrative, his challenging his master reveals his heroic side as a 'man', but Jacobs's concealment in her grandmother's house makes her challenge a passive one. These two different acts are evident of the different ways in which these two slaves are forced to be "black women and men in search of dignity and selfhood" (Nellie Y. McKay as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 77). In her account of her struggle for freedom, Jacobs portrays the physical and psychological experiences, which are shared only by black women. This contrasts sharply with Douglass's

narrative in which he assumes a position from which he speaks out in the name of all black people. As a man, Douglass has “considerable mobility, even as a slave...” (Nellie Y. McKay as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 77) and at the end of his struggle he is able to be an abolitionist spokesman. Jacobs’s freedom is earned, on the other hand, mainly by means of her skills in devising strategies in dealing with the white master. These two slaves are both deprived of their selfhood during slavery. However, their narratives reveal the differences of the psychological developments of the black female and male on the way to freedom and selfhood. As Nellie Y. McKay writes: “For men agency was the power of self in the public image of manhood; for women it was a self-recognition of their ability to manipulate the power in the self even when they were in otherwise powerless situations” (as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 77). The black female self exploits her own resources and experiences to uplift “true black womanhood,” without adopting the normative notion of agency defined by the white world, (Nellie Y. McKay as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 79) whereas the black man tries to acquire his identity as a ‘man’ by employing the norms of the patriarchal system.

Because the system of slavery had deprived male slaves of their masculine features, the black man was denied the sense of superiority the white man had in terms of sex and class relations. As a result of this lack of power as defined by the white patriarchal system, the main goal for the black man has become the attainment of dominance, and the recovery of his manhood. Hence, their need to adopt the norms of the white patriarchal system, the WASP society, which is based on power relations. On the other hand, the difference in the ways the white and black women were exploited within the patriarchal structures, that is the exploitation of the black women’s productive and reproductive powers outside the institution of family has not led them to adopt the norms of the patriarchal system in the construction of their identity. In her essay *The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography*, Nellie Y. McKay asserts:

...black womanhood was not static or a single ideal. The selves in the stories of the early foremothers reveal black female identity as a process of ongoing reinvention of self under the pressures of race, class, and gender oppressions. While one cannot overestimate the damaging effects of black and white,

male and female dominance on black women's agency, the group turned away from absolute victim status by rejecting other-determined and unachievable models of womanhood to shape its identity out of its own self-definition. For example, slave or free-born nineteenth-century black women, as members of a white-designated inferior racial group, knew that the conditions of their lives denied them access to the construct of white womanhood. As a result, they set about the task of reconstructing selves out of the only reality they could claim: their experiences and the need to survive. (as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 79)

Black men accept the white male as a model; on the contrary the first success of the black female self is "her rejection of the model of white womanhood" (Nellie Y. McKay as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 79). 'True black womanhood' denies the lifestyle of white women. Accordingly, the black female self tries to acquire power to overcome her helpless situation, only with her experiences in the white and male dominated world. Consequently, the black man aims at gaining his identity towards a powerful and dominant manhood, whereas the black female self reinvents her identity independently of all dominant ideals.

The construction of identity and self-discovery is reflected evidently in the works of black women writers. Hence, the black female resorts to the genre of autobiography for her self-representation. As Leigh Gilmore argues:

...they [feminist criticism and autobiography studies] should demonstrate that women's self-representational writing is bound up in still other discourses.... I offer the term *autobiographics* to describe those elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine, not content with the literary history of autobiography, those elements that instead mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography- namely, those legalistic, literary, social, and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced. Autobiographics, as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation. (as qtd. in Smith, Watson, 1998: 184)

Indeed, it is evident that the genre of autobiography is the most satisfactory means through which the black woman portrays her identity, which she has constructed upon her own experience and values.

## 1.4. Overcoming the Silence and Adopting a Voice in Black Women's Narratives

and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid

so it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive.

(Audre Lorde- *Litany for Survival*)

(as qtd. in Hooks, 1989: 17)

Considered as 'object', the black woman did not have any right to define her own reality in oral and written forms during the period of slavery. Her identity and history were defined as 'the other' of the universal being. The black woman was not only deprived of the means to write her own story but was also identified and represented by the point of view of the white patriarchal system. The white patriarchal system maintained its authority by speaking for these people, which reduced the effectiveness of the black woman's experience. Even though the white authorities never experienced the tragedy of being black and a woman during the period of slavery, they were regarded as the 'authority' for the black experience. As Bell Hooks asserts:

Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story. For white women, non-white women, black people, and all individuals from various ethnic groups who are gay, there have been historical moments wherein each of our experiences were most studied, interpreted, and written about solely by white males, or solely by a group with greater power. That group became the 'authority' to consult if anyone wanted to understand the experiences of these powerless groups. This process was a manifestation of the politics of domination. (Hooks, 1989: 43)

Therefore, the emergence of the slave narratives by black women was a major step towards to acquire a voice and to draw attention to the life of the black woman. These narratives provided the black woman with the opportunity to shape

her identity against the sex, class and race exploitation that she encountered during the period of slavery.

The self-narratives of black women teach us a worldview which is against exploitation, oppression, racism and sexism and they give the black woman a chance to define herself as a victim of this oppressive system. Consequently, it is possible to examine the black woman's life and the unity of her mind, body and spirit through her voice:

The sociohistorical perspective that we use reflects the desire for us to focus on our history and how that history affects our writing and thought processes about our communities and the work that we do. Without this approach it would be impossible for us to formulate thinking about the old conclusions that were drawn about women. (Burgess, Brown, 2000: 4)

Black women who were once kept outside the literary and the social life, tried to define themselves outside the limits that white men had constructed for them. For instance, during the period of slavery, black women were considered to be corrupt and lustful. With the slave narratives, they were now able to show that such claims were rooted in their experience of rape by white men. Contrary to the images of black women fictionalized by the patriarchal system, black women writers created their own images based on their own sexual and racial experiences in their autobiographies.

These slave narratives demonstrate how the black woman who was exposed to more severe forms of oppression than the white woman, resisted oppression. For instance, Harriet Ann Jacobs refused to go into her master's room although she knew that she would be whipped for this resistance. By writing about this experience, Jacobs not only moved from silence to speech, but also made other people overhear her voice with the intention to inform them of the oppression the black women had experienced during the period of slavery.

Silence was a sign of oppression, exploitation and dehumanization, reflecting the situation of the black women, who had been dominated and objectified. As opposed to this, 'talk' became the mark of freedom and their becoming subjects. By telling their stories and sharing their histories, black women gained power in the male-dominated society. Breaking through their silence, they gave personal sorrow,

anguish, rage and hatred a voice for the first time. For example, during the period of slavery, black women were silenced especially by white men as a result of sexist oppression. Although they bore the children of white men, they did not reveal this fact in the public sphere. It is well known that they had internalized this silence from their childhood on. To overcome this internalization, they had to generate a speech of their own. Their autobiographies could be regarded as examples of this kind of speech.

The most difficult issue was revealing the secrets and the truths, which involved the deepest emotions, thoughts and basically the sorrows of their lives. Their act of speech was courageous because it was both against the racist and sexist ideals of the white world. With the help of autobiographies, they tried to reveal their 'absence' in the white and black social lives. While they were battling in the social life as 'black women', they were also forced to battle in the literary world as 'black women writers' due to their positioning as 'doubly oppressed' in the patriarchal discourse. Hooks comments on their transformation from object to subject:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject- liberated voice. (Hooks, 1989: 9)

The lives of all black women served as a data, a testimony of oppression and self-recovery. In black women's writings, the term 'voice' is not only used in reference to the process of bringing the self to consciousness, but also the process of becoming a speaking subject. Nellie Y. McKay comments on Lorene Carey's following words from her life story by emphasizing the importance of the genre of autobiography in the acquisition of the black woman's voice:

[The narratives] burst into my silence, and in my head, they shouted and chattered and whispered and sang together. I am writing this book [*Black Ice*] to become part of that unruly conversation... without the stories and the songs, I am mute. (as qtd. in Stanton, Stewart, 1995: 92)

Bell Hooks points out the speechless condition of the black woman by focusing on her own life and comments on how the black woman was prevented to speak her own words:

...It was in that world of woman talk (the men were often silent, often absent) that was born in me the craving to speak, to have a voice, and not just any voice but one that could be identified as belonging to me. To make my voice, I had to speak, to hear myself talk- and talk I did- darting in and out of grown folks' conversations and dialogues, answering questions that were not directed at me, and endlessly asking questions, making speeches. Needless to say, to punishments for these acts of speech seemed endless. They were intended to silence me – the child- and more particularly the girl child. Had I been a boy, they might have encouraged me to speak believing that I might some day be called to preach. There was no 'calling' for talking girls, no legitimized rewarded speech. The punishments I received for 'talking back' were intended to suppress all possibility that I would create my own speech. That speech was to be suppressed so that the 'right speech of womanhood' would emerge. (Hooks, 1989: 5)

The black woman must speak as a subject because subjectivity is a liberating process in the personal and political struggle to reveal and end the oppression. Speaking is considered to be a way for opposition and resistance. Indeed, the most important feature of the black woman's struggle to acquire a voice is its insistence on achieving this independently of the dominant patriarchal system. The white man's representation of the black woman caused her to be perceived as a debased object. As opposed to this, the black woman's primary goal was to truthfully represent her tragic life experience. In order to show that she exists she has to write and speak courageously. When the black women try to end their silence individually and when they write as individuals, it opens a way to reach others and become 'we' by getting into contact with others. In this way, this struggle becomes a global one, rather than an individual one.

## **2. The Social Position of The Black Woman**

### **2.1 The Concept of ‘Double Oppression’ in the Black Woman’s Life**

The man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed , and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man- when I could get it- and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, non but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (as qtd. in Collins, 2000:14)

The construction of black woman’s life was based upon cultural codes of race and sex. As can be concluded from the words of Sojourner Truth quoted above, the black woman’s life was full of all kinds of labor, under all kinds of abuses. They had no help from either black men or white women. Under the oppression of the white race and the black man, the black woman tried to survive and resist abuse. This defined the culturally constructed life of black woman in its general terms. The identity of the slave black woman as a mother, daughter, wife, concubine and a worker, under violence and abuse was complicated by the black man’s absence in her familial life and was consequently constructed in terms of both its affinity and opposition to the white woman’s social positioning.

In the framework of (white) man made laws, the black woman was defined as the ‘other of the other’ and inhuman, who was deprived of all human rights. In contrast, the white woman was denoted within the category of human, only less human than the male. In the same way as gender determined the social status in society, skin-color disposed the borders of freedom and humanity. In the introduction of her book *We Are Your Sisters Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Dorothy Sterling explains the difference between black and white women:



...black women were just like whites, except that their skins were darker. Later I realized that this was untrue. The strengths and skills that black women were forced to develop had been transmitted to their descendants. My black friends were different because their history and culture were different. (Sterling, 1984: XIV)

Similarly, Sarah L. Forten describes the conflictual relationships between white and black women in her poem:

We are thy sisters. God has truly said,  
That of one blood the nations he has made.  
O, Christian woman! in a Christian land,  
Canst thou unblushing read this great command?  
Suffer the wrongs which ring our inmost heart,  
To draw one throb of pity on thy part!  
Our skins may differ, but from thee we claim  
A sister's privilege and a sister's name. (as qtd. in Sterling, 1984: 114)

The black woman suffered from both the problems deriving from being a woman in sexual terms and from being black in racial terms. These race and gender based approaches were considered to be fixed and unquestionable. This formed the biologically deterministic features of being both black and woman in a patriarchal white world. The black woman carried the disadvantages of being a black person and a woman so she had to be involved in the struggle of both groups. However, they were also excluded by these groups, as their needs were different from black men and white women struggling for freedom or the improvement of their rights. The black women had to fight for the rights of blacks and of women separately but simultaneously, which opened the way to black feminism, reinstating their outsider position in relation to racial and sexual categories.

When the historical context of the black woman was considered, it was clearly observed that the black woman shared a totally different history from the black man or the white woman. The black woman was affected by gender, class and racial issues. Therefore, she could not be examined only in one group, although she existed in all groups, separately. All 'ism's were dominant in her struggle. Because of the common history and experiences of black women, she was left outside of all other groups. As D. Soyini Madison says, "This is the contradiction and the paradox of the outsider/ insider- of living on the borderlands" (as qtd. in Pollock, 1998: 338).

The black woman agreed with the white woman on the issue of feminism and with the black man on the issue of fight against racism. She struggled for both groups. However, the white women separated themselves from the black women as their skin colors were different and also the black men separated themselves from the black women, as their genders were different. The reason for being both inside and outside of this struggle was that the black woman was bound to live “in a system that still privileges whiteness and maleness” (as qtd. in Smith, Watson, 1998:97).

As a person who experienced all class, sex and race discriminations, the black woman existed on the lowest level of all humanity. All the groups aspired for equality with the dominant group, whereas the black woman, only, resisted the exploitation and oppression by all these groups. In accordance with this, the black woman could never be the oppressor in any domain, although every other group of people acted as an exploiter in some way. For instance, the white woman was herself oppressed by sexism but she became the oppressor in her relation with the members of the black race. The black man was exploited by racism but his gender hypothetically placed him superior to the black woman. In connection with this, the black woman encountered these problems in both ways. She adopted, and modified, the feminism of the white woman and the black man’s struggle against racism and defined her own liberation struggle with the assistance of these two concepts. Elizabeth V. Spelman argues:

He [Wasserstrom] leaves no room for the Black woman. For a black woman cannot be ‘female’, as opposed to being Black’; she is female *and* Black. (as qtd. in Bhavnani, 2001:78).

The black woman’s subjection to abuse was class-based, raced-based and gender-based. When these subjects collided in the black woman’s life, she took her place at the lowest level of society. In her book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston explains the life of the black woman, which was full of maltreatment and endeavor:

Honey, de white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (as qtd. in Collins, 2000:45).

The white woman considered feminism globally and blamed patriarchy for all kinds of domination. She judged men as the enemy and women as the victim without separating any categories. According to the white woman, men ruled the world and abused all other groups. Just the same, we observe the white woman as the oppressor during slavery. Like the exploiter and exploited could be in the same color, they might be in the same gender. This is why the black woman could not embrace white feminism in all its directions. She engaged in the feminist movement but she should specify the diversity in it. Hence, the problem of the black woman went far beyond the problem of only sexism. The real conflict which constructed femininity in a society was rooted in race, class and sex:

Using the paradigm of sex, race and class means that the focus does not begin with men and what they do to women, but rather with women working to identify both individually and collectively the specific character of our social identity.' (Hooks, 1989:23).

The black woman's resistance against oppression differed because she had a different history and heritage that contained both racial and gender tyranny. She developed a voice of resistance that was refused by black men and white women, although this voice supported the issues and battle of both groups. The important thing in the black woman's struggle was being both 'black and woman' because race, class and gender oppression were inseparable in her life. Women were considered to be second-class citizens and blacks were considered to be chattel, which made the social position of the black woman the worst among all. She was exploited at all levels; her femininity, her reproductive powers, her labor force in the field and her service in the white and black households. Thus, the class hierarchy during the period of slavery was settled for the white male's power, the white female's dominance and the black male's hegemony over the black woman, as Dorothy Sterling points out: "To be a black woman in nineteenth-century America was to live in the double jeopardy of belonging to the 'inferior' sex of an 'inferior' race" (Sterling, 1984: IX).

Besides the white racism by both white woman and white man, the black woman had to rebuff the black man's aggressiveness against her, who considered that the sexual abuse of the black woman by the white man was an advantage for her. The black man believed that the black woman was subjected to a lesser degree of

maltreatment and also enjoyed the sexual abuse. For him this was a way for freedom. This myth increased the frustration of black men against black women.

Another problem the black slave woman faced was the jealousy of white women. In Jacobs' *'Letters from a Fugitive Slave'*, which appeared in the New York Tribune of June 21, 1853, Harriet Ann Jacobs's account of the experience of a fourteen-year-old black girl who was exposed to the sexual assault of her master, and was sent away by her jealous mistress illustrates the white woman's hostility towards the victim of the sexual abuse:

At fifteen, my [Harriet Ann Jacobs] sister held to her bosom an innocent offspring of her guilt and misery. In this way she dragged a miserable existence of two years, between the fires of her mistress's jealousy and her master's brutal passion. At seventeen she gave birth to another helpless infant, heir to all the evils of slavery. Thus life and its sufferings was meted out to her until her twenty-first year. Sorrow and suffering had made its ravages upon her – she was less the object to be desired by the fiend who had crushed her to the earth ... In the dead hour of the night this young deserted mother lay with her little ones clinging around her. When the sun rose that brokenhearted mother was far on her way to the capital of Virginia. And where she now is God only knows. (as quoted in Sterling, 1984: 78)

The sexist and racist oppression of black women also damaged the image of femininity implicating a woman who was in need of a man's assistance and who only dealt with housework. This definition of femininity stressing the delinquency of woman was contrary to the black woman's life, who, devoid of support, had to labor at home and in the field and who had to resort to her own strength to overcome the hardships she faced. Contemporary black feminism's conception of black femininity derives from this difference in the historical experiences of white and black women as Patricia Hill Collins defines the double oppression of the black woman by mentioning the term 'iron'<sup>6</sup>:

Only African-American women occupy this center [Patricia Hill Collins believes that the African-American woman has her own experiences, which bases on oppression, and which takes its place in the literary world of black women] and can 'feel the iron' that enters black women's souls, because we

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<sup>6</sup> The term is used in the Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's novel *Iola Leroy* to mention the double oppression of black women and the spiritual effects of this oppression. 'No man can feel the iron which enters another man's soul' (as qtd. in Nicholson, 1997: 253).

are the only group that has experienced race, gender, and class oppression as Black women experience them. (as qtd. in Nicholson, 1997: 253)

Because the black woman's selfhood is based on this shared experience and because one type of assault cannot be prioritized or excluded, the historical double oppression of the black women cannot be disregarded in discussing the formation of the black woman's identity.

## 2.2 The Life Story of Harriet Ann Jacobs in her Autobiography, *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself*

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. Her father, Daniel Jacobs and her mother Delilah were mulatto slaves, who were owned by Dr. Andrew Knox and John Horniblow. Jacobs was raised by her mother until her death in 1819. “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away,” explains Harriet Jacobs in her narrative, *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (Jacobs, 1861: 11). Until her mother’s mistress Margaret Horniblow’s death in 1825, she was raised by Horniblow who taught her how to read, write and sew. Margaret Horniblow left Harriet Jacobs to her niece as her will, but as the niece was too young, her father, Dr. James Norcom (Dr. Flint)<sup>7</sup> became her master in 1825.

When Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) was in her fifteen, she encountered another dreadful side of slavery. “But I now entered on my fifteenth year, a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear” utters Jacobs in her narrative (Jacobs, 1861: 44). Dr. Norcom subjected her to sexual harassment for nearly a decade. Although Jacobs rejected the sexual abuse and asked for Dr. Norcom’s permission to marry another man, she was prevented. Moreover, she was forced to be a concubine of Dr. Norcom. Resisting against the demands of Dr. Norcom, Jacobs found another way that would drag her to dangerous adventures and that would make her a ‘fallen woman’. In her sixteen, she became involved in a sexual liaison with a white lawyer, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (Mr. Sands) and she had two children. Their son Joseph (Benjamin) was born in 1829 and their daughter Louisa Matilda (Ellen) was born in 1833. This incident did not prevent Dr. Norcom’s sexual assaults. At last Harriet Jacobs found it proper to escape in 1835. She hid herself for almost seven years in a small ‘crawlpace’ in her grandmother’s house before she escaped to Philadelphia by boat in 1842. This small ‘crawlpace’ was nine feet long, seven feet wide and only three feet high. There was no light and there were

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<sup>7</sup> In her autobiography, Harriet Ann Jacobs used different names for all the characters and even for herself to conceal their real identities. In parenthesis, their assumed names are given.

many rats and insects. She could only exercise at nights for a short time. During all these years, she waited for her children to be sold and sent to the North for their safety. Until they were bought by their father and sent to New York, she had to stay in the vicinity of Dr. Norcom and venture the danger of being caught. In 1852, after Dr. Norcom's death, she was sold by Norcom's daughter Mary Matilda Norcam (Mrs. Dodge) to Cornelia Grinnell Willis (Mrs. Bruce), for whom she worked as a nursemaid. She started living as a free woman in New York with her children. In 1858, she finished her autobiography and in 1861 she had her book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, published by a Boston printer. Jacobs died in 1897 as a free woman.

Harriet Jacobs played an important role in anti-slavery meetings. Then, she became friends with Amy Post, who urged Jacobs to write her own life story. It would be an important source for their struggle against the system of chattel slavery. In her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Harriet Jacobs explains her aim:

...I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people! (Jacobs, 1861: 6).

Jacobs' aim was to struggle against racism and to enlighten an awareness of women to act collectively. Her narrative included many voices as the mother, the daughter, the granddaughter and the fugitive black slave, revealing the truths about both blacks and women. In this regard, her autobiography can be identified as a female African American self-narrative:

Harriet Jacobs was always curious about revealing her own life story. She was aware that she would also reveal her secrets about her sexual life, which harmed her family and her grandmother. She gave some other names to the characters in order to protect them. Another reason for concealing the names was not to distance the reader but to draw attention to the main point, which

was 'the life of a slave girl' that passed in oppression, endurance and resistance. Thus, she wanted to focus on the lives of all black women, who are under the same conditions. The black woman should construct her own language and identity that had both black and female elements in it. Hence, the slave woman 'needed a sense of an empathetic female audience, not an interrogating male one, before they could write or speak freely'. (Johnson, 1998: 14).

Jacobs tried to gain the empathy of the reader and point out the sisterhood of white and black women by addressing and asking questions to the reader: "By directly addressing her reader in this way, Jacobs not only established that hers was the voice of a representative black female slave but also made an appeal to the sisterhood of all women" (Johnson, 1998: 25). The following quotation testifies her aim of sisterhood:

O, you happy free women, contrast *your* New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman! With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is blessed. Friendly wishes meet you every where, and gifts are showered upon you. Even hearts that have been estranged from you soften at this season, and lips that have been silent echo back, "I wish you a happy New Year." Children bring their little offerings, and raise their rosy lips for a caress. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you. But to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. (Jacobs, 1861: 26).

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! ... I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery... (Jacobs, 1861: 83-84).

Although she had longed for a sisterhood, she could not experience it much during the time she served as a slave and during her escape from slavery. Although the slave woman was usually left alone by both the black man and the white woman, and accused and oppressed by both parties, Jacobs writes about the help she received from several women in her life story as well the hostility she suffered.

The most important support that she had was from her grandmother, who hid her for seven years in her house's attic by taking the risk to go to prison.

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Another example is Mrs. Willis who helped Jacobs by admitting her to her house as a nursemaid. Mrs. Willis endeavored hard to rescue her and make her free. She was also brave enough when she confronted Miss Norcom to negotiate for the selling of Jacobs. Lastly, Jacobs had the support of Amy Post, when writing her own narrative and publishing it. However, Jacobs had the hardest attacks from a female, Mrs. Norcom, who was the wife of Dr. Norcom. During the time that she lived in Norcoms' house, Mrs. Norcom treated her like an enemy because of Dr. Norcom's sexual harassment. Harriet Jacobs recounts her first impressions about Mrs. Norcom in the following words:

Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind. If dinner was not served at the exact time on that particular Sunday, she would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and the spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking... The slaves could get nothing to eat except what she chose to give them... (Jacobs, 1861: 22).

In addition to Mrs. Norcom's cruelty, Jacobs had to cope with her jealousy because of Dr. Norcom's unendurable sexual assaults. Although Jacobs tried hard to resist this sexual harassment, Mrs. Norcom blamed her for the acts of her husband, as was common with many Southern women, as they had no power against their husbands. Harriet Jacobs' account of Mrs. Norcom's attitude sheds light on the relationships between the white mistress and the black slave woman:

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 fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe... 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, 1861: 45).

As a result of the sexual assaults of Dr. Norcom, an observable change had occurred both in the behavior of Mrs. Norcom and in the household. When Mrs.

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Norcom started to watch her husband and Harriet, she was well aware of the concern of her husband for Harriet. She asked Dr. Norcom to punish her but when he refused to do so she was angrier than before. It was impossible for the white woman to oppose or have any influence on the white man. Accordingly, when she could not change the behavior of her husband, she found it easier to attack the black woman. The only explanation for this action was she was projecting her anger and fury upon another woman who was weaker than her. The black woman was inferior to the white woman and was the only person she could exercise her power upon. Jacobs was expecting understanding from her mistress: "I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her; and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet," (Jacobs, 1861: 51) however, she found her life threatened by her. Her mistress did not leave her alone most of the nights and she was arranging some unexpected visits to her bedside. Jacobs writes:

I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed. I could not blame her. Slave-holders' wives feel as other women would under similar circumstances. (Jacobs, 1861: 53).

Harriet Jacobs used all her cunning and strength against Dr. Norcom to gain her freedom. The only feeling Jacobs had for Mrs. Norcom was pity because she considered her as another victim of the system of slavery. This system turned the white woman into a furious and jealous victimizer, who was ready to attack, as Johnson says: "Her [Mrs. Norcom's] jealousy made her perversely cruel, an enraged monster" (Johnson, 1998: 38). Under these circumstances, it was not possible to build up a sisterhood between the white woman and the black woman. The black woman was deprived of the opportunity for a bonding with the white woman who could be her supporter on gender issues.

In most of her life, the black woman was left alone, she had to struggle alone and resist alone. She had to trust herself, only. Jacobs expresses the black woman's isolation in her memories:

I had my secret hopes; but I must fight my battle alone. I had a woman's pride, and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and laws on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each. (Jacobs, 1861: 130)

Under 'double oppression', Harriet Jacobs tried to resist the cruelties of her master, the jealousy of her mistress and all the oppression of slavery.

## **2.3 Sojourner Truth and Her Life Story in her Narrative, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828***

Isabella Baumfree (Sojourner Truth) was born in 1797 in New York, as one of thirteen children of slave parents. When she was around eleven, she was sold for the first time in 1808. After that she had five different masters until she was emancipated. When slavery was abolished in Fourth of July, 1827 in New York State, she was legally free. As she had encountered many hardships with different masters, she tried to get over these with her Christian faith, which was imposed on her by her mother. While she was with her third master, Mr. Dumont, she was forced to marry another slave, Thomas. They had five children and she devoted her life to her children and to Christian faith. Different from most of the slave women, Isabella Baumfree's spiritual support was not only her family but also her strong feelings about religion.

While Isabella was the slave of Mr. John Dumont, she was promised to be given her freedom. As John Dumont did not let her free, Isabella ran away with her son. After a year, she was set free according to the state's emancipation.

After her emancipation, she did not give up but continued her struggle as a preacher and an abolitionist. During this time, she devoted her life to the rules of God both for the salvation of her race and to give an end to all the traces of slavery. In 1843, she changed her name to Sojourner Truth. She pointed out her decision to change her name:

When I left the house of bondage I left everything behind. I wa'n't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner because I was to travel up an' down the land showin' the people their sins an' bein' a sign unto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people. (as qtd. in Lerner, 1992:371).

Besides abolitionism, she placed women's rights and their suffrage in her speeches. Her well-known speech 'Ain't I a woman?', which was upheld in

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the meeting of Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851, was her most important speech on women's rights.

Sojourner Truth never learned how to read and write. She was from a Dutch settlement and she could only speak in Dutch until she was sold as a slave. When she stayed in her first master's house, she had to learn how to speak English. Another crucial contribution she made to the women's struggle was her autobiography, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*. As she was unable to read and write, she dictated her memoirs to Olive Gilbert and her narrative was published in 1850. In 1857, Truth moved to Michigan and continued her engagement in the cause for the rights of black people and black women. Sojourner Truth died in November 1883 in Battle Creek, Michigan.

For Sojourner Truth, black women's rights were the main goal of her life, and she struggled hard to change the fate of the black woman. In the meeting of the American Equal Rights Association on May 9, 1867, she briefly explained her aim on black women's rights:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. (Lerner, 1992:569)

On the same meeting she addressed her audience about acquiring the black woman's own voice and talked about their wearisome life:

I wish woman to have her voice there among the pettifoggers... I have been forty years a slave and forty years free, and would be here forty years more to have equal rights for all. (Lerner, 1992:570).

Sojourner Truth was a major example, who faced all the hardships and suffered all kinds of abuses as a black woman during the period of slavery. First, she was separated from her family then she was raped by her master, John Dumont and then was forced to marry an older slave. After this, she had to care for her family and struggle for her freedom alone like all other black women. In the preface of her narrative, Truth talks about the hard and cruel conditions, in which she spent her life like other black women:

The following is the unpretending narrative of the life of a remarkable and

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meritorious woman—a life which has been checkered by strange vicissitudes, severe hardships, and singular adventures. Born a slave, and held in that brutal condition until the entire abolition of slavery in the State of New York in 1827, she has known what it is to drink to the dregs the bitterest cup of human degradation. That one thus placed on a level with cattle and swine, and for so many years subjected to the most demoralizing influences, should have retained her moral integrity to such an extent, and cherished so successfully the religious sentiment in her soul... (Truth, 1850:V)

Gerda Lerner illustrates the ‘disadvantages’ of being both black and woman in her description of Truth’s appearance in the Fourth National Woman’s Rights Convention in New York in 1853:

Sojourner Truth, a tall colored woman, well-known in anti-slavery circles... made her appearance on the platform. This was the signal for a fresh outburst from the mob... Sojourner combined in herself... the two most hated elements of humanity. She was black, and she was a woman, and all the insults that could be cast upon color and sex were together hurled at her... (Lerner, 1992:566-567).

Sojourner Truth first struggled for her race and stood against the system of slavery for all black people. Then, she struggled for black women. Although her fight was for both black people and all women, she was not supported much by either black men or white women. Her life story reveals that, she was abused more by the white woman during the period of her slavery. While Sojourner Truth was a slave of Mr. and Mrs. Dumont, she described the difference between her master and mistress:

Mr. Dumont had been nursed in the very lap of slavery, and being naturally a man of kind feelings, treated his slaves with all the consideration he did his *other* animals, and *more*, perhaps. But Mrs. Dumont, who had been born and educated in a non-slaveholding family, and, like many others, used only to work-people, who, under the most stimulating of human motives, were willing to put forth their every energy, could not have patience with the creeping gait, the dull understanding, or see any cause for the listless manners and careless, slovenly habits of the poor down-trodden outcast--... (Truth, 1850:30)

Even if their genders were the same, Truth had to face the insults of her mistress, who mistreated her out of jealousy:

Her [Isabella’s] master often shielded her from the attacks and accusations of others, praising her for her readiness and ability to work, and these praises seemed to foster a spirit of hostility to her, in the minds of Mrs. Dumont and her white servant, the latter of whom took every opportunity to cry up her faults, lessen her in the esteem of her master... Her master insisted that she could do as much work as half-a-dozen common people, and do it well, too;

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whilst her mistress insisted that the first was true, only because it ever came from her hand but half performed... the potatoes that Isabel cooked for breakfast assumed a dingy, dirty look. Her mistress blamed her severely, asking her master to observe 'a fine specimen of Bell's work!'—adding, 'it is the way *all* her work is done.' (Truth, 1850:31)

Sojourner Truth was sold when she was around ten, for the first time. Because she could only speak Dutch and did not understand English, she was physically abused and whipped. She identified this period of her life as: "Now the war begun" (Truth, 1850:26). She tells the first whipping and its reason in her memoirs:

If they sent me for a frying-pan, not knowing what they meant, perhaps I carried them the pot-hooks and trammels. Then, oh! how angry mistress would be with me!...One Sunday morning, in particular, she was told to go to the barn; on going there, she found her master with a bundle of rods, prepared in the embers, and bound together with cords. When he had tied her hands together before her, he gave her the most cruel whipping she was ever tortured with. He whipped her till the flesh was deeply lacerated, and the blood streamed from her wounds—and the scars remain to the present day, to testify to the fact. (Truth, 1850:26-27)

Unlike Harriet Ann Jacobs, Sojourner Truth adopted a submissive attitude until she became a mother. Her memoirs reveal the extent to which she internalized slavery and even sometimes honored her masters:

... 'he sometimes whipped me soundly, though never cruelly. And the most severe whipping he ever give me was because I was cruel to a cat.' At this time she looked upon her master as a *God*; and believed that he knew of and could see her at all times, even as God himself. (Truth, 1850:33)

Sojourner Truth was one of the slave woman, who faced the cruel attitudes of both her master and mistress. The 'double oppression' pacified her until she had to raise her children under the brutal conditions of slavery.

### **3. The Social Life and The Problematic Sexuality of the Black Woman**

#### **3.1. The Marginalized Sexuality of the Black Woman**

...‘men and women are taught to see men as independent, capable, and powerful; men and women are taught to see women as dependent, limited in abilities, and passive’. But who is taught to see Black men as ‘independent, capable, and powerful’, and by whom are they taught? Are Black men taught that? Black women? White men? White women? Similarly, who is taught to see Black women as ‘dependent, limited in abilities, and passive’? If this stereotype is so prevalent, why then have Black women had to defend themselves against the images of matriarch and whore? (Elizabeth V. Spelman as qtd. in Bhavnani, 2001: 78)

As previously discussed, the racial and sexual exploitation in the black woman’s life was not separable. The concept of rape differed and acquired some other meanings, when it was considered in the life of the black woman. The white rapist had many reasons to act in this way, except solely the animalistic instinct. Rape became a form of racial-sexual oppression during slavery.

The black woman’s sexuality was always defined by white people especially by white men. It was set as a binary opposite to the white woman to glorify the white woman. Besides, she was defined in terms of silence, secrecy and invisibility so that she could not react to the stereotyped images of her. The black woman’s sexual identity was determined in two ways. The first one was describing her sexuality as unseen and invisible. The second one was her marginalized sexuality, which was supported by some myths as the ‘black whore’.

The sexual life of the black woman was totally different from the white woman’s. The only aim was to benefit from the black woman’s sexuality to reproduce new slaves, during this period. Therefore, the conventional meaning of sexuality, which was suitable for the white woman, was not valid for her. Evelyn M. Hammonds explains the conception of the sexuality of the black woman:

And from even this very incomplete history [the experiences and the history of the black woman], we can see that black women’s sexuality is ideologically situated between race and gender, where the black female



subject is not seen and has no voice. (as qtd. in Alexander, Mohanty, 1997: 176)

As Lorraine O' Grady maintains "White is what woman is [was]; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be," (as qtd. in Alexander, Mohanty, 1997: 172) and the black woman was considered as if she had an uncontrollable and problematic sexuality. The black woman was regarded as an object, who was always ready for sexual exploits and who enjoyed it. The way the sexuality of the black woman was seen removed the difference between a black woman and an animal.

As a result of this, the black woman's identity was set in opposition to the 'the cult of true womanhood'<sup>8</sup>. As Lorraine O' Grady writes, "White women were characterized as pure, passionless and de-sexed, while black women were the epitome of immorality, pathology, impurity, and sex itself" (as qtd. in Alexander, Mohanty, 1997: 173). The binary opposition between the white woman and the black woman exalted the white woman, who was expected to be virtuous and respectable. Considered within the context of 'the cult of true womanhood', the black woman was regarded as promiscuous, even if she had all the characteristics of a 'pure woman'. In order to control the blacks, the white world created a myth about the black woman: "much of the popular culture have characterized poor black women as promiscuous, lazy, and lacking motivation or merit (a time-honored measure of moral deservability)" (Marha J. Tyson Darling as qtd. in Silliman, King, 1999: 215). The characterization of the black woman's sexuality was based upon the biological determinism of the black race. Marha J. Tyson Darling maintains:

In their [African American females] many guises, theories of biological determinism have generally served to construct and legitimize racist, sexist, and classist beliefs and actions against the poor, women and people of color. As it has been constructed and used, biological determinism is at the root of the idea that those who have been most marginalized from the sources, structures, and institutions of authority and privilege are least deserving of rights, because they are believed to be genetically inferior and hence less valuable to society. Throughout this century the marginalized have been the

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<sup>8</sup> The term was firstly used to describe the pure femininity of the Victorian woman in the nineteenth century. It includes four basic virtues- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. The idea of 'true womanhood' supports the purity and the chastity of white woman, who is purified from all sexual desires. During the period of slavery, the black woman is defined with the features that are in conflict with this idea. The main reason is to prove the so-called biological determinism of the black woman and to provide the racial and political control over the black race.

most vulnerable, as the agencies of the state often undertook to define “compelling interests” and to construct social policies predicated on racially and sexually prescribed normative and ethical considerations of “worthiness” and deservability”. In this regard, theories of biological determinism have been complicit in constructing all women, but especially poor African American women, as the “undeserving other.” (as qtd. in Silliman, King, 1999: 216)

The features of ‘true womanhood’, which were valid for the white woman, could not be defining for the black woman. According to the ‘true womanhood’, the woman should be graceful, genteel, charming but deprived of any sexual behavior, delicate, in need of help and care and equipped with grace and high morality. None of these features were appropriate for the black woman. The slave woman could not be genteel or delicate while she was working in the fields. She could not ask for help or care, as she had to work for white and care for the black people. She could not be charming, while she was living an unwomanly life. Lastly, she could not avoid sexuality or acquire the approved morality, as she was sexually exploited and her reproductive potential was utilized for the continuation of slavery.

The labor and the body of the black woman were always controlled by her master. She was under the domination of her master both racially and sexually. She was regarded and compelled to behave as ‘nonwoman’ according to the myth of the black woman. Thus, the slave woman had no other choice except to be defined as ‘the other’ of ‘decent’ white woman. As long as she carried both the racial and gender difference on her, she became ‘the other of an otherness’ as Sidonie Smith asserts:

The black woman, however, had a far more complex struggle for selfhood on her hands than either the white woman or the black man. Doubly the site of western culture’s totalizing representations, doubly embodied as African and woman, doubly colonized in the territory of rape and enforced concubinage, the slave woman confronted conflated destinies, discourses, and identifications. (Smith, 1993: 37)

As the black woman existed outside the norms of ‘true womanhood’, she was devalued with some concepts and terms. She had a life of unwanted concubinage and she was called as jezebel, mammy, and whore. As Angela Y. Davis states “...the Negro woman became ‘promiscuous and loose’ and could be ‘had for the taking’. Indeed, she came to look upon herself as the South viewed and treated her, for she had no other morality by which to shape her womanhood” (as qtd. in Bhavnani,

2001: 54). She was believed to be deserving and enjoying the sexual abuse of the white man, unlike the white women, who were sexually assaulted by black men, as Angela Y. Davis mentions:

If black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attentions of white men. Viewed as 'loose women' and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy. (as qtd. in Bhavnani, 2001: 54)

Although she had no behavior that was in conflict with social rules, the black woman was assaulted and exploited sexually according to the racist mythology. An anonymous black woman expressed the devalued situation of the black woman in an article published in the September 18, 1902 issue of *The Independent* :

I am a colored woman, wife and mother...

A colored woman, however respectable, is lower than the white prostitute. The Southerner white woman will declare no Negro women are virtuous, yet she places her innocent children in their care.... No amount of discussion will alter a fact, and it is a fact that a very great number of Negro women are depraved. It is also a fact that... Christian men and women of the South sold wives away from their husbands and then compelled them to live with other men. Fathers sold their own children. Beautiful girls brought large sums to their owners when sold, especially for mistresses to the fathers and brothers of these same women who now marvel that the Negro is not chaste. The Negro woman's immorality shows more plainly than her white sister's because she is poor and ignorant. (qtd. in Lerner, 1992: 167)

Slavery was necessary for the continuation of the political and economic power of the white patriarchal system. Thus, the white race should practice its controlling power by all means on the black race. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, "...such as the rule claiming that one drop of black "blood" determines racial identity, required strict control over the sexuality and subsequent fertility of Black women, White women, and Black men" (Collins, 2000: 133).

The stereotypical images of the black woman helped to perpetuate the exploitation of the black woman, who was attributed with characteristics different from piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. The first image, which was 'proper' for the black woman, was the 'mammy', whereupon, the black woman's main duty would be caring for the white woman's children and taking care of the housework. In this way, she could only exist in domestic work. The black slave would accept her place as an obedient servant in the white house. Thus, the mammy

image compelled the black woman to internalize the gender oppression. As the mammy image signified the harmless, domestic and sensuous side of a woman, it strengthened the black woman's position as a slave. In connection with these features, the black woman would not be rebellious and she would not be eager to escape. All the same, the mammy image represented the asexual woman so she would not be a danger for the white woman in the household. This was the victory and superiority of both white women and men.

Another controlling image for the black woman was 'jezebel and whore'. These images helped the white race to control the black woman's sexuality, which was the best way to maintain the black woman's oppression. Patricia Hill Collins describes the function of 'jezebel':

Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women. Jezebel served yet another function. If Black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility should be the expected outcome. By suppressing the nurturing that African-American women might give their own children which would strengthen Black family networks, and by forcing Black women to work in the field, "wet nurse" White children, and emotionally nurture their White owners, slave owners effectively tied the controlling images of jezebel and mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery. (Collins, 2000: 81)

During the period of slavery, the black man was identified with the image of beast, who was ready to attack whereas the black woman was regarded as jezebel or whore, who had high sexual appetites and who was ready to be attacked. Consequently, there occurred " 'a race of 'animals' [who] can be treated as such-as victims or pets. The mythical rapist implies the mythical whore- and a race of rapists and whores deserves punishment and nothing more" (Collins, 2000: 147).

### **3.2. The Sexual Exploitation and the Resistance of the Black Woman**

...her [the black woman's] body functioned as the vessel for reproducing "chattel" for the system (since children followed the mother) and for shielding the "proper", sexually repressed white woman from the uninhibited sexual desires of the white man, both strategies for maintaining colonial relationships of power. As bell hooks notes, "Rape as both right and rite of the white male dominating group was a cultural norm. Rape was also an apt metaphor for European imperialist colonizations of Africa and North America." The black female body served the slave system as both the ground upon which the slave owner asserted his cultural authority over the black male. (Smith, 1993: 40)

The sexual abuse of black women had two main reasons: The first one was about the political issues and the second one was about the economic issues.

As the white man regarded the black woman as his 'chattel', he did not hesitate to rape her. This was more than an animalistic desire that the 'modern' white man possessed. The main reason of rapist events was to maintain the status of the black woman as a property. Besides, the white man had to be dominant over the black race for the continuation of slavery. As Kimberlé Crenshaw points out:

When black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically: their femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection. (as qtd. in James, Sharpley-Whiting, 2000: 223)

The white man's being dominant over the black woman sexually meant that he also had control over the black people in the social domain. Through the sexual abuse of the black woman, the white man had also authority over the black man because he was the one, who had dominion on the black man's wives, daughters, sisters and mothers. In this way, the white man could symbolically castrate the black man and deprived him of his manly features.

As Evelyn M. Hammonds mentions, the sexual exploitation of the black woman, during the period of slavery was "simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency" (as qtd. in Alexander, Mohanty, 1997: 177). The institutionalized sexual abuse of the black woman strengthened the white man's dominance and caused the slave woman

to be totally subordinate. In other words, the rape of the enslaved black women was a practice to maintain social control over the black race.

Another reason for the sexual exploitation of the slave woman was the economic issues. The white man tried to increase his prosperity and economic power through the reproductive powers of the black woman. In the beginning of the period of slavery, the black male was utilized as worker in the fields to develop the economic power of his master. When the import of new slaves from Africa was banned in the First of January 1808, the only way to increase the slave population was utilizing the fertility of the black woman. Considered as “animals for breeding”, black women were forced to give birth as frequently as possible. Initially, the black men were used to make the black woman pregnant, disregarding the institution of marriage. The black women were not wives but they were compelled to produce new slaves with any black male in any time. Dorothy Sterling explains the maltreatment of the slaves about their sexuality and the value of the black woman:

When an overseer asked for “a negro woman, young and likely, and be sartin that she is sound,” he was taking the first step toward becoming a man of property. A slave woman was both the nucleus of a labor force and the producer of wealth that increased rapidly. In the decade before the Civil War, her child was worth \$100 at birth, \$500 at the age of five. The dollar-and-cents value of a good “breed woman” was well known in the quarters. Tempie Herndon, who had nine children before freedom, said:

I was worth a heap to Marse George 'cause I had so many chillen. De more chillen a slave had de more day was worth. Lucy Carter was de only nigger on de plantation dat had more chillen den I had, but her chillen was sickly and mine was muley strong.

Most slave owners did not care who fathered the children, as long as they kept on coming. A minority employed studs or forced couples to mate “just like cattle”:

...[Master] would never allow the men to be single after they were eighteen, nor the women after they were fifteen. I remember one day, when he had returned from town with about twenty-five heads of slaves, he called out all those who had no wives or husbands on the place. Said he, “Well, boys, I’ve gotten a fine set of girls for you, and I am going to put you all together; likewise you, girls, I’ve got these fine boys, and I am going to put you all together, so that there will be no reason for any of you to have wives and husbands off the place.” So then he gave each one his wife or husband; he chose them out himself.

On the Blackshear place, they took all the fine looking boys and girls that was thirteen years old or older and put them in a big barn. They used to strip them naked and put them in a big barn every Sunday and leave them there

until Monday morning. Out of that came sixty babies. (Sterling, 1984: 31-32)

In addition, the white slave owners themselves raped the slave women and in consequence of this, there were many mulatto children, who also served as slaves:

...there was an early definition of black women as sexual property, a definition that was enlarged because slave women had no power to prevent sexual assaults by white men. In their ignorance, many white men came to believe that black women actually enjoyed their sexual assaults. Slave women performed multiple roles. They worked as both field hands and domestic servants; they were required to have children, sometimes through forced breeding with selected male slaves; and they cared for their families and children in the slave quarters after all their other work was finished. (Elizabeth M. Almquist as qtd. in Freeman, 1995: 580)

As well as the slave woman's labor, which was the same with the black man, her pregnancy was another financial profit for the slave owner. He could maintain his wealth both with the work and with the fertility of the black woman. Therefore, the slave owners preferred the female slaves, who had high fertility and who gave birth to many healthy children. Although the black woman did not have many advantages during her pregnancy, sometimes she was given some rewards or time to rest after the birth to encourage the pregnancy. In contrast to this, "Infertile women could expect to be treated like barren sows and be passed from one unsuspecting buyer to the next." (Collins, 2000: 51) Hence, the enslavement of black female occurred in two ways. One was based upon the physical enslavement; the other was related to sexual enslavement. An article titled "The Race Problem-An Autobiography", written by "A Southern Colored Woman," published in *The Independent* on March 17, 1904 illustrates the point:

It is commonly said that no girl or woman receives a certain kind of insult unless she invites it. That does not apply to a colored girl and woman in the South. The color of her face alone is sufficient invitation to the Southern white man- these same men who profess horror that a white gentleman can entertain a colored one at his table. Out of sight of their own women they are willing and anxious to entertain colored women in various ways. Few colored girls reached the age of sixteen without receiving advances from them- maybe from a young "upstart", and often from a man old enough to be their father, a white haired veteran of sin...

Everything is forgiven in the South but color. (as qtd. in Lerner, 1992: 158)

The exploitation of the black woman's sexuality and fertility were supported by the laws<sup>9</sup>. It was not considered immoral for the black woman to have fatherless children or to be pregnant from interracial relations. This strengthened the institutionalizing of the sexual abuse of the black woman. Patricia Hill Collins points out the relationship between the femininity and fertility of the black woman:

Essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery, this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy. During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed Black women as more suitable for having children than White women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this image provided justification for interference in enslaved Africans' reproductive lives. Slave owners wanted enslaved Africans to "breed" because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves. The controlling image on the breeder woman served to justify slave owners' intrusion into Black women's decisions about fertility. (Collins, 2000: 78)

The black woman used some strategies to resist the sexual oppression of the white man. She kept silent as a way of resistance and to protect their sacred values. Hence, she could demonstrate her respectability against the image of 'immoral woman'. The black woman struggled to prove that the myth about the slave woman was a lie. As Evelyn M. Hammonds says, "...black women during slavery were faced with having to develop ways to be recognized within the category of woman by whites by asserting a positive value to their sexuality that could stand in both public and private" (as qtd. in Alexander, Mohanty, 1997:173). The black woman tried to survive and resist the sexual assault of the white male. In her struggle, she was both rebellious and passive. Besides, in her resistance, she taught her children the traditions and the heritage of the black race and she taught them how to survive. Dorothy Sterling describes the resistance of a black woman named Lucy, with an example:

*Fight, and if you can't fight, kick; if you can't kick, then bite," one slave advised her daughter. A sizable minority of "fighting, mule-headed" women refused to "take foolishness" from anybody.*

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<sup>9</sup> '1662 Act XII. Children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother' (Silliman, King, 1999: 218). This act can be an example, which supported the institutionalizing of the sexual assault of the black woman.



...The white folks said I was the meanest nigger that ever wuz. One day my Mistress Lydia called for me to come in the house, but no, I wouldn't go. She walks out and says she is gwine make me go. So she takes and drags me in the house. Then I grabs that white woman and shook her until she begged for mercy. When the master comes in, I wuz given a terrible beating but I didn't care for I give the mistress a good un too...

*Not many slave women killed their mistresses. The few who tried usually resorted to poison or arson, putting jimsonweed seeds in the coffee pot or torching the barn. Others, driven to desperation by ill treatment, turned their anger on themselves or their children. (Sterling, 1984: 56-57)*

Some slave women refused to go to his master's room, even if they were sure that they would be whipped. Others were ready to kill their own children so as not to see them as slaves. Most of the time, the slave woman endured the conditions of slavery for the sake of her children. But, when she could no longer bear the conditions, she risked her life by trying to escape.

### 3.3 The Sexual Abuse in Harriet Jacobs' Life

The autobiography of Harriet Ann Jacobs bears testimony to a life, which stood outside of the rules of 'true womanhood' and challenged its doctrines. If we 'characterize the "true woman" as gentle, innocent pure, pious, domestic, submissive, and somewhat helpless' and mention them as 'obedient, submissive wives and mothers' (Johnson, 1998: 18), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* presents the black woman as a rebel, who challenges all the virtues of 'true womanhood'. Thus, the events in the life of Harriet Jacobs clearly show that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacob, 1861: 86).

When Harriet Ann Jacobs was fifteen years old, she had to face the sexual assaults of her master. This was the first step for her to be an 'untrue woman'. Her master, Dr. Norcom had always had sexual intentions concerning Jacobs. When he realized that he would be under the pressure of his wife, he even built up a cottage for Jacobs and planned to keep her there as his concubine. However, he could not succeed in his plans as Jacobs managed to avoid him. Under the circumstances Jacobs had two choices. She could either accept the offer and become his concubine or resist it. However, the resistance could not be a reaction in its literal meaning because the slaves did not have a right to reject the demands of their masters. Instead, she chose to find a lover and have babies from him so that Dr. Norcom would give up. In this period, she had a relation with a white man, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer and she became pregnant. Both of these choices made her stand outside of the conventions of 'true womanhood'. Under these circumstances, the qualities as 'innocence and pureness' could not be valid for the black woman, whatever her choice was. Jacobs had her free will in her choices but still they could only be considered as the obligatory choices under limited conditions. Jacobs defines the condition of the black woman:

...Soon she [the black girl] will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. (Jacob, 1861: 45)

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The sexual abuse of the master was, generally, known by the public. Jacobs' situation was similarly known by the members of the household and the neighbors. Although everyone pitied her, she was the propriety of Dr. Norcom and he, legally, had every right on her. "They [the other slaves in the house] 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," writes Jacobs. (Jacobs, 1861: 46)

Jacobs was not the first victim of Dr. Norcom's sexual assaults; he had eleven slave children but no one had enough courage to tell who the father of those children was. As these children would be a new source of profit and as a man he had every right on his chattel, the acts of such a 'respectable' and dominant figure as Dr. Norcom should be condoned. By writing about Dr. Norcom's immoral acts, Jacobs pointed out the immorality of the South in all of its institutions. She mentioned the immorality of the white man, the household who could not reveal the truths, the white woman who accepted all the rotten acts of her husband and continued her marriage without any challenge and lastly the whole system who let the white man build up a cottage for his slave to make her his concubine and continue his life with two spouses. She briefly indicated how the concept of true womanhood was in a moral decay. Yvonne Johnson states the moral decay of the Southern woman:

...she [Harriet Jacobs] questions its [the cult of true womanhood] validity for either slave or white woman. Southern white women were expected to be pure, but Jacobs notes that 'southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves'. According to Jacobs, the institution of slavery 'deadens the moral sense' of the pure southern lady. She implies that many southern ladies are dishonorable for ignoring their husband's transgressions and mentions two 'ladies' who exhorted their husbands to free their children as 'honorable exceptions'. (Johnson, 1998: 20)

In her narrative, Jacobs did not claim that she was pure. She was aware that she was guilty because of her relation with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. On the other hand she found it more bearable to have a relation with another man in her free will. She asked the reader for their understanding and asked them to consider the circumstances of the black woman in the system of slavery.

In her relation with Sawyer and Dr. Norcom, Jacobs did not consider the opinions of the neighborhood but as the influence and importance of the old black

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woman in the black family is well known, the grandmother's point of view was important. When Jacob's grandmother learnt that she was pregnant from another man who was not her master, she considered it as a shame and refused to see her. If a black woman had babies from her master, she was not considered as immoral because no one could question the master's morality. Jacobs' autobiography is revealing in the sense that it points out the hypocritical moral values of the South during slavery.

Despite the cruelties that Jacobs was subjected to, she had some advantages when compared to other slave women. For instance, after Jacobs gave birth to her children, Dr. Norcom told her that he forgave her. He laid her two alternatives; she would either accept his offer to live in the cottage he had built for her to live as a concubine with her children or she would be sent to the plantation with her children. They would all work under hard conditions and then her children would be sold after a while. Jacobs chose to go to the plantation, even if the results would be hard both for her and her children. Dr. Norcom's offer is worthy of mentioning because, generally the slave woman was not asked to have choices. She was both subjected to sexual abuse and had to do fieldwork. She had to endure them all because there were no promises and privileges given to the black woman in the system of slavery. Although Jacobs had some advantages, it was hard to endure the conditions of slavery and the sexual assault. In her autobiography, Jacobs compares her life with some other black women who had to endure harder conditions under physical abuse. In the following quotation, she points out that the small hole in which she lived for seven years was better than living under this system of slavery and talks about the unbearable conditions that most of the black women had to live:

This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the fate of others. I was never cruelly over-worked; I was never lacerated with the whip from head to foot; I was never so beaten and bruised that I could not turn from one side to the other; I never had my heel-strings cut to prevent my running away; I was never chained to a log and forced to drag it about, while I toiled in the fields from morning till night; I was never branded with hot iron, or torn by bloodhounds. On the contrary, I had always been kindly treated, and tenderly cared for, until I came into the hands of Dr. Flint. I had never wished for

freedom till then. But though my life in slavery was comparatively devoid of hardships, God pity the woman who is compelled to lead such a life!’ (Jacobs, 1861: 174)

Harriet Ann Jacobs challenged some other important requirements of ‘true womanhood’, such as submissiveness and domesticity. In contrast to the passive life of the white Southern woman, she did not submit to the preset oppressive rules of the system of slavery. She tried to find her own way and make her own decisions.

When she asked Dr. Norcom’s permission to marry with a black man, he did not let her. Her answer was a challenging one:

‘Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying?’  
‘You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!’  
‘You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me.’ (Jacobs, 1861 61-62)

When Jacobs explained that she was pregnant, Dr. Norcom accused her of being sinful and she answered, “I have sinned against God and myself, but not against you” (Jacobs, 1861: 91).

When Jacobs rejected Dr. Norcom’s offer about building a cottage for her and chose to work in the fields, she challenged the domesticity of a woman. The term ‘domesticity’ had different meanings for the white woman and the black woman; the white woman took it as being in the private domain as a delicate woman, who directed the daily works of the house but, for the black woman, it meant submission to the rules of the white man by working everywhere in every condition. In connection with this, Jacobs indicated her challenge by making her decision about whom to have relation with and making her own home with her children outside of slavery. She once again preferred to choose a kind of domestic life far away from the one that was presented to her under the conditions of slavery. She told the ‘domesticity’ that she wished for herself:

The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than for my own. (Jacobs, 1861: 302)

Jacobs had never defined herself as helpless or weak. She had never accepted  
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to live under the promised conditions, which would be more 'comfortable'. In contrast, she had the courage to face the hard conditions of being a fugitive. Her way of life also challenged the myth of the black woman, who was believed to be benefiting from the advantages of being a concubine or who was pictured as 'the sexually attractive black whore'. Yvonne Johnson states:

Jacobs speaks for women, both slave and free, who have no rights to their bodies. She subverts the stereotypes of the black whore and the white lady by demonstrating that the 'cult of true womanhood' was truly a myth. This subversion of the myth, however, also reveals a double-consciousness, a consciousness that is simultaneously bound to and alienated from the very women Jacobs is addressing. (Johnson, 1998: 24)

While most black men believed that black women were turning the sexual assault of the white man into a privilege, the life of Harriet Jacobs proved just the opposite. Firstly, the sexual harassment of Dr. Norcom dragged her on a never-ending adventure. Secondly, Jacobs risked her life because of Mrs. Norcom's "sexual jealousy." (Hortense J. Spillers as qtd. in James, Sharpley-Whiting, 2000: 79)

Since "true womanhood" was associated with domesticity, helplessness or submissiveness, it had to be characterized by silence. In a society, in which a 'true woman' was associated with silence, Harriet Jacobs had written her own life story in these years. In connection with this, she had her own voice in her own narrative. Although she had the authentication narratives of two white women, Lydia Maria Child and Amy Post, she had the chance to convey her own life story. Establishing her own point of view for her experience, Jacobs again challenged the image of the silenced woman. In this regard, Jacobs' demand to acquire voice and selfhood and also her resistance were all connected. These were the crucial aspects of her survival. Yvonne Johnson emphasizes this aspect as she states "Linda's selfhood is tied to her voice, for her act of resistance is expressed in that voice" (Johnson, 1998: 37).

In accordance with these aspects, Jacobs subverted the concept of 'true womanhood'. Moreover, it can be argued that she tried to form a new concept of womanhood, at least for the black woman. She introduced a new definition of 'true woman' as challenging and as a person who had the control of her own life. Hence, Jacob's life showed a great deal of freedom and control over her on life. The most

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important example of this was the end of her narrative. It does not end with death or captivity, but freedom. She was not ostracized because she was not pure or she challenged domesticity. In contrast, she pointed out that the conditions of the white woman or the black man would not be valid for the black woman. She stated that she had lost her purity by her will, for the sake of freedom. Yvonne Johnson mentions: "Nineteenth century women's magazines often portrayed women who prefer death to loss of purity. If women who lost their purity did not die, they usually went insane." (Johnson, 1998: 19) But, it was clear that Jacobs' end would be different from the conventional woman. Through her representation of her master, Dr. Norcom, and his sexual exploits, she showed that it was impossible to be pure for the black woman. Besides, her sexual involvement with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer was a deliberate choice by means of which she escaped sexual abuse and death.

The four cardinal virtues, which were piety, purity submissiveness and domesticity, were brought up to women as the way that promised happiness and power. But, Jacobs proved that it could be achievable to reach happiness and freedom without these so-called virtues and she demonstrated that the black woman's struggle existed in more complex grounds. The life of Harriet Jacobs ended neither with death nor with marriage. Her salvation was different from the other women, whose ways of life and death were set up by the patriarchal world. In this sense, her freedom may be considered as a total liberation. Harriet Ann Jacobs describes the end of her life story:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition. (Jacobs, 1861: 302)

Jacobs revealed her desire for freedom and her will to build her own identity with her own decisions in different ways. Firstly, by hiding in her grandmother's attic for seven years she showed how determined she was in her acts:

I had succeeded in cautiously conveying some messages to my relatives. They were harshly threatened, and despairing of my having a chance to escape, they advised me to return to my master, ask his forgiveness, and let him make an example of me. But such counsel had no influence on me.

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When I started upon this hazardous undertaking, I had resolved that, come what would, there should be no turning back. "Give me liberty, or give me death," was my motto. (Jacobs, 1861: 151)

Another example of her will to determine her own life was her relation with Mr. Sawyer. By the help of this relation, she tried to demonstrate that she was the only one who had the control of her life. When she announced her relation with Mr. Sawyer and her pregnancy, Dr. Norcom asked her if she loved that man:

"Do you love him?" said he, in a hissing tone.  
"I am thankful that I do not despise him," I replied.  
... I said something about being unwilling to have my child supported by a man who had cursed it and me also. He rejoined, that a woman who had sunk to my level had no right to except anything else. He asked, for the last time, would I accept his kindness? I answered that I would not.  
"Very well," said he; "then take the consequences of your wayward course. Never look to me for help. (Jacobs, 1861: 92)

Her response presented a woman who had her own ideas and an identity. Besides, Dr. Norcom's last sentence was really meaningful because only free people may have their own decisions and shoulders the responsibilities of these decision's results.

Throughout her lifetime, Jacobs tried to have the control of her own body. In a world where even the black man's body was controlled, Jacobs as a black woman took the control of her body. She had decided whom to have a relation with and have babies from. This was a leading event for the black woman. She was in between two characters; the first one was the pitiful slave girl who was about to be raped by her master and the second one was the strong willed character that was free to choose her own lover. Sidonie Smith comments on controlling the black woman's body and Jacobs' free will:

...she presents herself not as the passive victim but as the iron-willed antagonist who fights her master's victimization with bravado. And she voids the narrative of the threat of seduction. The fate of the female body is the profound unspeakable of the seduction tale- unspeakable but always thinkable. When Jacobs takes as her point of departure the body already taken, already raped, she forces her reader to begin on the other side of the convention and to consider how the heroine can survive. (Smith, 1993: 47)

Jacobs mentioned how hard it was to gain the control of their own bodies for black women as she had expressed her feelings when she had her first baby as a girl:

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When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. 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. (Jacobs, 1861: 119)

Jacobs tried to resist all the difficulties that the black woman had to encounter. She also struggled for her own rights as a human being. If she had accepted the proposal of Dr. Norcom, she might have had an easier life. But the important thing for Jacobs was not leading a better life under the circumstances of slavery. Her aim was to be a black woman as a free individual who had self-esteem, even if she faced harder conditions. Sidonie Smith clarifies Jacobs' challenge:

Refusing to be figured as the sexually unrepressed primitive black woman whose body constitutes her identity, refusing to be figured as the "mammy" of white children, refusing to be figured as morally and spiritually bankrupt, refusing therefore to be figured as less than fully human, she destabilizes colonial notions of the African. (Smith, 1993: 51)

Harriet Jacobs announced that she was free in all of her choices. By this way, she could indicate that she had her free will. Having a white lover, who had no control over her, was her most challenging choice. In this case, the reader could trace her desire for freedom during her lifetime.

### 3.4 The Sexual Abuse in Sojourner Truth's Life

In her narrative, Sojourner Truth did not reveal the secrets of her life like the sexual assaults of her master, Mr. Dumont, her relation with her lover, Robert or other brutal conditions of slavery instead, she chose to talk about her religious feelings. By reason of her Christian faith and her life style, she excluded some of her memoirs and withheld the details of her many secrets about her life during the period of slavery. She described why she did not publish every incident in her life:

There are some hard things that crossed Isabella's life while in slavery, that she has no desire to publish, for various reasons. First, because the parties from whose hands she suffered them have rendered up their account to higher tribunal, and their innocent friends alone are living, to have their feelings injured by the recital; secondly, because they are not all for the public ear, from their very nature; thirdly, and not least, because, she says, were she to tell all that happened to her as a slave—all that she knows is 'God's truth'—it would seem to others, especially the uninitiated, so unaccountable, so unreasonable, and what is usually called so unnatural,...they would not easily believe it... 'they'd call me a liar! they would, indeed! and I do not wish to say anything to destroy my own character for veracity, though what I say is strictly true.' (Truth, 1850:82)

Although Sojourner Truth did not let the reader ascertain the secrets of her life, we could trace some crucial parts that indicated the sexual assault or other difficulties related with this as her relation with Robert was prevented by Mr. Dumont and her mistress' jealousy was an important oppression on her. As the rape of her master was not revealed openly in her life story, Olive Gilbert, who wrote her life story for her, points out, "Her master John Dumont raped her and later married her to an older slave, Thomas..." (Lerner, 1992; 371)

Sojourner Truth displayed the features of true womanhood to an extent. During the time she served as a slave, she was submissive and domestic. She accepted the rules of slavery and submitted to the requisitions of her master. She was assured to be given her freedom by Mr. Dumont but he dishonored his promise. Sojourner Truth was also humble as she waited for her freedom. When she asked to marry with Robert and although Mr. Dumont did not let her marry Robert and raped her, she was still not rebellious. Furthermore, Mr. Dumont obliged her to marry an

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older slave. Sojourner Truth internalized slavery and met her fate calmly until she comprehended that Mr. Dumont would never hold his promise. She clarifies the situation:

Isabella's master told her if she would do well, and be faithful, he would give her 'free papers', one year before she was legally free by statute...the time specified for her receiving her 'free papers', she claimed the fulfillment of master's promise; but he refused granting it, on account of the loss he had sustained by her hand. (Truth, 1850:39)

She reveals her feelings and her revolt with those words:

But Isabella inwardly determined that she would remain quietly with him only until she had spun his wool—about one hundred pounds—and then she would leave him, taking the rest of the time to herself. ... 'the slaveholders are TERRIBLE for promising to give you this or that, or such and such a privilege, if you will do thus and so; and when the time of fulfillment comes, and one claims the promise, they, forsooth, recollect nothing of the kind; and you are, like as not, taunted with being a LIAR; or, at best, the slave is accused of not having performed *his* part or condition of the contract'. (Truth, 1850:40)

Another important event that changed her from being a domesticated character to a challenging woman was the illegal sale of her son. When she realized that her children were going to be made slaves, Isabella also became rebellious. She compares the two different conditions:

...if any one talked to her of the injustice of her being a slave, she answered them with contempt, and immediately told her master. She then firmly believed that slavery was right and honorable. Yet she *now* sees very clearly the false position they were all in, both masters and slaves; and she looks back, with utter astonishment, at the absurdity of the claims so arrogantly set up by the masters, over beings designed by God to be as free as kings; and at the perfect stupidity of the slave, in admitting for one moment the validity of these claims. (Truth, 1850:34)

Although Sojourner Truth did not talk about her sexual and private life, it can be observed that she could not be considered as pure and innocent according to the terms of 'true womanhood'. Like all other slave women, it was impossible for her to be pure as she was raped by her master. Her impurity was in connection with the indecency of the system of slavery and her being raped by her master and her marriage with an older man were the consequences of this system. In accordance with this, Sojourner Truth regarded her marriage:

We have said, Isabella was married to Thomas—she was, after the fashion of  
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slavery, one of the slaves performing the ceremony for them; as no true minister of Christ can perform, as in the presence of God, what he knows to be a mere *farce*, a *mock* marriage, unrecognized by any civil law, and liable to be annulled any moment, when the interest or caprice of the master should dictate. (Truth, 1850:37)

The ‘caprice’ of the black woman’s master might direct her life in any direction that he wanted. In Sojourner Truth’s case, Mr. Dumont prevented her from getting married with Robert, and then she was married to Thomas, who had previously two wives. Because Truth did not mention the details of her private life, the reasons of her master’s decisions were not definite. In similar cases, the reason was the jealousy of the master. However, Sojourner Truth explicated her salvation in Christian faith on which subject she revealed many of her memoirs and she constituted her selfhood.

### 3.5. The Familial Responsibilities of the Black Woman

During the period of slavery, the difference between gender roles did not apply to black people as far as fieldwork was concerned and there was no difference between the roles of black fe/male. The slave woman had all the responsibilities and works in the household and in the fields. It was not the extensive amount of work that she complained of but the exploitation:

“A saying among enslaved Africans “It’s a poor dog that won’t wag its own tail”, alludes to popular perceptions among Blacks that Whites were lazy and did not value work as much as African-Americans themselves.” (Collins, 2000:50)

The black woman’s work started from her early ages, even childhood. She took care of her white mistresses’ children as her first work. Then, she looked after the black families’ children<sup>10</sup>. “Slave girls were put to work earlier than the boys. When they were four or five they took care of babies.” (Sterling, 1984:6) She grew up working in the house. When she got old enough, she started working on the fields but she continued to work in the house for her mistress. The black woman aimed to withdraw herself from the housework and be involved in fieldwork, only. There were many reasons for this. First, she wanted to escape from the domesticity of the womanhood, which was associated with the white female’s lifestyle. Second, the slave woman supported the black male in every field, so she took her place as assistance. Lastly, she wanted to stay away from the sexual harassment of the white male. As Dorothy Sterling writes, “As they grew older, the girls were put to work full time in the house or sent to the fields”(Sterling, 1984:7). The memoirs of slave women point out the experiences of young slave females:

When I is about six years old they take me into the big house to learn to be a house woman, and they show me how to cook and clean up and take care of babies...(as qtd. in Sterling, 1984: 7)

.When I was nine years old, dey took me from my mother an’ sol’ me. Massa Tinsley made me the house girl. I had to make de beds, clean de house an’ odder things. After I finished my reg’ler work, I would go to the mistress’ room, bow to her, an’ stand dere ’till she noticed me. Den she would say,

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<sup>10</sup> The black families did not look after their own children. They had a collective manner about the childcare.

“Martha, is you thew wid yo’ wuk?” I say “Yes mam.” She say, “no you ain’; you isn’t lowed de shades.” I’d den lower de shades, fill de water pitcher, ‘range de towels on de washstand an’ anything else mistress wants me to do. Den she’d tell me dat was ’bout all to do in dere. Den I would go in de odder rooms in de house an’ do de same things. We wasn’t ’lowed to sit down. We had to be doing something all day. Whenebber we was in the presence of any of de white folks, we had to stand up. (as qtd. in Sterling, 1984: 7)

As well as the works she shouldered in the fields, she had many works to do in the household for both white people and black male. An anonymous slave woman’s words illustrate the burden of the black woman at home:

When slaves come in from de fields de womans cleant up deir houses atter dey et, and den washed and got up early next mornin’ to put de clothes out to dry. Mens would eat, set ’round talkin’ to other mens and den go to bed. Mammy and pappy and us twelve chillen lives in one cabin, so mammy has to cook for fourteen people, ’sides her field work. She am up way befo’ daylight fixin’ breakfast and supper after dark with de pine knot torch to make de light. She cook on de fireplace in winter and in de yard in summer. (as qtd. in Sterling, 1984: 38)

The slave woman did not only perform their masters and mistresses’ works, but also their own works. Besides their daily duties like caring for children, cooking or washing, the black woman had to care for their health problems. Although this was a special field, which needed special education, some of the women were chosen to be ‘midwives’. In this way, the slave owner could cut his expenses for the care of the blacks. The following quotation from the memoirs of a slave woman provides an example:

When I was 13 years old my ol’ mistress put me wid a doctor who learned me how to be a midwife. Dat was ’cause so many women on de plantation was catchin’ babies. I stayed wid dat doctor, Dr. McGill his name was, for 5 years. I got to be good. Got so he’d sit down an’ I’d do all de work. (as qtd. in Sterling, 1984: 17)

Although the slave woman had many duties, her main role was on womanhood and motherhood. As Dilworth-Anderson and Rhoden state:

Both men and women were subject to the authority of a white master, worked side by side in the fields and were treated according to their capacity for work and their obedience. Within the household, however, women continued to play a central role in the sustainment and stability of the family. (as qtd. in Burgess, Brown, 2000:85)

Although the slave woman encountered many difficulties during the period of slavery, she existed as the most important component of the black family. It did not stop her to bring the black family together, even if she had babies from her master, and she was tortured or she was separated from her children and family. The slave mother always had to sacrifice herself for her family. Peggye Dilworth-Anderson and Lyn Rhoden maintain in their discussion on the memories of Frederick Douglass:

...The only times that Douglass saw his mother after their separation were at night when she would walk the 12-mile journey to see him after having worked all day as a field hand. Despite the risk of a beating, Douglass's mother would come to him, lie down with him while he slept, and leave for her return journey long before he awakened. (as qtd. in Burgess, Brown, 2000:85)

The instinct of motherhood prevented the black woman from escaping. Thus, it was the most important means for the master to keep the black woman as a slave in his house. The image of 'mother' was the main point of dependence in the black family. She tied the black family together. Moreover, the family consisted of only the mother and the children. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar state:

The family, rightly, has been the object of much debate in the women's movement and has been cited as one of the principal sites of women's oppression- women's role in reproducing the labor force, their supposed dependence on men and the construction of a female identity through notions of domesticity and motherhood have all been challenged.' (as qtd. in Bhavnani, 2001:22)

Beside the physical oppression that she encountered as a slave and as a woman, she suffered as a mother. Motherhood tied her up in the master's house as a slave and also made her suffer physically and emotionally because she had to give birth to many babies. Moreover, she had to witness their death because of insufficient health care for both mothers and children, as exemplified in the following quotation:

Fanny has had six children; all dead but one... Leah has had six children; three are dead....Sophy... came to beg for some old linen. She is suffering fearfully; she had had ten children; five of them are dead. (as qtd. in Lerner, 1992:49)

Another example concerning the problems of slave woman's pregnancy is the memories of Harriet Jacobs from her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*:

Mrs. Flint, at that time, had no children; but she was expecting to be a mother, and if she should want a drink of water in the night, what could she do without her slave to bring it?

*....The slave woman stayed at her post at night, even when she herself was pregnant. She gave birth to six children, all of whom died within the first few weeks of life.*

All the while she was employed as night-nurse to Mrs. Flint's children. Finally, toiling all day and being deprived of rest at night, completely broke down her constitution, Dr. Flint declared it was impossible she could ever become the mother of a living child. After this, they allowed her to sleep in the little room in the outhouse, except when there was sickness in the family. She afterwards had two feeble babies, one of whom died in a few days, and the other in four weeks. (as qtd. in Lerner, 1992:18)

Motherhood was more important than marriage and mothers were the central figures in the slave family. This type of slave family constructed the idea of 'Black Matriarchy'. In contrast to the typical matriarchy system, the woman did not rule the family in black matriarchy; she was not the dominant figure like in the female dominated families. The black woman became central in the black family because of the absence of the black man. One of the reasons for that absence was the separation of the black woman from the black man or the escape of the black male. In accordance with that, this female centered family played an important role against the disintegration of the black family tradition. The black woman acted as both mother and father. Moreover, the black family did not only include the mother but also the grandmothers, sisters or aunts. Involved in many works in the household or on the fields, the black mother, the biological or 'the bloodmother', could not properly carry out her maternal duties. One of the black women acted as the 'othermother' and cared for all black children and the children of their mistresses in the house. Thus, in the absence of the black man, all the black women- the grandmother, the aunt, the mother, the young girls- undertook all the parental functions in this family. When a bloodmother escaped from slavery, the othermothers shouldered the responsibility of her children. The concept of bloodmothers and othermothers reflected the centrality of women in the black community during the period of slavery. In that case, 'the insistence upon care and nurturance in the midst of conditions of racism and often poverty establishes the home and community as sites of "resistance and liberation struggle"'. (Bell Hooks as qtd. in Burgess, Brown,



2000:91) The system of Black matriarchy also proved that the care of children could not be limited to the biological mother, only.

During the period of slavery, the black woman had all the responsibilities of the black family. She had never complained about the work she did in household or on fields. From her very early ages, she started working under every circumstance without any prerogatives because of her age or her special conditions like pregnancy.

In her narrative, Harriet Jacobs summoned her childhood and her life as a slave, which started when she was six years old. When she was in her twelve, her mistress died and she was given to another master. Then in a year, immediately after her father's death, she had to encounter the painful side of slavery. She was not even allowed to attend her father's funeral: "I thought I should be allowed to go to my father's house the next morning; but I was ordered to go for flowers, that my mistress's house might be decorated for an evening party." (Jacobs, 1861: 18)

In addition to the black woman's work in the household, she had to work in the fields with the black man. Jacobs was one of the black women who had to be a worker on the fields. In contrast to some of the black women, this work was her salvation as she was sexually abused by her master. She voluntarily asked for this work because the work was also a challenge against her master. After she had born two babies and rejected her master's offer to be a concubine, she was threatened to be sent to the plantation. Paradoxically, she accepted this immediately. Jacobs explains how she had accepted to go to the plantation:

"I am ready to go to the plantation, sir," I replied.  
"Have you thought how important your decision is to your children?"  
said he. [Dr. Norcom]  
I told him I had.  
"Very well. Go to the plantation, and my curse go with you," he  
replied. "Your boy shall be put to work, and he shall soon be sold; and  
your girl shall be raised for the purpose of selling well. Go your own  
ways!" ' (Jacobs, 1861: 129)

Jacobs' coming to the plantation was not enough for Dr. Norcom. He wanted to damage her spiritually by bringing also her children to the plantation. Jacobs described the situation and her feelings about the place she was living in:

...he [a gentleman who came to the plantation in certain periods to check the conditions of the slaves and their works] said, "Linda, how do you like your new home?" I told him I liked it as well as I expected. He replied, "They don't think you are contented, and to-morrow they are going to bring your children to be with you. I am sorry for you, Linda. I hope they will treat you kindly." I hurried from the room, unable to thank him. My suspicions were correct. My children were to be brought to the plantation to be "broke in". (Jacobs, 1861: 143-144)

The oppression of the black woman could be in many ways. It could be both physical and psychological. Sending Jacobs to the plantation for hard work and torturing her might be physical, but taking away her children was a psychological one. When Jacobs heard that Dr. Norcom would take her children from her grandmother's care and probably sell them, she decided to run away. Her aim in planning this escape was to save her children from becoming slaves in the plantation. The main concern for the black woman was her children, which meant her family. In accordance with this she was many times threatened by Dr. Norcom about her children's situation. The following quotation illustrates Dr. Norcom's aim to make use of Jacobs' children to bring her to heel:

My children grew finely; and Dr. Flint would often say to me, with an exulting smile, "These brats will bring me a handsome sum of money one of these days."

I thought to myself that, God being my helper, they should never pass into his hands. It seemed to me I would rather see them killed than have them given up to his power. (Jacobs, 1861: 122)

Jacobs always sacrificed herself for her children. Another example of this was about the change in her ideas on death. She always wished to die rather than to be a slave and a concubine of Dr. Norcom. When she had babies and when her babies were in need of her, she was aware that she had to live at least for her children. The following quotation reveals her feelings about the idea of death:

When my babe was born, they said it was premature. It weighed only four pounds; but God let it live. I heard the doctor say I could not survive till morning. I had often prayed for death; but now I did not want to die, unless my child could die too. (Jacobs, 1861: 122)

Her decision to escape was again a leading example of her care for her children. Motherhood both strengthened her desire to escape and prevented her because she could not go without her children. In Yvonne Johnson's words,

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“Motherhood, although addressed with mixed feelings, gave Brent [Jacobs] a reason to struggle against her master, a reason to live.” (Johnson, 1998: 39) The idea of motherhood served as a source of motivation, courage and determination. Jacobs expresses her desire for freedom in connection with her feelings for her children:

My drooping hopes came to life again with the flowers. I was dreaming of freedom again; more for my children’s sake than my own. I planned and I planned. (Jacobs, 1861: 126)

Dr. Flint was suspicious, and determined not to loosen his grasp upon us. I could have made escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. (Jacobs, 1861: 136)

After Jacobs’ escape, her children were bought by their father. Jacobs’ all effort was to prevent her children from becoming slaves. She even could not escape to north in order not to be away from Joseph and Louisa Matilda. When they were safe with their real father, she felt relieved in her ‘crawlspace’. Her following words indicate how she had cared for her family and how self-sacrificing she was:

I had my season of joy and thanksgiving. It was the first time since my childhood that I had experienced any real happiness. I heard of the old doctor’s threats, but they no longer had the same power to trouble me. The darkest cloud that hung over my life had rolled away. Whatever slavery might do to me, it could not shackle my children. If I fell a sacrifice, my little ones were saved. It was well for me that my simple heart believed all that had been promised for their welfare. It is always better to trust than to doubt. (Jacobs, 1861: 166)

Jacobs represented herself as a caring and heroic mother, who searched for freedom. Together with achieving freedom, she wished for a home for her and her children. She indicated that it was hard for a woman to have her freedom in every case but she also demonstrated that it was the hardest for the slave woman. As the concepts of motherhood and womanhood were determined according to the will of her master, the black woman was deprived of her basic right, which was motherhood and family relations, because of the system of slavery. The unendurable conditions of slavery made the slave woman a more courageous and caring mother. Together with her determined will, she sacrificed herself for the comfort of her children and their freedom. She also relinquished her own life for the sake of all her family and black women who were in bondage by revealing her privacy to others. In connection with this, she could not hold a life of her own and for her own comfort, only. The history

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and the life of the slave woman were always placed among familial issues. In this case, Jacobs, as a heroic mother, exalted the feminine role, outside the conventional definitions.

The concept of 'black matriarchy' had priority in Jacobs' life story; she had the support of her grandmother and felt the presence of her children during her escape and the period that she became free. Harriet Jacobs' grandmother was evidently the central figure in her life. In her childhood, she was the one who saved her from beating. In her hard times when she escaped, she provided food and a place. She helped her to arrange her escape to north. She took care of her children when she was hiding. These are the reasons why she felt indebted to her grandmother:

I was frequently threatened with punishment if I stopped there; [her grandmother's house] and my grandmother, to avoid detaining me, often stood at the gate with something for my breakfast or dinner. I was indebted to *her* [Jacobs' grandmother] for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal. It was *her* labor that supplied my scanty wardrobe. (Jacobs, 1861: 19-20)

Jacobs felt responsible for her children and her family. Unlike her brother, who did not feel any responsibility for the people he left behind when he escaped, Jacobs could not leave her children and had to hide in a small place for seven years after she made her mind to escape. Even after she had escaped to the north, she was struggling to save her children before acquiring her freedom. The black woman always turned back for her family and for her responsibilities. She always tried again and again and stayed somewhere close. In the following quotation Jacobs points out the details of her uncle's escape and indicates how painful it was for her grandmother:

"I have come," said Benjamin, "to tell you good by. I am going away."  
I inquired where.  
"To the north," he replied...  
"Linda," he continued, "we are dogs here; foot-balls, cattle, every thing that's mean. No, I will not stay. Let them bring me back. We don't die but once."...  
"Go," said I "and break your mother's heart." (Jacobs, 1861: 34)

Soon after his escape, he was caught and brought back to his master. He was punished, put in jail with chains. While he was in jail, Jacobs and her grandmother were the only ones who came to visit him by taking the risk of being caught. Jacobs

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tells this scene:

We [Jacobs and her grandmother] knelt down and took Benjamin's cold hands in ours. We did not speak. Sobs were heard, and Benjamin's lips were unsealed; for his mother was weeping on his neck... He had asked her pardon for the suffering he had caused her. She said she had nothing to forgive; she could not blame his desire for freedom. (Jacobs, 1861: 36)

Although motherhood was central in the black woman's life, it was only regarded as a way for profit by the white man. The black woman was only evaluated with her fertility "because the female, [...] has been robbed of the parental right, the parental function" (Hortense J. Spillers as qtd. in James, Sharpley-Whiting, 2000: 80). She was materially valuable as long as she could give birth to new slave babies. This is why they were sold at a greater price than the black man, as Jacobs implies:

Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals. (Jacobs, 1861: 76)

As a fecund and healthy slave, Jacobs was also valuable for her master. After Dr. Norcom's death, his daughter continued to search for her. She was insistent in finding her because she was short of money and she was suffering financially. In her narrative Jacobs mentions, "...and my fears were confirmed by a letter from the south, warning me to be on my guard, because Mrs. Flint openly declared that her daughter could not afford to lose so valuable a slave as I was" (Jacobs, 2003: 295).

She was also a way out for Mrs. Norcom's son and her son-in-law, as Dr. Norcom did not leave inheritance to his daughter and his son when he died. They had both claimed rights on Jacobs. Thus, they had to try Jacobs as their only property. Jacobs describes the fight over her:

A quarrel arose between him [Mrs. Norcom's son] and her brother, [Mrs. Norcom's son-in-law] and the brother cowhided him. This led to a family feud, and he proposed to remove to Virginia. Dr. Flint left him no property, and his own means had become circumscribed, while a wife and children depended upon him for support. Under these circumstances, it was very natural that he should make an effort to put me into his pocket. (Jacobs, 1861: 76)

The black woman was faced with the hardest conditions. She had to bear the most painful and pitiful circumstances. Besides, she shouldered all the responsibilities of her family and her race. Even after the fugitive slave law was

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established, all black women in the south and in the north as well, were the ones who were most affected. Jacobs depicts the situation of the black woman in the north, after the fugitive slave law was established:

Many families, who had lived in the city for twenty years, fled from it now. Many a washerwoman, who, by hard labor, had made herself a comfortable home, was obliged to sacrifice her furniture, bid a hurried farewell to friends, and seek her fortune among strangers in Canada. Many a wife discovered a secret she had never known before; that her husband was a fugitive, and must leave her to insure his own safety. Worse still, many a husband discovered that his wife had fled from slavery years ago, and as "the child follows the condition of its mother," the children of his love were liable to be seized and carried into slavery. (Jacobs, 1861: 286)

Sojourner Truth's life narrative is full of incidents that bear resemblance to Harriet Jacobs' memories concerning the plight of the black slave woman as mother and nurturer. Like many other black women, who were made slaves in their childhood and forced to work both in the household and on the fields, as well as being used to give birth to new slaves, Sojourner Truth was sold when she was eleven, put on to work from that time on and was forced to have babies. Again, her oppression started with physical work and continued with the threats from her owner concerning her children. Considering this, the children of the black woman existed as important key resources for the masters to 'discipline' the black woman. When Sojourner Truth escaped from her master, she was tried to be pursued by her master to come back. As she did not accept this offer, Mr. Dumont threatened her with taking away her child:

When her master saw her, he said, "Well, Bell, so you've run away from me." 'No, I did not *run* away; I walked away by day-light, and all because you had promised me a year of my time.' His reply was, 'You must go back with me.' Her decisive answer was, 'No, I *won't* go back with you.' He said, 'Well, I shall take the *child*.' (Truth, 1850:43)

The way the black woman dedicated herself to her children deprived her of a private life of her own. This devotion of the black woman also made her rebel against the institution of slavery, although she previously did not have the courage to oppose. In Sojourner Truth's life story, we are told that she did not break with the

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demands of her master before she had children. However, when she felt the danger on her children, she changed her point of view about slavery and she was courageous enough to resist. The following quotation concerns the confrontation of Sojourner Truth with her mistress:

Isabella heard her [Isabella's mistress] through, and after a moment's hesitation, answered, in tones of deep determination—'*I'll have my child again.*' 'Have your *child* again!' repeated her mistress—her tones big with contempt, and scorning the absurd idea of her getting him. 'How can you get him? And what have you to support him with, if you could? Have you any money?' 'No,' answered Bell, 'I have no money, but God has enough, or what's better! And I'll have my child again.' These words were pronounced in the most slow, solemn and determined measure and manner. (Truth, 1850:45)

During the time she had served as a slave, she was whipped by her master. However, she had accepted this with a humble aspect. When the same conditions were set for her son, she was not forbearing enough:

'Heavens! What is all *this* [mentioning the scars of whipping]?' said Isabella. He answered, 'It is where Fowler whipped, kicked, and beat me.' She exclaimed, 'Oh, Lord Jesus, look! see my poor child! Oh Lord, "render unto them double" for all this! Oh my God! Pete, how *did* you bear it?' (Truth, 1850:54)

Even though the slave woman was separated from her children by her master, she never dispensed with her children. Likewise, Sojourner Truth had spent her life to save her children from slavery, especially for her son, Peter. She supported him when he tried to escape and continued to be in touch with him by writing letters.

Although Truth was a self-sacrificing mother, who did everything for the sake of her children, the meaning of motherhood and womanhood was different for her because of the system of slavery. As the concept of motherhood included the division of bloodmothers and othermothers and as these concepts constituted the idea of the black family, the black mother had all the responsibility of her family. The slave woman had the responsibility of her parents and children, without the support of the black man. In Sojourner Truth's narrative, she stresses the importance of the black woman for the black family, considering her own family life. Truth took care

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of her father, who was heavily distressed after his wife Mau-mau-Bet's death. Truth's description of her father's agony points out the importance of the black woman:

“They are [his children] all taken away from me! I have now not one to give me a cup of cold water—why should I live and not die?” Isabella [Sojourner Truth], whose heart yearned over her father, and who would have made any sacrifice to have been able to be with, and take care of him, tried to comfort, by telling him that ‘she had heard the white folks say, that all the slaves in the State would be freed in ten years, and that she would come and take care of him.’ I would take just good care of you as Mau-mau would, if she was here’—continued Isabel. ‘Oh, my child,’ replied he, ‘I cannot *live* that long.’ ‘Oh *do*, daddy, do live, and I will take such *good* care of you,’ was her rejoinder. (Truth, 1850:23)

Truth also took care of her children on her own, which was her most important responsibility, even when she was working in the fields as a slave:

When Isabella went to the fieldwork, she used to put her infant in a basket, tying a rope to each handle, and suspending the basket to a branch of a tree, set another small child to swing it. It was thus secure from reptiles, and was easily administered to, and even lulled to sleep, by a child too young for other labors. (Truth, 1850:39)

In Truth's life, the absence of the black male was not only observed as the absence of a husband while she was trying to bring up her children, but also the absence of a son. When her son, Peter Van Wagener, left his family, Truth was left alone with other three women members of the family, Sophia, Betsey, and Hannah, which once again build up the ‘black matriarchy’. In his letters, Peter uses the words, “Your only son” (Truth, 1850:78), but ‘the only son’ was not with his family, who should have supported them like in the concept of the family in the patriarchal form as we are accustomed in the conventional meaning. Whereas, Truth dedicated her life to her children although her motherhood and fertility were only used to increase the wealth of her master:

In process of time, Isabella found herself the mother of five children, and she rejoiced in being permitted to be the instrument of increasing the property of her oppressors! Think, dear reader, without a blush, if you can, for one moment, of a *mother* thus willingly, and with *pride*, laying her own children, the ‘flesh of her flesh,’ on the altar of slavery—a sacrifice to the bloody Moloch! But we must remember that beings capable of such sacrifices are not mothers; they are only ‘things,’ ‘chattels,’ ‘property’. (Truth, 1850:78)

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As the female slave was used to increase the wealth of her master, she was considered to be at the same level as the animals:

The same terms are applied to slaves that are given to cattle. They are called 'stock.' So, when the children of slaves are spoken of prospectively, they are called their 'increase;' the same term that is applied to flocks and herds. So the female slaves that are mothers are called 'breeders,' till past child-bearing; and often the same terms are applied to the different sexes that are applied to the males and females among cattle. (Truth, 1850:133)

Although her motherhood and womanhood was exploited by her master, Sojourner Truth tried to be a dedicated mother to her children and a 'true woman' in accordance with her Christian belief.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of slavery, the black woman was placed at the lowest level among all human categories. As the black woman's plight was intertwined with gender, class and racial issues, her life was made all the more unendurable. The self-narratives written by black women are important documents that bear testimony to their oppression and fight for survival during the period of slavery.

During the period of slavery, the black woman was constantly faced with sexual exploitation and rape. She had no other choice than to give birth to the children of white men. Moreover, she had many responsibilities both in the household and in the fields as a slave. While she was trying to survive in this environment, she was alone in her struggle because of her positioning as the other of the other. Therefore her identity was mainly built in relation to the 'black matriarchal' family.

The black woman's engagement in life-writing is not only her response to the system of slavery, but at once an attempt at constructing her identity by overcoming her silence. She told her own life story, her own experiences to acquire a voice. In order to be an individual and to be regarded as a subject, she had to overcome some obstacles; first, she had to reject being a slave, then, she had to struggle and resist the oppression that the system of slavery set as a rule, and lastly, she had to speak out and announce herself as a separate and free individual. In addition to this, she had to convince others and make them acknowledge her as a human being.

The autobiography of Harriet Jacobs portrays a strong and rebellious woman, who stood outside of the rules of true womanhood and who only trusted herself without being submissive. Her life story points out the brutal conditions that a slave woman faced sexually, physically and psychologically. Sojourner Truth's life, on the other hand, was of a submissive religious woman, who remained silenced until she had children and encountered the risk of losing her children to the brutal practices of slavery. Her life narrative represents the awakening of a slave woman who had spent her life for the sake of her children by depending on her Christian faith.

Sojourner Truth's religious feelings prevented her from revealing her innermost secrets about her life. Contrary to Harriet Jacobs, she did not expound the rapist attitudes of her master or the oppression on her womanhood. Like Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth did not have the support of white women or black men. Her account of her life with her children and her struggle for her children reveals the self-sacrificing attitude of a slave woman as she had attempted to liberate her children. After she was emancipated, she dedicated herself to the emancipation of black women, and worked for the rights of black women in many congresses and meetings until she died.

Indeed, the autobiographies of black women connect the literary texts to political and social issues. Revealing their most intimate experiences, and emphasizing the shared history of all black women under slavery the black women who wrote their self-narratives took a major step towards the construction of a collective identity and subjectivity for the black woman.

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