

**RE-ASSESSING THE NOTIONS OF RACISM AND SEXISM IN SLAVE  
NARRATIVES : CASE STUDY OF LINDA BRENT'S *INCIDENTS IN  
THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL***

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**Abstract :** In slave narratives, the black subject is assimilated with a means of production – a machine or a beast of burden. His/her possession draws a demarcation line between the dominated and the dominator. Involved in the struggle for the emancipation of black people, slave narratives show human exploitation, fiercely denouncing racism further nourished by slavery. By claiming for equality between races from their structure, they disclose more the aspirations of black men. The centrality of this theme in the detriment of the conditions of black women engenders an antiracist discourse, that which justifies in fact the existence and continuation of a phallocratic order in both Antebellum and Post-Bellum American society. Through the reproduction principle of the ideology of domination, our objective is to show by using black feminism how this antiracist discourse excludes black women and their concerns. This is the reason why the African American feminist Bell Hooks points out from this antiracist discourse a sexist articulation which makes the black woman a double victim from the color of her skin and her gender. Thus, racism and sexism are two distinct and complementary concepts used to re-assess the reality of slavery. The representations of the feminine disclose sexism as the other legitimate discourse through which the condition of black women at slavery is made readable.

**Keywords :** Slave narrative, sexism, phallocratic order, antebellum society, feminism.

**REEVALUATION DES NOTIONS DE RACISME ET DE SEXISME DANS LES  
RECITS D'ESCLAVES : ETUDE D'INCIDENTS DANS LA VIE D'UNE ESCLAVE  
DE LINDA BRENT**

**Résumé :** Dans les récits d'esclaves, le sujet noir est perçu comme un moyen de production, une machine ou une bête de somme. Sa possession marque une ligne de démarcation entre le dominant et le dominé. En participant à la lutte pour l'émancipation des noirs, les récits d'esclaves témoignent de cette exploitation de l'homme par l'homme, tout en dénonçant avec véhémence le racisme davantage nourri par l'esclavage. En prônant l'égalité raciale de par sa structure, le récit d'esclaves semble plus porter les aspirations des hommes. La centralité du thème de l'égalité raciale au détriment de la condition féminine engendre un discours antiraciste perceptible justifiant en effet l'existence et le maintien d'un ordre phallocratique qui régit la société américaine d'avant et d'après-guerre. Par le principe de reproduction de l'idéologie de domination, notre objectif est de montrer à travers le féminisme noir comment le discours antiraciste exclue les préoccupations des femmes esclaves. C'est pourquoi la critique féministe africaine américaine Bell Hooks décèle dans ce discours antiraciste une articulation sexiste qui fait de la femme noire une double victime de par sa couleur de peau et son sexe. Racisme et sexisme sont alors deux notions distinctes et complémentaires pour mieux appréhender

l'esclavage. Les représentations du féminin dévoilent le sexisme comme étant l'autre discours à travers lequel s'apprécie mieux la condition de la femme noire pendant l'esclavage.

**Mots-clés :** Récit d'esclave, sexisme, ordre phallocratique, société d'après-guerre, féminisme.

## Introduction

Participating in the emancipation of black people in the United States, slave narratives deal with human exploitation. Its writing goes with the denunciation of systemic racism engendered by the institution of slavery. The architecture of all slave narratives displays a narrative scheme that goes from bondage to liberty, as it can be read in the title of Booker T. Washington's text *Up from Slavery*. They celebrate the freedom of slaves, making then racial equality a central theme (A. G. Pambo Pambo Ndiaye, 2019, p. 4). The abolitionist discourse in slave narratives being anti-racist, the theme of female condition is discarded from or unprioritized in the struggle for the emancipation of black people in America. The structure of slave narratives veils the aspirations of black women who fought against slavery. It can be illustrated with figures like Sojourner Truth in the important role that she played in the underground railroad (K. Estell, 1994, p. 31). Beyond racial equality, slave women also fought against other forms of mistreatment, particularly gender discriminations which they were victims of. The denunciation of sexism was not inscribed in the agenda of abolitionist movements that sponsored, published, recorded, and even wrote most slave narratives. By making the issue of slaves a national cause, the feminist movement had gained more visibility. The abolitionist discourse had impacted racial matters with the Emancipation proclamation (C. Mulvey, 2004, pp. 20-21). It has, by the way, perpetrated the phallocratic order that existed and defined the post and ante-bellum American society. The antiracist discourse contains the principle of the reproduction of the ideology of domination which as matter of facts excludes black women's concerns. It is in this perspective that the feminist African American critic bell hooks points out in the antiracist discourse in slave narratives a sexist articulation (B. hooks, 1982, p.15). It makes the black woman a double victim. Racism is supported by physiological difference - black skin color as an emblem prejudices woman. The other criterion is related to her nature of woman - gender assessed as a biological determination, sex subjugates the female subject. In other terms, black woman is victimized because of her skin from which racism is based on, and of her genital organ, which appears as a prejudice. It translate sexism. The notions of racism and sexism that come out of the analysis of slave narratives are then both distinct and complementary to better apprehend slavery. Based on black feminist theory, the abolitionist discourse contained in slave narratives, especially in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* does not only denounce racism, but also sexism revealed as part of the ideology of slavery.

### **1. Drawing a parallel : the end of slave narrative and the liberation of black people as a paradigm of black women's exclusion**

A contextualization of slave narratives is, above all, important to better grasp the mobiles of the writing of slavery. As a genre of African American literature, slave narratives appeared in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the anti-slavery campaign started in America and Europe. The first wave in the publications of slave narratives correspond to this period and are involved in a struggle against the Peculiar institution, while the second wave would build literary tradition (S. B. Stepto, 1994, p. 271). In the second wave, slave narratives produce an abolitionist discourse. The link between this literary genre and the theme of abolition helps understand and correlate the role played by abolitionist movements as sponsors, editors, and publishers (K. Estell, 1994, p. 19). It is interesting to determine the interests of these movements, mostly minorities, with the ideals of liberty carried by slaves. It will not be too risky to assert that feminist movements use the black cause for their own emancipation as well. The abolitionist discourse in slave narratives contains elements of aspiration of white feminist movements, despite the fact slave narratives are read as instruments for propaganda. A slave narrative should then be considered as an ideological text. Or to better say its dynamics, it is an ideologically conflictual text. Slave narrative is built around an abolitionist discourse with the objective to put an end to the institution of slavery. Slavery is to be apprehended as an economic and social system in which work is organized on the principle of subalternity between the master and the slave (M. Lengellé, 1962, p. 28). In other terms, power defines the position of each actor. Liberty is gained through a quest of power that which sets slave narrative as a place of antagonism between dominator and dominated. The marginalization of white women is seen in their massive involvement in the abolitionist movements. White women as well as black people struggle for their emancipation from racism and sexism understood as the major wrongs that slavery has widely spread.

The term emancipation used to mean the abolition of slavery is quite evocative. The Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln has given not only visibility, but also an echo to the female cause, especially white women's concerns. It has paved the way for their struggle. For, this proclamation could be seen as a sign of victory for a cause that is also theirs. The fight for the emancipation of white women has truly started with the important role that played in the Abolitionist movement. The plausibility of this reinterpretation is based on the perception of this agenda as an incitement to the birth and growth of purely feminist organizations. The Emancipation Proclamation could be understood more as an institutional end of systemic slavery, than the abolition of slavery itself. In fact, other forms of marginalization characterize the American society. Lexical terms associated with the act of emancipation are brought in the architecture of slave narratives. The slippery of signifiers that goes from the river to the train in the Underground railroad, describes a continuum, the submission of black people, especially women. Their freedom is indeed questioned in slave narratives. The ones published before the Emancipation Proclamation have as a matter of fact a proleptic value, with an anticipation announcing the end of slavery. From this point of view, the writing of slave narratives is utopian (S. B. Stepto, 1994, p. 269). The ideal of liberty that is inscribed in these texts can be taken as a repression, the manifestation of the unconscious. Freedom is

thus unattainable in the form of a phantasm, that only writing can achieve. Most slave narratives were sponsored, written, recorded, and published by abolitionists (associations, movements, and/or individuals) from the North of America and the United Kingdom. The North starting its industrialization as was England the first industrialized nation needed more manpower to support this sector. In this perspective, it presented more job opportunities than the South. The idea of liberty by migrating to the South is linked with this fact. Not surprising at all, the abolitionist movement moved from England to America. The imagery of the North not only as the land of liberty, but also of opportunities is essentially fed with economic considerations. Here, comes out the first reproduction of the imagery of migration that helps draw a comparison in the creed of the American dream between settlements in the American colonies and the slave migration (A. G. Pambo Pambo Ndiaye, 2020, p. 136). The value of the proleptic discourse secondly resides in the reproduction and upholding of the phallographic ideology heritated from Europe in general, the British aristocracy particularly. In the American slave society, disparities are not only racial and social, but also genderly orientated. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* portrays the white phallographic society in the representation below where a slave being called simultaneously by his master and mistress, is severely punished by his master for disobedience :

One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two ; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, "You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first."

"You are my child," replied our father, "and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water."

Poor Willie ! he was now to learn his first lesson of obedience to a master. (L. Brent, 2002, p.450).

A double interpretation can be made on the passage. On the one hand, the pyramidal hierarchization of the slave society positions the white man as the absolute possessor of power and authority. It is translated in the use of the lexeme "father". By associating the master to the figure of the father, writing testifies his sacrality, as in judeo-christian perspective. The slave must obey his master. On the other hand, the slave's obedience to the mistress and his disobedience to the master give the position of subordination in a slave plantation of white women toward white men, in spite of their race. The writing of slave narratives brings to light other forms of inequality and injustice, especially those related to gender. The description above reveals sexism rather than racism as it has been usually perceived. In other words, sexism appears in discriminatory actions and violence through which the abolitionist discourse is elaborated in the writing of slave narratives. By analyzing female representations in slave narratives, especially *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a phallographic articulation comes out of the antiracist discourse privileged and produced in the context of the struggle for the emancipation of

black people in America. Sexism is readable both in a racial and interracial dynamics, prejudicing not only white women, black women, but also black man. But the emancipation of black men is more pronounced. The abolition of slavery has been more profitable for them. It stands a symbolic liberty for black women. It has widened the discriminatory gap between black men and black women. The end of systemic racism has definitely shed light on sexism in the antiracist and abolitionist discourse.

## 2. Reading Sexism in Slave Narratives as the Foundation of Slavery

Slavery has not only encouraged racism between white and black people. But it has also accentuated sexism, which is defined as a gender discrimination. Black women are particularly victims of sexist deeds during slavery. It has established sexism as a norm (B. hooks, 1982, p. 15). In other words, sexism as well as racism support the system of domination and exploitation of black people at place. In fact, sexist discourse is perceived in the representation of a female slave considered as "a valuable piece of property" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 446). Her value is determined by the different roles that she can have. "Officiating in all capacities", she is described as an essential character in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Her importance in the organization of a plantation, in the institution of slavery is due to her nature of woman. Slave holders need female slaves in order to maintain slavery, to perpetuate the system through pro-creation. They represent a guarantee not only for species through birth, but also for wealth. In a plantation, births increase the number of the master's possession (B. hooks, 1982, p. 16). Fecundity is a criterion of selection. Then, pregnancy is seen a good sign. Feminist representations in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are not limited to the description of manpower, physical capacities which women are denied of, though they find themselves working in the field. Slave narratives deal with family stories with an attempt at drawing a family tree. This is done with the objective to describe an economy of the exploitation of men. Slavery has made the promotion of natality which is assimilated with cattle breeding. From a thematic perspective, lineage is a structuring component of slave narratives. But it is not inscribed in a quest of identity. Lineage rather allows to denounce the human marchandization. The writing of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* exposes auctions, slave expropriation – two factors of fragility and fragmentation of the family structure. This is what the narrator Linda Brent says by evoking the fate of her grandmother's sons in the following passage :

My grandmother remained in her service as a slave ; but her children were divided among her master's children. As she had five, Benjamin, the youngest one, was sold, in order that each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents. There was so little difference in our ages that he seemed more like my brother than my uncle (...) only ten years old, seven hundred and twenty dollars were paid for him. His sale was a terrible blow to my grandmother. (L. Brent, 2002, pp. 446-447).

The ideology of slavery, which transpires in the writing of slave narratives, is elaborated not only on racial difference, but gender as well. It is manifested through

racism and sexism. The representation of the black subject, the male character particularly in the plantation of cotton, sugar, and wheat is far from the only form of dramatization of the realities of slavery. The working conditions are drastic and dehumanizing. When looking at sexist motivations, the representation of black female characters in the house as it is the case of Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* who is close to the master and mistress either expresses the horrors of slavery. Sexism transcribes in one of the principles of the slave society, which forbids a black woman to publicly reveal the name of the genitor, when this latter is white. Such a deed is considered as a « crime », says the narrator. Linda Brent asserts in the text that : "it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 455). In this very case, the paternity of a mulatto child in a plantation cannot be assigned to a black man. The identification of the father of a child at the time is only based on the criterion of likeness in a plantation. It is easily done. White men's presence in a plantation is not dense at all. The proof of paternity is much evident that everyone in the plantation knows, but dares not say it publicly. The mother of the mulatto child is doubly punished. The violation of the law of silence by the slave mother makes her a victim of both the master and the mistress. Mistreatment of black women, mostly mothers at slavery is often due to the sexist attitudes of white people, be them male or female. It is definitely in the forms of silence that sexism is understood as one of the main causes of violence on black women during slavery. In other words, sexism justifies as well as racism slavery in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Slavery lasts over four centuries because of the natality policy through which sexism is expressed. If the master's wealth is seen through the number of slaves possessed, as it is the case of M. Litch who is described as being extremely rich with "six hundred slaves" (L. Brent, 2002, pp. 490-491), the quest for profit leads many masters to procreate with their slaves. Linda Brent reports that : "My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 478). Animalisation of slave women is established in the norms of the church on its chapter on adultery (M. Lengellé, 1962, p. 19). It reads in the text : "If a pastor has offspring by a woman not his wife, the church dismiss him, if she is a white woman ; but if she is colored, it does not hinder his continuing to be their good shepherd" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 524). The master's adultery with a slave is not condemned, as it is the case with a white lady.

The difference of treatment goes beyond the expression of systemic racism, since it opposes black women with white women. It allows to rather read sexism in the church attitude which shows no consideration for the colored woman for her nature. The denial of adultery hides the recognition of her femininity, which has to be apprehended as the black woman's space of emancipation. It explains why the mistress further combats the slave woman as the text testifies it with Ms. Flinch. The black female subject is made a double victim of slavery, as compared to men. This reading reveals the undeniable place and role of slave women in the resistance and struggle against slavery. Slavery was thought in a patriarchal logic. In this way, it has more easily subdued black men. Slavery reinvents itself with sexist orientations on black women who appear to be more subversive than black men (B. hooks, 1982, pp. 44-45). Mulattos, for instance, as a symbol of adultery are not privileged at all at slavery. Like their mothers, they are the property of the master, the master's wealth, as the narrator Linda Brent puts it : "my child was an

addition to his stock of slaves" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 508). Since mulatto children do not enjoy a different status, but that of slaves, the reproduction between the master and the slaves is a choice with sexist motivations. For, black women are used to perpetuate the system of exploitation. In that, the criterion of the color of the skin is replaced by gender. It accounts for the preeminence of sexism at the time of slavery as a way to fragilize all forms of resistance from matriarchy. Sexism is readable in procreation, in so much as the birth of a mulatto is for both the mistress and the black man a sign of humiliation - a representation that questions their authority. The white woman does no longer enjoy the privilege of her husband. The presence in the house of the slave lady is a permanent threat. A mulatto is a sign of the black man's dispossession of power, as a husband mostly in the fields. In the hierarchisation of power, he finds himself limited. As a house slave, the black woman is closed to the master. This organisation of the slave society has favored white men's domination. In other terms, it has consolidated white men's patriarchy, as opposed to black men's patriarchy.

In the text *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the presence of a mulatto reduces the authority of the black man. It generates uncomfortableness that reminds him of his condition of slave. It explains the permanent tension in black couples, Linda Brent says : "The poor man lived, and continued to quarrel with his wife". The mulatto is the representation of the phallic dispossession that emasculates the black man in his relation with his wife. It also infantilizes him in his relation with the master who is assimilated with the figure of the father. With regards to its structure, whose plot goes from bondage to freedom, the writing of slave narrative fortells the Emancipation proclamation that ended slavery. It is a writing that has restored the freedom of black men through the repossession of the phallic signifier (H. L. Gates Jr, 1989, p. 85). Slave narrative recreates a co-text where the black men is away from the tyranny of the master. It is definitely a genre that supports an masculine order - the black men's patriarchy which denies freedom to black women.

One of the indicators of sexism in slave narrative is the degree of violence on the victim. The presence of a mulatto creates more sexist tensions between the mistress and slave women. Violence and mistreatment are greatly intensified, as the consequence of sexism. It is established in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that : "it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child". The term "crime" describes the degree of additional and extreme violence. Writing becomes even sarcastic, when it uses death for punishment in an irrefutable case. If unveiling the identity of the genitor leads to death, the irrefutability of the evidence condemns the mother and the child, as it is testified in the mistress's words : "There is no such place for the like of her and her bastard". Sexism adds a degree of violence on racist deeds in slave narrative. As for the master, a mulatto is also a symbol of humiliation, as it is illustrated in the text. The master's daughter gives birth a mulatto. The father is a slave in the plantation. The text reads : "his daughter had selected one of the meanest slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 498). In this scene, sexism appears in the act of subversion of the master's daughter. It expresses the rejection of phallocracy in the white community. It appears in the deliberate act of the black man to be the genitor, associating then the slave not only with the figure of the father, but also with the figure of the master. The writing

of slave narrative contains the scheme of the Hegelian dialectic, making it subversive. In the economy of the text, the comparison between the master and his slave makes the conjunction of the figure of the father who both incarnates the master and the slave. Hence the use of the superlative adjective "the meanest" adding a degree of intensity in the expression of hatred. This representation shows as a matter of fact how sexism determines interracial relations even in the context of slavery where, by any means, the dominated searches his/her liberation. Through the representation of a mutallo, both the master's daughter and the slave dispossess the master of his means of domination.

In the interracial dynamics of slavery, sexism involves as well female characters. Mrs Flint hates her slave Linda Brent, because of, as her alter ego, she deprives her of all the privileges due to her nature of woman. It is what makes the comparison possible when Mrs. Flint is relegated to a "second wife" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 478). The privileges that the slave woman receives from the master, as it can be read : "He had never punished me himself, and would not allow any body else to punish me" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 475) construct an apparent atmosphere of jealousy. In fact, tensions rendered in the terms of "intolerable", "angry words", "a storm", "the fire of her temper", "flame", etc., describe the degree or the intensity of violence that incarnates sexism. In the Peculiar institution, the master uses racism more as a modality of domination of black men. Meanwhile, the mistress makes use of sexism to control black women, even though they are also victims of racism. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, racism and sexism are then two means equally used during slavery to oppress the other. As it appears in the following passage : "mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child's own mother is among those hated ones" (L. Brent, 2002, p. 471), racism and sexism have the same consequence – hatred of the other, either based on race, or gender. On gender, sexism deconstructs the idea of hatred based on racial difference from which racism is elaborated. The mistress's sexist attitude toward the slave woman is due to her phallic dispossession. Here also, Linda Brent reminds Mrs Flint of her real condition of a submissive woman with her husband in the household, hence « violent outbreaks of jealous passion ».

Sexism in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* dwells as well in the aesthetics of the body. It is inscribed in the perception of Linda Brent's body. In other terms, its significance is achieved through the act of representation. Linda Brent is observed by Mr. Flint who stands for a focalizer. His admiration and seduction based on the body transformation of a teenager mark the master's interest in gender. The text raises questions about racism through the expression of sexual desire. With regards to the narrative scheme that shows her harassment, sexism explains all the forms of violence and mistreatment which condemn the slave girl to silence. It reads : "Dr. Flint swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as the grave". If slave narrative formally denounces racism, sexism is also decried and transpires in the forms of silence in the text. The theme of racism grants to this genre of American literature all its legitimacy regarding the historical context. But, it is not the case for silence. The inscription in the aesthetics of the body reveals how sexism has deeply influenced and structured the slave society. The formula "If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse" shows the victimisation of black women beyond the criterion of the color of the skin that defines



racism in the slave society. In other terms, bell hooks's analysis allows to question racism as to read sexism as the greatest plague engendered by slavery.

## Conclusion

Slavery still remains a very important event in the history of the United States of America. By institutionalizing racism, the consequences of slavery in contemporary America are today more than evident. Racism is up today one of the main scourges of the American society with reference to police brutality in George Floyd with Black Lives Matter. In fact, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the discourse on racism does not fully reveal the truth about the reality of slavery. As opposed to racism, the theme of sexism has not been much developed in slave narratives, because this genre of American literature especially deals with race matters. The truth about the reality of slavery is to be found in sexism. It shows that the slave society is phallogocentric. And as such, sexism helps better it. The analysis of sexism reveals the horrors of slavery silenced by the perspective of racism. Associated with the paradigm of sexism, the analysis renders more dicible the experience and condition of slaves. It establishes a correlation between on the one hand slavery, on the other racism, and sexism both as the outcomes and instruments of human exploitation system. With racism, slavery guarantees the authority of Whites over Blacks, as sexism does for males over females. The combination of racism and sexism leads to the absolutism of the white people's domination, a tyranny that black women are the most victims. The writer of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* talks about "her greatest curse". Linda Brent's text also brings to light the reproductive dynamics of the ideology of slavery. It is not only an interracial phenomenon as it opposes white to black. But racism and sexism are also experienced in each community as an intra racial phenomenon – white versus white, as well as black versus black. This reality described in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girls* goes beyond systemic or institutional slavery. Then, Linda Brent's writing releases the voices of slaves who have been the victims of both racism and sexism favored by the Peculiar institution.

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