



African American Women Writers Before Reconstruction: Tackling Socio-Political Changes Through Their Words

A Comparative Analysis of Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley

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Abstract— *The Reconstruction in the US (1865-77) is a period set apart by critical social, political, and economic changes. The years preceding that were an agitated period in American history. During this time, African American women scholars essentially impacted the discussion about orientation, race, and personality. This thesis is a comparative report on two of these eminent writers: Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley. It utilizes qualitative analysis to look at their individual perspectives and distinct narrative styles in the literary productions of the mentioned writers. Also, I will be reviewing literature surrounding the effects of these works on discussions regarding socio-political incidents, for instance, the Civil War. Through looking at primary materials, scholarly data sets in the spheres of gender and race studies within the particular time span, and carrying out an in-depth comparative examination of content, the aim of this thesis is to contribute towards a more extensive and holistic comprehension of American literary legacy.*



Keywords— *Harriet Jacobs, Phillis Wheatley, African American, Women Writers, Reconstruction*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of the United States, the revolutionary years immediately after the Civil War, roughly from 1865 to 1877, are referred to as Reconstruction (Foner). Restoring the South's economy, social structures, and infrastructure while attending to the constitutional legitimacy and rights of recently liberated African Americans was the primary objective of Reconstruction (Foner). Significant legislative and constitutional changes were put into place during this time, such as the 13th Amendment's abolition of slavery, the 14th Amendment's grant of citizenship and equal protection under the law, and the 15th Amendment's voting rights provided to African American men ("Civil War Amendments (Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments)"). However, the pre-Reconstruction era was a crucial period in the literary and cultural history of African Americans. Black men and women of this era defied social norms and channelled their views, emotions, and ideas into works of literature despite the difficulties presented by slavery and racial discrimination. Most African Americans

prior as well as post the Civil War, were prohibited from gaining the ability to read and write. Despite that, a significant number of the African American population learned to read and write, contributing to the growing canon of their literature. Within this already tumultuous environment, African American women's literary progress was a symbol of resiliency and resistance.

Although the term "feminism" was not coined until the latter part of the 19th century, African American women's actions, which incorporate what we could today call feminist beliefs, have been a major influence since the early days of American history. This thesis is a comparative study between two such women during the 19th Century: Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley, who used their narratives to drive the socio-political discourse.

Harriet Jacobs used her words to bring to light the heinous realities of slavery and the sexual abuse faced by enslaved women. Her writings were primary evidence of African American women's resilience and willpower against racial as well as gender discrimination.

This study does a close in-depth analysis of her book, *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (published in 1861), which continues to serve as a harrowing account of the harsh reality of slavery yet the unfaltering determination of survival. Jacobs emphasizes the intersecting oppressions caused by race, gender, and sexuality with the help of her first-person narrative, and underlines the challenges that African American women encountered in their quest for freedom.

Phillis Wheatley, the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry, released *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773 (“Phillis Wheatley”). Wheatley's poems explore topics of liberation, faith, and humanity as a whole, by reflecting on her time as an imprisoned woman and her profound faith in Christianity.

The main research questions which this thesis deals with are as follows:

1. What narrative techniques did Jacobs and Wheatley employ to advance their political agendas and social justice goals?
2. How do Harriet Jacobs' autobiographical narrative and Phillis Wheatley's poetry anthology converge yet are distinct in their portrayal of the experiences of African American women pre-Reconstruction?
3. How did these writers navigate their way through challenging societal expectations versus conforming to the norms so as to reach a bigger audience?

This thesis will provide insight into the ways in which these female authors utilised literature and writing styles as tools for change and emancipation by writing about issues such as gender, race, and slavery. It will also examine how their works affected the literary and cultural climate pre- as well as post-Reconstruction. Even though prose and poetry are two different writing genres Jacobs and Wheatley were determined to challenge the prevalent sociopolitical and racial injustices and advocate for the dignity and rights of African American women.

Finally, the conclusion of this thesis contends that Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs' works are timeless testaments showcasing the strength, creativity, and autonomy of African American females. A close analysis of their writings is helpful not only for the exploration of the spectrum of their creativity but also for understanding the significance of the opinion of these authors in discussions of social justice, gender, and race issues during the contemporary era. This comparative research could provide a substantial addition to our knowledge of how African American women writers used writing to confront and traverse the repressive social and political conditions pre-

Reconstruction. It will further aid in developing a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted ways in which 19th-century writers paved the way for future generations of writers and activists.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilises both primary as well as secondary research.

Primary data

My research analyses the original copies of *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs and *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) by Phillis Wheatley, both released during a period when slavery was extremely prevalent in the United States. Both of these authors are prominent personalities in African American literary history, hence an ideal pair for a comparative analysis of women authors of African descent during this period. Along with that, my selection of their respective texts exemplifies the variety in their literary works, as demonstrated by the lyrical poetry of Wheatley and Jacob's compelling narratives.

Through close reading and comparative textual analysis of *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, this research looks into the topics, literary techniques, and rhetorical devices that the writers employed when referring to the socio-political shifts in 19th-century America. Furthermore, Jacobs and Wheatley's contributions to American literature and society have endured because the topics and challenges they tackled in their writings are still pertinent today.

The analysis of *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* will focus on the use of pseudonyms in writing, apart from traditional literary analysis.

Secondary data

It uses a qualitative comparative approach to holistically analyse the literary and historical importance by integrating a combination of primary source analysis, literary criticism, historical scholarship, and digital resources. By juxtaposing the two primary texts, it further aims to determine the ways in which Jacobs' stories and Wheatley's poems address common themes like resistance, gender, religion, agency, and the interconnectedness of these identities to unearth nuanced insights. One of the most significant components of the analysis will also comprise literary criticism, which will be investigated through critical essays, academic papers, and literary remarks around the disciplines of African American studies and gender studies, that shed light on these writers' works.

As a strategy to situate the writings of Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley within the larger socio-historical environment before Reconstruction, the research will make use of historical information. The abolitionist movement, the Civil War, the experiences of individuals who were subjugated to slavery, the fight for women's rights, and the cultural environment that affected African American women writers at this period are all going to be addressed. Along with researching about what influenced the narratives and poems of Jacobs and Wheatley, this paper will analyse the impact of Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley's works on the literary and socio-political surroundings too.

Apart from looking at primary texts, the study will explore any alternate or revised versions, and archival materials related to the literature by utilizing a variety of digital and archival resources. Examples of digital resources that offer access to a range of textual works, including historical narratives, essays, novels, poetry, and stories, are digitized collections, online archives, and scholarly databases. By utilizing these resources, the study will interact with unique materials and offer an extensive understanding of these writers' creative works.

Furthermore, it draws upon insights from critical theory, particularly the feminist and critical race theory. Within the context of feminist theory, this research explores how Jacobs and Wheatley navigate the intersections of race and gender in their poetry and story. It additionally highlights African American women authors' attempts to establish their agency and subvert prevailing myths of womanhood by looking at how they negotiate the patriarchal systems of enslavement and society. Along with that, critical race theory presents an angle that enables us to analyse the ways in which Jacobs and Wheatley address racial oppressive structures and describe the realities faced by African American realities in the time period. This method provides a closer look into the numerous ways in which their writings oppose white supremacist ideology, push against racial stereotypes, and promote racial equality and fairness.

For analysing the qualitative data, methods like narrative analysis and meta-ethnography can be used. "Narrative analysis is a qualitative analysis method focused on interpreting human experiences and motivations by looking closely at the stories (the narratives) people tell in a particular context" (Al-Saraf). "Meta-ethnography is a method for combining data from qualitative evaluation and research, especially ethnographic data, by translating concepts and metaphors across studies" ("Meta-Ethnography").

Chapter 1: Background of Harriet Jacobs and the Power of Narrative in 'Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl'

Trigger Warning: The following chapter contains mentions of sexual assault and harassment. This may be a sensitive topic for some readers. Please proceed with caution.

The objective of this chapter is to delve into the life and literary journey of Harriet Jacobs. It further analyses her first-person narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

To provide more context about the author, Harriet Ann Jacobs was born in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813 into the cruel reality of slavery due to the 'partus sequitur ventrem,' which was a legal doctrine mandating that in the case of enslaved children, the status passes down through the mother not the father (Morgan 3-4). Her parents, Delilah and Daniel Jacobs, were both enslaved. Her mother passed away while she was young, and she was sent to live with her maternal grandmother, Margaret Horniblow, who gave her reading and writing lessons. With a nationwide restriction on teaching slaves, this early teaching was noteworthy and rare (Yellin). She was bequeathed to Mary Matilda Norcom when she was just 11 years old, which resulted in experiencing difficulties under her de facto master, Dr James Norcom. A frequent occurrence for enslaved women, Jacobs suffered constant sexual harassment by her master. She opposed this abuse by developing a relationship with a white attorney named Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, with whom she had two children. Part of the purpose of the alliance was to deflect Norcom's attempts strategically (Andrews).

Harriet Jacobs was raised under harsh circumstances, yet she became a forceful and persuasive voice against slavery. As documented in this book, in chapters XVII "The Flight" (Jacobs 145) and XVIII "Months of Peril" (Jacobs 150), the author records her escape from Dr Flint (an alias for "Dr Norcom") and how she had to remain in a confined attic for seven years with restricted contact to the outside world, to avoid her master's constant efforts of recapturing her. Chapters XXX "Northward Bound" (Jacobs 237) and XXXVI "The Hairbreadth Escape" (Jacobs 268), discuss the narrator's challenging escape to the North as she makes her journey to New York City in 1842. There she met notable feminists and abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison (Korb) and Frederick Douglass as mentioned in his own autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and these interactions inspired her to write about her experiences. The influential piece *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, written by Jacobs and published in 1861 under the alias Linda Brent, exposed the interplay of gender and racial discrimination by documenting the sexual assault that

slave women endured. This narrative provided a nuanced indictment of the brutal effects of slavery, especially on women and children, besides being a personal narrative. The publishing firm Thayer & Eldridge, who were renowned for publishing abolitionist pieces (Donlon), agreed to publish a manuscript about a slave narrative, especially within the context of how difficult it was for African Americans to get published in this period.

The autobiography is not just a work of fiction or a usual diary, but intricately crafted. In this personal account, Linda Brent covers her experiences in detail from when she was a child with no care regarding her status as a slave till her road to getting freedom. The author uses several aliases in the narrative such as Aunt Martha and Mr. Sands. She frequently uses hyperbole to describe situations, such as her cover in the attic (Jacobs 173) which goes into detailed description to evoke a sense of claustrophobia in the reader. Understanding Jacobs's familial background is paramount in comprehending such intricacies, as it can be utilized as a foundation for analysing the text as well as interpreting her experiences within the larger context of slavery in the antebellum South.

Yellin, in her paper *Harriet Jacobs's Family History*, rectifies the information about Jacobs's father being a slave of Dr. Andrew Knox apart from being a carpenter named Daniel (765). The change reveals the author's intentional structuring of her autobiography and her deliberate choice of narrative techniques. By correcting this historical error, Yellin highlights the subtle control Jacobs had on her story — for instance the intricacies she chose to integrate or omit out of her account.

By using the surname Jacobs instead of Knox, the writer does the deliberate act of detaching oneself from her enslaver's authority and control over her life. Although she had no control over her enslaved status, she was continually developing her own story while utilizing her voice as an author. Using her paternal last name rather than the enslaver's can be analysed as an extension of using pseudonyms, for example, Jacobs using the alias of 'Linda Brent' in the novel. The reason behind using this pseudonym was to save Jacobs and her family from the retaliation of her previous slave masters, especially Dr. James Norcom, who harassed and exploited her sexually (Thompson). As mentioned earlier, this distance created between the author and the audience is somewhat of a "double consciousness" (Yi 12) — a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois regarding the internal dispute that African Americans go through because of the racial prejudices in a predominantly white society ("Double Consciousness") — would've expanded boundaries and allowed her to write about her experiences and perspectives more candidly.

The use of a pen name is particularly significant when publishing about sensitive topics like sexual harassment and exploitation, especially within the context of enslaved America. Her first impression of Dr. Flint's house is described as an atmosphere with "cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment" (Jacobs 18). The repetition of the word "cold" provides a powerful example of the dehumanizing impacts of institutional tyranny, encapsulating the mental and emotional toll of slavery. As the narrator's encounters with Dr. Flint progress, in the initial chapters, her tone is marked by that of apprehension and vulnerability. Jacobs compares his gaze with that of a predator looking at its prey, but worse (63) and then overtly writes "(t)here was nothing I dreaded as much as his presence" (120). This sense of helplessness is evident in the face of Dr. Flint's authority because of this feeling of watching and scrutinizing.

The reader experiences a visceral reaction towards Brent's sense of powerlessness, which triggers feelings of sympathy and compassion. The presence of a continual sense of surveillance and inspection marked the daily lives of women who were held as slaves. The broader themes of authority and helplessness, present in the narrative, are exemplified by these quotations.

Doherty further delves into how Flint "demands his victim's willing complicity, favouring psychological, not physical, pressure" (84). This psychological manipulation is another one of the central themes in the novel. Dr Flint adopts psychological conduct including coercion, gaslighting, and emotional manipulation besides physical assault to keep his victims under his control. An example of this is:

You obstinate girl! I could grind your bones to powder! ... You are blinded now, but hereafter you will be convinced that your master was your best friend. My lenity towards you is proof of it. I might have punished you in many ways. I might have had you whipped till you fell under the lash. But I wanted you to live; I would have bettered your condition. Others cannot do it. You are my slave. (Jacobs 91)

By using imagery, Jacobs presents a more nuanced and authentic portrait of what she experienced. The readers can sympathize with her anxiety, concern, and perseverance amidst this apparently overwhelming peril. This emphasis on the psychological repercussions of slavery calls for awareness of the human cost of slavery, which goes beyond just physical harm. He claims that despite his unrelenting abuse and exploitation of Brent, his "lenity" for her is

evidence of his purported camaraderie and kindness. The purpose of this gaslighting is to undermine Brent's sense of autonomy and reality, making it harder for her to challenge his authority.

This theme of manipulation also fits into the broader historical context of the 19th Century, especially the Abolitionist movement. Vivid descriptions of such harrowing experiences, as portrayed in works such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, served as primary evidence for influencing and mobilizing public opinion against the institution of slavery change by invoking feelings of compassion and empathy in readers and stressing on the immediate need for social change.

Revisiting the theme of Dr. Flint's manipulation, it isn't just limited to people he has enslaved but also his wife, Mrs. Flint. She is revealed as a naive anxious person who refuses to accept her husband's lewd deeds. Since she is portrayed as a product of 19th century Victorian She worries about her dignity and self-image, thus instead of confronting her husband, she projects her frustration upon Brent. The narrator describes herself to be "an object of her jealousy, and consequently, of her hatred" (Jacobs 53). As chapter VI progresses, Mrs. Flint's paranoia becomes more evident as she gets the author to "sleep in a room adjoining her own" (53-4) and goes to the extent of even "whisper[ing] in my [Brent's] ear, as though it was her husband speaking" (Jacobs 54). These insecurities indubitably arise from her status as a woman in a patriarchal society, where her husband's earnings and character play an integral part in establishing her value and position in society. This leads to emotions of insufficiency and animosity as a result of Dr. Flint's adultery and predatory tendencies towards Brent, jeopardizing Mrs. Flint's sense of security and dignity.

Mrs. Flint's character is the epitome of the social dynamics of the antebellum South during the time period. Analysing through the lens of feminist critical theory, although as a relatively wealthy white woman, she occupies a position of privilege, the gender conventions and norms impede her agency and autonomy. Nevertheless, Mrs. Flint's compliance with her husband's exploitation of slaves, such as Linda, exposes the manners in which women perpetuated the upholding of oppressive regimes inside and outside the confines of their homes. However, her character does eventually change to tricking her husband instead (54), which can show instances of agency, deconstructing the notions of women's subservience.

In the case of Linda Brent, or Harriet Jacobs, "the issues of class and race alter one's experience of gender, just as gender alters the experience of class and race" (Biswas 567). While Mrs. Flint, a white woman, is presented as the

embodiment of purity and virtue, Brent is commodified and sexualized. Her body and soul have been claimed "as a right" to rule over (Jacobs 60) by her master and even if she wants to get married her lover has to "buy her" (Jacobs 58). She falls on the bottom rung of the ladder, in the domains of race, gender, as well as caste. Another example of this is the overlapping power dynamics of gender and race hinder her efforts to turn down her enslaver, Dr Flint's, sexual overtures since she must deal with his patriarchal authority and simultaneously his racial privilege, which are central themes in the novel. This theme will be further delved into in the forthcoming chapters.

This chapter has demonstrated a profound exploration of the themes and literary devices, especially the imagery, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Being an enslaved African American woman, Linda's intersectionality emphasizes the multifaceted ways that racism and sexism influence her oppression and autonomy. Her attempts to negotiate the interconnected dynamics of patriarchy and white supremacy highlight the difficulties black women had in claiming their dignity.

Chapter 2: Background of Phillis Wheatley and her Voice Through 'Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral'

The last chapter examined the background of Harriet Jacobs and an in-depth analysis of her account *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This chapter explores Phillis Wheatley's personal history and a close examination of her poetry collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. This chapter will carry forth looking into the themes which were explored in the previous chapter but through a poetic lens.

Phillis Wheatley Peters, born around 1753, is often recognized as the first African American to have published a book of poems, and the third American woman ("Phillis Wheatley"). Captured by slave traders at a young age, she was sold to the Wheatley family upon her arrival in Boston (Luebering). However, along with working for the Wheatleys', Phillis also got the opportunity to read and write (Wheatley 6), which was rare for an enslaved person. With her first poem published in 1767, which gained her exceptional prominence, Phillis Wheatley published her first collection of poems in 1773 called *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* ("Phillis Wheatley"). The collection consisted of thirty-nine poems covering themes from religion to race. The publishing of the book was financed by the then Countess of Huntingdon, Selina Hastings, in London as colonial printing was quite uncommon and a microscale industry in North America (Mulder). Even though the poet doesn't centre her poems around slavery, it is conspicuous that her social identity as

an enslaved woman plays a role in what she writes (Luebering).

Wheatley's poetry was often inspired by religious and philosophical concepts during the Enlightenment, which was the period "of intellectual inquiry and discovery that stretched roughly from 1680 to 1820" (Winterer). Her writings were deeply intertwined with her Christian faith while utilizing classical analogies, exhibiting her interdisciplinary intellectual foundation and engagement with the intellectual discourse.

In one of her extremely well-known poems, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (Wheatley 18), wherein Wheatley uses her religious perspective to argue for the inherent unity and equality of all humankind, a notion which is considered to be a radical departure within a context which is deeply fractured by race and slavery. An example of this is "Remember, *Christians*¹, *Negros*, black as *Cain*², / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." (Wheatley, lines 7-8) — the poet directly addresses Christians in these lines, particularly calling out the slave owners, as she reminds them of their religious responsibilities and the fundamentals of Christianity i.e. equality, compassion, and redemption for all its followers. As Loving says, it is "an effort to underscore the inconsistencies between Christian principle and Christian practice" (73). Furthermore, by italicizing "Christians", "Negroes", and "Cain" there is a rhetorical linkage which is established as it links religion with the people of African heritage, along with the biblical allusion of Cain. The inclusion of Cain is rather interesting since he was perceived "to be the originator of evil, violence, or greed" ("Cain") and adding his name alongside that of people with African identities and the colour "black" can be interpreted as Wheatley highlighting the pervasive racist stereotypes of black skin being intrinsically inferior or nefarious. In this poem itself, lines 5-6, the poet writes how "Some view our sable³ race with scornful⁴ eye, / 'Their colour is a diabolic die.'" further emphasizing the dehumanising of people with dark skin in the eyes of white people, which not only is passive but actively undermining. By utilising the rhetorical strategy of direct quotations in the latter line, the bigotry is showcased without any filter. It also creates a distance from the author's voice, as there is a clear separation established between her perspective versus the societal views. The use of "die" can be interpreted as a double entendre, referring to 'dye' as a noun or the verb 'to die', the initial one

insinuating a sense of unchangeableness and the other carrying negative connotations about blackness. Wheatley establishes the foundation for her ultimate theological argument, which targets and critiques racist paradigms within her own religion.

The eighth line of the poem "questions Christian dogma regarding the power of baptism to remove sin" (Loving 73). The term "refin'd" implies a process of purification, possibly referring to baptism in this context, suggesting that African Americans can achieve moral and spiritual refinement too and are worthy of the same chances for atonement as other fair-skinned Christians. Wheatley invokes spiritual imagery in the final line when she mentions "th' angelic train" which can be interpreted as a train ascending to heaven, subtly contesting the dominant ideology surrounding slavery and reiterating the Christian teachings. The profound irony also emerges in knowing how a group, in this instance Christians, take pride in identifying with a moral and spiritual high ground yet adhere to such unjust prejudices. This poem serves as a mirror to their hypocrisy, urging them to align their actions with the Christian beliefs that they uphold.

Additionally, we must acknowledge the progression of the poem from the writer expressing her affirmation of faith in line 3 ("That there's a God / that there's a *Saviour* too:") to criticising the followers of her religion in the final lines. This can be misinterpreted to be viewed as Wheatley problematizing Christianity when the two issues are separate, i.e. "her gratitude for redemption and her condemnation of slavery" (McBride 386). Her denunciation of slavery is evident in the first line itself where she employs euphemism in expressing her gratitude for being brought to America, calling it a display of "mercy". The reader can sense the irony as the poet's kidnapping from Africa and being coerced to experience the horrors of slavery were far from what is considered merciful. The use of "*Pagan*⁵ land" (line 1) to describe Africa is intriguing as Wheatley engages with the dominant colonial discourse which portrays Africa as an uncivilized continent. The enslavers, or the majority of the society, were exposed to this prevailing Eurocentric viewpoint about Africa. This line shows the author situating her own experience within the broader context of compulsory conversion to Christianity amongst African Americans, invoking sympathy among the readers. However, in the next line, Wheatley transitions to a personal testament of her

¹ The word 'Christians' looks like 'Chrifians' in the original print due to the use of the long s (l), which was a typographical style.

² The firstborn son of Adam and Eve, who murdered his younger brother Abel. Being a farmer, he was double-cursed by God — he will be more cursed than the earth, which will withhold its

produce from him, and in addition he is to be a ceaseless wanderer (Genesis 4:11–12).

³ Long s (l) used in original print.

⁴ Long s (l) used in original print.

⁵ Derived from the Latin word 'pagus'; someone from a Pagan land means belonging from a 'village' or 'district'.

faith by writing how Christianity “Taught my benighted soul⁶ to understand” (line 2), affirming her acceptance of spiritual awakening and salvation. Although fairly short, this poem is a powerful analysis of the intersection between religious belief, identity, and the barbarity of slavery.

The reason behind doing a close analysis of this poem is because it covers most of the themes which are present throughout the collection of *Poems*. Religion and faith are the predominant themes in several poems as they often reflect Wheatley’s devotion to the Christian faith. Such works addressed topics of contemplating salvation, divine providence, and spiritual enlightenment. Another example of this, apart from “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (Wheatley 18), is “To the University of Cambridge, in New England” (Wheatley 15-16). The conclusion of the poem says,

Improve your privileges while they
stay,
Ye pupils and each hour redeem, that
bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav’n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul, (lines
21-4)

Apart from the author encouraging students to utilize their educational opportunities, she also advises them to exercise moral and spiritual discernment. By highlighting the effects of sin on the soul, she urges the kids to live by virtue and high morals. Alongside academic pursuits, the poet equally prioritizes the significance of following Christianity and abiding by its teachings. Although not stated very explicitly, Wheatley mentions her experiences as a slave, subtly challenging the issues of racial prejudice and the institution of slavery. “To the Right Honourable William,” (Wheatley 73-5), for instance, lines 15-17 say, “No more, *America*, in mournful strain / Of wrongs, and grievance unredress’d complain, / No longer Shall thou dread the iron chain,” which although has a hopeful tone, reveals the realities of slavery. “The iron chain” (line 17) serves as a powerful use of imagery, of actual slaves in iron clads and chains, as well as a metaphor for freedom from the figurative chains of oppression and injustice. By directly addressing and italicizing “*America*” in line 15, Wheatley draws attention to the personification of the country creating an atmosphere of urgency and making the appeal for justice and freedom more poignant.

A theme, however, which wasn’t present in “On Being Brought from Africa” but is still prevalent in some other poems is that of the power of nature and the sublime.

Frequently, Wheatley delves into the enigma and beauty of nature, evoking feelings of wonder and fascination by using vivid imagery. She uses the natural environment as a setting for her deliberation on human experiences. An example in the collection *Poems* is “An HYMN to the Morning” (Wheatley 56-7). The poet personifies Aurora, “the Roman goddess of dawn” (“Goddess Aurora”), by saying that the deity “demands my song” (line 4). This advancement of the morning to a divine status does not only showcase dawn as the most powerful time of the day but also exhibits it to be a sentient presence which should be honored through poetry. Wheatley extends the use of personification and imagery in lines 7-8, “The morn awakes, and wide extends her ways, / On ev’ry leaf the gentle zephyr plays;” which creates the visual splendor of the light spreading into dawn and the morning breeze rustling the leaves. Such evocative imagery used by Wheatley ignites a sense of awe and gratitude amongst the reader for nature, which has been created by God.

The titles of the poems in the anthology are rather interesting and deliberate as well since they guide the reader on how to approach a specific poem. The majority of the titles begin with “To”, or “On” which is a direct address to either a person, institution, or even an incident. By employing such prepositions Wheatley personalizes the poems further and offers insights into her relationship with the directed subjects and her perspectives on certain events. She also often addresses influential figures, for instance, the Earl of Dartmouth, or social issues like slavery to make her work both intimate as well as befitting the larger public discourse. Titles beginning with “An” mostly discuss principal and broader themes such as the divine nature or universal notions. It projects a personal yet contemplative tone, which addresses a higher godly power and audience.

Hence, this chapter has revealed the different themes which Wheatley covered in her poems. Through utilizing several literary devices and biblical references, the poet effectively intertwines her perspectives on religion with her experiences as an enslaved woman.

Chapter 3: Intersecting Journeys: Comparing Jacobs and Wheatley

The previous chapters delved into the individual historical and literary backgrounds of Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley. Although both of their experiences and interactions with the socio-political scenario were distinct in their own ways, their writing styles and themes did intersect in some ways. This chapter explores the ways in which the portrayal and experiences of African American women overlapped and diverged in the writings of both

⁶ Long s (f) used in original print.

authors. Even though the literary forms are distinct — Jacobs’s being an autobiography and Wheatley’s a poetic anthology — they successfully use their works to reach the audience and make them aware of the circumstances enslaved individuals lived in.

Firstly, both the writers utilise first-person narrative in their own ways. Even though Jacobs uses a pseudonym, her narrative seems to directly approach the reader and encourage them to understand the situations she is going through in order to consider the larger implications of slavery on African Americans, specifically women. She consistently uses the first-person singular pronoun “I” in an attempt to put the reader in her shoes. There are heartrending instances described in detail such as in Chapter XXXII, “The Meeting of Mother and Daughter” (Jacobs 249-53) wherein her daughter asks her ““Mother when will you take me to live with you?”” (Jacobs 252) at the age of nine, which highlights the struggles African American women faced as their identities did not only constitute of their race but also influenced by their gender, for instance in Jacobs’s case maternally. Karcher identifies how Harriet “baring her sexual history as an unwed slave mother” reveals the diverse effects of slavery on women (787). “Women writers responded more boldly to the challenge of overcoming voicelessness and speaking the unspeakable” (Karcher 787), which is prevalent even while using an alias.

Although Wheatley isn’t extremely explicit about her encounters with slavery, she used allegorical writing and formal structures to defy racist stereotypes against black people, making her writing appealing to the white audience as well. Her poems usually condemned the institution of slavery through a religious perspective, which gathered the interest of elite and religious groups. According to Yellin, the “color line” and its “adherence to the rules of decorum” (57) constrained African American women authors to express themselves entirely. However, by tailoring her poems to the taste of a white Christian audience, Wheatley manages to successfully navigate such restraints. As mentioned in the previous chapter, she effectively incorporates her critique of slavery by referring to Christianity. In her poem, “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth” (Wheatley 73-5), she says “...Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung, / ...I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch’d from *Africa*’s fancy’d happy feat:” (lines 21, 24-5). By using the imagery of being “snatch’d”, Wheatley uses her traumatic memory of being taken away forcibly from Africa to plea for the freedom and liberation of America. She also uses an oxymoron with “fancy’d” to increase the emotional effect of her experience. By using a rhetorical question in line 21, it emphasizes Wheatley’s advocacy for liberation.

Similarly, even Jacobs mentions Christian beliefs to denounce slavery. She highlights the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholders who practice the faith while executing diabolical acts on their slaves. For example, the author talks about how Mrs. Flint “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” (Jacobs 22) accentuating the juxtaposition of Flint’s religious faith with immoral behaviour towards slaves. This line, akin to how Wheatley emphasizes what it is to be a ‘true’ Christian, forces the reader to re-evaluate what Christianity actually is: a faith which promotes equality or perpetuates it? Jacobs doesn’t generalize the false piety of all the Christian slaveholders as she mentions a young lady who “taught her slaves to lead pure lives and wished them to enjoy the fruit of their own industry” (Jacobs 77). Despite Jacobs’s frequent contestation against slavery and slaveholders in order to support her advocacy for freedom, the author remains authentic and shows a nuanced narrative which induces complexity in the narrative.

In terms of how the writers challenged and conformed to societal expectations, both Jacobs and Wheatley used classical and formal narrative styles to some extent. Wheatley used the long s (ſ) in most of her poems in the anthology as previously analyzed, whereas Jacobs also used it frequently, for instance in the title of chapter XXIV “The Candidate for Congress” (Jacobs 189) and chapter XXIX “Preparations for Escape” (Jacobs 225). This ‘s’ was “developed in the court of Charlemagne in order to provide a uniform and legible form of writing” (Ticak). Apart from this showing the background in education for both the authors, it shows the adherence to the literary traditions of their time period.

On the other hand, unlike typical literary works and due to the gravity of the subjects they discussed, the use of rhetorical appeal was very prevalent in both works in order to evoke certain emotions in the readers. There is often a direct address which puts their accounts on a pedestal where immediate action should be taken. The issues that they address often fit into the broader discourse about slavery, particularly for Jacobs as she discusses the experiences which intersect with her identity as a slave as well as a woman — sexual exploitation, fracturing familial bonds, etc.

Therefore, this chapter looks into the several ways in which Jacobs’s and Wheatley’s stories converge through utilizing several literary techniques, yet they are distinct. It further discusses how they navigated their way through societal expectations in order to make their voices heard.

III. CONCLUSION

Harriet Jacobs and Phillis Wheatley's works served as instruments for the advocacy of socio-political reforms and exposed the harsh realities of slavery. In a broader context, these narratives shaped the Abolitionist movement i.e. the social movement with the objective of ending the slave trade and the institution of slavery ("Abolitionism"), which eventually led to Reconstruction.

Their works do not align with solely one social identity but showcase the significance of intersectionality that wasn't present in the works of most African American male authors. In order to make their writings effective and reach a broader audience, both authors employed various narrative strategies. Jacobs used a first-person autobiographical narrator with an alias, the three appeal methods of ethos, pathos, and logos — ethos is the credibility of the narrator in order to make the reader trust them, pathos targets the emotive state of the reader to make them empathize or sympathize, and logos refers to the logical arguments that appeal to the sense of reason ("Pathos, Logos, and Ethos") — which served as firsthand evidence for the monstrosities of slavery. Alternately, Wheatley's poetry employed classical allusions, religious imagery, and formal poetic forms to challenge moral integrity and argue for spiritual liberty with regard to slavery. This thereby challenged the ethics of her target audience by appealing to their religious beliefs. Furthermore, Wheatley's success as a poet in such a tumultuous time period is also inspiring and presents her as a role model for the generations to come, including the contemporary period.

Although the two writers decided to opt for their individually unique approaches to advancing socio-political reforms, their works coincide in their underlying aim of condemning slavery and advocating for the equality of African American people, especially women.

Even though a significant amount of scholarship exists on Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* and Phillis Wheatley's *Poems*, this thesis provides a close and detailed comparative analysis of the writings of two most prominent African American published female authors before the Reconstruction period. It uncovers the common themes and literary techniques which improves our understanding of how and why their works became so influential. Moreover, the time period that is examined in this thesis i.e. pre-Reconstruction, is a period which is less explored academically even though it was a crucial time. It places Jacobs and Wheatley within the broader literary canon and offers a multifaceted understanding of their works.

This thesis serves as groundwork for multiple future research, for instance comparing works of classical

African-American women writers with those of contemporary ones. Furthermore, there can be exploration around how these writers, if they did, engage with bigger global discourses about abolition and women's rights.

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