

Liberation or Discipline: Female Abolitionists' Interpretation of the Issue of Female Slaves

Juelin Chen^{1,a,*}

¹*Shanghai Pinghe bilingual school (middle school), Shanghai, 201206, China*

a. Jolin0630@outlook.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: On the topic of "Whether the discussion of female slaves under the abolitionist movement is related to women's rights", this paper analyzes a short story about female slaves written by a well-known female abolitionist Lydia Maria Child during the abolitionist movement. The paper make an brief summary of the tale and analyze it's purpose based on Lydia's language and description to the tragedy, and since her phrasing of the sufferings brought by the slave status of the two female characters in the story is all based on the misfortunes of love, the lack of chastity and other plots, which are still in line with the traditional requirements of patriarchy for women, so a conclusion can be draw that the description and discussion of the suffering of female slaves at that time were still based on the patriarchal discipline of women. Since the abolitionist movement was closely followed by the women's suffrage movement, the study of feminism in the abolitionist movement can help to form a more comprehensive understanding of the development of women's rights and the abolitionist movement, which is of relatively important significance, and also gave us a fuller picture of the era.

Keywords: The abolition movement, feminism, female slaves, racism, Lydia Maria Child

1. Introduction

In the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, female abolitionist Elizabeth Cady Stanton met the founder of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society Lucretia Mott. The two were both furious about the unfair exclusion of women delegates in the proceeding and discussed abolition and women's role in society during the convention. The conversation triggered both Stanton and Mott to become active participants in the women's suffrage movement, which came right after the abolitionist movement. [1] In the 19th century, female's awareness of their unfair position in the public and political sphere was wakened during the abolitionism movement and triggered further feminist movements. But what kind of feminism was being awakened by abolitionism? When female authors looked at slavery, what precisely did they find wrong with it? Did they argue from the perspective of modern feminism, that female slaves were being denied individual rights, or did they argue more conservatively? In this work, the writer found out that female abolitionists' focus on female slaves during the movement was more on them being figures who failed to achieve patriarchal womanhood, rather than rights-bearing individuals.

2. Background

During the 19th century, the abolitionist movement happened in the United States, where ppl started to campaign for the end of slavery. The movement for the very first time triggered lots of females to not only focus on domestic duties but also seek the importance and necessity of them joining the political sphere and making an influence. With that, lots of famous and influential female abolitionists appeared with famous written pieces or speeches to persuade the crowd. Among some of those pieces, discussion, and analysis of the special hardships of female slaves and problems like sexual abuse and family fragmentation were also introduced to the public.

3. Secondary sources

Counting on the area of female slaves and female abolitionists, in the past many scholars have already researched various aspects of this field. For example, Franny Nudelman's *Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering* focused on the motivation of female abolitionists to talk about female slaves' special dilemma and torture, as they wish to form an emotional appeal with the free white women readers and call them into political actions. [2] Another example could be Jean Fegan Yelin's *Women and sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* which gave an analysis of the representative works by the Grimke sisters, Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Jacobs. She particularly gave a conclusion about the relationship between patriarchy's discipline to women and female slaves, which is that though patriarchy set lots of obligations and duties to women, such as the duty of protecting their virginity and also domestic duties, due to slavery female slaves cannot escape situations of rape and being forced to separate with their children, which means that basically, it's impossible to accomplish any of these expectations.[3]

4. Primary sources

4.1. Reason choosing the source

This paper offers a deep analysis of how female abolitionists view the violence and abuse that were particularly experienced by female slaves, while other scholars in the past focused on the motivation of female abolitionists and their social background, this paper will be particularly focusing on the description to female slaves suffer itself and the author's understanding to those problems by analyzing a primary source.

The main primary source involved in this paper is a short fiction story called *The Quadroon* written by Lydia Maria Child, a white female abolitionist, who was also a very famous and influencing writer at her time. The story is about a tragic story of a female under slavery, in this tale Child introduced for the very first time a literary figure as "the tragic Mullato", which means a mixed-race woman in a slave society and lasts in a tragic ending. The invention of this figure was highly appreciated by historians and scholars, and also being recognized as a classic tragic figure of a female slave.

Two things the writer would like to say about the reasons for choosing this source: First, the author: the writer chose the work of a white abolitionist rather than a black abolitionist as the writer think the motives of the two are often different: What drove a black woman to become an abolitionist was more likely her personal trauma of slavery and her pain is the reason she opposed slavery, yet what drove a white woman to do so was more her moral sense, and she opposes slavery just because she thought it's wrong to do so. The goal of this paper is to explore why female abolitionists at that time could not accept slavery and its violence against women from a moral perspective. So, the writer think it's more reliable to choose the works of white female abolitionists.

Secondly the theme: the writer choose a short story as the primary source because compared with speech or case analysis, this form of expression is more open and free, and it allows the author to

output a large number of subjective arguments. In a fiction story, the characters, plot, and theme of the tale are all fully controlled and designed by the author, in the writer's opinion, it will be the most accurate expression of the author's subjective views on the issue of female slaves.

4.2. Context summary

The story *The Quadroons* is about a happy family torn apart by slavery, it sets in a cottage in Augusta, GA. The two main characters, Rosalie, a woman with mixed blood of white and African, which is the "quadroon", and her husband Edward, a pure white man fell in love with each other but can't get married since marriage between a white and an African American was not recognized in the US at that time. Rosalie cannot make any legal claim on her common-law husband, but they still love each other deeply. The two have a daughter named Xarifa, who grows up sheltered.

Everything's fine until Edward formed a political ambition, and decides to marry a white woman for this, since Rosalie refuses to be his mistress the family's been torn apart. Edward left the family and then drank too much due to the guilt of Rosalie, he finally fell off a horse and died due to this reason. Eliot's death triggered Rosalie's death later because of heartbreak from losing her love. After the death of the couple, Xarifa was taken care of by teachers hired including George Elliot, her harp teacher. Xarifa and George fall in love and planned to move to France together, but she was sold before this can happen since her mother Rosalie was the daughter of a slave; whose master forgot to manumitte. Which means that Xarifa was still a slave. She was then been auctioned and sold to a man who tried to please her with flattery presents, but she was still unhappy all the time. Xarifa and George plan an escape but are betrayed by another slave, and George is killed during the attempt. After this Xarifa's owner has lost his patience, and sexually abused Xarifa, making her a lunatic at last.[4]

4.3. Source analysis

4.3.1. Motivation

Child mentioned in the preface of Harriet Jacobs' autobiography the purpose of writing content related to the suffering and painful experiences of female slaves, which is to call for political actions by the middle-class-northern women with their common gender. [5] From this, we can infer further that since this story also involved similar content, the meaning and purpose of writing it should also be close to Jacob's autobiography. As Child herself is a part of the middle-class white females, there is no need to go out of her way to understand and cater to her readers, because they all have similar ideas in the same environment, and they are also personally approved of the point of view. In other words, the tragedies brought about by slavery mentioned in this story can be regarded as the concrete embodiment of the author's abstract aversion to slavery, and the analysis of the events in this story will also serve as a reliable reference for the reasons why the female abolitionist opposed slavery.

The story is a total tragedy itself as no lovers can happily live together and basically every main character died. Yet though the ending for all of them are similar, the pain they experience while living still varies, and could be separately analyzed through the characters' age and generation.

4.3.2. 1st gen: romantic tragedies and patriarchal wife pursuit

For the 1st generation, as Rosalie and Eliot, their tragedy would be being forced to separate due to racial discrimination, and the impossibility of a proper marriage, which is also the biggest trigger to their plots and their death. Although Eliot betrayed Rosalie for his benefit, his deep love for Rosalie still existed and actually never changed throughout the whole plot about him, same for Rosalie. It is not much that Eliot was been phrased as a selfish villain, but that the pressure and impetus of the

environment forced him to do that. Although slavery's direct participation in the first generation was minimal, and Rosalie's slave identity wasn't even revealed to the readers, it's still a crucial factor in the bad ending of the lovers. Precisely because black people were inferior as slaves in a slave society and were not even treated as human beings, the group was also not regarded as individuals deserving the same status as white people in a relationship in the society at that time, and this is the basic reason for the tragedy in the story.

What Child feel sad about female in slavery, and wanted her readers to feel sad and empathize with in this part is Rosalie's sorrow of not being able to get married to the loved one, or even being forced to separate because of social circumstances. Child's expression here is clearly not related to the fundamental injustice and immorality of racial restrictions on marriage and love, but there are still many reasons for framing the story this way. On the one hand, based on the discipline of women to become men's wives at that time and the social guidance to pay more attention to and value romantic love, such a plot can certainly be understood as catering to such ideas and persuading readers along such opinions; But on the other hand, as a literary and artistic work with the purpose of moving readers and persuade them to take actions, it is indeed more effective to cut from the angle of "Black women's love tragedy" than from the angle of "female slaves lack freedom in love and marriage", and it is indeed a better way from the result. Moreover, in the time background of the abolition movement, the understanding and discussion of human rights were not very mature yet, and the human rights related to marriage were not at the center of discussion at that time. If Child ignored the point that such a tragedy was due to the neglect of human rights, she still should not be strongly criticized and blamed.

4.3.3.2nd gen: The violation of to the beautiful daughter and the acceptance of chastity

In the tale, it was during the second generation that slavery began to really affect the family: Which was about Xarifa becoming a slave, losing her freedom, and being raped to madness. Counting on this character, similar plots about a sad romance also existed, such as the death of her lover George during Xarifa's escape. Apart from the pain of love, something new about this character is the topic of sexual abuse. From a modern perspective, we all know that rape is a terrible offense to an individual's body and personal will. However, during the nineteenth century, the way female abolitionists defined its harm was much more conservative and feudalistic, as just the loss of virginity. The information was clearly stated in the text, even only in a tiny length:

"That pure temple was desecrated; that loving heart was broken; and that beautiful head fractured against the wall in the frenzy of despair." [6]

Although as previously mentioned, the purpose of the tale is to appeal to northern women, since virginity was an important valuation to females commonly among all upper classes in the US, it could be somehow reasonable to argue that this part is just a short ingratiate to the readers. [7] But as an abolitionist, an advanced individual opposed to a system that most Southerners at the time embraced and took for granted, it was unlikely that Child would revise all her views on the subject of female slave sexual violence for the sake of a more persuasive story, plus Child herself was born in a middle-class family and being in this level during her lifetime, the probability of a contradiction between her thoughts and the general middle-class women's were even smaller. Therefore, the most likely scenario is still that Child herself agreed with the theory of chastity. It's still no doubt true that she wished to appeal to her readers by the story, but it's also true that she also recognized this narrative being the description of the problem towards sexual violence against female slaves. Although sexual purity is one of the earliest ways for women to arouse social influence and has certain revolutionary significance, it is still a rather backward idea from the perspective of contemporary feminism.[8]

4.3.4. A confusing leave out, yet unclear for the incentive

Another issue that's strongly related to females, yet totally absent in the story is the transition of slave identity. At the time, the United States had special rules about how slaves could be passed on as slaves: children should only follow their mother's condition but not their father's, which means that if a female, especially a mother is a slave, then all of her children will all follow her to be slaves no matter the father's race. The original intention of this policy from slave owners was to both have enough labor but also maintain abundant productivity for future economic enterprises. [9] However, it also resulted in a double exploitation of female slaves, as they not only needed to face harsh labor as male slaves, but furthermore were also treated as fertility machines, who were forced to reproduce under circumstances beyond their control, and had no right to raise their own children.

This is actually a very big issue specifically for female slaves, however in the story there's basically no description to it: Child basically just treat this unfair system and the transition of slavery between three generations of women as a background setting and a factor only used to push over the plots, and didn't make any moral or emotional statements about it at all.

Because of this total blank space, it is difficult to determine the author's attitude towards this rule: from a literary point of view, this blank space can be a completely intentional literary expression, leaving the reader to wonder why slavery should spread the tragedy to three generations in this way, thus stirring up more protests; but different from the choice of love tragedy in the first part, the brand of describing three generations of slaves who cannot escape and the deep suffering brought by this is actually a very impactful and classic plot, but the author's choice in this tale is still a rough brush. Plus the importance that middle-class women placed on wifely status and chastity at that time, and the dual identity of Child abolitionist and middle-class white woman, I prefer to believe that her status as a white middle-class woman and the environment she lived in influenced her views on the situation of female slaves as an abolitionist. It's also possible that the author was completely oblivious to the issue, since as a member of the middle class, in addition to the limited information dissemination ability at that time, there is a high probability that the author, as a relatively wealthy population, could not understand this information at all. Although she is also the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. [10] But this was almost 20 years after the novel was published, so it's also possible that she was completely unaware of it. However, the author clearly indicates in the novel the reason for the inheritance of the slave status, that is, the identity of the mother, so this argument is still difficult to stand up. So as all above, although there is nothing to criticize and criticize, as an advanced individual at that time, in the description of the plight of female slaves, she still paid more attention to the definition and discipline of women from the perspective of patriarchy and did not mention the oppression of women as a human being by patriarchy and slavery. This is undoubtedly a manifestation of feudalism and backwardness, although it is difficult for individuals to break and change.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, although female abolitionists do pay attention to female slaves' particular dilemma during the anti-slavery movement, but the reason and incentive behind are still strongly patriarchal and conservative, and not related to feminism. Maybe the child herself was dissatisfied with the patriarchy's requirements and discipline on women, but he did not express it due to the discord with the mainstream ideology and the desire to gain support. However, in practice, the description of the suffering of female slaves in the abolition movement was still far from the central theory of the later feminist movement. However, as the abolition movement being the first big triumph of modern human rights movements, regardless of its theoretical basis, this historical event still made the world much more equal and fairer and was of great revolutionary significance in itself. As one of the first

successful human rights movements, we should not be too critical of it from a modern point of view. In addition, since the modern equality movement for women hadn't emerged at that time yet, a large number of women's conversations and discussions on political and social issues due to the emergence of the abolition of slavery were also great progress. Combining the two above, we actually shouldn't question and criticize the female abolitionists too much, and should still be proud of the great achievements and changes brought by the abolition movement.

References

- [1] Unknown, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Underground railroad, Women's rights, National historical park New York*, (Last updated: February 26, 2015), 1.
- [2] Nudelman, Franny. "Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering." *ELH* 59, no. 4 (1992): 944.
- [3] Jean Fegan Yelin, *Women and sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, (1989, lastly updated March 14, 2020), 72.
- [4] Lydia Maria Child, *The Quadroons, The Liberty Bell, Boston: Anti-Slavery Fair*, (1842), 116-141.
- [5] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl written by herself, In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts*, (1860), 5.
- [6] Lydia Maria Child, *The Quadroons*, 141
- [7] Carpenter, Laura M. "Gender and the Meaning and Experience of Virginity Loss in the Contemporary United States." *Gender and Society* 16, no. 3 (2002): 345.
- [8] Moslener, Sara, 'Sexual Purity and Civilization Work in the 19th Century', *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, Oxford Academic, (New York, 18 June 2015), 1.
- [9] Emily West, *The Double-Edged Sword of Motherhood Under American Slavery, Motherhood in Early American episode 237, Ben Franklin's World*, 1.
- [10] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl written by herself, In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts*, (1860), 5.