

The Female Slave Experience: An Analysis of Female Slave
Narratives

“Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women”

by

Laura Bos
s4380770

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Name of student: Laura Bos

Student number: 4380770

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Abstract

This thesis critically analyzes the experience of female slaves on the basis of four female slave narratives. As such, the focus is on themes that especially concerned female slaves, such as rape, (physiological) abuse, and motherhood. Central in this thesis is Harriet Ann Jacobs' well-known autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Her work is compared to the following three narratives: Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868) by Elizabeth Keckley, and Sojourner Truth's *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave* (1850). This comparison illustrates that apart from issues, such as racism, inequality, and discrimination, that both male and female slaves had to endure, female slaves also experienced sexual oppression, abuse, and the struggle of motherhood.

Key words: slave narratives, slavery, female slaves, female experience, abuse, motherhood

Introduction

In the field of literature, the issue of slavery has traditionally been discussed through slave narratives, as they provide eyewitness accounts of individual slaves (Heglar 13). As such, these narratives record the unique slave experience. Reading these narratives helps people to understand the slave experience in more detail, and situates slavery as a part of the American past. However, the focus has mostly been on the narratives of male slaves. In literature courses, the discussion of slave narratives has traditionally been centered around the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, as it is the most widely read of all the slave narratives. Yet, female slave narratives provide much-needed insight into the key themes of the slave experience from a female perspective, especially into themes like motherhood, sexual oppression, and abuse. In this thesis, four female slave narratives will be analyzed that offer descriptions of these key themes. Before discussing the works of Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince, and the lesser known works of Elizabeth Keckley and Sojourner Truth, the history of slave narratives is briefly covered.

Slave narratives were primarily written over the eighteenth and nineteenth century and mostly captured the stories of enslaved Africans. A broad categorization into three different types of narratives can be made. First, there were written accounts of slaves' spiritual journey, of the possibility of redemption through religion. These narratives were published from the 1770s to the 1820s (Anderson 333). Second, from the 1820s onwards, many narratives were written to inspire the abolitionist struggle. As the call for abolition of slavery grew stronger, this encouraged slaves to present the reality of slavery to support the abolitionist struggle (Bland). As such, these tales were usually written in the autobiographical form, such as Harriet Jacobs' narrative. Lastly, there were some narratives that focused on individual and racial progress. An example of this is the autobiography by Elizabeth Keckley. These narratives contained fewer descriptions of the horrors of slavery, because they were written after the abolition. Instead, the focus was more on the road to freedom and their new identity. This thesis will mostly focus on the second category. These slave narratives were particularly written to present the violent reality of slavery, which included stories about slave auctions, sexual violence, and the breaking up families. Thus, these stories captured the personal experiences of the slaves and were often labeled as autobiographical.

Many slaves from different regions wrote narratives, but the focus of this thesis is on the discussion of slave narratives by African slaves from North America. North American slave narratives became the main form of African-American literature in the nineteenth

century, and as such became the foundation of an African-American literary tradition (Blight). In general, the main purpose of these slave narratives was to change the way people thought about slavery, to present the horrors of slavery in order to move readers. Later, many writers of slave narratives, for instance Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, became important abolitionist voices and their slave narratives were used as abolitionist propaganda. That is why at first historians had major reservations about using slave narratives as proper sources for the study of slavery (Blight). They questioned their reliability, authenticity, and objectivity, partly because several writers received assistance from white abolitionist writers (Gibson). However, the best way to understand the history of slavery is to have former slaves as first-person witnesses give a glimpse of their own experiences (Blight).

All major and minor powers in the Atlantic were involved in slavery and the slave trade, such as the Dutch, the British, the French, and the Americans. Slaves worked in cities or in the countryside, as servants, laborers, or farmhands. They held different roles, based on their abilities, strengths, and looks. Most slaves worked as field slaves, who were assigned to plant, cultivate, and harvest the crops. Although this type of work was burdensome and intensive, it was performed by both male and female slaves. The other class of slaves were called house slaves, who lived in close contact with their owner and his family (Harper 123). In general, house work was considered lighter than field work, but on the other hand, house slaves had little to no privacy, as they were constantly under the eyes of their owners. The concept of slavery was always the same: slaves were considered property. Their status as property was often enforced by violence. In general, black men and women on the whole experienced the same horrors of slavery. Both were torn apart from their families, were forced to perform hard labor, and were denied basic rights (Hallam). In addition, female slaves faced the constant threat and practice of sexual exploitation, harassment, and rape. Although male slaves faced this threat as well, it was not in the same numbers as females (Foster 447).

While there are three main categories of slave narratives that can be identified, and as a result there are variations in form and style, the overall structure of these narratives tends to have several common characteristics. In the following brief analysis, Frederick Douglass' autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) will be used as the model for the entire genre of slave narratives, as his narrative was highly influential on the shape of slave narratives (Heglar 18). First, the introduction of a slave narrative often contains frequently used phrases, such as "I was born," to make clear that slaves too should be perceived as human beings. It is very common for slave narratives to start off this way. Another common phrase is "written by himself/herself," whereby the author

wants to illustrate that the narrative has his or her textual authority and thus is a true depiction of a life during slavery. Douglass used this phrase in the title of his narrative. Such phrases also “highlight the slaves’ mastery of literacy at a time when bondsmen were forbidden to read and write,” which was of great importance to slaves, as most slaves connected their road to freedom to their literacy (Aje). Owners often kept their slaves deliberately illiterate or ignorant, by withholding information from them, simple facts such as their age or real name, as information was power. For Douglass, literacy helped him achieve power and control in his life, by first gaining control over communication, which can be found in the way he structured his story in *The Narrative* (Morgan 79). He begins his narrative by mentioning how little he knows about his origins. Douglass does not know his age or his father’s identity, for example.

This thesis is mostly focused on antebellum slave narratives, that emphasize “the brutality of conditions and the narrator’s actively escaping from slavery” (Heglar 12). On the other hand, works that were written after the American Civil War period in the United States, were often aimed at postbellum achievement and as such were less focused on depicting the harshness of slavery (Heglar 12). An example of a postbellum slave narrative is the work by Elizabeth Keckley, whose relationship with Mary Lincoln, the wife of president Abraham Lincoln is central in *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868) (Heglar 13). In general, slave narratives tend to follow a linear narrative structure. The focus is mostly on a slave’s personal journey from slavery to freedom, whereby the author explains how he survived and escaped slavery and then tries to define his freedom. After first trying to define his own identity through his family history, descriptions of his daily life as a slave are given (“True Tales of Bondage and Freedom”). Slave narratives provide a glimpse of the beatings and whippings of slaves by their masters, the sexual abuse of black women, the poor conditions slaves lived and worked in, and the master-slave relationships.

Another common characteristic is the inclusion of documentation, such as diaries, letters or local government records, in appendices (“True Tales of Bondage and Freedom”). Douglass uses his appendix to set his views on religion straight, because he feels people could get the wrong impression of his earlier statements. According to Douglass, he is a true and dedicated Christian but slaveholders are not, as slavery and Christianity are the complete opposite to each other. He also includes a letter in his autobiography, written by Wendell Phillips, which functions as a sort of second introduction to his narrative. In his letter, Phillips points out the importance of a narrative about slavery written by an actual slave. Phillips was an American abolitionist and advocate for Native Americans. Many slave narratives contained

letters from white abolitionists, which would serve as endorsements to vouch the authenticity of the author's work (Blight).

Religion is an often recurring theme in slave narratives, as it is linked to the key concepts that almost all slave narratives feature, as previously mentioned. Usually towards the end of the narrative, when the slave gained a sense of his own identity, he instigates the decision to escape, which is often affirmed by his faith in God ("True Tales of Bondage and Freedom"). Many slaves had adopted Christianity, yet adapted it to their African practices. In Christianity, they found hope for and faith in a better future, because many slaves believed that God would end their plight. It was a religion of justice, support, and resistance (Norton 253). In terms of resistance, religion was also used to argue for the abolition of slavery. In his autobiography, Douglass takes a firm stand on the hypocrisy of white Christianity. According to Douglass, it is impossible for someone to believe in God while being a slave-owner at the same time. Slave-owners used their religion as an excuse, to justify their horrible practices.

Most slaves, whether male or female, experienced racism, discrimination, and violence during their time in bondage. They had to live in extremely poor conditions, having only the bare necessities, were often torn apart from their family, and were forced to take on extensive labor (Hallam). Yet according to historians, females often experienced slavery in a different way compared to males (Andrews). As a result, male and female slave narratives tend to differ, although the general line of most slave narratives is the desire for and quest towards freedom. Differences can be found in presenting the struggles slaves encountered, their focus of thought, the manner in which the story is presented, and their views on subject matters, such as the family unit (Phipps). As such, differences in life experiences led to differences in theme and style (Heglar 23). Female slaves also wrote about the cult of true womanhood, meaning that women's role was to be submissive and domestic, in particular a maternal domesticity, as well as writing on marriage, motherhood, and sexual abuse. Most female slaves were mothers, who had to witness their children being sold to different owners. They were also more likely to be the victim of their master's sexual needs against their will. Thus, they had more risk of sexual oppression, exploitation, and abuse. Although some male slaves also suffered from sexual abuse – Douglass, for instance, writes about this – the physiological aftermath was different. The way in which it was experienced and described also differed. Male slave narratives usually focused on describing the physical aspect (Myles 150). Douglass writes about his experience of slave assault and also mentions an instance of female sexual abuse, yet "reports only the physical abuse of women" (Myles 150).

To narrow down the corpus of female slave narratives, four texts are analyzed in this thesis. On the basis of the following four texts, a general conclusion of the female slave experience is made. First, the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs will be discussed, as Jacobs' autobiography is among the most well-known slave narratives ever written and probably the most well-known female slave narrative. Jacobs was the first African American woman who wrote a slave narrative in the United States. Her narrative is especially appealing to women, as it is focused on describing the struggles women faced under slavery in such a way that it spoke for all female slaves. Jacobs could relate to her audience through their shared struggles and hopes as women (Morgan 76). Jacobs wrote her autobiography under the pseudonym Linda Brent. She describes Brent's attempts to escape from her master Dr. Flint, who sexually harassed and abused her severely, in great detail. The second narrative to be analyzed is Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* (1831). Prince describes the physical details of her abuse, but also her physiological experience. According to William Andrews, this autobiography was the first female slave narrative from the Americas (Andrews xxix). Although Prince was a West Indian slave, she was still considered an African American slave, as she was born on Bermuda but to an enslaved family of African descent. Her narrative contains a great amount of beatings, of herself as well as others, that provide a vivid picture of the cruelty of slave masters and the injustice of the slaves' punishments. What stands out in Prince's narrative is her view on motherhood and the difficulties female slaves faced before, during, and after giving birth. The third narrative that will be examined is Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). Keckley offers several descriptions of sexual abuse in her autobiography. Keckley's narrative provides a vivid example of the reality of rape, as she was impregnated against her will by a white man and gave birth to her son in 1839 (Waal 101). The last autobiography that will be discussed is *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave* (1850) by Sojourner Truth. Her narrative describes the thirty years Truth was in bondage and points out white people's view on slavery.

While the discussion of slave narratives has traditionally been centered around male narratives, with Frederick Douglass' autobiography as the prime example of this, the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, Elizabeth Keckley, and Sojourner Truth provide significant insight into the key themes of the slave experience from a female perspective, especially motherhood, sexual oppression, and abuse, and as such, reading these narratives will help to understand the female slave experience in greater detail.

Chapter One: Harriet Jacobs

Harriet Ann Jacobs shared her experience through the pages of her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, hereafter referred to as *Incidents*. It tells the story of her life as a slave and the road to freedom for herself and her children. It also gives a detailed description of a slave's struggles with abuse, sexual harassment, and her role as a woman and mother. In what follows below, first a general brief summary of the plot is given before zooming in on the most important events that capture the specific female themes. This design applies to all three chapters. In her autobiography, Jacobs uses Linda Brent as a pseudonym. Fictional names were often used to protect the identities of the people involved (Smith 35). Although the book was published by Lydia Maria Child, who also edited it, Jacobs has been confirmed to be the author. Based on written correspondence between Child and Jacobs, Child's influence proved to be limited to small revisions. Thus, "Jacobs was solely responsible for the subject matter and voice of the text" (Andrews 174). In the following analysis of *Incidents*, the name Brent is used to tell the story of Jacobs, so as to adhere to the narrative's original style. Whenever a new person is introduced, his or her real name is mentioned after the pseudonym in parentheses.

Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) was born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. Till the age of six, she had a happy childhood with her father, who worked as a carpenter, her mother, her younger brother William (John Jacobs), and her maternal grandmother. When Brent is sold and has to live with Dr. Flint, she experiences whippings, sexual harassment, and the constant threat of rape. He tries to force her into a sexual relationship and so, moved by despair, Brent starts having a relationship with Mr. Sands to escape from Flint's assault, hoping Sands will protect her from Flint. Together they have two children, but it does not hold back Flint, which gives Brent no other choice but to hide, leaving her children behind. In 1842, Brent is able to escape to the North, where eventually she reunites with her children.

When Brent turns six, her mother passes away. Up until that moment, she has never thought of herself as a slave (Jacobs 13). Brent has to live with her mother's mistress Ruth Nash (Margaret Horniblow), who teaches her to read, write, and sew. This is remarkable, because many slaves were not allowed to read or write, as it was seen as a form of freedom. Mostly, slave-owners were afraid slaves would spread messages to slaves on other plantations and start a revolt against their masters (Dunaway 227). In addition, slaves were considered property and therefore did not enjoy the same rights as other human beings, such as the right

to marry. So why does Nash teach Brent how to read and write? Although the specific reason is never mentioned in Jacobs' narrative, some slave-owners who were Christians did teach their slaves how to read the Bible, as an act of religious obligation, so slave-owners could go to heaven (Lynch). Some female slaves also learned how to sew, which "often took precedence over, or was the female substitute for, learning to read and write" (Hedges 18). They had to produce clothing and other household textiles for the entire slave community (Rice 417). In *Incidents*, Jacobs writes the following: "While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory" (Jacobs 15). This is not the kind of description one would expect to read of a slave-owner, but Jacobs later knew she was blessed for this situation, given how few slaves were taught to read and write.

Six years later, Nash dies and her niece Emily Flint (Mary Matilda Norcom) becomes Brent's new legal master. However, Emily Flint's father, physician Dr. Flint (Dr. James Norcom), is much more interested in Brent and so he becomes her de facto master. Compared to her former owner, Dr. Flint is cruel, vicious, and careless: "The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence, [...] cramming it down her throat till she choked" (Jacobs 19). Flint takes pleasure in having absolute power, forcing his will on his servants. Then again, Brent is already aware that she will never find another master as kind as Nash. Especially the wife of Brent's master, Mrs. Flint, is mean and vengeful and often takes advantage of her dominance, for example when she spits in all the pans to prevent the cook and the other slaves from eating the leftovers. The first time Brent is punished happens when Mrs. Flint orders Brent to never wear her new shoes again and then sends her barefoot on an errand, in the snow (Jacobs 28). Slave-owners were mostly driven by the desire for prosperity and power, as owning slaves gave them wealth, standing and reputation (Gerstle 65). But gaining power can make a person greedy and mean (Gargiulo). In portraying the master-slave relationship, Jacobs shows "the dehumanizing effect of slavery on both slave and master—the slave due to his being oppressed, the master due to his power to oppress" ("Master/Slave").

On her fifteenth birthday, Flint begins to whisper vulgar words into Brent's ear, "which robbed her of her innocence and purity, a phenomenon that psychologists call inappropriate sexualization, which encourages a child to interpret her own value primarily in sexual terms" (Kerber 135). Although she is still young, Brent begins to understand his intentions, but she does not stop him, as she fears Flint and the possible consequences: "He

told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things” (Jacobs 39). Flint also sends notes to Brent, even when she could not read yet, but when he figures out she does can read, his notes turn nasty, too (Jacobs 45). After a while, Mrs. Flint senses something is going on between her husband and Brent, which further gives rise to her feelings of jealousy. Mrs. Flint often has heated arguments about Brent with Dr. Flint, for one because she believes Brent is not punished enough. After Mrs. Flint forces Brent to tell her the truth about Flint’s intentions, Brent now fears Mrs. Flint, afraid of what she might do to her in an act of jealousy (Jacobs 48). As such, besides the constant risk of sexual abuse and bodily threats, slave women also had to deal with jealous mistresses. As a result of Flint’s foul words and the angry and jealous outbreaks of his mistress, Jacobs becomes “prematurely knowing in evil things” (Jacobs 41).

When Brent becomes an adult, Flint forces her to have a sexual relationship with him. He is building a secret house for Brent in a hidden place, as Flint plans to have sex with her (Jacobs 76). However, Brent finds ways to escape his attentions and thus gets into a relationship with Mr. Sands (Samuel Tredwell Sawyer), a free white lawyer, hoping that this will hold back Flint. The events at Flint’s household involving Brent have not gone unnoticed for the town members. This also sparks the attention of Mr. Sands, who is actually a friend of Brent’s grandmother, aunt Martha (Molly Horniblow). Brent believes that “nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another,” which would lead to Flint selling her (Jacobs 79). She is convinced Mr. Sands would buy her. However, Flint loves having power more than he loves money, especially psychological power (Doherty 88).

Brent hopes that her relationship with Mr. Sands will put an end to the assaults of Dr. Flint, but he is not holding back. In another desperate attempt to escape from Flint and the secret cottage he built for the two of them, Brent becomes pregnant with Mr. Sands’ baby. Brent wants to escape from her master’s sexual violation so badly that she “chooses to have sex with a kinder, less predatory white man [...], as an act of agency and self-protection” (Pipes 26). It is also an act to prevent further suffering of herself (Pipes 38). However, “the circumstances in which Jacobs becomes a mother offer the reader the first hint of the perversion of motherhood, and emphasize that for the female slave the journey to motherhood is tainted and besmirched from the very moment of a baby’s conception” (Mian 10). Brent enters womanhood unwillingly and once again is stripped of her pride, dignity, and innocence. Such violation leaves her in desperate state of mind: “If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice. [...] But I was struggling alone

in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery. [...] I became reckless in my despair,” which manifested itself in her second pregnancy (Jacobs 78).

Because Mr. Sands is a free man, Brent feels sure their offspring will be made free. However, because her baby boy Benjamin (Joseph Sawyer) is born to a slave mother, he is still considered a slave according to the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*. This principle meant that the status of a child derived from its mother (Morris 43). This principle was widely adopted into the laws of slavery in the British North American colonies and later in the United States. Therefore, the children of Brent and Mr. Sands were seen as mixed-race slaves.

Although Brent considers having children as her last resort, she feels extremely bad about her pregnancy, because she knows slavery is no way to live. She believes having children and an illegitimate relationship will anger Flint so much that he will want to get rid of her by selling her to Mr. Sands, but her plan fails. Instead, Flint demands Brent to stop seeing Mr. Sands ever again, because he is a white man.

When her son Benjamin is a one-year-old, he gets really sick and in her heart, Brent believes it is best if the child does not survive: “I could never forget that he was a slave. Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy. [...] Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery” (Jacobs 88). Slavery could create such thoughts in the minds of slaves, as some slave-mothers would actually kill their own children or wish they were death, only to save them from growing up as slaves (Frazier 15). Brent is having these sad thoughts again when Flint throws her son across the room. Because Flint was once again verbally and physically attacking Brent, Benjamin begins crying, which further enrages Flint and so he takes it out on Benjamin. When Benjamin wakes up after being passed out, Brent questions if she should be happy that he is still alive (Jacobs 115). Four years later, when Brent is nineteen, she gets pregnant again. After Flint is informed of Brent’s second pregnancy, he is infuriated and cuts off all her hair, knowing it will upset Brent. By doing this, Flint breaks down Brent with physical and physiological abuse (Doherty 88). In 1833, she gives birth to a baby girl, named Ellen (Louisa Sawyer). This saddens Brent even more, since “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women” (Jacobs 110).

Eventually, Flint gives Brent an ultimatum: either be his mistress or get sent off to his son’s plantation, where she will have to endure hard labor. Despite Flint’s threats that “your boy shall be put to work, and he shall soon be sold; and your girl shall be raised for the purpose of selling well,” Brent chooses to go to the plantation. Because Benjamin is sick again, he stays behind where he actually might be better off, as his little sister is put to work,

is separated from her mother, and is treated as a slave (Jacobs 122). Again, Brent struggles to combine motherhood with slavery: “When I lay down beside my child, I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about, as I daily saw him beat other little ones” (Jacobs 123).

After some time at Mr. Flint’s plantation, Brent meets his wife, Mrs. Flint, and immediately gets a glimpse of her malicious character when the slaves are giving their weekly food allowance. Mrs. Flint prevents a very old slave from getting his food, because “he was too old to have any allowance; that when niggers were too old to work, they ought to be fed on grass” (Jacobs 132). When Brent finally has enough, she flees the plantation and goes into hiding. Dr. Flint is destined to find her and get her back. One of his strategies is throwing her brother and her children in jail, but Brent keeps quiet about where she is. In the meantime, a speculator, who secretly represents Mr. Sands, buys Brent’s children and Mr. Sands promises to Brent that they will be free. Dr. Flint agrees to sell them, because earning money from it would be better than the risk of them escaping too, as he believes that Brent has fled to the North. However, once he finds out it is Mr. Sands who now owns the children, Dr. Flint is outraged. For Brent, this act of her children being freed, brings her real happiness, something she has not experienced since her childhood (Jacobs 152).

Before Brent sees an opportunity to escape in 1842, she is in hiding for roughly seven years in such a tiny hole that it still feels as if she is a prisoner. Because Brent no longer wants to submit to Dr. Flint’s abuse, but does not want to abandon her family either, she hides. This shows the devotion Brent has to keep her children safe from their slave master, to keep her family together, as she self-sacrifices herself by hiding out in a crawlspace (Pipes 25). It once again demonstrates the importance of motherhood and family life, with the family functioning as an emotional anchor.

She successfully escapes the South by boat, but this time Brent is constantly reminded of her race. She has multiple experiences of racial prejudice when she is working as a nursemaid for Mrs. Bruce (Mary Stace Willis), an English woman. For example, when they are on a steamboat, Brent is the only nurse who is not offered tea by the waiters. On another occasion, when Mr. Bruce (Nathaniel Parker Willis) asks Brent to have meals delivered at their room, the white waiters refuse to wait on black people. When Brent stands up for her rights, she is treated like the others. In England, where Brent works for ten months, she never experienced racial prejudice. Sadly, Brent’s employer Mrs. Bruce dies in 1845, but Bruce’s second wife (Cornelia Grinnel Willis) is just as kind. Towards the end of the novel, she secretly pays for Brent’s rights, thus giving Brent her freedom. Although Brent and her

children are now free, her ultimate dream of having her own family home is just that; a dream.

Chapter Two: Mary Prince

Just like Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince was a former slave who wrote down the physical details of her abuse as well as the physiological experience of her time in bondage. While working for Thomas Pringle, who encouraged her to tell her story, Prince had her narrative transcribed by Susanna Strickland. Prince did not edit the book herself as a result of her limited literacy (Barron 53). She told her story to Strickland, which makes the style and tone of Prince's narrative oral and familial (Paquet 136). In 1831, her book *The History of Mary Prince* was published. Pringle, an abolitionist writer and founder of the Anti-Slavery Society, served as the editor. According to William Andrews, this autobiography was the first female slave narrative from the Americas, which makes it interesting to take a look at her story, especially in light of the discussion of the female slave experience. Prince was a West Indian slave, but still considered an African American slave, as she was born in Bermuda, but to an enslaved family of African descent (Andrews).

Mary Prince, born into slavery, is sold to Captain John Ingham at the age of twelve. Thus, she is separated from her family at a young age, as her brothers and sisters are sold to different owners. Prince's master and his mistress are cruel; she is frequently and severely punished and has to work long hours in poor conditions, even as a child. When she is sold to Mr. D, Prince has her first experience with sexual assault. In 1826, Prince marries Daniel James, a former slave, although her new master, John Adams Wood, does not approve. In 1829, Prince begins working as a domestic servant for Mr. Thomas Pringle, who helps publishing her story in 1831.

In contrast to most slaves, Prince does have quite some knowledge about her background: "I was born at Brackish-Pond, in Bermuda. [...] My mother was a household slave; and my father, whose name was Prince, was a sawyer" (Prince 8). When Prince is a baby, she belongs to Betsey Williams, the granddaughter of Captain Darrel Williams, to whom she was originally sold. Miss Betsey treats her well: "This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave" (Prince 9). At the age of twelve, Prince is sold to Captain John Ingham, who she only refers to as Captain I in her narrative, away from her mother and brothers and sisters, who are all sold to different masters. It is the first time she is completely separated from her family: "The bond between mother and child cannot compete with slavery's brutality. Because of this, Prince seeks out surrogate mothers and family members" (Schroeder 34). The nurturing role of her mother, providing Prince emotional and practical support, is of importance and "constructs Prince's

understanding of self-worth and individuality” (Kanneh 82). But Prince did not just write down the effect it had on her, noting “I thought my heart would burst,” she also describes the pain her mother felt when the family was torn apart: “See, I am shrouding my poor children; what a task for a mother” (Prince 13). According to Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Prince’s mother “conceptualizes the sale of her children as death” (Paquet 141). In this particular passage, Prince shows an individual and collective feeling, of grief and terror, and state of mind when her mother mourns the loss of her children. Not just her mother, but Prince herself also speaks from “a resistant heart as a primary site of self-identification and identification with others,” thus speaking for all enslaved mothers, too (Paquet 142). Prince’s descriptions of her mother show the emotional battle slave-mothers were often fighting. For slaves, motherhood was both a joy and a strain, but the joy of giving birth was clouded by agony (Tierney 1319). Because “children whose parents were slaves automatically took on the slave status,” they were subjected to cruel treatment (Marquis 100).

Although Prince has only positive memories of her time with Miss Betsey and Mrs. Williams, on the day she is sold, it is still painfully clear for Prince that she is a slave and thus is seen as a slave, as her master notes: “I am going to carry my little chickens to market. [...] You belong to me” (Prince 14). This serves as a painful reminder of the fact that slaves were seen as property and not as their individual selves. Throughout the narrative, Prince often compares slaves to cattle or sheep. In the above example of Miss Betsey, she treats slaves like cattle that can be sold on a market as if they are inhumane, thus not taking their personality and identity into account. This deprived slaves, like Prince, of their self-esteem and it could damage their self-image.

Prince had several masters before Captain I, who were kind and let her do light tasks as a child, but her new master and his wife are cruel. They often abuse Prince, as well as the other slaves, even for minor offences or no fault at all, using the whip, the rope, and the cow-skin. For slave-owners, especially punishing their slaves for no reason was a means of exercising power over them. Prince talks about the beatings and the whippings, how it broke her skin, which led to scars, and the painful recovery that followed: “The story of Mary Prince’s scarred and broken body is one of humiliation and torment. It is a body that knows violation, torture and abuse,” as a result of the punishments she received for years (Paquet 143). In the descriptions, again references towards cattle are made: “To strip me naked—to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence” (Prince 20). Slaves were not only punished like animals, with whipping as their only punishment, but they were also treated as animals.

Slave-owners could kill or rape their slaves without having to go to jail, simply because slaves were considered 'stock,' so they were not subject to human laws (Bay 131). Slave-owners did the same to slaves as butchers do to their raw meat that hangs in their shops. Standing naked in front of someone, who can look at and mistreat their bodies, is an uncomfortable situation. It is especially shameful for women as slave-owners were usually men, which made female slaves even more vulnerable for this kind of punishment.

But Prince does not only tell her own personal story, she also mentions some experiences of the people around her. In the new home that she is in now, Prince talks about the cruelties that Hetty, one of the other slaves, had to face. Hetty is a French black slave, whose presence Prince enjoys very much. Hetty is like a surrogate mother for Prince, because she gives Prince love and guidance when Prince is still young and separated from her mother and father (Schroeder 24). Even though Hetty is pregnant, it does not stop her master from abusing her. She is blamed for letting one cow escape and is severely punished with the whip and cow-skin, over and over again. Later Hetty delivers a dead child after severe labor. She recovers quickly and so her master and his mistress begin beating her again. Not long afterwards, Hetty dies, which devastates Prince, but many slaves are convinced death is better for her (Prince 21). Hetty's death deeply affects Prince, because again she loses her source of motherly sympathy. Once again, it shows that "when in the context of the female slave experience, the mother-daughter bond is plagued by the horrors of slavery" (Schroeder 25). Just like Jacobs, Prince is first taken away from her mother at a young age. Then, when she seeks other mother figures, Prince is plagued by the cruel reality of slavery.

Whenever Prince, Hetty or any other slave, has an accident, they are blamed and punished by their master Captain I. He does not only abuse his slaves with awfully harsh names, he also physically abuses them. At one point, Prince has enough and she runs away to her mother. However, Captain I punishes her extremely by giving her harsh treatment almost daily. This lasts for five years before he sends her away to Turk's Island. Prince is not allowed to say goodbye to her family: "Oh the Buckra people who keep slaves think that black people are like cattle, without natural affection" (Prince 25).

Prince is sold to another slave-master, whom we only have the name Mr. D, who Prince considers a butcher, too: "I hoped, when I left Capt. I—, that I should have been better off, but I found it was but going from one butcher to another" (Prince 27). Just like Captain I, Mr. D. beats and whips his slaves, but his face does not move a muscle. The sighs, tears and prayers of the slaves leave him untouched, whereas Captain I was "raging and foaming with passion" (Prince 27). This stone-cold attitude serves as another example of the

dehumanization of slavery. Prince also talks about how other slaves are treated in Mr. D's household. For example, slave Daniel has to endure the cruelest punishments. After Mr. D. beats him so hard and long, he pours a bucket of salt upon Daniel's raw flesh (Prince 29). Prince feels it is her duty to tell the horrors of slavery, because only a few people knew what slavery was. Because Prince is a slave, she knows what slaves feel and what they go through (Prince 30). She does not only remember her own suffering; she wants to tell the stories of others too. By telling these personal stories, Prince is able to address the importance of slave narratives as a form, as they offer true depictions of slavery. Slave narratives do not only contain historical facts, they also point out the feelings and emotions of slaves, which in turn make clear the effect that slavery had on people, which cannot be captured in historical facts (Blight). As such, slave narratives, such as Prince's story, contribute to the understanding of the overall effect of slavery (Goldin 339).

As said before, it was especially shameful for slave women to be stripped down naked before getting whipped, to stand in front of their masters with their naked bodies, who can look at them all they want, as "the stripping and touching of slaves had a sexually exploitative, sometimes sadistic function. Nakedness implied lack of civility, morality, and sexual restraint even when the nakedness was forced." It further reinforced the belief that black slave women were "uncivilized, immodest, and sexually aberrant" (Pilgrim). Although Prince does not talk much about sexual abuse in her narrative, she does mention an event from which we can make careful indications of her master's sexual exploits (Schroeder 40). Mr. D. would also strip himself naked in front of her, ordering her to wash him. Prince tells of repeated beatings and floggings in her narrative, but says this was even worse than the beatings, which makes clear how much impact sexual abuse has: "Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame" (Prince 34). This depiction of the sexual advantage taken by her master reveals the close relationship between violence and sexual depredation (Kanneh 83). As Andrea Starr Alonzo states, female slaves were "subjected to the humiliation and pain of sexual exploitation. Rape, concubinage, and the wrath of jealous mistresses were only a few of the indignities female slave suffered just because they were women," which female slaves often considered even worse than the whippings (Alonzo 121). In Prince's description, there is a "reverse scenario, where it is the master's naked body that is forced into scrutiny and exhibition, reveals the power invested in the master's body," which once again underscores the dominance of slave-owners, "and the coercion of Prince's gaze onto his nakedness operates as a kind of violence, more threatening to her than physical abuse," as stated before by Prince herself (Kanneh 83).

In 1815, Prince is sold to the sadistic Mr. John Wood. He and his family take her to Antigua. Two years later, Prince joins the local Moravian Church, where she learns to read. It is also the place where she meets her husband Daniel James, a free black man who works as a carpenter and cooper. He bought his freedom with the money he earned from working in his free time, which Prince is also doing since two years. However, they are not allowed to marry in the English Church, because slaves were not allowed to marry at all. Marriage was, and still is, a legal contract and slaves were not considered legal people (Williams). Because James is a free man, he could not marry a slave woman. Eventually, they do get married in another church, the Moravian Chapel. Prince's master and his master disapprove of the marriage, partly because she did not ask for permission, and so Prince is beaten with a horsewhip. Mrs. Wood does not want a free black man living at their place, using the same furniture as her. She also fears that Prince will lose time to do her chores, because Prince has to do tasks for her husband, too. However, some slave-owners did allow, or even encourage, their slaves to marry, as it was in their own advantage. Promoting marriage made economic sense, because it would increase the possibility of slaves starting a family, which in turn would increase the slave population. Slave-owners believed that marriage and family would function as a stimulus for slaves to remain on the plantation, as opposed to try to escape (Hunter).

Most of the time, Prince does not have a happy marriage due to being a slave: "Prince shows that domestic life is undermined by slavery" (Barron 65). She should feel joy being married, but instead she feels anger, reflecting the beatings. Unlike Jacobs, Prince closes her narrative childless as a result of "the physical and psychological torture of a lifetime," which also left her "crippled with arthritis, blind, and in exile" (Paquet 143). Although she escapes to England in 1828, where she is finally a free woman, the circumstances Prince is in prevent her from being with her husband. Thus, she never truly becomes free, as she cannot be with her lover and cannot have children. So, Prince still faces exclusions in some way. On the other hand, her escape also shows how strong her sense of womanhood is. Prince makes the decision to stay in England, because it is the place where she is free, instead of returning to be with her husband in Antigua. She mostly wants to be free, to be herself. Prince does discuss a slave's difficulties in being pregnant and the problems of motherhood through the relation of the experience of others, such as Hetty. Her pregnancy is under domination of her master. If Hetty does not obey to his wishes, Mr. D. whips her, which eventually leads to her death. Prince describes the constant fear and threat of danger that pregnant women and mothers had to deal with. Prince may have chosen not to procreate as an act of resistance to slavery and the

sexual exploitation of female slaves as well as her status as a slave (Barron 16). Learning from the experiences of her mother and Hetty, Prince is also aware that “motherhood negatively affected the lives of female slaves” (Barron 28). In her narrative, it becomes clear that the “discourses of womanhood, marriage, motherhood, the family, and domesticity were integral to the female slave experience” (Barron 53).

Chapter Three: Elizabeth Keckley and Sojourner Truth

In this last chapter, short passages of two female slave narratives will be discussed that reflect the most featured themes in female slave narratives. The first narrative was written by former slave Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley. In 1868, she wrote and published her autobiography *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Only the first part will be discussed, as this can be considered a slave narrative, which gives insight into Keckley's early life in slavery. The second part is focused on her time with the First Family, where she worked for Mary Todd Lincoln, the President's wife, who Keckley considered her friend. Keckley was born a slave in Virginia in 1818, owned by the Burwell family. Her mother Agnes was a house slave, her father a white planter. Keckley experiences harsh treatment under slavery, having to endure many severe beatings, but mostly, she is the victim of sexual assault by a white man. She starts working at the age of four and is often subjected to punishment by her master Col. A. Burwell. In her teenage years, she is sent to live with Robert, the eldest Burwell son. His mistress makes Keckley's life miserable. Keckley has a forced sexual relationship with Alexander M. Kirkland, a prominent white man, which lasts for four years. During that time, Keckley is raped and gives birth to her son George. In 1855, she buys her freedom and that of her son.

When she is in her forties, Keckley begins writing her story. Slavery has a lasting impact on her life, as she can still remember what happened very clearly: "The visions are so terribly distinct that I almost imagine them to be real" (Keckley 18). Although Keckley is only four years old when she starts working as a slave, too young to fully take care of herself as she is still a child herself, her first duty is to take care of Mrs. Burwell's newborn Elizabeth. During that time, Keckley experiences her first beating. The severity of the lashing is so cruel, that years later she still remembers it well. Another tragic event that Keckley perfectly recalls is the severing of her father and mother: "... how my father cried out against the cruel separation; his last kiss; his wild straining of my mother to his bosom; the solemn prayer to Heaven; the tears and sobs — the fearful anguish of broken hearts" (Keckley 23). The loss of a dear one by sale or forced separation is a recurrent theme in female slave narratives. In this case, Keckley never sees her father again. The contrast between the love of her family and the cruel treatment by her masters extremely distresses Keckley. The family unit was very important to slaves, because it created "a world outside of the world of work" ("The Enslaved Family"). Not only because they had relatives, but even more so because they could take on roles, such as being a mother, outside of that of a slave. The mother-child

relationship was the most important relationship in the slave family. The role of mother was highly valued in African societies (Weed 126).

When Keckley is seven years old, for the first time she witnesses the sale of a human being. Just like Prince, references to cattle are made, as Little Joe is “sold, like the hogs” (Keckley 28). Keckley describes the cruelties of slavery for a mother, who has to watch her child being taken away from her, not knowing if she will ever see him or her again. On top of that, Joe’s mother, who is devastated with grief, gets punished for crying. Slave-masters often deliberately did not acknowledge a slave’s personal feelings. This also became clear when Mrs. Burwell speaks unfeeling words to Keckley’s mother, who was deeply distressed in parting with her husband: “Stop your nonsense. (...) Your husband is not the only slave that has been sold from his family. (...) If you want a husband so badly, stop your crying and go and find another” (Keckley 23).

Keckley has her first experience of sexual abuse at the age of eighteen. Female slaves on large plantations usually worked as house slaves and so “they were more likely to suffer endless cruelty and torture, because they were constantly in the presence of demanding mistresses and masters,” which brought along stress and strain (Hooks 24). They worked in close contact with white mistresses. Because Keckley’s presence causes resentment with Mrs. Burwell, she orders Mr. Bingham, the village schoolmaster, to physically abuse Keckley. Slaves often did not know why they were punished: “She seemed to be desirous to wreak vengeance on me for something” (Keckley 32). Thus, when he orders Keckley to take off her clothes so he can whip her, Keckley offers resistance: “I was eighteen years of age, was a woman fully developed, and yet this man coolly bade me take down my dress” (Keckley 33). However, she cannot win the fight. Keckley is sexually harassed by Bingham: “Then he picked up a raw-hide, and began to play it freely over my shoulders” (Keckley 34). Slave-masters often found enjoyment in punishing their slaves and even in hearing them scream (Northup 163). The use of force gave them a sense of power and control (Worden 106). However, Keckley does not want to give them this satisfaction and so she does not scream or move a muscle. Afterwards, Keckley is in pain, full of bruises and severely bleeding. As she writes in her narrative, she is not only suffering from bodily torture; Keckley also suffers mentally. She could not bear getting punished for no reason or without any explanation of her possible wrongdoings: “My spirit rebelled against the unjustness that had been inflicted upon me” (Keckley 35).

This is not the only time Keckley experiences sexual abuse, which brings her suffering and deep mortification (Keckley 38). Female slaves “lived in constant awareness of their

sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear that any male, white or black, might single them out to assault and victimize” (Hook 24). Although she does not mention his name specifically, Keckley is forced to have a sexual relationship with a white man: “[...] For four years a white man—I spare the world his name—had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother” (Keckley 39). It is curious she withholds the name of her rapist, whereas Jacobs has a tendency to simply name her abusers. Based on Keckley’s writing, it may be she does not want to give him any more attention. Again, Keckley becomes the object of sexual lust of another white man (Stansell 231). Although her son is a constant reminder of her rape, Keckley loves James very much. Slaves had to be careful as to which details about their time in bondage they would reveal to their audience. They often wrote their narrative for a white audience, so as to convince them of the horrors of slavery. Thus, writing extensively about black women’s sexual violation could stand in the way of convincing them of their moral character, which could be why female slave narratives, such as Keckley’s, do not go into detail about their experiences of sexual abuse (Sielke 22). Nevertheless, it is important to also detail this side of the story when discussing the female slave experience, as such experiences “played a major role in the development of their definition of the sexual self” (Stansell 231).

Around 1852, Keckley married James Keckley, a freeman from Virginia, although she has serious doubts about the marriage. She did not want to bring another child into slavery and she does not want to marry while still enslaved. On condition that she can buy her freedom and that of her son, she accepts James’ proposal. When Keckley soon learns that James is actually a slave too, she solely focuses on earning money, so that she can buy her own freedom.

The second novel that will be discussed is *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* (1850), written by Olive Gilbert, a white abolitionist, based on information provided by Sojourner Truth herself. Truth never learned to read or write. She was originally born as Isabella Baumfree, but changed her name to Sojourner Truth in 1843. Truth was born into slavery in 1797, but never learned the exact date (Field 87). Her parents James and Elizabeth have ten or twelve children, but again, Truth does not know the exact number. During her time in bondage, she only meets one of her brothers. Knowing their history or background was important in the development of slaves’ identity, but they were often kept ignorant of such basic facts. Because they were considered animals, slaves were both stripped from their identity and humanity. Slaves with no knowledge of their personal background were also

easier to control, so slave-masters would often “use the slaves’ loss of identity as a control tool” (Walker 140).

During her youth, Truth is sold to many different masters, all of whom abuse her, but none are as cruel as John Nealy. In 1817, Truth is forced to marry Thomas, an elder slave, with whom she has five children. In 1826, Truth runs away from her master John Dumont, leaving her husband and children behind, and she ends up at the home of Isaac and Maria van Wagener, who give freedom to Truth and her daughter Sophia. Two years later, Truth successfully sues a white man for illegally selling her son Peter.

As said before, Truth only meets one of her siblings, as the rest of them are all sold to different owners. Truth often finds her mother crying: “Oh, my child, I am thinking of your brothers and sisters that have been sold away from me” (Truth 9). Not knowing where her children are, how they are doing, if they are even alive: these insecurities bring Truth’s mother in utter distress and make her feel desolated. This highlights the cruelties a slave mother had to face. Up until 1806, Truth remains with her parents, together with her youngest brother Peter. But when their owner dies, an auction is held to sell his property, “the slaves, horses, and other cattle” (Truth 12). As described by Truth herself, “a slave auction is a terrible affair to its victims, and its incidents and consequences are graven on their hearts as with a pen of burning steel” (Truth 24). The fact that slaves are connected to sheep makes their situation only more painful. Throughout the narrative, Truth makes several references to cattle, for example when she talks about Mr. Dumont, her last master, who “treated his slaves with all the consideration he did his other animals” (Truth 30). Slave-owners treated their slaves worse than their animals, because no animal was deliberately tied up and beaten till its death (Andrews 119).

At the auction, Truth is sold to Mr. Nealy, who whips her frequently and severely, “with a bundle of rods, prepared in the embers, and bound together with cords,” which makes Truth question why human beings are treated as such (Truth 25). Truth is often in conflict with Nealy’s mistress, because they could not understand the other, as Truth could only talk Dutch and the Nealy family only English. For Mrs. Nealy, this is a “source of dissatisfaction,” which results in punishment and suffering for Isabella (Truth 18). Female slaves were often the victim of feelings from the mistress, for example anger and jealousy because of her husband’s affection for a slave woman (Finley 99). As a result, mistresses would often turn against slave women, disagreeing with all they said and did.

In 1810, Truth is sold to Mr. Dumont, her last slave-master before she is free. Every time she is sold to another owner, her treatment becomes worse. Especially Mrs. Dumont is

harsh and cruel to her. Although she does not explicitly mention it in her narrative, historians assume Truth is sexually abused in the Dumont family: “The sexual abuse of Sojourner Truth has been ‘passed over in silence.’ Her narrative implies that she was not only sexually abused by her master, but she was also the sexual object of her mistress” (Crawford 26). Truth herself notes that not every event or incident is recorded, partly because she does not want to publish everything as she thinks people might not easily believe it. According to Truth, some events are so unaccountable or unreasonable that they are not for the public ear (Crawford 26). As we have seen, it was uncommon in slave narratives in general to mention instances of rape by slave masters. Instead, the focus was on the explication of the physical abuse. According to Nell Irvin Painter, the fact that Truth is sexually abused by a woman especially makes it highly exceptional to talk about (Crawford 26). Painter writes: “The sexual abuse came from her mistress Sally Dumont, and Truth could tell about it only obliquely, in scattered pages in her Narrative. Truth spoke straightforwardly about most of her suffering in slavery, but only vaguely about this” (Painter 16).

Around 1815, Truth falls in love with another slave named Robert, but Robert’s master does not approve of their relationship. He does not want Truth to have children when he cannot own them or has no rights to claim them, as Truth is not his property. This frustrates Truth, because she is not allowed to be with the one she truly loves. Instead, Truth’s master Mr. Dumont forces her to marry Thomas, who is a slave on another plantation and they have five children together: “Forced breeding in the slave quarters manifested itself as an indirect form of rape,” because people were forced to engage in “unsolicited sexual activity” (Berry 79). Slave-owners would often pair ‘good breeding’ man and woman with a connection to profitability, so that they could “produce strong children that slave-owners could sell at a high price” (David 46).

When Truth is able to escape from her owner, she takes her daughter Sophia with her. However, when she finds out her son Peter is illegally sold to another owner, as it is in violation of the gradual emancipation law, Truth is destined to get him back: “My boy has gone as a slave, and he is too little to go so far from his mother. Oh, I must have my child” (Truth 52). Mrs. Dumont, her former mistress, responds with the cruelest remarks, which suggests that being a slave-mother does not mean anything: “Ugh! A fine fuss to make about a little nigger! Why, haven't you as many of 'em left as you can see to, and take care of?” (Truth 51). Although Truth successfully sues for his freedom, the whole experience once again makes her aware, in a painful manner, that slave-masters were able to postpone or deny black people’s rights and claims to freedom (Field 87).

Conclusion

Slave narratives were the main literary form in early African-American literature. Their influence remained strong even after the abolition of slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. Thus, slave narratives gave rise to the tradition of African American literature (Ishida 165). In general, slave narratives provide portrayals of a slave's time in bondage, but the stories of slaves are not the same. As we have seen, there are several differences between the written accounts of males and females. Although male slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, also wrote about women and slavery, the best way to learn about and understand female slavery is to look at it from a female perspective. As such, this thesis focused on two better known slave narratives; Harriet Ann Jacobs (1861) and Sojourner Truth (1850). Two lesser known accounts have also been analyzed; the stories of Mary Prince (1831) and Elizabeth Keckley (1868).

There are a few themes that stand out in each narrative that is discussed. Harriet Jacobs clearly portrays the importance of the family unit and the struggles of motherhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. To escape from the sexual relationship that her master is forcing on her, Jacobs unwillingly enters womanhood and struggles to take on her role as a mother, for example when her child is illegally sold and taken away from her. Since the children of a slave woman are automatically born into slavery, Jacobs wants to spare them this life full of misery and pain (Morris 43). The fact that Jacobs is willing to hide in an attic for seven years, which eventually made her permanently physically disabled, shows the significance of the family unit for slaves, which was often addressed in female slave narratives: "The well-being of her family is a constant worry to Jacobs. [...] She consistently notes that her family and children are her only reason for staying alive." This strong emphasis on family values is typical for most female slave narratives (Phipps). Another central female theme in Jacobs' narrative is her experience with sexual assault, which robbed her of her innocence and purity. At the same time, it damaged her perception of sexuality and seduction, as she has her first encounter with her master (Kerber 135).

Mary Prince also depicts the struggles of motherhood that female slaves faced in her narrative *The History of Mary Prince*, thus directly appealing to women. Based on her descriptions of fellow slave Hetty, pregnant slave women were neither excluded from punishment, nor from hard labor. In fact, they were expected to start working again almost immediately after giving birth (Dunaway 130). Mostly, Prince's narrative perfectly exemplifies how badly slaves were treated, as she writes about the scornful view with which

slave-masters looked at slaves. Prince makes many references to cattle, as slaves were considered property and as such were treated like animals. Slave-masters treated slaves as mere working animals or merchandise. They were sold at an auction, alongside sheep, cows, and other cattle. Female slaves were often called breeders, referring to childbearing (Weld 285). Prince considers this form of psychological abuse, of not being regarded as human beings, worse than the beatings.

Lastly, Elizabeth Keckley and Sojourner Truth also discuss the constant threat of sexual harassment and rape they had to face, just because they were women (Alonzo 121). Keckley is the victim of rape, as she is impregnated against her will by a white man, whereas Truth is subjected to so-called forced breeding, which “manifested itself as an indirect form of rape,” producing children for economic purposes (Berry 79). This experience with slavery largely differed from the male experience: “Female slave narratives deal with themes of sexual vulnerability and agency,” and the control over one’s body, “typically stories of female slaves only hinted at such themes (Harrington 28). It was not uncommon that slave-masters raped and impregnate their slaves. Not only would it fulfil their sexual needs, slave-masters also benefited financially, as slave-children always followed the condition of the mother and thus became the property of the slave-owner (Solinger 33). This practice was known as slave breeding: “It refers to those practices of slave ownership that aimed to influence the reproduction of slaves in order to increase the profit and wealth of slaveholders” (“Women and Slavery”). Because slave women could not only work but also bear children, they were extremely valuable to slave-owners: “Strong black women were sold as breeders valued for their reproductive as well as productive capacity” (Doherty). However, female slaves, like Keckley, could not count on any legal support. Instead, as opposed to free or white women, slave women could not charge their perpetrators with rape, because they were considered the property of their owner and thus their bodies were considered to be possessions (“Women and Slavery”).

What these four female slave narratives have in common is the depiction of typical female slavery themes and characteristics, that embody the female slave experience. Jacobs, Prince, Keckley, and Truth all provide numerous portrayals of punishment, such as beatings and whippings, which male slaves also experienced and wrote about in their narratives. However, what differs is that female slaves emphasized the physiological effect that this physical abuse had, instead of only describing how and why they were punished. Female slave narratives were partly written to record black women’s victimization as slaves: “Primarily, the oppression of slave women was through violence to their bodies. Violence

took various forms, including whipping, rape, sexual abuse, exposure of their genitalia or private body parts, physical deprivation, and mutilation” (Crawford 23). Thus, female slaves’ descriptions of such violence expose the physical and emotional abuses of slavery, which sometimes led to dehumanization at the hands of the slave-masters. Other frequently repeated motifs in female slave narratives include details of the loss of a significant family member, often connected to motherhood, the destruction of the family unit and ties, and the quest for freedom. Especially Prince focuses on motherly love and the bond between a mother and her child, thus directly appealing to women, even though only Prince leaves the narrative childless, feasibly as an act of resistance (Barron 16).

In conclusion, although slave women had to perform hard labor, just like males, forced childbearing and rearing fell upon females as an added burden (Doherty). As a mother, slaves had to helplessly witness their children being sold, which destroyed the family unit, which was of vital importance for female slaves (Weed 126). Pregnant slaves and mothers were, rather surprisingly, not excluded from punishment. Some were even expected to continue working up until childbirth or to immediately start working again after giving birth (Crew 38). Slave women were also more likely to receive punishment, as they offered more resistance. Slaves had to endure frequent punishments, which ranged from beatings and whippings to sexual abuse and rape, which was not only humiliating, but it also made them feel frustrated, anxious, or upset. They had no control over their own bodies. Female slaves were often the sexual object of their master and in some cases, this led to conflicts with their master’s wife. As a result of jealousy and anger, female slaves were also punished by the mistress. Thus, during their time in bondage, female slaves were not only the victim of violence, they also had to face sexual abuse, rape, and destruction of the family unit.

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