Contrasting Perspective Of Slavery In The 1800s In Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl

Dating all the way back to 1619, slavery was a common practice in many places all over the world. It was mostly concentrated in the south US due to an abundance of plantations seeing as the south was more rural. Harriet Jacobs, a young woman born into slavery, spent 16 years of her life in the south as a slave. However, in 1835 she escaped slavery and later on worked to write and publish her life story. She titled her work “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” and published it a while after her escape. In that autobiography, she describes a situation in which she had to fight for sexual justice. Many women during that time also had to fight for these rights due to a similar situation to that of Harriet Jacobs. This led to her work being well known throughout history.

Here aforementioned autobiography was published in 1861 under the name of Linda Brent and was used to describe her life as a slave and how her master treated her. A significant part of this work was her account of sexual offenses that occurred during her time as a slave, generally caused by her master using her for sexual endeavors. In her writing, Jacobs uses a descriptive approach when explaining the actions of her master. While her writing is a series of her own personal stories and is her direct experience, many believed her writing was a work of fiction when it was first published. It was often overlooked for this reason. When describing her encounters with her master Jacobs stated, “He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things.” (Exploring American Histories, 385) It is clear that Jacobs was forced into a position of being seen as an object rather than a human being.

All things considered, Harriet Jacobs not only being a slave but also a woman offers a new perspective on the situation that may not have otherwise been touched on. She presents her experiences in a clear and factual way and does not present any bias aside from describing the hardships she was put through. While other slaves, such as Mary Reynolds, did come forward with their stories in other sources provided in the textbook, Jacobs’ stands out due to her detailed account of her treatment as a slave woman in relation to sexual exploitation. Jacobs’ only reason for writing “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” was to tell her story and provide a dialogue on the theme of sexism in terms of slavery. Seeing as the autobiography is a collection of her personal experiences and does not focus on bias, it seems to be a trustworthy source. Also, there are multiple sources out there that back up the contents of Jacobs’ autobiography.

In conclusion, Harriet Jacobs’ accounts of her life as a woman in slavery in her autobiography provided a contrasting perspective of slavery in the 1800s. Through her accounts of her mistreatment by her master in a sexual manner, she provided a strong point of view on sexism and offered her position as a woman in slavery. As she stated in her work, “Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall,” (Exploring American Histories, 385) which greatly describes the fear she experienced during her 16 years in the south with her master. Overall many women as slaves in the south and more than likely all over the world experienced a great deal of sexual injustice and Harriet Jacobs’ writing served as a step towards slave women fighting for their rights and taking back the sexual justice that was taken away from them from their masters.

Sources:

1. Hewitt, Nancy A., and Steven F. Lawson. Exploring American Histories: A Survey. Bedford/St. Martins, Macmillan Learning, 2019.