
The Lives of the Three Feminist and Human Rights Activists, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Harriet Tubman

The Three Harriets: Jacobs, Beecher-Stowe and Tubman

The female name, Harriet, has historically symbolised feminine virtue, strength and fortitude. Meaning “estate ruler” or “she who rules the home,” communicates the natural leadership ability of Harriet and even hints at her ambidexterity and her skills to operate affairs and manoeuvre life in both domains of the household and the world of work. Three notable women emerge: Harriet Ann Jacobs, Harriet Beecher-Stowe and Harriet Tubman. Heavily involved in social activism, these Harriets have shaped human rights and empowered so many to break down the social walls and pursue their self-determined dreams.

Harriet Ann Jacobs, abolitionist and feminist, documents her life as a slave woman in the work “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” (1862). The chapter on Childhood relates the happy days as a young, innocent girl. However, the deaths of her mother and her mother’s mistress are blows which expose her to the horrors and harsh realities of slavery specifically for the female slave. The chapter on “The Jealous Mistress” lays bare the sexual exploitation of the female slave and the master’s control over her body and the resultant tensions in the home. The slave-girl’s guilt is compounded by the suspicion and malice of her mistress who recognizes the sexual relations between female slave and her husband, hence, the female slave is the target of both master and mistress. Child-bearing becomes a business as slave-masters father children with their female slaves. The cuckolded wives turn a blind eye and sell the children as property, separating family. A Perilous Passage in a Slave Girl’s Life tells about the slave-girl’s marred innocence, spoiled childhood and the inevitable surrender of her virginity. Although a slave girl tries to follow morals and standards of society by marrying, the narrator begs not to be judged a loose woman. The Loophole of Retreat describes the fugitive slave’s hide-out while she escapes the clutches of her slave-master, Dr. Flint. Dr. Flint rightly characterizes the master for he is stony-hearted, tyrannical and unsympathetic of the repercussions of his actions. He is self-absorbed and is bent on spoiling his female slaves.

Harriet Beecher Stowe is the female author of the renowned Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) which advocates abolitionism and becomes a best seller. The chapter on “The Mother’s Struggle” relays the feelings and reactions of a slave-mother whose child is about to be sold. The child belongs to the slave-owner, not the mother, and by law is his property. Eliza flees slavery in an effort to keep her child who is about to be sold. Stowe also points to the hypocrisy of slavery and the denial of Christian principles. All is not lost and Eliza resorts to the Quaker settlement where there reside the most fervent abolitionists, and friends of humanity. Stowe outlines the heavenly temperament of the Quakers in their genuine Christian friendship, compassion on the plight of slaves, and active effort in sheltering fleeing slaves. Eliza plans to cross the border to Canada since after the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and the Kansas-Arkansas Act (1854). During slavery, Canada becomes the usual destination for runaway slaves especially since after the laws the Kansas-Arkansas Act and the Fugitive Slave Act. These laws stigmatize permanently the slave regardless of location whether in the slaveholding states or free-states. The

Underground Railroad, the route by which slaves got to Canada, is a network in which the Quakers are active participants. The chapter on The Martyr relates the story of Uncle Tom's torture and death at the hands of his own slave-master, Legree. Because of the many slave escapes, Uncle Tom is suspected of being an accomplice. The slave-owner's cruelty, ingratitude, and inhumanity are contrasted to Uncle Tom's genuine Christian heart of self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and love.

Harriet Tubman, born to Ben Ross and Harriet Green in 1820 in Maryland. Although known during her enslavement as Araminta or "Minty", she would be more identified as Harriet, her mother's namesake and subsequently living up to the expectations of this name during her lifetime as she led her entire family to freedom. Notable is the fact that Tubman endured the ravages of cruel inhumanity which drove her to seek liberty. She was beaten so severely that she suffered head injuries causing excruciating migraines and apoplectic fits. All about her body were the bruises and scars attesting to brutal whipping. In spite of these hardships, Tubman also was reported to have been blessed with a prophetic and visionary gift which empowered her to direct others. As the architect of the Underground Railroad, an ex-slave living in America, she had to collude with several abolitionists and spies, even meeting with Mr. Frederick Douglass. She wittily affirms, "I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say; I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger." She engineered a complex network which conveyed runaway slaves due North, to the more liberal Free States. After escaping slavery herself, she could not bear knowing that her family and friends were still in bondage. Therefore, she trailblazed a path, leading hundreds of slaves to freedom. In addition to her emancipatory profile, Tubman also collaborated with the Northern Army, working as an undercover spy and after the war, established a home for senior citizens. In 1850, the Northbound route to freedom had to be modified because of the introduction of the Fugitive

Slave Law that compelled all to cooperate with the slaveowner and recapture slaves, whether in the free or slaveholding zones. As a result, the Underground Railroad led runaway slaves to Canada which was decidedly anti-slavery. She lived until the ripe age of 92, when she died from pneumonia among her family, friends and admirers.