

Slavery's Women

Traditionally we learn the effects that slavery has had, and in some ways still has, on blacks: exploiting labor, undermining identity, separating mother and child, dehumanizing slaves who are the master's blood relatives, dying at the end of a whip or barrel of a gun, and sowing fear to prevent advancement of the black race. We know that these are the horrors of slavery that blacks faced everyday, but we are embarrassed to admit that the United States was fundamentally structured in inequalities; our embarrassment and guilt associated with slavery often makes us dismiss how the privileged were also negatively impacted. The need to maintain power corrupted and consumed slave masters, causing them to become suspicious and power hungry, while the white mistress had no choice but to succumb to the demands of her husband and other white men. This essay will examine how script writers understand how slavery has impacted white women as shown through the roles and relationships between Martha "Patsy" Jefferson and Sally Hemings in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Jefferson in Paris* and Tiny Andrews's *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*. In both films the men exercise their power over the women. Jefferson's daughter Martha, also referred to as Patsy, finds herself trapped between being controlled by Jefferson and trying to empower herself by degrading her father's mistress, Sally. In *Jefferson in Paris*, the relationship between Hemings and Patsy mirrors the inferiority that white and black women suffered during slavery, but *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* depicts Martha as trying yet failing to subdue Hemings who has more intellectual, sexual, and persuasive power over Jefferson.

The last scene in *Jefferson in Paris* portrays the equal disempowerment of white and black women within the patriarchal social order of slavery. Sally and Patsy are both silent and submissive while their fates are determined by the men in their lives. The scene begins with James and Sally entering Jefferson's study room; James stands tall, looks Jefferson in the eyes, and confidently tells him that he will be staying in Paris with Sally. While James physically and verbally confronts Jefferson, Sally remains behind her brother, literarily distancing herself from the ensuing argument between the two men in her life, while figuratively removing herself from this power struggle between the white "slave owner" and the black "slave." Meanwhile, James's poise, facial expression, and verbal response show his intensity and determination in refusing to back down. To further empower himself, James disempowers Sally by deliberately saying "we"; he refers to Sally and himself when arguing with Jefferson even though he never asks Sally what she wants. Similarly, when Jefferson refers to Sally and what she wants, he does not take his eyes off James or direct his attention to Sally. He does not give Sally the power to speak about what she wants or decide what should become of her. Sally's powerlessness and lack of involvement in this matter is made explicitly clear when James replies to Jefferson by saying, "She don't understand nothing, she do as I say." James's response reveals that men believe women lack the intelligence to decide what they want or what is best for them and, as a result, must listen and abide by what the men decide for them.

Sally remains silent, unengaged, and acquiesces to the social power structure where men dictate the fate of who they believe to be "their" women, as though the women are objects to be possessed and controlled. Sally only faces the men, looks up, or talks when she is asked to talk; this interaction, or lack of interaction, shows that the men need to give her the power to relay what she wants. When Sally is given the power to "decide," Jefferson controls her response

through manipulation, by posing his question in a negative manner. When asking her if she wants the same freedom he has proposed for James, Jefferson ominously replies “Now what do you say Sally? Think long and hard.” Before she has time to contemplate what Jefferson has just said, Jefferson thinks for her and tells her that granting her freedom would mean that she would have to leave Monticello and find work elsewhere. The prospect of being alone, unemployed, and responsible for supporting her children leads to Jefferson’s success in controlling Sally’s response, as shown when she breaks down under the pressure and cries. He uses her emotional instability to control her and to indirectly control James, who believes that he has his sister’s best interest at heart, while giving the appearance that they decide their own fates.

Once Jefferson and James have agreed upon an arrangement where James, Sally, and all of Sally’s children will eventually be freed if they return with Jefferson to the United States, Jefferson interrupts Patsy’s piano playing and “asks” her to step into the room. He tells her what he is going to do, how his decision will affect her, and that she will be required to carry out her father’s promise if anything should happen to him. Jefferson does not ask her if she is willing to take on this responsibility but degradingly asks her “do you understand me?” She literally takes a deep swallow, simultaneously symbolizing how she swallows her pride by conceding to her father’s command. When Patsy hears about Sally’s children and what her responsibilities to their freedom will be, she realizes that her father’s promiscuity with his slave girl is real and, now, after hearing about the children, publicly visible; Patsy’s head slowly falls as her eyes become glossed over and she purses her lips to restrain from crying. When asked if she “binds” herself to her father’s promise, she hesitates for a moment at the depth of what she has found out and what that implies for her, but ultimately gives in to her father’s wishes.

Slaves are viewed as lowly people who exist to work for the whites, who have no power in what happens to them, and who have, in this instance, been given more power than Patsy; Patsy now has an obligation to uphold a promise to her father and his slaves. As Jefferson begins taking his oath over the Bible the camera pans out to show the similarities between the positions of Patsy and Sally. They silently stand in the background; they look down and away from the events taking place; they appear somber, sad, and almost depressed; and they are out of focus of the camera. Slavery has placed Sally in a position where her master overpowers her brother who tries to prove his masculinity by protecting his sister. James’s desire for masculine power causes him to fight for what he believes to be his sister’s wants and needs, but in the process he tries to exercise an almost equivalent control over Sally as Jefferson does. Similarly, Patsy’s future is decided for her by Jefferson, but, unlike Sally, Patsy’s new, found obligation, as dictated by her father, forces her into a degraded position of equality with her father’s slaves, a group of people whom society deems as lowly and inhuman. Even the cinematography emphasizes the importance and power of the men by clearly focusing on them while the backgrounds remain fuzzy and out of focus. Contrary to the men who have a commanding position in the foreground, Sally stands behind James, blending in with the background, while Patsy remains behind Jefferson.

Contrary to the equal disempowerment of white and black women in *Jefferson in Paris*, in *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*, Martha Jefferson tries to exert superior power as a white, but Sally Hemings gains more power than Martha through her intimate relationship with Jefferson. At the end of *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* Jefferson, dies and, Martha relays

the contents of Jefferson's will to Sally. Both women are clearly upset, but Sally remains quiet and composed as Martha uncomfortably paces back and forth, tries to hold back tears, and talks quickly. Martha struggles to maintain composure and control her emotions as she realizes that any semblance of power she had as the president's daughter has been lost; Jefferson provides her with no inheritance, no bequeaths, nothing. While Jefferson's death leaves Martha absolutely powerless both financially and socially, Jefferson's will includes a list of five slaves whom he could afford to free, two of whom are Sally's children. Martha sincerely tells Sally that she was not mentioned in the will but was included on the slave inventory list. She then claims that Jefferson would want to keep the Hemings family together so she is willing to exercise her power as Jefferson's eldest daughter and override his written instructions. Her desire for control escalates, and she forcefully commands Sally to look at her when she speaks, but Sally does not look up or face Martha as she defiantly says "no." When Sally does turn towards Martha, she physically equalizes her physical position by standing up; she figuratively rises from her lowered status as she confronts Martha saying, "You look at me." Sally reverberates and expands upon this notion of equality by telling Martha that they are the same, they are related, and therefore they have the same blood. Not only are they both women who experience powerlessness in their society, but Sally acknowledges the intimate familial bond in an attempt to get Martha to recognize the similarities between white and black women and realize that she does not have power over Sally.

While they are both women with the same wants and needs who have suffered from the dynamics of their society, Jefferson leaves Sally with a greater sense of power. Long before his death he gave Sally documentation that freed her, meaning that Sally chose to stay with Jefferson, while Martha had no choice but to obey and remain with Jefferson. Jefferson provides Sally with choice, with the freedom of moving on after his death, but his daughter inherits debt, a questionable family reputation, and the obligation of preserving his legacy for the rest of her life. Martha believes that she obtains power after Jefferson's death and exercises her new-found power by going against her father's instructions and by controlling Sally's future; Martha's power dissipates as Sally confronts her about their blood relation and Jefferson's documentation of Sally's freedom. Sally is not merely portrayed as equal to Martha but gains greater power than Martha because she chose to stay with Jefferson, to reside at Monticello, and maintain her current lifestyle, while Martha lacks the power to control her life, receives no economic or social power from his death, and remains enslaved to preserving Jefferson's image for the remainder of her life.

In *Jefferson in Paris*, Sally finds herself caught in the middle of a power struggle between her master and her brother. Although these men are deciding her fate, they do not allow Sally to tell them what she wants. She is only given minimal power over her life when the men give it to her, but Jefferson manipulates his question concerning her freedom and the freedom of her children so that she answers the way he wants. Similarly, Patsy's life is also controlled by the man in her life, in this case Jefferson. He tells Patsy what she must do in the future without concern for what she needs or wants. Cinematically, both women stand behind the men, remain silent, look down, and appear out of focus. Contrary to the equal powerlessness of women in *Jefferson in Paris*, in *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*, Martha attempts to empower herself by granting freedom to Sally who is still Jefferson's property, but Sally steals that power back from Martha when she produces a letter verifying her freedom. Sally is given an uncharacteristic

amount of power over a white woman during that time and a fictionalized power for a black slave girl. While the entire and true story of the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson is unknown and still currently debated, her cinematic depiction in *Jefferson in Paris* is more realistic than that in *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Jefferson in Paris* follows the historically accurate gender structure of a patriarchal society by depicting Sally Hemings as young, weak, and submissive to the men in her life; Sally's lack of power mirrors the inferior position of Jefferson's white daughter Patsy. Contrary to Hemings's relationships in *Jefferson in Paris*, writer Tiny Andrews's *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* empowers Hemings through her high education, sexual equality, and power of persuasion over Jefferson. All of these notions of power are uncharacteristic of slaves. Andrews heightens Hemings's power by juxtaposing her against a historically accurate portrayal of the actions of a typical white "mistress-like" character through Martha Jefferson who is unattractive, jealous, and conflicted. Andrews publicly claimed that her motivation behind the creation of *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* was to give a voice to all slaves and, more specifically, to empower black women by portraying Sally Hemings as a private person who is not a passive victim. By depicting Sally as a strong powerful woman, Andrews creates a false sense of comfort where black girls are transformed into women who willingly enter intimate relationships with their masters and who chose to suffer slavery to remain in such relationships. Although her goal is valiant, Andrews's attempt to empower blacks disserves those who experienced the violence and devastation of slavery. Her film fails to force the audience to wrestle and struggle with the horrors of slavery, the current effects of slavery, and what constitutes true freedom.