

Film Review

Harriet

A Film by Perfect World Pictures

Directed by Kasi Lemmons

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Produced by Gregory Allen Howard, Kasi Lemmons
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Author Note

This special film review is written from the perspective of the author, a certified social worker and an ordained clergywoman who dedicatedly serves others in the areas of social justice and human rights. The insights or views expressed in this review represent those of the author herself and her faith communities. The author has no conflicts of interest.

Introduction

*I was never yours, Gideon. I was never anybody's property. I reasoned I had one of two things
I had a right to: liberty or death; and if I couldn't have one, I'd have the other.*

– Harriet Tubman

From the movie, Harriet

By all worldly logic and standards, the woman who came to be known as the Moses of her people would be perceived as an anomaly. As the original Greek term *anomolia* means that which is or one who is “uneven” or “irregular,” Harriet Tubman in no way fit the *regularly* expected description of one who was so courageous and daring as to almost single-handedly defy the immoral stranglehold that the human-created and human-imposed evil system of slavery had on her, her family and her people. Hence, as a perceived anomaly, Harriet’s life begs the question, “How can we possibly account for a life such as hers by using mere worldly logic and standards alone?” Truth is, we cannot. Harriet, both as a person and a movie, cannot be grasped

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or elevated to the high stature each deserve without viewing and valuing her life through the spiritual/theological lens in which she lived it. It is only by examining and appreciating the personally loving, intimate and dependent relationship of faith Harriet had in and with her God that context and credence can be given to the amazing, massive and even miraculous accomplishments she achieved, particularly in view of the legion of limitations she faced, both socially and personally.

As the film depicts, Harriet, a young enslaved, illiterate and financially impoverished woman prone to epileptic spells, found herself in her early twenties in the unenviable position of being forced to leave her family and husband, all of whom she dearly loved, to escape the cruelty of the enslavers and the slave system that sought to devalue, denigrate and destroy her. Equipped with total faith in her God and a burning zeal in her soul for what she knew rightfully belonged to her, this small-framed, iconic freedom fighter seized a moment in history that ultimately led her to actualize the high spiritual calling in her life: to obtain the God-given right to freedom for herself and countless others.

Hence, *Harriet* is as much a theological narrative on what can happen when one becomes a majority with one's God as it is a social critique on the unbridled evils of humanity, especially the still unfathomable evil that came to be known as chattel slavery. Harriet viewed slavery as a vile and wicked idea as well as a beast that needed to be slain, for, as she emphatically tells her attempted enslaver, Gideon Brodess, God created all people to be free, "not for people to own other people." In *Harriet*, we dramatically witness her vow come alive: to commit "every ounce of blood [she has] to this end." As one who both experienced and witnessed slavery's detriment and destruction to the lives of those it entrapped in its vice, Harriet knew all too well that slavery was not just a peculiar institution; it was a perverted and pathological one as well.

In Summary....

Harriet opens with Minty (Harriet's nickname, which is short for her birth name, Araminta) in a supine position on the ground obviously experiencing one of her *spells*. It is important to note here that Minty, superbly played by British-born actress Cynthia Enrivo, had experienced unexpected blackouts since her early teens as a result of being hit in the head with a lead iron by an overseer in her efforts to protect a field hand trying to escape the overseer's wrath. As later revealed in the film, Harriet attributes this injury to be significant to her revelatory relationship with God when she commented, "The hole in my head [from the lead iron] just made me hear God's Voice more clear." For her, this included receiving revealing dreams and visions that aided her in her many safe escapes from the South as she led herself and others out of the vile bondage of slavery to freedom.

As Minty awakens from her spell, John, her husband, played by Zackary Momoh, is leaning over her. After she lovingly speaks his name and he lovingly teases her back about it, he assists Minty up and shares the good news with her that they have a letter from the lawyer they hired documenting that Minty's mother, Rit (Vanessa Bell Calloway), was supposed to have been given her freedom at the age of 45 as well as any children she had while enslaved. This was extremely exciting news to John, a free man, and Minty, because they wanted to have children --free children, not enslaved children. And since the law said children will take the status of the mother, it was important that Minty, through the rights of her mother's freedom, become free as well. Her father Ben (Clarke Peters), already a free man (although not free to actually protect

or be with his wife and children), joins this opening scene in the hope that the lawyer's findings will result in the freedom for their family that they all desire and deserve.

The next scene is that of a religious service taking place in the front yard of Minty's enslaver, Edward Brodess (Mike Marunde). After the enslaved plantation minister, Rev. Greene (Vondie Curtis-Hall), finishes his sermon by reminding the enslaved to obey their enslavers and those gathered begin to leave, John and Minty, supported by Minty's father, get an audience with Brodess, along with his wife, Eliza (Jennifer Nettles), and her son, Gideon (Joe Alwyn). The Brodess' are already sitting on the front porch overseeing the outdoor religious service to make sure it favored their positions as enslavers. Rit and two of Harriet's brothers are present as well.

John shares with Brodess the information given to them by the lawyer along with the request for Minty's freedom so their children can be born free. Brodess becomes outraged by the request. After asking to see the lawyer's letter, which he instantly shreds into pieces, tells the family in quite emphatic terms that they will not be set free and will always remain his property. He also tells Ben and John they were no longer welcome to come and be around "his enslave[d]." Heartbroken and in tears, Rit tells Brodess that he "is the devil" and Minty, also visibly upset, is seen shortly afterwards running to her favorite tree where she goes to talk to God. Here, on bended knees and in tears, she pleads with God to change the heart of her enslaver; however, if his heart won't change, she states, "then take him." Gideon, who follows her, hears her prayer plea and tells her, quite condescendingly, that God does not listen to the prayers of a "n_____." (*For personal reasons I do not let myself say or write this word when intended to ontologically devalue and demean people by denying the inherent sacredness of all*). After expressing his hopes to forget her name as he would a favorite pig as well as slapping her after she hits him to stop his unwanted advances, Gideon summons Minty to "come on" back to the house.

Within two weeks, Brodess is dead and Minty is shown having a dream-image signifying his death prior to its occurrence. At his funeral Minty and Gideon look at each other, no doubt remembering her prayer asking God to "take him." Consequently, Brodess' death leaves the family in a vulnerable financial state and the proposed option to address their monetary woes is to sell some of their enslaved. Harriet then receives another vision of her need to run and she realizes she is going to be one of the ones sold. This invokes fear because of the painful memory of two of her sisters being sold in the South, never to be heard from again. Minty, more than anything, deeply fears being sold into a strange land and separated forever from her parents, husband, siblings and all whom she knows and loves. It is these fears, along with an unquenchable desire to be free from such an evil system that splits up loved ones, that propels Minty to escape. After saying goodbye to her parents and purposely leaving John out of fear of him being put back into slavery if they are caught, Minty runs away, literally, for her life.

Minty's escape is climatically dramatized in a scene in which Gideon, along with other slave hunters, closes in on her on a bridge. Well aware of the meaning of this impinging entrapment, she surveys the rushing waters below as Gideon approaches her, trying to make going back with him sound appealing. This includes him saying he decided not to sell her and that he "won't hurt [her] bad" if she returns "home." Unmoved by his disingenuous semantics, Minty looks at him and unwaveringly states, "I'mma be free or die!" With these words still reverberating for Gideon to comprehend, Minty jumps into the river. She not only survives, but, with reliance on God and the aide of humane others, finds her way to freedom over a month later in Philadelphia.

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It is in Philadelphia that Harriet meets the abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor, William Still (Leslie Odom Jr.), and others active in its operations. It is also the place where she takes on the name, Harriet Tubman -- Harriet being her mother's first name and Tubman her husband's last. Her meeting with Still along with her miraculously obtained freedom and her name change, changes the trajectory of Harriet's life and, as her life's purpose apparently dictated, the lives of countless others. For after a year of being free but lonely, Harriet makes the daring decision to return to the South to help free her husband and family. Although painfully learning on her first trip back that John has married a free woman with whom he is now expecting a child, Harriet, even in the midst of this great pain, realizes and accepts that God sent her south to free others. After freeing two of her brothers and several other freedom seekers on her first return, Harriet makes several dangerous trips back to free many others, including her parents and a niece, Anger (Aria Brooks). Not only does she join the organized multi-state abolitionist effort known as the Underground Railroad, but Harriet, with her continued reliance on and faith in God guiding and protecting her and all whom she helped lead to freedom, soon becomes known as the greatest conductor it ever had.

Harriet is a cinematic dramatization of how and why she rightly earned this title of "greatest conductor." You see, despite many posters widely spread throughout the entire region, as well as parts of the North, frantically and fanatically seeking her with a substantial reward affixed to her capture, she led countless enslaved safely to freedom without ever being apprehended. Even after congressional passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act (a law even for free states that required all escaped enslaved persons upon capture, to be returned to their enslavers), Harriet was undeterred in her resolve to *help set captives free*. This resolve included, as was shown towards the conclusion of the film, her role as a commander during the Civil War as she serves with the Union to defeat the slavocracy of the South, while helping set free many other enslaved. Even after returning to her home and family and friends in Auburn, New York for the latter years of her life, Harriet continued to fight for the rights of women and helped to provide housing and care for the elderly and the newly freed enslaved -- all of which were a part of her push for human rights for all. For Harriet, there were no physical deterrents or social detractors significant enough to stop her from responding to the needs of others or what she believed God required of her. This was the source of her great power. This was the source of her ability to attract others, both Blacks and Whites alike, to her cause for freedom for herself and others.

While the film *Harriet* centers around Harriet's adult life as an abolitionist and freedom fighter, the film also exposes the life and character of the enslavers, bounty hunters and others also caught and bound in the web of human entanglement that slavery is. Both Eliza and Gideon Brodess as mother and son, represent the complex darkness of slavery. Eliza's whole sense of self was based on shallow values that required her, as she so thought, to compete with other enslavers in having "n's" to determine her self-worth and value. The sick irony of this was lost on her, Gideon and many other enslavers who failed to grasp that the very ones they mistreated so inhumanely were the very ones on whom they attached their own sense of self.

The peculiarity of slavery as well as its perversion and pathology are well illustrated in many scenes in *Harriet*. One in particular occurs when Eliza, after Harriet's sister Rachel (Deborah Ayorinde) dies, is so guilt prone about how badly she treated her and, undoubtedly, contributed to her death, that she becomes paranoid that Rachel's eight-year-old daughter, metaphorically named Anger, blames her for her mother's death and is trying to poison her. After whining and complaining to Gideon that she feels like she is "in prison surrounded by

hostile Black faces,” Eliza, from her supposed sick bed, slaps the tea tray from the hands of a stunned and frightened Anger. Most revealing about this scene is how heartless, cold and disconnected both Eliza and Gideon are from the human reality of the lives of those they were imprisoning, including that of an innocent, naïve and traumatized eight-year old who is now an orphan. This film clearly reveals that while the system of slavery afforded whites the opportunity to vent and project the evils of their hearts onto the enslaved, it did not and could not eradicate their evil nor that their inner state of Being was just as miserable, if not more miserable, than those whom they evilly and miserably enslaved.

The reality of slavery’s reciprocal bondage for the enslaver and the enslaved alike is witnessed in Gideon’s complex and conflicted relationship with Harriet, to whom he was obviously attracted. Despite his natural and understandable attraction to her, his self-identity as an enslaver and hers as one who he believes, according to the social system of slavery, he has the right to *own as his property*, prevented him from approaching and treating her in the way he actually felt. His life is then consumed with his desire and need to find Harriet for these juxtaposed feelings of liking (and even loving her) and the belief that the only way to have her is by keeping her as his enslaved. Thus, we again see the peculiarity, perverseness and pathology of slavery.

We see this same peculiar perverseness and pathology play out in the character of Bigger Long (Omar Dorsey) who, as a free Black man, carves out a role in the madness of slavery by becoming a Black bounty hunter. Bigger, for a price that far exceeds money, ruthlessly tracks down his own enslaved brothers and sisters. The distortion of his conflicted and, apparently, haunting role plays out in the scene where he kicks and stomps to death another free person, Black entrepreneur Marie Buchanon (Janelle Monáe), in her own boarding house in Philadelphia where he and Gideon went on a tip that Harriet was staying there. Bigger’s last stomp was particularly vicious as Marie named his evil by identifying him as the traitor he was and one who, although supposedly free, was not free at all, for he was still enslaved to an enslaver and slavery itself. Marie’s words rang true not long afterwards. Gideon shoots and kills Bigger to prevent him from shooting and killing Harriet as they continued to pursue her capture. Ironically, Bigger, in the end, is killed for the very role he took on in his desperate efforts to be in the peculiar, perverted pathology that slavery is.

Just as *Harriet* is a study of the dark, dangerous and deadly complexities of human life, it is also about the hope, faith, determination and resiliency of the human spirit and will. It is also about the possibilities of conversion, transformation and redemption as evidenced through the character, Walter (Henry Hunter Hall). Walter, who knew and initially worked with Bigger, was a paid Black slave-tracker. Walter, however, has a conversion experience when he witnesses Harriet have one of her spells that made it obvious to him that she was talking to her God -- and that “it seemed God was talking back to [her].” Once Harriet came out of her spell, she knew to go in a different direction than where Gideon and Bigger were waiting to capture her and those with her. As he continued to watch the daring bravery of Harriet result in all of them risking their lives to walk through a river to freedom despite much fear and resistance from the group, Walter made a pivotal decision in his life. He no longer wanted to be a tracker, nor a traitor. Instead, recognizing and awed by the fact that there was apparently a force (and a Source) greater than the slavery system designed to entrap Harriet, Walter opted to offer his services to help Harriet assist other enslaved freedom seekers become free. And this he did, representing the transformation that is possible when our wills, hearts and minds are rightly aligned to higher ideals and purposes beyond our own limited and egoistic self-interests.

Upon Reflection...

Harriet is a film that should inspire, encourage and challenge us all to have our own inner reflections and *reckonings* as well as conversions and transformations as we examine where and how we genuinely are in advancing the cause of freedom for ourselves and others equally. It is a film that should have us identify and define the theological and the anthropological views we hold that determine our own way of perceiving and relating to others based on these views. The transcendent nature of Harriet's accomplishments is undeniable and can easily fall into the category of the incredulous minus this theological and anthropological understanding. And while there is an intensity about Harriet that creates an aura that seems to transport her beyond the worldly norm into the realm of the mystical, Harriet is very clear about how she was able to fulfill the daring feats she accomplished. As she tells William Still on return from one of her several freedom escapades back into the dangerous slave territories of the South, "God showed me how."

It has always been Harriet's tenacious faith that long ago gave me great appreciation for the role and contributions she made to our freedom journey as a people. This movie has helped me to appreciate her all the more. Even after seeing this film for the sixth time, I never tired of watching, witnessing, championing and being moved by her God-driven bravery. As an ordained minister, I was most impressed with how she was able, in a time when seemingly all odds were against her on all levels, to commandeer a different reality that she responded to based on her hearing and heeding the Voice of God. Indeed, she entrusted her fate and her freedom not to what she saw that sought to enslave her outwardly, but rather to what she knew and experienced that liberated her inwardly.

Unless we acknowledge and appreciate the highly evolved spiritual Being that Harriet, not just was but still is, we will keep her minimized in history and in our own lives as an anomaly. There is a danger to making people anomalies. When we do, we make the excuse that we have not the inner capacity to accomplish in our own current day the same needed great deeds that Harriet and many others of history have so courageously done. The Truth is: Harriet Tubman was not the anomaly; slavery was. Slavery was and always shall be a horrific anomaly to who we are and how we are to relate to one another. And this includes the slavery that is inherent in all isms that are used to pit us against one another by maintaining human hierarchies of insignificance. Just as human greed, ethnic arrogance and the disregard for the rights and needs of others ushered slavery onto the shores as well as into the soul of this nation, we find ourselves still today relentlessly plagued by those of us who wrongly believe we have the right to ontologically minimize and ethnically minoritize whole segments of people by claiming theological and anthropological privileges none of us have. *Harriet* is a powerful disclaimer to this illusion. It is a testament to what is possible when we commit the entirety of our existence to a cause that benefits humanity.

Given the indefatigable depth of Harriet's faith in God and her love for her family and for her people, even as she made her physical transition from this earthly world, her last words aligned with how she lived: "I go to prepare a place for you." *Harriet*, as a cinematic presentation that captures the indomitable spirit of its protagonist, is one we should all see. We should see it to be encouraged and inspired as we face our own life odds -- life odds that can be transcended as Harriet shows us through her own life of valiantly and selflessly being willing to die to honor her passionate knowing that all have the right to not just live, but to live free. We should see *Harriet* to be reminded that we have the right to claim this same freedom for ourselves, just as we have the responsibility to keep offering this same freedom to others. This is the summation of Harriet's *raison d'être*.



Harriet Tubman (far left) at her home in Auburn, New York, with family and neighbors rescued from slavery. Photograph circa 1887.