

# Meanings of Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*

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## Introduction

Although much time has passed since the slave trade had been abolished, slave narratives are still widely read across the world. For example, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents of a Slave Girl* became one of the best-selling books in Japan in 2017. This reveals that contemporary readers do not consider slavery as a thing of the past, but something that still exists in the present as they live in a society with wide income disparity where women are more deprived. Alongside the classical slave narrative, contemporary writers attempt to recover the lost voices of slaves by writing neo-slave narratives. Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010) provides such an example. *The Long Song* tells the story of July, who recounts her time as a young slave during the period of the abolition of slavery in Jamaica. July is kidnapped by Caroline Mortimer, the sister of John Howarth—the plantation owner—to become a housemaid in the master's house.

In the writing of *The Long Song*, Levy explains why she decided to write the novel:

At a conference in London, several years ago, the topic for discussion was the legacy of slavery. A young woman stood up to ask a heartfelt question of the panel: How could she be proud of her Jamaican roots, she wanted to know, when her ancestors had been slaves? I cannot recall the panel's response to the woman's question but, as I sat silently in the audience, I do remember my own. Of Jamaican heritage myself, I wondered why anyone would feel any ambivalence or shame at having a slave ancestry? Had she never felt the sentiments once expressed to me by a Jamaican acquaintance of mine? 'If our ancestors survived the slave ships they were strong. If they survived the plantations they were clever.' It is a rich and proud heritage. It was at that moment that I felt something stirring in me. Could a novelist persuade this young woman to have pride in her slave ancestors through telling her a story? That was where the idea for *The Long Song* started. ( 'The Writing of *The Long Song*' )

This episode reveals that her main purpose for writing the novel is to encourage people with a heritage of slavery to be proud of their ancestry. In other words, by portraying the strength and resilience of the slaves, Levy endorsed them in a more positive and individual light rather than depicting their helplessness.

Levy's *The Long Song* has been examined in Maria Helena Lima's 'A Written Song' and Elif Öztapak-Avci's 'Playing Bad for White Ears'. Lima reads the novel as a metafictional neo-slave narrative, contrasting to the traditional historical novels, while Öztapak-Avci focuses on the narration of the novel. As the novel reveals a part of history that has been forgotten, this paper is in line with Lima's argument to read the novel as a metafictional neo-slave narrative, however, I shall place more emphasis on how the form of metafiction is appropriate in questioning the legacy of slavery and undoing the fabrication of race.

Levy's *The Long Song* is an example of a metanarrative fiction with the author—presumably July—narrating the story, and her son, Thomas Kinsman, beginning and ending the narrative. One of the first works of fiction to employ this metanarrative technique was Denis Didrot's *Jacques the Fatalist*, which used metanarrative fiction to question realism and fatalism. Similarly, Levy's *The Long Song* questions what is real and what is fiction.

On explaining the metanarrative fiction, Linda Hutcheon considers that metafiction problematises the question of historical knowledge, drawing on the argument of Hayden White who argued that 'The very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which "the true" is identified with "the real" only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity' (Hutcheon476, White11, Nooran212-213). In other words, fictional and historical realities are conditioned by the possibility of narration, and historical realities are actually constructed (Nooran 212-213).

Metanarratives problematise the question of historical knowledge by juxtaposing self-reflective accounts. In *The Long Song*, when elderly July is recounting the Christmas dinner at the planter's home, she is interrupted by her son who says she should tell readers about the Baptist War that happened that time and its leader, Sam Sharp. However, July says that she did not witness the rebellion herself and refuses to craft a story according to her son's wishes. Instead, she advises her readers to read *The Great Slave Rebellion of Jamaica* (1832) by George Dawson, a Baptist minister (87).

July's claim of not experiencing the Baptist War as written in a historical account, and her advice to read the historical account, reveals how each one of us experiences history differently, and how most of us are unaware of what is happening when a historical event is taking place. Similarly, when history is recorded, only the major event is accounted for, while the experiences of individuals remain untold. History is one of the grand narratives and the reality depicted in history books is not always deemed real by the people who have actually lived through the experience. Levy reveals the truth of history by foregrounding the gap between what July knows and what the history tells us.

On writing of the novel, Levy states: 'Dramatic events happened in Jamaica during this time—real events, like the Baptist Wars, the period of Apprenticeship, and emancipation

itself—but again, just like you or me, July is never really at the centre of the action. She hears about it, is affected by it, but her experience of her times is an individual one, full of action of her own.'

### The Real and the Imaginary

Levy is careful not to follow the great narrative of the history, but instead reconstructs the history experienced by an individual at the time of the Baptist War. Furthermore, the novels question the representation of the event, foregrounding the uncertainty and ambiguity on the real and the fictive. Three events in the novel demonstrate that what we believe happened may not have actually happened in reality, but had been fabricated. One of these events is the suicide of John Howarth, the master at Amity plantation. On witnessing the brutality inflicted on a Baptist bishop by fellow white settlers, Howarth commits suicide out of desperation with the white men and the unethicalness of colonisation. However, his sister—July's mistress, Caroline Mortimer—fiercely denies his suicide, claiming that her brother would not commit such an unchristian act (121). Partly from fear of being punished for her brother's sin, Caroline refuses her brother's suicide and makes up a story that he was shot by Nimrod, a free black man hiding in the master's room. With the death of Nimrod and Tam Dewar, an overseer, Caroline succeeds in convincing people that her brother was killed by a free black man, thereby justifying the conflict between the white planters and the black slaves, and enforcing the myth that the whites were pitted against the blacks.

When Nimrod was attacked by Dewar, July escaped to a slave quarter, attempting to save Nimrod from Dewar. When she was about to be killed by Dewar, her long lost mother—Kitty—attacked him and urged her daughter to run away. The narrator reveals that Kitty is later hanged on a tree. July's mother is considered as an unforgivable sinner who killed a white man and is called a 'devil' by the white public in a courtroom; however, the novel reveals the truth behind this incident: Kitty killed the man who had raped her to save her daughter. Hence, this episode reveals the true story behind the murder, demonstrating that what is considered the truth in the courtroom is not always true when seen from a different perspective.

Another instance where Levy demonstrates the fabrication of 'truth' is when the portrait artist, Mr. Francis Bear, paints Mr. Goodwin a little older and Mrs. Goodwin a little more slender in their portraits (238). When Mr. Bear paints the view of the lands of Amity into the background of the portrait, a free boilerman—Dublin Hilton—finds out that the painter ignores 'the higgledy-piggledy of the negro village'(252). The artist tells Dublin Hilton that 'he admired the view of the lands from that position, but had no intension of including the disgusting negro hovels' (252), to which Hilton tells the artist that he paints an 'untruth'.

Through the medium of fiction, Levy conveys to the reader that what is portrayed as real or true is often manipulated and distorted; hence, what we perceive as real or true is not

always so. In doing so, the story of *The Long Song* deconstructs the boundary between the real and fictive worlds.

### *Jacques the Fatalist and The Long Song*

Returning to *Jacques the Fatalist*, the novel is placed within a tradition of the clever servant: Jacques has control in his relationship with the master, while the master is portrayed as inept, incompetent, and largely dependent on Jacques. *Jacques the Fatalist* is said to have facilitated the French revolution, exposing the parasitic nature of masters—or aristocracy—and the third estate's strength, as represented by Jacques. It may not be a coincidence that the author, Denis Diderot, condemned slavery as a violation of natural law in his *Encyclopédie*. Moreover, in the second edition of *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot narrates the slave's self-liberation under the leadership of a great man, called the Black Spartacus.

Like *Jacques the Fatalist* which reveals an exploitative relationship between Jacques and the Master, *The Long Song* also problematises the relationship between slaves and masters, depicting the subversion of master and slave. During the time of the Baptist War, and when her brother was away, Caroline felt abandoned and alone, and consulted July (Margurite) on everything; she exclaims to July: 'you are all that I have.' (103)

Ironically, Caroline's dependence on July grows heavier following her brother's death and the slave's emancipation. Upon being advised to close the dungeon—a place feared by everyone on the Amity plantation—Caroline asks July for her opinion, to which July firmly replies with cautious authority that Caroline must close the dungeon and use it no more (175). Caroline takes July's advice and closes the dungeon (177).

Now July was a servant who did read and write better than many white people up on the island. She did have a wit enough to negotiate the best prices from even the most craven of negro traders... she rode a horse at her missus's side and could steer her in a gig; she brushed her missus's hair and laced her missus's clothes; and at her missus's bidding she would visit the boiling house, her feet being choked upon entering the Hades...to examine the liquor within the teaches and convey her missus's commands to the head man.(178)

The passage demonstrates July's capability and skills; she can read and write, and negotiate prices, and run the household. Afraid that July might abandon her, Caroline pleads with her not to leave, and July stays because she cannot leave Caroline alone (180). This is the instance where the power balance between slave and master is reversed.

The novel portrays the atrocities of the slavery; however, Levy does not portray slaves '...as simply a mass of wretched voiceless victims' ('The Writing of *The Long Song*'). For instance, Kitty is a strong and caring mother to her daughter July, despite her being born out of rape. Raised in a big house as a house servant, July is proud to be a mulatto. Likewise, Levy does not depict white people as mere villains in her novel, Howarth kills himself because he was

disillusioned by his fellow white planters. Despite her harsh treatment, Caroline teaches July how to write and read (177) and Goodwin falls in love with July, who seduces him at the start. Further, when Goodwin is abandoned by his workforce and decides to cut canes by himself, distinguishing him from a black person becomes difficult for July.

Levy writes of slavery in her explanatory essay 'The writing of *The Long Song*' as follows:

It (slavery) could almost be a morality play with the planters as the villains, Wilberforce as the white knight and the slaves as simply a mass of wretched voiceless victims. But as soon as I began to reflect upon the plain historical facts, I realised that slavery was much more than a two-act play; it was a massive social system – a society in the true sense – that endured for three hundred years. Three hundred years! Let's just imagine what that means; if you were a slave in Jamaica in, say, 1815, it was possible that all your ancestors stretching back to your great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandparents had also been slaves in the same place. A whole society had built up over time according to the distorted rules that slavery imposed. People were suffering and dying. But clearly people were living and surviving as well.

In Levy's work, she recovers the lost voices of the slaves and brings back their individual differences. Maria Helena Lima calls *The Long Song* as 'a metafictional neo-slave narrative' (122), distinguishing it from classical slave narratives, such as Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), written for white readers (137). While classical slave narratives focus on the authenticity of slaves' experiences, neo-slave narratives underline the impossibility of recovering the slaves' lost stories, focusing on the unreliability and fictionality of the accounts (Lima138, Öztabak-Avcı139). Lima's identification of *The Long Song* as a neo-slave narrative is justified, since the novel unsettles a distinction between the real and the imaginary, between history and fiction.

### Fictionality of the Concept of Race

By the employment of metanarrative in her fiction, Levy perhaps indicates the fictionality of the concept of race— a lie that was foundational to the system of slavery and that people have believed and still believe. This way of thinking about race was coined by Karen and Barbara Fields in *Racecraft* (2012): 'Witchcraft and racecraft are imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined, the action and imaging inextricably intertwined. The outcome is a belief that present itself to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth' (19).

Slavery came into the existence because the fictive concept of race was believed as real, or as the truth. On slavery and racism, Levy clearly states it is a belief system in her 'The

Writing of *The Long Song* :

Every book on slavery that I had read (and I have read a few—it's hardly virgin territory) was not an easy read, with definitely little room for humour. And if I was to write a convincing story I would have to spend a great deal of time researching eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Jamaica—a truly horrible part of our history. More than that, I would have to immerse myself in the weird world of European racism. I would have to fill my head with sentiments like those of the eminent Enlightenment philosopher David Hume: '*I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites.*'

Or this from Emmanuel Kant: '*Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples.*'... I could go on. Racism as a belief system had become truly endemic in Britain at this time; making 'negroes' into non-people – into sub-human livestock – was an important aspect of justifying slavery.

Levy elucidates the racist thinking found in the works of famous philosophers and writers, underlining that racism as a belief system that justifies slavery. She clearly exposes racism as a system of othering, created to maintain power. By showing how racism was ingrained within people's lives, poisoning their views of the world, Levy successfully problematises the legitimacy of racism as carefully crafted discourse, rather than as a truth through the story of July.

## Conclusion

The ending of the novel, like that in *Small Island*, mentions a baby with black and white heritage. In *The Long Song*, July's daughter is taken away by her mistress Caroline and her husband Mr. Goodwin who escaped from Jamaica to England. Her daughter has white skin because Mr Goodwin is the father and could 'pass' as a white person. The novel suggests that the daughter might be brought up somewhere in England, believing her mother is Caroline, not July. The episode also reveals that the racial mixture is more prevalent than what is recorded in history, and that Britain has a long history of it. By presenting the baby of mixed heritage as the future, Levy questions the politics of blood, thus undermining the myth of purity and racism.

*The Long Song* does not portray July as a helpless victim, but a living person with strengths and weaknesses who lives to publish her stories, telling them with humour and pathos. The reading of the novel makes the time of slavery more known to the readers, making us notice that the racial prejudice that was foundational to the system of slavery strongly persists until today. Through reading of the novel, readers reconsider that there is more than Wilberforce to the history of slavery and the survival of the slaves, and that its

heritage is what makes today's Britain.

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