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THE NARRATIVE AGENCY AND TESTIMONY IN THE LONG SONG

Geeta Verma[1]
Research Scholar, Department of English, CSJM University, Kanpur
Dr Sarvesh Mani Tripathi[2]
Associate Professor, Department of English, CSJM University, Kanpur

Abstract:
In a self-aware, metafictional story, Andrea Levy's The Long Song (2010) reimagines slavery in the Caribbean by putting the power of the former slave front and center. This article examines how the book builds narrative agency and testimonial voice by utilizing July's reflective storytelling. Levy elevates the neo-slave tale to the level of a potent act of resistance by casting July as more than just a character she is an active narrator who manipulates memory, breaks with chronology, and deals with editorial meddling from her son Thomas. Because it dramatizes the dynamics of narrative and places lived memory ahead of archive authority, the book challenges official history. The Long Song employs metafiction, contradictory narratives, and the denial of narrative closure to regain captive subjectivity as a counter-historical witness. This book demonstrates that stories are about more than just remembering; they are also about fighting for one's rights to live and standing up for what one believes in.

Keywords: Narrative agency, testimony, neo-slave narrative, metafiction, memory, counter-history

Introduction

The legacy of slavery was discussed in a London conference few years ago. A young lady rose to offer the panel a touching question: She wondered how she could be proud of her Jamaican ancestry since her ancestors were slaves. As a quiet audience member, I remember my reaction to the woman's question, but not the panel's. As a Jamaican, I pondered why anybody would feel ashamed or ambivalent about their slave ancestry? What a Jamaican friend told me had she never felt? They

were powerful if they made it through the slave ships. They were smart if they survived plantations. a long and distinguished history. I felt something stirring at that moment. This young lady might be moved to be proud of her slave ancestors by a story written by a writer.

According to my epigraph, Andrea Levy's The Long Song (2010) is historical, fake memoir, and metafiction, but she wants to define her motivation. Levy joins a large number of African Diaspora authors who have studied slave narratives since the late 20th century. After slavery, the slave tale was extensively rewritten to restore its historical value and (re)imagine the enslaved's humanity. For years, top-down history writing and ideological debates distorted slave narratives [1]. In the late sixties and seventies in the US, additional slave narratives were uncovered and disclosed, making retelling them vital to subaltern history. Neo-slave narratives must show structural injustice and black subjugation, perhaps most crucially. Lars Eckstein says, "while most colonial testimonies of slavery have long disappeared from the working memory of today's Black Atlantic societies, the prejudices and stereotypes they conveyed have not."

Write drove slave tales to place a 'race' in the Great Chain of Being, according to Enlightenment. Henry Louis Gates called early black English authors "the central arena in which persons of African descent could establish and redefine their status within the human community." Gates says the Enlightenment relied on man's ability to reason, but it used the "absence" of reason to limit the humanity of the people and cultures of color Europeans had been "discovering" since the Renaissance [2]. Nobody questioned the idea that reason and history were written. If slave narratives associate "the rights of man with the ability to write," African-American literature sought to promote black democracy. Neo-slavery studies African Diaspora and African-American literature and literacy's possibilities. Modernity is reevaluated when print literacy ideals and institutions support the neo-slave narrative [3]. When modernity's political promise seems spent and shattered, books like Toni Morrison's Beloved reinvent it. Most African-American neo-slave tales are skeptical of their own literary modality—writing has not brought African Americans full citizenship—and reflect former slaves' confused subjectivity.

The British Caribbean had 300 years of slavery, but most neo slave narrative theory is American. Many black British neo-slave narratives have been written recently,

therefore the academic establishment's quiet on Britain's "Heart of Darkness" may explain this silence [4]. One of my students asked Andrea Levy "whether British Literature would indeed include everyone" in 30 years during a public reading. Levy said, "and a separate category is necessary to mark that difference, to remind people of the existence of inequities." She doubted 30 years would erase British inequality. The standing-room-only audience was reminded of Jamaicans' myriad ways to avoid being black in Miss July and Clara's romance chapter. Levy ends with a plea for Emily Goodwin, July's mulatto kid with Amity Plantation's final overseer. The descendants of "an" Emily Goodwin, ignorant their great-great-grandmother was a slave, complimented her for The Long Song [5].

The Long Song is unclassifiable. Like Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative (1789), which Vincent Carretta calls "a spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, slave narrative, rags-to-riches saga, economic treatise, apologia, testimony, and possibly even a historical fiction," reviewers didn't know what to Levy had the son of the former slave, a famous printer/publisher in 1898 Jamaica, tell his mother's narrative instead of the customary "white frame" to verify it. Thomas Kinsman's Foreword emphasizes factual reporting (the remembered and acknowledged atrocities of slavery), but readers also seek artistic quality, as he would "make her tale flow like some of the finest writing in the English language[6]." The Long Song emphasizes proud, not embarrassed, stories for youngsters. In response to whether the audience member feels "any ambivalence or shame" about having slave ancestors, Levy suggests that "a novelist [could] persuade this young woman to have pride in her slave ancestors through telling her a story." I believe Levy's queries show binary discomfort. She wants pride to replace oppression, but she realizes the tale cannot be that easy. She must write metafiction to escape binaries [7].

The Rewriting Of History

"Slavery is a lengthy day for the master and nights transformed into days. But how long can the master's sunshine control our nights? Forget. The memory is anguish striving to revive itself". —Fred D'Aguiar

Neo-slave narratives, like historical novels, investigate the tight relationship between individual and national history by reconstructing previous events. Neo-slave tales defy official history and bourgeois ideology, unlike historical novels. These

narratives aim to recover and reconstruct a large portion of history that has been purposely ignored or rejected. To expand Frances Smith Foster's definition, neo-slave narratives are Sankofa texts: "Sankofa—an ancient Akan concept with direct bearing on the question of what's fiction, what's real, what's important—translates as the following imperative: 'We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we can understand why and how we came to be Sankofa encourages us to listen to our history, choose what is good, and apply it for good. Foster defines sankofa as "benevolent knowledge utilization. It works best with a hermeneutic of mistrust, or, as [her] grandmother would say, 'consider the source.' Though painful, July must remember as much as the black British need to know their past before Windrush [8].

Levy's narrator breaks her story with her son's queries and confusion:
He says, 'But this is the period of the Baptist War, Mama. In your novel, Caroline Mortimer's unfinished dinner night is the Christmas insurrection, when all the turmoil started. I must express my knowledge of Sam Sharpe, the rebel commander, including his temperament and appearance. I should explain how every negro felt the King of England had emancipated them [...].

The narrator addresses her audience directly, saying indolence does not prohibit her from writing more. Remember that news "did not travel as it does today," she advises us to seek other accounts. We should read the booklet "written by a Baptist minister named George Dovaston with the title, Facts and documents connected with the Great Slave Rebellion of Jamaica (1832)" even if she did not witness the events [9]. The planter John Hoskin leaflet should be avoided because "for the man is a fool who does blame only the sons of Ham and men of God for what occurred." Readers learn a hermeneutic of mistrust, again to invoke Foster, as they encounter several histories rather than one. Told history by whom? In whose name? To what end? Levy's tale centers on these ex-centric concerns of the past. Slavery was overlooked for a long time because the world's top historians favored a white-European narrative and because African descendants wanted to forget slavery while fighting segregation and for civil rights. Black inferiority and subjection were symbolized by the slave. Only pre-Middle Passage history was regarded. A long dark era of slavery in the new world deprived black's identity and humanity. As chattel, enslaved Africans could not be cultural or historical subjects [10].

But reading many of the literature Levy recognizes at the conclusion of The Long Song helps us comprehend enslaved Africans and improves our interpretation of her novel. James Walvin's Black Ivory provides a historical materialist framework for the Baptist War. Walvin writes, "planters were right to fear black Christianity, for in the British West Indies it led the slaves to resistance and ultimately the campaign for black freedom." The more the British debated black freedom, the more it spread to slave quarters to foster black aspirations [11]. Bringing the slaves into the Christian fold would complete de-Africanization. Baptist preachers convince blacks that "they are as worthy as white man" and that the King gave them freedom. Walvin explains this transition:

The slave islands were progressively filled with Christian slaves, no longer joined by 'raw' Africans encouraged to dream of freedom by Britain but facing a hostile plantocracy. Because Africans were scarce, landowners had to labor their slaves harder, frequently at duties they disliked. As long as the slave trade remained, Africans could be sent into the fields as shock troopers of the plantocratic regime. Many 'Creole' slaves who expected better employment were relegated to manual labor after 1808. Discontent spread quickly.

During Christmas 1831, about 20,000 slaves from Baptist churches in western Jamaica revolted. Sam Sharpe commanded his audience as commander of Jamaica's first revolutionary struggle. Walvin says Sam Sharpe's audience never forgot his voice or message [12]. Sharpe, called 'the most brilliant and extraordinary slave [he had] ever met with,' taught that "whites had no more right to hold black people in slavery, than black people had to make white people slaves." The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, was excellent for black preachers to reinterpret because of its language, imagery, and stories of tyranny, liberation, promised lands, and redemption to come. Paradoxically, Christianity oppressed and emancipated slaves by telling stories of freedom and demanding they forget their roots. Walvin says that "more than 500 killings and executions, including Sam Sharpe [13], avenged the fourteen white deaths and material damage of over one million pounds."

Despite presenting disproportionate Baptist War retribution, the tale presents other critiques. Levy's neo-slave narrative also seeks to revive plantation-era resistance. Consider the dutiful house-slave. One might differentiate between field

slaves and master's home slaves on a plantation. The house slave is portrayed as an obedient servant who accepts her/his lot, strives to serve the master at all costs, and is willing to betray other slaves for a few privileges. The slave tales themselves repeat such prejudices. This image reflects the master's psychological and moral urge to reaffirm his kind and paternal character. House-slaves were less likely to revolt than field-slaves, but they resisted in subtle yet effective ways [14]. Covert opposition is shown in Levy's story when good linen is replaced with cotton bedsheets for Christmas dinner. Even July smelled "Godfrey's mischief." Despite the idea that "Niggers cannot give civilized music," Levy describes the Amity plantation fiddlers "performing in the yard for the servants' gathering" as "no more clamor or incomprehensible tune—the sound of a delicate melody came softly through the open window They found it amusing to play harm to white ears. Nimrod's rationale for stealing ("whatever is your massa's, belongs to you") may be more bold. Taking things from your massa for personal use doesn't hurt him. Be his property too. Everything transfers. Your possessions are still your massa's. You hardly use it." This redefining of property is too logical for John Locke [15].

Neo-slave tales emphasize re-imagining historical memory above linear storytelling, distinguishing them from historical novels. Neo-slave tales are part of a larger culture that emphasizes the need to recall, testify, and pass on history's most unpleasant, awful, and painful events. July's memories aren't in history. The book is July's memoir and a memory-based story. The metafictional aspect of the narration keeps history and memory separate. Neo-slave narratives reimagine the subjectivity of the slaves, whereas original slave tales sought to restore history. In The Long Song, history and memory destroy and restore community, home, and family [16].

Neo-Slave Narrative And Testimonial Framework

Neo-Slave Tales Revisit Slavery To Question Historical Silences, Like The Book. Neoslave Narratives Recreate Internal Subjectivity, Unlike Eighteenth- And Nineteenth-Century Slave Tales, Which Were Typically Edited By Whites.

Literary Testimony Is Both Recall And Ethical Testifying. Trauma And Historical Atrocity Sometimes Inspire Testimonial Writing To Observe Incidents Not In Official Records. July Prioritizes Human Remembrance Above Factual Certainty In The Long Song [17].

Levy Intentionally Blends History With Fiction. The Baptist War Of 1831 And Liberation Are Historical Occurrences, But The Narrative Stresses Their Subjective

Experience. Thus, Novel Testimony Is Interpretative Recollection, Not Factual Reality.

July As Narrator: Constructing Narrative Agency

Narrator Agency Includes Selection, Omission, Framing, And Tone. July Regularly Controls.

- **Direct Address To The Reader:** July Routinely Addresses "Reader," Undermining Openness. History Is Mediated By Speech, As This Rhetorical Gesture Shows. Recognizing The Audience Gives Her Influence Over How Her Tale Is Perceived.
- **Revision And Contradiction:** July Has Several Birth And Love Stories. These Modifications Show That Narrative Truth Is Manufactured, Not Unreliable. Memory Resists Solitary Authority And Is Flexible And Subjective [18].
- **Refusal Of Complete Disclosure:** July Refuses Her Son Thomas's Demands To Share Facts She Prefers Not To. Her Chosen Silence Is Agency. She Choose What To Say And What To Leave Out, Showing That Testimony Is Speech And Refusal.

July Rejects The Passive Position Of Historical Object With These Techniques. Instead, She Creates Her Narrative Identity.

Metafiction And The Politics Of Storytelling

Levy Emphasizes Narrative Politics With Metafiction.

July Often Discusses Writing, Ink, And Narrative. The Tale Becomes A Story About Storytelling. Being Self-Aware Undermines Realist Preconceptions And Underlines That History Is Constantly Mediated [19].

This Metafiction Serves Three Purposes:

1. **Exposing Historical Construction** – Official Histories Are Shown To Be Selective.
2. **Questioning Authority** – Who Controls Narrative Determines Whose Voice Survives.
3. **Empowering The Enslaved Subject** – By Controlling Narrative Form, July Symbolically Reclaims Power Denied To Her Historically.

The Long Song Rejects Flawless Realism In Historical Fiction. Interruptions And Editing Disputes Highlight Narrative Ownership.

Thomas As Editor: Negotiating Authority

July's Son, Thomas Kinsman, Edits And Publishes Her Story. A Second Mediation Layer Is Added By Him.

Thomas Symbolizes Print Culture, Enlightenment Rationalism, And Reading. He Corrects And Disputes His Mother's Chronology. He Never Has Ultimate Power. July Regularly Disputes His Interventions [20].

This Relationship Highlights Generational Conflict Between Lived And Institutional Knowledge. July Represents Recollection, Thomas' Historical Documentation. Memory And Literacy Are Valued In The Story, Providing A Conversation Rather Than Hierarchy [21].

By Creating Tension, Levy Shows That Narrative Agency Is Negotiated.

Testimony As Counter-History

The Story Often Contrasts Personal And Official Accounts. July Quotes Pamphlets And Historical Texts On The Baptist War But Doubts Their Accuracy [22]. Levy Undermines A Single Authoritative History By Emphasizing Opposing Accounts. July Tells Counter-History From Below.

Significantly, The Long Song Testimony Is Not Purely Sad. July Uses Sarcasm And Comedy. Surviving Via Laughter. Emotional Interpretations Of Slavery Are Complicated By Her Unwillingness To Represent Herself As A Victim [23]. The Testimony Here Emphasizes Humanity, Not Weakness. July Speaks Of Persistence, Wit, And Intricacy.

Narrative Closure And Refusal

July Tries To Finish The Book. Thomas Inquires About Her Grief And Loss. Because She Lacks "The Ink," July Avoids Some Memories. This Rejection Is Important. The Testimony Need Not Be Exhaustive. By Coming To An End, July Takes Control Of Time. Exogenous Closure Is Replaced By Self-Determined Closure[24]. The Resolution Of The Narrative Is Complicated By Open-Ended Requests For Information From Emily Goodwin. History, Like Memory, Is Imperfect.

Identity Through Representation

Stuart Hall, A Cultural Theorist, Contends That Representation Plays A Role In The Formation Of Identity. She Is Defined By July's Performance Of Real-Time Storytelling. July's Narrative, Not Her Race Or Status, Defines Her. Identity Is Shaped By Narrative Agency [25]. Reclaiming Narrative Voice And Selfhood Are Linked, According To The Long Song.

Conclusion

According to Narrative Agency and Testimony, Andrea Levy makes neo-slavery an appealing narrative resistance site in The Long Song. Levy writes to inspire, not chronicle enslavement. July's self-conscious narrative, metafictional pauses, connection with her son and editor Thomas, and unfinished story show historical representation's politics. Storytelling revives identity, history, and memory. July reveals plantation atrocities, changing history. Traditional history values colonial and archival narrative above experience. Her rudeness, delays, and immobility distract. Levy prioritizes subjective reality over institutional record and memory over official paperwork to refute slavery myths that make slaves passive victims. July handles legacy well. The poor and quiet are empowered by this book. July's recalling and Thomas's editing contrast written and spoken accounts.

July symbolizes emotional actuality and corporeal memory, whereas Thomas represents reading, documentation, and Enlightenment rationality. Bargaining power preserves literacy. History confronts and evolves. Levy emphasizes mediation to demonstrate voice amplification and silencing. The Long Song shows witness needs authority and memory. Admitting and keeping testimony is ethical. The novel's narrative agency suggests illiterate, silent individuals can tell stories. July recounts her death. This expands Levy's story beyond slavery. Reps talk and shape memories. Levy shows how storytelling may make neo-slave stories analytical, self-aware, and resistive, redefining power. Humans appreciate narrative authority in July.

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