

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY: THEMATIC STUDY IN ANDREA LEVY'S *THE LONG SONG*

S. ABINAYA (Author)

PhD. Research Scholar, (Part time internal), (Reg. No: 20122234012016), PG and Research Department of English, V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi. (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.)
E-mail: abinayasoundar75@gmail.com

DR. S. NISHANTH (Co - Author)

Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor, PG and Research Department of English, V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi. (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.) E-mail: nishanthsoosiah@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

The Long Song (2010) is a modern Caribbean novel that explores the theme of slavery, written by Andrea Levy. The story explores the era of slavery during the early 19th century in Jamaica, focusing on the life of a slave girl named July who resides at Amity, a sugarcane estate. Set against the historical backdrop of a renowned Jamaican slave uprising, the Baptist War, which occurred in 1831, and the subsequent abolition of slavery in 1833, this novel provides a detailed account of the lives of the enslaved individuals on Jamaican plantations both prior to and during their emancipation. The work extensively examines the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the persons residing on the plantations, where the British class structure predominates, with a strong focus on the issue of identity. Therefore, this article will examine how the British social order significantly impacts the identity of slaves in the Caribbean. Additionally, it will examine the diminishing potential and significance of the British class system in Jamaica following the Baptist War.

Keywords: Slavery, Identity, Class Hierarchy, Colonialism, Baptist, War, Colour.

The Long Song (2010) is a literary work authored by the famous British-Caribbean writer Andrea Levy. This literary work is a Caribbean neo-slave narrative that explores and reexamines the historical context of Jamaican slavery on the plantations during the early nineteenth century. The story also chronicles the Baptist War of 1831, the emancipation of slavery in 1833, and the subsequent events that occurred in Jamaica. *The Long Song* is a memoir penned by an elderly Jamaican woman named July, who resides as a slave on the sugarcane plantation known as Amity. July is the central character of the work. July, a person of mixed race, is the offspring of Tom Dewar, a Scottish supervisor, and Kitty, a lady who was enslaved. The work chronicles her encounters with enslavement and its consequences among the Jamaican slave rebellion, culminating in the abolition of slavery in the British-controlled Caribbean.

Levy's novel explores the categorization of society in Jamaica during the era of slavery. The period of slavery that her family endured served as the primary inspiration for her writing. According to her statement:

My family background was my first source of inspiration . . . When I was growing up, my parents, who were from Jamaica, were at pains to distance themselves from every aspect of that slave ancestry. My mum would sooner say her family were slave owners than that they were once slaves. My parents couldn't – or wouldn't – tell me much about the history of where they came from. . . A history which includes not only the slave population from West Africa, but people coming from all over the world . . . Clearly this all created a society that was considerably more complex than I had appreciated. (*The Long Song* 408-9)

July, the central character in *The Long Song*, is a native of Jamaica. She identifies as a mulatto, meaning she is of mixed race, with her mother being a black slave and her father being a Scottish plantation supervisor. Consequently, she believes that she possesses a superior social standing compared to the other enslaved individuals of African descent on the farm. She experiences a promotion in her living conditions, transitioning from a cramped slave dwelling to a more pleasant residence where she serves as a housemaid to Caroline Mortimer, the sister of a recently appointed plantation overseer. Tayari Jones asserts that “the caste system of the house and field servants has been a mainstay of neo-slave narratives” (Washington Post). However, within the residence of the overseer on the plantation, July's name is altered by Caroline, who refers to her as ‘Marguerite’. Consequently, she undergoes a feeling of deprivation of her inherited cultural heritage. Levy, in the narrative, reflects the social structure of the plantation system in Jamaica, which is evident and easily understood. Andrea Stuart argues “the social gulf between domestic slaves and those working in the field” that there existed a significant social divide between domestic slaves and those who worked in the fields, highlighting the hierarchical structure of society (Independent).

July thinks that because she is mulatto, she is at the top of the social ladder among the black people and slaves on the farm. She often thinks of herself in terms of white people because she is of mixed blood. In the book, this is shown by how her bond with Robert Goodwin, a new Scottish overseer, grows over time. But Robert Goodwin is also very close to her, even though she is from a lower-class racial family. His idea is that “The African stands firmly within the family of man. They are living souls. God's children as sure as you or I” (*The Long Song* 216) But because Goodwin is a minister, he is shocked to learn that July is not his child because she was born outside of marriage. Because she is of mixed race, she joins a group on Friday nights where only non-white people are allowed to dance: “‘Now, Miss July,’ she said, ‘you know me dances be just for coloured women’” (*The Long Song* 241). July sees herself as part of the Jamaican coloured people.

As the story is set, the Baptist War of 1831 is happening in the background. This was a slave revolt in Jamaica that freed many slaves and changed the power structure on the plantation societies. July, the main character of the book, acts as a go-between for Goodwin,

the farm owner, and the slaves who have just been freed. Because of the Baptist War, there was not any contact between the plantations. Both the blacks and the whites felt like everything was out of control. July only thinks about herself and a bottle of alcohol during the uprising and protests. And after the War ends in 1833 and slavery stops in Jamaica, there is a big change in the relationship between black people, former slaves, and plantation owners. Once the black people were no longer slaves, the estate owners had to change how they treated them because they were no longer slaves. As in the book, July remembers Caroline's different view on the freed slaves:

This means that the slaves are free, but the estate owners are now slaves because their job is to feed, house, and clothe the black people just like they did before. She had to "to care for those negroes in the same way – with lodging and food and clothing. . . . Sweet teeth in England just did not know the trouble she bore for them" (*The Long Song* 203). Caroline is now involved with freed slaves. July, on the other hand, feels like her true self again when Caroline calls her by her real name, July, instead of 'Marguerite', as a white guy suggested. She is immediately aware of how low she is in society.

The apprenticeship was finally forced upon our missus and all the planters of the Caribbean. Though they [the ex-slaves] were still bound to the miss us to work for six years without pay the slaves believed themselves to be actually free. They refused to work no more than the forty hours a week now required of them by King William and the law of England. No call to orderly conduct and "obedience to all persons in authority" had any effect upon Caroline Mortimer's negroes. And forty hours a week was just not enough time to take off a sugar crop. No inducement, nor overseer could get her negroes to task any longer. (*The Long Song* 202)

On the one hand, Robert Goodwin tries to get July to fall in love with him and then cheats on her. On the other hand, he shows people how to understand and respect each other. He never wants to say out loud that he loves and is dating the negro girl. But he comes up with a bad plan to marry Caroline so that he can have July and avoid his father's anger:

He love da negro girl. He loved July. And to marry a negro to marry a negro! Oh, who could countenance such an indecent proposal? Certainly no this father. To bring kindness to the negro, to minister to the negro, to pity the negro, was his father's dearest wish for him. But for his son to marry the negro – that would surely kill him. (*The Long Song* 278)

Robert thinks his plan is honest and fair because "it was to the injury of no one, and the advantage of all" (*The Long Song* 279). But the truth is that neither Robert nor Caroline can marry someone less important than them. July once again fails to reach the social level of a white girl.

The British class system on the plantations of Jamaica kept going even after slavery ended in the British West Indian countries, but it was slowly losing its strength and power. In order to keep up her social standing, Caroline always serves her guests the best and most expensive food at the Christmas dinner she plans, even though she can't afford it. So, she

wastes more and more money on things that aren't necessary and then complains that they are too expensive. One of her black slaves makes fun of her by telling her, ““It is not that things are expensive, it is just that you cannot afford them” (*The Long Song* 78).

The book is set during the time of slavery in the Caribbean and is based on the experiences of black people who worked on Jamaican plantations during and after slavery. In the book, Levy takes a critical look at how the British class system in the Caribbean affected black people's lives and sense of who they are. Because July is mulatto, she often thinks she is more important than the other slaves on the farm. She tries hard to become as important as the white woman, but every time she fails, she faces racism. The Baptist War freed the slaves and changed the power structure in Jamaica. As a result, the British social order in the Caribbean starts to lose its importance and usefulness.

Works Cited:

1. Andrea Stuart. Review of *The Long Song*, by Andrea Levy. *Independent*, 5 Feb. 2010.
2. Jones, Tayari. Review of *The Long Song*, by Andrea Levy. *Washington Post*, 8 May 2010.
3. Levy, Andrea. *The Long Song*. Headline Review, 2010
4. Levy, Andrea. “The Writing of *The Long Song*.” *The Long Song*, Headline Review, 2010, pp. 405-16