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Theme of Identity: A Study of Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*

Shamsul Haq Thoker

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of English

Central University of Kashmir,

Kashmir, India.

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Abstract

The Long Song (2010) is a contemporary Caribbean neo-slave narrative written by Andrea Levy. The novel revisits the period of slavery in the early nineteenth century Jamaica depicting the experiences of a slave girl, July at Amity - a sugarcane plantation in Jamaica. Written in the background of a famous Jamaican slave rebellion, the Baptist War erupted in 1831, the abolition of slavery in 1833 and its aftermath, the novel details the life of the slaves on Jamaican plantations before and after the period of emancipation. Replete with the theme of identity, the novel explores the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the characters on the plantations where the British class system is largely in vogue. Thus, the paper shall explore the identity of the slaves in the Caribbean which is greatly affected by the British social hierarchy. It shall also focus on how the British class system begins to lose its potential and importance in Jamaica after the Baptist War.

Keywords- Identity, Plantation, Class System, Caribbean, Slavery, Emancipation

The Long Song (2010) is a novel by an emerging British-Caribbean writer Andrea Levy. The novel is a Caribbean neo-slave narrative revisiting the history of Jamaican slavery on the plantations in the early nineteenth century. The novel also describes the Baptist War of 1831, the abolition of slavery in 1833, and its aftermath in Jamaica. *The Long Song* is actually a memoir written by an elderly Jamaican woman named July, who lives as a slave on the sugarcane plantation at Amity, the protagonist of the novel. July, a mulatto, is the daughter of Tom Dewar, Scottish overseer and Kitty, a slave woman. The novel details her experiences of slavery and its aftermath during the time of Jamaican slave uprising, followed by the end of slavery in the British domain of the Caribbean.

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Levy's fiction investigates the classification of society during the period of slavery in Jamaica. The period of slavery her family experiences that inspired her most for her writing. As she states:

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 Writing of *The Long Song* 408-9)

July is the protagonist of *The Long Song*, who was born in Jamaica. She calls herself a mulatto, a person of a mixed race, as her mother was a black slave and her father was a Scottish plantation overseer. Therefore, she thinks that she holds a higher social status than the other black slaves on the plantation. She gets a higher rank from a small slave shanty to a comfortable lodging place where she works as a housemaid to Caroline Mortimer, sister of a newly joined plantation overseer. As Tayari Jones maintains that “the caste system of the house and field servants has been a mainstay of neo-slave narratives” (*Washington Post*). But in the house of the plantation overseer, July's name is changed by Caroline, who calls her ‘Marguerite’. As a result, she experiences a sense of loss of her ancestral identity. Levy, in the novel, mirrors the social hierarchy within the plantation system in Jamaica, which is crystal clear. Commenting on the social hierarchy, Andrea Stuart also contends that there was “the social gulf between domestic slaves and those working in the field” (*Independent*).

Being a mulatto, July holds the belief that she attains the highest rank of the social ladder among the blacks and the slaves on the plantation. And because of this mixed blood background, she often compares herself with the whites. This is illustrated in the novel by the development of her relationship with Robert Goodwin, a new Scottish overseer. Robert Goodwin also comes very close to her irrespective of the fact that she belongs to a lower background in terms of race. His notion 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 Goodwin, being a clergyman, feels shocked on learning that July is an illegitimate as she is born out of marriage. Again, her mixed origin prompts her to take part in a Friday night congregation where non-white people only are allowed to dance, “‘Now, Miss July,’ she said, ‘you know me dances be just for coloured women’” (*The Long Song* 241). July considers herself as a member of the Jamaican coloured people.

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The novel is written in the backdrop of the Baptist War of 1831 – a slave rebellion in Jamaica, resulting in the emancipation of slaves in Jamaica which in turn shifts the power structure on the plantation societies. The protagonist of the novel, July works as an intermediary between Goodwin, the plantation owner, and the newly liberated slaves. Because of the Baptist War, there had been a lack of communication among the plantations; both the whites and the blacks experienced a total sense of chaos and confusion. During the rebellion, in the middle of the protests, July only cares about herself and thinks about a bottle of alcohol. And after the War ends in 1833, resulting in the abolition of slavery in Jamaica, the relationship between the blacks, former slaves, and the plantation owners undergoes a dramatic change. The plantation owners had to change their perspective towards the blacks in accordance with their social position as they are no longer slaves. As in the novel, July recalls Caroline’s different stance concerning the freed slaves:

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 missus 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)

As a result, the slaves are now free but the plantation owners become enslaved, for their job is still providing the blacks with food, shelter and clothes in the same manner as they used to before. For instance, Caroline is now entangled by liberated slaves and she was needed “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). But July again experiences the feeling of her real self when she is called by her own real name, July, instead of ‘Marguerite’ by Caroline on the suggestion of a white gentleman. She at once becomes aware of her lower social position.

Robert Goodwin, on the one hand, seduces July and deceives her in love, and on the other, teaches the lessons of mutual understanding and respect among people. He never wills to admit openly his love and relation with the “negro” girl. But in order to have July at hand and escape his father’s resentment, he designs a wicked plan to marry Caroline:

He loved a negro girl. He loved July. And to marry a negro . . . to marry a negro! Oh, who could countenance such an indecent proposal? Certainly not his father. To bring kindness

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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 considers his plan to be fair and honest as: “it was to the injury of no one, and the advantage of all” (*The Long Song* 279). But as a matter of fact, neither Robert nor Caroline can marry a person of lower rank, inferior to them. Thus, July once again fails to achieve the social status of a white girl.

Though the British class system on the plantations of Jamaica continued to exist after the end of slavery in the British West Indian colonies, it was losing its power and strength gradually. For instance, on the occasion of the Christmas dinner arranged by Caroline, she offers her guests the best and a full-course dinner in order to retain her social position, though she is not able to afford. Hence, she wastes more and more money unnecessarily, and later grumbles that the things are very extravagant. On this occasion, one of her black servants insults and ridicules her by saying: “It is not that things be expensive, it is just that you cannot afford them” (*The Long Song* 78).

The novel mirrors the period of slavery in the Caribbean recalling the black people's experiences of slavery and its aftermath on the plantations of Jamaica. Levy in the novel critically examines the British class system in the Caribbean influencing the lives and identities of the blacks. July, being a mulatto, often considers herself to be of higher social status than other slaves on the plantation, and struggles to attain the social status of the white woman but every time she fails and experiences racial discrimination. Because of the Baptist War, which ended in the emancipation of the slaves and changed the power structure in Jamaica, the British social hierarchy begins to lose its significance and potential in the Caribbean.

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