Lost Voices of History

The Portrayal of Slavery in Andrea Levy’s The Long Song

B.A. Essay

Anna Marie Fennefoss Nielsen
Kt.:060790-2059

Supervisor: Ingibjörg Ágústdóttir
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Abstract
The historical novel has been extremely popular since its rise in the nineteenth century and to this day it is celebrated worldwide. With silences and gaps in our history, historical fiction provides a platform for a variety of untold narratives, enabling us to better comprehend the multicultural world we live in today. This essay explores the representation of slavery within historical fiction, exemplified in Andrea Levy’s novel *The Long Song*. Published in 2010, it is mostly set in early nineteenth century Jamaica, before and after the Baptist War. In the form of a memoir, the novel tells the story of the former slave July, as she looks back on her life on the sugar plantation Amity. This essay examines the narrative structure of *The Long Song* and discusses the significance of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives within the novel. Levy’s background and inspiration for *The Long Song* is reviewed, as is the novel’s relevance to modern times. In addition, similarities between other works of historical fiction are explored, including Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Moreover, Levy’s use of metaphor is analyzed regarding a painting in her novel. The painting can be seen as metaphor, symbolizing the untruths and erasure found in dominant accounts of history, as well as underlining the narrator’s centrality to the narrative and to history in general.

Through historical fiction, Andrea Levy is successful in bringing forward the silenced yet significant voices of Caribbean slaves. In *The Long Song*, Levy brings attention to the erasure that has taken place within the British historical consciousness and sheds light on the centrality of slavery to British history. Moreover, the novel provides a form of legacy for Caribbean slaves and for their descendants, inspiring pride rather than shame in regard to their heritage.
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Introduction

Historical fiction is a unique literary genre, consisting of a number of subgenres, all with the potential to reimagine and challenge history. As opposed to simply re-telling historical events, historical fiction can provide the reader with diverse viewpoints and interpretations of history. Since its rise in the nineteenth century, the historical novel has been extremely popular and to this day it is celebrated worldwide. The genre provides a unique platform for a variety of narratives, and can help bring attention to the experiences of those who have been marginalized.

When it comes to slavery within the British colonies, there are gaps and silences in our history, due to lack of documentation and testimonies from the slaves themselves. As a result, authors such as Andrea Levy have resorted to historical fiction, to fill in these gaps and bring forward the untold stories of slaves. What sparked the idea for Levy’s fifth novel, *The Long Song* (2010) in particular was a young girl raising the question of how she could be proud of her Jamaican heritage, seeing as her ancestors had been slaves (Levy, *The Writing of The Long Song* 405). As a descendant of Jamaican slaves herself, Andrea Levy was inspired to write a story that would encourage pride rather than shame in slave ancestry. This sent her on a path to explore and better understand her own heritage, leading her all the way to Jamaica.

*The Long Song* is a historical novel that takes the reader back to early nineteenth century Jamaica. Levy pays tribute to the slaves of the Caribbean and gives them a voice through a neo-slave narrative, a fictional recreation of a first person slave narrative. In addition to the narrative structure itself, Levy’s use of metaphors and vivid language questions and challenges dominant accounts of history. For there are many who have not been represented, many who have not been heard, for whom historical fiction can be used to lend a voice. The narrator of *The Long Song* is for the most part the former slave July, telling her life story in the form of a memoir. July’s narrative is centered on her individual experiences, as opposed to simply following the historical events happening around her. As we follow her life journey we are introduced not only to the inhumanities of slavery but also to the humanity of life itself. *The Long Song* focuses on an individual experience during a harrowing time in our history. The novel is filled with humor, despair, happiness and sadness, all without diminishing the struggle of the slaves. Rather, Levy highlights both the good and the bad, as she masterfully depicts what might have been the life of a Jamaican slave. Thus Andrea Levy’s use of a
ne-slave narrative within historical fiction successfully portrays a silenced yet significant part of history.
1. Andrea Levy, background and ancestry

Andrea Levy was born in London in 1956 to Jamaican parents who came to England in 1948 (Levy, *Six Stories and an Essay* 5). She is an award-winning author who to this day lives and works in London, often using her native city as the setting of her works. Despite not having started writing until in her late thirties, Andrea Levy has become an acclaimed author, selling over a million copies of her novels worldwide. Her works of historical fiction shed light on important issues, including heritage, race, history and identity. Thus far, Levy has written five novels, including *Small Island*, which won the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Book of the Year and the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize. Her most recent novel, *The Long Song*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2010 and won the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2011. Her most recent publication is a collection of her short stories, *Six Stories and an Essay* (2014), which includes an essay where she discusses her Caribbean heritage and how it has influenced her writing.

In “Back to My Own Country: An Essay” from *Six Stories and an Essay*, Levy discusses her childhood, her heritage and what inspired her to start writing. Her essay begins with a memory from her childhood, where a man of Caribbean descent tries to engage Londoners on a bus in a friendly chat. However, “nobody would be drawn into conversation; they clearly wanted nothing to do with him. But he carried on trying anyway” (Levy, *Six Stories and an Essay* 3). Looking back, Levy struggles to understand how it came to be that the people of England did not know this man, “Why was he, and why were all black people from Britain’s old empire, so completely alien to them?” (Levy, *Six Stories and an Essay* 4). Levy raises an important question; how come there are still gaps in our knowledge and understanding of certain parts of British history?

What are the links that made Britain a natural destination for that Caribbean man on the bus, fifty years ago? How and why did Britain forge those links in the first place? These are questions that have come to fascinate me, because they reveal what amounts to a lost history for many of us. It was certainly lost to me for much of my early life, and it was a loss that caused me some problems. (Levy, *Six Stories and an Essay* 4)

Levy then describes her experiences of growing up as an outsider in her own country. As her family tried to adapt to their new lives in England, they discarded their old ones in Jamaica. Levy grew up feeling ashamed of her family, and felt embarrassed by her
Caribbean heritage. These feelings of insignificance and inferiority had a big impact on her childhood, leading her to neglect her background in order to feel a sense of belonging with her mainly white community. It was not until she was in her late twenties that Levy began to thoroughly explore her Caribbean heritage.

When Levy visited Jamaica for the first time she realized that not only was her background and ancestry important, it was fascinating and worth exploring. Furthermore, she had the means to explore it through her writing (Levy, *Six Stories and an Essay* 12). Therefore, most of Levy’s works have something to do with race, slavery, immigration or alienation. Additionally, all of her works are in a sense about history. Whether set in modern society or in the past, her stories shed light on the forgotten parts of history that influence us to this day. In *Six Stories and an Essay*, Levy brings attention to how little the British general public knows of slavery in the British Caribbean in comparison to slavery in the American South: “America’s story will not do for us. Our legacy of slavery is unique and we need to understand what it is” (Levy, *Six Stories and an Essay* 15). Mainstream history often lacks information. Certain parts of it can easily be erased and silenced, especially when the events occur thousands of miles away. British history books are no exception, especially when it comes to slavery in the Caribbean. Levy states, “the importance of those centuries of British slavery in the Caribbean is underplayed. That British plantation slavery has no lasting legacy for this country is absurd, but it is a claim that is made implicitly by this silence” (*Six Stories and an Essay* 14). The historical novel provides a platform for these silenced voices. In her works of fiction, Levy is able to spark interest in, and create awareness of subjects such as racism, identity and isolation. In her latest novel, *The Long Song*, she brings to life an important part of British history and celebrates the unique legacy of slavery in the Caribbean.

1.1. The inspiration behind *The Long Song*

*The Long Song* is unique in comparison to Levy’s prior works of fiction as its narrative is set in nineteenth century Jamaica. In her essay “The Writing of *The Long Song*”, Levy explains what initially sparked the idea for the novel, as she attended a conference in London some years back. 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.

(Levy, *The Writing of The Long Song* 405)

As mentioned before, Levy’s prior novels mostly deal with the experiences of black people in Britain. Her novels in many ways mirror her own struggles as a woman of color in Britain, as well as her parents’ experiences as Jamaican immigrants. However, *The Long Song* is set in early nineteenth century Jamaica, making for a somewhat different writing process. A significant part of Jamaican history, and a highly influential event in *The Long Song* is the Baptist War. Our narrator July does not experience the Baptist War from its frontlines, yet it affects her deeply as she lives to see the aftermath of the rebellion.

The Baptist War, also known as the Great Jamaican Slave Revolt, was led by Baptist Deacon and slave Samuel Sharpe and took place in December 1831 (Kaye 17). Sharpe “triggered a rebellion of thousands of slaves by reportedly telling them that they had been freed and that they should stop work and claim their freedom” (Kaye 17). Sharpe had mistakenly believed that freedom had already been granted by the British parliament and as a result his peaceful strike inadvertently provoked a rebellion. What started as a strike, demanding more freedom and working wages from the plantation owners, quickly escalated into full rebellion upon refusal of the slaves’ demands. The rebellion lasted for eleven days and mobilized up to 60,000 of Jamaica’s 300,000 slaves, making it the largest uprising in the British West Indies (Kaye 17). The loss of property and life during the rebellion contributed greatly to the abolition movement, and on August 1st, 1834, slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire (Kaye 17).

In regards to documentation of events such as this, Levy points out that despite there being an excellent body of scholarship on the history of slavery, there seem to be very few documents and artifacts where enslaved people speak of and for themselves (*The Writing of The Long Song* 409). Additionally, the writing or testimony that has
emerged has largely been filtered though a white understanding or serves a white narrative (Levy, The Writing of The Long Song 409). It is because of the lack of testimonies and documents where the slaves are able to tell their own story that their voices are missing from history books. Levy manages to bring these untold stories forward in the form of historical fiction in her novel The Long Song. In “The Writing of The Long Song”, Levy explains why she chose to write her novel in the form of fiction:

This is where I believe that fiction comes in to its own. Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out. Not just the wails of anguish and victimhood that we are used to, although that is very much part of the story, but the chatter and clatter of people building their lives, families and communities, ducking, diving and conducting the businesses of life in appallingly difficult circumstances. (410)

The Long Song mostly takes place on a Jamaican sugar plantation before, during and after the Baptist War. However, despite being set in the time of slavery, that is not the main focus of the novel. Its narrator is the former house slave, July. “It’s the story of her life lived in a society so strange to us that we can barely understand it. But she lives it much as you or I would try to – with ingenuity, cunning, charm, resilience, despair, love” (Levy, The Writing of The Long Song 415). As the story is being told from a slave’s viewpoint, it allows the reader to explore this particular part of history from a new angle.

The Long Song is essentially a story of bravery, resilience and the ups and downs in the life of a slave being told on her own terms. July tells her life story, and while historic events are taking place, they affect her without her actually being at their center. She shares her individual and personal experience and even warns the reader what to expect from her story, as it will be far different to the volumes of history books available at the time: “So I will not worry myself for your loss if it is those stories you require. But stay if you wish to hear a tale of my making” (Levy, The Long Song 9). Essentially, Levy gives a voice to those who have been silenced through history in The Long Song, and this un-silencing is a key part of her project: “If history has kept them silent then we must conjure their voices ourselves and listen to their stories. Stories through which we can remember them, marvel at what they endured, what they achieved, and what they have bequeathed to us all” (Levy, The Writing of The Long Song 416). By paying tribute to the Caribbean slaves she hopes to not only highlight their stories, but also to inspire the descendants of slaves to feel proud of their heritage.
2. The historical novel

Historical fiction is a literary genre, in which narratives are set in a particular historical period. The characters may or may not be historical as well. There are numerous subgenres within historical fiction, including war novels, historical romances, alternate history and historical fantasy. However, the most recognized subgenre of historical fiction is arguably the historical novel. In *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J. A. Cuddon defines the historical novel as “a form of fictional narrative which reconstructs history and re-creates it imaginatively” (383). Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) is widely regarded as the first historical novel. Nevertheless, Scott drew inspiration from an already rich tradition of including historical themes in novels. In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács states:

> Novels with historical themes are to be found in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, too, and, should one feel inclined, one can treat medieval adaptations of classical history or myth as ‘precursors’ of the historical novel and indeed go back still further to China or India. (19)

However Lukács also notes, “what is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age” (Lukács 19). Despite perhaps having a historical theme, the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century focuses on portraying specific qualities of its own age through realism (Lukács 20). Scott’s historical novel can therefore be seen as a direct continuation of the realistic English novel of the eighteenth century (Lukács 31). The historical novel does not simply re-tell historical events. It can provide the reader with a different point of view and another interpretation of history, as well as creating a platform for the experiences of the people of its time.

The historical novel as a genre has been extremely popular since its rise in the nineteenth century and to this day it is celebrated throughout the world. One of its unique qualities is its diversity: “Historical fiction is written by a variety of authors, within an evolving set of sub-genres, for a multiplicity of audiences” (De Groot 2). Whereas history focuses on the known and is presented as fact, “the historical novel fundamentally challenges subjectivities, offering multiple identities and historical story lines” (De Groot 139). This freedom enables the author to not only explore multiple viewpoints and experiences; it provides a platform to reclaim the past on behalf of
numerous unheard voices (De Groot 140). Many of these unheard voices are those of minorities, especially those of women.

Women’s historical novels have often been dismissed and ignored by literary critics. In the 1960s and 1970s the form was strongly associated with women’s popular fiction and was, as a result, not taken seriously (Wallace 227). “Yet in the 1990s it became a high-brow genre again, invigorated by a new self-reflexiveness about the constructed nature of history” (Wallace 227). The historical novel as a genre has allowed women writers to transcend the constraints of gender by distancing themselves from the limits of romance plots and the domestic novel (Wallace 227). According to Diana Wallace the historical novel has allowed female writers to:

Invent or ‘re-imagine’, the lives of marginalized and subordinated people, especially women, but also the working classes, Black people, slaves and colonized peoples, and to shape narratives which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history. (2)

The historical novel in comparison to other literary genres is unparalleled in the way that it allows the writer to reclaim the past on behalf of a variety of unheard voices. In regards to slavery, the lack of documentation and testimonies from the slaves themselves has left gaps in our history. This has led many contemporary writers, including Andrea Levy, to attempt to fill in some of these gaps and create a platform for these stories through historical fiction.

2.1. Similarities between *The Long Song* and other works of historical fiction

One of the many issues explored within historical fiction is the subject of slavery, and the loss of history. Whereas numerous history books cover the subject of slavery in a detailed manner, these accounts tend to be somewhat one-sided, especially regarding slavery in the former British Colonies. Dominant accounts of history often overlook and neglect the experiences of the oppressed, which results in generations of slaves being deprived of their history. *The Long Song* focuses on the lives of slaves before and after the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean, yet there are several parallels between the story itself and other works of historical fiction. As Keppner argues, “*The Long Song* contributes to the wider Black Atlantic effort to confront the traumatic past of slavery and its legacies through an intimate history, which offers a fragmented, partial and subversive view of the oppression of empire” (6). Another example of historical fiction
with a slavery-based narrative is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). In correlation to *The Long Song*, the novel is set during a time where slavery is coming to an end. In this case the novel takes place in Kentucky, in the mid-1880s. The central character of the novel, Sethe, kills her own daughter to spare her from a life of slavery and is later haunted by her ghost (De Groot 148). Her story mirrors the real-life case of Margaret Garner, who executed filicide and attempted suicide when caught after escaping in Kentucky in 1856 (De Groot 148). Although Morrison’s novel takes place in the United States of America, while Levy’s novel takes place in the Caribbean, both novels depict the consequences of slavery in their own unique ways.

The poltergeist in *Beloved* haunts Sethe, due to her being unable to cope with the death of her daughter. The loss of her child and the guilt she carries for killing her has a devastating impact on Sethe’s family and her mental health. In *The Long Song* we are presented with the same theme of child loss. July is ridden with guilt and feels deeply ashamed after giving up her son Thomas as an infant. She even wishes to cut the narrative short at this point in her tale, as it is too painful for her to continue. In addition, July’s daughter is seized from her as Caroline and Robert Goodwin, the plantation owners, go back to England. In further comparison, *Beloved* and *The Long Song* both illustrate the disposability of the slaves and the callousness towards their children by their owners, as both Sethe and July are taken from their mothers at a very young age. Morrison’s haunting novel emphasizes and “dramatizes the ways in which the past can haunt and inhabit the present” (De Groot 149). Much like Sethe is haunted by her past, after keeping it repressed for so long, society must face its history to fully understand and get past it. Both *Beloved* and *The Long Song* are examples of how historical novels can “rescue the marginalized and give voice to those who were silenced” by engaging in political rewriting (De Groot 149).

Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a postcolonial novel, inspired by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). The central character of the novel is Antoinette Cosway, a Creole heiress living in Jamaica. The novel acts as a prequel to the iconic *Jane Eyre*, and gives the reader a glimpse into what could have been the life of Mr. Rochester’s first wife, the mad Bertha Mason. It takes place in Jamaica, shortly after slavery has been abolished, and delves into the complexity and difficulties of life on the island. Much like in Levy’s *The Long Song*, we see examples of racism both outside of and within the black community, as well as the significance of skin color. Furthermore, Rhys draws attention to the struggles of the Creole peoples in Jamaica, perceived as
outsiders by both the English and the black communities, as demonstrated in
Antoinette’s reflections on the issue:

It was a song about the white cockroach. That’s me. That’s what they call all of
us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave
traders. And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I
often wonder who I am and where is my county and where do I belong and why
was I ever born at all. (Rhys 63)

Antoinette never truly fits into the Jamaican community, nor will she ever fit into
English society. As we follow her life, we see her slowly fall into madness as her
husband’s mind is poisoned against her.

One of the most symbolic scenes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is when Antoinette’s
husband stops calling her Antoinette entirely and starts calling her Bertha. “‘Bertha,’ I
said. ‘Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me
by another name. I know, that’s obeah too.’ Tears streamed from her eyes” (Rhys 95).
Antoinette’s name is part of her identity, and by calling her Bertha, Mr. Rochester is
asserting his dominance over her, trying to shape her into something she simply cannot
become. The changing of Antoinette’s name is something we see clearly mirrored in
*The Long Song*, as July is taken from her mother as a child to live in the big house with
Caroline Mortimer, and loses her identity in the process:

‘Marguerite, Marguerite!’ That is Caroline Mortimer calling out for July. She
has resolved to call her slave Marguerite, for she liked the way the name tripped
upon her tongue like a trill. Yet it was only Caroline Mortimer who did look
upon July’s face to see a Marguerite residing there. (Levy, *The Long Song* 55)

Caroline Mortimer renames July in a similar way as one would a pet. The name change
highlights the power dynamics of their relationship as owner and property. When the
slaves start to rebel against the plantation owners we see a change in the dynamic
between Caroline and her house slaves, which is strongly emphasized when the slave
Godfrey forces Caroline to call July by her real name: “Her house girl was not named
Marguerite–her name was July. Three times, Godfrey made Caroline speak that name”
(Levy, *The Long Song* 124). When Robert Goodwin enters the picture, he treats July
with respect, “almost as if she were one of his own kind”, furthermore, he demands that
Caroline call her Miss July (Levy, *The Long Song* 283). As they fall in love and July
bears his child, Robert Goodwin treats her with kindness and demands the same
behavior from Caroline. However, when Robert Goodwin suddenly turns against her
and starts to call her Marguerite, July’s feelings are greatly injured. The change in Robert Goodwin is clear, and from that moment on he treats July like property. This change is evident the moment he calls July Marguerite, just as when Mr. Rochester starts to call his wife Bertha instead of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The name change can be seen as an assertion of ownership over these women. By stripping them of their names, they also strip them of their humanity. Evidently, Mr. Goodwin and Mr. Rochester are unable to transcend their own racial prejudice. Although initially both of these men seem above the racial perceptions of their time, they eventually give in to racial prejudice and are reduced to treating their lovers as lesser beings. Thus *The Long Song* not only shares similarities with *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Beloved*, but also mirrors pivotal scenes from these two novels. Through these intertextual elements, Levy arguably underlines the significance she places in the subject at hand. Most importantly, *The Long Song, Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Beloved* are all examples of novels that present the untold stories of the marginalized, be it slaves, former slaves or women in general.
3. Slave narratives and neo-slave narratives

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, a distinguished group of writers across the African Diaspora has attempted to recover elements of the narrative structure and thematic configuration of slave narratives (Lima 135). Amongst those writers is Andrea Levy. The slave narrative is defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as “an account of life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally” (Andrews). Slave narratives are to this day one of the most influential literary traditions in America. “From 1760 to the end of the Civil War in the United States, approximately 100 autobiographies of fugitive or former slaves appeared” (Andrews). Furthermore:

After slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865, at least 50 former slaves wrote or dictated book-length accounts of their lives. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the WPA Federal Writers’ Project gathered oral personal histories from over 2,500 former slaves, whose testimony eventually filled 40 volumes. (Andrews)

These narratives are mostly centered on the hardships and cruelty of enslaved life and the journey towards freedom. Especially in the United States, slave narratives have been extremely popular and inspired some of the most recognized novels of the 19th century, including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Sadly, throughout the years, slave narratives have been considered unreliable as a historical source, in many cases due to ideological differences and the nature of history writing itself (Lima 135). However, Lima argues:

as more slave narratives were discovered and republished, mostly in the late sixties and seventies in the United States, the rewriting of such stories has become central to a contemporary effort to re-imagine that history from the point of view of the subaltern. More importantly perhaps, (neo)-slave narratives still need to be written to expose systemic inequality and the unjust treatment of black peoples everywhere. (Lima 135)

Although slave narratives are typically an African-American genre, they have become more distinct within British fiction in the past twenty years. There has especially been an increase in publication of fictional slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, in an effort to draw attention to slavery within the British Empire.

In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernhard Bell defines neo-slave narratives as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom”
(289). Essentially, a neo-slave narrative recreates a first person slave narrative within a fictional text, drawing inspiration from the original slave narratives of the past. The neo-slave narrative explores the African-American literary tradition and the origins of the African Diaspora from a contemporary vantage point (Lima 136). Historical fiction can thus be used as a tool to fill in the blanks and silences of slave narratives as they reanimate lost histories. Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* is a great example of historical fiction that with the help of a neo-slave narrative comes across as a believable and heartfelt autobiography of a former slave.

3.1 Narrative structure in *The Long Song*

As stated above, *The Long Song* is mostly told from the perspective of the former slave July. Apart from the foreword and afterword of the novel, written by her son and editor Thomas Kinsman, July is the narrator of her own story, her autobiography. In the foreword of the novel, July’s son Thomas introduces the reader to his mother, explaining that this is her story to tell: “The book you are now holding in your hand was born of a craving. My mama had a story—a story that lay so fat within her breast that she felt impelled, by some force which was mightier than her own will, to relay this tale to me, her son” (Levy, *The Long Song* 1). Thomas’s editorial foreword is in itself a form of intervention, contextualizing and containing July’s narrative (Baxter 88). As a printer his responsibilities include stabilizing language, and throughout the narrative Thomas consistently tries to contain July’s story. It is clear that Thomas does not always agree with his mother’s manner of writing, yet he decides to let her have her way: “Some scenes I earnestly charged her not to write in the manner she had chosen. But, like the brightest pupil with an outworn master, she became quite insistent upon having her way. And agreeing with a resolute woman is always easier” (Levy, *The Long Song* 2).

July demands narrative authority throughout the novel, and is insistent on telling her story in her own way. She frequently disrupts her own narrative and speaks directly to the reader, sometimes to further explain her own standing, or to withdraw her prior statements. Moreover, there are times when her son pushes her further and urges her to tell the truth. Thomas thus frames the narrative in a way, and helps his mother when she is reluctant to go on.

July is the narrator of her own life’s tale, and from the very beginning of the novel she speaks directly to the reader, explaining what lies ahead. This is her story and
though it may differ from what is written in history books, she insists that she is telling the truth. She urges the reader, if he or she so wishes, to read the white narratives available in history books. Furthermore, she does not feel pressured to “recreate any form of realist, historical narrative and, rather cheekily, she refers the reader to additional (fictional) reading matter should they feel the need for ‘a fuller account of what happened during this time’” (Baxter 89). With this form of storytelling, Levy counteracts the formal historical narrative of Britain’s exploitation of African-Caribbean peoples (Tolan 98). In *The Long Song* she gives voice to and reanimates a lost history, and does so without depicting the slaves as voiceless victims. Her story inspires pride rather than shame as it exemplifies the courage, resilience and strength of the slaves. The focus of the narrative is centered on July and perhaps more importantly, her personal experiences within a historical time.

What July decides to share with her readers is mostly what she experiences first hand. Despite the historical moments taking place all around her, July is rarely at the center of the action. By doing this, Levy is exemplifying “the manner in which the great moments of history rarely coincide with everyday lived experiences” (Tolan 100). Furthermore, Levy creates parallels within July’s narrative and history. At a time where the slaves are starting to rebel against the plantation owners of the island, a symbolic rebellion is taking place within the Amity household. As Caroline Mortimer is desperate to throw a perfect Christmas dinner, things start to go horribly wrong. It becomes evident that the slaves are purposely ruining Caroline’s Christmas party. Even the fiddlers, who play unrecognizable tunes for Caroline and her guests, later turn out to be quite skillful musicians: “The fiddlers, now playing in the yard for the servants’ gathering, began to strike up a song. No more clatter or unrecognizable tune—the sound of a sweet melody came whispering through the open window. For, like most slave fiddlers, it only amused them to play bad for white ears” (Levy, *The Long Song* 95). Once July has concluded her narrative on the Christmas dinner, she is confronted by her son Thomas, who rightfully points out to her that this is happening during the time of the Baptist War:

‘But this is the time of the Baptist War, Mama,’ he tell me. ‘The night of Caroline Mortimer’s unfinished dinner in your story is the time of the Christmas rebellion, when all the trouble began.’ He then commenced to blast me with fierce commands. (Levy, *The Long Song* 101)
As Thomas urges his mother to write about the rebellion, Sam Sharpe and the historic events of this time, July demands authority over the narrative. As she speaks directly to her readers she makes it clear that despite everything that happened during that time, she will only write about what she experienced first hand:

What I do know is that when those fires raged like beacons from plantation and pen; when regiments marched and militants mustered; when slaves took oaths upon the Holy Bible to fight against white people with machete, stick and gun; when the bullets sparked like deadly fireflies; and bare black feet ran nimble through grass, wood and field—At Amity, the loudest thing your storyteller could hear was Miss Hannah gnawing upon the missus’s discarded ham bone. (Levy, *The Long Song* 103-4)

July frequently interrupts the narrative to speak her mind, especially when she feels pressured by her son Thomas to do something differently. She dismisses anything that might undermine her authorial control. Despite this, things are more complicated than they seem, as argued by Tolan: “her text contains multiple instances of unresolved, hyperbolic and contradictory narratives that foreground experiential rather than factual accounts and problematize notions of authority and veracity” (100).

July’s storytelling is lively, humorous and heartbreaking at the same time. Nevertheless, the most apparent instances of July’s unbelievable or contradictory narratives can be seen when she is dealing with difficult or painful memories. At the very beginning of her story, July tells extraordinary tales of her own birth, one of which involves a tiger with a long spiky snout and six legs (Levy, *The Long Song* 13). She does however retract these stories almost instantly and subsequently goes on to tell the real story of how she came into this world. In reality, the white overseer of Amity’s plantation rapes and impregnates July’s mother, and July’s birth is a difficult one, a far cry from July’s earlier testimonies. However, July does not dwell on the horrific occurrences in her past, in fact we see her trying to avoid discussing her most painful memories.

At a certain point in her story, it becomes too difficult for July to continue, and she claims that she will go no further. “I can go no further! Reader, my story is at an end. Close up this book and go about your day. You have heard all that I have to tell of a life lived upon this sugar island” (Levy, *The Long Song* 183). What follows is July’s most shameful memory, one she does not want to relive, the birth of her son Thomas
and her decision to give him away. At this point it is Thomas who pushes her further, and against her will, July goes on, stating:

I know that my reader does not wish to be told tales as ugly as these. And please believe your storyteller when she declares that she has no wish to pen them. It is only my son that desires it. For he believes his mama should suffer every little thing again. Him wan’ me suffer every likkle t’ing again! (Levy, *The Long Song* 192)

Here we see a sudden shift in July’s language, as she momentarily loses her composure. When she is faced with these painful memories we see the Jamaican Creole coming though her writing, which forms a sharp contrast to the carefully composed language she uses throughout most of her narrative. When in an emotional state, it is natural for ones native language or dialect to come through, especially in passionate speech. Nevertheless, July regains her composure and carefully goes on telling her tale. Once her story comes to an end, her son Thomas urges her yet again to continue. Nonetheless, July has decided to end her story, with only the happiest of endings. “Perhaps, I told my son, upon some other day there may come a person who would wish to tell the chronicle of those times anew. But I am an old-old woman. And, reader, I have not the ink” (Levy, *The Long Song* 395). In the end, July claims narrative authority of her tale once more, by deciding when to finish it. She has told her story, in her own words and on her own terms, and she alone decides when her long song will come to an end. The narrative structure of *The Long Song* can be seen as a representation of the lost narratives and voices in our history, subsequently deepening our understanding of slave narratives and challenging dominant accounts of history.
4. The painting as metaphor for history’s lost voices

*The Long Song* features a painting that is of great significance to the overall understanding of the novel. The painting can be seen as metaphor, symbolizing lost voices of history, embodying the narratives of Caribbean slaves. At the center of Levy’s novel is a painting of slave master and mistress, Robert and Caroline Goodwin with their slave July. She is “placed in the picture as a possession to signify their wealth and importance. Yet, despite being relegated to the position of object, Miss July forces her subjectivity into the painting with such vigour as to become its central focus” (Fischer, “At the Centre of the Picture” 109). A portrait Levy saw whilst working on her novel inspired the idea of the painting of Miss July with her master and mistress:

I was thinking about a wonderful painting of somebody called Dido Elizabeth Belle. She lived in Kenwood House. She was an illegitimate child and taken in and brought up, with a cousin of hers who was white. It’s a picture of these two young women, and the white woman is at the centre of the picture, but Dido absolutely steals it by the look on her face and her demeanour. Clearly the artist was in love with her or something [*laughs*] – it’s really very palpable. And I just loved that idea. (Fischer, “Andrea Levy in Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer” 134)

![Figure 1: The painting of Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido Belle](image)

The painting in question (figure 1), is a portrait by an unknown artist which was displayed as part of the ‘Slavery and Justice Exhibition’ in 2007 (Fischer, “At the
Lady Elizabeth is in the foreground, yet it is Dido, pointing at her own smiling face that draws the attention of the viewer.

Just as Dido points to her own smiling face in the original, July draws attention to herself with the expression on her face in the portrait titled *Mr and Mrs Goodwin*:

And although the artist requested that July look towards her mistress with obedient esteem upon her face, July’s countenance craftily contrives to catch the eye of the viewer with an expression that says quite clearly, ‘So, what you think of this? Am I not the loveliest negro you ever did see?’ (Levy, *The Long Song* 287)

Not only does July grab the attention of the viewer, it is clear that Robert Goodwin’s gaze is fixed upon July: “Robert Goodwin was indeed gazing upon July through the whole of the portrait’s execution. For July was carrying his child and he wished to stare nowhere else” (Levy, *The Long Song* 292). Therefore, the painting originally meant to celebrate the marriage of Robert and Caroline Goodwin, ends up highlighting Robert’s love for July. The portrait not only underlines their forbidden love, it is emblematic of July’s role in the novel. As July upstages her master and mistress in the painting and becomes the focal point of the picture, she not only shows her own prominence in their story, but also draws attention to slavery’s centrality to history (Fischer, “At the Centre of the Picture” 109). July demands the attention of the viewer despite being relegated to the position of object. Similarly, her memoir enables her to forward her experiences through her own narrative after being marginalized for so long. *The Long Song*, just as the painting, brings attention to July and her story rather than the white plantation owners who stand beside her.

The painting is mentioned again in the latter part of the story in a scene where the painter is working on the background for the portrait. Comparably to the painting’s foreground its background can be seen as a metaphor of the portrayal of slavery within history. A distiller-man, and former slave by the name of Dublin Hilton sees a white man painting a picture up near by the great house, painting the view of the lands of Amity into its background (Levy, *The Long Song* 295). He recognizes July and Robert Goodwin from the painting right away. However, in regards to the white woman in the picture he notes that she is “too narrow” to be Caroline Goodwin (Levy, *The Long Song* 295). The representation of Caroline in the painting is an example of the painter’s attempts to make her look more appealing. In addition, Hilton notices the white man ignoring the negro village before him, erasing the huts from the landscape altogether:
“Soon Dublin approaches this man with a question, ‘Pardon me, massa, but you can no see the negro dwellings?’ ‘All too clearly. Now, be off with you, nigger,’ was the reply Dublin Hilton received” (Levy, *The Long Song* 296). As Dublin continues to query as to why the village is left out of the painting, the white man responds: “no one wishes to find squalid negroes within a rendering of a tropical idyll” (Levy, *The Long Song* 296). Dublin goes on to discredit the false picture of the island: “you paint an untruth” (Levy, *The Long Song* 296). Instead of painting what is before him, the white man erases the unwanted village from the scenery. This parallels the white understanding of the British colonization in the Caribbean. The painting can therefore be seen as a metaphor for the untruths and erasure found in dominant accounts of British history. Furthermore, this scene stresses the importance of July’s narrative and her individual story being told, as one would paint the village back into the picture. In *The Long Song*, Levy masterfully paints the village back into the picture, so to speak, by giving voice to the silenced slaves of the Caribbean.

### 4.1. *The Long Song* in relevance to modern times

As stated above, what originally inspired Levy to write *The Long Song* was a young girl raising the question of how she could take pride in her Jamaican heritage, since her ancestors had been slaves. Despite mostly taking place on a sugar plantation in nineteenth century Jamaica, slavery in itself is not the novel’s main focus. Levy gives voice to the slaves of the Caribbean and tells a story beyond slavery itself. *The Long Song* transcends being merely a story of cruelty and hardship and is essentially an account of resilience, love, loss and humanity. Bringing forward lost histories and narratives can play a significant role in shaping our understanding of the past. By giving voice to the silenced, Levy raises awareness and brings slavery to the center of the picture. With her use of a neo-save narrative she is able to tell an individual story of great significance as it represents the many who have been silenced. In addition, her use of a neo-slave narrative exemplifies an individual experience during a historic time, as opposed to the dominant accounts of Caribbean history that give a somewhat one-sided view of the past.

*The Long Song* closes with an afterword by Thomas Kinsman, where he, Fischer argues, “reasserts the importance of reclaiming and re-examining history” (“At the Centre of the Picture” 119). Thomas states that he has been unsuccessful in his search
for his half-sister Emily Goodwin. Moreover, he wonders if she knows of her heritage and her connection to Jamaica:

But I have of late been puzzling upon the whereabouts of Emily Goodwin and the situation under which she now lives. Perhaps she is in England, unaware of the strong family connection she has to this island of Jamaica. She may have children of her own, who have no understanding that their grandmama was born a slave. (Levy, *The Long Song* 398)

As Thomas implores the reader to contact him with any information about his lost sister, he urges caution regarding the sensitive matter, seeing that “in England the finding of negro blood within a family is not always met with rejoicing” (Levy, *The Long Song* 398). While he wants to be reunited with his sister, and for her to know of her heritage, he is painfully aware of how unsettling this might be for her.

By ending the novel with this reminder that a woman with a more complex history than she perhaps even realizes has assimilated into white English society, Levy emphasizes the unbreakable connection between the intertwining histories of Jamaica and Britain (Fischer, “At the Centre of the Picture” 119). Today the descendants of slaves are part of what makes modern Britain a diverse and multicultural society. The slaves of the Caribbean did more than survive slavery itself, as they lived, laughed and loved and built a culture that is part of British history. *The Long Song* tells a story of a human experience during an impossibly difficult time in our history. Yet it does not focus on the monstrosities of slavery, but rather focuses on an individual experience during a historic time. Levy not only raises awareness of a significant part of history, she stresses the importance of questioning the narratives we are exposed to. By writing historical fiction, Levy is able to fill in some of the gaps and counteract the erasure of slave narratives from British history. In addition, a neo-slave narrative enables her to shed light on the lost narratives of the slaves by reanimating their experiences in the form of a memoir. Overall, these narratives are extremely important in modern society, shaping both our understanding of the past and the multicultural present. By reanimating the experiences of Caribbean slaves, Levy has created a form of legacy for their descendants. Slave ancestry should not be regarded as shameful, it should inspire pride, and by embracing your history you can find pride in your heritage.
Conclusion

With her use of a neo-slave narrative within historical fiction, Andrea Levy successfully portrays a silenced, yet significant part of history in her novel *The Long Song*. Historical fiction as a genre can provide a unique platform for untold narratives and can be used as a tool to bring attention to minimized and underplayed accounts of history. By reanimating the experiences of Caribbean slaves Levy questions dominant accounts of history and gives voice to the marginalized. Whereas numerous literary works, including works of historical fiction confront the history of slavery in the United States of America, Levy brings attention to the history of Caribbean slaves. Written in the form of a memoir, *The Long Song* focuses on an individual experience during a historic time, providing the reader with a very personal look into what might have been the life of a Jamaican slave. In addition, the neo-slave narrative adds to the authenticity of the storytelling, giving the reader a glimpse of the Jamaican Creole spoken by the slaves. All in all, *The Long Song* tells a compelling story while simultaneously drawing attention to slavery’s centrality to history. Just as July becomes the focal point of her mistress’s painting, Levy pushes slavery into the center of the picture. Moreover, Levy draws attention to the erasure that has taken place within British history as the metaphoric slave dwellings are erased from the painting represented in the story.

The unique legacy of slavery in the Caribbean deserves recognition, awareness and the attention of modern society. Modern day Britain and the history and culture of the Caribbean are intertwined, not separate. Due to the gaps in our history and the missing voices from our history books, there is plenty of room to explore the narratives of the marginalized. Historical fiction can be used as a tool to raise awareness of countless subjects, including lost histories and narratives. The genre has unique potential to challenge and reimagine history, providing a platform for the stories of the marginalized to be heard. Neo-slave narratives have become increasingly distinct within British fiction for the past two decades. In addition, these fictional slave narratives have proven successful in drawing attention to slavery within the British Empire as opposed to the white narratives of British history books. By reimagining history, historical fiction actively broadens horizons and raises awareness of numerous subjects. In her novel *The Long Song*, Andrea Levy tells a story of great importance, shedding light on a part of history that has often been ignored or diminished.
Works Cited

