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REWRITING THE HISTORY OF ENSLAVED AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND THEIR SURVIVAL IN JOHNSON'S YELLOW WIFE

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ABSTRACT:

The paper critically reads Sadeqa Johnson's masterpiece Yellow Wife (2021) as a neo-slave narrative. The neo-slave narrative is a post-World War II genre. The traditional slave narratives gave the account of a fleeing slave who opposed slavery and worked to abolish it. In an attempt to build a critical history of the Black Atlantic, the neo-slave narrative highlights the slave's historical legacy by uncovering the past through the foregrounding of African Atlantic experiences. Johnson shows a realistic image of African-American life. She believes that many difficulties and facts of African-Americans' lives are overlooked and neglected in slave tales. The paper is about slavery, a terrible time period in African-American history that is notorious for constant dehumanization, humiliation, racial segregation, and exploitation. The paper attempts to showcase Johnson's unveiling of the sufferings of black slaves in the white American society and its huge influence on African-American women. The paper seeks theoretic support from the ideas of Ashraf H. A. Rushdy - the most influential source of thought about neo-slave narratives. This paper closely reads Johnson's fictive yet intimate account of a biracial (black) woman's survival in particular and how black women break the stereotypes created by the whites in general.

INTRODUCTION

African-American literary tradition relates to the history and culture of people who have been oppressed. The writer's creative works include the repressed and exploitation of the people of the African-American race and society. Slavery which was characterized by continual brutalization, disgrace, racial segregation, and oppression, left its mark on the history of African-Americans. In white America, African-Americans were perceived as having no histories, no traditional heritage, no values, and no self-identity. African-Americans were considered inferior creatures and denied the ownership of their cultural, intellectual, and ethnic values throughout the centuries under the racist doctrines of inferiority that were advanced by Europeans and Americans.

Slave narratives describe the dislocated and enslaved Africans' realities in Great Britain's colonies as well as in the United States. The narratives of women were largely absent from these narratives, which led to the portrayal of female slaves either as submissive or non-aggressive. Neo-slave narratives include literary portrayals of slavery that demonstrate the lasting effects of enslavement in the twentieth and 21st centuries. This genre first appeared in the 1950s. The writers of neo-slave narratives were able to engage more openly with the enslavement system and its modern effects without the limitations imposed on the writers of slave narratives. Neo-slave narratives mostly written by women and featuring female protagonists serve to rewrite, reclaim, and reposition women in the past that has mostly excluded them. The neo-slave narratives through their imagination, construct stories from black narratives and historical accounts.

Yellow Wife is a twenty-first century neo-slave narrative, re-reading the cultural, economic, and political aspects of the Virginian slavery system in the nineteenth century. The Lumpkin's Jail near Virginia, sometimes known as 'The Devil's Half Acre', is referred, throughout, in the novel. Pheby Delores Brown is the female protagonist and the narrator of the story. Her story is inspired by the real-life character, Mary Lumpkin who was the enslaved mistress of Robert Lumpkin - a famous white slave dealer who ran the appropriately titled 'The Devil's Half Acre', the slave-trading facility that Lumpkin had established in 1840. The compound contained an auction block, a dormitory, and a bar. According to Johnson's author note the jail served, from 1844 to 1865, as a notorious holding facility and "breaking center" for even more than nearly 300,000 black slaves. The novel depicts, through the narration of an enslaved woman Pheby Delores Brown, the brutalities of white enslavers. Raised on a Virginia plantation, she is the daughter of the master Jacob Bell and his enslaved mistress Ruth. Before Pheby turns 18 years old, her father traveling with Ruth, runs into an accident. Both of them suffer injuries that ultimately result in death. Jacob's wife Delphina sells Pheby, expecting a child with her slave boyfriend Essex Henry. At Rubin Lapier's famous slave trading facility in Richmond, Pheby was to be sold. Pheby is tagged as a "fancy girl" for auction because of her exceptional beauty and fair skin, but the jailer notices her and declares her his "yellow wife" instead. She must use incredible tactics to sail the extremely stormy waves of her relationship with Rubin Lapier because of her frequent exposure to the impetuous jailer's anger. The jailer had always used her son, Monroe, as just a

lash across her neck to force complete obedience, therefore she must figure out a method to save him. She also needs to find a means to protect her children. After several failed efforts and the attendant implications, she finally succeeds in assisting him in fleeing to the North before Lapier sells him, at the risk of her life. After their father passes away, three of Pheby's kids, who were fathered by Lapier, are shown in the epilogue living as white people in the North, with one of them steadfastly devoted to supporting the freed people within the years following the civil war and freedom.

To give an honest fictive account of the brutalities perpetrated on blacks by the white men before the abolishment of slavery and to recreate its history through the narratives of black female slaves has been a very hard nut to crack for both creative writers and critics. The blacks, due to their biological specificity and color, have always been identified as the inferior creatures of the earth. The reality of slavery is not sugarcoated in this work which shows the bond between enslaved people and their owners is not romanticized, even though this stereotype has been reinforced in many works. This work is truthful in its portrayal of the brutality, dehumanization, and familial divisions experienced by black women during the slave trade, as well as the choices they made to preserve their offspring's life. Johnson doesn't want to lighten the story in order to make it easier to read. Yellow Wife is the perfect resource for Americans who are currently struggling with black problems to know how they got to where they are.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focuses on the many thousands of African inhabitants who were kidnapped and sold into slavery in the Americas beginning from 1619 to be precise. Detained Africans were primarily forced to serve in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the south of the modern United States and used as slaves. According to some historians, nearly five million Africans were sent to Brazil, over three million to the Caribbean, and about 400,000 were exiled to British America.

Johnson uses rich imagery in her writing that makes it difficult to turn away, even during the most heartbreaking scenes. Readers experience a gripping suspense. Azon (2021), employing psychoanalytical literary theory, presents a psychoanalytical analysis of the different resilience strategies and politics that these enslaved African women adopted and utilized to deal with the terrible, painful and deadly risks of their daily lives. According to Azon, Johnson's Yellow Wife was created in opposition to the naive notion of the enslaved worker's ambivalence and satisfaction under the confines of slavery. It also analyzes the slave women's reliance on cultural identification rituals and narratives, as well as other psychological elements that give purpose to their life and avoid sadness and suicide. Azon also points to Johnson's highlighting of the important part of African theology as a critical aspect of slave's mental balance: protective magic designed to keep the carriers secure and relieve the sufferings of their situation (pp. 228-241). Ruth gives her daughter a protective amulet that she requests her not to ever separate with. She also gives her a bundle of dried leaves, little seeds, and fingernail trimmings, nestled into a scrap of lace and asks her to "sew this into the hem

of your skirt. For your protection while I'm gone from here" (Johnson, 2021, p. 25). Pheby carries this item with her in memories of her mother when she passes away. Beyond the chasm of death, the amulet serves as an emblem of cultural history and individual memory, as well as a link between mother and daughter.

Sharee Hereford reads Yellow Wife as a historical novel and believes that Johnson brings her readers to Virginia in the 1850s when slavery is still legal and plantations are commonplace. Johnson does not just transport us back in time and place us among miles of cotton fields and large plantation mansions; she also establishes the tone for how terrible daily life is for black slave people in America. Yellow Wife appears to be a piece of fiction, but it isn't, and that is the aspect that shall be bothering for the readers. Mary Lumpkin, Robert Lumpkin's enslaved mistress, inspired Pheby. Robert Lumpkin was a white slave dealer who owned and ran a real-life prison for enslaved African-Americans (Hereford, 2021).

Clarissa Harwood observes that the most moving aspects of Yellow Wife are those around motherhood. After giving birth, female slaves' whole emphasis changes to finding a better life for their offspring: "ain't many choices for a slave woman," Pheby's mother warns her early in the narrative, "Please understand that all I do is for you. I'm going to die a slave." For female slaves their children are their legacy. Pheby too like her mother is eager to go to any length for her children. Pheby's major means of struggle is her secret notebook, which she uses to write both her mother's prescriptions and the stories of the slave females she prepares for trade. Her writing is frequently her primary means of protesting the injustices she witnesses daily - a powerful deed in a story in which all of the admirable people are otherwise weak (Harwood, 2021).

For Ellen Morton, Yellow Wife tells the story of one determined enslaved woman's survival in the antebellum South. Pheby's perspective becomes increasingly important as she adjusts to life under Lapier's ruthless supervision. Her unusual location allows her to participate in acts of disobedience while witnessing the jail's everyday procedures and institutional atrocities. Pheby's unique attention and inventiveness are most evident in these deeds, which are sometimes little and banal, sometimes risky and overt. She realizes: "it was time for me to become my rescuer" and "[m]y days as a young lady were over. I needed to think like a lady now." She marshals her resources to accomplish what she can, always conscious that her survival relies on her slave master's acceptance of her as a loving wife. She says: "I hated the way he made my name sound like a question when it was most certainly a command." Finally, Morton lauds Johnson's writer's note, which describes the stories that influenced the novel, as the most interesting of all chapters (Morton, 2021).

As Yellow Wife manifests the white peoples' brutality toward the black slaves, therefore, almost all the reviewers have pointed to this effect of the novel as shown in this section of the paper. Johnson expertly holds the mirror up to the true real life experienced by a black slave through her neo-slave narrative.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The content of African-American literature is continually evolving, with enslavement, the challenges and experiences of African-Americans throughout history, race issues, literature, and new kinds of verbal expressions all playing a major role. Slave narratives tell us not only about the difficult track from slavery to liberation but also about black people's battles to write openly in antebellum America. The slave narratives focused on the transformation from verbal to textual literature for African-Americans. Both are significant aspects of African-American culture (Irele, 2011, pp. 26-36). Fredrick Douglas' The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas: An American Slave (1845) is the earliest example of slave narratives.

Slavery produced a complex, difficult, and demanding variety of cultural items, one of which was the slave tale. It can be divided into two groups for independent study: One is a genre of visionary fiction about slavery that originated during the end of slavery, while the other is the ancient and postwar narratives produced by fugitive slaves. The latter group of slave narratives includes the neo-slave narratives. Neo-slave narratives are a significant literary movement in American literature that aims to improve racial harmony in the country by moving "African Americans to a new place" (Pun, 2017, p. 22). The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition, a 1987 publication by Bernard W. Bell, is recognized for coining the phrase "neo-slave narratives." According to him, neo-slave narratives are "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell, 1987, p. 289).

The neo-slave narrative has an impact on how later African-American narrative genres developed. The term "neo-slave narrative," according to Valerie Smith, also refers to a wider variety of texts within Bell's conceptual framework that take some viewpoints on the system of slavery and use a range of writing techniques, from historical research-based realism novels to fantasy fiction, postmodern explorations, humor, and works that merge these many types. Despite their diversity, these writings show how important slavery's history and recollection seem to be to our personal, ethnic, sexual, cultural, and social identities (Smith, 2007, pp. 168-185).

The neo-slave narrative does not write about the writers' personal experiences or serve as an executive assistant for a former slave. As a result, Afro-American writers of recent years have recreated "a still partial historiography of slavery" (Levecq, 2001 p. 136) and created works that depict slavery from the views of African-Americans. The neo-slave narratives utilize the imagination in two different ways. First, it's the expertise that each slave narrative author brings to the table. The author also uses the pronoun "I" in his or her literary work, which identifies African-Americans as complete human beings and turns it into a narrative. Second, these narratives inspire readers to use their imagination in need to fully understand what is being given. To experience the concept of humanity in this situation, as "rediscovered in the form of neo-slave narratives today," requires imagination (Pun, 2017, p. 16). Valerie Smith, in her essay "Neo-slave Narratives" recognizes Ashraf Rushdy as the one who defined the genre as "modern books that embrace the structure,

follow the traditions, and carry on the first-person narrative of the antebellum slave narrative" (Smith, 2007, p. 169).

Sofia Munoz-Valdivieso, a historical critic, puts the spotlight on how the phrase "Neo-Slave Narrative" came to be. She says in her article, "Neo-Slave Narratives in Contemporary Black British Fiction" that the term has come to refer to all current books about slavery in a broad sense, but it also has a more specific definition that Ashraf H. A. Rushdy established in The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form. Neo-slave narratives, within this more concrete way, are a specific type of slavery fiction that recreates the first-person narration of the original works written (or delivered) by the liberated slaves themselves. The term "neo-slave narratives" will be used in the current debate to refer to literary first-person works that are similar to the earlier slave fictions in Rushdy's more concrete way, and slavery novels will also be used to describe the books that deal with enslavement in any other way (Muñoz-Valdivieso, 2012. pp. 43-59).

Remembering Generations, Race, and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction (2001), is yet another of Rushdy's work in the same direction. America's dark secret of enslavement is a ghostly history that remains large in our collective consciousness. In a novel depicting the long-lasting impacts of slavery mostly on ancestors of slaves there in the post-civil rights period, three current African-American authors are examined in this study, and how artistically they express this idea. Ashraf Rushdy places the three works—Gayl Jones' Corregidora (1975), David Bradley's The Chaneysville Incident (1981), and Octavia Butler's Kindred (1979)—in their historical contexts of creation while underlining how they connect to current discussions of race and family.

Combining the ideas about slave narratives and neo-slave narratives as given by Rushdy, the research at the hand establishes a theoretical framework for the critical approach that guides our exploration of Sadeqa Johnson's novel Yellow Wife which presents the sufferings of enslaved people and the brutality of slave owners perpetrated on the black people through the narration of a biracial woman Pheby.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Slavery and Neo-slave Narratives in America

Sadeqa Johnson's Yellow Wife is truly a representation of the history of the African-American enslaved people through the narration of its female protagonist: Pheby. The neo-slave narrative does not write about the writers' personal experiences or serve as an executive assistant for a past slave. The reality of slavery is not sugarcoated in this kind of work. Rather, it shows that the bond between enslaved people and their owners is not romanticized, even though this stereotype has been reinforced in many works. This work is truthful in its portrayal of the brutality, dehumanization, and familial divisions experienced by black women during the slave trade, as well as the choices

they made to preserve their offspring's life. Johnson doesn't want to lighten the story in order to make it easier to read.

Johnson's depiction of slavery and class system is particularly stunning. It's no secret that children fathered by slave owners were typically given preferential treatment in the plantation hierarchy, according to their skin color. They were all still enslaved at the end of the day, with no way out. However, Johnson emphasizes the terrible change in circumstances that Pheby must learn to manage by presenting Pheby's early childhood. A narrative is a piece of writing which is a narration of a series that is related to real events or life experiences. The neo-slave narrative does not only write about the author's individual experiences or serve as a copy's manuscripts for a former slave. The authors of neo-slave narratives are influenced and refined by the study of the history of slave stories, the developing literature of slavery, and challenging the history of race issues around the world, notably, in the U.S. They are indeed allowed to use their imaginations to uncover previous unacknowledged and mysterious effects of oppression on slaves, slaveholders, including their kids.

Breaking the Stereotypes

The white men considered the blacks especially the females as uncivilized, uneducated, illiterate, and having no knowledge of medicine. This work shows us the strong women who have broken all these stereotypes. They could communicate with plants, wildlife in the wild, and streams, call upon the spirits and spirits of creatures and request their healing abilities and other qualities. Ruth, Pheby's mother, has a unique position at Jacob's Plantation. Her character is reinforced by her understanding of black medical knowledge, particularly, even if it is just symbolic. The novel begins with her midnight seeking for leaves inside the forest, where she glides as though blessed with a unique sense of direction: "mama believed that the full moon was the most fertile night of the month and that everything she touched held God's power […] Even in the dark, she knew where to stop for herbs and how to avoid the dangerous ones" (Johnson, 2021, p. 1).

Healing techniques convey identity in such a way as they created an exclusive framework reserved for black people. When a white doctor was called in to treat Rachel, a black woman who is ill, Ruth screams, "he ain't know nothin' about doctoring no field hands" (Johnson, 2021, p. 4). In reality, Rachel passes away, and Ruth was convinced that she might have rescued her if she had been called sooner. After her mother passes away, Pheby carried all her mother's memories along with her as a tribute to her. During that time of slavery, black people were not allowed to read and write because it was considered against the law. Miss Sally taught Pheby and also taught her how to play the piano. Pheby had beautiful memories of her because she treated her very differently. She always protected her from the brutality of Missus Delphina.

Dehumanizing behavior of White Master

Missus Delphina, the white mistress of Master Jacob did not like Pheby because of her identity and status at the Plantation. She complains: "Sally

taught Pheby a lot. Your sister spoiled that girl […] she is better than a slave" (Johnson, 2021, p. 11). She also hated Ruth because of her importance in her master's life and she called her a "nigger woman" in a bitter tone of jealousy. In the jealousy and grudge Missus sold out Pheby on the day of her mother's funeral. When Ruth has faced an incident Pheby requested to Missus for a doctor for her mother, but she was not allowed for it and she blames Missus for her death: "do not speak of my mother, she would be alive if you had only sent for the doctor, her blood is on your hand" (Johnson, 2021, p. 58).

Robin Lapier is the owner of a jail called 'The Devil's Half Acre'. He has the business of selling the slaves at a high cost. He hates the negros and represents the blackest brutality of white men towards their slaves. Marse brutally beats Tommy who did not do anything but as his punishment for being black is beaten badly. Pheby said about him: "he behaves like an animal who had finally cornered his prey" (Johnson, 2021, p. 162). The enslaved Essex who escaped from the Bell Plantation is caught and the whites wanted to punish him. Robin says: "these niggers need a good showing of what happens when they fix it in their head to escape" (Johnson, 2021, p. 185). He wanted to give the proper auction in front of all enslaved people so that everyone knows what will be done to them if they try to run away from there: "I will get justice on this nigger for every slave who has run off or even think about running off […] I will scare them straight. You have my word" (Johnson, 2021, p. 186). Johnson's Yellow Wife rewrites history and shows us how white slaveholders punished blacks if they try to escape from them. It was much horrible and a violent scene when he punished Essex in front of many people. The writer uses the word "Thwap, Thwap" when he beats the black enslaved people. Tommy gave a tray of weapons to the jailer; he takes his cowhide whip to punish him. He has beaten him repeatedly and then "scalding hot pepper water poured into his skin" (Johnson, 2021, pp. 200-201).

Survival of Slaves

Pheby's mother wanted her daughter to live free life and didn't live the life she herself had lived there. She says to her that "I'ma die a slave, I knows that […] you are meant to see freedom, I's makin sure" (Johnson, 2021, p. 18). There was always one thing which she always reminded in her mind that she was not a slave: "'member now, even in the big house you's still Pheby Delores Brown, born on Christmas Day" (Johnson, 2021, p. 25). And one thing she had said to her that, "you a woman born to see freedom […] you ain't nobody's property" (Johnson, 2021, p. 25).

Pheby is all too aware of Missus Delphina's enviousness over both her beauty and her husband's love and desire for his black mistress, from whom he has conceived Pheby. Her hatred and hostility are what make Pheby's life miserable. On the same day when Pheby buries her mother, she sold her away. Delphina approaches Pheby to give her another slap just as she is about to be escorted away. Pheby terrifies Delphina with a curse in a remarkable moment in which she recalls her heritage, mourning and desperate but without crying: "I curse you […] May all your worst fears come to pass, and all the evil you

do come back on you tenfold. This plantation will be your living hell" (Johnson, 2021, p. 57).

In Lapier Jail she has only her mother's diary and Essex's necklace. She had thoughts that her master came there and saved her. The slaves were to be exhibited; they ordered a black woman to disrobe herself in front of their sellers, which was too bashful a scene. She was the only one who did not follow their order and she also stared into the eyes of the presenter. She was ready to die rather than obey their orders. She now had to protect her son as her mother had done for her. Indeed she was now the mistress of Master Rubin, but her son will be always considered a slave. Her main concern had always been protecting Monroe, from being sold or living a brutal life as a farm worker. She admits to a black woman who accuses her of preparing for his business, "I do it for my son" (Johnson, 2021, p. 116).

Pheby relied heavily on music to maintain her psychological peace and employs it to relieve pain, generate dreams, and express her thoughts. Pheby finds herself in an extraordinary situation since she had access to the piano that cherished piece of the white man's possessions that is out of reach for many enslaved people. As a result, her situation cannot be applied to all other slaves. But her need for music conveys the endurance of a long-standing black tradition that had been upheld by yearning, suffering, and adversity. First and foremost, playing is an escape and a way for Pheby to imagine. The story repeatedly returns to these priceless times when she is permitted to sit and meld with the chords: "my fingernails scratched the keys […] the sound flow through me. I was no longer in the parlor, the jail, or Richmond. I floated high above […] as if no one controlled me. Like I was free" (Johnson, 2021, p. 103).

The Devil's Half Acre serves many purposes and serves as a crossroad for many black slaves, including those traveling to other locations, new arrivals destined for public auction, disobedient employees sent to be disciplined or subdued, and attractive "fancy girls" destined for sexual exploitation in Lapier's tavern. Pheby is responsible for giving the unlucky women on the train proper clothes that increased their market value. She would give them small amounts of food while she makes or purchases their new outfits, consoles them with a few balming words, and then attempts to persuade them into speaking so that she can record their unique stories: "writing their story down […] pray over them, and record their stories" (Johnson, 2021, p. 128).

One of the persistent occurrences that seem to be deeply embedded in the narratives of female slaves is sexual exploitation. Pheby once says: "I was same as those chained up in the courtyard awaiting sale, my status did not protect me" (Johnson, 2021, p. 194). Dissimulation was a crucial tactic used by enslaved people, including Pheby, to manage their survival and transcend the brutal existence their captors wanted for them. These women who worked in the "big house," who had to constantly contend with the curious eyes of white people, appear to place the utmost value on the art of appearance. Pheby had to develop her craft of pretending. She conceals her literacy, moves objects covertly in hidden pockets, and also carries her diary in a petticoat:

"when I flipped to the front of the diary I could hear mama's voice whispering in my ear" (Johnson, 2021, p. 226); masks her emotions with a cheery expression even when she is in frustration, pricks her middle finger to confess her love to Lapier, and also is awarded in a plethora of other ways for concealing who she is. These are the survival tactics that explain the resilience of slaves.

CONCLUSION

Sadeqa Johnson's Yellow Wife recreates the history of enslaved black people to show the true picture of antebellum era. She pens down all the possible accuracies of the history of African-American people regarding slavery, brutality, and oppression. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how she re-creates and re-writes the history of African-American enslaved people and the outrageous behavior of white masters towards the enslaved black people in America. The practice of slavery, based on the biological configuration of the black African-Americans, gave license to the vicious white Americans to subjugate them. Johnson has considered this fact quite realistically and in doing so her mind has produced what means to be a compressed embodiment of the historical truths. Johnson provided the fictive shreds of evidence, right from the very beginning of her novel, that how the white masters treated their black slaves just like animals. They had even not their basic rights and identity to survive in the cruel enslaving world. These narratives tell us not only about the difficult track from slavery to liberation but also about black people's battles to write openly on antebellum America. The neo-slave narratives examine the racial causes of social inequality and have long questioned what freedom means to black Americans. African-American literature has imaginatively gone back to the era of slavery to rethink how history ought to be recorded and interpreted. Their writing examines the legacy of slavery in the twenty-first century which shows the realities of economic and social inequalities, racism, and the inability. Although slavery has its roots back in the very early days of human history, in the case of African blacks this has something different to do with it. They were marked as the finest embodiment of slavery. Pheby's life and survival shows how much she had suffered in her life to protect her children. The fictive portraits of plantations and jails established for keeping the slaves are the striking sites for exploring the black existence crushed by the white masters before and after the Civil War time in America. In all the regions the rules of slavery were different and contrasted in their compositions of rules and regulations and the ways of punishing the slaves for their trivial mistakes. These stories of slavery lost to history are picked up by Johnson to establish her own imprint of a neo-slave narrative.

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