

Voices of Resistance: Slavery, Race, and Identity in Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*

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Abstract

A Professor of Law at California University, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw is a writer and scholar of Critical Race Theory, a social theory that focuses on the relationship between race, ethnicity, identity, and social laws. Critical Race Theory contemplates racism as a structured and organized oppression and prejudice against disadvantaged groups, and this structured oppression and prejudice is evident in Andrea Levy's The Long Song (2010). Andrea Levy's The Long Song explores the themes of slavery, identity, racism, gender discrimination, freedom, and empowerment. This paper, through a close textual reading and an analysis of Critical Race Theory from the work Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement (1996), edited by Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, aims to analyse the intersection of multiple oppression, such as racism, identity crisis, laws, and slavery, faced by the enslaved in the sugarcane plantations in Jamaica. The paper, through the protagonist of the novel, July, further aims to highlight the resistance steps taken by July along with other enslaved people working on the plantation to free themselves from the cruelty of the plantation owners and gain their freedom from racism and the legally abolished slavery.

Keywords:

Race, freedom, identity, resistance, slavery.

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Introduction

Born in London on 7th March, 1956, to Jamaican parents, English author Andrea Levy is best known for her works *Small Island* (2004), *The Long Song* (2010), and others. Most of her works revolve around themes of racism, identity, slavery, immigration, and the dynamics of white versus black. In 2005, Levy was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Andrea Levy's novel *The Long Song* (2010) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2010, and has also received the Walter Scott Prize. Set in Jamaica, the novel reveals the harsh, cruel, and gruesome reality of racism, identity crises, gender biasness, and slavery. The novel is a memoir narrated by an elderly Jamaican woman at her son's request.

The novel, through July, the protagonist, who resides in Amity, a sugar plantation area, explores the cruelty of slaves working in sugar plantations. July is born to a slave mother, Kitty, who too works on sugar plantation, and a Scottish father, thus facing an identity crisis. July prefers to be called as "a mulatto, a person of mixed race, as her mother was a black slave and her father was a Scottish overseer" (Thoker 38), rather than having one fixed race.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced during a workshop by Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Stewart Phillips, and Kendall Thomas with an aim of focusing on the relationship between ethnicity, race, identity, and political and social laws. They stated that "Critical Race Theory does not simply seek to understand the complex conundrum of law, racial ideology, and political power" (Crenshaw et al., xvii), but rather aims to make people and scholars fully aware that "Critical Race Theory understands that racial power is produced by and experienced within numerous vectors of social life" (Crenshaw et al., xxxii). CRT emphasizes the need for theories that voice the struggle for equality and serve as a bridge for the 'black' voice, equality, and equal opportunity.

Objectives

- To explore the issues of slavery, identity, racism, gender discrimination, freedom, and empowerment.
- To highlight the resistance steps taken by July and other enslaved people working on the plantation.

Methodology

- The paper has been analysed through Critical Race Theory using the work *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (1996), edited by Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas.

Discussion

“Slavery is as old as humanity and is not confined to anyone culture or people” (Badawi 324)

The era of slavery remains one of the most horrifying and traumatic events in history, especially in Africa, even to this day. Badawi in her work *An African History of Africa: From the Dawn of Humanity to Independence* (2024) wrote that;

It is estimated that, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least 12.5 million enslaved Africans were brutally ripped from their homes and sent across the Atlantic Ocean. It is likely that as many as 2 million did not survive the arduous journey. Those who did faced a life of extreme hardship, degradation, and humiliation. Much has been written about slavery in Europe and the Americas, but less about its impact on Africa and how Africans, including those in the diaspora, resisted it and contributed to its abolition. (323)

This cruelty, atrocity, and inhumanity are evident in Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song*, where slaves working on sugar plantations faced inhuman treatment from their European masters, especially women who endured double the oppression: first because they were ‘black’ and secondly because they were women, which made them part of disadvantaged groups, and this mirrors Kimberle Crenshaw’s Critical Race Theory, where she argues that, women of color faced double oppression, because of their gender, and because of their race.

Miranda Ngangom in her thesis *Intersectionality Oppositional Gaze and Ecriture Feminine in Select African American Slave Women’s Narratives* (2025), in discussion to race, wrote that:

Race in particular has determined the trajectory of most events throughout history. Amplifying that trajectory is the addition of colour and gender and the judgements that have come to be associated with it. The domination of a race or the consideration of a nature of superiority or inferiority based on one’s race over the other is considered racism. The result of one of history’s biggest conviction of the precedence

of one race over the other has ended in enslaving millions of people of the African race. (1)

Moreover, Angela Davis, in her book *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), in relation to slavery, race, and female slaves, stated that, “women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatments that could only be inflicted on women” (3). Davis in her work not only illustrates the struggles, pain, and experiences of enslaved black women working in the plantation fields, but she also wrote on the double sufferings, and experiences women of color faced in domestic circle, after returning from the plantation fields. This every same experience of slavery, oppression, and discrimination is also present in Levy’s *The Long Song* through Kitty.

Kitty, one of the characters in the novel *The Long Song* and the mother of the protagonist, serves as the prime example of women’s oppression, discrimination, and cruelty under European rule during the slave era. When Kitty, a slave woman, was pregnant with July, she was brutally beaten and whipped by a white man, to the point where her fellow female slave begged the master to stop beating her, as she was pregnant, “she birthin, massa, she birthin, massa...for she could see this man was preparing to strike Kitty again. Pity, massa, pity, no lash her, she birthin, massa” (17), thus, revealing the harsh inhuman treatment slaves received in the plantation, especially women. Ngangom in her thesis wrote that:

The violation of slave women’s bodies and spaces were considered normal during slavery as these bodies were considered as properties and transactional items. Slaves were associated with witlessness, ignorant, and unable of having the capacity to learn, further subjecting them to harsher comments on accounts of their looks, appearances, color, and ability to perform. Slaves, in general are expected to perform their assigned duties, which often comes at the cost of their health. The system was designed such that there was no leisure, to feel, to express, over sorrows, joys, or separations. (23-24)

Similarly, in Davis’s *Women, Race, and Class*, she also wrote about the brutal treatment female slaves received at the hands of their masters. Humanity and mercy seemed to have not existed, as the Europeans would mercilessly whip women, pregnant women, and lactating mothers without any hesitation. An enslaved women during an interviewed revealed the conditions lactating mothers had to go through under the hands of the brutal guards. She stated that:

On the estate I am speaking of, those women who had sucking children suffered much from their breasts becoming full of milk, the infants being left at home. They therefore could not keep up with the other hands: I have seen the overseer beat them with raw hide, so that the blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts. (6)

Similarly, in the novel *The Long Song*, the protagonist, July, was born on a sugar plantation, in a dirty and filthy trash heap, which symbolizes the unfortunate life that she would lead. When she was little, July was snatched from her mother, Kitty, by Mrs. Caroline Mortimer, who took her with her and trained her to work so that July could serve as a maid. In the house, July was trained to become a maid and was also taught stitching. Every time July made a mistake, she would receive a handful and punishment. One day, when July was receiving punishment, she cried out for help and uttered the word, Mama and Mrs Caroline replied, “Your mama is sold away. She is sold away, you hear me? Sold away. You are mine now.” (67) This trading of slaves reveals those slaves especially women are just commodities for the white masters. Similarly, Critical Race Theory as illustrated by Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, stated that

Critical Race Theory uncovers the ongoing dynamics of racialized power, and its embeddedness in practices and values which have been shorn of any explicit, formal manifestations of racism. Critical Race Theory thus provides a basis for understanding affirmative action as something other than “racial preference” (a notion whose implicit premise is that affirmative action represents a deviation from an otherwise non-racial neutrality. (Crenshaw, et al, xxix)

Women were exploited in so many ways. Not only were women made to work in the sugar plantation with very less wages or no wages at all, but they were also treated as objects for sexual pleasure, abuse, and exploitation. Kimberle Crenshaw in her work “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991) states that “because Black women face subordination based on both race and gender, reforms of rape law and judicial procedures that are premised on narrow conceptions of gender subordination may not address the devaluation of Black women (1270).

The slave plantation owners, the overseer, would beat, whip the women and would also physically, and sexually exploit them. Just like Kitty who was sexually exploited and forced to have sexual intercourse with the Spanish overseer, similarly July herself too gave birth to Nimrod’s son. This is just two from among the thousand incidents or realities that

happens with slaves' women. Many slave women would carry, and gave birth to the child of their masters, and these "white man had fathered the child she was birthing" (18).

Davis with regard to discrimination, oppression and rape inflicted upon women stated in her book, *Women, Race and Class* asserts that, "it is important to remember that the punishment inflicted on women exceeded in intensity the punishment suffered by their men, for women were not only whipped and mutilated, they were also raped" (19), and they have also institutionalized rape and turn it as a weapon towards women exploitation. Thus, the long history of slavery and colonial history has remained as one of the unfortunate events in the history of mankind. Ngangom in her thesis *Intersectionality Oppositional Gaze and Ecriture Feminine in Select African American Slave Women's Narratives*, wrote that:

The history of slavery and the slave trade is a dark and complex chapter that stretches across millennia and has left a permanent mark on societies around the world. Racial inequality and discrimination, economic disparities, election rights, loss of cultural heritage, and enduring psychological trauma are some of the marks left by slavery. (3)

However, in the novel, we also see instances and phases where 'black' people, including women working on sugar plantations, voice their concerns and fight for their long-lost freedom. In the midst of their resistance and struggles, many people also lose their lives. They are cruelly beaten, shot, and tortured to death by the Europeans, and their bodies would lie around, rotting. In the novel, we witness the cruel beatings and tortures that the European masters inflicted upon the slaves when, "the boy was then sealed into a barrel which was roughly pierced with over twenty-five long nails hammered into the shell. The boy still trap within the spiky cast, was then rolled down the hill" (148-149) and lost his life.

Similar is with the case of Kitty, July's mother, who in rage and in order to save her daughter July slashed down Tam Dewar; by slicing him like she was slicing a cane.

Dewar was found, not yet death, but spread upon the ground of the mill yard with a broken collarbone, a fracture in his skull, two broken ankles, two broken arms and his ribs mash up. Wounds he would die from two days later- fitting, spewing and boiling hotter than bubbling cane liquor" (173).

When the Europeans heard of the crime she committed, they immediately captured Kitty and took her to the courthouse, where a decision and judgment would be made. The courthouse declared that Kitty, "have been found guilty of the worst crimes that can be perpetrated, and must be hanged by the neck until death" (177). The novel also reveals the

inhumane hearts of the Europeans and how the slaves and other people were mercilessly murdered, hanged, lashed, and subjected to other forms of torture.

When the day has arrived, they took Kitty and hanged her and leave her dying, rotting all alone, and July's "mama struggled. Her mama choked. Until, at last stilled, her mama hung small and black as a ripened pod upon a tree" (177) and succumbed to death.

The 'black' people have finally decided to fight for their freedom and thus their cries, fights, resistance and voice, reached the ears of the Queen of England, who later abolished slavery. The 'black' people were rejoicing in happiness over winning back their freedom. However, that was not the total end of slavery. Though it is no longer the legal slavery, however they are still the slaves of their masters for they still have to work in the sugar plantation and toil the soil. James Richard states that,

Some of you believe that the Queen of England has granted you your lands as you will, but this is not the case. Your provision grounds belong to me, and I can rent them to whomsoever I choose. The Queen, and indeed all the people of English, agrees with my actions. Working for the common good is what will prove to be right for every one of you over the course of time...But you are no longer slaves, you are freemen, and all freemen in England- yes, white men- work for wages...you must labour for wages upon Amity with the same enthusiasm as you have worked upon your lands. (310-311)

The above statement clearly explains the situations and conditions that the 'black' people will still have to go through the evil treatments, which is caused mainly due to racism and this "evil of racism exists when- and only when- one can point to specify, discrete acts of racial discrimination, which is in turn narrowly defined as decision-making based on the irrational and irrelevant attribute of race". (Crenshaw, et al xv)

Despite the abolishment of slavery, though they are now paid, they still have to work for their masters. They are still domestic workers on the white man's plantation, and they are still living with the label of the white masters' slaves.

Upon hearing this statement and understanding what was happening around them, they finally realized that they were still under the cruel bondage of slavery. They were still their masters' slaves, and slavery was either still present or had returned to Amity, to destroy and exploit them, their land, and their resources once again. Therefore, the 'blacks' made up their minds to once again voice their rights and fight for justice, equality, and freedom.

The slaves or the plantation workers later, have finally come up with a decision and “agreed that not one person amongst them would work even a day for Robert Goodwin” (313) and in any of his plantation’s area. Upon hearing the strike and decisions of the plantation workers, Robert was furious and stated that, “I the master of this plantation, mean to deliver upon my word; that those who have not paid their rent must now work for me, or be removed from their dwellings and grounds” (315) but however the workers still refused to work. Similarly, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas in their theory also wrote on the importance of taking action against injustices. They wrote that “Critical Race Theory fully comprehends that the aim of affirmative action is to create enough exceptions to white privilege to make the mythology of equal opportunity seem at least plausible” (xxix).

Robert Goodwin, the plantation owner, having no workers to tend to his fields, went insane and could no longer control his emotions. He rushed to the plantation area, and when July, who had gone to search for him, found him in the plantation fields, she described him as:

a negro, this figure standing small before a louring barbed wall of yellow-parched cane. Ragged, filthy, black. He was stripped to the waist and clasped a machete, holding it high above his shoulder. But only when he struck it down and slashed the cane in the middle of the pole did July realize she was string not upon a negro-who would have felled that cane skilfully at the base and be casting it away by now- but upon the frame of Robert Goodwin (332).

This statement proves that the white men are nothing if there are no ‘black’ slaves’ men working for them. They are no used compare to the strength and skill that the ‘black’ workers possessed; they therefore just used their superiority of color to claim authorship over them, since “racism was identified only with the outright formal exclusion of people of color” (Crenshaw, et al xvi) and also mainly because the Europeans thought “that Africans were incapable of properly governing themselves” (Parker and Rathbone 102), as they are uncivilized and uneducated.

The strike of plantation workers has adversely affected Richard Goodwin that he fell terribly ill and July is banned from attending him with an excuse that Richard does not want to see a negro and that she too is a negro and Richard’s wife blamed everything that has happened to Richard is because of the negro. She states that, “it is a negroes who have brought him to this” (348), and thus July cannot see or even attend Robert, until both Richard and his wife left Amity.

Badawi in his work, *An African History of Africa: From the Dawn of Humanity to Independence* (2024) wrote that:

By the end of the 1970s, all of Africa was free from the colonial rule except of a handful of states in southern Africa- where there was a strong colonial presence and dominant white population.... The final country to become free of white rule was South Africa gaining independence when Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) was released in 1990. (452 454)

Towards the end of the novel we see, July leaving the house at Amity which was already sold to the other owners and went to find and rent a small shop where she would make some pickles and jams. Through her own strength, determination and hard work, July,

grow so rich and old and happy upon her wit, that she purchased a little boarding house.... Navel men and their families and travellers of the highest ranking did lodge with her when visiting within the town. And so often did these good guests return, that her reputation roamed the world and beyond without her.” (361)

In the end of the novel, we all witnessed the reunion of July with her son Thomas Kinsman, a child which long ago she had abandoned outside the Baptist Church. Thus, proving that she is a strong woman, full of determination, and resilience, and further prove that one “cannot enslaved a mind that knows itself, that understands itself, and values itself” (Badawi 455), and she therefore is independent and successful.

Conclusion: The novel largely explores the backgrounds, history, and inhuman treatment of the slaves working on the sugar plantations. It also discusses slave resilience and rebellion against their white masters, which ultimately results in the abolition of slavery.

Slavery, identity issues and especially the “question of race enters the picture, because African history has often been seen as the history of black people” (Parker and Rathbone 2), people who are ‘dark’ and uncivilized. Therefore, the Europeans, due to their different skin color, think very highly of themselves and impose their power, authority, and superiority on others. They invaded Africa, enslaved its people, and turned them into slaves to work for them in domestic settings and on sugar plantations, as witnessed in the novel *The Long Song*.

In the novel *The Long Song*, we also witness the cruel treatment that slaves had to endure on the plantations, especially women, who faced double discrimination—for being ‘black’ and for being women, “female slaves were a great deal more profitable than either free workers or

male slaves. They cost less to capitalize and to maintain than prime males” (Davis 8), therefore they are ever more exploited in the fields. Women faced a great deal of suppression and oppression and are often viewed as object for sexual pleasure just as in the case of Kitty and July and several other women slaves. However, with their own strength, determination and resilience they were able to voice and fight for their own right and freedom and they all thus emerged victorious, independent and successful just as July, the protagonist of the novel.

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