

Resistance to Oppression in *The Book of Negroes* by Lawrence Hill

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Abstract

This article explores Lawrence Hill's historical fiction, *The Book of Negroes*, a retelling of the brutality of slavery. This fictional slave narrative captures the voice of a slave girl, yearning for freedom and identity. Hill portrays the experiences of slavery, freedom, and her struggle and fight against oppressive forces by narrating her journey from being a slave to becoming an empowered woman who spoke for her people. The novel highlights that her education helped her significantly combat all the oppressions she faced. Furthermore, book captures the physical, sexual, emotional, religious, and economic violations that led to her enslavement. Notably, the metanarrative in the novel explicates the components of resistance literature, leaving space for a critical interpretation of the text and deep understanding of the counter narratives against the imperial forces and abolitionists. As a result, the study categorizes the novel primarily as a resistance narrative, as encapsulated by Barbara Harlow in her seminal work, *Resistance Literature*.

Keywords: Resistance Literature, Canadian Literature, Imperialism, Decolonization

Introduction

Lawrence Hill's fictional character, Aminat Diallo in the novel, *The Book of Negroes*, is a composite of millions of enslaved African women, embodying resistance and resilience, radiating a strong fighting spirit against slavery. The unique characterisation made the novel remarkable and widely popular, captured the consciences of the readers. The character's unavoidable voyage as a slave in a foreign land, along with the ensuing transformations in her life through education, fortified her and equipped her as a resilient individual, capable of advocating for her fellow victims who endured dehumanisation in slavery. Besides this trajectory, her strong opposition to the objectification of slaves by imperial forces provides a significant rationale for examining the novel in light of resistance literature. Hence, the article tries to trace the elements of resistance literature in the slave narratives present in the novel and examine the protagonist's struggle in the face of oppression.

Born in Canada to American immigrant parents, a black father and a white mother, Lawrence Hill grew up in the suburb of Don Mills, Ontario. He is widely known as a Canadian novelist, essayist, and memoirist among the literary circle. Given his parents' involvement in the human rights movement, his works profoundly explored issues of identity and human rights. His father was the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and he has written a book about black freedom. His mother, also a human rights activist, significantly contributed to the enactment of anti-discrimination laws by the Ontario government and authored a book about the struggles of Black people. Therefore, Lawrence's primary concerns in fiction, essays, and public talks are Black history, slavery, freedom, human rights, migration, the search for home, mixed-race identity, individual and collective identity, and the experiences of

refugees. Also, he is considered one of Canada's most important contributors to black culture. Notably, his novels strike the chord between fiction and history, giving an experience of the past violence to the present generation.

In 2007, Lawrence published his third novel, *The Book of Negroes*. The sensitive nature of the original title prompted the release of the book under the title *Someone Knows My Name* in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Inspired by a true story, Hill has tried to blend facts and fiction in the form of historical fiction, filling the gaps in history through a resistance narrative and extending his voice for the victims of enslavement. He has described the undocumented incidents in the Canadian Historical Records as a retelling of history, including the black loyalists' experience in Nova Scotia. The Black Loyalists were a group of approximately 3500 free blacks who migrated to Nova Scotia in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War. Many of them pledged their loyalty to the British army as a condition for freedom.

The Book of Negroes has been a best-selling novel, selling out 800,000 copies in multiple languages. It has both an illustrated edition and movie rights. In 2009, an anonymous man announced via email that he had planned to burn the novel, and this incident gained international attention. In response to this, Hill published a book that covered a wider historical context of creativity and resistance. Furthermore, the novel has won several awards because it delves deeply into the profound repercussions of slavery and remains relevant to the present day. Particularly the Commonwealth Prize, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fictional Prize, and the CBC Radio Canada Reads competition acknowledged the novel's wide acclaim. The novel's widespread circulation, opposition, and recognition have validated its status as a work of resistance literature.

Though the term resistance was used in Palestinian literature in 1966 by Ghassan Kanafani in his work *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine*, Barbara Harlow is attributed to be the key founder of the field of resistance literature with her 1987 book *Resistance Literature*. This book has become a fundamental text in postcolonial writing, providing a critical perspective on approaching

resistance voices in literature. Therefore, the fundamental element of resistance literature lies in its challenge to established norms and its resistance to domination. Resistance literature helps decode how governments and civil changes have occurred in the past and present. This subfield of literature paves the way for literary analysis and gives rise to political resistance in multiple dimensions.

Barbara Harlow asserts that resistance literature is historically specific, accounting for any true incident. Analysing the novel *The Book of Negroes* as resistance literature leads to locating the specific historical context on which it is written, explicating the dehumanisation act of slavery, a context that is situated in the history of western imperialism. The novel is set in the late eighteenth century, giving an account of the historically marginalised population and challenging the political machinations that dictated the slave narrative in the name of the abolitionists' movement. The French Code Noir of 1685, which declared slaves to be movable property, justified this dehumanization practice (Buchanan). On the contrary, there have been several voices emphasizing treating slaves as human beings in history, like the biased abolitionist. However, Hill's work creates a counter narrative through the voice of a female slave without diluting reality. Her story suggests that Lawrence Hill exercised full control over the creation of this historical document, portraying the true story of African enslavement. Though the novel has several fictional elements, the main thread passes on through several historical incidents to draw attention to the historically marginalized people.

The novel addresses the interstices of Canadian memory, capturing the fictional life of Aminata Diallo, a young girl who was kidnapped from her village in West Africa and forced into slavery. The journey took her across the Atlantic to South Carolina. During her journey, she faced numerous acts of brutality, including the brutal rape of her fellow slave. However, she resisted the exercise of dominance with her fighting spirit. Her name changed to Meena Dee once she arrived in the alien land. However, she learns to read and write and develops bonds with fellow slaves, including Chekura, whom she married. They begot a son,

and he was plundered from them. He was sold to a Jewish man, Solomon Lindo, who later helped her escape during the American Revolutionary War. She endured significant hardships, including the loss of her husband and daughter. She decided to fight abolition rather than going back to her village. She travelled to England, where she shared her life story to end the slave trade. At the end, she reunited with her daughter. Through this plot structure, Hill exposes the harsh realities of slavery, enslaved people's struggles, and the fight for freedom. Besides, the story reveals the enslaved people's resilience and survival, resisting, adapting, and surviving in the face of domination.

Barbara Harlow argues that literature produced in the context of oppression serves as a means of resisting or challenging oppressive forces. Within this context, the language and motifs of slave narratives, designed to resist domination, heavily influence Hill's novel, *The Book of Negroes*. Hill has cleverly explored the reality behind the facts about how the strong female character resisted the dehumanization of slavery. He has highlighted that Aminata has well understood the cunning nature of abolitionists who, on one side, are fighting to end the slave trade and, on the other side, are objectifying and dehumanising slaves. Aminata talks about her meeting with a prominent abolitionist, Stanley Hastings, who wanted to interview her.

'With delicacy and all meticulous care', he said, 'we will interview you and write a short account of your life, including the abuses you suffered in the slave trade'. I cleared my throat. 'You will write an account of my life?' 'It's so important that I may take on this task myself', said Hastings. ... 'We need to arrange the account just so. The slightest inaccuracy or inattention to detail could be fatal to our cause'. I listened warily to Hastings' plans to write about my life (451).

However, Aminata aspired to pen her own story, believing that she alone could provide a true account, while Stanley might rewrite it to suit the oppressors' narrative. She says she 'had no business breaking the soil of [her] own private garden' (451). She also highlights the tactics and true nature of the abolitionists, saying, 'But their lips do not yet say my name, and their ears do not yet hear my story. Not the way I want to tell it' (101).

Resistance literature depicts characters' opposition to social norms. *The Book of Negroes* portrays Aminata as a woman who defies societal norms and expectations. In the beginning of the novel, Aminata reveals her identity as, 'I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali. ... I am writing this account. All of it'. (4) She refused to accept the name that the white people had given her. This nature reveals her spirit of resistance to domination. Furthermore, the name change suggests that the oppressors treat slaves as mere objects of possession, naming them according to their convenience. Aminata's resistance to such practice is evident in the beginning of the novel.

According to Harlow, it is a human rights discourse that connects resistance narratives and encompasses broader human rights issues. Similarly, *The Book of Negroes* documents the severe infringement of human rights, making the story a part of the human rights discourse. From the beginning of their journey until the end of their lives, African slaves have endured severe violations of their human rights. Separating them from their families and treating them as possessions reduced them to the status of animals. Aminata recounts how a doctor raped one of the female slaves during the first voyage, and how their owners mistreated them in the alien land, using them as their possessions. At one point, Aminata's owner, Appleby, raped her. Her children are plundered. She lost her husband. Her whole life has become a victim story. Having endured all such persecution, Aminata says, 'I should not have lived this long. But I still can smell trouble riding in any wind... I have escaped violent endings even as they have surrounded me' (13-14). It also elucidates the atmosphere of fear and terror that permeates the land of the Black people, as well as the ruthless ways in which oppressors destroyed families and countless lives. There are no laws in place to protect her people, a situation that has been enacted with sheer inhumanity as the norm.

Resistance literature foregrounds political engagements and the potential for literature to effect change. Aminata learnt to read and write, and with her knowledge, she planned to fight for her people in the political space. She uses literacy as a political tool to combat oppression and stereotypes about those who oppress her. Her self-development

is a response to the stereotype that ‘Blacks were incapable of intelligence’ (Morrison 108). She has broken the stereotypes in the discourses: she is considered ‘the most literate Negro he has ever met’ (364), and ‘the African who knows more books than the Englishman’ (381).

She considered writing her story would make big propaganda to stop slavery. She realized the power of words, saying, ‘I have long loved the written word, and I came to see in it the power of the sleeping lion’. This is my name. This is who I am. This is how I got here. In the absence of an audience, I will write down my story so that it waits like a restful beast with lungs breathing and heart beating (101). She refers to herself as a sleeping lion, the ‘restful beast’. Despite losing her family members and experiencing their pain, she prioritised advocating for her fellow slaves over returning to her homeland.

The novel explores the theme of displacement and objectification as a form of social imprisonment. Hill has articulated these broader societal issues, which relate to the alienation of African communities and their loss of personal freedom being treated as property. Even the abolitionist views Aminata as a display object. They thought of displaying herself as a victim to evoke pity in order to create momentum for their movement and political gain. She says, ‘brought out to adorn the abolitionist movement’ (5). However, she retaliates and resists, asserting that their thoughts and imaginations can’t be owned by their owners. She remarks, ‘How did it come to be that he owned me, and all the others? I wondered if he owned me at all times, or only when I was working for him. Did he own me when I slept? When I dreamed?’ (134).

White people also disliked the idea of black people dressing well and enhancing their standard of living. Appleby demonstrated this attitude by tearing and burning away all of her best clothes. She said how Appleby reacted when seeing her husband present a beautiful dress to her, ‘Your clothes’, he said to me. When I hesitated, he tore them off and threw them down into the pile... ‘We have a law in the province of South Carolina,’ he said. ‘Niggers don’t dress grand.’ (193). Because of his dislike for Chekura, Appleby even went so far as to rape her. She reveals that she couldn’t bear the brutal,

inhuman act, saying, ‘I screamed as I have never screamed before. I didn’t recognise myself. I had no clothes, no hair, no beauty, no womanhood...’ (195-96).

The interplay between culture and politics is a recurring theme of resistance literature. According to Harlow, cultural factors can reflect and influence political realities, particularly in the context of colonial and post-colonial struggles. It is the cultural stereotype of generalizing a category of members of a group who share the same characteristics based on nationality, religion, gender, race, or age. Moreover, it bears similarities to the concept of manifest destiny, which serves as a justification for the acquisition of a country’s territory. In the same way, African slaves are seen as a lower grade community. Aminata frequently confronts a derogatory stereotype that white people use to justify slavery. Aminata’s owner, Appleby, rapes her and then calls her ‘African whore’ (161). The two words reveal the whites’ attitude towards Africans. This offensive word has been a catalyst for both cultural degradation and political suppression. A political gain stems from the disappearance of culture and identity.

The oppressed suffer countless losses; in Aminata’s life, she lost her freedom, her virginity, her sense of belonging, her family, her land, and ultimately her motherhood. She wanted to give it back through her writing. So she says, ‘There must be a reason why I have lived in all these lands, survived all those water crossings, while others fell from bullets or shut their eyes and simply willed their lives to end’ (13). All of these instances of innate resistance within Aminata made her strong enough to confront oppression.

Conclusion

Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* serves as a suitable example of resistance literature, substantiating the elements identified by Harlow. Through metafictional strategies, Hill portrays Aminata, a female character, as a slave who resists objectification by all means. After witnessing the extremes of slavery, she turns stronger and stronger instead of becoming weak. She became more vigilant and self-exploring, taking advantage of the rare opportunities she had, particularly in developing her

reading and writing skills. She has boldly resisted the dehumanising activities of the whites. She qualified herself as a revolutionary, claiming human rights and black emancipation. She has utilised literature as a tool of resistance, battled against repression, participated in political engagements, and transformed her writing into a revolutionary discourse on human rights. Therefore, the paper's arguments based on a slave narrative align perfectly with the character's resistance and resilience.

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