

Neo-Slave Narratives as Recent Interventions on Race, Social Justice, and Freedom

Min Pun, PhD

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

Abstract: The major objective of this paper is to discuss contemporary slave narratives, also known as neo-slave narratives practiced by African American writers for the last fifty years. The institution of slavery in the United States was a site of unimaginable physical, emotional and spiritual cruelty, and was justified by racism. So neo-slave narratives question the issues of race, social justice and freedom and include such narratives that have set during and after the slavery in the United States from the founding of the United States to the present day. For example, Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy* fall under this category.

Keyword: African Americans, literary tradition, race, neo-slave narratives, slavery.

Date of Submission: 17-08-2020

Date of Acceptance: 03-09-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

In the discourses of slavery and freedom in the United States, slave narratives had been an important means of opening a dialogue between the blacks and the whites. Originally, slave narratives of antebellum period were designed to enlighten the both black and white readers about the slavery in the United States and are produced "to be recounted to others" (Pun, "The Politics of Identity" 53). Such narratives tell the stories of slavery, considering it as the systematic institution and the state of black people as human beings. The nineteenth century slave narratives were produced by the former slaves that were taught and included in the curricula of American universities. They were powerful texts that dominated the university courses in the United States, in particular, provoking the readers on issues related to race, social justice and freedom of black people and involving black peoples in identity politics (Pun, "The Politics of Identity" 54). After the Civil War, the former slaves continued to record their experiences under the life in slavery, particularly to make aware of the newly-united nation that the slavery threatened their existence. In addition, they also wanted to make American people to make aware that they are dedicated to the social and economic progress of the nation.

This present paper aims to discuss contemporary slave narratives, also known as neo-slave narratives produced by black writers who did not have experiences of slavery for the last fifty years. The institution of slavery in the United States was a site of unimaginable physical, emotional and spiritual cruelty, and was justified by racism. The neo-slave narratives are fictional works produced in the last fifty years evolved to include texts on the themes of slavery during and after the period of slavery in the United States. In this paper, Toni Morrison's two novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy* have been discussed to justify the argument that neo-slave narratives are produced by black writers who did not have any experiences of slavery, but deal with the themes of slavery.

II. NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The institution of slavery in the United States was an extreme example of cruelty to humanity. The slave narrative emerged out of such a system of slavery that is a rich, challenging, and demanding body of cultural products. It can be studied separately into two categories: One, the antebellum and post-bellum narratives written by runaway slaves; the other, a genre of imaginative literature about slavery that emerged after the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. The neo-slave narratives fall under the latter category of slave narratives.

In American literary history, the genre of neo-slave narratives is an important development that has a purpose to reform the race relations in the United States, shifting the "African Americans to a new place" (Pun, "Anti-Racist" 22). The term "neo-slave narratives" originated with Bernard W. Bell's critical work *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* published in 1987. The term "neo-slave narratives" as mentioned by him is "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). But over time that definition has expanded to include a more diverse set of texts than Bell's initial description could have anticipated. Here, Robert Burns Stepto's view is quoted here to distinguish the neo-slave narratives from the slave narratives of the nineteenth century:

When a historian or literary critic calls a slave narrative an autobiography, for example, what he or she sees most likely is a first-person narrative that possesses literary features to distinguish it from ordinary documents providing historical and sociological data. But a slave narrative is *not* necessarily an autobiography. (227)

Hence, the neo-slave narrative bears on the development of subsequent African American narrative forms. Although the neo-slave narrative is also the account of slavery written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries like those of the nineteenth century slave narratives, the neo-slave narrative writers create stories out of black histories and past narratives, using their imagination. Valerie Smith further defines the term “neo-slave narrative” that can include a more diverse set of texts than Bell’s theoretical framework:

They approach the institution of slavery from a myriad of perspectives and embrace a variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes. Their differences notwithstanding, these texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities. (“Neo-Slave” 168)

In effect, the writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can only re-imagine the condition of slavery and, therefore, write in order to connect the receding past to the living present. This genre emerged during the 1960s with the revival movements such as the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The social conditions for the emergence of a literary form are mapped in admirable detail, comparable to the method of other contemporary writers of today.

The neo-slave narrative is not writing of its own experiences of the authors or acting as an amanuensis for a former slave. As such, the African American novelists of the past few decades have rewritten “a still partial historiography of slavery” (Levecq, “Black” 136) and have produced stories about slavery from the perspectives of the African Americans. The writers of neo-slave narratives write from a perspective informed and enriched by the study of classical slave narratives, the changing historiography of slavery, the complicated history of race relations in the world including the United States. They, therefore, are free to use the imagination to explore unacknowledged and elusive effects of the institution of slavery upon slaves, slaveholders, and their descendants.

In the neo-slave narratives, imagination functions in two ways. First, it is the faculty that the individual slave narrative writer brings to. The individual also employs “I” as his or her literary effort that makes it a narrative work and distinguishes the African Americans as fully human beings. While claiming this, one should not only be able to report and survive, but also be able to create and appreciate the case. Second, imagination is also the faculty that narratives encourage the readers to exercise in order to understand what is presented. In this case, creativity is required to experience the idea of humanity through a particular metaphorical use of language as “rediscovered in the form of neo-slave narratives today” (Pun, “Rewriting” 16). Hence, the neo-slave narrative writers create their narratives by using creative imagination to fit into the fictional mode of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The genre of neo-slave narratives includes some of the most dominant fiction produced during the second half of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As quoted in Valerie Smith’s essay “Neo-slave Narratives,” Ashraf Rushdy has defined the genre, “Contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (169). Here, the slave narrative conventions were followed by the African American writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. On the whole, according to Rushdy, the writers of neo-slave narratives rewrite the slave narrative by reclaiming the past and by reinscribing the history of African Americans.

The genre of neo-slave narratives, as many historians believe, begins with Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) and is practiced by other fictional works such as Ernest J. Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), Sherley Ann Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), Morrison’s two novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, and Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990). The neo-slave narratives have now become widely read and discussed forms of African American literature. In Christine Levecq’s words, these writers have taken “a new interest in revisiting America’s slavery past and have appealed to a wide audience in the process” (“Texts” 159). Here, the concept “revisiting history” means when it pertains to literary texts. When one takes into account the narrativity of historiography, it rests its dependence on historians’ ideologies. Such neo-slave narratives seek to rearticulate the community’s historical memory.

In this way, such neo-slave narrative texts after the 1960s regard the interdependence of slavery and personality formation that have triggered great controversy. One of the reasons is that the neo-slave narratives are considered political subtexts that helped consider as cultural products, making the genre acceptable for the readers. In this connection, Valerie Smith, advancing a range of theories that expand Bell’s initial definition, elaborates the view that the literary texts of the neo-slave narrative

provide a perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses, among them: the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom. ("Neo-Slave" 169)

For Smith, literary texts by neo-slave narrative authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries possess such freedom of writing strategies which were unavailable to the freed and fugitive slaves who wrote the slave narratives. Consequently, any statement about what the neo-slave narrative authors are doing to history should be anchored in a thorough investigation of that history.

Another survey of such neo-slave narratives is done by Angelyn Mitchell who has coined a term "liberatory narratives" for the term "neo-slave narratives" (qtd. in Smith, "Neo-Slave" 169). She has selected Butler's *Kindred*, Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Morrison's *Beloved*, *J. California Cooper's Family (1991)*, and Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child (1995)*, which advocate for freedom of the coloured people. Thematically, the liberatory narrative, as its antecedent text slave narrative, is concerned with the enslaved protagonist's life as a free self (Smith, "Neo-Slave" 169-70). Thus, the liberatory narrative explores the first-hand account of an individual's struggle for freedom; according to Mitchell, it focuses on the theme of freedom, not slavery. The narrative details how the protagonist's determination to overcome the social barriers and to become a free individual. Further, such works of the liberatory narrative create a space to problematize the slavery/freedom dichotomy from which the African American writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries deal with the theme of slavery which did not happen in the past. There was another trend in the emancipatory narratives by women writers in the nineteenth century that helped reveal the realities of slavery through their narratives.

Among recently published neo-slave narratives are Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone (2001)*, Nancy Rawles' *My Jim (2005)*, Edward P. Jones' *The Known World (2003)*, and Morrison's *A Mercy*. These texts have inspired a rich and illuminating body of neo-slave narratives, and confront "the politics of representation more directly by invoking omissions and inclusions of some of the best-known works of American fiction" (Smith, "Neo-Slave" 180). Here, the continuity of writing on the subjects of slavery shows that new perspectives on the institution of slavery are certain to emerge in the future. It also indicates that the African American writers continue to work with the legacy of slavery even well into the twenty-first century.

Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, and Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography* exemplify the fictional slave narrative, a form that originated with several works during slavery in the United States. Some of the fictional works that exemplify such narratives are William Wells Brown's *Clotel: Or, The President's Daughter, A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States (1853)*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North (1859)* and Stowe's *Uncle Tom*. The writers of these narratives used elderly black men to narrate their fictional stories in order to get attention of the readers about the horrors of slavery. These fictional works draw on the writers' life stories "in slavery and freedom" (Smith, "Neo-Slave" 170). Like those of the works of the antebellum fiction writers, Morrison's *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a woman who portrays a former slave who killed her daughter to save her from being returned to slavery. In Gaines' work, Miss Pittman's wife is portrayed as a Civil Rights activist moves from slavery to freedom, which is presented in the form of interview.

Although apparently not considered as the forms of slave narratives, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson before Dying (1997)* also incorporate some elements of the slave narrative. Both the works do not directly take the subject of slavery as in Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy* rather they include the political content that correct the "misrepresentation of African Americans in American history and the omission of African Americans from American history" (Pun, "The Politics of Writing" 79). But both writers, in their works, transform conventional elements to achieve new dimensions, suggesting "the proximity and connection between slavery and contemporary racial relations" (Smith, "Neo-Slave" 172). For instance, in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the protagonist achieves his freedom and see himself as a human being when he returns to the South in search of his cultural roots, leaving his material temptation. Similarly in Gaine's *A Lesson*, Jefferson, a young man on Death Row for a murder he did not commit, is able to cast off his slave mentality and free his mind and soul only. He goes beyond the society's conception of himself as a lesser man and begins to connect with his root, considering himself as a human being. In this way, we can see the transformation of Morrison's and Gaine's black protagonists towards the mainstream life as human beings.

The neo-slave narratives represent the processes of transmitting and resolving family secrets as a way of showing the lasting effects of slavery on the present-day subjects. Interestingly, Bernard W. Bell's study of Morrison's *Beloved* shows that the African Americans did not venture to write their history because of "the silences in the slave narratives due to authorial compromises to white audiences and to self-masking from a

painful past” (“*Beloved*” 58). The neo-slave narratives, in this way, approach the institution of slavery from diverse perspectives and embrace a variety of styles of writing: from historical novels to imaginative novels of postmodern experiments.

III. CRITICAL STUDIES ON NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES

With the rise of the genre of neo-slave narratives, there is an emergence of the rich array of critical studies. Some of the examples of critical works on the neo-slave narratives are Ashraf Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) and *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001), Caroline Rody’s *The Daughter’s Return: African American and Caribbean Women’s Fictions of History* (2001), Agnelyn Mitchell’s *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (2002), Arlene R. Keizer’s *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004), and numerous other articles (Smith, “Neo-Slave” 169). These works have raised and elaborated the initial definition of the genre in a greater detail. Moreover, they have developed a range of theories that deal with the genre in the cultural politics of today and analyze other ideological works from a new perspective.

For example, Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives*, according to Levecq, argues that the past few decades have seen “a resurgence of the historical novel in general, and of the historical novel of slavery in particular” (“Texts” 159). Rushdy, thus, explores how each of the four novels he has chosen to write about conducts a complex dialogue with this legacy of the sixties. The neo-slave narratives, in this sense, deal with the political, social, and cultural content of the given literary form that emerged out of “the Black Power and Black Arts movements” (Smith, “Neo-Slave” 169). Four of such novels that exemplify as neo-slave narratives are Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), Williams’ *Dessa Rose*, and Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage*. According to Rushdy, these neo-slave narratives revise history of slavery according to emerging discursive formations, the discovery of new evidence, or new approaches to known sources. They also present visions of history that suit their authors’ needs and imaginations.

Originally, the slave narrative is a form of autobiography that traces the protagonist’s escape from slavery to freedom. Although Jacobs’s *Incidents* and Douglass’s *Narrative* have become the best examples of slave narratives, many black authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have adopted the slave narrative conventions. As quoted in Valerie Smith’s study of neo-slave narratives, Arlene Keizer argues that neo-slave narratives theorize “the nature and formation of black subjects, under the slave system and in the present, by utilizing slave characters and the condition of slavery as focal points” (“Neo-Slave” 170). In this way, the main purpose of writing neo-slave narratives is to rewrite the history of African Americans, particularly the nineteenth century enslaved black people. The neo-slave narrative writers like Williams, Morrison, Cooper, Jones, and Butler explore slavery through the lens of African Americans who denied the privilege of having an identity by the institution of slavery.

The writers of neo-slave narratives enjoy freedom to produce narratives of diverse subjects that were unavailable to the slave narrative writers of the nineteenth century. In addition, the writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries write from diverse perspectives in a new context. As Valerie Smith remarks, regarding how Morrison recovered the lived experience of enslavement to write *Beloved*, Morrison required her to “supplement historical research with the resources of the imagination” (“Neo-Slave” 174). In this way, they use their imagination freely to explore horrific effects of the institution of slavery upon slaves, slaveholders, and their descendants. As such, the twentieth century black autobiographies such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) and Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1987) are influenced by the slave narratives which were written by the post-world war African Americans, using the first person narrative technique.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the tradition of writing slave narratives historically originates from the true experience of the former slaves whereas the tradition of writing neo-slave narratives is based on the experience of oppression imaginatively. For instance, the neo-slave narrative writers such as Morrison in her two novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, by imagining the condition of slavery, write in order to blend the past with the present. Though slave narratives and neo-slave narratives belong to different times and settings, both serve as a means to fight against the oppression in terms of race and skin colour.

Similarly, both types of narratives are related to each other in the sense that the genre of neo-slave narratives is considered as autobiographical and fictional descendants of the slave narratives that confirms the continuity of its legacy of vitality and importance. Like the writers of neo-slave narratives look back to the stories told by fugitive slaves like Douglass and Jacobs did, and also look back to the 1960s, as a way of reflecting on their own historical moment. In addition, the neo-slave narratives probe the origins of social injustice in terms of race and critique the meaning of freedom for the black and white Americans alike since long.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Bell, Bernard W. “*Beloved: A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past.*” *Toni Morrison’s Beloved*. 1st ed., edited and with an Introduction by Harold Bloom, Viva Books, 2007, pp. 57-68.
- [2]. Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. U of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- [3]. Levecq, Christine. “Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered.” *African American Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2001, p. 136, *Gale Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- [4]. Levecq, Christine. “Texts and Contexts: The Historical Novel about Slavery.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2001, pp. 159-165, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i251782>. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- [5]. Pun, Min. “Anti-Racist Pedagogy and the Canonization of Toni Morrison.” *Crossing the Border: International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2017, pp. 15-24. *NepJOL*, <https://doi.org/10.3126/ctbijis.v5i2.18434>. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- [6]. Pun, Min. “Rewriting of History: Slave Narratives and Toni Morrison’s Novels.” *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, vol. 37, 2017, pp. 13-20. *IISTE*, <https://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JLLL/article/view/38684>. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- [7]. Pun, Min. “The Politics of Identity: The History of African Americans Reconsidered through Narratives.” *Journal of Political Science*, vol. XVII, 2017, pp. 52-62. *NepJOL*, <https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v17i0.20513>. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- [8]. Pun, Min. “The Politics of Writing.” *The Outlook: Journal of English Studies*, vol. X, 2019, pp. 77- 85.
- [9]. Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. “Daughters Signifyin(g) History; The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.” *Toni Morrison’s Beloved*. 1st ed., edited by Harold Bloom, Viva Books, 2007, pp. 115-139.
- [10]. Smith, Valerie. “Neo-Slave Narratives.” *Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, edited by Audrey Fisch, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 168-185.

Min Pun, PhD. “Neo-Slave Narratives as Recent Interventions on Race, Social Justice and Freedom.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(8), 2020, pp. 57-61.