

# Rhetoric of Silence in American Studies

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**Slavery through a Rhetorical Lens: *The Book of Negroes* by Lawrence Hill as the Female Neo-slave Narrative**

**Niewolnictwo w perspektywie retorycznej: *Aminata: Siła miłości* Lawrence Hilla jako nowa autobiografia niewolnicy**

### Abstract

The paper uses the rhetorical lenses to examine a neo-slave narrative *The Book of Negroes* by Lawrence Hill. The exploration of emotive, ethical, and political dimensions of the text allows the author to demonstrate its emotional and moral effects, deriving within the triad author-text-reader. The article particularly highlights gendered aspects of bondage, which have been traditionally marginalized. The female protagonist and the message that her story conveys prompt the readers to assume a position on the subject of slavery which transcends the story as such and condemns the legal institution of human chattel enslavement in all its representation.

Artykuł wykorzystuje perspektywę retoryczną w omówieniu neo-narracji niewolnicy w książce Lawrence Hilla *Aminata. Siła miłości*. Zbadanie uczuciowych, etycznych i politycznych związków w tekście, które ujawniają się w relacji pomiędzy autorem, tekstem i czytelnikiem, pozwala autorce na pokazanie ich efektów w sferze emocjonalnej i moralnej. Artykuł zwraca szczególną uwagę na genderowe aspekty niewolnictwa, które tradycyjnie były marginalizowane. Bohaterka kobieca i jej historia prowokują czytelnika do zajęcia krytycznego stanowiska wobec niewolnictwa, w każdym jego aspekcie.

### Key words

neo-slave narrative, female slaves, abolitionism  
neo-narracja niewolnika, niewolnica, abolicjonizm

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## **Slavery through a Rhetorical Lens: *The Book of Negroes* by Lawrence Hill as the Female Neo-slave Narrative**

### **1. Introduction**

Lawrence Hill's novel *The Book of Negroes* (2007) is a cross-generational story that spans six decades and covers three continents, exploring the historical connections between the roles of Africa, North America and Europe in the slave trade. The fictional story of Aminata Diallo, an eleven-year-old girl abducted from her village in Mali West Africa in 1756, is built around a framework of historical facts, such as slavery, the American Revolutionary War, abolitionism, the first colonies of free Black people, and the problems of racial discrimination, such as they were in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century society. The protagonist's transnational experience takes her through the Middle Passage to the South Virginia indigo plantation, then to Charleston, New York City, Birchtown in Nova Scotia where black loyalists are given passage to a British colony, Sierra Leone, and finally London. Aminata's itinerary revises the model of triangular trade and puts Canada on "The Black Atlantic" (Gilroy 1993) map. Like Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal* (2006), Hill reconstructs the trans-Atlantic slave trade from a subaltern perspective. *The Book of Negroes* presents gendered aspects of bondage, which so far have been given less literary attention than the male-penned accounts, finding its place alongside such authors as Tony Morrison and bell hooks.

I examine Hill's narrative as rhetoric, in which the triad author-text-reader allows to explore emotive, ethical, and political dimensions of the reading process. The author shapes his story in such a manner as to produce the greatest emotional and moral effect. On the one hand, he presents the experience of slavery through a female perspective, pointing to those aspects of the protagonist's experience that are traditionally marginalized but are gender specific and hereby given the central stage. As Cindy Weinstein claims: "To think about the slave narrative in relation to knowledge that is absent, partial, or deferred illuminates a fundamental fact not

only about the experience of slavery, but about how that experience is told” (2007, 123). Re-imagining slavery from the female point of view, Hill’s novel expands and enriches the culture’s memory of the period, marking an important stage in the development of African American literary tradition.

On the other hand, the author’s intention is not only to engage the readers in the horrors of slave life but also to make them assume a certain position on the subject of slavery. A pragmatist view of narrative as rhetoric views narrative as bound with its interpretations (Fish 1989, 141-162), and Hill’s text offers a rich area of rhetorical exchange, which reveals a political voice in support of abolitionism as one of its purposes. Abolitionist texts were created for purposes of communicating a certain message thus informing, persuading, and encouraging an audience to act in a desirable way. Hill’s readers situate themselves emotively and ethically in relationship to his female protagonist and the message that her story conveys. Aminata’s message, however, transcends the story as such and condemns the legal institution of human chattel enslavement.

## 2. Redressing the gaps and misrepresentations of dominant history through the neo-slave narrative genre

A choice of the particular narrative format indicates an intention of the author to construct a rich socio-cultural context, in which his recommendation is presented as a prompt to an audience’s response. Stories have a format that summarizes the interpretation and evaluation of goal-directed actions in response to situations that require adaptations (Van den Hoven 2015, 118-169). As the border between argumentation and narrative is fluid, the author revises the traditional slave narrative to demonstrate the validity of the message of freedom and equality for contemporary readers. *The Book of Negroes* is an example of a fictional neo-slave narrative,<sup>1</sup> following Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, the African* (1789), Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (1831), and Frederic Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass* (1845) classics of the genre. Written retrospectively in the first person narrative voice and using the tropes of the genre, the story follows the protagonist’s life from an African childhood, through capture, transport to America, slavery, and a long road to freedom. However, compared to the conventions of slave narratives outlined by James Olney in “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” (1984, 50-51), Aminata’s account differs in many respects. There is no engraved portrait, signed

1. The term “neoslave narrative” was first coined by Bernard Bell in his *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1987). I follow Ashraf Rushdy’s definition of neo-slave narratives (*Neo-slave Narratives...* 3), however Paul E. Lovejoy distinguishes “freedom narratives” (“Freedom Narratives... 91), and Aminata’s story also fits the latter category.

by the narrator, claim to the authorship, an appendix composed of documentary material, or the white person's, be it an editor or an abolitionist friend, acknowledgment of the veracity of the former slave's account. There is, however, an epigraph with a quotation from Jonathan Swift and the Bible, which serves as "further evidence of [the narrator's] superior literacy, and therefore of full humanity" (Newman 2013, 26). While in the traditional slave narratives the focus is on the transformation from a dehumanized slave to the self-emancipated free man, in the case of Hill's protagonist, she never allows herself to be completely subdued by enslavement, always retaining a sense of dignity and self-respect. Like Equiano's or Douglass's accounts that follow their freedom out of bondage, hers is also the coming-of-age story, in which "the perpetration of racism against the body and the infringement of slavery upon the worthy intellect" (Yorke 2010, 129) play crucial roles in her transition from childhood to adulthood.

### 3. Midwifery and literacy as emancipation tools

Aminata's life account is an act of rhetoric, designed to influence the reader's impression of its author and affect the reader's beliefs. The emphasis on the self-made life and the importance of linking the self to larger ideals of the community permeates her narrative. The woman narrator draws attention to specifically female aspects of the story, which might not be familiar to the readers. In this way, she creates a tension which helps her to achieve a rhetorical purpose of involving the readers cognitively and affecting them emotionally. Aminata possesses and uses two talents that allow her to survive and maintain a sense of humanity: the knowledge about midwifery and the language skills. Both have been instilled in her by her parents when she was a child. Since early days, she helps her mother to deliver babies, learning about the healing techniques and remedies that help the mother and the newborn. While assisting at childbirth, which is an important moment in both a woman's and communal life, she creates a human bond transcending tribal, linguistic, and racial boundaries. Later, her knowledge benefits the women who have been raped: "I was sometimes asked to stop a child from growing inside a woman"<sup>2</sup> (188-189), and those with feminine problems: "I bought the bark from the wild black cherry tree, which I would soak in warm water to help women whose monthly bleedings were too strong" (189). Midwifery skills allow her to battle hunger and poverty, as she is allowed to "make extra money on self-hire" (187). Wherever she goes, she is appreciated not only by female members of the community, but also the men in power, black and white, notice her worth and usefulness. Because slave women could not only work but also bear children, they

2. All references are to this edition and are cited by page within the text: Laurence Hill. 2007. *The Book of Negroes. A Novel*. Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd.

were extremely valuable to slave-owners, prized for their reproductive as well as productive capacity. Aminata's advantageous social position allows her to seek extra rations of food, cloth, or even some money, which ultimately keeps her alive. Moreover, being able to save lives in the world where slave lives are easily replaceable, she becomes a valuable member of her community

The second ability is connected with Aminata's knack for languages. Being a daughter of a mixed family, she knows Bamanankian, her mother's language, and Fulfulde, her father's. The father, who is a devout Muslim, "once travelled [to Timbuktu] to pray, to learn and to cultivate his mind." (17) Hearing the stories of faraway lands makes Aminata "want to cultivate [her] mind too" (17). When her father brings a copy of Qur'an, becoming the only literate person in their village, Aminata hopes that one day he would teach her to read. It is not so obvious, as father claims that it is not "the place of a girl to learn to read or write, but relented when he saw [her] attempting to draw words in Arabic with a stick in the sand. So, in the privacy of [their] home, with nobody but [her] mother as a witness, [she] was shown how to use a reed, dyed water and parchment" (18). This early experience instills in her a love of words and a desire to learn more. Literacy, thus, is presented as a crucial element of the protagonist's growth and a means to assert her power, especially that traditionally as a woman she would not enjoy such opportunities. In a twist of irony, Aminata's intellectual development is facilitated by her enslavement, which provides her with an opportunity to escape the traditional mold of a Bayo woman.

In her pursuit of knowledge, Aminata finds assistance in most unexpected places: a friendly mulatto overseer Mamed instructs her how to read, and her second owners, the Lindos, teach her to write, count, and keep the books. On the plantation, she musters Gullah, the slave dialect that the slaves speak to each other, the grammatically stronger but far from perfect English they use with the white, and later the proper English. Aminata is aware of the differences created by various registers: she knows when to use colloquial slave English in contacts with the white masters, and when to employ the sophisticated stylistics to authorize her manumission. She realizes her favorable position, admitting that those slaves who cannot communicate with the white people "would never be given an easier job, or taught an interesting skill, or be given extra food or privileges" (121). Her ability to understand languages allows her to escape before she is sold by Alassante, who highlights her literacy and midwifery skills while evaluating her worth: "She is old. But she speaks many languages. The toubabu at Bance say that she catches babies with great facility" (392). Aminata works as a translator, composes business letters, and keeps ledgers, recognizing her potential because she is needed and valued by others. The work on *The Book of Negroes* brings about another

realization: “I felt that I was giving something special to the Negroes seeking asylum in Nova Scotia, and that they were giving something special to me. They were telling me that I was not alone” (261). Krampe signals the importance of the social aspect of Aminata’s literacy: by “encouraging, teaching and inspiring her fellow people, in not letting her and her fellow Blacks’ memories slip away” (2009, 69) she becomes their instructor and mentor. One can observe the twofold significance of the heroine’s skills, which serve the community she finds herself in, and also benefit her own cause—the dynamics made possible by the fact that both midwifery and literacy are practical and useful skills.

While signing a hotel register in New York City, for the first time Aminata feels: “a person, with just as much right to life and liberty as the man who claimed to own [her]” (219). Thus, the act of writing her name is the declaration of her being an emancipated person, and an urge to further pursue the thought. The importance of naming as a means to resist the erasure of the slave presence is replayed in other tropes, such as Aminata’s refusal to be named Mary, by which she rejects the imposition of a slave identity, and the fact that she often recalls her parents’ names, maintaining the bond with her ancestors who thereby coexist within the domain of the living. Likewise, Chekura’s request to say aloud his own name is a gesture to assert his personhood, while the conditions on the slave ship and his uncertain future might suggest otherwise. By claiming a membership in a genealogical line, which was contrary to a discriminate belief in absence of an African identity, family names humanize slaves and retain their sense of identity, while the naming practices of slave owners are shown as another instrument of humiliation and control to efface the memory and sever their contact with Africa. The echo of Chekura’s words inspired an American title of Hill’s novel, *Someone Knows My Name*, which is also an allusion to James Baldwin’s collection of essays *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961).

The same determination to speak her own words can be seen when Aminata insists on being the one to write her memoir, refusing the help of white abolitionists, who want to remove the details that “couldn’t be proven.” In order to be published, it was customary for the Black authors to be endorsed by whites<sup>3</sup>, who could testify to their credibility and authenticity of their stories. By refusing to adhere to the conventions of slave narratives, she destabilizes the genre and questions the priority of its function as a political instrument in the abolitionist movement in nineteenth-century London. On a different level, her ultimate act of resistance to hegemony testifies to her agency, as “having had little control over her life, she will control its public representation” (Ball 2013, 9).

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3. See, for example, John Sekora’s “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in Ante bellum Slave Narrative.”

#### 4. Storytelling as a communicative process

In order to relive the past, the reader must take part in an active process of reconstitution that involves accepting the story in such a way that it becomes real, embodied, and lived through the storyteller's mediation. In order to do so, language is used not only as a means of communication but also as a conceptualizing and persuasive tool. The power of language and memory to undermine the oppression of slavery and give voice to its victims is signaled in a traditional role of *djeli*—a storyteller, who has “the honour of learning and retelling the stories of [their] village and [their] ancestors. It was said that when a *djeli* passed away, the knowledge of one hundred men died with him” (58). Aminata, who represents the unrestrained voice of an enslaved minority, becomes a *djeli* not only for her people but also for all humankind, recording her life experience and passing it on. This task gives her a sense of agency, and her life a purpose: “I sought comfort by imagining that I had been made a *djeli*, and was required to see and remember everything. My purpose would be to witness, and to prepare to testify” (58). During the darkest moments, she draws comfort from the realization of the importance of her endeavor: “I shivered and wanted to scream. No, I told myself. *Be a djeli. See, and remember*” (66, emphasis in the original). She must remember and speak not only for herself but for all those who will never speak again, highlighting the connection between individual and collective memory: “what purpose would there be to this life I have lived, if I could not take this opportunity to relate it?” (7). Thus, as Krampe observes, “the insertion of the traumatic memory of slavery into a mainstream collective memory unperturbed by these recollections [...] is at the core of Aminata's testimony” (2009, 71). Her testimony provides a challenge to the acceptance of slavery as a socio-economic institution, becoming a powerful tool for exposing the brutalities of the chattel slave system. Once her memoir is finished, so is her life purpose: “I am finally done. My story is told” (420), giving her a sense of fulfilment and closure. Thus, literacy skills prove instrumental to her survival and emancipation, as well as become essential in reconstructing and comprehending the reality of slave culture, especially from the former slave's perspective. They link the pursuit of literacy with the pursuit of freedom, creating a heroine who is committed to intellectual achievement and personal freedom, thus challenging Julie Newman's observation that “where the male slave tends to follow the pattern of literacy-identity-freedom (“teach'em to read and run”), the woman writer emphasizes family-identity-freedom, placing more emphasis on community than individualist values” (2013, 27).

Aminata's survival is facilitated by the way her parents endowed her with the gifts that enable her to endure the hardships: “in all the years that have followed, I have thought of how much my parents planted in my mind in the short time

we had together” (58). The role of mother in teaching her midwifery, and father in showing her the written word is invaluable, and she is grateful for that. The importance of father as a family protector and mother as an enabler is reiterated throughout the narrative: “I imagine their hands steering me from trouble, guiding me around cooking fires and leading me to the mat in the cool shade of our home” (11). During hard times, she recalls her happy childhood: “I comforted myself with thoughts of my parents in Bayo” (199). Whenever in doubt, she would ask herself what her parents would do: “Every day, I thought of my parents and imagined them telling me to soak up learning and to use my skills” (151). “[I]n absence of the living parents,” Krampe claims, “her memory of them guides and advises her. The imaginary conversations serve, in Maurice Halbwachs’ terminology, as *cadres sociaux*, the social framings” (2009, 68) since personal memory is largely affected by social memory. “Our perception, and thus the contents and modes of what and how we remember, are pre-structured by our social framework (even *in absentia*)” (Krampe 2009, 64), like in the case of Aminata’s parents. Slavery severs not only family ties but also other kinds of communal relationships, uprooting people and forcing them to make provisional bonds, such as with Georgia, who becomes her mother figure, friendships with Dolly and Daddy Moses, and her love for Chekura. Unfortunately, these ties are provisional and, just like the protagonist, subjected to external forces. Since they can never replace the feeling of the only real happiness she felt in a childhood home, Aminata decides to go back to Africa to look for the lost past.

## 5. The rhetoric of sympathy and sensibility

Narrative that communicates knowledge, feelings, and values is rhetoric. In classical rhetoric the forms of argumentation involve both a reference to the receiver’s intellectual sphere (*logos*) and to his or her emotional one (*pathos*) (Aristotle). Hill’s text demonstrates a selection of imagery used in order to win the reader’s sympathy, both for the protagonist and the cause. Even though the readers participate in communication in an individualized manner, emotive references to individuality steer this process in the direction of persuasive communication. Persuasion, however, should not be interpreted merely as an act of forcing someone to do something, but it rather refers to its ancient rhetorical interpretation as authenticating—by using arguments and testimonies the author persuades someone to do something (Aristotle 2006, I, 1-2; Grimaldi 1972, 54-68). An act of belief engages the reader’s intellective and volitive powers and should not be reduced only to emotional activity. Therefore, the protagonist’s physical suffering is presented as less persuasive in comparison to an emotional one.

In line with the traditional slave narratives, Aminata's story does not shy away from physical cruelty, yet it is not as graphic as male slave narratives, which often focus on describing the physical aspects of bondage, such as the detailed descriptions of the elaborate torture scenarios and merciless punishment executed by the cruel masters, mistresses, and overseers: there are no descriptions of patrols, of failed or successful attempts to escape, or of pursuits by men and dogs. When Aminata leaves her owner in NY City, it is done without much drama: she just leaves his hotel and goes into hiding. The girl is branded after being sold to slave traders and raped "only" once on the South Carolina plantation, yet she seems unscathed by the trauma. She manages to avoid ever being whipped, maimed or otherwise physically punished despite the fact that she is incredibly outspoken: "With all the Negroes watching, I had stood up to Appleby" (163), and the planter's biggest punishment is stripping her of her clothes and shearing her hair. It is as if she possesses extraordinary luck, beginning with the ship's doctor, who takes her to his cabin: "Whenever he put his hand on my shoulder or back, I gave a sharp shove and an angry shout. He would recoil like a kicked dog and begin to read from a book that he kept in the room" (76). During the voyage to America, Aminata is spared at the expense of other slave women whom he takes to his bed. However, she complicates the concept of abuse indicating not only white but also black perpetrators: "In plain daylight, a white man tried to grab me and pull me into a tavern. I wrenched my arm free and ran away. The very next day, a tall Negro man in the fish market put his hand on my breast and tried to pull me by the wrist" (182). So, violence is presented not as resulting solely from Aminata's slave status but also from the fact that she is a woman. The same trait is replayed in a conversation with Lindo, when she says: "I am a wife. I am a mother. Aren't I a woman?" (200), marking her multiple roles as a female key to her identity. Aminata's words, according to Christine Duff, mirror Sojourner Truth's speech "'Ain't I a woman?'" at a women's rights convention in Ohio in 1851" (2011, 251), and in both cases serve as "assertion of Black femaleness" (Duff 2011, 251).

Even though Aminata has largely been spared physical cruelty, her greatest suffering is depicted as emotional. It is not the traumatic episodes of her enslavement, but the loss of her parents, husband, and a little son who is sold to another planter that haunt her at the old age. What she fears most is shame and loss of self-respect, when, for example, she could feel "[w]arm urine r[u]n down [her] legs" (65), or during a long march to the coast when she experiences her first menstruation: "In my nakedness, it was impossible to hide the blood running down my legs" (43). She is ashamed of how she looks: "Dried waste caked my feet. My teeth hadn't been cleaned. I felt my womanly bleeding gush out of me and detested having to stand before this hairy toubab" (69). After being stripped naked and shaven, she

is given a mirror: “I screamed as I have never screamed before. I didn’t recognize myself. I had no clothes, no hair, no beauty, no womanhood” (165). These detailed descriptions of female suffering serve as visual elements of persuasion, which ascribe to imagery a significant role. Communicating a text oriented to emotions does not only aim at arousing them, but also at treating them as an element of a broader process that leads to taking specific decisions. By selecting those images that pertain to female realm and defining the location of a pictorial element within the narrative structure, the author aims at creating a desirable effect of compassion and concern on the readers.

Such situations, in which her personal boundaries are violated and her private space is invaded, undermine her self-worth and strip her of moral and emotional power that she held within the community. As humiliation is a personal experience located in a social context, Aminata’s pain arises from being exposed to people around her, mostly men, in situations which traditionally belong to a female domain. Especially that she comes from a society in which the separation of male and female roles is strictly observed. A degrading treatment of both sexes alike is used as an instrument to engineer conformity and obedience for other slaves, who witness these acts. The above examples of social discomfort, which a male captive never has to endure, highlight gendered aspects of slavery and implicate humiliation as a significant mechanism of oppression, directed especially towards female victims.

## 6. The rhetoric of the female slave body

Rhetorical scholars have recognized the body as an instrument of argumentation, rebellion, and self-identification (Butterworth 2008, 260). The discourses of power and influence have always been a crucial part of constructing the body. The female slave’s body is used mainly for work and procreation, whereas a youthful, female body becomes an instrument of pleasure for her masters, revealing functionality as its main feature (Martin 2012, 2). In slavery, the bodies that fail to perform these tasks are discarded as useless. Thus, body used as a rhetorical argument reveals its position as both the subject and object of discourse.

Aminata uses various images of her body as means of persuasion. However daunting her life is, she tries to maintain a sense of femininity, with whatever few accouterments available at her disposal. Her wedding gifts are not some practical items but the objects to help her take care of her looks: “a comb, a jar of corn oil said to be good for working through kinky hair, a red and gold headscarf, and a beautiful blue wrapper made of soft, smooth cotton” (161). A young woman’s need to appear and feel beautiful supersedes the overwhelming misery of her life

as a slave, even at a risk of punishment: “You and your head scarves. Fancied up like white folks” (164), sneers her master, “ ‘We have a law in the Province of South Carolina [...] Niggers don’t dress grand’” (163). The motif of hair as part of Aminata’s representation appears throughout the story, either presented as an important component of a tribal identity: “I looked to see who had tribal marks, and how the women kept their hair. Braided? Rowed? Bunched? Covered?” (111), signaling the woman’s clan affiliation and her social position, or a space for creativity and self-expression: “I lost all of the hair that Georgia and I had worked over every Sunday morning. All the combing, oiling, braiding and bunching was gone” (164). Doing hair allows her an expression of independence and fosters a bond with other women, who come and laugh while combing each other’s hair. In the world that is hostile to women such personal contacts with physical touch and feel, *in lieu* of family relationships, foster intimate ties and generate a feeling of safety and acceptance. Having her hair publicly shaved is presented as one of the most painful moments that affects her self-esteem, so is mocking her hair: “‘Say ‘I gots wool on my head, not hair’” (164).<sup>4</sup> These dehumanizing and de-personalizing measures aim at breaking not only her sense of femininity but also humanity in an attempt to render a docile worker. When the story unfolds, the changing image of hair communicates physical stages of her life: “My hair has mostly fallen out now, and the remaining strands are grey, still curled, tight to my head” (13). Thus, the image of hair is used in the story as a visual indicator of her individuality and an expression of womanhood that refuses to be contained in the conventions of slavery. By reducing a female slave to her body, slavery robs her of control over her own physicality and renders her a “laboring body,” “available for public use and public viewing” (Putzi 2004, 3). Even if the female slave cannot perform as a woman, in writing her story, she acts as the speaker who transgresses the boundaries of tradition and thus gains agency.

There is another aspect of Aminata’s care for her beauty, which has been carefully crafted throughout the narrative, whose forms and techniques are such as not to corrupt the intended message by appearing too sexual. Her claims to femininity, which manifest themselves in attention to appearance and character, must not exceed the accepted canon, so Aminata is very careful not to appear overtly sexual or provocative, in terms of language, looks, and behavior alike. Slave women’s sexual vulnerability, which was the product of the culture of exploitation and abuse, was often used against them to disparage their chances of manumission. “[W]hile resisting women may appear heroic to modern readers historically and

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4. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century “African hair was deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans. Many white people went so far as to insist that Blacks did not have real hair, preferring to classify it in a derogatory manner as ‘wool’” (Byrd and Tharps 2001, 14).

rhetorically, a woman who resisted, verbally or physically, could also potentially compromise her womanhood and jeopardize her readers' sympathy (Santamarina 2007, 237). In fact, Aminata's credibility as a narrator and abolitionist relies on how she is perceived by the public, whose idea of femininity largely rests on the racialized norms for womanhood. Therefore, she uses her narrator's voice to represent herself opposite female sexuality, as a skillful midwife and a literate and efficient worker. At the time when the general image of slave women oscillated between two stereotypes: a domesticated "mammy" and a threatening "Jezebel," Aminata's self-fashioning manages to escape the confines of both. Her sexual history is very short, Chekura being her one and only husband and the love of her life, and she does not engage in affairs when they are separated, which is most of her life. Thus, against the backdrop of slavery's systematic patriarchal authority, Aminata's sexual restraint is presented as the key feature that speaks to her virtue and wins the hearts of her audience, but also the one "that obscured the realities of slave women's exploitation" (Santamarina 2007, 233).

## 7. Re-claiming her identity as a free woman

McNaughton argues that "identity is not merely performed but also argued" (2007, 142). Hill's protagonist makes a claim to her identity, after the experience of slavery leaves her forcibly uprooted and displaced. Even though there are rhetorical constraints on slave narratives, the protagonist demonstrates signs of agency and manages to fashion her own version of the story through her rhetorical resourcefulness. The protagonist may be referred to as a conscious but not free subject, but it is interesting to observe the ways in which she exercises her personal powers in communication. As communication processes are a prerequisite for the protagonist's functioning, the readers may witness how she becomes both the subject and the object of the communicative process. First person narrative voice and the language that employs lexicon from the personal narrative genre serve both to inform and build identification with the readers. More importantly, she establishes a connection between the text and its readers by enlarging the notion of individual subjectivity, in particular by applying a gender lens to her account.

In the process of emancipation, she struggles to retain a sense of agency, but her confrontation with the land of origin provides more confusion than clarity: "in South Carolina, I had been an African. In Nova Scotia, I had become known as a Loyalist, or a Negro, or both. And now, finally back in Africa, I was seen as a Nova Scotian [...] they [Temne women] seemed to think that I was just as foreign as the British" (401-402). In America and Canada, Aminata is seen as African but back in African homeland, having been tainted with the transnational experience, she is denied acceptance as one of their own: "You are a toubab [a white

person] with a black face” (411). In response to the protagonist’s constant misidentifications, Ball observes how she “affirms a local, rooted identity – one left behind in Bayo and endlessly longed for thereafter – over the violent exigencies of circum-Atlantic travelling routes and the transnational, relational identities they generate” (2013, 8). Paradoxically, this multifaceted representation of her elusive identity is what allows her to survive, as she escapes the discursive reduction of a slave subject to a white-centered taxonomy. Thus, identity is presented as a social construct whose significance depends on the individual’s position against the dominant group, however both the Africans in the homeland and in the diaspora determine their inclusion in or exclusion from the group vis-à-vis the white hegemony. Aminata’s story demonstrates how the Atlantic slave-trade affects not only the lives of its victims and oppressors but also other inhabitants of the three continents, shaping their opinions via Eurocentric prejudices and manipulating their worldviews.

Slave narratives often assume a religious framework, fashioning a slave’s emancipation on a tale of religious redemption. Hill’s narrative, however, dispels the hypocrisy of those who use religion to support slave trade and justify the existence of slavery. There are three Abrahamic religions introduced in the novel, but they all foster ambiguity, condemning and condoning the practice of slavery at the same time. Aminata’s faith represents both victims and perpetrators of slavery: “There were three captives – all unbelievers – in our village, but even children knew that no Muslim was allowed to hold another Muslim in captivity” (20). For Muslims, slavery is permitted as long as it does not affect their coreligionists. Christianity and Judaism are presented through Biblical imagery, such as the story of the Hebrew people in the Book of Exodus, with Daddy Moses mirroring his Biblical predecessor. Hill’s narrative demonstrates how the idea of the Promised Land for free Black people is drifting away, together with the failed attempts at settlement, first in Nova Scotia and later in Freetown. It is ironic that for Africans, America represents a place from which to escape—the Biblical Egypt, while for the persecuted European Christians, such as Separatists, it was the Promised Land. Solomon Lindo, Aminata’s second owner, also uses scripture to explicate his position, however the girl questions the reasoning behind his ruminations: “Mr. Lindo had mentioned a few times that Jews had been slaves in ancient Egypt and that his own ancestors had been driven from Spain. He had told me that Jews and Africans could understand each other because we were both outsiders, but even though the man preferred the term *servant* to *slave*, he owned me and he owned Dolly and now he owned Dolly’s baby boy” (192, emphasis in the original). The discrepancy between what Lindo says and what he does undermines the veracity of his words and reveals his hypocrisy. If Lindo helps Aminata on her road to emancipation,

at the same time benefitting financially from her skills, he also brokers the sale of her son, “mimic[ing] the trajectory of Black-Jewish relations in the twentieth-century United States” (Casteel 2014, 120), which showed Jews both as victims of social discrimination and stakeholders in the slave economy (Lindo is an indigo inspector). Finally, Christian abolitionists that she meets in London approach the issue of slavery from the moral standpoint, deeming it a stain on Christianity and a sin. Marrying religious arguments rooted in Christian values and ideals with the compelling evidence of human suffering, they appeal to people’s compassion and a sense of justice.

As the white people are the only source of religious teaching, and the slaves are forbidden to read scripture, religion becomes a viable instrument of control and repression towards the enslaved people. So is proselytizing of the African continent: “Within months of arriving, six different religious denominations had established their own meeting houses” (349). The missionary movement in Freetown not only spreads gospel but also sanctions and upholds the British dominance in the region. Amidst the chaos of competing religious groups that shift in their endorsement of spiritual, economic, or political agendas, Aminata finds her own way: “I have not embraced a God as might be imagined by a Muslim, Jew or Christian, but in the mornings it comforts me to imagine a gentle voice saying, *Go ahead, that’s it, take another day*” (211, emphasis in the original). She rejects institutional religions with their grand narratives, as they fail her, and relies on her inner spirit, “revealing slave acculturation as a subtractive rather than an additive process” (Yorke 2010, 141). Aminata lives for the moment, not ruminating about the past, or focusing too much on the future. She never succumbs to hate and offers her own thoughts and perspective subtly: “I had learned that there were times when fighting was impossible, when the best thing to do was to wait and to learn” (424). Demonstrating self-consciousness and awareness of the restrictions of her position, Aminata reclaims her life, even if only mentally, but this authority allows her to survive physically. With such characterization of his heroine, the author manages to undermine the political function of slave narratives that catered mainly for Christian audience and reiterated racial mythologies. The example of a capable female protagonist, whose story appeals to basic values of justice and freedom, educates the audience not only about the horrors of slavery but also creates new social knowledge.

## 8. Rewriting the narrative about slavery

Rhetoric is not based on true and false propositions, so there is no question about the veracity of the protagonist’s account. If there is no direct access to the facts

which are the basis for textual communication, rhetorical means create an illusion of authenticity, which is accepted by the readers depending on how in/consistent it is. As Robert Rowland puts it, “the key issues in terms of persuasiveness is not the truth of the narrative, but its credibility” (2009, 122). As the process of communication requires the expression of the speaker’s intention and the recognition of the receiver’s attitude, the narrative reveals the protagonist who debunks the major myths surrounding the experience of slavery. Both informative and persuasive modes of communication (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012, 28-33) are present in the text, informing about slavery and persuading the readers to condemn it. Both the narrator and the readers are participants of this experience, however it is the reader’s positive response to the textual message that speaks to its success.

Slave narratives characteristically contrast the protagonist’s early innocence and ignorance against a bitter, brutally acquired experience. Aminata’s idyllic childhood in Africa, as the only daughter of a Muslim jeweler and his wife, the local midwife, is set against the horrors that begin with her capture. Following the Bildungsroman conventions, the narrative traces Aminata’s development in relation to society, on the one hand, and the examination of her own place within it, on the other. The protagonist’s growth can be traced throughout two important realizations, which affect her trans-Atlantic life: the disparity between the Western ideal of freedom and the reality of racism, and the problematic role of religion in upholding the slave system. During the Revolutionary War the issue of slavery is used by the opposing forces to support their agendas. First, Aminata hears white Americans talking about freedom: “We shall be free of the British and their taxes. Never again shall we be slaves” (227), but this freedom is exclusive: “Niggers, nothing. I’m talking about us. Rebels. Patriots” (227). When Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia, issues the Proclamation in which he promises to free slave recruits in exchange for service in the British Army, the idea of freedom begins to take shape; however, little do they know that the same Lord Dunmore has his own slaves. When the rebels complain: “it isn’t fair, stealing Negroes from good men” (242), the peace treaty assures them that the British will withdraw “*without Causing any destruction or carrying away any Negroes or other Property of the American Inhabitant*” (254, emphasis in the original). While fighting with the British for their freedom, the Americans still align with them when it comes to the issue of slavery, sanctioning the chattel slave system and demonstrating the supremacy of racial affiliations over current politics.

When Britain surrenders to American rebels, they keep their promise to the Black Loyalists: “Nova Scotia is a British colony, untouched and unsullied by the Americans, at a distance of two weeks by ship from the New York harbor. It is a fine colony indeed, on the Atlantic Ocean but north of here, with woods, fresh

water, abundant animals and rich forest just begging to be converted to farmland. Nova Scotia, Miss Diallo, will be your promised land” (285-6). With the certificate proving they have worked behind the British lines for at least a year, they can sign their names in the register called *The Book of Negroes*, thereby given passage to a British colony. Birchtown in Nova Scotia becomes the first and the largest settlement of free Blacks outside Africa in the years following the American Revolution. Even though the British send some fugitives to freedom, they also allow white Loyalists to bring along their own slaves, complicating social relationships. As the new colony is not equipped to maintain the influx of new citizens, and the White settlers are served first in terms of rations and land grants, the Black Loyalists suffer from racial and economic discrimination, once again facing prejudice, fear, and hatred from the white society.

Aminata’s story becomes representative for the collective trauma of the whole group of Black Loyalists who come to Canada. She demonstrates, in Faigley’s words, a “communitarian” notion of the subject that “locates [itself] in terms of the shared discursive practices of a community” (1992, 17). Dissatisfied with the conditions in Nova Scotia, they accept the offer of the Sierra Leone Company (a British anti-slavery organization) to resettle in Sierra Leone, on the Atlantic coast of West Africa: “Blacks and whites would have the same civil, military, personal and commercial rights and duties in Sierra Leone, and it would not be lawful for the Sierra Leone Company to hold any person in slavery or to traffic in the buying or selling of slaves” (319). However, it soon becomes apparent that the Royal Navy, which is to protect the new colony of Freetown, is at the same time assigned to protect the British slave-trading depot nearby: “the same men who rowed slaves to Bance Island carried us over the waters of St. George’s Bay and onto the shores of Sierra Leone” (341). Traders bring slaves through Freetown, and the crew of slave vessels come to drink, demonstrating the multifaceted policy of Great Britain, which is one of the most successful slave-trading countries, and also the birthplace of the anti-slavery movement.

The issue of slavery is depicted in various shades, revealing its complex history and moral dilemmas. Aminata is a victim of the Atlantic triangular slave trade, but it is the Africans who capture her and sell her to the white slavers. The fact that the Africans had been dealing in slaves long before the first ones were sent to the Americas becomes the common justification of the white people for the trade, facilitating the view that African enslavement is intrinsic to the continent. In fact, the notion of slavery is not alien to Aminata’s people, as they also keep slaves, known as “*woloso*, which in [her] mother’s language meant captive of the second generation. Since his birth, he had belonged to [their] village chief” (23). Slavery is presented as a source of revenue for many European nations: “everybody’s doing it.

The British. The French. The Dutch. The Americans” (375), conveniently diluting a sense of personal responsibility. Europeans like to enjoy cane sugar: “Ninety-nine Englishmen out of one hundred take their tea with sugar. We live for our tea, cakes, pies and candies. We live for the stuff, and we will not be deprived” (376), thus the maintenance of their superior lifestyle justifies the demand and the measures taken to obtain it. To muffle the guilt, they “prefer the term *servant*. And we don’t treat our servants rudely. In our home, you will find none of the barbarism of St. Helena Island” (171, emphasis in the original), asserts one slave owner. In this vein, Black people are stereotyped as barbaric savages, and the plantation is signaled as the place where they would acquire civilization, thus both the planter and the slaves would benefit from the situation: one financially and the other culturally. At the same time, London streets are portrayed as filthy, with legless beggars and overpowering stench, indicating an unjust and deeply class-ridden society, in need of social reforms. Both in Africa and America, the narrative shows those who trade in slaves, and those who passively witness the trade, posing the question of moral responsibility. Yet, there is no clear cut division between white and black, civilized and heathen, signaling human complexity. By defamiliarizing its standardly foundation, Hill’s novel questions the white-black binary convention of the slavery discourse. In this way, Aminata’s story prompts individual readers to examine their current knowledge of and about slavery in order to help them identify exclusionary and oppressive practices and ideologies the chattel system maintained.

## 9. Conclusion

The communal dimension of human existence is grounded in interpersonal relationships, which are the basis for forming a society. Even though the slave narrative genre officially lost its usefulness with the abolition of slavery, its successor’s aim is to re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative, and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity. In many respects, Hill’s narrative adheres to the genre of slave narratives, yet at the same time undermines it, drawing a critical attention to political and religious pressures of the abolitionist cause. Demonstrating different rationales behind abolitionist debates, the author shows how racist beliefs validate political and economic ambitions. By giving a voice to a slave woman, Hill’s narrative readdresses the issues of slavery and racial discrimination, whereas the female perspective allows for various forms of psychological abuse and sexual vulnerability to take precedence. The protagonist’s attempts to take control over her body become a form of resistance to the overwhelming lack of agency, which the experience of slavery brings in its wake.

In Duff's words, "Aminata's narrative is a declaration of humanity, subjecthood, and agency" (2011, 252). Stephanie Yorke highlights the persuasive aspect of the narrative, observing that "Aminata is permitted to tell a compelling story, rather than merely present a narrative as a piece of evidence for use in a white-authored philosophical discussion" (2010, 132). Even if Hill's narrative draws on the experience of one particular slave woman, an intense emotional impact of her story has far-reaching consequences as it sensitizes the readers to any form of social oppression, imploring them to adopt a moral position that promotes the importance of social justice, liberty, and equality.

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