

The Lived and Learned Narratives of the Past: Memory in Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*¹

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ABSTRACT

In his *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925) Maurice Halbwachs makes a simple distinction between collective memory and history: while memory is the lived history, history is the learned version of the past. Andrea Levy's last novel *The Long Song* (2010) revisits the lived history of the Afro-Caribbean community that is sidelined in the learned history. Told by a former slave named July, the novel is set in early 19th-century Jamaica in the years before and after the abolition of slavery. Despite her editor-son Thomas's questioning and requests for an account of key historical events, July's story is an attempt to unveil what is left unsaid about plantation life in conventional historiography. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's distinction between history and memory, this paper aims to examine how the novel foregrounds the memory of the Afro-Caribbean community and reconstructs the past in multi-faceted versions to challenge the received version of the past in Western historiography.

Keywords: Memory, Andrea Levy, History, Halbwachs, Slavery

Geçmişin Yaşanmış ve Öğrenilmiş Anlatıları: Andrea Levy'nin *The Long Song* Romanında Bellek

ÖZET

Maurice Halbwachs *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925) adlı eserinde kolektif bellek ile tarih arasında basit bir ayrım yapar: bellek yaşanmış tarihtir, tarih ise geçmişin öğrenilmiş versiyonudur. Andrea Levy'nin son romanı *The Long Song* (2010), Afro-Karayip toplumunun öğrenilen tarih içinde bir kenara itilen yaşanmış tarihini yeniden ele alıyor. July adlı özgürlüğüne kavuşmuş bir köle tarafından anlatılan roman, 19. yüzyılın başlarında Jamaika'da, köleliğin kaldırılmasından önceki ve sonraki yıllarda geçiyor. Editör oğlu Thomas'ın sorgulamalarına ve önemli tarihsel olayları anlatma taleplerine rağmen July'nin hikayesi, geleneksel tarih yazımında plantasyon yaşamı hakkında söylenmemiş olanları ortaya çıkarma girişimidir. Maurice Halbwachs'ın tarih ve bellek arasındaki ayrımından yola çıkan bu makale, romanın Afro-Karayip toplumunun belleğini nasıl ön plana çıkardığını ve Batı tarih yazımında geçmişin kabul edilen

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versiyonuna meydan okumak için geçmişi çok yönlü versiyonlarla nasıl yeniden inşa ettiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bellek, Andrea Levy, Tarih, Halbwachs, Kölelik

1. INTRODUCTION

Andrea Levy's fifth and final novel *The Long Song* (2010), shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2010 and awarded the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction 2011, tells the story of July, who – as an old Jamaican woman – recounts her memories as a domestic slave and later her life as a free woman. The novel is set in nineteenth-century Jamaica in the years before – and just after – the abolition of slavery and is written in the form of a memoir by the protagonist. Yet, it subverts the narrative of classic slave narratives by its use of humour and laying bare the editorial process of such narratives, which constructs an enslaved subject. In doing so, the novel underlines the conflict between memory and history. Challenging the revisionist approach of the publishers/printers in such narratives, the novel foregrounds the unacknowledged voices in history by giving voice to the memory of the enslaved Afro-Caribbean communities and overlooked or denied aspects of slavery in historical records.

A similar black British perspective and outlook on the past can be traced in the works of David Dabydeen's, Fred D'Aguiar's and Caryl Phillips', but Levy's humour in the novel's dealing with a subject that is actually traumatic is more reminiscent of Zadie Smith's use of humour. Her approach to long-overlooked narratives in history is rather amusing. The characters are exposed to torture, humiliation, and contempt but they fight back in their own ways. Levy does not focus on how they suffered but how they raised their voices. It helps to make the traumatic losses in the past less painful and forms a contrast to the classic slave narratives. The novel has received much critical acclaim since its publication in 2010. Most of the critical analysis deals with the structural aspects and use of humour in the novel. Drawing attention to the narrative structure of the novel, Sofía Muñoz-Valdivieso analyses the novel's relation to other slave narratives and underlines how it recreates the history of the black British. Accordingly, in the novel 'the horrors of slavery are mainly conveyed in her silences' (Muñoz-Valdivieso, 2016, p. 38). Similarly, Jana Gohrisch focuses on how the novel conveys black agency through literary conventions such as 'slave narrative and autobiography, romance and action thriller, to low comedy and farce' (Gohrisch, 2015, p.415). John McLeod focuses on the genealogical relations arguing that the novel "offers an alternative mapping of conception and heredity that counters the official parameters of legitimate heritage" (2022, p.13). Elisabeth Bekers finds the novel empowering in terms of the role of the literary tradition of neo-slave narrative in 'combatting Britain's historical amnesia' (Bekers, 2018, p. 36). Ulla Rahbek also states that 'big history is ... a constant companion to the small history of the character's lives, but it is never allowed to

overshadow the smaller events in July's narrative' (Rahbek, 2010, p. 149). Through the protagonist's personal account of the past, the novel both gives voice to the small history of the enslaved and lays bare the constructedness of historical accounts. While much of the existing scholarship focuses on themes of trauma, resistance, and postcolonial identity, this study will link the novel's treatment of memory, particularly through Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, to the aesthetics of mobility in African diaspora narratives. Following up on these studies, this paper will focus on how the novel engages with memory and history as lived and learned versions of the past.

In *The Long Song*, July, who was a slave on Amity Plantation, recounts the past as she remembers randomly, but her son, Thomas, who is both the editor and printer of July's memoir, interferes with her narration by putting events into chronological order. Thomas grew up in England after his mother abandoned him on an English minister's doorstep as a baby. As a publisher who acquired his education in England, Thomas has learned history as written in the books. He wants to publish his mother's book, but while July enjoys giving us a humorous account of life on plantations, providing different versions of the past, Thomas requests for a 'serious' account of key historical events. He embraces Western rationality while acquiring at the same time the cultural identity of the colonizer. July, on the other hand, relates how her slave mother was raped by the plantation's overseer and how the bond between mother and daughter was severed when she was taken to the house to become a maid to Caroline Mortimer, the owner's sister and later mistress of the plantation. History repeats itself for July and she gives birth to the child of her English master and is separated from her own baby, Emily, who was taken to England by her father, Robert, the husband of her mistress, Caroline. July wants to be heard by her daughter and that is what brings Thomas and July together in the writing of the book, since Thomas also wants to meet his half-sister. In the "Afterword," Thomas addresses the readers in England:

Perhaps she is in England, unaware of the strong family connection she has to this island of Jamaica. She may have children of her own, who have no understanding that their grandmamma was born a slave. So here is where I come to my request. If any readers have information regarding Emily Goodwin [...] I would be very obliged to them if they could let me know it. (Levy, 2010a, p. 398)

Just like July's story of fragmented families that could not find place in history, Emily is probably somewhere totally unaware of her mother and her heritage. As such, contrary to Thomas's expectations, July's account is an attempt to unveil what is left unsaid about plantation life in conventional historiography. The attack against the collective memory of the Afro-Caribbean community is evidenced in July's memories of the breaking up of families under slavery. The chain of separations prevents the members of the family, and the community in general, from developing their collective memory and, consequently, consolidating their identity as part of a group. Working against the grains of Western

historiography³, the novel lends itself to an analysis of the distinction between “lived history” and “learned history” - the terms conceptualized by the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs. Drawing on Halbwachs’s distinction between history and memory, this paper aims to examine how the novel foregrounds the memory of the Afro-Caribbean community and reconstructs the past in multi-faceted versions to complicate the received history. Furthermore, as the account of the past is different in Thomas and July’s narratives, how Halbwach conceptualizes the ways history and memory operate provides a theoretical basis to understand Levy’s dealing with slave narratives in her novel. Levy focuses on July’s individual account to uncover a lost past that is still recalled by its living members. However, Thomas’s reliance on historical narrative illustrates a past that cannot perpetuate itself. In this sense, the novel attempts to recover what has disappeared in history. This paper argues that the novel constructs history through conflicting operations of memory and historical narrative, revealing multiple, contested versions of the past. By doing so, the novel interrogates and problematizes the validity of the existing historical accounts concerning the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

2. RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

As a historical novel, *The Long Song*’s engagement with slave narratives also lays bare the distinction between memory and history. Most classic slave narratives give insight into the experience of suffering of the enslaved Africans. As Paul Gilroy contends in his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), slave narratives ‘express in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation’ (Gilroy, 1993, p.69). In such classic slave narratives, the recount of the formerly enslaved individuals is reconfigured and reshaped by white editors to enhance the authenticity of the narrative. Omissions and distortions are inevitable in the narratives edited by white individuals (Escott, 1979, p. xiii). Consequently, as Bekers contends, ‘slaves generally disappeared into anonymity. Along with their freedom and agency, they lost their voice and the power to convey their life histories and generally disappeared into the margins of the historiography of the West’ (Bekers, 2018, p. 24). The target reader of the slave narratives was the white reader to make them feel sympathy for the victims. Classical slave narratives, as Gould explains, were edited, framed, and structured by the abolitionists (Gould, 2007, p. 13). For instance, as Gould further notes, the preface and appendices of *Narrative of James Williams: An American Slave* (1838) were ‘written and compiled by abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier’ and the additional parts attached to the narrative ‘are nearly half as long as Williams’s story’ (Gould, 2007, p.19). To persuade the reader of the immediacy of the abolition of slavery, the editors wanted the narrative to sound credible and authentic. In line with this tradition and as a publisher raised by an abolitionist minister, Thomas tries hard to structure

³ In this context, historiography refers to ‘the method of researching the past’ and ‘writing history as well as its theory’ (Partner and Foot, 2013).

his mother's narrative to look trustworthy and historical. He aims to structure the material chronologically to give it the appearance of historical documentation.

In this sense, the novel lays bare this editorial process of slave narratives. Levy's reconstruction of the past is a strategy to subvert the construction of Afro-Caribbean identities in the learned history by creating empowering narratives of their own realities. As Öztapak-Avcı states, '[i]n contrast to the emphasis on authenticity in classic slave narratives, July's narrative draws attention to its fictionality and unreliability, both of which foreground the constructedness of the narrator' (Öztapak-Avcı, 2017, p. 122). On the very first pages of the novel, the narrator warns the reader that her views of life on the plantation radically differ from the perceptions rendered in white people's stories about the island. Dismissing her editor-son's warnings, July has a note for the reader: 'If you do read it and find your head nodding in agreement at this man's bluster, then away with you – for I no longer wish you as my reader' (Levy, 2010a, p. 103). She builds her narrative on the assumption that recovering a single truth about the past is impossible. We witness the individual processes of recollection, which will focus on the memories that are socially constructed and preserved in the interaction with the community. Therefore, the novel focuses on the interrelations between individual and collective memories, and the (re-)writing of the past as a strategy to resist colonial oppression.

The aesthetics of the novel also mirror the disruptions caused by slavery throughout history. July's narrative serves as a medium that connects us to history and understand how cultural identity is formed through memory. Her story is continuously interrupted by her son's impositions. Moreover, her remembrance of the past itself is discontinuous and full of contradictory versions of the same story. As such, the structural characteristics of the novel convey that a totalizing version of their experiences is not possible to put together. Yet, July and Thomas's contrasting accounts of the past and competing voices produce the multiplicity of collective memory and cultural identity of the characters. Accordingly, while July's narrative uncovers both individual and collective memory of what happened in the Caribbean plantations in the 19th century, her son Thomas's interruptions and different perspectives on the events lay bare a historical outlook on the past. Thus, this study brings insight into how Levy draws attention to the collective memory of slavery and colonialism.

3. COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS LIVED HISTORY

Maurice Halbwachs theorized collective memory in his *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* in 1925. In 1950 his collection of essays *La Mémoire collective* was posthumously edited and published. Informed by the studies of Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim, Halbwachs focused on the role of social dynamics in the production of memory in his studies. Although memory studies have long taken a transcultural turn, Halbwach's studies on collective memory and history are still relevant as illustrated by the variety of memoirs, slave narratives, and historical novels that lay bare the sidelined aspects of the past. Principally, Halbwachs claims that 'memory depends on the social environment' because it is as

members of a group that we remember the past (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 37). Images of memory collected by our individual experiences are actually shaped and given meaning by the 'social frameworks' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 41). The social frameworks he mentions include class, family, religion, generation, traditions, cultural practices, etc. It is these social networks that assign 'depth, coherence, [and] stability' to memory images (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 44). Halbwachs' distinction between memory and history is a foundational concept in memory studies. His work has shaped multiple disciplines, including history, sociology, cultural studies, and literary studies. In his *How Societies Remember* (1989), Paul Connerton deepens this distinction by showing how memory is embodied through rituals, performances, and traditions. He argues that while historical records are written and stored in archives, memory is enacted and lived, making it more susceptible to change over time (Connerton, 1989). In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) Michel-Rolph Trouillot also critiques how historical narratives are constructed and how collective memory is shaped by power dynamics (Trouillot, 1995). Likewise, Jan Assmann refines Halbwachs' ideas by distinguishing between everyday memories, which last about three generations, and institutionalized memory preserved through literature, art, and monuments (J. Assmann 2010).

Halbwachs focuses on individual memory as a constitutive or an aspect of collective memory. To him, individual recollections are located within collective memories; as members of various social groups, individuals take part in various collective memories. As a member of the group, the individual is exposed to stability and a certain way of recollection of the past. However, they can transgress the stability with the changes brought along by the shifting social contexts because individuals can adopt new positions that affect their recollection of the past. Therefore, the collective memory endures as it is a product of a specific group, but still, it is the individuals as group members who recall the past. While these recollections are common to all members, what and how individuals remember might still differ by how they experience the events. As individual memories are placed in social frameworks and contribute to the collective memory of the group, individuals can acquire a recollection of the past (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38).

For Halbwachs, rather than the knowledge of the past that is collected from some sources, lived experiences play a major role in the creation of shared memory. Therefore, in his theoretical treatment of memory, he distinguishes memory from history. Accordingly, history and memory are mutually opposed ways of appreciating the past; while history is universal, memory is particular. As he points out, 'history may be seen as the universal memory of humankind. But there is no universal memory. Every collective memory is based on a group which is confined to a particular time and place' (Halbwachs, 1992, p.137). Individuals reshape their past through the elements constituting the group to which they belong. And memory is built on how the group constructs and reconstructs itself in time. Such collective frameworks are more about customs, traditions, and institutions rather than specific dates and names in history. Thus, there is no lack of continuity between periods. Moreover, history is a discipline that involves methods for researching the past. It

investigates cause-and-effect relations in events. Also, as opposed to memory, history lacks continuity; it is a 'record of changes' (86) since it divides time into periods. In Halbwachs's words, '[o]ur memory truly rests not on learned history but on lived history' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 57). Since history is based on research, it is not directly experienced, it is just learned. Therefore, it remains abstract and the past it explores is 'situated external and above groups' that experience the past (Halbwachs 1992, p. 80-81). In this sense, the historian is not familiar with the group who has first-hand experience since s/he 'is not located within the viewpoint of any genuine and living groups of past or present' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 82). Halbwachs further maintains that history is unitary in its representation of an objective and disciplinary perspective; however, memory 'retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 80). Thus, the scope of memory is limited and determined by the group who has the lived experience. As long as the group that creates the collective memory is alive, there exists a continuity between the past and present because memory retains oral narratives and traditions of the group. While history divides time periods into fixed categories, the material of memory is fluid and relative depending on the choice of the group. It depends on how individuals evaluate the past and which events and social frameworks in the past they identify themselves with. As their value judgments vary, recollection of the past also varies.

4. MEMORY CHALLENGING HISTORY: A STORY OF RESILIENCE AND SURVIVAL

The Long Song lays bare the problematic nature of recollection of the past and the power struggles it is subjected to in the process of reproduction. Memory is not an objective recollection but a contested space where dominant and subaltern voices struggle to control historical narratives. Thus, the protagonist's act of recalling the past is influenced by societal power structures, colonial narratives, and the post-emancipation context. As stated by Halbwachs, even in the case of the memories we keep to ourselves, 'we often replace our remembrances within a space and time whose demarcations we share with others, or we also situate them within dates that have meaning only in relation to a group to which we belong' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 54). Besides, collective memory is not linear; it is flexible in that recollections may pass generations allowing for time lapses. On the contrary, history marks specific periods anchored in chronological frameworks and severs the bonds between the memory of the moment and its social environment. Thus, what Thomas knows about his mother's experience depends on its history which recorded the past when its social ties faded out. He interrupts to correct or question her account: "Mama, this is not written in truth" (Levy, 2010a, p.362). July's recollections are shaped by external forces, particularly Thomas' attempt to impose a respectable, sanitized version of events. This highlights the tension between personal memory and the collective desire to construct a more acceptable historical account. In this sense, July's memory is situated in the shared memories of Amity plantation, considering that the most significant moments in her life

are in many cases represented through the accounts of other community members who contribute to the recollection of the past.

In history, as Halbwachs conceptualizes, there is no link between the consciousness of the group that experienced the memory and the present (1992, p. 15). The contact with the past is broken and the link with the authentic experience has been lost. This is indicative of the loss of the formerly enslaved individuals' voices in classic slave narratives, as well. Referring to her writing process in her essay 'The Writing of The Long Song', Levy points out that 'little writing or testimony has emerged that was not filtered at the time through a white understanding or serving a white narrative—whether it be the apologists for slavery and the West Indian planter classes, or their opponents, the abolitionists' (Levy, 2010b, p. 409). As mentioned before, the accounts that have been filtered by white editors are mostly fictional as they have some misarticulated parts. Besides, these accounts do not reflect the voice of those who experienced slavery. As such, history strips memory of its lived experience. Thomas was an infant when his mother left him at the door of a minister, so he had no connection to the Afro-Caribbean community July lived in. Although he provides the prologue and epilogue to July's book, he wants to make sure that 'the tale herein is all [his] mama's endeavour' (Levy, 2010a, p. 3), because he is outside the shared context.

Memory is multiple by its nature; individuals may have different versions of the same events as they can be members of multiple groups, but a historian 'is not located within the viewpoint of any genuine and living groups of the past or present' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 15). Thus, July refers to different versions of her birth, and her parents' deaths, and repeatedly tells the reader to 'stay if you wish to hear a tale of my making' (Levy 2010a:142). By contrast, a historian tries to get a totality of information, which is the way to achieve the possible closest version of the past. Through the struggle between July and Thomas, the novel also illustrates how dominant culture is imposed on others. July resists Thomas's inquiries about the events. On the back page of her book, she tells 'Cha, I tell my son, what fuss-fuss. Come, let them just read it for themselves' (Levy, 2010a, para. 1). Refusing the impositions and recommendations of her editor/publisher, July insists on her self-narration. As Bekers states, July 'prevents Thomas from transforming her narrative into one of those finely groomed slave narratives that were presented with the help of abolitionist amanuenses and editor' (Bekers, 2018, p. 35). Therefore, when she remembers, for example, the Baptist War, the largest slave rebellion in the Caribbean, it brings her and the editor into conflict as her recollection of the past, and hence her perception of history, differs from Thomas's learned history. Thomas expects July's account to focus on some key events in history, which are, in his perception, significant details in the process of making history, such as the invasion of the plantation estates, the names of the leaders of the uprising, and the eventual emancipation of the slaves. However, it turns out that July knows little of the outbreak of the war. How she perceives the experience of war centers around the moment of Christmas dinner given by her mistress Caroline. Thomas begins to 'blast [his mother] with fierce commands' when July remembers the night when the war broke out. He asks July to explain where the firing of the plantations started, and requires

details about the leader of the rebellion, Sam Sharpe. He continuously insists on her making it clear 'how every negro believed themselves to have been freed by the King of England; how they had promised to do no more work until that freedom was felt' (Levy, 2010a, p.77). Yet, all July can recall is that

when those fires raged like beacons from plantation and pen; when regiments marched and militias mustered; when slaves took oaths upon the Holy Bible to fight against white people with machete, stick and gun; when the bullets sparked like deadly fireflies; and bare black feet ran nimble through grass, wood and field – at Amity, the loudest thing your storyteller could hear was Miss Hannah gnawing upon the missus's discarded ham bone. (Levy, 2010a, p. 79)

She only recalls the part of the events that concern her and the group she belongs to. Therefore, her memory and Thomas's knowledge of history are incompatible. The Baptist War, or the Christmas Rebellion, which played a significant part in the abolition of slavery, has different representations in collective memory and history because the Jamaican community in the late 19th century was not a unified entity and lacked its own narrative of the past. As Aleida Assmann claims, in such cases where the communities lack a collective identification, 'history in general turns into "our history", reconfiguring it through selection, forgetting, and celebrating specific moments as a part of collective identity' (A. Assmann, 2006, p. 216). In this sense, while July's memory represents the version of the rebellion night experienced by the plantation community, Thomas's version, and expectations to hear, align with the historical narratives. He relies on documents such as a pamphlet titled 'Facts and Documents Connected with the Great Slave Rebellion of Jamaica' written by George Dovaston, a Baptist minister. As a man raised in Britain by a minister, he thinks such documents reflect the truth without question. Thus, he questions July's version of the past as follows:

'Mama,' he says to me, 'do not take me for a fool. This is the story of your own life, not of your creating, I can see this.'

'No it is not,' I tell him.

'It is,' him say.

'It is of my making,' I tell him.

'It is not – it is of your life lived,' him tell me.

'Oh no, it is not.'

'Oh yes, it is.' (Levy, 2010a, p.142–3)

Thomas wants to hear factual details and a thorough recount of the events without any gaps in between as historical documents are arranged chronologically. In other words, Thomas intervenes in his mother's narrative to make it align with the Western construction of history. July thinks her version of the past is as equally truthful as the Baptist's version. Although the pamphlet is a document, which is regarded as historical proof, July says '[a]lthough nothing that appears within this minister's pages was witnessed by my eye, and what my eye did see at the time does not appear in this man's report, my son assures me

that this account is very good. Try that if you so desire' (Levy, 2010a, p.103). Her skepticism highlights the constructed nature of historical accounts, which, as Halbwachs (1992, p.16) argues, are shaped by social frameworks rather than individual recollection. Furthermore, while July critiques the pamphlet, she also admits to embellishing or fictionalizing aspects of her own account, reinforcing Halbwachs' assertion that memory is not a static retrieval of facts but a dynamic process shaped by social influences and present concerns. The novel does not suggest the validity of personal memories; instead, it underlines the unreliability of collective memory in terms of the contingent elements such as the fading of details in time, the age of the individuals who remember what happened in different ways, and the position of the group members within the community. This also aligns with Jan Assmann's notion of communicative memory, which is shaped by oral transmission, subjective experience, and personal storytelling. The novel highlights how history is not merely recorded but actively constructed, with official history (cultural memory) often silencing or distorting the voices of the marginalized (J. Assmann, 2010, p.112). 1992, p.56).

In her version, July reconfigures the events according to her emotional reactions to the situation and the recollections of the Amity community. As such, the novel underlines the constructedness of all narratives. It is further emphasized in a particular scene in which an artist, 'a white man with a fancy feathered hat upon his head', is invited to paint the life on the plantations. He paints a fictional picture by omitting the dwellings of the slaves. As July remembers:

The artist-man, with a heavy sigh, then told the old boilerman that he admired the view of the lands from that position, but had no intention of including the disgusting negro hovels. 'But they are there before you', said Dublin Hilton to he. At which the artist barked upon him, that no one wished to find squalid negroes within a rendering of a tropical idyll, [...] 'But you paint an untruth', said Dublin Hilton. (Levy, 2010a, p. 29)

Since it is not recorded by allegedly truthful historical documents, the actual circumstances and experiences of plantation life will not be represented in the learned history. July's lived version of the past also challenges the conventional roles assigned to the Afro-Caribbean community. Concerning her aim in writing the novel, Levy notes that slavery 'ha[s] been boiled down to the potted version...the middle passage, the cruel plantation life, and the perhaps disproportionate attention paid to the struggle for its ending' (Levy, 2010b, p. 4). Challenging this simplified representation of the enslaved people, she draws attention to her protagonist's survival skills. July reminds the reader not to 'feel pity for the plight of our July, for [her] tale did not set forth to see her so wounded' (Levy 2010a: 34). Slavery catalogues and labels black communities as passive and subjugated in the service of the white, and as primitive and ignorant. However, July's narrative draws a picture of an adaptable and resourceful community rising above the stereotypes inflicting them. In other words, through July's memory, the novel reconstructs the learned history by sharing the lived history of the Afro-Caribbean community. In doing so, the novel resorts to Jan

Assmann's distinction between communicative memory (the lived, informal memory of individuals and communities) and cultural memory (institutionalized, formal history) (2010, p. 116). While official history (cultural memory) often silences or distorts the lived experiences of marginalized groups, July's narrative preserves communicative memory—the subjective and oral history of her community. Drawing on Halbwachs's ideas on cultural memory, J. Assmann points out that when communicative memory fades, it is either absorbed into cultural memory or lost altogether (2010, p. 112). July's act of storytelling, then, functions as a form of resistance against erasure, as she reclaims a history that might otherwise be misrepresented or forgotten. Unlike classic slave narratives that focus on misery and suffering, the novel foregrounds the exuberance and practical reason of the characters, hence revealing this lost memory. To do this, Levy deliberately introduces rebellious figures challenging slavery. For instance, July thinks white women are 'too sentimental' and 'full-full of self-regard' in their manners (Levy, 2010a, p.195). She also refers to many incidents of subversion of the image of subjugated slaves in a humorous tone such as her taking food and clothing from her masters for her fellow slaves, setting a stained cotton bed sheet on the Christmas table, and Kitty's murder of the plantation overseer to protect her daughter. July also mentions her relationship with Robert, her mistress's husband. He 'was neither a ruffian nor a drunkard; he was a gentleman, the son of a clergyman with a parish near Sheffield' (Levy, 2010a, p. 214). As a house slave, she is very playful and enjoys spending time with him in the cellar.

Another example of the novel's subversion of the roles assigned to the Afro-Caribbean community can be observed in July's direct address to the reader while struggling with her son over the narrative voice:

Reader, my son tells me that this is too indelicate a commencement of any tale. Please pardon me, but your storyteller is a woman possessed of a forthright tongue and little ink. ... Let me confess this without delay so you might consider whether this tale is one in which you can find an interest. If not, then be on your way, for there are plenty books to satisfy ... your desire. (Levy, 2010a, p. 7–8)

She both lays claim to her narrative voice and memories and subverts the tone of classic slave narratives by acknowledging the potential biases or sensitivities of her audience and refusing to tone down her candid voice. This act of self-assurance challenges the historical silencing of enslaved individuals' voices, marking her as an active participant in shaping her own narrative rather than a passive subject of history. By subverting the solemn and restrained tone of classic slave narratives, she demands the reader's engagement on her own terms. Another instance further illustrates the theme of resistance through humor and physical agility. July narrates how she manages to avoid punishment as follows

Although hopping and hobbling, the missus could chase July around the room [...]. At these times July would jump, weave and spin to avoid her. For she knew that soon the tropical heat would so exhaust the demented fatty-batty missus that she would fall upon her daybed in a faint of lifelessness. (Levy, 2010a, p. 49)

July knows how to exploit her mistress to escape punishment and uses her strengths to outwit her. Alongside the struggles for the abolition of slavery, which eventually led to emancipation, these acts are shown as pivotal in the process of empowerment. Instead of submitting to violence, she reclaims control through wit and movement. The description of the “demented fatty-batty missus” falling into exhaustion highlights a reversal of power dynamics, where the oppressor is ridiculed and rendered powerless. This interplay between struggle and defiance underscores how agency can manifest even within the confines of oppression.

5. CONCLUSION

Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* engages with the interplay between memory and history to offer an alternative perspective on slavery, one that foregrounds personal experience, resilience, and agency. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs’ concept of collective memory, it is revealed in this study that the novel underlines how personal recollections differ from official history. By centering July’s voice, Levy challenges dominant historical narratives that often render enslaved individuals as voiceless victims. Instead, the novel emphasizes how memory, particularly the act of storytelling, becomes a tool of empowerment, shaping identity and resisting historical erasure. There are as many versions of the accounts of the past as many collectives, yet, individuals do not represent all collectives, and what they produce is not history although they expand historical discourse. This is illustrated by the unreliability of July’s narrative. However, individual memories play a significant role in contesting dominant voices in history. *The Long Song* is both an attempt to form a collective memory and to contest the learned history. Levy foregrounds the role of lived history in filling in the silences in the learned history through a story of resilience, agency, and survival written in a humorous tone. The novel, while acknowledging that memory is fallible and variable, gives voice to the collective memory of the Afro-Caribbean communities and represents the past as a lived experience. The humorous voice of the narrator refuses to present the members of the Afro-Caribbean community as victims who may evoke pity in the reader. Instead, the protagonist struggles to own her narrative voice to reconstruct the lost memory of enslaved people. She not only presents a broader picture of the past incidents but also exposes the process of construction of her memories. By portraying enslaved individuals as complex, strategic, and even joyful despite oppression, Levy disrupts the often one dimensional portrayal of enslaved people in historical accounts. Instead of a narrative that centres solely on trauma, *The Long Song* celebrates the resilience and agency of those who endured slavery, offering a more nuanced, memory-driven reconstruction of the past. Ultimately, the novel asserts that personal memory, with all its subjectivity and emotional depth, is just as vital, if not more so, than official history.

Statement of Research and Publication Ethics

In all processes of the article, the principles of research and publication ethics of the Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Journal of Social Sciences were followed.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

The entire article was written by the author.

Declaration of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest with any person or organization.

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