

At the Centre of the Picture: Andrea
Levy's *The Long Song*
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Chapter Summary: Narrated in the voice of a former slave named Miss July, Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010) imagines one of the countless voices lost from slavery in Jamaica with a view to recuperating that history. At the centre of the novel is a painting, ostensibly of the master and mistress of Amity Plantation, with Miss July proffering sweetmeats on a tray, her pose meant to signify their importance and her subservience. Yet Miss July upstages¹ the master and mistress, and by becoming the focal point of the picture shows not only her own prominence in their story, but more broadly slavery's centrality to any history of both Britain and Jamaica.

At the centre of Andrea Levy's fifth novel, *The Long Song* (2010), is a painting of slave master and mistress, Robert and Caroline Goodwin, with their slave Miss July, placed in the picture as a possession to signify their wealth and importance. Yet, despite being relegated to the position of object, Miss July forces her subjectivity into the painting with such vigour as

5 to become its central focus.

This central image in *The Long Song* of Miss July forcing her way to the centre of the picture symbolizes how slavery must be similarly recognized as central to English culture and history, despite the ways that it continues to be sidelined². This is Levy's second historical novel and the first to take place primarily in Jamaica. It is also the first not to focus on the ¹⁰ Windrush Generation or its offspring. Levy uses the historical novel to unearth and recuperate silenced and marginalized lives and to place these experiences at the forefront. *The Long Song* represents a continuation of Levy's preoccupation with the 'inextricably linked' pasts and destinies of Britain and Jamaica, this time going closer to the root of that ¹⁵ relationship with an exploration of slavery and its immediate aftermath. Here, Levy uncovers Jamaica's and Britain's interwoven histories, by recreating the years of slavery, [...] its final abolition in 1838, and continued exploitation after that time'. Levy thus uses historical fiction to reimagine the past with a view to changing our perception of both past and present.

As Levy notes in her essay 'The Writing of *The Long Song*', there are the 'potted' histories ²⁰ of slavery that one learns in school, as well as good scholarship on the subject, but few extant³ sources incorporate the voices of those that lived through it, in which 'enslaved people speak of and for themselves. Little writing or testimony has emerged that was not filtered at the time through a white understanding or serving a white narrative'. This is the gap she has chosen to fill with *The Long Song*. As Levy writes, This is where I believe that ²⁵ fiction comes in to its own. Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out'. Levy imagines what the lives of enslaved people were like by setting them against the research she did for the novel, which of necessity drew mostly upon the voices of the hegemonic⁴ culture:

For me, reading these British settlers' accounts was a bit like gazing at an optical ³⁰ illusion — at first I see a candlestick, but suddenly it turns into two faces in profile. By reading between the lines of these narratives, and by tapping into our common human ways (our motives, fears and ways of coping with the hand life deals us) I found it was possible to imagine a vivid picture.

In re-imagining that living, Levy draws the lives of people under slavery not as mere ³⁵ victims of their circumstances, but as actors in their own lives - lives that were certainly complicated and included tragic events, but which they lived - hence the song. As she says, the novel 'is really a story about a person's life, a lost voice from history that needed to be heard'.

Ultimately, her narrative - rather than the 'official' story told from the point of view of the ⁴⁰ white slave owners - will emerge as central.

Andrea Levy has said that this image was suggested to her by the painting of Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray, which she saw at Kenwood House, in London. The portrait by an unknown artist belongs to the Earl of Mansfield's collection and was displayed as part of the 'Slavery and Justice Exhibition' in 2007.

The iconography of the original painting suggests that Lady Elizabeth is of the world of culture and high society, whereas Dido is of the natural world and exotic. Although foregrounded, Lady Elizabeth fades into the distance, and it is Dido, with her intelligent eyes and impish face, that constantly draws the viewer. As Levy has said, 'Dido absolutely steals the picture by the look on her face and her demeanour. Clearly the artist was in love with her or something - it's really very palpable'.



1. To upstage sm. = to steal the attention/the limelight from sm.
2. To sideline smth. = to push to the side
3. Extant = still in existence
4. Hegemonic = leading/powerful

Reporter 3 (more difficult task): Prepare to discuss the ideas from this document. You should look up any difficult vocabulary and prepare your answers to the following questions (at least!). You will have only about 2-3 minutes to present as many details as possible to your group, so you must be efficient!

- 1) Find as much information as possible about 'reimagining lost voices' and prepare to explain the concept to your group.
- 2) What was Andrea Levy's goal/aim, in writing this novel?
- 3) In what ways is the painting in the story a metaphor?