

“Curiosity is Unbecoming in the Female Sex”: Resisting the Notion in Manu Herbstein’s *Ama: A*

Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade

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Abstract

The notorious transatlantic slave trade has given birth to hundreds of slave narratives. Along with the historical and classic slave narratives, mostly first-person accounts of former slaves like Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) and Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897), there are fictional neo-slave narratives like Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) that emerged mainly after WWII. Penned by a white male author Moritz Isaac (“Manu”), Herbstein’s fiction *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (first published in 2000) is a much later engagement with the theme of transatlantic slave trade. This result of Herbstein’s meticulous research is no less than a historical document as it tells the unheard tale of Nandzi or Ama, one among the thousands of black women, the worst victims of the slave trade. Like the other female slaves, she is abducted, enslaved, tortured, raped and torn apart from her near and dear ones. Unlike most of the slave narratives, *Ama* takes into account the entire journey of the slave girl, from her village to the Asante Kingdom, from there to the Dutch coastal outpost and eventually to the Brazilian plantation. This highly nuanced and complex novel not only gives a realistic and horrific picture of the slave trade but deals with the issues of language and education as tools empowering the female slave. By mastering the very language(s) of the white men, a black female slave Ama, doubly marginalized by patriarchy and colonialism, talks back and curses her oppressors. By acquiring the secular knowledge of the West, she is able to argue rationally. What starts as a kind of experiment by her owner De Bruyn, Ama’s secular education eventually arms her against her oppressors. As an interpreter and translator, she gains a unique power of twisting information and hiding or revealing information according to her needs. This helps her uniting the African slaves against the slave traders. Surprisingly, it is the language of the oppressor that becomes a tool for preserving the African identity of the slaves and their culture. A common European language like Portuguese also helps creating solidarity among the African slaves of various ethnicities and linguistic groups who could never have been able to communicate otherwise. What is intended to be a bane for the slaves becomes a boon for them. *Ama* also stages the debate between the slave owners regarding the education of a slave, particularly distinguishing secular knowledge from “Bible literacy,” the latter meant to create meek and docile subjects.

Key words: Atlantic slave trade, neo-slave narratives, black female slave, language, literacy, Bible literacy, secular knowledge, interpreter, resistance, rebellion, plantation, solidarity, African identities, African cultures.