

Trabajo Fin de Grado

JACKIE KAY'S FEMINIST NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE:  
TRAUMA AND IMPLICATION IN *THE LAMPLIGHTER*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most common features of slave narratives is the predominance of male figures as main characters. These stories have contributed to throwing light on the experience of slavery, but as the focus was not often on women slaves, an effort has been made in the last decades to provide an insight into slavery from a female perspective. Since the 1970s onwards, in what constitutes the postmodern period, literature has shown great interest in the past, in history, but dealing with episodes and points of view that had traditionally been pushed to margins, or utterly silenced. History is often rewritten in postmodern literature from non-hegemonic perspectives, from the perspective, that is, of those that were less powerful and/or victimised, and usually excluded from official accounts. At the same time, with the development of feminist literary criticism –especially since the beginning of the Second Wave of feminism– more and more relevance has been given to the task of recovering women’s silenced voices and studying the way in which women had been portrayed in previous literature. Seeing the possibilities of literature in conjunction with feminism, more and more female authors have also committed themselves to bringing to light stories about women and/or from women’s perspectives, narratives that remained in the dark and that are often about historical episodes associated with collective traumas such as that of slavery.

*The Lamplighter*, by Scottish author Jackie Kay, is a play in which the hard lives of four women (Black Harriot, Constance, Mary, and The Lamplighter) are told in an attempt to bear witness to the horrors of slavery. The author represents slavery through the voices of the four female characters mentioned above in a story that tells about their hardships, beginning with the onset of captivity in an African village, and the awful sea journey aboard a slave ship carrying slaves to the markets where they were sold in order to be then transported to the sugar plantations in Occidental India. Significantly, the task of giving voice to silenced women (initially at least) is carried out through a medium where voices are listened to: *The*

*Lamplighter* came out as a radio play and some editions of the book even come with a CD to capitalize the aural dimension of the work, which many saw as a multi-layered epic poem—a genre that takes us back to the oral origins of literature—or as a multilayered, choral work that recalls the songs sang in many voices by slaves in the plantations. The special status of this play needs to be mentioned, as it was first broadcast on BBC radio in 2007 to coincide with an important anniversary in the history of slavery, as will be explained later, and then it was also performed as a stage play. The book, which was published in 2008, was reissued with a preface by the author added in the 2020 edition and entitled “Missing Faces”, where Kay explains about the book project and its special focus on Britain’s slavery past and the terrible experiences of women slaves, who constitute, she implies, the “missing faces” in the history of the slave trade. Thus, *The Lamplighter* can be seen as an exercise in feminist post-memory, a neo-slave narrative written by a woman writer about events that must be told not only to make people aware of not so well-known aspects of slavery in general, and of female slavery in particular, but also because “the history of the slave trade is NOT black history, it is the history of the world” (Kay xi). It concerns us all, not just because we are human beings, but also because its consequences are still felt in contemporary society.

Although slavery is a subject that has attracted a great deal of attention in the last decades, male voices and male stories can be said to have been predominant in both non-fiction and fictional accounts alike. Even if this has started to change, as mentioned above, a gender perspective is still necessary. The same applies to the fact that the history of slavery has traditionally been approached (by literature, film, etc.) in an African-American context, downplaying or leaving other contexts out, as if they were less relevant or had nothing to do with slavery. This being so, it also seems necessary to broaden the focus from which the slave trade and its legacy are approached in the arts, and in literature in particular. Kay’s play portrays different aspects of the experience of female slavery through the accounts of their

main characters and is written by a woman of African descent (Kay's biological father was an African). Kay is a British citizen and, as such, she is also interested in delving into Britain's role in the slave trade –so often ignored and still unknown to many– both in the past and also regarding present-day Britain's connection with it. This combination –the traumatic memory of female slavery plus the focus on the part played by Britain– makes *The Lamplighter* truly distinctive.

Taking all this into account, the aim of this dissertation consists in analysing: firstly, the way in which Kay conveys in narrative form the traumatic experience of female slaves, what they went through and the need to put their story into words; and secondly, how the play delves into the past in order to deal also with the theme of implication as discussed by Michael Rothberg in a theory aimed at highlighting different degrees of responsibility in difficult histories of victimization, violence and exploitation, as is the case with the history of slavery and its legacy through time.

In order to achieve the aims explained above, I have structured my dissertation as follows. The second section, which comes after the Introduction, investigates the history of slavery through the neo-slave narrative genre and justifies why Kay's work belongs to this genre. Then, the following section approaches the trauma of slave women and also the legacies of slavery, reading what *The Lamplighter* conveys on this subject in the light of Rothberg's theories on implication. Finally, the Conclusion discusses the main ideas drawn from the analysis of Kay's play in relation to the contents mentioned above.

## 2. INVESTIGATING THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY THROUGH THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

Many people may associate the slave trade with the American colonies and therefore think of the huge impact it has had on the history of the American nation. Nevertheless, it is more complex than this because of the number of colonial powers that benefitted from it and whose history also includes this dark episode, as is the case with Britain. Its involvement in the slave trade began in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its consequences have been long-lasting. Before the start of the play as such (*The Lamplighter*), in the preface (“Missing Faces”) Kay highlights and reinforces the idea of Britain as a major slave-trading nation (vi). As mentioned above, the preface also highlights a significant historical issue: Kay explains that the BBC approached her to write something to commemorate the bicentenary (in 2007) of the abolition of the African slave trade in Britain (in 1807) (vi). This means that the inception of the play is connected with a historical fact, an anniversary, and an important date in the history of slavery. One of the play’s aims is to throw light upon a part of British history that has been given little visibility as slavery and slave fiction are more often than not connected with African-American experience and literature, and the role of Britain in the slave trade has rarely been discussed in history books or in literary works. According to Anna Grespan, “in the mid- and late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Britain was the greatest commercial and imperial power of Europe and, after the formation of the Royal African Company in 1672, the British became the main European presence on the African slave coast” (16). In particular, Scotland needs to be mentioned since it is one important part of Kay’s identity: her biological mother was Scottish and so were her adoptive parents; she grew up in Glasgow, she also developed there as a writer, and she even held the post of Scots Makar (the National Poet of Scotland) from 2016 to 2021. As she points out in the preface, “I belong to Glasgow, dear old Glasgow”, but at the same time she complains that “Scotland has been slow to acknowledge its legacy, and

slow to teach its children about why Jamaica Street is Jamaica Street, and why every second place name in Jamaica comes from a Scottish place name” (vii). Scotland was one of those countries that got involved in the slave trade, perhaps less than others, but nonetheless it benefitted from the “triangular trade”, as Emma Jane Canning explains:

Even though there was only a scarce number of slaves located in the Scottish land of the British Isles, they were the reason behind the growth and success of many merchants in Glasgow and other urban areas in the United Kingdom. This was achieved by the use of a system which is known as the “triangular trade” in which people were shipped from Africa to the colonies in the Caribbean and surrounding areas, to then begin working within the plantations, in exchange for the products cultivated there such as tobacco and sugar, which were later transported to the British Isles. (4)

The triangular trade is also shown in the play in connection with the different stages in this scheme. Firstly, European colonisers went to Africa and there they got men, women and children that would turn into slaves (they were exchanged for goods or simply kidnapped); these black people were made to wait in a fort, which was a prison or sorts, prior to their journey into slavery. Secondly, the African captives were shipped in terrible conditions and sold to work in the colonies. Thirdly, the result of their work (sugar, cotton, etc.) was sent from the colonies to the colonising country, which became richer on the basis of slave work and exploitation. The play begins with references to the fort where the young girl Anniwaa is after being caught and there are memories of that, representing the first phase in the triangular trade: “It smells bad down here. So bad I don’t want to breathe. So bad, I take small sips of the dirty air. Sometimes strange people come down. Their skin is pink” (Kay 5). After some time in the fort, Africans were loaded into ships, which is also what happens to Anniwaa and the others:

LAMPLIGHTER. I was the one who was recaptured and sold  
For eighty pounds, on December 8<sup>th</sup> 1792,  
Forced then to board a vessel at Lamplighter’s Hall

Avvonmouth, heading for the plantations.

BLACK HARRIOT. To board a ship and across the water

Board a ship and be carried over

To be carried across the water.

And land with strangers all over. (Kay 7-8)

The triangular trade's third phase is portrayed in the play through references to the benefits to people and cities in the colonising countries:

BLACK HARRIOT. We were sold for sugar in the coffee.

Sugar in the tea.

MARY. We were sold for tobacco and rice.

Sold to make the cities rise. (Kay 9)

Dialogues like these clearly show that slaves were exchanged for goods such as rice, tobacco, etc., and that their exploitation further contributed to producing such goods at low costs, which increased the wealth of slave trading countries. Thus, the title character, The Lamplighter, says at the end of the story: "My story is the story of Great Britain / The United Kingdom, The British Empire" (73), thus connecting the progress of the nation that became a most powerful empire to the slave trade, and to her story in particular. In sum, all the stages in the triangular trade are present throughout the play.

Kay's portray of slavery and the part Britain played in it is made by resorting to the genre of the neo-slave narrative. Slave narratives were and still are a tool for reconstructing the unknown past and conditions of slaves, telling about what they actually went through in a very direct way because they are first-hand accounts written by enslaved people that managed to write their stories. Of course, these narrations became public once slaves had left their martyrdom and reached freedom. As Canning points out: "Authors such as Frederick Douglas, a former slave who portrayed his experience through literature, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white abolitionist writer who wrote a novel about slavery called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were among the first to give slavery a stage in the literary world in which it was truly



recognised” (11). For their part, neo-slave narratives must be understood in the light of their connection to the original slave narratives. They are fictional and modern works inspired by those slave narratives, in the sense that a neo-slave narrative is a contemporary work that recreates through fiction the first-person voice and autobiographical experiences narrated in the slave narratives of the past. In Sherryl Vint’s definition, “neo-slave narratives are an African-American genre that investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition” (1). In order to establish a clear distinction between the two genres Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda C. Macnair explain that “while original slave narratives are narratives written by people who actually lived during the antebellum period and were enslaved, neo-slave narratives are written by contemporary authors who retell or reenvision the slave experience in America” (51). These quotations illustrate the clear tendency to associate the genre to America and African-American literature, which is not the context of *The Lamplighter*. And yet, the previous definitions also help to see Kay’s play as a neo-slave narrative as there are several elements in the work that substantiate this. *The Lamplighter* is a neo-slave narrative mainly because it is written by a contemporary author who did not experience the hard times of slavery herself but tries to recreate it in the present and in a fictional story. Kay’s vision of slavery is conveyed by fictionalizing historical events and characters, relying on several voices throughout the play, which are the voices of slaves that recount their personal experiences as the authors of slave narratives (former slaves) did in the past.

More specifically, *The Lamplighter* is a feminist neo-slave narrative. This play, written by a black woman, is feminist writing that gives prominence to the female voice through the characters, the four women slaves, and their polyphonic account. Besides, throughout the play there is a repeated sentence that needs to be mentioned: “This is Herself talking, This is the story of Herself” (7, 9, 12, *passim*). These repetitions and the fact that

“Herself” begins with a capital letter are significant not only because they emphasize that all language involved makes sense in the narrative act –telling as an aid to healing and the story insistently presented as told by The Lamplighter herself to strengthen believability in a way that recalls old slave narratives– but also because this “Herself” is specific enough (The Lamplighter) and at the same time inclusive enough so that her story is both hers and that of all enslaved women (present through a chorus of voices).

There are several voices in the play, in particular the outstanding voices of the female slaves –Constance, Black Harriot, Mary, The Lamplighter– and also the male voice of MacBean. The combination of voices make for a reconstruction of the past, of the different stages in the slave’s life from the moment when they were captured and then enslaved without even knowing what was going to happen to them. From the very beginning of the play the voice of Anniwaa, a young girl, expresses her confusion: “I am a girl. I am in the dark. High above me, there is a tiny crack of light. Last time I counted was eleven, nearly twelve” (Kay 1). Sentences like these constitute a clear representation of the terror and the threat of the unknown because this girl does not know where she is or why. This section is also related to the first phase of the triangular trade where slaves are in the fort waiting to be shipped. Although the character does not know where she is, the audience does because of the scene’s title (Scene 1: Interior Fort) and the short stage direction indicating the place: “The noise of the sea slapping against the walls of Cape Coast Castle” (1). Anniwaa’s voice fills this first scene of the play and is then followed, as Scene 2 opens, by that of MacBean. As Andrea Albertin states, “MacBean is a voice we mainly hear in the scenes called ‘Shipping News’, where he provides the hearer/listener with statistical and historical information” (47). That is, at one level, MacBean is the voice of information and announcement of what is going on throughout the play in connection with the transportation and sale of slaves. But, at another level, he stands for the other side of the slave trade: he seems to represent the slave trader, the

plantation owner and, in sum, all the voices of authority (significantly male) that exert control on the slaves' lives. MacBean's first intervention includes references to slave ships (the *Dorothy*, the *Duke of Argyll*) and to the number of slaves that survived the journey, which indirectly throws light on the fact that many died even before slave ships reached their destination. The voice that continues the story is the one of the main character, The Lamplighter. As the play advances, the readers may realize that both Anniwaa and The Lamplighter are the same character in the story. This becomes clear when The Lamplighter tells the story of how she was enslaved and it is the same as Anniwaa's, which can be read before (Albertin 48). The fusion of these two characters (Anniwaa and The Lamplighter) is not coincidental, and neither is the name of Anniwaa's later self. The Lamplighter is a nickname presenting the character as a person that brings light, and this is actually what the protagonist does throughout the play: "She throws light across the Black Atlantic, which was indeed Jackie Kay's aim in writing this play: she wanted to bring light to a dark and forgotten past, she wanted to make these stories come out of the dark" (Albertin 49). Hence, her light (her narrative) brings to the centre stage the terrible darkness of slavery and those partly unknown or insufficiently remembered times. But this intention is not only focused on one voice. As previously mentioned, other characters such as MacBean contribute to creating a vivid as well as cruel atmosphere. The other characters, the women slaves whose voices come together as a kind of chorus, have specific names –Black Harriot, Mary, and Constance– and stories, and so they are individual characters. However, their life narratives are in important respects similar, and so they speak to voice the experience of women slaves as a whole. They are the same and different, one and many at the same time.

The first one of these slave women, Black Harriot, was a slave prostitute whose main clients were members of the House of Lords. Black Harriot represents then how a slave became beneficial for their masters in the context of a sex market where the wages won by

black prostitutes were hardly ever kept by themselves and belonged to the slave owner; moreover, others made the most of this situation by getting cheap sexual services, like the Lords Black Harriot points to in order to denounce how distinguished Members of the Parliament participated in this system of dehumanization and exploitation.

As Canning claims, the British presence in the Caribbean is illustrated by Kay's use of "Jamaica as an example, undoubtedly due to the strong historical connection the island maintains with Scotland" and which is portrayed, in terms of characters, through "Mary and Black Harriot who have deep connections with Jamaica and Scotland" (23). Indeed, fragments like the following throw further light on Scotland's involvement in the slave trade:

MARY. I landed in Jamaica in the 1720s. I was a child. They named me  
Mary MacDonald

MACBEAN. In 1770 on the slave island of Jamaica  
There were one hundred Black people  
Called MacDonald;  
A quarter of the island's people  
Were Scottish.

BLACK HARRIOT. My daughters have Scottish blood.  
Scotland has my blood. (Kay 73)

Black Harriot was made pregnant by Scottish men (that is why her daughters have Scottish blood and her blood is part of Scotland). For her part, Mary was given the surname "MacDonald" probably because she was bought in the slave market by a Scottish family with this surname (Canning 24). Mary is also significant because she illustrates the slave's rebelliousness as the only way out for some when oppression became unbearable, regardless of the risks and the harsh punishments: Mary attacked her master and was hardly beaten to death, although she miraculously survived and converted to religion (Albertin 50).

Last but not least the figure of Constance significantly contributes to the picture of female slavery in the play. As Albertin points out (50), the name of this character has not been

chosen by chance, and Constance herself explains that she was called like that “so that I would be a virtue, like my sisters Faith, Patience and Charity” (25). Constance was forced to raise children, as she had fifteen kids, four of whom were sold and the others died. Although it is not explicitly said, the reader can infer the reason why she had so many children: slave women were forced to work like any other slave but they were often sexually abused too, which accounts for their multiple pregnancies. Many, like Constance, could have been used to “produce” offspring, as white masters got slaves “for free” in this way (as a result of rape) whom they could then sell or force to work in their plantations. Exploitation and dehumanisation was double in the female slaves’ case, as human beings and as women in particular.

As has already been pointed out, the voices of the female characters contribute to recreating a story by means of polyphony. The fact that the work uses this polyphony is also one of the features that link it to the genre of the neo-slave narrative. The first slave narratives, such as the one by Frederick Douglas mentioned above, were written in the first person and, therefore, the story was told from one single perspective: that of the author-narrator who produced the autobiographical account. Nevertheless, the fact that neo-slave narratives are fictional allows authors to explore other possibilities when it comes to narrative voice. In Kay’s play, polyphony generates new perspectives through several characters, and this strengthens the feeling of authenticity. Moreover, polyphony definitely makes for the inclusion of different aspects of the female slave experience since there are more characters involved, more stories told, more forms of abuse, and of endurance, described. *The Lamplighter* breaks with the usual first-person form in traditional slave narratives as a means to producing, as Sofía Muñoz-Valdivieso argues, “a reconsideration and re-evaluation of slavery and its legacy” (13). In sum, all the features commented on in this section present Kay’s neo-slave narrative –her contemporary reconstruction of the past through a chorus of

female voices in the shape of a play— as a good vehicle for providing an interesting approach —enriched, more nuanced and more complete—to the history of (female) slavery and the role that Britain (and Scotland in particular) played in it.

### 3. THE TRAUMA OF SLAVE WOMEN AND THE LEGACIES OF SLAVERY

#### 3.1. *The Lamplighter* as trauma literature

Before starting to analyze *The Lamplighter* as trauma literature, the notion of “trauma” needs to be clarified as well as its evolution through time. As Anne Whitehead explains:

“Trauma” derives from the Greek word meaning “wound”. It was first used in English in the field of medicine in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, always making reference to a physical injury caused by an external event. The origins of the concept of psychic trauma as we know it today go back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when medics studied the behaviour of victims of railway accidents who had not been physically injured or had already recovered from injuries, but continued suffering from different forms of mental distress long after the event. (1)

*The Lamplighter* is a play that has been considered as trauma literature because it portrays the significant mental suffering caused by slave captivity, a psychic distress that is also shown to derive in the work from physical hurt, from violence on the body (through beating, forced sex, malnutrition, etc.) and that ultimately leaves its scars on the mind. It was such a brutal violence that was inflicted upon slaves that their mental torment is directly conveyed by Kay through references to the body in pain and physical sensations, ultimately providing a portrait of the enslaved body (Grespan 68). Slaves went through a process of dehumanization in which they were treated like animals or objects, as Anniwaa conveys when she utters “Outside this place, where I am trapped and kept like an animal, there is a sound I never hear before” (Kay 2). This clearly means that slaves were captured like preys and felt like animals just because of the degrading treatment they were given. In addition to being deprived of freedom, they were forced to work and live in subhuman conditions. On top of that, there was the sense of having lost their identities because they were removed from Africa to unknown countries and they were sold, the owner giving them new names that erased an essential part

of what they were. Significantly, the names in *The Lamplighter* illustrate this loss of identity, as the characters' African names have been replaced by European names (like Mary or Constance). This change of names points to the fact that slaves belonged to the master, who also gave them his surname. This contributed to making them feel as if they were not people in themselves, but someone else's property.

Just as slaves' names were erased, the story of the victims of slavery was erased from history. This explains the play's effort to reconstruct a past which is nothing but the traumatic memories of what slaves went through, and in particular, the traumatic memories of women. Kay tries to stir our consciences as in the past many historical episodes were glorified or normalized, but we should reevaluate then time and again so as not to forget the brutality they involved and the injustices our ancestors benefitted from. Also connecting the present with a traumatic past, Tournay-Theodotou highlights in her analysis of *The Lamplighter* the concept of "postmemory", which refers, as she puts it, "to the memory of traumatic events that affects those future generations that did not experience them directly and enables the understanding of a traumatic experience that is inherited rather than witnessed first-hand" (3). Thus, postmemory is another key issue in Kay's work because it recreates traumatic events which were not directly experienced by the author, a Black British writer that resorts to history and the creative imagination in order to give visibility to the hard experiences African slaves went through and to invite reflection on the legacies of slavery in the present.

The play's traumatic background is developed throughout the stories of the already-mentioned women slaves: The Lamplighter (Anniwaa), Constance, Black Harriot and Mary. An important issue in the play is that Anniwaa and The Lamplighter are the same person, which accounts for the possibility of interpreting this in the light of Grespan's view that "this doubleness represents Anniwaa's 'split personality' due to the trauma of slavery" (43). At the beginning of the play, Anniwaa is just a frightened girl who does not know where she is. Her



later experiences damage her and produce a psychic fracture that is typical of trauma. Afterwards, The Lamplighter introduces herself in the play as a woman who is going to tell her story, although apparently unrelated to Anniwaa. The split offers different points of view –that of a little girl (Anniwaa) and that of a woman who has grown up (The Lamplighter) – but, from the perspective of trauma, this dissociation can be understood as the initial failure of The Lamplighter to integrate her (traumatic) past, which is what Anniwaa represents. In the third section of the play, Anniwaa wonders: “if I will be a girl when I get out of here. A girl, twelve. Maybe a girl, thirteen. Fourteen. Maybe not a girl anymore. Maybe a woman. Maybe I’ll have grown into a small woman without my mother” (Kay 6). Then, in Scene 6, entitled “The Story Coming Back”, The Lamplighter remembers the happy part of her childhood and remarks:

THE LAMPLIGHTER. Seems another me  
lived that blessed life, another girl-  
girl, deep in the interior country  
far away from the coast,  
a girl who had never ever seen the sea,  
a girl who climbed to the top of the trees.  
I like to think she is up there, still,  
mysterious, magical girl,  
that she would never ever  
hear this story. (Kay 16)

Here the reader can see that Anniwaa and The Lamplighter have the same past/are the same person, but The Lamplighter does not want to remember anything from the time after, that is, from the traumatic part of her life. This explains why The Lamplighter is dissociated from her past as a result of a defense mechanism. In sum, as Grespan concludes, this split becomes one with the “necessity to avoid the traumatic past”, which can be explained “through psychoanalytic theory, according to which an unclaimed traumatic experience can originate a dissociated personality” (85). However, there is also an evolution in the right direction, as the

protagonist explains that when she looks back to the past, to that girl (Anniwaa), she recognizes her. This recognition is important because it is only after it happens that she can start telling her story and also writing it down.

THE LAMPLIGHTER. One day I finally managed to tell  
My story. I wrote it down.  
[...] Only when I turned and faced her,  
Standing there like that,  
Could I begin to tell my story. (Kay 84)

This moment in the play suggests that the link between Anniwaa and The Lamplighter is being rebuilt because she refers to Anniwaa as her own past, although in an indirect way:

THE LAMPLIGHTER: And one day the years caught up with me  
I turned round, and there they were  
All the years,  
ANNIWWAA: There I was.

THE LAMPLIGHTER. The years facing me. Her hair plaited with thread. She has climbed down from the tree. She is wearing her mother's yellow head-tie. Her arms on her hips. (Kay 86)

Thanks to these references, the possibility of telling is shown to go hand in hand with the ability to take a step forward towards the union of the two parts of the protagonist's split personality.

Despite the crudity of the narrative, there is also an element of optimism connected with the fact that the main character is called "The Lamplighter". The nickname means that she is the one that provides the other women with "the light" (Tournay-Theodotou 7), that is, with the power to endure the hardships they have gone through:

LAMPLIGHTER. I carried the light from the day.  
You lost her.  
A bright light across the deep dark sea.  
CONSTANCE. I carried a light for my sons, my daughters. One day  
I'd find the wings to fly away. (Kay 34)

In addition, the name Lamplighter also has to do with the idea that what is not told remains in the dark, as a hidden trauma that haunts the individual and undermines his/her strength and stability. The trauma does not disappear by itself as working through it requires that the traumatized person takes an active role, trying to engage with the past and tell about it. In this respect, the protagonist's name significantly has to do with her role as teller of a story that is hers and the other characters'. Telling the story plays a key role in overcoming a traumatic past that must be faced and voiced so that the individual can put order in his/her mind and overcome the effects of that trauma. This involves a process in which the person will transform the traumatic memory into a narrative, which is crucial to heal and connect the past with the present. Anniwaa mentions at one point "I am the ghost of the child past. I am your past" (Kay 73), thus highlighting the importance of not repressing traumatic memories, and by extension, the need to narrate traumatic experiences, which makes *The Lamplighter's* decision to tell the story really relevant. She admits that this story always comes back and that time alone cannot heal it:

LAMPLIGHTER. But no matter how fast I ran from my story,  
No matter how many years,  
The story just kept coming in and coming back  
Like the sea to the shore  
Like the sea always comes back to the shore (Kay 17)

Giving voice to it is an important step in order to somehow exorcise the ghost of the past, working through it and also healing the wounds.

In sum, Kay manages to represent the diverse traumatic experiences of slave women. On the one hand, she conveys how slavery affected their minds, their sense of identity, their feelings and emotions. On the other hand, she also writes about the brutality on their bodies, the physical violence that slavery involved, for women in particular, and how physical pain also made for psychic trauma. But, in addition to focusing on the mental and physical sides of

trauma, Kay also highlights the role that telling the traumatic story plays in the process of healing the wounds. In other words, narrating in the present works as a cure for transforming the effects of a terrible past.

### **3.2. Implicated subjects in Jackie Kay's play**

This section aims to go deeper into the issues dealt with in the previous one. More specifically, this part is going to deal with the theme of implication discussed by Michael Rothberg in a theory that delves into the different kinds of responsibility that exist in histories of victimization, violence, and exploitation, as is the case with slavery in general and Kay's approach to it in *The Lamplighter*, in particular.

I will first clarify the notion of "implicated subject". According to Michael Rothberg's definition, an implicated subject "is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles" (1). Also, as Claire Watt comments on Rothberg's term,

The figure of the implicated subject is suggested as a new way of considering political responsibility. Rothberg argues for the breakdown of the binary, nostalgic distinction between victim and perpetrator in existing political and ethical discourses. Deeming these categories insufficient, he demonstrates that there are often no completely innocent nor guilty parties in historical events. Rothberg explains that, in interlocking systems of oppression, '[T]he innocent, uninvolved bystander is, in most cases, an idealized myth'. (2)

What Michael Rothberg tries to do with the concept of "implicated subject" is to rethink history and what we have been told, above all because the roles of those involved in historical conflicts have traditionally been approached in the light of the binary victim/perpetrator or, in any case, victim/perpetrator/bystander. However, this classification is reductive, and so, other roles and other types of connection with or responsibility for events must be considered. In

particular, when dealing with slavery issues, as Watt mentions, “Rothberg argues that the descendants of perpetrators are not perpetrators of the same deeds as their ancestors, but rather implicated subjects. These descendants have a future-oriented responsibility to repair and undo the acts of their ancestors, whether they benefit from them or not” (3). What the quotation means is that the perpetrators bear the guilt for the crimes committed and are the main beneficiaries, but their descendants may benefit in a different manner as well and, above all, they have an inherited responsibility, the duty to try and compensate for, or at least not to repeat the past injustices. The contemporaries of the perpetrators may also be implicated in their desecrable acts, not because they actively collaborate but because they profit from them. That is, a slave master who has benefitted from slave trade is the one to blame, the guilty one. But, if the master has a big house, a wife, and children that live affluently, these people are also going to be indirectly benefitted as well from the slave trade. Hence, they are going to fall within what Rothberg calls implicated subjects. Widening the focus, we could consider how the citizens of a nation involved in the slave trade benefit from it. This does not turn them into direct perpetrators, but they are nonetheless implicated in the crime. *The Lamplighter* calls attention to this. There is, for instance, a point in the play when Mary refers to the increasing wealth of cities and Constance enumerates the ones that have benefitted most from the slave trade:

MARY. We were sold for tobacco and rice.

Sold to make the cities rise.

[...]

CONSTANCE. Bristol, London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow,  
Edinburgh (Kay 9)

This enumeration points to the exploitation of slavery in colonial fields (Angeletti 3), but also sees the growth of Britain/the British Empire at that time as rooted in the exploitation of other human beings (slaves). In important respects, the foundations of the country can be seen as

stained with blood and all those who have benefitted from that prosperity are implicated in the crime. Although they are not perpetrators –they are not at the same level of guilt or evil as slave masters or slave traders– average citizens are not entirely innocent, they are tainted by what happened. Continuing with this issue, Scene 13 of the play is packed with references to British cities that developed their industry, their maritime trade, etc., thanks to the wealth that came from the slave trade and the colonies. That is why the female characters feel as if they “owned” these cities.

LAMPLIGHTER. Sea, city, harbour, port  
Sugar city, sugar ship,  
Tobacco city, tobacco lips.  
My story is the story of the city (Kay 62)

This “implicates” those who, in the times of slavery, saw the country and the British Empire prosper, and benefitted from it. What is more, according to Rothberg’s theory, people are still benefiting nowadays from the events of the past, which extends in time the legacies of violence. This is a reflection that must be taken into account when reading Kay’s play and it is equally important to trace these issues in her preface “Missing Faces”, where the concept of implication is present in what she writes even if it is not explicitly mentioned. A most outstanding remark is the following: “Slavery is one of those subjects that we all think we know about. People repeat, like a litany, facts they think they know” (v). This quotation makes reference to all that has been previously said regarding the past, who has benefitted from it, and the recurrent patterns of inequality and discrimination involving gender and race, which may turn present-day citizens from developed countries into implicated subjects who think they know but do not feel themselves connected with the past. Kay refers to the consequences of having enslaved people in the past: “I realised that the past was not past [...] and that many of the inequalities and divisions in our society today were the direct result of the slave trade” (vi). This assertion throws light on the issue of the problematic legacy of what

was done in the past and on how implication (for people, societies, nations) may have to do with their historical backgrounds. Nowadays, many people may not even be conscious about it and they have simply assumed their backgrounds without reflection, just as others may even not know what their history is. It is easier not to know or not to face facts that are uncomfortable and hard to accept, as Kay puts it: “Most British people think of slavery as something that happened in America and perhaps the Caribbean. They know vaguely about boats, Bristol, Liverpool, and something about sugar maybe, but not that Britain was the main slave-trade nation”. Nevertheless, as Kay adds in her preface, “there can be no such thing as too many stories about slavery” (vi). There is always much to learn about the past and she herself reflects on how ignorant she was regarding certain facts and how shocking this knowledge can be: “Being African and Scottish, I had taken comfort in the notion that Scotland was not nearly as implicated in the horrors of slave trade as England” (vi). The radical discrimination at the heart of slavery, the dehumanization of the non-white, the non-European, have not been done away with by the passing of a law. Racism, inequality, prejudice against the man of colour, the immigrant, the “other”, the one who is not like us, continue in the present and perhaps we, well-to-do white Europeans, repeat certain patterns without being conscious of it. Rothberg’s theories are a call for reflection and awareness of varying degrees of responsibility, which also includes seeing in the present the traces of the past. A curious fact about the play is that it ends with a sentence that appears on the very first page of the work:

ANNIWAA. Once upon a time, I lived in a house with a cone-shaped roof,  
in a big compound. My mother grew okra and pumpkin in her  
yard. My father shaped woods and metals. (Kay 1 and 87)

This way of linking the beginning and the end of the play can be interpreted as pointing to the repetition of the story: present problems may be seen to echo what happened in the past regarding slavery. There are reactions, such as the Black Lives Matter movement that

denounce an inequality that people of colour have suffered for centuries and that has its roots in the times of slavery. The life of a slave was nearly worthless to the white man. This movement denounces very much the same thing with respect to people of colour centuries later. The existence nowadays of movements such as Black Lives Matter calls attention to the fact that maybe we have not moved forward as much as we think.

Kay manages to unveil a story she was not fully aware of and to think over facts she already knew. Similarly, as readers, we are invited to reflect on those dark episodes that are not maybe the best known by all of us nowadays, simply because humanity tends to forget, or to be given facts and words and not analyze them, especially if that implies taking responsibility for actions that may unsettle us. Thus, deep reflection is required not only when discussing the play and its portrait of slavery, but also in order to keep in mind its consequences in present-day society because certain forms of injustice are perhaps being repeated and we are being what Rothberg calls implicated subjects. Most importantly, if we do not take all this into account, we will continue reproducing, in different ways, forms of violence based on racism.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

After an in-depth analysis of *The Lamplighter*, it can be concluded that this play succeeds in providing a feminist perspective that brings new life to the tradition of the slave narrative by focusing on four female characters and on less well-known aspects of the slave trade, like Britain's massive role in it. In this neo-slave narrative, *The Lamplighter*, Mary, Constance, and Black Harriot build the story of their traumatic past in a way that reminds of but also differs from the old slave narratives. A most relevant aspect is how Kay conveys, through the character of The Lamplighter, the idea that traumatic experiences can be "healed" by telling and writing the story, thus giving voice and imposing order on the traumatized person's thoughts and feelings. As has been noted in the dissertation, to narrate is crucial for the characters to begin to cure from their devastating pasts. It was and still is at the heart of psychological treatment and, as the author transmits to the readers, the four characters start a new phase in their lives once one of them is able to tell her story, which the rest share with her.

Moreover, *The Lamplighter* not only offers a feminist approach to the traumas of slavery, but also connects its account with Rothberg's theory of implication, making us feel directly addressed by the play's reflection on issues we might not feel closely related to. *The Lamplighter* calls attention to the fact that it is quite important to know as much as possible about the historical background of our present-day society in order to pursue the goal of a life where racism, discrimination and other forms of injustice are faced and fought. Rothberg's theory of implication almost emerges as a must when reading and/or analyzing the play as it is grounded on the idea that society needs to become aware of the past and its legacy if we do not want to repeat the horrors of such dramatic historical episodes as slavery.

In addition to this, the preface "Missing Faces" deserves to be mentioned because this introduction by the author has contributed in important ways to the development of my

dissertation. “Missing Faces” is a summary of what the reader is going to find in Kay’s play. It helps to understand, sympathise and reflect critically on uncomfortable issues that people do not think about much in their daily lives.

To conclude, in *The Lamplighter* Jackie Kay offers readers a fresh and interesting perspective to deal with a crucial episode of our civilization’s past and also calls for re-thinking the consequences of that past and its connection with our present in ways that implicate us all.

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