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RILALE

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A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF ENSLAVED AFRICAN FEMALES' STRATEGIES OF MENTAL RESILIENCE AND SURVIVAL IN SADEQA JOHNSON'S *YELLOW WIFE*

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ABSTRACT
This study focuses on the condition of enslaved African females in the United States through Sadeqa Johnson's novel *Yellow wife*. These women needed an exceptional mental strength to face their unusual condition of human commodity. This article offers a psychoanalytical reading of the various resilience tricks and politics these enslaved African females used to cope with the hopeless and unbearable challenges of their condition and manage to survive the deadly threats of their daily circumstances. It uses the psychoanalytical literary theory and purports to be explanatory and descriptive, with the objective of shedding light into the mechanisms of mental resilience these enslaved laborers developed.

Key-words : enslaved black female – resilience – abuse – culture – psychoanalysis

RESUME
La présente étude est réalisée sur la condition des femmes africaines esclavisées aux Etats-Unis à travers le roman *Yellow wife* de Sadeqa Johnson. Ces asservies avaient besoin d'une force mentale exceptionnelle pour faire face à leur condition inhabituelle de marchandise humaine. Cet article propose une lecture psychanalytique des divers stratagèmes et politiques de résilience utilisés par ces femmes africaines asservies pour faire face aux défis désespérés et insupportables de leur condition et réussir à survivre aux menaces mortelles auxquelles elles faisaient face au quotidien. La théorie d'analyse utilisée est la théorie littéraire psychanalytique. L'analyse se veut explicative et descriptive, se proposant de mettre en lumière les mécanismes de résilience mentale développés par ces asservies.

Mots-clés: femmes noires esclavisées – résilience – abus – culture – psychanalyse

INTRODUCTION

Hardly anywhere in the field of social and literary research can we find topics of interest as engaging, challenging, and ripped with contradictory views as scholarship on black slavery in the USA and its continuing legacy on racial assumptions. The memories of slavery are today recalled with much awe and the legacy of the system is felt on current racial considerations and practices in the USA. Looking back on the life circumstances of those unfree laborers, one of the commonest questions that comes to mind is how they managed to survive and cope with the system and its unsurmountable, life threatening challenges all their lives, and make the most of their plight as living and thinking chattels. Resilience among these people does not seem obvious with the lifelong and hopeless hard times they experienced. Most of them were born in the system and knew

they would certainly die in a society entrapped in the same economic and political order. How did they manage not to succumb to despair? This article probes the issue of psychological life-nurturing resources that sustained the existence of people deprived of freedom and hope, of joy, and sometimes, of family. The study is carried out through Sadeqa Johnson's *Yellow wife* (2021). It is developed in negation to the simplistic conception of the enslaved worker's passivity and contentment in the shackles of slavery. This paper analyzes the resort by females enslaved people to practices and narratives of cultural identity that assume a paramount importance in their survival, as well as other psychological springs that give a meaning to their lives, preventing despair and suicide. The theory it uses is the psychoanalytic literary theory.

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The enslaved people focused on in this paper are the hundreds of thousands of African populations abducted and deported into bondage in the Americas, starting from the early seventeenth century, more precisely, 1619. Deported Africans were used as chattels and made to work mainly in Latin America, in the Caribbean, and in the south of the present-day USA. Some historians record that there were about five millions of Africans brought to Brazil, over three million in the Caribbean, and some four hundred thousand deported into British America (Gates, Jr., 2014). The "peculiar institution," for the enslaved, is a desperate plight as it condemns them to lifelong servitude with hardly any hope for the improvement of their condition. Freedom, at least within the limits allowed by the constraints of human society, is known to be an indispensable component for a balanced life. It is then worth asking how these enslaved Africans have found the mental energy to bear the brunt of their difficult condition and make a living in circumstances as desperate as those of slavery in America. Psychological resilience is generally conceived of as the capability to mentally cope with difficult situations, to "protect [the] self from the potential negative effects of stressors" (Fletcher & Sakar, 2012, p. 675). Resilience proved necessary for their survival. A fictionalized account of the lives of these enslaved is offered in Sadeqa Johnson's *Yellow Wife.*

The neo-enslaved narrative of *Yellow Wife* is a 21st-centruy re-reading of the social, economic and political stakes of the mid-19th century Virginian slavery system. It fictionalizes the history of the Lumpkin's Jail in Virginia, dubbed, for the purpose, "The Devil's Half Acre." From an autodiegetic perspective, the novel tells the story of Pheby Delores Brown, born on a Virginian plantation to its owner, Jacob Bell, and Ruth, one of his enslaved laborers. Shortly before Pheby is 18 years, his progenitor embarks on a trip with his enslaved concubine and Phoebe's mother, Ruth. On their way back from a journey, they have an accident whose injuries finally send them both to an early grave.

Delphina, Jacob's wife, sells Pheby who is pregnant with the son of her enslaved lover Essex Henry who has just escaped. Pheby is sold to the scary enslaved prison owner Rubin Lapier in Richmond, at his notorious slave trading center. Because of her extraordinary beauty and her light complexion, Pheby is marked for sale as a "fancy girl" but she is spotted by "the Jailer" who makes her his "yellow wife." With her constant exposition to the irascible Jailer's wrath, she has to resort to astounding stratagems to navigate the very turbulent waves of her life with Rubin Lapier. She must find a way to keep her daughters safe, but most importantly, manage to save the life of her son, Monroe, whom the Jailer has always held as a lash around her neck to exact total obedience. At the peril of her life, after several failed attempts and ensuing sanctions, she manages to help him escape to the North before Lapier sells him. The epilog stages three of Pheby's daughters fathered by Lapier, after their father's death, passing as whites in the North and the last in Richmond resolutely committed to helping the Freedpeople in the wake of the civil war and emancipation.

As this research work deals with the strategies that enslaved women used to make meaning of life and achieve sanity in difficult conditions, it involves the study of the enslaved people's therapeutic reconstruction of the self and wholeness of the individual as well as the community. Interactions in social life are a privileged site of traumas and cause of psychological instability. It is sound to question psychology for an understanding of the psychic distortion people are victims of. From the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, it is understood that identity is a social construct. It is built in relation with the other. The process starts from the moment the infant completes its imaginary stage and grows conscious of the world. The infant enters into a world of regulation, a world in which there are things that are allowed and others which are forbidden. To adjust, it has to develop some resilience strategies, repress its envies that the society does not tolerate. That is the beginning of the identity formation process.

People create their identity from the image that the mirror of society sends them. African enslaved workers lived in a society which denied them every right even the one of being considered human beings. Freud, as well as Lacan, assures that all that is repressed is not lost. Repressed envies or feelings are embedded in the unconscious where they are prevented by the conscious censor to emerge into the conscious and trouble the established identity. Freud posits that repressed desires, chunk of memories, can create mental disorders or, in unguarded moments, resurface in slips of the tongue, in unintended puns, dreams. They can also emerge through slips of tongue, symbols, metaphors, allusions or, through condensation, behind seemingly harmless images (Bertens & Bertens, 2001, p.159). The continuous exposure of the subject to stress or trauma may also help them build specific defense mechanisms for adjustment.

These mental mechanisms give ground for analysis and offer an insight into the resilience strategies the subject uses to reinterpret life and the position they occupy in it. Applying psychoanalysis to the African enslaved workers, in this research work, helps identify the various psychological devices they used in an attempt to redefine the self, build a sense of personal dignity and, at the same time, adjust to the obligations inherent in their enslavement.

2. Cultural Memory and Resilience: Rootwork and Storytelling as Strategies of Survival

There is a widespread belief of the contentment of black people under slavery. This belief argues not only for the African enslaved people's acceptance of the limits imposed on them by the "peculiar institution", but further, posits them as contented and loyal, happily bowing to the authority of most benevolent enslavers (Fitzhugh, 1854/2009, p.246; Phillips, 2007; Schouler, 1882). Athough the enslaved people were said to be "as happy as a human being can be" (Fitzhugh, 1854/2009, p.246), the theory of the passive acquiescence of black enslaved could not stand in the light of their constant attempts at organized rebellions and the perpetual resort of planters and other enslaved holders to mental and physical violence for discipline. Although one knows today that the theory was helpful only in justifying an economic system and the social order that went with it, it is nonetheless pertinent to ask oneself questions as to how and where these enslaved people found the necessary mental resources to resist and make a survival in a hopeless situation that mostly calls for suicide.

Lots of records suggest that suicide rates among enslaved were very low, although not totally negligible. Kneeland reports that among enslaved Africans, "almost certainly less than one percent, opted for suicide" (2006, p.41). These low suicide rates are said to be similar to the suicide rates of Africans and people from African descent in general (Kneeland, 2006; Miller, 1896, p.9). The low rates of suicides partially indicate collective strong mental resilience strategies developed among these enslaved workers. Some researches argue that the drive which fueled enslaved workers' resilience was first and foremost found in some cultural traits engrained in African culture, in their traditional conception of life and death (SPRC). This paper analyzes these culture-related mental resources for resilience in *Yellow wife* before focusing on the other mental resources that the enslaved female characters resort to.

Pheby the young female protagonist knows too well that Missus Delphina, Jacob's wife, is jealous of her beauty and of the love and craving that her husband has for his black concubine to whom he has fathered Pheby. It is her envy and jealousy that ruin Pheby's

life. Delphina sells Pheby the very day the latter buries her mother. Just before Pheby is taken away, Delphina moves forward to slap her once again. In a memorable scene in which she appeals to her ancestry, grieving and desperate but not shedding a tear, Pheby petrifies Delphina with a curse: "I curse you and all of your unborn children in the name of my grandmother, Queen Vinnie Brown. May all your worst fears come to pass, and all the evil you do come back on you tenfold. This plantation will be your living hell. Mark my words" (Johnson, 2021, p.57).

Pheby's curse that tetanizes Delphina in her run up is built on her identity discourse. Its authority is founded on her lineage of an ancestral figure whose power and spiritual authority legitimize her descendants to utter words of command, to curse and bless. It is from this royal ancestral figure, Vinnie Brown, that Pheby has acquired her authority. As a matter of fact, she has always been taught by her mother that she is of a royal ancestry: "You the gran-daudder of Vinnie Brown, who was the gran-daudder of a Mandara queen. You a slave in name, but never in your mind, chile" (Johnson, 2021, p.25).

The appeal to the mythic black forebear sheds light into this reaction formation sheme developed by these female characters that makes their marginalization in a white-ruled and phallocratic society easier to bear. The historicity of these ancestral figures is not the point. As can be seen in the way Pheby is transmitted her narrative of identity and is bequeathed her grandmother's name, the connection to a glorious past is the ground on which she can build her sense of dignity to cope with her current wretched situation. Pheby's position is all the more difficult as she knows very well that her father is the white plantation owner. But she selects that remote, sparse indication she has on her lineage from the maternal side to construct her own sense of worth and dignity. The ancestor becomes an enabler of mental escape, from their bleak reality, through time.

Through matriarchy, Pheby is an heiress to the proud female line of African queens and goddesses. It can be argued, in this vein, that in most African American novels intent on recreating black legacy from a female perspective, both enslaved narratives and novels set in the post-civil-war era, usually evoke this figure of the mythic matriarch used as the foundation on which to stand and confront the hardships of the present. The matriarch is evoked each time their progeny is in difficulty, as a source of energy and reassurance. From Sapphira Wade in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* to Sybella Owen's in John Edgar Wideman's *Homewood trilogy*, Santi Bess in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Water dancer*, Adjarry in Colson Whitehead's *Underground railroad*, all these figures play this role of mythic reference that legitimizes the African legacy and, as such, comfort and empower. These ancestors, whether actual or metaphorical, serve, to use Lacan's expression, as

points de capiton or "quilting points" in a dark and tumultuous ocean of a violent, undocumented past, and a future which promises nothing certain beyond the chances of happenings, the changing moods and fortunes of the enslaver.

The practice of rootwork and healing is part and parcel of Pheby's rightful legacy, as outlined by Mama Day to her own heiress: "It comes with a cultural territory: the beating of the drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went to settle in the belly of the blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to ripe old, age. You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it - but even if your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever lose it." (Naylor, 1988, p.111).

Izabella Penier, in her paper subtitled The function of storytelling in the process of identity formation of us mulatto women, points out this deliberate choice inherent in the identity formation of mulatto women, with an obvious renouncement of their white legacy: "The identity of modern Afro-American [mixed-race females] in the context of great cultural variety can be created only through reinvention of culture from fragments of ancient African past and more recent history of the African Diaspora in the New World" (2002, p.165). These narratives of identity are necessary as well for psychological balance as they are for the preservation of fragments of traditional rituals and for belief reconstruction. These females' belief in the generative power of language registers in a wider cultural practice of magic and rootwork.

Turning to ancestral customs, the female enslaved laborers still found resource for balance in their communication with the nature. They could talk to trees, plants, wild animals, rivers, could summon spirits and the souls in things, ask for their curing properties and other virtues. These rituals were believed to replenish their energy. Ruth's special status on Jacob's plantation, even if symbolically, is enhanced by this mastery she has of black medical tradition. Her knowledge makes black workers respect her and seek her care. She has always experienced this preeminence among enslaved. The narrative clearly shows that her position as Jacob's favorite and concubine is of less importance in the eyes of her fellows than her knowledge. She is not submitted to the usual hardships the other field hands share. She has a special status and finds favor with Jacob with whom she travels, kindling Delphina the white official wife's wrath and jealousy. But all these advantages can be surmised to have a symbolic relation to her mastery of rootwork. The perspective of the novel allows to make the interpretation that her knowledge of esotericism has enabled her to win her master's favor over his wife Delphina, in subtle ways, as much as the southern society allowed. Although she is an enslaved, Ruth is given some privileges that Delphina is denied. She uses this position

solely trying to make a way for her daughter into freedom. Ruth stands, in the community of enslaved workers, as a respected figure of power and mystery, as an exception to the lower status of the ordinary enslaved. Her nightly search for leaves in the forest in which glides as if endowed with particular sense of orientation opens the novel:

> Mama believed that the full moon was the most fertile night of the month, and that everything she touched held God's power. Each full moon, she dragged me out in the middle of the night with her to hunt for roots, plants, seedlings, and rare blossoms to, use for healing. I did not understand why God's power could not be found during daylight hours, and as I trudged behind her the March cold overwhelmed me… Fear of the woods made my feet clumsy, and I tripped over fallen sticks, scratched my shins on the spiky brush, and bumped my head on low-hanging branches. Mama, on the other hand, moved with skill and confidence, like the earth parted a path and presented the way for her. Even in the dark, she knew where to stop for herbs and how to avoid the dangerous ones. (Johnson, 2021, p.1)

Healing practices are expressive of identity in this way that they draw a frame of exclusivity kept for black people. "He ain't know nothin' 'bout doctoring no field hands," Ruth exclaims as a white doctor is brought to attend to Rachel, a black female who is sick (Johnson, 2021, p.4). As a matter of fact, Rachel dies and Ruth does believe that she could have saved her, had she been summoned in the right time.

But unfortunately, Ruth herself has an accident in which she breaks her thigh and goes unattended by a white doctor. The accident bares the relative precariousness of her privileged status and the flimsiness of her precious medical knowledge traced back to her forebears. The reader is then made to discover the demythified side of this medical knowledge most often used by the enslaved workers as practical resources used in replacement for the standard healthcare that the enslaved could not have access to with (white) physicians. Pheby, Ruth's daughter however treasures her mother's legacy and will use it in several circumstances to heal wounds, cure illnesses and to timely put herself, sick fellow workers, and the Jailer himself, to sleep when need arises.

Although no direct mention is made of African divinities, Johnson outlines an important aspect of African spirituality as key-factor for the mental balance of the enslaved: charms of protection designed to keep the bearers safe and alleviate the hardships of the enslaved person's condition. Ruth gives her daughter a protection amulet that she asks her never to part with: 'She then handed me a mixture of dried leaves, small seeds, and her fingernail clippings, tucked into a scrap of lace. "Sew this into the hem of your skirt. For your pro'tection while I's gone from here"' (Johnson, 2021, p.25). It is this treasure that Pheby keeps with her in memory of her mother after the latter dies. The amulet plays the two roles, first, of cultural heritage and, also, that of personal memory, that is connection between mother and daughter, beyond the gulf of death. One realizes the

importance of these little tokens of connection when one considers the particularly precarious environments these people navigate. They could be snatched away from everything and everyone they know and cherish any minute, which accounts for the high importance these little keepsakes transmitted from parents to children bore.

James Coleman, in *Faithful visions*, laments the scarcity of scholarship on the literary production of black novelists carried out from a Christian perspective. He argues that Christianity has played a capital role in the religious belief of enslaved people and therefore deserves to be given a priority in the literary criticism that focuses on the historiography of enslavement through these works of fiction:

> Religious and biblical traditions that engender faith are arguably the most important cultural feature to African Americans, and therefore also to African American writers who write about black culture. However, despite the large amount of recent theoretical and philosophical work that addresses religion, critics who write about black novels seldom deal with religious and biblical traditions in fiction. (Coleman, 2005, p.1)

His observation overlooks this truth that memory, as Daniel Cooper says, is "a *choice* [emphasis mine] one makes while flying fearlessly towards a future of unknowable change" (Elliott, 2009, p.250). Christianity was a religion forced on enslaved people. It most faithfully reflected the worldview of the enslaver. The Christian worldview was complicit in, further, of paramount importance to, the practice of slavery and defined the black person in devilish terms. It is all the more pertinent to minimize this legacy of enthrallment in the dynamics of liberation. Linking the enslaved to their ancestral practices and beliefs secretly transmitted among the enslaved, most often unheeded by their captors, is a conscious and responsible act of reclaiming the past and a sign that one has learned the lessons taught by slavery. This cultural memory was transmitted among enslaved workers through storytelling that weaves belief and individual experiences.

Keeping the individual memories of sufferings alive seems to be one of Pheby's major sources of inspiration and the nourishment of her fortitude. The Devil's Half-Acre, as a multi-purpose place, is the crossroad for many enslaved people: those on their way to other destinations, new arrivals that are intended for public auction, recalcitrant workers sent to be punished or subdued, beautiful "fancy girls" meant to be sexually exploited in Lapier's tavern. Phoeby is in charge of providing the unfortunate females on transit with a proper dressing that enhanced their market value. As she sews or buys their new dresses, she will give them bits of food, a few words of comfort, and then try to make them speak in order to record their personal stories: "Writing [their] story down, acknowledging that [they] had passed through, that [they] had a name and a

history—it was all I could do. I could do nothing but feed them, pray over them, and *record their stories*" (Johnson, 2021, p.128).

Pheby's compulsive drive to record the passing women's life stories seemingly arises from a need to steady their otherwise wavering destinies and transmit memory from generation to generation. As Pheby can write, she records these stories in writing. Most enslaved females transmitted their stories through the oral tradition. Ursa Corregidora's grandmother calls this duty of remembrance "making generations": "They [white men] can burn the papers, but they can't burn the conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence" (Jones, 1975, p.22). White history, as a matter of fact, has kept very little evidence of these women who served as sexual preys, nannies, mistresses, and mothers to their "jailers". They were most often exposed to lifelong sexual abuse as most black females in *Yellow wife* are. Pheby bears witness to this. We can imagine her, later in life, standing for collective memory, bearing witness to the sufferings of all these wretched, beaten, abused, sold women that have passed through the Lapier's jail. Their perpetual sufferings account for the multiple resilience strategies, defense mechanisms, and other tricks they developed to cope with their situation.

3. Music and other practices of resilience and survival among female enslaved Africans

We have to acknowledge in Pheby the determination and the ability to continually reinvent herself at all cost and adjust to her new circumstances, as if struggle and the contemplation of freedom were the very purpose of life. While, as a young teenager, she is still living with her mother on the Bell plantation, contemplating the freedom she is promised by Jacob, who happens to be her progenitor, is the central motive that has sustained her desire to live. She also finds this *raison de vivre* in her mother. But when her mother dies and she herself gets sold, her priority has shifted to keeping Monroe her son safe from sale and from the brutish life of the field hand. "I do it for my son," she confesses under the accusing look of a black female she is dressing for sale (Johnson, 2021, p.116). In this, the narrative of *Yellow wife* emphasizes the specificities of enslaved females, their hardships with their enslavers and the strategies these black women developed to survive and fight for their progeny.

Resilience, in enslaved laborers, was, among others, articulated in their refusal to accept to be defined in the terms of the white people. To the physical coercion of the social order, they oppose their freedom of mind. To the brutish tasks they are committed to, they oppose a sense of moral dignity that sees beyond the pitiful condition of their enslavers. Pheby is taught by her mother never to mentally surrender to the condition of

enslaved. For freedom is not only to be considered as the ability to do what one wants to do, the power to move or act freely, it also lies in mental resilience, in the quality or state of not giving up on free will and the contemplation of freedom, in the ability to dream and change one's destiny. It is this nuance which exists between physical shackle, on the one hand, and mental annihilation and submission, on the other hand, that translates into the difference between the *enslaved person* and the *slave*. Ruth always reminds her daughter that she is nobody's property: "You a slave in name, but never in your mind, chile" (Johnson, 2021, p.28).

Ruth's strategy of resistance consists in sacrificing herself just to make sure that her daughter sees freedom. The daughter lives up to her mother's expectation by never subduing her will. In psychological translation, she too lives just to keep her son safe. The silent but perceptible resilience that Pheby shows infuriates Delphina, Jacob's wife. Delphina feels powerless as she realizes that she cannot subdue her will or obtain total obedience. When she slaps Pheby, the latter shows no sign of feeling the hurt of the slap: "I refused to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much she had hurt me." (Johnson, 2021, p.12). Within the shackles of slavery, Pheby contemplates her lot as a temporary condition, an ordeal that will soon end and be repaid with the bliss of freedom. Never, whether on the Bell Plantation or in Rubin Lapier's jail, has she lost hope of freedom, through manumission first, and later in life, through the contemplation of escape. She refuses to be defined as the white man's property: "You will not put your hands on me ever again... I am not property," she hammers out (Johnson, 2021, pp. 56 & 66). Her sense of dignity is what makes her catch Delphina's hand in the air and crush her fingers when the latter raises her hands to slap Pheby. Pheby sees in Delphina the weakness that she tries to compensate for by displacing her frustrations on the enslaved hands, in sheer wickedness. Although the resistance to Delphina leads her to being sold, she has managed to keep her dignity all the way through. It is very important to underline this that there are signs which show that she has always put a limit to the authority of the enslaver, even after her refusal to submit earned her to be sold into the Lapier jail. An evidence to the fact that she has not been broken by that traumatic experience of her sale is that just a few days after, she opposes a point-blank refusal to the order of the auctioneer to "disrobe" and squat for bidders to set her price. She knows very well that she may be beaten to death but refuses to obey.

Also, music plays a key-role in helping Pheby keep her psychological balance. She is taught by Jacob Bell's sister, Miss Sally, to play the piano and later uses her musical skills to soothe her pains, to dream and convey her emotions. Pheby's access to the piano, which is a central fixture in the white man's treasured property, puts her in an exceptional position unattainable to many enslaved workers. Thus her skill as a piano

player cannot be generalized to the other enslaved. However, her craving for music expresses the persistence of an enduring tradition among black people that was sustained by longing, pain and deprivation. For Pheby, first of all, playing is escaping and daydreaming. The narrative revolves time and again to these treasured moments when she is allowed to sit and literally fuse with the piano keys:

> I felt a bit off-center and my fingernails scratched the keys. […] I did not have to think about where my fingers traveled. I just walked across the keys and let the sound flow through me. I was no longer in the parlor, the jail, or Richmond. I floated high above this place. Dancing, feeling, recalling Essex, my mama, and all my family on the Bell plantation as if no one controlled me. Like I was free. [….] I closed my eyes and let my mind escape inside the tune I had just played on the piano. […..] The tempo and timing sounded beautiful, like a coveted piece of silk floating in the sky. When I was finished, I had released as best as I could my resentment toward him [the Jailer]. (Johnson, 2021, 103 & 159).

She uses music to deal with pain, release anger and hurting feelings of humiliation. Even on the sad occasion of her mother's burial, music and dancing help Pheby assuage her pain. She testifies to the benefits of dancing to the music the enslaved people make by stomping their feet. She asserts: "When we danced, we cast our worries to the wind. All our troubles and ailments forgotten. We seized life with both hands, crushing our tribulations with the sway of our hips and the stomp of our bare feet" (Johnson, 2021, p.105). It seems paradoxical that one may dance for mourning. After burying her mother, Pheby dances: "Parrott lifted me to my feet and we moved together. I closed my eyes... Everyone clapped and I stirred my hips, trying to shake all the pain from my body. My feet stomped and the movement rinsed and released my heart. I had not felt so free in weeks" (Johnson, 2021, p.65). The ritual of dancing, for the bereaved, appears as a cultural device designed to help them divert their attention from the deceased person, at least for a while, and find a semblance of calm and joy. These rituals of working trauma through song and dancing are also found in the culture of Southern Benin, with some specific rhythms such as *avizinli* and *hankpa*.

Sexual exploitation seems one of the pervasive phenomena ingrained in the stories of female enslaved. Pheby makes her brutal acquaintance with the phenomenon the day she bumps into her mother in bed with Jacob Bell:

> I remembered the one time I interrupted one of Master's visits to the loom house and caught Mama laid across the bed with her dress up, while Master's pants were gathered around his feet. His pale white hind parts moved back and forth, and he groaned like a wounded animal—the sound that lingered in my head for months. Mama caught me standing frozen at the top of the ladder. She made her eyes large and mouthed for me to go, so I did (Johnson, 2021, p.18)

Musing on this traumatic scene, Pheby gradually gains insight into her mother's sacrifice and into herself being a "high yella." Although enslaved males may also fall

victim to sexual abuse as Essex is in the hands of Delphina, all females almost unavoidably fell prey to sexual predation. Some did make the best of their position as white men's concubines since it gave them some advantages. *Yellow wife* introduces us however to a generalized practice: a whole society of male jailers who are rejected by white marriageable women on account of their occupation. All of them take "yellow women" as official concubines and father their descendants to women that they often treat no differently than the other enslaved.

As a new arrival to Richmond, Pheby knows nothing of this world she will be forced into and wonders how black women could take pride in being the concubines of their captors: "I watched her [Corrina Hinton] disappear down the cobblestone street, trying to imagine how she could say yes to this life [of slave jailer's concubine]. But what choice did we have?" (Johnson, 2021, p.118). She soon understands the rules of the game that all these women had to play, masking their repulsion for the sake of survival, trading sex in apparently unacceptable compromises. Pheby recalls her sexual experience with Rubin showing how she always needs to compartmentalize this unwanted but necessary sacrifice to keep her mental sanity. Her compatimentalization borders psychological dissociation. She stands at a distance and holds out her body to the Jailer for his sexual pleasure; her spirit stands aside, contemplating her body from without. She further likens the experience to an undesirable *job*: "Being underneath him was a duty, just like my *job* in the sewing shed preparing the girls. I closed my eyes and searched for a scenario into which I could escape" (Johnson, 2021, p.126). She uses all the tricks offered by language in her account of her relations to Rubin Lapier to preserve the distance she tries to maintain. She learns how to feign happiness, how to feign love, and how to make Rubin Lapier have an orgasm fast in order to get rid of him.

Dissimulation is an important trick that enslaved women like Pheby use to negotiate survival and elevate themselves beyond the brutish lives their captors wished for them. The art of semblance seems of paramount importance to these women working in the "big house" who always lived under the constant inquisitive gaze of white people. Pheby had to learn and perfect her art of make-believe. She hides her literacy, moves goods undetected in secret pockets, carries her diary in petticoat, hides her emotions under a placid face, keeps her face pleasant in despair, pricks her finger to tell Lapier she loves him, and is as well gifted in one thousand other ways for hiding her true self. This is the defense mechanism that could best explain the behavior of some characters that are usually considered as sold out in this that they exert maximum violence on their fellow hands. Their ferocity toward other enslaved people is the best way to fend off suspicion and scheme their own escape. Basil is one of those. Lapier is surprised that "so loyal" an enslaved could dream about and plan escape and is infuriated to have been so

easily tricked into trusting him. James McBride's Liz in *Song yet Sung,* reminds us of this art of dissimulation as a major device for survival so learned and rehearsed that it becomes mechanical:

> she felt her face folding into the blank expression of nothingness she had spent the better part of her nineteen years shaping; that timeworn, empty Negro expression she had perfected over the years whereby everything, especially laughter, was halted and checked, double-checked for leaks, triple-checked for quality control, all haughtiness, arrogance, independence, sexuality excised, stamped out, and vanquished so that no human emotion could emerge. A closed face is how you survive, her uncle Hewitt told her. The heart can heal, but a closed face is a shield, he'd said. (McBride, 2021, p.2)

Apart from dissimulation, another survival and resilience strategy that these people used was dreaming, mental escape. Sally's favorite song that Pheby usually plays to shed her own sadness away is 'Pretty Dreamer', whose lyrics, with their poignancy, evoke all the sadness that heaves on these women's wretched souls. Mental escape was necessary for males and females to deal with their condition, as the conversation Pheby overhears between two men shows:

> The men's voices strung together in quick conversation. One said, "Cain't wait to get to Richmond. Got me a fine piece waitin' on me."/ "You ain't got no woman nowhere," said a man with a high-pitched voice./"Jest jealous 'cause I get luckier than you."/ "Dream on, sailor. Better get that paddle wheel going if you want to keep this job. Capt'n coming" (Johnson, 2021, p.76).

This is a different type of escape, performed through an invented scenario, an escape into dreams.

CONCLUSION

In *Yellow wife,* Saqeda Johnson exposes the tricks and strategies that enslaved women resorted to to navigate the difficult circumstances of slavery. The novel first works in refuting the argument put forward by some scholars that slavery was not as bad as cruel as it is usually portrayed. Based on the true story of Robert Lumpkin, it further sheds light into the ins and outs of enslaved females' stratagems of survival. Neo-enslaved narratives usually tend to lump together the hardships of all enslaved, males and females together but females were confronted with specific threats against which they have accordingly developed specific responses and resilience strategies. The works of female novelists like Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, and Jesmyn Ward have opened new doors into these often overlooked stories of women who walk the tightrope of their circumstances, negotiating balance between personal dignity, motherhood, wifehood, and survival. Thousands of them got killed playing the game of survival and resilience, thousands bore the visible and invisible scars of this negotiation. Just as Mary

Lumkin's story is passed down through Pheby Dolores Brown, their memories need to be passed on to future generations.

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