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du Département d'Anglais adossée au **Groupe de recherches
en Littérature et Linguistique anglaise (GRELLA)**

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INTER-TEXTUAL

RECONCEPTUALIZING SLAVERY IN CHARLES JOHNSON'S *OXHERDING TALE*

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Abstract

This paper aims at showing how the incorporation of Buddhist thoughts and Western philosophical ideas in *Oxherding Tale* offer a new understanding of slavery and freedom. The results of my investigation reveal that the individuals are entrapped in mental and spiritual bondage by their ego, desire, and societal expectations. Moreover, the outcomes of my research indicate that self-determination is achieved by transcending spiritual and mental forms of bondage. It implies embracing a lifestyle and spiritual discipline based on self-denial, asceticism, and non-action.

Key words: slavery, ego, Buddhism, neo slave narrative, freedom, desire, spiritual, mental

Résumé

Cet article vise à montrer comment l'intégration des pensées Bouddhistes et les idées philosophiques occidentales dans *Oxherding Tale* offrent une nouvelle compréhension de l'esclavage et la liberté. Les résultats de mon investigation révèlent que les individus sont prisonniers de l'esclavage mental et spirituel à cause de leur ego, désire, et les attentes de la société. En plus, les résultats de mes recherches indiquent que l'autonomie est atteinte en transcendant les formes d'esclavage mental et spirituel. Cela implique embrasser un mode de vie et une discipline spirituelle basés sur le déni de soi, l'ascétisme, et la non-action.

Mots clés: esclavage, ego, Bouddhisme, récit néo-esclavagiste, liberté, désir, spirituel, mental.

INTRODUCTION

Antebellum slave narratives have commonly explored bondage in terms of physical and legal chattel slavery and perceived freedom as physical liberation. This conventional understanding of subjugation and freedom has been deconstructed and reconceptualized in neo-slave narratives. The neo-slave narratives challenge and stretch the conventions of traditional historical accounts and the earlier slave narratives. They explore a new way of understanding bondage and freedom from a spiritual and mental, rather than purely political perspective.

The term neo-slave narratives is coined by Bernard Bell. B Bell (1987, p. 289) defines neo-slave narratives as "modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom". Ashraft Rushdy employs the term in a more restricted sense. A Rushdy (1999, p .3) claims that "neo-

slave narratives" refer to "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative". Rushdy's description applies to critically celebrated novels such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982), Sherley Anne William's *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1986). Neo-slave narratives are contemporary works of fiction that reimagine the experience of slavery to comment on modern society. V. Smith (2007, p 168-169) claims that neo-slave narratives explore a wide range of themes such as race, gender, identity, freedom, religion and the complexities of power dynamics.

Reconceptualizing slavery implies a philosophical and spiritual redefinition of bondage beyond physical chattel slavery. It encompasses mental, psychological, and cultural enslavement, as well as ego bondage. Reenvisioning slavery subsumes rethinking freedom and resistance from mental and spiritual perspective.

Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* is a philosophical novel and a metaphysical slave narrative. It chronicles the complex life of Andrew Hawkins, a biracial man born into slavery in the Antebellum south. The story explores Andrew's quest for personal freedom and enlightenment through picaresque adventures and contact with a range of individuals who function as his own teachers. The story explores themes of identity, race, slavery, and freedom through a blend of slave narrative, Western philosophical thoughts, and Eastern religious thoughts.

This paper stipulates that slavery, resistance, and freedom are reinterpreted through the lens of Buddhist thoughts and Western philosophical ideas. Buddhist thoughts and western philosophical ideas underscore mind-based subjugation. Their concept of slavery encompasses internal, mental, and psychological forms of subjugation. The Buddhists believe that true freedom comes from internal transformation. It implies a process of self-emptying and a detachment from illusory self and worldly attachments.

The objective is to show how the integration of Eastern Buddhist philosophy and Western philosophical thoughts in *Oxherding Tale* offers a spiritual and mental understanding of subjugation and freedom. How does Johnson's blending of western philosophical ideas with Buddhist thoughts offer a spiritual understanding of slavery and freedom and how is freedom achieved?

This study is essentially based on the theory of intertextuality. G. Allen (2000, p. 7) defines intertextuality as "an attempt to understand literature and culture in general." I refer to Michael Worton and Judith Still's ideas of rejection of textual autonomy, meaning as a network of references, and dynamic and relational meaning in "Introduction", *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Worton and Still emphasize that a text is never a self-sufficient and closed system; rather, its meaning is generated through its dialogue with a network of other texts. I will use Worton and Still's ideas of rejection of textual autonomy, meaning as a network of references, and dynamic and relational meaning to show how the writer's incorporation of Buddhist thoughts and Western philosophical ideas in his metaphysical slave narrative offers a new way of understanding slavery and freedom.

The argument is divided into three parts. The first part emphasizes mental and spiritual bondage, the second one highlights the reevaluation of freedom and resistance, and the third one underscores release.

1. Mental and Spiritual Bondage

Mental and spiritual enslavement refers to various forms of bondage beyond the historical reality of the 19th-century chattel slavery. It encompasses slave to sex and ego bondage. The first aspect of mental and spiritual slavery I wish to explore is slave to sex.

1.1. Slave to Sex

Being a slave to sex is being controlled by one's senses. It refers to the perpetual and unrestrained human being's need for pleasure. Human being's unending and continuous pursuit of sexual pleasure makes him a slave to his own insatiable desire. In this regard, T. Hobbes (1994, p. 6) assumes that the state of human existence in nature is an existence directed by the senses or by what he terms "original fancy". He subsumes that our senses are meant to control our existence. Human being is "in the service of the senses". He is enslaved by his senses. In this regard, L. A. Seneca (1969, p.95) declares:

Show me a man who isn't a slave; one is a slave to sex; another to money; another to ambition; all are slaves to hope and fear And there's no state of slavery more disgraceful than one which is self-imposed.

Seneca explores mental or emotional enslavement. He argues that mental or emotional enslavement to vices like ambition, fear, and desire is true slavery. He adds that true slavery is self-imposed as it is a willing servitude to passion and vices.

Slave to sex is explored by Johnson. Actually, Flo Hatfield is a slave. In this regard, C. Johnson (1982, p. 62) assumes through Reb that Flo Hatfield is "a slave like you'n me". Although Flo Hatfield is the sovereign of Leviathan with uncontrolled powers, she is a slave to sex. Through Flo Hatfield, Johnson explores another form of bondage. Flo is "in the service of senses". It implies that her life is built around sexual pleasure. Her sexual bondage is perceived through her speech, which is connected to sexuality. Indeed, her reflections on black men are expressed in terms of appetite. C. Johnson (1982, p.41) reveals that Flo looks at" her slave like a woman comparing chunks of pork at public market". This quotation italicizes Flo Hatfield's sexual appetite. The chunks of pork's recipes trigger an explosion of flavors. Flo compares the taste of the chunks of pork with the sexual appetite brought about by her sexual contact with the slave. This comparison brings to the fore her dependency on sex for her survival. Like all the human beings who are dependent on food for their survival, she is dependent on sex to lead a meaningful life. Besides, as a sex maniac, she psychologically prepares her soon- to be- sex slave for their future lovemaking. In this perspective, C. Johnson (1982, p.45) reveals Flo Hatfield's following observation: "I wonder what you'd taste like." This passage is told from the perspective of Flo Hatfield. The narrator reveals her obsession with sex. Her life is centered on the pursuit of sexual pleasure. She is unable to control her senses and emotions. In so doing, she is trapped in sex bondage. Flo Hatfield is the embodiment of thirst for sexual pleasure. Before lovemaking, C. Johnson (1982, p.63) asserts that Flo Hatfield consumes opium and wine. The combination of wine and opium engenders intense physical and emotional sensation. During lovemaking, Flo experiences intense sexual pleasure. C. Johnson (1982) describes Flo's emotional state and feelings when she achieves orgasm:

Flo, a Screamer, could not truly experience her feelings, appreciate her own pleasure, until she whooped, oh there! Or Andrew, don't you dare do that! Which meant, of course, that this was precisely what I should do, and then, as our first night of lovemaking into daybreak-all the servants kept awake by her screams (OT,63)

The peak of Flo's sexual excitement is characterized by an overwhelming release of emotion leading to screams, feelings of pleasure, and euphoria. This passage is an illustration of Flo's slave to sex and desire and her dependent state. In fact, although she is powerful, she is paradoxically dependent upon a slave, Andrew Hawkins, to make her life meaningful. We notice that the power, dependency, and autonomy relation that regulate the master's relationship

to the slave is ironically reversed. The sovereign, with all her attributes and power is enslaved and powerless. As a matter of fact, her bottomless sexual appetite condemns her to mental or emotional enslavement. Her insatiable sexual appetite is at the root of her sex bondage and dependency. However, Andrew Hawkins, a slave, who is denied humanity and rights becomes powerful. He is the one who makes her existence meaningful through his sexual performance

We remark that Johnson makes use of intertextual techniques. He draws upon Western and literary traditions, with special reference to Hobbes and Seneca to redefine slavery. Johnson uses Worton and Judith Still's ideas of rejection of textual autonomy, meaning as a network of references, and dynamic and relational meaning. Worton and Still (1991, p 1 -2) claim:

The theory of intertextuality insists that a text (for the moment to be understood in the narrower sense) cannot exist as a hermetic or a self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the writer is a reader of texts (in the broadest sense) before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotation and influences of every kind.... Secondly a text is available only through some process of reading: what is produced at the moment of reading is due to the cross -fertilization of the packaged textual material (say, a book) by all the texts which the reader brings to it.

They argue that no text exists in isolation. Its frontiers are blurred as it is caught in the system of reference to other books and other texts. They posit that all texts are interconnected and derive their meaning from a network of other texts, whether through deliberate techniques like quotation, allusion, and parody, or through less intentional, pervasive cultural influences and shared literary conventions. We notice that Johnson converses with the western philosophical novel of ideas by means of allusion and reference.

In a chapter entitled "*Oxherding Tale: Slavery and the Wheel of Desire*", Rudolph P. Byrd perceives a striking similarity between Flo Hatfield and pretas. R. P. Byrd (2005, p. 83) asserts: "Of special importance to us in our effort to shed additional light upon the special character of Hatfield's slavery are the pretas." Pretas are supernatural beings from Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions, also called "hungry ghosts ". R. J. Corless (1989 p. 142) declares that "pretas are characterized by insatiable thirst and hunger Their particular suffering is that of constant hunger and thirst." Pretas' extreme and unfulfilled hunger and thirst are similar to Flo Hatfield's insatiable sexual appetite. Like pretas whose hunger and thirst are at the root of their suffering, Flo Hatfield's sexual appetite is at the root of her enslavement and dependency.

Through Hatfield's sexual appetite, which is reminiscent of pretas' unlimited hunger and thirst, Johnson incorporates Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist traditions in *Oxherding Tale*. In so doing, the novel honors the forms. It implies that *Oxherding Tale* involves many genres. The diversity of genre and form or hybridity, is an aspect of the novel. In this perspective, A. Rushdy (1999, p. 182) asserts that "Johnson suggests that like the student of Asian martial arts who performs a kata, or prearranged set of fighting moves, the writer who works within the galaxy of forms we inherit must honor the form ". Johnson suggests that the writers must cross boundaries of genre. It implies that the writer must blend elements from different established genres to create hybrid work. Creating hybrid work implies that Johnson incorporates other genres in his novel. He rewrites slave narrative through dialogue and interconnectedness with other genres. By combining diverse styles, themes, narratives, and conventions, the writer challenges traditional conventions and explores a new way of storytelling. *Oxherding Tale* honors the form. In this regard, A. Rushdy (1999, p. 180) claims that " the two major forms [Johnson] adopts are the slave narrative and the Zen parable". *Oxherding Tale* honors the form of a number of traditional fictional genres. These fictional genres encompass the slave narrative, the picaresque novel, the philosophical novel of ideas, and Zen parable.

A picaresque novel is usually a first-person narrative, relating the adventures of a rogue or lowborn adventures. He drifts from place to place and from one social milieu to another in his effort to survive. A slave narrative is an autobiographical literary genre in which the slave recounts his experience from physical bondage to physical freedom. Zen parable, also known as koan is a short story-like narrative often humorous and paradoxical, used in Zen Buddhism. The Zen parable is meant to prompt deep reflection, doubt, deep insight into Buddhist teachings and the nature of existence. The Zen parable underscores philosophical quest for spiritual enlightenment.

Flo Hatfield's unchecked sexual appetite, which is similar to pretas' unrestricted thirst and hunger leads to her sexual exploitation of Andrew, Patrick, and other black male slaves. Her sexual exploitation of Andrew Hawkins consists of two phases. The first phase is related to a rigid education and the education of the senses. Andrew is "in the service of the senses" under the tutelage of Flo Hatfield. She is one of her teachers in his quest for spiritual enlightenment. The kind of education she gives him differs from that of Ezekiel. Ezekiel's education prioritizes intellect above all. However, Flo Hatfield's education values desire above reason. The kind of education he receives at Leviathan is similar to the Eastern education in the monastic tradition. This type of education is based on discipline, a total devotion to the practice,

and complete obedience. Hatfield inculcates into him a type of education based on monastic traditions. In so doing, he becomes submissive. This is perceived through his new vocabulary at Leviathan. C. Johnson (1982, p. 60-61) asserts " My vocabulary, which at Cripplegate had turned on the phrase *But* and *on the contrary* and *Do you mean to say ...?* Was scaled down at Leviathan to *Of course* and *Quite so* and *Any fool can see that*". This quotation brings to the fore the difference between Western education and Eastern education. Western education teaches analysis, criticism, and objection, while Eastern education is based on submission and obedience. In Leviathan, Hatfield does not allow objection and contradiction; rather, she requires submission and devotion from her trainee.

Another aspect of education at Leviathan is connected to devotion to Flo Hatfield. This is perceived through Andrew's compliance with her whims and demands - C. Johnson (1982, p. 61) assumes that Andrew satisfies Flo Hatfield's need for a "polymorphous" lover "who is "husband ravager, teacher, Galahad, eunuch, swashbuckler, student, priest, and, above all else, *always there*". This quotation is a perfect illustration of Andrew's total devotion to Hatfield and his altruism. He renounces his idea of self in order to be at the service of Flo Hatfield. He detaches himself from his Self and Mind in order to free her from her bondage to desire. The fact of giving up his substantial Self and Mind enables Andrew to display compassion and altruism towards her. His disentangling from his Self leads to a stronger sense of connection to Flo and a more profound appreciation of her.

The second phase of her sexual exploitation of her slaves is manifest through her sexual tyranny and her sexual assault. Indeed, she turns her slaves into sex slaves. Her insatiable sexual appetite turns her into a sexual oppressor. She victimizes her sexual partners. Actually, in spite of Andrew Hawkins' remarkable sexual performance, Flo Hatfield is insatiable. She requires his constant presence by her side, which is the testimony of her sexual tyranny. She is whimsical and too demanding during lovemaking, which is strenuous and taxing. In this regard, C. Johnson (1982, p.61) assumes: "It would have been easier to pick cotton". The comparison between the sexual activity and the picking of the cotton is very telling. In fact, picking cotton under the scorching sun is a strenuous task. However, this task is easier than having sexual intercourse with Flo Hatfield. The comparison brings to the fore the suffering, the pain and the trauma her slave lovers undergo during their lovemaking.

Lovemaking which should be a moment of pleasure turns out to be a moment of sexual aggression. In this perspective, C. Johnson (1983, p.73) confesses: "Flo began to rub against

me in a raw, hard way. It was, I thought, like using me as a kind of scratching post". The passage represents the storyteller's perspective. The use of the first person narration expressed by "I" and the first-person singular pronoun materialized by "me" gives the narrator the status of an internal narrator or homodiegetic narrator. In this narration, the narrator, Andrew Hawkins, underscores the sexual violence he endures. It is the evidence that she denies him identity, humanity, and masculinity. She considers him as a sexual object rather than a sexual partner. A sexual partner is treated with respect and consideration. However, as a slave, even during their moment of intimacy, he still occupies the position of the oppressed and is powerless. As a result, he is obliged to comply with her wishes and bear her whims. However, he has eventually revolted against her sexual tyranny. He has inflicted upon her a physical and psychological damage.

The use of the first - person voice is an aspect of Neo-slave narrative. In this regard, A. Rushdy (1999, p. 3) claims that "Neo-slave narratives" "take on the first person voice of the antebellum slave narrative." It implies that neo-slave narratives are indebted to historical narratives. It means that *Oxherding Tale* borrows from them. The first person voice is also termed homodiegetic narrator by Gérard Genette who assumes:

Il faudra ... distinguer à l'intérieur du type homodiegetique deux variétés: l'une où le narrateur est le héros de son récit ... , et l'autre où il ne joue qu'un rôle secondaire, qui se trouve être, pour ainsi dire toujours, un rôle d'observateur et de témoin (G. Genette (1972, p.253).

The homodiegetic narrator is present as a character in the story he /she tells. The story being told is his own. However, the first- person narrators may be heterodiegetic, since they may be telling someone else's story rather than their own. Another aspect of spiritual mental and spiritual enslavement involves ego bondage.

1.2.Ego Bondage

Ego bondage refers to a psychological state of being controlled by one's self importance, pride, and insecurity. Thus, Flo Hatfield is ruled by her ego. Her ego is excessively inflated with pride, superiority, and the sense of self-esteem. This is perceived through her own declaration when she first meets Andrew. C Johnson (1982, P38) asserts: " I am Leviathan's sovereign, its soul all others are, in a manner of speaking, the points, tendons, nerves, and tissues that sustain the soul." This quotation brings to the fore Flo Hatfield's unbalanced ego. Through her speech, she reveals her self-sufficiently, her sense of self-esteem, sense of pride, and arrogance. She also manifests a sense of superiority over Blacks. She does not perceive them

as human beings with soul and histories. She rather perceives them as matters, properties, objects, and equipments which provide her with everything she needs. As properties, life does exist in the slaves. Their existence depends on the will and whim of the slaveholders. Flo's inability to control her ego makes her a slave of it.

Ego bondage is evident through ego's need to control situation and people through possession, loyalty, and strong ties. C-Johnson (1982 P61) claims that Flo needs a lover who is "always there". She feels isolated and needs Andrew's physical presence by her side to fill the void. Driven by pride, insecurity, and fear, the ego leads to a desire for control and emotional manipulation. The fact of feeling incomplete and experiencing suffering without others is perceived as being caught in egoist bondage.

Ego bondage is obvious through the search for perfection, one that leads the individual to be critical and dissatisfied with people and with the way things are. Flo's successive marriages have never brought her peace, bliss, and satisfaction. As a result, she has broken up with her partners. C. Johnson (1982, p.38) reveals that Flo Hatfield has been "married eleven times". Her unsuccessful marriages result from her inability to accept the others and the white women's victimization by white patriarchal society. Actually, the white patriarchal system sanctifies the exploitation and the hardship of white women. It denies them humanity. It never recognizes them as subjects and severely restricts the realization of their potential. Moreover, she realizes that love, selflessness, and security are missing in her marriages. The relationships with her husbands are based on exploitation and domination. She is treated with contempt and as sexual objects. She is the victim of white men as is Andrew, living in gender limited life of "relative being". The writer reveals the white world's perception of Blacks and women. C. Johnson (1982, p.75) writes: 'Again and again, and yet again, the New World said to blacks and women, "you are nothing". The white world denies Blacks and women humanity. In so doing, it inflicts on them ill treatment and humiliation. Flo's ego is disregarded. Her sense of worth, her sense of self-esteem, and her dignity are trampled down on. Seeking perfection and being too critical are manifestations of ego bondage.

Ego bondage is also clear through the persistent need for external validation. External validation is the fact of relying on outside sources such as other people's opinion or society to confirm one's own worth, value, or sense of self. Thus, Flo Hatfield is confined by her own inflated sense of self-importance, sense of self-esteem and sense of worth. She relies on Andrew

for validation. In the following conversation with Andrew, Flo Hatfield expresses her desire for external validation. C. Johnson (1982) declares:

Is wanting tenderness too much?... Or intelligence in a man?... Of course, I also want sexual satisfaction complements gifts fidelity a great body cleverness sophistication yet boyish exuberance a full head of head of hair good teeth and the ability to know my mood...Is that too much (*OT*, 60)

The first-person narrator, Flo Hatfield, quenches her erotic and ego needs on Andrew. She highlights the traits she most desires in a male lover. In addition, she craves for external validation. She seeks compliments or approval from Andrew to confirm her sense of worth or self-esteem. As stated earlier, her former relationships are fruitless because her ego is disregarded. In this new relationship, “compliments”, “gift”, and “tenderness” can be source of comfort and can be reassuring. She can therefore establish a sense of self and feel accepted.

Unfortunately, her desire for validation from Andrew to feel complete is annihilated by an incident. In fact, Andrew’s revolt against her sexual aggression puts an end to their relationship. Her frosty reaction after Andrew strikes her in her face, apparently breaking her nose, shows the extent of her frustration. C. Johnson (1982, p.74) reveals: “She was as calm, her voice as cold as when discussing the weather... Flo gave me a glacial look”. Flo is entirely demoralized after the violent strike she has received on her face. The violence she has undergone is the testimony that Andrew is not entirely under her control and domination. Her ego has been squashed. As a result, she feels a void. She experiences suffering and inner turmoil. Her misfortune experience reveals that those who are enslaved by their ego are trapped in a vicious cycle of never-ending frustration, suffering, and humiliation. Reassessing slavery implies reanalyzing resistance and freedom from a new perspective.

2. Achieving Mental and Spiritual Freedom

This part aims to detail the way the conventional understanding of freedom as defined in the slave narrative is subverted. By subversion, the argument is about rethinking the notion of freedom through the lens of Eastern philosophy. Thus, freedom is not just about physical escape from slavery, it is predominantly a philosophical journey of self-realization and enlightenment influenced by Eastern philosophy like Buddhism and Taoism. This gives a metaphysical and spiritual dimension to freedom. Thus, mental and spiritual freedom is an internal transformation, which involves the dissolution of the ego, self-denial, asceticism, and detachment from world affairs. This part mainly shows how to achieve mental and spiritual freedom.

The dissolution of the ego is an important step to achieve mental and spiritual freedom. As a matter of fact, those who are entrapped in egoist bondage experience endless humiliation and suffering. However, breaking free from it provides inner freedom. Thus, Reb is the embodiment of detachment from ego. This is perceived through his reaction to Andrew's questions and comments regarding the process of making a coffin. C Johnson (1982) contents:

It's a beautiful casket. You do fine work. I didn't do anything, said Reb. He booked up for an instant, straight ahead, scowling at something I couldn't see in his mind. Things are done, that's all. Often he had this way of talking which baffled me. Each casket you do is different, though, I said. There must be some technique... Technique? Reb laughed (*O.T*, p.47)

This passage is perceived through the point of view of the narrator. The use of the third-person narration expressed by "He" gives the storyteller the attributes of an external narrator. Andrew is a homodiegetic narrator who assumes the status of an external narrator. In this fragment of text, the storyteller underscores Reb's emptiness of his ego. In fact, in spite of Reb's masterpiece of art, he gives enigmatic and self-deprecatory commentary on his masterwork. This is illustrated through his following answers: "I didn't do anything" and "things are done, that's all". In spite of his self-deprecating commentary, it is acknowledged that coffin making requires concentration, meditation, art, and technique. And yet, Reb does not display self-importance and self-esteem in relation to his masterwork. Instead, he displays humility and expresses indifference to praise. Breaking free from ego enables Reb to achieve wisdom, emotional balance, and inner peace.

The character of Reb embodies the rejection of ego. Through Andrew's interaction with Reb, he learns that true freedom comes from relinquishing the attachment to individuality and rigid sense of self. Johnson's integration of Eastern thoughts, especially Buddhist concept like the dissolution of ego offers a new way of understanding a path to freedom that transcends physical and traditional notion of freedom.

Furthermore, mental and spiritual freedom is reached through pragmatic approach to life's challenge and the adoption of non-action. Reb exemplifies pragmatism and non-action as a mode of resistance. C. Johnson (1982) reveals:

Reb's quarter left no residue of its lodger. He appeared busy – the hardest worker at leviathan... He was not in the shed-not in his work. Not truly in thickness of the web, as I was _ boomeranging from desire to desire _ and waiting, I wondered if Reb hundered for freedom as I did what did he want ? Seldom, if ever, did Reb take the initiative in producing anything. He waited as a cat (*O T*, 75).

The fragment of text underscores Reb's pragmatism and his discipline of non-action. Reb is portrayed as a pragmatic character who focuses on his work. He lives in the present moment and emphasizes on each day. He leads a life that is in stark contrast with the struggle and selfish desires of other characters like Andrew. In addition, this fragment of text highlights Reb's discipline of non-action as a means of achieving true freedom. His passivity is perceived as non-action or non-engagement. This is manifest through his inability to take any initiative to free himself from physical bondage. And yet, non-action is Reb's strategy of resistance. In this perspective, R.P. Byrd (2005, p.78) reveals that Reb's strategy of resistance stems from "the Taoist concept of Wu Wei". T Merton (1965, p.74) defines Wu Wei as "an attitude of genuine non-action, motivated by a lack of desire to participate in the struggle of human affairs". Wu Wei refers to effortless action or acting without excessive struggle or force. It does not mean complete passivity, but rather acting without unnecessary effort. It involves surrendering and letting things unfold naturally without forcing the outcomes. This mode of resistance should be understood in the spiritual and metaphysical context. The forces against which Reb is fighting are not the slaveholders, but rather, desire, ego, fear, and ambition. Overcoming these forces enables him to reach freedom. This conversation between Reb and Andrew exposes Andrew to a new mode of resistance: non-action or non-engagement.

Through Reb, Johnson redefines the concept of resistance. He reshapes it through the lens of Taoist and Allmuseri worldview. Reimagining resistance through the lens of Taoist philosophy amounts to rewrite traditional slave narratives. These slave narratives underscore violence and escape as a means of resistance against slavery. Subverting earlier slave narratives aligns with Worton's and Still's idea of meaning as a network of reference.

In addition, freedom is reached through self-denial and the practice of extreme asceticism. As a matter of fact, the individual is free when he brings to the heel his passions and desires. Reb is the incarnation of self-denial and the practice of extreme asceticism. C. Johnson (1982) contends:

[He says] yes to liberation and yes to misfortune...Reward he did not expect. Nor pleasure. Desire was painful. Duty was everything... This was his way. It was, I thought, a way of strength and spiritual heroism doing what must be done, dead to hope (*O.T*, 76-77)

This passage underscores Reb's detachment from physical self and world attachment and pleasure. He transcends societal roles and expectations. He does not comply his life with societal beliefs, values and standard of living. Thus, he distances himself from the pursuit of

material wealth and is indifferent to reward. He overcomes his passion and desires. Extinguishing his desire, passions, and ego enables him to achieve mental and spiritual freedom.

Seeking physical gratification such as engaging in sexual activity causes much frustration and suffering. R.P Byrd (2005, p.77) assumes that Taoism admits that desire, fear, will, and ego are “the source of considerable suffering in human existence”. Those who are enslaved by desire, fear, will, and ego are entrapped in a permanent cycle of frustration, humiliation and emotional imbalance. However, extinguishing them provides human being with a sense of inner freedom.

Johnson reinterprets freedom through the lens of Taoist philosophy. True freedom is defined as the absence of fear, desire and ego. Johnson’s reconceptualization of freedom in Oxherding Tale goes in line with what Rushdy terms the contemporary relevance of slavery. It emphasizes the contemporary experience of slavery through new form of freedom. Andrew’s exposure and internalization of the tenets and teachings of Buddhism and Taoism have widely contributed to his enlightenment.

3. Release

This part is essentially devoted to Andrew’s liberation and Reb’s deliverance from a probable death. In fact, after Andrew’s and Reb’s escape, Hatfield places a bounty in their head. Soulcatcher is committed to this task. Although the Soulcatcher catches them, he spares their life. He does not murder Reb because of his Way. The Soulcatcher admits that he wants nothing. C.Johnson (1982, p. 173) confesses: “how the hell you gonna catch a Negro like that? He can’t be caught; he’s already free. Not legally, but you know what Ah’m sayin”. This passage reveals the reasons why Horace Bannon refrains from killing Reb. As a matter of fact, Reb is the embodiment of Buddhist and Taoist values, beliefs, and tenets. Through his attitude and everyday behavior, he adopts a discipline of self-denial and asceticism. He also exhibits a discipline of non-action or non-engagement. The exhibitions of these values through his attitude, actions, and speeches make him a free person.

Andrew’s liberation stems from his interaction with Reb, who has inculcated into him Buddhist and Taoist values such as self-denial, asceticism, and detachment from the ego. The final stage of his release arises from his interaction with Horace Bannon, the Soulcatcher. Andrew’s contact with Bannon enables him to understand his own past and experiences represented within the tattoos of the Soulcatcher’s body. C. Johnson (1982, p.175-176)

confesses that Horace Bannon's immensely tattooed body offers Andrew a deeper understanding of his past and future. This quotation pinpoints the role of the tattoos in Andrew's enlightenment. In fact, they are the metaphors for the entire story of Andrew in microcosm. This story involves all the people he has met and all the knowledge he has gained. Through a vision, he understands how Reb has achieved freedom. The tattoos reveal Andrew the meaninglessness of physical existence, since the story and experiences of all the human beings are interwoven or interconnected. This deeper realization frees him from the attachment to ego, desire for material wealth, personal ownership, and sexual pleasure. In other words, it releases him from physical existence.

Furthermore, the Soulcatcher is a catalyst for Andrew's liberation through his process of embodying the others. In fact, Bannon's method of hunting consists in involving with and even incarnating his preys. In so doing, he absorbs their way of thinking and ideology. Thus, after absorbing the life of Andrew's father, George Hawkins, he "becomes" George Hawkins. As a result, he cannot kill Andrew Hawkins who becomes his son.

Andrew's detachment from physical existence, that is to say, his transcendence from desire for earthly possessions and ego-driven desires, is perceived through his return to Cripplegate and his reconciliation with the Soulcatcher. C.Johnson (1982, p.176) asserts: "the Soulcatcher buttoned his shirt, covering the theater of tattoos. He helped me, a free man, back to his wagon, then delivered me, dazed, to my wife's doorstep". This passage underscores Andrew's mental and spiritual freedom. He distances himself from sensual desires, the pursuit of external validation, and societal expectations. Thus, he has detached himself from Peggy Undercliff; he surrenders the relative comfort he enjoys at Spartanburg, as well as his status as a white man and a teacher.

CONCLUSION

This paper has underscored the reconceptualization of slavery in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*. It has shown that true freedom is achieved through a spiritual and mental liberation from the system of slavery and its psychological constraints. Reb has achieved freedom by letting go of all desires and expectations. Andrew has achieved freedom by transforming his inner consciousness and transcending the desire for earthly possessions and social constraints. Through Worton and Still's theory of intertextuality, we have tried to show how Johnson draws from historical narratives, Western literary and philosophical texts, and Taoist and Buddhist texts to offer a new way of understanding slavery and freedom.

The results of this analysis highlight how Johnson combines Eastern philosophy, Western philosophical ideas with historical slave narratives to create a more universal understanding of human bondage and freedom. The research frames slavery as a metaphor for various forms of subjugation and a tool to explore broader themes of identity and race. In addition, the contribution suggests exploring various theories. Thus, the topic can be explored from a narratological theoretical framework. We can study the literary devices deployed by the writer to analyze spiritual and mental aspects of subjugation and freedom. The topic can also be analyzed through the lens of postcolonial theory. Frank Fanon's works are critical to examine the "mentality" that shapes an individual's status within an oppressive society and explores strategies of resistance that go beyond radical black power movement. Moreover, this topic is a hotbed for exploring the fallacy of race.

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