

Unveiling the Continuum: Analyzing Slave Narratives and Neo-Slave Narratives through Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* and

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

كشف النقاب عن الاستمرارية: تحليل روايات العبيد وروايات العبيد الجديدة
من خلال "العالم المعروف" لإدوارد ب. جونز و"رحمة" لطوني موريسون

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Abstract:

Slave Narratives and Neo-Slave Narratives are distinct literary genres which explore the enduring impact of slavery on the African American community. As the society undergoes continuous transformation, the revival of classic narratives becomes crucial for advocating justice and asserting the rights of this demographic. Neo-Slave Narratives, contemporary counterparts, offer nuanced perspectives and additions to the narratives of past generations. This analysis, centered on *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, delves into the intricate alterations differentiating these genres. Navigating past and present within African American literature, it aims to illuminate the enduring significance of Neo-Slave Narratives as indispensable records of the African American journey, providing valuable insights into the genre's evolution and sociocultural dynamics.

Keywords : Slavery, Slave Narratives, Neo-Slave Narratives, Edward P. Jones, Toni Morrison.

ملخص

روايات العبيد وروايات العبيد الجدد هي أنواع أدبية متميزة تستكشف التأثير الدائم للعبودية على المجتمع الأمريكي الأفريقي. وبينما يمر المجتمع بتحول مستمر، يصبح إحياء الروايات الكلاسيكية أمراً بالغ الأهمية للدفاع عن العدالة والتأكيد على حقوق هذه الفئة الديموغرافية. تقدم روايات العبيد الجدد، نظيراتها المعاصرة، وجهات نظر وإضافات دقيقة لقصص الأجيال السابقة. هذا التحليل، الذي يتمحور حول "العالم المعروف" من تأليف إدوارد ب. جونز وتوني موريسون "الرحمة"، يتعمق في التعديلات المعقدة التي تميز هذه الأنواع. من خلال التنقل في الماضي والحاضر داخل الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي، يهدف إلى إلقاء الضوء على الأهمية الدائمة لروايات العبيد الجدد باعتبارها سجلات لا غنى عنها لرحلة الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي، مما يوفر رؤى قيمة حول تطور هذا النوع وديناميكياته الاجتماعية والثقافية.

كلمات مفتاحية: العبودية، روايات العبيد، روايات العبيد الجديدة، إدوارد ب. جونز، توني موريسون

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1- Introduction

The global legacy of slavery, particularly pronounced in the United States, has left an enduring imprint. The nation's extensive history of slave ownership marked a grim chapter, stripping individuals of dignity and erasing their identities, leading to an arduous battle for self-

discovery. African slaves, faced with these horrors, pioneered the Slave Narrative genre, evolving from the 1700s to its contemporary counterpart, the Neo-Slave Narrative.

Both genres bring slavery's narrative to the forefront, addressing issues such as freedom, racism, and equality, aiming to garner global sympathy for Black individuals. While they differ in features and narrative strategies, both share a common thread, prompting a comprehensive study.

Edward P. Jones and Toni Morrison's literary works delve into the struggle of good and evil within the slavery backdrop, considered masterpieces of African American Literature. Despite different time periods, they revisit the nightmarish world of bondage, recounting diverse stories with eloquence. This paper explores the interconnectedness of Slave and Neo-Slave narratives, emphasizing their significance and the evolving portrayal of slavery through Jones and Morrison's exceptional writings.

2- Exploring the Depths of African American Experience: Comparing Slave and Neo-Slave Narratives

This examination navigates the intricate tapestry of human experiences, shedding light on the enduring significance of traditional Slave Narratives and the nuanced contributions of Neo-Slave Narratives. Through an analysis of seminal works, the presentation aims to illuminate the evolving narrative landscape, bridging the past and present to offer valuable insights into the complex sociocultural dynamics encapsulated within these powerful literary genres.

2.1. Slave Narratives:

Historians and literary critics are in consensus that the genesis of slave narratives dates back to the 1780s, marking the genre's inaugural moments with the courageous efforts of a minority of fugitive and newly emancipated slaves. A pivotal objective of these early narratives was to elicit empathy from white society for the plight, struggles, and fears endured by the enslaved individuals (Rushdy, 2011, p. 423). These works were explicitly tailored for white audiences, designed to convey the anguish and torment experienced by slaves. It was this very notion that ignited the abolitionist movement, as their capacity to resonate with audiences in the northern states proved instrumental in galvanizing political action.

The evolution of these narratives was gradual, culminating in their peak during the the pre-war period when they became widely recognized as Fugitive Slave Narratives or The Antebellum Slave Narratives. These accounts served not only to expose the inherent inhumanity of the slave system but also to provide compelling evidence of the shared humanity of African Americans, reaffirming their status as equals to any other individual (Andrews, 1997, p. 667).

In total, there exists a corpus of approximately 6,000 slave narratives, with around 500 of them having been published prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. Some were even translated and distributed in the European market (Sekora, 1987, p. 483). The earliest noteworthy narrative is attributed to Olaudah Equiano, titled "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," published in 1789. Equiano's work is widely regarded as the foundational cornerstone of the genre, setting the template for subsequent narratives. In the realm of female-authored narratives, a pioneering piece is "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs, published in 1861. However, the most enduringly successful and renowned narrative remains the one chronicling the life of Frederick Douglass, first published in 1845.

2.2. Features of the Slave Narratives:

Most narratives of enslavement share a compelling and recurring pattern, one that resonates with the arduous journey of the protagonist in their relentless pursuit of freedom. These narratives often trace the transformative odyssey of formerly enslaved individuals as they traverse various stages towards achieving their ultimate goal. This transformation typically unfolds in the narrative through the protagonist's physical and spiritual journey, taking them from the oppressive South to the liberating North, from rural landscapes to bustling urban environments, from a state of legal powerlessness to one of citizenship, and from a lack of self-awareness to the profound discovery of their "felt self" (Elder, 1992, p. 101).

What distinguishes these narratives is their distinctive autobiographical form, often presented from a poignant first-person perspective. While there are exceptions, particularly within the realm of slave novels, the overarching narrative structure consistently commences with a vulnerable enslaved individual in the South and culminates with their empowered self in the North (Elder, 1992, p. 101). These narratives consistently introduce the protagonist's family, tracing their lineage from parents to relatives and, subsequently, to their own spouse and children. This familial context provides a poignant backdrop against which the narrative unfolds.

Moreover, the narrative focus in slave narratives gravitates towards the plot itself, rather than an intricate exploration of the characters. It painstakingly details the brutalities endured by the enslaved individuals and the harsh realities of the institution of slavery, vividly portraying the torment and degradation suffered by the enslaved population. As scholar Bernard Bell (2004) astutely argues, these narratives are fundamentally concerned with depicting the protagonist's profound transformation from an object to a fully realized subject (p. 10).

The tide began to shift with the election of Abraham Lincoln as the President of the United States, signaling a pivotal turning point for enslaved individuals. The Civil War that ensued between the North and South culminated in a victory for the North, paving the way for the

Thirteenth Amendment (1865) that ultimately abolished slavery in U.S. territories. While slavery officially came to an end, racial issues persisted, presenting a new challenge for Black Americans in their quest for full integration into American society. This crucial juncture marked the genesis of the Neo-Slave Narratives, a genre that grapples with the enduring racial challenges and complexities that persisted even after the formal abolition of slavery (Olejniczak, 2020, p. 7).

3- The Neo-Slave Narrative: Unmasking its Defining Attributes

The slave narrative genre retained its paramount importance in advocating for the rights of Black Americans well into the post-Civil War era, extending through the tumultuous twentieth century, encompassing the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression. During the harrowing depths of the 1930s Great Depression, a remarkable collection of approximately 2,300 testimonies from former slaves were meticulously documented through the Federal Writers Project for the Slave Narrative Collection (Nash, 1989, p. 243). However, in the subsequent years, the number of narratives waned, despite a few writers who continued to grapple with the enduring legacy of bondage. This ebb in narrative production reflected the changing social landscape of the United States, which paved the way for a new movement and vision, ultimately realized in the Neo-Slave Narrative.

The emergence of the Neo-Slave Narrative marked a transformative shift, gaining momentum as the refuge and creative platform for the succeeding generation of Black American writers. According to Rushdy (1997), "Neo-slave narratives are modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effect of new world slavery" (p. 533). Several factors and pivotal events contributed to this literary transformation, particularly the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, encompassing the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. These movements championed racial equality and sought to reshape the educational and societal foundations, reigniting scholarly interest in the original slave narratives, albeit through a new lens (Namaradja, 2015, p. 12).

The Black Power Movement played a pivotal role in shaping the Neo-Slave Narrative, offering a poignant reflection of the authentic experiences of African Americans in a society far removed from parity. This movement imbued African Americans with a profound "sense of subjective empowerment," inspiring them to craft innovative narratives that reimagined the institution of slavery in a fresh light (Rushdy, 1997, p. 534).

Given the fictional nature of Neo-Slave Narratives, many authors utilized an imaginary enslaved character as the narrator, one with ancestors who had endured the shackles of bondage. This narrative genre deliberately reclaimed elements of the old slave culture, a vital component for the survival of African-American slaves, often interwoven with elements of African folklore.

This departure from strict realism afforded Neo-Slave Narratives the creative freedom to tell their stories without being constrained by the need to adhere strictly to factual accounts (Namaradja, 2015, p. 15).

Notably, a significant distinction exists between classic slave narratives and the Neo-Slave Narrative genre in terms of narrative perspective. While Slave Narratives predominantly adopt a first-person perspective, Neo-Slave works occasionally employ a third-person narrator. Furthermore, the Neo-Slave Narrative genre introduces elements of romance into their narratives, a stark contrast to the stark absence of romantic themes in traditional Slave Narratives. The absence of romance in classic narratives stemmed from the slave owners' deliberate efforts to dehumanize enslaved individuals, prohibiting them from experiencing emotions or forming meaningful relationships, even within the confines of marriage (Robinson, 2007, p. 44).

Ultimately, the Neo-Slave Narrative genre's enduring power lies in its ability to resonate with contemporary readers, keeping the specter of slavery alive in the collective consciousness. This serves as a solemn reminder to the current generation of their responsibility to safeguard against the recurrence of the same injustices and torment endured by the protagonists in these narratives.

In essence, the Neo-Slave Narrative transcends the constraints of its predecessor by providing readers with a closer examination of the enduring aftermath of slavery. This genre offers insights into aspects of bondage that the original slave narratives could not fully convey, shedding light not only on the language but also on the indescribable cruelties and tribulations faced by those who directly endured the horrors of slavery (Olejniczak, 2020, p. 10). The barriers to understanding have been dismantled, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of the African-American experience with slavery, rendering justice to their stories and the unfathomable challenges they confronted.

4- Summary of *The Known World*

Edward P. Jones' work entitled *The Known World* belongs to the contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives and it is published in 2003. It follows the story of a couple; Henry and Caldonia Townsend. The first was a newly freed slave, and a brilliant farmer and bootmaker. His Parents are named respectively Augustus and Mildred Townsend. The story began with his death although it narrates his entire life as the story progresses drawing the past, present, and future. He starts his life like all people with dark skin as a slave on the plantation of someone called William Robins as he was a groom. At the age of 17, his father finally succeeded to buy him. Yet, he remained under the protection of his master. After a few years of hard work, he managed to purchase his

own farm and owned his own slaves as well. He met Caldonia and married her. Regrettably, he never had any child because he died of an indefinite illness. Caldonia became the holder of the plantation but she could never control its affairs and thus she asked for the help of the overseer named Moses. After a while, things evolved between the two to a sexual relationship and this represented a huge opportunity for Moses to have his freedom. He began to convince his mistress to marry him and then set his family free. Nevertheless, Caldonia was not prepared at all for such thing and she did not want more than a physical rapprochement. Here, Moses started to have a second plan. He began by sending his making his wife and children to the north escaping with Alice; a fellow slave. Then, he followed them but he was captured a few days after. However, he secured the liberty of his family hoping for better days for himself. At the end of the work, the plantation was rescued as Caldonia married one of Robins' relatives named Louis and the couple lived a happy and peaceful life there.

5- Ultimate Deviations in Jones' *The Known World*

While the Neo-Slave Narratives certainly share a connection with traditional slave tales, it's essential to acknowledge the significant departures that distinguish them. In the following lines, we'll explore these differences through examples from Edward P. Jones' masterpiece, "The Known World."

One notable departure in Edward P. Jones' work, which qualifies it as a Neo-Slave Narrative, is the prominent presence of romance and depictions of love in various forms, a facet rarely found in the conventional slave narratives. Jones meticulously weaves romantic encounters between enslaved individuals into his narrative, such as the courtship between Elias and Celeste (Jones, 2003, p. 100). Furthermore, Jones delves into the realm of Calvin's homosexual feelings of love and sexual desire (p. 66). Love, in this context, emerges as a rare aspect of life that even the harshest slaveholders could not fully control or suppress, underscoring the enslaved individuals' innate humanity. As Mutter (2011) aptly notes, in "The Known World," the concept of "love" serves as a conduit of identification, bridging the gap between the noun "slave" and the noun "person," while distancing it from the dehumanizing label of "thing" (p. 128).

There is also a substantial element that was not presented in the classic slaves' tales which is non-than magical realism. It is something extremely occurred in the Known World and there are multiple fragments that confirm it. For instance, in Stamford's life-changing encounter with lightning, with the two children who are connected via their dreams (Jones, 2003, p.67). Moreover, in Augustus' visit/vision to Mildred after he has died (p. 346). Nevertheless, the main example is found at the beginning of the work when the writer describes the experiences of Henry once he dies.

Henry walked up the steps and into the tiniest of houses, knowing with each step that he did not own it, that he was only renting. He was ever so disappointed [...] Whoever was renting the house to him had promised a thousand rooms, but as he travelled through the house, he found less than four rooms, and all the rooms were identical and his head touched their ceilings. "This will not do," Henry kept saying to himself. (p.10)

The writer's approach in this instance is a homage to the rich folklore that permeated the Antebellum Slave Narratives, offering writers and storytellers the freedom to shape their own cultural narratives. The passage we've just examined hints at Henry's profound discontent with his earthly existence, a sentiment that resonates even with his spectral presence. This sentiment finds its symbolic representation in the diminutive house he inhabits in the afterlife (Donaldson, 2008, p. 272), evoking the idea of two parallel worlds coexisting in the storytelling, ushering in a fresh and innovative method for portraying the life of a slave.

6- Summary of *A Mercy*

In 2008, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* precedes her renowned Neo-Slave Narrative, *Beloved* (1987). Both delve into maternal despair, with "Beloved" depicting a mother's tragic choice in the 1850s, while *A Mercy* explores earlier periods and employs a unique narrative structure. The novel unfolds in the 1690s during the American states' formation, focusing on Master Jacob's small community. Rebecca, seeking a better life, embraces an opportunity for adventure in a new environment.

The unconventional storytelling features seven perspectives, primarily Florence's first-person account, and five characters adopting a third-person perspective. As Jacob amasses wealth, he envisions a mansion for a lasting legacy. A romantic entanglement with Florence follows, but tragedy strikes with Jacob's smallpox death, leaving Rebecca gravely ill.

Florence's solo journey to save Rebecca involves encounters with Native Americans, forging a bond with a blacksmith. However, his refusal to join her shatters her hopes. Returning home, Florence finds Rebecca recovered but changed, her strict religiosity leaving Florence incomplete. The novel concludes with Minha Mae's narrative, Florence's mother, unveiling a history of slavery, assault, and rape on D'Ortega's plantation. Minha Mae's unspoken message echoes a tale of pain, anguish, and a mother's desperate love forever concealed from Florence.

7- Ultimate Deviations in Morrison's *A Mercy*

Within the tapestry of *A Mercy*, one finds a mosaic of elements that evoke the classic narratives of enslavement, particularly those etched during the Antebellum Era. Yet, as one navigates its intricate narrative, distinct features emerge, firmly anchoring *A Mercy* within the Neo-Slave Narrative genre.

In a fashion reminiscent of *The Known World*, the novel fearlessly explores themes of romance and sexuality, a bold departure from the conventional tone of Antebellum-era narratives. The pages of this tale teem with intimate connections, notably embodied by two couples whose stories unfold with poignant resonance. The first among them is the enduring love between Rebecca and Jacob Vaark, a love that matures and deepens over the years. Rebecca's initial agreement to marry Jacob, a decision tinged with doubt, appears coerced by her father. Yet, their mutual commitment defies societal norms, leading them to carve out a serene existence in isolated solitude on their farm. Tragically, their seclusion, when beset by smallpox, transforms from sanctuary to peril, as they find themselves bereft of a supportive community (Downie, 2009, p. 57).

The novel audaciously navigates the terrain of sexuality, a subject scarcely ventured into within the original slave narratives of the Antebellum period. Florence's profound affection for the blacksmith, initially characterized by explicit sexual encounters, becomes the focal point of intrigue among the farm's laborers. With time, Florence's infatuation transcends the carnal, evolving into a profound and intricate love that transcends the narrow stereotypes propagated by those who painted Africans as creatures devoid of emotion, driven solely by raw desire. Florence's emotional complexity challenges and subverts the narrative advanced by abolitionists, infusing the story with depth and nuance (Namaradja, 2015, p. 77).

Toni Morrison, a literary luminary, deftly weaves elements of magical realism into the narrative's fabric, imbuing it with an ethereal quality that blurs the boundaries between the tangible and the otherworldly. The character Sorrow, for instance, finds solace in her imaginary friend, Twin, whose presence feels more palpable than the living souls that surround her. Florence, in her own unique way, embraces a form of superstition, interpreting the signs she encounters in her daily life as harbingers of future events. She derives comfort from Lina's stories, especially the one recounting the plight of abandoned baby eagles, which nourishes her hope (Morrison, 2008, p. 62). The novel's exploration of magical realism further unfolds as Lina reflects on the past following Jacob's death and his ambitious project of constructing a grand mansion. Lina muses, "killing trees in that number without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up misfortune" (p. 44). The narrative also unveils Florence's peculiar conversations with birds and her practice of placing screens beneath her pillow for protection. Morrison subtly underscores how these rituals seamlessly meld with European rites over time (p. 48), symbolizing the organic evolution of spirituality within the tale's distinct characters.

In this literary masterpiece, *A Mercy* deftly interlaces the familiar threads of Antebellum-era slave narratives with the innovative and distinctive features of the Neo-Slave Narrative genre.

The result is a captivating and multi-dimensional exploration of the lives and experiences of enslaved individuals, elevating the narrative to a profound and resonant work of literature. -

8- Conclusion

In the tapestry of American history, slavery's legacy remains a harsh scar on the collective consciousness of the black community. This institution erased identities, thrusting African Americans into a journey to reclaim their place in society. Enslaved individuals' narratives became powerful instruments in the struggle for recognition and justice, transcending time and prejudice, evoking universal sympathy.

The Neo-Slave narrative genre echoes and progresses classic enslavement narratives, portraying the enduring aftermath and indomitable spirit of African Americans. Works by Edward P. Jones and Toni Morrison illuminate the disparities between the genres and the nuanced evolution of discourse on slavery and racism.

These discussions leave an indelible mark, broadening horizons and deepening understanding of the legacy of bondage. Neo-Slave narratives, unlike classic ones, extend the triumphant freedom ending in thought-provoking ways, confronting enduring traumas and shedding light on unexplored aspects. They serve as a vital continuum, offering a key to revisiting history and delivering poignant narratives resonating with power and relevance.

In conclusion, Neo-Slave narratives testify to the enduring spirit of African Americans, bridging past and present with an unwavering commitment to bearing witness to human will in the face of history's darkest chapters. They challenge reflection, empathy, and engagement with the ongoing pursuit of justice, serving as indispensable chronicles of our shared humanity.

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