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Triumph and Integrity of Black Family Life in J. California Cooper's *Family*

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Neo-slave narrative, as a genre has garnered a huge amount of attention over the last decade. Great literary works like Margaret Walker's historical novel *Jubilee* (1966), Earnest J. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), a few examples of the genre, have received abundant critical attention. Elizabeth Beaulieu points out that "The advent of the neo-slave narrative, inaugurates a new direction in slave narrative studies" by revising history "to include the perspective of enslaved Americans" (xiv). J. California Cooper's 1991 novel, *Family*, too shares a number of themes and concerns with these slave narratives in its representation of the joys and perils of slave existence and in its distinctly contemporary message, although it has received considerably less scholarly attention. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu says that the critics "are either unaware of Cooper and her work, are disinterested in her projects, or have relegated her to a second, even third tier of African American women writers". Beaulieu revises this assumption of the critics and calls Cooper "not [only] an emerging voice in African American literature; she is a fully emerged voice" (84). Cooper has applied a less frequently used technique in *Family* where the narrator and her audience are bound in a close and sentimental relationship, which facilitates the ways for social rehabilitation both in the fictional world of the novel and the contemporary world of the readers. The speaker very powerfully advocates a feminine stance from which to view the world of enslaved women.

In this paper an attempt would be made to highlight the rehabilitative roles within the fictional world of Cooper's novel, *Family* which encompasses "therapies" which help to heal the physical and psychological injuries of the black. "Healing narratives", is a term introduced by Gay Wilentz in *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Disease* (200). In this type of narrative, the author employs the concept of hope as a central and guiding factor. The narration is usually in the first person who describes the spiritual journey of the central character from the states of despair to a better and healthier state of being. The narrative technique and language is also less complicated so that the message is readily accessible to the readers. The most important part of a healing narrative is that it always concludes in optimism. Many critics have given their views on the importance of the role of 'healing' in the neo-slave narrative. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy notes that the genre "comment[s] on cultural politics in America" by recuperating an African American literary tradition and engaging the legacy not only of slavery but also of the social movements of the 1960s (6). Bernard Bell contends that these slave narratives attempt to "awaken our conscience to moral and social justice" (285). Even the recent critics like Farah Jasmine Griffin and Angelyn Mitchell have noted the "transformative potential" (Griffin 521) incorporated in such a

narrative. Beaulieu writes “The neo-slave narrative, which leans well into the past for its subject matter and its inspiration, extends the hope of healing far into the future” (xv).

Cooper introduces the novel with a mythical prologue to explain the dominant theme of humanity’s need for kinship.

and the earth mother asked the earth child as she handed it the succulent earth fruit, “and when does a tree bear fruit that is not its own?”

and the earth child threw back its beautiful head, laughing, saying, “never, never. . .” then took a huge bite from the heavy full fruit which sent the rich fruit running down its chin, falling, falling over the mountains of the earth child. rolling, rolling down and into the river of love and hate called tears. running, running even over the fields of time, until all the juices flowed together again. blending, into the ocean of human life.

the sun looked down. . . the moon peered up. listening, moving on, saying, “everyone knows that. that’s what makes a family!”

The image of the running juice flowing “. . . until all the juices flowed together again, blending, into the ocean of human life” suggests the possibility of a harmonious existence of all human beings by accepting the familial connection to one another, regardless of racial background. Viewed from this standpoint, the notion of domination by colour or culture as promoted by eighteenth century European philosophers prove unjustified. Cooper’s suggestion in this novel is to see beyond artificial barriers created by mankind and to accept the bond of blood that sustains human life.

Cooper takes the therapeutic power of narrative in *Family* by portraying Clora as the narrator of the experiences of the many generations of enslavement. She links the past and present and relates the consequences of slavery to her audience and invites them, especially the black women to take control of their lives and seek self-actualization. She presents her daughter, Always, as an example of the undying spirit of humanity in the midst of adversaries. Near the end of the novel we find Always recuperating from the ills of slavery and working to reconstruct a community around her in the post Civil-War years. Always invalidates earlier depictions of black slaves by white authors like Margaret Mitchell in *Gone with the Wind* (1936) where the enslaved black people are presented with myriad demeaning images. This kind of portrayal perpetuated the racist belief systems crystallized in the antebellum South. The situation demands that there is a need to ensure that all sides of the story of American slavery are revealed. Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*, Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River*, Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* and , most notably Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* are novels that reflect the agony of the enslaved , but with a triumph of the self at the end. These black women writers have produced a more heroic representation of people who survived the black history of what man has done to man in slavery. These writers rearticulate in contemporary terms that enslaved persons were not wretched but instead deliberate, determined, and dignified and this applies particularly to those black women who mothered under the conditions of slavery.

Chinua Achebe in an interview in *The Paris Review* had referred to the great African proverb “until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”. He based his condition on this saying and decided to be that historian so that “the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the trivial, the bravery, even of the lions.” Hence, the neo-slave narrative of the late twentieth century has always been presented from the point of view of the “lion”, reflecting the “bravery” of the slave in the turmoil of the so called “peculiar institution”. Contemporary black writers have recovered from the slur of slavery, and they have done so with a spirit of celebration. Black women writers in particular glory in the triumph of spirit they find when imagining their enslaved maternal ancestors, in resisting their exploitation by their white masters and thus inscribing a new history.

Cooper sets *Family* during the years of slavery and concludes well into the Reconstruction period. The opening lines of the novel, “ HISTORY. LIVED, NOT WRITTEN, is such a thing not to understand always, but to marvel over” (1) very aptly demonstrate the experiences of a black family that searches for methods to achieve more than the mere physical survival of slavery and its consequences. Their part of history has to be found in the unwritten documents of their life experience. History, especially written by the dominating whites is biased and chronicles only the sunny side of the story. From the time that Thomas Jefferson published his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1780), the southern slaveholders used his book to support the argument that blacks are biologically and mentally inferior race and thus slavery is justified.

In *Family*, Cooper’s characters find ways and means to end their misery by negotiating whiteness for their own benefit. However, unlike the new black generation, the earlier enslaved women hated whites and they had taken drastic steps to show their wrath and helplessness. Clora, the dead but not gone narrator gives the example of her grandmother who “had killed herself rather than stays in slavery and keep on bringing more babies into the world...” (5). Finding no other option this was her way of resisting the ongoing tradition of the white master’s breeding slaves for sale. Generations of mixed race helped in this process of negotiation where the light skinned slaves passed off as whites for the purpose of physical survival and social and economic progress. Although in the case of Clora’s family, it took some time to witness this change in skin colour and motive. Fammy, Clora’s mother speaks of her grandmother as “most jet black in her color” (3). About her mother Fammy, Clora says that “My mama was very light cause her father had been a Master of the Land”. About her own colour Clora reveals that apart from the many white babies her mother had had from the white master, she was brown as she says “Cause my mama hated white folks, she wanted a brown baby. See. . . my daddy being a dark skinned man made me a tan color or whatever God would call it”(5). It is thus necessary to study the impact of slavery on the psychological development of persons of African descent. When Clora refers to her grandmother’s “jet black” colour, we are at once connected to the early period when the “slave catchers came”(2) and the continues process of stealing and selling of Africans to various lands and owners like “Portuguese, Spanish, English, Italian, French, Irish, Scottish, others. Men from lands all over the world” (5) began. Clora remembers her mother once telling her that her mama had some kin in Africa but they know nothing about each other’s whereabouts. In the closing passages of *Family*, when Clora declares, “All my family, my blood, is mixed up now. They don’t even know each other. I just hope they don’t never hate or fight each other,

not knowing who they are”(230) , it is a suggestion to humanity the futility of hatred on the basis of colour, race, and culture. She appeals to all black and white (in fact all humanity) to accept and embrace their kinship as she believes that all human beings are somewhere connected. With the dark past revisiting their lives as long as they lived, Clora , after death, understands that the present should be forgiving and healing, so as to evoke the promise of the future.

Cooper initially ascribes no gender to the narrative voice she creates. The speaker says in the first reference to personal history in this way “near my time, a girl-child was born who was to be my grandmother”(2). From this point of self introduction, the speaker quickly establishes a female family tree, tracing from the birth of her grandmother to the subsequent birth of her mother. Clora, as narrator, possesses qualities that highlight the orality of the novel. Cooper makes Clora interact with the audience by inserting words, phrases and sentences that are clearly directed to the reader. Frequent use of addresses like “See?”(5),“ I’m tell you this”(55), and “You know what I did?” (222) helps to bridge the distance between the narrative voice and the reading audience. By this kind of interaction with the readers, Cooper succeeds in giving a colour of authenticity to the narrative.

The narration continues with Clora telling “there was only one person in my family I knew at that time. My mother” (3). However, the lives of Fanny and Clora effectively come to a close the night Fanny kills the master and then herself. Like her mother, Fanny too resists the master and his sinful intentions by destroying the root cause of the whole episode of slave breeding. But she was wrong, the poison of slavery continued. After her death, the burden of her enslavement is quickly passed on to Clora, “Yes. . .I was a woman at twelve, and sure was one at thirteen years old when I had my first baby for the Master of the Land. . .I was my mama, now” (16-17). By bearing several children for the Master of the Land, Clora relives her mother’s legacy in a tragic way. Unable to bear the heavy burden of being an enslaved mother whose children are sold away by their father, Clora reaches a breaking point and she cries out “I hated him! Ohhhh, I hated him. I never felt love with him. Or bout him. . .well, I just hated him. Not only for ownin my body, but for blocking my mind, letting my heart dry and shrivel up cause it didn’t have nothing to do but hate him”(21-22).The enslaved black woman has no choice but to surrender to the never ending story of exploitation revisiting generations after generations in their dark world.

“Time passed by slow and fast all at the same time . . . endless Time passed” (21) and the horror of slavery deepened. It is interesting to note that the white Mistress of the Land never sympathized with the black victim as Clora relates, “ she would’nt hate her husband, uh, uh,she would hate mama more” for giving birth to white babies(6). An undertone of hatred for the slave woman is always experienced even by the white Mistress, and this was one of the reasons why the children born to the black woman were quickly sold off. In one of such incidents, Cooper highlights a brief moment of the encounter between the two women, one black and the other white, but who are both under the possession of the Master of the Land. In a brief impulse of motherly protection, Clora resists her Mistress when the safety of her child mattered. The subdued and shattered slave erupts when the Mistress hit her baby who looked like her husband . . . “that Mistress leaped at me and commenced to slapping me with her hands, first, then a poker that was kept by the fireplace. She hit my baby . . . too young to

take a beating. Well, . . . I took that poker away from her!!". This changed situation at that time puzzled both the women "We was both of us shocked! I was shocked to be a fool to struggle with the Mistress of my life, and she was shocked at the sudden change in our way-situation role and we was like stuck in time, justin starin at each other". Cooper has effectively depicted this incident like a painting as Clora says "Her arm raised to strike and the poker raised in my hand to strike her back!"(31-32). This incident may be taken as the first sign of direct revolt against exploitation in the novel. But Clora too like her mother Fanny and grandmother had to pay the price for this with her life. Deeply aggrieved by her lack of freedom, Clora makes the same decision as Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* does, determining that her children would be better off dead than lifelong slavery. Clora cannot see the consequences of her action and succeeds in killing herself only, her children survive the poisonous weeds she had fed them . After death, Clora, the dead but not gone narrator referring to her audience says, "Do you know what happened? I died. But my children who I was trying to save . . . lived"(35).

But Clora's death is the force that moves the narrative forward; her presence continues to narrate the story. When the transformation from human to narrative voice takes place, Clora assumes a mythic dimension and is allowed, by some divine power, to remain observant of her children. She can foresee the future as it pertains to her "blood" as well. Cooper intends Clora to be received as a living, talking being that can serve as a medium and can bridge gaps between the past and present, between her children and her children's ancestors, and between Cooper and her readers. In her essay "African –American Women's Historical Novels", Barbara Christian concludes that "as we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history, they [African-American Women's Historical Novels] remind us that if we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts we want to remember, those parts we want to forget" (340-341). Christian's statement explains the significance of the historical fictions like *Family* which centers on the lives of black women during slavery and the Reconstruction years. Contemporary black women writers can "remember that which could not be recorded but which continues to exist in storytelling, in cultural patterns, and in the imagination," pass on the memories of strength, courage and endurance necessary to establish and maintain African American culture and community (Christian 338).

Now at the centre of the new myth is Always, who inherits her mother Clora's life. But in Always, Cooper creates a new type of African American mythic figure, larger than life, more myth than person. Always is much stronger and determined to get from life what was not possible for her ancestors, though at first it appeared as if she would be caught in the same web of abuse and subjugation like them. But Always possesses an intuition and a will that they lacked. She is presented as very well balanced, negotiating carefully between head and heart. When Doak Butler purchases her so as to increase the strength of his slaves with an aim to impress his wife-to-be, Always just "walked towards her future down that time-worn path to the buggy waiting to carry her away . . ."(80). In a very short period Always is able to rejuvenate barren land, inspire hopeless lives, and endure with dignity to see the day when she is legally emancipated. The reader is provided by Cooper with an intimate look at the strategies black women might have used not only to survive their condition, but also to improve upon it and move on with their lives. The moment Always realizes that her fate is

sealed as Doak's property, new thoughts raise inside her. It is activated by the Master's denial to a proper burial of Plum, her sister's crushed body. Always decides there and then that she would find a "place, a secret place. . .to bury her little sister, the end of her family. And that secret piece of land she would make hers. She would steal it!"(91). Clora, as the unseen witness, notices her daughter's growing hatred and understands her mind that tried to plot, to scheme, and how it lay in wait for the proper time to strike back silently. She is a planner as Clora says " My Chile, Always, had planned when she didn't even know she was planning!"(219).

Doak Butler's barren land is transformed into a self-sustaining estate, with Always at the helm. With her care and dedication Always very soon wins the confidence of her Mistress and impress upon her to make Masr Jason, the crippled brother of the Master to oversee the vast land. Many things are organized carefully by Always to benefit all of them from the barren land. Masr Jason too gets a new lease of life and is relieved of his hopeless life. Always also, moves on from helplessness to self-empowerment, giving the message through rehabilitative story telling that all is not finished. In the fictive world of Cooper's novel, the characters struggle to overcome the physical, social, and psychological restraints imposed upon them by the institution of whiteness. Always makes a choice to remain where she is and not leave the land even after she was free. She has earned "silver and gold money" from the land as per her dreams (110). Always' entrepreneurial plans suggests a new order of prosperity and independence for the enslaved woman. In addition to portraying Always as an independent farmer, working the land and increasing its productivity, Cooper suggests that there is something of the tricksters about Always. By endowing her lead protagonist with the ability to subvert the forces of oppression, Cooper affirms the power of the human spirit over the most trying circumstances.

The events that Clora narrates as the experiences of a slave allows her to address and comment on problems and incidents that occur in the past and present, making the novel to function as a living narrative and allowing her to evolve psychologically. By the end of the novel, Clora's attitude towards slavery and whites change. Through the example of Always, her courageous daughter, she understands that there can be many other avenues for black women to subvert white domination besides giving up the struggle as she and her maternal ancestors had done by committing suicide and believing it to be the only route for escaping slavery. Clora's hatred for the whites at last seems to vanish. By the end of the novel, her attitude towards the whites softens, as she declares ". . .all these people livin are brothers and sisters and cousins. All these beautiful different colors! We!"(231)

The concept of racial passing as a means to escape white oppression serves as an important theme throughout Cooper's *Family*. Clora's other children, Peach and Sun who had learnt to read and write without the knowledge of their Master choose a life of "passing" instead of living under slavery assigned by the whites. While passing did allow them the freedom to pursue economic and social stability, it also necessitated them to deny all familial ties to the black community. Peach and Sun eagerly embrace the privileges that whiteness affords them, and they deny everything related with their past. Sun becomes a wealthy businessman and marries a French lady of dignity and lives a life of ease and comfort as a white. Peach too reaps the advantage of being born with a white skin. She lives in Scotland

after marrying the man who had bought her and passes as a white very easily; she has to change her name only from Peach to Peachel and pronounced it Pe-SHEL. On the other hand, Always, who is “most white as her mistress” (41), continues to live as a black woman, maintaining allegiance to the blood ties of her ancestors. Always as the novel’s heroine, is depicted throughout the text as strong, resilient as well as shrewd. Taking her own life like her ancestors would have contradicted the elements of intriguity that Cooper has endowed her with. Always does not tire easily because in her mind she is working towards and planning for a better future for herself. She succeeds in exchanging her first born white son by Doak Butler for his legal son born just twenty four hours earlier. The boys looked similar and the Mistress was weak enough to understand any foul play by a slave. Always does this to make her son reap all the benefits of a white life. Always gathers the fruit of this trick after many years when she demands a piece of land from her legal son living in the white world. The reunion of Always with her son is not pleasant as her son is ashamed to be born of a slave mother. But Always with her intelligence tempts him with her hidden treasure of gold and silver and compels him to succumb to her demand of owning a piece of land she has worked so hard to prosper. She probably wants to be the owner of a land in order to be rid of the memory of being the property of the Master of the Land for so long. She gets her own land and home and marries a black man and finally gets a life of true love with a brown child born to them who is completely free and not a slave. Cooper celebrates the triumph of wit and independence of a black woman in the role of Always.

Clora, who is tired, is highly satisfied to see her grandchildren all happy and free. She watches her children “. . . my blood, . . . it was getting all spread out” (62). She has no regrets on Peach and Sun assuming to pass as whites. She says “ My blood ran like it was let loose from a stream into the river, into the ocean. It ran. . . Ran into the world, hidden, but THERE” (63). Negotiating with whiteness was necessary for them to get away from the dungeon of slavery.

Thus, the pain from which Clora suffers at the beginning of the novel is in the end alleviated. Clora has moved from bitterness to forgiveness and from hatred to love by the end of her narration. Sharing her story becomes the key to her psychic healing. For Clora’s audience, who are part of her journey, the events of the novel culminate in an invitation to reconsider the separatist ideas that inform race relations by promoting the acknowledgement of the familial ties that, if fully accepted can bind humanity.

Elizabeth Beaulieu explains on the recent changes in outlook on slavery and refers to Steven Spielberg’s film *Amistad* and the film adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* with Oprah Winfrey playing the lead. These two films confirmed people’s will to see the revision of American history from a different perspective. She further says in her Preface:

As a contemporary phenomenon, the neo-slave narrative reflects late-twentieth-century interest in slavery as subject matter. American history textbooks now include the findings of 1960s revisionist scholarship and thus students receive a more well- rounded portrait of American history. The debate over a national apology for the wrongs of slavery has been rekindled, and there is talk of a national monument to slavery.

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