

The book of negroes

Sociology, Slavery



Lawrence Hill's novel *The Book of Negroes* is a gripping tale of a young African girl named Aminata, in her life as she is abducted at a young age and forced into the slave trade. This is not a challenging read as it does not have a high level of vocabulary so it is readable by almost all ages. The story progresses as Aminata grows and matures physically and mentally, through horrendous conditions and mistreatment. The journey is full of twists and turns, and you can't help but root for the determined young Aminata. This Novel will keep you wanting more, you won't be satisfied till the final page. *The Book of Negroes* is divided by three parts. In the first part you are exposed to a quite young Aminata. She is (at this point) inexperienced, or in other words oblivious to the world outside her close conglomerate of nearby villages. This is portrayed by her innocence as a child to the harsh realities of the outside world. Her mother is a midwife and delivers babies to provide for their family. Aminata is taken along on many of her trips and learns how to do it herself, which will be a crucial skill for her later on throughout life. This point in the novel, there is a twist thrown into the plot. On their return journey they are captured by slave traders and marched away from their home. The brutality of the slave traders gives the reader their first glimpse into the hardships Aminata will endure throughout her journey. Despite the bleak conditions, Aminata retains her hope and will to live. Throughout the novel the reader witnesses Aminata's growth in several aspects. After being taken she begins going through puberty, hard enough while being in the best of circumstances. Secondly she grows intellectually as she progresses through her trials. An awareness of how different the world really was than what she had first envisioned as a child. Her journey progresses as she

changes with each no surrounding she is placed in. Starting from Africa, to Carolina, Nova Scotia, even Sierra Leon. As she travels from place to place you become aware of the extent that slavery had penetrated into every society around the world. While in Carolina, Aminata (much older at this juncture) retains much more responsibility and freedoms due to her skills as a midwife, as well as ability to read and write, than the majority of African slaves of the region. While in the States at this time an American war erupted between Britain and nationalist Americans. Aminata's contributions to the British won her a spot in the famous Book of Negroes. This book was the only thing that would anyone whose name was in it, to leave the United States and resettle in Nova Scotia, Canada. She is then greeted with the realization that Canada isn't as accepting as she would have hoped.

Canadians hold a expectation of accommodation, yet are not as welcoming as we would have liked to believe. Lawrence Hill creates a story to where the reader must feel sympathy for Aminata. That we would root for her with each undertaking she pursues, that each act of strength and defiance despite unprecedented odds stacked against her. She truly exemplifies a strong women protagonist in a world where not only women are second class in a male dominated society, but also black in a white dominated society. The fact that she overcame insurmountable odds makes this story that much more intriguing. Other struggles she has faced are not all that uncommon in such facets like: sexism, exploitation sexually, verbal and physical abuse, and public humiliation. The story of Aminata is a realistic story, whose struggles are easily relatable to an extent which makes the novel that much more enticing. I really enjoyed this novel, it kept me on the edge wanting

more. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is looking for a good book to read leisurely. Significant Passages Book One Chapter 1: " And now I am old" I have escaped violent endings even as they have surrounded me. But I never had the privilege of holding onto my children, living with them, raising them the way my own parents raised me for ten or eleven years, until all of our lives were torn asunder. 68 - The abolitionists say they have brought me to England to help them change the course of history. Well. We shall see about that. But if I have lived this long, it must be for a reason. 76 - Here I am, a broken-down old black woman who has crossed more water than I care to remember, and walked more leagues than a work horse, and the only things I dream of are the things I can't have—children and grandchildren to love, and parents to care for me. 85 - One girl asked if it was true that I was the famous Meena Dee, the one mentioned in all the newspapers. Her parents, she said, did not believe that I could have lived in so many places. I acknowledged that I was Meena Dee, but that she could call me Aminata Diallo if she wanted, which was my childhood 88 - Love them good, I told her, and love them big. Love them every day. She asked why I was so black. I asked why she was so white. She said she was born that way. Same here, I replied. I can see that you must have been quite pretty, even though you are so very dark, she said. You would be prettier if London ever got any sun, I replied. 92 - Honey, I said, my life is a ghost story. Then tell it to me, she said. As I told her, I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali, born in the village of Bayo, three moons by foot from the Grain Coast in West Africa. I am a Bamana. And a Fula. I am both, and will explain that later. I suspect that I was born in 1745, or close to

it. And I am writing this account. All of it. Should I perish before the task is done, I have instructed John Clarkson-one of the quieter abolitionists, but the only one I trust-to change nothing. 100 - I am branded, and can do nothing to cleanse myself of the scar. I have carried this mark since the age of eleven, but only recently learned what the initials represent. At least they are hidden from public view. I am much happier about the lovely crescent moons sculpted into my cheeks. I have one fine, thin moon curving down each of my cheekbones, and have always loved the beauty marks, although the people of London do tend to stare. 118 - I was tall for my age when I was kidnapped, but stopped growing after that and as a result stand at the unremarkable height of five feet, two inches. To tell the truth, I don't quite hit that mark any longer. 121 - Do not trust large bodies of water, and do not cross them. If you, dear reader, have an African hue and find yourself led toward water with vanishing shores, seize your freedom by any means necessary. And cultivate distrust of the colour pink. Pink is taken as the colour of innocence, the colour of childhood, but as it spills across the water in the light of the dying sun, do not fall into its pretty path. There, right underneath, lies a bottomless graveyard of children, mothers and men. I shudder to imagine all the Africans rocking in the deep. Every time I have sailed the seas, I have had the sense of gliding over the unburied. 146 - Book 1 Chapter 2: " Small hands were good" mint tea has always brought me back to my childhood in Bayo. 158 - I asked Papa where, exactly, was Timbuktu? Far away, he said. Had he been there? Yes, he said, he had. It was located on the mighty Joliba River, and he had once travelled there to pray, to learn and to cultivate his mind, which every believer should do. This made me want to cultivate my

mind too. About half of the people of Bayo were Muslims, but Papa was the only one who had a copy of the Qur'an, and who knew how to read and write.

176 - I loved to hear the story about how they had never been meant to set eyes on each other, Mama being a Bamana and Papa a Fula. I loved how their story defied the impossible. They were never supposed to meet, let alone come together and start a family.

185 - Papa drank in her smooth walking gait, level head, lifted chin, the arch of her back, her long, strong legs and the heels of her feet, dyed red. " She seemed serious and dependable, but not to be trifled with, " Papa said. " I knew in an instant that she would become my wife. " Mama sipped her tea and laughed. " I was busy, " 192 - Mama's first husband had disappeared 197 - People assumed that he was either dead or kidnapped. Papa's wife-to whom he had been betrothed before he or she were even born-had recently died of fever. 198 - They settled on six goats, seven bars of iron, ten copper manillas and four hundred strung cowrie shells. These were troubled times, and without all the turmoil, the marriage between a Fula and a Bamana would not have been permitted. 202 - He claimed that it was not the place of a girl to learn to read or write, but relented when he saw me attempting to draw words in Arabic with a stick in the sand. So, in the privacy of our home, with nobody but my mother as a witness, I was shown how to use a reed, dyed water and parchment. I learned to write phrases in Arabic, such as Allaahu Akbar (God is great) and Laa ilaaha illa-Lah (There is none worthy of worship except God). 208 - Mama was always wanted when a woman was ready to bring a child to light. Once she even helped a donkey stalled in labour. She had a peaceful smile when she was happy and felt safe, a smile that I have thought

of every day since I was ripped away from her. 219 - When my time came, I refused to enter the world. Papa said that I was punishing my mother for conceiving me. 222 - I remember wondering, within a year or two of taking my first steps, why only men sat to drink tea and converse, and why women were always busy. I reasoned that men were weak and needed rest. 239 - Once, however, Fanta, the youngest wife of the village chief, slapped me when she found me attempting to make a baby suckle me. 243 - I had heard stories of men in other villages being stolen by invading warriors or even sold by their own people, but never did it seem that this could happen to me. After all, I was a freeborn Muslim. I knew some of the Arabic prayers, and even had the proud crescent moon carved high into each of my cheeks. The crescent moons were to make me beautiful, but they also identified me as a believer among my Fulbe villagers. 244 - but even children knew that no Muslim was allowed to hold another Muslim in captivity. I believed that I would be safe. 248 - Mama said that some women had their womanly parts cut up and put back together very badly. 259 - I became adept at that, and Mama said it was good to have me along because my hands were so small. 274 - " Mama is beautiful, " I said. " Mama is strong, " he said. " Beauty comes and goes. Strength, you keep forever. " " What about the old people? " " They are the strongest of all, for they have lived longer than all of us, and they have wisdom, " he said, tapping his temple. 345 - " And I will travel, and cultivate my mind, " I said. " We will not speak of that, " he said. " Your task is to become a woman. " 358 - " Then you must learn to hide your disrespect. " 376 - The woman laughed. " You spoil her. " " Not a chance. I am training her to carry me the same way, when I am old. " 382 - Their eyes

sank. Fomba dropped his head. The male captives could do nothing for me. They were all tied at the hands and yoked by the necks. To resist was suicide, and who but my own father and mother would fight for me now, and fight to the death? 489 - I prayed that this was a dream, but the dream would not relent. 493 - Book 1 Chapter 3: " Three Revolutions of the Moon" To gaze into another person's face is to do two things: to recognize their humanity, and to assert your own. As I began my long march from home, I discovered that there were people in the world who didn't know me, didn't love me, and didn't care whether I lived or died. 506 - I felt a cowrie in the sand, under my toes, and scooped it up before they yoked my neck again. It was white, and hard, with curled lips ridged like tiny teeth, the whole thing as small as my thumbnail. It was beautiful and perfect and, it seemed, unbreakable. I rinsed it in the water and put it on my tongue. It felt like a friend in my mouth, and comforted me. I sucked it fiercely, and wondered how many cowries I was worth. 525 - One did not smile at enemies. I told myself this, but suddenly doubted it. My father, I remembered, had told me that a wise man knows his enemies, and keeps them close. 533 - I nearly made myself crazy, wondering how to escape my own nakedness. 539 - We were roped above the ankles, in pairs, and our neck yokes were removed so that we could lie down under the baobab tree. 558 - " Come near, child, " she said. " I can feel you shivering. I spoke harshly because I am hungry and tired, but I won't really beat you. " 561 - He lay next to me, patted my arm, and said he would not let them hurt me but that I must sleep correctly. 566 - . . . but I got no further. A captor came and struck me with his stick and ordered me back onto the ground. Eventually, I fell asleep. 573 - I was worse

than a captive. I was becoming an unbeliever. I could not praise Allah properly, without prayer. 578 - Part of me wanted to hate Chekura, and to keep my hatred simple and focused. Another part of me liked the boy and craved his company—any conversation with another child was welcome. 617 - " Take the food, " she said, " but don't talk to him. He is not your friend. Remember that. " 625 - Fanta and I began to walk side by side, but never at the front of the coffle, so we wouldn't be the ones meeting snakes or scorpions, nor at the back, for fear of being whipped if we slowed the pace. 631 - The children began taunting the new captive. 643 - I could not understand why we had been the amusement of those village boys. True, the children of Bayo—myself included—had teased Fomba all the time. But we had never hurt him. We had never yoked him by the neck, or deprived him of food. 648 - I had never seen captives passing outside our walled village. But if we had seen men, women and children yoked and forced to march like woloso, only worse, I hoped that we would have fought for them and freed them. 650 - " They are only boys, Aminata, " Chekura said. " And all these villagers who sell goods to the captors and stand guard over us at night? Why do they help these men? " " Why do I help them? " he said. " What choice have they? " " They were not all sold by their uncles, " I said. " We do not know their stories, " Chekura said. 656 - It was such an unexpected gesture of kindness that my eyes filled with tears. 664 - In my nakedness, it was impossible to hide the blood running down my legs. 667 - I looked for signs of knives or other instruments, wondering if they meant to do something to me, now that my womanhood was emerging. 683 - I felt so much better, and safer, with my privates covered. Suddenly I was hungry,

and I realized that the shame of nakedness had kept my appetite at bay. 686 - This I heard my mother saying to me, from the spirit lands. Take the food, child. These women won't hurt you. 688 - I wished that I had been allowed to stay with them. 694 - I had no idea whether the people of the next village would show brutality or kindness. 695 - Under my foot was the body of a naked, decomposing man. 712 - Fanta took the leaves and wiped my foot and held me and told me not to be afraid. But my hysteria escalated, even though Fanta barked at me to calm down, and I could not stop screaming. 713 - Soon we were stepping over at least one body a day. When captives fell, they were untied from their coffles and left to rot. 721 - The baboon swept up the small girl who had been walking for two moons with her father and stole away with her, tearing back into the bushes. 730 - Chekura cut through the rope around the man's ankle and ran off with him in pursuit of the baboon. 731 - The captors did not tie him back up. They let him dig a shallow grave for the girl. 734 - I found it unbearable to contemplate his pain, yet I could not escape the sound of his agony. 737 - The other captives also turned away from the grieving father. 739 - I stood up and stared and hoped. 745 - Our captors refused to bring him to his daughter, or to bury him or even to touch the body. They were unwilling to acknowledge this act of self-destruction. 749 - On their orders, we walked for a good 750 - saluted a new breed of man. Skin speckled, like that of a washed pig. Shrunken lips, blackened teeth. But big, and tall, and standing like a chief, chest out. So this was a toubab! 753 - "Is he a man or an evil spirit?" "A man," Chekura said. "But he is not a man you want to know." "You know him?" "No, but you don't want to know any toubab." "My papa said, fear no man, but come

to know him. " " Fear the toubab. " 759 - " How can he breathe, with a nose so thin? Do those nostrils admit air? " " Do not look at the toubab. " " He has many hairs. " " To look directly at the toubab is a mark of defiance. " " Chekura! There are even hairs growing from his nostrils. " " Walk carefully, Aminata. " " Are you my captor or my brother? " Chekura 764 - She described how she had been taken captive while carrying food to the women who were working in the cassava fields, pulling the roots from the ground. With the baby so full inside her, she had chosen not to fight. 823 I didn't know if it was wise to name a child so quickly, or to name it after me. Perhaps it would bring bad luck to name a child after someone in such danger. 833 Sanu and I touched fingers. Tears sprang from Sanu's eyes, and that unlocked all the sadness within me. I heaved and shook and cried until my eyes were emptied, and Sanu's tears rolled steadily down her cheeks as she held still and fed the baby. It was bad luck, I knew, to cry when a baby was born. 836 For two days, I lost myself in daydreams while staring at the tiny baby bundled up close against her mother. 843 It confused me to see them force Chekura into my canoe. 852 As we left the land, a captive in the boat next to mine struggled to his feet, bellowed and rocked his canoe. Two huge oarsmen stopped rowing and bashed him mightily with their oars. Still he kept struggling. When the canoe began to pitch, they dropped their oars and quickly threw the captive out into the fast-moving waters. He thrashed and sank and was gone. 854 " You are one of the lucky ones, " he said. " A big boat is waiting, and nearly full. All of you will be sold and will travel across the water in very short time. " " Lucky? " I asked. " Others will have been waiting on that ship for moons. Dying, slowly, as it fills. But you will not

have to " Walk gently among your captives, Chekura. One will be sure to have a knife, and be waiting for you to make one false step. " " And you, Aminata, beware of your own beauty, flowering among strangers. " 866 " I have taken many men to the sea, " Chekura said, " but not once have I seen one return to his village. " " Then I will sleep by day and walk at night. But listen to me, friend. I will come back. And I will come home. " 875 Locked inside this pen, naked and sore and bleeding, we stood tight together in sandy soil that stank of urine and feces. They brought us boiled millet and dumped it in a trough. 866 Women from my own homeland washed us with cold water and rubbed palm oil on our skin, to make us look shiny and healthy. Inside our pen, homelander women who were clothed and cold-eyed dragged one female captive to a corner, where toubabu and homelander men stood waiting with a metal device heating over glowing embers. I looked away, but heard the woman screaming as if someone had torn off her arm. I vowed not to give them the pleasure of my pain. But when my turn came, I surrendered to their coarseness and their stink. They dragged me to the branding corner. Their wounding metal was curved like a giant insect. As they brought it toward me, I defecated. They aimed a finger's length above my right nipple, and pressed it into my flesh. I could smell it burning. The pain ran through me like hot waves of lava. The people who had been pinning me down let me go. I could think only of heat, and of pain. I could not move. I opened my mouth, but no sound came. Finally, I heard a moan escape my lips. Arms around me. Another woman's scream. And I was gone. 888 I held Fanta with one hand, Sanu with the other. The noise was such that it drowned out the crying of Sanu's baby. When the explosion from the

clouds ceased, we found ourselves in a field of mud up to our ankles. We spent the whole night standing. The boat terrified me, but I was even more afraid of sinking deep into the salty water, with no possibility for my spirit to return to my ancestors. Let them do what they wanted with my body-on land. Then, at least, my spirit would travel, and I would return home to my ancestors, and I would no longer be alone. 913 Men and women shook and trembled. I grew quiet, and calmer. " Fear no man, " father had said, " and come to know him. " I saw Chekura. His face was bruised and his expression defeated. His head was slumped. What a stupid boy. He should have fled on land, near Bayo, where he knew the forests and the people. He should have fled long before they turned on him. I did not call out to him. I clenched my teeth and looked out over the water at all my people tied in canoes and being pushed, prodded and pulled up a long plank rising along the great wall of the ship. I turned back to see my homeland. There were mountains in the distance. One of them rose like an enormous lion. But all its power was trapped on the land. It could do nothing for any of us out on the water. 922