ISSN 3007-3170(O)
ISSN :3007-3162(P)
January-March 2025
Social Sciences & Humanity Research Review

FRACTURED SELVES: EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF SLAVERY IN SADEQA JOHNSON'S *YELLOW WIFE*

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Slavery, Racism, Identity Crisis, Identity Vacua, Double Consciousness.

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the concept of identity crisis in the novel, *Yellow Wife* (2021), written by Sadeqa Johnson. This historical novel is inspired by the real-life story of a mulatto enslaved woman, Mary Lumpkin, whose experiences are fictionalized through the protagonist, Pheby Deloris Brown. She serves as the embodiment of the perilous existence and the complex challenges faced by the enslaved individuals in the brutal system of slavery in the Southern America. This study argues that slavery plays a significant role in exacerbating Pheby's identity crisis. It also unearths the hampering effects of double consciousness on her identity development. The protagonist's fragmented identity as a result of the racially prejudiced social hierarchy shows her denied agency to construct a cohesive self. The research interprets the novel by employing Erik H. Erikson's concept of identity crisis as the theoretical framework. Erikson (1970) contemplates the biological, personal, and social aspects of identity development and how these factors challenge a particular group of individuals. In the novel, the oppressive social system inherited from slavery deprives Pheby of the opportunity to construct a unified self-identity due to her subjugated status. The study concludes that the system of slavery is not only harmful to the physical well-being of the slaves but also erects an array of psychological problems that still have considerable impacts on the choices of black people.

Introduction

The issue of identity crisis among the black community in the United States dates back to the era of slavery. The transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the Southern United States left inerasable marks on the hearts and minds of the black people. At the heart of the slave business was the idea of racial segregation based on skin color, which was derived from the concept of religious distinction. In other words, the religious superiority of a Christian over a non-Christian manifested into the racial superiority of a white person over a black (Lavalley & Johnson, 2020). The exclusive environment of the racially segregated society of the Southern U.S. made it impossible for the transported people to imagine themselves other than a disposable commodity (Vitez, 2024). The plethora of social, cultural, ethnic, and racial problems forever altered the self-perceptions of the black community. One of the key social issues generated by the slavery system was the question of the identity of the black inhabitants of the U.S. Whether to reclaim their African roots or assimilate into the new social reality of America remained an issue of great importance among the black community (Du Bois, 2015). Identity confusion sprawled over the minds of the entire black population for many generations.

A great body of literature has been produced to address the question of identity conflict and its impacts on the minds of black people. Sadeqa Johnson's novel, *Yellow Wife* (2021), is one such endeavor to reflect on the past and to resurrect the lost voices of those who were silenced because of their dark skin. The story of the novel, *Yellow Wife* (2021), is based on—although not entirely—the life of Mary Lumpkin in Richmond, Virginia, as Sadeqa Johnson notes in the "Author's Note." She was the concubine (later became the wife) of Robert Lumpkin, who was a white slave trader. The novel portrays the brutalities done to black people during the period of slavery in the United States. The cruelties were not only harmful to the physical well-being of the black people but also posed tremendous threats to the "psychic dimension" of the slaves (Painter, 2006). One of the greatest damages that slavery and the resultant racism did to the black people was the confused identities of the slaves (Smedley, 1998). The novel also refers to the challenges encountered by the black protagonist, which illuminate the pull between white supremacy and the black selfhood.

The social role and status enforced upon the protagonist of the novel entail profound impacts on her selfhood and identity. This study brings forth the idea of how the black Afro-Americans (the protagonist in particular) in the novel face the problem of identity crisis as a result

of slavery. Slavery and identity crisis are inextricably linked terms because slavery is the root cause of identity issues in American history. In this context, Erik H. Erikson's theory of personality development and his concept of identity crisis shed light on psychological, biological, social, and historical aspects of identity formation. With the help of Erikson's model, the identity crisis of the protagonist can be aptly understood in the aforementioned novel. The given research is conducted while taking into consideration the following two questions:

1. How does the novel, *Yellow Wife* (2021), portray the identity crisis faced by the protagonist?
2. How does double consciousness hamper the formation of an independent identity of the protagonist in the novel?

Thus, the study aims to highlight the social implications faced by black people in integrating themselves into a racially divided society by utilizing Erikson's concept of identity crisis. This research study is an attempt to investigate the identity crisis experienced by the slave protagonist of *Yellow Wife* (2021) because of slavery.

Literature Review

The slave trade, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, considerably changed the history and lives of the African people. Its impacts on the culture, civilization, history, identity, and psyche of the black people were so immense that they can be felt even to the present day. Racism, one of the most destructive ideas in history, emerged in America as a result of slavery, which Fredrickson defines in terms of "difference and power" (Fredrickson, 2002). Fredrickson argues that racism emerges from a particular "mindset" that considers "them" different and alien from "us." This differentiation, he argues, "rationalizes for using our power advantage" against the other races in such a way that it would be considered an atrocity "if applied to members of our own group" (Fredrickson, 2002). This "mindset" makes racism even more dangerous as people from other groups are not only looked upon as inferior but also as potential criminals, which then justifies every extreme act against them.

Slavery and racial discrimination eventually result in loss of selfhood, which is one of the pivotal themes of black literature. According to Asangaeneng, Eka & Okon (2023), black literature "has always questioned the idea that humanity is White" or the concept that "the White man must define the Black man" (p. 105). It is this trend of describing the blacks by the standards of the white world, and then considering them inferior because they do not fulfill the criteria of that

world, that forced the black writers to shed light on the identity problems faced by the black folks. "Identity," the authors of the aforementioned research add, "continues to reverberate as a very strong motif" in black literature, for their very existence depends on an independent identity in a world dominated by white standards. Black authors treat the identity of the blacks both ways, that is, "the way Blacks identify themselves," and the way "how Whites identify them" (p. 108). Sadeqa Johnson's novel *Yellow Wife* (2021), which is written in a retrospective narrative style, also reflects the same identity issue, that is, how the black protagonist constructs her identity under slavery, and how she is viewed by her white masters.

Quddusi, Shaheen & Qamar (2022) view the novel *Yellow Wife* (2021) as a "neo-slave narrative." According to them, "the neo-slave narrative" has significantly affected the development of "later African-American narrative genres." This type of narration, as they argue, examines the slavery system from a range of perspectives by using "a range of writing techniques," such as from historically realistic novels to fantasy writing, postmodernist, humor, and other writings that blend these types (Quddusi, Shaheen & Qamar, 2022, p. 872). By inculcating such a diversity of techniques and experiences, this type of literature, as the authors argue, portrays the importance of the history and reminiscences of slavery for the "personal, ethnic, sexual, cultural, and social identities" of the black community. They also discuss the role of imagination in the neo-slave narrative in a two-fold manner: "First, it's the expertise that each slave narrative author brings to the table." By using the first-person narration, the author tries to legitimize the independent identity of the African-American slave. Second, these accounts encourage the reader to use his/her "imagination in need to fully understand what is being given" (Quddusi, Shaheen & Qamar, 2022, p. 872). These re-created tales of slavery not only depict the dangerous pathway followed by the slaves towards freedom, but also about black people's battles to write openly on antebellum America" (Quddusi, Shaheen & Qamar, 2022, p. 877).

Azon & Uac (2021) analyze the black female characters in *Yellow Wife* (2021) from a psychoanalytical perspective. Their research explores the dehumanizing challenges faced by black people, particularly women, during the era of slavery as described in the novel. They also explore "the various resilience tricks and politics" that the black female characters in the novel embrace to ensure their survival in the ruthlessly oppressive slavery system, and to avoid the "deadly threats of their daily circumstances" (Azon & Uac, 2021, p. 228). These coping strategies adopted by the black female characters play an important role not only in their survival but also in historicizing

their harsh experiences. Moreover, these schemes, such as storytelling, folk songs, and religious hymns, also offer them a healthy channel to get rid of their repressed thoughts. But these survival tricks are not as simple as they appear to be. Thousands of black people lost their lives while "playing the game of survival and resilience," and many more bore the visible and invisible scars of this negotiation. The novel also refutes the prerogative put forward by some literary critics who claim "that slavery was not as bad as cruel as it is usually portrayed" (Azon & Uac, 2021, p. 240).

Theoretical Framework

Erik H. Erikson is a well-known German-American psychoanalyst. His work on psychological and personality development gives a new dimension to psychoanalysis. Erikson believes that personality development begins from early childhood, as a result of which a person goes through a range of periods that are not confined to sexual drives only, as the traditional Freudian model believes them to be. Among these stages of development, an important one is the identity crisis. Since Erikson coined the term *identity crisis,* it has become an interesting research area in psychoanalysis as well. For Erikson, identity is "something quite definite, but terribly elusive" (Gleason, 1983). Erikson's *Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis* (1970) and his theory of the eight stages of psychosocial development (*Childhood and Society,* 1950) provide substantial analytical data about the concept of identity crisis.

In *Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis* (1970), Erikson argues that the identity crisis of a person is dependent on both "psycho and social means" (p. 731). Erikson states that the "psycho" aspect of identity crisis is beset with the dynamics of conflict, and from the vantage point, a person can experience "contradictory mental states such as a sense of aggravated vulnerability." Identity crisis, Erikson continues, emerges in a particular "developmental stage" which is comprised of "adolescence and youth." By this, Erikson means that identity crisis "partially depends on psychobiological factors" (Erikson, 1970, p. 732). Erikson, then, introduces the "socio" aspects of one's identity by which he means that all individuals reside in a community that significantly shapes their identities. "Psychosocial identity," he adds, "then, also has a psychohistorical side, and life histories are inextricably interwoven with history" (Erikson, 1970, p. 732). The analysis confirms that identity crisis is not confined to the psyche of a person only but also depends upon the environment and history as well.

Erikson, in another major work, *Childhood and Society* (1950), puts forward eight stages

of psychological development of an individual, from childhood to death. During each stage of development, social, biological, and psychological factors work together in varying degrees to contribute to the mental development of a person. These factors have profound impacts on an individual's psychic life, and if not handled properly, the result can be either poor or extreme mental behavior. Various behaviors are adapted by a person while going through these stages. From stage one to stage four, that is childhood, an individual gains little autonomy and is mostly dependent on parents and caregivers for both physical and emotional support (Erikson, 1950). In the fifth stage of development, childhood, according to Erikson (1950), comes to a proper end, and the child enters the stage of "sexual maturity" (Erikson, 1950, p. 227). This is the stage where identity crisis surfaces, which may lead to what Erikson calls "role diffusion" (Erikson, 1950, p. 228).

Race and class play a special role in the process of role diffusion because people with different demographic specifications may face the trouble of acceptance in a particular society. The black people in America faced the same phenomenon as slaves: they were part of a society where their identities were not acknowledged as independent human beings. In this context, Du Bois, in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2015), substantiates the process of estrangement in society under the terminology of "double consciousness." For Du Bois, "double consciousness" is a psychic state in which a person judges "one's self through the eyes of others (Du Bois, 2015, p. 5). Double consciousness is the "two-ness" where an individual is entrapped in "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" which eventually leads to a deep sense of lost selfhood. The life struggle of a black individual revolves around "this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (Du Bois, 2015, p. 5). If this struggle fails, the individual can suffer a desperate sense of rootlessness, which, in turn, impedes the formation of an individual's self-identity.

Discussion

The novel, *Yellow Wife* (2021), revolves around an enslaved woman, Pheby Deloris Brown. She lives on a plantation farm with her mother, Ruth, and their white master, Jacob, and his wife, Missus Delphina. Pheby is the daughter of Master Jacob, who is in an extramarital relationship with Pheby's mother. He promises Ruth that Pheby will be sent to a school like a white girl and will not be treated like an ordinary slave. However, Master Jacob and Ruth met with an accident

on their way home from a trip. Both were badly injured. Ruth was brought back to the house, where she shortly died. As Pheby mourns her mother's death and holds funeral rituals, Missus Delphina detains her and sells her to slave traders. She is sent to the notorious jail known as "The Devil Half Acre" (Johnson, 2021) in Richmond, Virginia. The owner of the jail is a cruel slave trader, Rubin Lapier, who purchases Pheby as his mistress from the auction at his jail. Pheby struggles to understand the jailer due to his unpredictable and violent behavior. Besides her first son, Monroe, from her enslaved lover, Henry Essex, she bears four daughters by Lapier. At the jail, Pheby observes the gruesome violence inflicted on the slaves, including Essex, who escapes from Master Jacob's plantation but is later recaptured. Pheby takes extreme measures to ensure her son's safety by sending him away with other escapees from Lapier's jail. Finally, she marries the jailer after the abolition of slavery as a result of the U.S. Civil War.

The novel, Yellow Wife (2021), presents a disturbing yet bold depiction of slavery in the Southern United States before the American Civil War. It is written in a first-person narrative using tangible details and concrete imagery to convey the profound experiences of Black people to the reader. Through this narration, the author, Sadeqa Johnson, emphasizes the individual growth and maturity of the protagonist, Pheby (Schipper, 1985). Pheby begins her story in her childhood with her mother, Ruth, and the other Black slaves on Master Jacob's "Bell Plantation" in Virginia during the mid-nineteenth century. She reveals that she is the child of a Black slave woman and her white master, which affords her a special status in her master's house. Both Pheby's mother and Master Jacob impress upon her that she is different from the other slaves and is destined for freedom. The promises of Master Jacob reassure Pheby about her freedom, which remains elusive in the Southern United States. Nonetheless, she remains hopeful and waits for the day when she will attend school like a white girl and finally be free. These hopes and promises of a free life deeply affect Pheby as she struggles to accept that she is, after all, a slave.

Pheby, as a teenager, is in the developing phase of her psychosocial identity, which is characterized by a natural stage of crisis in young people, particularly teenagers (Erikson, 1970). As Erikson (1970) explains, the transition from adolescence to adulthood becomes a challenging stage in life where individuals must decide their role in the future, that is, whether to adhere to traditional or expected roles or explore new paths for themselves (Erikson, 1970, p. 732). If the transition is successful, the individual can achieve a unified selfhood. Pheby also undergoes this transitory phase of her life. Her mother and Master Jacob help her navigate through her identity

crisis stage by promising her a good role in a bright future. Being the person who holds his slaves' future in his hands, Master Jacob promises Pheby freedom when the time is right for her, as he states: "Our Pheby will have a good life (Johnson, 2021, p. 20)." Her mother, too, tries everything she has at her disposal to provide her daughter with a free life. She mentally prepares her daughter to embrace these made-up promises as facts by telling Pheby about her very limited set of choices as a slave: "Just know everything I do is for you. I'ma die a slave…But you, baby, you are meant to see freedom." (Johnson, 2021, p. 21).

Pheby's mother, Ruth, plays a pivotal role in educating her daughter for a new and free life. Her extramarital affair with Master Jacob serves as a bridge in the life of her daughter because she is well aware of the fact that if someone can do something for her slave daughter, it is Master Jacob. At the same time, she takes special care of Pheby's upbringing and teaches her not only what she knows herself, such as knowledge about herbal medicines, but also how the free folks—white people—behave. Ruth also makes sure that her daughter knows her true familial roots. Ruth understands that if her daughter is to see freedom, it is undoubtedly necessary for her to be well aware of her family roots, which Ruth recites to Pheby as: "You the gran-daudder of Vinnie Brown, who was the gran-daudder of a Mandara queen. You a slave in name, but never in your mind, chile…You a woman born to see freedom…you ain't nobody's property. Hear?" (Johnson, 2021, p. 27).

Ruth systematically educates her daughter about her identity roots, which she traces back to Central Africa, as Mandara comprises modern-day northern Cameroon and northeastern Nigeria (Wade, 2012). This not only helps Pheby understand who she is but also allows her to consolidate her self-identity more accurately. After realizing her true self-identity, Pheby refuses to accept the identity imposed upon her by the social system, specifically that of a slave. With the help of her mother's education, Pheby soon recognizes that the slave identity entails nothing more than being a commodity—to be owned, bought, and sold. In this way, Ruth plays multiple roles within a compact slavery system—Pheby's mother, mentor, and protector all at once. Thus, the bond between mother and daughter is not just a bond of blood but is more firmly rooted in the promise of a new life.

Moreover, Pheby resides in a society fundamentally divided into racial compartments. The compartmentalization of her surroundings renders her as vulnerable and submissive as the other slaves; however, her direct blood relation to Master Jacob serves—or is supposed to serve—as a

bridge between the two compartments. Another advantage she possesses is the familiar community where people know her. According to Erikson (1970), "communal models," along with parental support, play an important role in the development of the "socio" aspect of a person's identity. Pheby lives among people who share not only the same background and history but also a common mode of living under an oppressive system. The people around her are closely knit by a shared atrocity committed against them, which facilitates understanding among them. Freedom is at the heart of all their wishes and desires. Pheby is not alone in the pursuit of freedom; however, her mother's strategic approach to the matter of her freedom and her blood bond to Master Jacob seem to offer her some advantage over the others. Socially, apart from her mother's teachings, Pheby absorbs the general dissent and the common psyche of rebellion against the white masters, which are integral to the identity of almost every slave around her.

Aside from her mother and Master Jacob, the person who plays a vital role in Pheby's upbringing is Master Jacob's sister, Miss Sally. Where education is strictly banned for slaves, Miss Sally serves as a personal mentor to Pheby, formally educating her as Pheby recounts her quality time spent with the Master's sister: "sitting by the fireplace, reading in the inglenook, learning arithmetic and geography, and playing the piano" (Johnson, 2021, p. 16-7). These talents imparted by Miss Sally serve a significant purpose in Pheby's future, distinguishing her from the rest of the slave community. She does not speak like them and knows how to navigate the white masters. These traits in Pheby's personality assure her of a promising role and future once she reaches the minimum legal age—the age of at least eighteen years—required for a slave to obtain freedom papers. This is why Pheby thoroughly absorbs the idea of her freedom; she finds it almost impossible to shake, as she states that Master Jacob's promises of a free life cling to her mind, while her mother further solidifies this idea: "Mama talked of it as often as she did her recipes for healing, weaving it into the fabric of my life" (Johnson, 2021, p. 40).

Thus, the promises of a different life trickle into Pheby's mind with such assurance that she develops a sort of phobia of seeing herself as a slave. The dream of freedom takes an irreplaceable status in her mind, due to which she develops a psychological split regarding her identity, that is, on a factual basis, she is as much a slave as all the other slaves at the plantation of Master Jacob are. While in her mind, she is as much a free black woman as a white woman can be. The psychological pull between her real-life circumstances—Pheby being a slave girl—and her idealized self-perception—a free black girl—eventually leads her to what Erikson calls "role

diffusion." Till this point, her identity crisis is part of her normal growth process and developmental period. The psycho and social aspects of her identity demonstrate a healthy development. Her mother, Master Jacob, and Miss Sally prove to be decisive in helping her navigate through the early turbulence of identity.

Pheby's life, however, takes an ugly turn at the critical juncture. Her mother and Master Jacob met with an accident on returning home from a trip. Ruth is brought back to the house while Jacob is carried to a nearby plantation, both of them badly injured from the accident. Ruth succumbs to her injuries in the house. The incident puts Pheby's life upside-down as not only does she lose her mother and Master Jacob, who also dies, but also the promises of freedom become blurry. Their absence from her life leaves her completely at the mercy of Missus Delphina, who already despises Pheby because of her mother and her elevated status. Even in the presence of Master Jacob, Missus Delphina repeatedly abuses Pheby both physically—by slapping her—and psychologically—by calling her "Ninny" to belittle her. Pheby's idealized perceptions of herself and her mother's teaching—a slave in her name only but never her mind—face a serious encounter under the authority of Missus Delphina. Delphina sees Pheby as a threat to her dominance due to her rebellious nature. For Delphina, she becomes a challenge to be surmounted. Her disregard for Pheby's presence is a struggle to drag her back to her proper place and social status, which is being a slave and nothing more.

As soon as Missus Delphina gets the chance in the absence of her husband, she sells Pheby to slave traders right in the middle of her mother's death ceremony. Pheby is transported to Lapier's Jail—notoriously known as "The Devil's Half Acre"—owned by Rubin Lapier (commonly referred to as the Jailer), a slave trader himself. Rubin, instead of selling her off, makes her his own concubine. Pheby takes charge of the jail as mistress of the jail, and the Jailer's trade and dealings. The social environment of Pheby changes at the jail as she is not only responsible for her own well-being but also the maintenance of Lapier's affairs. The role enforced upon her contradicts the role designed for her by her parental upbringing, aided by her social reality at Master Jacob's house. At Lapier's, she is pushed into a mental abyss where she finds herself neither a complete slave nor a truly free person. The unfortunate incidents and her role at the jail worsen her role confusion. The contradiction of self-identity Pheby intensifies when she comes to realize that she has entered a vicious, inescapable, and, definitely, disdainful role, which Erikson (1970) affirms by stating: "Identity problems sharpen with that turn in puberty when images of future

roles become inescapable" (p. 743). The thoughts of her freedom fading away under the social reality of her circumstances work as fuel on the fire.

Pheby does not achieve the role promised to her, which is why the expected identity crisis turns into psychological mayhem. She is forced to develop what Erikson (1970) terms a "negative identity" (p. 733). Erikson (1970) explains negative identity as:

The negative identity is the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or by which atypical individuals and marked minorities are made to feel "different." …A specific rage can be aroused wherever identity development loses the promise of a traditionally assured wholeness (p. 733).

The excerpt from Erikson clarifies that Pheby is unable to "submerge" the "undesirable" and "irreconcilable" chunks of her slave identity, which are imposed on her by the slavery system. The negative identity not only forces Pheby to accept her slave identity but also robs her of her promised future. The social setting of the race-oriented society, accompanied by the historical phenomenon of slavery, makes it impossible for Pheby to forge a completely positive and coherent self-identity. Pheby explains this dismay as "the war that raged inside of me…my only task was freedom" (Johnson, 2021, p. 103). This tension and contradiction in her selfhood produce psychological despair and mental restlessness.

The restlessness and desolation of Pheby can be better explained by Erikson's idea of "identity vacua" (1970, p. 733). Erikson (1970) explains "identity vacua" as follows:

The nature of the identity conflict often depends on the latent panic pervading a historical period. Some periods in history become identity vacua caused by three basic forms of human apprehension: *fears* aroused by new facts…*anxieties* aroused by symbolic dangers vaguely perceived as a consequence of the decay of existing ideologies; and the *dread* of an existential abyss devoid of spiritual meaning (emphasis original, p. 733).

In a historical sense and as a black slave, Pheby does have fears, not only about her own future but also about the future of her black son, who is not from the Jailer but from a slave called Henry Essex at Master Jacob's plantation. She knows that, in jail, neither she nor her son is safe. The ever-present danger of her being sold or her son being separated from her results in persistent anxiety. Pheby is constantly reminded of this possibility whenever a mother is separated from her children at Lapier's jail, which she describes: "the cries of the poor woman being separated from her son rang in my ears" (Johnson, 2021, p. 105). The risk of losing her child compels Pheby to

take extreme measures to ensure his safety; that is, she arranges his escape with his real slave father, Henry Essex.

An identity crisis may take a more severe and chronic form for individuals who are not accepted as part of the society in which they reside. This occurs because the "self-concept" assumes a particular "shape and form," supported by a specific "social, institutional and cultural structure" (Allen, 2001). Under compromised circumstances, people often develop what Du Bois (2015) calls a "double consciousness." This is also true for Pheby, as she lives in a society that offers her "no true self-consciousness" (Du Bois, 2015, p. 5). Her struggle to achieve a unified and coherent selfhood is consistently overshadowed by her double consciousness regarding her identity, particularly the slave identity imposed upon her. Even though Pheby resembles the wife of the Jailer, she is deliberately denied a free identity, which she expresses: "It did not matter that I lived in the big house, had his children, helped run his business: I was the same as those chained up in the courtyard awaiting sale" (Johnson, 2021, p. 167). The integration of these two realities—being a black slave and a free woman simultaneously—becomes a distant possibility for her within the Manichean social discourse.

Identity crisis severely deteriorates the self-esteem of Black people for two reasons: first, as an unavoidable biological phenomenon, like all other human beings, they also experience an identity crisis, which is part of normal human development. Second, while white people easily adjust to society because of their racial superiority, this opportunity is not available to Black people, as the social system does not provide them a chance to find their place in the status quo due to their racial inferiority. In this context, the contempt for and control by the white master overshadow the possibility of integrated self-consciousness for the slaves. Pheby, too, is not exempt from this social curse. The commodification of her existence is a constant reminder of the enduring constraints associated with her Black skin. Thus, the identity conflict within Pheby's personality is further aggravated by the social circumstances of her life.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above discussion that the novel, Yellow Wife (2021), vividly portrays the psychological consequences of the slavery system in the Southern United States before the U.S. Civil War. In this novel, apart from the physical well-being of the protagonist, Pheby Deloris Brown, being at stake, slavery is the main cause of the identity crisis that the slave protagonist

faces in its entirety. An identity crisis, according to Erikson (1970), is a normal developmental stage of a person's life; it can, however, turn into a psychological disaster for individuals who lack self-autonomy and are branded as unacceptable in the society where they reside. The protagonist, Pheby Deloris Brown, is an excellent embodiment of the identity crisis faced by many black slaves during the era of slavery. The communal role imposed upon her by the slave system, on the one hand, and her personal striving to develop a complete independent identity, on the other, become an inextricable aspect of her character in the novel. Her character—a representation of all the slaves in general—exemplifies the difficulty in finding a place for herself in a world that is divided based on skin color. Therefore, Pheby not only represents the exploited racial minority but also symbolizes the confused black folks whose true identities are ruined by the commercialization of their bodies.

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