



# Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade

*Manu Herstein*

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1775. The kingdom of Asante has conquered its northern neighbor, Dagbon, and exacted an annual tribute of 500 slaves. Ama is a story of the eponymous heroine who is caught up in the aftermath of these events.

Ama passes successively through the hands of the Dagomba, the Asante, the Dutch at Elmina, a British slave captain and Brazilian slave traders before ending up on a sugar estate in the Bahian Recôncavo. The point of view is Ama's throughout; yet while it is a consistently African point of view, the universality of the story's basic premise, that the cruelest oppression cannot erase mankind's love of liberty, transcends the particularities of geography and period.

The principal locations in which the story unfolds are a small hamlet in the savannah, in what is now the Northern Region of Ghana, the town of Yendi, the royal palace in the city of Kumase, Elmina Castle, a slave ship, *The Love of Liberty* and a sugar estate in Bahia, Brazil.

The plot of Ama is simple. The protagonist is captured and eventually transported to Brazil. Ama adopts various strategies in her struggle against the deprivation of her liberty, striking a balance between, on the one hand, escape and resistance and, on the other, accommodation to the realities of the power of her oppressors.

Ama is the principal character and the only one present from beginning to end. She is seventeen when the story starts, a simple country girl. Responding to hard experience, her character and moral strength develop and she becomes wiser and more resourceful and sophisticated. Prematurely aged at the end of the story, she has lost her eyesight but none of her spirit.

Other characters include Abdulai, leader of slave raiders; Itsho, Ama's lover; Ya Na Saa Ziblim\*, King of Dagbon; Koranteng Péte\*, Asante conqueror of Dagbon and later regent in the reign of Osei Kwame; Osei Kwadwo\* and Osei Kwame\*, fourth and fifth Asante kings; Konadu Yaadom\*, Asantehemaa (or 'queen mother'); Esi, a pawn in the royal palace; Pieter De Bruyn, governor at Elmina, who takes Ama as his concubine and teaches her English; Hendrik van Schalkwyk, lecherous chaplain; Augusta, Fanti slave trader; Jensen, Danish chief merchant; Richard Brew\*, slave trader at Anomabu; David Williams, captain of *The Love of Liberty*, William Williams, the captain's nephew, later British consul in Salvador; various British seamen; Butcher, ship's doctor; Nana Esi, slave; Tomba, slave from the Upper Guinea Coast, later Ama's husband; Josef, Fanti slave and his Yoruba wife, Wono; Olukoya, Yoruba babalorixa; the Senhor, owner of the sugar estate; the Senhora, his wife; Miranda, their daughter! ! ; Father Isaac, Catholic chaplain; and Jesus Vasconcellos, the Senhor's successor. (Asterisks indicate historical persons.)

The essential conflict in this story is between Ama and those who would deprive her and her fellow slaves of their liberty. In a broader sense, it is between the slaves and the world economic order of the time represented by the shadowy capitalists in remote metropolitan centres who were the ultimate beneficiaries of the slave trade and slavery.

There is a great deal of violence in this story. It is not arbitrary violence. Slaves lived their lives under constant threat of brutality. The crisis which gives the story its initial impetus is the capture of Ama (still known by her birth name, Nandzi) by a Dagomba raiding party, in the course of which Abdulai, its leader, rapes her. The final climax is the dreadful vengeance which Tomba wreaks upon Jesus Vasconcellos for

what he has done to his wife.


This novel deals frankly with the role which African rulers and merchants played in the slave trade; at the same time it distinguishes between the function and nature of slavery in Africa and the chattel slavery of the Europeans.

Ama finds herself at the receiving end of ideologies of slavery practiced by Islam and Christianity. Her own religious beliefs sustain her and her spiritual life is enriched by new forms of African religious experience which she encounters in Bahia.

In its depiction not only of the slaves but also of the more humane of their oppressors, the novel treats with sympathy the difficult moral choices which face those who challenge the accepted ideologies of their society and times.

Injustice, the oppression of the weak by the strong, did not vanish with the abolition of slavery. It is the similar moral choices which confront us in the modern world which lend this historical novel its contemporary relevance. These last paragraphs might suggest that Ama is a political tract. It is nothing of the sort. It is a story of real, warm-blooded people, living out their short lives in difficult times.

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