

## The Underground Railroad As A Gateway For Freedom In Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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### Abstract

This study focuses on Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* published in 2016. The novel is important in African literature because it explores the slavery and the traumatic experiences of slaves. The novel describes the story of Cora, a slave on Randall plantation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She tries for freedom from her plantation by following the underground railroad. She undergoes a lot of sufferings in the American racial society. He describes the racial issues and reflects the atmosphere, events, and characters. In the novel trains become, for African Americans, symbol of freedom and growth. The novel depicts the cruelty of slavery and also respect for the slave's wish, love, and protection. They make sacrifices to survive. The novel shows rail transport and secret route. The novel explores the life of slave named Cora and how she relieves from her slavery. Slaves search their identity not among themselves, but somewhere else. They fear loss of identity. In this novel Cora escapes from place to place to save her identity. She searches for her happiness. Whitehead shares African's story especially African American women who get affected both physically and mentally. It exposes how the underlying fear of black freedom and power contributes to violence against black people. The novel vividly describes the horror of slavery and backwardness of humanity and her desire to free from the slave life.

**Key Words:** Slavery, African American, Plantation, Identity, Underground Railroad.

### Introduction

Colson Whitehead is an American novelist born in 1969. He has written nine novels and two nonfiction. He won National Book awards and Pulitzer Prize for fiction. He grew up in Manhattan where he attended Trinity school and graduated from Harvard University. In college, he became friendly with poet Kevin Young. After graduation he wrote for *The Village Voice*. He began writing movies, books, and television criticism for *Weekly News* and culture paper for *The Village Voice*. He left that job in the late 1990s to concentrate on writing novels. In his career Whitehead has taught at colleges and Universities throughout the United States. His innovative novels describe social themes, including racism. Colson whitehead uses literary elements in *The Underground Railroad* such as imagery, metaphor, and irony which expands the reader's understanding of slavery and its consequences in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century American south. The central idea of novel is the slave gaining freedom in the north using the underground railroad. During 1850 and 1860 in US the south practiced slavery whereas the states in the north do not allow slavery.

*The Underground Railroad* is a historical novel and contains magical realism. His writing style includes post-apocalyptic fiction to coming-of-age, mystery, memoir, literary fiction, crime, and magical realism. During the African American slavery, the railroad is a monument to their indomitable spirit, not only to survive but also to free themselves from slavery. William Brown says, "*The Underground Railroad* is, like the plot, in an almost impossible position in attempting to make visible something that is not just typically invisible within white hegemonic culture, namely slavery, but which rather is antithetical to the ethos of visibility that is at the core of that same white hegemonic culture" (12). *The Underground Railroad*, as a symbol of resistance and escape from slavery, exists in a paradoxical position. It seeks to make visible the horrors of slavery and the struggles of enslaved people, yet it operates in secrecy to evade the oppressive forces of white hegemonic culture.

This paper discusses race, slavery, and traumatic experiences in African American novel. *The Underground Railroad* explores a slave girl Cora who runs away from slavery and physically travels from state to state through the railroad of the American south. It tells the story of Cora, a young enslaved woman who escapes from a plantation in Georgia, where her family has been held in bondage for three generations. The novel follows Cora's journey as she uses the underground railroad as a network for freedom in the North. Along the way, Cora faces numerous challenges and dangers, including slave catchers, treacherous terrain, and the ever present threat of capture. Through Cora's story the novel sheds light on the brutal realities of slavery and the struggles of those who fought "to escape the fundamental principles of your existence impossible" (9). It clearly shows that for Cora, this phrase evokes the capability of her past, the trauma, and pain that shapes her journey. Despite her efforts to flee and start anew, the memories and scars remain a testament to the enduring power of her experiences. It speaks the human condition, acknowledging certain truths and realities. The fundamental principles of existence, in this context, include the persistent struggles for freedom, equality, and justice.

The novel also explores themes of identity, community, and the long-lasting impact of slavery and racism on American society. *The Underground Railroad* has received widespread critical acclaim for its powerful and vivid characters, and unflinching portrayal of one of the darkest periods in American history. Aida Levyhussen criticizes that:

to interrogate the premise that re-experiencing historical pain is transformative and necessary and investigate how therapeutic reading's claim to moral urgency may inadvertently produce rote habits of canon construction and interpretation, blinding us to contemporaneous works African American fiction that expressly disavow an orientation towards the past. (6)

The enslaved Cora tries to escape from the brutal Georgia plantation. After boarding the train, Cora's first stop is South Carolina, surrounded by the skyscrapers, the state that serves as a progressive asylum for slaves, who are subjected to a series of social welfare programs that double as a precursor to a sophisticated program of medical testing and forced sterilization. She was supposed to hide in North Carolina, from which all blacks have been expelled, an order enforced by routine public execution of any black found within the state's border. Cora's only source of light and air was a hole in the wall that faced the street. The compelling scenes in the novel do not occur underground, but in the squat limestone building in South Carolina where Cora works as a resonator in the "Living History division of the museum of natural wonders" (108).

Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, was transported to the United States in a slave ship after being forcibly removed from Africa. After that, she was made to labor for decades until her death on the Randall farm in Georgia. The pain and suffering she went through left a lasting impression on her family, including Cora. The horrific transatlantic slave trade and the cruel treatment of enslaved people are vividly brought to light by Ajarry's story. Her experiences as well as those of her ancestors such as Cora, provide witness to Black people's tenacity and fortitude in the face of unfathomable injustice. The novel demonstrates how the suffering and anguish inflicted upon slaves have been inherited by subsequent generation, impacting their relationship, prospects, and general wellbeing.

Mabel's escape and the abandonment of Cora has a profound impact on Cora's life and psyche. Cora grows up with a feeling of abandoned and unloved, wondering why her mother left her behind. This feeling of abandonment also fuels Cora's desire to escape and find her mother which becomes a driving force in her journey. Mabel's escape also highlights the difficult choices enslaved people faced. Mabel saw escape as her only chance for freedom, but it meant leaving behind her child. This decision haunts Cora throughout the novel, and she struggles to understand and forgive her mother's actions. The complex mother daughter relationship between Cora and Mabel is a central theme in the novel, exploring the ways in which slavery and oppression can damage family bonds and relationship. Cora faces immense hardship and isolation on the plantation. As the daughter of an escaped slave, she is viewed with suspicion and resentment by the other enslaved people. They see her as a reminder of the escape they may never, and the consequences that come while trying to flee.

The plantation's owner Mr. Randall, and his overseers are cruel and sadistic, using violence and fear to maintain control. Cora's body bears the scars of their brutality, and her spirit is worn down by the relentless oppression. Cora finds ways to resist and hold onto her humanity. She forms connections with a few fellow enslaved people, like Caesar, who becomes her ally and have potential love interest. Together they hatch a plan to escape via the underground railroad, risking everything for a chance at freedom.

In South Carolina, Cora still unaware of anything sinister at work in her new home, is alarmed when a fellow ex-slave starts screaming that someone is taking her children. A post-traumatic flashback is as follows:

They had heard it so many times in plantation life, the lament of the mother over her tormented offspring. Cora remembered Caesar's words about the men at the factory who were haunted by the plantation, carrying it here despite the mails. It lived in them. It still lived in all of them, waiting to abuse and taunt when chance presented itself... it was a long night for Cora as her thoughts returned to the woman's screams, and the ghost she called her own. (13)

*The Underground Railroad* masterfully captures the haunting legacy of plantation life and the lingering trauma it inflicts on individuals and communities. The passage conveys the ways in which historical trauma can become embedded in individual and collective psyches continuing to shape lives and experiences long after the initial wound has been inflicted. The novel's opening chapter establishes reciprocal relationship between narrative, history, and justice instructing readers to see the novel as an extension of historical genealogy. Cora's journey begins when a slave man, Caesar says her to escape north via the underground railroad. The author reimagines the historical network of secret routes and safe houses used by enslaved African Americans to escape to freedom as an actual railroad with physical trains and stations. This creative liberty allows Whitehead to explore the Black experience throughout American history in a unique and powerful way. By having Cora and Caesar's first stop be South Carolina, Whitehead highlights the complexities of freedom and oppression in different regions of the country, like South Carolina, with its more relaxed rules and codes, allows Cora and Caesar to experience a resemblance of freedom, but it's still a fragile and precarious existence.

The novel's structure, which follows Cora with its own distinct history and culture, allows Whitehead to examine the multifaceted nature of Black experience in America with the railroad as a symbol of movement and transition, Whitehead underscores the ongoing struggle for Black American history. Cora and Caesar are given a sense of normalcy and freedom they never experienced in Georgia. They are provided with a home, food, and employment, and are able to blend in with the local community. Sam's kindness and generosity make them feel as if they've found a haven and for a brief moment, they can forget about the trauma they've faced. However, as they settle into their new lives, Cora and Caesar begin to realize that this newfound freedom is still tenuous and fragile. They are forced to navigate the complexities of racial tension and hierarchy in South Carolina, where segregation and oppression still exist albeit in more subtle forms.

Despite the relative comfort and security they've found, Cora and Caesar know they can't stay in one place for too long, lest they risk being discovered and captured. They must continue their journey, facing new challenges and uncertainties as they seek true freedom and equality. Cora's escape to the underground railroad platform is a tense and desperate moment, and the fact that Caesar is left behind adds to the sense of urgency and danger. The burning of Sam's house serves as a stark reminder of the risk and consequences of helping the escaped slaves and the brutality of the slave catchers, "*The Underground Railroad* Caesar had been very busy. Did they really operate this deep in Georgia? The idea of escape overwhelmed her" (62). The southern region was mainly known for its white color domination and oppression of slaves. Cora never saw the outside world. No one was allowed to escape from that area but the thought of escaping fueled her to face Caesar's drive and her inner sense made her proud to escape the garden, "this was her first time out in the world and there was much she did not know. Her own vote was for lighting out as soon as possible. Every mile between her and plantation was a victory"(76). Cora likes to runaway and leave the plantation since her childhood. The slaves are trained to do works by their owners. They don't know that there is a beautiful world waiting for them:

The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating patter. The sheer industry that had made such a project possible ....Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crosssties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting towards miraculous terminus.(67)

The novelist uses of sensory details like the alternating pattern of dark and light colored stones, the steel rails, and the wooden crosssties. This passage is a testament to Colson Whitehead's masterful storytelling and descriptive powers, drawing the reader into the world of the underground railroad. This plot's twist raises the stakes for Cora's journey and highlights the ever presence of capture and violence that she and other enslaved people face. It also underscores the importance of the underground railroad and the network of abolitionists and sympathizers who risk their lives to help the escapees. The loss of Caesar and destruction of Sam's house also adds a personal dimension to Cora's journey, as she navigates the treacherous landscape of the underground railroad alone, driven by her determination to find freedom and safety. The harrowing and devastating sequence of events Cora experiences in North Carolina is in stark contrast to her relatively safe haven in South Carolina. Carra Glatt says that "Cora seeks out the famous underground railroad from the slave south to the free north" (38). The situation of Black people in North Carolina is worse, with the state actively working to expel or kill them.

Royal, the conductor on the underground railroad, brings Cora to the valentine farm, a heaven where she can finally experience freedom. The farm, a thriving community free and escaped black people, offers Cora a sense of belonging and purpose. Cora is subjected to harsh and unrelenting forced work in the fields, where she endures physical abuse, long hours work, and scant food. Cora experiences continual dehumanization, and blighting, which has an equally devastating emotional toll. It is really challenging to escape from the plantation life. There are so many people being moved around, "It's hard to get messages through the railroad is god's work, but maddening to manage" (109). In some states, such as Georgia and North Carolina, teaching slaves are considered illegal. Cora is blessed to be educated in Carolina. In the garden, Cora has no one to share her emotions, her good and bad times. Her grandmother died and her mother left her and run away from the garden. But still at valentine's farm she keeps molly, Sybil, and Rayal to spend her happy moments. Rayal comforts her when she worries about leaving the farm. He has been her mentor who provides support and encouragement.

Valentine farm represents a vision of a more equitable society, where Black people can live without the constant threat of violence and oppression. It's a testament to the resilience and strength of those who have fought for freedom and created their own communities. Cora's time on the farm is a chance for her to heal, grow, and rediscover herself outside the confines of slavery. Alexander Manshel says "as a black woman, she is coerced into repeatedly reperforming the trauma of slavery" (16). It's a powerful reminder that even in the darkest times there are people and places working towards a brighter future.

Cora suffers both physically and mentally .She examines her body for syphilis in South Carolina, a lynching festival in North Carolina. She was raped by her master, which shows the impact of slavery on her own identity. Finally, she rebels, makes her brave but physically she's traumatized and can't quite break free. Slaves sought a way to live their dream lives and built the underground railroad, the way to their liberation. According to Dhanya Lourdes Mishma "Cora the protagonist attains her freedom through underground railroad. This historical evidence of journey towards freedom is one of the most innovative and successfully liberation tactic," (4). Nothing in this world can be achieved easily, but only with perseverance it can be achieved. Many slaves experience great joy after their struggles. Cora, the protagonist attains her freedom through the underground railroad. Javed Khan says "A black subject still finds itself a pariah in the corner of American society" (2). This is the historical evidence of the journey towards freedom, one of the most innovative and successful liberation strategies.

### Conclusion:

Cora, having faced unimaginable loss, is once again captured by the ruthless Ridgeway and his accomplice Homer. The demand to lead them to the underground railroad stations is a cruel twist, forcing Cora to confront the secrets she hopes to leave behind. Cora's journey is marked by trauma, resilience, and hope, but this final twist underscores the ongoing

struggle for freedom, a survival in a society built on oppression. A journey begins Cora having escaped the darkness of the tunnel, emerges into a brighter future, symbolized by the covered wagons and the open trail. Her encounter with Ollie, an old Black man with a warm and generous spirit, marks a turning point in her journey. Railroad is a powerful symbol of freedom and escape from the brutalities of slavery.

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