

Women's Abuse and Traumatic Experience in The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

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Abstract

This research focuses on the novel *The Underground Railroad*. This novel explores the significance of enslaved people's journey through struggles by exposing the specific trauma of African American people. It is necessary to discuss the contextual background of the story when discussing the problem in these works because it has a significant impact on the author's writing, mainly how the slavery system creates much inhuman treatment toward Blacks throughout the Slavery era. As the author, Colson Whitehead expresses his anger and opposition to the slave system to which the main characters are subjected. The protest can be seen near the end of the novel's narrative. The story depicts the meaning of freedom for each person is essential to fight for, and it should not be tied by law or anyone else via the battle of the main characters to escape from their enslaver. The present research examines how Whitehead's use of metaphor in *The Underground Railroad* portrayed abuse and gender concerns. It has concentrated on a few significant, frequently occurring conceptual metaphors and has examined how they contribute to the success of his work, particularly in the manner that they advance his central issue of connecting different periods and feminist perspectives.

Keywords: trauma, slavery, battle, metaphor, feminist.

Introduction:

This chapter focuses on Whitehead's novel, *The Underground Railroad*, dealing with the trauma of slavery through their escapes. Through an analysis of both the text and the text-as-object, I argue that escape is constituted by an audacity that depends upon the pursuit of the unimaginable. As Whitehead's novel shows us, escape is not a finite process, nor is it alone maneuvers. In *The Underground Railroad*, there is a secret journey of Cora, a young girl born into slavery. She escapes from a Georgia plantation with her companion, Caesar, and heads north on an underground railroad based on a network of tracks and tunnels. Cora and Caesar

are haunted on their journey by a ruthless slave catcher. They face many challenges and dangers.

Women's Abuse and Traumatic Experience in Whitehead's work:

In *The Underground Railroad*, Cora is an enslaved person and a brave girl. She was born on Randall's plantation in Georgia, where she was treated like a slave. So, she wants to escape from that plantation. Then Caesar is another enslaved man who lives on the same plantation. Caesar asks Cora to run away from this place, but Cora refuses to go with him. Because she relates to thinks about her grandmother Ajarry's life. Slave traders kidnap Larry as a child in Africa; the slave traders murder her father. Ajarry is often sold from Ouida, and the rest of her family is purchased by Portuguese traders. Larry does not know the ship's fate where the slave traders gang-rape her. After that, an agent buys her for two hundred and twenty-six dollars. Larry attempts suicide twice in her lifetime, but she imagines that one day she goes north, her life will change, working as a kind master. She reached South America, where Ajarry was sold multiple times and raped by the traders; finally, the Randall plantation representative bought Ajarry for two hundred and twenty-nine dollars, where she lived the rest of her life.

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead describes that life of Ajarry is married three times. Her first husband was so aggressive and beat her while he drank that eventually, he sold her. Her second husband is so kind, and he dies of cholera. Her third husband also died of injuries from stealing honey. After that, Ajarry has five children; two died of fever, one child was killed by her boss, and another died of blood poisoning.

At last, Ajarry has only one girl child who survives Mabel; she is the mother of Cora. Mabel has run away from Cora when she is ten years old. Ajarry strictly takes care of her child and never sells off. Eventually, Ajarry died of a brain hemorrhage on the cotton plantation. "The last of her village keeled over in the rows from a knot in her brain, blood pouring from her nose and white froth covering her lips. Ajarry believes that incarceration is unavoidable and that liberty was reserved for other people" (9).

It is Ajarry who talks when Cora refuses to go with Caesar. When Cora makes up her mind three weeks later, she is trying to invade the soul of Mabel. Whitehead has depicted this same trauma because he begins by describing the trauma of being forced into slavery through Ajarry; then, he shows Cora's trauma as a woman born into slavery. In Georgia, Cora is living without her mother on the Randall plantation. She became odd among the other enslaved people on the plantation, so she was sent to live in the Hob. Hob is the exiled home of the wretched—enslaved people who have been broken physically or mentally by the pain and suffering of plantation life. Hob used to be populated by men, but now it is inhabited by women, many of whom call out the names of their deceased children in the middle of the night. That's why Cora has to place in Hob because she always thought about her grandmother and missed her mother, Mabel.

Cora has a small garden for herself. Cora's runaway companion, Caesar, observes, "She knew the preciousness of what little she called her own. Her joys, her plot, that block of sugar maple she perched on like a vulture" (232). Alice Walker, in her essay *In Search of Our*

Mother's Gardens (1983), analyses and celebrates gardening as a means of African American self-expression as well as a means of fighting off what Orlando Patterson refers to as *Slavery and Social Death* (2018), in the systematic oppression that enslavers follow. The garden serves as a symbol of resistance, demonstrating the failure of the abolition of slavery by not making all slaves servile: in her garden, Cora "owned herself for a few hours every week" (12); it is "An anchor in the vicious waters of the plantation" (55), this evidence that slavery never destroys the imagination and creativity in African Americans. With her gardening, Cora rejects the idea of the ferocious, uneducated black person who is only good at forced physical work. She refuses to submit to her circumstances. The garden is connected to family heritage and continuity, just like in Alice Walker's novel: it was "the most valuable land in all of Georgia" (294), according to Ajarry, who passed it down to her daughter Cora through Mabel. This heavily symbolic garden is also similar to Miss Ethel's park in Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012), the elderly, heaving African American woman who heals the protagonist's sister and describes that " was not Eden; it was so much more than that" (130).

On Randall's plantation, an old enslaved man, Abraham, decides it is wrong to have a garden for her. After that, a group of men enters the plantation; Blake is a strong field-hand person on the Randall plantation. Blake decides to keep his dog in Cora's Garden so that he can build a little hut for his dog. One fine morning, Cora finds her grown cabbages are destroyed. In their community, all people are watching their reaction to Cora. Angrily Cora kills the dog's house and cuts the dog's tail in half. Then Blake approaches Cora, and it becomes a conflict between them. Cora becomes Hob's most infamous resident as a result of this incident. Cora remains while other Hob women are sold or commit suicide. Cora stores firewood in Blake's doghouse, while Blake and others in the community start telling false stories about Cora that make her appear sinister and insane. Soon Cora gets puberty; Blake rapes her on Randall's plantation. Blake has run away from the plantation, but he is killed when he is captured. Further, this is not directly impacted by the protagonist's life in a traumatic way, but some mental repression occurs.

The plantation owners are James and Terrance, who they visit during the celebration of the jockey's birthday festival. Terrance recalls James telling him about an enslaved youngster who could recite the Declaration of Independence on James' side of the plantation. "Then recollected James telling me about a nigger he had down here," Terrance said, "could recite the Declaration of Independence" (37). One of the employers, Moses, notifies the brothers that the youngster above, Michael, has died. Michael had been taught to recite vast chunks of text by a past master. The master proudly displayed Michael to guests, who then debated black people's lack of intelligence. Michael had been mentally handicapped by some unknown torment when he landed on Randall, and Connelly beat him to death. James is enraged, claiming he should have known about Michael's death.

The brothers appear to be drunk as they drink wine from cut-glass goblets. James does not spend more time with enslaved people on the plantation, but Terrance constantly interacts with the enslaved people, and he rapes half of the women on the plantation. Terrance constantly tortures the enslaved people on the plantation. He tortured the enslaved people to

dance if they were not happy while dancing; Terrance got angry and shouted at them. "Terrance tapped his cane. His face sank as he took in the crowd. You're not going to dance? I have to insist. You and you" (39).

On the other hand, Terrance makes a point of interacting with the enslaved people and raping the women on his half of the plantation, boasting, "I like to taste my plums" (36). He even pays visits to newlywed slave couples on their wedding night to rape the bride before the marriage is consummated. Terrance beats Cora and Chester because Chester splashes the wine on him. Suddenly Cora bends over to shield Chester so that Terrance hits both of them.

In *Hob*, seven women are feeling the trauma of mental illness. One has fits, while the other two have been traumatized by mental instability. In the Underground Railroad, two more never talk; one has had her tongue amputated. Two other women committed suicide recently, which is not uncommon. On the Randall plantation, James dies because of kidney failure. So that Terrance takes over half of the James plantation, and he becomes the new master of Cora. This impulsion makes Cora have to escape from the plantation. Then she agrees to go with Caesar. Both met Mr. Fletcher, who was ready to send them off to the underground railroad. Cora and Caesar escaped in the middle of the night from the plantation. They set out to Mr. Fletcher's house, where they unexpectedly met Cora's friend Lovey. Lovey also joined them. Three white hog slave traders capture the runaway slaves. Two of them in the slave traders seize Lovey and drag her off.

Cora is grabbed by the third hunter, who is a small boy. To get away, she repeatedly hits him with a rock. He dies as a direct result of his injuries. He is leaving Cora and Caesar even more wanted as fugitives for killing a white man. Finally, both of them reached Mr. Fletcher's house. He feeds both of them, then they travel to the underground railroad in his cart, hiding under the blanket. Lumbly, who is the station agent, transports them in the actual train, where they are saved into a boxcar and sent to South Carolina,

Ridgeway is an effective and cruel slave catcher. He has been recruited to find Cora's mother, Mabel. But she is missed. Now he is employed to find Cora; he is discovered eagerly to see Cora and kill her. Then Cora and Caesar reached South Carolina, where they met the station agent Sam. Both changed Cora as Bessie's carpenter to protect their identities and Caesar as Christian Markson. In South Carolina, Cora lives in a dormitory run by white women. Cora works as a maid for the white family, whose name is Anderson, and Caesar works in a factory.

Cora and Caesar discuss the plan to escape from South Carolina and go farther north. In *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (2013), R. J. M. Blackett also notes the role of enslaved people in seeking freedom and makes them key figures in the construction of what we know as the Underground Railroad, and ultimately in helping to bring about the collapse of slavery. Some of Larry Gara's points are reiterated by Blackett: "my focus is on the slaves as well as those who aided them where it mattered the most: in the South" (2), the South from which some enslaved people escaped to avoid being punished or sold, or because masters failed to keep promises, or to join family members who had escaped earlier. Blackett concludes that "They were well aware of what they were doing

and the consequences of their actions" and that "whatever the specific reasons for leaving, collectively their actions were informed by what E. P. Thomson has called a 'general notion' of rights and a passionate desire for freedom" (95), thus disproving notions of enslaved people as content and spineless. (Blackett, 2013)

They start to know about the three underground railroad trains to come and go without being boarded. One night, Cora sees a black woman crying and running down the street road because her babies are taken away by the slave traders. This incident reminds Cora of how the slave women and their babies are sold from the plantation to other plantations. Cora asks about the incident, to miss. Lucy lies that the women are mentally disconnected from reality. In the museum of natural wonders, Cora works as an actor in three exhibits: one depicts life in Darkest Africa leading up to slavery, one depicts life on a slave ship, and one describes life as a plantation enslaved person. Cora worked in three rooms. That first day, gray drapes covered the large glass windows that separated them from the public. The following day the drapes were gone, and the crowds arrived. The first room was scenes from Darkest Africa. A hut dominated the exhibit; its walls and wooden poles lashed together under a peaked thatch roof. The soothing blue walls of life on the Slave Ship evoked the Atlantic sky. Here Cora stalked a section of a frigate's deck, around the mast, various small barrels, and coils of rope. Typical Day on the Plantation allowed her to sit at a spinning wheel and rest her feet, the seat as sure as her old block of sugar maple. Chickens stuffed with sawdust pecked at the ground; Cora tossed imaginary seeds at them from time to time. She had numerous suspicions about the accuracy of the African and ship scenes but was an authority in this room. She shared her critique." While a steady stream of white museum visitors watches them, Cora and two other women take turns in each exhibition, imitating daily duties. (130-131)

Until she discovers what is going on, South Carolina had become a place where Cora had begun to feel at home. She continued to work in the history museum and finally found a sense of freedom and safety. However, she and her friend Sam start talking to a doctor, and they discover that "the men were participants in a study of the latent and tertiary stages of syphilis" (145). "Syphilis programmed was one of many studies and experiments underway at the colored wing of the hospital," the doctor claims (145). The doctor then reveals that one of the reasons for these experiments was white American fear of slave revolts.

America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states, the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization—first the women but both sexes in time—we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher us in our sleep. (146)

Whitehead has depicted this same trauma because he begins by describing the trauma of being forced into slavery through Ajarry; then, he shows Cora's trauma as a woman born into slavery; finally, he offers to Cora all the traumas that would occur to her descendants by

condensing time. He perfectly depicts the constant tearing of social fabric; every time African Americans reclaimed their identity and experience, it was traumatized further through legal mandates. Cora asks Lucy about the group of women who have disappeared from the dormitories. But miss. Lucy tries to persuade Cora that other dormitory women should also be sterilized. At the end of their conversation, Cora listens to miss. Lucy was talking about the slave catcher who is looking for a murderer. Cora goes to convey the matter to Sam. According to Sam, Ridgeway has found Cora and Caesar's location and is looking for them. Sam hides Cora beneath his house on the railroad platform. Cora hears the crowd of people sound in front of Sam's house set on fire. Still, Cora lives in Sam's place in the darkness.

Then Cora worries about Caesar; without him, Cora goes into the underground railroad. Finally, a train appears, but it passes without stopping. But she races it, yelling, and runs to stop the train. He just checked the railroad lines, but he picks her up and leaves Cora at the station in North Carolina. The station appears to have collapsed, and Cora believes she will be underground again. However, a station agent named Martin Wells emerges and assists her in clearing the trouble and gaining access to the surface. Martin is concerned about her presence and claims she should not be there. So Martin gets Cora transported to his house. When they reach Martin's house, Cora meets Martin's wife, Ethel, who is angry because Martin will get them killed. So they hide Cora in a small nook above the attic. In North Carolina, Cora spends an unspecified period hidden in a "cramped nook" (154) above a false ceiling in the attic of the house of the local station agent, where "the only source of light and air was a hole in the wall that faced the street" (154); a "suffocating nook" (157) reminiscent of the attic, also in North Carolina, where Harriet Jacobs' novel (2001) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, writing as Linda Brent, hid for almost seven years to escape from slavery. The self-chosen imprisonment in what Jacobs terms "a dismal hole," "my little cell," or "my dungeon," is, nevertheless, better than slavery: "This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave". (Jacobs, 2001) They warn Cora that they will be reported and killed if anyone notices her, including her maid Fiona. Cora can view the public park from her hiding spot through a window next door.

Ethel attempted to explain herself by stating that Martin had hidden Cora without her knowledge. Despite the crowd's desire to have Cora executed, Ridgeway appears and asserts that he has the legal authority to return her to Georgia. "You can keep the reward," he told Fiona. He bent slightly and lifted Cora her arm. "You don't have to be afraid, Cora. You're going home" (225). Cora observes Martin and Ethel being chained to the hanging tree and stoned to death by the mob as Ridgeway drags her away. After being captured by Ridgeway, Cora now travels in a wagon with Ridgeway and two of his slave traders, Boseman and a Homer. Another Georgia slaveholder has ordered Ridgeway to capture a fugitive slave shown to be living free in Missouri, so the group does not return Cora to Georgia immediately. Ridgeway plans to reunite the two enslaved people in Georgia.

They are all going to Tennessee on this journey. Cora tries to escape twice, but she is captured every time, giving her even more chains. On the way, Ridgeway captures a runaway

named Jasper along the road; Jasper travels together for four days with Ridgeway. Ridgeway threatens and orders to stop, but Jasper continues to sing. "JESUS, carry me home to that land..." (239). Then Ridgeway eventually comes to a halt and shoots Jasper in the face, splattering his blood all over Cora. Ridgeway explains that the money he hoped to make by returning Jasper to his plantation is not worth the irritation of Jasper's singing. Homer agrees the Ridgeway's calculation and also checks their financial records are accurate. Homer verified his boss's calculations in his notebook. "He's right," he said (255). Ridgeway informs Cora of the death of both Lovey and Caesar on their travel. Lovey has taken back to the Randall plantation, where she is wounded and hanged.

After suspicions spread that Caesar is responsible for the murder of a young white boy, so he has imprisoned and eventually cut apart by an angry crowd in South Carolina. Ridgeway feels happy in telling these stories to Cora and pleasures in her pain. On the other hand, Ridgeway believes that he and Cora are pretty similar; Cora killed a young white boy, but she feels no guilt about that. Ridgeway also has no grief for the enslaved people he murders. Ridgeway buys a new dress for Cora, so he stops in town. Boseman removes Cora's chains that night to rape her. Ridgeway spots Boseman in the act and meets him in a fight. While Cora is released, the young black man who had previously seen her and two others arrive, armed with weapons and knives. Boseman is killed in the ongoing conflict, and Cora's rescuers lock Ridgeway and Homer to the wagon. Then Cora notices a young black man gesture at her. Cora kicks Ridgeway three times in his face before escaping with the men. "The boy is a devious sort," the leader said. "I can tell that. We have to go." He looked at Cora. "Will you come with us?" Cora kicked Ridgeway in the face three times with her new wooden shoes" (273).

It's time to tell the story of Caesar's life on the Randall plantation. Caesar was forced to try to escape the more openly repressive Randall plantation after living a relatively privileged life as a Virginia enslaved person. However, he needed Fletcher's encouragement to get underway. As Caesar observed Cora from afar and heard stories about her from other enslaved people, he became convinced that she exhibited the determination required to escape successfully. Cora's rescuers, guided by a freeborn black man named Royal, transport her to an Indiana farm through the underground railroad. Royal and his partner Red are all in Tennessee to save Justin, another escaped enslaved person traveling with them as the third man. When Royal discovered Cora in Ridgeway's custody, he extended their travel to Indiana to save her. Cora lives on a farm owned by John Valentine, a light-skinned African man who utilizes his white look to help the situation of Africans in America when she arrives in Indiana. Cora continues to work on the farm as she used on the Randall plantation, but now she feels like a free woman.

After an escaped slave near-death landed on their doorstep, John and his wife, Gloria, resolved to dedicate their farm to abolition efforts. While John is abroad on business, Gloria serves as the farm's matron. After healing and preparing for their next voyage, the majority of fugitives that pass through the farm carry on to Canada or abroad. Cora asks everyone she can find if they've seen her mother, speculating that Mabel may have been through Valentine on her trip north. Mabel is wholly forgotten. After an escaped enslaved person's near-death landed

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He explains that, despite the damage to his home, he escaped north and continued to work for *The Underground Railroad*. He even pretended to be a slave catcher to liberate captured runaways and encourage them to continue north. Terrance Randall has died, according to Sam. Ridgeway's reputation has faded since Cora escaped from Ridgeway in Tennessee, he also tells Cora. Weekly meetings in the Valentine community include dining, dancing, and special events by musicians, poets, and public speakers. Elijah Lander, one of the speakers, gets into an argument with a Valentine resident named Mingo. Mingo, who purchased his and his family's release, is upset that Valentine houses fugitive slaves; he is concerned that the existence of people like Cora will enrage whites. Lander makes the ideological argument that everyone should be free; hence everyone should be welcome during Valentine's Day. Mingo decides to challenge Lander to a debate. Lander's speech is disrupted and killed by a mob of white vigilantes on the night of the discussion.

They destroy the farm and set fire to the farmhouse, and they also find that everyone should be killed or kidnapped. Royal is shot to death, but not before telling Cora to find the old underground railroad station and see where it goes. Cora attempts to escape but is seized by Ridgeway and Homer. Homer informs Ridgeway, fascinated with discovering *The Underground Railroad* that he overheard royal discussing a tunnel with Cora. Mabel is forced to escape the Randall estate. She said goodbye to Cora and apologies to the sleeping girl. Moses, one of the enslavers, had been rapping Mabel and threatening to rape Cora if Mabel refused. Adam Kelly (2018) published a research article titled Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead. The novel aims to give Mabel's story a satisfying conclusion, but in doing so, it also reinterprets Cora's original story as a fabrication.

Mabel's moment of liberation is described as "ironic" in Kelly's interpretation of this passage in his novel, but not in a rhetorical or postmodern sense; instead, it is "structural, dramatic, and tragic" irony caused by its belated narration. (Kelly, 2018) As we read, we learn that Mabel decided to go back to her kid just as she was about to reach a place where she could have been safe. "She was free. This moment. She had to go back. The girl was waiting on her" (294). Mabel is bitten by a cottonmouth snake and perishes in the swamp after returning to the

plantation on the way. She never gets to see her daughter again, so her story is left open for Cora to read and continues to have a seductive influence on her decision to flee. However, the reader discovers is not just the reality of one of the novels suggests branching out narratives but also the idea of freedom.

Mabel relaxed in a swamp after a long day of running. To be with Cora, she wanted to return to the plantation. She began her return voyage. She has never gone far since a cottonmouth snake bit her. She felt the poison killing her as she walked forward. She lay down on a patch of mud, whispered here, and disappeared into the swamp, possibly giving up on making it back to the plantation. Ridgeway orders Cora to take him and Homer to see the underground railroad for them. Cora leads them to the destroyed station. Ridgeway offers to remove her chains so she can help in searching out the entrance. They start down the stairs once the door opens, and Ridgeway is close behind Cora.

Cora puts her arm around Ridgeway and pulls them both down the stairs. Ridgeway's fall forces him to smash his head and break both of his legs. Homer pursues them, carrying a lantern, to join Ridgeway. Ridgeway either can't notice Cora in the faint light or ignores her as she gets onto the handcar. Ridgeway tells Homer he has an idea and wants him to jot it down in his journal, failing to realize that he is chasing Cora. Cora begins moving the handcar and traveling the track away from her kidnappers as Ridgeway speaks to Homer about the "American imperative." "The imperative is...no, no. That's not it. "The American imperative is a splendid thing...a beacon...a shining beacon" (362).

Cora travels in the dark for days, first by car and then on foot, daydreaming about Royal. She eventually emerges from the tunnel, first into an overgrown tunnel, then into the open air. She continues walking until she comes to a path where she sees three wagons going west. The third wagon driver, an elderly black man named Ollie, gives her a ride. He informs her that they will travel to Missouri and then to California.

Conclusion:

Finally, understand the trauma of escaped enslaved people that impacted their lives, community, and family. This research asserted that Whitehead's novels depicted the significance of travel and journey by exposing the specific traumas of African Americans. This idea is most apparent in the novel's open-ended climax, in which Cora arrives at an unknown location. While escaping to the underground network, she encounters numerous hardships and mental persecution at the hands of slave dealers on the plantation. Cora's escape story is an exception to the rule; we can appreciate how the novel shows the difficulties of escape and its reliance on the idea that another unknown reality is within reach. The sense of the extraordinary looms in the railroad's figuration and Cora's constant escapes. *The Underground Railroad* reinvigorates the possibilities of what "escape" can mean; the novel asks its contemporary readers to consider a collaborative, underground network of evasion and escape as one way to pursue unknowable, more accessible futures.

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