

EXPLOITATION OF THE BLACK WOMEN IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

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Abstract

This study aims at the analysis of the novel *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead so as to bring out his treatment of racial abuse, slavery, and exploitation of Black women even by their own men. Both White and Black men inflict sufferings on Black women. Women in general face discrimination in the American Society. In *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead portrays the struggles of the young Black woman named Cora, who has tried to escape the plantation along with another slave Caesar, and they are caught by the slave catcher, Ridgeway. She is subjected to physical and mental torture. Cora gets many lessons from the outside world. Cora faces difficulty in judging people. Some of them are good but many of them want to exploit her. She longs for freedom which she gains only at the end. Colson Whitehead depicts adeptly the history of many runaway slaves and the lurid violence committed against them. He also highlights the forced sterilization of the State to control the population of the Blacks. Persons like Ethel, show to the world that they are helping the Blacks but in their deeds, they are not genuine. They face double marginalization in the American society. Colson Whitehead skillfully reveals it in this novel.

Keywords: Race, Gender, Exploitation, Cruelty, and Pain

Colson Whitehead is a renowned African American writer who has written many works on the racial discrimination and the exploitation of Blacks in the American society. He explores how the Black women suffer at the hands of Whites. His popular novels are *The Underground Railroad*, and *The Nickel Boys*. He received Pulitzer Prize for these two fictional works. This study aims at an analysis of *The Underground Railroad* so as to bring out the exploitation of the Black women by the Whites as well as by their own Black men. He explains how the Black women suffered in the plantations. He also reveals the punishments provided to the runaway slaves. He highlights the issue of the forced sterilization of the Black women in the name of their betterment by the White administration.

Black women undergo a lot of suffering at the hands of the Whites. Generally women face discrimination in society, and in the case of Black, it worsens. Whites exploit the Black women both physically as well as mentally. Sexual assault and physical violence against the Black women are prevalent in the slavery era of America. Many such incidents are unreported and unaddressed. Many of the Black women are subjected to the sexual assault in their lifetime. As they are slaves, the Whites think that they can treat the Blacks as per their wish and they are the owners of their body and mind. They have all rights to do whatever they like. Many Black men and women are kidnapped by the Whites and they are forcibly separated from their own family. The slaves are put to auction and prices are fixed according to their physical

aspects. While the Black women are sold to other owners, they are stripped naked and they are physically verified in front of others to know whether they are capable of producing offspring. Even after the abolition of slavery, abuse of the Blacks continues in the American society. Before the abolition of slavery, all laws were against the Blacks. Though the current laws treat all equally, the White supremacy and racism do not allow the Blacks to feel the freedom in the American soil. Colson Whitehead narrates the story of plantation slaves who have faced the brutalities of the Whites. He brings out the cruel treatment of the slaves in the plantation. They are subjected to the physical as well as the mental torture. The story revolves around the protagonist Cora who longs for the freedom and escapes the plantation. Colson Whitehead also delineates the punishments undergone by the runaway slaves at the hands of the owners of plantation. Cora suffers from the physical torture of the White owners. Ajarry, the grandmother of Cora shares her experience of life. She says that they are kidnapped by the Whites. She says: "Dahomeyan raiders kidnapped the men first, then returned to her village the next moon for the women and children, marching them in chains to the sea two by two"(3). The Blacks think that they are going to be united with their family but they are sold to some other places. Ajarry says that her parents are killed by the Whites. She is sold many times she says: "She is a part of a bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder" (3). As a captive, she is sexually abused by the Whites and she is unable to tolerate the violence. Even she tries to commit suicide but she is saved by the Whites. She is chained from head to toe to avoid any suicide attempt. Through this incident, Colson Whitehead shows how the Black women suffer at the hands of the Whites and they are repeatedly abused by them.

Family members of the Black slaves are sold to different plantations and they are unable to meet again. Colson Whitehead highlights the longing of the Black women slaves to see again their family members. The slaves are sold after the physical verification and the physicians have to certify them free from any illness. The novelist writes adeptly the scene of selling of the slaves particularly the selling of Ajarry:

Onlookers chewed fresh oysters and hot corn as the auctioneers shouted into the air. The slaves stood naked on the platform. There was bidding war over a group of Ashanti studs, those Africans of renowned industry and musculature, and the foreman of a limestone quarry bought a bunch of pickaninnies in an astounding bargain. Just before sunset an agent bought her for two hundred and twenty-six dollars. She would have fetched more but for that sea-son's glut of young girls. His suit was made of the whitest cloth she ever had seen. Rings set with colored stone flashed on his fingers. When he pinched her breasts to see if she was in flower, the metal was cool on her skin. (5)

Through this Colson Whitehead depicts the sufferings of the Black women. They are stripped naked in front of others. The agents and White masters check their bodies to find whether they are capable to produce offspring. It shows the cruelty committed against the Black women by the White owners. The women slaves are treated worse than animals and they are purchased as livestock. There is no dignity and honour in the slave trade. Slavery is the sin and worst crime committed against the Blacks. The virtue of modesty of the Black women is violated by

the White masters. There is another scene which shows the cruel mind of the Whites. Mabel, the daughter of Ajarry when delivers a baby, she is not given the proper treatment. Cora describes, "How her mother bled for days and Connelly didn't bother to call the doctor until she looked half a ghost" (14). This scene adeptly shows the inhumanity of the White supervisors. He does not have the courtesy towards Mabel and he does not consider her as a human being. Colson Whitehead through this reveals that the slaves in the plantation are treated worse than animals. Even after the delivery, the slave women are forced to work in the field as the owners do not want the work to be affected due to their delivery. Their pain is not taken into their account and they want that their work has to be done at any cost. Even their own Black men do not have concern towards them and they also exploit them as they like. When the woman loses her child in delivery, the pain is extremely terrible one but the White owners do not concern about it.

Cora was left by her mother, when she was eight years old. Alone in the plantation, she suffers a lot. As soon as she attains her puberty, she is gang raped by her own Black men. Colson Whitehead presents the cruelty: "Not long after it became known that Cora's womanhood had come into flower, Edward, Pot, and two hands from the southern half dragged her behind the smokehouse. If anyone heard or saw, they did not intervene" (25). Colson Whitehead brings out the miseries of the Black women. At the tender age, she is gang raped and she does not know much about her own physique at that time. Men from her own community exploit her at the beginning of her adult age. Black women are treated as pleasure providing tools by the Whites as well as by Blacks. Both the White men and Black men abuse the Black women. Black women suffer from exploitation of them in general. Connelly, the White overseer uses women whoever he sees, and makes any Black girl as his partner for that particular month. He changes frequently his partners and every Sunday, he picks a new girl from the plantation to pleasure him. Men like Connelly, use women for their physical pleasure and never consider about their feelings and sentiments. They desert the women after enjoying pleasure. It reveals the cruelty committed against the Black women in the plantation. It is really unfortunate that they are treated as mere pleasure providing machines and not human beings with soul and mind.

At Randall plantation, they conduct a birthday party of old Black man Jockey. On that day, all the slaves of plantation are happy and they forget their worries by indulging themselves in celebration. They dance for random music. Cora does not involve in the dance party because she is afraid about the behaviour of men. Colson Whitehead says: "She was wary of how sometimes when the music tugged, you might suddenly be next to a man and you didn't know what he might do. All the bodies in motion, given license" (34). She is physically abused by the Black men many times so she does not take part in the dance party. She feels scared about the men. Often she undergoes the trauma, when she reminds of her gang rape. Here, Colson Whitehead reveals the sufferings of the Black women realistically. Cora could not come out from the trauma of the gang rape. She is afraid of the touch of men even if it is, gentle and without any malign motive.

Terrance Randall, brother of James Randall is the cruelest White owner. He does not have mercy towards Blacks. To show his crookedness, Colson Whitehead delineates his sadist act. He outrages the modesty of the Black women on their wedding night. The writer says:

When Terrance appeared on his brother's plantation, he usually appraised each slave and made a note of which men were most able and which women the most appealing. Content to leer at his brother's women, he grazed heartily upon the women of his own half. I like to taste my plums, Terrance said, prowling the rows of cabins to see what struck his fancy. He violated the bonds of affection, sometimes visiting slaves on their wedding night to show the husband proper way to discharge his marital duty. He tasted his plums, and broke the skin, and left the mark. (36)

This practice of the Terrance Randall has shown the cruel attitude of the White masters. Whenever he comes round for the tour of the plantation, the women suffer greatly. Colson Whitehead reveals obviously the brutalities committed against the Black women in the plantation by the White masters. He could not stop the marriage but he can interrupt in their family life. He shows his supremacy and reminds them that they are the slaves of him and he has every right to interfere in their life. It displays his crooked nature to the readers and it is adeptly presented by the novelist. Chester a small boy accidentally pours a drop of wine in Terrance coat. He simply lashes the boy at his will with the cane. The beating continues even after the apology of Chester. The boy just shrinks to the dirt and screams in pain. Cora could not tolerate to see the punishment. He is punished for just a drop. So, she runs in-between them and she covers the boy. Hence Cora also suffers from beating:

One drop. A feeling settled over Cora... She had seen men hung from trees and left for buzzards and crows. Women carved open to the bones with the cat-o'-nine-tails. Bodies alive and dead roasted on pyres. Feet cut off to prevent escape and hands cut off to stop theft. She had seen boys and girls younger than this beaten and had done nothing. This night the feeling settled on her heart again. It grabbed hold of her and before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her, she was bent over the boy's body as a shield. She held the cane in her hand like a swamp man handling a snake and saw the ornament at its tip. The silver wolf bared its silver teeth. Then the cane was out of her hand. It came down on her head. It crashed down again and this time the silver teeth ripped across her eyes and her blood splattered the dirt. (40)

Colson Whitehead exposes the cruel nature of the White plantation owners. They long for the mistake of the Blacks so that they can punish them in any way. The single drop may be drained and it is harmless. In order to show their superiority over the Blacks, the Whites indulge in these atrocious activities. The White owner lashes the Blacks at his will whenever they come across. The punishment is severe. They whip the slaves nakedly in front of others, which invokes fear in them. So that, the other slaves do not commit mistakes. After the severe beatings, "Connelly peeled them open the following sunrise. He started with Chester, to follow the order in which the transgression had occurred, and called for their bloody backs to be scrubbed out with pepper water afterwards. Connelly repeated the whippings the next two mornings" (43). This shows the sadistic behaviour of the Whites. Colson Whitehead as an

African American depicts the pains and misfortunes experienced by his ancestors through this incident. He skillfully presents the humiliation undergone by the Blacks at the hands of the Whites.

Cora at one stage plans to escape along with another slave named Caesar but their plan is overheard by another slave named Lovey so all the three escape the plantation. Before they can move to another place, they are caught by the slave hunters. Lovey is dragged by hunters and she is taken back to the plantation and Cora hits a White hunter with rock. Both Caesar and Cora escape to South Carolina and they are given shelter by the underground station agent named Sam. Life in South Carolina is far better than in the plantation. People at the place treat the Blacks as human beings, so they plan to stay in South Carolina. Blacks have to take full body checkup in order to find their fitness to work. When Cora undergoes the fitness test, the doctor comes to know about the physical abuse of her. Again they are checked by the Dr. Stevens who asks about birth control measure as it has become mandatory in some places. Cora remembers the last night event. When she returns to home, she encounters a Black woman who shouts: “My babies, they’re taking away my babies” (126). Dr. Stevens explains that Black women who have two children are forced to have birth control. He says: “South Carolina was in the midst of a large public health program to educate the folks about a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman severed to prevent the growth of a baby. The procedure was simple, permanent, and without risk” (134). Through this scene Colson Whitehead shows the wicked mind of the Whites. They sterilize the Black women in the name of help. They have made the surgery mandatory so that the Blacks could not refuse it. They start the sterilization in the asylum of Black women. They use the Blacks for their medical research and reduce the population of the Blacks. Whites have brutalized and harassed the Black women, and finally, they try to reduce their population outside the plantation. It is revealed by this incident.

The stay of Cora and Caesar in South Carolina is found by the slave catcher named Ridgeway. So, Cora consults with the station agent Sam while discussing the arrival of the slave catchers, they come to that place Sam sends Cora to the Underground Railroad and his house is put into fire by the slave catchers. Cora travels to North Carolina. She encounters a station agent named Martin. He comes there to stick notice about refusing the runaway slaves in North Carolina. The Whites who accept the Blacks are put to death. Out of pity, he accepts to help her. Ethel, his wife does not accept as she is scared of being hanged by the Whites if she allows Cora in to her house. She dislikes her and she treats unfairly her. She says, “You stupid thing. Not a sound. Not a single sound. If anyone hears you, we are lost. She pulled the hatch shut” (185). She is scared and also she does not like Cora. Cora can come downstairs only when there is no one in the house. She is allowed to use bathroom once in a few weeks and she is not given proper food. Colson Whitehead delineates the pathetic condition of the runaway slaves. The section of Whites who are ready to help the Blacks, are afraid of the masters of the plantation. On Friday Festival, the captured runaway Blacks are tortured and hanged in front of people. Two night riders have caught a slave girl named Louisa and brought her to the stage. Colson Whitehead depicts: “Her gray tunic was torn and smeared with blood and filth, and her head had been crudely shaved” (191). This shows the sad state of the runaway slaves and they are mercilessly tortured and hanged at the end. The Whites do not have any mercy; they abuse the

runaways and put them to the death. When Louisa is hanged, a woman comes forward to push the stool in which she is standing: “A young brunette in a pink polka-dot dress rushed to take his place” (192). Through this Colson Whitehead reveals that even the White women are against the Black women. Irrespective of the gender, the White supremacists inflict sufferings upon the innocent Black women. After some days, Fiona, the maid of Martin, complains about Cora's stay in their house. Colson Whitehead writes: “She crawled under Martin’s old bed and that’s where they found her, snatching her ankles like irons and dragging her out. They tossed her down the stairs. She jammed her shoulder into the banister at the bottom. Her ears rang” (222). The Whites treat the Black women very cruelly and they just drag her like lifting an iron rod. It is pathetic to note the brutalities unleashed against the Blacks by the Whites.

Colson Whitehead makes Ridgeway to reveal the cruel death of Lovey, “The young girl was installed in hers, hooked through her ribs by a large metal spike and dangling. The dirt below dark with her blood” (250). The sad state of a runaway slave after the recapture is explained by Colson Whitehead. It is terrible death of the innocent Black woman slave. The punishments given to the recaptured slaves are vicious and some slaves are burnt alive in front of the others so that they do not attempt to escape. These are the real punishments that are given to the Blacks by the White master’s decades before. Even in the present time, the Blacks suffer from domination, oppression, and degradation. Racism continues in American soil even now.

Moses, the Black man in plantation becomes a boss for the Black workers. When he was a child, he was beaten severely. Mabel, mother of Cora has saved him. After some days, his mother was sold to some other plantation. Now, he acts against his own people and he is cruel in treating the workers. He physically abuses the Black women. Mabel is raped by Moses and in fact, she is in his mother’s age. The novelist writes:

When he told her to come to the schoolhouse she scratched his face and spat at him and he just smiled and said if you’re not game I’ll find someone else—how old is your Cora now? Cora was eight. Mabel didn’t fight him after that. He was quick and he wasn’t rough after that first time. Women and animals, you only have to break them in once, he said. They stay broke. (350)

The Black men themselves hurt their own women. The Black women suffer from double marginalization as their own men as well as the White men have exploited them. Through this novel, Colson Whitehead has brought out the brutalities committed against the Black women by both their own men as well as the Whites. The sufferings of the Black women at the plantation are hidden by the masters. The novelist, being an African American has depicted the cruelties of the White supremacists. The rape and abuse of the Black women are not seriously viewed by others. African American women are subjugated to sexual abuse and violence. Through the sufferings of Cora, Mabel, and Ajarry, Colson Whitehead highlights the darker side of humanity. Slavery is the worst sin and heinous crime. Slave trade is the obnoxious act in the civilized society. Unfortunately, the Africans are forcibly taken to the American soil as animals and auctioned there to work in the plantations as labour force. The status of the African slave women is really pathetic. They are exploited physically and mentally at will by the White plantation owners like Terrance Randall. Cora’s rape by the Black boys

and Mabel's rape by Moses reveal the sufferings of the Black women inflicted upon them by their own men. Colson Whitehead has adeptly brought out the exploitation of the Black women in the novel and made the readers understand the sad state of them.

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