

# **The Psychological Impact of Slavery: Trauma and Healing Struggle in**

## ***The Underground Railroad***

**An Undergraduate Thesis**

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Research

Slavery is one of the darkest parts in the history of the United States of America. Slavery might happen because of the fact that the world was filled with various races, ethnicity, nations and cultures. Even though in general people expected to be able to live in peace and be treated fairly, even in an environment full of differences, yet, it did not seem to happen easily as expected particularly if you were a black people living in America around the 17<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> century.

According to Bigsby and Thompson (as cited in Fauziah et al., 2016), the Atlantic slave trade was one of the largest slavery trades in history, occurring from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, where it traveled along the Atlantic Ocean carrying around 9.5 million Africans. At that time, slavery occurred because white people needed slaves as labor, considering them as goods or assets that they can use as they please, they were treated unfairly.

Slaves from Africa were brought in because they were thought to be able to reduce labor costs, more profitable than employing Indians or poor white people. Since white people needed the labor of slaves, it resulted in the increase in the growth of the black population. A census of the black population conducted in 1860, in the American South, specifically in Georgia, reached 43.7% of the total population (Kennedy qtd in Fauziah et al., 2016)

According to Hamby, slaves were required to work to fulfill the needs of the landowners without stopping. By 1850, 80% of the world's cotton was produced in South America. In 1793 a cotton gin was invented by Eli Whitney. The invention of the

tool made the role of blacks as managers of the fields increasingly necessary, and the role of whites as owners of capital increasingly uncontrollable (Fauziah et al., 2016)

Normal human beings want to live free and not to be controlled by anyone. However, the slaves whose lives were oppressed and controlled by others lived a miserable life. The oppression led to resistance to fight for their human rights. The way the slavery people at that time resulted in resistance and rebellion. In addition, other rebellions and resistance were carried out individually, namely by escaping to the North to get a life free from suffering (Fauziah et al., 2016)

Most of the slaves in the south fled to the North American territories because it was the place where they could receive more humane treatment. Residents of the North claimed that slavery was the main cause of the region's financial and industrial decline. The abolitionist movement was aggressive, uncompromising, and insistent on an immediate end to slavery. The movement undertook activities to help escaped slaves to reach safety in the North into Canada. The result of this movement was the emergence of a network known as the Underground Railroad. This network spread throughout the North with many elaborate secret routes (Hamby Fauziah et al., 2016)

The period of slavery is often considered a dark period for the country. Therefore, many writers raise and immortalize this issue in their works. One of the writers who raised the issue of slavery in their works is Colson Whitehead, with a novel entitled *The Underground Railroad* (2016). This novel tells the story of the struggle of a slave girl named Cora, who was left behind by her mother, who was also a slave, to find the meaning of freedom after she and her family lived in torture on a plantation in Georgia. Cora escaped with her friend who was also a slave named Caesar by using the

subway to other states in America. After several stops, did not only experience violence and other torture, but also learned lessons about struggle and freedom.

This novel won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. This book is known for its unique way of presenting, combining existing fiction and historical facts, as well as providing an overview of the cruelty of slavery in America and also the impacts experienced by the victims. Whitehead explores slavery, violence, trauma and the healing process that occurs as a result of the events that occur in his work through the character of Cora. Cora does not only experience physical violence, but also mental damage which results in Cora having her own perspective regarding the world and herself.

As time goes by, Cora's journey of escape is not only to save herself, but also to slowly heal mentally due to the violence she has experienced so far. Healing is an important focus because the process is not easy, there are various obstacles, bitter experiences, problems of searching for identity, trauma and also the need to make peace with the pain experienced in the past. This novel tells us indirectly that the healing process takes quite a lot of time and requires emotional support for the characters to face their painful journey.

One of the problems experienced by Cora in this novel is the trauma resulting from complex problems, such as physical violence, sexual and psychological violence. Cora was depressed since she was a slave. She did not want to be treated badly by her masters as a result of her trying to shield a young boy she suffered from her employer's punishment, she tried as hard as she could to keep her cool (KUMAR, 2022)

All black people in this novel have their own obstacles, problems and traumas just like Cora. They experience a significant amount of retardation, trauma, and

apprehension, Cora is a hard worker, she much as feasible and avoids the problem as much as possible because of the terror that she has been through because her Employers have an impact on employees' mental health (KUMAR, 2022)

The writer argues that the issue of violence, trauma, and healing processes are strong in the narrative. Therefore, this research is entitled “The Psychological Impact of Slavery: Trauma and Healing Struggle in *The Underground Railroad*.”

## 1.2 Identification of the Problem

Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) vividly depicts the brutal reality of slavery in the 19-century United States. The narratives centers on Cora, a black woman who escapes the horrors of a Georgia plantation, seeking freedom in the North. Her journey is marked by relentless violence injustice, both physical and psychological, which she witnesses and experiences at each stop along her escape.

The novel does not shy away from portraying the deep trauma inflicted by slavery. Cora’s experiences of brutality and oppression raise critical question about long-lasting psychological impact of such violence. The text suggest that escaping physical bondage does not guarantee freedom from the psychological scars of trauma. Cora's experiences reflect a continuing internal struggle. Her responses to violence, including repression, emotional release, and eventual disclosure, demonstrate the activation of psychological defense mechanisms, crucial for survival but also indicative of deeper, unresolved trauma.

Therefore, this study seeks to identify how *The Underground Railroad* presents not only the brutal impact of slavery but also the subtle inner journey toward

psychological healing, with particular attention to the defense mechanisms employed by Cora and other characters as part of their survival and recovery efforts.

### 1.3 Scope of the Research

This thesis examines the representation of violence, trauma and healing struggle in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Through a psychoanalytic analysis of Cora's experiences, it will explore the form of violence she encounters, the resulting psychological trauma, and the mechanisms of healing she employs.

### 1.4 Research Question

This Research aim to answer these following question:

1. What are the violence experienced by the black people in the slavery era, through the characters in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead?
2. What form of trauma and healing struggle did Cora experience after experiencing several forms of physical and mental abuse?

### 1.5 Review of Related Studies

The writer presents some previous studies that related to this research, which can be seen in the following discussion:

The first related study was conducted by (Fauziah, 2019) from Pakuan University entitled "The Struggle of the Main Character To Obtain Freedom In Colson Whitehead *The Underground Railroad*." In their article, their explored the struggle of the main character to obtain freedom, highlighting the physical violence Cora experiences not only from her master but also from other slaves. This study aligns with the current research in acknowledging the pervasive violence in Cora's life. However, this research expands on Fauziah's work by specifically examining then psychological

trauma resulting from this violence and the subsequent healing mechanisms employed by Cora.

The second related study was conducted by (KUMAR, 2022) from Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, entitled “Depiction Of External Racial Conflicts In Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*”. In his article, investigated the external racial conflicts in the novel, examining how the characters' motivations to achieve freedom are depicted through conflict. Similar to this study, KUMAR's research acknowledges Cora's journey towards freedom. However, while KUMAR focuses on the conflict between Cora and Ridgeway, this research takes a broader approach by analyzing the internal conflicts and trauma that Cora experiences and how she attempts to overcome them.

The third related study was conducted by Khatimah, Sili, and Muhajir (2021), from Mulawarman University, entitled “Rejective Behavior Toward African American Slaves In Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*”. In their study, they analyzed the rejection behavior of African American slaves in response to the violence they faced. Their study also acknowledges the violence experienced by Cora and other slaves. However, this research goes beyond examining reactive behaviors to explore the deeper psychological impact of this violence on Cora and her journey toward healing.

The fourth related study was conducted by (MOTLAGH, 2020) from Malayer University of Hamedan, entitled “Traveling Ever Toward Freedom: A Metaphorical Feminist Study of Colson Whitehead’s”. In his Article, he discussed to what extent Whitehead’s use of metaphor in *The Underground Railroad* has been effective in demonstrating racial and gender issues. Metaphor creates or communicates knowledge, the mental representations and knowledge of abstract concepts that we cannot

physically experience. The similarity of this study and The writer's study is that both examine the female protagonists' persona, the trauma of their lived experiences, their resistance and survival. The difference is that the writer does not examine what metaphors Colson Whitehead uses in his novel.

The fifth related study was conducted by (Stanković, 2024) entitled "Slave Narratives and Speculative Fiction in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*." The paper explores the links between a contemporary novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead and the literary genre of slave narratives, explored the links between *The Underground Railroad* and the literary genre of slave narratives, highlighting the novel's adaptation of slave narrative tropes and speculative realism. Both studies acknowledge the significance of race and the legacy of slavery. However, this research diverges by focusing on the psychological dimensions of trauma and healing within the narrative, rather than the novel's relationship to the slave narrative genre

The sixth related study was conducted by (Glatt, 2021), entitled "Anti Narrative os Slavery in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*". In his article, he examines Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad*, which focuses on themes of identity, freedom, and narrative limitations. The book criticizes the reliability of storytelling, particularly in the context of American history, and highlights the inadequacy of conventional narratives in capturing the complexity of the experience of slavery. Using an anti-narrative approach, the novel reflects on trauma, memory, and the ongoing impact of historical injustice. The similarity of this study and the writer's study is that both examine the freedom that Cora wants, and discuss the trauma experienced

by the main character and the impact resulting from injustice. The difference is the author does not focus on the narrative form of this novel.

The seventh related study was conducted by Dischinger (2017), entitled “States of Possibility in Colson Whitehead’s *The underground Railroad*.” This essay considers the effects of the novel’s speculative premise in conjunction with its use of satire, focusing on the depictions of the nineteenth-century locations through which Cora moves. Thus, this essay argues that critics working to account for and redress national and regional fantasies should examine and instrumentalize the poetics of contemporary speculative fiction. The similarity of this study and the writer's study is that both explain the racial injustice experienced by Cora as the main character. The difference is this study focuses on the speculative and satirical elements of Colson Whitehead's novels and how the narrative connects fantasy with harsh reality.

The eighth related study was conducted by (SALVÁN, 2020) from University de Valladolid, entitled “Narrative Structure and the Unnarrated in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*.” In his article, Salvan analyzes the narrative structure of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* against the grain of traditional slave narrative conventions. His main hypothesis takes cue from the explicit, literal rendering of *the Underground Railroad* in the text, which may be considered as symptomatic of Whitehead’s approach to the slave narrative convention, in that his novel discloses or makes visible aspects which, in slave narratives, were left unnarrated. The similarity of this study and The writer’s study is that both tell the story of a slave girl, Cora, and her escape from a Georgia plantation. The difference is this study analyzes the narrative structure of this novel.

The ninth related study was conducted by Usman and Ashfaq (2022) entitled “Continuation Of Slavery In Postracial America: A Fanonian Critique Of *The Underground Railroad*.” In this article, they examined what causes the continuation of practices in post racial America through the analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016). The theory they use to further their research is Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theorization. This research examines racial dynamics in the US, highlighting the struggles of marginalized and oppressed groups. It aims to uncover the underlying psychological factors that contribute to racism. The similarity of this study and the writer's study is that both examine racism experienced by the characters, the difference is that this study focuses on the causes of racism in the united states of America, while the writer focuses on the causes that occur due to racism experienced by the character Cora.

