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**Imagined Realities: An Exploration of Societal Hierarchies and Racial Violence in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad***

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This research explores the idea of social hierarchies and the consequent violence, as shown in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. The novel summons the theme of inequality, Xenophobia, individual struggle and trauma. The aim is to analyze the various factors that create and strengthen racial hierarchies and the psychological and physical effects of slavery. The protagonist Cora is part of a broken family and becomes a victim of a pre-written fate by coming into a world where whiteness is the norm. Shackled and broken, she yearns for the world that exists outside the set boundaries. However, the absurdity of her existence becomes clear when she realizes that the outside world is no different from the world she had just escaped. Hence, this research aims to explore the past that is buried behind the fancy slogans of color blindness and post-racism. In this context, critical race theory including Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Paulo Freire's theory of oppression will be used as tools to analyze the oppressor/oppressed consciousness and accentuate the economic, physical, and psychological exploitation that the blacks have faced at the hands of their imperial masters. The future implication of this paper suggests that these racial hierarchies, far from being fully uprooted, have been made invisible and are manifested in various other ways.

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**1. Introduction**

The idea of racial denigration, hatred against the non-whites, and the colonized Other is one of the significant trails of colonization. Despite the fact that each individual comprises distinct physical features, the idea of race has no biological justification as "genes do not define races" (Perry, 2007, p.1) yet there have been various attempts to rationalize it on the basis of moral, cultural, and religious terms. Whereas on the one hand, it has been regarded as the White Man's Burden to propagate civilization and enlighten the "noble savages" who inhabit the dark continents of the world, on the other hand, black inferiority was justified by regarding them as the ill-fated descendants of Ham cursed by Noah as shown in the Book of Genesis. These ideas of racial disparity were voiced and further strengthened by literary pieces such as R.W Shufeldt's *America's Greatest Problem: The Negro* and pseudo-scientific theories including John Burke's *The Wild Man's Pedigree* which reinforce the idea that savagery is inherent and hence a biological condition.

Hence, one's race is seen as the prime signifier to determine one's intelligence and other physical attributes. This further explains the ideology behind Burke's racial hierarchy which portrays African blacks as governed by wild instincts and indolence in contrast to the civilized European whites. However, many theorists including Richard J. Perry, use the word race within quotation marks to show that it is a mere artifact, a constructed or an imagined reality. Michael Banton believes that using the

word “race” reinforces the same idea that “race is real” (Perry ix). Even when we negate the idea of race, considering it a constructed social belief, it is difficult to deny the pernicious consequences that racism has resulted in.

Racism has its roots in the earlier days of colonial venture and European exploration. Césaire’s equation: “racism=thingification” (Césaire, 2000, p.42) shows how colonization has led to the objectification of the colonized. Colonization resulted in millions of Africans being traded from their own countries to the Americas and other parts of Europe through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Wherever there was slavery, there were instances of fugitives running away and slave rebellions. The Nat Turner rebellion that occurred in 1831 in southeastern Virginia is an example of one such revolt that resulted in the killing of dozens of white men and women. Though this revolt, aided by the enslaved people of Virginia, was fully suppressed and many of the participants including Nat Turner were captured and publicly executed, it was a harbinger of threat for the white masters and severe measures were taken to implement the slave code.

The very idea of a slave escaping the bondage of chattel slavery was not only detestable to the white masters but posed a serious threat to the whole institution of slavery, which is why the masters would go to the extent of offering handsome rewards for capturing runaway slaves who were pursued, dragged back, and gruesomely executed in a public spectacle. In this way, the aura of fear, discipline, and apparent complacency was maintained. The consequences of such an escape have been chronicled by Colson Whitehead in *The Underground Railroad*. From Ajarry, the protagonist’s grandmother, to Cora, every character goes through the same excruciating pain of slavery, seeing their families torn away and killed in front of their eyes, living in a place where the very idea of crossing the boundary of the plantation is a sin, an act of sacrilege towards the white master. Cora has hated her mother, Mabel, all through her life as she chose freedom over her daughter until the day comes when Cora herself finally decides to leave the plantation to reach North, the land of liberty, a benevolent place that she believes welcomes negroes.

Through Cora’s escape, the novel accentuates some of the major historical events of the era including the underground railroad and the abolitionist movements emerging at the time but Whitehead’s description of the underground railroad is more appropriate and closer to legend than actual history. Rather than defying the melodramatic description of the railroad, he portrays it as a well-organized system of underground railroads, a tall gigantic tunnel that leads to a small twenty feet tall platform with steel rails, tracks and a bench. The railroad even has a timetable and after covering miles after miles of darkness, Cora finally reaches South Carolina, and marvels at the dazzling sunlight and the tall skyscrapers, a place in accordance with her imagined utopia.

Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens* states that an imagined reality is a “communal belief” (Harari, 2014, p.32), a fabricated idea that a lot of people believe in. This can be seen from the fact that even after the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment that illegalized involuntary servitude, the myth regarding white superiority and black inferiority kept on prevailing. In fact, the proslavery sentiments increased and became stronger which can be seen from the atrocious activities of the KKK and Jim Crow. This imagined idea of race gave birth to a history of violence and racism and this is how, according to Harari, “figments of imagination” were changed into “cruel- and very real- social structures” (157).

## **2. Literature Review**

*The Underground Railroad* has been viewed through various aspects including the theme of suppression, a journey towards (un)freedom and struggle, and the ensuing trauma of slavery. Apart from being historical fiction, it can be regarded as a neo-slave narrative depicting the era of slavery and an individual’s attempt to escape its clutches. While talking about neo-slave narratives, it is worth mentioning that slave narratives have played a significant role in revealing the atrocities of slavery, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is an example of one such memoir. Douglass escapes believing “one hundred miles straight North, and I am free” (Douglass, 2009, p.72) oblivious of what lies ahead, an eternal slave label. Hence, Whitehead incorporates all these historical elements in his novel, and though shows Cora’s successful escape but it is not without its repercussions. Stephanie Li in her article “Genre Trouble and History’s Miseries in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*” quotes Ramon Saldivar’s idea of speculative realism which is a “hybrid amalgamation of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fiction” (Saldivar, 2011, p.585). Li’s article further highlights the delimitations of Whitehead’s novel

because of the novel's anachronistic portrayal of certain things including a real railroad and the skyscrapers that Cora witnesses, and states that the novel "fails to historicize its own conceit" (Li, 2019, p.3). Madhu Dubey's article "Museumizing Slavery: Living History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*" on the other hand, regards the literal depiction of the railroad as an act of "materializing the past in all its concrete particularity" (Dubey, 2020, p.111).

*The Underground Railroad* is not only about the journey of the protagonist towards freedom but an amalgamation of various events that have happened in American history, and as a result, the story dangles between the realm of fiction and nonfiction. The saga of the underground railroad has itself been exaggerated to the level that it is prone to discrepancy and has turned more into a myth. One reason for this mythification, as Wilbur H. Siebert points out, is that the history of the underground railroad is written through the recollections of the abolitionists and was passed down through the oral tradition of storytelling. Moreover, it is believed that many records regarding the runaway slaves who were helped by the conductors were deliberately discarded because secrecy was of chief importance. Larry Gara believes that the legend of the railroad has been oversimplified by portraying the abolitionists as heroic figures, the fugitives as passive and inactive and the southern slaveholders as vicious beings in opposition to the benevolent New Englanders. The famous painting of Charles T. Webber, painted in 1893 regarding the underground railroad, strengthens the image of brave white abolitionists and the helpless runaways by showing the arrival of a group of black slaves assisted by white abolitionists. However, the legend ignores some of the exceptions and generalizes the facts by overlooking those "Southerners who had no direct interest in slavery" and the presence of "benevolent slave owner(s)" (Gara 1996, p.4). It also ignores the efforts made by the runaways themselves as most of the time they were self-reliant and had no outside assistance.

As stated earlier, the idea and workings of the underground railroad have been magnified throughout history. Wilbur H. Siebert's research on the underground railroad is considered to be one of the most comprehensive works regarding this topic but it stresses more on the heroic deeds of the anti-slavery whites rather than discussing the plight and the self-reliance of the fleeing blacks. This saga of heroism, near-death escapes, and the moral supremacy of white abolitionists determined to save their black fellows has become a part of American history. The danger lies not in sharing such stories but in sharing only some selective portions of them, deliberately hiding the darker parts. This purposeful blindness from the facts helps in elevating the image not only of the nation but the nation's past as well. The fact is that slavery in antebellum America was a well-knit institution but the railroad was a scattered network of a few individuals, mostly blacks, fighting against the iniquity of that whole system.

However, Whitehead in his book has literalized the metaphor and adheres to the exaggerated image of the underground railroad. By weaving his story around this fabricated trope, Whitehead shows how history itself is at times mythologized. By showing an alternate history, Whitehead, in the words of Madhu Dubey, aims to "defamiliarize public narratives about race" (1). Moreover, the vocabulary associated with the railroad such as conductors, station masters, and tunnels, helped in maintaining the secrecy of the endeavor at that time and Dubey believes that this heavily coded lexicon helped Whitehead in literalizing them. Besides this, Whitehead's anachronistic style of writing, by showing an actual railroad, establishes a relationship between the past and the present, and "the traffic between literal and figurative meanings sharpens the contradiction between American principles and realities" (13). Just as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* comes back from the dead and Octavia Butler's Dana in *Kindred* time travels from the late 1900s to the early 1800s, witnessing the reality of slave life, Whitehead's railroad is the link that creates a continuum between the present and the past.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on the qualitative method of research and discourse analysis is done keeping in view both primary and secondary sources. In order to conduct this study, articles from various distinguished journals, magazines and theoretical books of various notable writers have been consulted. The study is non-empirical and textual analysis of the selected novels is done using interpretivist mode of research.

### 4. Research Framework

Michael Omi in his work *Racial Formation in the United States* talks about the pivotal role that race plays in the various institutions of the United States and is of the view that all social institutions and relations are defined in terms of it. Moreover, the same pattern of racial stratification can be applied to gender relations as well, as “the corporeal distinction between white men and the others over whom they ruled as patriarchs and masters, then, links race to gender, and people of color to women” (Omi, 2015, p.107). Omi believes that race “symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (110). Though corporeal distinction has always been a popular way of justifying racial stratification, it actually works according to an ideological framework and has certain political dimensions. Racial discourses particularly of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essay on the Inequality of Races* and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* have only strengthened racial beliefs. Jefferson though criticizes the idea of racial superiority but believes that blacks “in reason [are] much inferior . . . in imagination they are dull” (Jefferson, 2011, p.163).

This shows that blacks have a history of exploitation that persists till today. Critical Race Theory, in this respect, helps in analyzing the various forms of racism that exist in society. It emphasizes the ordinariness of racial prejudice because people having a privileged position see their views as unquestionable and normal. The reason racism is difficult to cure lies in the fact that the people with power fail to acknowledge their inherent racism. Moreover, Derrick Bell, a CRT theorist, believes that the state, law, and the white elites work as a unitary force to preserve the status quo. By citing the *Brown v. Board* decision and the passing of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment in the US, Bell shows that the reason behind these decisions was more than racial equality or the whitening of America’s image as a nation. His interest convergence theory helps in understanding these decisions that allowed blacks certain rights which had been denied earlier.

Another significant tenet of CRT is its emphasis on story-telling as a way of counteracting the majoritarian narratives. The stories that the dominant groups create help in justifying their superiority. On the other hand, for the oppressed groups it is not only a form of resistance but presents the “outgroups, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream” (Delgado, 2012, p.2412) with a “counter-reality,” a reality that depicts the world from their perspective. Hence, stories are a way of creating social reality and it is only when a story combines with its counter-story that a balanced narrative is formed.

Moreover, it can be seen that physical differences have historically played a role in highlighting the polarity between the two races. To quote Fanon, the effects of this “corporeal malady” have been faced by black women in a different way than that of black men. bell hooks, in *Ain’t I A Woman*, argues that while discussing slave history, the role of black women, a victim of both slavery and sexism, has often been overlooked. It is believed that slavery stripped black men of their patriarchal role “reducing them to an effeminate state” (hooks, 2015, p.36). However, this analogy between dehumanization and womanhood only intensifies the derogatory position occupied by women. Black women were both commodified and objectified and “while institutionalized sexism was a social system that protected black male sexuality, it (socially) legitimized sexual exploitation of black females” (41). Historically, sexism has been a part of all societies and colonial America was no exception. Though white women were also a victim of sexism, what made their situation better was the “right to assume the role of the oppressor in relationship to black women and black men” (167) which shows that feminism which speaks of safeguarding women’s rights has proved to be a very lopsided term due to the self/other, white/black hierarchy that exists within this movement. The polarity that exists between the life of Whitehead’s white female characters as compared to the black women can be seen from the fact that after Cora’s sexual abuse, be it at the hands of Terrance the slave master or other black men, her own women “the Hob women sewed her up” (Whitehead, 2016, ch.2).

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, is another major tenet of CRT that talks about the overlapping forms of oppression that black women face. Even before the emergence of intersectionality as a concept, black women and theorists of the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries have raised the issue of gendered racism. Sojourner Truth, a slave, questioned the social standards regarding masculinity and femininity which shows that their position as doubly suppressed had always been a part of black female consciousness. Through her famous traffic metaphor, where an accident happens due to traffic coming from all directions, Crenshaw shows how race, gender and class affect black women by acting as interlocking systems of suppression. The reason they are at the bottom of the hierarchy, “the unprotected margin” as she calls it, is because feminist issues have always

been dealt with by using a “top-down approach.” Furthermore, an intersectional analysis shows how law recreates hierarchies by forcing the oppressed plaintiffs to be a part of one or the other major groups, neglecting the multidimensionality of their oppression.

This research also aims to analyze the oppressor/oppressed consciousness and the violence that this cycle of oppression ensues. For this purpose, Paulo Freire’s theory of oppression, as shown in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is of significant importance. He believes that the biggest problem in overthrowing an oppressive system lies in the conundrum that the oppressed group faces. Whereas on the one hand, there is a keen desire to be free, they harbor a “fear of freedom” as well. After years of suffering, they internalize the fact that they cannot survive without the system and it actually works for their betterment. Freire believes that the oppressed is not only supposed to regain his own humanity back but has to rehumanize the oppressor as well (Freire, 2005, p.44). As it is not only the oppressed who have been dehumanized, but the system that revolves around violence and bloodshed dehumanizes the oppressor as well. The reason behind the oppressor’s dehumanization lies in the “possessive consciousness” that he inhabits. For the oppressor, “to be is to have and to be the class of haves” (58). The oppressor develops such consciousness and starts thinking of other people as lesser beings because he knows that there is a system that will protect him. Freire believes that the oppressed, rather than trying to be like the oppressor, should break this circle of oppression in order to get freedom for both.

The tragedy lies in the fact that racism has taken a modern form in our contemporary society where police have taken the job of slave catchers, segregation has been replaced by the mass incarceration of blacks, prisons work both as the abode for chattel slavery and reform schools, and the label felon imposes the same nature of restrictions as it used to have in the era of slavery. Michelle Alexander regards this system as “the new Jim Crow” which “operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race” (Alexander, 2010, p.13). In fact, Cora’s continued journey shows that blacks are still trapped in a racial circle but are trying to venture towards freedom, the promised land.

#### **4. Discussion and Analysis**

The novel shows the protagonist’s journey towards freedom, a quest that not only helps her in knowing her own self but the true face of America as well. This yearning for freedom started with Cora’s grandmother Ajarry who was brought from Africa in slave ships where she was assaulted for weeks by her captors. After being sold many times, she reached the Randall plantation and felt as if she had reached home. Ajarry taught the same strategy to her children as well in which silence was one of the prerequisites for survival. Despite practicing the technique of silence and subservience, her only child who survived was Mabel, Cora’s mother, whom Cora had always hated as Mabel left her when she was only eleven. Contrary to Mabel who fled the plantation, Cora pursues Ajarry’s foot trails and rebuffs the offer proposed by a slave named Caesar. The only thing that Cora has inherited from Ajarry is a three-yard plot, a tiny piece of land that gives her the satisfaction of owning something. Cora is secluded from her black community as well and lives with hob women who share the same fate. During a fight over her plot, she is dragged into the forest and gets assaulted at the hands of the rival blacks. It is only after she is beaten by Terrance, the plantation owner, that she decides to run away with Caesar and taste freedom, the freedom that her mother tasted years ago. During their escape, she moves from state to state, believing that each state will open up new possibilities for her but the belief proves nothing more than a delusion. At times she is only a body to be molested, an object of experimentation, and a thing to gawk at. But it is only after she tastes freedom that she realizes the worth of it and continues her journey to achieve the unattainable, to be a free negro. While the novel deals with the issue of race and its repercussions, Whitehead does not aim to generalize the black experiences but shows the racial hysteria as faced by three generations, from Ajarry to Cora. Since each character faces discrimination in a different way, their psychological trauma is manifested differently as well. It’s a world where people are judged on the basis of white aesthetics of beauty, morality is associated with whiteness, the law is white, and to be black means utter dehumanization.

CRT regards race as a socially constructed category or an “imagined order” in the words of Harari, and these socially constructed hierarchies cannot function with violence only but need to be believed, justified, and look natural. Subjugation is

achieved through violence and violence has to be justified to shun any kind of moral pangs. Keeping in view the racial atrocities and genocides that happened in the past, it becomes evident that it is not easy to question, let alone uproot, the established beliefs as “every person is born into a pre-existing imagined order, and his or her desires are shaped from birth by dominant myths” (Harari, 2014, p.125).

The novel opens up narrating the fate of Cora’s grandmother who was torn away from her family as part of the transatlantic slave trade. As slavery was a lucrative business, strong men and young childbearing women were considered profitable for their masters. Ajarry saw her family being torn apart, witnessed her mother’s death and her father’s dead body left by the trail. The rest of her family sailed on a different ship and died of the plague on board but Ajarry imagined them working for some kind white master up north, and the ignorance of their fate gave her comfort. That slavery destroyed the blacks’ family life is seen from the fact that Ajarry married thrice; “one sold to another estate, the second dies of cholera, and the other had his ears bored for stealing honey” (Whitehead, 2016, ch. 1). Moreover, she gave birth to five children and taught them to practice silence in order to survive. Her deliberate muteness not only shows how, according to Freire, oppression domesticates the oppressed but throws light on the “fear of freedom” psyche as well. Her silence is due to the internalized belief that she is not going to survive if she rips herself away from the system that governs them. The irony lies in the fact that none of her children survived apart from Mabel who knew that survival was not in subservience but in resistance.

One striking element of the novel is its attempt to present a female character as the protagonist. Hence, the novel shows the world from the eyes of a person oppressed on more than one level. Cora has inherited both; her grandmother’s silence and her mother’s spirit of resistance. She is seen as a social pariah and lives in the Hob, a place inhabited by the most wretched of the black community. The Hob not only represents the margin that exists within the already marginalized group but is emblematic of the disunity that exists within the slave community itself.

The novel throws light on the life of every character individually showing that apart from being a chattel, every slave has a past and a story to tell. Their past is juxtaposed with their present to show the familial, psychological and physical deterioration that the characters have gone through. Caesar’s early life is different from others as he and his parents served a white lady without whips on their backs. The old lady was against slavery but believed that owing to the “intellectual deficiencies of the African tribe to free them from all at once would be disastrous-how would they manage their affairs without a patient eye to guide them?” (ch. 2). On her death the family is torn apart, contrary to the white woman’s promise of setting them free, and are sold on different plantations. Ever since his arrival at Randall, Caesar only wishes to reach the North and has learned about the underground railroad that operates in the South liberating the blacks. He takes Cora with her because he believes her to be lucky as her mother succeeded in getting freedom. They are attacked by four white men, one of whom Cora accidentally kills. Cora and Caesar reach Mr. Flecher’s home who is a white abolitionist and one of the railroad conductors. However, the news of a white man’s murder at the hands of some slaves spread like wildfire and there are slave catchers everywhere looking for them. Mr. Fletcher takes them to the railroad’s tunnel and leaves without any further guidelines telling them that his part is done.

Whitehead’s depiction of the underground railroad is interesting in the sense that rather than depicting the railroad in its actual historicity, he shows it as an actual, neatly built railroad. The depiction of an actual railroad that transports the blacks to other states presents a ‘what if’ scenario showing would the past be any different if there were an actual railroad helping the slaves. The train that Cora sees the first time is different from the way she has envisioned it as “the locomotive pulled one single car, a dilapidated boxcar missing numerous planks in its walls” (ch. 2) and she has ambivalent feelings about riding it. She wants to know about its builders and who maintains the train schedules. The conductor advises them to “look outside as [they] speed through and [they] will find the true face of America” (ch.2), and following the advice, Cora can only see darkness mile after mile.

On reaching South Carolina, Cora sees skyscrapers and elevators, an image that aligns with her imagined utopia. Here they are assisted by Sam, a white conductor, who gives them new names stripping them of their identity when it's the color that shackles them with their past. They are told that South Carolina has a progressive view regarding blacks and they have enough freedom here as they can come and go whenever they please and their children are not snatched. Cora and Caesar are both satisfied with this cramped freedom that they decide not to take the next train. Cora spends her day as a free woman walking in tall buildings made with marble walls and vaulted ceilings. She walks among white men and women who sometimes even give her a little bow. South Carolina then becomes a representation of the present-day society where racial hatred is hidden beneath compliments, courteous smiles and gentle bows.

CRT propagates that blacks are allowed to make progress and are granted certain rights only if they are advantageous to the whites, "interest convergence" as Derrick Bell calls it. He believes that "most racial remedies, however, when measured by their actual potential, will prove more symbolic than substantive value to blacks" (Bell, 2008, p.110). Equality for blacks means mitigating white power; destruction of the status quo. This can be seen from the fact that after coming to South Carolina, Cora starts living in a dormitory, has a bed to sleep in, food to eat, and clothes to wear, things that she had never imagined back then. The delusion of a happy present blankets her past trauma for the time being and she gets used to living without chains and whips. The state has even opened new hospitals for blacks where they get free checkups. These checkups are deemed necessary for the well-being of the blacks. During an intelligence test, Cora is asked about the origin of her ancestors, reinforcing the same stereotype according to which intelligence is defined by the color and creed of one's ancestors. Moreover, she is asked to get undressed for a physical examination where the doctor probes her with various instruments, "his fingers traced the scars from her whippings . . . the exam was painful and made her ashamed, the doctor's cold attitude doing nothing to ease her discomfort" (ch. 4). The treatment of Cora as a mere object of examination is evident from the scene as it not only reminds her of the Randall but accentuates the fact that the past may not be the past after all. Moreover, during one of their discussions about not taking the next train, Cora and Caesar see a black woman crying outside the hospital, wailing that her baby has been stolen. On hearing this, the only thought that comes to their mind is that of the plantation, ending with this relief that they have forgotten their past and escaped the plantation for good.

The illusion is soon shattered when Sam tells them that the purpose of these hospitals is neither to treat them for bad blood as they have been told nor to undo any kind of damage that slavery has wrought but they are being experimented on for syphilis and many other types of research. The reason that the doctor gives is to control their "sexual aggression and violent natures [and] protect our women and daughters from their jungle urges" (ch. 4). Through this event Whitehead refers to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment which actually started in the mid-1900s but Whitehead blurs the timelines of all these various events and places them within the slave era to show the continuous dehumanization of the blacks and the similarity that exists between the past and the present. The blurring of timelines also shows the way these events are stored in the collective memory of the nation. The Tuskegee experiment included, as Susan M. Reverby shows, 623 black men who were treated as guinea pigs in a medical experiment that lasted for forty years. The horrors of which are no different from the Nazi experiments done on Jews. Those involved in the research were told that they were being treated for bad blood when the actual purpose was to see what happens in human beings when syphilis is left untreated. Hence, the same blacks who have been denied their humanity, considered as the descendants of some other species, become human beings when it comes to experimentation that aims to help the whites in furthering their scientific research. This strengthens Bell's idea that blacks achieve presumed equality when it comes to the interests of white men. Besides this, Whitehead shows a gravedigger, Steve, who steals and sells black bodies to medical schools which shows that "in death the negro became a human being. Only then he was the white man's equal" (ch. 5). These instances affirm CRT's stance that all prejudices, stereotypes and corporeal differences can be forgotten if it fuels the white interests. Whitehead's presentation of such incidents is the microcosmic representation of events happening at the macro level including famous court proceedings when blacks were allowed to have their way because of the convergence of interests.

Moreover, CRT accentuates the importance of counter-narratives as they help in deconstructing the majoritarian stories- “the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms and shared understandings” (Delgado, 1989, p.2413). Reality is constructed with the help of these one-sided sagas and narratives. Stories and counter-stories are always different in perspective and neither can be seen as the objective truth or genuine history. It is only when the story is read with its counter story that it becomes a complete whole. These counter-stories not only voice the concerns of the oppressed and heal their psychic wounds but also hold a mirror to the oppressed who enjoy moral complacency by taking the majoritarian narratives as the only truth. During Cora’s stay in South Carolina, she is sent to work in the Museum of Natural Wonders which is opened the same day as the hospital. The museum that recruits black people and the hospital that provides medical treatment to blacks in an age when black hatred is the norm of the day become a symbol of South Carolina’s accepting attitude towards blacks. The museum attempts to visually depict some of the historical events including life in the “darkest” Africa and slave life on the plantations. The manager tells Cora that “like a railroad, the museum permitted [the people] to see the rest of the country beyond their small experience” (ch. 2). Though the museum claims to show the true story of America, Cora realizes the falsity of these narratives- the deceptive ideals that America is based on. In the scene, A Typical Day on the Plantations, Cora is shown sitting at a spinning wheel and resting her feet, a direct opposite of how she has spent her life at the Randall. What’s wrong with Whitehead’s depiction of the museum is that it shows the world from a monistic view and suppresses what CRT aims to highlight; the multiplicity of voices. The history shown in the museum shows how majoritarian narratives are disseminated. It only shows what the majority, the whites, want to see and believe in. Hence, a counter-narrative is required “to make visible the racial biases that are deeply embedded in the unstated norms of America” (Lynn 18) and to see how the world appears from their position, the bottom. Cora knows that the land of her ancestors became the “darkest” only after it was robbed by the whites. Had A Typical Day at the Plantations been this peaceful, she would have never lost her mother and risked her own life to get out of it.

No image of any society is complete without showing the condition of its female subjects. Hence, while talking about slavery, it is essential to discuss the various forms of oppression faced by black women. Whereas black male slaves were exploited on the basis of their masculinity, black women were exploited not only physically and psychologically but sexually as well. She was, at the same time, a plantation worker, a mammy to the white children, and an object of sexual gratification for the white men. Furthermore, the negative stereotypes and the Jezebel image of black women justified the assaults inflicted on them. bell hooks says that “rape meant, by definition, rape of white women, for no such crime as the rape of a black woman existed at law” (hooks, 2015, p.57). She further states that the reason for such assaults was not “a case of white men satisfying their sexual lust” but was an “institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women” (45) and what makes it tragic is that such an abuse was not only inflicted by white men but blacks as well.

This idea of multiple oppressions which Crenshaw terms as “intersectionality” is one of the basic tenets of CRT. *The Underground Railroad*’s employment of a female protagonist helps in viewing life as it appears from the bottom. Whitehead gives a chapter-length description of each female character in order to focus on their individual experiences without generalizing them. Cora’s problems are aggravated not because she is a black person or a woman but a black Hob woman. The Hob not only shows that class is another significant element of oppression but also highlights the oppressed group’s desire to create a hierarchy within their oppressed circle. Cora is molested at the hands of her own black men due to her status of being a Hob woman, an outcast. By owning a three-yard plot, something that even the men of her community don’t have, she crosses the patriarchal limits and hence, needs to be restrained. These intersecting oppressions are not only faced by Cora but by all black women. Ajarry is sold and molested for weeks and because she cannot resist, she embraces silence and believes that her survival is only in submission. Her daughter, Mabel, faces the same fate. Cora is not only assaulted by the whites but by the blacks of her community as well showing the tragedy of female slaves that “white men eat you up, but sometimes colored folk eat you up, too” (ch. 2). While viewing through the lens of intersectionality, it becomes visible that the woman who is already

suffering due to her color and gender is further victimized due to her marginal existence within her own community. Her assault at the hands of black male slaves shows that the blacks copied the white male behavior rather than protecting the black women and were fully conscious of the subordinate position that black women had in comparison to them.

In the novel, Alice is the beloved of James Randall as she was of James' father. As a result, she is seen with fear, if not respectability, within her own community. During one of their celebrations, where every slave contributes to the party, Cora gives Alice two heads of cabbage, which Alice later throws in the slop basket. Cora cannot confront her owing to her status as the owner's mistress. However, Cora realizes "there was an order of misery, misery tucked inside miseries, and you were meant to keep track" (ch. 2). Whereas Cora's problems are multiplied due to her Hob status, Alice's so-called better position allows her to subdue those who are beneath her, "she became insufferable. Preening, gloating over the ill-treatment that she alone escaped" (ch. 2). This relationship dynamic that exists between Cora and Alice not only shows the lack of unity among the oppressed but becomes a symbol of class differences that exist within the black group, another form of oppression that intersectionality talks about.

The question then arises that why the victims continue victimizing others rather than breaking the cycle of oppression. Freire shows that "the very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors" (Freire, 2005, p.45). Both the characters, Alice and Moses, show how the oppressed perpetuate oppression. Moses was born on the plantation and faced the brutality of plantation life. When he was a kid, he was beaten for stealing a potato. After beating, Connelly washed his wounds with hot pepper until he passed out. These beatings made him silent, strong and fast but not evil. It is only after "Connelly made him a boss, the master's eyes and ears over his own kind. That's when he became Moses the monster, Moses who made the other slaves quake, black terror of the rows" (ch. 11). His oppression is not only limited to beating slaves in the fields but he takes every possible measure to be as intimidating as the white master. Once he tries to take advantage of Mabel but she resists. However, Moses threatens her that her daughter's safety, Cora who was eight then, depends on her submission. Mabel never resists after that. Moses' ideology is based on the belief that "women and animals, you only have to break them in once. They stay broke" (ch. 11). Rather than having solidarity with the members of their own group, Moses and Alice choose to assume the role of perpetrators which affirms Freire's stance that "the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole" (Freire, 2005, p.46).

Apart from all this physical and sexual violence, slavery had a direct impact on the psychology and the family system of the black slaves. Bulhan talks about the six markers of oppression including "space, time, energy, mobility, bonding and identity" (Bulhan, 1985, p.140). Hence, the oppressed are robbed of basic rights without which life seems inconceivable. As in *The Underground Railroad*, Cora has no choice but to hide her own identity in order to save herself from getting caught. She flees from state to state searching for a place she can call home. She has to stay in an attic, so small she can't even stand, for months. There is no mention of her father, and she hates her mother who has left her at the mercy of the white masters. Cora's grandmother took a husband thrice and neither of them succeeded in staying with her. She has seen all her kids, except Mabel, die by disease or beatings in front of her eyes. Terrance makes sure to convert every joyous event of the slaves to always end in misery. If any of his slaves got married, "he would violate the bonds of affection sometimes visiting slaves on their wedding night to show the husband the proper way to discharge his marital duty" (ch. 2). Under all these circumstances one can easily assume the kind of family that would grow out of it; broken and traumatized.

Besides this, one of the most intangible effects of slavery includes the impact that it has left on the psychology of the blacks. The slaves' continuous exposure to violence and fear becomes a barrier in their way of struggle. Whitehead shows the Randall plantation where beatings and lynching are common and it is mandatory for the slaves to witness it. When Ridgeway brings Big Anthony back after the latter runs away, he is "doused with oil and roasted" while the blacks stand around him to see his misery. The punishment of running would always be exemplary to create fear in the other blacks. The slave mothers

terrorize their children by saying, "mind yourself or Mr. Ridgeway will come" (ch. 3), a fear that stops them from getting liberation and crossing the boundary.

Whereas terror and fear of punishment stop slaves from liberating themselves, the "fear of freedom" itself, as Freire poses, is another significant factor. Freedom is always gained by putting life at stake, the very life for which he wants to get freedom. This fear of getting freedom shows that "the oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (Freire, 2005, p.47). Whereas beatings stop other slaves from running, it has an entirely opposite effect on Cora. After she is beaten by Terrance on saving a little black boy from his violence, she makes up her mind to run. As she is already ostracized from her own community, there is nothing more to lose. Hence, her marginalized position gives her the power to resist and overthrow the system that others cannot.

Oppression and violence are intertwined with each other as oppression ensues violence. Fanon believes that violence can be defeated only by violence. Hence violence is in the very foundation of this system of colonial subjugation. It does not merely control the colonized but "it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture . . . sheer physical fatigue will stupefy them. Starved and ill, if they have any spirit left, fear will finish the job" (Fanon, 1963, p.i). The best example of this internalized dehumanization and the "fear of freedom" psyche is the character of Homer, Ridgeway's young slave. He buys Homer for five dollars and sets him free the next day. The boy seldom speaks and catches the runaways alongside his master showing no sign of affinity or kindness for them. Every night he chains himself to Ridgeway's horse cart because he believes that being chained is the only way for him to sleep. Homer shows the assimilation of the two races, blacks and whites, that occurs with a calm acceptance of the latter's eternal slavery.

Moreover, in Fanonian terms, violence can always be defeated with more violence. This can be seen from the fact that when Cora and Caesar run towards South Carolina, they are pursued by a group of white men who try to capture them. During the struggle, Cora accidentally kills one of the attackers, a young white boy. The memory of these accidents haunts her but she tries to justify it by saying that it was necessary. Besides this, in the last chapter when Ridgeway finally captures Cora from the Valentine Farm, a black Eden, he forces her to take him to the underground station to which she agrees. While leading them down the stairs, thinking about the past traumas, Cora sums up all her courage "she spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron . . . she held him close like a lover and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness" (ch. 11). Fleeing does not help Cora, it is only after confronting the source of that violence that she walks "into northness," towards freedom.

## **5. Conclusion**

The conducted research shows that even though racial binaries are justified using science, religion and culture, racial differences are political rather than natural. The repercussions of the years of slavery cannot be easily grasped. Apart from the psychological, economic and physical damage, it destroyed their close relations and family life. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead succeeds in articulating the trauma that the slaves and their succeeding generations faced. We know Cora hates her mother, Mabel, for escaping the plantation leaving Cora at the mercy of the whites. Throughout the novel, she keeps believing that her mother is out there, enjoying freedom, and the narrative ends with the same image of Mabel in Cora's eyes. She never gets to know the fact that her mother, after crossing the plantation and running a few miles, turns back to take Cora with her. However, on her way back through a swamp, she is bitten by a snake, dies on the spot, and her body is devoured by the swamp. Whitehead reveals Mabel's fate only in the last chapter, and her story becomes a part of those thousands of stories that were never narrated. This is how slavery jeopardized the family system of blacks and many people died waiting for their loved ones to return.

Even at present, the innocent killings of people like Martin Trayvon and George Floyd show that race is a significant marker in the lives of Afro-Americans. The myths that maintained a blemished black image in the past still exist. These myths and racial

restrictions have merely been redesigned and are based on the same principle, the purpose of which is to sabotage the non-whites. While talking about the present society, post-racial as it is called, it can be seen that though there are no plantations, Jim Crow laws, any Klan, or slave catchers, black progress is impeded through various other ways. Michelle Alexander's research shows that the rate of black incarceration in this century is higher than in any of the previous centuries because of the much-believed myth that criminals are usually black or brown. This shows how the police have replaced the slave-catchers and the legal justice system acts on the same principles as that of the Jim Crow.

The study deduces that certain "imagined realities" are created, disseminated, and become a part of the majority's consciousness because people want to believe in them. They are not questioned because they maintain the oppressor/ oppressed hierarchy. These beliefs are not only transferred from generation to generation, but religion, science, and the law, all play a role in maintaining the hierarchy that these beliefs create. The black subjugation that started from the idea of Noah's curse, the scientific theories of black primitiveness, and the modern belief of black criminality, show that though the justifications behind racial subjugation have changed, the objectives remain the same. Considering the present age's racial killings, all-black neighborhoods, and the rate of black incarceration, the idea of post-racism itself seems to become a myth, an imagined reality.

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