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Dispossession and Dehumanization: A Subaltern Study of *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract

Black chattel slavery by Americans is an atrocious historical phenomenon engraved in the history of America. Literature is the mouthpiece of different historical events and epitomizes those events vividly. This study focuses on dispossession and dehumanization and its impact on the plight of female slaves in Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Underground Railroad*. It reflects various modes of dispossession and dehumanization in the form of separation, deprivation, objectification, indoctrination, and marginalization. The main objective of this research is to explore women portrayed as subalterns via dispossession and dehumanization in *The Underground Railroad* and its impact on the women in the novel. The researcher employed textual analysis and close reading techniques as this study is qualitative. The researcher has applied the postcolonial and feministic essay of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" It probes the experiences of female slaves as subalterns on the Randall plantation in the South and their journey of running away to the North. Henceforth, the present study shows the long lingering effects of slavery which started from the slave trade and continue to be there on Black women in the white society. The findings show that female slaves are consistently dispossessed and dehumanized in the novel which has a devastating effect on them and their society, respectively.

Introduction

The slave trade has been an agonizing episode in the lives of Afro-American people. Black slaves were ruled by white masters and taken as their property. During slavery, slaves were dispossessed. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024), dispossessed refers to "deprived of homes, possessions, and security." Henceforth, dispossession is an illegal and non-consensual deprivation of a person or group from their belongings. The major proponent of dispossession is the forceful displacement of an individual. It can occur through various means such as legal proceedings, financial coercion, and physical displacement. Henceforth, it is a mode of marginalization used against any person by the wilful use of the power of the superior hands.

Dehumanization has been a common herald of acts of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination throughout history. Merriam-Webster (2024) defines dehumanization as to depriving (someone or something) of human qualities, personality, or dignity. According to social psychologist, Haslam (2006), dehumanization is "the denial of full humanness to others, and the cruelty and suffering that accompany it." It is an extremely biased behaviour coerced by a powerful agency on a meek target. According to Haslam, it is a phenomenon applied by an in-group on the out-group resulting in the harsh mistreatment of the enemy. Similarly, white masters, overseers, slave catchers, and doctors dehumanized female slaves in the novel. Henceforth, dispossession and dehumanization are active tools of marginalization for men and women and vehemently used against women in *The Underground Railroad*.

Whenever a colonizer has colonized a nation, it has practiced dispossession and dehumanization as tools to civilize them meanwhile, the latter has lost their humanness, individuality, freedom, land, and self-esteem in the enslavement. The colonizer ignores the fact that the colonized are human beings and in the coercion of power they develop a false consciousness of demi-god and ruthlessly maltreat the colonized. In *The Underground Railroad*, black Africans are enslaved on the Southern plantation in the United States of America. The slave owners, overseers, and slave catchers make the lives of the enslaved people, especially women a horrible nightmare. The white masters and their assistants play a significant role in marginalizing women in the novel. The present study investigates a lineage of women in the slaves who are dispossessed and dehumanized from birth to death.

Spivak's "subaltern" experiences marginalization which causes oppression. Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern" in his renowned book *Prison Notebooks* in 1923. According to his perspective, a subaltern is any person or group considered inferior in a particular society under the rule of a hegemonic power. Henceforth, subaltern belongs to a lower position in any society, and they are socially, politically, economically, and geographically excluded from the exercise of power. In post-colonial theory, the subaltern is always at the margin of society. Spivak emphasizes that subaltern women cannot speak in the hegemony of the master colonizer as their voice is muted due to their inferior status. She believes that poor, black, and female subaltern is marginalized thrice as they don't have any voice, physical status, or space of their own. According to her formula, the institutions are designed to exploit and administer the marginalized strata of society. In her view, subaltern women are treated like objects, tools, and commodities that lack feelings and emotions.

In the novel female slaves are treated as objects and commodities who do not have their will and voice. If they show resilience, they are punished even lynched by the white masters for establishing their rule. The journey of marginalization started from the slave trade and is still in progress as its impact cannot be compensated.

Literature Review

The Underground Railroad is a modern novel that has been explored from different dimensions. Rituraj (2021) has explored the literal and imaginary fantasies of escape of an individual character in *The Underground Railroad*. Zarei and Roozbeh (2019) wrote "Black Feminism in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*." Their focus is on Collins' theory of intersectionality and Black feminism to study the racist nature of the West regarding black women. Usman and Ashfaq (2022) have illustrated the post-racial image of America by applying Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory on *The Underground Railroad*. They have discussed the malady of slavery and its impact on the enslaved people broadly focusing on the psychological trauma of the oppressed. Motlagh (2020) wrote "Traveling Ever Toward Freedom: A Metaphorical Feminist Study of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*". In this article, he has exploited all the possible meanings of the conceptual metaphors used in the text for slavery and oppression. Zarei and Roozbeh (2020) have analyzed the novel with the canon of W. E. B. Du Bois' theory of "Double Consciousness and the veil". Their focus is on the anti-racist ideas of equality and justice for every section of society, whether colored or non-colored. Shams Eddine (2023) explores the novel with the Marxist perspective and interprets the text and the historical oppression of black Africans in America as mere treatment of commodities. Yang et al., (2022) investigate the oppression between women and nature in the novel with the lens of ecofeminism. They analyze the relationship between women and nature and how both are oppressed under patriarchal rule. Groba (2019) explores in "Riding the Rails to (Un)Freedom: Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*" that Cora's journey of freedom is elusive and can't be attained in those states where slavery is abolished. Her journey to freedom remains a dream even in the northern states of America.

Although, all these critics have analyzed and discussed *The Underground Railroad* from different perspectives but claim that there are untrodden paths in their study. The present study is intended to explore those gaps and fill them by extensive analysis of the novel under the light of Spivak's postcolonial and feminist approach.

Research Methodology

The mode of research is qualitative as it is based on human behavior and can't be quantified. However, close reading technique is employed to answer the proposed questions in the light of the postcolonial feminist approach. Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Underground Railroad*, is the primary text chosen for this study. Moreover, secondary data is collected from different journals, articles, electronic repositories, and other theoretical books. The present study explores *The Underground Railroad* with Spivak's concept of gendered subaltern with the help of textual analysis and portrays the marginalization of women and their endeavors to survive and attain freedom from the white masters.

Discussion

The Underground Railroad is the story of an African slave girl, Cora. Her journey of subalternity starts at the beginning of the novel. First, the novel is written from third person's point of view to make the protagonist mute. Spivak (1985) claims, "the subaltern is unfortunate and unprivileged. It does not have a voice which can be heard. It is very hard to determine how a subaltern can speak and how it can be heard." (p.77) Therefore, Cora does not have the power to narrate her story as she is a slave and she does not have this privilege to narrate or make histories but to subjugate only. When the novel starts, we are told that Cora is the daughter of a fugitive slave named Mabel and the granddaughter of Ajarry (who is sold three times) and works on Randall's plantation. Mabel ran away from the plantation without the consent and permission of her master. The researcher claims that Cora is a subaltern. Firstly, she is a female African slave and secondly, she is the daughter of a fugitive slave. Colson Whitehead unveils the exploitation and oppression of subalterns in the hands of the powerful masters.

According to Spivak, the subaltern tries to speak but the powerful discourses suppress its voice. On the eve of Jockey's birthday, one of the slaves named Chester bumped the master, Terrance Randall, and stained his shirt with a drop of wine. Terrance Randall brutally whipped him, and Cora was watching this extremism. All of a sudden, a shrug appeared in 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...It [cane] 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" (Whitehead, 2016, p.34). Cora tries to protect Chester and shows resistance, but her voice goes unnoticed by the masters and the overseers make sure that the voice is never produced again in the future.

The history of subalternity has long begun from the day Transatlantic slaves started in 1640 and the captives were traded from Africa to Europe America. The macro journey from captivity to subalternity is presented via the micro journey of Cora in *The Underground Railroad*. Randall's plantation became the destination of Ajarry after being sold "that many times" (Whitehead, 2016, p.11). She is treated as a commodity that is sold and lost: "Ajarry spent three months as the property of a Welshman" (Whitehead, 2016, p.11) and "sold a few times... passed between slavers for cowrie shells and glass beads" (Whitehead, 2016, p.8). She did not possess her body or her will even her kids were not in her hands. The kids died and were killed "one after another. At least they were never sold off" (Whitehead, 2016, p.11). These slaves even don't have the free will to stop living this miserable life as "she twice tried to kill herself on the voyage to America, once by denying herself food and then again by drowning" but the sailors rescued and chained her from "head to toe" (Whitehead, 2016, p.11). Cora's grandmother being a subaltern does not have the right to be asked about her will. Like Ajarry, Mabel was on death bed illness and "bled for days and Connelly didn't bother to call the doctor until she looked half a ghost" (Whitehead, p.15). He only called the doctor to save a laborer, not a human being.

Spivak believes that Subalterns do not possess property or material possessions. On the plantation, there were wooden cabins, and "the strip between the cabins was a place to tie a goat, build a chicken coop, a spot to grow food" (Whitehead, 2016, p.15). Cora got the charge after her mother escaped from the plantation, but Blake (a nigger from California) decided to tie his dog on Cora's spread and built a dog house as well. Blake consciously was giving her the impression that she is invisible and her presence doesn't hold any significance. Blake makes her realize that a single inch on the plantation does not belong to her as she is an African slave. This series of dispossession is taken further, and she is not allowed to choose where to sleep and call her harbour on the plantation:

Off to Hob with those who had been crippled by the overseers' punishments... broken by the labour in ways you could see and in ways you could not see...lost their wits...with strays. The damaged men, the half-men, live in Hob first. Then the women took up residence. (Whitehead, 2016, p.18)

Even she could not assert that she is sane and has not broken any rule for sending her to "Hob." However, subalterns belong to their masters. On the plantation, Cora is the property of the Randall brothers but when she ran away, she became "the property of the United States Government," and when caught she is the property of its owner (Whitehead, 2016, p.81).

Subalterns do not have the right to choose a partner or the consummation of marriage; "He [Terrance] will arrange and approve all marriages personally to ensure the appropriateness of the match and the promise of the offspring" (Whitehead, 2016, p.45). Masters felt proud of possessing the bodies of the slaves as they were the only authorized persons to check their maturity and puberty. Subalterns do not have a right to know, and they are mostly kept unaware of the history, dates, and news. One of Cora's friends insists Cora pick a birthday, but she does not and says, "Can't pick...It's decided for you" (Whitehead, 2016, p.16). She knows that it does not make a slave special or free if she gets to know her birthday that painful day should be erased from her memory. The

slaves were kept in a veil as they were not allowed to get to know the happenings around in other states of the U.S; “Antislavery literature was illegal in this part of the nation. Abolitionists and sympathizers who came down to Georgia and Florida were run off, flogged, and abused by mobs, tarred, and feathered” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 49). To make a slave an ever slave it must be twice removed from the current affairs to make his/her desire for freedom inactive or else a rebellion may arise, and slaves will run away. That is why “Connelly once put out a slave’s eyes for looking at words” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 84). Being a subaltern, Cora does not have the authority to narrate or write history, but the colonizer has the power to narrate or write the history for the colonized. She is uncomfortable with the African history presented in the museum as “she had numerous suspicions about the accuracy of the African and ship scenes but was an authority in this room” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 94). She talked to Mrs. Field, but she responded that because of the size of the room she has restricted the presentation to a miniature. Cora is once again hushed and not heard as she has been the eyewitness of the plantation and an authentic person to give the true picture of it. Spivak (1988) claims that subalterns are subordinate to their masters. Therefore, they do not have any history.

The journey of subalternity passes from every demeanour of animosity. In the novel, the white men are trying to disown the colored women from having offspring; “Dr. Stevens explained, to educate folks about a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 96). Cora tries to speak for her as she does not want to go through the surgical procedure, but Dr. Stevens informs her that “As of this week, it is mandatory for some in the state” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 97). She realizes the bitter truth that “they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 97). Therefore, she thinks of the same surgical procedure offered to white women too and concludes that the white race is the best and cannot be disowned anyway. The surgical procedure in Spivak’s language is “*white men are saving brown women from brown men.*” In South Carolina, most of the colored people were bought by the government and they would “get food, jobs, and housing...marry who they wish, raise children who will never be taken away” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 81). The masters pretend to be the savior of the colored people to exploit them by strategically controlled sterilization while targeting “first the women but both sexes in time” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 104). Colonizers want to suppress and cut the roots of the subaltern as they fear the bloody revolution that could be brought by the marginalized. Therefore, the masters pretend to be saving the subaltern while on the contrary, they are destroying the future of subalterns. Cora recalls the screaming woman and could make sense of her screams, “they are taking my babies” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 105). The screaming woman is indeed a subaltern as her screams are not recognized even though the lady is called mentally unfit while she could feel that “the doctors were stealing her babies from her” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 105). Cora never affirms the surgical procedure and tries to decide for herself: “I can decide for myself” but Miss Lucy as a master never recognizes her decision and rejects her, “you’re not the person I thought you were” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 109).

According to Spivak, the colonizer provides Eurocentric education to the slaves to keep the slaves as per their desires and Randall is the true example of it as he “forbade religion on his plantation to eliminate the distraction of deliverance” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 111). A subaltern does not have a right to religious or intellectual education as it empowers the slave and thinks of the master as his/her enemy. Connelly on the plantation would make use of such verses which would benefit the white masters: “Niggers, obey your earthly masters in everything and do it only when their eye is on you and to win their favor but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 152). Ridgeway, the slave catcher, opens the Pandora’s box of the white master “to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy what needs to be destroyed. To lift the lesser races. If not lift, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 183)

Dehumanization is a psychological phenomenon that minimizes the enemy from the stature of a human and is not treated as human. Haslam et al. (2007) define dehumanization as “the process of denying a human being proper humanness, notably: autonomy, individuality, and a sense of dignity”. Slavery is a form of dehumanization and black people are therefore dehumanized since the rise of transatlantic trade. In the novel, Ajarry is depicted as the epitome of dehumanization at the hands of white people. Buying and selling “human souls” for utility, as they belong to white men, is the first step to dehumanization. Ajarry is sold many times on the way to America. While purchasing a slave, the feelings, emotions, pains, and respect are denied to her as Ajarry’s maturity is checked by stripping her body to see “if she was in flower” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 9). She could not get to feel like a human as she “spent three months as the property of a Welshman” (Whitehead, 2016, p.13). Even as a tool “her price fluctuated” in the market (Whitehead, 2016, p. 10). Ajarry along with other women is treated like chattel

and henceforth “chained from head to toe, in exponential misery” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 8). She found that her white masters considered a fertile slave girl “like a mint, money that bred money” (Whitehead, 2016, p.10). She knew that the level of dehumanization was very low, and her people were objectified, “if you are a thing — a cart or a horse or a slave — your value determined your possibilities” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 10).

Human beings are born with a bestial nature to consider other human beings as less human. The white masters may be the Randall brothers or Connelly could not feel the pain and trauma through which Mabel was going through while giving birth to Cora, “[Mabel] bled for days and Connelly didn’t bother to call the doctor” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 15). Spivak uses the Marxist perspective to see the exploitation of the oppressed people in the hands of the colonizer. Terrance Randall “wrung out every possible dollar” as he like other plantation owners sucked blood out of Black slaves in the name of labor (Whitehead, 2016, p. 25). The masters knew that “when black blood was money, the savvy businessman knew to open the vein” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 25). White masters did their best to make slaves productive, “White man trying to kill you slow every day, and sometimes trying to kill you fast” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 28). It shows that no matter what happens white men are only concerned with their material gains and financial progress, but humane treatment is denied to slaves.

While African slave girls are regarded as inferior to human beings they are “whipped” by the overseer, Connelly. He “whipped her grandmother and mother, stalking the village with a lopsided gait that reminded her of an old ox” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 36). He “peeled” her and “scrubbed” her wounded, bloody back with “pepper water” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 36). The whipping and beating had been hellish which made Cora moan and experience “the dizzy spells and a pounding in her skull” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 36). Whenever any slave would be punished on the plantation, other slaves were supposed to watch the brutal punishment as “it was customary for slaves to witness the abuse of their brethren as moral instruction” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 43). Worst of all is the appropriation of marriage for the slave girls to have the best slaves as offspring. The white master as usual believes that African slaves are brutal animals who need to be tamed and civilized as they are *tabula rasa*. Therefore, Terrance Randall would “arrange and approve all marriages personally to ensure the appropriateness of the match and the promise of the offspring” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 45).

Even after Cora escaped to South Carolina, she could not change her status from a chattel and was still “the property of the United States Government” and “purchased” by the Government as “Bessie Carpenter” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 81). In South Carolina, she is placed at the Museum of Natural Wonders where she is supposed to show the journey of an African from “Darkest Africa” onto the “Slave Ship” and “Plantation” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 94). At the museum, she is minimized to the stature of an actor and “stalked” being an African, but a dummy was fixed for a white sailor (Whitehead, 2016, p. 94). Even marginalization is dominant in the museum where Africans are segregated from the Americans.

Black slave women tormented over their offspring to be as doctors and surgeons are educating folks about “population control” and its “mandatory” for those colored women who have given birth to “more than two children” or “imbeciles and otherwise mentally unfit” and “habitual criminals” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 97). Colored women are chattels and hence marginalized but white women like Mrs. Anderson who “suffered black moods” were not supposed to go through this medical procedure as she belongs to the supreme race of humans (Whitehead, 2016, p. 96). Even as free women still colored women were “herded and domesticated. Not pure merchandise as formerly but livestock: bred, neutered” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 106). Her status of being a tool is never changed as she goes to other States as she is “still property, even in Indiana” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 223). The only way through which a slave can only be restored to his/her position and rehumanized is only “death”, “in death the negro became a human being. Only then was he the white man’s equal.” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 116) Death is the ultimate solution to serve justice.

The heart reckoning modes of marginalization and its impact are portrayed in the form of suicidal attempts, isolation, loss of identity, lack of motivation, running away from the tyrant masters, death of friends and slaves, and unimaginable pain. These effects are depicted in the form of psychological trauma, pain, detachment from society, and loss of friends. The overseer sent Cora and other slaves to Hob, where mentally disturbed slaves were kept. According to Whitehead, “off to Hob with those who had been crippled by the overseer’s punishments” (Whitehead, 2016, p. 18). In the Hob, white and brown men would physically and mentally torture women due to which they would give birth to physically and mentally retarded or dead babies. Cora became a stray in the miserable environment of the plantation. Slave women’s status is not more than that of an object as they are tools of experimentation. White men scientists and doctors are performing secretive experiments to get to know about

black people's gene mechanisms and "peered beneath things to understand how they worked" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 10). They are kept ignorant of their origin, heritage, lineage, identity, religion, rights, spouse, homes, and the knowledge of the future. However, the indoctrination by the white master never ends as women slaves are "educated" on different occasions (Whitehead, 2016, p. 96). On the Plantation, marriages are "arranged and approved" by the master or best offspring (Whitehead, 2016, p. 44). On the contrary, the offspring of runaway slaves are taken away.

Female slaves are marginalized wherever they are. Earlier, Cora did not realize how white people are excluded from the spotlight of marginalization. Cora can't be exempted from the population control, but Mrs. Anderson and other white women are not offered any medical procedure. Cora felt the absence of her lack to live a fearless life. This uncertainty and living in fear make her inquisitive about her status and feels the depth of marginalization with every passing minute. She ran away from the plantation like her mother believing that she would get rid of her master but lately, she realized that "she was free of her master but slunk around a warren so tiny she couldn't understand" (Whitehead, 2016, p.149). Finally, she found out that she could not run away from the marginalization in the States anyway. She feels disgusted and wants to get rid of being white master's property. She is exasperated over her lack of decision about her life, choice of partner, reproduction, education, bonding with her relatives, religion, and harbor. Whitehead describes her situation along with other female slaves as commodities and objects who are subject to subjugation at any cost. Spivak claims that subalterns are treated as commodities, which is a dominant trait throughout the novel. Cora is treated as an object and a non-living entity in the museum that lacks emotions and feelings. That's why when she looks back in the eyes of a white female in the museum; she gets scared and leaves the section.

Marginalization inculcates despair, anger, and mental agony in the subalterns. According to Spivak, subcultures are always considered inferior in society. Consequently, Cora and other slaves are considered inferior and downtrodden in *The Underground Railroad*. In the novel, sterilization and experimentation are done exclusively on African slaves to eradicate some of their races. Masters in the guise of kindness are secretly controlling the black slaves as objects. Cora and other black women don't have a choice to deny sterilization as it is "mandatory". It is evident from the text that women are under constant surveillance whether on Plantation in the South or any other state in the North. Deliberately, they are separated, isolated, and marginalized. Consequently, they become stray, frustrated, and want to break the shackles of slavery.

In the last part of the novel, the narrator laments that running away from slavery is a delusion (Whitehead, 2016, p. 236). The narrator finally realizes that black slaves will never forget the pain and misery they have gone through, "you saw your mother sold off, your father beaten, your sister abused by some boss or master" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 233). The impact of dehumanization and marginalization is profound and can't be reinstated anyway. Cora, like her mother started the unwanted journey of running away from the plantation to find a refuge but was terrorized and traumatized at every step in the pursuit of the harbor. Ajarry, Mabel, Cora, and other female slaves are subalterns and don't have a voice. They are marginalized by their immediate masters and other white people in their society.

Conclusion

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead explores the themes of marginalization and its bitter impact on the lives of female characters, Cora, Ajarry, Mabel, and the African slaves. They are treated as commodities and sub-humans because of their race and gender. Throughout the novel, women show resilience as they face the brutalities of the master, the overseers, the slave catchers, the white unsympathetic doctors and facilitators. The odyssey of marginalization commences from commodification leading to dispossession, indoctrination leading to objectification, and separation leading to dehumanization. The colonial white master has successfully doubly marginalized women and they have successfully shown resilience and followed the clandestine way to escape via the underground railroad. When the novel ends, Cora is still on the way to run away from the brutalities and atrocities of the white men. She has experienced her dehumanized status and wants to undo the injustices that have been done with her three generations on the Randall plantation. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the historical experiences of enslaved Africans in the antebellum era. It shows the marginalization and oppression of not only women of African slaves but of African society exclusively.

The effects of marginalization are obvious throughout the novel. The three generations of slaves have felt the loss of intimacy of parents, missed the warmth of relationship and the ultimate freedom which wasn't provided to them. They don't feel the motivation and urge to live which are the evident results of physical and mental stress. Consequently, they seek refuge in death. Though Cora and her mother ran away from the plantation their presence

on the plantation and absence from the plantation is a taxing experience for them and their peers which leads to anxiety and stress.

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