

Continuation Of Slavery In Postracial America: A Fanonian Critique Of The Underground Railroad

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Abstract

This study aims to explore causes of continuation of slavery-like practices in postracial America through the analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016). Contemporary African American novels reverberate with the enigma that despite the election of Barak Obama to the US presidency, a black subject still finds herself in a slave-like status. To explore this paradox, *The Underground Railroad* is investigated in the light of Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theorization. An important concept of Fanon's theory; negrophobia, is explored in the text of the novel by examining the psychological causes of slavery and its effects on the blacks as depicted by Whitehead. Resorting to antebellum south, and connecting past with the present through anachronism provide contemporary Black American writers a chance to contest the notion of postraciality, to revisit the past, and to fill gaps in the historical record. The significance of the study is that it analyzes the racial matrix in the US, thereby contributing to the cause of the wretched of the earth; the marginalized, and the oppressed, by deconstructing psychological melody which is the cause of racism.

Keywords: Slavery, postracial America, Fanon, Colson Whitehead

Introduction

Slavery started in the United States in 1619 when for the first time African slaves were brought to the colony of Virginia, and it soon became an established institution (Franklin 2011; McCartney, 2003). American society was divided on the lines of color, the black and the white. It became a profitable trade for the white community—particularly for southerners—to deal in the slavery of the blacks, transported from Africa to the US through the Middle Passage in the triangular Atlantic slave trade¹. Southern states flourished on the free labor of the slaves, hence they advocated for the continuation of slavery, while the North adopted a more sympathetic attitude toward these slaves. Thus, the division of American society was manifested between the South and the North. Resistance to slavery and segregation from the black and white abolitionists culminated in the Civil War of 1860s.

¹ Triangular Slave Trade and the Middle Passage: Ships, carrying manufactured goods, departed from the harbors of European countries to Africa; this was the first side of the triangle. They used to buy slaves in exchange of goods and would embark via Atlantic to the US. This was called the Middle Passage. Majority of the slaves died during this voyage. In the US, these slaves were sold to buy sugar, cotton, tobacco and raw material. The ships would sail back to Europe to complete the third side of the triangle.

Not only were these social changes represented in literary arena but they were alloyed by literature. Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, published in 1852, is regarded as the cause that laid the foundation of the civil war. It was augmented by Abraham Lincoln's remarks, when he first saw Stowe, that she started the whole civil war (Jarrett, 2014; Kaufman, 2006). After the civil war, there was a never-ending clash between racists and abolitionists. Racists advocated conformity to the system of slavery and its byproduct segregation. On the other hand, abolitionists resisted the inhuman practices of slavery and slavery-like practices. Among sociologists, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois are the early post-civil war advocates who strived for the rights of the blacks. Booker T. Washington proposed accommodationist model for the emancipation of the African Americans while W.E.B. Dubois presented active resistance to the system. W.E.B. Dubois's model invigorated 20th century activists, both in literature and in politics. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr are important political figures who worked for the cause of the black community. Likewise, American black writers of 20th century like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker tried to give voice to the African Americans in their writings.

By the turn of the 21st century, the tall claims of democracy indicated that there is no trace of racism in the American society. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the US constitution (1865, 1868 and 1870 respectively) legally abolished slavery and extended civil and legal protections to former enslaved people. The claim that America is free from all sorts of racial injustices was further solidified by the fact that an African American black man was elected to the White House. Thus, American society was considered as "post-racial" (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Parks & Rachlinski, 2009; Ponds, 2013). However, despite the fact that legal and constitutional sanctions had been made against slavery and segregation and Barak Obama had been elected to the presidency of the US, there still remain many "legal and social fetters that have historically been and are today imposed upon individuals who are [apparently] imagined as free" (Davidson, 2010, p. 244). Albert Memmi (2000) says, "There is a strange kind of tragic enigma associated with the problem of racism. No one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist; still, racism persists, real and tenacious" (p. 3). In order to strive for an equitable and just world, Alice Walker (1973) believes that racism is "like that local creeping kudzu vine that swallows whole forests and abandoned houses; if you don't keep pulling up the roots it will grow back faster than you can destroy it" (p. 165).

The Underground Railroad (2016) by Colson Whitehead

Colson Whitehead is a contemporary black American novelist. He is the author of six novels. His novel, *The Underground Railroad*, was awarded the National Book Award for Fiction in 2016 and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2017. Third person narration in tradition of realism and speculative realism is employed in *The Underground Railroad*.

This novel is a master piece of the novelist that records a young woman's journey who happens to be a slave during a hopeless journey of escape in the Southern state of the United States—Georgia. The book is a smashing contemplative discourse on the American convoluted racial and political history. In his review of the novel, published in *The Washington Post* on

August 2, 2016, Charles remarked, “The Underground Railroad reanimates the slave narrative, disrupts our settled sense of the past and stretches the ligaments of history right into our own era” (para. 2). It is a story of a young girl whose name is Cora. She is born in Georgia to a slave woman named Mabel. Mabel escapes from slavery leaving her daughter—Cora—to her fate when Cora was in her infancy. Coupled by hardships, Cora is haunted by the specter of slavery. But her life is made more nightmarish by her condition as a pariah among her fellow African-American slaves. When Cora comes closer to adulthood, more pain and danger awaits her womanhood. There is another slave, Caesar. He has recently arrived on the same plantation. He tells Cora about the Underground Railroad—a means of escape from the slavery of the South to the freedom of the North. She takes the most significant decision to accompany him on this journey. During this escape, she is pursued by a merciless slave-catcher—Ridgeway. Earlier, years before, Ridgeway pursued Cora’s mother—Mabel. Mabel succeeded to elude him but Cora is caught. The novel is a tale of a woman’s violent struggle to evade the nightmare of slavery.

Theoretical Framework—Fanon’s Concept of Negrophobia

Negrophobia refers to a pathology of whites. It is fear of blacks in whites. This fear, and the accompanied hatred toward a black person, is irrational. What is the origin of negrophobia? Fanon (1952/2008) says, “In Europe, evil is symbolized by the black man” (p. 165, emphasis in original). Fanon further observes, “In Europe, the black man, whether physically or symbolically, represents the dark side of the personality. ... The archetype of inferior values is represented by the black man” (p. 166). In the *weltanschauung* of the white person, the association of blackness with evil is ingrained to the extent that they feel fear and hatred from blacks. Associated with negrophobia is the concept of phobogenic object. Due to negrophobia, a black person is regarded as the phobogenic object; an object which causes fear and anxiety. Fanon says, “The black man is a “phobogenic” object, provoking anxiety” (p. 129). Associated with this concept are the psychoanalytic notions of phobia and paranoia. In these terms, the implied meaning is irrationality and excess of bad feeling; fear, anxiety and hatred. Fanon explains, “the phobic is a person governed by the laws of prelogical rationality and affectivity” (p. 133). Fanon further points out another feature of phobic object. Hatred towards it is accompanied by unconscious attraction. This is called ambivalence. In this regard, fear and hatred towards blacks in whites go together with unconscious attraction toward blacks.

Problem Statement

Compared to Jim Crow era during which the Blacks were brutalized by such White supremacist groups as Klu Klux Klan, one might argue that the Blacks are better off today than they were fifty years ago. However, if one critically analyzes the social chains imposed upon the Blacks and socioeconomic inequalities that they have experienced, one would realize that a lot still needs to change. Even the election of Barak Obama to the presidency did not change the situation. In literary arena, gap between nominal equality and lived inequality for the blacks is a major focus in 21st century African American literature. As such, projection of slavery and segregation finds its place in the contemporary African American novel. Colson Whitehead draws attention to this issue by parodying historical milieu to expose the contradiction that

although everyone denies being a racist but racism exists in American society. Colson Whitehead seems to challenge the proposition of postracial American culture in his novels which the researcher finds needs discussion, exposition and analysis.

Research Question

What are the psychological factors that contribute to the continuation of slavery and segregation, and their effects on the blacks in the American society, as depicted by Colson Whitehead in *The Underground Railroad*?

Literature Review

Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel attracted a number of researchers to explore its contents. Writers have published a number of reviews and critical essays in important journals. In this regard, the first review of the novel was Stacy Parker Le Melle's "The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead" published in *Callaloo*, Volume 39, Number 4, Fall 2016, pp. 936-938. This review shows the reviewer's personal subjective experience after reading the novel. In the next issue of *Callaloo*, Volume 40, Number 2, in Spring 2017, Tyrone Simpson published "The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead (pp. 183-186). Simpson (2017) starts his review with the absurdity of the claims of post-raciality. He laments that the euphoria of Obama's presidency has waned not because Trump has ascended the White House who sides with white supremacists but because Obama era gave birth to the Black Lives Matter movement. This political scenario prompted many novelists, essayists and documentarists to explore why the current era seems so troubling in America. This existential account of the American politics, sociology and literature provides an imperative which drives Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Underground Railroad*. Kaylie-Anne Ward (2017) in "The Unfinished Project of Freedom in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*" opines that the novel is not just an imaginary story of a slave girl. The "underground railroad" is a metaphor used by the novelist. By combining fantastical element into his narrative, the novelist has turned the metaphor into a literal train running through American past into the American present. Dischinger (2017) in "States of Possibility in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*" argues that the novel deploys the poetics of "speculative satire" to recompose readers' understanding of the US history of slavery. Such an alternative history is constructed in the novel by counterfactual settings: by transforming the figurative underground railroad to a literal train, depicting skyscrapers in South Carolina, and syphilis and eugenics experiments in antebellum era. Another critical essay, "On the Railroad Again: Heterotopia and the American Identity in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," by Ann Jillian G. Cabanban, published in December 2017, argues that "railroad" in the novel functions as heterotopia and affects the identities of those involved with it. "Moving Ever Forward: Reading the Significance of Motion and Space as A Representation of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*" by Samantha Richmond, published in May 2017, discusses trauma experienced by African-Americans as portrayed in *Song of Solomon* and *The Underground Railroad*. A review focusing on the comparative analysis of *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi titled "Fiction and Slavery's Archive: Memory, Agency and Finding Home" was published by Lisa Ze Winters in

June 2018 issue of *Reviews in American History*, Volume 46, Number 2, (pp. 338-344). ““A Long Way Away”: Unreachable Freedoms in Contemporary Afrofuturist Neo-Slave Narratives”, published in *Journal of Science Fiction* in its December 2018 issue by Nadine Knight, compares Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad* to a rap/space opera *Splendor & Misery*. Knight (2018) calls these works as “Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives”. Adam Kelly’s “Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead” (2018) argues that *The Underground Railroad* is in the tradition of African-American literary genre which is called the novel of slavery. It espouses discourses of slavery and freedom. This novel shows Whitehead’s response to the changes taking place in American society and culture. These changes call for a more sincere appraisal of the situation. James Mellis (2019) in “Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*” opines that both the novels create literary sites of resistance as a protection and a site of resistance to an oppressive society. “Genre Trouble and History’s Miseries in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*” by Stephanie Li (2019) is focused on the structure of the novel. Colson Whitehead’s novels resist to be grouped under a particular genre. His books are often dubbed by critics as hybrid forms. Groba (2019), in “Riding the Rails to (Un) Freedom: Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*,” reviews the novel from the perspective of contemporary historical research. Antoszek (2019), in “The Neo-Gothic Imaginary and the Rhetoric of Loss in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*,” argues that protagonist of the novel, Cora, “may be seen as the embodiment of losses that span over generations of black women” (p. 271). This is a psychoanalytical study of Cora’s character. Freud’s study of melancholia is applied to the trauma faced by Cora. “Metaphorical Expressions in Cora’s Pursuit of Freedom from Racism and Slavery in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*” by Ria Destya Ningrum (2019) is a formalist study of the novel. The novel’s intrinsic and extrinsic aspects are explored from the perspective of formalist approach. “The Struggle of The Main Character to obtain Freedom in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*” by Fauziah, Shita Dewi Ratih, and Natawiria (2019) explores the oppression in plantation setting and the struggle of Cora to attain complete freedom. ““A Useful Delusion”: Valentine Farm and the Flight for Freedom” by Nihad M. Farooq, published in *Utopian Studies*, Volume 30, Number 1, in 2019, pp. (87-110), explores the novel’s prioritization of motion over stasis. “Bleak Dreams, Not Nightmares: Critical Dystopias and the Necessity of Melancholic Hope” by Mathias Thaler (2019), published in *Constellations* issue 26, no. 4, investigates *The Underground Railroad* in the light of critical dystopian fiction. “Allegories of “Postracial” Capitalism: Colson Whitehead and the Materials of Twenty-First Century Black Cultural Authorship”, published by Maria Bose in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, investigates Whitehead’s allegorical engagement with changing manifestations of racism across historical development of capitalism.

Studies reviewed here show that *The Underground Railroad* has not been explored yet in the light of Fanon’s theorization of black problem in the broader perspective of postcolonialism. This provides a gap to be investigated and discussed.

Research Methodology

The nature of this study is qualitative and analytical, and the technique used for data analysis is textual analysis. Broader framework of the study is postcolonialism. Within postcolonialism, Frantz Fanon's exploration of race, in the context of American anti-black racism, is applied to the study. Through textual analysis of *The Underground Railroad*, an important concept of Fanon in *The Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*; negrophobia, is explored. The study is limited to the sixth part of the novel, North Carolina, where Fanonian concept of negrophobia is depicted with full swing.

Discussion and Data Analysis

Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Underground Railroad*, is a historiographic fiction. In this novel manipulation of the black—colonized—by the whites—colonizers—and various modes of resistance by the blacks are depicted. There is a third person narration in the novel. Plot of the novel is placed in the antebellum south where slavery of the blacks is the norm of plantation life. Focus of the narration is on a female slave girl, Cora. She resists slavery with all its dehumanizing aspects and escapes via underground railroad with the help of white abolitionists to the North. During her journey to the North, she stays at North Carolina for some months where she observes that blacks are brutally tortured.

Negrophobia in North Carolina

Situation in North Carolina is more dangerous than in South Carolina. Martin; the underground railroad agent in North Carolina, has come to the underground station to leave a message for the underground railroad network that he can accept no more passengers. However, he finds Cora in the most deplorable condition who got down at this station. She fell asleep due to exhaustion, hunger and privation. She is taken by Martin to his house in a wagon by hiding her in the sacks of grain covered by tarpaulin. On the way to his house, Martin stops the horses and removes the tarpaulin to show Cora the Freedom Trail Road. "The corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments. Some of them were naked, others partially clothed ... Gross wounds and injuries marked the flesh of those closest to her. ... One had been castrated. ... The other was a woman. Her belly curved. ... Their bulging eyes seemed to rebuke her stares, but what were the attentions of one girl, disturbing their rest, compared to how the world had scourged them since the day they were brought into it?" (pp. 182-83). This road is called the Freedom Trail Road. Martin tells Cora that such hanging bodies go all the way to town. In this description a particular point to note is that the naked bodies of the black men show that they are castrated and bellies of the pregnant women are ripped open. The whites think that blacks are posing an existential threat to them. As discussed earlier, in South Carolina, the doctors are trying to eliminate the black race under the mask of birth control. Here, in North Carolina, their fears and anger are manifested in the way they punish blacks. This is a manifest example of negrophobia. The irony is that this road is called the Freedom Trail Road which can be attributed to both whites and blacks. Whites called it Freedom Trail from their perspective. They think that eliminating the black race is freedom. The blacks think that such a gory spectacle of their hanging bodies is a price of their freedom. Martin's wife, Ethel, is not happy to find a runaway in her house because she thinks it will bring complications and dangers to them. Therefore, she says, "You're going to get us murdered" (p. 183). Ethel informs Cora

about her maid Fiona. "If she hears you, she'll turn us in and they will kill us. ... Not a sound. Not a single sound. If anyone hears you, we are lost" (pp. 184-85).

Cora keeps herself busy in the attic of Martin's house by observing the park outside through the spy hole in the attic and listening to the sounds of Fiona, Martin and Ethel's daughter, their son-in-law and their children who come to stay with them. Observing the people in the park, Cora comes to know that in North Carolina there is no mixing of races. They are all whites. "In North Carolina the negro race did not exist except at the end of ropes" (p. 187). We can extend Cora's thoughts regarding blacks in North Carolina to the whole of the United States. Blacks have very bleak future despite the fact that now they are the residents of America. They are treated as outsiders. Cora notices that a stage is set for the Friday Festival in the park. This is a coon show. Before the show, Judge Tennyson delivers a welcome speech which is followed by a blackface skit. White actors have blackened their faces and they are exaggerating the frivolities of blacks which causes humor and laughter. In another play, a slave runs away from his master after a light rebuke. He suffers hardships during his journey and returns back to his master. "The last scene depicted the slave on his master's doorstep. having once again runaway, this time from the false promises of the Free States" (p. 189, emphasis added). He begs his master to forgive him and give him his former place. But the master explains very patiently that it is impossible because North Carolina has changed. The people are very happy with the moral of the play. The play which Cora watches from the attic haunts her. It shows the inferiority of blacks. For whites, it sends a different moral message and for the blacks a very tragic one. Blacks are disowned by the masters who refuse to let them in. They are left to the brutal world to make a life on their own while in reality blacks become victims of brutality. In other words, if blacks resist the inhuman practices of slavery, they are brought back to it and are meted out with severe punishment. Likewise, the moral of the play suggests that slavery is beneficial and resistance is for blacks. It also sheds light on false promises of democracy. A slave succeeds to get to the free states but instead of overt slavery they are subjected to other inhuman conditions. The result is that blacks think they are better off in slavery. After this play another very fearful act is enacted in the park which is observed by Cora.

Another white man comes on the stage. He introduces himself as Jamison. He enumerates before the crowd the services of night riders. In their team another young boy is recruited who has caught a slave girl. This girl is named Louisa. Jamison tells the crowd, "She absconded from her plantation in the confusion of the reorganization and hid in the woods these many months. Believing she had escaped the logic of our system" (p. 191, emphasis added). Jamison further says that black miscreants lurk in dark to violate the wives and daughters of the whites. In this way, the whites are at the mercy of these criminals. According to Jamison, "For this separate nation [North Carolina] we have forged, free from northern interference and the contamination of a lesser race. The black horde has been beaten back, correcting the mistake made years ago at this nation's nativity. Some, like our brothers just over the state line, have embraced the absurd notion of nigger uplift. Easier to teach a donkey arithmetic" (p. 191). These racially charged words motivate the crowd to throw stone at Louisa after she was swung with a rope tied to the platform. Cora turns her face in the attic and afterward never looks out through the hole of the attic to the park which is called "the miserable thumping heart of the town" (p. 192). Jamison calls brutality against slaves as the logic of their system. For slaves,

freedom is impossible vis-à-vis systematic dehumanization of blacks. Slave owners in Southern states regarded Northern states' endeavors for black community as an absurd cause. The tragedy is that common folks were conditioned to this discourse. Crowd in the park is moved by Jamison's speech and they lynch a black girl.

Fear of blacks in whites, i-e, negrophobia, is conveyed by third person narration in the novel. It is the main cause that made Martin and Ethel to hide Cora in their attic. The problem started with cotton in the south of America. "The ruthless engine of cotton required its fuel of African bodies. Crisscrossing the ocean, ships brought bodies to work the land and breed more bodies". There was no stop to this engine. "More slaves led to more cotton, which led to more money to buy more land to farm more cotton". This voraciousness caused the whites to bring a number of blacks from African continent to America. But another problem started. The whites felt themselves threatened. "Whites outnumbered slaves two to one in North Carolina, but in Louisiana and Georgia the populations neared parity. Just over the border in South Carolina, the number of blacks surpassed that of whites by more than a hundred thousand. It was not difficult to imagine the sequence when the slave cast off his chains in pursuit of freedom—and retribution" (p. 193, emphasis added). Jean Paul Sartre refers to the same point in the start of *Black Orpheus* as "What would you expect to find when the muzzle that has silenced the voices of black men is removed? That they would thunder your praise? When these heads that our fathers have forced to the very ground are risen, do you expect to read adoration in their eyes?" (cited in Fanon, 1952/2008, pp. 12-13). Whites have seen some of the uprisings by blacks in South America, Georgia, Kentucky, and the Caribbean Isles where blacks tuned against white masters. The narrator says, "before the Southampton rebellion was smothered, Turner and his band² murdered sixty-five men, women, and children. Civilian militias and patrollers lynched three times that in response ... to set an example [and to] clarify the terms. But the number remained, declaring a truth unclouded by prejudice" (Whitehead, 2016, pp. 193-94).

Martin speaks to Cora the coming Monday when his daughter and her husband and children have returned to their own house. Similarly, their maid, Fiona, has also returned to her home. During the night, Martin speaks to Cora in whisper. He is very cautious because his next-door neighbor is a night rider. Martin in his conversation with Cora points out two reasons behind the persecution of blacks; negrophobia and voraciousness of whites for economic advantages. Martin says that night riders or patrollers are the substitutes of police constables. The picture he depicts of them is the same as those of slave-catchers discussed in "Georgia" section. "The patroller required no reason to stop a person apart from color" (p. 194). Any small revolt, like war, motivated the common public to use arms against blacks. The blacks were butchered, mutilated and the sympathizers filled the jails. "Once the slain had been avenged—and more important, the insult to white order repaid with interest—the civilians returned to their farms and factories and stores, and the patrollers resumed their rounds" (p. 195, emphasis added). But the population of blacks still remained a conspicuous number. In this context, Martin tells Cora about the true purpose of abolition of slavery in North Carolina.

² Nat Turner (1800-1831) led a revolt of the slaves on August 21-23, 1831 in Virginia. There was a widespread fear of blacks in the aftermath of this revolt. 1967's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Confession of Nat Turner*, is based on the first-person narrative of these events. This novel aroused controversy about the perspective of the character of Nat Turner in the novel.

When people other than blacks arrived in America, they substituted the blacks for doing their farming work. On one hand, there was cheap labor with the possibility of uprising by blacks, while on the other, there was cheap labor of the immigrants with stability of the system. These immigrants became allies of the southern system. “On Election Day when they took their turn at the ballot box, theirs would be a full vote, not three-fifths³. A financial reckoning was inevitable, but come the approaching conflict over the race question, North Carolina would emerge in the most advantageous position of all the slave states” (p. 197). North Carolina gave the impression that they abolished slavery, but actually they wiped blacks.

Martin tells Cora how North Carolina’s population became purely white. The slaves were purchased by the state government and were transported to those states where they required black labor like Florida and Louisiana which absorbed the stock. New laws were enacted according to which it was illegal for a black person to set foot on the soil of North Carolina. Free blacks who refused to leave North Carolina were either run off or were murdered. State militia took part in this purging campaign. After the militia, the night riders or patrollers took their job. Martin further tells Cora that every town holds their Friday Festival which is concluded by lynching a black. “Some places reserved extra captives in the jail for a fallow week when the night riders returned empty-handed” (p. 199). In North Carolina there are different practices to punish blacks and whites. The whites under the new law are punished by hanging them and are not put to display. However, there was a particular case of a white farmer who harbored black refugees. The white farmer and the black refugees were burnt in the house and when the patrollers came to pick up the bodies, they were unable to distinguish between the white farmer and the blacks. They were all put to display on the road of Freedom Trail and no one objected to the protocol. Fire had eliminated difference in their bodies. They were leveled. As we discussed in the analysis of Stevens character that there is no biological difference between blacks and whites except the skin color, therefore, negro myth is based on assumptions. The same point is repeated here. If the skin color is eliminated, there will be no difference between them. In a system developed by whites, a racist structure, whites are meted out with different punishment than blacks. Contradiction in such a racist system is implicitly conveyed by Martin. If you cannot differentiate between whites and blacks, as the above example shows, what is the logic behind different sorts of punishment? No one objected to the protocol in the above scene because objection would have exposed contradiction in the white order. Martin apologizes his wife’s behavior and explains to Cora that it is due to her fear that she is not happy with Cora in her house. He says, “You understand she’s scared to death. We’re at the mercy of fate”. Cora asks, “You feel like a slave?” to which Martin replies that Ethel has not chosen this life. Again, Cora asks, “You were born to it? Like a slave?” (p. 201).

The first part of this conversation shows the brutality of the whites of North Carolina against the blacks due to negrophobia and their avarice. The concluding remarks show alienation of whites. Whites, like Martin and Ethel, are also subject to the inhuman conditions of the world. They feel the same fear which the blacks feel in their slavery. Like blacks, they lack agency to impress upon their humanity. They are caught in the whirlpool of fatalism. The

³ The Three-Fifth Clause of the U.S. Constitution: Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution declared that population of the blacks would be counted as Three-Fifth of the population of the whites for representation in the Congress. This came to be known and meant as a black person is considered Three-Fifth of a white person.

preceding part of the novel shows how Ethel desired her life and how she came to pass this absurd life. Absurdism is a branch of existentialism which theorize that life is pain and suffering and man is caught in this quagmire. It also sounds like nihilism which proposes the effacing of all human values. It is, therefore, very apt to apply Fanon who says that both black man and white man are locked and his purpose in *Black Skin, White Masks* is to deliver man from this prison which is woven by centuries of incomprehension and stubbornness.

In the nook of the attic, Cora thinks about the approaching season of the harvest. This time, cotton will be picked not by blacks but poor whites. Cora wonders whether the Irish and Germans like to do the work earlier done by blacks. She thinks they will feel no shame because their salaries are surely given to them, unlike blacks. Poor whites substituted poor blacks on the rows of cotton fields. The only difference is that at the end of the week the poor whites are no longer poor. In this way the engine of capitalism worked with only change of the fuel of the engine (p. 205). This is the survival of the fittest scenario. Penniless whites snatch the means of livelihood from penniless blacks. But there is another dimension to this scene. The blacks work but they are not paid their wages. It is stolen from them which is Marxian alienation. It is further complicated by the dimension of racism. Therefore, the compounding effect on the psyche of blacks is inferiority complex explained by Fanon (1952/2008). Cora is further given to wild dreams and fantasies. She dreams her house with her husband and children. The picture of the boy she killed in Georgia rarely pops up in her mind. In her fantasy, she is not responsible to anyone, therefore, she is not supposed to defend her action; killing the boy in the woods. However, the act of violence is a trigger of fear in whites. "Fear drove these people more than cotton money. The shadow of the black hand that will return what has been given" (p. 206, emphasis added). Cora thinks that she is one of the vengeful monsters the whites are scared of. She has murdered a white boy. She may kill another the next time. "And because of that fear, they erected a new scaffolding of oppression on the cruel foundation laid hundreds of years before" (p. 207, emphasis added). She thinks that whites are justified to be afraid of blacks. Cora's thoughts shed light on the nature of negrophobia which is discussed by Fanon (1952/2008 & 1961/2004).

In the course of narration, it is told how Martin became an abolitionist. He was not interested in the cause. His father, Donald, never expressed his opinion about slavery. His father's conversation consisted of ellipses and muttered asides, and, in this way, it was difficult to interpret what he meant when he spoke. At his deathbed, Donald made Martin promise to continue Donald's work. Martin assumed that the old man meant to take charge of the feed store. This was the first misunderstanding. The second misunderstanding was that Martin took the map he discovered in his father's belonging for direction for a treasure of gold. But the treasure was the underground railroad. From Donald's diary, it was revealed that he considered "chattel slavery ... an affront to God, and slavers an aspect of Satan. Donald had provided aid to slaves his whole life, whenever possible and with whatever means at hand, ever since he was a small boy and misdirected some bounty men who badgered him over a runaway. ... Donald had conveyed a dozen souls to the Free States" (p. 211).

One night, two night-riders come to Martin and Ethel's house to inspect. They search the whole house while Cora is hiding in the nook of the attic. The dramatic effect of the episode is conveyed through the metaphors of 'hunter' and 'prey'. The night-riders are called "sharks"

who are moving below a ship. They are looking for prey; Cora. “Only thin planks separated hunter and prey” (p. 214). The regulators leave the house without observing anything amiss. The next night, Cora proposes to take initiative which is turned down by Marin. Pondering over the world, Cora ponders what the world is and what the meaning of freedom is “that makes a living prison into your only haven. ... Being free had nothing to do with chains or how much space you had” (p. 215). She compares her life on Randall plantation and her life in North Carolina, in the nook of Martin’s house. She was allowed to roam free on the fields of plantation but was a slave. Here, she is free, but confined to a place where she cannot stand. Whitehead, through Cora’s thoughts, conveys the message that both slavery and freedom change their manifestations. Despite constitutional and legal sanctions imposed against slavery, one can enslave his or her fellow human in postracial era by systemic marginalization. Loneliness in the nook of Martin’s house provides Cora an opportunity to reflect on a number of issues of the world. She thinks the futility of her ownership of a plot on Randall plantation which echoes Marxian alienation. A plot of a few yards on Randall plantation “convinced her she owned something. [However,] it was hers like the cotton she seeded, weeded, and picked was hers. Her plot was a shadow of something that lived elsewhere, out of sight” (p. 216). Cora realizes that her sense of ownership of the plot was like Michael’s sense of freedom which he implied through the recitation of the Declaration of Independence. The freedom promised in this document was not something real and concrete but something which existed elsewhere, or perhaps nowhere, for blacks. Cora’s sense of belongingness to the plot now seems to her a joke when she has seen a bit of the country. The following night, she seriously falls ill. Therefore, she is shifted to the lower part of the house. They dismiss Fiona on the pretext that Martin has contracted the Venezuelan pox and therefore they have quarantined him. Ethel nurses Cora during her illness. Her behavior softens now. Cora feels during her delirium that Ethel kisses her forehead motherly. This shows human feelings of Ethel. She was strict earlier due to the fear of their persecution. This also shows that not only blacks are subject to negative effects of the system, the whites too are affected badly due to racism. True humanity is buried under the burden of racism. Cora and Ethel discuss Scripture. While Ethel looks at Scripture with reverence, Cora thinks that these verses are unnecessary. Ethel is vexed by Cora’s assertion. However, Cora says, “I don’t get where it says, He that stealeth a man and sells him, shall be put to death. ... But then later it says, Slaves should be submissive to their masters in everything—and be well pleasing” (pp. 218-19). To which Ethel answers, “It means that a Hebrew may not enslave a Hebrew. But the sons of Ham are not of that tribe. They were cursed, with black skin and tails. Where the Scripture condemns slavery, it is not speaking of negro slavery at all”. Cora does not agree to this. She says that she has black skin but no tail. Cora points out the contradiction of the standard that slavery is a sin when whites are enslaved but it does not apply to Africans. “All men are created equal, unless we decide you are not a man” (p. 219). Cora wants to tell Ethel that it is not God-given rule but it has been concocted by people who wrote the Scripture. “People always got things wrong, on purpose as much as by accident” (p. 220). Cora’s talk reveals that since the advent of Christianity, the powerful and influential people fabricated the injunctions of the religion for their colonial enterprise. As such it ends up creating ambiguities and paradoxes. The idea of superiority or inferiority of the races

was not originally ordained in the Scripture but was concocted by colonial discourse, for which necessary changes were made in the holy books.

Cora's health improves. Martin and Ethel decide that she will be shifted to the nook of the attic back in the morning. The next morning Fiona will return for her work. But, before her shifting back to the nook of the attic, regulators come in the night and they search Martin's house. She is found out and all the three; Martin, Ethel and Cora, are led to the park for execution. They are about to hang Cora when Ridgeway enters and claims that he will take Cora to her master in Georgia under the Fugitive Slave Law. It turns out that Fiona has informed the patrollers about the existence of a slave in Martin's house. She did so to earn some reward. Cora is chained and tied in a wagon. As they pull away, Cora sees Ethel and Martin are tied to the hanging tree in the park. A white girl picks up a stone and throws it at Ethel. It hits her in the face. The people laugh at "Ethel's piteous shrieks". More children pick up stones and hit them. "The town moved in and then Cora couldn't see them anymore" (p. 226).

Conclusion

Whitehead, through his black female protagonist, asserts the selfhood of the subject. The techniques he makes use of are postmodernist but thematically the novel is not an ontological flicker. Whitehead employs third person narration. There is postmodern blending of boundaries between genres. However, the technique does not render the subjectivity of the protagonist a compromised entity. Likewise, Colson Whitehead's approach is eclectic. The first two parts of the novel; Ajarry and Georgia, are written in the realistic tradition. Later on, fantastical elements are introduced. Metaphorical railroad turns into a literal railroad. This is the example of genre trouble, speculative realism and speculative satire. However, each part which starts with the name of a place carries a runaway advertisement which apparently bears no connection with the content of that part. Each advertisement carries a date except the last one which is about Cora. This is the mixing of realism and fantasy. Furthermore, there are numerous anachronisms in the novel which are manipulated to criticize the present-day American society in terms of their past wrongs inflicted upon blacks. Colson Whitehead seems to convey, like Fanon, the problem is due to negrophobia. He seems to proclaim that not only blacks are alienated, but whites, like Martin and Ethel, are also alienated. Colson Whitehead chooses the subject of slavery in post racial America to satirize the present-day discrimination of blacks. As a counter-narrative to dominant discourse of whites, he asserts the subjectivity of a black subject. Moreover, slavery is the integral parts of black cultural history. Black writers choose these subjects to enliven the past.

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