

A Study of Trauma Writing in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract: While black women's circumstances improved in post-emancipation era, significant challenges to their bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom persist in contemporary America. This study examines the manifestation of trauma and liberation in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, focusing on the protagonist Cora's experiences as an archetype of African American women's historical and ongoing struggles. Employing trauma theory, the paper conducts a textual analysis of three interconnected traumas inflicted upon Cora: physical abuse, psychological wounds, and intergenerational trauma inherited from her grandmother Ajarry and mother Mabel. The research further traces Cora's transformation from victimhood to agency, analyzing how community support and self-awareness catalyze her pursuit of autonomy, identity reclamation, and agency actualization. Through the lens of trauma theory, this study finds that Cora's resilience and ultimate self-liberation symbolize the broader fight against systemic oppression, underscoring how trauma both constrains and fuels resistance. Theoretically, by integrating literary and psychological theoretical frameworks, this study offers a nuanced portrayal of African-American women's experiences, providing a critical lens to examine African-American women's historical and societal positioning; meanwhile, by examining the slavery trauma in *The Underground Railroad*, this study highlights literature's role in critiquing enduring inequities.

Key words: Colson Whitehead; *The Underground Railroad*; Trauma Writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Significance of the Study

Colson Whitehead, born in New York City in 1969, stands as a preeminent voice in contemporary African American literature. Nurturing an early ambition to write, he graduated from Harvard University in 1991 and has since earned the moniker "literary chameleon" for his remarkable thematic range and stylistic versatility across genres. His acclaimed body of work includes nine novels and two non-fiction collections. His debut, *The Intuitionist* (1999), garnered significant attention, while subsequent works like *John Henry Days* (2001) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning novels *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and *The Nickel Boys* (2019) cemented his reputation. Whitehead consistently engages with profound American themes, particularly the enduring legacies of racism, oppression, and racial inequality, exploring their devastating impact on individuals and society. A defining characteristic of his fiction is the masterful blending of historical reality with resonant contemporary critique, often employing inventive narrative devices to illuminate persistent social injustices.

His sixth novel, *The Underground Railroad* represents his first direct confrontation with the institution of slavery. It tells the harrowing story of Cora, a young enslaved woman who escapes the brutal Randall plantation in Georgia. Her journey northward towards potential freedom was facilitated by a literalized "Underground Railroad" — a physical network of tunnels and tracks beneath the American earth, transforming the historical metaphor into a tangible, albeit perilous, reality. Cora's flight was fraught with constant danger: relentless hunt by slaveholders, encounters with extreme racial violence, the treachery of the supposed allies, and the pervasive cruelty of a society built on white supremacy. She traversed landscapes revealing different, yet equally insidious, manifestations of oppression in various states, witnessing firsthand the corruption of law and the normalization of brutality. Through Cora's eyes, the novel lays bare the profound inhumanity of the slavery system, the pervasive injustice fueled by racism, and the indomitable spirit of those who resisted. While fictional, Cora's experiences serve as a powerful archetype for the collective trauma endured by countless African American women. Whitehead's surreal narrative device imbues this historical exploration with both visceral authenticity and a potent, haunting quality.

American history, in Barack Obama's words, is "a melting pot of traumas" (Bond and Craps, 2020: 2). The use of the term "trauma" had experienced a boom during 1500 and 2008, which means that there have been increasing ways to "categorize, represent, and exploit distressing experiences" (Bond and Craps, 2020: 2-3). More importantly, this finding proves that trauma has not died out. On the contrary, it has invited surging attention from numerous novel writers, film makers, artists, etc. *The Underground Railroad* is deeply rooted in the horrific and

enduring trauma inflicted upon African Americans, particularly women, since the inception of slavery in the 16th century. Enslaved Africans, forcibly transported through the Middle Passage, endured unimaginable physical and psychological torment for centuries. Subjected to relentless, brutal labor under inhumane conditions, their life expectancy was devastatingly low (Steckel, 1979: 87). Fundamental human rights — freedom of movement, expression, and self-determination — were utterly denied. For enslaved women, this oppression included systematic sexual violence; they were exploited as breeders to replenish the labor force, their bodies commodified and controlled entirely by enslavers. The anguish of family separation, especially the forced parting of mothers from children, added another layer of profound psychological trauma. While the Civil War (1861-1865) brought legal abolition, the deep-seated ideology of Black inferiority ensured that discrimination and inequality persisted. Even in contemporary America, African Americans, black women specifically, continue to face systemic racism and oppression, as starkly illustrated by the disproportionate impact of policies like the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* on poor women of color, limiting their reproductive autonomy.

Therefore, analyzing Cora's trauma and her arduous path to freedom in Whitehead's novel provides a crucial lens through which to understand the multi-generational legacy of racial and gendered violence experienced by African American women. This study aims to dissect the specific traumas imposed upon Cora — physical and psychological — reflecting the historical realities of enslavement. Crucially, it will then trace her evolution during her escape: examining how she navigates relentless peril, processes her suffering, and ultimately moves beyond mere survival. The core significance lies in exploring how Cora, through her quest for physical liberty, progressively achieves self-awareness, recognizes her own identity separate from the bonds of slavery, and asserts her female subjectivity. Her journey symbolizes the arduous, ongoing struggle for true liberation, self-definition, and agency — a struggle deeply resonant with the historical and contemporary experiences of African American women, making this analysis profoundly relevant. Whitehead's novel, by concretizing historical struggle through Cora's specific, yet emblematic, experience, offers a powerful example for this essential exploration.

1.2 Literature Review

Since its publication in 2016, the novel *The Underground Railroad* has aroused extensive attention. As an enslaved girl on Randall's plantation in Georgia, Cora wanted to escape and seek freedom of her own. Therefore, she ran away with her company Caesar and headed North on an Underground Railroad based on a network of tracks and tunnels. (Mutharasi, 2022: 124)

Generally, the scholars who study *The Underground Railroad* mainly focus on the narrative structure and techniques, the representation of American history and the writing of race in the novel. Recent scholarship consistently analyzes traumas in the novel but emphasizes distinct dimensions. Mutharasi (2022) foregrounds the gendered physical and psychological abuse of female slaves, using Cora's journey to symbolize escape and the pursuit of freedom. Feng's study (2021) broadly examines the novel's narrative techniques for depicting the individual and collective African American trauma and their reflection on racial identity. In Huang's dissertation (2021), the roots of trauma are explored and the possibility of healing is proposed. Liu (2023) introduces a spatial lens, arguing that terrain, text, and "chronotropic spaces" externalize societal and psychological trauma and facilitate healing processes. Though there has been some progress in the study of the trauma writing in the novel, few researches have accomplished a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the physical and psychological traumas on Cora. Furthermore, comparative analysis of intergenerational trauma transmission versus resilience mechanisms remains unexplored across these studies, which deserves an in-depth study as a psychological preparation for Cora's escape and pursuit for freedom, which eventually activate her agency.

1.3 Theories of Trauma

The term "trauma" traces its origins to physical injury but evolved significantly through modern psychology to denote profound psychological damage caused by overwhelming experiences. Sigmund Freud established the foundation, defining trauma as an extreme mental stimulation occurring in a short period that disrupts normal adaptation and permanently disturbs psychic energy distribution. He crucially extended trauma's scope to encompass violence embedded within modern civilization and history, such as warfare, genocide, and exploitation. Later developments, notably Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's "intergenerational ghost" theory, proposed that hidden family traumas are unconsciously transmitted across generations, psychologically impacting descendants (Abraham and Torok, 1994: 43). Cathy Caruth's authoritative definition characterizes trauma as a delayed, "uncontrollable reaction" to "unexpected, disastrous, inevitable events", marked by recurring intrusive symptoms like flashbacks that impose lasting psychological burdens (Caruth, 1995: 11).

As an interdisciplinary field, literary trauma theory analyzes trauma's representation and impact within texts. It highlights three core features: ineffability, where victims struggle to articulate their suffering, leading to persistent, unspeakable pain; the complex relationship between Trauma and Memory, involving fragmented, inconsistent memories triggered unwittingly to cause repeated harm and ongoing psychological oppression; and a crucial ethical dimension that shifts focus beyond the individual victim to trauma's broader societal and cultural consequences and responsibilities. (Caruth, 1995)

The theory also serves vital social and ethical functions. Socially, it facilitates the inheritance and reconstruction of social memory through art, aiming not to conceal wounds but to rebuild a moral community by confronting collective pain (e.g., Holocaust literature). (Caruth, 1995: 2) It also contributes to shaping cultural identity by narrating historical traumas, acting as a bulwark against the erosion of historical memory over time. Ethically, it promotes the practice of ethical criticism, recognizing trauma testimony as an act of witness intertwining the politics of oppression and the ethics of resistance. (Caruth, 1995: 112) This reexamination seeks to reintegrate difficult history into understanding, particularly where comprehension initially fails. Furthermore, it underscores the need for social responsibility and political action, emphasizing that trauma reshapes group consciousness and identity. Reflection and recovery from major cultural traumas (e.g., the Holocaust, segregation) are thus collective human responsibilities. Ultimately, the theory aims for the restoration of the public domain, guiding practical actions to repair public spaces, the psyche, and relationships after disaster, moving beyond merely investigating causes. (Caruth, 1995: 167)

2. TRAUMA WRITING IN *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*

In the novel *The Underground Railroad*, the protagonist Cora suffered from extremely brutal physical and psychological trauma. On Randall's plantation, she was required to work for the slavers without any break. Aside from the physical exhaustion and exploitation, she also suffered from inhuman torments, including assault and sexual abuse, which left lifelong psychological shadow on her. Besides Cora, her grandmother Ajarry and mother Mabel were also the victims of inhuman exploitation and abuse, which had profound impact on Cora's growth.

2.1 Physical Trauma on Cora

On Randall's plantation, Cora endured a life characterized by pervasive violence and systemic abuse. Beyond witnessing the torment of her fellow enslaved individuals, Cora herself was repeatedly subjected to brutal mistreatment, which left enduring scars on both her body and psyche.

The overseers Connelly and Terrance frequently abused and insulted Cora, inflicting profound physical trauma. Connelly, in particular, subjected Cora to severe physical violence, lashing her body with a whip that left deep, indelible scars and instilled in her a pervasive sense of helplessness and fear. Whitehead (2016: 38) poignantly illustrates Cora's physical condition following one such beating: "Cora lay on the floor and moaned. Two weeks after the beating, she endured dizzy spells and a pounding in her skull. For the most part, she was able to keep it at bay and work the row, but sometimes it was all she could do to stay upright until the sun sank". This vivid portrayal underscores the barbarity of the slave — owning class and the arduous experiences endured by countless female slaves like Cora. Following Connelly's order that "bloody backs be scrubbed out with pepper water", Cora's suffering epitomizes the broader cruelty inflicted upon enslaved women (Whitehead, 2016: 37).

In addition to physical torment, Cora also experienced sexual assault at the hands of the overseer Terrance, which inflicted severe physical pain. Whitehead (2016: 48) recounts: "Once Terrance walked up to Cora, put his hand under her clothes, held one of her breasts, and squeezed hard, while Cora did not resist". This incident highlights the vulnerability of enslaved women and the power dynamics that enabled such abuses to occur with impunity.

Hob, derisively referred to as "the wretch house" by other enslaved individuals, served as a site for the punishment and segregation of female slaves on the plantation. Within this dark, frigid environment, Cora endured additional physical trauma inflicted by male slaves who were also enslaved and had brown skin. Despite sharing a common plight of exploitation by the slave owners, these men showed no sympathy towards Cora. Instead, they exploited her sexually, further underscoring the systemic subjugation of women within a patriarchal society. Whitehead (2016: 21) alludes to Cora's sexual abuse by these male slaves: "Not long after it became known that Cora's womanhood had come into flower, Edward, Pot, and two hands from the southern half dragged her behind the smokehouse...The Hob women sewed up". This veiled reference not only illuminates Cora's dire circumstances on the plantation but also foreshadows her eventual decision to flee to the North with Caesar, seeking refuge from the

relentless brutality she faced.

After enduring a series of inhuman torments on Randall's plantation, Cora ultimately resolved to flee to the North in search of a new lease on life. Her journey was, however, fraught with challenges far exceeding her expectations. Along the way, she encountered physical maltreatment in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee, further underscoring the pervasive cruelty of slavery and the extreme oppression under which Cora lived.

In South Carolina, Cora suffered multiple physical traumas that ultimately compelled her to resume her flight. There, she was selected for medical experiments, with African-American participants unknowingly serving as objects of study. Compounding this injustice, white doctors concealed diagnoses and research findings, refusing to provide any treatment and allowing viruses to proliferate unchecked within their bodies. Beyond these inhuman experiments, South Carolina implemented a grievous policy that inflicted significant harm on Black women's bodies. To control the African-American population in the region, the government mandated sterilization for African-American women. Cora was influenced by Miss Lucy's encouragement, which further highlighted the local government's efforts to control and oppress the African-American community.

Upon uncovering the truth beneath South Carolina's veneer of hypocrisy, Cora resolved to take refuge elsewhere in pursuit of genuine freedom. However, as she and Caesar attempted to flee once more, Ridgeway and his subordinate slave hunters arrived in South Carolina, hunting them relentlessly. Cora and Caesar's path to freedom was once again fraught with obstacles. Nevertheless, Cora remained determined to escape from South Carolina, where the illusion of freedom and comfort was, in reality, predicated on exploitation and oppression.

After departing South Carolina, Cora and Caesar arrived in North Carolina, where they were apprehended by Ridgeway, who had relentlessly pursued them. In North Carolina, where African-Americans fugitives faced potential extreme violence and oppression, Cora found herself in an even more precarious situation. She was forced to conceal herself in a cramped attic, unable to stand upright or speak freely. Her sole diversion was a book that she read repeatedly for half a year before being betrayed by the maidservant Fiona and nearly captured by Ridgeway.

Following her escape from North Carolina, Cora reached Tennessee via the Underground Railroad, yearning to truly break free from the clutches of slave owners. Compared to South Carolina and North Carolina, Tennessee offered a relatively less oppressive environment for Cora, yet challenges and uncertainties remained. After being recaptured by Ridgeway, Cora was chained to a car and faced the prospect of being returned to Randall's plantation, where she and her family had endured brutal abuse and exploitation. Fortunately, she was rescued in time and brought to Valentine Farm by the free Black man Royal and his companions. Although Valentine Farm provided relative safety, it was later devastated by white aggressors, forcing Cora to flee once again.

In summary, after escaping from the plantation in Georgia where she was born and where her family members had also suffered brutal abuse and exploitation, Cora encountered a myriad of hardships on her quest for freedom, ultimately achieving her rebirth as a truly independent individual. While on the plantation, she was exploited as a laborer and, when sexually abused, had to endure various humiliations in order to survive and seize the opportunity to escape and alter her destiny. However, her journey of escape met with even greater difficulties. Most inhumanely, in North Carolina, amidst widespread hostility towards African-Americans, the government even mandated sterilization for African-American women to control the birth rate of the entire racial group. The physical exploitation and oppression inflicted upon Cora on Randall's plantation and during her escape caused profound psychological trauma, ultimately compelling her to embark on the path to escape, break free from her tragic fate, and pursue freedom and rebirth.

2.2 Psychological Trauma on Cora

Undoubtedly, all the aforementioned physical traumas sowed the seeds of escape in Cora's heart, ultimately impelling her to embark upon the Underground Railroad in pursuit of freedom. This section offers an in-depth analysis of the psychological trauma depicted in the novel that Cora endured, and elucidates how a series of psychological afflictions ultimately galvanized Cora's resolve to break free from the clutches of the slaveholders and seek liberty.

On Randall's cotton plantation, while enduring a myriad of physical abuses and exploitation, Cora also grappled with profound terror and isolation, which compounded her physical trauma. When her mother Mabel deserted the

plantation, Cora was left alone at the tender age of 10 or 11. Rather than eliciting sympathy, her status as an abandoned child subjected her to dual bullying—both physical and psychological. The enslaved woman Ava, who had not shared a cordial relationship with Cora’s mother Mabel, frequently sought to cause trouble for Cora and isolate her. On one occasion, Cora was driven to Hob by Moses due to Ava’s bribery. Being consigned to the so-called “wretch house” not only deprived Cora of her living space and her sole sanctuary on the plantation but also, indirectly, exacerbated her sense of isolation, thereby deepening her psychological wounds.

Furthermore, the sexual abuse inflicted upon Cora by the slave owner Terrence and the male slaves in Hob cast a long psychological shadow over her. When Terrence subjected her to such shameless treatment, Cora remained immobile and did not attempt to conceal herself, a reaction that underscores how her prior experiences had numbed her to the point of being unable to resist. This numbness is, in effect, not an indication of a recovering body. As Caruth (1996: 11) has explained, the subject “who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares”.

In the novel, Cora’s arduous life experiences have engendered a multitude of challenges and have progressively warped her sense of identity across various phases of her existence. Initially, during her sojourn on the plantation, a concatenation of experiences contributed to the distortion of Cora’s identity to a significant extent. There, she was perceived as a crazy woman and consequently faced ostracism and bullying from her contemporaries. This form of identity distortion engendered profound isolation for Cora on the plantation, precipitating severe psychological trauma and prompting her to consciously avoid male company during dances to forestall any potential misunderstandings. (Whitehead, 2016: 28)

Drawing upon relevant theoretical frameworks, Cora’s excessive avoidance of physical contact with the opposite sex can be attributed to hypervigilance — a condition, as found by Rieder and Elbert (2013), that persists in persons who have experienced highly traumatic events, especially those who have directly experienced or witnessed violence”. It’s not difficult, accordingly, to comprehend Cora’s perpetual state of heightened vigilance as if imminent danger were omnipresent. Both the tangible physical harm inflicted and the isolation imposed by other slaves left an indelible psychological scar on Cora, compelling her to completely shun male interaction on the plantation. Furthermore, the grave sexual trauma she endured on the plantation exerted a deleterious influence on Cora’s perception of matrimony, effectively precluding her from selecting a spouse or establishing a family, as was customary for others. Randall’s plantation, in this regard, appeared to be an inexhaustible source of psychological trauma for Cora. Nevertheless, these experiences also imbued her with a fortified resolve and impelled her to tenaciously pursue freedom as an individual.

Additionally, when Cora embarked on successive escapes to South and North Carolina in quest of freedom and renewal, the personal experiences she underwent and the atrocities she witnessed also left an enduring psychological impact. In South Carolina, the government implemented policies aimed at controlling the Black population by promoting syphilis testing and ligation among African-American women, thereby depriving them of their dignity, freedom, and even their lives. This disillusionment with the notion of freedom further distorted Cora’s identity as an African-American woman, exacerbating her sense of isolation and helplessness on her perilous journey of escape.

Freud, in the article “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, proposed that the wound of mind “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth, 1996: 4). In the novel, Cora was subjected to a series of traumas that inflicted profound psychological damage upon her, periodically plunging her into the abyss of nightmares. Witnessing male slaves being hanged from trees, devoured by bald eagles and ravens without any semblance of resistance, or observing female slaves being beaten until they were black and blue — and even more horrifyingly, seeing both living and deceased bodies being incinerated atop woodpiles — left an indelible mark on Cora. Having observed boys and girls younger than herself enduring unimaginably inhumane treatment, Cora found herself powerless, engulfed by feelings of sympathy and helplessness. That night, such emotions incessantly invaded her mind, gripping her tightly. (Whitehead, 2016: 34) These dreams, according to Freud (1961: 7), “repeatedly [bring] the patient back into the situation of his accident”. The trauma an individual has endured tends to resurface repeatedly around the survivor, particularly during nightmares, where it follows imperceptibly and insidiously, like a shadow. This narrative segment by Whitehead vividly portrays Cora’s empathy for those in similar predicaments and underscores the psychological trauma inflicted upon her by the bloody scenes on the plantation.

Beyond the harrowing experiences of others, Cora's personal encounters inflicted even more haunting nightmares upon her. The sexual abuse and insults she endured left deep scars on her psyche. In addition to avoiding physical contact with males, Cora remained perpetually cautious and defensive on her journey toward freedom, a testament to the psychological shadows cast by the terrifying experiences on the infamous plantation. Moreover, the brutal scenes Cora witnessed on her path to freedom also imposed severe psychological trauma. In North Carolina, where the African-American community was met with extreme hostility, Cora encountered even more blood-soaked massacres on the streets. Such horrific vistas frequently plunged Cora into "violent dreams", yet, paradoxically, they also fortified her resolve to seek genuine freedom even more steadfastly.

In Cora's nightmares, a myriad of inhumane and bloody scenes, such as sexual abuse, slave hunts, and slaughters, recurred relentlessly. These were not merely reflections of the physical trauma she had suffered but also external manifestations of her psychological scars. Although Cora endeavored to escape the clutches of trauma on her journey of escape, it continued to haunt her, influencing her behaviors and mental state in profound ways.

2.3 Intergenerational Trauma on Cora and her Family

Intergenerational trauma denotes the phenomenon wherein a sequence of traumas is transmitted from one generation to the next, resulting in enduring psychological damage to all family members involved. It has been posited that, through interactions with their parents, children can perceive the transference of trauma via specific life details impacted by such trauma in their parents' lives, such as physical characteristics or their parents' recounting of the scars left on their bodies. (Lin, et al., 2013: 1670)

In *The Underground Railroad*, Cora, her mother Mabel, and grandmother Ajarry all endured intergenerational trauma, which imposed a substantial psychological burden on Cora. In her youth, Ajarry was sold into slavery and transported to the plantation, during which she was repeatedly traded as mere commodity. Over time, she was compelled by the slaveholders to work incessantly until her death. Colson Whitehead (2016: 8) portrays her demise in the following manner: "Ajarry died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean...She was the longest—living one among those from the same village, but because of a lump in her brain, she collapsed in a row of cotton plants, with blood gushing out of her nose and the lips covered with white foam." Through these descriptions, readers can envisage the profound harm that slavery inflicted upon African-American women, not only upon the deceased but also upon their descendants who either witnessed their horrific deaths firsthand or learned of them through family members or other slaves privy to the circumstances. In *The Underground Railroad*, Ajarry's death not only impacted her daughter Mabel but also indirectly influenced her granddaughter Cora, as the trauma took form of Cora's nightmares, subjecting her to immense psychological strain and unrelenting terror.

In addition to Ajarry, Cora's mother Mabel also exerted a profound influence on Cora's growth and psychological transformation. When Cora was young, Mabel departed from the notorious plantation in pursuit of freedom and renewal. Her absence initially exacted a physical and psychological toll on Cora. Starrs and Békés (2025: 247), in their study of intergenerational trauma transmission, stated: "parental sensitivity to the developmental level of the child, including the timing of disclosure, is modeled as a protective factor against transgenerational traumatization". According to this finding, Mabel's departure when Cora was at the age of 9 or 10 indicated a lack of parental sensitivity and thereby, a lack of "a protective factor against transgenerational traumatization". Bereft of her mother's protection, Cora endured brutal abuse at the hands of the slaveholders and was banished to Hob, where she became the subject of ridicule by Ava, who had once regarded Mabel as an adversary and sought to perpetuate the enmity towards her descendants.

Mabel's departure represents a profound and complex decision, reflecting both her pursuit of freedom and her love for her daughter. Although it appeared to be a dreadful choice that left Cora vulnerable to repeated bullying on the plantation, it also inspired her to break free from captivity and seek genuine freedom. Through Mabel's experiences, *The Underground Railroad* vividly illustrates the challenges and dilemmas that African—American women confront in their quest for freedom.

3. FROM A VICTIM TO A WARRIOR: CORA'S SELF-SALVATION

In the last part, the physical, psychological, and intergenerational traumas inflicted upon Cora have been discussed. Whether on the plantation or during her flight, Cora endured a multitude of traumas. Some of these traumas manifested as tangible scars on her body, while others persistently haunted her in the form of harrowing

nightmares. Nevertheless, despite the myriad of harms and abuses perpetrated by the cruel institution of slavery, Cora never succumbed to despair. Instead, she altered her destiny through courage and perseverance.

On her journey northward, Cora continued to experience several traumas, particularly in North Carolina, where the African-American community was subjected to intense hatred and discrimination. Despite these adversities, Cora ultimately succeeded in reaching the North, where she was able to live freely, unencumbered by abuse or discrimination. Throughout this journey, which was fraught with challenges yet imbued with hope, Cora underwent a significant transformation in terms of her identity, self-awareness, and agency. Influenced by her family and supported by the community, she gained a growing sense of subjectivity and empowerment.

3.1 The Influence of Family and Community Relations on Cora's Awakening

In the novel, both Cora's family and the communities in which she resided play pivotal roles in spurring her to flee the abominable and infamous cotton plantation and ultimately cast off the shackles of slavery.

Having endured repeated torture under the institution of slavery, Cora's immediate family inflicted a series of psychological traumas upon her, ultimately galvanizing her determination to escape to the North despite insurmountable odds. Bereft of her mother Mabel's protection, Cora suffered unimaginable oppression and abuse, which intensified her fervent desire to escape. Within her family, her fundamental human rights and dignity were ruthlessly stripped away, further fueling her yearning for freedom and dignity and compelling her to embark on a perilous journey at a tender age.

Moreover, the emotional detachment and isolation from her family indirectly motivated Cora to seek escape. During her formative years, Cora was forcibly separated from her mother Mabel and witnessed the tragic death of her grandmother Ajarry, leaving deep psychological scars. Without the solace of her closest kin, Cora felt powerless and vulnerable on the plantation, facing relentless abuse and oppression in solitude.

Additionally, the apathetic and hostile attitudes of her peers exacerbated Cora's sense of hopelessness and solidified her resolve to leave the place that harbored endless nightmares. On the plantation, the slave owners subjected her to repeated physical and psychological abuse. She was even sexually abused at a young age. (Whitehead, 2016: 48) Yet, witnessing the brutal oppression, her peers on the plantation remained indifferent, with some even betraying Cora for their own gain. The fact that the plantation offered no refuge or protection but rather perpetual terror strengthened her resolve to pursue independence and freedom, fostering her awakening consciousness.

Despite the myriad of sufferings Cora endured and the numerous betrayals and acts of indifference from her family and peers, she never relinquished her pursuit of morality and justice. In essence, her ethical consciousness emerged as a significant driving force in her growth and awakening throughout her escape. During her journey, Cora also encountered benevolent individuals who extended a helping hand. Upon arriving in South Carolina, the Andersons took her in. (Whitehead, 2016: 93) They provided Cora with shelter and employed her as their babysitter, enabling her to live relatively safely in South Carolina. As Cora realized that South Carolina had become too perilous due to the relentless hunting of slave catchers, she was compelled to flee to North Carolina. At her arrival, the Martins offered their attic as a temporary refuge, despite the potential threat from ruthless slave owners, demonstrating their kindness and selflessness. (Whitehead, 2016: 153)

When Cora's whereabouts were inadvertently revealed by the maid Fiona, she was once again forced to flee. This time, she found sanctuary on Valentine Farm in Indiana. It was on Valentine Farm that she accessed the real community support. People on the farm shared a similar tragic past of slavery and racist trauma. With the support from the community, Cora acquired valuable knowledge, which played a crucial role in her psychological transformation and personal development. Valentine Farm endowed Cora with opportunity to receive a formal education for the first time in her life. She received her first-ever new book, a poignant symbol of her thirst for knowledge and quest for freedom. Reading enabled Cora to engage with diverse thoughts and ideas, thereby significantly expanding her intellectual horizons. In addition to acquiring knowledge, Cora also made notable strides in her labor skills on the farm. She undertook tasks that were familiar to her, completing them with ease, which not only rendered her financially self-reliant but also provided her with a sense of spiritual fulfillment. Over time, Cora's labor skills continued to evolve. She mastered the art of managing her own life and became increasingly proficient in various aspects of agricultural knowledge.

Furthermore, Cora expanded her social network on the farm. She gradually developed romantic feelings for Royal, who had rescued her from the clutches of the slaveholder Ridgeway. This emotional connection enabled Cora to experience the warmth and care of human relationships, offering her solace amidst the arduous journey of escape. Most significantly, Cora attained true freedom and dignity on Valentine Farm. It was here that she experienced genuine freedom for the first time. The farm served as a sanctuary for escaped slaves. The support and camaraderie of these friends and peers provided her with strength and companionship in the face of adversity. As Hudson's (2016) study has found, if the trauma is experienced by a large group of people, a sense of in-group connection will be fostered. This feeling of belonging "can be protective, as it reframes solitary experiences and histories into a larger, interconnected context" (Starrs and Békés, 2025: 247). Black feminist theorist Patricia Collins also emphasized that the emancipation of African-American women must not only address issues of race and gender but also acknowledge the existence of class oppression. Unity among African-American women could foster collectivism, thereby driving social reform. (Collins, 2000: 98) In essence, African-American women could gradually achieve self-awakening through mutual support and solidarity within the group, despite the multiple oppression of race, gender, and class. On Valentine Farm, black women supported and encouraged one another, confronting challenges collectively. This solidarity not only provided Cora with spiritual sustenance but also offered her a platform to express herself and resist oppression, thereby fostering her consciousness.

In summary, both family and community played a pivotal role in Cora's self-awakening. The oppression and indifference she encountered within her family fueled her desire to escape and seek freedom, while the relatively liberated and supportive environment of Valentine Farm provided fertile ground for her growth and awakening. These experiences collectively shaped Cora's self-awareness and facilitated her transformation from an oppressed slave into an independent-minded individual who courageously pursued freedom.

3.2 Self-awareness and Identity Realized by Cora

In *The Underground Railroad*, it was a complex and profound process for Cora to achieve self-awakening and identity. Black feminist criticism, which focuses on both the individual experiences of the African-American female and their roles and responsibilities in the African-American group, has provided a theoretical framework, which helps us understand how Cora accomplished the awakening of self-awareness and the reconstruction of identity. It is pointed out that only by facing the tragic past and sharing history with the black community can the African-American female like Cora form a sense of belonging to their community. (Zhou, 2024: 22)

During her escape, Cora embarked on an arduous and trying odyssey that tested both her mental and physical fortitude. The challenges she confronted encompassed external threats, such as the relentless pursuit by slaveholders, the harshness of the environment, as well as internal psychological struggles and terror. It was through these adversities that Cora's self-awareness came to bud.

The awakening of self-awareness is initially manifested in Cora's profound comprehension of her own identity. Throughout her escape, Cora witnessed firsthand the cruelty and brutality of slavery. She observed the systematic abuse and exploitation of slaves by their owners and felt her own powerlessness and insignificance as an individual within this oppressive system. These profound experiences prompted her to introspect on the very essence of slavery and gradually spurred her awakening. Cora's unwavering pursuit of freedom is another hallmark of her self-awareness. On her journey towards liberation, she continually pondered the significance of freedom. She came to understand that true freedom could only be attained by escaping the bonds of slavery. Moreover, Cora gradually cultivated the ability to think and judge independently during her escape. Rather than blindly following others, she made decisions based on her unique circumstances and personal needs. This enhancement in her capacity for independent thought and judgment is a significant indicator of her growing self-awareness.

The awakening of self-awareness achieved by Cora holds profound implications and offers valuable inspiration. It demonstrates that regardless of the difficulties an individual may encounter, it is possible to attain self-awareness and personal growth through courage, resilience, and a relentless pursuit of one's goals. Furthermore, when confronted with abuse and exploitation, individuals should courageously fight for their freedom and dignity, as exemplified by Cora's journey.

Cora's identity underwent a transformative journey from passive acceptance to active self-determination, a process that not only underscored the distortion and oppression of individual identity wrought by slavery but also highlighted the resilience and awakening of human nature amidst adversity. Initially, as a young girl, Cora was compelled to accept her status as a black slave, reduced to a mere tool and commodity for labor. On Randall's

plantation, she endured a life of misery and subjugation, forced to perform arduous tasks, subjected to abuse by slaveholders, and bullied by her peers. During this period, Cora had no recourse but to passively acquiesce to her circumstances, feeling powerless to alter her fate and resigning herself to silence.

Cora did not entirely capitulate to the brutality of slavery, nevertheless. When she resolved to escape, she embarked on a quest for freedom and dignity. On her journey northward — a pilgrimage towards genuine freedom and rebirth — Cora encountered diverse individuals and confronted a myriad of challenges and trials. These experiences prompted her to reflect on her status and destiny, leading her to recognize that her birth into a slave family did not irrevocably determine her fate as a lifelong victim of abuse and oppression. Consequently, she began to seek her own value and purpose, endeavoring to break free from the shackles of slavery.

As she drew closer to her aspirations, Cora gradually discovered her own voice and inner strength. She commenced standing up resolutely, fighting for freedom and dignity not only for herself but also for the entire African-American female community. In this transformative process, Cora's identity underwent a fundamental shift from that of a passive recipient to an active combatant. She realized that, despite the entrenched nature of slavery in American society, which sought to deprive her of freedom and dignity, she could still assert her rights through her own efforts and struggles.

Cora's personal growth extended beyond mere liberation from slavery. While fleeing northward, she deepened her understanding of freedom and equality. She came to realize that true freedom encompassed not only physical emancipation from abuse but also the attainment of mental liberty and dignity. Thus, she began contemplating strategies to secure greater rights and dignity for herself and her community, seeking to dismantle the constraints and oppression imposed by slavery on African-American individuals, particularly women. This pursuit was evident not only in Cora's actions but also in her worldview and attitude. She began to confront her life proactively, striving for the rights and dignity that were rightfully hers.

To conclude, Cora underwent a profound metamorphosis from a passive victim to an active warrior, ultimately succeeding in her quest for freedom and dignity. On the one hand, Cora's escape journey exposed the distortion and oppression inflicted by slavery on individuals. This remarkable odyssey, on the other hand, embodied the awakening and tenacity of human nature in the face of adversity. When confronted with inhuman oppression and exploitation, Cora's courage and resistance stand as a testament to the indomitable spirit of humanity.

3.3 Cora's Agency: From Potential to Actualization

Within the field of anthropology, according to Vorhölter (2024: 1), agency is extensively defined as the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act. This concept is typically employed to analyze how individuals endeavor to influence or alter their life worlds, as well as how they operate within, or even resist, powerful structural forces. In essence, distinct from subjectivity, agency emphasizes that an individual actively selects options, makes decisions, and exhibits goal-directed initiative to attain predetermined objectives. Furthermore, agency accentuates the autonomy of individuals in their actions, highlighting that individuals proactively shape their behaviors and make decisions based on their volition and capabilities.

In *The Underground Railroad*, Cora initially demonstrated her agency by generating new knowledge and meanings that diverged from those produced by the dominant class. Her challenge to the prevailing mechanism of knowledge production commenced with her efforts to enhance her literacy. White society regarded literacy as an exclusive privilege, perceiving Black individuals as "purely animal-like bodies" (Zhang, 2019: 103). To preserve the perceived animal nature of enslaved people and thwart their intellectual development, white settlers prohibited literacy among slaves, establishing an invisible boundary that reinforced a rigid binary opposition. After arriving in South Carolina, Cora participated in literacy classes funded by a government program designed to enhance the literacy levels of the colored population. As her literacy progressed, she gradually acquired the capacity "to see through—and call out—lies and distortions" (Maus, 2021: 129). Through reading and writing, she began to "push the plantation from her" (Whitehead, 2016: 97). Literacy served to expunge the identity of slave from the subject, thereby facilitating the construction of her own sense of self. Consequently, when she read the Bible and almanacs at the attic of Martin's residence in North Carolina, she realized that the authors of these texts "always got things wrong, on purpose as much as by accident" (Whitehead, 2021: 182). It was precisely for this reason that Cora "adored the old almanacs", as "[t]he tables and facts couldn't be shaped into what they were not" (Whitehead, 2021: 183). Armed with this critical perspective, Cora discerned that knowledge was covertly manipulated through power mechanisms, and those in authority "educated the public through constructing, interpreting, and

disseminating knowledge about a power order” (Wang and Yu, 2023: 33). Consequently, she began to question the doctrine of equality espoused in the *Declaration of Independence* and engaged Ethel, Martin’s wife, in a theological debate (Whitehead, 2021: 182). Cora’s challenge to the dominant power discourse exemplified a new way of understanding the world, thereby revealing her capacity to independently explore, discover, and generate new knowledge and experiences, as well as to create new values and meanings grounded in her own intentions and objectives.

Elaine Scarry (1987: 49), in the study of bodies in pain, maintained that the only means for a slave to “inhabit[s], humanize[s] and own[s] a space much larger than that occupied by his body alone” was to “project his words and sounds into his environment”. In Smallwood’s (2007: 125) words, to claim the ownership of a larger space, a slave on the cramped slave ship need “to explain it, to define and delimit it”. If Whitehead, in this context, intentionally alluded to the attic as a metaphor for the cramped space aboard the slave ship during the Middle Passage, then Cora, following Scarry’s reasoning, had indeed expanded her spatial presence. This is evidenced by her request for almanacs from the Martins and her insistence that Ethel read the Bible aloud to her, during which she also engaged Ethel in an argument regarding the inequalities revealed in this holy book. Within the narrow confines of the attic, she voiced her demand and, more significantly, her challenge to the holy and the authority. As Scarry (1987: 49) articulated: “Agency aboard the slave ship took refuge above all in the voice”, Cora, who kept expressing her thoughts to the Martins, realized her “self” “across the bridge of the body in the world”. It is her act, so to speak, of redefining the social space that preserved her agency.

In general, Cora’s agency is manifested through her arduous and protracted escape journey. Certain actions she undertook during this escape, in particular, served as quintessential examples of her burgeoning agency. In South Carolina, Cora, along with two other girls, was assigned to work at the “Museum of Natural Wonders” as “living exhibits” (Whitehead, 2021: 115). To portray American history, the “Museum of Natural Wonders”, adhering to the taxonomy of natural history, was segmented into three exhibition halls — “Darkest Africa”, “Life on the Slave Ship” and “Typical Day in the Plantation”. This “art of mimesis” was pivotal to the “museum’s story of human evolution” (Dubey, 2019: 115). By designating the African continent as the starting point, the museum implicitly associates Blacks with “barbaric nature”, while positioning the slaves at the terminus as embodying “relative advancement”, thereby suggesting that the evolution of slavery constitutes a process of human civilization (116). Evidently, this spatial arrangement “unambiguously falsifies slavery”, interpreting it as a manifestation of racial progress (Konstantinou, 2017: 18). Cora’s daily routine commenced with a depiction of life on the African continent and culminated with her portrayal as a “slave”. The absurdity and shame inherent in this historical distortion, however, impel her to alter the sequence of her performance by inverting the spatial order, transitioning from “Typical Day in the Plantation” to “Life on the Slave Ship” and finally to “Darkest Africa”. Through this revision of historical discourse, Cora presented a rebuttal to the white narrative of racial evolution. The white-conceived “advancement” of civilization, progressing from the African continent to slavery plantations, was entirely subverted by Cora, who redefined a return to African life as a genuine manifestation of racial progress. This practice unequivocally underscores Cora’s endeavor to resist structural forces and, in doing so, effectuate change in the world.

4. CONCLUSION

This study conducts a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted traumas endured by Cora, encompassing physical, psychological, and intergenerational dimensions that profoundly shape her mental states and behavioral trajectories. Through rigorous analysis, it elucidates the complex psychological and behavioral attributes of African-American women under intersecting oppression. Furthermore, the study traces Cora’s journey towards heightened self-awareness, identity reconstruction, and agency realization. By integrating literary and psychological theoretical frameworks, it offers a nuanced portrayal of African-American women’s experiences, enriching scholarly understanding of Cora’s character and providing a critical lens to examine their historical and societal positioning. Ultimately, the study posits that only through unity and resolute pursuit of freedom can African-American women attain genuine liberation amidst pervasive oppression.

FUNDING

This work was supported by Department of Education of Guangdong Province under Grant [2023WTSCX064].

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