



DAYDREAMING ABSCOND: VICTIMIZATION IN THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

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Abstract

Colson Whitehead is a twenty first century writer who has explored lives of African Americans in a variety of ways in his novels. This paper studies the 2017 Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Underground Railroad (2016). The paper treats this work as an instance of blaxploration. It demonstrates how the figurative idea of the Underground Railroad is reworked into a literal one. The paper also examines the literal and imaginative fantasies of escape of the individual characters in the novel.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, Underground Railroad, blaxploration, escape.

Life is a journey for every human. Travels are often undertaken to a destination for attaining dreams. For a few nineteenth century slaves in the American continent, journey had a different meaning. They undertook a life threatening journey once in their lifetime, for retrieving their life from the clutches of their masters. Their journey is from crippling low self-esteem to a hope for freedom. The hatred towards their enslavers turned them crusaders fighting against slavery. Several African American authors have reimagined the lives of people as slaves on plantations. Twentieth century authors like Toni Morrison or Maya Angelou have portrayed the continual struggles of African Americans in the American society. The new imagining of black lives has been taken forward by post-soul black writers too. Such fiction has been termed “ blaxploration” by Bertram D Ashe (614). The novel *Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead too presents such a blaxploration. The novel explores the fierce aspiration for freedom and the trials and tribulations of all slaves in attempting to liberate themselves from the clutches of slavery.



This paper deals with two things: one, the figurative idea of the Underground Railroad, which was the path to liberation, as is known historically and explains how Whitehead converts it into a realistic railroad with its boxcars, conductors and stations; and two, the way in which Whitehead imagines “escape,” what it signifies to different characters in the work and how they attempt to achieve them.

Colson Whitehead is a double Pulitzer Prize winner novelist who has explored different facets of black lives in his different works. His works have been compared to those of Toni Morrison and Percival Everett, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for the last two works. Each of these works can be considered as an exercise in blaxploration by which Ashe referred to the “propensity to trouble blackness” (614). For Whitehead blaxploration is “a method of reworking existing cultural artefacts that is remarkably similar to historiographic metafiction” (Maus 12). The notion of the Underground Railroad, which is equated to the idea of liberty in the minds of African American is reworked by Whitehead in this novel thus making it a blaxploration.

Understanding the Underground Railroad

“Underground” alludes to the existence of various kinds of alternative cultures within the society. It is generally used to mark a boundary between the normal or the everyday, the mainstream and a secret world below the surface of the city. Underground in the twentieth century has been linked to the subway, connecting it to the life above, to living lives like moles and to the underworld. It is any activity that is secret, and usually illegal. In it, the people try new and often shocking or illegal ways of living or forms of art. However in the context of African Americans, “underground” recounts a history of resistance movements under harsh regimes or abject social situations. The term was employed to refer to the necessary secrecy of the resisters of slavery namely the African Americans and the Abolitionists. It is in this respect that Whitehead uses the term Underground Railroad.

Resistance movements have sprung up against oppression in different places across centuries. Many of them have been covert affairs. One such resistance is the “Underground Railroad” used in the nineteenth century, through which slaves in the Southern part of the US were helped to escape to places free of slavery especially to the North. It is one of the most venerable and philanthropic innovations in the long and dreadful history of human bondage. The term



“ underground” began to be used in the 1830s coinciding with the advent of railway technology. It is estimated that between twenty-five thousand and thirty thousand people actually escaped to a new life in the North, using the Underground Railroad.

Frederick Douglass is yet another famous figure who escaped slavery. He first tried to escape slavery but was unsuccessful. Sojourner Truth is one of the most significant people in the black history, who escaped to freedom with her infant daughter in 1826. These persons used the system of Underground Railroad as a means of escaping slavery, and later on used it again for assisting others, hoping that once there would be no slaves left under bondage.

The runaway network was neither underground nor a railroad. It was an underground resistance. Though it was figuratively underground, it had a very complex structure, consisting of meeting points for slaves and guides, secret routes, transportations, safe houses, etc. They kept the whole things in utmost secrecy to ensure their success. They even created a set of new codes as their secret language. The people who facilitated the escape of the slaves were called “ conductors” or “ engineers.” The places where they hid themselves or the rest were called “ safe houses,” the places along the escape routes were called “ stations” or “ depots,” escaping slaves were called “ passengers” “ cargo” or even “ goods.” The slaves generally were organized into small groups to maintain secrecy. None of them knew the whole route of their journey including the connecting stations. From stations to stations, the conductors changed every time, and they knew the details of the next stations and depots.

Colson Whitehead uses the term literally in his fiction. He converted the figurative railroad, the network of safe houses with conductors, stations and tunnels into a railroad with underground tracks and locomotives, making stops in different states. He imagines an actual boxcar that transports runaway slaves to the North. He arranges the novel anachronistically to take up the challenge of blending fantasy with tragic historical truth. Colson’ s conjuring is so vivid that he took much liberty with the actual past and the American history. Though the novel is a feat of imagination, it is inspired by similar real life events. The protagonist of the novel, Cora, a slave girl, is on a heroic quest to escape captivity. The Underground Railroad leads her to the much yearned freedom. The railroad through which the boxcar travels is more like a doorway allowing Cora to get from State to State, and episode to episode. Whitehead deliberately weaves fantastical and ahistorical elements into the narrative. By making the metaphor of the railroad into a real,



physical phenomenon, Whitehead questions assumptions about what is “real” and what is not when it comes to African-American history. Furthermore, he blurs the boundaries between history and myth whose very individualistic and free existence is a threat to the fantasy of the white supremacy. Like the modern subway, the Underground Railroad makes Cora’s journey easier and faster, and like the ancient Underground Railroad, it takes her to freedom.

Cora, the novel’s protagonist’s journey is physical, emotional and mental. Each stage of that journey-on foot, via train, and wagon, simultaneously running forward – takes her closer to the realization or belief of true freedom. Thus, the novel presents a picaresque adventure. The novel has the geography as its plot. The South represents iniquity and bondage, while the North represents enlightenment and freedom. Through the terrains which the protagonist travels, station by station, the novelist builds a physical landscape out of the chronology of African American history. And it reveals that slavery quintessentially shaped American society and their attitudes.

Weaving Together Different Modes of Escape

Documented records of the Underground Railroad point out the use of quilts in communicating secretly. Many patterns were woven together in these quilts and used as codes to signal information to the abolitionists or the runaway slaves. The quilts can then symbolically be treated as routes of escape. Colson Whitehead weaves together the lives of people on the Randall Plantation and their fantasies of escape in the novel. Similar to the different patterns woven onto different quilts, the fantasies of freedom are different for each character in the novel.

In the depiction of life on the plantation, the novelist imagines a hell. There is very little fun or relief there. They have a very few celebrations, and those days play an important role in their lives. They provide rare happy moments for the enslaved population. Even such small intervals of freedom relieved them; they are free enough to stop thinking about running away. However, Cora has a different attitude towards celebrations as she thinks that she finds those celebratory days sinister, a way of subduing the enslaved population and suppressing any chance of rebellion. It is as if to tame their thoughts of running away. Thus there is a distinct contrast between the kinds of freedom that different enslaved people at the plantation think of. Jockey, the eldest slave at the Randall plantation, affords his make-believe world of freedom by randomly selecting birthdays for himself throughout the year and thus has a small relief through such celebrations. While other



slaves like Caesar and Cora think of running away so as to enjoy freedom in the North by leaving from the clutches of their masters, Jockey tries to enjoy it by staying with the master, and thereby not risking his life and food. There is a collective identity for the slaves in their deep subconscious minds that long for freedom, while the different ideas of freedom for different kinds of people occurs due to the personal traumas that they suffer. Some are more patient or appear cowardly, while some others are more courageous and impatient.

All the slave characters in the novel are in a sort of constant running to escape from their fate. Most often, all the slaves shared common desires and dislikes. Many chapters of the novel are preceded by an actual runaway ad of the time, and seeking the recapture of the slave, offering rewards for the recapture, and warning people not to harbour them. Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, is kidnapped from Africa as a child and brought to America, where she is sold many times before ending up on Randall plantation. Throughout her journey, she faced a lot of evils. Conditions on the ship are hellish.

Once, when her suicide attempts are unsuccessful, she think about her family, about their serving kind white masters, and eventually living up free in the North, etc. She realizes that she should be financially strong to survive. Yet, she doesn't harbour the dreams to run away and seek true freedom. For her, the idea of relocating over again and again doesn't sound like freedom. Movement and uncertainty are her logic of captivity. To have a place to call her own- even if it is a tiny plot of land is, for her, better than death and running. Thus, she learns to entertain herself without doing anything physically, but remaining in the plantation itself and by enduring all sorts of brutalities. It is her thoughts that give her solace and peace of mind.

Ajarry's idea of escape is death and it is ironically her daughter Mabel who achieves that dream and forever evades capture. The only bleak answer that we can find for it is her only child, Mabel. But, Mabel, Cora's mother, decides not to die on Randall and escapes into the night. Everyone believes that Mabel has reached north. The story of Mabel's escape becomes the single success story of having made it "North" and the source of inspiration for future runaways like Caesar and Cora.

Cora has inherited the desire for running from her mother Mabel, whom others think has attained freedom and is living free in the North, Cora always think of her sadly and with rage for leaving



her all alone. Her frequent thought of her mother, though detesting, conveys her with the idea of escape. It is for her mother's escape, she is placed among the hob women, and all these conditions facilitated her for thinking and dreaming of freedom that she thinks her mother enjoys by escaping from the plantation. As she is constantly reminded of her mother, she is more frequently reminded of freedom. The fact that her mother is a strong and cunning person, and so that she was not recaptured also gives mental courage and determination for Cora, and as Mabel's only child, she believes she also could do it successfully. She thus while preparing to run away, packs all things like, vegetables collected from her garden, that once her mother also packed while running away, suggesting that she is following her mother's path. Also the fact that she has no any liabilities like child, husband or friends at the plantation also makes feel free to run away. The garden that Cora inherits from her mother stands for her hopes. Through the connection to her family by the garden, she is able to seek a life of freedom, and the garden provides a peaceful atmosphere for her to dream for it.

Caesar has also inherited the idea of escape. He cherished it since from his childhood. His earlier master, Mrs. Garner was a lady with a relatively mild behaviour towards him and his parents. She had the opinion that slavery was a necessary evil, as the black people were inherently unintelligent, and abolishing slavery would leave the blackpeople helpless in their incompetence. And thus she taught her slaves to read and write. Thus he feels that he is competent enough to live free in this world and freedom is more tangible for him. Furthermore, Mrs. Garner had also promised to liberate Caesar and his family upon her death. He thus confirmed his freedom that awaited him in his near future. But the promise was not kept by her relatives after her death, and subsequently he was sold off. This monumental disappointment was too much to bear and breaks him completely; he always harboured that unfulfilled dream in his mind. He remained determined to seize the freedom that he owned. And so, he always thinks about it, and tries relentlessly to find an appropriate time and companion for it, and he chooses Cora. He is a person who thinks and dreams for the liberation of the whole slave community, and hence he takes another two slaves with him, Cora and Lovey, struggles for them, at stake of his own life.

The Underground Railroad is a secret fantasy harboured in the hearts of the people on the plantation. When they first see the Underground Railroad Cora and Caesar are awed and their vision of freedom becomes much clearer than before. The boxcar affords them the luxury to



dream of freedom and their journey with greater clarity. The Underground Railroad in the novel is constructed solely by the blacks. The construction stands for the bringing of their dream into reality. The railroad is constructed underground, away from the notice of white people, similar to their dreaming of freedom, which is a secret fantasy for them. In the astonishment of the vision of the Underground Railroad, Cora feels respect and wonder for the black people, for their hard work, creativity and willingness. She wonders if they receive a proper reward for it. She thus justifies the slaves' love for freedom. The railroad has given innumerable wheels for her dreams to move on swiftly.

To sum up, this paper had analysed how Colson Whitehead reworked the notion of the Underground Railroad and turned it to a realistic railroad. It also showed that the variety of patterns in quilting that was employed in connection with railroad is figuratively converted into patterns of imaginative and literal “escapes” through the lives of the characters in the novel. Whitehead's writings become significant in the context of “Black Lives Matter” movement and this work is yet another reminder of the struggles to maintain liberty. The African Americans crave for an America where there are no racist divisions, where blacks are treated as human beings, and where fraternity reigns over the colour of the people. Thus the novel tries to portray not only a physical journey, but more prominently, an inner, mental journey of the characters, like Caesar and Cora. All other incidents and characters in the novel come up as if in the memories and of thoughts of the little protagonist. Throughout the novel, we get bits of backstory, someone or the other is always thinking, thinking of their relatives, family and a free life.

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