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18. Gender, Hegemony and Survival in Colson Whitehead's the Underground Railroad

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Abstract

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead examines the structural oppression of slavery while emphasizing how race, gender, and power are intertwined. Using gender, hegemony, and survival as focal points, this research paper analyzes how Black women are portrayed in the novel. Through an examination of the experiences of the main character Cora and other female characters, this paper makes the case that Whitehead challenges the dual oppressions of gender and race while highlighting the ways in which women deal with and fight against this oppressive system. Further, this study highlights how resilient women are against hegemonic domination and how important they are in the struggle for survival and freedom.

Keywords: Gender, Race, Hegemony, Oppression etc.

Colson Whitehead is a prominent figure in modern Afro-American literature. He has written two non-fiction books, seven novels, and several news articles. By combining history, reality, and imagination, his avant-garde works experiment with narrative technique while exploring societal topics relating to the complexity of racism. Through his work, he has consistently demonstrated his awareness of America's terrible racial past. He has won two National Book Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes. His book *The Underground Railroad*, which tells the story of a teenager slave Cora who escaped from bondage on a Georgia cotton plantation, bring in him further recognition and praise from critics in 2016.

The Underground Railroad is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that explores the complexities of race, gender, and power in the Southern part of America. This novel offers a reinterpreted account of the escape from slavery, merging the actual Underground Railroad with a fantastical pursuit of freedom. At the heart of the narrative is Cora, a young woman enslaved on a Georgian plantation, who ventures to escape. Through Cora's journey and the stories of other women within the book viz. her Grandmother Ajarry and Mother Mabel, Whitehead explores the interplay between gender and power dynamics within the larger context of slavery. This paper

analyzes the themes of gender, power and survival as depicted in *The Underground Railroad*, particularly highlighting the experiences of Black women. Simultaneously, Whitehead highlights the strength and various strategies of resistance utilized by these women in their struggle for independence and survival. At the same time, he emphasizes the resilience and forms of resistance employed by these women in their fight for autonomy and survival. The narrative of Cora's voyage from enslavement on a Georgia farm to freedom in the North is told in *The Underground Railroad*. She travels across the nation, stopping in South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana before making her last escape into an unidentified location in the free North. In order to give Cora a sense of place and time in American history, Whitehead incorporates aspects of science fiction and magical realism into the book. Her tour encompasses South Carolina's eugenics and other twentieth-century social control practices, North Carolina's harsh racial exclusion laws, Tennessee's extensive environmental damage, and Indiana's intentional community. In this book, Whitehead turns the Underground train into a real train, with vehicles Cora rides between states being pulled by engines. Along with the risks she encounters in the locations she goes, Cora also meets an adversary in Ridgeway, the slave catcher, who follows her around. The plot is driven by their tension as he pursues her across multiple states.

Hegemony, as described by Gramsci (1971), refers to the dominance of one group over another, not through direct violence alone, but by shaping the cultural, ideological, and institutional structures that governs society. In the context of slavery, hegemony manifests through the systematic control of Black bodies, particularly Black women. In Whitehead's novel, this hegemony is embodied by the violent forces of enslavement that regulate the labour, sexuality, and reproductive rights of Black women. Slavery's control over women's bodies is evident from the very beginning of the novel. Enslaved women like Cora are not just forced to work in the fields but are also subject to sexual violence, with their bodies treated as property to be used for reproduction and labour. This form of control is compounded by the societal expectation that women remain passive, obedient, and invisible. Whitehead uses Cora's experiences to highlight the gendered nature of this subjugation, where Black women face the compounded oppression of both racism and sexism. Enslaved women's bodies are commodified in the novel, and their ability to bear children is a key component of the hegemonic structure. The novel's portrayal of the sexual exploitation of enslaved women is a reflection of the historical reality that Black women's bodies were viewed as labor resources to be controlled, bred, and exploited for economic gain. As

Whitehead explores in his narrative, this systemic abuse ensures the preservation of slavery and denies women their humanity. The character Arnold Ridgeway-slavecatcher stands for the American imperative's forces. He describes his job as upholding white supremacist order to permit the economic growth fuelled by cotton cultivation. His pursuit of Cora is not motivated by hatred; rather, he sees her and other Black enslaved people as essential instruments that cultivate the crop that drives the global economy and, thus, advance American manifest destiny. According to this perspective, it is necessary to disregard Black people's suffering as unimportant and to see the hypocrisy of a country that prides itself on upholding a system of forced labor while claiming to believe in individual rights. Ridgeway's philosophy is in direct contrast to Cora's fiery individuality and drive. Her refusal to embrace his conception of America, which views her as an object rather than a person with the capacity for self-determination, is what drives their struggle. She fights against forces that try to dominate her throughout the entire book.

While the hegemonic system seeks to subjugate Black women, *The Underground Railroad* also reveals the ways in which women resist this oppression and fight for their survival. Resistance, in Whitehead's novel, is not limited to physical escape. Instead, it includes emotional resilience, solidarity among women, and subtle acts of defiance. Cora's journey toward freedom is one such act of resistance, yet it is the relational bonds formed between women that also serve as a crucial form of survival. Cora's escape is framed not only as an act of physical defiance but also as a symbolic rejection of the role imposed on her by her enslavers. By fleeing, she refuses to accept the definition of herself as mere property, asserting her autonomy and agency. Along her journey, Cora faces both physical and gendered threats, yet her determination to survive and find freedom reflects the resilience of enslaved women. The violence she faces, including sexual exploitation, illustrates how gender plays a central role in the ways women experience enslavement. Cora's escape represents a refusal to be defined by the violence enacted upon her body, and her survival reflects her resistance to the oppressive forces that seek to break her spirit. Mabel, Cora's mother, offers another example of the tough choices women face under the pressures of slavery. Mabel's decision to abandon Cora in order to escape is portrayed as a necessary act of self-preservation. Though this choice leaves Cora with a deep emotional scar, it also highlights the complexity of resistance and survival for enslaved women. Mabel's flight is not just about physical escape; it represents a rejection of the system of slavery, even if it means abandoning her child. This painful decision underlines the difficult trade-offs enslaved women often had to make between family

loyalty and personal survival. In addition to these individual acts of resistance, solidarity between women is a key theme in the novel. Whitehead portrays a network of women who support one another through their shared struggle. Whether it is through the Underground Railroad itself, where women help each other escape, or through the emotional bonds formed between women in the face of shared trauma, these connections illustrate the collective power that women can wield against oppressive forces. The novel suggests that, despite their subjugation, women's relationships with one another become crucial to their survival and resistance.

Survival in *The Underground Railroad* is not solely about physical escape. For women like Cora, survival means reclaiming autonomy over their bodies, identities, and futures. In a society that views Black women as property, their journey to freedom represents a reclaiming of agency. The trauma of enslavement is not only physical but also psychological, as women like Cora must navigate a world that seeks to strip them of their humanity. Their ability to survive, therefore, is tied to their capacity to resist being defined solely by the violence and dehumanization they face. Cora's journey illustrates that survival involves a struggle for identity. As she moves through different states and encounters different forms of oppression, her quest for freedom becomes intertwined with her search for self-definition. This reclamation of identity is deeply gendered, as Cora must constantly fight against the societal expectations that seek to render her invisible and powerless. Through her escape, she redefines herself as a person worthy of freedom, dignity, and agency, moving beyond the role assigned to her by the enslaving society. In addition to being a physical escape from slavery, Cora's trip is also a mental one. She becomes stronger and more independent at every destination. She starts learning to read in South Carolina while simultaneously refusing the physicians' attempts to manipulate her body and rob her of her future by sterilizing her. She reads almanacs in North Carolina that give her hope for a better future and a wider world.

To conclude, in *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead explores the intertwined forces of gender, hegemony, and survival, highlighting the unique forms of resistance and resilience embodied by enslaved women. The novel portrays the complex and multifaceted nature of oppression, where women, subjected to both racial and gendered violence, navigate these systems in different ways, from acts of defiance to the forging of emotional and physical bonds with others. Through characters like Cora and Mabel, Whitehead emphasizes the importance of survival and the reclamation of identity, illustrating that freedom is not merely the absence of

enslavement but the ability to define one's own life. The novel offers a compelling critique of the ways in which hegemonic systems—rooted in both racism and patriarchy—seek to control Black women, while also showcasing the power of resistance and the enduring strength of women in the face of dehumanization.

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