

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 12, December 2018

www.ijellh.com

M. Iswarya

M. Phil Scholar,

Holy Cross College (Autonomous),

Nagercoil. Tamilnadu, India.

murugesan16459@gmail.com

Role of External Constraints in an individual's life in Colson

Whitehead's The Underground Railroad

Abstract

The paper entitled "Role of External Constraints in an individual's life in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad" highlights the pathetic plight of a slave girl and her trials and tribulations on her pursuit of freedom. This paper further highlights the tough situation of slaves in the plantation and cruel punishments they endure during their life time. It also brings in the complexity of human life due to the external factors. It further explores the treatment of slaves as animals by the slave owners for their economical benefits and sexual satisfaction.

Keywords: slavery, plantation, punishment, freedom, overseer

This paper "Role of External Constraints in an individual's life in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad" is an attempt made to highlight the brutal treatment endured by the slaves in the plantations under a broad network called slavery. Colson Whitehead has brought the

bitter realities in the plantation to limelight through his 2016 Pulitzer winning novel *The Underground Railroad*.

The complexity of human life has been a great philosophical problem till today. Each and every individual in this world is predominantly haunted by an existential question which results from the hindrances they face in their daily life. The question is what makes life so vulnerable in this world? The above question must be evaluated in a wider sense. External constraints are extensively to the complexity of human life.

The Underground Railroad focuses on the history of slave with striking creativity and imagination. Slavery is a network where human beings are bought and sold as commodities by an individual based on the principles of property law. The hideous side of external constraints can be seen only when an individual happens to step into this cruel world and tries to live in a tranquil manner devoid of curtailment. It is very difficult for an individual to cope with this pessimistic situation until he/she has the ability to have a control over his/her own life. One cannot bluntly reject that external factors, not only deteriorates the quality of human life; it can also facilitate life if men decide to work along with it. Both these contrasting ideas are well portrayed in the novel *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead through the character named Cora.

“The man who is not able to develop and use his mind is bound to be the slave of the other man who uses his mind” says, Marcus Garvey. This is obviously authentic in the case of slaves all over the world. However, the development of slaves as individual human being without any restriction is really a hard thing to achieve. The novel, *The Underground Railroad* proves to be a perfect epitome for the above statement, the protagonist of the novel Cora is a slave till she

never thought of her as an individual human being and believes to be a part of the inescapable Randall's plantation..

A slave must work for his master unceasingly and obediently without questioning him. Slaves were treated as commodities and they were transacted ruthlessly even for puny items. "Cora's grandmother was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowrie shells and glass beads" (3). This system of slavery has many components within itself. It is a huge network consisting of slave owners, patrollers, overseers, fugitive slave catchers and night riders. The slaves within the plantation and outside the plantation had to face incessant impediments till their death or till the day they reach the free states. It is mandatory for slaves to stay within their borders in plantation and they cannot go to any free states even if they so desire. "Crossing the state line was a capital offense in Georgia" (49).

Slavers owners own numerous slaves to be used in their plantation. These slave owners buy their slaves in auction; they won them in winning a game or by any illegal means and they also make their slaves completely dependent on them. They treat their slaves as animals and extort their work to make money. Slaves were usually prohibited from learning to read and write. Masters exploit the slaves both physically and mentally, many brutalities are staged by the above slave owners, especially plantation owners. Slave owners are almost like parasites that feed on the blood of innocent slaves for their own growth. All their actions act as external factors which arrest the growth of individual human being in the plantation. They try to tame them as animals by fearful punishments so that they all unquestioningly do the work assigned to them. When someone tries to overcome their pathetic plight by running away to Free states they were hunted

by the slave catchers and punished in front of other slaves in order to uproot such kind of rebellious attitude from the minds of others.

The slave masters use foul external means like using hounds to catch them and by burying fetishes to destroy the runaway slaves. “Randall retained the services of a witch to goofer his property so that no one with African blood could escape without being stricken with hideous palsy” (48). African’s are widely known for their strong religious practices and rituals. They believe in many unique practices which others consider as superstition. The white masters are very much aware of their weaknesses, so they try to bound the slaves within the boundaries by these kind of strange practices. Goofer dust is a traditional hexing material and practice of African American tradition of hoodoo from the South Eastern region of the United States of America. It is used to cast a spell in a harmful way which may lead to trouble, illness or even death.

Cora being a slave suffers till the end of the novel as she is tormented by various external factors. She feels insecure when her mother Mabel left her behind in the plantation and the aftermath of her mother’s escape drives her away to the nook and corner of the plantation. Her problems start right from an early age. In the plantation she happens to face danger both from her masters and from her own people. She fights for the place which was carefully tended by her grandmother and mother. As a born slave she has to face all sorts of inconvenience throughout her life. Cora is quite different from other slave girls, she has the spirit of her grandmother which compels her to be a rebel in some places.

Cora is doubly subjugated as there is no one to take care of her both from her white masters and from the black slaves. When Blake sets his dog house in the place of her little

garden she becomes irritated and she destroys the doghouse with her hatchet. “Her first blow brought down the roof of the doghouse, and a squeal from the dog, who had just had his tail half severed” (23). Though Blake is a slave, he gives unnecessary troubles to Cora as she is an orphan which shows her doubly subjugated state.

Whitehead further brings in the unsafe condition and physical exploitation of the black slave women in the novel as “White men eat you up, but sometimes colored folk eat you too” (65). Though Cora is strong enough in her will to live a free life by running away to north her course of life has been changed by the external factors which make her suffer till the end of her escape. In Southern plantation hierarchical order overseers occupied an inevitable position. They were almost like a bridge between the slave masters and the slaves. The masters gave orders to these overseers to make the slaves work hard in order to harvest profitable growth in their plantations. They were cruel and calculative; they often took advantage over the women slaves. The prominent problem for everyone in the plantation was that they cannot be free even if they wish to be, as they are being watched out by the overseers. The overseers never allow them to cross the plantation boundaries. In this novel, the most problematic overseer whom every slave must face in the Randall plantation is Connelly who makes most of the women slaves his lovers as he is a licentious creature. He is a person who tries to remove the skin of every black slave with his whip in numerous ways. He even orders to inflict more pain on them by rubbing pepper water on their wounds after whipping. These sorts of routine mishaps literally diminish the longing of slaves to be free. When Caesar asks Cora for the second time about his plan of escaping she replies, “I ain’t trying to get killed by Connelly, or patrollers, or snakes” (32). This

Shows her fear of being caught or killed by anyone and the drastic situation in which she suffers by natural and artificial factors. She already had had a taste of the crude treatment by Connelly after Jockey's birthday. Connelly is assigned to control slaves when Cora's grandmother lives there. He is malicious while punishing the innocent slaves, his position has been secured till Cora's day by his master James Randall under his stewardship. It is clearly known to the readers through the words of Cora. "He was the same man who had whipped her grandmother and mother, stalking the village with a lopsided gait that reminded her of an old ox" (43).

A "cat o' nine tails" is a kind of whip made up of a narrow strip of cotton cord with nine braided lashes. In Ancient Egypt cats were considered as holy and they also believed that these cats have nine lives. The Egyptians had a strong belief that when someone was beaten with the hide of cats he would surely gain virtue from the whip. They also believed that the nine tails in the whip connotes the nine lives of the cat. The wounds created by these whip lashes gave an impression that it was made by the claws of a cat. The whip was widely used during slavery time prominently on the board ships to punish the disobedient slaves. Plenty of space was needed to swing the whip without any disturbances because of its tails. Later in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century cat o' nine tails is made to keep the African slaves under their control throughout the nineteenth century. These sorts of whips were widely used by the British Navy and sailors.

Fugitive Slave Catchers were people in the United States who were involved mainly in capturing and returning the runaway slaves to their owners during the mid nineteenth century. Slaves who escaped from the plantations had another problem in the name of Fugitive Slave

Catchers. During this period the North started its focus on the abolition of slavery. But the South focused on catching the runaway slaves with the help of slave catchers.

In this novel too, slave catchers serve as a great source of nuisance to the runaways as they use their men and hounds to get the slaves back. The dogs were trained to sense the smell of black slaves so that they can catch them easily. The most cruel slave hunter mentioned here is Nate Ketchum who is a specialist in capturing the slaves. Another cold-blooded slave catcher in the novel is Arnold Ridgeway who has been insulted by Randall very badly, when Old Randall talks about the ‘underground railroad’ in south which he rejected as mere rumour. He realizes the seriousness of the matter concerned only when he lost Mabel in search. He is a person who wants fame and name at any cost. He tries to regain his reputation by recapturing Cora. It is an undeniable fact that external factors can affect a person’s whole living. It is evident in the case of Cora. She manages to escape from the despicable Randall plantation but those who helped her to escape from the hatable world are brutally murdered by the circumstances which Cora created for them. It is Cora who left some traces through which the slave hunters catch many who help her throughout her escapade.

There are also many benevolent external agencies in the novel. People who help the slaves are from different profession, Fletcher in the novel is a shopkeeper and Lumbly is a farmer. Fletcher acts as a ‘conductor’ who guides the slave. His first attempt in guiding ends in vain as the slave is not able to make up to Fletcher’s place. But Caesar made it along with Cora. Fletcher introduces them to Lumbly, a station agent and his work ends there; he says, “My part is finished, my friends” (79). Martin Wells is also one of the station agent. He is a middle aged, barrel-shaped man, soft and kind-hearted. He is the one who informs her about the “Freedom

Trail” road which she later understands as a place meant for punishing the runaway slaves and the people who helped the slaves to escape.

External factors are responsible for the downfall of many characters in the novel. These external factors have a connection to their life and behavior. Their development as an individual is thwarted by the external factors such as cruel punishments, fear of overseers and their situations which affect the course of life severely. These external factors never allow an individual to act according to his own views and thought. This is because the world around him ostracizes himself from his own community if he tries to be an individual as he is considered to be a different or abnormal person by his own people. On the whole, these external constraints have a pivotal role in a person’s life. Through the protagonist Colson Whitehead has powerfully portrayed the role of external constraints in an individual’s life.

Works Cited

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. London: Fleet, 2017. Print.

“Cat o’ nine tails.” understandingslavery.com. 2011. Web. 29 Jan 2018.

“Marcus Garvey Quotes.” azquotes.com. N. p. n.d. Web. 28 Jan. 2018.