

Neo-Slave Narrative: Depiction of Enslavement in Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad"

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Abstract

*This study discusses the portrait of slavery in neo-slave narrative in the novel *The Underground Railroad* by using contextual based interpretation methodology and applying Ashraf Rushdy's theory of neo-slave narratives. In writing this research, the author analyzes the form of ill-treatment by white American towards black African-American as slaves. Not only that, the author also discusses slaves' struggle in their quest of freedom to escape from slavery institution. At the end of the analysis, it was found out that Whitehead's novel contains form of violence and discrimination towards slaves and also the journey of protagonist character in striving for her freedom.*

Keywords: *neo-slave narrative, racism, slavery.*

A. Introduction

Slavery was an institution that allow people to enslave, trade or sell their own *property*, and it was a legal practices and customs that was acceptable on the past. According to League of Nations (1926) on Slavery Convention, it defined as, "the status or condition of a person whom any or all other powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised." From this definition, it allows people who have power to subjugate and take control over one's body. As these individuals was inferior, they did not have the same rights—their rights were denied by the authority—like individuals who control them. Historians estimated that nearly 7.7 millions Africans were transported to New World by the British and Portuguese colonizers. Most of them were bought from the Dahomeyan port. The colonizer did not catch Africans by themselves but rather bought them from suppliers and exchange them with goods, this act known as a *slave trade* (Monroe, 2016). Subsequently, the numbers of African-American grew increasingly and became one of the largest ethnics in United States.

In hierarchical structure, slaves were at the bottom of social order, regarded as the most inferior creatures. According to Coombs (2013) slaves were the symbol of

prosperity, and it shows to other people that the slave-owners is wealthy. Sometimes they were treated inhumanly, but on the other hand, the slave-master treat them kindly and humanly, though it depends on the master and where they live. They often lived under stigma, prejudice, and racism, even after the declaration of independence of American, the slaves were not fully liberated.

The abolitionists have been taking this account seriously to put an end of slavery in United States. They believed that slavery was an immoral act and had no place in society. The government who hast to protect and fulfill its citizen's right failed to do so. One of the abolitionists is Fredrick Douglass, a former slave from Maryland emerged as the powerful public figures. His autobiography, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, becomes the most prominent slave narrative and has a huge impact in African-American literature.

There are some similar studies that were conducted by previous college students with the same topic to neo-slave narratives. They are as follow: The first study was conducted by Rooney (2008) from Clemson University, "Rewriting Boundaries: Identity Freedom, and the Re-Invention of the Neo-Slave Narrative in Edward P. Jone 'The Known World'". The aims of this research are the idea of identity and freedom constructed through the characters of Henry and Alice in the novel "The Known World", as well as, the depiction of slavery and the social construction written in the novel. She applies theory of neo-slave narrative from Ashraf Rushdy by applying qualitative methodology. As the result of her study, she points out that Henry's life is not in the state of freedom, as a former slave and later become slave owner, even though he has power and status. While Alice Night as a property, in the other hand, who suffers a mental illness, has more freedom by constructing it on her own mind.

The second study is conducted by Namradja (2015) from Raboud University Nijmeger, in her thesis 'Rewriting History: The Slave Narrative in New Millennium.' She aims to identify which is neo-slave narratives and barely slavery novels among of these five novels: Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, *Slave Moth: A Narrative in Verse* by Thylias Moss, *Copper Sun* by Sharon Draper, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, and *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison. She applies Olney's theory on the outline of slave narrative as she wants to compare these neo-slave narratives. Her study applies comparative methodological research. The result of her study is, from these five novels, there is one aspect of this genre which is relevant and important: the dreadful past of slavery. This sub-chapter discussed about the theories of literature and how those theory be analyzed. Some theories that will be conducted in this sub-chapter are the elements of the literary works especially in prose and the theory of power relations that the main theory to analyze the novel.

Intrinsic Elements in Neo-Slave Narratives

Neo-slave narrative, for what Rushdy (1994, p. 3) called contemporary slave narrative that is "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative". This so-called neo-slave

narrative is a new model of slave narrative written by the modern author which applying characteristics and complexions of slave narrative.

Olney (1984, p. 50) gives characteristics of slave narrative tradition, in actual narrative, the outline would something like this: the first sentence beginning, 'I was born'; a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father; a description of cruel master, mistress, or overseer; there is one extraordinary strong and hardworking slave; record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write; description of 'Christian' slaveholder; description of the amounts of kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required them, the pattern of a day, week, and year; account of slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, or slave being driven to south; description of patrols, of failed attempts to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs; description of successful attempt to escape; taking the last new name (generally suggested by the white men); and, reflections on slavery.

Racism is one of the most debatable discourses in this world. It exists because of the hatred of one person to other, disrespecting skin colour, language, cultural identity of the person. There are groups of people who believe their class are higher than others and thinks the class minority is inferior to them. Thus, the majority do not classify them with the same rights. According to Fredrickson (2002) ethnic discrimination is not an ideology or belief, rather it is a practice that is legitimized by the majority.

The most well-known example of racism is slavery, particularly the enslavement of black African-American in New World. The racist believes that people in colored is less humane and uncivilized than western colonizers. In the history, westerners had little access to contact or meet with sub-Saharan Africans. In fifteenth century, devils were depicted as having dark skins and angels were depicted with a light skin. Fredrickson in his book *Racism: A Short History* (2002) assumes that most western colonizers were racist because of the symbolic association, whiteness associated to goodness and blackness with evil and death.

In this study, theory from Rushdy (1999) *Neo-Slave Narrative* is applied to analyze the new literary slave narrative as a genre of American Literature. As Rushdy defines it as modern fictional works of slavery that adopted the characteristics of slave narrative in antebellum period. Thus, it can be named as a fictional novel that representing the practice of slavery. To analyze the representation of the practice slavery in Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad*, the theory of Rushdy is applied here focusing on analyzing the character, setting and plot to represent the struggle of slaves in attaining her freedom in the novel *The Underground Railroad*.

B. Method

This thesis is using qualitative as an approach of the study. Flick (2013) argues that categorizing and interpreting of linguistic (relating to text or language) is the key of qualitative data analysis to write the statements about implicit and explicit 'interpretation'

and what is represented in the object (of the study). Further he states in his article, "It is also applied to discover and describe issues in the field (the object of the study). Thus, the data of this research is generated and categorized the phenomenon of enslavement in America that re-presented in *The Underground Railroad's* novel. The data source was taken from Colson Whitehead's "*The Underground Railroad*", in the form of sentences, dialogs, and quotations. The process of generating data has four steps: reading, noting, interpreting and categorizing. In this study, the writer read *The Underground Railroad's* novel to understand the whole of the context. Secondly, by reading of the novel perceiving the whole text, the writer took notes from the information which discovered in the novel. After reading and taking notes, interpretation of the text is obviously needed, so that the writer re-reads the novel to get answer of research questions. The last steps of this techniques were categorizing the data, it classifies into three main inquiries: the life of slaves re-presented in the novel of *The Underground Railroad*, the slaves' struggle to liberate from bondage, and the authenticity of slavery institution in America. The data that have been accumulated from *The Underground Railroad's* novel by Colson Whitehead were categorized into the action of ill-treatment by white American towards slaves, Cora's endeavor to claim her liberty. The finding data are shown in the form of essay from the narrative or dialog in the novel. The theory used to analyze the data were Neo-Slave Narratives from Ashraf H.A. Rushdy.

C. Findings and Discussion

The Portrait of Slavery

This chapter discusses the slavery issues portrayed in *The Underground Railroad* novel by Colson Whitehead (2016). There are several forms of slavery: *violence, sexual harassment, barriers to literacy, sterilization program, and slaves' auction*. The writer also discusses how the main character resist the power of slavery, by running from the peculiar institution to get their own freedom.

The novel presents Cora as the main protagonist who born as a slave in Randall Plantation. She grew up without her parents, as her father died in illness and her mother flee from the plantation. As her mother escaped, she questioned her mother action, the meaning of declaration and freedom. Soon, she and Caesar run away from plantation by the 'underground railroad' and arrived at South Carolina. They stay there for a long time until they knew the sterilization program for the African-American was being run by the government, to control black population. Her journey continues through other states from the 'literal' train. During her quest of freedom, she could not escape from the stigma, ill-treatment, discrimination, and racism.

Violence

Slave has been subjected to torture, ill-treatment, or sexual harassment by the master. The slave-holders posited themselves as superior mankind that controlled colored citizens, as they thought an inferior creature. It's not only the slave-holder or the master,

but also from the overseer who supervise the slave, slave-catcher or other white person whom they think has more nobility than slaves.

For the slave narrative, there is always an account of the depiction of cruel master and overseer who behave towards his slaves cruelly, regardless of what slaves have done, the slave master become uncaring and emotionless. Cora's escape from the Randall Plantation is to follow her mother's escape, but also to flee from the persecution, violence and injustice under the system of slavery: to escape from the cruel master and overseer.

"She had seen men hung from trees and left for buzzards and crows. Women carved open to the bones with the cat-o'-nine-tails. Bodies alive and dead roasted on pyres. Feet cut off to prevent escape and hands cut off to stop theft. She had seen boys and girls younger than this beaten and had done nothing."
(Whitehead, 2016, p.34)

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is one of ill-treatment to female slave who already reach her womanhood. In this passage, Terrance Randall, the slaves' owner of Randall Plantation, shows the superiority of white man to his property:

"Content to leer at his brother's women, he grazed heartily upon the women of his own half. "I like to taste my plums," Terrance said, prowling the rows of cabins to see what struck his fancy. He violated the bonds of affection, sometimes visiting slaves on their wedding night to show the husband the proper way to discharge his marital duty. He tasted his plums, and broke the skin, and left his mark." (Whitehead, 2016, p.30)

The passage above indicates that Terrance do his job as master who can do anything to his property. The sentence, 'I like to taste my plums' shows that Terrance has sexual orientation to black female slave so that he gazes upon the more fascinated slave who can satisfy his sexual lustfulness. The slave girl cannot refuse it and have to abide the master's command; if she rejects, she will get another punishment either the extra time of work with no payment or lost their precious thing. The passage above also show that Terrance visits 'slaves wedding night to show the proper way', it indicates that he demonstrates to her husband the genuine way to have sexual intercourse with; even the slave female has husband or single, she still undergoes sexual harassment. And for the husband who lost his pride can do nothing, his mind stigmatizes that black slave is merely a property for a white man.

Barriers to Literacy

Another similarity in Whitehead's text to slave narrative is barriers against slave literacy. In antebellum America, it is typical for slave having difficulty in reading and writing and only small number of black people could read and write. For black

people/family that has ability to read and write, it gives them a slight advantage in protecting themselves from deceiver. In *The Underground Railroad* novel, Caesar has difficult time to read a book, as shown below:

After the beating Caesar visited the schoolhouse at night for the first time. Just to hold the book in his hands. To make sure it was still there, a souvenir from a time when he had all the books he wanted, and all the time to read them...

The book will get him killed, Fletcher warned. Caesar hid *Travels into Several Remote Nations* in the dirt under the schoolhouse, wrapped in two swatches of burlap. Wait a little longer until we can make the preparations for your escape, the shopkeeper said. Then you can have any book you want. But if he didn't read, he was a slave. (Whitehead, 2016 p.239)

Darkness is a friend for slave, whether for run away or sneak up to school house and read some letters. The reasons Caesar does not visit in the morning or evening because he does not have right to do so, only white people can attend school and get some lecture, or he can be beaten up for his dare action. It is different situation when he was a slave in the North, Virginia, where his master taught him letters and allowed him to range across the county as they pleased (Whitehead, 2016: 49).

Slaves Auction

Slavery is inseparable from the slave trade, the auction of slaves' family, and separation of family. The white men often sold and purchased the black people from the auction to earn and raise their revenues in monopolizing the black slaves' life. In the novel, Ajarry, Cora's grandmother, is sold in the auction as shown in the quotation below:

The next time Cora's grandmother was sold was after a month in the pest house on Sullivan's Island... A big auction always drew a colorful crowd. Traders and procurers from up and down the coast converged on Charleston, checking the merchandise's eyes... The slaves stood naked on the platform. There was a bidding war over a group of Ashanti studs... Just before sunset an agent bought her for two hundred and twenty-six dollars. (Whitehead, 2016, p.5)

It is the second time for her to be sold after the auction in Ouidah where the rest of her family was purchased by Portuguese traders. The situation is full of freeman that overflows the house of auction; they race up to make a bid for getting a pack of black slave. It is not about the amount of dollars but it is clearly a miserable condition that a human's life is valueless; it seems straightforward to make a bid, as if human's life is a property. Moreover, she had a thought that "if you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities." (Whitehead, 2016, p.7) What she points out in this narrative is that cattle, goods, and *slaves* have similar worth and in this

land of freedom; self-determination—the right of people to determine its own fate—is devoured and deprived by the legal authorities.

Quest of Freedom

Notion to be Free

Freedom and liberty are myth for slaves, they are actually do not exist, particularly in south antebellum America: freedom, liberty, and equality belong to white man. As slaves which merely a property, cattle, and a thing, only have a small freedom in vast plantation: the dream of escape was merely a dream in their sleep:

Cora tried to think of who put him up to this prank. “You going north and I’m going to eat,” she said... White men trying to kill you slow every day, and sometimes trying to kill you fast. Why make it easy for him?’ (Whitehead, 2016, p.27)

In this case, Cora already knew that running away from plantation means rebellion that is why she rejects Caesar’s notion. For slaves, it’s against the regulations made by the authority of states in South. Those who running away and disobey the master’s command shall be punished. She also thought that he was crazy guy or set a trap for her. She has never known what freedom is nor taste the feeling of liberty; free from bondage. Something she knew about freedom is torture, punishment and death waits at the end of the road of freedom.

D. Conclusion

The primary objective of this study is to examine the form of racism in neo-slave narrative and the struggle of protagonist character to escape from slavery. Slave narrative and other form of anti-slavery literature was banned and regarded as propaganda to breach slavery institution by the Sothern’s government. But after the long-lasting civil war, it was flourished and disseminated throughout the country to expose the maltreatment and subjugation of colored citizens by the tyranny. As the time goes by, the new form of slave narrative was born; neo-slave narrative. Neo-slave narrative, as Rushdy assumes as contemporary slave narrative is a powerful genre to expose grave human rights violations and other form of racism and racial discrimination by the white men and its government.

After doing the research, the writer discovers forms of racism towards slave in so-called neo-slave narrative. It consists of in the form of violence, where slave often harassed physically or mentally by the slave’s owner. The slave’s master does not regard them as human being but property, so that he disrespect slaves. Other white men also play role in doing ill-treatment to colored citizens, as they assume they are more superior than them. There is form of discrimination, as well, towards black minority communities. This form of discrimination divided into three: barriers to literacy, where colored citizens are prevented from getting education, either reading or writing; sterilization program, which

is a program to limit black population in South Carolina; and the last one is slaves auction, where slaves were being auctioned like property or cattle.

Furthermore, the writer also analyzes the process of Cora's escape from slavery. At first, Cora has to break their mind before she attempts to run away from her plantation. It is needed because freedom comes from her mind, and when her mind is free, she will be forever free. She and Caesar also use The Underground Railroad, it is a secret network for fugitive slave to run away. It is kind of different from the real underground railroad. In the novel, the writer illuminates the real train with its rail and it is like a time machine, but in the history, actually, there is no train. Despite the differences, it preserves the struggle and strive of slave for getting back their freedom. There are hindrances which prevent Cora and her friends to escape, such as the dissemination of her portrait throughout states, chased by the prominent slave-chaser, and hunted by white men and its government.

Even though Whitehead apparently declines the notion of traditional narrative in the beginning of his book, but he still uses the identicalness of slave narrative with the pattern "I was born". Yet he makes it unfamiliar by using the third person perspective and positing himself as a (neo)- slave narrator who recounts the tragic horrific exploitation of black men under the system of slavery. Whitehead's determination breaks his back to get readers' attention in reforming a dramatic scene of antebellum America.

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