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**Historical and Intergenerational Trauma in Colson
Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)**

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the Requirement for an M.A. Degree in English Literature and Civilization

Submitted by

Houda FERAZ

Supervised by

Dr. Abida Benkhodja

Members of the Jury

Chair: Dr. Ounissa CHIOUKH-AIT BENALI

Examiner: Dr. Sihem SAIBI

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Dedication

To my family and friends.

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Abstract

This dissertation presents an analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), focusing on the portrayal of historical and intergenerational trauma and its effects on African American identity. The study applies trauma theory, particularly through the lens of historical trauma and collective memory, to examine the psychological and emotional scars carried by the novel's protagonist, Cora. The research investigates how trauma from slavery is transmitted across generations, exploring Cora's journey of self-discovery and the effects of racial violence and oppression. In addition to analyzing the traumatic experiences of Cora and other characters, it also discusses its innovative use of speculative fiction to address systemic racism. By blending history with speculative elements, *The Underground Railroad* brings to light the lasting impacts of slavery, offering a profound exploration of race, memory, and the psychological consequences of systemic oppression.

Keywords: Trauma, Identity, historical trauma, slavery, racism, Intergenerational trauma, African American Identity, The Underground Railroad.

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Chapter I: General Introduction

General Introduction

Slavery in America began in the 1600s and lasted until the Civil War ended in 1865. This era represents a profoundly dark chapter in American history, characterised by the forced migration of millions of Africans to the New World under terrible conditions. They endured the Middle Passage¹, a dangerous journey across the Atlantic Ocean, where overcrowded ships, disease, and high death rates were common. On their arrival in the United States, these individuals were sold at auctions, their identities suppressed, and forced to work mainly on Southern plantations. The Southern economy heavily depended on forced labour, which played a crucial role in cultivating crops like cotton and tobacco. These crops required a lot of hard work due to their labour-intensive nature.

However, despite these overwhelming challenges, the spirit of resistance among enslaved Africans never died. They found ways to resist, whether through small acts like working slowly, keeping cultural traditions alive, or more direct actions like rebellions and escape attempts. The Underground Railroad was a source of hope during the time of slavery, providing secret routes and safe places to help enslaved people escape to the Free States and Canada. It played a key role in the fight for freedom, demonstrating the strength and determination of African Americans to achieve justice.

Colson Whitehead is a well-known American author who has made important contributions to modern literature through his creative and thought-provoking novels. Born in 1969 in Manhattan, Whitehead later graduated from Harvard University. Whitehead's work is

¹ The Middle Passage refers to the forced transatlantic voyage of enslaved Africans to the Americas, characterized by overcrowded, unsanitary conditions on ships, leading to high mortality rates due to disease and maltreatment. This journey, lasting weeks to months, was a crucial and brutal part of the Atlantic slave trade. For more detailed information, refer to the article on Encyclopaedia Britannica: "Middle Passage," Middle Passage." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Middle-Passage-slave-trade>. Web.

known for its innovation, often blending historical and speculative elements ²to tackle complex social and cultural issues. *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, published in 2016, received widespread praise and quickly became a bestseller, winning major awards like the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award. It is a historical fiction novel that reimagines this secret network as an actual underground train system. The novel combines history and imaginative elements, pushing the readers to reflect on the horrors of slavery and its lasting effects. The idea for the book originated when Whitehead was a teenager, envisioning the Underground Railroad as a real subway system. Through this new perspective, Whitehead reveals the continuous struggle for freedom and the persistent racism in American history.

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that follows the journey of Cora, a young enslaved woman, as she escapes from a cotton plantation in Georgia. The narrative explores themes of freedom, resistance, and justice while shedding light on America's troubled past with slavery. Cora's decision to escape with Caesar sets her on a risky journey through the Underground Railroad, which is depicted as a real train in the novel. As she travels through different states, each representing a different aspect of America's history with slavery, Cora encounters progressive societies that hide dark secrets, such as eugenics programs and the systematic extermination of Black people. The character of Cora serves as a mean for exploring the personal and shared struggles of African Americans

² Speculative fiction refers to a broad category of genres and narrative forms that is initially coined as a subgenre of science fiction, it has since expanded to encompass a wide range of genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, dystopian fiction, magic realism, and more. Speculative fiction serves as a cultural tool to explore alternative realities and challenge the traditional Western cultural bias toward literature that mimics reality. Speculative elements, within this framework, refer to the components of narratives that challenge conventional understandings of reality, thereby fostering imagination and envisioning possible futures. Oziewicz, Marek. "Speculative Fiction." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature. March 29, 2017. Oxford University Press. Web.

under the oppressive system of slavery. Her journey is not only about physical escape but also about discovering her identity and self-worth. Through magical realism elements, Whitehead adds depth to the exploration of these themes.

Although Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* has been widely studied for its mix of history and fiction, there is a gap in how the novel shows the impact of trauma on African American identity. Most studies focus on the novel's unique style, but less on how the characters' experiences of trauma reflect the real struggles of African Americans during slavery.

This study aims to explore how Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* employs a reimagined historical narrative to investigate the enduring effects of slavery on identity and both individual and collective memory. This study fills gaps by examining how the novel connects historical trauma to identity formation. It specifically investigates how Whitehead's speculative history enhances our understanding of the psychological and cultural impacts of systemic oppression and racism.

This study explores the enduring effects of slavery through Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. It is guided by several key research questions that will allow for a deeper understanding of the novel's engagement with trauma theory. Specifically, this research asks: How does trauma theory provide a framework for understanding the psychological, emotional, and cultural consequences of slavery as depicted in *The Underground Railroad*? And in what ways does Whitehead use the experiences of his characters, particularly Cora, to demonstrate the intergenerational transmission of trauma?

To answer these questions, I will first analyse the traumatic experiences of the characters in *The Underground Railroad* through the lens of trauma theory. This will involve examining how trauma, both historical and intergenerational, shapes their psychological, emotional, and cultural identities, with a particular focus on the protagonist, Cora. I will then explore how

Cora's personal journey serves as a reflection of the impacts of systemic racism and slavery. By focusing on the transmission of trauma across generations, I aim to highlight the lasting scars left by slavery and how they continue to manifest in the characters' lives and identities.

The scope of this study focuses on the complex portrayal of trauma within *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, particularly examining how historical trauma, especially slavery, is represented and transmitted across generations. The research investigates the psychological, emotional, and physical impacts of slavery, with an emphasis on intergenerational trauma and its long-lasting effects on both survivors and their descendants. The study centers on the protagonist, Cora, and explores the narrative strategies employed by Whitehead to depict the fragmented memories and silences that characterise trauma survivors. Through the lens of Trauma Theory, the research draws on the works of scholars such as Freud, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra. It mainly focuses on Cathy Caruth's studies to understand how trauma shapes identities within the novel. The limitations of this study include focusing solely on *The Underground Railroad*, excluding comparative analyses with other works of trauma literature, and concentrating on the literary representation of trauma rather than focusing on the process of trauma recovery. Additionally, this study does not focus extensively on the traumatic experiences of all the characters within *The Underground Railroad*, but rather centers primarily on the protagonist, Cora. While other characters' experiences of trauma are acknowledged, the study mainly examines how Cora's personal suffering serves as a representation of the broader trauma experienced by the entire community of enslaved individuals. This focus on Cora as the central figure limits the exploration of other characters' individual trauma stories, which could offer additional insights into the collective suffering of the enslaved.

To examine the intersection of historical trauma and identity in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, We divided this dissertation into three chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the literature review, providing an overview of existing studies on the novel. It explores previous works addressing themes of trauma, identity, and historical memory while highlighting gaps in the literature that this study aims to address. The second chapter focuses on the theoretical background, with an in-depth exploration of trauma theory. It begins by outlining the key concepts and principles of trauma theory, such as individual and collective trauma, cultural memory, and the unspeakable nature of trauma. This chapter also provides a detailed discussion of how these concepts apply to literary studies, forming the conceptual framework for analysing the novel. The final chapter, entitled *The Legacy of Historical Trauma in The Underground Railroad*, delves into the novel's narrative. It examines the historical context of slavery and its representation of collective trauma, with an analysis of Cora's personal experiences of trauma. This chapter also addresses the unspeakable nature of trauma, exploring how the novel's narrative structure and characters convey the enduring impact of slavery. The research concludes by synthesizing the findings of the study, emphasizing its contribution to trauma theory and African American literary studies.

**Chapter II: Trauma Studies and *The*
Underground Railroad: A Review of Critical**

Chapter II: Trauma Studies and *The Underground Railroad*: A Review of Critical Approaches.

1.1-Introduction

The impact of historical trauma on identity formation is significant in contemporary literary studies. This framework is particularly significant in understanding narratives of slavery and racial violence and their enduring consequences on African American experiences. Trauma theory offers a lens through which literature not only narrates these traumatic histories but also interrogates the lasting effects of systemic oppression on collective and individual identities. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* exemplifies how fiction uses the past to critique present realities, blending historical events with speculative elements to explore trauma's impacts across generations.

This chapter aims to explore the critical approaches to trauma studies as they are interlinked with historical narratives of slavery, focusing specifically on Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. This chapter examines how trauma theory, with its emphasis on the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of historical violence, enhances understanding of African American literature. This chapter seeks to examine how trauma influences identity formation and cultural memory by critically engaging with key scholarly works and theoretical frameworks. It also highlights the importance of speculative fiction in addressing the legacy of slavery and racial oppression.

This chapter is divided into several parts to provide a comprehensive overview of trauma theory and its application to the study of slavery and its aftermath. The first part introduces the foundational concepts of trauma theory, drawing on the works of key scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Michelle Balaev. The second section focuses on the intersection of trauma and identity, with a particular emphasis on how narratives of slavery, including *The*

Underground Railroad, contribute to the reconstruction of African American identity. The final section examines the role of speculative elements in Whitehead's novel, discussing how these elements challenge historical narratives and offer new ways of understanding the ongoing impact of racial trauma across generations.

1.2-Historical Trauma and the Legacy of Slavery

The concept of historical trauma³, as explored by scholars like Cathy Caruth, offers a vital framework for understanding the enduring impact of slavery, revealing how its traumatic effects continue to disrupt identities and resonate across generations. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she considers trauma as a narrative phenomenon. It shows how trauma resists and needs expression at the same time. According to Caruth, trauma is a wound that cannot be directly represented but instead returns later to disrupt the survivor's sense of time and identity. As she states, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). It provides, therefore, a framework through which trauma narratives go between the past and present, allowing histories of violence and suffering to find expression through literature. Caruth emphasises the role of narrative in bearing witness to traumatic experiences. This theoretical perspective provides an important lens how narratives engage with historical trauma and identities, allowing literature to document and critically address unspeakable experiences.

Similarly, Michelle Balaev's article, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," challenges the psychological view of trauma in literary studies, which often presents trauma as an

³ Historical trauma refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, resulting from massive group trauma experiences such as slavery, colonization, or genocide. The term was first developed in relation to Native American communities but has since been applied to other historically oppressed people. (Brave Heart, 2)

unspeakable and unchanging event that damages identity. Balaev argues that this approach neglects the many ways literature shows how trauma can be shaped by memory, culture, and place. She highlights the importance of the physical and cultural environment in helping characters rebuild their identities after traumatic experiences. Balaev uses examples from trauma novels, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, to show how stories of trauma often focus on growth and transformation rather than just destruction. She points out that techniques like fragmented storytelling and silences in these novels reflect the complexity of trauma and how individuals adapt to it. Instead of seeing trauma as only harmful, Balaev emphasises how these narratives connect personal experiences with more significant cultural histories and collective identities. By focusing on the role of culture and place in shaping trauma, Balaev provides a new way to understand how literature addresses the lasting effects of slavery and racial violence. Her perspective broadens trauma theory by showing how stories like *Beloved* explore pain and resilience.

Christine Levecq's article, "Texts and Contexts: The Historical Novel about Slavery", reviews Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, which examines the re-emergence of historical novels about slavery. Rushdy presents works like Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage* as "neo-slave narratives." These works reinterpret the 19th-century slave narratives while reflecting the socio-political dynamics of the 1960s, particularly the Black Power movement. Rushdy uses Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production to show how political forces shape the critique of the dominant narratives in these novels, focusing on themes of resistance, identity, and representation. While praising Rushdy's analytical work, Levecq offers critique of his deterministic framework linking political movements and literary production, and his choice of novels. She examines whether these novels actually revise or just reinvent history. Despite these critiques, she acknowledges

the book's importance in advancing the study of neo-slave narratives. Levecq's review emphasises how these narratives are crucial in reinterpreting history and challenging beliefs about their social and historical links.

In his article, "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory," Ron Eyerman examined how cultural trauma, specifically slavery, influenced the African American common identity through the intergenerational transmission of memory. As Eyerman asserts, the memory of slavery is essential in the creation of a common African American identity. This memory ties past suffering to present-day social problems. It also explores how collective memory, cultural representation, and social institutions help people cope with cultural trauma and shape a shared identity. Eyerman added that literature, art, and public debates are ways through which the legacy of slavery is expressed and its lasting impact on identity construction is worked out. He explored these dynamics through the lens of the cultural trauma theory. This allowed him to understand how people rebuild and change the meaning of historical events that often shift because of ongoing social conflicts.

1.3-Trauma Theory and Literary Criticism

James Berger's review article, "Trauma and Literary Theory," investigates the emergence of trauma studies as a critical framework that intersects with literature, historiography, and cultural theory. Berger reflects on the works of key scholars, including Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, Dominick LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust*, and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt*. He examines how these texts deal with the representation of trauma and its profound implications for understanding history, memory, and identity. He highlights Caruth's argument that trauma manifests in a delayed, fragmented manner and disrupts linear narratives. This aligns with LaCapra's focus between "acting out" and "working through" trauma, highlighting the need to confront historical atrocities while avoiding simplistic

narratives that diminish their significance. Tal criticises the psychoanalytic tradition and supports trauma literature as a direct account of survivors, emphasising its ability to drive change within feminist and social contexts. The review situates trauma theory as an important tool for analysing historical narratives, particularly those addressing collective suffering, such as slavery and genocide. Berger emphasises the connection between trauma theory and individual experiences, highlighting its importance in literary studies for examining the links with memory, identity, and the lasting impact of historical violence. It provides a comprehensive understanding of trauma as both a personal and collective phenomenon, making it essential for examining African American literature and narratives rooted in slavery.

In his article entitled “Slavery of the Past and Trauma of the Present: A Study of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Ashraf Abu-Fares explored the representation of slavery as a historical trauma in Morrison’s novel, emphasising its enduring psychological and emotional impact on African Americans. Abu-Fares argued that Morrison’s *Beloved* portrays the dehumanising nature of slavery, particularly its devastating effects on familial bonds, individual identity, and maternal relationships. Through the character of Sethe, Morrison captures the haunting legacy of slavery, where the past manifests as a continuous source of suffering and pain, symbolised by the ghost of Sethe’s murdered child. The article also highlights how slavery distorts concepts of masculinity and manhood, exemplified by the struggles of male characters, including Paul D, to define themselves in the face of systemic oppression. Abu-Fares used trauma theory to explore the recurring trauma in *Beloved*, highlighting the novel's significance as a historical and literary testament to the devastating impacts of slavery. The study shows Morrison's ability to weave together historical truth and fictional storytelling to confront the atrocities of slavery.

Dr. Yashoda Kumari and Manisha Sharma's study, “Voice for Identity in the Novels of Octavia Butler” analysed Butler’s works, including *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*, and *Mind of My Mind*,

to explore how they address the intersections of slavery, oppression, race, and gender. It emphasizes Butler's unique approach to science fiction, where she reimagines historical traumas like slavery and racial violence through speculative and dystopian narratives. This is mainly in *Kindred*, where Butler uses the time travel of the protagonist, Dana, to the antebellum South to examine the lasting effects of slavery on identity and memory. The article highlights Butler's critique of power dynamics and gender oppression by showing how these forces shape individual and collective identities. In addition, Butler's narratives expose the psychological and physical scars of slavery, particularly on African American women, and demonstrate the legacy of trauma across generations. Finally, they highlight Butler's ability to intertwine speculative fiction with historical and cultural realities, offering profound insights into the ongoing struggles for identity and freedom within African American contexts.

In "*Beloved* as Ecological Testimony: The Displaced Subject of American Slavery," Justine M. Bakker deeply explores Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a narrative that links historical pain to ecological and cultural experiences. Bakker emphasises that in the novel, memory and identity are placed in the natural world, which witnesses the terrible events of slavery and holds the memories of those horrors. This work examines how Morrison's fragmented storytelling reflects the disconnected and troubled identities shaped by the physical and mental scars of enslavement for African Americans. Through the use of trauma theory, Bakker illustrates how Morrison's *Beloved* recovers and re-evaluates African American historical narratives by reinterpreting the novel's setting and symbolism as crucial elements of a narrative centred on resilience and survival. The novel serves as a crucial exploration for examining the enduring effects of racial violence on collective memory and identity.

Complementing this view, Maria Varsam's article entitled "To Remember or Not to Remember: Traumatic Memory and the Legacy of Slavery in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" examines the interplay of traumatic memory, history, and identity in Butler's and Morrison's novels, highlighting how both texts belong to the neo-slave narrative genre while incorporating dystopian and speculative elements. Varsam emphasizes the breaking of mother-child connections, a frequent result of slavery, as a central theme in both novels. The theme shows clear evidence that slavery has the ability to break personal identity and destroy relations between generations. The novels highlight how traumatic memory shapes individual and collective identities, transforming its violence into sources of survival and renewal. By hybridising neo-slave narratives with dystopian conventions, Varsam argues that both *Kindred* and *Beloved* reframe the traumatic legacy of slavery, focusing on re-memory and reconciliation. The blending of personal and historical memory in the novels highlights the lasting effects of slavery. It provides a lens to engage critically with its continuous presence in contemporary discourses.

Another significant contribution is "Trauma, Memory, and Recovery in Myriam Chancy's *The Scorpion's Claw*," in which Carol Bailey examines how Chancy, in her novel, represents interconnections between individual and collective trauma in the setting of the postcolonial Caribbean literature. Bailey stated that the narrative serves as a metaphor for the fragmented lives of migrant women and their experiences of loss, displacement, and healing that are linked with the historical legacies of colonialism and slavery. Similarly, this article explores Jo's navigation through her memories as she tries to piece together her identity among the continuing effects of personal and cultural trauma. This study demonstrates how the combination of family and community stories, along with the protagonist's personal challenges, highlights the nature of memory as both a source of pain and a path to healing. Through the lens of postcolonial trauma theory, the author analyses the novel, contrasting it with Eurocentric trauma models and emphasising the importance of storytelling in addressing and healing the wounds of displacement and marginalisation.

1.4- Critical Approaches to Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Colson's Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* has generated extensive criticism due to its innovative narrative structure and its engagement with historical trauma. Since its publication, scholars have examined the novel through multiple lenses, including trauma studies, historical fiction, and racial identity. Of particular importance is a study "Genre Trouble and History's Miseries in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)». In this work Stephani Li provides an extended view of inequality and its evolution in the novel by presenting diverse portraits of black subjection, slavery, and white supremacy. Li focuses on three key concepts in the novel: slavery and violence, human psychology and morality, and historical reality. According to Li, Whitehead's depiction of the brutal reality of slavery, physical pain, and torture stands as a horrific example of the genuine disposition of the world, highlighting real accounts of slavery in the deep American South (11). Moreover, she sheds light on Whitehead's understanding of human psychology, which is reflected in Cora's decisions and actions, which seem either mysterious or fantastical (13). Li's study reveals that the novel addresses its genre issues by presenting a view of history, a morally ambiguous protagonist, and a happy ending that serves the audience's desires for narratives highlighting black experiences and resilience.

Another relevant study is Roberto Ferreira Junior's exploration of the role of memory in contemporary neo-slave narratives, as discussed in his study, "Memory and the Neo-Slave Novel in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*." Ferreira places these novels within the context of neo-slave narratives, which reimagine 19th-century slave accounts to tackle modern socio-political issues, focusing on race and identity. He highlights how Whitehead's and Coates's works combine historical realism with speculative elements such as magical realism, using these techniques to revisit forgotten historical traumas and connect them to contemporary debates about race and memory. In

Ferreira's argument, Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* employs an underground train as a metaphor for the diverse manifestations of racism across states, contrasting with Coates's *The Water Dancer*, which uses African mythology to explore spiritual liberation and cultural memory. Whitehead and Coates' novels use memory to fight historical and religious amnesia; Whitehead criticizes medical racism and eugenics, while Coates recovers African spiritual traditions. This article cites theorists including Ashraf H. A. Rushdy and Valerie Smith to show how these texts' political and cultural implications challenge traditional historical narratives. Ferreira's analysis deepens the understanding of how neo-slave narratives blend history and speculative fiction to explore slavery's impact on identity and collective memory. The study highlights the genre's power to recover marginalised histories and address the persistent effects of slavery in contemporary society. This perspective aligns with broader discussions of trauma and memory in literature, offering an essential lens for examining how historical violence continues to shape cultural and personal identities.

Another relevant analysis is presented in Constante González Groba's article, "Riding the Rails to (Un)Freedom: Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," which examines how Whitehead's novel uses history and speculative elements to explore the legacy of slavery. Groba states that the novel not only depicts the horrors of slavery but also connects its legacy to current American problems, such as systemic racism, thus illustrating its lasting impact. The narrative follows Cora's journey through allegorical states that represent various dimensions of racial oppression. Whitehead's portrayal of the Underground Railroad as a real railway system revolutionises historical fiction, emphasising the continuous struggle for freedom and challenging fundamental American beliefs. Groba situates the novel within African American literary traditions and draws parallels with works by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Toni Morrison. He argues that *The Underground Railroad* serves as both a historical and symbolic narrative, illustrating the intersections of racial trauma, identity, and resistance.

In a similar vein, Mutharasi Arumugam's article, "Women's Abuse and Traumatic Experience in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead," examines the trauma and struggles enslaved women face as portrayed in Whitehead's novel. The article focuses on the experiences of Cora and other enslaved women, emphasising the physical, psychological, and generational traumas inflicted by slavery. Whitehead's narrative portrays how the institution of slavery dehumanised women, subjected them to systemic sexual violence, and disrupted familial ties, as exemplified by Cora's life on Randall Plantation and her harsh journey to freedom. It highlights Whitehead's use of metaphor and symbolism, mainly through Cora's small garden, which represents resilience and reclamation of identity amidst oppression. The narrative also draws on the intergenerational impact of slavery, connecting Cora's experiences with those of her mother, Mabel, and grandmother, Ajarry, to illustrate how trauma repeats across generations. Arumugam also examines the role of the Underground Railroad as a metaphor for hope and survival, reflecting the unimaginable courage required to escape oppression. By focusing on the feminist dimensions of Whitehead's work, the article underscores the unique challenges faced by enslaved women and their acts of defiance against systemic injustice. This perspective aligns with broader discussions of trauma and memory in literature, offering a poignant critique of how slavery's legacy continues to shape collective and individual identities.

In line with the previous study, Afsaneh Askar Motlagh's article "Traveling Ever Toward Freedom: A Metaphorical Feminist Study of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," explores how Whitehead uses metaphorical language to portray the complex experiences of slavery, racial oppression, and the pursuit of freedom in the novel. Motlagh uses conceptual metaphors, such as "Freedom is a Railroad," to allegorise Cora's journey as a metaphor for African Americans' struggle against systemic racism and its enduring trauma. She also discusses how the work of Whitehead is in conversation with feminist and intersectional

perspectives, particularly regarding the brutalities Black women have had to bear. Motlagh uses Black Feminist Thought and cognitive linguistics in this work to explain how the metaphor in this novel can deepen the reader's understanding about freedom, resilience, and identity. Her work highlights how Whitehead's storytelling addresses ongoing societal issues such as racism and sexism.

Adam Kelly's article, "Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead," analyses how freedom is portrayed in Colson Whitehead's novels, focusing on *The Underground Railroad*. Kelly's work explores the novel's treatment of freedom and struggle within the broader context of neoliberalism and systemic racism. He asserts that Whitehead's representation of slavery goes beyond typical stories, showing how past suffering connects to present inequalities, including economic exploitation. This important framework emphasises the ironic concept of "freedom" within systems that continue racial subjugation, providing a richer understanding of how Whitehead's fiction reinterprets historical trauma. Kelly contrasts Whitehead's earlier works, marked by irony and detachment, with the more direct engagement with slavery and racial trauma in *The Underground Railroad*. This evolution highlights Whitehead's deepening focus on African American identity and resistance. The novel critiques systemic oppression through Cora's journey and links historical slavery to modern racial injustices. Kelly emphasises how the novel connects the legacies of slavery to current discourses on racial justice, such as Black Lives Matter. This perspective enriches the study of *The Underground Railroad* by framing its narrative within both historical and modern struggles for freedom. His work underscores the significance of Whitehead's novel in reinterpreting freedom and struggle, making it a pivotal text for understanding the intersections of historical and present-day racial traumas.

In another analysis, Michel Feith examines Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* as a modern interpretation of both 19th-century slave narratives and late 20th-century neo-slave narratives. His argument is that the novel shows a deep conflict in its view of the American dream of "pursuing happiness" because Cora's pursuit of liberty is hindered by false promises of happiness that prove to be deceptions. The narrative depicts a literal underground railroad; each state serves as an allegory for the varied and contrasting approaches to race in America, from seemingly perfect places to those that feel like oppressive dystopias. Feith highlights Whitehead's use of generic pastiche and intertextuality, drawing parallels between Cora's experiences and historical events, such as the Tuskegee experiments and the Holocaust, to underscore the ongoing impact of slavery on contemporary identity. The study concludes that *The Underground Railroad* not only critiques the foundational American ideology of happiness but also emphasises the necessity of confronting historical trauma to foster a more nuanced understanding of African American identity and resilience. This exploration of trauma and identity is crucial for understanding the broader implications of Whitehead's work in the context of historical trauma.

Building on the discussions of historical and metaphorical elements in *The Underground Railroad*, Ria Destya Ningrum's thesis, "Metaphorical Expressions in Cora's Pursuit of Freedom from Racism and Slavery in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," analyses how metaphorical language depicts Cora's fight against slavery and systemic racism. The study explores Whitehead's use of metaphor to enhance the reader's comprehension of Cora's difficult journey towards physical and psychological freedom. By analysing key metaphors, Ningrum highlights how these expressions reflect the broader themes of trauma, resilience, and the oppressive systems of slavery. The thesis emphasises how metaphor is used as a narrative strategy to convey the complexities of racial oppression and the enduring pursuit of freedom. Cora's journey is depicted not only as a literal escape but also as

a metaphorical representation of African Americans' historical struggle for equality and justice. The analysis underscores the novel's role in critiquing historical and contemporary systems of racial subjugation while exploring the intersections of personal and collective memory. This work is particularly relevant to discussions of trauma and identity in *The Underground Railroad*, offering insights into how Whitehead's use of language enhances the novel's thematic depth. It complements broader scholarly conversations about historical trauma and its representation in literature.

Despite the extensive research on Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, there are key areas that remain underexplored, particularly when it comes to understanding the role of trauma. Many researches delve into the novel's metaphorical and speculative aspects. However, they frequently neglect to explore how trauma theory can enhance our understanding of systemic racism and its enduring, intergenerational consequences. For example, the fragmented narrative structure that mirrors the broken memories of trauma survivors are rarely discussed. While often remarked upon, the novel's speculative elements, such as the literal Underground Railroad, require more thorough investigation of how they reshape collective memory and resist historical forgetting. Another overlooked area is the unique experience of enslaved women, whose struggles with physical, emotional, and generational trauma require a stronger feminist lens to fully unpack their stories. Furthermore, the discussions mostly focus on trauma's destructive aspects, neglecting its potential to build resilience and reshape identity. By addressing these gaps, scholars can uncover richer insights into how Whitehead's work bridges the past and present, illuminating the enduring impact of racial violence on individual and collective identities.

1.5-Conclusion

The exploration of historical trauma in literature continues to reveal new dimensions of how the legacies of slavery and racial violence shape memory and identity. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* offers a rich framework for investigating these themes through its innovative blend of historical realism and speculative fiction. Despite extensive academic work, crucial aspects, such as trauma's impact on collective memory and its blend with speculative fiction in reinterpreting history, require further investigation. Furthermore, the complex experiences of enslaved women, especially their survival strategies and identity rebuilding, need more in-depth study using trauma theory. The following chapter delves into the theoretical background, offering a detailed exploration of how trauma theory and identity formation intersect, providing the tools necessary to critically analyse Whitehead's narrative strategies.

Chapter III: Conceptual and Theoretical Background of Trauma Studies

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2.1-Introduction

Trauma theory has emerged as a crucial analytical framework in literary and psychological studies, allowing scholars to explore how traumatic experiences shape individual and collective identities. It is based on psychoanalytic principles and explores how intense experiences can interfere with memory, shape identity, and change perceptions. Over time, this theory has evolved, with scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Judith Herman contributing to its development. Each figure has provided significant insights into how trauma is experienced, represented, and processed. This chapter is about trauma theory and its application in understanding the impact of traumatic events on individuals and communities. Trauma theory provides an essential analytical framework that helps scholars explore how traumatic experiences shape personal and collective identities.

This chapter is divided into sections that address the foundational theories of trauma. It begins with Freud's early work on trauma and repression, followed by Cathy Caruth's exploration of historical and collective trauma. The chapter then moves to Judith Herman's recovery model, Dominick LaCapra's insights on historical trauma, and concludes with Michelle Balaev's contemporary approaches to trauma in literary studies. In these sections, we will also define trauma as a psychological wound that not only affects the individual but can be collective and historical, impacting future generations.

2.2- Sigmund Freud

Trauma theory is an interdisciplinary framework that explores the psychological, emotional, and societal impacts of traumatic experiences. It examines how trauma disrupts the mind and body, influencing an individual's memory, identity, and relationships. The origins of trauma theory can be traced back to Sigmund Freud's foundational work on psychoanalysis.

Freud first examined trauma in his studies on hysteria, particularly in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). Freud observed that individuals who had experienced painful events often repressed these memories, which later manifested in the form of psychological and physical symptoms. He introduced the concept of “*Nachträglichkeit*” (deferred action), which suggests that traumatic events are not immediately processed but are instead re-experienced later through disruptive symptoms (7). Freud’s case studies revealed that hysteria often resulted from repressed memories of traumatic events, which patients could not consciously recall but which returned through symptoms such as paralysis, aphonia, or anxiety (23). His work established the foundation for understanding how trauma impacts the unconscious mind and how it can manifest through various symptoms. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud further elaborated on trauma, introducing the idea of the “compulsion to repeat,” where individuals unconsciously relive traumatic experiences in an attempt to process them (12). His theories established the groundwork for future research on trauma's effects on memory and identity.

2.3-Cathy Caruth : Historical Trauma and Collective Memory

Cathy Caruth is widely recognised as a pivotal figure in contemporary trauma studies. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), she developed a theoretical framework to examine the paradox of trauma's resistance to representation and its urge to be expressed. According to her, trauma is not confined to the original event but is defined by its belatedness, the delayed return of the experience through symptoms, dreams, and narrative. She explains that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). This belated aspect of trauma aligns with Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), where an event is only fully understood and processed after its recurrence in the psyche. She also introduced the concept of the unspeakable nature of trauma, arguing that trauma carries an inherent

unspeakability. Survivors often struggle to articulate their experiences because the trauma itself resists linguistic representation. She notes, "it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). In other words, trauma makes it hard to use language, creating a situation where people need to express their experiences but find it difficult to put them into words. In this context, literature and storytelling are important. They help people witness and acknowledge traumatic events, even if they can only represent these experiences indirectly. This highlights how storytelling is crucial for understanding and dealing with trauma.

Caruth links trauma to historical events, arguing that trauma does not simply belong to the individual but is often collective. In her exploration of historical trauma, she asserts that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). This statement highlights the notion that trauma is not isolated within a single person's psyche but extends beyond, shaping the consciousness of entire communities and societies. Rather than being confined to a single period of time, historical trauma reverberates across generations, embedding itself in cultural narratives, collective memory, and inherited psychological states.

Caruth's perspective aligns with the broader theoretical framework of trauma studies, which emphasises how traumatic events, especially those tied to historical violence, oppression, and genocide, continue to affect the descendants of those who initially experienced them. She further asserts that the impact of trauma lies not only in its direct effects but also in the way it lingers across generations, shaping the consciousness of individuals and societies. This concept is fundamental to understanding historical trauma, a term often used to describe the long-lasting effects of systemic violence, including slavery, colonialism, war, and genocide. The

consequences of collective suffering do not simply fade over time but remain ingrained in cultural memory, influencing identity formation and shaping historical consciousness.

The idea of historical trauma is particularly significant in the context of slavery and racial oppression. It manifests in the lived experiences of African Americans and other marginalised communities. The intergenerational transmission of trauma is evident in the ongoing racial inequalities, systemic discrimination, and cultural narratives that continue to shape societal structures. Scholars such as Joy DeGruy have expanded on Caruth's theories by discussing post-traumatic slave syndrome, which describes how the traumatic impact of slavery continues to affect African American communities through institutional racism, economic inequalities, and cultural dislocation. Caruth's assertion that trauma is shared and collectively experienced helps explain why the past remains so deeply intertwined with the present in these communities. Through this lens, historical trauma becomes more than just an individual's psychological response to suffering; it becomes a collective inheritance, shaping national identities and cultural memory. Caruth's theories allow scholars to examine not only how trauma is experienced but also how it is remembered, transmitted, and negotiated across time.

2.4-Judith Herman: Trauma, Recovery, and Narrative

Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, places trauma within a broader context of psychological and societal reactions to violence. She argues that "the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness" (1), highlighting how individuals and societies avoid confronting traumatic experiences. She emphasises that "Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried" (1), reinforcing the idea that trauma can carry on through generations. It often shows up as symptoms or repeated behaviours.

She examined the effects of trauma on individuals, particularly in cases of domestic abuse, war, and sexual violence. Herman introduced a three-stage model of trauma recovery:

establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma narrative, and restoring social connections. She emphasised that “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections” (94). Her work greatly impacts trauma understanding, promoting an approach that includes socio-political contexts and survivor agency. She asserts, "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims"(1). This perspective underscores the importance of narrative and testimony in trauma recovery, aligning with Caruth’s argument that literature and storytelling play a crucial role in bearing witness to historical trauma.

The concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) also plays a central role in Herman’s work. PTSD is characterised by symptoms such as flashbacks, emotional numbing, and hyperarousal, which Herman describes as "a dialectic of trauma" (1). She explains that people who have gone through trauma often alternate between experiencing painful memories and completely shutting them out. This happens as the mind tries to cope with and process overwhelming experiences.

2.5-Dominick Lacapra: Acting Out vs. Working Through

Dominick LaCapra, another literary scholar, is one of the key figures in trauma studies, particularly in the field of historiography. In his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra explored how traumatic events disrupt historical narratives and challenge traditional approaches to history writing. By integrating psychoanalysis, literary theory, and historical analysis, he presents a framework for understanding how trauma influences both personal memory and shared historical awareness.

One of LaCapra's most influential contributions to trauma studies is his distinction between "acting out" and "working through." He defines acting out as repeatedly reliving trauma, where individuals or communities are stuck in a cycle of compulsive re-experience. This state hinders the processing of the traumatic event, as the past intrudes on the present without resolution. He writes, "In acting out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription" (70).

Acting out manifests through flashbacks, compulsive behaviours, and an inability to integrate the traumatic past into a coherent narrative. It is common in both individual trauma survivors and collective historical trauma, particularly in cases of genocide, slavery, and war, where entire communities struggle to move beyond cycles of violence and remembrance (70).

LaCapra, in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), differentiates between historical trauma and structural trauma, a distinction that explains the nature of traumatic experience. For instance, historical trauma refers to specific, identifiable traumatic events such as the Holocaust, slavery, 9/11, or colonisation. These traumas have particular causes, and victims are embedded in historical specificity. Structural trauma, on the other hand, refers to ongoing conditions of oppression, such as systemic racism, class disparities, or gendered violence. Unlike historical trauma, structural trauma does not have a clear beginning or end; it is ingrained in societal institutions and persists across generations. For instance, slavery as a historical trauma involved specific events such as capture, forced labour, and systemic violence, while racism continues to manifest as a structural trauma through economic inequalities, police violence, and cultural exclusion.

2.6-Michelle Balaev and the Evolution of Trauma Theory

Michelle Balaev is another literary critic who has significantly contributed to trauma theory, mainly through her book *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*. She

notes that "the field of trauma studies in literary criticism gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Narrative, Trauma and History* and Kale Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*" (1). These seminal works laid the foundation for trauma theory, defining trauma as an "unrepresentable event" (1), which means that trauma resists conventional representation and challenges the individual's capacity to articulate and process their experiences through language.

Trauma is often associated with a profound rupture in identity, leading to psychological fragmentation and dissociation. Dissociation, in this context, refers to a state of disconnection from oneself and others, a psychological response that isolates the individual from their external reality. As Balaev in her book entitled *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* articulates, "traumatic experience [is] a pre-linguistic event that universally causes dissociation"(1). This indicates that trauma can be such an intense experience that it often goes beyond what we can express in words or typical storytelling. It is something that might feel too overwhelming to fully grasp right away. Furthermore, she describes trauma as "an extreme experience [that] directly produces a dissociative consciousness wherein the truth of the past is hidden" (5).

The ways in which individuals respond to trauma can vary significantly, and dissociation is only one of many possible psychological reactions. Balaev emphasises this variability by stating, "Psychological research indicates that amnesia, dissociation, or repression *may* be responses to trauma but they are not exclusive responses" (6). This observation challenges earlier trauma models that considered dissociation as the defining characteristic of trauma, highlighting instead the diversity of psychological and emotional reactions that trauma survivors may exhibit. Some individuals might face hyperarousal, which is marked by high sensitivity to their environment or unwanted memories that surface

unexpectedly. Other people may avoid certain situations or feelings. The complexity of trauma responses underscores the necessity of a multidimensional approach when analysing trauma in both psychological and literary contexts.

As trauma theory evolved, so did the understanding of trauma within literary criticism. Balaev notes, "the evolution of trauma theory in literary criticism might best be understood in terms of the changing psychological definitions of trauma as well as the semiotic, rhetorical, and social concerns that are part of the study of trauma in literature and society" (2). This suggests that trauma theory is not static but adapts to new psychological insights and methodological approaches. The interplay between psychological research and literary analysis has led to a more nuanced interpretation of trauma narratives, emphasising not only the psychological effects of trauma but also how it is represented, narrated, and reinterpreted across different cultural and historical contexts.

The concept of trauma continues to be a focal point of study across various academic disciplines, with scholars and psychologists offering multiple definitions that reflect its broad and multifaceted nature. As Balaev points out, "the history of the concept of trauma is filled with contradictory theories and contentious debates, leaving both psychologists and literary scholars the ability to work with varying definitions of trauma and its effects" (2). This statement highlights the continuous discussions regarding trauma, acknowledging that there is no singular or universally accepted definition of trauma and its consequences. Theoretical perspectives on trauma vary from Freudian models emphasizing repression to modern neurobiological approaches examining trauma's effects on memory and cognition.

With the continued expansion of trauma theory, literary criticism has embraced new frameworks that move beyond traditional Freudian or Caruthian interpretations. Scholars now explore trauma through intersectional perspectives, considering how factors such as race,

gender, and socio-political conditions shape traumatic experiences and their representations in literature. The growing interest in cultural trauma, collective memory, and postcolonial trauma theory further underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of trauma studies. Balaev's contributions to the field serve as a crucial bridge between psychological research and literary analysis, fostering a deeper understanding of how trauma manifests and how it ultimately shapes individual and collective identities.

2.7--Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity

Ron Eyerman is a sociologist who explored the role of collective memory in shaping social identities. In his book *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2002), Eyerman presents the concept of cultural trauma, arguing that it is not the direct experience of slavery but the collective memory of slavery that fundamentally shapes African American identity. According to Eyerman, cultural trauma occurs when a group experiences a historically significant event that disrupts its collective consciousness, leading to the reconfiguration of its identity. He emphasises that African American is a historically constructed identity rooted in the memory and reinterpretation of slavery by subsequent generations (16). The history of slavery shapes the identity of African Americans, but it has been continuously formed and redefined by each new generation. Over time, African Americans have remembered and reinterpreted the painful experiences of slavery, and this process has influenced their sense of who they are. In other words, their identity is not something fixed, but something that has been constructed through their collective memory of slavery and the way it has been understood and passed down through generations.

Eyerman contends that the meaning of slavery evolved particularly after the 1880s, as African Americans confronted the reality that full citizenship and cultural integration remained unreachable. He explains that "by the 1880s, as the dreams of full citizenship and cultural

integration were quashed, the meaning of slavery emerged as the site of an identity conflict, articulated most clearly by the newly expanded and resourceful ranks of formally educated blacks” (16). This conflict gave rise to two competing narratives that shaped African American identity.

In *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Jeffrey C. Alexander defines trauma as an event that disrupts an individual’s or a collective group's sense of stability and well-being. He explains that "traumas are naturally occurring events that shatter an individual or collective actor's sense of well-being" (7). From this perspective, trauma is seen as an overwhelming experience that shatters the self and leaves enduring psychological scars. Additionally, Alexander emphasises that trauma is not only a personal experience but also a collective phenomenon, stating that "people also have continually employed the language of trauma to explain what happens, not only to themselves but to the collectivities to which they belong as well" (7).

Instead of viewing trauma as something that is simply part of an event, it is shaped by how society interprets it. Alexander asserts,

This suggests that trauma is not solely defined by the event itself but rather by how individuals and societies process, narrate, and assign meaning to it over time. In some cases, he even argues that imagined events can be just as traumatic as those that have actually occurred, stating that "sometimes, in fact, events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred" (13).

2.8-Intergenerational Trauma

The concept of historical trauma extends this notion of collective suffering by highlighting how trauma is shared across generations and among groups. Cathy Caruth further explores this idea, arguing that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of historical experiences, emphasising that trauma is not an isolated phenomenon but one that influences and is influenced by broader social and historical contexts.

According to *The Handbook of DOHaD and Society: Past, Present, and Future Directions of Biosocial Collaboration*, intergenerational trauma⁴ is defined as "emotional and psychological wounding that is transmitted across generations" (166). This concept highlights how trauma experienced by one generation continues to affect the psychological, emotional, and physiological well-being of their descendants. It explains that intergenerational trauma is closely linked to historical trauma, which encompasses large-scale events such as colonisation, slavery, and genocide. However, it also encompasses personal and familial traumas that are perpetuated through behavioural patterns, caregiving practices, and social conditions.

Intergenerational trauma also investigates how trauma can be passed through various ways, such as epigenetics, parenting, and cultural memory. It states that "parental and community experiences of trauma can be transmitted in utero and in early life, having a cumulative physiological effect such that historical experiences are embodied in the present" (166). This suggests that trauma is not solely a psychological phenomenon but also has

⁴According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, intergenerational trauma is "the trauma experienced by the older generation [that] is translated into a genetic adaptation that can be passed on to successive generations."

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Intergenerational trauma*. APA Dictionary of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/intergenerational-trauma>. Web.

biological dimensions, as stress responses and mental health challenges may be passed down through altered gene expression.

Additionally, the handbook emphasises the role of caregiving in reinforcing trauma across generations. It explains that “the destructive effects of trauma in caregivers’ own lives, often compounded by material disadvantage and ongoing discrimination, can lead to the re-creation of traumatising contexts for children” (167). This cyclical nature of trauma contributes to what is often referred to as the “cycle of trauma”, in which past experiences shape present and future vulnerabilities to stress, emotional distress, and mental health disorders.

Beyond individual scholars, numerous academic articles have explored trauma theory’s applications across disciplines. James Berger’s review article, “Trauma and Literary Theory,” situates trauma studies within broader historiography, literature, and psychoanalysis discussions. He examines how Caruth’s concept of belatedness aligns with LaCapra’s concerns regarding historical representation (571). Similarly, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, in their introduction to *Postcolonial Trauma Novels*, critique the Eurocentric focus of traditional trauma studies, advocating for the inclusion of non-Western histories of colonial violence and systemic oppression. Their work underscores the importance of expanding trauma theory to address diverse cultural experiences, particularly in the literature that deals with slavery, genocide, and forced migration (3).

2.8-Conclusion

This chapter has established a theoretical foundation for analysing trauma in *The Underground Railroad*, drawing on key scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, and others. It demonstrated that trauma is not only an individual psychological wound but also a collective and historical experience that shapes identity across generations. The discussion of historical and intergenerational trauma highlights how slavery’s effects

persist beyond the original event, influencing memory, cultural identity, and psychological well-being.

With this framework established, the next chapter, *The Legacy of Historical Trauma in The Underground Railroad*, will examine how Whitehead portrays the enduring impact of slavery. The analysis will focus on Cora's trauma, the novel's depiction of collective suffering, and its narrative strategies for conveying the "unspeakable" nature of trauma. Through this, the study will explore how literature serves as a means of witnessing and confronting historical trauma.

Among the various critical perspectives discussed, this study will primarily concentrate on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, particularly her concept of trauma as an event not fully experienced at the moment it occurs; instead, it reappears later through a process of belated repetition. Caruth's analysis emphasises the profound unspeakability and temporal disjunction present in traumatic experiences, providing a nuanced lens to examine the narrative strategies and thematic complexities of the novel. Her approach will facilitate a close reading of how trauma is presented in the text, both structurally and thematically, especially regarding memory, silence, and the fragmentation of identity. This framework will be central to the analysis presented in the following chapter.

Chapter IV: The Legacy of Historical Trauma in *The Underground Railroad*

Chapter IV: The Legacy of Historical Trauma in *The Underground Railroad*

3.1-Introduction

This chapter focuses on how slavery is portrayed as a collective trauma in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead and how it shapes the characters and their environment. It will examine how the trauma of slavery impacts not only the characters' lives but also their identities, relationships, and sense of belonging. The main focus will be on Cora's experiences, looking at how trauma affects her and other characters, as well as the lasting effects of intergenerational trauma. Through the use of Trauma Theory, this chapter will explore the psychological and physical impact of slavery on Cora. It will examine how trauma manifests through Cora's silences, her fragmented memories, and her difficulty in speaking about the horrors she faces.

3.2-Colson Whitehead's Biography

Colson Whitehead, a well-known American novelist, has significantly impacted modern literature through his thought-provoking and genre-blending works. Born in 1969 and raised in Manhattan, Whitehead graduated from Harvard University before starting his literary career. He debuted with *The Intuitionist* (1999), a novel praised for its originality and complex themes. Following this success, Whitehead continued to gain recognition with novels like *John Henry Days* (2001), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), and *Sag Harbor* (2009) (Whitehead).

Whitehead's writings are known for their variety. He often combines historical and speculative elements to explore social and cultural issues. One of his influential works, *The Underground Railroad*, gained widespread praise and multiple prestigious awards. His later novel, *The Nickel Boys* (2019), also won the Pulitzer Prize and established his position as a leading voice in contemporary American literature.

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead skillfully blended historical fiction with speculative elements, offering a reimagined version of a critical chapter in American history while addressing the lasting effects of slavery and systemic racism. His engaging storytelling and well-developed characters push the boundaries of literary fiction.

In an interview with Audible, Whitehead revealed that the concept for the Underground Railroad came to him during his teenage years. He envisioned the Railroad as a physical subway system transporting slaves from the South to the North instead of simply a metaphorical network. This creative twist reimagines the historical Underground Railroad as a subterranean network of trains and carriages.

In an interview with CBC radio, Whitehead asserted that he spent 16 years preparing for the book, not due to uncertainty about his ability to tackle such a sensitive subject but to gather the necessary historical context, especially slave narratives, to authentically portray the suffering of slaves. This attention to detail helps readers form connections with the historical realities through characters like Cora, whose migraines reflect the real-life experiences of Harriet Tubman⁵, who endured similar physical suffering from the violent treatment she faced.

Whitehead highlighted two crucial truths about slavery: first, that the system corrupted all those involved in it; and second, that the violence, both physical and psychological, needed to sustain it was both harsh and profoundly damaging. *The Underground Railroad* emphasises

⁵ Harriet Tubman (1820–1913) was an African American abolitionist best known for her work with the Underground Railroad, a network that helped enslaved African Americans escape to freedom. Born into slavery, she escaped in 1849 and later risked her life to return to the South, guiding approximately 70 enslaved people to freedom. Tubman also suffered from chronic migraines due to a head injury sustained during her time as a slave. Despite this, she continued her work in the abolitionist movement and served as a spy and nurse for the Union Army during the Civil War.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Harriet Tubman". Encyclopaedia Britannica, 29 Apr. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harriet-Tubman>. Web.

that the damage caused by slavery cannot be undone only by granting freedom, as many formerly enslaved people continued to suffer from post-traumatic stress. The novel shows physical, sexual, and emotional brutality, which makes it a difficult read but an important one for understanding the depth of trauma caused by slavery.

3.3-*The Underground Railroad*: Plot Summary and Setting

The novel's protagonist, Cora, is a young woman enslaved on a cotton plantation in Georgia. An outcast among her fellow slaves, she leads a difficult and lonely life. Her mother, Mabel, is the only person known to have escaped the Randall plantation, an event that fills Cora with both resentment and hope of escape.

Whitehead uses a rich vocabulary to depict the violence done to enslaved people, including the suffering of children, reinforcing the brutal reality that enslaved Africans were treated as property, and their children endured the same fate. The theme of family history runs throughout the novel, as Cora's identity is deeply connected to that of her mother and grandmother. Her actions, her self-perception, and her journey can be traced back to the experiences of the women who came before her.

Cora's path to freedom begins when Caesar, a fellow enslaved person, proposes an escape plan. At first, Cora feels slightly unsure, but she ultimately decides to go for it, motivated by her strong desire for independence. Their escape leads them to a dangerous and transformative journey through the literal Underground Railroad, helped by abolitionists and both Black and White individuals.

Each stop on their journey presents new and symbolic challenges. In South Carolina, Cora finds a society that appears progressive, only to uncover dark eugenics programs and experiments targeting Black people. In North Carolina, she encounters a state where African Americans are hunted down and exterminated, representing the extreme White supremacist ideology. Here, Cora is forced to hide in an attic for months, experiencing severe psychological tension as she witnesses horrific violence against Black people.

The novel also introduces Ridgeway, a relentless slave catcher who symbolises the powerful forces maintaining the system of slavery. His pursuit of Cora shows how systemic racism supported slavery. Ridgeway's beliefs about the inevitability of White supremacy contrast with Cora's determination to gain her freedom.

As she travels, Cora meets various individuals representing diverse human responses to slavery. Characters like Sam, a White abolitionist who risks his life to help runaway slaves, and Ethel, a White woman whose perspective on slavery changes through her interactions with Cora, add depth to the narrative. These relationships highlight the moral complexities faced by individuals in this chaotic period.

Whitehead adds a layer of magical realism to *The Underground Railroad*, making it not just a historical novel but also a story of resistance, freedom, and personal empowerment. The physical journey through the Railroad mirrors Cora's inner journey toward self-discovery and autonomy, transforming her flight from slavery into an exploration of identity.

While the novel explores the horrors of slavery, it also celebrates the resilience of those who resisted it. Whitehead's depictions of Cora's experiences emphasise the system's cruelty, also highlighting the strong desire of those who wanted freedom even when faced with very difficult challenges.

3.4-Intergenerational Trauma in *The Underground Railroad*

Intergenerational trauma as we have seen refers to the transmission of the emotional and psychological scars of trauma from one generation to the next. Cathy Caruth, in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, defines trauma not just as an event but as something that disrupts the survivor's understanding of time and self. She explains that trauma is not merely an event but an experience that remains unprocessed at the time it happens (4). This delayed processing creates a situation where the trauma "returns" in overwhelming ways, long after the physical event has passed. Caruth's theory helps explain why trauma, especially in the case of slavery, does not only affect the individual who directly experiences it but continues to haunt their descendants, shaping their emotional and psychological environments.

Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* vividly portrays intergenerational trauma through the lives of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora. Each generation of women is marked by the brutal and lasting impacts of slavery, with trauma passed down as an inheritance that shapes their actions, relationships, and sense of self.

3.4.1- Ajarry

Whitehead begins the novel by introducing Ajarry, Cora's grandmother, a character whose life reflects resilience and adaptability shaped by the brutal experiences of being enslaved. Although Ajarry's story is brief, it plays a crucial role in setting the tone for the novel and providing context for the protagonist's family history. Ajarry is portrayed as a woman who maintains a sense of agency despite the hardships she faces. Her story represents a prologue to Cora's journey. It offers important insight into the impact of slavery across generations, showing the strength and hope that many enslaved people carried with them. Her life is full of

losses, and the daily struggle of plantation life sets the stage for the novel's themes of freedom, agency, and the legacy of slavery.

Ajarry's story begins with her capture by Dahomeyan raiders, an event that is not just a moment of physical violence but a profound loss of identity and belonging. She is kidnapped from her village at a young age, separated from her family and homeland. This initial trauma begins her journey into a life defined by loss, alienation, and the stripping away of her identity.

Ajarry's traumatic journey to the United States continues as she is taken to the port of Ouidah and shipped across the Atlantic, where she is subjected to the brutal conditions of the Middle Passage. In the novel, Whitehead describes her suffering during the voyage: "The noxious air of the hold, the gloom of confinement, and the screams of those shackled to her contrived to drive Ajarry to madness" (4). This passage vividly portrays the dehumanising conditions of the slave trade. Ajarry's attempt to escape by jumping overboard shows her desperation to end her suffering. She "tried to kill herself on the voyage to America, once by denying herself food and then again by drowning" (4). This moment highlights the profound psychological burden of slavery and Ajarry's struggle to maintain her sense of agency during overwhelming pressure and despair.

Once in America, Ajarry is sold at an auction, a deeply dehumanising experience that marks the beginning of her life as a slave in Georgia. Whitehead describes the brutal process of buying and selling human beings: "Ajarry was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowrie shells and glass beads" (3). This passage reflects the commodification of Ajarry's body, as she is exchanged for items rather than valued as a human being. The phrase "passed between slavers" reinforces the idea of Ajarry's body being treated as an object traded. This experience of being sold not only takes away her sense of control but also begins a long journey filled with fear and uncertainty.

After being sold, Ajarry is eventually taken to a plantation in Georgia, where she spends the rest of her life as a slave. Her existence is defined by the labour of plantation life, the loss of her identity, and the constant threat of violence. She marries three times, but each marriage is marked by tragedy. Whitehead provides a glimpse into her complicated love life when he writes: “Cora’s grandmother took a husband three times. She had a predilection for broad shoulders and big hands, as did Old Randall, although the master and his slave had different sorts of labor in mind (7). This passage highlights Ajarry’s struggle to seek connection and love within a setting that deprives her of her humanity. Her marriages, however, are marked by the harsh realities of slave life, each husband either departing or dying under tragic circumstances. Her first husband becomes addicted to alcohol and is sold to another estate. Her second husband dies from cholera, and her third husband is punished and dies after being sold for stealing honey.

Ajarry’s life on the plantation is characterised by profound loss of her beloved ones. Her children endured the heavy burdens of slavery as well. Whitehead captures the deaths of her children: “Two died miserably of fever. One boy cut his foot while playing on a rusted plow, which poisoned his blood. Her youngest never woke up after a boss hit him in the head with a wooden block” (8). The loss of her children highlights the devastating impact of slavery, showing that even the lives of the most vulnerable people are at risk.

Finally, Ajarry passes away on the plantation, completing her life’s journey in the same place that had enslaved her for so long. Whitehead writes: “Ajarry died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean. The last of her village, keeled over in the rows from a knot in her brain, blood pouring from her nose and white froth covering her lips”(8). Ajarry’s death, like her life, is marked by the violence and dehumanization of slavery. Her death occurs in the cotton fields, symbolising labour and oppression.

Ajarry's life reflects the generational trauma passed down to her granddaughter, Cora. From her kidnapping in Africa, her sale at auction, and life as a slave on a Georgia plantation to her failed marriages and the deaths of her children, Ajarry's brutal experiences highlight the harsh realities of slavery. Her suffering establishes the psychological burdens impacting future generations.

3.4.2- Mabel

Mabel, Cora's mother, represents a second generation that struggles with the trauma handed down by Ajarry. Mabel's escape from the plantation, while it symbolises hope, it also represents the deep emotional conflict that many enslaved individuals faced: choosing between personal freedom and the well-being of their families. Mabel's abandonment of Cora is a tragic act of survival. It highlights the emotional impact of slavery on family dynamics.

Whitehead highlights the internal conflict Mabel faces when she attempts to escape but must leave her daughter behind. This decision reflects the complex emotional and moral struggles faced by enslaved mothers. Mabel's escape is filled with guilt, which is passed down to Cora, shaping how she understands her own worth and identity. The trauma of being abandoned by her mother influences Cora's ability to trust and develop meaningful relationships as she grows up without the presence of a maternal figure.

One of the most painful moments in the novel occurs when Mabel is forced to make a decision to protect Cora. Moses, a cruel and feared man, threatens to sexually assault Cora when she is only eight years old. To protect her daughter, Mabel does nothing to stop him. This act of sacrifice is tragic and highlights the many difficult choices enslaved mothers had to make to protect their children (292). Although this incident may seem overshadowed by later acts of violence, it is a crucial moment in Cora's life. The trauma Mabel experiences is passed down

to Cora, further complicating the mother-daughter relationship and continuing the cycle of emotional and psychological damage caused by slavery.

3.4.3-Cora

Cora, the novel's protagonist, is the third generation to inherit the trauma of slavery. As Whitehead vividly illustrates, Cora's life is marked by the emotional and psychological scars left by both Ajarry and Mabel.

A crucial and disturbing moment in the novel is the sexual abuse Cora endures at the hands of two fellow enslaved men. Whitehead writes, "Over and over, she was transported back to the night of the smokehouse, held down by nurses from the hospital as Terrance Randall grunted and thrustured above her" (144). This repeated memory shows how deeply the event has affected Cora's mind, symbolising how trauma persists long after the physical event is over. The term "transported" indicates that Cora is not simply remembering the event; instead, it haunts her mind with intensity, which is a typical sign of PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The trauma of the smokehouse assault reappears in Cora's mind throughout her journey, illustrating the inescapable nature of her past.

Another moment that underscores the deep scars of trauma occurs when Cora is once again assaulted by a young man, echoing her previous experience of sexual violence. Whitehead writes,

Lovey howled as the two men dragged her into the darkness... Cora's assailant was boyish and slender, perhaps the son of one of the other hunters. She was taken unawares but the moment he laid hands on her person, her blood

quickened. She was brought back to the night behind the smokehouse when Edward and Pot and the rest brutalized her (59).

This passage shows how Cora's body and mind react instinctively to violence, as her past trauma reappears in the present. Her response, "her blood quickened," highlights the intense fear and adrenaline she experiences, highlighting the ongoing cycle of violence that defines her life.

These examples of abuse highlight how deeply trauma affects Cora's life. The violence she endures is not just physical but emotional and psychological, reinforcing the intergenerational nature of her suffering. The trauma Cora inherits from Ajarry and Mabel is not a past event but shapes her decisions, relationships, and identity.

3.5-The Role of The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was a clandestine network of routes and safe houses established in the early 19th century, primarily in the United States, to help enslaved African Americans in their escape to free states and Canada. The system operated from the late 18th century until the Civil War and was a response to the systemic oppression of enslaved people, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required escaped slaves to be returned to their owners even if they reached free states. This act increased the need for secret and organized escape routes. The Underground Railroad was not a single railroad, but rather a collection of individuals, both Black and white, who worked as "conductors," helping to guide escapees. These efforts were part of a broader abolitionist movement aimed at dismantling slavery in the United States, with notable figures like Harriet Tubman risking their lives for others' freedom (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

In *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead transforms the historical metaphor of the Underground Railroad into a literal, subterranean train system that transports the protagonist, Cora, from one state to another. Beyond its physical role, the railroad serves as a complex metaphor for the psychological voyage through trauma, characterised by fragmentation and nonlinearity. The underground tunnels mirror the hidden, often inaccessible aspects of Cora's psyche, serving as a space for both escape and confrontation. Every stop along the railroad signifies not just a geographical change but also a transformation in Cora's inner self, a profound confrontation with the physical, emotional, and intergenerational trauma she bears. Whitehead writes, "If you want to see what this nation is all about, I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America" (69). This statement captures the dual purpose of the railroad: it is both a literal means of escape and a symbolic journey through the hidden structures of racial violence in American history.

Each station represents a different psychological trauma confrontation. In South Carolina, Cora initially believes she has found a place of peace, working as a domestic servant and attending lessons designed to "civilise" former slaves. However, this illusion of safety quickly reveals a very dark side of violence: forced sterilisations and medical experimentation on Black bodies under the pretext of public health. Cora's discovery of the sterilisation program is not accompanied by an emotional breakdown but by silence that reflects Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance— returns to haunt the survivor later on." (4). Cora's trauma resurfaces not through direct expression but through dreams, flashbacks, and silences.

This is more evident in North Carolina, where Cora is forced to hide in an attic for months, unable to speak, move freely, or see the outside world. The silence and isolation reflect

the state many trauma survivors experience. The literal confinement in the attic symbolises the mental imprisonment inflicted by trauma, characterised by a sense of invisibility and silence.

Even in moments of supposed freedom, the psychological remnants of trauma remain. In Indiana, Cora finds a space of community and hope at the Valentine farm, where free Black people and fugitives live, read literature, and engage in philosophical debate. Cora begins to imagine a life beyond survival, a future full of autonomy. Yet even this place is destroyed in a massacre led by white supremacists, which reinforces the idea that trauma is not easily escaped.

3.6-Cora's Personal Trauma

Cora's narrative illustrates the tyranny that African women faced throughout the history of the slave trade system. Throughout the years, she has faced various kinds of abuse, which has been tough for her. Because she has endured so many different forms of violence, the protagonist often finds herself struggling with flashbacks to those painful moments. To understand the nature of Cora's recurrent flashbacks, we must first grasp her complex relationship with the trauma she has experienced.

The first chapter, named after a state, "Georgia", is depicted as an oppressive place, mainly through the description of the Randall plantation. The state's economy was interlinked with slavery, and the conditions on plantations were harsh. There, she experienced extreme brutality, such as witnessing slaves being beaten and tortured, and herself being subjected to physical violence once she intervened to protect a young boy, Chester, from Terrance's anger, which resulted in her severe punishment. This event highlights Cora's physical and emotional scars from her brave act. Whitehead writes,

Cora lay on the floor and moaned. Two weeks after her 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. Every

hour when the water girl brought the ladle she licked it clean and felt the metal on her teeth. Now she had nothing left. (38)

Following Cora's escape from "Georgia" through the Underground Railroad, "South Carolina", in the novel, initially it seems progressive, offering better conditions and opportunities for Black people, including employment and education. In this state, Cora is no longer enslaved and is treated as a free woman. However, it is later revealed that the state conducts forced sterilisations and medical experiments on Black residents. Whitehead's depiction references the Tuskegee Syphilis Study⁶, conducted in Alabama, highlighting the long history of medical exploitation of African Americans. A woman's cry of distress horrifically describes it: "My babies, they're taking away my babies!" (105). The author uses this example to illustrate another means of owning the bodies of Black women. Even while Cora is not obliged to undergo sterilisation therapy, she discovers that many other women are forced to endure it, even in a society where they are no longer considered slaves.

Whitehead also explores Cora's inner fears and struggles through shattered memories and reflections,

Those were the scenes she decorated in blood when awake. In nightmares the exhibits were more grotesque. She strolled back and forth before the glass, a customer of pain. She was locked in Life on the Slave Ship after the museum

⁶ The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, conducted from 1932 to 1972 by the U.S. Public Health Service, is a notorious example of medical ethics violations against African Americans. The study involved 600 African American men in Macon County, Alabama, who were misled into believing they were receiving free medical care while being observed for the untreated progression of syphilis. Despite the availability of penicillin as an effective treatment by 1947, the men were deliberately denied treatment, resulting in severe health complications and death for many participants.

had closed, ever between ports and waiting for the wind while hundreds of kidnapped souls screamed belowdecks. Behind the next window, Miss Lucy cut open Cora's stomach with a letter opener and a thousand black spiders spilled from her guts. Over and over, she was transported back to the night of the smokehouse, held down by nurses from the hospital as Terrance Randall grunted and thrust above her. Usually the rats or bugs woke her when their curiosity became too much, interrupting her dreams and returning her to the darkness of the platform. (144)

The passage shifts between her waking thoughts and her nightmares, blending reality and imagination in a way that illustrates her trauma. The chaotic nature of these reflections, jumping from one image to another, reflect the nature of her psyche. The use of violent imagery, such as "decorated in blood," "a thousand black spiders spilled from her guts," and "Terrance Randall grunted and thrust above her," highlights Cora's intense psychological pain.

Additionally, the "Life on the Slave Ship" and the museum displays in South Carolina reflect Cora's feelings of entrapment and the lasting effects of slavery on her mind. The museum setting shows a display of suffering, as if her pain is an artifact to be observed, highlighting her feeling of dehumanisation, and the phrase "over and over" emphasises the cyclical nature of her trauma, highlighting that these memories and fears are inescapable and continuously haunt her. The shift between waking life and nightmares without boundaries blurs the line between reality and imagination, reflecting how her psychological scars affect her everyday existence.

During her journey toward freedom, Cora was consistently followed by Ridgeway, the slave catcher who wanted to get her back at any cost. This dynamic between Cora and Ridgeway illustrates that the escape from physical slavery does not mean achieving immediate freedom. The psychological scars and the constant fear of recapture persist, preventing complete

liberation. Ridgeway's character serves as a reminder to Cora, and to the reader, that the path to freedom is filled with challenges and that the ghost of slavery is always present. Even as Cora makes physical progress northward, Ridgeway's pursuit signifies that freedom is not just a physical state but also a psychological one. His presence in the story serves as a constant reminder of the past that haunts Cora, a past that cannot be easily forgotten.

North Carolina, on the other hand, represents an extreme form of White supremacist ideology, having removed all African Americans within its borders, a painful reminder of both historical and current realities of exclusion and harsh segregation, where anyone caught in the state was lynched and hanged on the Freedom Trail. Cora hides in an attic in North Carolina. This part of the story is central for exploring Cora's psychological state. As Cora is physically confined in the attic, her mental and emotional journey reaches new magnitudes, reflecting a critical aspect of her overall journey to freedom. Whitehead describes Cora's harrowing experience: "Cora had closed her eyes when their loud rapping on the front door shocked her. They stood directly beneath. The next minutes moved with appalling slowness. Cora huddled in a corner, making herself small behind the final rafter. (177)

This passage captures the intense terror and vulnerability of Cora's situation. It illustrates her fear and the constant threat she faces, even in a supposed place of refuge. The claustrophobic setting of the attic serves as a physical representation of the oppressive nature of the society from which she is fleeing.

From a historical perspective, Cora's time in the attic in North Carolina can be seen as a reflection of the context of the Underground Railroad. Many enslaved individuals seeking freedom faced similar circumstances of confinement and hiding in narrow and dangerous places. This part of her journey highlights the psychological and emotional dimensions of her experiences, adding depth to her escape story. This horrific situation forces Cora to confront her innermost thoughts and fears. Cora's experience in the attic is marked by severe

psychological stress. While she is physically confined, she also feels mentally and emotionally trapped, constantly aware of the danger just below her. This setting in the novel serves as a strong symbol of the oppressive nature of slavery, where the quest for freedom involves physical barriers and also psychological resilience.

Cora's journey through Tennessee is depicted as harrowing, characterised by a landscape devastated by fire and disease. The novel uses this setting to depict physical destruction and also to explore Cora's psychological state as she faces the harsh realities of her journey and the societal conflict in which she is involved.

Similarly, the depiction of Tennessee in the novel as a burned and diseased land reflects the consequences of that resistance, the reactions from slaveholders, and the societal challenges resulting from the clash between oppressive systems and the struggle for freedom and liberation. Whitehead describes this experience in much detail:

Tennessee was cursed. Initially she assigned the devastation of Tennessee—the blaze and the disease—to justice. The whites got what they deserved. For enslaving her people, for massacring another race, for stealing the very land itself. Let them burn by flame or fever, let the destruction started here rove acre by acre until the dead have been avenged. (215)

In the chapter of Indiana, Cora and Royal who is depicted especially in relation to Cora's journey toward freedom as the first freeborn man Cora encounters. Royal's presence symbolises a contrast to the life of slavery that Cora has known. Unlike many others in South Carolina, Royal has never been subjected to the horrors of slavery, having been born to free parents in Connecticut. His father, a barber, and his mother, a midwife, instilled in him the values of liberty and the dignity of honest labour from an early age. Royal's character growth mirrors the

novel's thematic evolution, especially in its examination of freedom and how various characters perceive it.

The relationship between Royal and Cora, which began in the context of the Underground Railroad, symbolises Cora's journey northward toward freedom. As she moves geographically towards liberation, her interactions with Royal help her understand and seek a life beyond the confines of slavery. Through his actions and beliefs, Royal represents not just a physical help in Cora's escape but also a metaphorical source of hope and possibility, illustrating what life could be in a world free of the institutional and societal horrors of slavery.

Royal's character serves as a critical element in the novel, highlighting the diverse experiences of African Americans in the pre-Civil War era while also offering a different perspective on the journeys of characters who have faced the harsh realities of slavery. Both characters begin to develop a more intimate relationship, and this part of the novel may be interpreted as a form of emotional release, in which Cora is finally able to express herself about her experiences. Having apologised for being gang-raped. She allows a guy to get physically and emotionally near to her for the first time, allowing herself to have her first real dialogue with him, as she may have been required to externalise her traumatic experiences first before engaging in a romantic relationship. When Cora shares the burden of her past, including the violence she endured, Royal responds with empathy and reassurance. Whitehead notes,

She broke down at the sight of next year's almanac. Thick as a book of prayer.

Cora had told Royal about the attic days in North Carolina, but seeing the year on the cover—an object conjured from the future—spurred Cora to her own magic. She told him about her childhood on Randall where she had picked cotton, tugging a sack. About her grandmother Ajarry who'd been kidnapped from her family in Africa and tilled a small corner of land, the only thing to call

her own. Cora spoke of her mother, Mabel, who absconded one day and left her to the inconstant mercy of the world. About Blake and the doghouse and how she had faced him down with a hatchet. When she told Royal about the night they took her behind the smokehouse and she apologized to him for letting it happen, he told her to hush. She was the one due an apology for all her hurts, he said. (280)

This exchange highlights Royal's compassion and his commitment to supporting Cora's healing and belief in her dignity. Additionally, the peaceful moments they share, free from the constant worry of capture, strengthen their relationship. For instance, “they stopped for a picnic at the side of a meadow, under a crab apple tree. He’d packed some bread, jam, and sausage. She let him put his head in her lap. She considered running her hands through the soft black curls by his ears but refrained when a memory of old violence reared up.” (256)

This scene symbolizes a significant moment of peace in their chaotic lives, reinforcing their bond. Whitehead describes Cora and Royal's relationship through these interactions, illustrating how it is built on mutual respect, shared trauma, and a collective hope for freedom. Their connection gives Cora a sense of safety and belonging, essential for her journey towards self-liberation and healing.

3.7-The “Unspeakable” Nature of Trauma

In *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead highlights the profound and persistent effects of trauma, mainly through the character of Cora. Her journey, both physical and psychological, reflects Cathy Caruth’s concept of trauma as a rupture that defies language. Through Cora’s silences, fragmented memories, and nonlinear narrative, Whitehead illustrates the unspeakable nature of trauma and its continuous effects throughout her life. These portrayals align closely with Caruth’s notion that trauma cannot be fully represented through traditional storytelling, as it disrupts the victim’s mental state and the narrative.

Cora's silences are a significant aspect of how trauma is represented in the novel. She is a character whose voice is often muted, either by the violence she faces or by her inability to articulate her trauma. This is evident in her fragmented relationship with her mother, Mabel, whose escape from the plantation leaves Cora both longing and resentful, unable to fully understand or express the reasons behind her mother's departure. The silence between them, especially when Cora tries to make sense of Mabel's abandonment, is one of emotional and psychological repression. Whitehead conveys that Cora's inability to speak of this trauma, her mother's escape and the abandonment she felt reflects Caruth's idea of trauma as something "unspeakable," an event so overwhelming that it cannot be integrated into a cohesive narrative or even processed in the victim's consciousness (4). Cora's struggle to process her trauma is mirrored in her struggle to speak about it.

Additionally, Cora's migraines, which are a repeated physical expression of her trauma, reinforce the understanding of this silence. Whitehead writes, "Cora lay down on the bench, seized by one of her headaches. How to snuff her thoughts like a candle? Royal and Lander dead." (299). The migraines, then, are symbolic of the emotional and psychological scars that she cannot verbalize. This is aligned with Caruth's claim that trauma cannot be fully articulated but instead manifests through the body.

Moreover, Whitehead's use of fragmented memory and narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of Cora's trauma. The novel does not follow a linear plot; instead, it jumps between past and present, reflecting how Cora's traumatic memories interrupt her thoughts in fragmented pieces. This narrative fragmentation in *The Underground Railroad* is not just a stylistic choice; it mirrors Cora's own inability to make sense of her trauma in any coherent manner. Her memories come to her in flashbacks that blend together, making it hard to piece them into a cohesive story.

Ultimately, *The Underground Railroad* portrays trauma as a complex, fragmented experience that defies language and resists full understanding. Through Cora's silences, fragmented memories, and the disjointed narrative, Whitehead illustrates Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as a rupture in experience. This rupture and this gap in language and time is at the heart of Cora's story, as she confronts a world shaped by violence, loss, and the constant re-emergence of past horrors. Cora's trauma, much like the trauma Caruth describes, is something that can never be fully articulated or understood, it lingers in the silences and in fragmented moments, haunting the character's psyche and life.

3.8-Conclusion

This chapter has examined the depiction of historical and intergenerational trauma in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, focusing on how slavery generates enduring psychological and emotional wounds that shape the lives of the characters, especially Cora. Focusing on trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's studies, the analysis highlighted how the traumatic past of slavery manifests in the present through fragmented memories, silence, physical symptoms, and repeated exposure to violence. The trauma endured by Ajarry and Mabel is inherited by Cora, making trauma not only a personal burden but a collective, generational one.

Through her journey on the literal and metaphorical Underground Railroad, Cora confronts various forms of trauma, from sexual violence and forced sterilisation to racial genocide and psychological confinement. Each station on the railroad exposes a different face of white supremacy and deepens her dissociative identity. Cora's evolving relationship with Royal and her confrontation with her own history reveal the slow and painful process of healing.

In conclusion, *The Underground Railroad* portrays trauma as a force that shapes and haunts its characters. The novel portrays Cora as a character who is marginalised, pursued, and

deeply affected, experiencing alienation and dislocation as direct outcomes of systemic and generational violence. As trauma theory highlights, these experiences are not restricted to a specific time but return later, forming a cyclical, unresolved circle. Thus, Whitehead's narrative affirms that the legacy of slavery persists not only in historical memory but in the bodies, minds, and relationships of those it touched. Cora's dissociation becomes the expression of how trauma alienates individuals from both themselves and the world around them.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

This study explored the deep and lasting impact of trauma as depicted in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. Through an analysis framed by trauma theory, the study contributes to the broader conversation on historical and intergenerational trauma, particularly in the context of slavery and its persistent effects on African American identity and memory. The findings reveal how Whitehead uses his novel to illustrate trauma not only as an individual psychological experience but also as a collective and historical phenomenon.

The research highlighted key elements of trauma theory, especially Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an experience that cannot be fully processed at the moment it occurs. This delayed response, known as "belatedness," is central to understanding how trauma is not confined to the initial event but continues to haunt individuals and communities long after the event has passed. Cora's experience in the novel, marked by fragmented memories, silences, and physical symptoms like migraines, mirrors this concept. Her journey through the Underground Railroad is both a literal escape from slavery and a metaphorical journey through the fragmented, disjointed nature of trauma itself. Cora's inability to fully narrate her experience speaks to the unspeakability of trauma, as theorised by Caruth and explored throughout the novel .

The study emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of trauma. It discusses how the trauma suffered by Cora's ancestors, her grandmother Ajarry and her mother Mabel, continues to affect her, highlighting the cyclical nature of trauma that reverberates across generations. The generational impact of slavery is explored through the lens of both individual and collective memory, showing how the effects of slavery are not confined to those who directly experienced it but extend to their descendants. The trauma passed down to Cora shapes her perceptions, relationships, and even her sense of self .

Additionally, it highlights how the experiences of enslaved women, like Cora, whose struggles are not only shaped by racial violence but also by gendered oppression, are central to understanding trauma in the context of slavery. The trauma faced by the characters in *The Underground Railroad* is explored through their survival strategies and identity rebuilding, underscoring the novel's significance as a text that critiques both racial and gender oppression.

In conclusion, this study offers an understanding of how trauma operates both personally and collectively, particularly in relation to historical injustices such as slavery. Whitehead's work is an essential contribution to the ongoing conversation about how literature can serve as a tool for understanding and confronting trauma. The fragmented narrative and the novel's speculative elements provide a powerful lens through which the enduring effects of racial violence are explored, offering important insights into the complex ways in which trauma shapes memory, identity, and cultural continuity.

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Résumé

Cette thèse présente une analyse du roman *The Underground Railroad* (2016) de Colson Whitehead, en se concentrant sur la représentation du traumatisme historique et intergénérationnel ainsi que sur ses effets sur l'identité afro-américaine. L'étude s'appuie sur la théorie du traumatisme, notamment à travers les notions de traumatisme historique et de mémoire collective, afin d'examiner les cicatrices psychologiques et émotionnelles portées par la protagoniste du roman, Cora. La recherche explore la manière dont le traumatisme de l'esclavage se transmet de génération en génération, à travers le parcours de Cora vers la découverte de soi et les effets de la violence et de l'oppression raciales. Outre l'analyse des expériences traumatisantes de Cora et d'autres personnages, le travail souligne l'usage novateur de la fiction spéculative pour aborder le racisme systémique. En mêlant histoire et éléments spéculatifs, *The Underground Railroad* met en lumière les impacts durables de l'esclavage, offrant une exploration profonde de la race, de la mémoire et des conséquences psychologiques de l'oppression systémique.

Mots-clés : Traumatisme, Identité, traumatisme historique, esclavage, racisme, traumatisme intergénérationnel, identité afro-américaine, Chemin de fer clandestin.

الملخص

يقدم هذا البحث تحليلاً لرواية *The Underground Railroad* (2016) للكاتب كولسون وايتهد، مع التركيز على تصوير الصدمة التاريخية والمتوارثة بين الأجيال وتأثيرها على الهوية الأمريكية الإفريقية. تعتمد الدراسة على نظرية الصدمة، لا سيما من خلال مفهومي الصدمة التاريخية والذاكرة الجماعية، لفهم الندوب النفسية والعاطفية التي تحملها بطله الرواية، كورا. تبحث الدراسة في كيفية انتقال صدمة العبودية عبر الأجيال، من خلال استكشاف رحلة كورا نحو اكتشاف الذات، وآثار العنف العنصري والاضطهاد. بالإضافة إلى تحليل التجارب الصادمة التي مرت بها كورا، يناقش البحث استخدام الرواية للخيال التأملي بشكل مبتكر لمعالجة قضية العنصرية المنهجية. ومن خلال مزج التاريخ بالعناصر التخيلية، تسلط *The Underground Railroad* الضوء على الآثار المستمرة للعبودية، مقدّمةً استكشافاً عميقاً للعرق والذاكرة والعواقب النفسية للاضطهاد المنهجي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، الهوية، الصدمة التاريخية، العبودية، العنصرية، الصدمة المتوارثة، الهوية الأمريكية الإفريقية.