

Role of Reality and Performance in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract

The Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Underground Railroad* written by Colson Whitehead and published in 2016 traces the life of a slave named Cora and her several attempts to run away from her owner. The novel renders a realistic description of antebellum America, the atrocities of slavery and the Underground Railroad system. Various performances like dance, music, and theatricals recur in the novel. The present paper analyzes the intertwined role of reality and performance in the novel in the depiction of slavery and racism. The blurring distinction between reality and performance in the novel will be examined. The various facets of performance and its application to critique slavery and racism will also be explored in the paper.

Keywords: Performance; Racism; Reality; Slavery; Underground Railroad.

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* published in 2016 is a brilliant depiction of the historical phenomenon of American slavery. It provides a mirror to the antebellum America which is deeply engulfed in slavery and racism. It is the story of a slave named Cora who being weary of the exploitation under slavery, runs away from her brutal owner. The novel traces the escape of Cora through the network of the Underground Railroad system till her final habitation in the North.

The Underground Railroad offers a realistic portrayal of slavery in the United States of America prior to the Civil War. It not only limits itself to the portrayal of slavery in the southern region but also questions the racial intolerance in the whole country through racial violence. The novel sticks to realism in its elucidation of racial hierarchy in the contemporary nation.

The depiction of the practice of slavery in the region is picturesque where the author is committed to the particulars of the system. The violent chastisement of slaves, the role of slave catchers in the repossession of slaves, and the secret escapes of slaves through the aid of abolitionists attest to historical facts. The influx of runaway slaves and emigrants to the port cities of the northern region also holds true mirror to the history of the era.

Colson whitehead in the process of the illustration of the historical institution makes brilliant use of the motif of myth, reality, and performance in the plot of the novel. The rigid dichotomy between reality and performance is intricately interwoven with the theme of slavery and the system of the Underground Railroad. The incorporation of the intricate role of performance in the novel is another facet to the author's exploration of slavery and racism. The motif of performance challenges the reality of racism and slavery in the contemporary society,

Performance studies is an appealing field of study which provides the readers a remarkable insight for the analysis of the wide genre of performances. It is developing in the field of anthropology, ethnology, as well as several other fields. Its propagators like Richard Schechner, J.L. Austin and Judith Butler have covered variety of fields like theatre, language, and gender studies. Performance studies is a branch of knowledge whose aim is the analysis of every kind of performance in all the fields of human learning as well as society. The wide horizon of performance studies doesn't restrict itself only to dramas and plays but takes within its purview varied types of performances whether they are rituals, shows, musical, dramas, politics, films, or dances (Schechner 2). These scholars hold that even things which seemingly do not hold up to the definition of performance have noticeable elements of performances.

Colson Whitehead uses the trope of performance to not only highlight the racist tendency of antebellum America but it also asserts social as well as cultural role of performances in a society. The novel is rife with the varied forms of performances like dance, music, oratory performances like speeches, and street performances like street theatricals. The author in the novel paces back and forth, in and out of reality through the use of performances. What appears to be reality is in turn just a performance, a façade to hide the dark reality. And on the other hand what in reality was just metaphorical, having no bearing to the truth, turns out to be real.

This paper aims at examining the role of performances in the novel. It not only restricts itself to the analysis of various genres of performances in the

novel but also analyzes the thin line between performances and reality. It questions the reality, which is no longer the truth but only a façade, a pretension.

There are multiple instances of performances by slaves in the opening part of the novel at the plantation of the Randall brothers. The first is the celebratory performance of slaves at the alleged birthday celebration of Jockey, a slave to James Randall. An individual's birthday is a fixed event which takes place at a certain day and time, irrespective of the circumstances. However in the novel it acquires the place of a performance given the background of the occasion of Jockey's birthday celebration. Jockey celebrated his birthday twice or thrice a year. To him it was an event worth celebrating which according to his mood occurred several times in a year. Here Maragret Dreval's definition of performance is enlightening. She avers that "Performance... might include anything about individual agent's negotiation of everyday life to the stories people tell each other, popular entertainments, political oratory, guerrilla warfare, to bounded events such as theatre, ritual, festival, parades, and more" (1).

It was a much anticipated event for the slaves as it was followed by a feast. The celebration consisted of music and dance. The author describes the birthday celebration in which Noble, a slave, played tambourine. Sometimes other slaves like Wesley and George use to play fiddle and banjo (Whitehead 33). The celebration was followed by the decorated centre table which was presented with scrumptious food prepared by all. This bi annual celebration turns into a performance as it was a meditated move by Jockey. As the narrator says that Jockey's plan for birthday celebration used to suddenly rise out of nowhere "according to some personal accounting of grievance that the plantation was undeserving" (Whitehead 30).

The author himself uses adjectives like "a show" and "performance" for this revelry of the slaves, put out with great skills in the guise of a mask. And much like other types of performances like music and dance it was a means of entertainment, and provided a relief amid the drudgery of slavery. For Lovey it was a getaway from the rude and monotonous existence of a slave. The author calls a celebration like this, the "rare escapes" (Whitehead 14). The use of epithet like amusement for the description of revelry sheds further light on the cause. Rightly the author calls it "the mask", as the daily reality of slavery was gloomy and marred by violence with no scope for happiness (Whitehead 39). Thus the reality of birthday turns into a performance within the confines of slavery.

Performance is a vital part of culture. Victor Turner dwells upon the intertwined role of performances and culture. He is of the view that performances are universal in nature and further holds that varied cultures find expressions through performances (Schechner 20). It is in similar milieu that music and dance form an essential part of slavery. Iola Thompson holds that the drums were taken over by Banjo and fiddle which were the common instruments at disposal of slaves and were their source of music (Thompson 75). Dancing like other social- cultural aspect of human existence found a way in slavery as well. Slaves shared some exclusive traits in their dancing style which was generally a group activity, and usually was in circular motion or in the form of a procession (Thompson 72). It was one of the shared experiences of slaves on the various plantations as depicted in the novel.

These dance and music performances manifest themselves in the brief account of the life on Randall plantation as well as during Cora and Caesar's escape in South Carolina. During their stay in South Carolina, Cora and Caesar witnessed the "social nights", held for the entertainment of the black populace. These "social nights" are full of the description of fugitive slaves dancing on the beats of the music of a fiddle and banjo. Cora emphasizes that on these nights black people performed dances and musical performances peculiar to one's plantation. These group dances and music performances in the novel can be described as not only one of the means of entertainment but also a manifestation of slave culture. In the burdensome life of slavery, slaves sought refuge in few moments of refreshment offered mostly during the period between Christmas and the New Year.

In the novel even the brutal punishments afforded to slaves in front of large crowd took shape of the staged performances as evident at Randall plantation. These punishments were minutely crafted by the slave owner not only to increase the ordeal of slaves but also to serve as warning to other slaves. Signification or a moral is a common aspect of a performance whether theatrical or public speech. The portrayal of slave punishments in the novel is also in similar vein. A subtle case in point is the punishment given to Big Anthony by Terence Randall, when the former was caught by slave catchers in his attempt to escape from his owner. The intricate description of the process of Big Anthony's punishment shares attributes of a performance. It constitutes of planning, staging, design, and the use of audience. The stocks used for his (Big Anthony's) damnation were designed in a vivid manner especially for the purpose, with minute engravings.

To have an all encompassing view it was placed at the spot with most accessible view. People were brought from far off places to visit Randall plantation. The people from far off regions like Savannah and Atlanta comprised of the audience and are addressed as "revelers" by the author. Special guests along with media, in the form of newspaper men, were among the privileged presence on the "American scene" (Whitehead 55).

Richard Schechner highlights seven functions of performances, which he points out are "to entertain... to create beauty ... to mark or change identity...to make or foster community ...to heal...to teach or persuade... to deal with the sacred and the demonic"(Schechner 46). Here performance of Big Anthony's punishment works as a means to instruct slaves and teach them the dangerous outcome of escape. As the author claims "It was customary for slaves to witness the abuse of their brethren as moral instruction" (Whitehead 54). The spectacle of Big Anthony's punishment served as a warning to other slaves as to what will happen to them if they'll act in the same manner.

Like a theatrical performance the punishment continued for days with varying audience for each day. The spectacle of punishment consisted of enormous violence which included whipping, broiling of the oil soaked victim as well as slitting his man parts. The last show of the punishment was meant for Big Anthony's fellow slaves who were especially given a time out on their services to witness the cruel treatment of their friend. The three day long affair ended with an address by the owner of the place, Terence Randall to his slaves. The speech acts as the resolution to the dramatic structure of the whole performance of the punishment. It brings out the moral behind such an elaborate performance of Big Anthony's punishment. All this drama of Big Anthony's punishment was performed with an explicit aim in the view that is to dispirit slaves by galvanizing them of the consequences of an escape attempt.

Another aspect of performance in the novel is the depiction of Underground Railroad system. As the title of the novel suggests, Whitehead portrays the Underground Railroad system in his work. In reality, this figurative nineteenth century system, Underground Railroad was a way to transport slaves escaping their owners to safe places in the North. The safe havens like houses and churches, which provided shelter to the fugitive slaves, were called "stations", and the people who assisted the slaves in escaping were called "conductors" (History.com). This metaphorical name becomes an absolute reality in the novel. In reality the Underground Railroad was nothing like that which is delineated in the novel. The nov-

el depicts the system as literally a secret transportation system of slaves through ill manufactured trains working under the ground hidden from the eye of general people. The railroad stations of this underground system are minutely designed and find rendition in the narration. The stage for the performance of the Underground Railroad was crafted with displays in details. All of the stations have been differently sketched with much precision and great visual appeal. The first station had a "fearsome display" with all sizes and types of cuffs, chains, and fretters. The decorations on the wall give it secret and gloomy appearance. It was a secluded place which was 20 feet tall, where "two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel" (Whitehead 80). This realistic delineation of the figurative system gains the aspect of performance in the novel.

The novelist also makes abundant use of theatrical vocabulary like plot, play, theatre, and performance in its delineation of the Underground Railroad. Cora raises suspicion regarding her and Caesar's escape through the Underground Railroad system. She doubts their escape as a staged performance construed for their capture. She questions this system when she says "their plot, escape, and arrival were the elements of an elaborate living play" (Whitehead 107). It further illuminates the presentation of the escape system as a performance.

The museum of living history plays a significant role in the novel. It illustrates life in Africa, the scene of slave cargoes, plantations of the South, and is another facet of performance technique used in the novel by the author. The museum of living history had three performances. The first comprised of the depiction of the rough life in Africa through a hut, artificial fire and medieval tools. The next one was of a ship taking slaves to slave markets with the backdrop of a black boy serving the crew members. During Cora's tenure at the museum Cora used to play the part of an African slave. She provided an air of reality to the scene while describing the life of an African slave. She was provided costumes for the acts. Her costumes for both of the occasions were a "colorful wrap" and "a tunic, trouser, and leather boots" respectively (Whitehead 130-131). The last scene a "Typical Day on Plantation" had her sit at a spinning wheel as well as throwing invisible seeds to artificial chicken. The scene also had a costume which consisted of shaggy "negro cloth" (Whitehead 131).

The museum serves as the theatre for exhibition of American history. The scenes, though staged, were to make people aware of America's history and vast cultural and regional geography. It is ironical that instead of the decided aim of presenting glorious American history it presents the dark

life of African slaves. It sheds light on the brazen present of America. Cora in the course of narratives suggests the failure of the scenes to present the accurate life of a slave. As Cora questions "Is this the truth of our historic encounter?" (Whitehead 138). Moreover these scenes refrain from depicting the violent reality of the existence of African slaves in America as well as onboard. It presents a completely opposite picture of the existence of American slavery than what we come across in the early chapters of the book, where slaves were victim of violent behavior. This performance of American history rightly did not want "to speak on the true disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it" (Whitehead 138). It only serves as the means of manipulating the reality and rewriting history from their powerful position especially in their own favour.

The museum plays a dual role in the novel. Through contradiction it not only serves as an occasion to illustrate the reality of the existence of African slavery, but also offers an instrument to the subjugated to undermine the racial power and authority. It is at the museum while standing at her spot on the scene, that Cora scares the visitor through her stare. Amid the groups that visited the museum she used to select one person and gazed at him/her angrily continuously until they were fearful and moved away (Whitehead 150). This was her way of paying them back, with the aim for the audience "to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too" (Whitehead 151). The museum empowers her and presents an occasion for revenge.

In North Carolina the outrageous violence on blacks gain a third dimension due to the theatrics through which it is performed. The "Freedom Trail" which Cora witnesses at the entrance of the town and the "Friday Festival" held in North Carolina have overpowering sense of performance to them. The exhibition of corpses which are brutally dismantled and hung on trees are like "rotting ornaments", where some "were naked, others partially clothed, the trousers black where there bowls emptied when their necks snapped" (Whitehead 182). This exhibition was meant to stress upon blacks the fate that awaited them on entering the city. The "Friday Festival" and the "Freedom Trail" exposed the façade of civilized, which is passionately impressed upon the reader's mind during the day time. The festival was put on the stage of the park in the centre of the town.

This theatrical festival covered all the aspects of a performance like music, dance, "coon show", speech etc. It began with a musical performance on Banjo and fiddle, being followed by an address by a respected figure dealing with the subject of the black man. It also served as a stage of ex-

ecution for the fugitive slaves. The Friday Festival was not only a means to terrorize blacks but also to have compliance from white people. Rightly did Megan O'Grady postulates that Colson suggests that "even the story of slavery... has been stolen for profit, for white entertainment". The theatrics held in the name of amusement and punishing blacks suggests an important aspect about the contemporary society. It sheds light on the fact that for the contemporary people racial hierarchy was a serious aspect of their existence. As Victor Turner says that "By their performance shall ye know them" (qtd. in Schechner 20). The performances which solely focused on the contempt and ridicule of blacks emphasize the impact of racism and the degradation of black people. It not only mirrors the well prevalent racism but also serves as a vehicle to propagate the racism and violence against blacks. Apart from the intended surface moral of black inanity it symbolizes the savagery of such fanatic ideas like racism. The performances at Friday festival follows a well manipulated form for the realization and propagation of racist ideology. It manipulates people that the rightful place of a slave or a black is at the doorsteps of his master spending his life in servitude. The travesty of black people, which exhibits foolishness and absurdity of African people, also follows the course of condemnation. The brutal executions of blacks, followed by these performances, serve as a tool which would result in psychological acceptance of the inferiority of blacks and justifies the brutalities on them.

The author further questions how reality can be manipulated, and its potential for myth through an episode in the narrative. Theorists of performance studies describe performance as any action "that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted or displayed" (Schechner 2). It is in similar relation that certain groups of scholars of performance studies hold that real life also shares components of a performance. This leads to the assumption that the difference between the reality and a performance is thread bare. In the novel the racially tolerant atmosphere of South Carolina which perpetuates an integrationist society, promoting peaceful coexistence of whites and fugitive slaves is a performance. When in reality it was a well conspired move by people who in the guise of racial harmony were victimizing black people by using them for unjust and inhumane syphilis study. Here Schechner's delineation of performance holds significance, as he says a performance is "twice-behaved" behaviors (qtd. in Komitee 7). Every behavior which is not natural which is deliberately put on by people with certain aim in sight can be considered as performance.

Thus the pretention of social harmony is a well maneuvered performance by these racist people for their own benefit with the aim of suppression

of black people. In the guise of providing them a treatment for a disease, they were being used as guinea pigs for the study of the cure for syphilis. Not only this but newly arrived black women were also compelled to have surgical procedures performed for birth control. The societal appearance was only a performance of freedom when in reality servitude had changed its form, as the narrator claims "Not pure merchandise as formerly but livestock: bred, neutered" (Whitehead 149). Behind the silence of communal harmony there are shrieks of outraged women who were forcefully made to give up their right to have children. The woman running down the street in South Carolina, crying to save her children is called a lunatic by the people, while in reality her shrieks were cry for help against the forced procedure of birth control being performed on her.

To contradict the overpowering violence and subjugation of black people through the use of performance the author employs similar strategy to counter it through the performances on "Saturday gatherings" held on Valentine's farm in Indiana. The gatherings on Saturday were filled with musical performances like violin, opera, poetry recitation as well as speeches to motivate black upliftment. In contrast to the "Friday Festival" the entertainments held on Saturday in Indiana were soothing and quite optimistic. They did not use art and performance as a means of propaganda, and just adhere to their purpose of providing comfort and solace, which is the main aim of performance.

The novel *Underground Railroad* in its projection of the reality of African slavery in America makes extensive use of performances. Through these performances the author tries to communicate to the reader the intensity of racism and violence prevalent in the nineteenth century America. Throughout the novel the author transgresses the boundaries between reality and performance in order to elucidate the intricate presence and deep dug roots of racial violence and slavery.

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