



Cora's Racism Analysis as Seen in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

Racism is unfair different treatment of people in society. The purpose of this study to describe the form of racism in Cora in *The Underground Railroad*. Cora's racism at *The Underground Railroad* is one of social problem held in the novel. This study used qualitative approach as the method. The data of the study were Cora's action, utterances, narration, other character action to Cora in *The Underground Railroad*. The writer collected the data by underlining the sentences reading the novel many times, identifying racism actions, analyzing the data, and concluded the data.

Cora's racism in *The Underground Railroad* showed how Cora suffered during enslaved by her master even her effort to run away from her master. The writer founds five forms of Cora's racism were discrimination, prejudice, segregation, stereotypes, and violence. The most of racial practices and many kinds of violence had experienced by Cora for being enslaved by her master.

Keywords: racism, Cora, *The Underground Railroad*

INTRODUCTION

Racism is the different treatments about person in society. Racism is a public-relations study. There is a conflict that makes this an issue worth talking about race relation. The differences in society are utilized by superior group that makes them more valuable than inferior group. The differences are made by the society poses a bad and negative impact to its subject of racism because the subject of the racism itself is unclear, and some have suggested that racism is not actually the racial problem itself. Australian Human Rights Commission (2018) states that racism is ugly as racism divides people into "us" and "them" because of the difference of our skin colour, and racism happens when the person who gets the treatment feels that it is okay to treat others badly as they go about their daily lives. Moreover racism brings negative effects for the victim in their society, and sometimes it omits the human right. Racism has many understandings in the world. Human is the strongest creatures in the world living in many different areas and conditions to life. People adapt many different life skills and evolutions to survive. Because of those conditions, some group claim to another group that they are more superior than the others. The conditions that divide people in society are called racism. According to Miles and Brown (2003) in chapter

Representation of the Other, it is explained that nowadays people have continued to identify someone from their biological aspect, especially from their skin color. According to OpenStax (2017) racism is unequal treatment to other races. Moreover, Williams (2004) stated that racism practice brings more negative effect than positive one, so the survival of our planet and restoration of our humanity requires a great change in crucial problem that we have to solve in order to make a good social relation of humanism.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach because it aimed to describe and interpret the forms of racism experienced by Cora in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. The qualitative method was chosen to explore how racism is represented in the novel through the characters' actions, utterances, and experiences, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the social issues embedded in the literary work. The data source of this study was the novel *The Underground Railroad*, focusing on Cora as the main character. The data consisted of Cora's actions, utterances, narrations, and other characters' actions toward her that reflect racial treatment and discrimination.

The data collection procedure involved several steps. First, the researcher read the novel thoroughly multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the story and its social context. Second, the researcher underlined and selected sentences or passages that contained indications of racism. Third, those data were identified, classified, and organized based on the forms of racism found in the story.

The data analysis technique applied in this study was thematic analysis. The researcher analyzed the collected data by identifying recurring themes related to racism such as discrimination, prejudice, segregation, stereotypes, and violence. Each theme was interpreted in relation to Cora's experiences and the broader social context depicted in the novel. Finally, the findings were summarized and conclusions were drawn regarding the representation and impact of racism on Cora's life. Through this method, the study provides a systematic and comprehensive understanding of how racism operates within the narrative of *The Underground Railroad* and how it shapes the experiences of the main character.

RESULTS

This work was supported by Cora's Racism Analysis As seen in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

1. Discrimination

According to Pager and Shepherd (2008) discrimination is unequal treatment to someone or group base on their race or ethnicity. The other theories from OpenStax (2017) explained that discrimination is unfair action against a group of people based on certain categories, such as age, race, religion, sex, etc.

Discrimination inside the novel *The Underground Railroad* was felt by Cora. In *The Underground Railroad* written by Colson Whitehead. Cora was an African American.

She became slave since she was born at Randal plantation. Cora threatened different because of her race that forced her to survive in a country as the minority on it. That result is proved as follow:

Even if impossible was the slave impudent enough to tell a white man he couldn't work because it was a slave's birthday. Everybody knew niggers didn't have birthdays. (16) line 9

The first, result of Cora's discrimination because of her skin color as African American, and it caused by whites. Whites did not give the right to black for celebrating their birthdays, which are contrary to human rights. Whites treat African American as the object not as the human.

The second, whites threatened black as their property, even their way of living. The narration of racism inside the novel, the whites lived in a good house and discriminated Niggers into the small houses. It can be seen in:

The walls of Hob made a fortress some nights, rescuing them from frauds and conspiracies. White man eats you up but sometimes colored folks eat you up too. (51) line 20

Randall family preferred to spend their money to give the remedy to their slaves. They would not help slave if not close to death. The only way Randall family helped them in order to save slaves life. Randall family preferred to save their money that called a doctor for their slaves. It can be found in:

On the Randall plantation, the doctor was only called when the slaves remedies, the roots and salves, had failed and valued hand was near death. (88) line 5

The narration of discrimination about health by Randall family to their slaves and worker showed how greedy they were.

2. Prejudice

The narration of Cora while she got prejudice from the worker of Mr. Fields family. Cora was suspected dangerous person because of her appearance. Everyone who looked Cora with their suspicion. Everybody think Cora can not be trusted because of her races. It can be seen in:

The girl who opened the door looked at Cora with suspicion, even after she explained who she was. (100) line 7

OpenStax (2017) explained that racism prejudice is beliefs, thought or feeling to a race superior on inferior than the other races even it is not the actual proof as the prejudgement ideas.

Most of African American were getting prejudice from the other races. It happened because the whites' ideas dominating other races because of their appearance such as skins, cultures, race, ethnicity, etc.

3. Segregation

It can be seen in:

On the Randall plantation, the doctor was only called when the slaves remedies, the roots and salves, had failed and valued hand was near death (88) line 5

OpenStax (2017) stated that segregation is the act to segregating someone or group based on their races bring harm impact in society. There are five indicate of segregation those are exposure, isolation, dissimilarity, divergence, and Theil (Whitehurst & Reeves, 2016).

Sometimes segregation and discrimination happened in the same time. Randall family segregated their house and each of their slaves into bad small house. Therefore, their victim had no one to help them because they were the part of minorities so that they did not have power to fight back

4. Stereotypes

OpenStax (2017) stated that stereotypes are oversimplified ideas about group of people. Racism stereotypes can be positive and the opposite. Stereotypes did not stop on races it can be the other aspects or characteristic in social environment. But in Cora's case showed negative stereotypes because of her biological appearance. Cora's appearance as African American made her having black skin color made her look dirty as mud. It can be seen in:

Edward, the most Wicked of Blake's gang, bragged of how Cora flapped her dress at him while she made Lascivious suggestions and threatened to slap him when he refused her. Young women whispered how they watched her sink away from the cabins on the full moon, to the woods, where she fornicated with donkeys and goats. Those who found this last story less than credible nonetheless recognized the usefulness of keeping the strange girl outside the circle of respectability. (24) line 1

Cora appearance makes her got negative stereotypes. Everyone thinks bad to Cora, they think Cora as alien that made her not accepted by society. Negative stereotypes to Cora made her not appreciate to her appearance that God gave to her.

5. Violence

OpenStax (2017) stated that violence is human action to damaging someone or group to inflicting pain. Young as cited in Adawiyah (2015) stated that violence is negative treatment to its victim that caused affliction. Most of Cora's violence is physical violence, Cora's skin was full of black patches caused by the wound from torture he had experienced while she was enslaved in Randall plantation. During her experiences enslaved in Randall plantation, she got many worse treatments from the people around her. It can be seen in:

Not long after it became known that Cora's womanhood had come into flower, Edward, Pot, and two hands from the southern half dragged her behind the smokehouse. (24) line 8

Another proof Cora become the victim of violence because of her race. She got it because of her disobediencies to their master in Randall plantation. Even Cora was dizzy, her master did not give Cora remedies.

Cora lay on the floor and moaned. Two weeks after her beating she endured dizzy spells and a pounding in her skull. (38) line 32

Not only physical violence Cora got, but also sexual violence from her master that threatened her like his own sexual desires objects. Cora's master touched her breast briefly anytime they wanted. Cora's master forced her to fulfil his sexual desires, if Cora refuse she will got punishment. Cora's master treats Cora as the object to do

anything that they are wanted. Cora experienced sexual violence since she was a girl at Randall plantation. The man who touched Cora cannot be count anymore because of her masters do anything to her she has to agree with it.

When Terrance got to Cora, he slipped his hand into her shift and cupped her breast. He squeezed. She did not move. No one had moved since the beginning of his address, not even to pinch their noses to keep out the smell of Big Anthony's roasting flesh. (46) line 1

DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead reveals the deep and systemic racism experienced by the protagonist, Cora, throughout her life as an enslaved African American woman. Based on the findings, five primary forms of racism—discrimination, prejudice, segregation, stereotypes, and violence—were identified, each contributing to the depiction of racial oppression in the novel.

The first form, discrimination, is evident in the way white people treat Cora and other African Americans as inferior beings. As Pager and Shepherd (2008) define, discrimination refers to unequal treatment toward individuals based on race or ethnicity. This can be seen in the novel when the white masters deny the slaves' basic human rights, such as celebrating birthdays or accessing medical care. Such acts demonstrate not only the denial of individuality but also the systematic dehumanization of Black people. The Randall family's refusal to provide medical assistance unless the slave's condition is life-threatening further emphasizes how economic interest outweighs humanity. These discriminatory practices illustrate the entrenched racial hierarchy that frames Black individuals merely as property rather than as human beings.

The second form, prejudice, reflects the social stigma attached to Cora's racial identity. OpenStax College (2013) describes racial prejudice as unfounded beliefs or attitudes of superiority that lead to biased judgments. Cora faces suspicion and mistrust simply because of her skin color and status as a runaway slave. Her interactions with white characters, such as the worker in Mr. Fields' family who views her with suspicion, reveal how racial bias operates even beyond the plantation system. This suggests that prejudice is not only a personal bias but also a broader social mechanism that justifies exclusion and mistreatment of African Americans.

Segregation in the novel is intertwined with discrimination, as it manifests in the physical and social separation of races. According to OpenStax (2017), segregation isolates certain groups and limits their access to resources, resulting in long-term social harm. In the Randall plantation, this is visible through the separation of living quarters, where slaves are confined to small, poor-quality houses while white families live in comfort. Such spatial division reinforces the ideology of white superiority and deprives Black people of dignity and equal opportunity. As Whitehurst and Reeves (2016) point out, segregation functions through mechanisms like exposure, isolation, and dissimilarity—all of which are evident in the way the enslaved community is marginalized and silenced.

The fourth form, stereotyping, emerges through the false and degrading narratives that white characters construct about Cora. OpenStax (2017) defines stereotypes as

oversimplified and generalized beliefs about a group. In Cora's case, she is portrayed as immoral and animalistic, accused of indecent acts that reflect the racist imagination of the dominant group. These negative stereotypes serve to justify her exclusion and reinforce the perception of Black women as inferior. Such portrayals align with Miles and Brown (2003) argument that racial stereotypes are tools of social control, designed to preserve the power of the dominant race and suppress the dignity of the oppressed.

The final and most brutal form of racism in *The Underground Railroad* is violence. Physical and sexual abuse are central to Cora's experience as an enslaved woman. OpenStax (2017) defines violence as intentional acts of harm, while Young as cited in Adawiyah (2015) describes it as behavior that inflicts suffering on victims. Cora's body becomes a site of racial domination, as shown when she is beaten, tortured, and sexually assaulted by her masters. The repeated violence inflicted upon her highlights how slavery functioned as both a system of labor and a mechanism of terror. Whitehead's depiction of these brutalities underscores how racism degrades not only the physical body but also the psychological and emotional state of the oppressed. Cora's silence and endurance symbolize both the trauma and resistance of African Americans under systemic violence.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the racism portrayed in *The Underground Railroad* is not confined to individual prejudice but is deeply institutionalized. Each form of racism—discrimination, prejudice, segregation, stereotyping, and violence—interlocks to sustain white dominance and Black subjugation. Through Cora's journey, Whitehead exposes the historical reality of slavery as well as its lingering echoes in modern society. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the human cost of racism and the resilience of those who endure it.

CONCLUSION

There is a conclusion that the writer got. In this racism study, there are five forms of Cora's racism in *The Underground Railroad* written by Colson Whitehead, those are discrimination, prejudice, segregation, stereotypes, and violence. Overall, racism problem still happens because it is needed. Some of them got the benefit and the opposite will take the impact. There will always be new variety of racism will be created by the society. Interventions that can assist students in managing their emotions more effectively, so that the negative impact on learning can be minimized. Further studies could also examine the role of lecturers and the academic environment in helping students deal with emotional distress, as well as how more flexible pedagogical approaches could be implemented to improve students' emotional well-being in the lecture environment.

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