

Psychological Scapegoating In Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore psychological scapegoating in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) in the light of Frantz Fanon's theorization of racial complex where blacks and whites come in contact with one another. This study extrapolates Fanon's theory to the American context regarding history of slavery in the United States. Euphoria of racial equality in the United States in the backdrop of Barack Obama's election to the presidency vaporized into the air with the passage of time and the term 'post-racial' seemed ironic. Contemporary American novel reverberates with this enigma. Fanon's concept of psychological scapegoating finds ample portrayal in white characters as depicted in *The Underground Railroad* by Whitehead. Psychological scapegoating is a main cause of continuation of effects of slavery and segregation which instills superiority complex in whites and inferiority complex in blacks. With this strategy, Whitehead seems to contest the notion of post-raciality, to revisit the past, and to fill gaps in the historical record.

Key Words Scapegoating, Fanon, Whitehead, post-racial, *The Underground Railroad*.

Introduction

Racial complex of the United States has been at the center of debate for many scholars. In literature it has been portrayed by many distinguished authors. In 21st century, a prominent development in politics was the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. Apparently, it was an indication that this country has surpassed the challenge of racial dilemma by granting blacks their civil rights. However, delving deep below the surface of the American society, it is

revealed that election of a black man to the presidency of the United States was only a cosmetic change. A black subject still finds itself a pariah in the corner of American society. On the other hand, a white man still seems to justify his superiority over a black man on the basis of skin color. In the face of tall claims of democracy, it is a disturbing sense both for whites and blacks. Fanon has analyzed this problem half century ago in the context of French and Caribbean cultures. He came to the conclusion in *Black Skin Whites Masks* that there is a psychological phenomenon which is called scapegoating which is the cause of superiority complex in whites and by turn the cause of inferiority complex in blacks. Contemporary American novelists depicts this phenomenon. In this regard, Colson Whitehead, in *The Underground Railroad*, has portrayed white characters who need scapegoats for the infirmities in their own characters. Their easy targets are the blacks in this regard.

Statement of the Problem

A positive sign of 21st century is the democratic ideal of equality in developed countries. In the United States, the election of a black man to the highest echelon of politics whose ancestors served as slaves was undoubtedly a manifestation of this ideal of equality. However, a black subject is still crippled in the chains of structural racism. This phenomenon needs discussion and analysis to unearth the cause of racial impasse in the United States. Colson Whitehead in *The Underground Railroad* portrays white characters whose dialogues and actions reveal that they need scapegoats for the shortcomings in their own personalities. Thus, the analysis of the novel can help in investigating the cause of racial deadlock.

Research Question

How does delineation of the white characters in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* manifest psychological scapegoating which instills superiority complex in whites?

Literature Review

Whitehead's 2016 novel attracted a number of researchers to explore its contents. Writers have published a number of reviews and critical essays in important journals. In this regard, the first review of the novel was Le Melle's (2016). Le Melle reads the novel's contents in the context of Trump presidency. Trump's arousal and alignment with white supremacist forces dispelled the euphoria of Obama's era. Le Melle says, "Whitehead's states are both magical and real as he

reconfigures American race history into new tableaux for his characters. Tableaus they hoped would protect them. Only to find that no matter where they run, America is one big breathing funnyhouse for all Negroes” (p. 937). Likewise, Simpson’s (2017) review of the novel deals with the absurdity of the claims of post-raciality. Simpson opines that existential account of the American politics, sociology and literature provides an imperative which drives Whitehead’s novel. Simpson states, “The clandestine rendezvous, the aliases and disguises, the dramatic dodgings of pursuing paterollers and slave catchers, the stolen moments of tender humanity while fleeing [...] function as a mesmerizing means, Ellisonian no doubt, of taking account of the relationship between the United States and those of its citizens who are dark” (p. 183-84). On the other hand, Ward (2017) opines that the novel is not just an imaginary story of a slave girl. The “underground railroad” is a metaphor used by the novelist. By combining fantastical element into his narrative, the novelist has turned the metaphor into a literal train running through American past into the American present. Another critic, Dischinger (2017), argues that the novel deploys the poetics of “speculative satire” to recompose readers’ understanding of the US history of slavery. Such an alternative history is constructed in the novel by counterfactual settings: by transforming the figurative underground railroad to a literal train, depicting skyscrapers in South Carolina, and syphilis and eugenics experiments in antebellum era. Cabanban (2017) argues that “railroad” in the novel functions as heterotopia and affects the identities of those involved with it. Cabanban contends that the underground railroad, like heterotopia, functions as a symbol of resistance to the logic of slavery. It changes its nature in different states of America because each state changes its ways of oppression on blacks. Kelly (2018) argues that The Underground Railroad is in the tradition of African American literary genre which is called the novel of slavery. It espouses discourses of slavery and freedom. This novel shows Whitehead’s response to the changes taking place in American society and culture. These changes call for a more sincere appraisal of the situation.

Thaler (2019) investigates The Underground Railroad in the light of critical dystopian fiction. This essay throws light on the importance of dystopia, fictional narratives’ political status and perspectival character of utopia and dystopia.

Theoretical Framework

In racial context, denying the responsibility for the wrong committed against the victim by blaming the victim is called racial scapegoating. In this process projection plays a key role. Blaming the victim achieves the purpose of avoiding guilt. The subject, in this case the white, identifies all the negative traits of his or her personality in the object, in this case the black. At the same time, the white feels guilty for the injustices, oppression, and violence they inflicted upon the blacks. In order to assuage the guilt feeling, the white blames the victim.

Discussion and Analysis

American racism is epitomized in the personalities of white characters of *The Underground Railroad*, particularly, Ridgeway and his father. Both are the two sides of the same coin: racism, which is called the American Imperative. How is the logic of that imperative continued? Delving deep into the psychology of racism, we come across a psychological phenomenon which is called scapegoating. Fanon (1951/2008) says, "Projecting his desires [negative impulses] onto the black man, the white man behaves as if the black man actually had them" (p. 143). Fanon asks a question, "can the white man behave in a sane manner toward the black man and can the black man behave in a sane manner toward the white man?" (p. 146). In the insanity of the white his sexual anxiety is a dominant factor. He regards the black man an animal. Fanon further states, "Confronted with this alterity, the white man needs to defend himself, i.e., to characterize "the Other," who will become the mainstay of his preoccupations and his desires" (pp. 147-48). In this regard, the black man becomes the object of the white man's violence. What is the cause of scapegoating? Fanon recounts two causes of this psychological melody; "sadistic aggressiveness toward the black man" and "guilt complex" in the whites in the face of democratic ideals of equality (p. 155). In this way, whites concoct a reason for their brutality that their violence against blacks is directed for advancement of humanity. In reality, he wants to relieve himself of psychological pangs by projecting his own negative impulses to a black man. Fanon (1952/2008) quotes Baruk who says, "We shall only be free of hate complexes once mankind has learned to repudiate the complex of the scapegoat" (p. 160). *The Underground Railroad* provides insight in to the psyche of whites through the delineation of the characters of Arnold Ridgeway, his father, Dr. Stevens, Mrs. Garners, and Ethel. Ridgeway and his father are typical white male characters who are the proponents of the logic of slavery. Dr.

Stevens has internalized the negro myth in imperceptible way. He regards blacks subhuman due to his urgency to earn money and fame as a doctor. On the other hand, Mrs. Garners treats Caesar and his parents benevolently but her promise to set them free proves futile with her death. Of all these white characters, Ethel is not only compassionate to blacks but also pays with her life by harboring Cora in her house despite the fact that she was brought up in a typical white family. Therefore, the psychological aberration of scapegoating can rightly be investigated in the violent characters like Ridgeway and his father.

Ridgeway's father was a blacksmith. "The sunset glow of molten iron bewitched him, the way the color emerged in the stock slow and then fast, overtaking it like an emotion, the sudden pliability and restless writhing of the thing as it waited for purpose. His forge was a window into the primitive energies of the world." His partner, Tom Bird, always spoke of The Great Spirit in all things. Ridgeway's father did not believe the religious talk but then Tom Bird would remind him about his feeling about hot iron. "He bent to no god save the glowing iron he tended in his forge" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 87). The notion about The Great Sprit during the course of narrative is reminiscent of Pantheism, a philosophical thought which propounds that God is present in all natural things. But instead of giving them reverence due to its holiness, Ridgeway's father admires hot iron and its latent energy to use it for his purpose. And his purpose is to make it economically beneficial. American racism treats blacks like this. "It was his mission to upset, mash, and draw out the metal into the useful things that made society operate; nails, horseshoes, plows, knives, guns. Chains. Working the spirit, he called" (p. 87, emphasis added). It is important to note that we are told about chains at Lumbly's station. These chains are used for subjugation of blacks, and Ridgeway's father is helping the system by making chains of iron. Ridgeway did not like his father's work because he worked on inanimate objects. His father told him that he would find his spirit one day. Ridgeway would apply his father's impulse of moulding to human beings. Another desire in Ridgeway is to surpass his father. Working on the anvil will not surpass him. Therefore, his father is not a model for Ridgeway to become so. Narrator in the novel says:

In town he scrutinized the faces of men in the same way that his father searched for impurities in metal. Everywhere men busied themselves in frivolous and worthless occupations. The farmer waited on rain like an imbecile, the shopkeeper

arranged row after row of necessary but dull merchandise. Craftsmen and artisans created items that were brittle rumors compared with his father's iron facts. Even the wealthiest men, influencing the far-off London exchanges and local commerce alike, provided no inspiration. He acknowledged their place in the system, erecting their big houses on a foundation of numbers, but he didn't respect them. If you weren't a little dirty at the end of the day, you weren't much of a man. (p. 88) This paragraph about the personality of Ridgeway indicates that Ridgeway's motives is not only related to commerce but they are related to psychological desire. Explaining the problem from Marxian perspective will not reveal the full picture. On the other hand, exploring Ridgeway's character from Fanonian perspective will be much fruitful.

Ridgeway took up with the patroller at the age of fourteen. Whitehead refers to historical patrol system in the character of Ridgeway. Franklin (2011) says, "One of the devices set up to enforce the slave codes and thereby maintain the institution of slavery was the patrol, which has been aptly described as an adaptation of the militia" (p. 139). Likewise, Campbell (1970) presents a detailed historical account of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Patrol System to enforce that law from 1850 to 1860. Ridgeway is well built. "His body gave no indication of the confusion within" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 88, emphasis added). Narrator's use of words "confusion within" presupposes Fanonian New Humanism. Fanon (1952/2008) says that both black man and white man are locked in their respective blackness and whiteness. There is the "lamentable livery built over centuries of incomprehension" and Fanon's aim is to extricate them (both whites and blacks) from these "affective disorders" (pp. xii-xvi). In this way a true human being will emerge where no one will try to subdue another because such a desire is not inborn in human beings but rather implanted in them by the social structure. Being a human being, Ridgeway will not be a merciless butcher but social order has made him a ruthless slave catcher. This gives rise to "confusion within". This also shows that racism is not only detrimental for the blacks in America, it is harmful for whites as well. And not only in America, it is injurious everywhere in the world.

Delineation of Ridgeway's character prepares readers for the narrator's remarks in the novel, "He beat his fellows when he spied his weaknesses in them" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 89). This is "scapegoating" in psychoanalysis which is like Jungian Shadow. The object becomes an epitome of evil for the subject although there may be no such evil impulse in the object. The

object becomes a source of ill-feeling for the subject and the subject wants to subjugate the object with force. Ridgeway sees his weaknesses first in his fellow patrollers and beats them. Later, Cora's mother and then Cora become objects for Ridgeway in this process of psychological scapegoating. Moreover, he relishes in his description of tormenting Caesar when he was found out. This is the sadistic impulse in his character. Instead of making his father a model for himself, who also harbored violent impulses, Ridgeway makes Chandler his model. Chandler is a ruthless slave catcher and patroller. "An imperfect model, but close to the shape Ridgeway sought. Inside the rules, enforcing them, but also outside" (p. 89).

Physically, patrol was not tough work for a physically strong person, however, it was psychologically the most difficult job for a sensitive person. "They stopped any niggers they saw and demanded their passes. They stopped niggers they knew to be free, for their amusement but also to remind the Africans of the forces arrayed against them, whether they were owned by a white man or not." The profession attracted Ridgeway and very soon he became the chief patroller. "The other patrollers were boys and men of bad character; the work attracted a type. In another country they would have been criminals, but this was America." In slave-catching, Ridgeway copied Chandler because slave-catching had entered into his blood and desire. "Ridgeway ran them down as if they were rabbits and then his fists subdued them. Beat them for being out, beat them for running, even though the chase was the only remedy for his restlessness. ... In the chase his blood sang and glowed" (pp. 89-90, emphasis added). Ridgeway became the most infamous and ruthless slave-catcher. His trick was: "Don't speculate where the slave is headed next. Concentrate instead on the idea that he is running from you. Not from a cruel master, or the vast agency of bondage, but you specifically. It worked again and again, his own iron fact." When Ridgeway became successful in his mission, "he finally left his father behind, and the burden of that man's philosophy. Ridgeway was not working the spirit. He was not the smith, rendering order. Not the hammer. Not the anvil. He was the heat" (p. 96, emphasis added).

The above quoted lines show that Ridgeway understood the systematic impersonal mechanism of slavery. He himself was the proponent of the system, therefore, he executed his campaigns by making them personal. He is not working for the system, he himself is the system. He became a symbol of terror. "The slave mother said, Mind yourself or Mister Ridgeway will

come for you.” Similarly, “The slave master said, Send for Ridgeway” (p. 97). It was due to this notorious nature of Ridgeway that he was summoned on Randall plantation when ordinary slave-catchers failed to bring back Cora’s mother, Mabel. Now he is summoned again to bring Cora back. Ridgeway in his mind thinks that he will level the previous score because he failed earlier to bring Mabel back. Moreover, he has come to know that underground railroad is working this far south. He wants to dismantle it. As he himself is the system, therefore, he wants to crumble down an opposing system. These impulses in his mind make him obsessed with Cora’s capture and he will go to every extent to catch her, make her an example for the rest of the slaves and to satisfy his ego. In this way American racism and white supremacy are symbolized in the character of Ridgeway. When Ridgeway catches Cora in North Carolina and takes her through Tennessee, he speaks to her. In this conversation his character is further revealed as merciless brute.

Conclusion

Psychological scapegoating is the main cause of superiority complex in whites. According to Fanon, scapegoating is the result of sadistic aggression and guilt complex. In order to assuage these complexes, white man projects his own negative traits to a black man and justifies himself for his brutal treatment of the blacks. Analysis of the white character of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* reveals that scapegoating is at the center of racial dilemma in the United States.

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