



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.3. 2022 (July-Sept)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

ANALYSIS OF THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN AND NATURE IN THE UNDERGROUND
RAILROAD FROM PERSPECTIVE OF ECOFEMINISM

HAIXIA YANG¹, YUWEI GAO², YUETIAN LU³

Assistant Professor

¹Research Supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University,
Changping District, Beijing, China

²Research Scholar, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Changping
District, Beijing, China

³Research Scholar, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Changping
District, Beijing, China



Article information

Received:22/07/2022
Accepted: 27/08/2022
Published online:30/08/2022
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.3.67](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.3.67)

ABSTRACT

With the increase of frequent outbreaks of epidemic and extreme weather in recent years, natural issues have once again become one of the concerns of people. However, with the development of people's ideas, natural issues are not only about nature. The relationship of people is taken into consideration. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* not only profoundly shows the history before the emancipation of slaves in the United States, but also has new enlightenment significance for the United States and the world today. This paper will interpret the oppression of women and nature in *the Underground Railroad* from the perspective of ecofeminism, analyze the alliance formed between women and nature, find clues that women and nature are oppressed by the same kind, and break the power relationship system and logocentrism under patriarchy.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, nature, women, oppression

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of *The Underground Railroad* and Colson Whitehead

Colson Whitehead won the 101st Pulitzer Prize for fiction and American National Book Award for his work *The Underground Railroad*. Once published, the book has been appreciated and favored by many readers around the world, and has become an important representative of mainstream literature, and has been strongly recommended. The book was on Obama's summer reading list. Major European media outlets have been raving about it. The book won the Andrew Carnegie Medal in January 2017.

Colson Whitehead was born in New York in 1969 and graduated from Harvard University. He is a talented writer who has taught at Columbia University, Princeton University and New York University. Colson collected a lot of materials for his novel. Some are from former slaves, and some are from memoirs written by former slaves. These materials paint a panoramic picture of life during slavery, including the farm scene, slave life, the operation of different farms in different states of the United States, as well as the language and conversation

between serfs and farmers. The author tries to reflect American history, and even black history, through the perspective of Cora, the fictional character, and her experiences. The materials he collected makes the whole story more vivid, increasing the credibility and appeal. Moreover, the description of the slave owner's manor is realistic.

The novel tells the story of Cora, a black slave, escaping from the south slave owner's manor and seeking freedom in life all the way to the north. The story takes place in the 19th century before the outbreak of the American Civil War. Cora's grandmother was captured by white slave hunters and brought to the United States. After several auctions, she came to Georgia in the southern United States to work as a slave. There Cora's grandmother found a husband and gave birth to a child, Mabel, Cora's mother. After giving birth to Cora, Mabel fled the estate when Cora was nine. Without the love and care of her parents, Cora was beaten and bullied by her slave owners, living a dark and miserable life. Cora couldn't bear it anymore and determined to escape with her friend Caesar. They took the legendary secretive underground railway to the north towards freedom. Each time they escaped, they felt as if they were in utopia, but later Cora found out that she was wrong. She fled to North Carolina, passed the trail where black bodies hung, hid in low attics for months, and envied the wild dogs that roamed the park. She was later accused, and the white couple who helped her were hanged. She went on the run. There is no destination in the world, only places to escape from. Although the road to freedom and equality is fraught with challenges, Cora must forge ahead. Along the way, they encountered hardships, brutal manhunt, and the innocent sacrifice of their fellow passengers, until they finally found the entrance to the underground railroad and boarded a train that would stop at no one knew where. The subway trains stopped at various stations from North Carolina, through Tennessee, Indiana, and then farther away. Cora's escape route presents a panorama of American life. Along the way, Cora witnessed the darkness of American society, the pervasive violence, and the unjust laws.

The title of the novel is a metaphor. It actually refers to a network and sanctuary that transported slaves from the slave states of the South to the free states of the north and Canada during the Abolitionist movement in the United States. It was secretly built by abolitionists, including black and white, and there was no real underground railroad. In Whitehead's novel, the underground railroad becomes an actual railroad system. The author has said that his original intention was to turn metaphor into reality, which is the essence of the whole book. The underground railroad has a strong symbolic meaning for the real world. It exists underground, in darkness, and represents a completely different order from that of the upper world. The worlds above and below were in sharp contrast. The world above, though bright, was cold, bloody, and inhuman to the black. The underground world, though shabby and dark, was warm and kind, and even offered the escaping blacks a glimmer of hope. The American racism reflected by the author in this book is presented through the attitude of white people to black slaves with a realistic approach rather than the author's comments. In his novel, Whitehead not only demonstrates the persecution of the white people to the black people, but also shows the black people's killing each other for their own interests, from which we can see the author's thorough examination of human nature.

1.2 Literature Review

Since its publication in 2016, the novel has attracted extensive attention from scholars at home and abroad. Many scholars have analyzed the history of slavery reproduced in the novel from the perspective of history or politics, and explored the historical consciousness and social significance of the novel through the establishment of cultural identity and racial consciousness of African Americans in the predicament. From the perspective of modern narratology, some scholars analyze the modern writing techniques of novels and the writing methods of restoring history. However, there is not much research on feminism in novels, especially on ecofeminism, which is a significant point of this novel. The novel's main character, Cora, has multiple identities, including female, black, and slave. Each of these identities invites inequality and oppression for her. Therefore, from the perspective of ecofeminism, this paper attempts to analyze the overlapping identity of women in this work and the alliance with nature, which is also oppressed and exploited, and overturn the binary opposition and logocentrism in the patriarchy.

2. Ecofeminism

Although the different definitions of ecofeminism cause the movement internal factionalism, but ecofeminism critics have reached the following consensus. There is an important connection between man's appropriation of nature and man's use of woman, and understanding the former necessarily helps to understand the latter, and vice versa. In other words, man's domination of nature is based on a patriarchal worldview that legitimizes their domination of women. Accordingly, ecofeminism expands its focus to examine the relationship between all types of oppressive governance structures. Ecofeminism is dedicated to the study of interlinked conceptual structures that sanction the oppression of a range of groups, including women, colored people, animals, and the nature. Ecofeminism is a universal ethical criticism based on gender and environmental issues. It is not only cross-sex and cross-species, but also cross-class and cross-race, eliminating all artificial separation gaps. Its acceptance in China will also lead to a unique dialogue position in the international academic arena through the formal development of traditional ideological resources.

The oppression of both women and nature comes from the binary opposition of western cultural tradition. Such a concept promotes the value choice and inevitably leads to the anomie of the relationship between human and nature. The binary opposition is a construction, so the oppression of women and nature is a constructive oppression under the same logic. Just because both of them are in the position of object and the other, the femininity and natural characteristics are constructed as the same kind by anthropocentrism, which leads to the seemingly natural closeness between them and promotes the spontaneous community of women and nature. The root of the binary opposition is logocentrism. In the relationship between man and nature, logocentrism is embodied as anthropocentrism, in which man is regarded as the center and nature is degraded. In gender relations, logocentrism is embodied as androcentrism, where men are the center and women are oppressed. The patriarchal system is just based on the theoretical basis of androcentrism. Therefore, mankind's plunder of nature and men's oppression of women follow the same set of ruling logic. Just because these two kinds of oppression are derived from logocentrism, it is necessary to resist logocentrism itself in order to resist this kind of oppression. It is impossible to retain logocentrism while eliminating oppression, and it is impossible to resist one kind of oppression while ignoring other homogeneous oppression. Otherwise, it can only alleviate the superficial phenomenon of oppression but not eliminate its deep structure. Therefore, ecofeminism is committed to simultaneously resisting these two kinds of oppression and eliminating the ruling logic behind them.

3. Ecofeminism in *The Underground Railroad*

The Underground Railroad tells the story of a black girl escaping from plantations. Because the setting is in accordance with the historical reality, little attention has been paid to the relationship between oppressed characters and natural imagery such as plantations. This chapter will analyze the implied meaning of the text from the following three perspectives from the perspective of ecofeminism.

3.1 The Intersectionality of Female Identity

For American intellectuals with conscience, especially ecologists and ecofeminists, the projection of the oppression of the disadvantaged on natural issues has always been one of their concerns. Ecofeminism pays attention to the intersectionality of the identity in its analysis. The intersectionality makes feminists realize that an individual subjected to multiple oppression, such as gender discrimination, racial discrimination and even class oppression, is in an extremely complex overlapping state of oppression. In the novel *The Underground Railroad*, the heroine Cora has multiple identities, including female, black and slave, which is a typical representative of the intersectionality of the identities. Cora is a homeless American slave girl who leads a hopeless life after being bullied and raped on a plantation. Each brutal beating made her determined to escape from the plantation. She escaped north on the secret underground railroad. Therefore, the oppression of Cora comes from many aspects of society, including male sexism and physical bullying based on androcentrism, cruel oppression by slave owners, and racial confrontation and persecution of colored people by white people. She was not only beaten and oppressed by the plantation owners, but also abused by the male slaves on the plantation. In addition, because of her race, she was exploited and cheated by white people in the process of

fleeing north. This enables the novel to be analyzed from multiple perspectives and has a deeper research significance and multi-level connotation. It is worth noting that in addition to the heroine Cora, there are some supporting characters with intersectionality identities in the novel that are worth noting. For example, the male black slave Blake was favored among the slaves because of his physical strength and the efficiency with which he created the value of labor. He was proud of his male superiority and considered himself an upper class slave, occasionally bullying others. However, he was only one of the oppressed. There are descriptions of him in the book that use natural imagery. "Blake was a big oak, a double-ration man who quickly proved a testament to Terrance Randall's investment acumen. The price they'd get for the offspring of such a stud alone." (Whitehead, 7) In this book, trees are mostly cut down and used to hang their carcasses, while horses naturally appear as images of being conquered, ridden, driven and enslaved. Through such images, the author reveals the essence of Blake's identity and points out that black, seemingly superior to others, has not escaped the fate of oppression. However, even men who are oppressed and discriminated against are still inclined and keen to oppress women and nature who are in a worse situation, which is enough to show the poison of patriarchal ideology and the multiple difficult situations faced by women and nature.

There are also supporting white women who help persecute colored people, such as Lucy, who are also worth analyzing. Instead of being sympathetic, supporting and protecting each other, she persuaded Cora to surrender the right to control her own body and covered up the crime of persecuting black women together with other white people. Lucy is Cora's teacher in the school on the way to the north. She helps the white government brainwash and do ideological work for black people, and lies to Cora and other colored people about the truth, so that the colored children are robbed and the direction of public opinion is changed. "Miss Lucy recoiled from the comparison. 'If you can't see the difference between good, upstanding people and the mentally disturbed, with criminals and imbeciles, you're not the person I thought you were.'" (Whitehead, 98) As a female, Lucy is fully aware of the physiological structure and rights of women, and she is likely to become a mother. However, when the white government steals the children of slaves, she does not try to stop it out of empathy, but lies and deceives others when questioned, so as to numb the cognition and thoughts of slaves. Lucy is a white woman, but because of her own identity partial cognition, she didn't want to know whether she is materialized as men for power and resources in the process, and she wasn't aware of the identity of cognitive bias and colluding with white male persecution of black women together can make the white women will someday end up the oppressed. The above characters have overlapping identities, but incomplete recognition and ignorance of the real principal contradiction will keep them trapped forever.

3.2 The Alliance of "the Other"

Oppressed by the same logic of domination, women form a sympathetic alliance with nature and the other oppressed. In this union, women are more caring and close to nature and other oppressed than men. The author juxtaposes the tragic experiences of women, nature and other oppressed people and constructs a connection between them, which is the expression of the common fate of women and nature oppressed and dominated in the patriarchal world, implying the author's humanistic care for women, nature and other vulnerable groups. In *The Underground Railroad*, there are quite a lot of isomorphism between women and nature to show the connection between women and nature. For example, Ajarry is Cora's grandmother, a slave brought to the United States from West Africa. She was traded several times and subjected to inhuman abuse and rape while being transported to the United States. She tried to fast and jump into the sea, but was stopped, handcuffed and shackled, and subjected to double pain and suffering. The slave owner roughly squeezed Ajarry's breasts during the sale to value her and branded her with fire. She had three marriages and five children, but only one of them survived. "Ajarry spent three months as the property of a Welshman who eventually lost her, three other slaves, and two hogs in a game of whist. And so on." (Whitehead, 2) The author juxtaposes the fate of black female slaves with that of hogs, reflecting the similar tragic situation of women and animals. "The temperature requirements for a healthy cotton harvest. Ajarry made a science of her own black body and accumulated observations. Each thing had a value and as the value changed, everything else changed also. A broken calabash was worth less than one that held its water, a hook that kept its catfish more prized than one that relinquished its bait." (Whitehead, 3) In this description, the author uses healthy cotton to refer to the

available slaves and women who are objectified. Natural images such as calabash and catfish further indicate that the oppressed can only be quantified as the use value of money in the eyes of the oppressors. "Ajarry died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean." (Whitehead, 4) Black slave women end up dying in cotton piles without successful resistance or change in their lives. Cotton, as a plant on the earth, has become a money-making machine in human hands. Cotton is grown to pick and reprocess things for human use, and is squeezed through life, much like the lives of black slaves on plantations. The black slave Ajarry died in the cotton pile and merged with the cotton, which further reflects the isomorphism of women, slaves and exploited plants. The whole plantation was full of oppressed and exploited slaves and cotton, making the setting of the novel more than meaningful. Moreover, the author first describes the process of trees being felled, and then establishes a close spatial and physical connection between the heroine and the trees in the novel, which also highlights that the oppressed women share the fate of the trees in essence. In addition, there is a subtle empathy between women and other oppressed people, such as animals and plants, who are constantly marginalized by the subject of power in the suffering and fate of powerless to resist.

However, sometimes women even act braver and stronger than men, and there are many episodes in the book to prove this, which fully embodies women's strong empathy and moral humanistic concern. When a young black slave on a plantation is brutally beaten by a slave owner, none of the able-bodied adult men stand up to him, only Cora bravely rushes to protect him. "It grabbed hold of her and before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her, she was bent over the boy's body as a shield. She held the cane in her hand like a swamp man handling a snake and saw the ornament at its tip. The silver wolf bared its silver teeth. Then the cane was out of her hand. It came down on her head. It crashed down again and this time the silver teeth ripped across her eyes and her blood splattered the dirt." (Whitehead, 16) Even as a slave, Cora did not lose the moral concern more evident in women. Both nature and weak children and women are vulnerable groups in a patriarchal society. And Cora's bravery and humanistic care in protecting the abused and beaten boy is undoubtedly the sympathy of women in the League of disadvantaged groups for the weak in their equal position.

3.3 Diet

In addition, diet is also one of the concerns of ecofeminism. Human food comes from nature, so dietary choices are relevant to animal liberation, female oppression, ecological ethics, and a host of important issues related to the state of oppression. Human's attitude and behavior on dietary choice are important factors affecting human's handling of ecological problems, and the most direct relationship with human's diet is non-human animals. Most animals are as conscious as humans and have the ability to sense pain and pleasure. The similarity in vital signs between animals and humans allows people to transfer human emotions to animals. Eating, as a metaphorical writing symbol, is an important code to interpret the power oppression system in the works, the conquering posture of victors and rulers, and the symbol of the spread of human desire to nature. Therefore, the author's description of food sometimes alludes to the situation of women. "The smell of the raccoon meat brought her back to the celebration and she pulled her arm away." (Whitehead, 10) When Cesar persuaded Cora to escape with him, Cora was at first skeptical that the plan would work. The kitchen smelled of food, and Cora, who was always hungry, smelled the meat and refused Caesar's offer. Cora, however, had not yet fully woken up. She was not conscious of the situation she was in and the need to fight or flee. Here the author uses the raccoon meat in the pot as a metaphor for Cora's fate. Raccoons were supposed to be wild animals, not domesticated poultry used for food. Therefore, cooking raccoon meat highlights the cruelty and gore of the plantation, implying the slaves' living conditions and future in the plantation. In the plantation, the slaves who were repeatedly exploited and pressed were just like the raccoon meat in the pot, with no hope of life, and would only be eaten alive in the end, especially the female slave Cora who lived at the bottom. If she doesn't run, she'll end up like raccoon meat. This description also fosters Cora's choice to run away. And there's more. "He violated the bonds of affection, sometimes visiting slaves on their wedding night to show the husband the proper way to discharge his marital duty. He tasted his plums, and broke the skin, and left his mark." (Whitehead, 28) Terrance was one of the slave owners on the plantation. He was not only rough with his slaves, but he also liked to abuse female slaves. He compared female slaves to plums, objectifying women as food and taking them as his own, which is a complete lack of respect for women and their human rights. As a fruit, plums

are one of the symbols of nature. Terrance treated black women as the snack of life, playing with and abusing them recklessly, destroying their lives and emotions. Black slave women can only be chosen, manipulated, exploited, and not resist. This metaphor shows the inability of the female slaves on the plantation to control their fate. In plantations, men in power not only used slave labor to exploit and extract nature, they also plundered women in the same posture and status.

4. Conclusion

The Underground Railroad comprehensively shows the oppression and exploitation of man to nature, white to black, and male to female from all angles. The author skillfully blends these inequalities together to show the real life situation of the United States during this period of history. In fact, the whole world today is still full of inequalities. From the above analysis, we can see the isomorphism of women and nature. Nature is closely connected with human beings. Ecofeminism encourages a state of harmony between man and nature. The beautiful scene of the common development of man and nature is the product of the combination of women's liberation and environmental protection, which marks a new climax in the development of feminist movement and a new stage in the development of environmental protection movement. Ecofeminism is related to the structure and development trend of material civilization, social civilization, spiritual civilization and political civilization, and is also an important content of community research based on the relationship between people, people and nature, and people and society. Ecofeminism emphasizes common development and benefit sharing, and forms the common value concept universally recognized by mankind. The combination of ecological thought and feminism is not accidental. Almost every national culture regards women, art and nature as one. Because of this, when nature is conquered, women will be enslaved, and the charm of art will fade in the process of disenchantment. In real life, when the environment destroys human beings, vulnerable groups, including women and children, are more vulnerable to threats due to their weak means of resistance, which also prompts women's groups to pay special attention to the solution of environmental problems.

The harmonious development of man and nature, the equal coexistence of men and women, and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind is a great cause in the overall progress of human civilization. Despite the gradual progress of the feminist movement, there are still many cases of women being oppressed. And the retribution of human destruction of nature is gradually emerging. We still have a long way to go on the road to de-centralization and the elimination of androcentrism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The deepest and sincerest gratitude goes to my tutor Prof. Haixia Yang for her continuous support and valuable advises to my research. In addition, I'm also thankful to my senior Yuetian Lu. I am highly indebted to NCEPU College of Foreign Languages for providing necessary information regarding this research and for their support in completing this endeavor.

REFERENCES

- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde. New York: Vintage, 2011.
- Gaard, Greta. "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature." *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Ed. Greta Garrd. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
- Nhanenge, Jytte. *Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women, Poor People, and Nature into Development*. Plymouth: University Press of America, 2011.
- Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. New York: Doubleday, 2016.