

Research Article

Silenced Suffering and Subversive Resistance of Black Women in Wench and The Underground Railroad: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Neo-slave narratives, as a literary genre, shed new light on the historical trauma of slavery by integrating historical realities with imaginative narratives. The contemporary contributions offer a platform for authors to revisit and reinterpret the experiences of enslaved individuals, often focusing on the voices excluded from mainstream discourse or silenced in traditional historical accounts. By centering the narratives on Black women, these authors examine the intersectionality of race and gender within the context of slavery, revealing the multidimensional and dynamic character of their struggles and triumphs. This paper examines the silenced sufferings and subversive resistance of Black women in two contemporary African-American neo-slave narratives: *"Wench: A Novel"* (2010) by Dolen Perkins-Valdez, and *"The Underground Railroad"* (2016) by Colson Whitehead. Drawing on a comparative framework, this study explores the sufferings faced by Black women during slavery and their strategies for survival, resistance, and self-preservation. The paper investigates themes such as sexual exploitation, motherhood, identity, and the pursuit of freedom, highlighting the authors' approaches to depicting the intricacies of Black female experiences in the slaveholding South.

Keywords: Fictional elements, Identity, Motherhood, Neo-slave narratives, Pursuit of freedom, Sexual exploitation, intersectionality.

Introduction:

The historical trajectory of slavery in America is deeply intertwined with ethnic and gendered oppression. Black women occupied a unique position, they were not only enslaved individuals but also mothers, wives, and caretakers. The interwoven influences of race, gender, and class profoundly influenced their experiences. As Miriam Thaggert notes, "Black women were often seen as the property of their male counterparts, subjected to the dual oppressions of racism and sexism" (Thaggert 45). This duality leads to the need to examine their narratives, which often elude mainstream discourse surrounding the institution of slavery. The genre of neo-slave narratives has emerged as a potent catalyst for contemporary African-American authors to revisit and reinterpret the intergenerational effects of slavery. These contributions not only foreground the Institutional marginalization but also provide a platform to explore the nuanced experiences of enslaved individuals, particularly Black women. This study undertakes a cross-sectional comparison of two notable neo-slave narratives: *"Wench: A Novel"* by Dolen Perkins-Valdez (2010) and *"The Underground Railroad"* by Colson Whitehead (2016). The focus

will be on silenced suffering and subversive resistance of the Black women as portrayed in these works, examining the various challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to navigate their harsh realities.

The neo-slave narrative genre, as defined by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999), is a form of contemporary fiction that takes slavery as its subject matter and usually adopts the first-person voice of the enslaved. These narratives serve to bridge gaps in historical records, articulating subaltern experiences and marginalized figures of the past. With reference to the experiences of Black women, these novels offer a unique perspective on the nexus between race, gender, and power dynamics during the antebellum period.

Methodology:

The qualitative research methodology is employed for this comparative textual analysis. Analysis takes place by closely reading the novel to establish common interest themes centered around the topic. These textual observations are then used in a conversation between themes surrounding the topic. This paper draws on both primary and secondary sources such as scholarly articles, historical monographs, and critical race theory to add to a more complex understanding of the topic. This comparative study will explore several sufferings and subversive resistance of the Black women that emerge across the selected works:

- 1) Commodification of Black women's bodies.
- 2) Struggle for Motherhood.
- 3) Quest for Identity.
- 4) Resistance and the pursuit of freedom.
- 5) The impact of trauma.

Through close analysis of these themes, this paper will highlight the similarities and differences in how each author approaches the experiences of Black women during slavery.

1. Commodification of Black Women's Bodies:

One of the most pervasive and devastating aspects of slavery for Black women was the commodification of their bodies. The novels under consideration address this issue, albeit with varying degrees of emphasis and approaches. In "Wench: A Novel," Perkins-Valdez (2010) places sexual exploitation at the forefront of her narrative. The story revolves around four enslaved women who are taken to a resort in Ohio as the mistresses of their enslavers. The protagonist, Lizzie, grapples with her complex relationship with her enslaver, Drayle, which blurs the lines between affection and coercion. Perkins-Valdez writes: "She had long ago accepted that her body was not her own. It belonged to Drayle, like the fields belonged to Drayle, like the house belonged to Drayle, like their children belonged to Drayle. She was just another piece of property" (Perkins-Valdez 57).

Colson Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad" (2016) addresses that on Randall plantation in Georgia, enslaved women are valued primarily for their physical strength and reproductive capacity. Their bodies are treated as commodities that generate wealth through labour and child birth. Whitehead's protagonist, Cora's experiences attempted rape and lives in constant fear of sexual violence. These portrayals encapsulate the commodification of Black women's bodies, highlighting how they were viewed as property to be used and disposed of at the whim of their enslavers. They also collectively emphasize how this commodification was not only a tool of oppression but also a means of asserting dominance and control over enslaved women.

2. Struggle for motherhood:

The struggle for motherhood under slavery is a central theme in both the novels, highlighting the unique challenges faced by enslaved women in their roles as mothers. The constant threat of separation from their children and the inability to protect them from the brutalities of slavery create a complex and heart-wrenching experience. In "Wench: A Novel,"

Perkins-Valdez (2010) explores the dilemma faced by Lizzie, who must navigate her role as a mother to her enslaved children while also being the mistress of their enslaver. The author writes, "She thought about her children and how she had failed them. She had brought them into a world where they would never be free" (Perkins-Valdez 203).

Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad" (2016) approaches motherhood from a different angle, focusing on the generational impact of mother-child separations. Cora's journey is significantly influenced by the abandonment she experienced as a child when her mother, Mabel, escaped without her. Whitehead writes, "Cora's grandmother had died in the cotton, and her mother had run away. Mabel had never come back, and Cora was left alone" (Whitehead 8). Through these various portrayals, the authors illuminate the complex emotions and challenges associated with motherhood under slavery. They highlight the strength and resilience of enslaved women who fought to maintain familial bonds in the face of a system designed to tear families apart.

3. Quest for Identity:

The quest for identity is a recurring theme in these neo-slave narratives, as the authors explore how enslaved Black women navigated the oppressive system that sought to deny their humanity and individuality. In "Wench: A Novel," Perkins-Valdez (2010) portrays Lizzie's journey of self-discovery as she grapples with her identity as both an enslaved woman and the mistress of her enslaver. The author writes: "She had always thought of herself as Drayle's girl, but now she wondered who she really was beneath that label" (Perkins-Valdez 178).

In "The Underground Railroad," Whitehead (2016) presents Cora's journey as a quest for self-identification. As she travels from state to state, Cora's understanding of herself and her place in the world evolves. Whitehead writes: "She was a new Cora, who had been born in the fields of Georgia and travelled through the secret veins of America" (Whitehead 298). Through these varied approaches, the authors demonstrate how the quest for self-definition was a crucial aspect of survival and resistance for enslaved Black women. The women in the novels fought to maintain a sense of self and to define their own identities beyond the labels imposed upon them by the slave system.

4. Resistance and the Pursuit of Freedom:

The theme of resistance and the pursuit of freedom is central theme of the both novels, with each author exploring different forms of defiance and the various paths to liberation. In "Wench: A Novel," Perkins-Valdez (2010) portrays resistance through small acts of defiance and the internal struggle for emotional and psychological freedom. Lizzie's decision to learn to read and write, despite the risks, is a form of resistance: "Each letter she formed was an act of rebellion, a silent protest against the system that sought to keep her ignorant" (Perkins-Valdez 142).

Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad" (2016) takes a more literal approach to the pursuit of freedom, with Cora's physical journey on the underground railroad serving as a metaphor for the broader struggle for liberation. Whitehead writes: "Every step of the way was a war, and Cora was a soldier" (Whitehead 172). Through these diverse portrayals, the authors demonstrate the multifaceted nature of resistance and the various ways in which enslaved Black women fought for their freedom. They show that resistance could take many forms, from small acts of defiance to daring escapes, and that the pursuit of freedom was as much an internal, psychological journey as it was a physical one.

5. The Impact of Trauma:

The novels grapple with the profound trauma inflicted by slavery and explore the various ways in which subjected women sought to heal and reclaim their humanity. In "Wench: A Novel," Perkins-Valdez (2010) portrays the lasting psychological effects of slavery, particularly the complex trauma of intimate relationships with enslavers. The author writes:

"The scars on her soul ran deeper than any physical mark could ever reach" (Perkins-Valdez 289).

Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad" (2016) addresses trauma through Cora's journey of self-discovery and her gradual reclamation of her own narrative. Whitehead writes: "She was not a slave. She was Cora" (Whitehead 301). Through these varied depictions, the authors highlight the complex and ongoing nature of trauma of slavery. They demonstrate that healing is not a linear process but a multifaceted journey that involves reclaiming one's identity, finding community, and reconnecting with cultural heritage.

Conclusion:

This comparative study of "Wench: A Novel" by Dolen Perkins-Valdez and "The Underground Railroad" by Colson Whitehead illustrates the diverse and nuanced approaches contemporary African-American writers take in representing Silenced Suffering and Subversive Resistance of Black women during slavery. Through their depictions of motherhood, quest for identity, resistance and trauma, these authors offer a complex and multifaceted perspective of the experiences of enslaved women. While each novel provides a unique approach, several commonalities can be identified: 1. The pervasive nature of the commodification of Black female body and its long-lasting impact on enslaved women's psyches and bodies. 2. The intense emotions of motherhood under the slavery and the strength of maintaining family bonds in face of systematic oppression. 3. The ongoing process of identity formation in system creates to deny individuality and humanity. 4. The various of resistance utilized by the enslaved women; from little acts of defiance to daring escapes. 5. The complex and ongoing nature of trauma of slavery; both individual process and collective process. This neo-slavery narrative serves not only as a means of revisiting and reinterpreting the historical traumas but also as a means of highlighting the resilience, strength and humanity of enslaved Black women. By giving a voice to these often silenced figures, the authors contribute to more comprehensive understanding of the impact of slavery on individuals and communities.

Moreover, these works show the continuing relevance of the slave narrative genre in contemporary literature. These authors produce captivating narratives which resonate with contemporary readers while shedding light on historical injustices. These neo-slavery novels represented a complex interplay of oppression and resistance, of trauma and healing, of despair and hope. These authors through their nuance depictions undermine simplistic narratives about slavery and point out complex experiences of enslaved women. In conclusion this comparative study shows in power of contemporary African American literature to revisit historical traumas, give a voice to the silenced and contribute to an ongoing conversation on race, gender and slavery. The exploration of these narratives indicates the value of the genre in providing a critical space in examining the untold and the underrepresented experiences of Black women. These authors through their matted elements of history, of fiction and of imagination challenge readers in confronting uncomfortable truths and having the hope of resilience & liberation. These texts contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the legacy of slavery and its lasting impact on society, inspiring a continuing conversation and reflection.

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