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Children As a Source of Exploitation: The Neglect of the Lives of The Children in Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*

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ABSTRACT

Underground Railroad (2016), a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel for fiction in 2017, focuses on antebellum Southern America during the nineteenth century in an alternative history fiction. The existence of a wide range of representatives of child neglect and abuse of Afro-American enslaved children in the novel stimulates a need to deal with the neglect of the children in the *Underground Railroad,* penned by Colson Whitehead in the framework of decolonial childhood theory through postcolonial literary criticism by Manfred Liebel to learn the way of protecting children from neglect, exploitation, and violence by benefiting from children's rights. It is pointed out that all the enslaved Afro-American children portrayed in the novel are neglected, ignored, and outcasted in the colonial period of America. Not only are their fundamental requirements not met, but even their right to live is taken from them without giving any punishment to the criminals, because the enslaved children are not given the right of citizenship in the colonial period. Thus, their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights are denied by the white supremacists. All in all, the children in the novel reveal the way they are exploited systematically in the process of colonial conduct before Emancipation in America.

Keywords: Children, Rights, Discrimination, Neglect, Exploitation

Sömürü Kaynağı Olarak Çocuk: Colson Whitehead'in Yeraltı Demiryolu Adlı Romanında Çocukların Hayatlarının Görmezden Gelinmesi ve İhmali

ÖZ

2017 yılında kurmaca dalında en iyi roman seçilerek Pulitzer Ödülü'nü kazanan *Yeraltı Demiryolu (2016),* alternatif tarihi roman türünde on dokuzuncu yüzyıl İç Savaş öncesi Güney Amerika'ya odaklanmaktadır. Romandaki köleleştirilmiş Afro-Amerikalı çocukların ihmal edilmesine ve istismarına dair geniş bir yelpazede örnekler içermesi, Manfred Liebel tarafından geliştirilen kolonileşme karşıtı çocukluk çalışmaları çerçevesinde onların ihmal, sömürü ve şiddetten nasıl korunabileceğini açıklayan çocuk hakları teorisi çerçevesinde çalışma ihtiyacını tetiklemektedir. Romanda yer alan kolonileşme dönemi Amerika'sındaki tüm köleleştirilmiş Afro-Amerikalı çocukların ihmal edildiği, görmezden gelindiği ve toplumdan dışlandığı görülmektedir. Böylece çocukların sivil, politik, ekonomik, sosyal ve kültürel hakları beyaz ırksal üstünlükçüler tarafından inkâr edilmektedir. Sonuç olarak, söz konusu romandaki çocuklar, Özgürlük Dönemi öncesi kolonileşme uygulamaları sürecinde sistematik olarak nasıl sömürüldüklerine ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çocuklar, Haklar, Ayrımcılık, İhmal, Sömürü

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Introduction

Underground Railroad (2016), by Colson Whitehead, has been one of the milestones of the post-millennium postcolonial novel, redesigning historical fiction. The novel aims to reimagine alternative history, and it presents a bright, insightful, and anti-narrative against slavery. Considering the race-reductionist views about the novel, it is highly possible to investigate the novel in terms of decolonial childhood studies, as the work is a vivid source of evidence of neglect and ignorance of children's rights through the story of a fugitive enslaved girl who strives to escape the antebellum bondage in the Southern America.

Colson Whitehead's writing style stands out for its preference to fictionalize the historical events from the American colonial era to shed light on institutional racism and social inequality from a critical point of view on the failure of American policies. The author frequently expresses that fiction is built on facts, so he frequently refers to events, policies, institutions, or people from the past to investigate the influence of institutionalized

racism, violence, and inequality as aspect of colonialism which still goes on its impact today. While he builds fictional characters who are precisely analyzed, at the same time, by reconceptualizing them in the fictional context, he stresses the way structural violence impacts African American people's lives.

The author's choice of themes in his fictional novels reveals his intellectual sensitivity towards reanalyzing traumatic, structural, and generally disregarded significant events from the past of the USA. Whitehead gives significance to exploring intergenerational traumas in terms of epigenetic postmemorial experiences to search for the multigenerational impacts of trauma and resilience for the Afro-American people who are the descendants of enslaved African captures who struggled against a wide range of discriminatory oppression that is embedded in the legacy of slavery. Thus, the author supports explaining the reasons for many issues that many Afro-American individuals confront today by authenticating the pain that has been ignored or underestimated by white authority. In this process, reconstructive historical literary works, which are the core of historical fiction, enable remembering and reminding of the traumas of the past for enslaved Afro-American people as the motto and apparatus of postcolonial literature to decolonize.

Material and Method

Material

Underground Railroad is a rich text to remember the aspect of colonialism. Besides, it spotlights the dark history of America's behavior towards the African American community (Londen, 2021, p. 24). Concurrently, the novel's anachronisms link the dark history to the current mistreatment of the same community. According to the Pulitzer Prize Jury, Colson Whitehead's approach to historical fiction is far from typical representatives of the category, and the way he uses allegorical elements to refer to the realities of the Afro-American people has enabled him to be awarded in 2017.

Underground Railroad narrates the story of a very young, enslaved girl in her teens who runs away from a Georgia plantation to have an opportunity to survive as a result of harsh punishment. While the story narrates Cora's experiences as an enslaved child before the abolition, the novel also sheds light on other enslaved children, such as Michael, Fiona, Lovey, and Homer, who are also victim of enslavement. Thus, the novel illustrates the way the children are mistreated by the white authority, so the paper struggles to investigate the representatives of ignorance of children's rights for the sake of imperialism in the *Underground Railroad.*

Decolonization of childhood studies in postcolonialism

Postcolonial literary theory and criticism aim to shed light on the unspoken subjects of the colonized sphere and the impact of European colonization. Lexically, colonization essentially refers to organization and arrangement. The word derives from the Latin word *colĕre*, which means to cultivate or design (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 1). This designation has also affected children from the colonized territories for the sake of capitalist-global benefits. Focusing on the policies conducted on the colonization of children, Manfred Liebel has observed that children constitute the majority of the profits gained from the colonization of children. Hence, the critic has concentrated on childhood studies in the framework of postcolonialism.

Manfred Liebel's studies are critical in terms of meticulously exploring the strong relationship between colonialism and children to evolve a notion of childhood within the postcolonial and decolonial framework. In his view, the history of childhood is closely interwoven with changes in the tendencies of production and reproduction of societies, with the development of the capitalist mode of production, and with the project of the colonization of childhood (Liebel, 2020, p. 36). According to Joe-Ann Wallace, the idea of the child was a significant precondition of imperialism. In other words, the West had to devise for itself 'the child' before it could think a particularly colonialist imperialism (1994, p. 176). When the concept of childhood was on the verge of formation in Europe, the child metaphor meant 'the primitive people' who were considered 'wild' and 'uncivilized'. Bill Ashcroft points out a critical point about the reality that when the child came out as a philosophical concept, 'race' as a classification of biological and physical distinction was put forth. While race could not take place, racism formed a hierarchy of difference, and the notion of child referred to the hostility that is inherent in this taxonomy and enables a 'natural' justification for imperial dominance over subjects of people. Tanja Kleibl et al. state that the colonial conquest and occupation of the new lands required naturalizing this process as a parent-child relationship, corresponding to the paradoxical impulses of parents between exploitation and care (2019, p. 1947). Hence, the child has been turned into an 'object' of global authority.

In this process, the child enabled the balance of the conflicting inclination of imperial rhetoric, referring to authority. According to Ashcroft, it is kept in balance with nurture, domination, and enlightenment degradation with idealization, negation with affirmation, exploitation with education, and filiation with affiliation (p. 41). While the West set its policies about colonization of African children, it based its structure on John Locke's notion of empty space as the philosophy that is necessary to base the philosophical background of the colonial conduct. In Mehta's view, the expression of the 'blank page' refers to absence and exclusion by commenting on a child's innocence, so West's exclusionary strategies nurture 'civilizational infantilism'. In this context, neither the child nor the colonial subject owns access to meaning outside the processes of colonization and Western education (199, p. 48). In this process, the children are accepted as the 'being' to be shaped by the 'civilized' in the framework

of Western doctrines to grow the future slaves in accordance with their owners' demands.

One of the leading results of childhood and colonial conquest was the idea of development that came out in the late 19th century and portrayed non-European countries as perpetually backward. As the child always implies having a future, the image of a child may be a personification of a better future, so the history of decolonization indicates that young people, whom we call children today, have always had a prominent role in liberation movements. According to Liebel, the West has developed dominant models of childhood that reproduce hierarchies and separations. In other words, a harsh separation between adults and children is built, and the relationship between both is institutionalized as a power structure, which is based on the force and privilege of the stronger group (p. 40). Hence, childhood is related to a state of incompleteness, dependence, and subordination. Regrettably, this adult-child dichotomy is rarely questioned since it is supported by the 'scientific construction of the hierarchical adult-child relationship'.

The theory of decolonialization of childhood is aware of the fact that children's rights are not sufficient to decolonize the children of colonized territories. According to Manfred Liebel, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is not enough as a reply to the existing problems of the colonized children. Still, he believes that even the rudimentary rules of the convention are not met in many parts of the colonized territories. In this context, the article aims to investigate the extent of the ignorance of children's rights in Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Underground Railroad,* as a literary work, including a wide scope of representations of the ignorance of enslaved children before emancipation in America.

Findings and Discussion

The neglect of enslaved children's rights in the *Underground Railroad*

The neglect and ignorance of children's rights in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* is a critical issue for decolonial studies, as it seeks to reimagine the past from the perspective of resistance-postcolonial counter-discursive narratives, and the novel includes a wide scope of representatives of violations of children's rights. Taking into consideration the enslaved Afro-American children in this novel requires remembering the fact that African American people were not accepted as citizens. Instead, they were put into the position of property of the plantation owners. In this sense, it is not possible to analyze the extent of ignorance of the children's rights in the aforementioned novel, so centralizing on the way the African American children's rights are neglected may be more plausible in the framework of childhood studies in a postcolonial context. The issues about children start in African villages, where children are kidnapped and sold to the British Governor. Russlyn Ali documents that when Christopher Columbus colonized America in 1492, sexual violence was a fundamental focus of control and authority, which was used to claim power over Indigenous women. Additionally, the majority of the survivors of this kind of violence were between nine and ten years old (2021, p. 19). In this context, the 'women' mentioned in the quotation were merely children from the period of primary school age who were stolen away from their families. Whitehead also sheds light on such cases by penning, *"[…] children, marching them in chains to the sea two by two"* (Whitehead, 2016, p. 3). This expression exemplifies the cases of child kidnapping on an international scale for the sake of imperial capitalist human trade. Hence, Article 7 of CRC, which states that children have the right to know and be cared for by their parents (CRC, p. 2), is violated since childhood is the best time to teach slavery and forget their past. Thus, the West took an active part in the children's being taken away from their families at a time when a human being needs their parents most. Hence, these children are separated from their roots and families and left alone on a different continent by forcing them to forget their family, culture, and past to forge them in line with the capitalist-colonial benefits. Regrettably, it is merely the beginning of the children kidnapped in Africa in the novel.

The Middle Passage, lasting more than six weeks in the ship's basement with a lack of food, hygiene, not enough space to sit, and confinement in shackles, reveals the extent of inhumane conditions in the novel to spot the way the captured children were neglected. The author mentions, *"gloom of confinement, and the screams of those shackled to her contrived to drive Ajarry to madness"* (Whitehead, p. 3). Ajarry's voyage demonstrates the extent of the physical violence on enslaved children by ignoring even basic requirements, although the West needed their workforce.

Nevertheless, Article 24 unequivocally states that all children have the right to attain the highest attainable standard of health and to have access to facilities for treatment and rehabilitation of their health (CRC, p. 8). Additionally, Article 27 states that every child has the right to live in a standard of living adequate for the child's somatic, mental, spiritual, and social development (CRC, p. 10). In this framework, Ajarry in the *Underground Railroad* experiences a voyage to America without any qualities appropriate for a child, and worst of all, her being only a child is ignored by the sailors on the ship, since she is raped. Furthermore, Cora is also exposed to rape, and the author says, *"Cora's womanhood had came into flower, Edward, Pot, and two hands from the southern half dragged her to the smokehouse"* (Whitehead, p. 25). In fact, colonial history has witnessed a high number of such cases of rape and child sexual abuse to oppress and mute enslaved children (Braithwaite, 2018, p. 589). The point, worsening the situation, is the law of colonial America, since the law defined rape as carnal knowledge of a woman 10 years or older, forcibly and against her will (Conley, 2014, 208). The existence of this law alludes to

the circumstances that ignore the rights to preserve enslaved female children. Hence, the novel demonstrates that the legal system was also constructed to serve colonial conduct and legalize the inhuman discriminatory policies.

The frequency of child abuse and rape in colonial America was a part of the project of oppression of the Afro-American enslaved children for imperial benefits. The worst part of the problem is that the law defines "woman 10 years or older". According to the CRC, a child is defined as every human being below the age of eighteen years in Article 1 (p. 1). Thus, the law accepts any person below eighteen years old as a child. In this context, Ajary, a child who is kidnapped and raped, is not a victim as a child. Furthermore, she is not a victim because she has no right to file charges against white people since people of colour were not accepted as citizens (Liebel, p. 77). In this sense, if no child is accepted as a citizen, there is no opportunity to preserve his/her rights. Thus, the legal system in the novel sheds light on the brutal reality of being an enslaved child who is exposed to displacement and sexual abuse to be subjugated.

Another kind of violation from the childhood theory is child labour and child trafficking, which was a common practice in colonial America till 1865, since companies and plantation owners were desperate for cheap labour. Nevertheless, Article 2251A of the U.S. legal system states that any person responsible for the care of a child is punished when the child is sold, or their control is transferred for the sake of commerce (Justice.gov, n.d.). Ajary, as an underage, experienced being sold many times even before she was eighteen, and the author expresses that:

> […] so many times was she sold and swapped and resold over the next few years. The diagrams were convincing, but in the end Ajarry was another asset liquidated (Whitehead, p. 6).

The quotation may sound implausible today, but enslaved children were the property of their masters or plantation owners, like a house or a carriage. Furthermore, the author's preferred language suggests he is providing information about the stock market and stocks, so the terminology he uses causes one to feel as if he details a 'thing' instead of an 'individual'. In fact, his choice of words helps to understand the mentality of the period, which puts poor and enslaved people into the position of an 'object' to oppress them. In this sense, Ajarry and other enslaved children like Ajarry were considered financial assets or property, which helps her to perceive how she is ignored as an individual via the slave trade, enabling her to understand the reality of the slave system, which decides any 'possibilities' for the enslaved children whose lives are shaped by their financial value. The book, titled *From Father's Property to Children's Rights: A History of Child Custody (1994),* mentions that this harsh approach towards children takes its root from English tradition, which constituted colonial employment law, including indenture contracts for children's custody after the death of the owners of the children. Thus, the novel reveals the way America carries on the dictations that England conducted in America before its independence, which means that the policies in the novel reveal the validity of the British subjugative conduct even after independence. The more critical point in this issue is that such laws were valid in the majority of the continent, where demand for labor exceeded the available supply of adult workers (Liebel, p. 78). Thus, the benefit of the children was surpassed for the sake of multipurpose colonial policies (Hunter, 1994, p. 548). In this context, children became an indispensable part of the imperial economy.

Another representative of ignorance of African-American children in colonial America is the sale of freeborn American babies to the Southern part of the continent as enslaved people without the necessity of making any payment to the babies' parents. In other words, kidnapping babies was an alternative way to meet the needs of the plantation owners in the South (Liebel, p. 208). Gertrude, as a woman staying in the South Caroline state dormitory in room number forty, refers to such sales by screaming, *"they're taking away my babies!"* (Whitehead, p. 126). Room number forty is beyond being an ordinary detail since it alludes to the state dormitories' conduct of controlling women who have babies and whose babies are kidnapped by the slave traffickers. These women's depression and aggressive attitude as a result of their loss were used by the dormitory managers, and they insisted that these women had lost their babies during delivery, but they could not accept their loss and psychologically rejected the realities and blamed people around them for being participants in this crime. Hence, the managers of the dormitories renumbered the rooms for the women who were not 'psychologically well enough' to take part with the other African American residents, so the quotation refers to the state's indirect participation in the ignorance of the children's rights by overlooking such cases.

Regrettably, even accidental mistakes by children were punished in the Antebellum Period. When Chester, a ten-year-old enslaved African American boy, bumps his master's brother, Chester is immediately punished, and the author mentions, *"cane crashed across his shoulder and head, again and again"* (Whitehead, p. 40). Nevertheless, the only person who shows a reaction to a child's exposure to violence is another child, Cora, who pays the price of preserving a teen who is not free. The cost of protecting a child from death is punishment in front of every member of the plantation for two days. Whitehead pens, *"peeled them open the following sunrise. […] called for their bloody backs to be scrubbed out with pepper water. … Connelly repeated the whippings the next two mornings"* (p. 44). In fact, the Convention on the Rights of the Child unambivalently expresses in Article 19 that all children have the right to be protected from all kinds of violence, including physical brutality. Nevertheless, the novel spots the extent of violence on enslaved children, which is beyond their limits to endure, so the author implies that the masters' attitude toward enslaved children reveals the extent of brutality, which frequently leads to their death.

The physical violence conducted on children represented in the *Underground Railroad* is noteworthy. The point that draws Cora's attention, as a child not in her fifteenth year, is the absence of even a reflexive response to such a great extent of violence. As a child herself, Cora may have difficulty understanding the issue of an unresponsive attitude towards violence against children at ten. Still, the response to violence is also met with more violence against anyone criticizing violence against the enslaved people, even if the person who condemns is the master's wife or his children. Under these circumstances, expecting any reaction to initiate any social change is not possible to end the violation of rights. Inevitably, such rarity of response to violence from enslaved adults on enslaved children stems from struggling to stay away from punishment, but it merely nurtures the master's autonomy and undermines collective resistance for freedom.

Leaving children without parents or unattended is a significant issue in the *Underground Railroad,* as seen in the cases of Cora and Chester. Article 5 in the CRC states that the duty of the child's parents, or any other person legally responsible for the child, is to provide appropriate direction and guidance (p. 2). Furthermore, Article 3 guarantees that the institutions, services, and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children must enable safety, health, and supervision (CRC, p. 2). When Cora's circumstances after her mother runs away from the Randall plantation are taken into account, her life as a daughter of a fugitive enslaved person turns into a lonely experience. The author says, *"she decided to hold on to her stake, even though she was young and small and had nobody to look after her"* (Whitehead, p. 17). Thus, Cora, as a child of ten or eleven, turns into a stray, since neither her master nor his overseer assigns anyone from the enslaved community or any other person to care for an underage child. It seems as if Mabel's escape is burdened on her daughter because the price of the gateway must be immediately paid, so it will not be a good representative of a successful escape for other enslaved people. In this sense, the search for the fugitives continues until they are found, and anyone with a relationship is also a potential source of a clue in the pursuit. Such neglect of the children also means the lack of unity among enslaved people since they struggle to be away from any trouble by taking fewer responsibilities, but this view merely nurtures fragmentation among the enslaved community, which hinders to come together to initiate a response to the discrimination they are exposed to. Furthermore, this fragmented community preserves masters' benefits who were against solidarity, which includes preventing revolts among enslaved people.

The rate of abuse of children is one significant issue that the *Underground Railroad* deals with since child abuse and sexual violence were not rare problems in the colonial period as a way of oppression to control and subjugate Afro-American enslaved children, and to demonstrate authority, sexual abuse was used in addition to pleasure or punishment. Cora's master, Terrance Randall, is also one of the exemplars of the plantation owners who considers abuse of power as his natural right as a white man. He declares directly, even in the crowd, saying, *"I like to taste my plums"* (Whitehead, p. 36). Even though the conduct of child abuse cannot be completely ended, Article 19 in CRC expresses that all children have the right to be protected from all kinds of violence, including sexual abuse (p. 6). Not only does the novel center on child abuse during that period, but it also sheds light on the impact of rape on children. Cora utters, *"he tasted his plums, and broke the skin, and left his mark"* (p. 36). Terence's calling his female slaves 'my plums' aims to take away their humanity and puts them into the position of object or property, as he legally owns all the rights to consume and exploit them if he wishes, by revealing his degree of cruelty. His inhumane metaphor referring to his obsessive love for Cora explains his sexual aggression and commodification of the female enslaved children, which indicates that slavery was not only nurtured by economic profit but also sadism, power, and a claim for the supremacy of the white authority by maltreating even enslaved children. Nevertheless, Article 34 in CRC expresses that every child and young person owns the right to be protected from sexual abuse, without taking into account the child's gender. Additionally, if a child or a young person is exposed to rape, they also own the right to recover from it and the right to have help to do so (CRC, p. 1989, 12). In this aspect, Cora's being left alone without any medical or judicial support is an act of violation of the children's rights.

Cora's expressions directly reveal that any child who is exposed to such cruel maltreatment cannot leave this experience behind, and it haunts them throughout their lives. Scenes such as dancing among the crowd demonstrate the extent of irritation as a result of her exposure to rape. The moment the music starts, Cora immediately becomes nervous, even thinking about being next to a man she cannot stand, and the possibility of anything to happen. Furthermore, the scene of celebration in the Valentine plantation first reminds her of all the bodies in motion with the accidental touches, which evoke memories of rape. Thus, the author unmasks the realities of child abuse and how they are stuck to these experiences even during their happiest moments.

Education is a precious criterion in the convention of the Children's Rights. In this sense, Articles 19, 24, 28, 29, 31, and 33 particularly emphasize children's right to have effective access to and receive education based on equal opportunity and to have primary education compulsory and free (CRC, p. 10). Thinking about the theme of education in *The Underground Railroad* immediately brings to mind inequality and injustice, since it was forbidden for enslaved people to learn to read. Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and, South Carolina, and Virginia passed anti-literacy laws between 1740 and 1834 for African American enslaved people (Cornelius, 1991, p. 44). This law was a political decision that served as White America's way to preserve the legalization of enslavement, dehumanization, and cultural dominion

over the African American community. Miss Lucy, in the novel as a proctor, mentions, *"I would be fined a hundred dollars and you would receive thirty-nine lashes. That's from the law"* (Whitehead, p. 114). Thus, Miss Lucy confirms that teaching an enslaved person to read is officially a crime, meaning that the law nurtures slavery and racism even for the children. The novel also illustrates the way the legal system nurtures the slavery system beginning in the early period of enslaved people through starting the institutionalized racism in their childhood. Being a white abolitionist and working in an institution supported by the government, Miss Handler is well aware of the paradoxical situation that she is in. The more interesting point about her circumstances is that the majority of her students are merely a few years younger than she is. It demonstrates that white supremacy enacted repressive laws to take control of every aspect of the relationship between Europeans and Americans (Mitchell, 2008, p. 78). Hence, America of the 18th century was the only country that passed anti-literacy laws (Span and Sanya, 2019, p. 402). Such conduct of the prohibition in the Southern states against the education of enslaved children stemmed from the elimination of the possibility of smart and cultivated African American people via hindering acculturation struggles. As a representative of these policies, the author expresses, *"OLD Randall built the schoolhouse for his sons and the grandchildren"* (Whitehead, p. 53). Old Randall's struggle to educate his family is a traditional way for white plantation owners to enable the best education for their white children, as a common practice among wealthy white Americans to be a participant in the high white society in America, and as a symbol of Western civilization (Liebel, p. 50). As regards the education of the African-American children, the Randall family does not let any enslaved children read, and they are not even permitted to go near the school. However, Old Randall's children do not prefer improving their education, nor do they live long enough to have children, so the school turns into a ruin that can serve neither the white nor the black community.

Cora, as a young African American fugitive in her mid-teens, feels astonished because of her late development and the wasted time that is ruined by illiteracy. In addition to this, Miss Handler's scolding of her students does not facilitate the process, so the children in the dormitory have to struggle hard to compensate for the deficiencies and disadvantages of the beginning of their lives as enslaved people. Furthermore, they have to deal with the books that are used many times by the previous dormitory residents. Article 17 (c) states that the production and dissemination of children's books have to be encouraged (CRC, p. 5), but Cora's book is completely in conflict with this article, and the author mentions that a page of her book slips out of her primer and the book falls apart because of being used many times. When Cora looks at other children younger than her, she sees the same primer for their courses, as well. Thus, she understands that no fresh copies exist. The books from the colored schoolhouse are also too worn, and she has to squeeze her writings wherever she can find any space among the scribblings of other people (Whitehead, p. 115). In this context, CRC's Article 17 saying that it should be guaranteed that the child has access to information and material from a wide range of national and international sources, fails in the dormitory by neglecting such a basic need, particularly those aimed at the promotion of his/her social, spiritual, moral well-being, and somatic and mental health. Hence, the author criticizes the circumstances that African-American children are in, even while struggling against institutionalized discrimination with the help of white abolitionists. Thus, the author stresses the impossibility of a clear-cut end to the issue of education for African-American children, which is still a critical problem today.

It is ironic to give place to a character who is an enslaved child reading the Declaration by heart in the novel. Although Michael is not free and the reader never experiences his gaining freedom, this boy achieves what even white people cannot recite. The remarkable point about it is that he does not seem to understand the meaning of the text, which reveals the way enslaved children are ignored in terms of their need for a proper education like freeborn white children. Such neglect hindered enslaved children from communicating, organizing to initiate social changes, and learning the realities of the world. Furthermore, the anti-literacy policies that were so strictly conducted in the novel were related to freedom since literacy is a critical element in abolitionist movements. Michael, being an enslaved Afro-American child, is a representative of a violation of the Declaration's stress on freedom by stating, "*all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty"* (Kaczor, 2023, p. 249). Thomas Jefferson's statement in 1776 demonstrates that Michael also has equal rights with any other white man and that his rights cannot be taken away from him, and his search for liberty is his natural right as a person born in America. In this sense, his enslavement is illegal and against God's will. Nevertheless, the white authority preferred dictating their racial superiority, so they both acted against the law and God's orders. Hence, children in the novel reveal that the way their rights are neglected is against both America's Declaration of Independence and Christianity. Finally, Whitehead's inclusion of this text subtly underscores the inherent irony that the document declaring the United States' independence from Britain based on individual rights was written by Thomas Jefferson, who owned slaves (Cohen, 1969, p. 503). Michael's having no idea about the context of the document is another paradox in the novel. Thus, neither the white master nor the enslaved child reciting the Declaration questions its core and significance. Because the statement is the basis text of the USA, Michael's talent refers to foundational sins of America (Groba, 2019, p. 255). Thus, Michael reminds the reader of what is neglected in practice, while the theory in the document gives priority to equality and freedom. Besides, Michael's talent spots the extent of enslaved

children's potential for education and what they could achieve if they had the opportunity, but the policies on the prohibition of education for these children illustrate the slave owners' consciousness about the children's capacities and fear of losing their most profitable workforce.

Childhood studies reject the neglect of children's rights within the framework of preserving their cultural and social identity. Article 29 (c) ensures the development of respect for the child's parents, his/her cultural identity, language, and values, for the national values of the country in which the child lives, the country from which s/he might originate (CRC, p. 11). Referring to Homer's formation of identity by living with the slave catcher Ridgeway, it is critical to remember that he was bought and freed for five dollars, and Homer learns to read. The paradoxical situation stems from his attitudes, as if his roots came from Europe, which bewilders the people from both the white and black communities. While he is an African-American child at ten years old, he does his best to seem as if he were white. Besides, his cursing Cora's name and swearing revenge before she escapes in Chapter-Indiana reveal his self-hatred towards both him and his own race. At the same time, he is fastidious and devoted to Ridgeway, a slave catcher. Such weird characteristics in Homer cause one to think of him as a brainwashed person.

It is a devastating revelation about Homer's self-hatred and his internalized racism against any African American person who recognized him. Although his coming together with Cora and other people of color offers an opportunity to communicate with people of his own race and participate in his own community, he is unflinchingly loyal to Ridgeway to the point that it disturbs anyone who sees them together. Whenever Ridgeway wants Homer to do something, he immediately follows his orders. Nevertheless, the scope of his loyalty merely corrupts Homer, which may be accepted as Ridgeway's worst evil that he commits on enslaved people. Although he does not behave better than Big Anthony, Homer is willing to be his living toy. Homer, who does not have a sense of solidarity with African American people and merrily prefers to follow Ridgeway's path, is observed by the reader to voluntarily alienate himself for the sake of white supremacy at such a young age. In fact, Homer's meticulous notes on Ridgeway's profits and losses reveal that he is alienated in pursuit of economic benefits, as well. When Ridgeway explains the meaning of Manifest Destiny, he says, *"taking what is rightfully yours, your property. Whatever you deem it to be"* (Whitehead, p. 266). He insistingly assumes that Homer is old enough to notice that a black boy has no future, free papers, or rights in this country. Homer can learn about the world with a white man (p. 243). Hence, Homer has been indoctrinated to mimic white civilization. In this process, a bridge might be built between Homer's mimicry and contemporary popular public figures who perpetually act against their own culture and past as a path to alienation from their own identity and roots by the 'self' in their own blood in the form of acculturation. Thus, Homer becomes a representative of a consciously forged child in the mould of mimicry as an Afro-American child. Homer's priority stresses the power of the double consciousness for popular culture as a prominent policy for assimilation of Afro-American youth by following mainstream and dominant cultures that are initiated by white supremacy, which attracts the Afro-American to get away from being 'other', or 'minority' in society, which is controlled by the white authority. Hence, many young members of the Afro-American community are subjugated via Western culture.

Conclusion

Underground Railroad is a widely known historical fiction that spotlights the enslavement after the antebellum period in America. Furthermore, the novel has been effective in demonstrating the way the enslaved Afro-American children were abused, neglected, and ignored systematically by comparing the representatives of neglect and ignorance of the children with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Articles 3, 5, 17, 19, 27, and 29 are frequently violated in the novel. The extent of physical, psychological, and political violence against children causes racial trauma, which results in subjugation and rejection of collective resistance to initiate a radical social change. As a minority group in America, African American children were born unfree. The characters, such as Cora, Chester, Michael, and Lovey, are ignored systematically; their rights as children in the country where they were born had not been taken into account. Referring to the future in literature, children in the colonial plantations allude to the destruction of the roots of the African American people, even from their childhoods. Therefore, the author seems hopeless about the future and the welfare of the colored population, as a child is a prominent metaphor referring to hope for the future in literature. In this context, Colson Whitehead reimagines and pens in *Underground Railroad* the most common representative of child neglect and abuse on colonial plantations in America before Emancipation. Additionally, the novel illustrates scenes of institutionalized racial discrimination against children, prohibiting them from receiving a proper education and nurturing an identity crisis. Thus, enslaved African American children in the aforementioned novel draw a vivid picture of children whose civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights are denied by white authority for the sake of globalization. Hence, the children in the novel reveal the way they are exploited systematically in the process of racial discrimination. Thus, the enslaved children become a metaphor for the heartbreak and the loss of youth as the inevitable realities of slavery after the antebellum period. Besides, these children's exposure to such intense neglect and violence does not promise improvement of their rights.

The novel's focus on the period before emancipation enables enhanced visibility of slavery in the

public memory by presenting the requirement of racial advancement, racial reconciliation, and collective resistance via describing cathartic scenes to associate the novel with the current problems of discrimination among Afro-American community in the contemporary period. Hence, the author implies the necessity for spotting the historical injustices to initiate transformative opportunities for social consciousness and collective resistance. Thus, the systematically oppressive workings of discrimination existing even after the millennium may be noticed, and Afro-American advancement may gain momentum.

All in all, the study concludes that the *Underground Railroad* represents the patterns of child ignorance and neglect, which are against children's rights in the framework of Manfred Liebel's childhood studies in the postcolonial framework. Thus, the novel spotlights the requirement to bring forward the issue of neglect of Afro-American children's rights today.

Extended Abstract

The existence of neglect and the ignorance of children's rights in the colonized territories is a crucial issue. According to Manfred Liebel, the exploitation still goes on all around the world, and the most dangerous kind of exploitation is conducted on children who do not have the freedom of choice and expression to defend their rights; therefore, the practice involves the distribution of asymmetrical power through economic and political relationships even on the children of the colonized. Children, as the hope for the future, take their share from racial devaluation and discrimination. The process of nation-state formation also could not enable decolonization to protect the colonized from 'marginalization'. Hence, children continue to be the victims of cheap laborers, as well. Despite the struggles of the non-governmental children's relief organizations to save the colonized children from the legacy of colonialism, they are regrettably restricted in furthering the elements of white civilization that do not correspond to the requirements of the indigenous children. Besides, the core of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Articles 3, 5, 17, 19, 27, and 29, is critical to meeting the basic needs of colonized children. Liebel's perspective on decolonial childhood studies triggers Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* to draw attention to how Afro-American enslaved children are exposed to all kinds of violence for the sake of capitalist imperial colonialism. In this context, this study aims to spot the neglect and ignorance of children's rights in the *Underground Railroad, within* the framework of Manfred Liebel's decolonial children's studies, by applying qualitative discourse analysis as part of literary research. The findings in the novel demonstrate that Afro-American enslaved children were not accepted as 'children'. Instead, they were put into the position of an 'object' serving their owners' benefits. Furthermore, the novel reveals that the enslaved children are deprived of every right that white children have, from the right to survival to the right to have a proper education, which are the fundamental responsibilities of Western civilization from their perspectives. In this context, it can be concluded that the colonizer who finds himself as the owner of the responsibility to educate and civilize the illiterate and barbaric indigenous people ignores his mission in the aforementioned novel.

Genişletilmiş Özet

Sömürgeleştirilmiş topraklarda çocuk haklarının ihmal edilmesi ve göz ardı edilmesi çok önemli bir sorundur. Manfred Liebel'e göre sömürü dünyanın her yerinde devam etmekte olup, en tehlikeli sömürü türü, haklarını savunmak için seçim ve ifade özgürlüğüne sahip olmayan çocuklar üzerinde gerçekleştirilmektedir; bu nedenle, ekonomik ve siyasi ilişkiler yoluyla asimetrik güç dağılımı uygulaması, sömürgeleştirilmiş çocukları bile etkilemektedir. Geleceğin umudu olan çocuklar, ırksal değersizleştirme ve ayrımcılıktan paylarını almaktadır. Ulus devlet oluşumu süreci de sömürgeleştirilmişleri 'marjinalleşmeden' korumak için sömürgesizleştirmeyi sağlayamamıştır. Bu nedenle çocukların ucuz iş gücünün kurbanı olması uygulaması sürdürülmektedir. Sivil toplum çocuk yardım örgütlerinin sömürgeleştirilmiş çocukları sömürgeciliğin mirasından kurtarma çabalarına rağmen, ne yazık ki, yerli çocukların ihtiyaçlarına uymayan beyaz uygarlığın unsurlarını ilerletmekte kısıtlanmaktadırlar. Ayrıca, Çocuk Hakları Sözleşmesi'nin özü, özellikle 3, 5, 17, 19, 27 ve 29. Maddeler sömürgeleştirilmiş çocukların temel ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için kritik öneme sahiptir. Liebel'in sömürgecilik karşıtı çocukluk çalışmaları perspektifi, Afro-Amerikan köleleştirilmiş çocukların kapitalist emperyal sömürgecilik uğruna her türlü şiddete maruz kalma biçimine dikkat çekmek için Colson Whitehead'in *Yeraltı Demiryolu* adlı romanını örnek olarak ele almaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma, edebî araştırma çalışmalarının bir parçası olarak nitel söylem analizi uygulayarak, Manfred Liebel'in sömürgecilik karşıtı çocuk çalışmaları çerçevesinde eserdeki çocuk haklarının ihmal ve görmezden gelinmelerinin nasıl gerçekleştiğine ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır. Romandaki bulgular, Afro-Amerikan köleleştirilmiş çocukların 'çocuk' olarak kabul edilmediğini göstermektedir. Bunun yerine, sahiplerinin çıkarlarına hizmet eden bir 'nesne' konumuna getirildikleri ortaya konmuştur. Dahası, roman köleleştirilmiş çocukların hayatta kalma özgürlüğünden Batı medeniyetinin sözde temel sorumlulukları olan düzgün bir eğitim alma hakkına kadar beyaz çocukların sahip olduğu her haktan mahrum bırakıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda, okuma yazma bilmeyen ve barbar yerli halkı eğitme ve medenileştirme sorumluluğunu üstlenen sömürgecinin söz konusu romanda görevini ihmal ettiği sonucuna varılabilir.

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