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The Study of Conceptual Metaphors in the Feminist Context of Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades conceptual metaphor theory has been a main development in cognitive semantics. Metaphor is one of the useful tools in determining the quality as well as the complexity of a literary work. A creative author can transform our ways of comprehending the world by replacing ordinary expressions with fresh metaphoric expressions, which bring new perceptions and new feelings for us. In this study, the metaphor of freedom has been discussed which is one of key devices that allows for a narration of slavery, injustice and most importantly issues within feminism. Black feminism maintains that class oppression, sexism, racism and gender identity, are intricately related together, it is a school of thought which Patricia Hill Collins as intersectionality explains in black feminist thought (1990). When a speaker successfully uses metaphorical expressions, the persuasiveness of his argument can be increased because they give credibility to his argumentative utterance by turning abstract concept in to something more vivid and clear. Lakoff and Johnson asserted "Because a large number of concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time etc.) different metaphors pervade our normal conceptual system." They consider the metaphor of LIFE IS A JOURNEY in their book, proving human understanding of life as the central part of this metaphor. They claimed conceptual structure is constructed in terms of a metaphorical system and it is determined by mappings or related associations between abstract and concrete domains. In Whitehead's work, the conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY has been used in order to explore the concept of freedom, in this regard, he has used the concrete source domain of Railroad to describe the target domain of Freedom. Whitehead sends Cora to a dreadful peregrination in quest of liberty and as the work proceeds, different stages of her travel acquaint reader with a variation on the situations of enslavement and emancipation. In this work, the cognitive black feminist debate has been conceptualized with the help of Collins' idea of Intersectionality. Whitehead made use of figurative language to picture those incomprehensible atrocities towards colored women because language, the tool of communication, seems to be unable to convey the unimaginable and dreadful destruction of humankind such as racial cleansing, syphilis experiment and rape ... if we limit ourselves to normal words, to the vocabulary of free people. The most successful way of overcoming this linguistic difficulty is the use of metaphor. By bringing intertextual references to real historical incidences and by portraying the goal-oriented emotional states of colored women, Whitehead deepens our understanding of colonialism, postcolonial ties, capitalism... racism, genders and their present situation. With a better understanding of the role of language –especially metaphor – in shaping mental representations of abstract domains, like life, freedom, oppression, time, etc. that people cannot experience first-hand, they will eventually be able to employ the power of metaphor to improve the societies and to fight against mass incarceration, police brutality and other violence.

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