

The reconstruction of slavery in the novel *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson: A post-nationalism perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research examines Laurie Halse Anderson's *Chains* as a counter-narrative to dominant representations of the American Revolution as a universal project of freedom. It employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation and a qualitative textual analysis approach. This study explores how the novel reconstructs slavery as an ideological structure that shapes and limits the meaning of revolutionary liberty. The findings show that *Chains* constructs a genealogy of slavery as a foundation of the American Revolution and represents freedom as a selective and racialized political project. Slavery is portrayed as a system of human commodification that is transnational in nature and legitimized by law and colonial economic practices. Racial stereotypes operate ambivalently by dehumanizing enslaved people while simultaneously opening spaces for agency and resistance. The character Isabel is represented as a rational subject who can read, interpret, and appropriate the discourse of freedom for self-liberation. This article concludes that *Chains* critically and ethically reconstructs the memory of the American Revolution beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Slavery is one of the most problematic historical foundations of the society in the United States (Kidd, 2025). In mainstream historiography, the practice of slavery is often positioned as a moral irony or ethical deviation that lies at the margins of the grand narrative of American freedom and democracy (Wimmler & Wiegminck, 2024). The American Revolution is frequently represented as an emancipatory moment that gave birth to universal freedom, while slavery is treated as a temporary historical residue that would be resolved along with the development of the nation. These narratives are constructed through discursive and visual representations

that shape public perception and normalize particular understandings of racial hierarchy (Ayedoji, 2021). Consequently, they produce a collective memory that places national freedom as the primary value while obscuring its structural relationship with the systemic practice of racial slavery (Bailey, 2023; Ward, 2023).

In the development of contemporary critical study, the view that situates slavery outside the core of the national narrative has begun to be questioned seriously. A number of historians and cultural critics emphasize that slavery is not merely a historical background, but an integral part of the formation of American economics, politics, and ideology (Bateman & Schickler, 2023; Gutacker, 2020; Soumyajit, 2021). National freedom does not emerge separately from slavery; rather, it is constructed through relations of power that exclude certain racialized subjects from the category of “free human beings.” This perspective encourages a shift from a nationalistic reading toward a post-nationalism approach that views history as an ideological area saturated with conflict, exclusion, and the negotiation of meaning across the boundaries of the nation-state (Abreu, 2023; Fozdar & Woodward, 2021; Guzmán, 2021).

Critiques of slavery have long constituted a major field of inquiry, particularly through readings of slave narratives in novels that reconstruct the history of slavery as a structural and ideological trauma. Studies of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* underline the function of literature as political testimony that relates the lived experiences of the enslaved subjects with projects of moral emancipation and critiques of laws that legitimate the ownership of human beings (Lakshmi et al., 2025). This text is also frequently read as an existential reflection on subjectivity and freedom, while affirming its status as a canonical work that demonstrates the systemic impact of slavery and the intellectual and cultural capacities for resistance among enslaved subjects (Taleb, 2023; Haile, 2024). Contemporary novels such as Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* extend this framework by positioning slavery as a traumatic memory that continues to haunt African American identity across generations, while simultaneously dismantling the illusion of the nation’s moral progress through fragmentary narrative techniques, non-linear temporality, and the deconstruction of binary oppositions between slave and master (Bauschke, 2014; Czerniakowski, 2021; Stern, 2024).

Meanwhile, *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead represents slavery as a national myth reproduced through systemic violence and illusory narratives of progress, combining historical realism and allegory to critique the persistence of structural racism within the modern American imagination (Rezk, 2025; Santin, 2023; Weiner, 2022). Studies on Afro-American literature demonstrate that literary works operate as portraits of human experience, reflecting identity, social struggle, and collective values embedded in racialized contexts (Kustinah et al., 2021). Furthermore, literary analyses of slavery emphasize that slavery should be understood as a structural socio-economic system rooted in power relations and forced

labor, rather than as a marginal moral issue (Saud, 2020). Further studies highlight how racial subordination is reproduced through literary representation, where black subjects are positioned as inferior, marginalized, and associated with labor and non-human status (Wajiran & Septiani, 2023). In addition, textual analysis of indigenous narratives reveals that representation plays a crucial role in shaping historical memory, identity, and resistance within dominant ideological frameworks (Hasyim, 2025).

These findings reinforce the argument that literary texts actively construct meaning, reproduce power relations, and create spaces for resistance. However, most existing studies focus on pre-Revolutionary or post-slavery periods and frame their critiques within the discourse of modern memory and trauma. Consequently, limited attention has been given to the representation of slavery during the American Revolution as an ideological foundation of national freedom, particularly from the perspective of enslaved subjects and within a post-national analytical framework.

Contemporary American literature, especially historical fiction, plays an important role in expanding ways of understanding history and national identity. With postmodern and post-nationalism sensibilities, literary texts no longer appear as neutral mirrors of historical reality, but as critical spaces that expose how “official” narratives are constructed, naturalized, and maintained (Bilton, 2020). Literature opens up the possibility of rereading history by revealing ideological gaps that are often concealed by national historiography, while shifting marginalized subjects from the periphery to the center of meaning production (Bilton, 2020).

At the same time, the growing attention of the voices of marginalized groups especially racial minorities who have historically been silenced indicates that multicultural literature operates as a representational strategy for presenting “insider” narratives that challenge the dominance of mainstream culture (Mansour & Martin, 2020; Multani, 2023). Therefore, in the context of rereading the national history, a post-nationalism approach becomes both relevant and productive: it enables literature to be read not as a reinforcement of the myth of national unity, but as an ideological practice that can be questioned, negotiated, and contested through representations of marginalized experiences that refuse to be confined to mere footnotes in history (Mansour & Martin, 2020; Multani, 2023).

It is within this context that Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Chains* (2008) occupies a significant position. Set during the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), this novel is narrated from the perspective of Isabel, an enslaved African American girl. *Chains* presents a sharp contrast between the rhetoric of revolutionary independence and the concrete experiences of slavery in the form of racial violence, human ownership, and legal powerlessness. Yet, to this date, *Chains* has predominantly been read as an educational historical novel or young adult fiction, and its potential as a critical text that exposes the ideological foundations of American national freedom has not received sufficient academic attention.

Drawing on developments in slavery literature studies and critiques of American national historiography, this article positions *Chains* as a text that reconstructs slavery within a post-nationalism framework. Rather than situating slavery as a moral anomaly that stands outside the project of independence, the novel represents slavery as an ideological structure that systematically both shapes and limits the meaning of the American Revolution's freedom. From the perspective of the enslaved subject, *Chains* demonstrates that national freedom operates through mechanisms of racial exclusion, hierarchies of humanity, and political and legal legitimations that remove certain subjects from the nation's imagination.

This study, therefore, examines how *Chains* represents slavery as an ideological structure that shapes and limits the meaning of revolutionary freedom. More specifically, it inquires how slavery is represented in the novel through the perspective of the enslaved subject, and how the representation functions as a critique of the American Revolution's discourse of freedom? To address these questions, the article employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation as its primary analytical framework, combined with a post-nationalism perspective to interpret the way the novel contests official national historiography. Through this approach, the study positions *Chains* as a counter-narrative and contributes to scholarship on slavery literature, American literary studies, and young adult historical fiction.

II. METHOD

This study applies a qualitative approach within the constructivist paradigm that views social and historical reality as the result of the construction of meaning through language, symbols, and practices of representation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach is employed through literary textual analysis of Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Chains*, positioning the text as a discursive space in which meanings of slavery and freedom are produced. The focus of the study is directed toward representations of slavery, constructions of freedom, and the positioning of the enslaved subjects within the context of the American Revolution, by examining how narrative strategies and linguistic choices shape power relations, racial hierarchies, and the ideology of freedom operating within the text.

The main analytical framework of this research is the representation theory of Stuart Hall with a constructionist approach. This theory is employed to understand how the meaning of slavery is constructed through the relationship between the social world, conceptual systems, and the language employed in the literary text (Hall, 2013). Representation is understood not merely as a reflection of reality but as a process of meaning-making that shapes perspectives on history and power relations. This framework is combined with a post-nationalism perspective to interpret how *Chains* critiques the narratives of national freedom that are exclusive and racially grounded.

The primary source for this study is the novel *Chains* (2008) as the primary text. The novel is selected because it explicitly situates the experiences of enslaved African Americans within the setting of the American Revolution and juxtaposes the rhetoric of national freedom with

the practices of racial slavery. The data are analyzed in the form of narrative excerpts, dialogues, character descriptions, and event structures that represent power relations, practices of subordination, and forms of resistance by the enslaved subjects. The secondary data in the form of books and journal articles relevant to the study of American slavery, contemporary American culture, post-nationalism, and representation theory are used to strengthen the historical context and interpretive framework.

Data were selected purposively from quotations, dialogues, narrative descriptions, and chapter epigraphs that directly represent at least one of the study's central concerns: (1) slavery as an ideological structure, (2) racialized constructions of freedom and humanity, (3) commodification and structural violence, and (4) agency and resistance from the perspective of the enslaved subject. Quotations were included when they offered recurring or especially significant textual evidence relevant to these analytical categories. This procedure was intended to ensure that the interpretation remained focused, text-based, and aligned with the research objectives.

Data analysis is performed in three stages using representational analysis with a constructionist approach. The first stage is data familiarization through repeated readings to identify recurring patterns of meaning. The second stage is coding, in which the data are grouped into main analytical categories, including (1) the language and symbols of slavery, (2) freedom as an exclusive ideological construct, and (3) the position of the enslaved subject as a counter-narrative to national historiography. The third stage is ideological interpretation, which links these categories to the social, political, and historical contexts of the American Revolution. The interpretive process follows the principles of encoding and decoding to trace how meanings of slavery are produced, circulated, and negotiated within the literary text (Hall et al., 2003). The analysis is conducted inductively by connecting textual findings with historical contexts to produce a critical reading of the ideology of American national freedom. Through this procedure, the study does not aim to assess the historical accuracy of the novel, but rather to examine how *Chains* functions as a literary text that reconstructs the meanings of slavery and freedom within a post-nationalism framework.

The findings of this study are not intended to be generalized to all Revolutionary-era fiction or all slavery narratives because it focuses on a single novel. Besides, close reading is interpretive, which means that the analysis does not reveal a single definitive meaning of the text. Nevertheless, this approach is appropriate for examining how literary representation produces ideological meanings and historical critique in the novel *Chains*.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Genealogy of Slavery as the Ideological Background of the Revolution (1619–1775)

The novel *Chains* represents slavery not as a temporal backdrop that merely coincides with the outbreak of the American Revolution, but as a historical structure that had been operating

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long before the discourse of national freedom was proclaimed. Through narrative strategies such as flashbacks and the insertion of historical information in the appendix, the text expands the reader's historical horizon to emphasize that slavery constituted an ideological foundation shaping the social, economic, and racial order of the American colonies. Consequently, the Revolution is not positioned as the starting point of freedom, but rather as an event that emerged atop an already entrenched system of oppression.

In the appendix, Anderson incorporates the history of slavery through a question-and-answer format resembling factual exposition. This formal choice is not neutral; rather, it functions as a representational strategy that embeds historical authority within the fictional text. The concise, chronological, and numerical presentation of information produces an impression of objectivity, while simultaneously directing readers toward a critical reading of national narratives that often obscure the presence of slavery in Northern regions such as New York.

(Data 1)

Are you sure there were slaves in New York back then? Absolutely. The earliest slaves were brought to New Amsterdam (later called New York) by the Dutch in the 1620s. When the British took over New York in 1664, about 10 percent of the population was of African descent. The number of slaves skyrocketed as the British kidnapped thousands of African men, women, and children and brought them to the city." (Chains, 2008, p. 310)

Within the Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the use of numbers, dates, and chronological markers functions as "codes of realism" that naturalize the meaning of slavery as an established social fact (Hall, 2013). Such representations do not merely convey information but actively produce an understanding of slavery as an institutionalized system formed through organized colonial practices, ranging from mass kidnapping and forced transatlantic displacement to the commodification of African bodies. In other words, slavery is presented as the results of imperial power relations rather than sporadic moral deviations.

By linking history from the 1620s to the British takeover in 1664, *Chains* implicitly rejects the national historiographical narrative that renders the American Revolution as the birth of universal freedom. The novel shifts the center of historical meaning from the event of independence toward a broader Atlantic colonial network. This perspective aligns with a post-nationalism approach that views early American history as part of imperial relations, global trade, and cross-national racial exploitation, rather than the internal history of an autonomous nation-state.

The emphasis on Britain as the primary agent perpetuating slavery further strengthens the novel's ideological critique. Anderson presents historical facts deliberately arranged as a paradox between law and imperial economic practice.

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(Data 2)

In 1772 an English judge ruled that slavery could not exist in England itself. In 1807 Parliament banned British involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. (From 1690 to 1807 British ships carried nearly three million kidnapped Africans across the Atlantic Ocean.)"

(Chains, 2008, p. 308)

This excerpt produces a sharp discursive contradiction: Britain is represented as a nation claiming a moral position by banning slavery in the metropole, while simultaneously acting as the primary actor in the Atlantic slave trade. Within Hall's encoding-decoding framework (Hall et al., 2003), the text encodes slavery as a power system operating through double standards, freedom and law for the imperial center, and exploitation and violence for the colonial territories. Freedom, in this context, is not universal but conditional and selective.

This representation has broad ideological implications for the interpretation of the American Revolution. By positioning slavery as a practice long-established before the Revolution and continuing throughout the struggle for independence, *Chains* deconstructs the myth of national liberty as an inclusive value. Freedom appears as a political project built through mechanisms of racial exclusion and human hierarchy, consistent with literary criticism and cultural theory asserting that historical American nationalism rested on the erasure of Black subjects from the imagination of citizenship (Cetin et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the narrative strategies of *Chains* demonstrate the role of literature as an arena for the production of historical meaning. The novel does not passively reflect the past; it reconstructs history as a field of ideological conflict between liberty and slavery. The meaning of slavery is produced through the selection of facts, the perspective of the enslaved subject, and a narrative language that consciously disrupts official national history narratives. Slavery appears as the foundational framework conditioning the lives of enslaved subjects even before the discourse of Revolutionary liberty gained public legitimacy.

Chains constructs a genealogy of slavery as the ideological foundation of the American Revolution while simultaneously shifting the historical reading from a national perspective to a post-nationalism perspective. Slavery is not positioned as an anomaly in the history of freedom, but as the historical structure that allowed the American national project to operate from the start through colonial power relations and racial exclusion.

Black Slave Stereotypes and Social Representation Hierarchies

The next findings indicate that *Chains* systematically constructs black slave stereotypes through the depiction of social spaces, narrative language, and hierarchically layered labor relations. In the early parts of the novel, Isabel's perspective is directed to observe public spaces filled with labor, where the presence of black people serves as a visual and social marker of manual labor and subordinate positioning. This representation is not presented as direct violence, but as a daily normalcy taken for granted within the colonial social order.

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(Data 3)

The working people were dressed muchly as we did out in the country... Some of the working folk were black. In truth, I had never seen so many of us in one place, not even at burials. (Chains, 2008, p. 27)

This quote illustrates a direct association between “working people” and black individuals. The similarity in clothing between city workers and those from Isabel's rural background marks a low, uniform class identity devoid of symbolic differentiation. The phrase “so many of us” builds Isabel's collective awareness as part of a group visually identified as labor. Within the framework of representation theory, language here functions as a code linking blackness with physical labor, crowds, and attachment to non-prestigious public spaces (Hall, 2013). This representation normalizes the position of black people as laboring bodies rather than autonomous social subjects.

This hierarchy of representation becomes clearer when the narrative differentiates the depiction of soldiers from black workers. Soldiers are represented as symbolically recognized figures, with activities associated with conversation and social order.

(Data 4)

And standing about on corners conversating with each other. (Chains, 2008, p. 27)

Conversely, black workers, such as servants and cart-drivers, are depicted through a different language register, one that is coarser and noisier.

(Data 5)

Calling out to each other and yelling at the dogs in their way. (Chains, 2008, p. 27)

The distinction between “conversating” and “calling out and yelling” forms a symbolic opposition between subjects considered civilized and those associated with noise and disorder. More problematically, the communication field of black workers involves not just humans, but animals. In representational analysis, attaching animals to the realm of human communication is a discursive strategy that reduces the human status of certain subjects (Hall, 2013). Language does not merely describe reality; it produces an ontological hierarchy: black people are placed in a threshold territory between human and non-human.

This hierarchy is articulated more explicitly through Curzon’s dialogue, which asserts Isabel’s social and ontological position as a black slave.

(Data 6)

You are a small black girl, Country...

You are slave, not a person.

They'll say things in front of you they won't say in front of the white servants. 'Cause you don't count to them." (Chains, 2008, p. 41)

This statement reveals a mechanism of direct subject erasure. The black slave is represented as someone who “does not count”, which is present physically but excluded from

social and epistemic recognition. In Hall's terms, this is an ideological representational practice that produces an absent presence: the subject is seen and functions, but is not recognized as a meaningful human in the social order (Hall, 2013). This erasure is not metaphorical; it serves as the operational basis for daily power relations.

This narrative emerges in the context of Curzon's persuasion for Isabel to act as a spy. Ideologically, this offer shows how the social invisibility of black slaves is utilized as a strategic asset. Because they are considered "insignificant," their presence is not monitored or accounted for. In the logic of colonial power, the lack of recognition as a subject is precisely what makes them an effective tool. The representation of black people as "invisible" works not only as a cultural stereotype but as a rationalization for political exploitation.

This ambivalence shows how stereotypes operate in *Chains*. Black slaves are recognized as productive labor but are simultaneously dehumanized through associations with noise, animals, and mindlessness. This ambivalence aligns with Hall's argument that stereotypes work through reduction and the fixation of meaning: the subject is over-represented on one side while being emptied of human complexity on the other (Hall, 2013). Thus, stereotypes are not merely negative images; they are ideological mechanisms that stabilize racial hierarchies.

Through this representation, *Chains* demonstrates that slavery operates not only as a material condition but as a system of meaning reproduced through language, imagery, and daily social relations. In a post-nationalism reading, these findings confirm that American national freedom was built upon representational structures that excluded black subjects from the category of "free humans" from the very beginning. The voices of Isabel and Curzon function as counter-narratives that expose liberty as a selective, racialized political project dependent on the erasure of certain subjects from social recognition.

Slavery as a Post-nationalism Project: Human Commodification and the Crisis of Revolutionary Liberty in Chains

Analysis results show that *Chains* reconstructs slavery as a post-nationalism project that operates beyond the borders of the nation-state and precedes the birth of the American Revolution. Slavery is presented not as a local practice or individual moral deviation, but as a cross-power economic-political system underpinning the formation of the American colonial order. With this strategy, the novel decisively shifts the historical reading from a nationalistic framework toward a post-nationalism reading that places the Revolution as part of a wider Atlantic colonial network.

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(Data 7)

Are you sure there were slaves in New York back then?

Absolutely.

The earliest slaves were brought to New Amsterdam (later called New York) by the Dutch in the 1620s. When the British took over New York in 1664, about 10 percent of the population was of African descent.

The number of slaves skyrocketed as the British kidnapped thousands of African men, women, and children and brought them to the city." (Chains, 2008, p. 310)

This excerpt serves as a discursive device binding the fictional narrative with historiographical legitimacy. The "question and answer" format resembles popular historical discourse, while the mention of chronology and population percentages presents an impression of objectivity. Within the representational framework, such numerical data works as codes of realism that stabilize the meaning of slavery as a social fact established before the Revolution (Hall, 2013). Thus, slavery is represented as the structural foundation of colonial society, not as a residue that could be erased by the rhetoric of independence.

The post-nationalism dimension strengthens as Chains positions the Dutch and the British as transnational agents of slavery. European colonialism is represented as the primary engine driving the commodification of African humans, even as moral discourses of liberty began to develop in the metropole.

(Data 8)

In 1772, an English judge ruled that slavery could not exist in England itself. In 1807, Parliament banned British involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. (From 1690 to 1807, British ships carried nearly three million kidnapped Africans across the Atlantic Ocean.)

(Chains, 2008, p. 308)

This paragraph displays a sharp ideological contradiction. Britain is represented as a legal subject claiming civilization and humanity, but simultaneously as the primary perpetrator of the Atlantic slave trade. From Hall's perspective, law functions as an ideological encoding mechanism that produces a moral image at the center of power while obscuring systemic violence in colonial territories (Hall et al., 2003). Freedom appears as a selective concept applicable spatially and racially, rather than as a universal value.

This contradiction is important for to the novel's critique. Chains does not represent slavery as a problem that appears within the boundaries of a single emerging nation. It functions as a system produced through overlapping imperial and commercial networks. The movement between Dutch colonial rule, British authority, Atlantic trade, and Revolutionary America shows that the meaning of freedom is formulated across structures that exceed the nation state itself. By placing Isabel's experience in these circuits of power, Anderson reveals that slavery is part of a transatlantic order in which liberty and domination are historically composite.

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The commodification of humans as a core feature of post-nationalism slavery is consistently represented in *Chains* through both slave advertisements and sale scenes.

(Data 9)

RUN-AWAY from the subscriber... A Negro girl named POLL, about 13 years of age, very black, marked with the Small-Pox... Whoever will take up and secure the said girl so that the owner may get her, shall be handsomely rewarded." (*Chains*, 2008, p. 13)

The scene in the excerpt reduces human identity to physical traits, disease markers, and exchange value, showing how print culture participates in the administration of slavery. This same market logic appears in the auction narrative experienced by Isabel and Ruth.

(Data 10)

Advertise in the paper, that's what we do around here... One of Brown's ships brought up a load of rum and slaves from the islands. They must have sold thirty-five, forty people in two hours' time." (*Chains*, 2008, p. 15)

The juxtaposition of 'rum and slaves' erases the boundary between object and person, which positions enslaved bodies as commodities circulating within colonial trade networks. The excerpts show that slavery in *Chains* operates not as an incidental moral failure. It functions as an institutionalized economic system sustained by print, mobility, and market exchange across imperial space.

The human crisis reaches an extreme when Ruth, a five-year-old child, is sold separately from Isabel.

(Data 11)

She is five years old... She is a baby, and you sold her away from me.

(*Chains*, 2008, pp. 134-135)

This expression functions as a counter-narrative to market language. Isabel rejects the logic of commodification by asserting affective relations and humanity. Within Hall's framework, this statement can be read as a practice of oppositional decoding, where the enslaved subject reclaims meanings erased by economic and legal discourse. However, this resistance directly confronts the revolutionary legal apparatus that claims civilization.

(Data 12)

The law binds my hands and my actions... Even during time of war, we must follow the rules of propriety and civilization. (*Chains*, 2008, p. 140)

This quote reveals the fundamental paradox of the American Revolution. Law, claiming to be the guardian of civilization, actually reinforces the ownership of humans. National liberty is placed above the freedom of enslaved subjects. In a post-nationalism reading, this moment shows that the Revolution did not break down the structure of slavery, but negotiated it for the stability of the national project.

The novel *Chains* represents slavery as a post-nationalism ideological structure that forms and limits the meaning of Revolutionary American freedom. Slavery is present not as a passive historical background, but as a center of conflict, revealing liberty as an exclusive and racialized political project. By placing the enslaved subject as the epistemic center of the narrative, *Chains* functions as a literary critique of American national mythology and opens a space for historical reading that transcends nation-state borders toward a broader ethical horizon.

Separation of Children, Forced Labor, and Subaltern Production: Structural Violence against Child Slave Bodies

Chains represents slavery not just as an economic and legal system, but as a mechanism of power working through the separation of children from affective relations, the normalization of forced labor from an early age, and the production of subjects without social origins. The character Ruth becomes a central figure, showing how a child's body is made a primary site of structural violence. This separation is not incidental or merely emotional; it is a systematic strategy to uproot identity, sever family memory, and create absolute dependence on the owner.

(Data 13)

"Did you sell Ruth?"

"You will not address me in that insolent manner." (*Chains*, 2008, p. 134)

This dialogue marks the absolute power relation between master and slave. Isabel's question is not answered on a moral level but suppressed through hierarchical discipline. Within the representational framework, Madam Lockton's language functions as a practice of silencing: the issue of selling a child is erased from the realm of ethics and replaced by a violation of etiquette. Power requires no rational justification because it has been socially institutionalized.

(Data 14)

"She is five years old... She is a baby, and you sold her away from me."

(*Chains*, 2008, p. 135)

This statement is an articulation of humanity directly confronting the market logic. Asserting Ruth's age and status as a "baby" functions as an attempt to deconstruct the discourse of commodification. However, the failure of this statement to stop the sale confirms that the voices of slave women and children carry no legal or social weight. In Hall's terms, the meaning of humanity encoded by Isabel undergoes a dominant decoding by the legal and ownership system, and is thus rejected as a valid claim.

The separation of Ruth from Isabel is also a traumatic repetition of a previous separation when their parents were killed. Thus, *Chains* builds a narrative of cycles of separation that produce subjects without social lineage. Ruth is represented as a post-nationalism figure:

without family, without roots, and completely detached from networks of affection. The breaking of these relations serves as a prerequisite for perpetuating slavery because subjects without origins are easier to control and trade.

In addition to family separation, child slaves are positioned as labor without regard for age, health, or psychological condition. This violence is structural as it is institutionalized as a normal social practice.

(Data 15)

"We can scrub your house clean, care for cows and pigs, work your garden, and carry just about anything." (Chains, 2008, p. 20)

Isabel's statement appears in the context of a sale negotiation, where she is forced to reduce herself to a list of functions. Discursively, the slave's body is represented as a multi-functional tool measured by productivity. Here, labor is not understood as a human activity but as exchange value. This statement reflects symbolic violence because the dominated subject is forced to internalize market language for survival.

(Data 16)

"She's a good simple, ma'am... Give her a broom and tell her to sweep, and you'll be able to eat off your floor." (Chains, 2008, pp. 20–21)

The phrase "eat off your floor" contains latent satire revealing the master's boundless expectations. The slave's hard work becomes the justification for increasing the workload. Power not only exploits labor but also drains time and consciousness, narrowing the space for reflection on freedom. Within the representational framework, the "diligent slave" stereotype functions as an ideological justification for continuous exploitation.

Forced child labor becomes even more concrete through seemingly simple direct orders.

(Data 17)

"Send that one to fetch us some clean water." (Chains, 2008, p. 34)

This order represents control over the body through routine. The task of carrying water—the source of life—is delegated to the slave girl, signaling that the comfort of the dominant class is supported by the physical suffering of the dominated subject.

(Data 18)

"It was near a mile from the Tea Water Pump... carrying heavy buckets that stretched my arms into sore ribbons." (Chains, 2008, p. 42)

Isabel's bodily experience shows that violence does not always require direct physical punishment. Distance, weight, and the repetition of labor become mediums of discipline. The child's body is made a logistical infrastructure for the master's household. Power works through accumulated exhaustion rather than a momentary burst of violence.

Internal hierarchy within the slave system is also visible in domestic labor division.

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(Data 19)

"I did near everything else... washing pots and plates... removing colonies of spiders... sweeping up a mountain of dust." (Chains, 2008, p. 48)

Although Becky is the head servant, almost all physical labor is passed to Isabel. This places Isabel at the lowest layer of an already degraded social structure. In this context, Isabel can be read as a subaltern as formulated by Spivak: a subject whose existence supports the system, but whose voice is not recognized epistemically or politically.

Control over Isabel's body is reinforced through Madam Lockton's symbolic violence.

(Data 20)

"She had not hit me again, but always seemed on the edge of it." (Chains, 2008, p. 49)

The constant threat of violence creates internal discipline. Power works through internalized fear, limiting the possibility of resistance even before an action is taken. In this case, violence becomes latent but remains effective.

Subaltern production is not only experienced by female slaves. The character Curzon shows that male slaves also experience similar exploitation in the form of pseudo-wage labor.

(Data 21)

"I'd been working for him for three months and had no coin to show for it."

(Chains, 2008, p. 8)

This narrative shows that racial status makes Curzon vulnerable to wage theft. Work is represented as debt, not a right. Thus, slavery transforms into a veiled exploitation that maintains racial hierarchy. Chains represents slavery as a post-nationalism system producing the subaltern through child separation, the normalization of forced labor, and the silencing of voices. Ruth and Isabel are not just individual victims, but structural figures showing how colonial power maintains itself by severing family relations, subduing child bodies, and turning humans into functions. Through this representation, Anderson presents a sharp critique of the myth of revolutionary liberty built on the suffering of bodies unrecognized as historical subjects.

Racial Stereotypes and the Ambivalence of Black Slave Humanity

Textual reading results show that Chains builds racial stereotypes through visual, linguistic, and social differentiation between black and white subjects. This differentiation is not working neutrally, it functions as a symbolic mechanism placing black slaves at the lowest layer of the social hierarchy. Anderson shows that public workspaces are represented as being "filled" with black bodies, while positions of authority and social recognition are attached to uniformed and officially identified figures.

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(Data 22)

"The working people were dressed muchly as we did out in the country... Some of the working folk were black. In truth, I had never seen so many of us in one place."

(Chains, 2008, p. 27)

The phrase "so many of us" does more than mark quantity, but it affirms a collectivization of racial identity. Black bodies are merged into a homogenous mass of workers, losing individuality and social differentiation. Clothing uniformity reinforces the visual construction that manual labor is the domain of a specific race. Within representation theory, this strategy is a form of reduction and fixation, which is reducing the subject to a single function and freezing it in repeating images (Hall, 2013).

In contrast, soldiers are represented as symbolically and socially recognized subjects.

(Data 23)

"...standing about on corners conversating with each other." (Chains, 2008, p. 27)

The choice of the word "conversating" marks a communicative relation that is equal and dignified. Soldiers speak with each other within a closed and recognized communication space. This contrast becomes sharper when compared to descriptions of black workers:

(Data 24)

"...calling out to each other and yelling at the dogs in their way." (Chains, 2008, p. 27)

The diction difference, "conversating" versus "calling out and yelling", demotes the quality of slave communication to an instinctive level. The presence of "dogs" as addressees reinforces symbolic dehumanization. In this representation structure, black slaves are placed on the threshold between human and animal. They work and function, but are not fully recognized as rational human subjects.

This ambivalence of humanity is explicitly stated through Curzon's voice.

(Data 25)

"You are a slave, not a person... 'Cause you don't count to them." (Chains, 2008, p. 41)

This statement condenses the logic of racial stereotypes: black slaves are not counted as social subjects. They are physically present but politically and epistemically non-existent. In Hall's terms, this is a practice of symbolic exclusion, which is erasing the subject from the realm of meaning without needing to physically remove them. Humanity becomes conditional and determined by race and social position.

This ambivalence continues in how slaves are reduced to aesthetic property and manipulative instruments. The character Ruth represents an extreme form of this stereotype.

(Data 26)

"My sister, dressed up as Madam's pretty pet..." (Chains, 2008, pp. 54-55)

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Ruth is positioned as a “pretty pet” serving a decorative function. Beautiful clothes do not signify respect, rather, they erase agency. Ruth’s tears and clenched fists are unseen by her masters, witnessed only by Isabel—a fellow slave. Thus, suffering can only be read and understood by fellow dominated subjects. This representation asserts that slave humanity is not totally erased but narrowed to the internal empathy space of fellow victims.

While Ruth is represented as aesthetic property, Isabel is reduced to a fully controllable labor instrument.

(Data 27)

“I worked as a puppet trained to scrub and carry, curtsy and nod.” (Chains, 2008, p. 157)

The puppet metaphor marks the loss of free will and agency. Isabel’s body is moved by the master’s will, while submissive gestures like curtsying and nodding show the internalization of hierarchy. This representation is normatively legitimized through an explicit statement:

(Data 28)

“He’s a slave. He will not be treated same as free men.” (Chains, 2008, p. 237)

This statement confirms the ideological separation between slave and free human. Slaves are not just economically exploited but excluded from the category of full humanity. In this context, racial stereotypes serve as the foundation for legitimizing structural violence.

However, the same stereotype produces a narrative paradox. Because she is considered mindless and insignificant, Isabel is allowed to be present during important political conversations.

(Data 29)

“I kept my face still as a plaster mask, but inside my brainpan, thoughts chased round and round.” (Chains, 2008, p. 61)

Isabel’s silence becomes a survival strategy. Stereotypes about stupidity open an epistemic gap: the slave deemed incapable of understanding turns into an observer and keeper of information. This ambivalence shows that stereotypes are never fully stable but always contain the potential for subversion.

Isabel’s role then evolves into an information agent.

(Data 30)

“If you hear anything else... you come and find me.” (Chains, 2008, p. 104)

(Data 31)

“...every once in a while, a message to the gap-toothed man...” (Chains, 2008, p. 239)

Within the dominant framework, Isabel’s actions are read as betrayal and dishonesty. However, a critical reading shows that this “betrayal” is a direct product of the slavery system. When loyalty is forced and humanity denied, survival strategies become the only possible ethics. This ambivalence reveals the internal contradictions of the slavery system:

dehumanization actually gives birth to an unaccounted capacity for resistance. *Chains* builds racial stereotypes through ambivalent mechanisms. Black slaves are represented as manual labor, property, animals, and puppets, but simultaneously appear as subjects capable of reading, storing, and moving knowledge. This ambivalence does not weaken the novel's critique but instead shows the fragility of racial hierarchies built on the denial of humanity. Within a post-nationalism framework, Isabel emerges as a liminal figure revealing that American revolutionary liberty stands on a contradictory and exclusive system of representation.

Agency and Resistance of Slaves as Rational and Political Subjects

Analysis results show that *Chains* consistently constructs slaves not merely as passive victims of a structure, but as agentic subjects capable of rational thought, reading political situations, and performing resistance against the system that oppresses them. Agency in this novel is not displayed through spectacular heroism, but through daily practices that are reflective, strategic, and high-risk. With this approach, Anderson rejects the representation of slaves as ahistorical and irrational figures, and places them as conscious actors in the vortex of the American Revolution's ideological conflicts.

In the social context of the American Revolution, racial hierarchies and legal status did place black slaves as a group without rights. However, *Chains* clearly separates limited access to education from intellectual capacity. This is seen when Isabel secretly reads *Common Sense*, a political text that heavily influenced the imagination of American freedom.

(Data 32)

"I finished reading *Common Sense* the night before the ball...

'For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever.'" (*Chains*, 2008, p. 271)

This quote displays two layers of agency at once. First, epistemic agency: Isabel is capable of reading, understanding, and remembering complex political arguments. Second, interpretative agency: she does not swallow Paine's ideas whole but interprets them within the context of her life as a slave. The principle of equality, the basis for the American Revolution's legitimacy, actually opens a space for critical awareness regarding the ideological contradictions she experiences.

(Data 33)

"Way I saw it, Mr. Paine was saying all people were the same... That's why America could make its own freedom." (*Chains*, 2008, p. 271)

At this point, *Chains* presents a sharp ideological irony. The discourse of national freedom produced to fight British power resonates as a trigger for a slave's personal liberation consciousness. Isabel appears as a critical reader of revolutionary ideology rather than a passive recipient of a national narrative. Thus, the slave is positioned as a subject capable of appropriating dominant political discourse for her own freedom.

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This awareness evolves into concrete resistance planning.

(Data 34)

"If an entire nation could seek its freedom, why not a girl?" (Chains, 2008, p. 272)

This rhetorical question marks the transition from awareness to action. Isabel begins to devise scenarios for escape, document forgery, and taking extreme risks. This thought process shows that resistance is not born from emotion alone, but from a rational calculation of possibilities and consequences. In this context, Isabel appears as a political subject considering strategies, risks, and goals.

However, this resistance directly faces the disciplinary mechanisms of slavery. Isabel's escape results in capture and a symbolic punishment of branding her face with the letter "I" (Insolence).

(Data 35)

"I traced the I with my fingertip...

This mark stand for Isabel." (Chains, 2008, p. 286)

Instead of accepting the stigmatization attached to her, Isabel reclaims the meaning of that mark. The letter "I," intended as a tool of humiliation and control, is transformed into a marker of self-identity. This meaning transformation is a significant form of symbolic resistance because power fails to monopolize the meaning of the slave's body.

Isabel's self-reflection in the mirror confirms this reconstruction of subjectivity.

(Data 36)

"I pushed back my shoulders and raised my chin, my back straight as an arrow."

(Chains, 2008, p. 286)

The "arrow" metaphor marks a readiness to move, fly, and break boundaries. The body once controlled now becomes a medium of self-affirmation. In a post-nationalism framework, this moment confirms that slave agency does not depend on state recognition, colonial law, or revolutionary legitimacy, but on ethical awareness and personal courage to reject oppression. Chains represents the slave as a rational subject, a reader of ideology, and an agent of resistance capable of appropriating the discourse of liberty for self-liberation. Isabel's agency deconstructs stereotypes of slaves as irrational and passive beings, while uncovering the paradox of the American Revolution: national freedom was produced through the exclusion of individual freedom for colonized groups. Slave resistance in Chains functions as a counter-narrative expanding the meaning of liberty beyond the borders of nation and state, and asserts literature as an arena for ideological critique against the foundations of modern nationhood.

IV. CONCLUSION

The novel *Chains* reconstructs slavery not as an ideological structure that shapes and constrains the meaning of national freedom. This study demonstrates that slavery operates as a system of meaning institutionalized through language, law, economic practices, and racialized power relations that extend across national boundaries. The novel constructs a genealogy of slavery as a historical foundation of the Revolution, while rejecting national narratives that position independence as the beginning of universal freedom. Revolutionary freedom is represented as a selective political project, from which the enslaved subject is excluded from the national imagination of humanity.

Racial stereotypes in *Chains* operate ambivalently. Black enslaved people are reduced to labor, property, and invisible subjects, yet are simultaneously portrayed as readers of ideology and repositories of political knowledge. This ambivalence exposes the internal contradictions of the system of slavery. The separation of children, forced labor, and the silencing of voices, particularly in the characters of Ruth and Isabel, affirm slavery as a form of structural violence that produces subalternity from an early age. At the same time, Isabel's agency demonstrates that resistance emerges as a reflective and rational practice through the appropriation of the discourse of freedom.

This study contributes by positioning the novel as a critical text that has not been widely examined in American literary studies. This study suggests that historical fiction, for young adults especially, can be a serious site of ideological critique through which readers may reconsider historical violence and marginalized perspectives. Meanwhile, it is limited by its focus on a single novel and by the interpretive nature of close reading. Future research could extend the study through comparative analysis with other Revolutionary-era or slavery narratives.

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