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**Literary Analysis of the Book Washington Black by Esi Edugyan through a
Sociological Approach**

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Dedication

To Santiago, Juan Francisco, and Ximena, because the past does not define us, and the future is built with hope, step by step, with courage, without depending on anyone. You taught me that moving forward is possible, and that freedom is choosing our own path.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all my university teachers for their unwavering support, guidance, and dedication throughout my academic journey. Thank you for your patience, encouragement, and for always pushing me to do my best.

Abstract

This literary analysis examines *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan as a powerful exploration of identity, racial injustice, and the enduring legacy of slavery and colonialism. Centering on the journey of George Washington “Wash” Black, an eleven-year-old enslaved boy, the novel traces his transformation across continents while confronting systemic inequality, displacement, and psychological trauma. Through Wash’s experiences, the novel shows the emotional and social consequences of racial hierarchies, as well as the complexities of liberation and self-definition. The analysis draws connections between the historical context of 19th-century slavery and ongoing struggles faced by Afro-descendant populations in the Americas and Caribbean. The author’s use of symbolism, particularly motifs of flight, light, and water, reinforces the themes of resilience, visibility, and transformation. The study also considers literature’s capacity to act as a medium of resistance and remembrance, offering marginalized voices space for narrative agency.

By analyzing Wash’s internal conflict and societal alienation, the essay underscores the novel’s relevance to contemporary conversations on racial identity and justice. The unresolved nature of Wash’s story challenges romanticized narratives of freedom, suggesting instead that emancipation is an ongoing, complex process. Ultimately, *Washington Black* demonstrates how fiction can confront historical trauma while fostering empathy, critical analysis, and social change.

Resumen

Este análisis literario de la novela "Washington Black" escrito por Esi Edugyan, se realizó desde una perspectiva sociológica, centrándose en cómo la narrativa demuestra las consecuencias persistentes de la esclavitud, el colonialismo y el racismo en los sistemas sociales de la humanidad durante el siglo XIX. A través de la vida de George Washington Black (Wash), un niño nacido en la esclavitud cuyo viaje lo lleva desde las brutales plantaciones azucareras de Barbados hasta los rincones más remotos del mundo; el estudio examina la formación de la identidad racial, el trauma intergeneracional y las complejidades de una liberación física que no implica necesariamente la emancipación mental.

Mediante la aplicación de marcos teóricos sobre el trauma racializado y el análisis del uso de elementos ficticios como la máquina voladora, los acuarios y los retratos, esta investigación ilustra cómo la escritora representa las cicatrices visibles e invisibles dejadas por la opresión histórica aun en sociedades donde la esclavitud fue abolida.

Además se muestra como la relación en evolución entre Wash y su antiguo amo y liberador Titch, funciona como una crítica hacia las jerarquías sociales no resueltas, así como de las dinámicas de poder y privilegio.

La novela se analiza a través de sus cuatro capítulos, cada uno centrado en una etapa clave del desarrollo de Wash y sus implicaciones sociológicas. El primer capítulo "Faith Plantation, Barbados" se centra en la experiencia de la esclavitud y su impacto en la sociedad; seguidamente en "A la deriva" explora la compleja relación entre el exesclavo y su liberador; en el tercer capítulo titulado "Nueva Escocia" se aborda la construcción de la identidad racial,

mientras que en el ultimo capitulo "Inglaterra" se examinan los perfiles psicológicos y el trauma intergeneracional.

Este estudio concluye que la novela Washington Black desafía las narrativas romantizadas de la libertad, presentando por el contrario que la emancipación es un proceso personal y continuo de autodefinición. En definitiva, la novela reafirma el papel de la literatura como herramienta para fomentar la conciencia social y la justicia narrativa en todos los tiempos.

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Chapter 1

Introductory Framework

This literary analysis of Esi Edugyan's book *Washington Black* delves into George Washington "Wash" Black's powerful narrative of survival, self-discovery, and his quest for freedom. This journey, seen through the eyes of an enslaved eleven-year-old boy, takes Wash from the brutality of a sugar plantation in Barbados to the Arctic, London, and finally Morocco. Along the way, he grapples with themes such as rejection, identity creation, friendship, and the search for belonging. His life, framed by slavery, colonialism, and systemic inequality, offers a rich exploration of complex racial dynamics and the struggle for autonomy.

As Wash navigates a world shaped by oppression, his experiences become emblematic of the historical and social forces that still affect marginalized communities today. This investigation delves into the social relevance of *Washington Black*, examining how the novel opens critical discussions about race and identity, issues that remain central to contemporary conversations about racial justice and equality for minorities with genuine social change.

By exploring Wash's journey from slavery to freedom, the novel offers a perspective that allows us to better understand the lasting effects of historical oppression on current racial dynamics.

Furthermore, Edugyan's portrayal of personal and collective struggles for equality prompts us to reflect on the importance of addressing inequalities and fostering a more just and equitable society. By analyzing the themes present in *Washington Black* from a contemporary perspective, this research highlights the continued importance of examining the legacies of slavery and colonialism and fosters dialogue about how we can actively contribute to dismantling the root causes of persistent systems of racial injustice.

1.1 Problem Statement

This literary analysis applies a sociological lens to Esi Edugyan's novel *Washington Black* to explore how the work highlights the lasting legacies of slavery and colonialism, and how these legacies continue to affect contemporary social structures, racial dynamics, and identity formation. At the heart of this investigation is the following question: How does the writer use Wash's journey to critique social institutions, cultural ideologies, and inequalities rooted in slavery that persist in modern society?

Through the character of Wash, the author offers a meticulous depiction of how historical trauma is embedded in the fabric of social life, shaping personal identity and patterns of marginalization and resistance. This literary analysis will investigate the ways in which *Washington Black* reflects sociological concepts such as racial stratification, power relations, social mobility, and the construction of identity within oppressive systems.

By focusing on themes such as race, freedom, and belonging, this analysis will examine how the author uses fiction to expose the lasting consequences of social institutions such as slavery and colonialism, and how these institutions continue to influence interpersonal relationships and social hierarchies between majorities and minorities.

Furthermore, the novel's open ending will be interpreted as a sociological commentary on the unfinished project of racial justice and the collective responsibility to dismantle systems of oppression, emphasizing that personal agency determines the outcome of our lives and that the responsibility for change lies with the individual, regardless of their environment. In doing so, this research will highlight the novel's relevance to contemporary debates about equity, resistance, and social transformation.

1.2 General Objective

To explore the impact of historical oppression on modern racial dynamics through the protagonist's lived experiences. This study will analyze how *Washington Black* brings to light the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism by tracing his personal journey from enslavement to self-discovery, and how his evolving identity reflects broader societal challenges related to racial injustice, marginalization, and the search for true freedom. By examining Wash's interactions, struggles, and growth, the study seeks to reveal how historical realities continue to shape contemporary conceptions of race, identity, and liberation, yet they can be changed.

1.3 Specific Objectives

1.3.1 Analyze the themes of race, freedom, and identity in *Washington Black*

Focusing on how they are represented through the character of Wash, whose transformation from an enslaved child to a self-aware individual illustrates the psychological and social struggles linked to racial identity and the search for acceptance.

1.3.2 Examine the novel's critique of racial injustice and inequality

Particularly regarding slavery and colonialism, and its relevance to the present. This will be addressed through Wash's experiences in diverse sociopolitical contexts, from plantation violence to the subtle and explicit forms of exclusion he faces in supposedly "free" societies, demonstrating how the writer links historical systems of oppression with their current manifestations.

1.3.3 Evaluate the novel's denouement and its implications for social change

The ending of *Washington Black* rejects the comfort of narrative closure, instead offering a symbolic and open-ended image that amplifies the novel's interrogation of freedom, identity, and historical legacy. As Wash enters the fog of a sandstorm, the lack of resolution challenges the reader's expectations of satisfying endings, especially in tales of slavery and liberation, leaving the possibility of change open and in the hands of the protagonist.

1.4 Justification

The novel *Washington Black* is a narrative that delves into the personal journey of an enslaved child in his quest to find a place in a free world. The analysis opens a space for critical discussion on topics such as race, freedom, and identity, which belong to the past and remain fundamental to contemporary debates about racial justice and social change.

The exploration of these themes in the novel reflects a historical reality but also serves as a mirror to the present, illuminating the persistent struggles that continue to shape our society.

It is part of a contemporary literary movement that seeks to rewrite history through the eyes of marginalized and minority voices. Esi Edugyan uses fiction as a tool to rescue historical memories, giving prominence to characters of African descent whose experiences have traditionally been excluded from official narratives. This work stands out for its narrative value, allowing the reader to question dominant historical discourses. In a global context where social movements have revived the debate on structural racism, a critical examination of the legacy of slavery takes on a new urgency.

Washington Black becomes a symbolic platform from which to reflect on how history continues to shape current racial dynamics. This research highlights how literary narratives can

contribute to social awareness by fostering empathy and critical thinking on issues such as discrimination, racial identity, and historical memory.

From an academic perspective, this work is the application of a sociological approach to literary analysis that enriches the understanding of the text by linking the fictional world with real social structures. This critical reading allows us to identify patterns of oppression, resistance, and social transformation that transcend the narrative with the present.

On a personal level, this study stems from the need to understand how art and literature can be forms of resistance to injustice. Through the character of Wash, we expose how the search for freedom and dignity remains a universal struggle.

1.5 Antecedents

Countless academic studies have shown that the historical oppression of enslaved people in Latin America and the Caribbean continues to shape racial dynamics and social inequalities even today. For example, after gaining independence from Spain, countries such as Mexico (1829), Argentina (1813), and Chile (1823) abolished slavery, although the integration of freed people was often marked by persistent discrimination.

Although slavery was formally abolished in the 19th century, racial hierarchies and discrimination entrenched during the colonial and slave periods continued long after emancipation. Formerly enslaved populations were often marginalized and excluded from full participation in society, frequently relegated to low-paying and physically demanding jobs, which contributed to cycles of poverty and limited social mobility (Bowman et al., 1988).

As Herbert Klein and Ben Vinson explain in their book, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*, the end of slavery did not lead to social inclusion, but rather to new mechanisms of control and exclusion for Afro-Caribbean people (Klein & Vinson, 2007).

Similarly, Marixa Lasso demonstrates that in Latin America, specifically in post-independence Colombia, racial hierarchies continued to be reproduced despite its republican ideals (Lasso, 2007).

Also, Hilary Beckles (2013) emphasizes how economic systems built on slavery in the Caribbean generated structural disadvantages that continue to affect Afro-Caribbean communities. Finally, we will mention Eric Williams and his study *Capitalism and Slavery*, which also demonstrates how the wealth generated through slavery laid the foundation for lasting racial and economic inequalities under capitalism (Williams, 1944).

In conclusion, the legacies of slavery have contributed to profound racial inequalities in Latin America and the Caribbean, affecting the social dynamics, economic opportunities, and political power of Afro-descendant populations. This persistent legacy underscores the profound impact that historical oppression has had on the current socioeconomic and political landscape.

1.6 Scope

This thesis presents a sociological analysis of Esi Edugyan's novel "Washington Black," focusing on how it reflects, and critiques social structures related to race, power, and identity in the contexts of slavery and colonialism. The study centrally explores how social forces shape the personal experiences of the protagonist, George Washington Black, highlighting the intricate relationship between individual identity and broader social dynamics.

The research employs sociological theories and concepts, such as structural racism, social stratification, collective memory, and postcolonial power relations, to examine the historical and persistent effects of slavery and racial injustice. It analyzes how these systemic forces influence the formation of racial and social identities, resulting in far-reaching psychological consequences.

Furthermore, the analysis situates the novel within broader social and historical contexts, linking its themes to contemporary discussions of racial justice, structural violence, and social transformation. By examining Wash.'s travels, the thesis also engages sociological perspectives on migration and the formation of cultural identities, illustrating how social boundaries are contested and redefined.

While this study maintains a concentrated focus on Edugyan's literary work, it selectively draws on sociological frameworks that illuminate the novel's critical engagement with social realities. This scope intentionally avoids an exhaustive treatment of all sociological theories or historical periods, preferring a focused application of concepts as they manifest in the text.

Ultimately, this research highlights how *Washington Black*, through his sociological lens, serves as a narrative space for interrogating historical injustices and their persistent social ramifications. It demonstrates the capacity of literature to deepen sociological understanding by offering nuanced portraits of social phenomena, thereby fostering critical awareness and empathy toward current struggles for freedom, identity, and equality.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

To analyze Washington Black from a sociological perspective, it is essential to first establish the theoretical foundations that guide this investigation. This chapter presents essential concepts that allow us to interpret the lasting effects of slavery and colonialism, and historical background of the social moment.

2.1 Definitions

2.1.1 Sociological Literary Criticism

According to Eagleton (1992), literature is considered as a social practice, which cannot be separated from power structures and relations.

If literature is important today, it is because it is held to incarnate, in peculiarly graphic and sensuous form, the fundamental, universal language of humanity, at a moment when the regimes under which we live have need of that notion but have themselves rendered it profoundly problematic. Literature provides our most intimate, subtly affective acquaintance with that language, and so is the concrete correlation of that abstract political unity which we share as formally equal citizens of the state (Eagleton, 1992).

It is an analytical approach that studies literature in relation to the social structures, ideologies, and cultural contexts in which it is produced. This approach examines how literary texts show or challenge social norms, especially those related to race, class, gender, and power. From this perspective, literature is not considered merely an isolated artistic expression, but rather a part of social realities. In the case of Washington Black, this approach allows us to analyze how the author critiques institutions such as slavery, colonialism, and racism, while also showing the psychological effects of structural inequality on the individual.

2.1.2 Racial Identity Formation

Racial identity formation refers to the process by which a person comes to understand and define themselves in relation to their racial group. This process is influenced by historical context, personal experiences, and social expectations. According to Broman (2015), racial identity encompasses aspects of belonging, attachment, and internalized meaning, all of which affect how someone positions themselves in the world. In *Washington Black*, the protagonist's journey from his enslaved childhood to his autonomous adult life shows us the painful evolution of racial identity in a world structured by racism. His scars, both physical and emotional, represent the complexity of this identity construction.

2.1.3 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory constitutes another key framework for this analysis. This theory investigates the cultural, psychological, and political legacies of colonialism, with particular attention to how formerly colonized peoples struggled to recover their identity. In *Washington Black*, this manifests in Wash's internal conflict, his desire for freedom and recognition, and his confrontation with the structures of racial inequality that still persist. The novel challenges the idea of emancipation as total liberation and shows that true freedom is incomplete when colonial orders remain embedded in society (Broman, 2015).

2.1.4 Metaphor

It is an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

In literature, metaphors embellish language and allow for the indirect expression of complex emotions or difficult to name realities. In *Washington Black*, the author uses multiple

metaphors that reflect the protagonist's trauma, search for identity, and desire for freedom.

Below are some examples that will be deeply analyzed in this research

The scar on Wash's face: Although described literally, in the novel it functions as a metaphor for trauma. It is a visible mark that symbolizes the invisible wounds of the past, pain, exclusion, and the persistent memory of the violence suffered.

The flying machine (Cloud-cutter): In addition to its narrative function, this artifact becomes a metaphor for limited freedom. While it allows Wash physical escape, it does not guarantee his psychological or social emancipation. The machine flies, but Wash continues to be defined by others.

The aquarium and the enclosed fish: The aquarium where Wash works in London represents a space for scientific observation, but it also functions as a metaphor for apparent freedom. The fish, like Wash, are trapped in an invisible structure, so they can move but cannot escape.

The Octopus: The relationship between Wash and the octopus is rich in metaphor. The animal, initially fearful, then gently surrenders to his hands. This represents both the fragility of trust and Wash's reflection on another marginalized and strange being in his environment.

These metaphors reinforce the novel's message that freedom, identity, and trauma are physical or historical conditions, as well as psychological and symbolic, conveyed through the narrative's poetic language.

2.2 Historical Background of Slavery

The history of slavery and its abolition in Latin America and the Caribbean is fundamental to understanding the racial and social dynamics that persist today. During the 19th century, Latin American countries gradually abolished slavery, often because of independence

movements influenced by revolutionary ideals and global abolitionist efforts. While nations such as Mexico, Argentina, and Chile abolished slavery at the beginning of the century, other countries, such as Brazil, maintained this institution until the late 1800s, highlighting the complexity and inequality of the processes toward emancipation (Bowman et al., 1988). In the Caribbean, Barbados represents a key example of a plantation-based slave society, where British colonizers established a brutal system of sugar and tobacco production, sustained by the forced labor of kidnapped and enslaved Africans. The abolition of slavery on the island in 1834 marked a turning point, although economic and social inequalities persisted long after emancipation. Similarly, the Haitian Revolution played a transformative role in the Atlantic world, when enslaved Africans overthrew French colonial rule and established the first independent Black republic, inspiring abolitionist movements throughout the region (World History Edu, 2024).

These historical events and processes form a crucial background for the analysis of *Washington Black*, a novel that examines the personal and social consequences of slavery and freedom. Understanding this context allows for a deeper exploration of how the work reflects, questions, and reimagines the legacies of racial oppression and the persistent struggle for justice.

2.2.1 The origins of slavery in the United States

The first enslaved Africans were brought to the British colony of Virginia in 1619. Over the next two centuries, slavery became a deeply entrenched institution, especially in the southern colonies, where the plantation-based economy relied heavily on forced labor. Enslaved Africans were exploited in the cultivation of highly profitable crops such as tobacco, rice, indigo, and, most importantly, cotton. This system was fundamental to the economy, ideologically justified

through pseudoscientific racism and religious arguments that dehumanized African people and presented slavery as a natural or even divinely sanctioned order (Draper, 2010).

As the colonies developed, differences emerged between the North and the South in terms of their economic structures and cultural ideologies. The northern states, for their part, gradually began to industrialize and adopt wage labor, which contributed to the early abolition of slavery in several of these regions in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In contrast, the southern economy remained heavily dependent on slave labor and agricultural production.

These contrasting trajectories laid the groundwork for political and moral tensions that would culminate in the Civil War. While many Northerners opposed slavery for ethical or religious reasons, others opposed its expansion for political and economic reasons, without necessarily advocating racial equality (Berquist, 2025).

Despite the brutal conditions under which they lived, enslaved people consistently resisted their enslavement, both overtly and subtly. Rebellions, escapes, work stoppages, sabotage, and the preservation of African cultural traditions were all forms of resistance that challenged the slave system. Notable rebellions such as the Stono Rebellion (1739), the Gabriel Rebellion (1800), and the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831) sparked fear among slaveholders and sharpened the national debate over abolition.

At the same time, an abolitionist movement grew, led by both formerly enslaved people and white allies. These activists engaged in political advocacy, published anti-slavery literature, and organized networks such as the Underground Railroad to assist escaped slaves. The moral and political debate surrounding slavery became one of the most contentious and defining in early American history, shaping national identity and testing the limits of the country's democratic ideals (Davis, 2006).

2.2.2 The Abolition of Slavery in United States of America

The abolition of slavery in the United States was a long and complex process that developed unevenly across states and regions, influenced by political, economic, social, and moral-religious factors.

The gradual end of slavery can be considered to have begun in the northern states at the end of the 18th century, where industrialization and the ideals of the Enlightenment played a key role in shaping an anti-slavery consciousness. For example, states such as Pennsylvania (1780), Massachusetts (1783), and New York (gradually between 1799 and 1827) passed laws to abolish slavery, generally through emancipation schemes that began with the liberation of future generations rather than those already enslaved. In contrast, slavery remained deeply entrenched in the southern states, where agricultural economies relied strictly on enslaved labor to produce cotton and other important crops.

Southern legislators passed increasingly restrictive slave codes, and the expansion of slavery into new territories became a key point of national debate. The Missouri Compromise (1820) and the Compromise of 1850 were legislative attempts to balance the number of free and slave states, but ultimately only succeeded in delaying the resolution of the conflict rather than resolving it. The move toward national abolition gained momentum in the 1830s and 1840s with the emergence of abolitionist organizations such as the American Anti-Slavery Society, led by figures such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. These activists worked tirelessly to expose the moral and humanitarian crisis of slavery and advocate for its total eradication (Davis, 2006).

The issue reached its climax with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and the subsequent secession of eleven southern states, leading to the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861–1865). The Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863, by which Lincoln declared all enslaved people in the Confederate states free.

However, the formal and definitive abolition of slavery was finalized with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in December 1865, which states: “Neither slavery nor indentured labor, except as a punishment for crime whereof a person shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” This amendment marked the legal end of slavery throughout the country, although racial discrimination and inequality persisted during Reconstruction and long afterward, even to this day. The abolition of slavery redefined the nation's labor system and transformed the legal and moral foundations of American society (Foner, 2011).

2.2.3 England & the Transatlantic Slave Trade

From the 16th to the 19th century, England became a dominant force in the transatlantic slave trade. In 1672, under King Charles II and the Duke of York, the Royal African Company (RAC) was granted a royal charter, granting it a monopoly on English trade with West Africa, particularly in enslaved human beings, gold, and ivory. During the 1680s, the RAC transported an estimated 5,000 Africans annually to the Americas. However, in 1698, under pressure from independent traders, Parliament passed the African Trade Act, breaking the RAC's monopoly and opening the market to private traders. This led to an increase in annual slave voyages to over 20,000.

By the mid 18th century, Britain had surpassed other nations to become the world's leading slave-trading power, transporting more than 3 million Africans, many of them to Caribbean plantations (Draper, 2010).

Trade routes operated under the triangular system, English manufactured goods to Africa, enslaved Africans to the Americas, and colonial goods (sugar, tobacco, cotton, rum) back to Great Britain. Cities like Liverpool, Bristol, and London accumulated immense wealth, fueling the development of financial institutions, insurance, and the Industrial Revolution. Prominent figures, including members of the monarchy and aristocracy, directly participated in this trade and benefited from it (Historic England, n.d.).

2.2.4 Abolition of the Slave Trade & Slavery (1807)

The abolitionist push strengthened for decades, led by figures like William Wilberforce and supported by testimonies and denunciations from formerly enslaved people, such as Olaudah Equiano (en.wikipedia.org). After repeated failed attempts, the Slave Trade Act was passed in March 1807, coming into force on May 1 of the same year. This act made the transportation of enslaved people within the British Empire illegal. Its enforcement was backed by civil sanctions and the deployment of the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, which captured around 1,600 slave ships and freed approximately 150,000 Africans before 1860 (Dowlah, 2020).

Although the trade was outlawed, slavery continued to exist in the British colonies. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 formally ended slavery, freeing nearly 800,000 people throughout the Empire beginning August 1, 1834. However, this legislation implemented an apprenticeship system that forced freed people to work for an additional four to six years under coercive conditions, until it was finally eliminated in 1838 due to social pressure. Furthermore, 20 million

pounds sterling, nearly 40% of the British budget at the time, was allocated to compensate slave owners, not freed people. This debt was paid by British taxpayers and was not fully settled until 2015 (Historic England, n.d.).

Abolition had broad implications:

Economic: Profits from the slave trade shaped emerging British capitalism.

Investments derived from slavery financed industrial expansion and modern financial structures.

Moral and political: Abolitionist narratives and testimonies mobilized public opinion and marked a shift in moral and legal attitudes toward human rights and imperial responsibility. However, post-emancipation systems, such as forced apprenticeship, the slave compensation scheme, and the lack of reparations for freed slaves, reveal the depth of racism and economic exclusion that persisted beyond the legality of slavery. This raises the question of whether these libertarian actions were not truly controlled by governments so that minorities could not flourish economically or socially due to the restrictions they continued to face (Dowlah, 2020).

2.2.5 The Abolition of Slavery in Barbados (1834)

Barbados, a small Caribbean Island located in the eastern Caribbean Sea, is known for its natural beauty and rich history dating back centuries. It was colonized by the British in 1627. At that time, the island was inhabited by indigenous Arawak people, who were quickly displaced by European settlers. During the early years of colonization, Barbados became a major center of sugar production through the establishment of sugarcane plantations. By the 17th century, it became a largely slave-based society, with enslaved Africans working under extremely harsh conditions. The island's economy was heavily dependent on sugar production, which was

primarily exported to England. The abolition of slavery in Barbados marked an important milestone in the island's history. In 1834, the Emancipation Act was enacted, ending the slave system in this British colony. This legislation freed enslaved people and granted them certain basic rights. However, many of those freed continued to work on the sugar plantations as day laborers under a system of forced labor contracts (HistoriaUniversal, 2023).

2.2.6 The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804)

The Haitian Revolution was a successful uprising of enslaved Africans against French colonial rule in Saint-Domingue (present day Haiti), which led to the creation of the first independent Black state. This revolution, which started in 1791, was influenced by the French and American revolutions and was led by figures such as Toussaint Louverture. The process culminated in the abolition of slavery in the colony and the founding of a free nation governed by Black people in 1804. Haiti's independence was a pivotal moment in the struggle against colonialism and slavery. It marked a turning point in the history of the Atlantic world and served as inspiration for other abolitionist movements and slave rebellions throughout the region (World History Edu, 2024).

2.2.7 The Abolition of Slavery in Latin America

The Abolition of Slavery in Latin America took place throughout the 19th century, with various countries taking steps to end this institution. The abolitionist movement was driven by revolutionary ideals and the influence of the Atlantic abolitionist movement. Many Latin American nations abolished slavery after gaining independence from Spain in the early 19th century, such as Mexico (1829), Argentina (1813), and Chile (1823). Brazil, the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, did so in 1888 with the signing of the Ley Áurea (Golden Law).

This abolition process had significant political, economic, and social implications, and freed people continued to face marginalization and discrimination (Bowman, et al, 1988).

2.3 Overview of Esi Edugyan's Work

Esi Edugyan is, without a doubt, one of the most powerful and original voices in Canadian literature of our time. Her novels are marked by a profound sensitivity to themes of race, identity, memory, and historical justice. Through complex characters and often silenced realities, she manages to connect the past with the present, giving voice to those who have historically been forgotten. Her writing is moving; it invites us to reflect and question what we think we know about history.

She was born in 1978 in Calgary, Alberta, to a family of Ghanaian origin. Her father was an economist and her mother a nurse. From a young age, Edugyan lived through experiences that confronted her with racism and exclusion. One of them, which she herself has recounted in interviews, was witnessing a Ku Klux Klan cross burning in the town of Provost, when she was just twelve years old. That scene, charged with fear and injustice, left an indelible mark on her memory and undoubtedly influenced her decision to use words as a tool of resistance. She currently lives in Victoria, on Canada's west coast, with her husband, fellow writer Steven Price, whom she met while both were studying at the University of Victoria. They have two children, born in 2011 and 2014. Beyond her role as a renowned writer, she is also a mother, partner, voracious reader, and a citizen committed to current debates about race McKibbin (2012).

Her journey into literature began at a very young age. In high school, a teacher saw a special talent in her and encouraged her to apply to the creative writing program at the University

of Victoria. Although she initially gravitated toward poetry, over time she found in fiction the ideal space to explore the stories that inhabited her. In 2011, her novel *Half-Blood Blues* marked a turning point in her career. Set in Nazi-occupied Europe, the story revolves around a young Afro-German musician who mysteriously disappeared. Through this story, Edugyan shows us another side of the Holocaust, that of people of African descent who were persecuted, rendered invisible, and erased from collective memory. The novel was widely praised for its originality, emotional depth, and historical accuracy. Not only did it win the prestigious Scotiabank Giller Prize, but it was also a finalist for the Booker Prize and the Governor General's Award, among others. But it was with *Washington Black* (2018) that Edugyan achieved even greater global exposure, as she was again awarded the Giller Prize, becoming only the third person in history to win it twice. The novel was a finalist for the Booker Prize and other important awards, and established its author as a unique voice in contemporary literature.

One of the most admirable aspects of her work is the way it gives prominence to people who have been historically marginalized, people of African descent, enslaved people, people of mixed race, migrants, and other minorities. Esi does not present them as passive victims, but as complete human beings, intelligent, creative, full of contradictions, dreams, and wounds. Furthermore, she expands the boundaries of traditional Canadian literature. Her novels are not limited to the white, rural landscape of classic Canada. On the contrary, they travel the world and time, addressing universal themes from Afro-Caribbean perspectives.

With her elegant style and intense emotional content, she manages to make her characters' personal stories resonate with contemporary debates about racism, memory, and belonging.

Ultimately, Esi Edugyan has made a valuable contribution to literature for her artistic merits, her work reminds us that fiction can be a political act, an act of justice, and also an act of tenderness (CBC Books, 2019).

2.4 The Experience of Slavery and its Impact on Washington Black

The novel is set in 1830. The first part, titled “Faith Plantation, Barbados” (Washington Black, Edugyan, 2019, p. 2), gives us a clear view of the environment in which Wash, the 11 year-old protagonist, grows up. From the beginning, he faces racism, both during his time as an enslaved person on a sugar plantation in Barbados and later, when he escapes to an unknown destination. The story begins with the plantation as the center of the economy, presenting Barbados as part of a global network of colonial trade. There, Wash and other enslaved people are treated as less than human beaten, murdered without reason, and stripped of their dignity. However, even when he manages to escape slavery with the help of a white abolitionist named Titch, Wash soon realizes that neither Titch nor the other white abolitionists truly consider him an equal. Although they help him, they see him as someone to be saved, rather than as a fully autonomous subject. The story addresses precisely this relationship between a former master and a freed slave; we follow their journey from a slave-owning society to a post-abolitionist world. The novel is written in a first person retrospective narrative. To analyze the experience of slavery and its impact on Washington Black, we will begin by getting to know the protagonists and their way of thinking,

2.4.1 George Washington Black

He is an 11-year-old boy who was born and lived as a slave on the Faith plantation in Barbados. He is observant, talented, and intelligent. When the then owner, Richard Black, dies,

his nephew Erasmus Wilde takes control of the plantation. Erasmus is much more brutal toward the slaves, he beats, mutilates, and kills them, and hires cruel overseers who do the same. The only person who protects Wash from this brutality is Big Kit, an older enslaved woman who works with him in the cane fields and who, at the end of the novel, is revealed to be Wash's biological mother. Due to the cruelty they endure, Big Kit considers killing Wash and committing suicide so that they can both be reincarnated in the African kingdom of Dahomey. However, when other slaves begin to commit suicide, Erasmus threatens to decapitate the bodies to prevent their rebirth, knowing that African tradition dictates that one is not allowed to enter paradise without a head, so Big Kit abandons his plan. Wash's life is surrounded by fear, deprivation, and the desperation to survive, and the only way to achieve this is by obeying his master in all things. In Wash's mind, white people have absolute power over the life and death of every enslaved person. This can be observed in the following citation,

And as I began to draw what I saw with a clean accuracy, I realized I was troubled by the enormous beauty of that place, of the jewel like fields below us, littered as I knew them to be with broken teeth. The hot wind snapped at my papers, and in a kind of ghostly sound beneath this I thought I heard the cry of a baby. For the few women who gave birth here were turned immediately back in to the fields, and they would set their tender skinned newborns down in the furrows to wail against the hot sun (p.54).

This image reveals the contrast between the idyllic landscape and the invisible brutality that sustains it. The crying of the baby, left in the sun while its enslaved mother works, symbolizes the systematic dehumanization of Wash's childhood under slavery that also reveals the impossibility of innocence in an environment structured by racial violence.

2.4.2 Christopher Wilde

His family divides their lives between Barbados and England. They own the Faith Plantation. Titch lived in Great Britain and joined the European abolitionist movement. As he himself says “slavery is a moral stain against us. If anything will keep white men from their heaven, it is this” (p.105).

Even though he generally believes in the rights of man, he fails when he enjoys the benefits of belonging to the England's wealthy elite. Titch's brother, Erasmus, although he rarely leaves the island, is aware of new political trends and happy to see Titch. He knows that his younger brother does not like plantation work and calls him a hypocrite because it is easy for Titch to be judgmental about the family business.

Erasmus presents himself as a reluctant slaver, as the eldest son and the responsible for the plantation work, keeping him trapped on “this godforsaken island” (p.26). Nonetheless, he views slavery as natural and necessary and wishes to defend the old order against his eccentric brother. In the novel we will see Colonialism and the Neo-Liberal Narrative, where the thinking by the majority of European characters recognizes the immorality of slavery, but do not view abolition as a way to obtain economic equality; they aim to get rid of legal and physical bondage, but do not want to go through the very root of the problem.

The relationship between both characters, Wash and Titch, has a complicated web. At the beginning of the story, we have Titch that educates Washington and exploits him at the same time. On the very day of his arrival on Barbados, Titch selects Wash, to be his personal assistant because he fits to the Cloud Cutter, he is only eleven years old and was one of Erasmus's field slaves. The way he treats the boy is great and open, as a challenge to Barbados's rules of racial segregation. Titch uses Washington to do light chores around the house as well as to further his

own scientific ambitions. Titch writes treaties on engineering and nature, but his most important project is to build a flying machine, an early prototype of an airplane (Cloud Cutter). So, he teaches Wash to read and takes him on a scientific expedition around the island. He makes it possible for Wash to discover a passion for drawing and lets him develop his talents, but within reasonable limits; Wash's gifts are to be encouraged in so far as they are useful to Titch.

A similar irony is visible when it comes to Titch's treatment of Washington as different from other field-slaves because the others are seen as nothing but hands.

Titch's admission that, despite of having intended to use Washington as ballast, he ended up be friend of the boy. Few years later Titch said "It is why I chose you, but it is not why I engaged you to help my experiments. It is not why I be friended you" (p.404-405). This exchange between the two protagonists is a very important moment when Washington fully grasps the fact that slaves occupy an undefined position between goods and human beings; additionally, their status may shift depending on the immediate need of those who hold power over them. According to Dowlah (2020), for around two hundred years, the African slaves were systematically dehumanized as their status for the English Crown was literally as goods. This is well illustrated in the following citation,

"And so you took in a young black boy, and you educated him as if he were an English boy. For his benefit, though? Or so that you might write about it?"

He looked quietly shocked. "I have never written about it."

"You took me on because I was helpful in your political cause. Because I could aid in your experiments. Beyond that I was of no use to you, and so you abandoned me." I struggled to get my breath. "I was nothing to you. You never saw me as equal (p.373).

Wash has understood that he was used as a political symbol rather than recognized as a person.

2.4.3 Philip

Almost a year after Titch's arrival, his depressed cousin, Philip, visits Barbados while Erasmus is away on business at another plantation. Titch shows Philip the work he's been doing with the Cloud-cutter. One day, while Titch is testing hydrogen, it explodes in Wash's face, leaving severe burns on the right side of his face. Scars are a recurring symbol in the novel, and they physically represent the idea that the past is inescapable. They are marks that people carry for the rest of their lives. Weeks later, Philip asks Wash to go hunting alone with him while Titch talks with Erasmus. When they reach the foot of a mountain, Philip takes his gun and shoots himself in the head, dying instantly and leaving Wash covered in blood. Wash returns desperately and tells Titch what happened, afraid that Erasmus will blame him for Philip's death and have him killed, despite his innocence, he decides to protect Wash and escape with him that same night on the Cloud-cutter, beginning a long journey around the world. Let us see this in this quotation,

He was like someone only slowly becoming aware of a malady taking root inside him, confused by the first stirrings of tiredness. It was a thought, in the four years of his absence, he had come closer to an understanding of darkness, closer to knowing what his cousin Philip had always accepted, that destruction was within us, and nothing we could hide from (p.362).

2.4.4 Gaius

Gaius is the porter at the Great House. Wash is afraid of him, particularly because he speaks and acts like a white man rather than a Black man.

2.4.5 Maria

Maria is the cook in the Great House. The narrator talks about her in the following way

I stared in amazement at the bounty, and felt something I had not known before wash over me—desire.

“Don’t you even do it, nigger,” Maria said sharply, as my eye caught a plate of pastries near the door.

I looked at her in fear, caught out. Something shifted in her face, softened.

“The time for that is later,” she said in a gentler voice. “When you is cleaning up, you can lick at what’s left over.”

“Is so?” I said.

“But only from the touched food, only when you are scraping their plates,” Gaius added.

“It won’t do for you to eat up the fresh food.”

“We get to lick the plates, Kit,” I said, smiling up at her in wonder (p. 17).

In this passage we can clearly see that the “privilege” of licking plates reflects how oppression shapes perceptions of dignity and personal worth.

2.4.6 William

He is one of the many slaves of Erasmus Wilde, he commits suicide in search of peace and believing that he would be resurrected in the paradise called Dahomey; however, to set an example to the other slaves, Erasmus cuts off his head and tells the others that he will do the same with anyone who takes their own life and that without a head they cannot be reborn. The narrator emphasizes in this point that,

We had lived in blood for years, my entire life. But something about that evening—the gleaming beauty of the master’s house, the refinements, the lazy elegance—made me feel

a profound, unsettling sense of despair. It was not only William's mutilation that day, knowing his head stared out over the fields even now, in the darkness. What I felt at that moment, though I then lacked the language for it, was the raw, violent injustice of it all (p.11).

This phrase reveals the awakening of Wash's moral conscience in the face of the structural cruelty of the slave system. Although he doesn't yet have the academic language to name it, the feeling of injustice is visceral, the pain becomes a source of insight into structural and symbolic violence.

2.4.7 Mr. John Willard

He is s the overseer of the Barbados sugar plantation, Willard is a skilled hunter, which underscores his toughness and ability to track and capture runaway slaves like Wash. Throughout the novel, Willard serves as a personification of the cruelty and harsh discipline that enslaved people endure. The narrator describes him as,

So this was him my ghost. This man small and calm and emboldened by outlandish morality tales and borrowed quotations. This was he, the one from whom I had been running these three years, the creature of nightmare who had driven me through landscapes of heat and wind and snow, whose shadow had forced me aboard boats and carriages and even a shuddering Cloud-cutter by night, whose face I'd pictured so many waking days and imagined so many sleepless nights (p.271).

2.5 The Complex Relationship Between Titch and Washington

In the second part of the novel, titled "Adrift" (Edugyan, 2019, p. 120), the story revolves around the lack of direction, stability, or control. Wash and Titch flee Barbados to protect Wash from the slave catcher sent by Erasmus, but they are unable to find a safe haven. On this journey,

they meet interesting people who will also be analyzed later. There are many moments in which Titch and Wash cling to sentimental ideals to avoid confronting the ideological reality that surrounds them. On one occasion, Titch asks Wash if he would prefer to be free or remain enslaved, to which Wash replies “oh, no, Titch, I would rather be your property” (p.105). He immediately adds a comment for the reader that “I had thought I was saying what he Titch wished to hear” (p.105). Washington, worried of offending Titch, assumes that the display of gratitude for bondage is expected from him; Titch, on the other hand, already tired of being Washington’s guardian, would love to see a desire for freedom. Washington’s apparent apathy solidifies Titch’s conviction that Washington is helpless and will continue to depend on him even when liberated.

This is an example where we can understand Washington’s life-long obsession with Titch; their individual relationship becomes an allegory for economic and cultural relations between former slaves and slavers.

Despite winning his freedom, Washington is trapped in Titch’s orbit. He tries to define himself at this point, that is, freedom, humanity and personhood, were first presented to him by Titch. They as much help Washington define himself as an independent individual as place him constantly in relation to his former master. In trying to figure out his place in the world, then, Wash is no less conflicted than Titch.

He is torn between admiration and resentment for the man who set him free from bondage, and then refused to take responsibility for his actions, leaving Washington to fend for himself.

As Washington says “I desired, despite every apprehension, to find Titch. [...] My life had been one life before he had taken me up [...]. My current life, I realized, was constructed around an absence” (p.324).

At this point we know that Wash and Titch are forever linked and marked by slavery, which is part of their lived experience and their identity. When the protagonists met together for the last time, in Morocco, where Titch is staying on one of his pseudo-scientific trips.

“Washington [...] I dreamed you would come” (p.393), says Titch; however, when Washington demands more details about the nature of the dream, Titch is unable to explain himself: “I cannot imagine my meaning” (p.396), he says.

Washington, then, is like a ghost haunting Titch’s life, and unlike Washington, Titch seems unable to make sense of this fact. He and Washington mirror each other on many levels; they are idealists, dreamers, and scientists. In a different world, they could be real friends but, in the one built by Edugyan, however, they lack meaningful communication.

How strange, I thought, that this man had once been my entire world, and yet we could come to no final understanding of one another. He was a man who’d done far more than most to end the suffering of a people whose toil was the very source of his power. He had saved my very flesh, taken me away from certain death. His harm, I thought, was in not understanding that he still had the ability to cause it (p.406).

What we see here is a resignation on Washington’s part, who seems to accept the fact that he and Titch will never be able to understand each other. Titch has spent his entire life running away from reality; first, he defined himself against his family’s legacy and the stigma of slavery; then, he ran away from Faith with Washington, saving and liberating his favorite slave, but captivity isn’t limited to physical restriction, and that Wash is still bound by inescapable tethers. Then, however, he tried to get rid of the boy, finding the responsibility of caring for his life far too heavy a burden. Hence, much like at the beginning of their common journey, Titch seems to remain ignorant about the true role he himself plays in Washington’s life and in the cultural and

social reality built around the slave economy. At the end of the novel, Titch claims to have learned that the key to a good life lies in one's ability, but his good intentions have not always been matched by his actions. We can appreciate this fact in the following citation from the novel,

“I have travelled all this way,” I said.

He exhaled a slow breath, and I thought he would speak, but he was silent a long while.

Finally, he said, “I knew you would never leave me.” He paused. “I could not go in a simple way.”

“So, it was a ruse? You only made it look as if you left?”

“I left.” He frowned out at the air before us, as though he saw something in it. But he said nothing more.

“I might have died there,” I said.

“You had Peter, you had my father. I would not have left you otherwise. I knew you would be well cared for.” He turned to me. “You were with my father, when he died?”

(p.371).

In conclusion, the relationship between Titch and Washington reveals the deep psychological and ideological scars left by slavery. Their inability to understand each other underscores the lasting impact of a shared history and the complex and painful search for freedom and self-definition. Their bond remains but cannot be fully resolved.

2.6 The Construction of Racial Identity

Nova Scotia is the third part of the novel, where we will analyze the construction of racial identity of Wash. As it is described in the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, the racial identity refers to one's understanding of themselves in relation to their racial group, encompassing attachment, identification, and evaluation of that group (Broman, 2015), so

we can conclude that it is a complex process influenced by various social, historical, and personal factors. In the novel, the protagonist's journey reveals how deeply the legacy of slavery, segregation, and discrimination shapes his racial identity.

Wash's experiences with personal trauma and systemic racism demonstrate how such societal forces can infiltrate an individual's sense of self. This idea is explored through characters like Erasmus Wilde, Tanna, and Medwin, who each face different aspects of racial identity, from overt cruelty to the subtler ways racism manifests in society. The text underscores how racism, whether through violence or societal judgment, leaves lasting effects on individuals' ability to freely express and shape their racial identities. Let's review these characters from the book and facts that support that was mentioned above.

2.6.1 Erasmus Wilde

Who is exceptionally cruel, his role is to represent the privilege of some, the oppression, and social hierarchies in each society. At the very beginning of the novel, at dinner one evening, Wash hears Erasmus describe the enslaved people to his brother, Titch: "They are not the help, Titch. They are the furniture" (p.21). This phrase illustrates the absolute objectification of Black bodies in the slave system. Erasmus doesn't conceive of them as subjects, but rather as functional objects in the household. This view legitimizes systematic violence and denies any possibility of empathy, reducing slaves to mere extensions of capital. After that moment, another enslaved woman, Big Kit, takes too long to clean up a stain Erasmus made, he smashes her in the face with a plate. Though Titch tries to help Big Kit, Erasmus tells Titch to leave it and not to make a mess of himself. Erasmus's belief in their inhumanity, exemplified by the idea that helping Big Kit is not worth. Titch staining his napkin with her blood, clearly enables him to treat enslaved people with complete disregard for their humanity. When Erasmus arrives on the plantation,

Wash describes how Erasmus and the overseers start maiming the enslaved people; cutting out tongues; burning them alive; whipping, hanging, and shooting them to death. The white overseers use the same racist beliefs to perpetuate massive injustice. We can see this in the following excerpt:

A Reward of One Thousand Pounds will be paid for the capture of GEORGE WASHINGTON BLACK, a Negro Boy of small stature, his countenance marked with Burns; a Slave for life. His Clothing is a new Felt Hat, black Cotton Frockcoat and Breeches, and new Stockings and Shoes. He may be travelling alongside an Abolitionist White Man not his lawful owner, with Green Eyes and Black Hair, of tall stature. Whoever secures the Murderous Slave so that I get him Dead or Alive shall have ONE THOUSAND POUNDS Reward.

JOHN FRANCIS WILLARD, acting agent for ERASMUS WILDE Faith Plantation, Barbados, British West India

I had been nothing but an object to Erasmus Wilde, nothing but an expression of his wealth in the world. My escape was his diminishment, I understood what he had lost was respect that is, power (p.315).

This bounty advertisement strips Wash of all individuality, he is reduced to a body with a price, described by his size, clothing, and scars. Although he has escaped slavery, he is still hunted as fugitive property, symbolizing that physical freedom does not guarantee social or emotional freedom.

2.6.2 Mr. James Wilde

He is Titch and Erasmus's father, James Wilde, a famous scientist working in the Arctic. Titch works on the Cloud Cutter to impress his father, who drew up the plans but never managed

to launch it successfully. When Philip visits Faith Plantation and reveals to Titch that his father has died, Titch is devastated, but when he flees the island with Wash, he sets out to find out what happened. There, he discovers that his father is alive, and they find him in the Arctic doing his research, but James is somewhat dubious of Titch's achievements and refuses to disclose his death so he can continue his research uninterrupted. Soon after, Titch decides to leave Wash behind, abandoning him in the snow. Subsequently, James falls ill and dies. Notice it in the following citation,

Watching him, I understood him to be a sensitive and intelligent man, quietly pragmatic in his solutions. I could not fathom why he'd elected to surrender his life to the unpredictable whims of Mister Wilde.

Also in the mornings Titch's father worked at his experiments in the fourth igloo, a space he had devoted on the microscopic study of various kinds of ice (p.192).

This reflection by Wash on James Wilde suggests that submission is not exclusive to the enslaved. It also shows how the figure of the powerful white man can become enslaved to his own ego. As a more mature man, Wash begins to question white men from a critical perspective, stops idealizing them, and begins to see them as contradictory, complex, and not necessarily superior subjects.

2.6.3 Tanna Goff

She is a mixed-race woman, Wash and Tanna have deep affection for each other, but their inability to communicate their feelings also tempers and obscures that affection.

Even when Tanna is explicitly expressing her desire to be with Wash, Wash is paralyzed both by the fear of society's reaction and the fear of John Willard (the hunter) coming to find him. Let us see this in this citation: "She was wondrous and brilliantly vivid, and when I thought

of Goff killing her to crate up as a specimen for his exhibition, a twist of nausea went through me” (p.250). Wash fears that Tanna, who is a racialized and intelligent woman, will be reduced to an object of study, of exhibition, as happens with animals or “exotic curiosities” in colonial museums. We can observe this situation in the following citation:

“What I am saying is that you are strong. You are standing on your own feet. You are embracing your self-sufficiency. Look at you. Look at what you have made of your life after such hardship.”

I puffed air bitterly through my lips. “Yes, look.”

We were again silent, the sound of the surf reaching us from the side streets.

And then I understood. “You came to ask me to dive in your stead. That is why you sought me out at my rooming house.”

Her face darkened. “I came to give you, my note. And because I wanted to see you, and because I thought you wanted to see me. I was apparently wrong.” Before I could speak, she turned in the road and began walking away (p.245).

This suggests that Wash isn’t fully free in his mind, as his fear and society’s judgment both prevent him from fulfilling Big Kit’s statement in the book’s first pages where she gives Wash the meaning of being free “Oh child, it like nothing in this world. When you free you can do anything” (p.9). See this situation in this excerpt:

I sensed her turning away in the dark. “Nothing.”

But I thought I understood what she would not ask. I understood she desired to know if I had found what I was seeking, if this trip would finally satisfy my erratic pursuit of an unanswerable truth, if it would calm my sense of rootlessness, solve the chaos of my origins for me. She wanted to know if anything would be laid to rest, or if we’d continue

to drift through the world together, going from place to place until I made her like me, so lacking a foothold anywhere that nowhere felt like home (p.368).

2.6.4 Medwin

He is a black man who is struggling to fit into life in Nova Scotia after having been enslaved. As Wash notes, many of the men that are hardened due to the racism and subsequent violence that they face in a place where they can't achieve a true sense of belonging. Wash is the same, as his past experiences have made him misfit in society.

In this part it shows that racism doesn't only manifest in overt cruelty, as is the case on the plantations; racism also manifests in white people treating non-white people in subtler ways that still dehumanize and diminish them like they do with Tanna, Medwin, Esquimaux people in the Arctic and others "You were a cause to him, not a person – however much he protested otherwise. You were something to be used to further his own crusade, his own sense of goodness" (p.283).

2.6.5 G.M. Goff

Is a noted naturalist and scientist. Renowned for his research on marine life, Goff initially offers Wash the opportunity to develop his artistic and scientific talents by hiring him to illustrate aquatic specimens. While Goff appears progressive in his scientific pursuits, his attitudes reveal the racial prejudices of Victorian society. Despite valuing Wash's abilities, Goff never treats him as an equal collaborator. Instead, he views him with a mixture of curiosity and condescension. These dynamic highlights one of the novel's central critiques, that freedom and equality are complicated by race and class, especially in the 19th century. Goff's relationship with his daughter, Tanna, further illustrates his conflicted liberalism. He supports her scientific career but grapples with societal prejudices related to her race and gender. Goff symbolizes the well-

intentioned but prejudiced white liberal of his time, someone committed to knowledge and progress, but blind to his role in maintaining exclusion. Notice it in this citation,

“I am exploring the discrepancy between the factual age of the earth and so-called evidence of His creation. It is more a philosophical investigation than one of strong conviction. I am simply curious to see if the evidence exists that would entirely dispute creationist theory” (p.239).

2.7 The Psychological and Emotional Effects of Racism

In the last part of the novel “England” (p.286) we will review the psychological and emotional effects of racism left in Wash and other characters, the racism they live in that moment of the story are deep-rooted and wide-ranging, affecting them on a personal level as well as shaping their sense of community and connection to the larger society. These effects are not isolated incidents but part of a broader historical and social context, with consequences that can endure across generations. According to Chen & Allen, (2021) discrimination is defined as the “differential treatment of members of groups by both individuals and social institutions,” and as a result psychological and emotional effects are shown at present. For example Intergenerational Trauma, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), lower self-esteem and identity conflict, sense of alienation and disconnection among others, these effects can remain on future generations, we will go deeply in those.

2.7.1 Character Psychological Profiles

Washington Black explores the psychological consequences of racism through the complex inner lives of her characters. The novel reveals how systemic oppression leaves lasting

imprints on the mind and shaping identity, self-worth, and human relationships. Washington Black, the novel's protagonist, carries the scars of trauma and internalizes inferiority long after he escapes bondage, "I was black-skinned and burnt, as disfigured inside as without, and though he took me seriously enough as an illustrator and a scientist, he said not want me for his daughter" (p.248). Big Kit, his maternal protector, reflects the quiet despair and spiritual resistance of a life spent under dehumanization. Even Titch, the abolitionist inventor, cannot escape the moral dissonance of his privileged position, while Erasmus Wilde, as a brutal enslaver, demonstrates the emotional numbness bred by power and racial supremacy. Through these characters, it is represented how racism distorts the psyche of the oppressed and those complicit in its systems. This is seen as follows,

2.7.1.1 *Washington Black*. Wash's early life as an enslaved child on a Barbados plantation instills in him deep psychological and physical scars, including fear, anxiety, and a fragmented sense of self, Wash is never free from the racial dynamics of the world.

Wherever he goes, he is aware of how others perceive him. He never fully feels a sense of belonging, even after gaining freedom and becoming a great illustrator of marine life, being able to do studies about atmospheric conditions, or asserting a presence in spaces typically denied to Black people in the 19th century, he grapples with feelings of inferiority and questions his humanity. His relationship with Titch exacerbates Wash's internal conflict, the abolitionist inventor who frees Wash, appears benevolent, yet his view of Wash is often paternalistic. He is fascinated by Wash's skills but also treats him as a symbol of his own moral righteousness "I was not his purpose... I was only his mission" (p.293), illustrating the tension between being valued for his intellect and being objectified due to his race. And "You had to understand, I had not been born a genius. I had been born a slave" (p.211), this

statement encapsulates that his identity was formed in an environment that denied his humanity and intellectual capacity.

How frightened I was, how terrified to be a small black boy alone at sea. I stayed out of the captain's path, fearing he might sell me to a passing ship bound for the Slave States. I was terrified also of meeting John Willard or his agents, convinced they would discover and kill me (p.209).

2.7.1.2 Big Kit (*Wash's mother*). Big Kit, an enslaved woman, embodies the emotional toll of living in perpetual oppression, resignation and survival instincts, references to African spiritual beliefs hint at a suppressed identity and inner life, showing how culture and spiritual memory become forms of psychological resistance. She exhibits a hardened exterior, shaped by years of suffering and survival under slavery. Her psychological state is one of stoicism and fatalism, she sees little hope for escape and even tells Wash that death may be the only freedom. She represents another form of resistance, quiet, spiritual, and deeply rooted in ancestral memory. As an enslaved woman, her physical freedom is limited, but she maintains an inner world rich with African beliefs and traditions. She speaks of the afterlife, of returning to Dahomey, and of the soul's journey beyond death, offering Wash a vision of identity that slavery cannot erase. Her stoicism is a survival strategy. When she says, "This world not meant for freedom," (p.16) it reflects not defeat, but a deep awareness of the systemic brutality around her. Her mother, sheughness is not the absence of feeling, but a shield, one passed on to Wash to help him survive in a world that devalues his existence.

Her relationship with Wash is maternal, even though she never confesses to Wash that she is

her mother, she tries to protect him emotionally by instilling in him a sense of strength and realism. However, this protection is laced with despair, she doesn't believe in a better world for him, which reflects the psychological devastation that racism and slavery have inflicted on her worldview.

She loved me with the terror of separation, as someone who had lost all the riches of a scorched life. She loved me in spite of those past losses, as if to say, I will not surrender this time, you will not take this from me (p.317).

2.7.1.3 Christopher Wilde (white abolitionist/scientist). Is conflictive. He abhors slavery and seeks to help Wash, but he also benefits from colonial privilege and often fails to fully understand the weight of Wash's trauma. His actions, though well-meant, are sometimes patronizing, and he fails to grasp that his view of Wash as a "project" or "protégé" can be dehumanizing. Titch's tendency to flee from his family, from the plantation, from Wash himself, can be interpreted as a psychological inability to confront the full consequences of racism and his own complicity. He is haunted by guilt but lacks the courage to face it, which points to a deeper inner turmoil. When faced with moral complexity, especially his, he often chooses to go away rather than confront. His sudden departure from Wash is a form of escaping. Wash later realizes that Titch's actions stem from an inability to reconcile his identity as both a benefactor and a participant in a racist world.

Until one day I woke to a burning certainty I needed to better my circumstances, or I would die. And I was trying my best to live up to that ideal, to be my own free man. But it was quite an awakening, to leave behind Titch's coddled world and meet again with the brutality of white men (p.212).

His emotional evasion reflects a broader theme in the novel, that even well-intentioned white allies may struggle to acknowledge the full extent of their responsibility.

Erasmus Wilde (enslaver), Erasmus embodies the psychological mindset of a white supremacist plantation owner. He dehumanizes the enslaved to justify his control over them. His violence is not just physical but psychologically designed to instill fear and submission, it is about maintaining a self-image built on superiority. Racism gives him a structure to channel fear, rage, and insecurity into domination. Erasmus appears emotionally stunted and devoid of empathy. His racism likely stems from deep-seated fear, insecurity, and a need to dominate. He uses power as a shield against introspection, suggesting a hollow psychological core built on maintaining hierarchy. In this way, racism becomes a coping mechanism for both, the oppressed and the oppressors, though in Erasmus's case, it hardens into emotional detachment and moral decay.

2.7.2 Intergenerational Trauma

The concept of intergenerational trauma refers to how the traumatic experiences of one generation can be passed on to subsequent generations, affecting their psychological, emotional, and social well-being (Broman, 2015). In *Washington Black*, it is powerfully illustrated, slavery and racism harm the individuals directly affected and leave a deep mark on the collective consciousness of their descendants. Wash carries his own experiences of violence and abandonment, also the legacy of suffering of those who came before him, Big Kit, Medwin, and an entire enslaved generation. This trauma manifests itself in his difficulty trusting, his constant need for validation, his anxiety about freedom, and his search for an identity not defined by pain. Even when he finds himself in "free" contexts, such as England or the Arctic, his past haunts him, shaping his relationships and perceptions. The novel shows that trauma does not disappear

with legal freedom. Wash's physical marks, such as the scar on his face, are symbolic of the inherited pain that cannot be erased. Slavery has shaped their inner language, their way of loving, thinking, and understanding their place in the world.

Wash's identity disorientation, a product of slavery and constant exile, is reflected in this fragment, which expresses the experience of a racialized individual who, despite being legally free, finds no place in the world. This metaphor of the "child without identity" highlights the psychological trauma and persistent alienation of the character experiences in contexts of apparent freedom.

And so, I gathered my belongings and moved on. In those drifting days I often gave my name as Joseph Crawford, as if I might hide inside the spectra of another man. I dropped the ruse and became again Washington Black. But I cooked always behind a curtain, unseen, my scarred face being, the owner feared, repugnant. I became a boy without identity, a walking shadow, and with each new month I fell deeper into strangeness. For there could be no belonging for a creature such as myself, anywhere, a disfigured black boy with a scientific turn of mind and a talent on canvas, running, always running, from the dimmest of shadows (p.211).

Wash lives in the tension between what he was, what he inherited, and what he aspires to become. This tension drives his story and, at the same time, reflects the history of people of African descent who, even today, continue to grapple with the psychological effects of centuries of slavery and exclusion.

This theoretical framework provides a solid foundation for analyzing the novel from a sociological perspective. Using sociological literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and concepts of racial identity construction, the novel is situated within the historical and psychological legacy of slavery and colonialism. The literary symbols used are narrative devices that represent trauma, limited freedom, and the search for identity.

Characters such as Washington, Titch, Erasmus, Big Kit, and G.M. Goff reveal how racism penetrates both external systems and the inner world of individuals, shaping identities, relationships, and emotional states.

The historical context, knowing about the transatlantic slave trade and slavery abolition in the United States, England, and Latin America, frames the novel's fictional world within historical realities of violence and resistance. Understanding this context allows for a deeper interpretation of the novel as both a historical and psychological manifestation of the self under conditions of oppression.

Ultimately, *Washington Black* challenges us to consider how the legacies of slavery continue to profoundly shape our understanding of race, identity, and humanity.

Chapter 3

Methodological Framework

This chapter presents the methodological foundations that guided the development of this research. A qualitative approach was adopted, allowing for an in-depth interpretation of its content, structure, and symbolic dimensions. The study focuses on the representation of racism and its psychological and social effects on the protagonist, Washington Black, analyzing both his personal experiences and broader systems of colonial oppression. This approach involved a close reading of the text, supported by theoretical frameworks from sociology, history, and postcolonial studies. This chapter also describes the data collection instruments, analytical categories, and methodological design that shaped this research, highlighting how literature can reveal profound truths about social structures and the formation of individual identity within historical contexts.

3.1 Research Method

To address this literary analysis, a qualitative research approach was employed, focusing on the close reading and interpretation of the text, considering racism as the main theme. For that purpose, key scenes in the book where Washington Black experiences racism or racial discrimination were considered, also the analysis of the motivations, actions, and inner struggles of characters in relation to racism. The historical context of the slavery, colonialism, and racism were used to examine how racism is institutionalized and how it affects the characters within that framework.

The research also considers the role of literary devices, including narrative perspective, symbolism, metaphor, and imagery, in conveying the nuances of racial trauma and resilience. In

this way, the method goes beyond content analysis to examine how Edugyan's stylistic choices reinforce her critique of racial hierarchies and colonial legacies.

3.2 Research Approach

This research adopts a qualitative approach, specifically through a literary analysis from a sociological perspective. It seeks to interpret Esi Edugyan's novel *Washington Black*, to understand how themes such as the construction of racial identity, trauma, and the legacy of slavery are portrayed after the era of colonialism.

This qualitative approach allows for an in-depth examination of the characters, narrative structure, and symbols, prioritizing interpretation over quantification and focusing on how literature reflects and questions real social realities.

3.3 Research Process

To achieve the objective of the research, a qualitative approach was used focusing on how racism is portrayed and how it impacts the protagonist's identity. The aim was to examine how the novel illustrates systemic racism, colonial dynamics, and personal struggles of racial identity.

The analysis relied on close reading, and thematic coding, to explore the social and racial power dynamics in the text.

The first step in the research process was to define the research question, which focused on how racism is portrayed in *Washington Black* life and how it affects his identity development. This question was shaped by the central themes of race, colonialism, and freedom in the novel. Understanding the significance of race and how it influences personal growth within a system of oppression became the key focus of the analysis.

Then, the researcher carefully read *Washington Black* while actively annotating the text. The researcher focused on key passages that illustrated the protagonist's racial struggles, as well as scenes

that frame the system of slavery and colonialism. Through this process, the researcher took detailed notes on language, character interactions, and symbolic elements related to race and discrimination.

The final step in the research process involved interpreting the data gathered from the close reading; the researcher analyzed how racism affected Washington's identity and how the novel critiques the systems that perpetuate racial oppression and psychological effects nowadays. The emotional complexity and evolving consciousness of the protagonist were central to understanding the novel's broader commentary on racial trauma and agency.

After revising, the researcher focused on editing for grammar, citation accuracy, and presentation to ensure the job met academic standards.

3.4 Research Instruments

The primary research instrument employed in this analysis was a close reading of the novel *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan. This method facilitated an in-depth examination of key passages, character interactions, and dialogue that reveal the racial dynamics prevalent during the novel's historical setting. Framed within the historical context of slavery in the Caribbean and the broader Atlantic world, the analysis focused on how systemic racism is embedded in the characters' lives and how it profoundly influences the development of the protagonist, *Washington Black*. The study also considered the psychological and emotional effects of racism, as well as the use of symbolism throughout the novel. These elements formed the foundation of the literary analysis, which was further supported by secondary sources, including historical studies and scholarly articles. These sources enabled a comparison between the fictional representation of events and real historical occurrences and figures, thereby providing greater context to the novel's treatment of race and identity.

Particular attention was given to the novel's symbolic elements such as the flying machine, aquariums, and portraiture, which serve as metaphors for liberation, confinement, and self-perception. These elements were treated as essential narrative tools that reflect the psychological and social dimensions of racial identity.

3.5 Sources of Information

3.5.1 Primary Source

The novel *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan. Edugyan, 2018, was the main literary work analyzed.

3.5.2 Secondary Sources

Books and academic articles on sociological literary criticism such as Eagleton (1992); theories of racial identity and trauma such as Broman (2015); and historical studies on slavery and abolition. Then Historical Documents about investigations on slavery in Barbados, the transatlantic trade, and the abolitionist movements of the 19th century.

3.6 Research Design

The research follows descriptive and interpretive design. It aims to describe how the novel, through its four chapters, represents sociological phenomena and to interpret the meaning of its literary elements within historical and theoretical contexts.

This design included a close reading of the text, identification of literary devices such as symbols, metaphors, and narrative tone.

Also, the thematic analysis based on sociological theories of racial identity, intergenerational trauma, structural racism, and postcolonialism making a comparison between historical events and their fictional representation.

3.7 Categories of Analysis

The thematic analysis of the novel was guided by the following analytical categories, derived from the study's objectives and theoretical framework

3.7.1 Racial Identity Formation. Exploration of the process by which the protagonist constructs his identity in a context of racial oppression and discrimination.

3.7.2 Trauma and Intergenerational Impact. Examination of the psychological wounds caused by slavery and their transmission across generations.

3.7.3 Freedom and Emancipation. Analysis of the quest for personal and collective liberation, both in a physical and symbolic sense.

3.7.4 Power Relations and Colonialism. Interpretation of the sociopolitical structures that shape interactions between characters and reinforce systems of domination, both explicit and hidden.

3.7.5 Symbolism and Metaphors. Study of literary devices that express deep meanings related to identity, trauma, and historical memory.

3.8 Data Collection Instruments

Given that this was a qualitative document based analysis, the main instruments were used to organize and interpret the textual information were:

3.8.1 Textual Annotation. Close reading and note taking directly on the text to highlight relevant passages.

3.8.2 Analysis Matrix. A structured tool for categorizing themes, symbols, and patterns in relation to the research objectives.

3.8.3 Research Notebooks and Reading Logs. Records of interpretations, reflections, and observations that emerged during the reading process.

3.8.4 Bibliographic References. Academic sources used to support the theoretical and historical interpretation of the work.

3.9 Data Collection and Analysis Process

Data collection was conducted through a close reading of the novel *Washington Black*, focusing on identifying passages that highlight racial oppression, psychological trauma, identity crises, and social exclusion.

These excerpts were carefully selected for their profound analytical value, as they allow the study of the work to be approached from a sociological perspective. Special attention was paid to the symbolic and metaphorical language used by the author, given that these literary devices represent the inner experiences of the protagonist and secondary characters, as well as the social contexts they experience. This allowed for an analysis of the interactions between the characters to reveal the dynamics of inequality, social hierarchy, and power that shape human relationships in the story.

The data analysis process was structured in the following stages, first the thematic Coding where key excerpts from the novel were identified and organized. Then a sociological Interpretation, coding themes were interpreted in light of sociological and postcolonial theories that allow us to understand the construction of racial identity and the social consequences of slavery.

Also, historical Contextualization of the events, characters, and symbols were situated within the historical context of the 19th century, considering the systems of slavery, colonialism, and racism.

Finally, the findings were integrated into an interpretive analysis that articulates the literary dimension of the work with its sociological and historical implications.

Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS

We find in our novel a deep human story, one of survival and the complex path to healing, identity, and belonging. This chapter explores how the emotional and psychological weight of racism is captured through dramatic events, and in quiet moments of fear, doubt, wonder, and hope that mark Washington's life.

As we follow Wash, we understand how the trauma of slavery lingers in the mind and soul. Through symbolic imagery such as flight, marine life, and art, Wash's inner world is given voice, his longing to be seen and understood, and his painful awareness that freedom is not just an escape but learning to exist within one's own skin.

This chapter brings together key passages, recurring motifs, and critical theories to better understand the weight of what the protagonist carries and how he attempts to build a life beyond that burden. It explores how we maintain our humanity when the world insists on denying it, and how stories like Wash's help us see the persistent impact of injustice in the present. More than a testament to suffering, *Washington Black* is an affirmation of resilience, imagination, and the power to reclaim one's voice.

4.1 Exploring passages that illustrate the emotional and psychological effects of racism

One of the most compelling aspects of *Washington Black* is its nuanced portrayal of how racism affects the inner lives of its characters, particularly the protagonist. The creator does not limit her depiction of racism to physical violence or systemic injustice; she goes deeply into the

emotional and psychological consequences that arise from living in a world where one's identity is constantly devalued. The following passages are examples that can illuminate how these effects are embedded in the protagonist's actions, in his memory, sense of self, and evolving worldview. For example: "I had been born in the old master's house... My first language was his. My first images were of the white world" (p.7).

I could feel the day's exhaustion descending on me. "What it like, Kit? Free?"

I felt her shift in the dirt, and then she was gathering me in close, her hot breath at my ear.

"Oh, child, it like nothing in this world. When you free, you can do anything."

"You go wherever it is you wanting?"

"You go wherever it is you wanting. You wake up any time you wanting. When you free," she whispered, "someone ask you a question, you ain't got to answer. You ain't got to finish no job you don't want to finish. You just leave it" (p.9).

"You are your own man, Washington. You owe nothing to Chistopher Wilde. You have been standing on your own two feet. Now keep going. Save yourself" (p.284)

Here we see that Big Kit's words express a radical idea of freedom as autonomy over one's body and one's own decisions, and Tanna's comment reinforces the idea that Wash must reconstruct his identity without relying on external validation

4.2 Demonstrate how themes like identity, trauma, and alienation appear and evolve

One of Washington Black's most powerful contributions is the way Esi Edugyan traces the evolution of his protagonist from an imposed identity, that of an enslaved, voiceless child, to an identity under construction, aware of his past but no longer defined solely by it. From the first chapters, Wash is presented as a child shaped by fear and silence. Slavery has reduced his

existence to obedience in order to survive. He has no control over his body, his time, or his future. His name, inherited from President George Washington, is a paradox, a symbol of freedom imposed on someone stripped of it. As the novel progresses, and especially after his escape with Titch, Wash begins to discover other possibilities for himself. Science and art have become tools of self-definition and expression. His skill in drawing allows him to communicate complex ideas, and to construct his own narrative about his existence. Through art, he begins to reclaim his humanity and establish his place in the world. However, this process of identity formation is not linear. Trauma, both physical and emotional, accompanies him at every stage. Wash experiences moments of intense alienation, especially when confronted with racism in supposedly "free" places like England and the Arctic. Despite having escaped slavery, he fails to feel truly free because society still views him as inferior. We can see this in the following citation;

I worked for a time in a small-scale fishery. But my years on the plantation, and my memory of John Willard's agent on the docks, had twisted something in me – I was everywhere uneasy in my skin, and this made me irritable and nervous and desperately melancholy, though I could not then have expressed it so. The fear, the fear was always with me. And not just of Willard's agents – kidnappers generally roamed the coast, and in the rainy, grey dusk they would stun a freed man in the street and drag him half-conscious onto a ship bound for the Southern states, to make of him a slave again (p.210).

How could he have treated me so, he who congratulated himself on his belief that I was his equal? I had never been his equal. To him, perhaps, any deep acceptance of equality

was impossible. He saw only those who were there to be saved, and those who did the saving (p.359).

Wash's realization that Titch never saw him as an equal is a profound emotional rupture, reaffirming that true liberation must include emotional recognition and validation.

This feeling of insecurity is intensified by Titch's abandonment, who represents an ambivalent figure for Wash, savior, mentor, father, and also traitor. Titch's disappearance forces him to confront the fact that he must build himself up alone, without relying on external validation. This marks a turning point, Wash begins to leave behind the identity imposed on him by others and begins to search for a more authentic sense of self. The novel doesn't offer a simple resolution. Wash's identity remains fluid, pierced by pain and hope. However, towards the end, there is a deeper acceptance of his history and a will to move forward, not from forgetting, but from awareness.

4.3 Application of theory

To enrich the literary analysis of *Washington Black*, it is important to situate the narrative within a broader theoretical framework. Scholars such as Chen and Allen (2021) in their essay, **The Wounds We Carry On Racialized Trauma and Narrative Repair**, argue that, "The racialized body becomes a site where trauma is inscribed, read, and regulated often without the subject's consent." This aligns with Washington's experience. His body is consistently marked first by slavery, then by public fascination with his "exceptional" abilities. He is both invisible (as a former slave) and hyper-visible (as a scientific prodigy), which creates constant tension in his self-perception. Washington's commitment to marine biology and his art can be seen as an

effort to rebuild a coherent sense of self outside the trauma of slavery. By applying these theories to the novel, we can better understand how Edugyan articulates the legacy of slavery and its impact on mental health, resilience, and the struggle for self-definition.

To facilitate understanding of the theoretical application of this analysis, the following table presents a summary of the main sociological and postcolonial theories used to interpret the novel. Each category relates to the central thematic axes of the study, such as racial identity, intergenerational trauma, and systemic oppression.

Table 1: Application of Sociological and Postcolonial Theories in *Washington Black*

Category of Analysis	Theoretical Concept Applied	Example from the Novel	Sociological Interpretation
Racial Identity Formation	Process influenced by historical context, personal experiences, and social expectations	Wash feels like a “child without identity” as he travels under different names and hides due to his skin color	Racial identity is shaped by trauma, exile, and social exclusion in post-slavery contexts (Broman, 2015).
Intergenerational Trauma	Psychological trauma is transmitted across generations	Big Kit wants Wash to die with her to avoid the life of slavery	Slavery leaves deep emotional wounds that are inherited as both personal and collective memory (Broman, 2015; Chen & Allen, 2021).
Power-Colonialism Relationship	How formerly colonized peoples struggled to recover their identity	Titch frees Wash but later abandons him, revealing his white privilege, action is more a political symbol than real freedom	White privilege reproduces control even when disguised as morality or ‘help’ (Postcolonial Theory).
Critique of Racial Injustice	Literature as a social practice that denounces dominant ideologies	Erasmus describes enslaved people as ‘furniture’ without humanity	Racism justifies structural violence and dehumanization as part of the colonial social order (Eagleton, 1992).
Social Alienation and Exclusion	Racism causes psychological detachment and dislocation	Even in England, Wash feels like he doesn’t belong and is treated as a scientific curiosity	Alienation shows how institutionalized racism shapes self-perception and social relations (Chen & Allen, 2021).

4.4 Patterns and Symbols

Esi Edugyan's storytelling is rich with symbolism and recurring motifs that deepen the emotional resonance of the narrative. Rather than presenting trauma solely through direct description, she uses metaphor, visual imagery, and narrative structure to convey the psychological fragmentation and lingering effects of racism. These symbols, including the flying machine, marine life, and artistic representation, serve as windows into Washington's internal struggles and desires. This section explores how these narrative techniques function as tools for expressing trauma and, at times, offer glimpses of healing or resistance.

4.4.1 The Flying Machine (Titch's Cloud-cutter).

The Cloud-Cutter is a flying machine built by Titch with the help of Wash. This machine symbolizes freedom, the possibility of escaping the physical chains of slavery. It also represents Titch's idealism, his desire to achieve a utopian vision of humanity, removed from violence and oppressive social structures; it is a path to escape reality. However, the symbol of the machine is also fraught with ambiguity. Although it allows escape, it does not guarantee safety or equality. Wash is literally carried through the air, yet he remains without control over his destiny. The freedom offered by Titch is partial, conditional, and incomplete. We can evidence it in this citation,

What did I feel? What would anyone feel, in such a place? My chest ached with anguish and wonder, an astonishment that went on and on, and I could not catch my breath. The Cloud-cutter spun, turned gradually faster, rising ever higher. I began to cry—deep, silent, racking sobs, my face turned away from Titch, staring out onto the boundlessness

of the world. The air grew colder, crept in webs across my skin. All was shadow, red light, storm-fire and frenzy. And up we went into the eye of it, untouched, miraculous (p.119).

The machine flies but does not completely free oneself and falls into the ocean, leaving them at the mercy of the environment; this time completely unknown to both of them, leaving them vulnerable and dependent.

4.4.2 Aquariums and Marine Life.

During her time in London, Wash works illustrating marine species at Goff's aquarium. The captive fish serves as a metaphor for her own experience, it beings that have been torn from their natural habitat, put on display, and studied with curiosity, but without truly understanding their essence. This critical metaphor shows how, even in academic and "civilized" environments, racialized bodies can be objects of observation rather than belonging. Aquariums symbolize the limits of apparent freedom, one can swim, but only within the glass walls, without the right to express opinions or transcendence; they are simply allowed to live. He mentions it in this way,

I felt, in those moments of looking around, ferociously proud—of this strange, exquisite place where people could come to view creatures they believed nightmarish, to understand these animals were in fact beautiful and nothing to fear. But a part of me felt also somehow anguished, ravaged, torn at. For I glimpsed, in each and every display, all my elaborate calculations, my late nights of feverish labour. I saw my hand in everything—in the size and material of the tanks, in the choice of animal specimens, even in the arrangement of the aquatic plants. I had sweated and made gut-wrenching mistakes, and in the end my name

would be nowhere. Did it matter? I did not know if it mattered. I understood only that I would have to find a way to make peace with the loss, or I would have to leave the whole enterprise behind and everyone connected with it (p.354).

Although he works in a scientific setting, he remains an object of study rather than a full subject. Aquariums represent the limits of apparent freedom meaning that you can swim, but only within the glass

4.4.3 Portraits and Visual Representation.

Art occupies a central place in the novel. Wash develops an exceptional talent for observation and drawing, and it is through this medium that he builds his autonomy. But he also grapples with the question of who has the power to represent whom, and how that representation shapes identity. His portraits, especially those he makes of himself, become acts of affirmation. They are attempting to define themselves without colonial filters. However, the white gaze is always present, whether in the critique of his works or in the appropriation of the knowledge he produces. For example, in this passage we can confirm it: “If not for yourself, then for those like you who would never get the chance of it. Men as talented as you, who will never get the chance of anything” (p.279).

4.4.4 Narrative Perspective and Time.

Edugyan employs a reflective, first person narration that mimics trauma’s temporal dislocation. Washington often jumps between past and present, reliving certain events emotionally, even when he is physically removed from them. This nonlinear storytelling

reinforces the idea that trauma is not simply remembered, it is re-experienced. Let us see this situation illustrated in the following quotation,

It had happened so gradually, but these months with Titch had schooled me to believe I could leave all misery behind, I could cast off all violence, outrun a vicious death. I had even begun thinking I'd been born for a higher purpose, to draw the earth's bounty, and to invent; I had imagined my existence a true and rightful part of the natural order. How wrong-headed it had all been. I was a black boy, only—I had no future before me, and little grace or mercy behind me. I was nothing, I would die nothing, hunted hastily down and slaughtered (p.151).

4.4.5 Scar Face.

The scar in Wash's face symbolizes the impact of trauma and the inescapability of the past. For Wash, it conceals a disfiguring burn, a physical reminder of the dehumanization he endured during slavery. It evokes horror or discomfort in others. This dual function reflects by wearing it, he internalizes how others view him, embodying the burden of managing their discomfort and expectations. Moreover, the scarf contrasts sharply with Wash's aspirations as an artist and scientist.

But I cooked always behind a curtain, unseen, my scarred face being, the owner feared, repugnant. The schedule was demanding, and after some months of this I gave up drawing altogether, finding no extra hours in my day. Though I did not know it then, I had begun the months of my long desolation. I became a boy without identity, a walking shadow, and with each new month I fell deeper into strangeness. For there could be no

belonging for a creature such as myself, anywhere, a disfigured black boy with a scientific turn of mind and a talent on canvas, running, always running, from the dimmest of shadows (p.211).

While his creative and intellectual pursuits represent clarity, discovery, and reinvention, the scarf symbolizes what remains hidden and unresolved what cannot be explained away or erased.

4.4.6 The Octopus.

The octopus represents Wash's inability to build a satisfying home for himself, even years after escaping slavery. In Nova Scotia, Wash finds the octopus on a dive for father and daughter biologists Goff and Tanna, and initially the octopus spurts ink because it is afraid of Wash. However, when he holds out his hands openly and gently, the octopus swims directly into his hands. This parallels Wash's own relationship with Titch, initially he feared Titch, but upon recognizing the man's gentleness, Wash was able to trust him and even followed Titch wherever he wanted to go even if that meant taking Wash away from the only home he ever knew.

Then, when Wash is building the aquarium that will house the octopus, he describes it as a place "where people could come to view creatures, they believed nightmarish, to understand these animals were in fact beautiful and nothing to fear" (p.354). This statement applies to the creatures within (like the octopus), and to Wash himself, whose dark skin and burn scars make him seem nightmarish to other people. Like the creatures in the aquarium, Wash is displaced from his home and becomes something to marvel at, making him feel isolated and like not belonging.

The parallels between Wash and the octopus continue, as Wash and the Goffs transport the octopus to London from Nova Scotia, the octopus starts to grow ill and turns colorless. In other words, by going from place to place, it loses its vivacity. When Wash looks at the octopus, he sees “not the miraculous animal but his own slow, relentless extinction” (p.310). he expresses it clearly in this excerpt,

The octopus arranged itself in a smatter of algae, its body hanging blackly before me. When I came forward to touch it, it sent out a surge of dark ink. We paused, watching each other, the grey rag of ink hanging between us. Then it shot off through the water, stopping short to radiate like a cloth set afire, its arms unfurling and vibrating. There was something playful in the pause, as if it expected me to ink it back. I held my hands out towards it, gently; the creature hovered in the dark waters, almost totally still. Then, shyly, it began to pulse towards me, stopping just inches away, its small, gelatinous eyes taking me in. Then it swam directly into my hands (p.250).

It also represents uprooting and the loss of vitality due to displacement. When Wash watches the octopus become ill in London, he sees his own “slow extinction” in it, reflecting his emotional deterioration.

4.4.7 The Nail.

Symbolizes Wash’s futile resistance, and the threat that resistance actually poses to the enslaved people on Faith Plantation. When Titch demands that Wash come stay with him in his quarters, Big Kit gives Wash a thick iron nail to drive into Titch’s eye if Titch tries to sexually assault Wash. However, as soon as Wash enters into Titch’s house, Titch notices the nail and asks Wash to set it down and Wash realizes that he could be killed simply for having a potential

weapon. This illustrates how white men have so much power in this society that even the mere prospect of resistance is hopeless:

He try to touch you, Wash, “she whispered”, you put this through his eye and just keep on pushing.

I felt her press something into my palm. I looked down, it was a nail. A long thick, heavy iron nail on it warm from the heat of her fist. I glanced up at Kit, but she was already turning away (p.28).

While the nail provides some hope for Wash in the moment, he quickly realizes that using it would mean his own death.

4.4.8 The Plantation.

Faith Plantation, where the story begins, is the most potent symbol of slavery and colonial order. It is a space where violence is normalized, where racial hierarchy is absolute, and where Black bodies are viewed as property. It is also a place that represents the origin of Wash's trauma, a place from which he physically escapes, but which accompanies him symbolically throughout the novel. The plantation does not disappear, it is present in his nightmares, in his scars, in his memories. It is the core of intergenerational trauma. Let us see what he says about it:

I looked instead to my hands, thinking of the years spent running, after Philip's death.

And I thought of what it was I had been running from, my own certain death at the hands of Erasmus. I thought of my existence. before Titch's arrival, the brutal hours in the field under the crushing sun, the screams, the casual finality edging every slave's life, as though each day could very easily be the last. And that, it seemed to me clearly, was the more obvious anguish—that life had never belonged to any of us, even when we'd sought

to reclaim it by ending it. We had been estranged from the potential of our own bodies, from the revelation of everything our bodies and minds could accomplish (p.382).

Through Edugyan's narrative, the plantation becomes a space that embodies the system of oppression, but also a starting point for resistance and the search for freedom.

To delve deeper into the symbolic dimension of the novel, the following table presents the symbols studied above. Each element is analyzed both in its literal context and in its symbolic meaning, as well as in its relationship to the protagonist's identity, trauma, and experience of racial oppression.

Table 2: Analysis of Symbols in *Washington Black*

Symbol	Literal Meaning	Symbolic Meaning	Relation to Identity / Trauma
The Flying Machine (<i>Cloud-cutter</i>)	Flying device built by Titch	Metaphor for limited freedom: physical escape, yet still bound to the past	Wash is unable to achieve emotional emancipation; he only escapes physically
The Aquarium and the Fish	Scientific space where Wash works in London	Represents apparent freedom: the fish are alive but confined	Like Wash, they can move but cannot escape social boundaries
The Scar on the Face	Burn caused during a flying machine experiment	Visible and permanent mark of his emotional and historical past	Symbolizes the deep-rooted wounds of slavery and ongoing pain
The Octopus	Strange marine creature that surrenders to Wash	Represents empathy, vulnerability, and connection to the unknown	Wash identifies with beings that are equally rejected or misunderstood
The Portrait / Visuality	Wash's ability to portray humans and nature	Critique of racial representation and the construction of identity through the gaze of the "other"	Wash struggles to reconstruct his own image and sense of self
The Nail	Iron nail given by Big Kit to Wash for self-defense	Symbol of desperate resistance, but also of the vulnerability of the enslaved	Represents helplessness in the face of white power; resistance could mean death
Faith Plantation	Physical place where the story begins, marked by violence and death	Ultimate symbol of the colonial order: origin of trauma, fear, and dehumanization	Space of systemic violence, but also the starting point for escape and transformation

4.5 Synthesis of Key Insights

This literary analysis of *Washington Black* set out to explore how the novel shows the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism and how these historical systems continue to shape contemporary racial dynamics, identity formation, and social structures.

Central to this study was the thesis that through Wash's transformative journey from an enslaved child on a Barbados plantation to a self-determined yet unsettled man navigating the world and the critique the social institutions, cultural ideologies, and systemic inequalities rooted in slavery that persist in modern society.

Each of the stated research objectives has been met through close literary and sociological examination. First, the novel's exploration of race, freedom, and identity has been analyzed through Wash's evolving character. His development reveals the profound psychological struggles and alienation imposed by a world structured around racial hierarchies. His journey from bondage to a semblance of freedom illustrates physical liberation, painful, ongoing process of self-definition in the face of internalized and external oppression.

Second, the novel's critique of systemic injustice was explored by analyzing Wash's experiences across various socio-political environments. Whether in the Arctic, North America, London, or Morocco, Wash consistently encounters racialized barriers, demonstrating how the structures and ideologies of slavery persist globally and morph into subtler forms of exclusion. These moments emphasize the novel's argument that the legacy of slavery is not confined to the past but remains embedded in modern institutions and cultural practices.

Third, the novel's ending refuses a clean, satisfying ending, and that's part of its power. It suggests that freedom is messy. It's not a single moment of escape or a destination; it's an ongoing, often painful process.

Key analytical findings that support these insights are:

The emotional and psychological effects of racism are reflected in Wash's deep internal conflict, his fear and isolation, especially in his relationships, and in his constant doubt about his own worth. Edugyan illustrates how trauma persists as well as a memory and as a force that shapes one's perception of oneself.

Throughout the novel, Wash experiences constant fear, even when he is in societies free of slavery. This anxiety is a result of his past as an enslaved person, and structural racism that continues to define his existence. A significant example is when he mentions:

I became a boy without identity, a walking shadow, and with each new month I fell deeper into strangeness. For there could be no belonging for a creature such as myself, anywhere, a disfigured Black boy with a scientific shift in mind and a talent for canvas, running, always running, from the dimmest of shadows (p. 211).

This type of statement reveals how racial trauma acts as a persistent presence in his mind. From a sociological perspective, it can be related to the theory of Frantz Fanon, who in **Black Skin, White Masks** (2008), explains how internalized racism fractures the identity of the colonized subject. Wash fears being physically persecuted, emotionally and intellectually invalidated.

Racism, in this sense, is an external force, a colonization of the inner world. Therefore, we can conclude that racial trauma transforms into a form of emotional violence.

Washington Black is far more than a historical novel; it is a searing exploration of how the legacies of slavery and colonialism continue to shape the living realities of marginalized communities today. While set in the 19th century, the novel's themes resonate deeply with contemporary issues such as systemic racism, forced displacement, and cultural alienation. Edugyan uses Wash's physical and emotional journey across continents narrates a personal story of survival that represents the broader, transhistorical experience of racialized individuals navigating a world that repeatedly renders them invisible, expendable, or out of place.

Wash's experience mirrors the dislocation experienced by many people today who are forced to leave their homelands due to violence, economic desperation, or discrimination. His journey reflects a pattern of migration shaped not by choice, but by the need to escape oppression and seek recognition. These movements parallel the global struggles of migrants, refugees, and descendants of colonized peoples, who often find themselves excluded from full belonging in societies that still bear the ideological scars of imperialism and racial hierarchy.

My current life, I realized, was constructed around an absence; for all its richness I still felt as if the floors might give way, as if its cores were only a covering of leaves, and I would slip through, falling endlessly, never again to get my footing (p.298).

Here we can see that moreover, the psychological dimensions of Wash's trauma, his internalized fear, distrust of others, and persistent search for identity, underscore the ways in which slavery and colonialism imprint themselves on social systems aside from the very bodies and minds of those they target. The author shows us that historical trauma is not confined to the past; it is carried forward in memory, culture, and social relations.

Through fiction, this novel crafts a space where history becomes both a living memory and a site of critique. Wash's story invites readers to confront the enduring presence of injustice in supposedly "post-racial" societies. It compels us to recognize that the hierarchies established during slavery and colonialism did not disappear, they just evolved.

The evolving themes of identity, trauma, and alienation emerge as central to Wash's developing life. His desire for acceptance, knowledge, and a sense of belonging reflects a broader human need, often denied to those marked by discrimination.

Wash undergoes a process of reconstructing his identity throughout the novel. From his childhood as a slave in Barbados to his life of relative freedom, achieved almost by chance, his journey can be interpreted as a constant search for meaning and belonging.

However, even among those who "accept" him, such as Titch or Goff, Wash is still perceived as the "other" from whom one can benefit, but he is not fully accepted as an equal. This feeling of exclusion is associated to the concept of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, "double consciousness," who introduced the term into social thought in his groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and which describes the internal tension between how one sees oneself and how one is perceived by a racist society. Wash longs to be valued for his intelligence, his artistic talent, his humanity, but he is often reduced to scientific curiosity or a useful assistant.

You took me on because I was helpful in your political cause. Because I could aid in your experiments. Beyond that I was of no use to you, and so you abandoned me." I struggled to catch my breath. "I was nothing to you. You never saw me as equal (p.373).

In this pivotal scene, Wash finally confronts Titch and questions his role as "savior." After years of emotional dependence, Wash realizes he was instrumentalized, revealing the awakening of Wash's critical conscience. He recognizes that his supposed freedom was not a selfless act, but rather part of Titch's moral and scientific agenda. This confrontation symbolizes the breaking of the bond of power and dependency and marks a pivotal moment in the protagonist's self-definition.

The novel's literary techniques, the use of metaphors, recurring motifs such as flight, water, and light, and a rich narrative voice, underscore both trauma and resilience. These elements help delve into the themes of liberation, visibility, and transformation. Esi Edugyan draws on powerful symbolic resources to explore Wash's experience, like Flight, especially the attempted escape in the cloud cutter, represents both the desire for freedom and the fear of abandonment. Flight is also a symbol of escape, of overcoming racial and social boundaries, although it is often revealed as a frustrating or incomplete dream.

Water, appears at key moments of transition (flight, transatlantic voyages, shipwrecks), and can be read as a dual symbol, on the one hand, of trauma, danger in the face of the unknown, and forced displacement; on the other, of rebirth and the possibility of change.

Light, is associated with revelation, hope, and also with painful realization. Its use emphasizes the search for inner clarity and the struggle to emerge from invisibility. The first-person narrative provides deep access to Wash's inner world. Its introspective and reflective tone is essential to conveying the emotional dimension of his experience. These devices are not merely aesthetics, but articulate a symbolic commentary on visibility, marginalization, and the transformation of the excluded subject.

The novel "Washington Black" reaffirms the power of literature as an essential tool for highlighting injustices, preserving historical memories, and fostering critical awareness. Through his narrative, the writer recounts the experience of an enslaved child like many others of the time, and also directly challenges the reader, inviting them to reflect on the systems of oppression that persist today. Literature, in this context, acts as a form of cultural resistance.

It allows silent voices to be recovered, offers new perspectives, and generates empathy with minorities. In the case of Washington Black, traditional narratives of freedom, especially those that present emancipation as a charitable act by whites or powerful people, are challenged and replaced by stories centered on the emotional complexity and intellectual capacity of enslaved people. Edugyan demonstrates that telling stories from the perspective of the oppressed is an artistic and political act. Wash is not a secondary character in a white story, he is the protagonist of his own life. His voice, his memory, and his perspective are the focus of the narrative.

Likewise, the novel rejects closed endings and simplistic or taken-for-granted solutions. The story concludes in a sandstorm, with Wash entering the unknown, symbolizing that the process of healing, defining oneself, and fighting for social justice is ongoing, unfinished, and collective. In this sense, literature functions not as a refuge from reality, but as a space to imagine new possibilities.

When we read Washington Black, we confront the past and our present, and we are challenged to build a more just and humane future.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Choosing *Washington Black* as the subject of this literary analysis was not only an academic decision, it was also a deeply personal one. From the very beginning, the novel stood out for its ability to bridge the intimate with the historical, presenting a story that is both profoundly human and politically urgent. The writer's narrative captivated me through its vivid imagery and compelling prose, through its unflinching confrontation with the painful legacies of slavery, colonialism, and injustice.

What impacted me most of this novel was its refusal to offer simplistic resolutions. Wash's journey is not a straight path from enslavement to liberation; it is complex, fragmented, and unfinished mirroring the real experiences of those whose identities have been shaped by systemic oppression and cultural dislocation. This complexity challenged me as a reader and as a researcher. It forced me to sit with discomfort, to question historical narratives the researcher had taken for granted, and to acknowledge the emotional weight of inherited trauma.

Throughout the research process, the researcher was especially struck by the way Edugyan portrays the psychological impact of racism and exile, not just through explicit violence but through subtle forms of discrimination. Wash's internal conflicts, his longing for belonging, and his desire to be seen for who he is rather than what he represents, resonated on a deeply human level. These moments reminded me that the most profound consequences of injustice are often those that go unseen like the doubts that take root in the mind, the isolation that silence imposes, the ache of a stolen history.

From a critical perspective, the novel reinforced my belief in the power of literature to foster empathy, impulse to dialogue, and serve as a vehicle for resistance of mediocrity. While

archival records and academic texts can inform us about the structures of slavery and colonialism, it is through fiction that we are given access to the emotional truth behind those systems.

As a researcher, this work has expanded my understanding of the intersections between literature and sociology. It has shown me how storytelling can serve as both an act of remembrance and a challenge to dominant ideologies. As a reader, it has left me with a sense of responsibility, not just to acknowledge historical injustice, but to engage actively in conversations and actions that push toward a more equitable future for children, women and men.

5.1 Purpose of the Conclusion

The purpose of this conclusion is to synthesize the main findings of the research and assess the extent to which the general and specific objectives were met. The sociological, historical, and symbolic dimensions of *Washington Black* are also presented, highlighting how the novel guides the reader to critically question racism, identity, memory, and trauma. Finally, recommendations are presented and some unexpected results observed throughout the study are identified.

5.2 Conclusions

The following conclusions are organized according to the objectives proposed in this research.

5.2.1 General Objective, to explore the impact of historical oppression on modern racial dynamics through the protagonist's lived experiences.

During the development of this research, the general objective, that is, to explore the impact of historical oppression on modern racial dynamics through the protagonist's lived

experiences, was successfully met. The analysis demonstrated that the slaveholding past continues to be projected into the present, affecting social structures and individual psychology, interpersonal relationships, and the possibilities for constructing a free and autonomous identity.

5.2.2 Specific Objectives. Likewise, the proposed specific objectives were fully achieved.

5.2.2.1 Analyze the themes of race, freedom, and identity in Washington Black.

This objective was fully achieved. The analysis demonstrated how the protagonist, Washington Black, evolves from being a boy considered "property" to becoming a man who constructs his own identity. This transformation is marked by visible and invisible traumas and is constantly strained by a social environment that, despite its apparent openness, continues to reproduce mechanisms of exclusion. The tension between personal growth and social limitations is central to understanding how race and freedom are represented in the novel.

5.2.2.2 Examine the novel's critique of racial injustice and inequality.

The novel not only denounces slavery as a historical institution but also exposes its persistent legacies: systemic inequality, the hypocrisy of certain liberal sectors, and the power structures that continue to condition the lives of people of African descent. Through symbolic characters and complex interpersonal dynamics, Washington Black critiques both explicit racism and subtle paternalism, emphasizing how racial injustice persists in both overt and covert forms.

5.2.2.3 Evaluate the novel's denouement and its implications for social change.

The novel's open ending, with Wash entering a sandstorm, serves as a powerful metaphor for the unfinished nature of emancipation. Freedom is not presented as a single,

punctual historical moment, but as an ongoing, internal process. This reinforces the idea that true liberation lies in the reconstruction of self, memory, and the search for an identity beyond oppression.

Overall, this research demonstrates that *Washington Black* is a literary work that transcends its historical context to engage the contemporary reader. The novel is part of a literary movement that seeks to rescue historically silenced voices, especially African descent, but can be extended to other minorities affected by discrimination and abuse of power in various contexts today, giving them space to reconstruct their own narratives.

Finally, it is concluded that literature can and should be a tool for social awareness. Through fiction, we can remember, feel, and question our way of thinking; and invite us, as a society, to assume the collective responsibility of recognizing and repairing the injustices of the past. It does not offer easy solutions, but rather a powerful invitation to empathy, memory, and transformation.

5.3 Research Question, How does the author use Wash's journey to critique social institutions, cultural ideologies, and inequalities rooted in slavery that persist in modern society?

This research demonstrated that Edugyan's novel uses Wash's experiences, both external and psychological, to critique the lingering legacies of colonialism and slavery. Through literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, and narrative perspective, the author conveys the complexities of racial trauma, social exclusion, and the search for acceptance.

The development of characters such as Wash, Titch, Big Kit, and Erasmus demonstrates how racism affects not only institutions but also the emotional and relational lives of individuals.

5.4 Unexpected Findings

One of the unexpected findings of this research was the discovery of the emotional richness and subtle hope present in the novel. Although much of the analysis focused on trauma, violence, and exclusion, elements of resilience, creativity, courage, and beauty were also revealed that enrich Wash's identity. Literary symbols such as the flying machine, the aquarium, and the octopus, among others, not only express suffering, but also imagination, historical memory, and the human capacity for transcendence.

In the end, Wash walking through the sandstorm also symbolizes the unknown. Wash doesn't know exactly who he is or where he's going, but he's moving forward anyway. It's a moment of becoming, not arrival, it encapsulates a kind of personal storm, letting the past go, grief, confusion, disillusionment, but also transformation. The novel insists that emancipation is not a singular event but a continuous, often solitary process of identity reconstruction. In doing so, *Washington Black* offers a powerful critique of historical forgetting and the romanticization of white savior narratives, emphasizing that true liberation emerges through self-authorship and the reclamation of narrative agency.

And yet I knew he was not mad-I knew he was simply re-enacting his past as a form of comfort, conveniently forgetting all that had been bad and wrong about it. And I understood too that he was setting himself up for a second failure, that this craft would not take him even halfway to that lost island, that he would either have to give it up or die in the trying (p.375).

I stepped out onto the threshold, the sand stinging me, blinding my eyes. Behind me I thought I heard Tanna call my name, but I did not turn, could not take my gaze from the

orange blur of the horizon. I gripped my arms about myself, went a few steps forward. The wind across my forehead was like a living thing. (p.384).

5.5 Recommendations

It is recommended that future research includes comparative analyses with other postcolonial novels or neo-slavery narratives to enrich the understanding of intergenerational trauma and racial identity. It could also expand the analysis of how multiple forms of oppression interact. Furthermore, incorporating sociological literary criticism into educational settings can foster empathy, historical awareness, and critical thinking about racial injustice. Literature, as *Washington Black* demonstrates, can be a transformative tool that invites readers to reflect on and engage with the realities of the past and present.

5.6 Limitations of the study

This analysis is intentionally focused solely on the novel *Washington Black*, aiming to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the novel's understanding of racial trauma, identity, and resilience. However, this singular focus presents certain limitations. By not engaging in comparative analysis with other contemporary or historical works, the study is limited in its capacity to generalize broader patterns or literary strategies within postcolonial or African literature. Future research could benefit from placing Edugyan's work in dialogue with these texts to deepen understanding of how racial trauma is expressed across different contexts and cultural frameworks.

Additionally, while this study primarily applies the theoretical lens of racialized trauma, especially as developed by scholars like Chen and Allen (2021), this approach does not fully capture all dimensions of the novel's complexity. Alternative frameworks such as critical race

theory, feminist literary theory, postcolonial studies, or intersectionality could uncover further insights, particularly regarding the interwoven roles of gender, class, and colonial power structures.

For example, a feminist lens could more closely analyze the limited agency of female characters like Big Kit or Tanna, offering a richer understanding of how patriarchal norms intersect with racial oppression.

Moreover, as with all literary analyses, the interpretations presented here are inherently shaped by the researcher's cultural background, academic training, and personal perspective. Literary meaning is not fixed, and other scholars or readers may draw different conclusions based on alternative theoretical orientations or emphases. For instance, while this study centers trauma and alienation, others might prioritize themes of scientific innovation or mentorship. Recognizing this subjectivity is essential to maintaining intellectual humility and openness to continued scholarly dialogue.

Ultimately, while these limitations do not undermine the validity of the study's findings, they highlight areas for further exploration and underscore the importance of multi-dimensional approaches to literary analysis, especially when dealing with texts that confront historical injustice and complex cultural narratives.

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