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Racism: Analytical Study of Richard Wright's Native Son

1-Abstract

Racism is a prominent phenomenon in African American literature. It represents the impacts of imperialism, racial and gender discrimination, as well as social and psychological situation of the Blacks. In other words: Racism is the belief in the superiority of one race over another, which often results in discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity. We can also say that, Racism can be present in social actions, practices, or political systems. In real life, we can see different races according to the different continent, such as Europe, Asia, Africa and America, and each one has its own features and characteristics, abilities, and qualities. Here, we are going to highlight on the racial discrimination towards the Blacks, especially, in America, through Richard Wright's *Native Son* novel.

2 -Introduction

Richard Wright is a black novelist, who has earned a wide white audience. This popularity was achieved, because of the production of his novels, *Native Son* and also *Black Boy*. Thus, he is considered as the most important Negro writer, before Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. *Native*

Son was published in 1940. It was a shock for many as the members of the party, the non-Marxist middle class readers, black and white audience, because it attacks all of them unconsciously. Whereas, its protagonist, *Thomas Bigger* was not understood, either by the communist class, Blacks or Whites. *Native Son* is Wright's first novel which granted him the Spingarn Award of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This novel expresses many themes rather than the theme of racism, which we are in connection with talk about. This novel was a successful and groundbreaking best seller. However, it was also criticized by Baldwin and others as an ultimately advancing Bigger as a stereotype, not a real character.

(Gottesman & el, 1980, pp. 1544-46)

3-A brief biography of Richard Wright

Richard Wright was born in 1908 near Natchez, Mississippi, exactly in the South, of a family sharecropper. He was very poor in his childhood, and he finished his education at the Junior school. He was a self-taught intellectual and literary figure, whose work effected an entire generation of black writers, from Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry and James Baldwin in the United States, to George Lamming and Camara Laye in the Caribbean and Africa. At the age of nineteenth, he left to Chicago, driven by a hunger for learning kindled in part by the books he stealthily borrowed from a white-only library, and particularly by the works of H.L. Mencken, whose ability to use words as weapons impressed him. In Chicago, Wright tried many works. He got the inductor as the director of the Federal Negro Theatre. In 1932, he joined the leftist John Reed Club, where he published poems in its journal *Left Front*. Afterwards, he joined the Communist party in 1936. In 1937, he became Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker* in New York City. Then in 1942, he moved away from the party, because they constrained the artist freedom and subordinated black protests against racial injustice. In 1947, he moved to France, in which he became an anti-communist. There, in France, he had many friendships with many intellectuals, whom were supporting him. The 1960s is considered as the last year for Richard Wright in this life. (Gottesman, 1980, pp. 1544-46)

4- The Effect of Racism on Bigger Thomas (a protagonist of *Native Son*)

To be understood Richard Wright's *Native Son*, we have to examine the character features of the protagonist, *Bigger Thomas*.

Bigger Thomas is a twenty-year-old black man, living in the poor South Side of Chicago. He lives squished with his family together in a tiny, rat-infested apartment. He is uneducated, only has finished the eighth grade. Race, poverty and education collectively limit his options, constrained him to work odd jobs. In the *Native Son*, Bigger stands for the physical embodiment of the psychological impact of racism on the Blacks in the early twentieth century.

Through the novel, we can note a very big storm of conflicting emotions colliding inside him. He hates and fears of the Whites, and at the same time envies them. His misery life and the media depict rich people as superior to poor people. His feeling of shame and disgust of his family's life position, exploded out of him in the form of murder. We can note that from the beginning of the novel :

"Well, they own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. They like God..." he swallowed, closed his eyes and sighed. "They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die." (3.1087)

In Franz Fanon's essay, called "*The Facts of Blackness*", he describes Bigger Thomas as a symbol represents all the black men. Thomas's most consistent emotion is fear, he is even afraid of *himself*.

Here is, we can see how *Bigger* feels even before he ever commits a crime:

T " You know one thing?" Big said.

"What?"

"Sometimes I feel like something awful 's going to happen to me," Bigger spoke with a tinge of bitter pride in his voice.

"What you mean?" Gus asked, looking at him quickly. There was fear in Gus's eyes.

"I don't know. I just feel that way. Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me..." (1.279)

This amount of self-loathing and relentless fear is an insanely destructive force. If you're made to feel that "something awful" is going to happen" from the start, you're pretty much trapped in a spiral of intensely negative emotions... which leads to more stress than anyone knows what to do with.

Ultimately, Fanon argues, Bigger Thomas has to do *something* to end the tension he feels. So he murders the daughter of his employers, and the tension is released. Even though the death was initially accidental, Bigger's act gives him a sense of purpose and identity. He's actually *done* something now: he's taken his fate into his own hands and his every choice in life is no longer dictated by others. This feeling is, of course, shortlived.

And it's not just Fanon that talks about the powder keg of emotion that Bigger lives with. Bigger's lawyer, Boris Max, highlights the fact that Bigger lives with crazy amounts of daily tension. He suggests that all black men in America grow up with a heightened sense of their powerlessness. Their powerlessness, combined with an aggressive attempt by the larger society to prevent them from accomplishing anything, creates an inner turmoil that is often released in acts of crime. Not only that, but Max suggests that American society itself is to blame for crimes like Bigger.

5- Symbolism stands for as Racism in *Native Son*

Before to explore the Elements of Racism in *Native Son*, which stand in symbols forms, we firstly, have to know what do we mean by symbolism in general and in literature ?

Symbolism is the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning. When an author wants to suggest a certain mood or emotion, he can also use symbolism to hint at it, rather than just blatantly saying it.

Symbolism In Literature

Symbolism is often used by writers to enhance their writing. Symbolism can give a literary work more richness and color and can make the meaning of the work deeper.

In *literature*, symbolism can take many forms including:

- A figure of speech where an object, person, or situation has another meaning other than its literal meaning.
- The actions of a character, word, action, or event that have a deeper meaning in the context of the whole story.

Richard Wright had presented many symbols which show the racial discrimination and persecution of Blacks in his novel, *Native Son*. These symbols stand as the elements of Racism in the novel, but they are invisible. They are sending as a hiding message.

In this research paper, we'll suggest some of these elements, are used by Richard Wright in his *Native Son*. The rat, alarm clock, the apartment setting, Dalton's Blindness and the Mass Media are some of them.

5.1 The Rat

The first symbol is a rat. It appears in the opening scene of the novel. As Bigger, mother, brother and sister are waking up, a rat runs across their only one bedroom apartment. Mrs. Thomas and Bigger's sister, Vera, jump on the bed while Bigger and his brother, Buddy, try to kill it. Bigger ends up cornering the rat and killing it with a skillet. This rat in this rat scene, as some writers believe, is a symbol of Bigger, due to the fact that they are alike in many ways. The rats as we know are living in dirty places, because they are homeless, so that they symbolize poverty. The rats, also, have lack power and intelligence, and are always hiding from something causing risk for them. Bigger, also, has the same similarity with the rats in how he is very poor and unintelligent, because he is an uneducated man. He hides himself from white society with little power. Both Bigger and the rat are destroyed by a stronger force.

Therefore, the rat is considered as an element of racism, because it is never found in Whites' houses, but in the Blacks. Wright suggests, that many Negro children are being bitten by the rats, in contrast white children are living in clean and wide houses, in which they never see any single rat at all. Rats, only invade those poor black people, whom have so many holes and garbage in their house.

How in hell do they get so big?"

"Eating garbage and anything else they can get."

(Rampersad,1993, p.17)

5.2. Alarm Clock

Native Son novel has started by an alarm clock, in which awakened Thomas' family.

Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiinnng!

An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room.

(Rampersad,1993, p.15)

This alarm clock was the major symbol that Wright has used in the novel to attack the American racism. Wright wanted to deliver a clear message not only for Bigger's family as Black, but for both black and white readers. The message which sent to the black reader is, it's a time to be waken up of sleeping, and to be rebelled against oppressing and racial discrimination, whereas, it foreshadows the Whites from transpiercing in a big rebellion with the Blacks. Therefore, Wright had used two words " dark and silent ", in which show that, the time is over and the Blacks should have to break their silent down.

The repetition of the letters " R ", " I " and the " N " in the word "*Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiinnng* " show a strong and harsh call as drums raps of war.

5.3. The Apartment Setting

Wright has given us a very clear picture about the very simple residence of Bigger and his family, and the modern houses where the Whites live in. Bigger was surprised when he had seen the huge houses of the Whites' world.

The houses he passed were huge; lights glowed softly in windows. The streets were empty, save for an occasional car that zoomed past on

swift rubber tires. This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses. He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605. When he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black, iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside.

(Rampersad, 1993,p. 38)

This world seemed to be very different to him. He lives in a house of only one room with all of his family, mother, sister and brother. Wright portrayed this scene at the beginning of the novel, when Bagger's mother asked her sons to turn their faces in order to dress.

" Turn your heads so I can dress," she said.

The two boys averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of the room.

(Rampersad, 1993p.15)

In contrast of Blacks, in the white's society, you will be found that every single man has own special room.

There was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceiling hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds, four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop-leaf table on which they ate. This was much different from Dalton's home. Here all slept in one room; there he would have a room for himself alone. He smelt food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in Dalton's home; pots could not be heard rattling all over the house. Each person lived in one room and had a little world of his own.

(Rampersad, 1993, p.72)

Through the above mentioned, we saw how Wright conveyed to us a very clear message about the misery and the injustice life of the black American. Whereas, those whom have a white skin, live in a luxury life where they need nothing.

From the very title of the novel, *Native Son*, invites the reader to think about ideas of "nativism" and territory. From the opening scene of the novel, where Bigger is killing the rat-invasader, to Bigger's execution at the novel's end, there is a tension between Bigger

's "native" status and his lack of political right. Bigger was born in Mississippi, not Chicago, and the idea of a "Native Son" applies more to Bigger's status as an American as opposed to his status as a Chicagoan.

6. Conclusion

Racism, in general, means that special sex, (Whites), is a higher than the other, (Blacks). In white societies, racism is practiced in ugliest forms against dark-skinned people (the minorities). These minorities are such, Negroes, the Pueblos of America, the Australian and the Asian people, (the oppressed), are suffered of racial discrimination and domination, from those who are Whites, (the oppressor).

This study dealt with the racial discrimination and violence, practiced against the black people, who came from Africa to America. They suffered much, from the fifteenth century, in which their first coming was in Jamestown, in 1619 by twenty blacks, till the twentieth century, when they had some rights, after the appearance of the Civil Rights Movement.

Literature succeeded in conveying the voice of Negro condition, whereas writers and intellectuals from the different period had faced this racial condition to the other people. Negroes committed to defend their case in the United States. Richard Wright's *Native Son* showed, in deep, this meaning. It tackled ghetto's life in America. In this novel, Wright also, showed that *racism* was the main reason for creating the circumstances of committing a crime, as what happened with his *Native Son's* protagonist, *Bigger*

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