

**RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*: A STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

*The aim of this paper is to provide a systematic study that examines racial discrimination in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Racial discrimination is any discrimination against any individual on the basis of their skin color, or racial or ethnic origin. Racism is the belief that it is a primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial difference produces an inherent superiority of a particular race. The term racism usually denotes race-based prejudice, violence, dislike, discrimination or oppression. As an ideology, racism existed during the 19th century as scientific racism, which attempted to provide a racial classification of humanity.*

**Key words:** *Race-based prejudice, violence, dislike, discrimination or oppression, suppression, etc.*

As Aristotle thinks literature is a reflection of life. It is an expression of our experience, and also an expression of our desires, faiths and failings. Of course, literature needs to be traded for the sake of reaching mankind. Literature is a sacred instrument. By using it in a proper way, one can combat the forces of ignorance and prejudice and foster national unity and world communion. As literature voices the past, reflects the present and moulds the future, human experiences is obviously reflected in the literary works.

American literature is grounded in the experience of black people in the United States. Even though African Americans have long claimed an American identity, during most of the United States history, they were not accepted as citizens and were obviously discriminated. As a result, they felt that they were part of America even being outside of it. Racial discrimination is like an alphabet for black authors to start their work of art, as he has visualized it for many a years. He too had had numerous experiences in his life which is in fact seen in his works.

Richard Wright emerged as a major Black intellectual warrior who was driven by the quest to defend Black humanity against the cultural domination of white supremacist ideas and practices. Moreover, he and others linked imperialism, colonialism and white supremacy, pointing out that the dehumanization and humiliation of Black Americans, Asians and even ethnic Russians were generated by the same global system of domination. It was in this way that he began to call for the revolutionary overthrow of global white supremacy and the implementation of scientific socialism and popular democracy on a world scale.

Wright had a natural instinct of presenting his native picture through his remarkable works. As a poor black child growing up in the Deep South, Wright suffered poverty, hunger, racism and violence and those experiences later became the central themes of his work. He stands as a major literary figure of the 1930s and 40s; his writings are a departure from those of the Harlem Renaissance School. Steeped in the literary naturalism of the Depression era, Wright's works express a realistic and brutal portrayal of white society's oppression of African Americans. Anger and protest served as a catalyst for literature intended to promote social changes by exposing the injustices of racism, economic exploitation and imperialism. Through his art, Wright turned the torment of alienation into a voice calling for human solidarity and racial advancement.

Richard Wright's influence began primarily with the publication of *Native Son* in 1940. The significance of the novel's publication lay in the new and daringly defiant character of its content and in its adoption by the Book of the Month Club. It signaled for the first time since the nineteenth century fugitive slave narratives the willingness of a mainstream reading public to give an ear to an African American writer, even one who appeared unapologetic in his bold and forthright representation of a large segment of African American culture.

Wright, through his *Native Son*, had enormous impact on the direction of the new black literature. Without avenues to power, black life was bleak, cut off from the possibilities of fulfillment and threatened by the ever-present hostile world. His novels and essays issued a cry of protest to a white audience that, unless America recognizes its native sons and give them their due; some blacks would rise up and destroy their oppressors. This statement is perhaps too simplistic a rendering of Wright's works. He analyses by penetrating the effects of social deprivation upon the black man's personality and he uses the elements of protest.

The *Native Son* moves with the intensity of a powerfully realistic crime novel. However, it is much more than that. Wright raises issues concerning the underlying problems of black men living lives that are stifled by the oppression of racism and classicism. For Bigger Thomas, murder is a way to feel his own power. Wright presents a grim picture of human degradation and destructive results caused by racism. At Bigger's trial, through his communist-oriented lawyer, Max, Wright presents a worldview of a more equitable society that would, possibly, not have produced a person like Bigger.

The main concept of *Native Son* is an argument that social conditions of deprivation motivate people to act in anti-social ways. Wright paints a clear picture of the impossible lives led by African Americans in 1930s Chicago. "But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something to be hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon" (Wright, *NS*, 67-68). They are forced into overcrowded, overpriced and substandard housing. They are given such low-paying and transient employment that they cannot maintain a secure living, they are cut off from education and they are the victims of racist media misrepresentations.

When Bigger acts in an unfeeling way, killing and then disposing of the bodies of his victims, Wright argues that these are conditioned responses to overwhelming stimuli. "If you killed *her* you'll kill *me*", she said. 'I ain't in this.... You told me you *never* was going to kill.' 'All right. They white folks They done killed plenty of us.' 'That don't make it right'" (Wright, *NS*, 168).

Throughout the novel, Wright illustrates the ways in which white racism forces blacks into a pressured, dangerous and unsecured state of mind. Blacks are beset with the hardship of economic oppression and forced to act subserviently before their oppressors. Given such conditions, it becomes inevitable that blacks such as Bigger Thomas will react with violence and hatred. Wright's development of Bigger's view of whites as an overwhelming force that sweeps him toward his fate can be seen in the context of naturalism. Wright uses the conventions of naturalism in this novel, in order to force one to enter into Bigger's mind and to understand the devastating effects of the social conditions in which he was raised. Perhaps Bigger was not born a violent criminal. He is a native son, a product of American culture, but the violence and racism that suffuse it.

With the newspapers presenting him as a murderous animal and Buckley using the case to further his own political career, anything said in Bigger's defence falls on deaf ears. His fear, rage and conflicting and unexamined desires torture him to the utmost. The public may desire to build a wall of hysteria surrounding Bigger in order to justify its racist stereotypes. It thus also attempts to deny its racism by creating the illusion of equal treatment under the law. The motto of the American justice system is equal

justice under law, but Wright depicts a judiciary so undermined by racial prejudice and corruption that the concept of equality holds little meaning. In response to his crime, the white-dominated press and authorities incite mob showed hatred against him.

Bigger and his family lived in cramped and squalid conditions. All he can do is to act out the role of the subservient black man that he has seen in countless popular cultural representations. However, as Bigger's life demonstrates, this constant fear actually causes violence. Throughout the novel, one can see that when Bigger is cornered, like the rat, he is overwhelmed by shame and fear and lashes out with violence, the only weapon at his disposal. Here is an example from his speech to Bessie and she cries out to Bigger after he admits to her that he killed Mary Dalton: "Lord, don't let this happen to me! I ain't done nothing for this to come to me! I just work ! I ain't had no happiness, no nothing. I just work. I'm black and I work and don't bother nobody..." (Wright, *NS*, 170).

Wright uses the conventions of naturalism to portray the effect of racism on the oppressed and the hypocrisy of justice. In this chain of events, Wright depicts the irrational logic of racism, a vicious cycle that reproduces itself over and over again. The attention prompts Buckley, the State's Attorney, to hurry Bigger's case along and seek death penalty. Unable to face the reality of his life as a black man, Bigger is forced to keep his thoughts and his feelings apart. Bigger's guilt and punishment are decided before his trial ever begins, perhaps even before he is arrested. These characters' lives are shaped by forces of society that are uncontrollable.

The racial climate in Wright's eyes, from a reading of *Native Son*, is that of the perspective expressed by a black American who says: "To Bigger and his kind, white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark" (Wright, *NS*, 109). It could be found that Bigger Thomas's history is the history of every black American. It coincides precisely with the finding and evolution of the United States of America. It irrefutably demonstrates that Richard Wright is one of its finest artists and sensitive chroniclers of black sensibility to the whole world.

Wright's early life, which had experienced extreme poverty and anti-Black racism, in the American South, shaped his proletarian world view. The violent, racist and impoverished circumstances of Wright's upbringing in the old segregated South made him search desperately to find out whether black men could live with human dignity and without fear in a world dominated by white male power. Wright's own complex consciousness, strongly influenced by modern rationalism, also made him fascinated by the irrational aspects of life. He wanted to find out if black men could be or become psychologically free of their white oppressors. Accordingly, Wright believed that the Black creative intellectual had a strong responsibility to contest white power's conception of existence and, in the process, to assert the validity and complexity of the Black experience.

Throughout the novel, Wright illustrates the ways in which white racism forces blacks into a pressured and therefore dangerous state of mind. Blacks are beset with the hardship of economic oppression and forced to act subserviently before their oppressors, while the media consistently portrays them as animalistic brutes. Given such conditions, as Max argues, it becomes inevitable that blacks such as Bigger will react with violence and hatred. However, Wright emphasizes the vicious double-edged effect of racism: though Bigger's violence stems from racial hatred, it only increases the racism in American society, as it confirms racist whites' basic fears about blacks. In Wright's portrayal, whites effectively transform blacks into their own negative stereotypes of blackness. Only when Bigger meets Max and begins to perceive whites as individuals does Wright offer any hope for a means of breaking this circle of racism. Only when sympathetic understanding exists between blacks and whites will they be able to perceive each other as individuals, not merely as stereotypes.

Thus, the author, through his works, brings out the fact that black people are never given liberty to

live with freedom and as per their choice. Wright has voiced out in an effective way how they were affected by racism. Ultimately, Wright portrays the vicious circle of racism from the white perspective as well as from the black one, emphasizing that even well-meaning whites exhibit prejudices that feed into the same black behavior that confirms the racist whites' sense of superiority.

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