

DISCRIMINATION OF BLACKS IN RICHARD

WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

1. Dr.P.Samuel, Assistant Professor & Head of English, Government Arts and Science College, Arakkonam.
2. Praveena. L, II M. A., English, Government Arts and Science College, Arakkonam.
3. Hephzibah. P, Research Scholar, Bharathiar University

ABSTRACT

Racial discrimination, the quest for freedom and the struggle for survival are the major aspects of African-American history. From the middle of the seventeenth century up to the twentieth century, African-Americans were exposed to various forms of oppression and discrimination that destroy their psyches and forced them to resort to escape mechanism necessary for survival. Therefore, African-American writers, among whom Richard Wright (1908-1960) is a leading figure, have always been concerned with pinpointing the African-American predicament within the socio-political context of that history. As a naturalist, Wright fictionalizes the aspects of racial oppression that crippled African-Americans in the 1930's and the 1940's and depicts their effects on them. The main objective of this work is to explore Wright's portrayal of the African-American people's struggle to psychoanalytically examine the impact of racial discrimination on African-Americans, especially in *Native Son*.

Key words: Racial Discrimination, African-American, Oppression, Subjugation

RACIAL OPPRESSION IN *NATIVE SON*

Wright fictionalizes the aspects of racial oppression that crippled African-American in the 1930's and the 1940's and depicts their effects on them. Bigger live in a segregated world that excludes them and limits their movement. During the 1930's and the 1940's Jim Crowism pervaded the South as well as the North. African-Americans were left outside of most American institutions. They were confined to the black ghettos of large cities and they lived in a Jim Crow world. In "How Bigger Was Bom", Wright describes this segregationist policy in Dixie, Chicago as he depicts it in *Native Son*:

“There are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated. There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white business and black business, white graveyards and black graveyards, and for all I know, white God and black God.”

Native Son is the most famous fictional work of the African American literature. Indeed it is worthy to consider as the twenty famous novels according to its rank during the twentieth century. Many had criticized it. Racism does not center only on black people but also on other races and in other shapes. As the Marxist theory deals with the working class, Wright also treats this subject. Therefore Wright had portrayed bigger as the worker and Mary Dalton as the capitalist. However racism in the novel effected on each of the black people, and it affects also the white people. Richard Wright's *Native Son* was an instant success, even though it met with some controversy and chagrin among middle and upper middle class black Americans, who wished he had published a novel celebrating black people's ability to transcend oppression. On

the other hand, as a contemporaneous Time magazine article noted, Wright had written an even more difficult novel-one about a black man justly accused of murder whose actions were nevertheless shaped by American cultural, social, and economic forces that he couldn't control. The Sales of *Native Son* made Wright a wealthy writer and one of the most acclaimed black writers of all time. He is often called the 'father' of black American literature.

Native Son by Richard Wright is a heart-rending expose of the racial oppression that permeated Chicago (and the rest of America) during the 1930s. Through the experiences of his black protagonist Bigger Thomas, Wright provides invaluable insights into the origins of racial segregation and the tragic ways in which it affected American society. Throughout the novel, Wright insists that Bigger was not born a violent criminal. He is a '*Native Son*': a product of the violence and racism that suffused the devastating social conditions in which he was raised. By no means does Wright downplay the oppression of blacks by whites, but he does demonstrate that much of the racial inequality was due to the profound lack of understanding, among both blacks and whites, of the other social group. Bigger's misunderstanding of whites binds him to a self-fulfilling prophecy, insofar as he behaves according to what he believe is his racial destiny.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISCREMINATION IN *NATIVE SON*

In NS, the South and the North are pictured as an inferior where African-Americans kept. In Chicago, Bigger Thomas, a nineteen-year old African immigrant from the south, lives with his mother, brother, and sister in a rat-infested room in the South side of Chicago. The novel

significantly opens with a rat frightening the members of the family, indicating the physical squalor of the residences as well as the metaphorical reference to fear as an inherent feature in the poverty-sticker milieu of African-Americans. Wright shows how African' places are defined in mere spatial terms. They are confined to segregationist areas which are completely isolated from white places. Bigger's first contact with the white world comes when he is sent by the relief agency to Mr. Dalton, a white businessman to work as a chauffeur. Otherwise, he spends his entire life within the black ghetto "behind the 'line' above which Mr. Dalton, the owner, soars like a distant god. This is Bigger's assigned placeless place".

Although Mr. Dalton is Bigger's landlord, they have never seen each other before. According to Joyce Ann Joyce, NS is based on the idea that "social, economic and political practices of segregation foster demeaning, destructive psychological attitudes that imbue the personalities of both Wright's Black and white characters". E. Lale Demirturk also suggests that Bigger symbolically lives in a mental slum because of the policy of segregation in Chicago where he is "pinned down to a role in life with no outlets".

Racial segregation is also widely practiced. Like Bigger, Fish suffers from segregation; although he enjoys the prosperity of a middle-class life, he lives in America like a second-class citizen. In the town of Clintonville, where he lives, there are about ten thousand African-Americans, and fifteen thousand whites, but a wall of segregation keeps them apart. Joyce equates racism with slavery and considers segregation one of its major practices: "While the system of slavery represents the most extreme division of American society into two basic

subgroups, racism, its replacement, transforms the discriminatory practices of the eighteen centuries into the cosmological order of segregation”. Commenting on lynching against African-Americans in the South, Wright argues that the relations between whites and African-Americans are so “volatile and tense that if a Negro rebels against rule and taboo, he is lynched and the reason for the lynching is usually called ‘rape’. According to Margaret walker, during the first half of the twentieth century, “lynching and mob rule become an accept part of the social order of Adams County (Wright’s birthplace), throughout Mississippi, the South, and the rest of the United States”. NS itself is based on a case of lynching. In “How Bigger Was Bom”, Wright explains the injustice and violence that accompany this case. When a crime occurs, the whole Black Belt is exposed to mob violence and in most cases any African-American is picked up in order to appease the public opinion.

VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION IN *NATIVE SON*

In NS, too, mob violence accompanies Bigger’s arrest and trial. Many whites go out hunt him, and when he is caught, they try to lynch him, stamping him with fifthly epithets which recall the beast imagery discussed earlier. Like a hunted animal, Bigger is dragged by policemen down the stairs of the building, where he was hiding, and through the streets over the snow. The racial Tribune describes him as an animal. Moreover, many African-Americans lose their jobs and others are beaten and dismissed from their houses. This mob violence in the book shows how the race system seizes upon such individual cases to terrify African-Americans. This recalls the many cases of violence and lynching in African-American history which were done under the

sponsorship of legal white authorities. These are the conditions into which African-Americans like Bigger is catapulted and nourished and they are not without negative impacts.

Bigger is described as looking “exactly like an ape” with “exceedingly black skin” and a lower jaw that “protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast”. The novel viciously accuses Bigger of raping Mary (an accusation which, although false, is corroborated in Bigger’s trial due to a cruel association of black men with rape crimes), and then proceeds to explain how increased segregation, limited education for blacks and an “injection of an element of constant fear” from the solution to the “problem” of Negroes in America. Wright also criticizes the media for slandering communists and Jews, and shows how the newspapers gave Bigger the idea to frame Jan in the ransom note by singing it ‘Red’. In general, the newspapers in *Native Son* serve as yet another illustration of how deeply entrenched racism was in American society in the 1930s.

Bigger commits an act of violence, his specific body parts (rather than himself as individual) are portrayed as the perpetrators. Wright’s use of synecdoche in these scenarios suggests that Bigger had little or no control over these actions. Even Bessie’s murder is portrayed as something driven by external factors, out bigger control. Wright succeeds in establishing the unfortunate, yet significant, causal relationship between racial oppression and black crime. This relationship becomes apparent to anyone who reads *Native Son* as expressed in 1948 by Roberta Key of Los Angeles, California, where she writes. In addition to his attribution of Bigger’s crimes to the racially oppressive nature of his upbringing, Wright also argues that Bigger’s

actions were guided by what he believed white people expected of him. At the beginning of the novel, Bigger frequently expresses that he feels like “something awful” is going to happen to him. This foreshadows the impending events in Bigger’s life, and contributes to the upsetting idea that Bigger was ‘destined for jail’ because of his race.

NS shows how African-Americans are psychologically castrated. Mary’s sexual allusions serve to emasculate Bigger because he cannot cope with her advances. She baffles him by her insinuations. Like a forbidden fruit before hungry man, she indirectly encourages him to approach her sexually: she is too frank with him, touches his body, drinks with him, smiles when he looks at her bare thighs, sits in the front seat with him, sprawls her legs wide apart, tells him that he is very nice, leans her head on his shoulder, and finally asks him to carry her to her room because she is drunk. Such behavior makes Bigger hate her because she represses him sexually. He hungers for her but cannot touch her for this is a taboo. As she sways before him, smiling, Bigger “Watched her with a mingled feeling of helplessness, admiration, and hate, she was beautiful, slender, with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people. As he attempts to help her to her room, Mary’s erotic incitement to him becomes explicit.

It is clear here that Mary is the initiating and sexually aggressive partner; this is even indicated by the linguistic aspects of the above extract; Mary and her body is the subject of most action verbs. These sexual gestures of Mary emasculated and castrated Bigger psychologically because she is a forbidden fruit. So, he has to repress his sexual desires, to erase his lust so that he can

avoid physical castration. But, all in all, by erasing his desires, Bigger also, erases his masculinity. Thus, castration in the novel has social, economic, and political implication as well as physical ones. Anthony Dawahare argues that in Wright's Depression Era works, African-American suffered from feelings of powerlessness and these inevitably lead to feelings of emasculation. He argues that "Wright shows how these feelings of emasculation can be intensified for black men; since they are extra- oppressed by racism and are symbolically emasculated as "boys" in a racist discourse". The castration metaphor also has other implications. In *NS* Bigger complains that he does not have the chance to be a pilot or an officer. This deprivation is considered a sort of castration.

Works Cited

- Demirtürk , Lâle. The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness: Richard Wright's "Rite of Passage", *Melus*, Oxford University Press, Vol.26, No.2, 2001
- Sillen, Samuel. "The Meaning of Bigger Thomas." In *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception*. Ed. John M. Reilly. New York: Burt Franklin, 1978 (83-86). Print.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1940. Print.
- Walker, Margaret. *Richard Wright: Demonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, A Critical Look at His Work*. New York: Wamer Amistad Books, 1988. Print.