

**الاثـر التدميري للصورة النمطية
للعنصرية في رواية الابن الاصلي للكاتب
ريتشارد رايت**

م . م . مصطفى محمد رشيد

جامعة التراث قسم اللغة الانكليزي

**The destructiveness of the stereotypical
picture of racism in Richard Wright's *Native
Son***

A Research Paper

Asst. lect. Mustafa Mohammed Rashid

Al-Turath University

Department of English

تعد رواية الابن الأصلي واحدة من أكثر الروايات تأثيرا في تاريخ العنصرية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، حيث شجع الكاتب ريتشارد رايت الشعب الأمريكي ليقوموا ما بوسعهم لتجنب العنصرية من خلال الإفصاح عن الأسرار المظلمة للعنصرية والتي أصبحت موضوعة جذلية في الولايات المتحدة لعقود. في الواقع، لطالما قادت الاختلافات العنصرية وقضايا الكبرياء للعديد من المشاكل كلما أراد الشعب الأمريكي من البيض والسود أن يعيشوا بسلام وانسجام لان الصورة النمطية للعنصرية النامية في أذهانهم والتي أصبحت جزءا من حياتهم. ولذلك، فان هذا البحث يهدف إلى مناقشة كيف أصبحت الصورة النمطية للعنصرية والتي تجذرت عميقا في أذهان الشعب الأمريكي من السود والبيض، حيث أصبحت أعمالا من كلا الطرفين للعنصرية من خلال تسليط الضوء على الاختلافات العنصرية والغضب والفجوات الثقافية والصراعات والكبرياء من السود والبيض على حد سواء والخوف وعدم الرضا وعناصر ورموز العنصرية في رواية الابن الأصلي للكاتب ريتشارد رايت. كلمات مفتاحية: الابن الأصلي، الشعب الأبيض والأسود، المنطق الثقافي، الصورة النمطية للعنصرية، الكاتب ريتشارد رايت.

Abstract

Native Son is considered one of the most influential novels in the history of racism in the United States of America, in which Richard Wright has encouraged the American people to do their best to avoid racism by revealing the dark secrets of racism which have been a controversial topic in the United States for decades. Actually, racial differences and prejudicial issues always lead to many problems whenever White and Black Americans want to live in peace and harmony because the stereotypical picture of racism is existed in their mind and became part of their life. Therefore, this paper aims at discussing how the stereotypical picture of racism which is deeply rooted in White and Black people's mind has become double-edged deeds of racism by shedding light on racial differences, wrath, cultural gaps and conflicts, prejudice of both White and Black people, fear, dissatisfaction and elements and symbols of racism in Wright's *Native Son*

Key words: Native Son, Racism, White and Black people, Cultural logic, stereotypical picture of racism, Richard Wright.

Introduction

Human beings have different races based on their skin, features, qualities and capabilities, therefore one can recognize and distinguish them according to where they live. However, racism divides people into inferior and superior, therefore superior people are those who rule and control everything, while inferior people are those who feel discriminated by superior people For many decades, racism has become a social problem, which leads to a wide gap, growing prejudice, and racial differences between Black and White people as well as preventing them from living together harmoniously and peacefully in the United States of America.

The bleak racial picture is deeply rooted in logic and mind of Black and White people in the United States which cause them to think illogically and prejudicially towards each other, therefore this racial picture is nothing but an ongoing process which lead to ruin both communities as well as widening the cultural gap between them.

The main aim is to analyze and discuss issues of racism like racial prejudice, logic of racism, injustice, wrath, and fearfulness which are destructive elements to the mind of Black and White Americans through Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

Racism causes a major division between African Americans and White Americans because the racial sentiment and the bleak picture of racism are deeply rooted in their mind, therefore Wright wants to spread the spirit of coexistence and equality in the society and puts an end to the racial catastrophes, therefore this paper will focus on the suffering of African people in the United States of America.

The complicated influence of racism

Richard Wright has tried his best to improve the conditions of Black Americans and their way of living in the society through his novel *Native Son* in an attempt to shed light on the suffering and the humiliation of Black Americans as well as the possibility in which they can change their way of life.

Gates has mentioned that America is "a fundamentally racist society" (Cheney, 1991). Similarly, Richard Wrights in his novel *Native Son* has shown the different kinds of jobs and works of the American society from his personal perspectives. Wright has focused on the mental impact of racial logic and the psychological effect which pressurize Black Americans. Irving Howe has praised Wright by writing "for bringing out into open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture" (Moore, 1951). During 1930s, Wright has written his novel *Native Son* when White Americans have the sense of supremacy in controlling the social and economic jobs in a comparison with Black Americans who have the sense of inferiority and this point shows how the racial logic leads to ruin and harm White American community.

Wright has shown through the journey of his major character in the novel Bigger Thomas, which is a physical and intellectual one that Thomas symbolizes the oppressed race while Whites symbolize the oppressing race, even though both races live in a continual fear, and this is what drives Robert Guthrie to call the Whites "guilt-hate-fear complex" and the Blacks "fear-hate-fear complex" (Guthrie, 1970). Wright in his novel *Native Son* has dramatized the White and Black complexes which help to destroy the pure intentions of Black and White people based on the color of their skin.

Wright has demonstrated the different way of living between Black and White people. Similarly, Michael Keith and Steve Pile have created the "special logic" which has an effect on black and white awareness (Keith and Pile, 1993). The concept of "special logic" refers to the mutual understanding that form the logical culture of a conventional image which is deeply sculpted in the American people's mind because of their prejudice which lead them to think about racism destructively. In the novel *Native Son*, the author illustrates the white characters particularly those with aggressive mind-set to be under the effect of racism in a very complicated

For example, the Daltons have gained their way. money by exploiting blacks indirectly, shrewdly they show themselves as human rights activists committed to defend the aim of black people.

In fact, the whites are programmed in their tremendous hatred and racial prejudice towards blacks by pretending that they are kind-hearted to hide their guilt which leads them to fear. While blacks are incapable of expressing themselves by words, therefore the economical powers exploit their huge physical powers in order to prevent the confrontations of their fear which possibly lead them to react violently.

The logical image of racism

In general, whites are unmistakably racists because of their racial prejudice and progressiveness which lead them to transform blacks into the negative impression of blackness by considering them dangerous, while blacks consider whites overwhelming and oppressing forces.

Actually, both blacks and whites have failed to recognize each other as human beings because they have different historical backgrounds which lead them to think about the concept of the cultural logic of racism. The cultural differences of black and white Americans have enriched racism at the national levels, therefore they have bad impressions towards each other as well as the sense of skepticism in the credibility of both in a way that affects them intellectually and physically. According to the concept of the cultural logic of racism, both blacks and whites consider each other terrifying and unreliable. To demolish this concept of racism, blacks and whites have to accept each other as equal in rights and responsibilities under the American flag, therefore they have to believe in coexistence as a way of life wholeheartedly. After the meeting which gathers Bigger and the public prosecutor Boris, does he believe that whites are individuals rather than racial beings?. Within the events of the novel, Wright points out the ways which show the ugly face of the white racism as a main reason behind forcing blacks into a destructive way of thinking. Blacks live in a condition of poverty which forces them to behave obediently before whites who are the controllers of everything. Yet media continuously fabricates news about blacks by showing them as terrorists and criminals, due to such things, the ugliness of racism affects deeply on Bigger to behave violently and full of hatred towards white people and his own black people because of his fearfulness. The author starts his novel *Native Son* with the angry voices of Bigger's mother and sister as well as the loud voice of an alarming clock which awaken Bigger. He lives with his mother, sister, brother, and a rat in a single-room apartment. The rat is a very significant symbol that appears at the very beginning of the novel when Bigger and his younger brother Buddy catch a black rat and get rid of it. The killing of this rat is a highly symbolic in the whole novel for it predicts the future of Bigger in which he will be trapped and destructed like the rat. Bigger is financially broke and abhors whites because he believes that he is trapped like a black rat and ruled by white rules and regulations in a world full of contradictions. He seeks freedom, richness, and power, but is metaphorically imprisoned in the southern side of the city. "It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice" (Wright,1940).

David Sibley has written about Bigger's feeling of alienation "belonging and not belonging to a certain space"(Sibley,1995).

Bigger has arisen his tremendous hatred towards whites and blacks as well as his family, also he is dissatisfied with the apartment he lives in as if he is trapped in it, simply because he laments his obedience which pushes him into restriction. The tough restrictions have driven him crazy and his physical limitations have changed him to behave aggressively.

Wright has referred to the racial limitations which urge blacks to act violently to each other, simply because they live separately "felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people because the white policemen never really searched against other Negroes who committed crime against other Negroes"(Wright,1940). Therefore, the white policemen allow blacks to commit crime against each other, but if they commit crime against whites, they will be tortured and punished, in other words, to kill a white man is something completely forbidden.

Wright has referred to the limitations of blacks through the meeting between Bigger and his close friend Gus down street with their backs leaned against a building trying to expose themselves to the sunshine which is warmer than their single-room flats. All of a sudden they have noticed an airplane in the sky drawing something with its smoke. They are not able to figure out what it is but Bigger in a wonder says: "God I would like to fly up there in that sky"(Wright,1940). In fact, he wishes to be as free as a bird in a wide canopy called the sky, he yearns for leaving his jail which is his single-room apartment behind. He expresses his dissatisfaction of his condition telling his friend Gus:

"They do not let us do anything. Who? The white folks. You talk like you just now finding that out.

Now. But I just cannot get used to it. I swear to God
I cannot. I know I ought not to think about it, but I
cannot help it....."(Wright,1940).

Exceptionally, Bigger has used double oppositions to point out the limitations, boundaries, and differences between blacks and whites which are logically spoon-fed for them from childhood. Therefore, he believes wholeheartedly that whites enjoy a complete freedom, while he feels that he lives in the darkest cell of prison, and this what has happened to him by people he hates. As a result, he is permitted to have a look once at the outside world through a very tiny hole.

This small chance of seeing the outside world through a very tiny whole has led him to be aggressive and violent apparently, but he is fearful inside deeply. According to that Bigger has experienced the risks of the American culture which transferred him to become a criminal, but before he is judged as a killer, he is nothing but a victim of racial discrimination at a social and cultural level.

Therefore, Bigger has lived in a culture where racial prejudice and ill-treatments exist between blacks and whites. Bigger thinks that if white people try to treat him kindly, he has to be careful ,because this is something to be feared more than anything else. He is completely possessed by this cultural logic, especially when Jan tries to shake hands with him, he becomes completely surprised:

"Jan smiled broadly, and then extended an open palm toward him. Bigger's entire body tightened with suspense and dread....."(Wright,1940).

Bigger is completely amazed and unable to understand the reason behind the proper behavior of Jan to him as well as Mary's response to him as if he lives in the same world she does. The cultural background of Bigger has not helped him in accepting the fact of being treated as a normal human. He is unbelievably surprised by their suitable behavior to him, but he can't help responding to them as whites. Jan and Mary think that Bigger will accept them as friends, unaware that he has been programmed to act with skepticism and fearfulness because of his racial logic.

Finally, Wright sheds light on the ugliness of racism from the point of view of both black and white people, assuring that even well-behaved white people sometimes show certain kinds of prejudice which lead black people to behave in the same way which shows apparently the racial superiority of whites. Moreover, Jan has driven the car with Mary in the back seat, therefore Bigger has become hesitant and felt stuck between two whites. As a result, bigger is completely stunned, sarcastically, he feels less free than in his single-room apartment. Therefore, Wright mentions " he did not understand them; he distrusted them, really hated them. He was puzzled as so why they were treating him this way"(Wright,1940). The unexpected well behavior of Jan and Mary has driven Bigger into a state of hesitation because of his cultural logic of racism which is deeply rooted in his mind.

The destructiveness of racism

The unexpected compassion of white people leads Bigger to feel prickly because he has been grown up in a black society. This black society and its environment has affected on the cultural logic of his race as well as his behavior. He realizes that all Negroes have been misunderstood by white people, and that's why white people treat them unfairly. Therefore, the good behavior of Jan and Mary has been removed by the racial image which is deeply planted in his mind. David Sibley states that "images of things we fear and glorify," is a very important fact for people to draw their own impression about others, whether to accept to deal with them or not(Sibley,1995). Bigger goes along with this concept, though, it is absolutely complicated for him to understand the real reason behind the good behavior of Jan and Mary, because their behavior doesn't match with his way of thinking about whites, again the racial image is deeply rooted in his mind as if he has it genetically.

The cultural logic of his race has led him to suspect of whites and his tremendous fear guides him to think that whites control the world while blacks live marginally.

Actually, in *Native Son* the lack of black and white interaction results oppression and criminal deeds. If Bigger as a Negro enters into white districts, he will be committing a crime by killing a white girl unconsciously. If a white man enters into black neighborhoods, he will try his best to exploit and get the best of blacks.

In this sense, whites try their best to get advantage of blacks and the opposite is true. It seems that they are eye blinded and there is no way in *Native Son* that people recognize each other as human beings because of the racial discrimination as well as the different backgrounds. Therefore, Bigger has killed the white girl, and then he feels comfortable because he believes that people are eye blinded and no one will accuse him of killing the white girl.

For a long time, Bigger has hidden the tangible evidences of his crime in order not to be caught by police, he drags the body to the basement and puts it in an oven. This savage behavior of Bigger can be analyzed in three ways. The first way is his tremendous fear which leads him to think about how to get rid of Mary's body in order not to be caught by authorities. The second way is to seek revenge from whites generally by saying, "you stuffed me in a one room apartment, I stuffed the dead body into a furnace"(Wright,1940). The third way is that he refuses to live in a world which is controlled by whites but not blacks.

Wright wants to warn people about racism as a destructive cultural logic, or it can be interpreted into a different way which assumes that Wright is the one who feels this kind of destructiveness. In his mother's single-room apartment, Bigger wishes not to be captured by police, he thinks smartly to involve Jan in the crime, it is going to be a simple task for him because Jan adopts communism as a way of life. Communists are similar to blacks, they both suffer from the white capitalists, therefore the Communist Party called for equal rights for blacks in America during thirties and forties(Kinnamon,1990). After the arrestment of Bigger, a Jewish communist lawyer becomes his advocate, called Boris Max.

Actually, Wright wants to show in his novel that communism is better for Americans to adopt as a principle calls for a complete justice than the deformed justice of capitalists who can twist the law by their racial prejudice and materialistic capitalism. Houston Baker has mentioned that "communism was, in fact, an ideology that fits Wright's fundamental cultural assumptions"(Baker, 1972). Communism is what motivated Jan to shake hands with Bigger. Bigger tries to avoid that because he is under the pressure of his racial logic which prevents him from knowing new friends. Bigger has succeeded in involving Jan to get arrested, but in fact there are so many things for him to remember. Firstly, he has to lie continuously in order to secure himself from accusation as well as covering his bloody crime. Shrewdly, he has decided to send messages for Mary's family asking for ransom to lead them to think that their daughter has been taken as a hostage. But when the detective Britten brings Bigger in front of Jan for interrogation, Bigger becomes sweaty and his confidence falls apart.

He has gone to meet his girlfriend Bessie in order to force her move with him to an isolated place in the poorest part of the neighborhood. Then he orders her to bring the ransom in a hope to get from Mr. Dalton.

Local reporters have found Mary's body in the furnace, because Bigger accidentally tries to stoke a flaming fire in order to get rid of any tangible evidence. Consequently, he thinks if the police arrest Bessie, she will tell them everything she knows about him; that's why he has murdered her and thrown her body down the road. Killing a black girl doesn't make Bigger afraid, but killing a white girl leads him to hold the responsibility of serious consequences. Bigger's thought shows how the blood of blacks is cheaper than the blood of whites in this world.

In the moment, the policemen arrest Bigger, he does not utter a single word, even when he realizes that the policemen have found Bessie's corpse. On the other hand, when the anticommunist Buckley has been appointed as a state's attorney, he charges Bigger with potential rape crimes and murder, but Bigger has denied the rape crimes as well as Jan's involvement in the horrible death of Mary. Because of the gigantic amount of the prosecutor's questions, Bigger feels weak and signs a confession. However, the prosecutor knows that Jan believes in communism; that's why he puts Jan under a strict cross-examination about his personal beliefs as well as the nature of his relationship with Bigger which somehow shows the racial logic of people.

"Do you believe in social equality for Negroes? I believe all races are equal, Jan began. Answer yes or no Mr. Erlone! You are not on a soap box....."(Wright,1940).

The prosecutor's behavior shows the damnation of racism which affects deeply on people's behaviors. Racism is the mean which motivates the prosecutor to cross-examine Bigger and Jan severely. Being a white capitalist, the prosecutor cannot imagine that a white man like Jan can adopt communism as a personal ideology. Therefore, he asks Jan if he believes in the social equality of blacks like Bigger or not. However, the prosecutor is completely under the destructive influence of his racial prejudice.

On the other hand, the Jewish lawyer Max stands firmly against the racial treatment of the prosecutor, then he asks for a permission to question Mr. Dalton about his constructed buildings and his properties in the same neighborhood where Bigger and his family live. The lawyer questions him about the real reasons behind the high charges for renting apartments for black people including Bigger's family, but Mr. Dalton answers saying "there was housing shortage...."(Wright,1940). Mr. Dalton is an obvious example of the sense of superiority of white people who belittle minorities as well as exploiting them for their own benefit.

At the end, the prosecutor has ordered Bigger to stand after so many witnesses and passed Bigger's notes of kidnapping, his pamphlets of communism, his bloody knife, his blackened ax, his bottle of whisky, and his signed confession to the jurors of the court.

To add salt to the injury, the prosecutor has ordered to bring Bessie's body inside the court to be a tangible evidence that leads to assume that Bigger has killed and raped the white girl Mary.

However, the prosecutor's behavior represents the racial logic of whites as well as their destructive interference in the judicial rules. Apparently, the prosecutor has used the corpse of the black girl which means nothing to him as an evidence against Bigger in order to prove that Bigger is responsible for Mary's death which means everything for the prosecutor as a white girl. Therefore, the only victim according to the judicial system is the white girl Mary in *Native Son*.

The Jewish lawyer Max has tried his best to defend Bigger, but instead of presenting witnesses to help him defend Bigger or cross-examining the prosecutor's witnesses, he prefers to deliver a very long speech about the social problems and the racial logic of people which affect deeply on Bigger's personality, therefore his tremendous hatred pushes him to murder the white girl Mary.

Max has tried to plead for having mercy on Bigger because he does not hold the whole responsibility for his crime, but the racial society is the main reason that drives him to commit such a horrible crime. However, the great effect of media and newspapers has influenced people by presenting the black man Bigger as a bloody criminal, therefore he has been convicted and sentenced to death. In the moment the prosecutor has ordered to send him back to jail, the lawyer gives him a word that he is going to visit him definitely.

Later, Bigger expresses his motivations and his logical reasons behind killing the white girl Mary, he believes that Whites have ruined his entire life like nasty diseases, until he murdered her.

Ironically, Bigger thinks that his crime has released him and enabled him to understand rationally that the destiny of any black man is to be behind the bars. on the other hand, Max has appealed to the governor of the State, but all the ways were failed.

Finally, Max visits Bigger and helps him to see the great fear of the white American authorities which leads him to forgive them for their suffering from the ignorance of racism which he has before. They have no idea about the sin of their racial arrogance which motivates them to mistreat other races, specially the black race.

The impact of racism

Logically, black and white American people hold the responsibility of their prejudice psychologically, culturally, and sociologically, therefore the negative racial images are deeply drawn in their minds because their fear prevents them from communicating with each other.

Bigger represents the anger and suffering of black people, therefore he suffers from hatred, fear and suspicion towards white people, while Mr. Dalton represents the arrogance and power of white people who fear their guilty conscience.

However, black Americans are victims of racial prejudice and cultural values, therefore all what has happened to Bigger symbolize the American racism which affects on people's behavior badly as well as the way they understand each other.

The white oppressors are corrupted because they rule people by force; the black victims are also corrupted because they are blind and terrified, therefore they cannot change their way of thinking. Bigger has seen Jan as a human, not as a white guy shortly before his execution. Wright's *Native Son* within its lines shows that Bigger Thomas is unable to get rid of his racial logic which has influenced him from cradle to the grave.

Elements of Racism in *Native Son*

Wright has created some elements that shed lights on the racial conditions against black people in the United States of America through his novel *Native Son*. He has used these elements invisibly in order to send a direct message for people to be aware of the consequences of racial discriminations. The elements of racism are the alarm clock, the rat, the apartment, and mass media which are highly symbolic in *Native Son*.

Alarm Clock

At the very beginning of the novel, the alarm clock is considered to be one of the major elements which is used by the writer to awaken Bigger and his family, more specially, the American people in order to resist against the racial way of life.

Wright has used this symbol to alert people about the darkness of racism in the American society. As if it is a call from the writer for the American people to wake up; not only from the protagonist of the novel and his family but for white and black people in United States of America as well. The lesson has been observed by black people, therefore they have to wake up and struggle against the injustice which they face in the society. On the other hand, Wright has used two major words 'dark and silent' which clarify that it's time for black people to break the unbelievable silence.

The Rat

Obviously, Wright has become hesitant to use the rat as a symbol in the first scene, because he thinks that it may not be suitable to use in the very beginning of his novel, therefore he assures that in his own essay 'How Bigger was born'.

I recalled that I'd seen many rats on the streets, that I'd heard and read of Negro children being bitten by rats in their beds.....

(Rampersad, 1993, p. 270)

Wright wants to show that Negro children and black people in general live in houses which are full of rats while white children and white people in general live in houses which are big, modern, and clean where there are no black rats to find.

The Apartment Setting

Wright wants to show the huge difference between the great houses and apartments where white people live and the cheap houses and apartments where black people live through the biggest surprise of the protagonist Bigger. For Bigger the world seems too small to contain him and his race, therefore the tops get higher the more he climbs, spots get smaller, and he gets bigger, therefore he lives with his family in a small room where there is no way for individual's privacies.

The Mass Media

Shegufta (2012) has admitted that elements in *Native Son* like newspapers, films, and magazines are very powerful means of racism in the United States of America. These means reflect the wealth of white people and their culture. Films are absolutely an example of white people wealth which refers to their absolute control and it sheds light on the richness of white daughters as well.

The voice of the commentator ran with the movement of the film: Here are the daughters of the rich taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida!....

Wright wants to prove through his novel that white people hold the important governmental and non-governmental positions including mass media, therefore they control the public opinion the way they like.

Conclusion

Wright in his novel *Native Son* has inverted the general assumption of American people on the opportunities of individuals. On one hand, the various crimes of Bigger and his catastrophic fate represent the expectations of people and the way they look at him as a negro, and on the other hand, the behaviors and attitudes of the Dalton represent the spirit and expectations of white people in general, therefore both of them are criminals and victims directly or indirectly because of the destructive impact of racism which leads them to behave aggressively towards each other.

As a result, the impact of racial disease in the blood of white and black people in the United States of America corrupts the cultural and social values of people. Therefore, racism lacks the communication and relations between black and white people.

The bitter fact is that the culture of racism is deeply existed in the United States of America on social, logical, and cultural scale.

Apparently, the effect of racism that is formed and increased among Black and White people in the United States of America which is not based only on skin but also on attitudes of most people of both groups. The main reason behind the division of Black and White people is the wild stereotypical picture that led to the lack of understanding each other. On the other hand, the poisonous means of media and politics has played a major role by adding salt to the injury through dividing people instead of uniting them. Therefore, many racial factors mentioned in this research paper have led to the occurrence of racism in the United States of America between Black and White people.

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