

THE EFFECTS OF RACIAL OPPRESSION ON BIGGER THOMAS IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan membahas permasalahan yang berhubungan dengan pengaruh-pengaruh penindasan ras yang dialami oleh Bigger Thomas pada novel Richard Wright berjudul Native Son. Teori yang digunakan adalah teori oppression dan setting yaitu Great Depression in the 1930's America.

Ada beberapa temuan setelah analisis dilakukan yang berhubungan dengan pengaruh penindasan ras yang dialami oleh Bigger Thomas. Kebencian dan kemarahan Bigger Thomas karena dia merasa tidak berguna bagi orang di sekitarnya terutama keluarganya yang bergantung hidup padanya. Pengaruh selanjutnya adalah kejahatan yang dilakukan oleh Bigger Thomas. Dia melakukan tindak kejahatan minor pada keluarga dan temannya, terlebih lagi, dengan membunuh seorang wanita kulit putih, Mary Dalton dan kekasihnya sendiri, yaitu Bessie.

Kata Kunci: *racial oppression, the oppressed, hatred and rage, and violence*

A. Introduction

The novel tells the story of 20-year-old Bigger Thomas, an African American living in utter poverty. Bigger lived in Chicago's South Side ghetto in the 1930s. McKean defines 'ghetto' as follows: "it is a section of a city occupied by a minority group who lives there especially because of social, economic, or legal pressure" (2007: 497). A ghetto is now described as an overcrowded urban area often associated with a specific ethnic or racial population. Bigger Thomas lives in the one-room apartment with his mother, younger brother and sister in the central black section of Chicago. Bigger always gets into trouble as a youth, but upon receiving a job at the home of the rich white family, the Daltons, he has experienced a realization of his identity. He accidentally kills a white woman, Mary, a daughter of the Daltons and rapes and kills his girlfriend and is then caught and tried. He thinks that what he has done is because of racial oppression in which he becomes the oppressed. Moreover, the white, the oppressor, think that Bigger Thomas is totally guilty; it is merely because Bigger Thomas is a black. Therefore, the writer would like to discuss the effects of racial oppression on the oppressed.

Concerning the oppression, it deals with two contradictive terms. They are the oppressed and the oppressor. Although they are contrast in meaning, they are related to each other. Usually, the oppressed have needs or desires of which the oppressor strongly disapproves. The reaction of the oppressed is "apt to be one of frustration, anger, and anxiety" (Deutsch, 2005: 4). Furthermore, the oppressor needs the oppressed. Deutsch says "their need to control and dominate the other, their intolerance of the autonomy of the other, makes them dependent upon having vulnerable, weaker others for the definition of their own power" (2005: 4).

Wright, in his novel entitled *Native Son*, tends to reveal the setting of place and setting of time, especially in 1930s as the effect of Great Depression. In 1920s, the American life was improved. Industrial production and employment were high and rising. The citizens lived prosperously from their business. Their income was getting bigger and bigger than their expenditures. The rising of industrial production fueled the speculation and they planned to invest the money in form of stock holding to fulfill the desire in having the product of manufacture. The stock market grew rapidly to satisfy people's comfort. As supported by Divine in *America Past and Present*:

Their conspicuous consumption helped fuel the prosperity of the 1920s, but their disposable income eventually became greater than their material want. The result was speculation, as those with idle money began to invest heavily in the stock market to reap gain from the industrial growth (1991:744).

The prosperity came to America during 1920s; unfortunately, it was the unforgettable moment for the Americans. Everything changed worse than before. This condition made the American's life in a mess. This moment is known as *Black Tuesday*.

B. Discussion

Native Son written by Richard Wright, an African American writer, stirs up real controversy by shocking the sensibilities of both black and white Americans. Richard Wright is determined to make his readers feel the reality of race relations. He creates the protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas, who hails from the lowest rung of society, and Wright does not infuse him with any of the romantic aspects or traits common to literary heroes. Rather, given the social conditions in which he must live, Bigger is what one might expect him to be sullen, frightened, violent, hateful and resentful.

Racial discrimination that segregates the black community from the white one affects every people especially the oppressed, herewith is the blacks represented by Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel entitled *Native Son*.

Because of racial oppression Bigger experiences, he feels anger and hatred, and then finally he commits violence. He is usually angry being humiliated. His ignorance and poverty make him ashamed, but he does not want to reveal either his shame or his fear because such a disclosure will be humiliating too. Therefore, Bigger keeps his feeling raging inside him, and he is furious at those who provoke these overwhelming emotions. He is especially furious at whites, not only because they are responsible for the oppressive conditions of his life but also because they scare and embarrass him.

1. Hatred and Rage

Bigger's hatred and rage have a thin-line to be differentiated because both feelings Bigger has exist simultaneously. When he hates something, then his anger emerges. Bigger Thomas views whites as collective, overwhelming force that tells him where to live, where to work, and what to do. He always hates everything he does if it has to do with whites. What he thinks about whites is everything sophisticated he can not afford to reach. His limited education traps him and keeps him feeling powerless.

Bigger Thomas also hates himself because of his condition of being a black. What he has realized is that he has already known that he can not be equal with whites. Bigger feels that the white authority makes him feel restless all the time. Bigger and his family live in a one-room apartment owned by a white baron. They have to rent with a very higher payment but the condition of the apartment is very poor, and Bigger hates it very much. Bigger's mother always blames him for their torture.

Bigger walked across the floor and sat on the bed. His mother's eyes followed him.

"We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you," she said...

All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!" (NS, 1998: 8-9).

Bigger feels hatred throughout of life because of his powerless. He is unable to ease his family's suffering of poverty. The only thing that makes him feel detest at his

family because they depend their life on him, even they have already learned that Bigger can not do anything to help them. Bigger's mother always prods him because of their poverty. Therefore, Bigger always feels useless in front of his family, and his uselessness always makes him hate himself. Though we know he has gained a new job, even the new job offers little hope for a better life. His family will continue to live in the same rat-infested one-room apartment and struggle to put food on the table, a fact that fills Bigger with a hopeless sense of his own powerlessness.

Moreover, Bigger finally learns that the one who employs him as a driver is a wealthy white family. His hatred gets stronger when he knows that Mr. Dalton owns the apartment where Bigger's family and other blacks live miserably.

He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way? He wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel like this...

"You live at 3721 Indiana Avenue?"

"Yessuh."

Mr. Dalton paused, frowned, and looked up at the ceiling.

"What kind of a building is that over there?"

"You mean where I live, suh?"

"Yes."

"Oh, it's just an old building."

"Where do you pay rent?"

"Down on Thirty-first Street."

"To the South Side Real Estate Company?"

"Yessuh."

Bigger wondered what all these questions could mean; he had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, but he was not sure. (NS, 1998: 47-48).

Bigger knows that the wealthy white family owns the apartment in which Bigger's family lives, so he knows that they make money off his family's misery. It seems ironic to learn that the man makes money by renting blacks including Bigger's family a rat-infested apartment, then simultaneously he donates some of the money to help blacks by giving them jobs just the way he has done to Bigger. Therefore, Bigger hates for such a situation that has already trapped him. However, he feels anger within himself. Because of racial oppression he suffers from, his emotion is uncontrollable. He keeps feeling hatred and anger within himself all the time.

When Bigger Thomas is being interviewed by Mr. Dalton, Mary comes interrupting the interview. What Mary has done makes Bigger feel angry because she

asks the things Bigger does not know at all. Yet, he does not do anything to ease his anger, he detests her very much. In his mind, he feels useless once again because of the white authority.

“Good evening, mam.”

The girl came close to him and stopped just opposite his chair.

“Bigger, do you belong to a union?” she asked.

“Now, Mary!” said Mr. Dalton, frowning.

“Well, Father, he should,” the girl said, turning to him, then back to Bigger.

“Do you?”

“Mary...” said Mr. Dalton.

“I’m just asking him a question, Father!”

Bigger hesitated. He hated the girl then. Why did she have to do this when he was trying to get a job?

“No’ m,” he mumbled, his head down and his eyes glowering.

“And why not?” the girl asked.

Bigger heard Mr. Dalton mumble something. He wished Mr. Dalton would speak and end this thing. He looked up and saw Mr. Dalton staring at the girl. She’s making me lose my job! He thought. Goddamn! He knew nothing about unions, except that they were considered bad. And what did she mean by talking to him this way in front of Mr. Dalton, who, surely, didn’t like unions?

In his heart he cursed the crazy girl. Maybe Mr. Dalton was deciding not to hire him! Goddamn! *Goddamn that woman!* She spoiled everything! (NS, 1998: 51-53).

Bigger feels very upset because he thinks that Mary has humiliated him. It is not because he does not know what Mary has asked him about, but it is merely because the one who asks him is a white woman. In his life, he really hates whites, but he has to take for granted that he lives his life around whites.

One moment of his rage comes up again when Bigger Thomas is asked to take Mary out. Mary asks Bigger to fetch her boyfriend, Jan. Mary and Jan treat Bigger as their friend, but Bigger feels ashamed, even thinks that they only make fun of him. What Bigger thinks is that they are different, black and white. Blacks always become inferior.

Bigger said nothing. The car whirred along.

“We seem strange to you, don’t we, Bigger?” Mary asked.

“Oh, no’ m,” he breathed softly, knowing that she did not believe him, but finding it impossible to answer her in any other way.

His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into so small a space, but he dared not move. He knew that they would not have cared if he had made himself more comfortable, but his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that. These people made him feel things he did not want to feel. If he were white, if he were like them, it would have been different. But he was black. So he sat still, his arms and legs aching (NS, 1998: 68-69).

Bigger thinks that Mary and Jan secretly make fun of him. He becomes infuriated because Mary and Jan make him intensely aware of his black skin, which is something Bigger feels a badge of shame. Their attention makes him feel naked and embarrassed, and he feels dumb, cold, and inarticulate for them.

2. Violence

Bigger Thomas is a violent character. He becomes violent then he intends to hurt anyone whoever they are when he is in anger and fear. The sense of violence within him exists because of racial oppression he experiences throughout his life. He does not feel hesitated to frighten his sister with the dead rat he has just killed, moreover he makes her fainted. It seems that he is satisfied by hurting someone.

The woman on the bed continued to sob. Bigger took a piece of newspaper and gingerly lifted the rat by its tail and held it out at arm's length.

"Bigger, take 'im out," Vera begged again.

Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear.

"Bigger!" Vera gasped convulsively; she screamed and swayed and closed her eyes and fell headlong across her mother and rolled limply from the bed to the floor.

"Bigger, for God's sake!" the mother sobbed, rising and bending over Vera.

"Don't do that! Throw that rat out!" (NS, 1998: 7)

Bigger Thomas has no mercy even toward his own sister. He seems enjoyable making his sister feel frightened. His violent deed toward his sister reflects his sense of oppression.

Furthermore, Bigger also does violent and cruel deed to his friend, Gus. Gus is one of Bigger's gang members. They usually rob blacks' shops. When they decide to plan a robbery in Blum's, that is, a shop owned by a white, Bigger within his heart is afraid of doing robbery. He feels such a fear because he has already learned his own community. He has thought that robbing a black is not harmful for him because the

police will not pay attention of what they have done to their own community, but if they rob whites, it will be hazardous for them. Therefore, in order to cover up his fear, Bigger fights Gus and blames him for his lateness.

Bigger was afraid of robbing a white man and he knew that Gus was afraid, too. Blum's store was small and Blum was alone, but Bigger could not think of robbing him without being flanked by his three pals. But even with his pals he was afraid. He had argued all of his pals but one into consenting to the robbery, and toward the lone man who held out he felt a hot hate and fear; he had transferred his fear of the whites to Gus...

Gus leaned on his cue stick and gazed at Bigger and Bigger's stomach tightened as though he were expecting a blow and were getting ready for it. His fists clenched harder. In a split second he felt how his fist and arm body would feel if he hit Gus squarely in the mouth, drawing blood; Gus would fall and he would walk out and the whole thing would be over and the robbery would not take place (NS, 1998: 25-26).

Bigger Thomas hits and warns Gus violently when Gus shows up late of the exact time of robbery. When Gus finally shows up, the anxious Bigger attacks and beats him violently without provocation or warning. He then pulls a knife on Gus and forces him to lick the blade. His feeling of being oppressed makes him think and do everything violently.

The severe violence Bigger Thomas has committed is that when he accidentally kills Mary Dalton. Bigger, long under racial oppression, accidentally suffocates Mary Dalton for fear that he will be discriminated against and charged with the rape of Mary Dalton.

He wanted to move from the bed, but was afraid he would stumble over something and Mrs. Dalton would hear him, would know that someone besides Mary was in the room. Frenzy dominated him. He held his hand over her mouth and his head was cocked at an angle that enabled him to see Mary and Mrs. Dalton by merely shifting his eyes. Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught... (NS, 1998: 85).

He snatched his hand away. Thought and feeling were balked in him; there was something he was trying to tell himself, desperately, but could not. Then, convulsively, he sucked his breath in and huge words formed slowly, ringing in his ears: *She's dead...* (NS, 1998: 87).

When Bigger discovers Mrs. Dalton's presence in Mary's room, he is reminded of the whiteness that controls his life, and is overcome by the magnitude of his transgression. Bigger is seized by hysterical terror. He knows that Mrs. Dalton is blind, but he worries that Mary may say something that unwittingly reveals his presence. In his panic, he accidentally smothers Mary to death.

Additionally, the most extreme thing Bigger Thomas has conducted crime is when he finally kills Bessie, his girlfriend. Bigger has told Bessie that he has already killed a white woman. Bessie has known everything Bigger has done. She becomes afraid of him. Because of Bigger's feeling of oppression, he kills Bessie. He does it because he feels fear that Bessie will confess it to the police.

He could not leave her here and he could not take her with him. If he took her along she would be crying all the time; she would be blaming him for all that had happened; she would be wanting whiskey to help her to forget and there would be times when he could not get it for her... (NS, 1998: 235)

He lifted the brick again and again, until in falling it struck a sodden mass that gave softly but stoutly to each landing blow. Soon he seemed to be striking a wet wad of cotton, of some damp substance whose only life was the jarring of the brick's impact...All he knew was that the room was quiet and cold and that the job was done...He bent and listened. It was his own breathing he heard; he had been breathing so loud that he had not been able to tell if Bessie was still breathing or not... (NS, 1998: 237).

He had thrown Bessie down the air-shaft and the money was in the pocket of her dress! What could he do about it? Should he go down and get it? Anguish gripped him. *Naw!* He did not want to see her again (NS, 1998: 239).

Bigger realizes that he cannot take Bessie with him but cannot leave her behind either. After Bessie falls asleep, he kneels over her with a brick. He hesitates for a moment, but seeing images of whites whom he hates the most, and of the law chasing him, he brings the brick down on Bessie's skull. He then dumps her body down an airshaft.

Bigger Thomas dominates the novel. He is fully drawn individual. There are Bigger among every oppressed people throughout the world. It argues that many of the rapidly changing and uncertain conditions of the modern world, a modern world largely founded on imperialism and exploitation, have created people like Bigger, restless and adrift, searching for a place for themselves in a world that, for them, has lost many of its cultural and spiritual centers.

C. Conclusion

Native Son was published in 1940. It is a novel written by a famous African American author, Richard Wright. Richard Wright gets inside the main character he has created, Bigger Thomas that reveals his feelings, thoughts and point of view as he commits crimes and is confronted with racial oppression, violence and debasement.

In regard with the discussion, the researcher needs some theories that may meet the analysis. The theories are oppression and setting dealing with Great Depression that happened in America in 1930s.

After conducting the analysis, the researcher reveals some findings. Bigger Tomas experiences racial oppressions. He lives in poverty. Bigger and his family live in a one-room apartment owned by a white landlord who hires him a job. Bigger always feels uncomfortable when he is around whites. He feels that he is being humiliated because of his black skin. Because of his limited education, he is only able to accept menial job. He has already had dreams but he feels trapped because of his feeling of inferiority. The effects of racial oppression that are suffered by Bigger Thomas are bad for him. He is unable to control his hatred and rage because of his sense of oppression he feels for the rest of his life. Moreover, the most severe effect experienced by Bigger Thomas is that he has conducted two violent crimes.

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