

**The Interpretation of Bigger Thomas' Dream and the Conflict in the
"Native Son" by Richard Wright**

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Abstract

Discrimination is often found in the society and many authors make discrimination as their main theme. One of the authors wrote their work with discrimination as their theme is Richard Wright in *Native Son*. This paper aims to discuss and analyze the conflict that appears due to discrimination which happens in the novel, also to interpret the dream that the main character had. The data was taken from the novel entitled *Native Son* by Richard Wright by using observation method and psychoanalysis approach. From the discussion and the analysis, it is found discrimination can cause several conflicts which lead to the psychological state of the main character.

Keywords: discrimination, conflict, dream, interpretation

I. Introduction

Discrimination often happens in the daily life, and sometimes we may unconsciously discriminate other people. The discrimination can occur based on race, gender, religion or even skin color. Discrimination in society is usually reflected through literary works. Many authors reflect the discrimination in the society to their writing. While we are discussing discrimination, we are also discussing the conflict that happens because of the effect of discrimination.

One of the literary works discussing discrimination is a novel by Richard Wright entitled "Native Son" which is first published on 1940s. The author, Richard Wright, is an African-American writer and poet. Most of his works are criticizing the discrimination of black people. The novel describes the hardship and the discrimination of black people in America, they are discriminated by white people because of their race. In this novel, 'Native Son', the main character, Bigger Thomas, is having a dream which makes him become so restless and frighten as if he was being haunted. His dream appears after he murdered his master's daughter.

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From the discrimination that happens in the society in the novel, there are some questions that appear like what kind of conflict that happens because of it? How and why can it happen? Moreover, in the novel the author tells that Bigger Thomas is having a particular dream which appears after his previous action. Then, how can the dream reflected Bigger Thomas fear? Then, what kind of relation that the dream has with the psychological state of Bigger Thomas? Those question are appeared as the author of this paper read the novel.

There have been some studies on the discrimination in the “Native Son”. An academic journal entitled “The cultural logic of racism in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” by Ayan (2011), discussed how discrimination can happen. From the study Ayan found that race prejudice and cultural logic of racism are the cause of the discrimination that happen in society, especially in the novel “Native Son”. Ayan stated that cultural logic can be a double edge in the society.

The second study about discrimination in the same novel is from an International Journal of Humanities and Social Science entitled “Racial Discrimination and Violence: A Psycho-Social Analysis of Richard Wright's *Native Son and the Long Dream*” by Albarrak (2016). In the essay Albarrak focuses on the effect of the discrimination experienced by Bigger Thomas in the novel. From the study Albarrak found that discrimination can give a psychological scars and psychological disorders toward the victim. Albarrak also stated that the impacts of racial oppressions are multi-faceted.

The next study is from an article in the Theory and Practice in Language Studies by Chen (2011) entitled “An Analysis of the Changing of Bigger Thomas’ Behavior and Thought in *Native Son*”. In this study the author discuss the changing that happen to Bigger Thomas in both his behavior and thought, how it can happen and what kind of changes that happen. The author states that the changes of Bigger Thomas’ behavior from how he can kill a mouse ruthlessly and ends up by killing two people are because of the effect of the racial discrimination in the society. His actions are also as an act of his struggle toward the society, which is surprisingly, discrimination also makes Bigger Thomas seek to human nature.

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The fourth study is from an article by Inayati (2014), an English Literature lecturer, entitled “STEREOTYPING BLACKS IN RICHARD WRIGHT’S *NATIVE SON*”. This article discuss the stereotype attached toward black people. In order to simplifying something people tend to generalize something. This generalization makes various group based on their diversity, and from this generalization then appears something that we call stereotype. This stereotype is often regarded as something bad and destructive in the society. The author of the article found that Black people usually are stereotyped as uneducated people, uncivilized, immoral, and even a criminal.

The next study is a study by Khan (2013) entitled “Racial Conflict between Black and White Communities in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*”. This paper discusses the racial differentiation between Black and White people. Because of this racial discrimination that lies in the society, especially American society at that time, prevents White people to realize the real and pure sympathy and makes some prejudice. Khan states that Bigger Thomas was not born as a criminal but he is a native son of American culture which create him as a criminal in the violent environment.

Previous studies above have the same object that is the discrimination in the novel of “Native Son”, but those studies have different concern on the matter, for instance, the first study is concerning more on what make the discrimination happen while the second study on the impact of the discrimination. Those study are indeed helpful for us to understand the condition of the main character in the story, but they lack of one of the crucial thing that is the conflict of the main character faces. What kind of conflicts are faced by the main character and they do not look at the dream that Bigger Thomas has.

The purpose of this study is to examine the conflict in the *Native Son* as the impact of the racial oppression or racial discrimination. Therefore, this study will focus to the conflict that black people faced. By discussing the conflict we can really know what kind of conflict caused by discrimination that leave some impact on the victim and the interpretation of Bigger Thomas dream and its relation with the psychological state of Bigger Thomas.

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This paper used intrinsic theory focusing on the conflict in the novel and psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud about dream. Conflict is one of the intrinsic elements in the novel. Conflict is needed to make plot have a certain pattern, like a beginning, a middle and an end of the story which is made the story becomes more interesting and not dull, flat and boring. The conflict, as Potter states in “Elements of Literature”, happens because there is a contradiction at least between two sides (1967:25). According to Perrine in the “Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense” conflict can be a physical, mental, emotional or moral (1998:42). According from the source of where the conflict occurs, there are two types of conflict, those types are internal and external conflict. Internal conflict occur from the inside of the character’s mind, he or she should struggle with his or her own self to find the answer or the solution of their problem. This kind of conflict is often called as man versus himself. While the conflict that occurs because of the problem that happens from outside the character’s mind, around the character and because of the character’s action, is called external conflict. Some examples of external conflict are a man versus a man, a man versus nature, and a man versus God conflict. By analyzing the conflict as one of the intrinsic elements in the novel, we can know how discrimination or racial oppression is described and how the character face and overcome the situation. Those conflict will lead the character to further action in the more serious situation.

Psychological approach in the literature is an approached which is used to see the psychological aspect in the literary work, how the author describes the psyche of each character. There are some cases where some situation which is faced by some character can affect the character’s psychology and come in the form of dream when they are sleeping. As already be known that dream is not only an illusion or imagination that appears when sleeping but it also can be interpreted as what people think and feel. Minderop quotes a theory from Eagleton (1996) which says Freud believes that someone’s behavior can be affected by dream. Dream is also reflecting the conflict, stress, suspense and oppression in our daily life. This theory can help us to understand what Bigger Thomas truly feels about his action.

II. Research Method

The paper used qualitative data of intrinsic elements and psychological aspects taken from the novel "Native Son" by Richard Wright. The data were taken by observation method with taking note and close reading or textual techniques. The sources used to analyze this novel are books, articles, dissertations, journals and internet sources. The writer read the novel thoroughly. The writer uses psychological approach by Sigmund Freud in order to analyze or to interpret Bigger Thomas' dream.

III. Result and Discussion

A. Conflict

Racism in the Native Son obviously can be seen. Black people which in the novel is presented by Bigger Thomas and his folks are being discriminated by the society, especially by white people. Bigger and his folks cannot get the same opportunity nor nearly-the same as what white people get. The opportunities, whether in education, job, public service and so on are hard for them to achieve. This treatment which black people get can be seen from the dialogue between Bigger and his friend, Gus, when they saw a plane.

‘I could fly a plane if I had a chance,’ Bigger said.

‘If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane,’ Gus said.

For a moment Bigger contemplated all the "ifs" that Gus had mentioned. Then both boys broke into hard laughter, looking at each other through squinted eyes. When their laughter subsided, Bigger said in a voice that was half question and half-statement:

‘It's funny how the white folks treat us, ain't it?’ (Wright, 1972:55)

Bigger and Gus as the representatives of black people are aware of the treatment that they get; ‘if you wasn't a black’ this shows that what Bigger and his folks get is already considered as a rule, a definite rule in the society which is unbreakable. Those treats make black people like they are always being dominated and oppressed.

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From the racism acts the society do bring up many kinds conflict to black people which can be seen clearly through Bigger. The most obvious conflict is the external conflict. There are some types of external conflict that appear in the story such as, man versus man and man versus society.

The first external conflict that I am going to discuss is man versus man conflict. Man versus man conflict is a conflict happening between people, this conflict can be seen from the conflict between Bigger Thomas and Gus. This conflict happened because Gus was coming late on the time that they had planned to rob one of white people house, Blum's house. Gus' lateness made their plan ruined. 'He stooped again and placed the knife at Gus' throat.' (Wright, 1972:77)

The next conflict is man versus society conflict. This conflict happens between a person as individual and a group of people in the society. In the man versus society conflict we can also find conflict of class which is also one of the sources of the conflict.

“I hate her now, even though she's dead! God knows, I hate her right now.....”.... “Yeah; and I ain't sorry she's dead." ...”I don't know. She didn't do nothing to me.” He paused and ran his hand nervously across his forehead. ‘She..... It was..... Hell, I don't know. She asked me a lot of question. She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog. I was so mad I wanted to cry...’ His voice trailed off in a plaintive whimper.... “Aw, Mr. Max, she wanted me to tell her how Negroes live. She got into the front seat of the car where I was...” (Wright, 1972:387)

From the quotation above can be seen Bigger Thomas' enmity toward white people represented by Mary Dalton. Bigger feels insulted by what Mary did, even though what Mary did was merely to be friendly without any intentions to insult or to hurt Bigger Thomas. Bigger thought what Mary did by asking him about how he and his folk live and by was sitting beside him in the front seat of the car was intended to insult him. His believe and perspective that he keep all that time that white people and black people have a different class, made him did not able to believe on Mary's behavior on him, even though what Mary did was a good one it will be always bad

on his perspective. What white people already did to his folk made him hated them and he expressed by insisting that he did not feel sorry for killing Mary. He argued what he did to Mary was a fair thing, because he felt oppressed when he was obliged to answer her every questions. It made him felt disgusted, not only because Mary is one of those white people but also because she is a daughter of his master, and he felt that he was the same as dog. 'I don't know. She asked me a lot of question. She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog.' (Wright, 1972:387)

B. Bigger Thomas' Dream and Its Interpretation

Freud put a claim from Schubert in his book (1920) which claims that "The dream is the liberation of the spirit from the pressure of external nature, a detachment of the soul from the fetters of matter." From that claim of Schubert, dream can be used to indicate how people actually feel and experience in their life. Even though they suppress what they experience and hide it perfectly until no one know what truly happen, they cannot lie to themselves, and those feelings will appear in the form of dream as the result of the pressure. This case also appears in the story when Bigger Thomas was having a dream after he killed Mary Dalton, a daughter of his master, Mr. Dalton.

.....he felt an urgent need to run and hide as though the bell were sounding a warning and he stood on a street corner in a red glare of light like that which came from the furnace.... (Wright, 1972: 204)

The quotation above shows that in even Bigger Thomas' unconscious mind he has an urge to run and hide even though in his dream he did not know yet his condition and his current situation. It is also indicates a feeling of guilty from what he did before. In addition, a phrase of 'a red glare of light like that which came from the furnace' conveys one of his action after killing Mary Dalton that is burning her head in the furnace in the his master's house.

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.....and he had a big package in his arms so wet and slippery and heavy that he could scarcely hold onto it and he wanted to know what was in the package..... (Wright, 1972: 204)

The package mentioned and presented in his dream is a representation of Mary's head that he had cut off from her body and he wrapped it in the newspaper. He wrapped it in order to camouflage so no one will know that it was a head. This action of him can be found in the novel, '....he wrapped the head in the newspaper... ' (Wright, 1972: 133)

.....and he stopped near an alley corner and unwrapped it and the paper fell away and he saw – it was his *own* head lying with black face and half-closed eyes and lips parted with white teeth showing and hair wet with blood..... (Wright, 1972: 204)

As have been discussed before, the package is actually a represent of Mary's head wrapped in the newspaper. But in his dream, instead of Mary's head he saw his own head in the horrible condition. Why he saw his head fell off, but not Mary's head? This shows that, once again, he realized for what he had done. He might be also imagining the consequence he will received from his action which is his head might be in the same condition as Mary's head.

.....he knew that very soon he had to find some place to hide but there was no place..... (Wright, 1972: 204)

The condition becomes more confusing, what he saw is his own head that fell down from the package, so why he needed to run away and hide? He still saw the object in his dream as Mary Dalton's and not his. His unwitting crime will be discovered soon.

.....and in front of him white people were coming to ask about the head from which the newspapers had fallen and which was now slippery with blood in his naked hands and he gave up and stood in the middle of the street in the red darkness..... (Wright, 1972: 204)

People who come to ask about the head in his dream are white people, this indicates that he actually felt repressed and dominated by white people. Moreover, his victim is one of those white people so it is clear enough that he will not be able to escape from the punishment. This will be different if his victim is from his own folk that is black people. If once he makes trouble with white people it is hard for him to escape and free, there will no justice for him even though he has right.

The dream is an indication of Bigger Thomas' fear of his unwitting crime and he tried to repress his fear and guilt deep inside his mind, his crime was just a form of a reflex action of a self-defense. When he knew that he had suffocated Mary until she was dead, he tried to hide her body inside a trunk. He convinced himself that everything will be okay and no one will know what he had done, moreover not only he had hid her body perfectly he also had made a scheme case to cover up his unwitting crime which he believed that people will believe him. The scheme scene that he made was 'I'll tell 'em I left her with Jan in the car after I took the trunk down in the basement. In the morning I'll take the trunk to the station, like she told me...' (Wright, 1972:134)

That is true that he can hide his fear almost perfectly and no one suspicious on him, but he cannot lie to himself. It can be seen from the dream that Bigger Thomas had. The dream is foreshadowing Bigger Thomas' mounting guilt and the accusation from white people as if his actions are about to catch up.

IV. Conclusion

The discrimination act in the novel *Native Son* causes many conflicts faced by the main character, Bigger Thomas. The most obvious conflict in the novel is the external conflict, such as conflict man versus man and man versus society. Those conflicts faced by Bigger Thomas lead to a certain psychological condition and were reflected in the Bigger Thomas' dream. As he tried to repress his fear and guilt, it unconsciously appear in the form of dream.

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