

Racial Injustice Against Blacks in the American Society as Represented in Wright's *Native Son*

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Abstract—Racial injustice refers to the unfair treatment of a specific race in a community, which disadvantages one race. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the social consequences of systemic racism and identify the various types of racial injustices experienced by Black people in the 1930s, as depicted in Wright's *Native Son*. Qualitative and descriptive methods, as well as Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism methods, were used. The results showed various forms of racism, including prejudice, negative stereotypes, segregation, and social isolation. These types of injustice have had a severe impact on African Americans, as seen through the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, who represented the constant state of fear, uncertainty, and frustration inflicted upon Black people. By uncovering the different kinds of racial injustice, this study emphasized the importance of societal reflection and action in eliminating long-standing racial biases and injustices.

Index Terms—racial, Black people, structuralism approach

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a compilation of written and unwritten stories, including texts and spoken language (Fadillah et al., 2022). In a written form, literature is categorized as poetry or novel, while in an unwritten or performed form, it is categorized as a theatre (Asriyanti et al., 2022). Broadly defined as artistic literary works created by distinct writers (Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019), literature is a vital resource that helps readers and scholars navigate through various genres such as short stories, poems, novels, plays, and songs (Arafah, 2018). Literature is considered the result of writing activity and could trigger an awareness to maintain the connection between humans and nature or the environment (Siwi et al., 2022). An individual's expression shows literature through words, deeds, and writings (Sunyoto et al., 2022). In this context, a writer typically bases literary works on surrounding events, exploring phenomena for inspiration and presenting particular ideas of interest (Arafah et al., 2024). The significance and depth of a literary work can only be fully appreciated by examining it within a cultural context (Arafah et al., 2020). In addition, literature explores personal, cultural, societal, and aesthetic values to comprehend human experiences (Sunardi et al., 2018).

Literary works should not be interpreted solely at face value, as they connect to various elements; hence, readers should investigate thoroughly (Asri et al., 2023). Novels as literary works often reflect facts and are considered a society record

(Abbas et al., 2020). Literature provides more than entertainment; it helps readers understand various phenomena on a deeper level (Abbas et al., 2020). Therefore, literature plays a significant role in society by showing and reflecting human experiences in real life (Arafah et al., 2021). Literary works can generally be categorized into genres such as prose, poetry, and novels (Mutmainnah et al., 2022). Literature has evolved over time, and many academic studies witness the emergence of new literary works and studies (Arafah et al., 2023).

In the academic field, students gain value through the stories they read in literary works. Education is not just a process of acquiring knowledge but also a means of achieving social and personal development (Misnah et al., 2024). Therefore, incorporating cultural aspects into the learning process is crucial to shaping students' behaviour and character (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Mokoginta & Arafah, 2022). Culture, as a pattern of life recorded in a community, includes traditions and rituals rich in life values (Arifin et al., 2022; Takwa et al., 2024). Cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation enriches each country or region with local wisdom (Hasyim et al., 2020; Takwa et al., 2024). This local wisdom serves as a guideline for good attitudes and behaviour (Takwa et al., 2022). Furthermore, cultural heritage is not only about tradition; it can also include local terms or languages that identify specific objects understood only by the local community (Mofu et al., 2024). Therefore, integrating literary works into the school curriculum helps students preserve local wisdom and shape their character by integrating cultural values (Halil et al., 2024).

The application of literary works in learning should be considered. The advancement of technology affects every aspect of social life, including learning (Suhadi et al., 2022). A few years ago, when the pandemic arose, people were challenged with a new dimension of online learning, where the learning process could take place outside the classroom (Arafah et al., 2023; Kaharuddin et al., 2024). Teachers are now expected to use technological devices to make lessons more engaging (Usman et al., 2024). This technological advancement makes literary works more accessible. The digital age allows students to acquire literary works, such as books, through online and technological-based media (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). At this point, digital media enables individuals to consume information and connect with people worldwide (Arafah et al., 2023; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a). Teachers should apply appropriate methods to understand the cultural values in literary works using technological-based media, and students should be highly motivated to gain a positive impact from reading literature (Kaharuddin et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2024). Despite the changes brought about by technological developments, modernization should maintain the traditional systems of society, such as the norms, culture, and environment (Takwa et al., 2022).

In literature, language plays an essential role, encapsulating cultural reality and serving as a communication tool (Arafah et al., 2023). Writers use complex indicators, such as signs and symbols, to convey messages to readers (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b). At this stage, the writer, as the speaker, is expected to communicate as informatively as necessary (Yulianti et al., 2023). Moreover, as an art, literary works rely on figurative language, such as metaphors (Baa et al., 2023). To understand figurative language in literary works, readers should analyze the signs and symbols by identifying their relationship to other signs (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). In a system of signs and symbols, cultural values should be conveyed effectively to avoid misunderstandings or misinterpretations that prevent appropriate comprehension (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a; Iksora et al., 2022). It is also essential to recognize that writers deliver messages both implicitly and explicitly (Kuswanty et al., 2023). Therefore, readers are responsible for interpreting a writer's meaning from their unique perspective. In addition, literary works are often presented in multiple languages, becoming global reading materials, such as English. Therefore, having language-learning aptitude is essential for readers to fully enjoy literature (Karamoy et al., 2024).

The development of literature is shared by readers' responses, which are influenced by various literary theories (Afiah et al., 2022). Literary works cover diverse topics such as economics, religion, politics, science, and society. Literature captures and records people's lives in specific eras and regions (Yudith et al., 2024). Through literature, valuable lessons about human survival and the environment can be discovered (Jusdalyana et al., 2024). Nature is a crucial, inspiring element in literary works (Manugeran et al., 2023). Unfriendly human behaviour has negatively impacted environmental sustainability, yet few people are aware of this (Yudith et al., 2023; Abbas et al., 2024). Thomas and Chasper (2019) argued that race has been a prevalent topic throughout American society's history. Blacks have endured racism and oppression for generations, more than other minority groups (Lavalley & Johnson, 2020). As noted by Oliver (2003, p. 3), numerous African Americans, particularly men, have been unfairly categorized as unintelligent, violent, and threatening offenders. In addition, women were subjected to gender discrimination during that time (Yudith et al., 2024; Arafah et al., 2024).

Racial discrimination, the behavioural manifestation of racism, occurs when power and prejudice intersect (Kirkinis et al., 2021). Racial discrimination includes both racial superiority (racism) and the societal structures and individual actions tied to power and subjugation (Pieterse & Powell, 2016). Mehrotra and Wagner (2019) stated that racial discrimination is associated with physical traits like skin colour, facial features, and hair type, often occurring in geographically isolated, inbred communities. Black people continue to experience discrimination beyond the 1930s. Discrimination remains a pervasive issue. Various racial challenges have happened throughout the history of the United States (Alzyoud & Makhareh, 2023).

The prejudice experienced by African Americans is evident in Wright's novel *Native Son*, which shows black individuals facing prejudice from whites. All individuals are equal and endowed with rights by their Creator (Todd et al., 1972).

This study aimed to investigate racial discrimination against Black individuals in American society as presented in Wright's influential novel, *Native Son*, due to its enduring influence on discussion about race, social justice, and systemic oppression in America. The purpose of this study was not only to examine highly acclaimed literary works but also to engage with the lasting themes that remain relevant in the current social and political contexts. The study team aimed to contribute to the broader conversation on race, equality, and justice in the United States, emphasizing literature as a powerful tool for social critique (Weber, 2012).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature is inherently connected to history, and genetic structuralism, a theory introduced by Lucien Goldmann (1913-1970), emerged in the mid-20th century as a significant intellectual advancement in literary and cultural studies. Developed in the 1960s in France, this theory was shaped by Goldmann's fusion of Karl Marx's historical materialism and György Lukács's concept of class consciousness, emphasizing the interpretation of cultural works in their socio-historical contexts (Goldmann, 1981). Goldman's (1981, p. 24) book stated that literary works are a vital expression of the writer's creativity and distinctiveness within society.

Swingewood and Laurenson (1972, p. 68) described genetic structuralism as identifying specific structures in a text and connecting them to the writer's vision, historical context, social conditions, groups, and classes. In addition, Goldmann (1981) argued that literature is an organized creation, reflecting historical developments and continual historical evolution. A writer uses fictional characters to represent various societal groups and according to Damayanti et al. (2021), writers and their fictional and social realities are closely intertwined and cannot be separated.

Considering the description of Genetic Structuralism provided above, it is clear that while structuralism focuses solely on the literary text, genetic structuralism incorporates genetic elements like the writer's background and social influences. This theory emphasizes the relationship between a piece of literature and the society in which it was created. According to Endraswara (2003, p. 30), the genetic structuralism method can be outlined as follows:

- a. The examination begins with internal components such as characters, point of view, theme, plot, and setting.
- b. Next, the study is conducted on the writer's background.
- c. Finally, social factors that influence the literary works are analyzed.

Genetic structuralism comprises three components, namely, (1) the inherent aspects of the literary works, (2) the writer's life story, and (3) the societal context.

III. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive method was used in this study, as it provides a detailed account of all aspects of the study topic (Sugiyono, 2018). Primary data were the main focus of the study and were categorized as the main source. The primary source was Wright's book *Native Son*, and supporting data such as books, theses, journals, and online materials were used to corroborate the results from the primary data (Purwaningsih et al., 2019). The study team collected, analyzed and investigated relevant data from these various sources. The data were then collected by thoroughly reading and comprehending the literary works and taking notes on specific words and sentences. Subsequently, the notes were evaluated using genetic structuralism to uncover racial injustice and explore how discrimination and intolerance impact individuals' lives, such as Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son*.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A thorough analysis of Richard Wright's impactful novel *Native Son* shows a profound exploration of American society in the 1930s, exposing vivid depictions of racial injustice. Significant results have emerged by delving into the book's narrative elements, character interactions, and societal portrayals. These results showed the widespread forms of racial discrimination experienced by Black people, clearly showing the deeply rooted obstacles, prejudices, and inequities of the time. Wright's story served as both a literary exploration and a reflective surface, showing the harsh truths of racial injustice and its profound effects on the African American community during this tumultuous period in American history.

A. Forms of Racial Injustice Experienced by Black People in American

Several forms of racial injustice are found in the novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright.

(a). Racial Discrimination and Dehumanization

Racial discrimination and dehumanization have been long-lasting types of injustice that have afflicted societies for centuries, primarily impacting marginalized groups due to their race or ethnicity. When examining the stories of racial prejudice and dehumanization, it is clear how deeply rooted these problems are in influencing social standards and the daily realities of marginalized groups, as shown in the following:

“Kill 'im!”

“Lynch 'im!”

“That black sonofabitch!” (Wright, 2009, p. 315)

In Wright's novel *Native Son*, the vividly shown conversation illuminates the themes of racial discrimination and

dehumanization. The statements "Kill 'im!", "Lynch 'im!", and "That black sonofabitch!" emphasized the pervasive racial hatred and demeaning beliefs in 1930s America, specifically towards Black people such as Bigger Thomas, the main character. The white characters in the novel held a violent and biased mentality, viewing Bigger only in terms of race. The demand for Bigger's lynching emphasized the widespread danger of extrajudicial violence that Black people experienced during that period. This type of language not only stripped Bigger of humanity by using derogatory terms but also rationalized and facilitated violence against Bigger because of their skin colour.

Another implication may be seen below:

"Kill that black ape!" Two men stretched his arms out as though about to crucify him; they placed a foot on each of his wrists, making them sink deep down in the snow. His eyes closed slowly, and he was swallowed in darkness. (Wright, 2009, p. 315)

The visual of Bigger lying in the snow, encircled by an unfriendly crowd of white faces, represented a lack of strength and defenselessness against systemic racism. The man's extended arms created a crucifixion-esque scene, emphasizing the intentional causing of pain and control over Bigger. Pressing their feet onto Bigger's wrists not only physically restrained but also symbolically strengthened the dominance and authority held by the white community over Black individuals. Referring to Bigger as a "black ape" and commanding to "kill" altogether removed any trace of humanity. It turned Bigger into nothing more than a target of ridicule and aggression, mirroring the widespread racial biases and opinions present in society during that era. The darkness enveloping Bigger's awareness represented the physical and emotional separation caused by racial discrimination.

(b). *Negative Stereotype*

In *Native Son*, the widespread negative stereotypes reflected racial injustices present in American society in the 1930s. Wright used offensive language like "nigger" and dehumanizing phrases such as "black ape" to show the demeaning attitudes and prejudiced beliefs of the dominant white culture towards African Americans, as is potentially confirmed below:

"... I'm a little sorry you bothered him. He's here to try to get a new slant on things."

"Well, you see 'em one way, and I see 'em another. To me, a nigger's a nigger."

"But he's sort of a problem boy". (Wright, 2009, p. 198)

The dialogue provided showed the common negative portrayals found in the book. The character's utterance, "To me, a nigger's a nigger," emphasized their strong racial bias. This offensive term stereotypes African Americans in a dehumanizing way, neglecting their uniqueness, intricacy, and humanity. The phrase's dismissive attitude emphasized the widespread belief in society that Black people are inherently inferior and should be subject to discrimination. The comment also emphasized how racial bias was becoming more accepted, with derogatory language being used casually and without hesitation.

Additionally, labeling Bigger Thomas as a "problem boy" continued to reinforce harmful stereotypes that implied Bigger Thomas was fundamentally defective or troubled due to race without taking into account the broader societal inequalities and external influences that impacted Bigger Thomas' life. In general, this dialogue showed how harmful stereotypes played a role in degrading and isolating African Americans in 1930s America, as shown in the novel.

(c). *Segregation and Social Isolation*

Examining segregation and social isolation showed how these behaviours had fueled racial discrimination, strengthening divides and widening inequalities in societies. The information provided below shows that:

The white neighbour decided to limit the amount of education his black neighbour could receive; decided to keep him off the police force and out of the local national guards; to segregate him residentially; to Jim Crow him in public places; to restrict his participation in the professions and jobs; and to build up a vast, dense ideology of racial superiority that would justify any act of violence taken against him to defend white dominance; and further, to condition him to hope for little and to receive that little without rebelling. (Wright, 2009, p. 495)

The story emphasized different types of segregation and social exclusion enforced on Black individuals by their white neighbours and society as a whole. Initially, there was a conscious attempt to restrict the educational options for the Black community, hence maintaining economic and social disparities. This limitation goes beyond just education and also included being excluded from positions of power like the police force and local, and national guards, which prevented opportunities for social influence and authority.

Residential segregation was maintained, guaranteeing physical isolation and strengthening economic inequalities. Jim Crow laws were enforced in public areas to promote segregation, limiting access and supporting racial separation. Systematic discrimination in professional opportunities and jobs also hindered the ability to move up and progress economically. Additionally, there was a widespread belief in the superiority of one race, which was used to rationalize using violence against Black people to uphold white power. This thorough system indoctrinated Black people to anticipate minimal outcomes and tolerate their marginalization without pushback, maintaining a pattern of social and economic oppression through organized separation and exclusion.

B. Social Implications of Racial Injustice Faced by Black People in The United States in the 1930s Are Shown in Wright's Native Son

Bigger's character represented the profound psychological effects of systemic racism and societal oppression on African Americans in 1930s Chicago. In the story, Wright carefully showed how white supremacy forced Black individuals into roles of economic subservience and social inferiority by constantly instilling fear, peril, and insecurity. Bigger's evolution from fear and frustration to violence and desperation was a blunt reflection of the unyielding struggles experienced by African Americans in such oppressive circumstances.

Bigger heard Mr. Dalton mumbles 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 immoral. Moreover, what did she mean by talking to him this way in front of Mr. Dalton, who, surely, didn't like unions? (Wright, 2009, p. 76)

In the passage above, Bigger's nervousness was evident as Bigger maneuvered through a tense situation with Mr. Dalton and Mr. Dalton's daughter. Wright used Bigger's internal thoughts to emphasize fragility and the danger faced as a Black individual trying to find a job from a wealthy white person. The concern about not getting the job because of the assertiveness of Mr. Dalton's daughter emphasized how race, class, and power dynamics impacted opportunities in society. Wright showed Bigger's internal conflict, showing the psychological impact of living in a society where racial bias controlled potential and hindered dreams.

One particular moment was shown in the following passage, where Bigger underwent a profound and troubling epiphany following a tragic incident,

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 is dead. (Wright, 2009, p. 116)

In the critical moment after Mary Dalton's death, he captured Bigger's existential struggle and the permanent implications of the actions. Wright beautifully shows Bigger's inner pain and disbelief when confronted with the reality of what has happened. The phrase "there was something he was trying to tell himself, desperately, but could not" showed Bigger's inner struggle to understand and accept the gravity of the actions. An attempt to excuse or justify what had occurred might arise, but the gravity of the situation prevented clarity or peace of mind.

The statement "She is dead..." signified a turning point in the story, as Bigger confronted the terrible consequences of the actions and the resulting social ramifications. This scene exemplified Wright's investigation into the psychological and moral quandaries confronting African Americans as a result of institutional racism and social oppression.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Richard Wright's *Native Son* deeply examined the various racial injustices Black people faced in 1930s America. By carefully examining the story's narrative, character relationships, and depictions of society, Wright vividly showed the widespread presence of (1) racial discrimination and dehumanization through hurtful words and aggressive behaviour, (2) reinforcement of negative stereotypes, and (3) segregation and social isolation. These unfair actions robbed African Americans of their respect, hindered their access to equal chances, and continued to uphold systemic oppression. Additionally, the social consequences of racial injustice experienced by African Americans in 1930s America were emphasized. Wright used protagonist Bigger Thomas to show how systemic racism and societal oppression caused Black individuals to live in a perpetual state of fear and insecurity.

Wright's *Native Son* served as a strong criticism of a society in which racial discrimination and financial inequality determined the fates of people such as Bigger Thomas. Wright used Bigger's experiences to challenge readers to examine the long-standing history of racial injustice and its profound social consequences, arguing for societal transformation and fairness for marginalized groups.

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