

Racial Discrimination and Identity Crisis in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to array out the effects of racism on black people by the white dominated society in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*. The protagonist of these two novels Bigger Thomas and the unnamed narrator suffer a lot at the hands of the whites. They are unable to prove their identity and the white people don't provide them the opportunity to do so. Both Richard Wright and Paul Beatty have shown this kind of racial discrimination in their novels in raw form which is an eye opener for the reader. Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* hates himself for being born in such a country where he is has to live in such a miserable condition. On the other hand the narrator of *The Sellout* rebels against the whites for killing his father for being black and on hearing that his city Dickens has been removed from the map of America as it was black populated area.

Key Words: Racism, black people, white people, discrimination, opportunity, identity.

Literature is the reflection of the society and every society has its own kind of kind of literature dealing with the situation prevailing there. And the pre dominant theme in the African American literature is racism as this menace has done a lot of damage to the black people. They are made to feel that America is the country of the white people and not the black people. To prove their self and to get their identity known they use their muscular power inviting more problems for the whole black community. The black people are separated in every sector of life whether it is education, health, jobs, business, eating points, means of transportation and even religion.

Richard Wright was one of the most important black writers who protested against this discrimination towards the black people through his works. He has written many novels, essays, poems and the central subject of almost all his works is dealing racial discrimination and the plight of black people living in America. The other author taken up for study here in this paper is Paul Beatty. He became the first black writer to receive the Man Booker Prize for his novel *The Sellout* in 2016. Like Wright his works also deal with the issues of bias and inequities, racial discrimination and segregation. He has also written some collection of poetry and a few novels.

Racism is discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity. In simple words racism means that a particular race is superior to the other, and racial discrimination means to victimise a particular group of people on the basis of the colour of their skin, caste, nationality, creed etc. Racism is not new to the world and it has been practised in most of the Western countries since last few decades. Today, the use of the term "racism" does not easily fall under a single definition. Racial discrimination refers to the separation of people through a process of social division into categories not necessarily related to races for purposes of differential treatment. Racial segregation policies may formalize it, but it is also often exerted without being legalized. Racism existed during the 19th century as 'scientific racism' which attempted to provide a racial classification of humanity. In 1775 Johann Blumenbach divided the world's population into 5 groups: the Caucasian race, the Mongoloid race, the Malay race, the Negroid race and the American race.

An early view of scientific racism was the polygenist view, which held that the different races had been separately created. In the view of Christoph Meiners, mankind is divided into two types which he labelled as "beautiful white race" and "ugly black race." In his book *The Outline of History of Mankind* he claimed the main characteristic of race to be either beauty or ugliness. He held the opinion that the white race is beautiful and the ugly race as immoral, inferior and animal-like. Racist ideology can

become manifest in many aspects of social life. Racism can be present in social actions, practices, or political systems that support the expression of prejudice or aversion in discriminatory practices. Sociologists, in general, recognize “race” as a social construct. This means that, though the concepts of race and racism are based in observable biological characteristics, any conclusions drawn about race on the basis of those observations are heavily influenced by cultural ideologies. Racism, as an ideology, exists in a society at both the individual and the institutional level. The works of these two American writers, Richard Wright and Paul Beatty describe this menace in the society in a very elaborate manner.

Native Son is Wright’s first novel which won him the Spingarn Award of National Association for the advancement of Coloured People. It was published in the year 1940. The novel tells the story of 20-year-old Bigger Thomas, an African-American youth living in utter poverty in a poor area on Chicago’s South Side in the 1930s. James Baldwin once wrote that no American Negro exists, who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull. Bigger lived with his mother and two siblings Buddy and Vera lived in a single rented room owned by the white people, in a dilapidated condition. The room in which the Thomas’ family was living was too small for a family of four members but there was no way out. They had to adjust themselves in that very room no matter how difficult it was just like all the black people who are supposed to make adjustment in their lives. Mrs. Thomas wanted that Bigger takes a job so that her family gets some financial assistance by his earnings and she had arranged one for him at the Dalton House. On the other hand Bigger always had a hatred for the white people as he thinks like most of the black people that the whites hate them and wanted to suppress them. Wright has given many elements which show the racial discrimination and persecution of blacks in his novel.

Bigger is frustrated at being a black with no reasonable identity but blackness. He curses himself for being black and living such a life of poverty and grief. This shows the psychologically devastating and detrimental effect of everyday racism. In the same manner, the character Pecola in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* sees herself as someone repulsive and meaningless. When Pecola hands money to the storekeeper Mr. Yacobowski, a white-man, he hesitates to touch her hand and when he reaches over to receive money from her hand, “His nails graze her damp palm” (37). Bigger is unable to find a suitable identity as Allen Wheelis a famous American psychoanalyst in his book *Quest for Identity* says:

Identity is a coherent sense of self. It depends upon the awareness that one’s endeavours and one’s life make sense, that they are meaningful in the context in which life is lived. It depends also upon stable values, and upon the conviction that one’s actions and values are harmoniously related. It is a sense of wholeness, of integration, of knowing what is right and what is wrong and of being able to choose. (19)

Native Son is a kind of search of Bigger for his own identity and purpose of black lives in the world. Right from the beginning till the end he remains in a dilemma whether he is fit for the society or not and where does he belong to. Being black is not a crime or to be born in a black community is not in the hands of a person. But racial discrimination and racial abuse did so much damage to the minds of the black people that even they began to think of themselves as some other creation animal like, as Gus replied to Bigger, “Man, if them folks saw you they’d run, ‘They’d think a gorilla broke loose from the zoo and put on a tuxedo” (61). Wright through the character of Bigger has shown such a picture of black people who were living in the American society at the mercy of the white people. He says:

. . .they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something to be hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man’s Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon (98).

The time when Wright had written his novel *Native Son* was the time that contains a conflict between the black and the white people, a time which contains different racial shapes in the world. Bigger always had a desire and dream that black people like him must have their own status, their own govt., their own authority their own superiority but at the same time he knew that it is equivalent to impossible because black men he thought are coward and don’t have guts to condemn the brutality and suppression. This is what Frantz Fanon says in his book *Black Skin White Mask* the double process as, “If there is an inferiority complex it is the outcome of a double process: primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority” (4).

In the concluding scene Max asked Bigger whether he raped Mary. Bigger replied no, and told him that he never thought or did so. Max asked him then why did he kill her. He replied that he hated her. Max asked him that she was trying to be kind with him, still he killed her. He replied that she just asked so many questions about the niggers, “Well, I acted toward her only as I know how, she was rich, she and her kind own the earth. She and her kind say black folks are dogs. They don’t let you do nothing but what they want...” (380).

The other novel for the discussion in this research paper is *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty. It is described as a biting satire about a young man’s isolated upbringing and the race trial that sends him to the Supreme Court, it challenges the sacred tenets of the United States Constitution, urban life, the civil rights movement, the father-son relationship, and the holy grail of racial equality. Paul Beatty’s novel *The Sellout* like Wright’s *Native Son* presents a concrete and virtual image of the social condition of blacks of its period in which readers could know about that time and the state of blacks, and they amplified their imagination.

The unnamed narrator, who is also the protagonist of the novel, is dismayed by the news that Dickens the city where he lives has been removed from the map of California. This surprised the narrator as well as the whole community. He took the challenge of bringing it back and decided to announce it in the Dum Dum Donuts meeting headed newly by Foy Cheshire, who like the narrator’s father saw racism everywhere. But here he annoyed Foy by protesting his belief that the word “nigger” be removed from classic works of literature, saying that sheltering kids from cruelty is not the right way to go. For this, Foy labelled the narrator Sellout. Meanwhile the narrator accompanied by Hominy set about their aim of bringing Dickens back by spray painting the boundaries of the place and putting up segregation signs all over the place.

His father is killed by the police in fight on seditious charges. When he was near the dead body of his father, a policeman came to him and repeated the final words uttered by his father before dying, “I’m warning you, you anal-retentive, authoritarian archetypes, you don’t know who my son is!” (43). He was supposed to cry at his father’s death but he began to think that his father’s death was an elaborate scheme to educate him the plight of the black race and to inspire him to make something of himself. The policeman told him to mourn the death and also for himself being a black man. He further told him that they were there to protect the rich white men and women and movie stars of all races. After his father’s death, he came to inherit the land of his father and also the house.

... Curse the system because your father has died at the hands of the police. Bemoan being lower-middle-class and colored in a police state that protects only rich white people and movie stars of all races, though I can’t think of any Asian-American ones. But I didn’t cry. I thought his death was a trick. Another one of his elaborate schemes to teach me... “See nigger, if this could happen to the world’s smartest black man, just imagine what could happen to your dumb ass. Just because racism is dead don’t mean they still don’t shoot niggers on sight. (43)

For the white people, the city of Dickens was a place of filthy black inhabitants. One day when the narrator came back home, Hominy showed him an entry by some unknown scholar in the online encyclopaedia, “Dickens is an unincorporated city in southwest Los Angeles County. Used to be black, now there’s hella Mexicans. Once known as the murder capital of the world, shit ain’t as bad as it used to be, but don’t trip” (223). The narrator, however, thinks that he has lost everything now, first his father then Dickens, meaning that he has lost his identity as well. By losing Dickens, he has not only lost a place but he has lost his identity. Dickens was a place of identity, it was the place that related him to the past and his future was in it. As he says:

Like the entire town of Dickens, I was my father’s child, a product of my environment, and nothing more. Dickens was me. And I was my father. Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was, and no clue how to become myself. (40)

Hominy Jenkins is another character, who is shocked and sad at the news of removal of Dickens. He is an actor, having a lot of fans and he loves his profession. Their love for him made him feel happy and he was enjoying his life. As the city of Dickens is removed he is unable to receive any letter of appreciation from his fans because of loss of address. This shattered him completely and he tried to commit suicide. Hominy becomes the narrator’s slave and both have the same goal of bringing back Dickens on the map of California. All the incidents in the novel are the result of racism. The narrator’s father was killed because he dared to object the white authority that too being a black and the city of Dickens was removed because it was an area occupied by the suppressed black people.

The constitution of America gives equal rights to its citizens but in reality it is the white people who are enjoying the rights and the black people are always treated as second class citizens. The black have to face racial abuse and racial discrimination in every sector of life throughout their lives. The narrator's struggle for the search of his identity started with him alone but it became more powerful when more people joined their hands in this mission of bringing back Dickens, "Sometimes, after retiring for the day, I'd return the next morning, only to find that someone else had taken up where I'd left off" (107).

The narrator then tried to reconnect with Maroessa, his college time love who was then married and driving a city bus. Another old man names named Homi Jenkins who like the narrator, was heartbroken in the loss of the City of Dickens, offered to become the slave of the narrator, which the narrator after some refusals finally agreed. Meanwhile the narrator accompanied Hominy set about bringing Dickens back by spray painting the boundaries of the place and putting up segregation signs all over the place.

The narrator doesn't know much about the future whether he will go to jail or wait for the SC judgement. But he continued his affair with Marpessa. Attending a black comedy, the narrator felt offended when a black man chooses a lone couple in the audience, telling them that was their thing. He felt bad about remaining silent not because he wanted to defend the white couple or protest the comic, but to ask the comic what he meant by their thing. Coming back home, he felt happy that Dickens had been listed again in the map. But he was dismayed to hear that the election of Barack Obama had made Foy believe that America had paid all its debts.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that the present study is an endeavour to throw light on brutal activities done in the name of colour difference. The writers Richard Wright and Paul Beatty are essentially the explorers of human sufferings, agonies and violence. Their writings are formally grounded in the society. The present paper is a detailed study of the origin of racism and reasons for its prevalence till now. There is a dehumanising effect of colonization upon the individual and the nation. The broader social, cultural, and political implications inherent to establishing a social movement for the decolonization of a person and of people are discussed critically. This research paper is a quest for justice for the people who suffer just because of their origins and difference in colour of their skin and fall prey to prejudices of colonizers. This study thus, is an optimistic effort to bring out how these black American writers have tried to criticize racism practiced by committing illegal activities, and provide the victims a platform where they can also enjoy their life like other human beings irrespective of their colour.

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