

MARGINALIZED EXISTENCE AND PERCEIVED INJUSTICE IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

Dr. Sadia Siddiq

Assistant Professor, COMSATS University Islamabad

Email: sadia_siddiq@comsats.edu.pk

Savera Waseem

MPhil scholar, COMSATS University Islamabad.

Email: saverawaseem6@gmail.com

Dr. Saima Shaheen

Assistant Professor, COMSATS University Islamabad.

Email: saima.shaheen@comsats.edu.pk

Abstract

*Social Aggression or Violence in an Excluded Population represents a major social problem for many reasons: The surge of people engaging in attempted homicide jeopardizes personal safety (or individual liberties) as well as endangers the stability of the nation by promoting social unrest and chaos. Despite substantial work in criminology related to the causes and effects of Violence; however, there has not been a lot of attention on how these issues are represented within our written words. To fill that void, using Alan McKee's Textual Analysis as a guide by applying Relative Deprivation Theory to investigate the correlation between the perception of injustice and acts of violence as portrayed through the character of Richard Wright (1940) in his novel, *Native Son*. Relative Deprivation create significant conditions that produce destructive behaviour amongst characters in Wright's novel. The psychological state of Bigger Thomas embodies the extreme of the frustrations, resentments, and subsequently, the anger that has resulted from the social conditions. Social status inconsistency, as a central element of Relative Deprivation, generates intense emotional turmoil that ultimately drives Bigger Thomas toward violent behavior.*

Introduction

From the earliest days of literature, writing has represented the struggles of marginalized peoples and revealed the struggles they face due to systemic inequality and oppression. Literature shows us the way that marginalized individuals face discrimination, exclusion from society, and unequal treatment through its characters, conflicts, and narratives. The works of literature highlight the external representation of social injustice; however, literature also shows the way that oppressive systems impact the individual experience of injustice. In addition to reflecting external injustices, Marginalized Characters are aware of their disadvantage compared to the power, privilege, and/or social status of others. Through this awareness of inequality, marginalized authors may create their characters with strong feelings of anger, frustration, humiliation, and at times, a desire to fight back against systemic oppression.

Through literature, readers can also understand the impact of systemic oppression on an individual's sexual identity, selfhood, and personal choice. This study utilizes Alan McKee's model for textual analysis in order to explore the impact of sexuality, power and meaning in cultural texts. McKee's model is centered on the idea that literature creates meaning as opposed to merely mirroring it. Therefore, through textual analysis, literature provides a forum for the representation and exploration of sexual identity, marginalized existence and social inequality.

Statement of the problem

The increasing violence being committed by people in oppressed areas is of extreme concern both to individuals and society as a whole. Many individuals who continue to face social, economic, and cultural barriers feel a sense of frustration because of unequal access to resources and opportunities. Political discussions about this violence and the ramifications associated with crime are prevalent in our society, but academic literature has not provided enough coverage regarding the depiction of these acts and their true causes within the context of literary fiction.

Research objectives

1. To analyze the impact of status inconsistency on the behaviour of marginalized characters in the selected text.

Research questions

1. What is the role of Status Inconsistency on the behaviour of the marginalized characters in the given text?

Literature review

The desire for social status is common among humanity. People want to acquire wealth, influence, recognition, or position within society. It shows our idea that success (in a social context) comes from hard work instead of an inheritance. The following is an idea expressed by Mario Puzo in his novel, *The Godfather* (1969): "Great men are not born great. They grow to be great" (p. 180). The drive for social elevation leads to innovation, leadership, and personal growth. However, in many instances, the drive for social advancement may create a competitive atmosphere that produces few ethical values. When society equates success with financial wealth and social recognition, some individuals will go so far as to ignore moral values to achieve their ambitions. When pursuing a status, there may be many ways to reach the goal; however, Puzo (1969) states: "Behind every great fortune lies a crime." This statement denotes the negative impact of thirsting for improvement. There have been multiples of examples which showcase this dynamic within underprivileged communities due to many structural impediments to legitimate social mobility. As stated, marginalization of people is defined as social, economic and political exclusion based on race (ethnicity) and/or class. Therefore, the marginalization of individuals produces a limiting framework of access to education, employment, and participation in civic affairs (Curb Institute, 2022) within the United States. The slavery of African Americans has created an extensive history of trauma and disadvantages. African Americans are continually exposed to discrimination and blocked opportunities, producing continuous psychological and systemic disadvantages.

Methodology

The research investigates how individual and cultural marginalization affects people's perceptions of themselves, their realities, and their actions. The methodology includes the qualitative use of text analysis as developed by Alan McKee to interrogate *Native Son* by Richard Wright. The work dissects the "meaning" associated with both social exclusion, as well as the "psychological effects of acting in a way that is solely based on your marginalization. This approach allows one a close reading of the storyline, settings, characters, and narrative complexities to more fully appreciate the combination of both external and internal influences on the actions of marginalized people, including the reasons behind their disruptive behaviours.

Relative Deprivation Theory will be used to help explain the individuals' motivations for their actions. In addition, Relative Deprivation Theory will provide insight into how perceived inequality and opportunities denied, create the emotions of "frustration, resentment, and

aggression" (the behaviours of individuals), and the intersection of these emotions and factors ultimately serve as the basis for an individual's reaction, or response, to a system of structural oppression. Therefore this research will demonstrate how literature is an indication of, and is a result of the intersection of structural oppression and individual response. Therefore Native Son will be examined through text analysis and with an understanding of Relative Deprivation Theory to demonstrate the socially disadvantaged influence on individual thought and behaviour, including what occurs within communities of socially disadvantaged individuals.

Analysis

When Bigger speaks to Mr. Dalton, he repeatedly uses "suh," reflecting not just politeness but fear and awareness of social hierarchy. Bigger knows that white people have power over his life, so he carefully moderates his speech to appear obedient and non-threatening. His confusion when asked about rent and living conditions highlights how little control he has over his life and how society rarely treats him as an individual of importance. This interaction also reveals status inconsistency: despite being a young man seeking employment and a better life, his reality is one of extreme poverty, with his family paying eight dollars a week for one room. Wright uses this irony to critique racial prejudice, showing how white landlords maintain Black families in poverty while feigning concern, leaving Bigger aware of systemic injustice but powerless to change it.

The dialogue between two Black men discussing Bigger's crime further explores status inconsistency and social oppression. One man, prioritizing survival, expresses fear and the desire to protect his family, while the other expresses anger and resistance, insisting, "We's all dogs in they sight! Yuh gotta stand up 'n' fight these folks." Both men are ordinary citizens with families and responsibilities, yet society reduces them to potential criminals solely based on their race. This exchange reveals the deep psychological impact of systemic inequality: the Black men understand their true social identities, but white society refuses to recognize them. Their contrasting responses survival versus rebellion reflect the complex ways individuals navigate oppression, yet both are shaped by deprivation and status inconsistency.

Bigger's own words to Max reveal the inner turmoil that drives his violent actions. He admits that his hatred of Mary was not personal but a reaction to what she represented: the power, freedom, and opportunities denied to him as a Black man. Through repetition, hesitation, and self-confusion, Bigger's speech demonstrates the psychological damage inflicted by systemic racism. His ambitions becoming an aviator, joining the army, entering business—were repeatedly thwarted by the color line, leaving him bitter, frustrated, and deprived. Wright shows that Bigger's violence is not born of inherent cruelty but of years of social deprivation and exclusion. The systemic denial of respect, dignity, and opportunity distorts his sense of self and morality, turning anger and helplessness into aggression.

Bigger's conversation with Max underscores that his violent behavior was a product of lifelong deprivation rather than personal malice. The opportunities available to white people were denied to him, leaving him trapped in a world that limited Black men to menial work and powerless positions. His comparison of his life with the freedoms and wealth of white society highlights the inequity that fueled his frustration. Bigger's crime emerges as both a personal and social response: a desperate attempt to assert control and exist meaningfully in a society that consistently denies him recognition and opportunity. Wright portrays violence as an inevitable consequence of systemic oppression, showing how deprivation, status inconsistency, and racial injustice converge to shape Bigger's experiences, choices, and identity.

Conclusion

Richard Wright's portrayal of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* demonstrates how systemic oppression, racial prejudice, and social deprivation shape an individual's behavior, thoughts, and identity. Through dialogue, indirect characterization, and interactions with other characters, Wright exposes the effects of status inconsistency, perceived inequity, and lifelong deprivation on Bigger's psyche. His violent actions are not born out of innate cruelty but are the result of a society that denies him dignity, opportunity, and freedom. Ultimately, the novel emphasizes that social injustice and inequality do not only marginalize individuals but can also distort their sense of self, morality, and humanity, revealing a powerful critique of the systemic forces that create oppression and desperation.

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