

ELEMENTS OF OPPRESSION: A STUDY OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON AND TONI MORRISON'S TAR BABY

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Abstract

The condition of the blacks in America can be described as they suffer from all kinds of racial oppression. The whites still have many prejudices against the blacks and the white supremacy is the main factor from which the blacks have to suffer. In all walks of life, blacks are given lesser opportunities. Even though slavery has been physically abolished, mentally it continues to exist. The historical factors, which have contributed to the suppression of blacks, continue to exist even today. The blacks suffer disadvantages at various levels-racial, social and sexual. The anger in the blacks because of the suppression, leads them to indulge in violent activities and they show their anger towards their females and the other blacks who are inferior to them for the black females and the lower class blacks seem to receive a rough treatment in the hands of the whites as well as their upper class black counter parts. A brief comparison of the elements of oppression can be categorized mainly under two kinds from which the blacks in America have suffered as portrayed in Richard Wright's Native Son and Toni Morrison's Tar Baby. American Literature right from Mark Twain and William Faulkner has depicted the racial conflict clearly. These white writers have written about the racial conflict, but the blacks are not happy about the depiction of the blacks by the white writers. So the black writers came out with competitive works with racial prejudice as one of their major themes. Richard Wright and Toni Morrison are notable among those black writers who have given creative expression to the oppression of the blacks through their remarkable works. The novels that speak with a strident voice about the condition of the blacks ultimately came only from the black writers themselves. Richard Wright and James Baldwin are pioneers and their novels depict the sufferings of the blacks fully and highly sympathetically.

Keywords: *Richard Wright, social justice, discriminations, whites, blacks, sexual prejudices, self-identity*

Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* probe into the psychology of a black who is driven to violence and deals with the intricacies of social justice and more ideals. Though he is a black, he does not justify whatever any of his characters do. He transcends racial discriminations. Richard Wright and Toni Morrison consider both the blacks and whites as human beings. They are not blind to the goodness of some of the whites and the evil in some of the blacks. They do not try to cover the evils in the white dominated society and the goodness in some of the blacks. Wright finds fault with the whites for not treating the black with dignity and honour. Most of the whites never provide

any opportunity for the blacks to come up in life. So the blacks are destined in poverty because of the indifference and interference of the whites.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all the whites are alike. Though some of the whites go to the extent of killing and some of them treat the black in a sub-human level. Very few whites tolerate the blacks. Mrs. Dalton plans to send Bigger to the night school, but Bigger acts irrationally and violently and misses the chance. Greene makes use of the Daltons and gets a better position in life. Wright in his novels advocates unity, love and understanding among races which can prevent violence and frustration. He finds fault with the entire system for segregating blacks and the whites. The basis for violence is misunderstanding which is the outcome of segregation. As both the races never come into close contact with each other there is no way of understanding. Bigger does not know what love is. He is not loved by anyone and he loves no one also. Because of the lack of love and understanding in his life, Bigger fails to recognize and reciprocate the love shown to him by the Daltons, Jan and Mary. He does not trust anyone in the novel. Because of undue restrictions, Bigger never feels free. He feels free only after killing Mary and comes to the conclusion that all the whites are bad.

Toni Morrison in *Tar Baby* probes into the psychology of a black female who is driven to violence which is internal and not physical. Jadine, the female protagonist of the novel, does not conform either to the black tradition nor to the white tradition, whereas all the other black characters are all conservative blacks who meekly accept the suppression by the whites. Morrison also points out clearly the class division between the blacks themselves. The Middle class blacks like the children who work in the white people's house as cooks, always dominate the Yardman and Therese who work in the garden, one step lower in the social rank. Ondine also accuses them of being lower to them. Morrison clearly shows that there is a deeper conflict among the blacks.

Toni Morrison presents the black females as deprived of independent life. They suffer both from racial and sexual prejudices. Even though Son lives with Jadine so much he tries to dominate her because of the male chauvinism. Jadine hates it and walks out of his life. The exposure of Son and Bigger to the white world and the friendliness of Valerian of *Tar Baby* and Daltons and Jan of *Native Son* fill them with suspicion and rage. When Bigger and Son feel hungry, even though they get food in white houses, they are not nourished and satisfied. Even when the whites try to treat them kindly they are not able to overcome their hatred towards the Whites, but the whites fail to understand the feelings and longings of the blacks.

Mr. Street in *Tar Baby* invites his cooks Sydney and Ondine to have dinner along with them on Christmas eve but Ondine does not like the idea of eating along with the whites. During the dinner Ondine accuses Mrs. Street of ill treating her son Michael Street and slaps

her. Mr. Street gets very wild and is not able to accept the blacks as their equals. His prejudice against the blacks gets entrenched from then onwards. Though Mr. Dalton is a philanthropist, he wants to give chances for the Negroes. " Bigger thinks that all the whites are bad. But Mr. Dalton never understands what the blacks really need. Mr. Dalton makes the blacks to live in one corner of the city and he thinks that negroes are happy when they are together. This incident shows how whites fail to understand the needs of blacks. Mr. Dalton thinks that he is helping the blacks by educating his black servants and by sending ping-pong tables for the blacks. This in no way will help the blacks in overcoming their hatred towards the whites.

In *Tar Baby* Mr. Street treats Yardman and Therese, his gardeners, as slaves, he doesn't even know Yardman's name. He dismisses them for stealing some insignificant apples. He expects them to work for him always like slaves. All the work and service they have done in the past are forgotten by Mr. Street in one temperamental moment. His attitude towards the blacks in general is quite conventional and prejudicial. The whites treat blacks as slaves and make them suffer. Bessie in *Native Son* says to Bigger. "All I do is work, work like a dog from morning till night I ain't got no happiness. I aint never had none I'm black and I work and don't bother anybody." (NS 169)

The blacks always long for recognition. Bigger is quite stunned when his photo appears in the newspaper even Jadine in *Tar Baby* feels proud when she is placed as the fashion girl in the place of white beauties. This shows their longing to be recognized as equal human beings. When Son first enters Mr. Street's house in *Tar Baby*, Jadine suspects that he has come to rape her. Son considers her to be a white even though she is a black and says to Jadine that the white always suspect them (black) for rape. When Bigger kills Mary is accused of both murder and rape. But Bigger never rapes her, when he tells the truth about it no one believes him. But when a white man rapes a black woman it never comes out.

Jadine and Bigger not only fight for liberation but also for their recognition as individuals. Jadine fights for sexual liberation along with social and economic salvation. The female characters encounter difficulties more because of their sex than due to the races. Both Jadine and Bigger seek for self-identity. Bigger who begins by refusing to confront the terrible reality of his glimpses the truth at the end: "I didn't want to kill but what I killed for, I am." This he says when he kills Mary. Even Jadine says when Son asks her to which culture she belongs, "I belong to me."

Bigger, a *Native Son* initially sees all black people through the eyes of the ruling white world. So he also dominates the inferior blacks like the whites. Bigger and Jadine cannot really stop to look closely at another human being. Jadine and Bigger ironically trust some white man better than the blacks because few whites treat them as human beings,

try to understand their feelings and recognize them as humans. Jadine at the end leaves the community and goes to Joseph a white man, because she does not like to be suppressed by anyone. At the end Bigger is able to understand and accept the love of Jan and Max which shows that he need not have been a criminal if the society had been promoting love, understanding and unity instead of hate, restrictions and discord.

Wright denounces slavery and oppression. He recommends equality and justice in society. Because of racial inequality, Bigger is not allowed to utilize his potentials in a better way. He takes up violence and acts accordingly. Bigger's crime is justifiable to the extent that he murders Mary, because he considers her as a symbol of oppression. He also justifies his crime, by saying that the white have killed plenty of blacks. He shows his anger towards Besie and the blacks who are inferior to him.

However Bigger is better in his death than he has been during his life-time because during his life time he hates the whites and at the end he understands that a few whites like Jan have a human heart and he says that he does not have anyone. He accepts responsibility for his crimes and he is punished for what he has done. Whereas, the society which is responsible for creating Bigger neither accepts its crime nor is punished. It hates Bigger till the end. Racial prejudice is present at the lowest degree even today from which many blacks suffer, many blacks try to overcome this oppression and many blacks have succeeded in it. Both whites and blacks are psychologically affected by these developments. It will take some more time to be cured off. Bigger's and Jadine's non-conformist attitude to their own class, with the conformity to the alien class stimulate us to reflect over the several factors involved in their struggle. It is not important whether they are triumphant or not in their endeavour but the urge to transcend is itself an indication of success.

Tar Baby explores oppression of female characters by the male characters. Women are not treated as individuals. They are seen as dull witted substandard simple beings. Valerian ignores Margaret's wish to leave the island and Therese is criticized by Gideon for her ignorance. Son humiliates Jadine on her receiving expensive gifts by questioning her femininity.

Even motherhood is presented negatively. Therese perceives that white women kill their babies, just because Valerians first wife succumbs too many abortions. Therese's and Margaret believe that being a bother sometimes suffocates them. Margaret abuses her child due to her miserable life as a wife. Jadine fails as a career woman though she takes up different jobs as a career woman in Paris, a daughter on Isle des Chevaliers and a mother representative to Son in New York. Bigger' mental dishonesty is the result of the continuous racial oppression he faces since childhood. He grows up in a cramped locale squirming under the forced life of poverty and little opportunity. The whites are the hostile force

which he is angry with and is afraid off. This leads to his accidental murder of Mary Dalton about which leaves no trace of guilt in him. Even the media projects the blacks as savages. The Daltons make their fortune by exploiting the blacks but presenting themselves as philanthropists dedicated to the welfare of the blacks. Even the court treats the blacks as unequal. Rigger's case gets decided before it reaches the court and the court fails to consider the circumstance under which Bigger kills Mary. He does not receive any opportunity to defend himself. The newspapers project him as a murderer and Buckley uses Bigger's case for his political career. Racism is portrayed by Wright both from the black and the white's perspective '.

Oppression is represented by the relationship of the black characters with nature and the white characters with civilization. Jadine shifts from civilization to the nature as she goes to rural Florida to visit Son's home town and rejects along with Son the materialistic life of the civilized. Finally she chooses the white culture by returning to Europe. The conflict between civilization and nature runs throughout *Tar Baby* Son, Therese, Gideon the people of Eloë, and the wild horsemen represent nature. They value their race and family connection and also proclaim the importance of places or origin. They strongly believe in their past and its influence of the past over the present and also in the reality of myth. They believe in their roots and in the bond of a character with their racial familial and geographical pasts. On the other hand Jadine and the other urban characters value education and the different forms of culture. Nature could be mastered. However Sydney balances to merge the values of both nature and civilization. In the *Native Son* the media presents contrastive pictures of the blacks and the whites. The blacks are portrayed as servants and savages while the whites are presented as civilized, and attractive. The media is the major force that leads to the execution of Bigger. Bigger himself is influenced by the media that he takes up the part of the submissive black man.

In the *Native Son* nature is presented in the form of snow but represents the whites. The snow that falls in the beginning of Book two helps in the capture of Bigger. The novelist presents the force of nature as weighing the blacks; The whites are viewed as frightening white mountain by Bigger. The title of the novel represents Jadine who is seen as a *Tar Baby* by Son, for she gets caught in the trap of Son, a seductive woman and a clever man who get bonded to one another. Oppression is represented by the colour black. The sky and the ocean where Son swims are described as black. Jadine gets trapped in a swamp that has a pit of black tar in the middle. While the characters who are one with nature blend with the colour black. Characters proceed in the wild hills of the island in the dark and are comfortable, the experiences of those characters that stand for civilization struggle with nature's blackness, and In the *Native Son* the colour white represents the whites. The control of Bigger's life by the whites is represented by the snow that fills the

mouth or Bigger when he tries to escape from his window after Mary's bones are traced in the furnace. The white snow prevents Bigger's escape from the police who capture him.

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