



THE WEAKNESS OF POWER IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*: LESSON LEARNED IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Komla Mawuenyega AVONO

Université de Lomé, Togo

calhno@gmail.com / kavono@univ-lome.tg

Abstract: Although American exceptionalism in many regards places the United States at the top of the hill, past, present, and future in forecast and perspective, the concept invites perpetual criticism and incessantly raises queries about how it is sometimes used against the hapless. In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, however, the white supremacist attitudes represented by the Dalton family are amazingly overthrown by Bigger Thomas, a young African American man and employee to them. As the white society builds, (re)enforces, and entertains the color line, they hold for weak all others on the other side. In an attempt to protect himself against American exceptionalism, this young man accidentally commits suicide and conceals it. This murder and subsequent events are used by Bigger Thomas to weaken the powerful mechanisms of white America. Through the lenses of a postcolonial reader, this paper shows the weak aspect of power vested in American exceptionalism. Results of this study recommend that an equity-oriented society is to be promoted instead of the most powerful looking down upon the weaker, because power can be weakened.

Keywords : exceptionalism, postcolonialism, power, supremacy, weakness.

LA FAIBLESSE DU POUVOIR DANS "NATIVE SON" DE RICHARD WRIGHT : LEÇON APPRISE DANS LE CONTEXTE DE L'EXCEPTIONNALISME AMÉRICAIN

Résumé : Bien que l'exceptionnalisme américain place à bien des égards les États-Unis au sommet de la colline, passé, présent et futur en termes de prévisions et de perspectives, le concept invite à une critique perpétuelle et soulève sans cesse des questions sur la façon dont il est parfois utilisé contre les malheureux. Dans *Native Son* de Richard Wright, cependant, les attitudes suprémacistes blanches représentées par la famille Dalton sont étonnamment renversées par Bigger Thomas, un jeune afro-américain et employé de la famille. À mesure que la société blanche construit, (renforce) et entretient la ligne de couleur, elle tient pour faibles tous les autres de l'autre côté. Pour tenter de se protéger de l'exceptionnalisme américain, ce jeune homme se suicide accidentellement et le cache. Ce meurtre et les événements ultérieurs sont utilisés par Bigger Thomas pour affaiblir les puissants mécanismes de l'Amérique blanche. À travers le prisme d'un lecteur postcolonial, cet article montre l'aspect faible du pouvoir conféré par l'exceptionnalisme américain. Les résultats de cette étude recommandent de promouvoir une société axée sur l'équité au lieu que les plus puissants méprisent les plus faibles, car le pouvoir peut être affaibli.

Mots-clés: exceptionnalisme, postcolonialisme, pouvoir, suprématie, faiblesse.

Introduction

Everywhere in the world, societies are shaped by social contracts which may differ from one society to another. Still, these contracts share the like theory of having two distinct groups in every society. The first group encompasses power holders who see to it that security, welfare, and the good functioning of diverse social strata are assured everywhere and at any time. The second group gathers those who live under the ruling authorities and who must abide by rules and regulations. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Lock, Thomas Aquinas, and other philosophers see in social contract the lead to stability within any human society. Understandably, this reality will prevent people from being a threat to the well-being and security of others; it protects every member of the society.

Surprisingly though, as societies evolve, the objective of social contracts has as well shifted. Authorities everywhere, if not checked, enjoy weakening and making them voiceless. For they believe they have things to teach, rules to dictate, and regulations that people have to observe. Some authorities also think they have no duties towards others. In this case, the duties of power holders come under oblivion and the rights of the second group are trampled down. This injustice results into mere oppression. In fact, oppressors abuse their power and use violence on the dominated. This dire situation of the oppressed people transpires through retaliation, brutality, and crime.

While Sheldon Brivic considers *Native Son* as a conflict of values, James A. Miller claims that Bigger epitomizes the quest for voice and audience. In concluding pages, Miller highlights that Bigger has shaken: "the 'authoritative discourse' of the white world to its foundations and triggered off an ideological debate which seeks to define his place in the public sphere" (Miller, 1986, p. 506). In fact, Richard Wright's *Native Son* bears witness to the reactions of the oppressed. Set in the American context, Wright uses Bigger Thomas, a black American boy, to debunk the inhuman oppression of the Black individuals by the White. Frustrated by racism and limited opportunities in Chicago, Bigger strikes out a futile attempt to transgress the boundaries of his position. He accidentally murders Mary Dalton, the only child to a wealthy real estate magnate. Yet, one needs to bear in mind that this act of murder gives his life a meaning.

This paper shows the weakness of power as revealed in Wright's *Native Son*. Again, it highlights the process through which an oppressed person expected to be submissive becomes violent instead, tempting to weaken to abrasive force. The exceptional supremacy of the United States of America has been demonstrated over the centuries in military, politics, economics, and others. Represented in *Native Son* by the Dalton family, the white supremacists believe they are the first group of the social contract that binds the world as the Daltons look down on the Blacks in Wright's novel.

To achieve the aforementioned goal, this paper reads through the postcolonial theory. The postcolonial theory is the appropriate lens in this study "because of its



insightful critical strategies, its wide applications to culture, and society, its global reach, its close textual analysis, and its search for answers to key questions about culture, representation, and identity it has been regarded as an intellectual tool for research and academic critique” (Burney, 2012, p. 41). Therefore, the paper starts first by investigating the white power which oftentimes translates in oppression. Then, it proceeds by analyzing the various reactions of the oppressed that challenge the American Exceptionalism.

1. White Power through Oppression

Over the history, individuals have gone through oppression and groups of people have been victims of its naughtiness. Whole nations have been flogged down under its weight while tribes and races have been carrying its indelible mark(s) for decades. Most often victims are the miserable and voiceless. This is the case of the Jews’ predicament in Ancient Egypt, in Babylon, and under the Nazi regime in Germany. Aborigines in Soweto, South Africa, under an ill-intentioned Apartheid constitute blatant examples. Blacks’ lot in America, especially when slavery was still regarded as a blessing, speaks volumes. Wright’s narrative epitomizes the sad story of some black people in America. In a beautiful conclusion on Wright’s masterpiece, Sheldon Brivic submits: “*Native Son* remains perhaps the definitive presentation in our language of a person dehumanized by his society, of a son denied life by the land which gave him birth” (Brivic, 1974, p. 245). This conclusion showcases the consequence of power. Due to the White America’s possession of power, the Blacks become victimized.

Oppression is undoubtedly the concern of everybody. A person could be either an oppressor or an oppressed, and this is true for most of people everywhere. And the origin of oppression can be traced back to the beginning of human societies. In a way, the pressures of a society shaped by white racism and capitalism force blacks into extreme positions and apocalyptic attitudes (p. 245). In the American society, lots of provisions stand as sources of oppression of the Blacks. Again, the following passage of Wright’s narrative needs to be seriously considered:

“Now, Mr. Dalton, it has been said that you donate millions of dollars to educate Negroes. Why is it that you exact an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week from the Thomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep?”

“Well, there’s a housing shortage.” “All over Chicago?”

“No. Just here on the South Side.”

“You own houses in other sections of the city?” “Yes.”

“Then why don’t you rent those houses to Negroes?” (p. 277)

Clearly, the system of high accommodation fees falls under the many ways used to oppress black people and cause their life to be more unbearable. Clearly, many black people were not allowed to easily rent houses. And the *raison d’être* sounds very illogical. The following discussion shows how much the situation is void of sense as the dialog goes on:

"Isn't it true you *refuse* to rent houses to Negroes if those houses are in other sections of the city?"

"Why, yes."

"Why?"

"Well, it's an old custom."

"Do you think that custom is right?"

"I didn't make the custom," Mr. Dalton said.

"Do you think that custom is right?" Max asked again. "Well, I think Negroes are happier when they're together." "Who told you *that*?"

"Why, nobody."

"Aren't they more profitable when they're together?" "I don't know what you mean."

"Mr. Dalton, doesn't this policy of your company tend to keep Negroes on the South Side, in one area?"

"Well, it works that way. But I didn't originate...."

"Mr. Dalton, you give millions to help Negroes. May I ask why you don't charge them less rent for fire-traps and check that against your charity budget?"

"Well, to charge them less rent would be unethical."

"*Unethical!*"

"Why, yes. I would be underselling my competitors." (p. 278, italics in original)

When brought to disclose why he chose Jim Crow black people, Mr. Dalton could not find any humane reason and merely presented himself as abiding by a "custom" he surely had never reflected on.

Supremacy-claiming whites champion their ways of life and they believe other people must copy them. For the whites still, any other way of life and culture different from theirs are inhuman and it does not have any value. This view pushed most white people to hold blacks as slaves for many centuries. For Poski and Williams: "The established classes within most ancient and medieval societies assumed that certain groups of people were inherently inferior. In modern times this theory is embodied in the term of 'white supremacy' ... Slavery was needed to create wealth and grandeur (...). Slave ownership was a primary attribute of power and distinction with certain societies" (1989, p. 1441). Through many ways and means, this ideology has been carried. For instance, in *Native Son*, no humane tie was possible between blacks and whites. Sex, especially between a black man and a white girl was seen as the most dreadful and upsetting relationship ever. Concretely, white girls are of the "superior" race; so, there must not be any sex relation with the "inferior" people. This act was a crime and sternly punished by the law, in favor of the "superior" race. That idea filled the mind of Britten, a house sleuth, as he questioned Bigger Thomas when the news of Mary's disappearance was freshly disclosed.



“Did this fellow Jan say anything to you about white women?” Bigger tightened with alarm. “Suh?”

“Did he say he would let you meet some white women if you joined the Reds?”

He knew that sex relations between blacks and whites were repulsive to most white men. “Nawsuh,” he said, simulating abashment. (p. 167)

For the White, the Negro would be considering himself or herself as equal to the white race, which would be a coup to the white supremacy if they dared to build any relationship with the former. Also, in another domain, white-supremacy glorifiers merely silence down efforts from black people to keep their ideology ablaze. Evidently, it would be a shame if people originally thought to be inferior initiate progress. Therefore, any act of creativity should be suppressed in the black community. Polski and Williams share the same view when they aver:

America’s earliest black scientists and inventors are buried in the anonymity that concealed their contributions to pre-revolutionary America. While Bannaker’s eighteenth-century successes in times pieces and urban planning are known and applauded, numerous achievements of blacks in architecture, agriculture, and masonry cannot be identified. Thus, while it is increasingly recognized that blacks had a significant impact on the design and construction of plantation and public buildings in the South and that rice farming in the Carolinas might not have been possible without blacks, the individuals who spearheaded these accomplishments remain unknown. (p. 1077)

As such, key figures like Archie Alexander (1787-1858), engineer; Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), inventor, Mathematician and Almanac-maker; Henry Blair (c. 1804-1860), inventor of a corn-planting machine in 1834; and George Washington Carver (1864-1934), agricultural scientists whose works helped derive 300 products from peanut and 100 from sweet potato are overlooked by the supremacist whites. “They own the world, Bigger said” (p. 19) as a sense of acknowledgement of the ill-treatment which black people undergo.

As a statement of fact, I hold that the white Americans succeeded in imposing their supremacy in more ways than one. When Bigger is interviewed at the Daltons before he gets his job, he is overwhelmed by the sight of everything in the house. Consequently, he feels inferior, unable to guess that such belongs could exist in the same country where he lives. And more, he attempts to see good manners, those of the white so as not to be seen as a subhuman. Only white manners are deemed to the good and acceptable and should be learned and practiced. And Bigger did not fail to try to cut the mustard:

“Yessuh, there’s four of us,” he stammered, trying to show that he was not as stupid as he might appear. He felt a need to speak more, for he felt that maybe Mr. Dalton expected it. And he suddenly remembered the many times his mother had told him not to look at the floor when talking with white folks or asking for a job. He lifted his eyes and saw Mr. Dalton watching him closely. He dropped his eyes again. (p. 43)

Furthermore, the superior race uses other methods to abuse black people and attribute them dehumanizing identities. Even the press - *Tribune* - which is considered to be neutral, impartial, and nonpartisan, finds the room to outrage blacks in *Native Son* as Bigger was caught after murder:

Overwhelmed by the sight of his accusers, Bigger Thomas, Negro sex-slayer, fainted dramatically this morning at the inquest of Mary Dalton, millionaire Chicago heiress.

Emerging from a stupor for the first time since his capture last Monday night, the black killer sat cowed and fearful as hundreds sought to get a glimpse of him.

"He looks exactly like an ape!" exclaimed a terrified young white girl who watched the blackslayer being loaded onto a stretcher after he had fainted.

Though the Negro killer's body does not seem compactly built, he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength. He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast.

His arms are long, hanging in a dangling fashion to his knees. It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex passion, overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her (...).

His shoulders are huge, muscular, and he keeps them hunched, as if about to spring upon you at any moment. He looks at the world with a strange, sullen, fixed-from-under stare (...).

All in all, he seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization. (p. 238)

The column is really abusing and insulting for the hapless Bigger and for all the blacks as well. The white press would surely act likewise in case any other Negro would be trapped in the same mess. The comment given in the press is but the revelation of the white people's belief that Negroes are beasts and should not be allowed to mix with the whites, superior humans. Instead of trying to know the why of Bigger's deed, the press editor shamelessly gives out something he judges to be the way out: "Crimes such as the Bigger Thomas murders could be lessened by segregating all Negroes in parks, playgrounds, cafés, theatres, and street cars. Residential segregation is imperative. Such measures tend to keep them as much as possible out of direct contact with white women and lessen their attacks against them" (p. 239). Furthermore, the making of law stresses the white supremacy in the narrative. Whites make laws which do not take in account the needs and desires of blacks. The law-making mainly white oriented. Consequently, they impose unbearable things on blacks, creating a blockade to their freedom. As Bigger complains about this situation, Gus, one of his gang pals explains things, trying to cool him down: "Aw, for Chrissakes! There ain't nothing you can do about it. How come you want to worry yourself? You black and they make the laws" (p. 50). In other words, the white-influenced law fosters segregation and assigns servile jobs to blacks as a technique to make the blacks recall their inferiority. As a matter of fact,



Jobs had a name and a color. “Negro” jobs were dirty, hot and heavy. White jobs were clean, light and well-paid. But the line between these categories shifted with each business crisis. When whites were hungry, “Negro” jobs were reclassified. Crisis by crisis, recession by recession, job by job, blacks were displaced as waiters, porters, draymen, cooks, caterers and artisans. (Benner, 1987, p. 258)

Richard Wright gives a clear account of that reality in *Native Son*. Bigger Thomas and his family are extremely poor – they are impoverished. The situation compels the mother to urge her son to take a job at the Daltons because to her, it is a blessing. But this is how Wright has Bigger see it: “But what could he do? ...Yes, he could take the job at Dalton’s and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action” (42). That is the case of many oppressed people who do not take jobs out of volition: they do jobs they don’t like.

White-supremacy praising is not the only reason for whites to oppress people. And hatred has fueled oppression as well. According to Merriam Webster, hatred “implies an emotional aversion often coupled with enmity or malice.” It can be understood as an active enmity that tends to wish or do evil to someone. Actually, hate is not a mere fact of disliking or detesting somebody or something. It is an extreme one, an extreme feeling that hinders the hater from seeing any single good aspect in what is hated. To the hater, there is no way to forgive anything, and all the hater wishes is that evil things happen to the victim. While most humans hate for some reason, for some others, there is no special reason. And the latter easily takes the lead to genocide, ethnocentrism, and other social pathologies.

Negroes are object to hate in *Native Son*. They are hated for no special reason. They are hated just because of the color of the skin. They are hated because they have to acknowledge they have no right to think themselves as equal to white people. That commonplace hate in the society where Bigger Thomas was born had to produce an effect. The Negro must always hide himself because showing up oneself in such a hostile environment equals danger and harm. Mob hated carried on Bigger Thomas does not stem from the fact that he has killed; it is a longtime feeling in lethargy in the whites. And that accident is among occasions where hate should be expressed.

In the mind of oppressors, they should hate blacks and keep these miserable people away from behaving badly and from crossing the line. Max, the unfitting Bigger’s defendant in the white shaped society, accounted for that at the court where it was meant that to the Coroner that hate-filled mob were waiting out and should jump over Bigger and devore him whenever he was not killed:

“No! Every conceivable prejudice has been dragged into this case. The authorities of the city and state deliberately inflamed the public mind to the point where they could not keep the peace without martial law (...).

“The hunt for Bigger Thomas served as an excuse to terrorize the entire Negro population, to arrest hundreds of Communists (...).

Indeed, the tone of the press, the silence of the church, the attitude of the prosecution and the stimulated temper of the people are of such a nature as to indicate that *more* than revenge is being sought upon a man who has committed a crime.

"What is the cause of all this high feeling and excitement? Is it the crime of Bigger Thomas? Were Negroes liked yesterday and hated today because of what he has done? (...)

"Your Honor, you know that this is *not* the case! All of the factors in the present hysteria existed before Bigger Thomas was ever heard of. Negroes (...) were hated as much yesterday as they are today.

"Your Honor, that mob did not come here of its own accord! It was *incited*! Until a week ago those people lived their lives as quietly as always. (pp. 325-6)

As Bigger realizes that he is victim of hate, he wondered: "B-b-but what they have me for?" (451). Overwhelmed by the situation and its being void of rationale, Bigger wants to grasp the reason of that awesome hate. I have been personally wondering why Bigger should ask this question, when earlier, Maw had put the same question to him. Yet, when zeroing in on the issue, it is evident that he was not satisfied in the first place. He even did not find the answer, the reason for being so much hated. As a result, both Bigger and Max ponder on the Blacks' predicament:

"They hate black folks," he said.

"*Why*, Bigger?"

"I don't know, Mr. Max."

"Bigger, don't you know they hate others, too?"

"Who they hate?"

"They hate trade unions. They hate folks who try to organize. They hate Jan."

"But they hate black folks more than they hate unions," Bigger said. "They don't treat union folks like they do me." (p. 295)

This close discussion cataclysmically discloses the seriousness of the Blacks' dire conditions of life in those days. Actually, Bigger could not find out any reason of the hate from himself. He could not buy the idea that his oppressors hate other people either. He thinks and ascertains the hate to black people is blatantly particular.

In the society where *Native Son* is set, whites - and the police - are educated to overlook Negro-to-Negro problems while White-to-White clashes are well handled. Whatever the case, a Negro-to-White conflict is seriously and quickly dealt with to the prejudice of the Negro. Still, there is no regard to problems opposing Negroes only. And that attitude praises and encourages problems among blacks, leading to their divisions and separations. Again, this attitude is shown in more ways than one in the narrative. The upcoming excerpt speaks of the first time Bigger and his pals plan to rob a white trader, Blum:



They had always robbed Negroes. They felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policemen never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes. For months they had talked of robbing Blum's, but had not been able to bring themselves to do it. They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them. (p. 12)

I wonder why the boys find it easier to rob a Negro. Is it because Negroes' properties are less secured? Definitely not; it is mostly because that crime is not seen as one and is not even slightly retributed. Contrarily, any slightest misbehavior toward the supremacist white world exposes the blacks to fire and fury, wrath and death.

Acknowledging the untouchable status of Blum, Bigger and his pals fear to dare anything. This type of fear paves the way for the individual to find it difficult, say, impossible to develop or concentrate on developing ideas. Parallely, it is a blessing for the oppressor since he/she thinks that will paralyze every endeavor of the oppressed. This idea has success in the illustration of Bigger and his gang's plan to rob Blum's. Before getting to rob the white man, they spent months thinking it over and over again. Their exchange showcases the dire situation:

"You niggers is crazy," Bigger said. "You laugh like monkeys and you ain't got nerve enough todo nothing but talk."

"What you mean?" G.H. asked.

"I got a haul all figured out," Bigger said. "What haul?"

"Old Blum's."

There was silence. Jack lit a cigarette. Gus looked away, avoiding the conversation.

"If old Blum was a black man, you-all would be itching to go. 'Cause he's white, everybody's scared?" (pp. 20-1)

They fear their oppressors merely because they are of the white race. Even though they cannot tell why, they finally could not carry out their plan. Instead, the context led to misunderstandings, quarrels and disputes between themselves.

Moreover, the output of that fear worsens ties between Bigger and Bessie. In fact, since they have been dating, Bigger and Bessie have been longing for money. What bliss should it be as they finally find some! But see how the girl balks at the opportunity:

"Here," he said. "Get you something and save the rest for me." "Oh!"

She looked at the money and hesitated. "Don't you want it?"

"Yeah," she said, taking the roll.

"If you string along with me you'll get plenty more."

They stopped in front of her door; he stood looking at her. "Well," he said. "What you think?"

"Bigger, honey. I—I don't know," she said plaintively. "You wanted me to tell you."

"I'm scared."

"Don't you trust me?"

"But we ain't never done nothing like this before. They'll look everywhere for us for something like this. It ain't like coming to where I work at night when the white folks is gone out of town and stealing something. It ain't...."

"It's up to you." "I'm scared, Bigger." (pp. 124-25)

I contend that Bessie's fear does not stem from the fact that the money was stolen because Bigger is known to be a thief. Obviously therefore, Bessie would have profited from stolen cents before and this would not be her first time. Bessie is just scared because she is deeply aware of the fact that stealing money from a wealthy white family is extremely dangerous.

In fact, oppression tends to silence the conscience of the oppressor before the potentialities of the oppressed as a whole. *Native Son* reads:

"I wanted to be an aviator once. But they wouldn't let me go to the school where I was suppose' to learn it. They built a big school and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could go to it but those who lived within the line. That kept all the colored boys out."

"And what else?"

"Well, I wanted to be in the army once." "Why didn't you join?"

"Hell, it's a Jim Crow army. All they want a black man for is to dig ditches. And in the navy, all I can do is wash dishes and scrub floors."

"And was there anything else you wanted to do?"

"Oh, I don't know. What's the use now? I'm through, washed up. They got me. I'll die." "Tell me the things you *thought* you'd have liked to do?"

"I'd like to be in business. But what chance has a black guy got in business? We ain't got no money. We don't own no mines, no railroads, no nothing. They don't want us to. They make us stay in one little spot...."

"And you didn't want to stay there?"

Bigger glanced up; his lips tightened. There was a feverish pride in his blood-shot eyes. "I *didn't*," he said. (pp. 299-300, italics in original)

How many young people have not dreamed of becoming aviators, enrolling in the army or doing a business? Millions have, of course. But turning the dream into a reality heavily depends on the society in one way. In Bigger's context, the white shaped society strives to shutter all hopes and dreams. Segregationist principles represent strong strategies to hinder the black person to fulfil in those days. Readers can clearly



notice the segregationist impact on Bigger's dream. Definitely, the central character of the novel could not attend to the school which would equip him to fulfil his unique vision. In fact, the introduction of reform school does not actually reform Bigger; it rather erases his dream of becoming an aviator.

Simply put, the diverse evidences of oppression show the white people want blacks to fear them, to see themselves as subhuman and thus be more submissive, to balk at the idea of stealing, and let only whites make decisions and laws, and display certainty of white supremacy. The repressive attitudes of the oppressor have had violent consequences (Redden 114). In order to justify all this, to assess their utter validity, I will knock at the door of the feelings/reactions that the situation raise in the oppressed people.

2. Responses to Oppression as a Challenge to the American Exceptionalism

According to Stephen George, "Richard Wright's use of violence in *Native Son*, far from being gratuitous evidence of Bigger's dissolution, in effect allows us to measure this moral progress, for by the novel's end Bigger Thomas has changed from a brutal rapist and murderer to someone who ultimately sees others as human beings like himself" (George, 1997, p. 505). This positivist viewpoint casts light on the outcomes of oppression. Truly, under the aegis of oppression, one of the most dreadful outputs is that some people among the oppressed stratum choose to side with their ill-traitors. Known as accomplices, they partner with oppressors in wrongdoings and crimes. Most of the time, accomplices who think they will have good conditions while helping in crime, illustrate themselves in betraying their own friends, other fellows, even parents. They help worsen their fellows' conditions. To substantiate, "*Native Son* embraces the ideology of American exceptionalism ... in order to launch a harsh critique of the way in which American civil religion was falling short of its ideals by exploiting, oppressing and contributing to the dehumanization of African Americans, therefore leading to the moral and physical disintegration of the nation" (Fraile-Marcos, 2007, pp. 124-25). Simply put, Richard Wright's narrative sabotages the American pride and it constitutes a great lesson to the Americans.

In fact, the accomplices believe that they will wind up being fully accepted in the oppressors' camp. Yet, it takes them long to realize they are just used for a purpose, and they should not expect more. During his flight, hiding Bigger tiptoed to a room from where he listened to an argument between two blacks about him: "'Jack, yuh mean t' star' there' n' say yuh'd give tha' nigger up the white folks?' 'Damn right Ah would!'" (p. 281). Wright is introducing here a negro, living in the same conditions like Bigger, who is ready to give away the relentlessly hunted Bigger. This Jack character does not try to understand anything of the issue. For him, a Negro in such a society cannot be otherwise guilty. More, he and other accomplices think that giving away guilty counterparts can help them escape from severity of life imposed on them. People may be right or wrong when betraying their fellows, when partnering with people maltreating them. However, they should also be conscious that it will not bring them

into the upper room. They may have petty opportunities today as reward to that dismal partnership. But still, they will regret it.

One other form of defying the American exceptionalism speaks through an active passivity under alcohol and sex abuse. In *Native Son*, two young boys were having a discussion one day. One of them was getting upset about the senselessness of their life. It made him scared and he incessantly thought that some awful thing would end up happening to him, causing his destruction. The other boy suggested that his buddy was having that problem because he was thinking too much. The only way according to him was to stop thinking about all that. As the former voiced his incapacity of following that suggestion, the latter advises him: "Get drunk and sleep it off" (p. 51). Getting drunk suggests to many people a way out of problems and pains. However, alcohol represents an ephemeral means to forget the current problem. In fact, after the effect of the alcohol the reality never disappears; the problem is still real to the amazement of the alcoholic person. Nobody ignores how alcoholic beverages do have impact on those to take refuge in them. When a person gets drunk, he or she experiences an evasive moment of joy, and the person relishes a very short period of happiness. At that time, they may become less conscious of many things, act comically and get relieved by making people laugh at their performances. Thus, they find out some delusional relief. Added to alcohol, sex gives to those who get involved in it as a means of escape to life issues some passive moments of pleasure, moments when they count heavens and somehow escape ephemerally problems.

Abuse - improper use - of alcohol and sex because of pleasure makes people believe in a kind of solace for grief. In the case of alcohol, for example, the alcoholic may escape for just some time, no longer than the duration of the beverage's effectiveness. Forgetting about one's worries for a mere elusive time is not the miracle solution to problems. Many African-American writers portray many characters who make their way up with alcohol and sex as ways out of their dire situation. And, not surprisingly, those characters end up being a threat or public danger to their own fellows. Many alcoholic parents abuse and rape their own children or batter their wives. Worse, the alcoholic condition may lead some to even commit suicide.

In point of fact, taking alcohol causes the drinker to be dependent. That dependence severely impacts on health of the drinker. Science has proved that many diseases such as lung cancer, hemochromatosis, and cardiovascular diseases are linked with alcoholism. In their "Chronic Diseases and Conditions Related to Alcohol Use", Shield et al. come into the conclusion that alcohol consumption is related to a considerable number of chronic diseases and conditions and contributes to a substantial amount of the global burden of chronic diseases and conditions. Basically, alcohol abuse is poisonous and therefore life-threatening. Just as drugs, alcohol does not offer a true chance of easily escaping, and faces them with withdrawal crises' demonstrations. The situation is not better with sex abuse. People who abuse sex in order to put their troubles under oblivion are faced up with many dysfunctions



leading to death through sexually transmitted infections and diseases. Sex should not be used for pleasure, and there is definitely absence of love as sex is used improperly.

In *Native Son*, Bigger offers an astonishing account as clairvoyant Max questions him following Bessie, his girlfriend's dreadful murder: "Did you love her? Naw. (...) I wasn't in love with Bessie. She was just my girl, I don't reckon I was ever in love with nobody" (pp. 381-2). This answer, all the same striking, states the reality when sex is just used for pleasure to allow oneself to shun difficulties and hardships in life. During sex abuse, just as in the case of Bessie and Bigger, people can voice love to each other. But in reality, that love stops just with the moment of the pleasure. The attitude of Bigger showcases how dangerous that case is. He does not resist to the killing of his girlfriend, as he sees in that a way of saving his own life.

Quintessentially, after considering the issue of escapism, we can rightly say it is one of the conditions people are forced to plunge into under oppression. And again, it is harmful to the escaper. Avoiding realities and responsibilities for just some time is far from being the magic bullet. De facto, the oppressed people should take care of both their physical and psychological stabilities, and should not get themselves so concerned with amusements and flights of imagination. As we have come to know that combatting oppression, breaking its barriers all over the world, is not easy, and trying to escape is not harmless. Definitely, there is the pressing urgency of going after an equity-oriented society to alleviate living conditions to people in order to avoid catastrophist actions.

Conclusion

What can be unquestionably acknowledged about oppression is that it is meant to dwarf the oppressed at all costs and prevent them from any type of evolvement. Powerful as they are, the oppressors enjoy chanting their supremacy and therefore put everything in place to testify to this supremacy. The media, the law, discrimination, and segregation play vital role in humiliating the oppressed. Under this weight, the hapless people develop fear, negativity, lack of confidence, very little creativity, and many more. The black people in Richard Wright's *Native Son* bear witness to such unbearable plights.

Set in an American context which claims that all men are born equal and inherently endowed with unalienable rights, the readership questions that American exceptionalism in matters of basic human rights. In point of fact, the American power and the global dominance resulting from the American exceptionalism are now slipping away (Coates, 2011). Through an extensive perspective, *Native Son* avers that both the oppressor and the oppressed are fatal victims of unfair treatment in society. Therefore, Bigger Thomas uses murder and subsequent events to weaken the powerful mechanisms of white America. The portrayal of this character demonstrates that power can sabotage itself (Kunz, 1998). Actually, the paper has showcased the weak aspect of power vested in American exceptionalism. It calls humans to work to build a fair community where human beings are not color-assessed but judged in the light of their (mis)behaviors.

References

- Benner, L., Jr. (1987). *A history of black America*. Chicago: John Publishing Co.
- Brivic, S. (1974). Conflict of values: Richard Wright's *Native Son*. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 7(3), 231–245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345415>
- Burney, S. (2012). Chapter two: Edward Said and postcolonial theory: Disjunctured identities and the subaltern voice. *Counterpoints*, 417, 41–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981699>
- Coates, D. (2011). The strength and weaknesses of the American Exceptionalism." *Huffpost*, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/american-exceptionalism_b_855812.
- Fraile-Marcos, A. M. (2007). *Native Son's 'ideology of form': The (African) American Jeremiad and American Exceptionalism*. In *Richard Wright's Native Son* edited by Ana María Fraile. Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 119-141.
- George, S. K. (1997). The horror of *Bigger Thomas*: The perception of form without face in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. *African American Review*, 31(3), 497–504. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042575>
- Kagan, R. (June 2002). Power and weakness: Why the United States and Europe see the world different. Hoover Institution, <https://www.hoover.org/research/power-and-weakness>
- Kunz, G. (1998). *The Paradox of power and weakness: Levinas and an alternative paradigm for psychology*. State University of New York Press.
- Miller, J. A. (1986). *Bigger Thomas's Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard Wright's Native Son*. *Callaloo*, 28, 501–506. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930846>
- Poski, H. A. & Williams, J. (1989). *The Negro almanac: A reference work on the African American*. Michigan: Gale Group.
- Redden, D. S. (1976). Richard Wright and *Native Son*: Not guilty. *Black American Literature Forum*, 10(4), 111–116. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041608>
- Shield, K. D et al. (2013). Chronic diseases and conditions related to alcohol use." *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews*, 35(2), 155-73.
- Wright, R. (1940). *Native Son*. New York: Vintage.