

A postcolonial psychoanalysis of determinism in native son



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Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*, exemplifies classic, African-American literature that raises serious questions about how deeply racial oppression damages Blacks. Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism exposes how racism subjects Blacks to the impotence assumed under determinism by denying nearly any confirmation of free will. Wright's narrative depicts the psychological and existential struggle of adolescent, black youth to feel any sense of agency in life because the institution of racial oppression impinges upon their psychological development; consequently, a strong-willed, black man may prove incapable of accepting a reality devoid of agency and dangerously struggle to create agency where there is none.

According to Dobie, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory differed from Freudian theory most significantly in that "Freud's concept of the unconscious as a force that determines our actions and beliefs shook the long-held ideal that we are beings who can control our own destinies" while Lacan asserted that the unconscious was not some peripheral force acting upon the conscious self but, rather, the core of the self—"the nucleus of our being" (Dobie 69). Freud's theory considered the unconscious to be peripheral, not central. The significance of this theoretical difference is that Freudian theory technically supports the philosophical doctrine of determinism whereas Lacanian theory challenges that notion without necessarily advocating existentialism.

In *Native Son*, one can argue that there are no characters who truly exercise free will; instead, there are simply those who live with a sense of agency and those who do not. Agency does not suggest free will, though, in the sense that it is merely the capacity to act, not the authority to act in any way one pleases. This distinction manifests in the protagonist's observation of a plane

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in the sky early in “ Book One” of the text. The protagonist, Bigger, draws the attention of his friend, Gus, to the plane. ““Them white boys sure can fly,’ Gus said. ‘ Yeah,’ Bigger said, wistfully. ‘ They get a chance to do everything’” (Wright 20). The implicature in Bigger’s statement suggests envy of Whites’ agency but not free will; in the latter case, Bigger’s last word would more appropriately have been “ anything,” as opposed to “ everything.” In either case, though, what is most pronounced is Bigger’s cognizance of a personal lack of agency. Lack is something with which Lacan says infants come to terms during the transition from the Imaginary Order to the Symbolic Order. “ When the infant realizes it is not connected to that which serves its needs, when it recognizes the Other and its own other, it begins to enter the Symbolic Order” (Dobie 71). This occurs when the infant begins to recognize difference, identifying Other—everything outside of the self—and subsequently identifying its own other, which is the external image one mistakes for an internal identity. Lacan believed the “ self” to be an illusory identity, and his theory purports this to be the case for everyone; however, within the context of racial oppression, it is only a damaging reality for the oppressed group. Everyone unconsciously manipulates themselves into accepting external images for internal identities, but as a result, only the subalterns accept problematic images for internal identities because the powerful group creates those external images for the subalterns in the process of othering them.

In *Native Son*, postcolonial literary criticism refers to Whites as the colonizers and Blacks as the subalterns or, more specifically, colonial subjects. Bigger and everyone with whom he is capable of identifying are subjected to

Eurocentrism and, thus, plagued by a sense of cultural displacement. The problematic, external images they accept from Whites who other them cause them to see themselves the way Whites see them, which is a crisis of identity that, more than anything else, robs them of any possible sense of agency. Determinism becomes their only possible reality because their beings are limited to what Whites declare them to be. This is exemplified later in the same, aforementioned conversation between Bigger and Gus: “‘ Maybe they right in not wanting us to fly,’ Bigger said. ‘Cause if I took a plane up I’d take a couple of bombs along and drop ‘ em as sure as hell’” (Wright 21). Bigger sarcastically expresses a sentiment that many Blacks may very well believe on an unconscious level, which is the idea that Whites have othered Blacks accurately. Wright uses Bigger to epitomize a sort of worst-case scenario apropos of what Whites’ psychological colonization of Blacks can yield. Bigger is actually the exception that proves the rule. All the African Americans around him in the text accept the problematic, external images Whites impose upon them, and they assimilate under the auspices of the Symbolic Order. Bigger is clearly different from everyone else around him, though. He is the only one who is depicted as being psychologically unstable—plagued by a severe anxiety comprised of rage and fear: Bigger watched Jack closely; he knew that the situation was one in which Jack’s word would be decisive. Bigger was afraid of Gus, because he knew that Gus would not hold out if Jack said yes. [...] the fear that Gus would really go made the muscles of Bigger’s stomach tighten; he was hot all over. He felt as if he wanted to sneeze and could not; only it was more nervous than wanting to sneeze. He grew hotter, tighter; his nerves were taut and his teeth were on edge. He felt that something would soon snap within him.

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(Wright 31) Everyone calmly weighs his options in the excerpt above while Bigger's anxiety level steadily rises in response to his own thoughts.

Bigger's unique struggle stems from his being such an inordinately strong-willed individual. Being strong-willed becomes a tragic flaw because it keeps him from assimilating the way those around him do. More than anything, a strong will seeks agency, and Bigger is constantly exhibiting a yearn for some sense of agency. This struggle is arguably Bigger's attempted regression to the Real Order—" a psychological state characterized by unity and completeness"—in which he could believe himself to be one with all things and perceive no distinction between self and Other, providing the ultimate sense of security on the basis of there being no existing entities to threaten him. Many such examples relate to a seemingly idiosyncratic thought he frequently has when faced with situations he does not like in which he simply waves his hand (or performs some other equally arbitrary action) to remove the situation from existence, so to speak. More than this, though, Bigger's reaction to his first murder highlights agency as the true object of his desire: Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that [...] He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible his will to kill. [...] He felt that all his life had been leading to something like this. [...] It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfil [sic] to himself in accepting the deed." (Wright 132). He felt he owed credit to himself for the sake of satiating his thirst for agency because this was something he felt his will had accomplished. Paradoxically, though, this same excerpt also illustrates determinism at play since he was aware of his

life being guided to this outcome, which explains why his alleged satisfaction was so ephemeral, requiring him to kill again later in the novel; he had not actually achieved any real agency.

Under a postcolonial psychoanalytic lens, *Native Son* attempts to quantify the depth of the damage resulting from racial oppression. The text shows psychological ramifications and depicts Eurocentrism as the conduit through which said ramifications are channeled. The work shows the convergence of an inherently strong will with cultural colonization's suppression of agency to explain the cause of Black criminalization. Whites socially construct the monster in the text, proving that "the fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man" (Hawthorne).

Works Cited Dobie

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