



VISIONS OF INVISIBILITY: LITERATURE AS PROTEST AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

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RESUMO: A literatura afro-americana se destaca pelo seu grande interesse em utilizar o meio literário como uma forma de protesto e, principalmente, para denunciar contextos sociais marcados pelo uso da opressão e da violência. Nesse sentido, destaque é dado ao romance *Native Son* (1940), do escritor afro-americano Richard Wright, por apresentar através do seu protagonista Bigger Thomas, as vicissitudes impostas à população negra no contexto da segregação racial. Assim, o presente trabalho visa desenvolver algumas considerações sobre a representação da experiência negra durante o período da segregação racial descritas no romance e procura examinar de que forma o contexto social interfere no psicológico do seu protagonista. Para tanto, baseamo-nos nos estudos de Brookshaw (1983), Bhabha (1998), Kathryn Woodward (2009) e Silva (2009).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Native Son*; Identidade; Literatura.

ABSTRACT: African-American literature stands out for its interest in using the literary field as a way to protest and mainly to denounce social contexts marked by the use of oppression and violence. In this context, stands out in the literary scenario the novel *Native Son* (1940), written by the African-American writer Richard Wright, who describes through its protagonist Bigger Thomas, the painful details and psychological problems that characterize the black experience in a social context marked by oppression and violence. So, the present paper aims at developing some considerations about the African-American experience depicted in Richard Wright's novel during the racial segregation period and attempts to examine how the social context interferes in its protagonist's psychology. To do so, we based our analysis on the studies developed by Brookshaw (1983), Bhabha (1998), Woodward (2009) e Silva (2009).

KEY WORDS: *Native Son*; Identity; Literature.

Introduction

"I am an invisible man [...] when they [white people] approach me they only see my surroundings, themselves, or fragments of their imaginations – indeed, everything and anything except me"
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

The fragment presented in the epigraph above highlights the privileged place literature has to represent minority voices as well as to bring reflections upon conflicts related to the acceptance of difference. In the novel *Invisible Man* (1952) it is possible to infer that Ralph Ellison

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used his novel to depict conflicts of social and historic order by giving voice to African-American characters with the purpose of (re) thinking or reviewing the painful details and psychological problems that characterized the African-American experience.

Not only Ralph Ellison had that idea, but also many other Afro-American writers, as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, for instance, have seen in their works an important way to react against the brutality of historical events and, mainly, to denounce and describe social contexts marked by oppression and violence.

It is in this context that stands out the works of Richard Wright (1908-1960). He is best known by being one of the first black writers to reach such a wide audience and by his belief that literature should be an instrument of social progress as well as a powerful way to protest.

He won international renown for his powerful and visceral depictions of the black experience in his novel *Native Son*, published in 1940. It tells the story of a young black man who faces psychological and emotional problems in a social context marked by the racial segregation. Furthermore, the novel presents us a compelling reflection on the poverty, the search for recognition and feelings of hopelessness experienced by those who did not achieve the American Dream's promises of equality and prosperity.

In this regard, the present paper aims at developing some considerations about the African-American experience depicted in the novel *Native Son* (1940) and attempts to examine how the social context interferes in its protagonist's psychology. To do so, we based our analysis on the studies developed by Brookshaw (1983), Bhabha (1998), Woodward (2009), Silva (2009) and Landowski (2012).

Fear, hate and violence: a reading of *Bigger Thomas*

There are many studies that affirm Richard Wright's novel is considered to be one of the most important literary productions in African-American literature and *Native Son* one of the greatest American novels published in the twentieth century. On the contrary of previous works as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain's *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) that only depicted superficially the racial problem in the United States, Wright's novel takes a step more by presenting a deeper reflection upon questions related to power and its possible consequences in its protagonist's mind.



By proposing a reading of the novel, Irving Howe (1963) highlights the great impact it caused in society. According to the critic, through its publication all American citizens could realize, with high intensity, the fear, hate and violence faced by excluded people and to reflect on possible results of that social exclusion. Moreover, Moskowitz (2008) states that *Native Son* sold 315.000 copies during the first three months after its publication, besides being translated into many languages and adapted for the theater and motion pictures.

The novel presents the city of Chicago as setting and has as historical time the year of 1930. The *diegesis* focuses on the main character Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old black man, poor and almost uneducated who chronologically shows us through the three chapters that compose the book: *fear*, *flight* and *fate*, the psychological consequences of the terrible environment in which he grew up.

At the beginning of the narrative one can perceive the degrading place in which Bigger, his mother, sister and brother live. The opening scene of the novel starts with a long sound of the family's alarm clock that wakes up everybody. Soon, the apartment's descriptions and reflections upon the family's terrible financial condition start being exposed.

They rent a tiny-room apartment in the Black Belt area of the city, a place where only black people could live. Mother, sons and daughter sleep, eat and dress themselves in the same small room. Through the apartment's and area's portray we can notice the bad living conditions in which the family lives, as well as depictions of the highest poverty of the area. Such place is compared by Bigger's mother as a "garbage dump" (WRIGHT, 1993, p. 7) and its residents compared to dirty pigs.

The bad conditions of the apartment can be interpreted as a personification of its residents' lives; in other words, the small room that Bigger's family rents would reflect their lack of prospect. Through the discourse used by Bigger's mother and shared with her sons it is possible to affirm that they only aim to acquire the little things white society would be willing to offer them.

However, it is through Bigger Thomas' inner thoughts that the heterodiegetic narrator with the perspective over the character tells us that the protagonist is afraid of having both the same destiny and way of facing life as the rest of his family.

He hated his Family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of



himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain (WRIGHT, 1993, p. 9).

It is possible to identify in the moment he says himself “powerless” to change his family’s lack of prospect, this characterized by feelings as “fear”, “despair”, “shame” and “misery”, it is implied that Bigger will try to achieve a different destiny. Also, by saying if he accepted the same destiny and way of thinking of his mother, sister and brother, he would kill himself or kill somebody. Such revelation becomes thoroughly important to understand the protagonist’s future actions along the narrative.

During that morning before taking a job as a chauffeur for The Dalton’s, a wealthy family in Chicago, Bigger decides to hang out with his friends and go to the movies. In the dialogues among them and when they play the game “play white”, described by the narrator as “a game of play-acting in which he and his friends imitate the ways and manners of white folks” (WRIGHT, 1993, p. 18) we can clearly verify the consciousness Bigger has for his degrading social, economic and political situation.

The game finishes with Bigger’s deep reflection upon racial tensions. He emphatically points out through the enumeration of antitheses as here/there, black/white; the use of the noun “jail” exploited here as a metaphor that represents his social condition and finally with the expression “Goddammit, look!” to call the attention to his friends that regardless of blacks and whites occupy the same city, their social realities are totally different and unjust. Such reflection destabilizes the protagonist when he thinks about his future:

Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They do things and we can’t. It’s just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence... [...] Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me... (WRIGHT, 1993, p. 20-21).

Additionally, feelings as hate, shame and frustration, aspects that he associates to his black identity, are reinforced through the local media in the moment he decides to go to the cinema. In the scenes showed during the movie, while white people are described with words as “wealth” (ibidem, p. 34), “happiness” (ibidem, p. 34) and “beauty body” (ibidem, p. 35), in the moment the movie mentions “black people” the semantic field immediately changes to “jungle savages” (ibidem, p. 36), “wild” (ibidem, p. 36), as well as pejorative inferences to Africa. So, the content of the movie represents the influence of the media in transmitting the idea of white superiority through the use of racial stereotypes.



In his book *O local da cultura* Homi Bhabha (1998) presents us many considerations to the interpretation of the content presented in the movie *Bigger* Thomas watched and its doubtless consequences. According to him, the use of stereotypes could be understood as a counterfeit representation by denying the difference of the other. In the same stream of thought, David Brookshaw (1983) claims that the use of stereotypes could be compared to the use of a “strait jacket” due to the fact that it could represent, in a certain way, a sort of social control and, at the same time, a way to deleting the subject’s individually features.

In this sense, by being portrayed as an animalistic brute, *Bigger* feels himself metaphorically wearing a “strait jacket” that literally stop him from being himself but a subservient black man covered with feelings of hate, shame and frustration.

By trying to deny such feelings, *Bigger* desperately attempts to do away with his fear of facing white people with his plan to rob a white businessman with his friends. Despite the aggressiveness and pressure that *Bigger* treats his friends, the narrator informs us that the protagonist presents a fake figure of a strong and courageous man, in other words, *Bigger*’s psychological tension and emotional instability depicts a weak and vulnerable person.

Overwhelmed by his fears, *Bigger* sabotaged the robbery. This episode clearly shows *Bigger*’s psychological fragility and his double identity: the first one, characterized by his feelings of invisibility, tense and unstable control; the second one, marked by the presence of aggressiveness and violent actions.

Taking into account *Bigger*’s split identity, we are guided to the studies that addresses the relation between identity and difference. Kathryn Woodward (2009) presents us many considerations in relation to the themes. According to her, identity is built through the relation among other identities and, therefore, characterized by presenting a binary opposition. Such relation would highlight the presence of “me” and “the other”, involving, as a result, essentialist claims about who will belong to or be excluded from a certain social group.

In this sense, Woodward claims that identity is only characterized by the presence of difference. As a result, she proposes that identity would be established by symbolic markings, that is, it would represent who is included or excluded. Besides, she points out that identity demands the presence of a classificatory system that would have the purpose of presenting how social relations are established in a given context:

A diferença é aquilo que separa uma identidade da outra, estabelecendo distinções [...] no qual as identidades são construídas por uma clara oposição entre ‘nós’ e ‘eles’. A



marcação da diferença é, assim, o comportamento-chave em qualquer sistema de classificação (WOODWARD, 2009, p. 41).

Tomaz Tadeu da Silva (2009) also offers contributions to the reflection about the theme. According to his studies, identity and difference are not only the result of linguistic, cultural and social actions, they would also be vulnerable to the influences of power relations. The presence of subject-positions are strongly marked by the power relations that would classify different groups within the same context.

By associating those reflections to the novel, it is clear that Bigger Thomas' split identity is highly dependent on the relation he has with white society. In this sense, the protagonist is aware not only about the symbolic value given to his black identity, but also of his social position in the north-American society, that is, the figure of a marginalized and inferior human being. This consciousness requires him to assume different identities, or subject-positions to survive in the white environment in different moments in the narrative.

Such ideas are described when he exceeds the racial boundaries and takes the job in The Dalton's. The narrative voice conveys the tension that he feels in the white neighborhood. What reinforces the knowledge he has about the danger that waits for him in the moment he accepted to work for them.

Until the present time, Bigger could be understood as Malcolm Bradbury asserted that the character may be seen as "a imagem do homem moderno privado de identidade. Ele é um homem sem essência; sua condição é o medo, sua situação o confinamento, sua ação a violência" (BRADBURY, 1991, p. 115).

Nevertheless, this situation changes when Bigger Thomas accidentally smothers and kills Mrs. Mary Dalton, The Dalton's daughter, in the end of chapter one, *fear*. One can observe that his identity goes through a metamorphosis, in other words, Mary's death would represent a turning point in the narrative or an awakening of the protagonist.

So, the transformation or "rebirth" of Bigger reveals us his purification or freedom of feelings that once used to torment him. The following passage shows Bigger's reflection upon the effects on the murder in his personality: "It was a kind of eagerness he felt, a confidence, a fullness, a freedom; his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act" (ibidem, p. 119). Therefore, before Mary's death Bigger's life was marked by a mix of "fear" and "terror". But at the present point of the novel, it is filled with feelings as "eagerness", "confidence" and "freedom" that allow him a feeling of some power and identity



By losing his fear of facing white people, Bigger starts using the racial prejudice, which excluded him before, against the white society. His plan on blaming Jan, Mary's boyfriend, for her disappearance, his perfect behavior during long interrogations and his plan on getting money with a fake kidnap note sent to The Dalton's are some instances that show how white superiority is problematized in the novel. After all, as he himself says: "who on Earth would think that he, a black timid Negro Boy, would murder and burn a rich white girl and would sit and wait for his breakfast like this?"(ibidem, p. 120).

With the intensification of the investigations and, consequently, many descriptions of Bigger's worries, the novel starts presenting us in chapter II, *flight*, allegoric elements that present important roles in the narrative. Among them, stand out the descriptions of the furnace, in which the protagonist put Mary's body and the snow that covers the city.

The furnace would represent Bigger's anxiety and his stream of consciousness. When he thinks in getting money with the disappearance of Mary, the noise that comes from the furnace is described as follows: "heard the fire singing in the furnace" (ibidem, p. 175). In the moment the policeman interrogates him, he reveals that: "He glanced quickly at the furnace. It was still very hot, droning" (ibidem, p. 177). Additionally, when the protagonist sends the counterfeit ransom note to The Dalton's, the furnace is depicted: "Like an enraged beast, the furnace throbbled with heat" (ibidem, p. 212). Finally, when the police discover Mary's remains, Bigger admits that: "he himself was a huge furnace" (ibidem, p. 251).

It is possible to notice a considerable gradation in the furnace's descriptions. Firstly, the verb "to sing" is used as a metaphor to transmit an idea of possible anxiety of the protagonist. Nonetheless, Bigger soon uses the adverb "very", the adjective "hot" and the verb "to drone" to emphasize his psychological state that reaches maximum level when he describes the furnace with the verbs "to enrage" and with the noun "beast". Thus, all elements used to describe the furnace guide us to the comprehension that Bigger starts losing control of that situation and, chiefly, of his feelings and attitudes. That explains the use of the adjective "huge" in the moment he says himself a huge furnace ready to blow up.

With the discovery of Mary's remains inside the furnace, episode that results in Bigger's desperate scape from The Dalton's, the snow is another allegoric element presented in the novel.



It is described in the beginning of chapter II, *flight*, when Bigger returns to the tiny apartment of his family in the Black Belt area after killing Mary. Soon, the snow turns into a blizzard moments before his capture by the police:

He went to the window and looked out at the swirling snow. He could hear Wind rising; it was a blizzard all right. The snow moved in no giving direction, but filled the world with a vast white storm of flying powder” (ibidem, p. 223).

The snow that covers the city might be understood as the power white society exerts on the protagonist. In the scenes that follow the novel, Bigger is discovered and runs away from the Dalton’s and falls off in the snow that covers his whole body. The feeling of weakness that he feels apart from his capture reinforces the power white society had over blacks, allegorically represented through the snow: “Snow was in his mouth, eyes, ears; snow was seeping down his back [...] he was himself now; he struggles against the snow, pushing it away from him [...] but he felt too weak” (ibidem, p. 254-255).

In the moment the narrator describes that Bigger “was himself now” and through the use of the adverb “too” to intensify the adjective “weak”, the character starts presenting a backtracking in the fiction. In other words, Bigger awakes from his dream of superiority and restores to the same features that defined him at the beginning of the *diegesis*, once the narrator affirms: “there were two Biggers” (ibidem, p. 292).

Chapter II, *flight*, closes with the dramatic capture of Bigger in the Black Belt area of the city and the narrator informing that he “was swallowed in darkness” (ibidem, p. 314). As Lola Jones Amis affirms, the Black Belt to which Bigger always tried to escape could be understood as the representation of Bigger himself. According to her, the black ghetto “is the psyche of Bigger’s entire life. It is part of the Bigger Thomas psyche. It is literally and at the same time figuratively represents the realities of life, the emptiness of his entire existence” (AMIS, 1977, p. 243).

As the novel moves toward its closing, we observe in the final chapter of the novel, *fate*, the most dramatic of the three chapters, the descriptions of the protagonist’s struggle to escape from death in the electric chair.

Before his trial, the narrator depicts the fury of American population, especially because they suspect Mary was raped by him. The population shouts that want him to be lynched, fact that makes the tension and hate between whites and blacks increase: “you black ape!”; “shot that bastard!”; “Burn’im!” e “kill’im” (ibidem, p. 390-391).



Moreover, we can again identify the remarkable power of media over the population reinforcing the idea of racial stereotypes. It depicts Bigger as a savage animal, a real monster, and, appealing to sentimentality, Mary is described as a defenseless girls, victim of the savagery related to black identity:

He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of the jungle beast [...] It is easy to imagine how this man overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her [...] he seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization (ibidem, p. 322-323)

As an attempting to save Bigger, his lawyer Max presents a long courtroom speech. In this regard, one can verify through Max's discourse that he portrays a dense review of the main points explored along the narrative. Thereby, Max defends the idea that Bigger would not be responsible for Mary Dalton's murder, but he and his actions would be the result of the way American society deals with racial differences. According to Max: "we [white American society] planned the murder of Mary Dalton" (ibidem, p. 459).

Therefore, the message Max tries to transmit in the courtroom is that Bigger would only like to have a chance to live and grow up with the same opportunities of the rest of the American society. However, by being black and excluded, he ended up being a victim as the rich Mary Dalton. As a result, Bigger Thomas would be, therefore, the product of the oppressive environment in which he lives.

In spite of all arguments exposed by Max, Bigger is sentenced and sent to the electric chair. Realizing that his fate was sealed, he slipped into total unconsciousness. As the novel presents an open ended form, a paradox is presented: Bigger could be interpreted as a victim of racial oppression in the United States during the racial segregation period; or as a hero that dares to exceed the racial boundaries and showed to white society the dehumanized way they got used to treating black people.

Final Considerations

Through the analysis of the novel *Native Son* we attempted to develop some considerations about the African-American experience during the racial segregation period, as well as examine how the social context interferes in its protagonist's psychology.

The long onomatopoeia described in the opening scene of the narrative not only serves to wake up The Thomas'. The protracted sound of the alarm could be symbolically interpreted as an



urgent call to the reader and mainly to white society to awaken from their self-induced slumber about the reality of race relations in the nation in addition to a way to demonstrate the degrading situation of African-American population in the 1940s.

The novel depicted along the three chapters “fear”, “flight” and “fate” a character that represents, through metonymy, the African-American experience of oppression in America. Such fact was verified among many situations of hazard, injustice and humiliation in which Bigger went through.

Such situations make his split sense of selfhood become a heavy burden, leading him to acquire different identities in different moments in the novel. In this sense, it was noticeable the presence of three identities acquired by Bigger: the first one, characterized by his feeling of inferiority and non-recognition with other members of his ethnic group; the second one, his gaining of freedom and temporary sense of identity through brutally acts of violence and, finally, his total alienation in the moment he is sentenced to death.

In this regard, *Native Son*'s protagonist is nourishing by the social environment, fact that generate violence as a continuous cycle. He reacts to humiliations and answers with the same violence that hurts him, in other words, by attempting self-knowledge Bigger is dehumanized by the racist society that excludes and oppresses him.

Moreover, the narrative shows many elements that help the reader to comprehend Bigger's actions. Through the monoscopic view presented, the allegoric elements, the presence of stereotypes, metaphors and through the characters' dialogues were possible to understand Bigger's inner thoughts and also the cruel consequences of the non-acceptance of his difference that, ultimately, moved him to murder.

To conclude, it is important to highlight that Richard Wright's novel presents us a deep and sensible realistic perception of the life of those who lived in the invisibility. As described by Ralph Ellison, the most important achievement of Wright was his power to convert “the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and ‘going-under-ground’ into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throws his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America” (ELLISON, 1995, p. 94). Therefore, *Native Son* present us a critic view about the United States as well as a description of a dehumanized and victimized protagonist by the north-American culture, being a fine instance of Richard Wright belief that literature should be an instrument for social progress and a powerful way to protest.



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