

# Mis-Education and Disempowerment of African Americans in Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

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**Abstract :** Under the Marxist theoretical angle, this article aims to investigate about blacks' education and its aftermath in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In his novel, Richard Wright, one of the most prolific novelists in African American literature reveals how the poor educational background disadvantages black people. They are victims of a special education which, the white world shapes by having in mind to impose and maintain firmly down their ideology of supremacy. To elaborate on the topic, it evolves around three main points. Education and visibility showing the importance of education in one's life as the triggering point of his visibility. The second part deals with the apparent aspect and policy of this special education. And lastly, the disempowerment of the black community under this special educational policy.

**Keywords:** Mis-education, visibility, invisibility, alienation, domination, disempowerment.

**Résumé :** Sous l'angle théorique marxiste, cet article vise à étudier l'éducation des Noirs et ses conséquences dans *Native Son* de Richard Wright. Dans son roman, Richard Wright, l'un des romanciers les plus prolifiques de la littérature afro-américaine, révèle comment les Noirs sont désavantagés par leur faible niveau d'éducation. Ils sont victimes d'une éducation spéciale que le monde blanc façonne dans le but d'imposer et de maintenir fermement son idéologie de suprématie. Pour développer le sujet, il s'articule autour de trois points principaux. L'éducation et la visibilité montrant l'importance de l'éducation dans la vie d'un individu comme point de déclenchement de sa visibilité. La deuxième partie traite de l'aspect apparent et de la politique de cette éducation spéciale. Et enfin, la déresponsabilisation de la communauté noire dans le cadre de cette politique d'éducation spéciale.

**Mots clefs :** manque d'éducation, visibilité, invisibilité, aliénation, domination,

## Introduction

Education is a powerful weapon if not, the most dynamic arm which permits to bridge two societies or social classes. It opens the doors to both rich and poor to be fed with the same intellectual food and so, it can even permit to the poor to overrun the rich intellectually. So, education is the mean through which the social stratification vanishes. But, when it is segregated, it maintains firmly down the scent of alienation and invisibility. Therefore, this article permits to elucidate on how the white community mis-educates the black community in

order to push further its policy of supremacy and superiority over black people. Richard Wright, is certainly one of the most black novelists who depict with accuracy blacks' conditions in white America. In *Native Son*, he has depicted blacks' disempowerment in their daily contact with the white world through a deficient educational system. Naturally education becomes the staple food that black people need to achieve their freedom and visibility. Therefore, what does education mean for the black community? It is, of course the path which leads to equality and visibility.

It enlightens and breaks apart the social barriers and its lack brings about the white community's domination and alienation over the black community.

### 1-Education and Visibility

To what extent education provides visibility and dispels away the syndrome of domination of one person or a community over another community? The white world dominates the black world because this white world has acquired the intellectual potency which allows them to have all the power namely economics, social and political power concentrated in their hands. So, for the black people, to poise the society education becomes an imperative task and longing as stated in the following extract:

Every day it seemed we complained about the long walk to the little white wood frame schoolhouse and our father told us again and again about the many miles he had walked to attend school. We wanted to shut out his words\_ his experiences. They kept coming back returning as we grew\_as we learn that education for black folks was hard to come by was struggle, was necessary\_a way to be free (Bell, 62).

Education as the author comes to it was hard because the oppressor knew that it could open the mind of the oppressed and make of him the oppressor's equal in terms of intellectual potentialities. So, freedom for the black community depends upon their literacy potentialities. It becomes vital for black people because it is the pathway which conducts to their political, social and economics visibility. The father inculcates to his children that the freedom pathway is foggy and slippery because it humanizes them which is not the oppressor's will as stated in the passage :''White racists from George Fitzhugh in the 1850s to George Wllace in the 1960s saw blacks'demand for access to schoolhouse as a threat to the preservation of white supremacy'' (Manning,368). The oppressor fears the oppressed's social, economics and political rising because this rising symbolizes its fall. The only weapon able to stir such fear in him is education.

Though this fear, they express their desire to maintain the black people far away from a potential and efficient but to direct them into a downward educational system, a decoy one. Education is that weapon which breaks down the social disparities and vanishes any assumption of superiority and inferiority based on the skin color.

Education as learning to write and read, empowers the learner to have access to the hooded reality. It grants him with eyes which dispel away his ignorance and invisibility. It is the road which leads to social equality and breaks down the social stratification. Its lack therefore, obscurs one's visibility and prevents him to have access to his surroundings, unpoises the society and widens the gap of alienation and invisibility. Education ennobles than alienates as George Schuyler shows it in his novel *Black-No-More* in the following excerpt : ‘‘Negro Announces Remarkable Discovery changes Black to White in three Days’’ ( Schuyler, 19) . The above statement confers to the black scientist who makes this discovery a sense of outstanding and consideration by the external world in spite of his being black. This discovery changes his social status and any social degrading prejudice against him. Education ennobles him.

This discovery takes away from him the savage assumption the white community used to have of him as expressed in the following passage: ‘‘Yes, Dr Crookman was telling the reporters while they eagerly took down his statements’’ (Schuyler,20). Dr Crookman becomes a towering figure and the focus of both white and black societies due to his scientific achievement. This scientific discovery breaks the white people assumptions of superiority and drags Dr. Crookman from obscurity to the visibility. So, education is the pill to cure alienation and invisibility. It discards the skin color as a thinking stream about superiority and inferiority. Education is refused to black people because its lack stresses their alienation and that seems to be the white community will as Frederick Douglass expresses it in his novel *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr and Mrs Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After i had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr Auld found out what was going on and at once forbade Mrs Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read (Douglass, 78).

Mr Auld's fear about his slave being instructed reveals that education is what missed in the oppressed's life to be equal to the oppressor. Mr Auld cannot stand his defeat or being

overrun by his slave. Education, becomes the triggering element which calls upon equality but also alienation when it is absent in one's life as it is put forth in the following extract :

If you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontent and unhappy (Douglass, 78).

By the expression 'keeping him', Mr Auld means domination and exploitation. His superiority exists only if the slave Douglass is kept ignorant and blind through illiteracy. Illiteracy makes one inactive and exploitable. Education shapes one spirit of revolution and love for freedom as stated in the passage: Thus, as the underprivileged become better educated they are more likely to upset the peace. It is no revelation that the privileged have always been suspicious of universal education because it may ultimately lead to the devolution of their advantage (Kern, 5). A black who acquires education becomes a threat for the white ruling class. Education propels one's social standards. In this token those with the social, political and economic privileges strive to maintain black people at the bottom of the social scale as stated in the extract:

Mr. Ostrowski, Malcolm X's English teacher was not quite as bad. But when the boy expressed the desire to become a lawyer someday, the teacher shut down such dreams. He told the boy he was reaching too high that black boys do not become lawyers. Now, maybe Malcolm X could become a carpenter. He was good with hands. Yes, that was with his reach if the boy works hard enough (David, 30).

This extract shows to what extent white people were afraid to see black people emerging in studies because that could be the end of the hegemony over black community. Since the education becomes the paramount challenge for black people and to maintain their domination they need to shape a special education for black people. So, black people deserve a special education to be kept firmly in the sphere of white man's domination and alienation.

## **2-Blacks' Mis-Education**

To maintain its domination over black people, the white community needs to obliterate blacks' educational system by shaping a special education for them. They come to the point that the physical brutality can revolt but the lack of education is a more destructive weapon against

black people as stated in the following passage: ‘‘I could fly one plane if I had a chance’’ (Wright, 25). Bigger cannot fly a plane not because he is unintelligent but the white society’s educational system handicaps him just to maintain him subhuman and easy to be dominated. The incapacity of flying a plane confers to him the status of an alienated and exploited person. He remains so a subordinate fitting to achieve the white man’s tasks. He is hated.

The hate in mis-educating black people is described in the following extract: ‘‘If you wasn’t black and if you had some money and if they’d let you to attend that aviation school, you could fly a plane, Gus said (Wright, 25). Bigger cannot achieve his dream because he is black. His illiteracy opens the gap of the assumption about superiority and inferiority and the white boys of his age overrun him as expressed in the passage: ‘‘Them white boys sure can fly, said Gus’’ (Wright, 24). The white people can fly not because they are compulsorily whites but because they possess the knowledge which black boys are deprived of. Ann Petry, in her novel *The Street*, reveals how this special education is scaffolded as put forth in the following extract:

It was only two thirty in the afternoon Miss Rinner looked at the wriggling, twisting children seated in front of her and frowned. There was a whole half-hour, thirty long unpleasant minutes to be got through before she would be free from the unpleasant sight of these ever moving brown young faces (Petry, 235).

The non-conducive atmosphere which reigns between the white teacher and her black students reveals the poor quality of teaching these students receive from her. They are going through a poor and mis-education than an efficient one. Miss Rinner shows more hate in teaching than elevating these black children’s intellectual potentialities. She infuses nothing in them as education but disorients them. So, such education is special and a willing one because it is elaborated to bring about illiteracy instead of literacy.

Hate replaces love of teaching as in the passage: ‘‘All the classrooms she had ever taught in were permeated with the same mixture of odors, the dusty smell of chalk, the heavy suffocating smell of pine oil used to lay the grain and disinfect the worn old floors, and the smell of the children themselves’’ (Petry, 235). By smelling nothing tasteful, Miss Rinner seems to be in front of animals than being in front of human beings. They are unworthy of learning. Their education becomes special and not an orthodox one. It differs from the one Miss Rinner would like to teach as mentioned:

On Saturday and Sunday she dreamed of the day when she would be transferred to a school where the children were blonde, blue-eyed like girls who arrived on time in the morning filled with

orange juice, cereal and creamy, properly cooked eggs and tall glasses of milk. They would sit perfectly still until school was out, they would wear starched pinked dresses and smell faintly of lavender soap, and they would look at her with adoration (Petty, 234).

The school Miss Rinner dreams of, does not exist in poor quarters peopled by black people. Through her attitude she disorients black children, disempowers them in profit of the white society. Miss Rinner's presence in the black middle is not a symbol of integration but that of undermining black children's intellectual advancement. She does not help to develop their intellectual power but she prevents it. Such special education declines black children's educational trajectory as it is expressed in *Native Son*:

How far did you go to school Bigger? To the eighth grade, mam. Do you ever think of going back? Well, I gotta work now, mam. Suppose you had the chance to go back? Well, I don't know, mam. The last man who worked here went to the night school and got an education. Yessum. What would you want to be if you had an education? I don't know, mam. And you ever think about it? Na'm (Wright, 61).

The exchange between Bigger Thomas and Mrs Dalton reveals on one hand Bigger's poor level of education and on the other hand Mrs Dalton's eagerness in attempting to convince him to get educated. Bigger, previously wanted to be able to fly a plane and to be visible but why suddenly he prefers working than going back to school. So, ironically Bigger's attitude reveals that education is not for black people. She investigates Bigger's and jokes because she would not like to see him as her equal with an efficient and effective education that is why Mr Dalton's policy of offering education to blacks is critical as described in the following passage: Even though Mr Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the only tumbling down from the rot'' (Wright, 148). There is a contrast between the millions of funds to help educating blacks is a decoy. This money helps to confer a special education, an impoverished education which does not help coming out of poverty and miserable conditions but tightens them. So blacks' education becomes critical as Ralph Ellison observes it ironically:

I see the bronze statue of the College Founder, the Cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding (Ellison, 33-34).

The bronze statue of the College Founder becomes a puzzling one instead of being a confident one. It is the critical angle under which, the author questions about the teaching which goes on in blacks' educational institutions. The teaching which goes on in the college does not develop black people to be outstanding but debases them at four footed level. The different questions which trouble the narrator's thoughts witness that he is in front of a revelation about an efficient blinding process of mis-educating black people as revealed in the passage: "And how they arrived! Come smiling, inspecting, encouraging in whispers, speech making into the wide-open ears of our black and yellow faces and each leaving a sizeable cheque as they departed" (Ellison, 34). Like Mr Dalton, the white philanthropists undermine the blacks' educational system for their own interest. They corrupt it just to fabricate some cowards instead of helping to build influent and outstanding persons. So, the white people fund the black educational institutions in order to cut short their intellectual advancement. To make of them weak and easy to be manipulated and dominated.

### **3-Mis-Education and Disempowerment**

The core meaning of black mis-education is to maintain them in a state of alienation and exploitation through degrading jobs. An uneducated black person is a cheap manpower as symbolized in the following extract:

They thinks 'cause everything down here is done by machinery, that's all there is to it. They crazy ! Ain't a continental thing that happens down here that ain't as iffen I done put my black hands into it ! Them machines just do rhe cooking, these here hands right have donr the sweeting (Ellison, 178).

The black worker boasts of being the one who does the work in the firm out of his state of ignorance. He is enriching the white owner while becoming poorer and poorer. He is so because of his state of illiteracy. His mis-education or illiteracy makes of him a cheap worker who is easy to be exploited. So, the capitalist society has made of the black people illiterate for massive manpower needs as it is said: "We are the machine inside the machine" (Ellison, 177). Black people line up the white man's pockets while remaining poor due to the capitalist ideology which deprives them of an efficient education.

Their state of illiteracy confers to them special jobs through which they are exploited and remained at the inferior stair of the scale as portrayed in the following excerpt: "I hope

you're a good driver '' (Wright, 61). Mr Dalton funds blacks' schools to turn them into drivers, manual jobs workers but not in prominent persons. To be a driver means to be under his domination and manipulation. Blacks' education is nothing but that which conducts to manual jobs. It disempowers them.

They are guided toward an education which keeps them impotent and order-takers as stated in the following extract:'' I'll be late for my swing class at the Y.W.C.A Vera said'' (Wright, 19). Bigger and his sister are pushed toward degrading and order-taking jobs while Mr. Dalton's daughter attends University as said in the passage: ''Father, if he hasn't anything else to do, let him drive me to my lecture at the University tonight'' (Wright, 54). The contrast reveals that blacks are not educated to escape poverty and white man's domination but to remain underdeveloped. Miss Dalton is the symbol of the white society's everlasting domination. By attending the University she is shaping the power to dominate Bigger Thomas who is a mere driver as stated in the following excerpt: ''Bigger at eight thirty, drive Miss Dalton out to the University and wait for her ''(Wright, 55). Her presence at the University symbolizes a rising figure of domination while Bigger who waits for her outside to take her back home is the perfect representation of a powerless and order-taking person. The white community's supremacy is visible only through the illiterate state of black people as Ellison puts it forth in the passage:

As you develop you must remember that I am dependent upon you and your fellow students. Through you and your fellow students I become let us say, three hundred teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmer, and so on. The way I can observe in terms of living personalities to what extent my money, my time and my hopes have been fruitly invested (Ellison, 41).

Mr Dalton has a super power over any kind of black worker. He invests in order to control them because ironically he does not want them to be his equal. He funds the black school to create subordinate and impotent persons. He deprives them of social, economics as well as political power by undermining their education. He is like many other white persons responsible of this special education erected to disempower black people for the sake of domination and supremacy. This special education also drives black children in the streets and shapes their love for violence among themselves as stated in the following passage:

His mother's a whore, Grey Cap repeated. Does nasty things with men, he elaborated. She don't either, Bub said indignantly. And you stop talking about her. Yah ! Who's going to make me ?



Your mother's a whore. Bub doubled up his fist and reached for and found the boy's nose. Why, you\_ the boy aimed a blow at Bub\_ a blow that slanted off as Bub ducked. Grey Cap pushed close against him, then knocked him off balance so that he went sprawling backward on the pavement (Petry, 248-49).

Bub and all the black children of his age are victims of an unbalanced education system imposed on them in order to dominate them, to maintain them blind. Their educational system rushes them in the streets and provide them violence as the only possibility to be visible and outstanding in their community. They are engaged in a process of self-harming and destruction. Instead of being in classrooms, gambling as mentioned in the passage becomes their routine:

Work for Poppa. Come for Poppa. Act right for Poppa. Hear what Poppa say. His body rocked back and forth as he talked to the dice, oblivious of everything, the street, the big man, the impatient little circle around him. Come on, roll'em ! What the hell ! Christ, you going to kiss them dice all day ? Roll'em, boy ! Roll'em ! (Petry, 246).

Their presence in this gambling arena is the symbol of their disempowerment and the white man's domination over them. The action of spending their time in gambling does not project a brilliant future for them because they become potential deads or prisoners as stated in the extract : "The big man kept turning his head. Taking quick looks first up and down the street. Bub looked, too to see what it was he was seeking. A mounted cop turned into the block from seventh street" (Petry, 246). They are trapped by the white world. Its action rushes them in streets and infuses in them this love for gambles just to provider them an ephemeral happiness and turn their backs to the fitting goals for themselves.

They are gambling masters because the white world shapes it this way for them to be gamblers and robbers as it is said: "It was Gus who had first thought of robbing Blums's" (Wright, 24). Out of classrooms, the black boys are monsters and that is the will of the white world because under this angle of violence and criminals, they are likely to be killed or arrested and jailed. They become an easy prey for the social prejudices. The policy of mis-educating black people in order to dominate them is well expressed *Native Son* as said in the following passage: "I want you to know that my heart is not bitter, Mr Dalton said. What this boy has done will not influence my relations with the Negro people. Why, only today I sent dozen pingpong tables to the South Side Boys' club" (Wright, 232). He gives gambling materials to maintain these boys ignorant because ping-pong tables do not enlighten them but take away their social advancement. So, the fund he invests in blacks' education is a critical act. He offers

to them a special education which conducts them in gambling houses and turn them into perpetual impotent who fit to work for him and take order from him because of their profound state of ignorance due to their illiteracy. This illiteracy state perpetuates the white community's supremacy over black community.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation about blacks' education reveals that a specific education seems to be scaffolded for black people in order to deprive them what an effective and efficient education could provide as power and visibility to them. Thus, illiteracy revealed to be a weapon for the white people to stress their domination and assumption of supremacy over black community because education offers political, social and financial power. For black people learning becomes the solely factor to acquire freedom as said in the passage:

'What we need are books that can bit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that makes us feel as though we had been banished to the wood, far from any human presence, a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us (Louis. West, 54).

The author insists on having books because they conduct toward effective freedom and visibility. Books dispel the fog and the mud on the way leading to visibility. It humanizes and takes away the claws of oppression.

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