



Socio-cultural Issues Representation in Native Son Novel by Richard Wright

Kathrin Meylida Annur¹, Fatchul Mu'in², Nasrullah Nasrullah³, Rina Listia⁴

kathrinma26@gmail.com

fatchul_muin@ulm.ac.id

nasrullah01@ulm.ac.id

rina_listia@ulm.ac.id

English Language Education Study Program, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, South
Kalimantan, Indonesia

Received: 2023-07-8 Accepted: 2023-07-08

DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v11i1.3679

Abstract

Novel is one of the types of literature that retells real-world events in a fictional way without taking away their social or cultural parts. This research was conducted to analyze Native Son, a novel about the lives of some black people in America in the 1930s. The elements analyzed in this novel include history and themes; language and interaction; character morals and characterization; and the socio-cultural impacts of this novel. The approach used is an interdisciplinary approach, and the method used is a qualitative method. The data are collected by reading the book, taking the contents that represent the issues, and then using the theory to figure out what the data mean. The results of the study show that Native Son novel portray some of the socio-cultural issues that often occur in society. Hence, this study provides readers with implications and enlightenment about socio-cultural issues that occurred in America and can still be found today.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary approach; Native Son; Novel analysis

Introduction

A novel is one of many kinds of literary works. The very first novel in the world was first published in the 17th century, meaning that novel has been around since a thousand years ago. A novel can be seen as an expression of the relationship between the text's structure and its social and cultural context, as expressed through language and ideology (Farahmandian & Shao, 2020). Novel authors can capture what is going on around them in society and paint it out in their written works. Therefore, people can freely encounter various social and cultural events in a single novel, which might have a deeper context in the plot.

Literature imitates the way people live their lives in real life. Not only does it come down to imitation, but literature uses language as a medium to re-examine the imitation, whether in the form of poetry or a story. Literature can also be considered a social document, which contains many things including history, morals, attitudes, and even culture. Therefore, the literary theory used in this study is from Wellek and Warren (1949), in their book Theory of Literature. The book sections used to support the theory include literary theory, criticism,

and history; literature and society; and the analysis of the literary work of art.

Native Son by Richard Wright was published in 1939. It's a novel about Bigger Thomas, a black adolescent living in poverty in Chicago during the 1930s. It goes into greater detail regarding how society has shaped certain races, particularly black Americans, into something that is socially unacceptable. Unfortunately, a mishap aided this and even turned Bigger into a criminal. Furthermore, the author fully tells a systemic cause for those incidents. This novel can be used as a reference for literary studies by looking at social and cultural issues that occur in the novel and in today's society (Mu'in, 2002).

Native Son (1939) became a piece of nautical literature that showed how people of color lived on the edges of the United States in the 1930s. Every day, black people have to deal with a lot of social, cultural, and political issues. These issues from the past are starting to get better, and there are signs of hope to improve it. But it is undeniable that these issues can never be completely eradicated. Therefore, this study is expected to increase knowledge and give a clearer overview of how bad these issues are now for the many various races of people out there. Without many people's concern, these issues are becoming harmful to our society.

Method

An interdisciplinary approach is a method of problem-solving that incorporates the consideration of multiple viewpoints from related, relevant fields of science (Sudikan, 2015). In this case, the author uses an interdisciplinary approach as a method of analysis, using an integrated review of various points of view in cognate sciences. A novel is a subconscious world that is so vast that it can be analyzed to its roots. Native Son is a novel that incorporates social and cultural elements, with a major focus on topics of racism, prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, and slavery among Americans (Quillian, 2006) that lasted hundreds of years ago. Therefore, the use of an interdisciplinary approach is the right step in exploring the world in this novel.

The author's technique and method are a text-based document (a novel) and a qualitative method that describe the results of the analysis of the novel. Aspers and Corte (2019) say that qualitative research means understanding, making interpretations, and making distinctions. In reading novels for analysis, real understanding is needed so that the results of the analysis become weighty. Miles and Huberman's (1994) model, which consists of four components—data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing a conclusion—collects data sources. So, the first step is to read and understand the whole book, then sort out the parts you want to analyze, and then show the data.

Table 1. Data source

Title of Novel	Genres	Author	Publisher	Year
Native Son	African-American literature, social protest novel	Richard Wright	Harper & Brothers	1939

The 'Native Son' novel by Richard Wright is the data source. The data analysis is conducted based on cultural studies.

Results and Discussion

History and Theme

Every major event must have a prefix. Prefixes, triggers, and causes are some of the things that are useful in knowing more about the big event. This is what we know as history. Cicero (cited from Susanto, 2014) states that "history is the light of truth, a witness to time,

a teacher of life; the first law in history is the fear of telling lies, the next law is not afraid to tell the truth". Thus, history always show truths, not lies.

Meanwhile, a theme is very significant in a literary work, and we can even say that identifying a theme should be the first thing we do before creating the work. The role of theme is very important in tale writing to elaborate on the issue that the author wishes to convey to the reader. Finding the theme involves awareness of the story's meaning and the ability to expand on what is contained in the text for the story's audience.

Therefore, the history is a proof of an event and is very helpful for many people in understanding what really happened to the truth of a certain event, while the theme is something that represents the whole thing discussed in the story. The following is the history and theme related to 'Native Son':

Table 2. History & Theme in 'Native Son' Novel

Aspects	Dialogues	Representation
Prejudice	<i>"There's a lot of white people in the world."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 72)	Prejudice is a negative or hostile attitude toward a group or its individual members that is held without justification or evidence. It is characterized by stereotyped, illogical views. In terms of historical perspectives, the earliest psychological research on prejudice was performed in the 1920s. This study aimed to establish white supremacy.
Discrimination	<i>"If you killed her you'll kill me', she said. 'I ain't in this.... You told me you never was going to kill.' 'All right. They white folks They done killed plenty of us.' 'That don't make it right'"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 168)	By the early 17th century, the neutral sense of discriminating, "the act of differentiating," had entered English, followed by the positive sense associated with exceptional judgment in the 18th century. Discrimination in the sense of "prejudice" has been practiced since the early nineteenth century, about 200 years ago.
Segregation	<i>"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."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 28)	Segregation is when people of color are forced to live, go to school, and use other services in separate areas. In the 18th and 19th centuries, segregation was enacted multiple times in America because some individuals

believed that black and white
 people couldn't coexist.

Language and Interaction

According to Jismulatif, Suganda, & Cristiana (2014), language is one of the most crucial aspects of human life; without it, people cannot communicate, connect, or share their experiences with one another. Each written work certainly uses language as a means of delivering stories in written form. Languages are manifold, and the author has the task of deciding what language he will use for the characters they include in the work.

The characters in the novel can use any language. Whether the character uses polite or casual language or the language used in a particular culture In *Native Son*, the difference between the two black and white cultures in America certainly has different languages as well. The explanation that follows provides context for the language style that the main character, Bigger, and several other characters use.

Table 3. Language & Interaction in 'Native Son' Novel

Characters	Dialogues	Representation
Bigger to Mr. Dalton	- "Yessuh." (<i>Yes, sir</i>) (Wright, NS, p. 50) - "Nawsuh." (<i>No, sir.</i>) (Wright, NS, p. 50) - "Good evening, mam." (<i>ma'am</i>). (Wright, NS, p. 53)	Calling someone 'sir' or 'ma'am' in American English means that person respects the other person as someone above him, maybe like a boss.
Jan to Bigger	- "First of all . . . don't say sir to me. I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan. That's the way it'll be between us." (Wright, NS, p. 65)	Jan wants Bigger to see him not as a person above him because of Jan's skin color.
Bigger & his siblings	- "You sonofabitch!" - "that sonofabitch could cut your throat" - "I bet that sonofabitch rakes off a million bucks..." (Wright, NS, p. 17)	Cursing habit.

Moral-character and Characterization

In both fiction and non-fiction, one of the most important things to the reader or fan of the work is the character and what they are like. The author's ability to design for character development needs to be done well. This is done so that the storyline of the work can run smoothly with the help of good character writing. So are the morals that a character has.

According to Cohen and Morse (2014), moral character can be defined as an individual's capacity to think, feel, and act ethically vs. unethically, or as a subset of individual differences that are morally meaningful. They also add that morality and ethics are concepts used to describe ethical and moral standards of behavior. In short, morals and ethics are two things that are interconnected, or even the same. That's why character morals are very important in character development and storyline development. The moral characters of some of the 'Native Son' characters are as follows:

Table 4. Moral-character & Characterization in 'Native Son' Novel

Characters	Dialogues	Representation
Thomas Bigger	<p>- <i>"There was in him an uneasiness and distrust that made him feel that he ought to have it along."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 46)</p> <p>- <i>"He flushed warm with anger. Goddamn her soul to hell! Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun at him?"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 65)</p> <p>- <i>He was feeling the rum rising to his head, "There's a lot of white people in the world."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 72).</p>	Bigger is a poor, uneducated black teenager who lives in a thug environment. He has been stuck his entire life disliking and fearing the whites, who define the tight bounds of the existence of black Americans.
Mr. Dalton	<p>- <i>"You know, he does a lot for your people.", "Yes, the colored people. He gave over 5 million dollars to colored schools." – Peggy referring to Mr. Dalton.</i> (Wright, NS, p. 57)</p> <p>- <i>"Mr. Dalton, why do you contribute money to Negro education?" – "I want to see them have a chance."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 165)</p>	An uncommon white man in America, who accepts Bigger as a trustworthy and hard-working guy. He states that he gives a great deal of money to African-American charities and that he hires black people to support them.
Mary Dalton	<p>- <i>The girl came close to him and stopped just opposite his chair. "Bigger, do you belong to a union?" she asked.</i> (Wright, NS, p. 54)</p> <p>- <i>"I scare you?" she asked softly, smiling.</i> (Wright, NS, p. 63)</p> <p>- <i>"I think I can trust you. After all, I'm on your side."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 63)</p>	Mr. and Mrs. Dalton's only daughter with a cheerful personality. She dates a communist and interacts with Bigger without concern for the social boundary between black men and white women. Mary's crossing of this line results in her death.

Socio-cultural Impacts

Sociocultural refers to a combination of social and cultural factors. Everyone's life is surrounded by social and cultural influences. Not only in real life, social and cultural aspects also appear in literary works. Even nowadays, it is very easy to spot socio-cultural aspects in works like novels. Farahmandian and Shao (2020) state "A novel can be regarded as a manifestation of the relationship between the structure of the text itself and its social and cultural background through language and ideology". Thus, the following are some socio-cultural events found in *Native Son*:

Table 5. Socio-cultural Impacts in 'Native Son' Novel

Aspects	Dialogues	Representation
Prejudice	<p>- <i>"well, you see 'em one way and I see 'em another. To me, a nigger's a nigger."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 140)</p>	Most white Americans have a negative opinion of all black people.

	- <i>"Some self-human black ape may be climbing through the windows of our homes to rape, murder, and burn our daughters"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 245)	
Discrimination	- <i>"That black sonofabitch !"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 216) - <i>"Kill that black ape!"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 216) - <i>"gee, isn't he black!"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 244) - <i>"Most Negro businesses were funeral parlors; white undertakers refused to bother with dead black bodies"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 162)	Discriminatory/racist remarks directed at black people.
Segregation	- <i>The white neighbor decided to limit the amount of education his black neighbor could receive.</i> (Wright, NS, p. 5) - <i>"Negro lived upon a common territory; separate from the bulk of the white population"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 5) - <i>"They built a big school and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could to it but those who lived within the line; that kept all the colored boys out"</i> (Wright, NS, p. 327) - <i>"You're being black, as I told you before, makes it easy for them to single you out."</i> (Wright, NS, p. 326)	Separation of some social groups, namely black people, in society (where white people are the majority).

Conclusion

The research findings show that there's a lot to be gained from Native Son's novels. From history, theme, language, interaction, socio-cultural impacts, and character morals, all are found in the same novel. Although topics such as prejudice, discrimination, and slavery are quite severe and sensitive to discuss, the fact is that these things are important for the whole community to know. The interdisciplinary approach was helpful in the process of analyzing Native American novels. Analysis for novels like Native Son is better seen not only from one discipline but also from various perspectives that later help us in understanding the story told by the author of the novel.

This novel, according to Wright, warns Americans about the risks of a culture that appears to ignore the fact that enslavement of dark-skinned people still exists. Because America is a society that loves freedom, this type of prejudice has the potential to destroy the country. Wright believes that everyone, black and white, should be prepared to deal with the consequences of America's two centuries of slavery. Wright also takes us inside Bigger's mind and shows us how his surroundings have tragic effects. Bigger didn't grow up to be a bad person, but he is a native son, a product of American culture's cruelty and bigotry.

Native Son is not just a work of fiction or literature; it also reflects how our society works. Therefore, the author suggests that this book should be looked at in more depth because there are still many social and cultural issues in it that haven't been covered in this study. The analysis of issues in this novel can be seen from other points of view, such as law, politics, and character psychology. From those perspectives, the studies are expected to help

reduce socio-cultural problems, especially in the context of cultural diversity.

References

- Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is Qualitative in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(2), 139–160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>
- Cohen, T. R., & Morse, L. (2014). Moral character: What it is and what it does. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 34, 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2014.08.003>
- Farahmandian, H., & Shao, L. (2020). Sociocultural Studies via CDA in Native Son (1939). *Arab World English Journal*, 11(1), 389–398. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no1.26>
- Jismulatif, J., Suganda, D., & Cristiana, M. D. (2014). A Reconstruction of the Racist Ideology in Richard Wright's Native Son. *IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science*, 19(3), 197–202.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. CA: Sage Publications.
- Masruddin, M., & Nasriandi, N. (2022). Lexical and Syntactical Errors Performed by Junior High School Student in Writing Descriptive Text. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 10(1), 1094-1100. doi:<https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v10i1.3024>
- Mu'in, F. (2002). *PENGANTAR STUDI SASTRA (Bahan Pendukung Mata Kuliah 'Prose')*.
- Quillian, L. (2006). New Approaches to Understanding Racial Prejudice and Discrimination. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32(1), 299–328. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123132>
- Sudikan, S. Y. (2015). PENDEKATAN INTERDISIPLINER, MULTIDISIPLINER, DAN TRANSDISIPLINER DALAM STUDI SASTRA. *Paramasastra*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.26740/parama.v2i1.1496>
- Susanto, D. (2014). *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah*. UIN Sunan Ampel Pres. <http://digilib.uinsby.ac.id/20183/7/Pengantar%20Ilmu%20Sejarah.pdf>
- Sidabutar, K. (2022). Grice's Types of Maxims in "Willoughbhys" Movie. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 10(1), 326-337. doi:<https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v10i1.2661>
- Wellek, R., & Warren, A. (1949). *Theory of Literature*. London: Jonathan Cape Thirty Bedford Square.
- Wright, R. (1939). *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Kathrin Meylida Annur, Fatchul Mu'in, Nasrullah Nasrullah, Rina Listia
Socio-cultural Issues Representation in Native Son Novel by Richard Wright