

**IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*, THE GAZE OF THE
WHITE EYE, IRONICALLY SELFBLINDING, WORKS AS
PANOPTICON AND MAKES THE BLACK GO BLIND**

Nipa Nasrin
Centre for Languages
BRAC University, 66 Mohakhali
Dhaka – 1212, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

In *Native Son* Richard Wright explains the causes of the psychological blindness of the Blacks and of the Whites, along with their results. Wright illustrates how the white gaze and ideology work as panopticon and force the Blacks into a pressured and dangerous state of mind while the media constantly portrays them as animalistic brutes. This conditioning bounds the Black to react violently or to become blind towards own existence. Unknowingly the Whites also get conditioned by their deep-seated racial prejudices, despite some rare good intentions. Mrs. Dalton's blindness represents White inability to see Blacks as anything other than the White media-enforced-stereotypes. Richard Wright deliberately suggests that America is self blinding, seeking to address the symptoms of racism while remaining incognizant of reality. In Bigger's blindness, like Sophocles, Wright connects the idea of 'excessive pride' and anger. Bigger is as blind to his potentials as of the duality of the reality. This blindness, of which all the Bigger's are the victims, results from the constant attack of racist propaganda and racial oppression. The Whites willingly created this dual blindness by using their ideological gaze as panopticon in order to condition Black life accordingly and to negate Black existence totally.

Key words: panopticon, ideological gaze, media-enforced-stereotypes, dual blindness, oppression

The gaze of the White eye, ironically self-blinding, works as panopticon and makes the Blacks go blind. Blindness is pervasive in the world of *Native Son*. Here all of Wright's characters blind themselves, one way or the other, so that they do not have to look at life's realities: and as a Naturalist, Richard Wright focuses on this psychological blindness that we find both in the Whites and in the Blacks (though different in nature). Now I would like to discuss this 'blindness', along with its cause, impact, working in three different stages: blindness of the Blacks, blindness of the Whites and Bigger Thomas as a blind.

First comes the 'blindness' of the Blacks. Blacks are forced and ideologically conditioned to act according to the White gaze. The White structure has always placed the Blacks in a regulated pattern. Even in the most personal area of life, Black men have been told what to think and what to do by the White power structure. Throughout the whole novel, Wright illustrates the ways in which White gaze forces the Blacks into a pressured and

therefore dangerous state of mind. The whole White gaze works as a natural force and makes the Black men act accordingly. This gaze has convinced the Blacks that they are not as good as the Whites, that they should play 'nigger' and 'boy' when they are in the presence of a White man. Bigger acts totally according to the White gaze like a blind man when he goes to Mr. Dalton's house. His knees are slightly bent, his lips are partly open and his shoulders stopped. This ape image of Bigger constructed by the Whites, shows us how conditioned, subconsciously, Bigger is to play the 'nigger' role, only because of the perennial assertion by the White world that all Blacks are shiftless and lazy, actually 'a little lower than the brutal beasts.' Though Bigger hates himself for doing it and tries not to do it, unconsciously like a blind man, he follows the White and acts as an ape:

There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him feel that they did. (Page 50)

This shows how the Whites conditioned the Blacks psychologically and made them blind about their human identity, to consider themselves as inferior. This conditioning or 'blindness' we find in Bigger which represents the 'Black blindness' as a whole.

To maintain this conditioning or gaze, or to form Black existence as slaves, Whites create a 'fear'. This 'fear' works as panopticon and controls and makes the Black blind to themselves. It is a fear, almost inborn, which has been reinforced by the actions of Whites for as long as Bigger can remember.

Along with this fear, newspaper, cinema, the media also worked as the instrument of the continuing White gaze. We find how Bigger is psychologically conditioned by *The Gay Woman* and *Trader Horn*. He goes to the Dalton house influenced by the luxury of the White world in the cinema. Again, cinema and newspaper also formed Black identity. In *Trader Horn*, the Blacks are presented as savages. The newspaper report in page 260, presents Bigger as an ape. It constructs Black identity as inferior, something like beasts, untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization (White). It also gives an implicit indication that America will love only harmless, genial Blacks, not the brutish 'Negroes' like Bigger. Politics of media becomes very clear when we find that Bigger is presented as a rapist so many times that it establishes him like this to incite mob. This type of Blacks was out of place in a White men's civilization. Thus media creates a white made picture of the Blacks and makes the Blacks blind about their real condition or identity.

Above all, the White ideology (education, law, religion) works as panopticon and makes the Black life so confidential that they get no chance or space (physical/mental) to survive. This White ideology works as a natural force (snow) – all the time around you; almost like person create fear and controls movement by the threats of numbness; stops all sorts of regeneration. It works something like God. It always controls you, but you can not see or bound to follow. Otherwise, you will be destroyed:

To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark. As long as he and his Black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that White force.

Whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived in this prescribe corner of the city, they paid mute tribute. (Page 109)

This ideological conditioning by the White gaze makes the Blacks bound to react in a violent way or to become blind towards their own existence. So, Bigger acts in a violent way. The denial of equal rights, economic opportunities, the wealth, possibility and media around makes the Black feel inferior and act blindly in a violent way. They act like this because they do not know what they 'are' and what they 'own.' To come out of this void they try to take shelter in religion but again get deceived as Christianity associates with Whites and finally loose their faith on themselves.

Mal be they were right when they said that a black skin was bad, the covering of an apelike animal. (Page 256)

The other way to react is to accept and become blind about existence like Ma, Bessie, and Buddy. Here Ma and Bessie accept and do not make any question. Buddy, like a blind, aspires for a job like Bigger not realizing the White gaze working. Even the Blacks, who were in some position, did not want to reveal the truth about the real situation of the Black existence. They did not want to express the hate, anger, shame, inferiority of the Black community of which they were victims. They felt ashamed that Bigger would reveal their nakedness to the Whites and destroy their pride. So they did not support Bigger, their own past. These people are as also blind made by white capitalist society. They did not want to see that they themselves are also conditioned by White ideology. Thus White gaze or ideals not only created spiritual blindness between the Blacks and the Whites but also among the Blacks themselves. This destroyed the possibility of unity very much needed for revolt.

Then comes the blindness of the whites. Unknowingly the Whites also get influenced by their own oppressive gaze or ideology. Their internalized sense of power, pride and superiority makes them go blind towards the Blacks as equal human being. They become conditioned by their deep rooted racial prejudices despite some rare good intention. This blindness of the Whites we find in various characters such as Mr. Dalton, Max, Jan, Mary, Britten, and Buckley. This

psychological blindness of all these is epitomized in Mrs. Dalton's Physical blindness.

Mr. Dalton was both consciously and unconsciously blind towards Black existence like all other Whites. Daltons think that they are friends of Black and they know the Black world. But they are ignorant and know only the Blacks who are content to play 'nigger' for them. Actually, they are blind to the reality and of the Black condition. They can not realize to what extent their gaze works on the Black and robs them (Blacks) of their own human existence. They give millions of dollar and 'ping-pong' tables to the Blacks as charity. But they can not see that this charity does not improve the Black condition. There is even politics behind this charity. The White men give the Black ping-pong tables because the blacks are supposed to play games like a boy and forget about their cramped condition, reality and oppression.

The whites know the social conditions well and to maintain their social, economic, and psychological conditioning of the Blacks they consciously create the blindness. We find this in Mr. Dalton. Though he does not know who made this ideology, he willingly accepts this Black conditioning for his benefit. He does not give rent to the Black in the white area and does not lessen the Black rent though he knows their poor condition. He considered it unethical. A kind of guilt/fear made by the Whites creates this blindness-

In their hearts they feel that a wrong has been done and when a Negro commits a crime against them, they fancy they see the ghastly evidence of that wrong. So the men of wealth and property, the victims of attack who are eager to protect their profits, say to their guilty hirelings, 'Stump out this ghost!' or, like Mr. Dalton, they say, 'Let's do something for this man so he won't feel that way' But then it is too late.

But their wrong not only made the Blacks commit crime but also dislocated them from their 'self.' The Whites also understand this and willingly become blind towards the killing of human being for their own profits.

Again characters like Mary, Jan and Mrs. Dalton are totally good intentioned, but become the victim of their own hegemonic discourse. Mary wants to see black 'life' and befriends with the Blacks. At one point she says of the Blacks:

We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They're *human*.....here are twelve million of them...They live in our country... (Page 70)

This suggests the very blindness of Mary. Human, to her, means having a car, good food, freedom, money, and happiness. She has no idea of the Black experience, no White man can. Eating Black cooked food, singing 'swing low, sweet' chariot is experiencing blackness to Mary. It is a game that she does not even realize she is playing. She tries to be a bit Black and a bit White at the same time. While eating, she tells Bigger that he will have to take the 'trunk' to the station. This shows her own hegemonic blindness. She will be a 'soul sister' but only as long as she can keep giving orders to her 'black brother.'

Like Mary, Jan is also influenced by White gaze. He insists Bigger to shake hands with him and to call him 'Jan' instead of Mr. Erlone. This made Bigger lost and naked. Because he was made to believe that a White men does not really accept a Black man as equal. The White people are the part of White world of terror; they belong to the system which functions to restrict Blacks from socializing with Whites. The white has created them enemy and can be kind occasionally to the Blacks if they wish. This thought of Bigger, Jan could not see. He could not see that how Bigger was made to believe this and that his friendly acts are not enough for Bigger to see him as being any different from other Whites. Jan later on realizes this-

"I see now. I was kind of blind...And may be in a certain sense I'm the one who's really guilty"(page 260).

Though both Mary and Jan were good intentioned, they could not see that Bigger's black world is a black hell, created by the Whites. They could not feel that they only making Bigger to feel worthless. In this regard, they were deceived by their own ideology and were blind about Bigger's individuality as much as the overt racist Buckley and Britten are deceived by a failure to recognize Bigger's humanity.

Finally comes Mrs. Dalton. All sorts of psychological blindness of the Whites are presented through Mrs. Dalton. Her physical blindness is, of course, the physical manifestation

of a blindness she shares with her husband, daughter Mary, Jan and much of White America. Mrs. Dalton's white eyes present the blindness itself. In Book I, Mrs. Dalton could sense Bigger in the kitchen. Because almost all the blind people develop an uncanny power to feel one's presence. Then why could she not find him in Mary's room? It happens so because she could not even think that a Black boy can be in Mary's (White girl) room at that time. This reflects not only the physical but also the psychological blindness of Mrs. Dalton.

Mrs. Dalton's inability to see Bigger leads him to kill Mary, Just as the total negation of the Whites to see Blacks as individuals causes Blacks to live in fear and hatred. Her blindness represents the inability of the white America as a whole to see Blacks as anything other than the embodiment of their media-enforced-stereotypes. Besides Mrs. Dalton's blindness, the distorting stereotypes and disfiguring violence of the 'blindly resins' mob' serves as a testament to America's spiritual blindness. And through all these Wright makes a deliberate effort to suggest that America is self blinding seeking to address the symptoms of racism while remaining deliberately incognizant of reality.

Finally we find Bigger as a blind in spite of his sudden moments of realization. In developing Bigger's blindness, like Sophocles, Richard Wright intertwines the idea of excessive pride with the idea of blindness. In Book I, Bigger was blind. In Book II, he starts facing reality and the blindness of others. In Book III, he is forced to confront his own blindness.

Like Oedipus, Bigger remains blind, in spite of his realization, of his fate. Through Bigger's struggle to live we find his sight. But what we could not see was that his fate was not fixed, even before he was born; as he was born Black in a White-ruled society. As soon as Bigger killed Mary, outcome was known. White society asked him to accept his living, to be contented with the realities of Black life or he would end up on the gallows as Ma foretells. When this comes true, it shows that he was actually blind of the white power.

Bigger was also blinded from his human self by the White capitalist ideology and media. *The Gay Women* created a kind of desire for White Luxury, and influenced him to accept slavery of the Whites. It also made him afraid of the communists. In this

way it prevents him from thinking and made him blind of his own rights. On the other hand *Trader Horn* presents Blacks as savages. By presenting these two films together, the White actually made a desire for whiteness and hate for Blackness in Bigger. Thus Bigger was ideologically blinded from seeing his real condition and to accept slavery by forgetting bitterness.

Bigger was not only blinded through media and ideology but also by the White-created fear. It is clear from the murder of Mary and Bessie that Bigger is incapacitated by fear of the Whites to the point where he cannot make judgment of his action, nor can he rationally determine what his own action should be. He was so blinded by the White panopticon of 'fear' that he has, figuratively decapitated him, refused to recognize his mind, creativity, his worth; he has made him faceless and dumped him into a stereotype mold of being less than human as a headless, faceless nobody.

Most notably, we see that Bigger Thomas's incredible pride and anger often blind him from seeing reality. He accepts Mary's killing as a sign of establishing his ownness for the first time in life. It makes him feel proud. He becomes a man to himself. "He had murdered and had executed a new life for himself" (Page 101). He even starts thinking that he would take revenge by making use of White blindness about Black intellect. His proud blindness also prevents him from seeing what opportunity he has. In the readers' eyes, Bigger's proud announcement that he is entering a new world, is a testament of his blindness. With so many opportunities to escape town and reject the destruction of violence, Bigger is trapped in the city.

Bigger's pride and anger alternate to keep control of his mind and prevent him from seeing clearly. Consequently, Bigger's flight in Book II is doomed before it begins and Bigger's 'Escape' is really a blind and headlong rush into the fate that is waiting for him.

Just like the Whites, Bigger is also blind to see the Whites as individuals. To him they represent the oppressive White force. He cannot see the good intention of Mary, Mrs. Dalton, and Jan. Their acts create anger and shame in him. He totally hates them. About Mary he says "Like her? I hate her! So, help me God, I hated her!"

Ironically Bigger is as blind of his potentials and actions as the White America is blindly unaware of the racism, poverty and of the Black existence as individuals. Bigger thought that by killing Mary he was actually establishing himself and ending the fear of White ideology. But what he could not see that he was re-enforcing the white idea or conditioning of Blacks as violent, brutes. Though he saw his killing Mary as an act of creation, he could not see that this was actually a result of White oppression. He also failed to see that this ironically provided a weapon with which the Whites will continue their oppression, keep Blacks within boundary and make them blind.

Bigger's blindness results from the constant barrage of racist propaganda and racial oppression. He was so conditioned by White gaze that whenever he tried to come out of it, his own mind came on his way. He himself was confused and considered himself as bad, criminal, violent and without hope.

Every movement of his body is an unconscious protest. Every desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal, is a plot or a conspiracy. Every hope is a plan for insurrection. Every glance of the eye is a threat. *His very existence is a crime against the startle.* (Page 367)

Out of his blindness, he tried to come out of the White gaze, and tried to go beyond. Just before his capture, he was literally above White men but was brought down into a new confined ghetto: prison. He could not see the impossibility of coming out of the White gaze and of going beyond the area of White eye.

The blindness of Bigger ends when he realizes the truth, his own blindness comes out of pride—"I will be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them...." (Page 388)

Now he realizes that forced into a racial system of checks and balances, he was their property heart and soul, body and blood. That they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking. He was made to live one place while they lived another. He had no choice ever. And for one reason: he was black. This was Bigger's spiritual sight. But it comes at the price of the physical sight. Bigger blacks out periodically and just he has reached the pinnacle of sight, he is taken away to be executed, his eyes closed forever. It seems that the White made the void of blindness remaining for ever.

Bigger is an embodiment of the Black revolt against the injustice of the White caste system. The White ideology which is hostile, indifferent, creates in Bigger hatred, shame, resentment, against himself, his family and of course against the White world. The White gaze makes him a man without conscience, a man without hope, desire and vision. In other words, he becomes blind by the White gaze.

After discussing the psychological blindness in the above three stages, we can conclude that the Whites willingly created this blindness by using their ideological gaze as panopticon in order to condition Black life accordingly and to negate Black existence totally.

REFERENCES

- [1] Goyal, Saab: *How to Write Research Paper*. Delhi: (2003)
- [2] Howe, Irving: *Black Boys and Native Son*. Dissent. (Autum 1963)
- [3] Smith, Philip: *Cultural Theory: An Introduction*. Massachusetts: BlackWell Publishers. (2001)
- [4] Wright, Richard: *Native Son*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers Inc. (1640)