

STEREOTYPING BLACKS IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

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Abstrak: Amerika sebagai sebuah negara multikultural, terdiri dari banyak ras dan suku. Latar belakang ini kemudian memunculkan banyak permasalahan rasial, salah satunya berupa penstereotipan kelompok dari ras tertentu. Ada banyak faktor yang menyebabkan munculnya stereotip dalam masyarakat yang heterogen. Sastra, sebagai salah satu sarana pencerminan masyarakat, seringkali mengangkat masalah-masalah tersebut sebagai sebuah tema. Fenomena ini pula yang dituangkan Richard Wright, seorang penulis Amerika, di dalam novelnya yang berjudul *Native Son*. Oleh karena itu, studi ini menggunakan konsep sosiologi sastra yang menghubungkan karya sastra dengan element eksternalnya. Studi ini menemukan beberapa stereotip orang kulit hitam yang digambarkan dalam novel tersebut, seperti tidak berpendidikan, kriminal, religius, berbakat dalam musik. Novel ini juga menggambarkan stereotip keluarga orang kulit hitam di Amerika sebagai *female headed family* dan *poor family*.

Kata kunci: Ras, Permasalahan Rasial, Stereotip.

INTRODUCTION

America as a multicultural country has faced racial problems as its consequences. One of the problems is the existence of stereotypes among the society. In regard to the differences brought by each race comprises America, people then tend to make a generalization to simplify those differences. As Taylor and Porter (1994) states in their article entitled "A Multicultural View of Stereotyping" that

The racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes, then, are part of the normal process by which people attempt to simplify and organize the complex social world with which they must cope on a day to day basis (p. 86)

The quotation above explains that people tend to simplify and organize the diversity they faced by making a generalization. In the case of black-white relation, white people use some kinds of generalization of blacks as, for example, are criminals or sexual immoral, as a means to justify and emphasize the inferior position they claimed to be blacks' natural status. In this case, this kind of stereotyping is assumed to bring a destructive effect toward the stereotyped group in terms that it can be used to justify the different treatment experienced by the group. Moreover, it is also regarded as a destructive power because as a generalization, it ignores the individual variability that may occur among the member of the stereotyped group. Thus, it becomes very interesting and important topic to be investigated.

In regard to the racial phenomena described above, many literary men write about it in their works. Richard Wright is one of the American black writers that concerns with this racial phenomena. Through his work entitled *Native Son*,

he represents the American society, in this case, described as a racist society that has a responsibility for all bad conditions experienced by black people in America. Thus, this novel can be an interesting source used to explore the racial phenomena, especially related to blacks' stereotype in American society.

Since this research uses a literary work as the primary source, therefore it is needed to use sociology of literature as the theory, as this theory is used to connect literary work with the external elements, such as the society, author and readers. Madame Stael and Traine stated that literature was identified through its social content as a mirror of external condition (especially geography, climate, race) and the expression of its historical period (the embodiment of the spirit of the time) (in Swingewood, 1986: 8).

This research is intended to analyze black stereotypes as reflected in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In this novel, Wright intentionally conveys the stereotypes of black people through the characters of the novel to criticize the society and to show how destructive these stereotypes made to the life of black people. Thus, the analysis covers the discussion on the stereotype, black stereotypes in *Native Son* and their relation to racial prejudice and discrimination experienced by black people in America.

In relation to the existence of stereotype among the society, there are many people that have conducted research on it. As Joseph Hrabá in *American Ethnicity* stated that stereotype are mental pictures we all carry in our heads, simple generalizations about intricate variation within any racial or ethnic group (1979: 124). Stereotype involves members of one group attributing characteristics to members of another group. It recognizes group differences on the basis of culture, ethnicity, race, gender and nationality.

Generalizing about groups or objects is a common pattern of thought among a complex society in which we cannot possibly know all the personal characteristics of each individual we met every day. That is why people tend to generalize and make judgments about other people. The negative side of this activity is that people will not notice on the variety of individual differences. Whether it is a positive or negative stereotype, thus, they who believe on these stereotypical pictures of a certain group may overlook or ignore the member of that group who refute these stereotypical pictures. The positive stereotype will enable them to acknowledge the ability of a certain group. Meanwhile, the negative stereotype will definitely bring a negative opinion and judgment toward the stereotyped group.

In regard of the existence of stereotype among the society, two major factors have been offered to explain the emergence of stereotype among society. In some instances, stereotypes are said to be formed through personal experience with group members. It means that a person build their stereotypic belief about a certain group only after he has made a contact with one of the group. However, when interaction with stereotyped group members is limited, stereotypes are assumed to develop through social learning, from family and friends, and from the media (Smith & Mackie, 1995). From the explanation above, it can be seen that besides personal experience, family, friends and media become the influential factor in transferring the stereotype.

In this case, blacks experience in the United States is a classic case. There are many factors that separate minority group from the very dominant white majority. The values, beliefs, behavior and also their physical appearances are different from that of the dominant white majority. Historically, the black people were brought from Africa to America to be slaves. During this period, the blacks suffered from being oppressed by the whites. They had to work and were treated inhumanly by the whites. They were not even regarded as human being. They were traded as if they were only goods (Davis, 1966:1-30). Having such kind of historical background, whites continuously see black people as more inferior compared to their race.

According to the power conflict theories, the superior position gives the dominant group such a justification to overgeneralization they made of the minority ethnic group. It is explained by Wilson in *Power, Racism and Privilege* that members of the dominant group can claim that they are in a superior position because they are naturally superior, that subordinate members do not possess qualities enabling them to compete on equal terms (1973: 43). Feagin describes one of power conflict perspectives on the social problems occurred among the society as he states that, the powerful routinely shape the prevailing beliefs and ideologies that rationalize the exploitative and troubled social arrangements of this society (1982: 25). Thus, it can be seen that the existence of stereotype of a certain minor group can be explained as a rationale on the part of the dominant group for keeping the minority ethnic group in an inferior position. It can be used to explain the existence of stereotypes in the society.

DISCUSSION

Having a background experience as slaves, blacks in America have to face a difficult position. As having been mentioned before, according to power conflict theory, members of the dominant group can claim that they are in a superior position because they are naturally superior, that subordinate members do not possess qualities enabling them to compete on equal terms (1973: 43). In this case, whites as the dominant group have claimed that blacks have innately had their inferior position among the society. Thus, they intentionally create rigid beliefs about black characteristics that contribute to their inferior position.

These beliefs then become the stereotype of black people since they are applied to generalize all blacks in America. Furthermore, these stereotypes are used to justify the different treatment experienced by black people. Because of having inferior position, whites believe that black people deserve to be excluded from the society. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is strongly portrayed this racial problem through the story.

A. Stereotyping Blacks through the Characters in *Native Son*

In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the stereotypes of black people can be analyzed through the portrayal of the characters in the novel. Those characters are Bigger Thomas and Bigger's mother. Through analyzing these characters, this study finds several black stereotypes in the novel. They are black as uneducated

person, black as criminal, black as religious person and black as music gifted person.

The stereotype portrayal of black as uneducated person is represented through the character of Bigger Thomas. Here, Bigger is portrayed as a black man who has no ability or manhood (Wright, 1940: 12). Before this novel, there have been many novels that portray blacks in the same condition, such as *Black Boy* and *Gone with the Wind*. It leads to the use of this kind of image to generalize all black people.

The root of this image can be traced back through the historical background of black people in America. During the slavery time, blacks as slaves were prohibited to learn reading and writing. This condition prevented them to educate themselves. No wonder, during this period, there were many illiteracy among black people (Davie, 1949:143). But fortunately, after the emergence of the Civil War, there were many freed blacks who built a private school to give education to the ex-slaves. This effort produced a significant result in reducing the illiteracy among black people. The illiteracy among black people during 1870 to 1969 had declined from 79.9 percent to 3.6 percent (Pinkney, 1975: 73).

Unfortunately, the portrayal of black as uneducated person that has steadily conveyed in several novels, has strengthened the stereotyping of black people as uneducated people, especially those which are written by whites. For example, in *Gone with the Wind*, which is written by Mitchell, blacks are portrayed as slaves who have no ability except in serving their masters (Mitchell, 1936).

Through this novel, Wright conveys the idea that shows how this stereotypical belief has much influenced black people. In this novel, Bigger passiveness in improving his education derived from the belief that as a black man, no matter how high his education, the whites will still view him as uneducated person who only deserve to have low pay jobs (Wright, 1940:62).

Furthermore, Wright in this novel also conveys the fact that this stereotype portrayal has led to the racial discrimination experienced by black people. Being regard to be uneducated people, blacks are concentrated in low pay jobs, such as drivers, labours, laundresses, maids, etc.

In regard to the bad effects resulted from the existence of the stereotype, there were many people who had made efforts to fight the stereotype, for examples, by creating the portrayal of black people in non-stereotypic manner through the mass media, such as movies, TV programs and newspaper. It is also supported by the idea that only through education, black people can mend their law position in the society.

In this novel, Wright also uses Bigger as the representation of black stereotype as criminal. Here, Bigger is portrayed as criminal who often robs and also the one who has killed a white woman, Mary and his black girl friend, Bessie. David Shaw as quoted in *Intercultural Communication: an Introduction* writes an article entitled *Despite Advances, Stereotype Still Used by Media*. It was published in *Los Angeles Time* in December 12, 1990. In this article, he mentions several ethnic stereotypes that still continuously appear in news media. One of the stereotypes concerned with black stereotype as criminal. It states that

When a woman jogger was beaten and raped in Central Park last year; the New York Times and Washington Post (among others) called her black attackers a "wolf pack," but these papers used no such bestial imagery to describe the whites who murdered blacks in Howard Beach and Bensonhurst (2001: 82).

This kind of portrayal that continuously appears in mass media, novels or movies has strengthened the existence of black stereotype as criminal in the society.

In coincidence to that, the negative portrayal of blacks in mass media has strengthened the negative stereotype of black people and influenced the public opinion. This stereotype then raises the racial prejudice and discrimination toward black people. It is mentioned in a book entitled *White Racism* that,

The stereotyped portrayals of African American and the unrealistically sanguine views of contemporary racial relations often presented in the main stream media help perpetuate the racist held by ordinary white Americans (Feagin & Vera, 1995:12).

This statement describes the role of stereotype portrayal of blacks in legitimizing the racial prejudice and discrimination held by white Americans. In this novel, this stereotype belief that shows black as criminal has led to the whites' prejudice that all blacks are dangerous. Thus, they are deserved to be excluded from the white society. It leads to the idea of segregation among American society.

Another black stereotype found in this novel is black as religious person. This stereotype is conveyed through the character of Bigger's mother. Wright portrays the character of Mrs. Thomas as a religious woman, who always relies on her religion as an emotional escape from the cruel racist American society. She often sings hymns during her daily activities to transfer her religious ethic to her children (1940:14).

In relation to the stereotype above, Gordon W. Allport in his book entitled *The Nature of Prejudice* mentions a report conducted by Kimball Young that found one of blacks stereotype is as religious fanaticism (1955: 196). Historically, as being brought from Africa, black people have their own traditional culture, including their religious belief taken from their land. By being slaves, they are forced to abandon their religion and start to be Christianized. Pinkney states that "African slaves had been baptized since their first importation,..." (1975: 120). From this quotation, it can be seen that the attempt to Christianize blacks has started since their first arrival in the new land. Blacks start to get to know the Christian belief.

During the slavery time, the religiosity of blacks was strongly seen as they often sing hymns during their hard work in the plantation. They do that as an emotional escape toward their hard days as slaves. In its development, religion has a significant role in blacks' struggle to get the equality status in America. During the Civil Right Movement, black churches have an important role in motivating blacks to achieve their equal status. It is proved by the existence of one prominent figures of the movement, Martin Luther King, Jr, who was actually a Baptist minister (Pinkney, 1975: 128). He motivated black people to struggle for their equality status through his speeches. Being based on the religion teaching, his speeches had persuaded black people in a subtle way. Based on this fact, the

important position of religion in the life of black people has confirmed black stereotype as religious person.

Since stereotype always involves overgeneralization, it shows that this kind of stereotyping does not represent all black people as whole. In relation to that, Wright creates a character that shows the negation of this stereotype. It shows through the character of Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend. Bigger's mother regards religion as a means to escape from her harsh daily life, meanwhile, Bessie chooses to use alcohol as an escape way. It shows contrary portrayal between the two of them. It is also seen in Yahoo!Answers that some people have refuted this stereotyping. They argue that the image of black as religious person cannot be used to generalize all black people in America.

The stereotype of Black as music gifted person can also be seen through the character of Mrs. Thomas, Bigger's mother. She sings a lot in her daily activities. Many of them are hymns, as one of hymns she sings in the beginning of the novel, while she is preparing their breakfast. The other evidence that shows this stereotype can also be seen through one of the scenes when Bigger drives Mary and Jan to have dinner. While talking about their perception on the Negroes, Mary mentions about their songs and their ability to sing. Suddenly, she asks Bigger whether he can sing or not and Bigger says no. This situation shows how Mary and Jan influence by the image of Negroes they have in their mind. It happens because they often see Negroes to sing. In relation to that image, they assume that Bigger must good in singing so that they force him to sing.

In relation to music, blacks' ability in music has been shown since the slavery time. At that time, black slaves often sing during their work in the field and when they take some rest after working hard all day. This activity is assumed as their psychological escape from their hard days. Many of them are hymns that belong to their religious relief and many others are songs that they created to entertain themselves. In his study, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, African-American scholar James H. Cone argued that "whatever form black music takes, it is always an expression of black life in America and what the people must do to survive with a measure of dignity in a society which seems bent on destroying their right to be human beings" (1991: 130). From the quotation above, Cone have proposed the notion that black music and culture were effective forms of expression and means to social inclusion, in terms that through their music they can show to the world their existences.

Actually, this stereotype is one of the positive stereotypes in relation to black people. This, however, can also bring a negative effect to them as well. The activation of this stereotype will prevent people to acknowledge the diversity and personal ability of the certain group. In many times, most people will relate blacks' beautiful voices with their activities in their churches because they often sing during the sermons. Moreover, this stereotypic belief leads to the opinion that black people can only be success just as musicians or athletes.

B. Stereotyping Blacks through the Portrayal of the Thomas Family

Analyzing black stereotypes cannot escape from discussing about the role of black people in the family as the smallest unit of society. Thus, this study also

analyzes the stereotype of blacks through the portrayal of the Thomas family since Wright uses this family as the representation of black family in American society. There are two stereotypes found through the portrayal of the Thomas family. Those are black family as female headed family and black family as poor family.

In this novel, the Thomas family is portrayed to be headed by the mother. Wright creates a family without presenting a father figure to emphasize the type of the family as a female headed family. It represents the stereotype of black family existed in the society. The manifestation of this stereotype can be traced back through black historical background. During the slavery time, being used as stallions, black men were often moved from one plantation to others. Thus, the family relationship among the slaves would dissolve through the sale of one of the husband. The female would stay to take care of their children (Pinkney, 1975). This condition greatly contributes to the image of black family as female headed family.

In its development, the condition being worsened by the stereotype beliefs about black men that placed them in a very low position among the society. Black males experience job screening criteria that often be based on the racial stereotyped about blacks such as, the belief that blacks are lazy and uneducated people (Feagin, 1982: 129). These kinds of barriers force black males to be unemployment for a long time. Thus, the figures of fathers in the family do not play an important role because they cannot support their families financially.

The condition above forces black women to join the labor force to earn their living. They have to leave their house to work as low wage labors or laundresses. As they take the financial responsibility, they are regarded to take the leader position of family. Thus, the dominancy of black women appears in the blacks' family system. Based on this portrayal of black family system, black family is then often stereotyped as female headed family.

In relation to the racial prejudice occurring among American society, the stereotype of black family as female headed family had been used to rationalize the Negro problem among black community. This stereotype was regarded to be the rationalization of many problems that happened to the blacks in American society. The female headed family system and the absence of the father figure lead to the opinion that black families were unstable one. As in *Black Americans*, Pinkney stated that "Historically the black family has been presented in American scholarship as a 'matriarchal' institution so unstable that it is responsible for many of the problems faced by blacks in the United States" (1975: 108-109). In the quotation above, Pinkney defines the matriarchal institution in black families as unstable and have to be responsible for many problems appearing in the society, such as crimes and mental illness.

Moreover, the portrayal of the Thomas family is also used to represent the stereotype of blacks as poor family. Here, they are portrayed to live in a very inappropriate apartment because they do not have enough money to rent a better one. In many books and movies, blacks are often portrayed to live in vile areas. In *Blacks Americans*, Pinkney describes blacks as generally work in agriculture, domestic service and the lowest paid jobs in industry. Houses are generally poor construction, unpainted, in need of repairs and without indoor sanitary facilities

and electricity. They are usually over-crowded, with several children sharing the same bed, often in the same room with other beds for adults or children (1975: 56-57).

In correspond to the explanation above, the stereotype portrayal of blacks' family as poor family leads to create a public opinion that blacks are dependent and cannot stand on their own. They are depicted as people who depend on the government welfare. Jandt in *Intercultural Communication: an Introduction*, mentions that after the Los Angeles riots in 1992, a media writes a report that African American line at the post office. The commentators describe them as welfare recipients, but in fact, many of them line to collect mail that cannot be delivered during the riot (2001: 79). This image contributes to the inferior position of black people in the society. As the result, many whites still believe on blacks inequality, so that they deserve to have a different treatment in many aspects. Moreover, the stereotypical belief of blacks as poor people has also led to racial prejudice among the society. As in *Race and Ethnic Conflict*, it is stated that poor blacks are believed to be dishonest because of the pressure of their economic condition (1994: 120). This kind of belief has led to the racial prejudice among American society. Many whites then believe that because of their poverty, blacks tend to conduct crimes to earn their living. They often relate black poor environment to the high rate criminality conducted by black people. They assume black poverty as one of the root problems of crime among black people.

In coinciding with the racial prejudice and discrimination toward black people, Feagin views the society as the creator of social barriers that definitely limit blacks almost in all institutions including their occupations. Being blacks, they cannot have a better job, except those low paying jobs, such as laborer, driver, porter, maid, laundresses, etc (Feagin, 1982: 118-119)

CONCLUSION

The complexity of the social world forces people to tend to make a generalization toward something. This generalization is used to help people in simplifying their social world. In relation to the diversity among ethnic groups, the generalization often brings false perception toward a certain ethnic group. This overgeneralization is widely known as stereotype.

This study has come to the finding of several stereotypes of black people. Those are black as uneducated person, criminal, religious person, music gifted person, female headed family and poor family. Those stereotypes have become the rationalization of different treatment experienced by black people, including the segregation in almost all aspects of black's life. Even now, after the Civil Right Movement, many people are still influenced by these stereotyping.

Furthermore, it is also found that whether positive or negative, stereotypes are regarded as a destructive power, in terms that they ignore the probability of individual differences among the stereotyped group. That is why, many people struggle to fight the existence of these stereotypes.

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