SURVIVING RACISM: A CRITICAL STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE NICKEL BOYS*

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Abstract: Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys offers a vital investigation into the enduring psychological consequences of institutionalized racism and the enduring effects of systemic oppression. Historically, the novel is a postcolonial text that highlights the continuous oppression of Black bodies and attempts to erase their identities. Elwood and Turner exemplify forms of the colonized subject who exist within a racist white world. The aim of this article is to analyze how institutional racism repeats the colonizing trajectory of violence, which depersonalizes individuals while amplifying their psychological trauma. From a postcolonial approach, it examines questions of surviving, resisting, and re-asserting an identification of self in an ongoing face off to racism and the trauma of colonization.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Systemic racism, Psychological trauma, Survival and Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

This research seeks to analyse the mental impact of systematic racism and survival in Colson Whitehead's*The Nickel Boys* from a postcolonial perspective. Elwood Curtis and Turner's ordeal of being in the Nickel Academy forms how this study analyzes how Whitehead captures the impact of racism and racial violence. The novel reflects the methods of colonial domination in which political power stifles self-governance and personality, resulting in deep psychological wounds. The aim of this study is to compare and contrast the dehumanizing effects of postcolonial institutionlized racism and the presentation of Racism as depicted in the novel as dehumanizing institution to the colonized subjects and Black Americans in racially segregated society in America. This paper analyses the ways in which*The Nickel Boys* depicts the experiences of trauma, survival and the kind of resilience that is required in a system that is oppressive because of race.

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF RACISM ON IDENTITY

The impact of systematic racism on the psychological and emotional health of black men as presented in Colson Whitehead's book,*TheNickel boys*, in view of the Afro-Asian postcolonial theory. This study looks at the manner in which Whitehead portrays the effects of racial trauma on the African-American subject through key aspects including institutionalized racism, identity, survival and resistance. It is drawn to analyze how the Nickel Academy impacted the characters, and how the reactions combined with the role of the oppressors reflect the colonial experience of inhabitants under the colonial rule. Like other colonialist systems, the Nickel Academy is presented as a place where the bodies of victims circulate and become simultaneously constructed as an identity and a trauma. This, this study reveals how one's identity is eroded through racial oppression and likened to colonialism where someone must deal with a dehumanizing system.

III. FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING SYSTEMIC RACISM

This study applies the postcolonial theory is used in analyzing Colson Whitehead's novel known as*The Nickel Boys* with emphasis on colonial power relations in the novel by portraying racism. The framework looks at how Nickel Academy relates to a colonial like structure that maintains racial oppression similar to colonial rule. Exploring the boys' grief in detail, it compares the psychological wounding of the colonial power to the effects of race on identity with the help of Fanon's colonized theory. It examines the boy's ability to resist and survive as forms of resistance from dehumanization and emphasizes how the boys contend for their dignified and human selves against oppression.

In*The Nickel Boys* the Nickel Academy embodies represents colonial power relations and the oppression and violence endured by the boys emulates colonial domination. The physical abuses inflicted on Elwood Curtis and Turner in the academy symbolically relates to the forms of degradation and barbarism done by the colonial masters on their colonies. This is a clear picture of what Frantz Fanon described as the "colonized mind" in Elwood, the civil rights activist full of zeal to achieve justice and perceived equality only to be bogged down by the academy.This psychological damage, reminiscent of colonialism, erases a part of Elwood's identity, showing as to how racist structures undermine a Black man's subjectivity. In addition, some of Turner's rebellious behaviors that are seen in the novel including resisting and surviving inhuman treatment by the academy portrays the struggle of colonized people against the oppressive authority. These measures would reveal the inequality which the frankens and their kind suffered while trying to remain human against postmodern hegemony that aims to dehumanize the subject.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research design to examine Colson Whitehead's*The Nickel Boys*, focusing on the psychological effects of institutional racism and abuse on the protagonists, Elwood Curtis and Turner. The methodological approach draws from the strengths of textual analysis and psychological frames to examine Whitehead's representation of the effects of racial oppression on individual identities.

V. INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND COLONIAL DOMINATION

In*The Nickel Boys*, Nickel Academy can be seen as the symbol of institutional racism and as the place that works in a manner similar to colonial systems and their ways of establishing control through the use of violence and subjugation of the native population. This section looks at how the organisational structure of the academy and its cruel practices represent colonial domination. Overall, the product of cruel and dehumanizing treatment through physical and psychological infliction of pain, forced labor and neglect the experiences of Elwood Curtis and Turner depict the colonial sovereignty paradigm. Through comparisons, the study lays emphasis on how the novel portrays the effects of racists regimes and continuation of colonial violence in today's environment.

VI. PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND IDENTITY FORMATION

The role of Turner in Nickel Academy provides a real-life approach to the most challenging conditions in the environment of the institution, which is a worthy counterpart to the excessively optimistic character of Elwood. Interestingly, while attempting to change the system, at first, Elwood turns to the aspect of systems thinking: active engagement and utilization, on the contrary, Turner uses such strategies as emotional disconnection and passive non-compliance. As demonstrated in the novel, "Turner kept to himself, didn't have friends. It was safer that way, quieter" (136), his withdrawal from other people is an isolation for a reason, as the main character is trying to survive in the world of violence and police surveillance. This has implications with exigent circumstances in social justice in that it becomes difficult for an individual to maintain his or her dignity under oppressive circumstances. As Turner does, one will find that remaining alive in a dehumanising world entails endorsing a world that aims at unpersoning one. This is in line with Fanon's idea that the colonized individuals have to over-emphasize humaneness in unfavourable settings.

The psychological problem of systematic racism emerges as shown through Turner's attempts at persisting peacefully and at mental strength. He does not seem to have a survival plan that his physical body is going to be safe but definitely a psychological safety. He fights the attempt that the academy make to set him and deny him freedom of performing his African cultural practices through a show of conformity while he rebels deep down. A prime example of this is depicted in Turner's daily life where "every night you stayed in that room meant you are still in the fight; they hadn't broken you yet" (102) depicting resistance as an index of mental health. This internal struggle for dignity, subjected to a system that dehumanizes him shows the racism aspect of the tale as it portrays profile degradation under institutionalization.

Turner's refusal to emotionally invest in the academy's politics is a deliberate form of self-preservation, emphasized in his tactic of remaining invisible: "It was impossible to talk to anyone," said Clarissa, "But at least he could sit there and be invisible" (156). Invisibility serves as his armor that enables him cope with the violence at the academy not losing control over his self-formation. In oppose to the academy's version of justice "the squirming of boys on the ground after the housemen's fists fell" (93), witness Turner's process of retreat as the drive that enables him to endure and do not let the academy turn him into an object.

VII. RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Elwood Curtis at first attempts to fight the dehumanization of Nickel Academy, with the belief in the black civil rights activists. This attempt of his to stand against the injustice of the institution, when he attempted to report a case of abuse, provides evidence of the hero's morality. "He wanted to stand up against the abuse but he was not a fighter.Instead he would report the incidents to the administration but no one pay heed to him" (96). There is a concept of justice that stands out from the systematic annihilation of his principles once he gets into the dark side of the academy's brutal world.

As Elwood continues to experience the cruelty of Nickel Academy, his internal struggle is palpable: "He held close the things he was given, though day by day they unravelled like cheap rope in front of his eyes" (121). This line symbolizes his struggle to maintain the ideas of dignity

and individuality in the face of dehumanizing academy. Elwood changes tactics from active to passive, though one can also observe in him a psychological and ethical determinacy in a situation as 'I might be in their hands now by I will not be in their hands forever'(183).

Racism's toll on his identity becomes increasingly apparent: "He realized that the future dreams and aspirations had been vanished and the academy was the one, which robbed him of it", "Deeply his personal and worldview transformed", (164). The novel portrays the physical and mental fatigue of people of colour trying to live in a system that degrades them. 'It was hard work staying whole when you were constantly broken': a phrase to capture Elwood's struggle to remain a person being conditioned to feel like a broken one by the institutions that surround him.

VIII. OBSERVATIONAL UNCANNINESS AND EMOTIONAL INFORMATION

Turner's survival strategy is built around the idea of not making oneself visible in order not to attract the attention of outsiders. His approach reflects his need for emotional preservation: "Turner realized, however, that the trick was to lie low, to remain as inconspicuous as possible This is the way not to get noticed And if you aren't noticed then there is a chance they will leave you alone" (Weinberg 144). That is how Turner becomes an 'invisible man' and minimizes his risk in the hostile environment, thus guaranteeing his survival as he does not attract the attention of the academy officials.

Due to the oppressive nature of the conditions that Turner is subjected to, he is still allowed to have some personal freedom. "The way Turner move around the academy was unique, this was partly because he was completely original"(169). He is also a rebel against the system and although he does not fight the system himself, he encourages other boys in the academy and does not demean himself. This is a strategy of living in a hostile environment so that he can manage the daily discrimination, and at the same time maintains control over his 'person.'Turner's lack of emotional involvement with the academy's politics allows him to function in a way that preserves his sense of self: As reported: "Turner had long ago decided that if you did not give him anything to work on, he could not 'crack' you" (193). By not becoming a complete participant in the system that attempts to depersonalize him, Turner remains human and challenges the oppressive relations.

IX. THE ROLE OF SOLIDARITY AND COMMUNITY

In*The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead underscores the theme of camaraderie as an effective form of combat against oppression and as an effective weapon against structuralized racism. The boys receive love and support from the friends they make at Nickel Academy under adverse circumstances; The camaraderie exhibited is not only emotional but also physical. This entails may be a critical source of consolation for the boys and denoting the formal and informal ways through which they get information or other aid in handling their daily pains. These are the rare instances of togetherness and tenderness serving as a cushion from the depersonalization that the institution has in place and, to a great extent, these are the only sources of hope and zest in brutal world for these boys.

Whispering to each other or occasionally helping with words and actions as, Turner's relations with other boys is tangible to the means of showing, solidarity. According to Turner the words, "You couldn't go it alone, the world was too vicious. You had to be strong together" (164).

Friendship and support are strongly depicted in the boys of the TOP group; this can be perceived as part of the ways through which the boys are fighting Nickel Academy as an oppressive institution. All these collective endeavours give these boys not only emotional support of which they are in desperate need, but also resist the institution's attempts at dehumanisation and the removal of their worth as human beings.

X. NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA AND HEALING

Through*The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead gives rich depictions of trauma and recovery, and the effects of systemic racism and institutional violence on the characters' emotional and psychological worlds. The novel illustrates the traumatic experiences of Elwood Curtis and Turner as they face the realities of Nickel Academy. These two traumatic narratives, which are foundational to Elwood's and Turner's journeys of suffering, are also essential in thinking about their journeys of recovery towards agency and resilience.

The Boys of Nickel's trauma is not only the physical kind, but emotional too, and the right to be human is never granted to them. Despite being written in the postmodernist style of cynicism coated within humor, Whitehead takes the time to explain the physical abuse, sexual harassment, humiliation, and the general culture of terror in the academy. Realism within the academy destroys all the idealism and faith in justice that Elwood had; this results into severe psychological breakdown that dissociates him completely. And he seems to understand: "All the things you believed about the world, all the things you thought you were could be wiped away by a blow" (133). A survivor strategy and small-scale rebellions are, translated in Turner's means of coping with the psychological trauma inflicted by the institution at large: he, too, was rendered a mere container. The novel does not shy away from depicting the impact of such traumatic incidences as evidenced in how they define and pervert the character's identity.

Despite the profound trauma, Whitehead weaves narratives of healing and resilience into the story. Healing in*The Nickel Boys*is depicted not as a straightforward process but as a complex journey involving both personal and communal elements. The characters' paths to healing involve reclaiming their sense of self-worth and identity amidst the dehumanizing forces of the academy. Elwood's attempts to hold onto his principles and Turner's effortstopreserve his dignity amidst adversity are crucial to their processes of healing. The solidarity and support they receive from each other play a significant role in their emotional recovery. These communal bonds provide a source of strength and reassurance, helping them navigate their trauma and fostering a sense of hope and purpose despite the overwhelming odds.

XI. INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

The consequences of systemic racism, as portrayed throughout*The Nickel Boys*, extend beyond Nickel Academy, permeating institutional and societal realities. Whitehead's novel evaluates how systems of oppression work to perpetuate trauma and marginalization, and offers a deeper critique of society as a system that institutionalizes injustice and inequality. Through institutional practices at Nickel Academy as a model, one can see how these practices are generalized to larger society and reflect historical forms of racial oppression.

Systematic racism reflected in Nickel Academy further represents institutional shaming and dehumanization that happened in society at large. The institution is portrayed as authoritarian and hierarchal and has outlines the power relations and discriminations that exist in the broader society. Whitehead narrates the misdeeds of the institution and how its bigotry dehumanizes the Black people in the society. The novel puts the academy in the foreground of exhibiting the systematic power of Nickel where 'the power impartial to the helpless was strictly and ruthlessly exercised' (178). Although Elwood and Turner have different trajectories, both of them suffer from traumatic past at Nickel Academy, which symbolises the white supremacy as an institution. Turner starts to come to terms with the oppression that very much exists and he says, "What done to us here at Nickel, that just a reflection of the world out there leaving people behind if they think we worthless" (209). This means that the prejudice that they experience in their daily lives is felt in the academy and inflicts on the oppressed and exploited the kind of social injustice that pervades racists oppression.

The Nickel Boys also explores the complicity of society in sustaining oppressive systems, demonstrating that societal ideals and values often provide cover for and sustain institutional racism, showcasing a disturbing attitude of indifference towards racial injustice. Through an illustration of the acceptance and normalization of the academy's injustices, Whitehead critiques the broader societal views surrounding the neglect of people of color. This portrayal serves as a revealing analysis which demands systemic change and an increased social awareness of eradicating or dismantling these systems to end racial injustice.

XII. INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, HISTORY, AND TRAUMA

The racial violence subtext is the reason why Elwood Curtis and Turner underwent the traumatic experience of the movie. Nickel Academy as an institution continues this violence and exploitation; it is an extension of this violence intrinsic to the history of America. The torturing, abuse and injustices meted on the boys portray current vices that are as a result of historical racism. This connection is also underlined by Whitehead, for the past is not only history in his work, but it is shown as the alive force which permeates the lives of Nickel Boys prisoners and never leaves those who have to endure its consequences (142). It is the themes of race, history and trauma of oppression that are painted in human characters' agencies to make meaning of their lives.

Elwood's optimistic hopes for justice are undermined by the brutal reality of his surroundings, as he grapples with the harsh truth: In this merciless reality, hope is cruelly crushed until its place is taken by certainty of the terrible existence of*The Nickel Boys*: 'The hope I had was beaten out of me, replaced by a reality too cruel to imagine' (197). On the other hand, Turner's tactical ways of coping imply his awareness of the fact that their surroundings are oppressive, exemplifying through his scenario a center manifestation of race as an extreme priority to circumnavigate life. It means that what happened at Nickel Academy is not an individual tragedy of a victim; it is a significant break in the history, a change in which people were stabbed in the back by leaving the discourse of racial trauma and justice. Turner Like the words of Turner which state: "Our suffering here is not for us alone but: of the dead, of the generations to come" (211).

XIII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

A critical reading of the intersections between Colson Whitehead's*The Nickel Boys* and other textbooks of post-colonial literature indicates significant levels of congruence between therepresentations of systemic racism in the text, as well as colonial oppression more broadly. By reading*The Nickel Boys* in concert with texts of the postcolonial canon, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, it is possible to see how Whitehead's text, and specifically narrative, reflects, and expands upon the realities ofthe colonized, and their resistance to colonial interpellation and the systems of oppression that are its by-products.

A Things Fall Apart, Achebe conveys the horrific effects of British colonialism on the Igbo, it illustrating the collapse of social structure and cultural identities in the face of colonial violence. Okonkwo, the story's protagonist, represents the preservation of indigenous cultural identity and is caught between ethical dilemmas along the spectrum of colonialism's extension. Achebe captures this in Okonkwo's psychological conflict, which also reflects the dissolution of his community: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame was based on solid personal achievements" (Things Fall Apart, 7).*The Nickel Boys*, in a similar manner, presents the implications of systemic racism for African American identity in the American context of Nickel Academy. The oppressive conditions characterized by physical and psychological violence at the academy are juxtaposed with the dehumanizing trauma of colonial governance described by Achebe. Whitehead captures this point with the representation of institutional brutality: "They were being punished for crimes they did not commit, their lives reduced to mere echoes of what they once were" (89).

Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea examines postcolonial trauma with consideration to racial and cultural dislocation in the Caribbean. The narrative addresses fragmentation of identity and psychological distress in a framework of colonial and racist influence. Rhys discusses Antoinette Cosway where she explains how colonial identification is both traumatic and deeply entrenched: "I was not a real person to them, just a thing they could use or ignore" (Wide Sargasso Sea, 117). *The Nickel Boys* discusses the psychological harm of living in the reality of a systemic and oppressive environment, and the extent to which institutional violence interferes with identity formation and agency. Elwood Curtis finds himself echoing Antoinette in the loss of his idealism as he observes and reflects back on the brutality of the conditions of humanness he endured at Nickel Academy: "The idealism that once guided me was shattered by the cruel truth of our existence" (142).

XIV. IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ON RACIAL JUSTICE

The depiction of systemic racism in*The Nickel Boys* is timely and relevant in understanding contemporary racial justice issues pertaining to the continuation of discriminatory systems within institutions such as schools and the criminal justice system. The horrid realities of Nickel Academy faced by boys today still challenge marginalized communities; like systemic racism and other forms of discrimination, institutional racism can often manifest in veiled or unveiled shapes. It also challenges our never-ending responsibility to critique institutional policies and practices that create racial inequality. The focus on historical wrongdoing, and the continuing impact of those wrongs on contemporary day-to-day social structures, serves to remind us that racial justice does

not only need to address dynamics of inequity in the present, but address the historical and systemic nature of old wrongful practices.

Racialdemonstrates the resilience and agency of people faced with systemic oppression and provokes necessary dialogue around themes seen in contemporary movements of activism and resistance. Characters like Elwood and Turner, Whitehead displays how people navigate and negotiate considerations of risk and resistance with Elwood's more idealistic and hopeful approach to justice being contrasted with Turner's pragmatic survival instincts: "Elwood believed things could change, even if it took time. But time, Turner thought, was an unnecessary luxury" (103). This is salient considering social justice movements, where advocates seek for some form of systemic change through structural and concealed forms of resistance, which is analogous to the character's choice to act against or avoid the oppressive systems around them. Elwood's subdued moment of realization - "Justice, as he had then imagined it, was only a distant dream" (189) represents the loss of hope and faith shared by many other individuals battling preventative forces underpinning injustices, trauma, and other system impacts of entangled social identities.

The book's description of psychological trauma and the building of one's identity is central to the intersection of mental health and racial oppression. Whitehead also depicts how structural racism disrupts the identity of individuals within society and creates lasting impacts on their psyche: "Nickel had a way of getting inside you, and once it did, it stayed (163). This creates a call for future thoughtful recommendations that incorporate comprehensive mental health intervention for individuals and communities who have experienced or witnessed systemic oppression.*The Nickel Boys* calls for a holistic response representing a greater need to review the interplay of race justice and mental health, and develop supports and therapeutic practices for healing the psychological damage residents face from structural oppression.

XV. CONTRIBUTIONS TO LITERARY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

 From a literary standpoint,*The Nickel Boys* demonstrates how historical fiction might function as a pedagogical referent to advance a critique of social injustices. Whitehead's narrative process, which goes between fact and fiction, is perfectly positioned to produce a comentary on the psychological and social implications of systemic racism. This articulates the contribution of the the novel to literary critique in that it shows the efficacy of historical fiction when engaging complex social commentary while interacting with historical memory. By accented experiences of individual narratives and connecting them with the broader historical lasting connections, Whitehead goes as far as old empirical science, in the present inflecting into their identity making up the story.

The exploration of trauma and survival in conjunction with the earlier text contribute cultural critique based on its critique through a cultural lens where stoicism functioning as a way of making meaning for those experiencing culture through systemic oppression in the individual and collective identities. The way the novel details the boys experiences at Nickel Academy is central view of institutional violence then contexted through the lens of attempting to survive to get your dignity back to re-establish selfhood. The pedagogical framing not only affords an understanding of cultural narratives for race and identity but justifies the lens of trauma with the historical ongoingbiological and historical interest of or multiple shores.

XVI. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE OF STUDY

The central aim of this research is to apply a postcolonial framework to Naylor's *The Nickel Boys*, this narrow focus skips over numerous other important literary perspectives including feminist, queer, or psychoanalytical, that are equally as valuable. The notion of a black childhood under conditions of institutionalized racism and its psychological effects reduces numerous broader themes and dynamic interactions that can exist. the research does not analyze the novel's stylistic and romantic qualities, which could present endless possibilities. Understanding these limits can situate the research and point to the need for future work that takes up additional theories and lenses.

XVII. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research on Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* could benefit from applying theoretical frameworks beyond postcolonial theory, such as feminist and queer theory. Feminist theory could explore how gender dynamics intersect with racial oppression in the novel, revealing additional layers of systemic violence and resistance. Examining the experiences of female characters and gendered aspects of trauma could provide a more nuanced understanding of identity and oppression. Queer theory could be utilized to investigate the impact of non-normative sexualities and gender identities, offering insights into how the novel addresses and subverts traditional gender norms and explores queerness in relation to systemic injustice. Future research could assess the novel's impact on contemporary discussions about race and justice. Empirical studies could investigate how different reader demographics engage with the novel and its themes, providing insights into its effectiveness as a tool for fostering dialogue and empathy. Exploring the novel's influence on public policy and social movements could shed light on its role in advocacy for criminal justice reform and historical redress. These directions will deepen the scholarly understanding of *The Nickel Boys* and its relevance to ongoing conversations about systemic oppression.

XVIII. CONCLUSION

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* analyses the interconnections of systemic racism and its psychological effects through a postcolonial lens. It suggests that Nickel Academy acts as a colonial-style institution and demonstrates the ways institutionalized racism erodes identity and sense of self. The analysis suggests that the boys' experiences include, but are not limited to, psychological trauma and survival strategies, mimicking the historical legacies of violence towards colonial populations.

Results suggest that Elwood Curtis' idealism is steadily deteriorating while forming a fragmented sense of self through the brutal realities of the academy. Turner effectively reflects broader themes of resilience and subtle resistance strategies despite being subjected to systemic oppression. The study demonstrates the novel's relevancy in contemporary discussions on racial justice and understanding colonialism's sting on modernity through the permanent traumas imposed by racial injustice, colonialism, systemic racism, and structural oppression. By identifying these aspects in *The Nickel Boys*, the analysis supports the book's relevance from a contribution to discussions on racial injustice and the complexity of identity construction under oppressive systems.

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