

Traces of Institutional Racism in Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys

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Abstract

Using the notion of institutional racism, this article discusses 'The Nickel Boys' by Colson Whitehead. In this novel, a young African American is trapped by racism and ends up in a reform school in Florida. It is based on the real-life Dozier Reform School, which was notorious for its long history of abuse and cruelty. This study analyses the mechanisms of the evil social powers that do not allow a growing black personality to develop a respectable life within American society. The study also considers how these forms of institutional racism are applied in various social establishments as such, like the education system, a law enforcement body, and the judicial system, to prevent black progress and keep white supremacy. It references the ideas of black criminality and the prison industrial complex to identify different racist ideologies behind institutional racism as well as to provide adequate historical details about the conditions in which the novel is set. Additionally, in the analysis of this study, methods proposed by Colson Whitehead to resist and surmount these forms are presented.

Keywords: Animals, Institutional racism, Black criminality, Prison Industrial Complex, White supremacy, African American experience.

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Racism manifests itself in various forms. There is a major distinction between individual racism and institutional racism, or systemic racism. The former is overt, and it can be observed in the actions of individuals who openly express prejudice or discrimination. The latter is more indirect, and it operates with the authority of social institutions that have the power to control and shape an individual's life and actions.

The term, 'Institutional racism' was coined by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in their work, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. According to Carmichael and Hamilton, institutional racism "originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type" (Ture 4). Since those in power enact it, their actions set a precedent for others to follow their example and further cement these discriminatory practices. This study highlights how it operates within social structures. By bringing these covert forces to light, one can understand the underlying mechanisms that sustain racial inequality within American society.

Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* states that institutional racism:

refers to the incorporation of racist policies and practices in the institutions by which a society operates: for example, education; federal, state, and local governments; the law, both in terms of what is written on the books and how it is implemented by the courts and by police officials. (345)

This definition provided by Tyson captures the core of institutional racism, which stresses that institutional racism affects all the facets of social functioning rather than being restricted to a single institution.

Research Questions:

The study traces the notion of institutional racism in the novel *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead, and explores the following:

1. How is this kind of racism practiced within the society?
2. What are the racist ideologies that backup or lead to institutional racism?
3. What are the consequences of it?
4. How are the characters in the novel affected by it?
5. How do they resist it and ultimately, what can be done to overcome this insidious oppression as implied in the novel?

These inquiries collectively constitute the research questions and objectives of this study.

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* was published in 2019, marking another significant milestone in his literary career. Like his previous novel, *The Underground Railroad*, this novel won him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2020 and strengthened Whitehead's position as a prominent writer in contemporary literature. The story is set during the ending years of the Jim Crow era in the 1960s. During that

time, the law maintained that black Americans were equal but separate. This doctrine perpetuated racial segregation across various facets of society, from schools and colleges to theatres, amusement parks, and other public spaces. The protagonist of the novel is an aspiring young boy named Elwood. He is studious and hard-working. Inspired by the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., he participates in civil rights movements to end this segregation. Though he has every quality to succeed in life, the shackles of institutional racism soon catch him, and his life takes a huge turn. He is put in a reform school in Florida named The Nickel Academy. This school is actually based on the real-life Arthur Dozier reform school in Florida. The reform school is notorious for its 111-year-long history of beatings, abuses, and killings. The novel provides a glimpse into the horrors endured by the young inmates of the Nickel Academy. Following a long history of controversy and failing to fulfil state inspection criteria, this real-life reform school was forced to close in 2011. Dozier Reform School serves as the backdrop against which the narrative of the novel unfolds.

Institutional Racism in Society

The first incident in which Elwood was exposed to this institutional racism was when he was arrested unjustly for no reason. Mr. Hill, Elwood's history teacher, had suggested Elwood to join a college which is about seven miles from Elwood's home. He hitchhikes to reach there. He gets in a Plymouth driven by a black man. Soon, a cop car tails behind them. The police claimed the car was stolen. It was at this point that the officer made a comment that revealed racial biases within the system: "First thing I thought when they said to keep an eye out for a Plymouth... Only a nigger'd steal that" (Whitehead 40). This incident illustrates how stereotypes and preconceptions about Black individuals can result in unjust arrests and harassment. Elwood's wrongful arrest, despite his innocence, highlights the serious impact of systemic racism. Lois Tyson aptly states in her work, *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write About Literature*, "In order for racism to have any real force in a society, it must be supported in some way by that society's institutions" (211).

The above example clearly illustrates how prejudiced notions and stereotypes are kept alive and perpetuated by authoritative forces in society. Even though Elwood did not break any law, the judge sentenced him to a cruel reform school named The Nickel Academy without proper investigation. This hasty and unfair judgement demonstrates how deeply institutional racism has infiltrated the core of the legal system. After three days, Elwood is picked up by a police car to take him to the Nickel Reform School in Florida. There were two other white boys in the car. When the officer tells them that Elwood was a car thief, in response, a white boy named Bill laughs and confesses, "Oh, I used to go joy-riding all the time" (Whitehead 45). It means that Bill often indulges in this sort of adventure and gets away with it because of the fact he is white. A black boy, on the other hand, is arrested for simply being near the crime he didn't commit. This vividly points out the institutional racism present within the judicial and law enforcement systems. Moreover, this asserts W.E.B. Du Bois's words: "The problem of the 20th century is

the problem of the color line” (3). The color line is the division in treatment between Black and White Americans in the same society. It represents not just a physical separation but also a social and systemic rift. Irrespective of the skin’s complexion, both are Americans at the end of the day. However, the presence of color line creates an unpleasant experience for the blacks. The same happens to Elwood in the novel.

To understand what motivates this practice, drawing upon the concept of Black criminality by Khalil Gibran Muhammed could be helpful. Black Criminality is the idea of connecting the quality of being black with crime. Because it is wrongly assumed that blackness comes with inferiority. This is done specifically to maintain the notion of white supremacy. Muhammed in *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* states, “racial inferiority and crime became fastened to African Americans by contrast to ideas of class and crime that shaped views of European immigrants and working-class whites” (6). This invention of Black inferiority not only promotes negative preconceptions but also creates a readily accessible target for society’s issues. By assigning crime and social problems to Black people, the blame is shifted away from whites. Muhammed boldly states:

With the publication of the 1890 census, prison statistics for the first time became the basis of a national discussion about blacks as a distinct and dangerous criminal population . . . The census marked twenty-five years of freedom and was, consequently, a much-anticipated data source for assessing blacks’ status in a post-slavery era. (3)

This exposes the motive of the whites who were in all eagerness to establish their supposed white supremacy. They were finding ways to label the blacks as inherently criminals. They have deliberately overlooked the presence of Black codes during that period. Black codes refer to the rules and laws that specifically apply to the black population. Black individuals can be imprisoned for vagrancy, blacks migrating north to find employment, and other petty things that cannot even be considered crimes. The statistics were weaponized by the white supremacists. They point to the disproportionate incarceration rates while deliberately turning a blind eye to the discriminatory policies and other legal practices that caused this situation in the first place. This explains how “crime and blackness soon became synonymous in a carefully constructed way” (Anderson 104). This phenomenon serves as a striking reminder of the enduring influence of racial bias within the criminal justice system. Recognizing the historical manipulation of statistics is an important step towards building a fair and just society in which individuals are judged based on their actions rather than the color of their skin.

Discrimination in Educational System

The novel also brings out the institutional racism present within the educational system. After Elwood arrives at the Nickel Academy, a sad reality becomes apparent. Despite the historic Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*

in 1954, which declared racial segregation in public schools unlawful, the Nickel Academy openly engages in discriminatory practices. The institution continues to function with separate facilities for white and black students, boldly violating the court's decision. It does not welcome the integration of whites and blacks. Furthermore, the Nickel Academy's proclaimed goals and actual practices are in complete opposition. Elwood reads from the school newspaper the following:

The state opened the school in 1899 as the Florida Industrial School for Boys. 'A reform school where the young offender of law, separated from vicious associates, may receive physical, intellectual, and moral training, be reformed and restored to the community with purpose and character fitting for a good citizen, an honorable and an honest man with a trade or skilled occupation fitting such person for self-maintenance'. (74)

However, everything that happens inside the Nickel Academy serves as a testimony to the opposite of its motto. Having learnt accounting by working in Marconi's shop, Elwood was on his way to pursue advanced studies in college. Nevertheless, here, he receives elementary-level textbooks. He asks the teacher if he could take advanced classes. The teacher promises to bring this matter to the attention of the school's director but soon forgets it. This shows the gap between the Nickel Academy's professed commitment to teach students a skill or trade and make them respectable citizens. It also exposes the institution's failure to carry out its claimed objectives, which robs young people like Elwood of the opportunity for personal and academic growth. The first time Elwood arrives at Nickel, the superintendent, Spencer, tells the new arrivals that they could graduate when they get enough merits. Elwood quickly associated merits with academic performance. He believed that diligent study and achievement would pave the way for his advancement. However, a revealing conversation with his friend, Desmond, soon shatters this notion. Elwood learns that earning merits at the academy has nothing to do with academic excellence. The narrator makes the realization apparent in the following sentence: "Work, comportment, demonstrations of compliance or docility, however—these things counted towards your ranking" (Whitehead 56). Rather than fostering and developing the abilities of the students, the academy places a strong emphasis on compliance and conformity. So, instead of training the students with a skill so that they can advance as professionals, the school does the opposite. The institution diverts their efforts into laborious tasks. Elwood reads from the school's newspaper that Nickel produces 20,000 bricks every day and earns about 2,50,000 dollars in profit every year through its printing press. The institution's misplaced priorities reveal how institutional racism negatively affects the educational system.

Angela Y. Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* explains the concept of prison industrial complex. She defines that the prison industrial complex is "an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correctional communities, and media" (Davis 84). This perception explains the activities in Nickel Academy. Nickel Academy functions basically as an industry exploiting the labor of students to make profits for corporations. The student labor produces significant financial rewards,

similar to corporate interests frequently connected to the prison industrial complex. Since the free labor of students turns into profit, it becomes more of an incentive to keep them imprisoned than reforming.

Elwood learns that “most of the kids had been sent here for much lesser—and nebulous and inexplicable—offences” (Whitehead 51). It means that the institution is trying its best to keep as many students’ prisoners as possible. This is manifested when Elwood gets into trouble. When Elwood witnesses Corey being mistreated by fellow students, Big Mike and Lonnie, he tries to help Corey. Unfortunately, the warden hears the noise and takes all of them to Spencer. He later takes them to a building named White House to give beatings. Although Elwood did nothing wrong, he was also taken along with them. Elwood decides to count the number of beatings the other person gets to predict the beatings he will receive. *The Nickel Boys* records it in the following lines:

Corey got around seventy—Elwood lost his place a few times—and it didn’t make sense, why did the bullies get less than the bullied? Now he had no idea what he was in for. It didn’t make sense. Maybe they lost count, too. Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why. (66)

Even though the state has made corporal punishment illegal, the institution authorities do not hesitate to abuse their power since it happens inside the walls and is not open to the public. Getting in trouble reduces the merits of the students and, by extension, keeps them longer inside the reform school. The longer they are in, the longer they can be exploited to make more profits. This offers a glimpse into the routine brutality that students at the academy endure, often for minor transgressions or for simply trying to do what is right. The Nickel authorities have no problem in even killing the black boys and burying them on the school grounds if they don’t show acts of compliance and conformity. Since the laws are against the black population, they have no leverage. Nickel staff go to any extreme to keep the black boys from acting independently. This proves that the Nickel, like every other prison industrial complex, is purely “driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit” (Davis 84). The events at the Nickel Academy provide insights on the insidious nature of institutional racism, and they reveal the ideologies that perpetuate institutional racism.

Consequences of Institutional Racism

The impact of institutional racism on the lives of those who are affected is huge. When Turner meets an ex-Nickel Boy named Chickie Pete, he wonders, if the institution had not interfered, how well of a trumpet player his friend would have become. *The Nickel Boys* expresses this feeling in the lines:

Chickie Pete and his trumpet. He might have played professionally, why not? A session man in a funk band, or an orchestra. If things had been different. The boys could have been many things had they not been ruined by that place. Doctors who cure diseases or perform brain surgery,

inventing shit that saves lives. Run for president. All those lost geniuses—sure not all of them were geniuses.... but they had been denied even the simple pleasure of being ordinary. Hobbled and handicapped before the race even began, never figuring out how to be normal. (164)

As the narrator points out, the Nickel boys were deprived of the happiness of leading an ordinary life. Like Elwood, many other ambitious young people were stopped from pursuing their life goals. Not only did it deprive them of this, it also traumatized them and made them alienated from society, all because of this institutional racism. Beyond just depriving people of chances, institutional racism causes severe emotional and psychological harm to those who fall victim to it. The trauma inflicted upon young minds by a system that perpetuates discrimination leaves lasting scars and hinders their ability to engage with society.

Since Elwood is an aspiring individual and someone who is motivated by the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., he tries to resist and expose this institutional racism practiced by the Nickel Academy. He maintains a record of how the institution devours the public funds allocated for the improvement of Nickel Academy. When the school undergoes a state inspection, Elwood decides to bring the atrocities of Nickel to light. He stakes his life by writing a letter, which entails all the details of the school's illegal activities, to the inspectors. When his friend Turner tells him that he could die because of this, Elwood shows his firm determination. He asserts, "It's not an obstacle course... You can't go around it—you have to go through it. Walk with your head up no matter what they throw at you" (Whitehead 172). This statement by Elwood captures his will to confront the injustices of institutions for the welfare of others. Even in the face of adversity and systemic oppression, he exhibits the courage to face challenges and maintain his values. This resonates with the perception of Carter Woodson, who states in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* that:

The Negro needs to become radical, and the race will never amount to anything until it does become so, but this radicalism should come from within. The Negro will be very foolish to resort to extreme measures in behalf of foreign movements before he learns to suffer and die to right his own wrongs. There is no movement in the world working especially for the Negro. He must learn to do this for himself or be exterminated just as the American Indian has faced his doom in the setting sun. (129)

Elwood's dedication to bring justice and Carter Woodson's call for radicalism collide to emphasize the critical role of people who dare to challenge existing conventions and strive for a more just society. Though this radical mindset ends up getting Elwood killed, it was because of people like Elwood who fought for the common good that the civil rights movement was possible and ultimately abolished the Jim Crow laws through its perseverance. This idea is suggested at the end of the novel, Turner, now a grown man, sits at the dinning of the Richmond Hotel. The same hotel, where Elwood, when he was a kid, hoped to see a black person sit in the dining

room one day when all segregation ends.

Moreover, Woodson proclaims, “Can you expect teachers to revolutionize the social order for the good of the community? Indeed, we must expect this very thing. The educational system of a country is worthless unless it accomplishes this task” (106). This assertion is very apt for the present study as the novel exemplifies the transformative impact a good teacher like Mr. Hill can have on the students. Mr. Hill is the only teacher who wants his students to erase all the racial slurs in his students’ second-hand textbooks passed from white students. His encouragement helped Elwood come a long way from participating in a theatre protest to exposing the institutional racism of Nickel Academy. Consequently, it can be suggested that people like Elwood may serve as inspiring role models for the larger Black community, displaying the power of dedication and resilience to bring a positive change. Similarly, educators can find inspiration in Mr. Hill’s commitment to promote equality and fairness within the educational system. Another important line in the novel reveals where change is necessary. Turner says to Elwood, “You can change the law but you can’t change people and how they treat each other. Nickel was racist as hell” (Whitehead 103). This is very true in all forms of institutional racism since this kind of racism is subtle and hard to notice as it is perpetuated by the authoritative figures who are supposed to uphold the law and good conduct. Turner’s statement serves as a reminder that legal reforms alone are unable to erase deeply held biases and prejudices in society. While laws may be changed in favor of equality and justice, what truly matters is changing the attitude and behavior of the people. Because it is through people’s actions that the impact of the law is felt. This declaration urges the readers to stay vigilant because after the abolishment of slavery, blacks and whites were equal in theory, but in practice, discrimination continued in the form of Jim Crow. Likewise, today, even after the abolition of Jim Crow laws, racism in various subtle and indirect forms operates within American society. It provides an alert that institutional racism is continuous and requires constant efforts to eradicate it. Thus, this study underscores the unending need for individuals and institutions to confront and remove systemic biases.

Conclusion

Therefore, in brief, Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* is observed as a condemnation of identity-based prejudice that has become pervasive across the United States. This study has brought to light the web of institutional racism, and it makes one realize how stealthy and insidious this beast is. The first question of the study has answered how institutional racism serves as an evil force within social institutions, holding on to inequalities by accumulating practices unnoticed by the general public. The second question addressed the racist ideologies that support institutional racism and maintain white dominance. It revealed the longevity of this unfair association between blackness and criminality. It also emphasized the role of the prison industrial complex in exploiting the students. The third question was related to the deep consequences of institutional racism, as opportunities are denied and serious emotional and psychological traumas are inflicted. It demonstrated how

institutional racism would eventually cause the dehumanization of the individuals in question by society. The fourth and fifth questions of research helped in analyzing characters that are presented within a novel who were affected by institutional racism and how such personalities resisted against it. Elwood's persistence clearly indicates a situation where positive change could result from resilience and activism based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings. Mr. Hill, a teacher who requested that learners delete racial slurs in textbooks, is symbolic of the power that educators hold towards making lasting change within the educational system. The last research question reviewed ways of addressing institutional racism. As Turner states, while some legislative improvements have been achieved, it is crucial to change the thinking and attitudes of people. Lastly, the study urges the readers to be watchful and to work for a society where there is equality, fairness, and respect regardless of one's skin color.

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