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अनुक्रम

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Narrative of Control: Race and Hegemony in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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The literary works of contemporary African American writers have been gaining international recognition for voicing an uncommon issue pertaining to racial constructs in highly ethnically diversified American society. From the arrival of the first enslaved Black people at Jamestown to the present day The Black Lives Matter Movement, the stories of black's experiences were full of inequality, injustice, violence and white hegemony. Taking this idea, the present research paper tries to study Colson Whitehead's celebrated novel *The Nickel Boys* in the light of race and hegemony in American society. This novel provides a terrifying tale that examines the issues of race, control and hegemony within the context of the Nickel Academy, a juvenile reform school in the 1960s Jim Crow era. This academy is a fictional reconstruction of the notorious Arthur Dozier School for Boys that ruined the lives of countless black boys by endorsing harsh beating, torture and even killing on campus.

Colson Whitehead is a significant literary figure in contemporary African American writings. He has authored seven novels and two books of non-fiction and several journalist articles on movie, book and television criticism in *Weekly News* and cultural paper *The Village Voice*. His innovative novels explore social themes related to complexities of racism with experimentation in narrative style by blending history, realism and fantasy. He is a recipient of two National Book Award as well as twice winner of Pulitzer Prize, who has been constantly shown his awareness of America's horrific racial history through his oeuvre. He received greater attention and critical acclaim in 2016 with the publication of *The Underground Railroad*, a tale of runaway teenage slave for freedom from bondage in a cotton plantation in Georgia. The release of 2019's novel *The Nickel Boys* made him the first writer to win a Pulitzer Prize for consecutive books.

The Nickel Boys is a novel set against the backdrop of the Jim Crow era and it explores the systematic mistreatment, discrimination and atrocities faced by Black teenagers within the oppressive confinement of the Nickel Academy. The novel opens with a prologue that introduces a Nickel boy Elwood Curtis, now a grownup

living in New York City. He has not recovered from the trauma that he faced during his days at Nickel. After school was demolished, many of his schoolmates began sharing their disturbing stories on various media. Elwood was reluctant to talk about his time at the Nickel and never made any effort to contact former students. However, the reporting of an archaeological investigation carried out by a team of the University of South Florida was making headlines about the discovery of buried bodies of boys in a “secret graveyard” on Nickel campus. He realizes that he needs to return to Nickel and tell his and his schoolmates harrowing stories. Chapter one of the novel begins with a young Elwood, who is being raised by his strict grandmother Harriet after his parents abandoned him at the age of six. He is an exceptional child, a meritorious student, incredibly honest, disciplined and hardworking. Elwood follows the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. and often listens to recordings of his speeches. The words of King and his mentor Mr. Hill inspired him to get involved in the Civil Rights Movement. This association with activist movement made him more optimistic about a better future for blacks. But in an unfortunate incident, Elwood is unfairly sentenced to reform school at the Nickel, an incredibly harsh punishment for unknowingly riding in a stolen car. When he arrives at Nickel, he is hopeful of an early escape.

However, when he sees a boy being bullied by two in the bathroom, he steps in to interfere. Instead of being praised for his efforts, all four boys are taken from their beds in the middle of night by the Superintendent Spencer and a houseman Earl and subjected to a brutal beating in a building called the White House. When Elwood finds out that the school administration is corrupt and the goods like medicines, food and other supplies that were meant to be used for the Black boys at Nickel were distributed to local businesses for money. In the hope to stop this corruption and student abuse at Nickel, he has decided to expose the Nickel administration at the time of surprised State inspection by handing his notebook that records all the corruption at Nickel. In the end when his plan failed no change was happened in the Nickel. A few days later as a punishment for his rebellious act, he was brutally beaten by the Superintendent and housemen at the White House and later locked in a dark room on the top floor with minimum food and water. One night when his friend Turner comes to him and reveals the warden’s plan to kill Elwood by taking him “out back.” Then he decides to escape, the two friends leave Nickel, but they are chased by a Community Service van and eventually Elwood is dead from a rifle shot and Turner escapes successfully. Turner takes Elwood’s identity to honor his memory.

The novel is a powerful narrative of the interplay between races, hegemony and how systematic control operates to maintain racial hierarchies within and outside of the Nickel against racially charged 1960’s. The Nickel Academy serves as a model institution of the broader societal structure in the US that upholds racial hegemony and exercises control over its inhabitants. The working of Nickel administration systematically favored white students while subjecting black boys

to discriminatory treatment, mirroring the systematic racism deeply embedded in America. This institutionalized racism of Nickel reflects a form of hegemony where Whites in power i.e. the Superintendent and Housemen use their authority to maintain racial dominance. To the State and common people, the Nickel Academy seems like a reformatory functioning to provide education to wayward boys who are caught in acts of crime and to make them disciplined, respectable and law-abiding. But in reality, it worked as an open prison, the black students were often harshly beaten, abused and humiliated for minor mistakes by taking them at night in a place called the Ice Cream factory.

“The white boys bruised differently than the black boys and called it the Ice Cream Factory because you came out with bruises of every color. [...] The beating entrance, the boys called it” (41)

In the novel, Whitehead shows how white authority at the school use their power to control black boys. This creates a system where white people are in control and black people are made to follow their rules. This way of administration based on race doesn't limited to the school only but it becomes a part of whole American society. Throughout the story, we come across many incidents where blacks being treated badly, which shows how being controlled by others because of their race affects them physically and mentally. The main characters, Elwood Curtis and his friend Turner, go through a lot of mistreatment, abuse and torture, these emphasize how the whole system works to keep racial differences in place. The violence against blacks is used to make sure this way of controlling them continues.

The novel also shows how individuals, both Black and White, internalize and maintain hegemonic ideologies. Some Black characters like Grandmother Harriet, and the black Housefather Blakeley despite being victims of racial oppression believed in reinforcement of the existing power structures. This internalization adds layers of complexity to the novel, emphasizing how hegemony operates not only through external force but also through the internalization of oppressive ideologies. While the novel features the inescapable system of racial hegemony, it also portrays moments of resistance on the part of the characters. A character like Griff tries to challenge the established order by not losing at the annual boxing match against the white boy. He was taken to 'out back' and killed.

They came for Griff that night and he never returned. The story spread that he was too proud to take a dive [...] when the state of Florida dug him up fifty years later, the forensic examiner noted the fractures in the wrists and speculated that he'd been restrained before he died, in addition to the other violence attested by the broken bones (73)

The death of Griff and Elwood's act of disclosing the wrong functioning of The Nickel shows that the consequences of resistance within a hegemonic system are harsh and often end in death.

In a nutshell, Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* offers a distressing narrative of control that is based on racial indifferences in American society.

Through the tormenting experiences of characters like Elwood Curtis, Turner and his other black schoolmates at the Nickel Academy, Whitehead challenges the unjust and oppressive systems that dominate blacks in every sphere of life. Besides, this novel serves as powerful evidence of the need for acknowledging and dismantling the system of hegemony that propagates racial inequalities.

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