

Dominican Immigrants' Call for Concerns: A Political Perspective Analysis of the Theme of Junot Diaz's *Drown*

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Abstract

Drown, a collection of short stories by Dominican American writer Junot Diaz, successfully created a group of impressive images of Dominican immigrants. From the political perspective, the theme of the novel is not only the life and growth of immigrants, but also the expression of their political demands. The novel drew readers' attention to Dominican immigrants and their staying family by depicting their miserable separating life; Through the metaphor of father's presence or absence, it expresses the desire for strong and orderly intervention; By depicting the predicaments of Dominican immigrants in the United States, it proved that sympathy for them is justified. Junot Diaz is well versed in the cultural tradition of Christian self-help, and he plays up the hope and struggle for a better life of Dominican immigrants in the novel, expressing a religious belonging and conversion. Narrative analysis of the life of Dominican immigrants before and after their immigration to the United States and the fate of the main characters reveals its role in shaping the theme of the novel --Dominican immigrants' political demands for attention.

Keywords

Dominican Immigrants; Call for Concerns; Political Perspective; Analysis; Theme; Junot Diaz; Drown.

1. Introduction

Drown, a collection of short stories published in 1996, is the first work of Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz. As soon as it came out, it attracted the keen attention of readers and critics, and Diaz himself became famous. The collection consists of ten related stories, most of which are told from the first-person perspective of a young kid, Yuniors. Based on the life experiences of author Diaz and his family before and after emigrating to the United States, the work describes Dominican immigrants' miserable life and their hard struggles.

The interpretation of the novel theme is the core of literary appreciation. Different researchers have analyzed the theme of *Drown* from different angles. The mainstream views are as follows: first, immigrant life, second, growth, and third, the construction of immigrant cultural identity (see Danielle E. Flores:2013[1]; Tian Jing :2014[2]; Wang Rui: 2014[3];). In fact, from the political perspective, the theme of the novel is not only the life and growth of immigrants or their identity anxiety, but also the expression of political demands.

The influence of literature on politics is indirect and subtle. The spiritual edification of literary works has influenced the reader's mind. At the same time, readers will intentionally or unintentionally receive the political thoughts or political demands contained in literary works. However, some political thoughts in some works are sometimes not intentionally expressed by the author. Therefore, for our readers and commentators, in order to better understand the works, we need to dig out the political demands in the works.

2. Political Thought & Theme of Novel

The research tradition of the relationship between theme and thought can be traced back to ancient Greece. Aristotle concluded six basic elements of tragedy in *Poetics*[4], the melody (song), diction(language), spectacle(setting), ethos(character), mythos(plot) and dianoia (theme). Dianoia refers to the idea or thought that the reader gets from the writer, and it is generally called the "theme" in modern criticism. The theme of a novel is its controlling idea or its central insight, so the theme of a novel should be abstract and generalize about life, that is to say, the theme should be capable of unifying the whole novel. It is whatever general idea or insight the entire story reveals. Theme exists only in the novel that seriously attempts to reflect life faithfully or intends to reveal truth about life, or in the novels which are based on ideas or theories of life.

Every reader is entitled to extract a theme based on his understanding of the novel. Themes can largely define novels. A novel is a work of art, and the theme is just an abstract concept. We can use vitamins and fruits containing vitamins to compare the difference between themes and novels. The theme is vitamin, and the novel is a fruit containing vitamin. Sometimes readers will find that the theme of the novel is similar or even the same as the life he already knows, but he is still fascinated by the novel, because the theme appeals solely to their intellectual level of reading while the novel as a whole mainly appeals to their emotional level. The general theme of the novel is to enhance one's life consciousness.

Sometimes the theme of the novel is clear, but more often it is obscure, especially the political theme in novels, because the novel is not written to convey an idea but to convey an idea artistically. Duras[5] once said, "If a person is not a politician, then he is not an intellectual." Many American immigrant literature works have more or less political color and practical significance, mainly due to the author's political trauma. At the beginning of the novel *Drown*, Diaz quotes Gustavo Perez Fairmat's poem "How to explain to you that I don't belong to the English culture, but I don't belong anywhere else", which shows that he, as a successful immigrant, still bears the identity anxiety that other Dominican immigrants suffer and the political trauma caused by their embarrassing status on the edge of society. The masked boy who briefly appeared in the first story and was bullied by others, and his face was half eaten by a pig, was the visualization of Diaz's political trauma.

3. The Expression of Political Appeal in *Drown*

Drown is a vivid embodiment of the real life of Dominican-American immigrants. Lu Xun, a famous Chinese writer, once wrote: If you don't break out in silence, you will perish in silence. This sinking silence needs someone to break, and this sinking cry that needs attention needs to be voiced. This theme is well expressed in the novel. In the following part, we will analyze the expression of political demands in *Drown* from four aspects, and will explore its deeper theme from the political perspective.

3.1. Draw Readers' Attention to Dominican Immigrants and Their Staying Family by Depicting Their Miserable Separating Life

At the beginning of the novel, it shows the readers the life of Yunior in his hometown in Dominica when he was a child. As his father Ramon emigrated to the United States, the teenage life of two brothers, Rafa and Yunior, who grew up in a family lacking father's love, was chaotic: the 12-year-old brother Rafa was fighting, cheating, unruly and swearing ... Although Yunior could not fully understand his brother's behavior, he regarded his brother as a "role model".

From the obscure description of the novel, we can see the great trauma that colonialism and dictatorship brought to the families of Dominican immigrants in their hometown. Yunior's mother suffered the trauma left by the war. Her "back and abdomen are full of scars, which

were left by the missile attack in 1965"[6]. While Yunior described the tear gas tank burst in the neighborhood where they moved, she said, "Mother knew that smell from the year when the United States invaded your island country".

In *Drown*, Yunior's mother is the representative of Dominican women, and her life is a true portrayal of Dominican women's life. Her life seems to be confined to the kitchen. She is not only confined to a certain range of activities in her life, but also deprived of the right to speak and kept silent all the time. This was the common living condition of Dominican immigrant women at that time. Yunior's father left his family for many years, found a Puerto Rican lover, and brazenly took his two sons to his lover's home. But when he was sad or in trouble, he always called back to ask Yunior's mother for money. In the face of her husband's betrayal and irresponsibility, Yunior's mother, as a woman, chose to bear all this silently, and warmed the injured hearts of children with maternal love.

3.2. Express the Desire for Strong and Orderly Intervention through the Metaphor of Father's Presence or Absence

America's immigration policy is an important reason for Dominican immigrants to flood into America. Realizing the Dominican dream based on the American dream is the spiritual pursuit of young immigrants, even though they have made heavy sacrifices for it. Yunior's father Ramon came to the United States alone in order to realize his Dominican dream, hoping to live an upper-class life with "two hands and a heart as strong as a rock", but this wish never came true. On the contrary, long-term absence made him a "traitor" in his wife's mouth and a "stranger" in his children's heart, which eventually led to the gradual disintegration of his decision-making position in family life and forced him to leave again.

Yunior's family came to America with their father Ramon, hoping to find a way out in life. In order to change his predicament in the lower class, Ramon sneaked into the United States alone and became an illegal worker. In the process of taking root in a foreign land, Ramon hopes to live an ideal life, but the reality is that he has suffered a lot. After discovering that the idea of starting from the bottom was not feasible, he successfully obtained American citizenship by marrying Nilda, who was already an American citizen. When he turned back home and took his family in Dominica to the America, their life seemed not change a lot. Yunior's mother has always adhered to Dominican tradition and cannot accept American life. His brother Rafa chose to run away from home and get to know people who never grew up with him. Yunior, on the other hand, leads a decadent life under the pressure of survival, stealing, gambling, taking drugs and even promiscuity. This sad reality reflects the disillusionment of their "American Dream".

The duality of father's absence and presence in the novel is actually a metaphorical mapping. Father represents authority, strength and order. The comparison of Yunior's hope and life during his father's departure and return actually expresses a desire for strength and power that can help Dominican-American immigrants get out of trouble. Father is a metaphor of patriarchy. In a strong patriarchal society, father's attitude dominates the fate of children. To some extent, this is actually a reflection of the immigration policy of the US government, implying the contradiction and ambiguity of the relationship between "father" and "children", the US and its immigrants.

3.3. Justify the Sympathy for the Dominican Immigrants by Depicting Their Hardship in America

One of the dilemmas of Dominican immigrants living in the United States is the anxiety about their immigration status. As far as Anglo-Saxon American national culture is concerned, Dominican immigrants are marginalized due to differences in race, nationality and class, and become the other of the mainstream culture of the suzerain country, suffering from the double crisis of cultural identity and ownership. At the same time, the Dominican national identity of

immigrant groups is bound to be questioned, excluded or even wiped out by mainstream culture, which makes Dominican immigrants have to hide or even rush to get rid of their national identity, trying to cover up the fact that they are "marginalized". When sharing dating tips with friends, Yuniór mentioned hiding "the photo of hot popcorn head" and taking white girls to American fast food restaurants when dating. Obviously, Yuniór tried to hide his "black identity". Dominican immigrants constantly "bleach" themselves in order to integrate into the white culture, and this awareness of "bleaching" reflects the white culture's exclusion of Dominican ethnic culture.

The second dilemma of Dominican immigrants living in the United States is economic poverty. Díaz shows the poverty, drug abuse, violence and crime in Dominican immigrant settlements from the perspective of the working class in suburban areas. Díaz's description of the poor and uneasy life of the Yuniór family in the United States can be found everywhere in the novel. Ramon often suffered unfair treatment at work. He was forced to accept the worst shift time, and was demoted after being injured at work but failed in litigation. The first thing that Yuniór gives advice on dating is "take the government cheese from the refrigerator", which shows his anxiety about being in the lower class and being economically poor. Dominican immigrants are on the edge of society in social status.

The third dilemma of Dominican immigrants living in the United States is the disillusionment of their "American Dream" and "Dominican Dream". The Dominican dream of Dominican immigrants is a dream and belief based on the American dream. The "American Dream", which advocates striving for a better life through hard work, encourages young people from all over the world to rush to the United States. On this basis, the "Dominican Dream" demands that Dominican immigrant youth who pursue the "American Dream" strive to enter the upper American society and return home. However, this has brought great psychological pressure to immigrants. They are not only troubled by being unable to prove themselves, but also feel painful to compensate their families who have sacrificed for them.

In a certain sense, Díaz's description of all these dilemmas is to prove that sympathy for Dominican immigrants is justified.

3.4. Justify the Support for the Dominican Immigrants by Following the Religion Tradition that God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Junot Díaz is well versed in the cultural tradition of Christian self-help. In the novel, he pinned his hopes on the self-salvation of Dominicans. He believes that most Dominican immigrants are silently suffering from social injustice, family violence and life pressure like Yuniór's mother. This is the influence of Dominican native culture on Dominicans. Even so, the perfect image in the book is mother. All details about mother are beautiful. Mother's smell, like the wind blowing trees, mother's palm, is warm without sweat. Díaz praised Dominican women as a whole, and he thought that it was women's tenacity and pragmatism that supported this poor and backward family from falling apart.

As to Dominican men like Yuniór, Yuniór's father and brother, Díaz regards their immigrant life as a pilgrimage and a struggle for a better life. This silent struggle through hardships and depravity is the embodiment of masculinity in Latin American culture and a moving national characteristic of Dominicans. Latin American culture holds that men are dominant in gender relations. They represent a male-dominated social concept of "male chauvinism" and have the characteristics of "intelligence, resourcefulness, cunning but convincing". The novel reflects the influence of this Latin American cultural feature on Dominican immigrants. The Dominican immigrants' pursuit of "tough guy" images such as intelligence, wit and courage provides them with the motivation to persist in their struggle for better life. In the first story "Ruben Israel", the masked boy whose face was chewed off by a pig turned into a strong spirit in the story "No Face". He studies English hard, keeps exercising, tries his best to help an old man and a cat, and

loves his younger brother deeply. He believes in his own strength and that no one can run faster than him.

Diaz, on the other hand, pinned his hope on the mainstream American class who believed in Christian culture. Christian culture preaches that God helps those who help themselves. At the end of the last story "Persistence", it writes Yunior's reverie about his father, "He squatted down to show his yellow formal socks, and his hand stroked the scars on my head and arms. Neil, he finally said. A face full of stubble is facing me, and a circle is made on my cheek with his thumb. "This is a harmonious and loving picture, showing a child's desire for fatherly love, and an eager hope for his father's approval. This reverie may be a sustenance of Diaz' s hope. As mentioned earlier, the father in the novel is a metaphor of power and order, a metaphor of external forces that dominate the fate of immigrants, and a metaphor of the United States and its immigration policies. Diaz hopes that Dominican immigrants can be recognized by the mainstream American culture, and the contradiction between them can be alleviated and finally support will come under the inspiration of Christian culture.

4. Conclusion

Yunior's memory of his father can only be found in the photos. He is eager for his father's love, but his father abandoned his family at first. Even after the whole family moved to New Jersey, he didn't act like a real father to Yunior . He would be furious if Yunior vomited in his car. These descriptions of the relationship between father and son, analyzed from a political perspective, are the reflection of the American mainstream class' attitude toward Dominican immigrants.

Drown is a reflection and solution of the conflict between Dominican immigrants and American mainstream culture. It is the expression of Diaz's political thought. He hopes that the plight of Dominican immigrants can be noticed and their efforts can be recognized and supported. But this appeal may be futile, just like the relationship between Yunior and his father is hard to improve in reality.

Emotional appeal and political appeal are the two ends of a grand theme expression. Emotional appeal makes readers resonate emotionally, and political appeal makes readers think, which is a higher level of resonance. In this sense, exploring the political appeal of *Drown* can help us have a deeper understanding of the theme and significance of the novel, but the political appeal in the novel must be multi-level and multifaceted, so there must be some limitations in this study.

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