

THE SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL TO SIR, WITH LOVE: EXPLORING ISSUES OF RACISM, STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE IN BRITISH SOCIETY AND ITS EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN THE 1950S FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A BLACK MAN'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

YARI OTOBİYOGRAFİK ROMAN "TO SIR, WITH LOVE" (ÖĞRETMENİMİZE SEVGİLERLE): SİYAHİ BİR ADAMIN KİŞİSEL DENEYİMLERİ PERSPEKTİFİNDEN 1950'LERDE İNGİLİZ TOPLUMUNDA İRKÇILIK, BASMAKALIPLAR, ÖN YARGILAR VE EĞİTİM SİSTEMİ KONULARINA BAKIŞ

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Reference

Sarıbaş, S. (2020). "The Semi-Autobiographical Novel To Sir, With Love: Exploring Issues Of Racism, Stereotypes And Prejudice In British Society And Its Educational System In The 1950s From The Perspective Of A Black Man's Personal Experiences", Academic Social Resources Journal, (e-ISSN: 2636-7637), Vol:5, Issue:17; pp:468-475.

ABSTRACT

The racial and social issues of British society in the 1950s are what make Edward Ricardo Braithwaite's To Sir, With Love an important book. The book is Braithwaite's memoir and it is far from fiction. To Sir, With Love is an important novel, not so much for its literary qualities, but more because it was among the first works of fiction by a Caribbean author that attempted to articulate the disillusionment with life of an immigrant in Britain. The semi-autobiographical novel To Sir, With Love explores the issues of racism, stereotypes and prejudice in British society and its educational system in the 1950s from the perspective of a black man's personal experiences. The book is a concrete example of British society in the 1950s. A well-educated black engineer who was a pilot in the Royal Air Force in 1945 is forced to find another job to continue his life after leaving the service. Unable to work in his chosen profession of engineering, he finally becomes a teacher in a school in East London. Edward Ricardo Braithwaite, the author and the main character of the book, has mostly white students and in contrast to the discrimination he faced from potential employers, he does not discriminate against any of his students. This paper will focus on racism, prejudices which a colored person experienced, and discrimination between white and black people in British society.

Key Words: Stereotypes and Racism Prejudice, Discrimination

ÖZET

İngiltere toplumunda 1950'li yıllardaki ırksal ve sosyal meseleler, Edward Ricardo Braithwaite'in To Sir, With Love kitabını önemli kılmaktadır. Kitap, Braithwaite'in hatıralarından oluşmaktadır ve kurgu olmaktan çok uzaktır. To Sir, With Love'ı önemli kılan edebi niteliklerinden ziyade Britanya'da bir göçmenin yaşamıyla ilgili hayal kırıklığını dile getirmeye çalışan Karayip'li bir yazarın ilk kurgu eserlerinden biri olmasıdır. Yarı otobiyografik roman To Sir, With Love, siyahi bir adamın kişisel deneyimlerinden yola çıkarak 1950'lerde İngiliz toplumunda ırkçılık, basmakalıplar, ön yargılar ve eğitim sistemi konularına ışık tutmaktadır. Kitap, 1950'lerdeki Britanya toplumunun somut bir örneğidir. 1945'te Kraliyet Hava Kuvvetleri'nde pilot olan iyi eğitilmiş bir siyahi mühendis, görevinden ayrıldıktan sonra hayatına devam etmek için yeni bir iş bulmaya zorlanır. Kendi seçtiği meslek olan mühendislik alanında çalışamayınca sonunda Doğu Londra'daki bir okulda öğretmen olur. Kitabın yazarı ve ana karakteri olan Edward Ricardo Braithwaite'in öğrencileri daha çok beyazlardan oluşmaktadır ve potansiyel işverenleri tarafından maruz bırakıldığı ayrımcılığın aksine öğrencileri arasında hiçbir şekilde ayırım yapmaz. Bu makale, siyahi bir adamın maruz kaldığı ırkçılık ve ön yargılara ve İngiliz toplumunda siyahlar ve beyazlar arasındaki ayrımcılığa odaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Basmakalıplar ve İrkçılık, Ön yargı, Ayrımcılık

1. INTRODUCTION

The prejudices of teachers toward unruly students in the school, the experiences of discrimination and stereotypes relating to “black” people or “mulattos” and racism are the main themes of the book. Braithwaite sees his students without thinking about color, and he mentions them in this way “(...) these children whom I loved without caring about *their* skins or *their* backgrounds, (...)” (Braithwaite,1959: 166). According to him, all of them have the same status and he is only concerned about how to educate them without using force or harsh rules. Braithwaite aims to turn those children’s hatred against life and others into self-respect and love by trying to demonstrate the prejudiced, stereotypical, and racist thoughts in their minds. Braithwaite treats those children as if they are all in the same class and situation. He does not care from where they come or to which ethnicity they belong. Braithwaite says, “I tried to show them that people were not confined to any geographical location because of their color, but that there could be found people of every racial strain in all parts of the world” (Braithwaite,1959:77). He believes that, by educating the new generation with this idea, society might change in a positive way.

2. PREJUDICE, STEREOTYPES and RACISM

E. Ricardo Braithwaite is an intellectual Caribbean born in British Guiana (present day Guyana). His ethnicity plays an important role in the novel as it is a memoir of the racism and prejudice he faced while living in London. In order to overcome prejudices and stereotypes about blacks, one should live with them. “The biggest problem is that the majority of white people have got preconceived ideas about black people. The attitudes of white people who live among blacks are completely different to those of people who have never lived among them. They know us better, they know we are human and not some alien from another planet” (House, 1998:11). The image of a black teacher and East London students proves this citation in a positive way. In the novel, Braithwaite contrasts himself with a white teacher, Weston, and shows others that a black can be more successful, tidier and cleaner than a white man. In addition to this, East London students should not always be seen as rude and dirty people. If teachers and society pay more attention to the social lives and backgrounds of these students, they will become better members of society.

The novel opens with a racist scene. J. Manuel Casas explains that racism is “based on beliefs and reflected in behaviors that accept race as a biological entity and maintain that racial groups, other than one’s own, are intellectually, psychologically, and/or physically inferior” (2005:502). In the novel, a woman refuses to sit next to Braithwaite because he is black. As the white woman sees him unequal to herself, she humiliates him by refusing to sit next to him on the bus. Even though standing on the bus is forbidden, she does not listen to the driver’s warnings. “The slim woman remained standing, cool, remote, undismayed by the conductor’s threatening attitude or the pointedly hostile glances directed at her by the women in their immediate sympathy and solidarity with the conductor against someone who was obviously not of their class” (Braithwaite,1959:4). The woman treats Braithwaite as if he does not exist. Black skin makes him invisible. House indicates that in Britain, “white people treated black people so poorly” (Braithwaite,1959:11). The woman enjoys her “superior” action. Braithwaite does not show his anger to her, he lets it be and he describes the woman as “a smooth, elegant, superior bitch” (Braithwaite,1959:4). He knows that he is unwanted. He leaves the bus and sees the triumph of the woman. “(...) as I stepped off the platform, I saw the woman take the seat I had just vacated, stiff backed and unruffled” (Braithwaite,1959:5). No matter where a black person graduated from or where he works or how intellectual he is, skin color gives white people the right to feel superior in the Britain of those times.

In contrast to the stereotypical images of colored people, Braithwaite is clean, handsome and he attaches importance to self-care. “I had taken a great deal of care with my appearance that morning. I was wearing my best suit with the right shirt and tie and pocket handkerchief; my shoes were smartly polished; my teeth were well brushed and I was wearing my best smile “(...) Yet the

receptionist's smile suddenly wavered and disappeared" (Braithwaite,1959:31-32). After the example of the white woman's behavior on the bus, once again these visible hostilities can be seen in job appointments and they exemplify the prejudices of white people against colored ones. House indicates that employers generally reject black people who apply for employment:

"It was commonly believed that employers discriminate against black people who apply for jobs. This seemed to be taken for granted by younger participants and was not something which required any explanation: it was assumed as a fact. They found it difficult to provide evidence for this view, although of course it is never easy to know why one is rejected for a job" (House, 2008:18).

It does not matter how good one is in one's field, if one is colored, it might cause a problem for white people in the industry. In those times, no white person would willingly want to be under the authority of a black person. Although Braithwaite feels confident he will get the position he has applied for, he is responded to with this remark: "Employing you would mean placing you in a position of authority over a number of our English [white] employees many of whom have been with us a very long time, and we feel that such an appointment would adversely affect the balance of good relationship which has always obtained in this firm" (Braithwaite,1959:33). He is disappointed and saddened in addition to being angry. "Those folks must have looked at my name on the application forms and immediately assumed that I was white; there was nothing about the name Braithwaite to indicate my color (...)" (Braithwaite,1959:34).

Moreover, not only in industry are all doors closed to Braithwaite, but also in social life as he has difficulty because of his color. When he wants to hire a room, he experiences the same situation as in the job appointment: "Immediately the smile was replaced by the expression of cold withdrawal I had come to know so well" (Braithwaite,1959:97). Another racist scene occurs when he and his girlfriend, Gillian Blanchard, go out to dinner for Gillian's birthday. "(T) he service was being exceptionally slow, especially to our table (...)" (Braithwaite,1959:141). Intentionally, the waiter attempts to humiliate Braithwaite. The waiter goes too far and spills some soup on Braithwaite's lap. "Whether by accident or design, some of the soup was spilled from my plate on to the cloth" (1 Braithwaite,1959:41). Yet, Braithwaite shows no reaction to this accident as he does not want to confirm the stereotypes of the society.

In Eyo B. Ndem's analysis "The Status of Colored People in Britain", he argues that in British society, the success of black students is very important to prove that a black can be just as successful academically as a white student. "(...) failures of colored students will, by and large, be regarded by working-class coloreds as a loss of status in the eyes of the white community and will carry the impression (for whites) that coloreds are incapable of intellectual work" (1957:86). However, Braithwaite's education often becomes an obstacle for him. His curriculum vitae proves his abilities yet one of the potential employers tells him that "I never went to Grammar school, let alone University, and none of our employees are as well educated as you are, so I don't think you'd fit here. They might resent the posh way you speak" (Braithwaite,1959:40). He feels "caught like an insect in the tweezer grip of prejudice" (Braithwaite,1959:40). No one gives him a job although he is very qualified in the engineering field.

Outside forces change Braithwaite's work-life. In this novel, being employed is vital for survival. "It was a decision forced on me by the very urgent need to eat; it was a decision brought about by a chain of unhappy experiences which began about a week after my demobilization from the Royal Air Force in 1945" (Braithwaite,1959:29). His educational qualifications would have allowed him to be in a higher socio-economic position where he was able to find a job in his field, yet he chooses to become a working-class teacher in an East London school. He chooses this path after his demobilization from the RAF because he has no other option. He cannot find employment in the engineering field because of his skin color. This fact leads him to another way of life, far from his ideals and imagination. Despite it all, Braithwaite feels happy and useful. He also finally feels a

sense of belonging in this new country because according to him “(...) none of it could detract from the wonderful feeling of being employed. At long last I had a job (...)” (Braithwaite,1959:28) For Braithwaite, being employed and being a contributing member of society is a valuable thing.

The article “Stereotyping and Racism: Findings from Two Attitude Surveys” by Elliot House is an important source to explain the racism and stereotypical images mentioned in the novel *To Sir, With Love*. For instance, when Braithwaite enters the school’s staff room and introduces himself as the new teacher, another teacher called Weston makes remarks intended to be funny such as “Ah another lamb to the slaughter – or shall we say black sheep?” (Braithwaite,1959:11) and ‘Maybe Braithwaite will try a little black magic on them?’ (Braithwaite,1959:58). This racist sense of humor actually hurts Braithwaite; however, he does not attempt to stop these types of remarks. House attempts to explain this situation from a colored person’s perspective. He believes colored people “did not think this was offensive, partly because of the skill with which it had been executed, but also because it addressed a race issue head on, with a sense of humor, and without ‘going all around the houses’” (Braithwaite,1959:13). Yet, the irritating and offensive part is the racism contained in the joke. Colored people are often not happy with these stereotypical jokes made at their expense, but these jokes are made to make others laugh.

The Greenslade School has “[a] spirit of democracy and tolerance” (Braithwaite,1959:160). even though there are people from different ethnicities and different religions in the school, it does not matter. Everyone goes to the same hall to eat together and they pray to God together in the same chapel. No one has any bias against any other religion. “Assembly was a simple affair without religious bias or emphasis. It began with a hymn and prayer in which every child joined, either actively, or merely by being there. Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant and Moslem, they were all there, all in it, all of it; the invocation for guidance, courage and Divine help was for each and all” (Braithwaite,1959:48). The Greenslade School is symbol of freedom. It symbolizes a world without racism and prejudice. The headmaster of the school does not discriminate against anyone or anything. His most pressing concern is to educate students without being harsh on them. Even though Weston makes racist jokes to Braithwaite, his intentions remain unclear. He might be doing it purposefully or without thought. “I have always been subject to quick explosive anger, but for years I have been making a determined attempt to exercise close control of my temper. So now I watched this fellow, ready, willing and, I hope, able to take a joke about myself” (Braithwaite,1959:10). Braithwaite stands those jokes for the sake of his job. They are not important to him because he is accepted by the others in the school. He says that “(...) most of my colleagues wanted me to make good; they had accepted me unconditionally as one of them. And that was the most important thing of all” (Braithwaite,1959:58).

Even though there are no other racist attitudes except Weston’s jokes toward the black teacher within the boundaries of the school, society still has prejudices against a *black* person. It is seen when Braithwaite and his students take a class trip to a museum. They must use a public bus which is very crowded. Some white women accuse Braithwaite of being too close to the young white girls who are his students. “The stare of disapproval they cast in our direction was made very obvious; and soon they were muttering darkly something about ‘shameless young girls and these black men’” (Braithwaite,1959:87). The relationship between Gillian Blanchard and Braithwaite is affected by this incident. Because society is unaccustomed to seeing a white woman and black man together, or as Braithwaite describes: “the sight of a white woman in a Negro’s company” (Braithwaite,1959:91), he begins to think about their future and their happiness. “How long would our happy association survive the malignity of stares which were deliberately intended to make the woman feel unclean, as if she had abjectly degraded not merely herself but all womanhood?” (Braithwaite,1959:91). He considers the incident which occurred on the bus to the museum as a “reminder” of this situation.

Being white is enough not to face the cruelty of the society. Mr. Florian see the students “as if they were all tiny, helpless children” (Braithwaite,1959:26). However, Braithwaite thinks that they look

like adults and they are not “helpless” at all. “My own experiences during the past two years invaded my thoughts, reminding me that these children white; hungry or filled, naked or clothed, they were *white*, and as far as I was concerned, that fact alone made the only difference between the haves and the have-nots” (Braithwaite,1959:25). This is the only important difference as it is much worse being a black have-not rather than a white have-not.

Braithwaite has his own prejudices towards these children. He is shocked by the appearance of students in the school. “My vision of teaching in a school was one of straight rows of desks, and neat, well-mannered, obedient children. The room I had just left seemed like a menagerie” (Braithwaite,1959:10). This first impression provides the foundation for his prejudices. His colleagues further these biased thoughts against those children. When Mr. Florian advises Braithwaite not to be harsh on the students, Braithwaite says to himself: “He was speaking as if they were all tiny, helpless children, a description very much at variance with what I had seen of the husky youths and girls jiving the auditorium” (Braithwaite,1959:26). If one does not break his or her own biases, there will never be a chance to move forward. With the advice of an old white man who is not concerned about being in the company of a black man, Braithwaite decides to break his own prejudice against his students and he now thinks about being a teacher in East London. “Don’t ever underrate the people of the East End; from those very slums and alleyways are emerging many of the new breed of professional and scientific men and quite a few of our politicians” (Braithwaite,1959:43).

Another stereotype encountered in the novel can be seen when one of Braithwaite’s students, Fernman, says “But all natives are black, Sir” (Braithwaite,1959:96). Not only students, but also other teachers think in a similar way as “[t]hey had been taught with the same textbooks that these children were using now, and had fully digested the concept that colored people were physically, mentally, socially and culturally inferior to themselves, though it was rather ill-mannered actually to say so” (Braithwaite,1959:96). In order to change this stereotype, Braithwaite gives examples from his personal life and from his classroom such as Fernman and Seales. They are both British; however, they do not have the same color skin. Also, the idea of Braithwaite being “Sir” to those children breaks this image of black people. He is quite smart and skillful and he is the one who teaches *white* students how to be clean, how to be gentlemen or ladies, and how to be successful. According to House’s research, these stereotypes are completely true. People are classified according to their skills and these skills change according to their color.

“[S]chools and white society were deemed to regard black people as being suitable only for certain occupations and roles in life: black people were seen as being good at practical skills but lacking intellectual abilities. By not pushing them intellectually, schools, it was felt, failed to bring out the best in black pupils, and thus reinforced black people’s disadvantage in the labor market” (House, 2008:19).

3. PREJUDICE AT SCHOOL

Braithwaite, as an inexperienced teacher, has difficulties trying to create order in his classroom. While other teachers, like Mrs. Dale-Evans, act like mothers towards their students and coddle them, Braithwaite considers himself their equal and treats them as adults. He does not, of course, know what he should do to reach his students, but being a creative teacher, he makes lessons more enjoyable and interesting for the disobedient students. In doing so, he becomes a role model for other educators. “One preservice teacher viewed Sir as an example to follow, hoping that she would be able to ‘give as much time to [her] work as a teacher as Sir did’ (Trier,2001: 132).

Braithwaite first needs to gain the students attention and respect, then he can teach them to be anti-racist and unprejudiced. He reads pedagogical books and knows there are three stages he should overcome in the class. The first stage is the silent treatment: “They would do any task I set them without question or protest, but equally without interest or enthusiasm” (Braithwaite,1959:62). They were not interested in anything, even his skin color. The second stage is the “noisy treatment”

(Braithwaite,1959:63). The students did not pay attention in the class and spoke to each other without asking permission from Sir. The last and third stage is the “noisy interruption and the crude remark” (Braithwaite,1959:64). In class, “kids” start to make noise while Sir is reading a text or writing something on the blackboard and they seem that they make those noises accidentally. The girls in the classroom protest the authority by setting a used sanitary napkin on fire. “The situation in a classroom is further refined by considering Megan Laverty’s distinction between what might be called pedagogical and ethical listening. When the objective is learning, the listening is alert, deferential, inquiring, and critically engaged, whereas ethical listening is inclusive, indiscriminate, impartial, uncommitted, and uncritical” (Rud and Garrison,2001:165). After this event, even though it seems Braithwaite loses the students, he enables them to obey and listen to him in the end.

Braithwaite attempts to break down the “barriers” between his students and himself. The novel shows the reader that having prejudice towards others is one of the worst things a person can experience – this is something Braithwaite understands firsthand. House claims that “Most of the participants felt that getting to know people from different ethnic backgrounds, as individuals rather than as members of another ethnic group, was a good way of breaking down barriers” (Braithwaite,1959:11). If this claim is adapted to the setting of this novel, one can say that a person should live among East London School children in order to remove any preconceived prejudices against those children. The first impression that Braithwaite has of his students is obviously not good. “At first, I had been rather critical of their clothing, and thought their tight sweaters, narrow skirts and jeans unsuitable for school wear” (Braithwaite,1959:148). Braithwaite begins to rid himself of his prejudices against his own students. He starts fresh and treats them as “adults” not “kids”. He believes that as long as they are treated and seen as kids, they will behave as kids. “They now accepted the things I said completely, unquestioningly, because they had accepted me, and no one seemed to be disposed to query the authenticity of anything which bore the seal ‘Sir said’” (Braithwaite,1959:89).

Braithwaite is the image of “teacher savior” (Trier,2001:133). As Trier indicates “the teacher’s professional life disrupts his or her personal life” (137). Braithwaite does not have a life out of school. He even brings work home with him even when advised not to. When he goes to the local market, he experiences his students’ environment. “I was introduced, *in absentia*, to most of the members of their families and very soon I learned of the new job ‘our Joannie’ had secured; of the girls ‘our Alf’ was going to steady with; of the difficulties at home since ‘our Dad’ was on strike at the Docks; when ‘our Mum’ was expecting the new baby. I was part of it and very happy to be so much a part of it” (Braithwaite,1959:102). He becomes a part of their lives.

Braithwaite tries to “build bridges between knowledge and life, between youth and adulthood, between thinking and acting, between so-called working-class failure and middle-class success. One gets the feeling, however, that the bridges have a ‘good’ side and a ‘bad’ side, and that student traffic is supposed to go one way only” (Braithwaite,1959:174). By building these bridges, he attempts to connect more deeply with his students. He “sometimes walk(s) around the neighborhood after school to learn something of the background” (Braithwaite,1959:64). When Braithwaite accomplishes building these bridges, he will break the prejudice and racist thoughts his students might harbor, as well. Similarly, he responds to the stereotypical behaviors of his students in good temper. When he cuts his finger, “red blood” appears and one student surprisingly reacts by saying: “Blimey, red blood!” (Braithwaite,1959:103). Meanwhile, another student, Pamela, gets frustrated with this unintended racist reaction, “What did you expect, fat boy? Ink?” (Braithwaite,1959:103). Sir likes the way Pamela defends him. However, he does not get angry at Potter because he knows the boy’s real intention.

Braithwaite wants to prepare his students for real life and he harmonizes real life with abstract lessons. He turns his lessons into question-and-answer seminars. By doing this, he both learns who they are and why they are rebellious and also, he teaches them how to become contributing members of society.

“Rather than continuing to plod through the boring exercises of the prescribed high school curriculum, Sir suggested that they use class time to talk seriously about life. (...) I remember identifying with Sir as he battled with cynical teachers, prejudice and ignorance, ultimately rejecting a much more prestigious career in teaching (...). It lingered somewhere in the sedimentary collage of images that form the inchoate, primary material for thinking and feeling” (Weber and Mitchell,1999: 165).

Even though, Braithwaite educates these students with gentle issues, as his antagonist, Weston mocks the posh way the students address each other. Braithwaite tells the students to call girls “Miss” and boys by their surnames. When Weston comes across this situation, he makes another of his racist jokes: “Ah, well, Weston resumed, I suppose it comes natural to some people to say: Yes, Ma’am; yes Boss” (Braithwaite,1959:84). It is clear that Weston’s prejudice against these students is not broken down.

Every prejudice at school is not easily distorted. Braithwaite is a black teacher and his colleagues and students love him regardless of his skin color. As the novel goes on, it is conceivable that those students may no longer harbor racist and prejudiced views on colored people. However, when the only colored student’s mother passes away, the other in the class collect money to send flowers to his home. Moira Joseph states the reason why they cannot go to Seales’ home: “It’s what people would say if they saw us going to a colored person’s home” (Braithwaite,1959:165). Jacqueline Bender goes on to explain “but if one of us girls was seen going to his home you can’t imagine the things people would say. We’d be accused of all sorts of things” (Braithwaite,1959:167). Braithwaite is disappointed by these prejudiced thoughts. Being black or mulatto is enough to be isolated from the people who love you, spend time with you, laugh with you, or have the same opportunities as you have. “If he’d been pimp or pansy, moron or murderer, it would not have mattered, providing he was white; his outstanding gentleness, courtesy and intelligence could not offset the greatest sin of all, *the sin of being black*” (Braithwaite,1959:168). According to Braithwaite, a black person is condemned or punished or alienated by others just because of “a little change, a little shift in geographical position” (Braithwaite,1959:168).

He now believes that this society and their racial prejudices are not going to simply be destroyed. “This is a community with many strong racial and religious tensions and prejudices, most of them of long standing” (Braithwaite,1959:166). However, despite every obstacle he faced and all the disappointments he suffered; Braithwaite gets his reward at the end of the book. Lynne Macedo points out that “despite everything, [Braithwaite’s] stoicism and determination to combat racism are eventually rewarded on a number of fronts” (Braithwaite,1959:1). When Braithwaite goes to the Seales’ home to offer his condolences, he is greeted by a crowd of his students who, despite what others might say about them later, went to the home of a colored family anyway.

4. CONCLUSION

The novel draws the image of white students as black ones because of their life style, social status and their image in the public’s eye. The black teacher, on the other hand, is seen as a white person as he is handsome, clear and intellectual. This mixed situation is displayed to demonstrate racist and prejudiced views against colored people in British society. By breaking his prejudices, Braithwaite implies that everybody should be given a chance without regard to color. He turns his students from rebellious youth into obedient adults and he, in the end, loves them. If one purifies oneself from all kind of prejudices and tries to understand others, as House emphasizes, they will learn that those colored people are human as well and they all live in the same country (Braithwaite,1959:11).

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