

Down These Mean Streets: Prevalent struggle between Racial and Cultural Identity

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Introduction

Down These Mean Streets is a book published in 1967 by Piri Thomas. It is considered to be a memoir of Piri of his early years of life. The plot is divided into three sections. These include life between Harlem and Long Island, Down South, and life in prison. Stuart Hall's theoretical views on cultural identity and interpellation are implicated in Piri's life. This essay intends to explicate the racial and cultural complexities faced by the protagonist Piri Thomas in *Down These Mean Streets*.

Summary

The memoir starts with a prologue in which Piri introduces himself and the reason for writing his book. Piri is the oldest son in his family (Puerto Rican Immigrants) living in Harlem. The setting of the story is based in Spanish Harlem. Piri's family has moved from Spanish Harlem to the Italian section due to the death of his younger brother. Piri often fights with white kids due to his dark colour. Later, Piri's family goes back to Spanish Harlem, where Piri joins a Puerto Rican gang (Famously called TNTs) and starts stealing. Once, the police catch him, but Piri manages to escape and feels guilty for running away. The Thomas family moves to Long Island, where Piri does not like the environment. Some school fellows criticize Piri for his dark colour. Soon, Piri leaves for Harlem but has no place to live. He gets into more conflicts because of his ethnic and racial background, which forces him to leave Harlem and move Down South with his best friend, Brew. Piri is resolute in verifying that he is a dark-coloured Puerto Rican. Piri goes back to Harlem to visit his aunt where he gets to know about his sick mother. Piri starts living with his father in Long Island after his mother's death. Piri leaves his father after a couple of months due to a fight with his father over his affair with another woman. Piri moves back to Harlem, and from this moment, his life starts to go downhill towards mobsters and drug smuggling. He goes to jail for shooting a police officer. He serves fifteen years in jail by drowning in the memories of his love of life (Trina). After coming out of jail, he comes to know about Trina's marriage. Piri changes his personality and perception. He becomes religious and starts to live with his aunt.

Conflict on Cultural Identity

The cardinal theme of this story is Piri's prevalent conflict over his dark skin colour to prove his racial/ethnic identity which is Puerto Rican. Piri's conflicting personality can be understood through these lines from the prologue, which states "skinny, dark-face, curly-haired, intense Porty-Ree-can"(Thomas, 1997). This visual description of Piri makes everyone perceive him as black, which he isn't. The cultural identity and conflicting personality of Peri can be perceived through this visual description of his physical features and inner character. To gain a reputation, Piri tries to take on and adapt Italian and American urban culture to conform to the stereotypic standards of their culture in Harlem (Blake, 2018).

Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Identity

According to Flores and Roman's analysis, "The conflicting situations of Rican and Black identity put Piri in the problematic selection to sustain both cultural identities in the authoritarian racial foundation of the US" (Flores, 2009) Stuart Hall emphasizes two different ways of contemplating on cultural identity. The first way of interpreting cultural identity depends upon one standard and shared culture. However, the second way of interpreting cultural identity is unstable and metamorphic. The interpretation of cultural identity depends upon the concept of "being" (what we are) and "becoming" (what we have become). Cultural Identity is not a fixed essence. Cultural identity always evolves and develops through memory, narration, and myths. The second interpretation of cultural identity reflects upon the traumatic experiences of colonial characters. (Hall, 1996). The concept of interpellation can be associated with cultural identity because every culture encourages its subjects to accept the assigned roles.

Theoretical Implication on *Down These Mean Streets*.

The implication of Hall's theory of cultural identity and interpellation can be viewed through the lens of *Down These Mean Streets*. The prevailing conflict of Piri's diasporic life in Spanish Harlem to prove his ethnic and racial origin validates interpellation. Throughout the book, Piri is in racial conflict with his personality of "being" (Puerto Rican) and "becoming" (Black). The "being (Puerto Rican)" of Piri is highly affected by the affirmations of his mother in his early childhood. The "becoming (Black)" trait of his personality is highly affected by the culture and society he is living in. Furthermore, Piri's life is "unsatisfied, hoping, and always reaching."(Thomas, 1967).

However, at the end of the story, Piri's racial identity does not concern him after coming out of jail. He becomes a changed person after serving his punishment in jail and losing his love of life, Trina. Everyone around Piri forcefully perceives him as black because of his [dark skin](#) colour and wants him

to accept it just like his brother. Piri's brother's advice to accept this new cultural identity reflects cultural interpellation. However, he keeps trying to prove his ethnic Puerto Rican origin. During his stay at Long Island, he is subjected to criticism for being black. The second interpretation of Hall's cultural identity signifies the traumatic experiences of Piri's colonial and diasporic life. Piri goes through a prevalent conflict in accepting his dark skin colour, which results in him proving his cultural identity to everyone.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, *Down These Mean Streets* is a story that envisages racial differences and diasporic problems faced by colonial people, such as the traumatic life of Piri. His [life in the United States](#) has to go through major racial and cultural complexities/ discriminations in his early period of life in the United States of America. Piri is in a constant struggle between Puerto Rican and [Black cultural](#) identities to be accepted by his community. Furthermore, Hall's theoretical views about cultural identity and interpellation are pertinent to Piri's life. This story explores the impact of race and culture on Piri Thomas's life.

References

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