



EXPLOITATION OF BLACKS IN *NATIVE SON*

1. Dr.P.Samuel, Assistant Professor & Head of English, Government Arts and Science College, Arakkonam.
2. Praveena. L, II M. A., English, Government Arts and Science College, Arakkonam.
3. Hephzibah. P, Research Scholar, Bharathiar University.

Abstract

The novel deals with the fear employed in the lives of Blacks which led them to exploitation. The fear is deep rooted by the racism of whites. The fear is deep rooted by the racism of Whites. The *Native Son* brings revolution in the Afro American society and literature because it changed the shame, anger, bitterness, frustration, violence which were employed in the Afro American society. The novel highlights the fear and racism in the lives of Blacks people but finally eliminates and helps the Afro American society to be uplifted. Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* is set in Chicago in the late 1930s and reflects many different traits of the city during that historical era. Chicago had a large and growing black population, made up mainly of African Americans who were leaving the south to come north and find better jobs and more opportunities for social and cultural freedom. Bigger Thomas and his family live in a racial ghetto on the south side of Chicago. Such ghettos, which were characteristic of many large northern (and southern) cities, were often poverty-stricken areas and areas of high crime. Participation in gangs and involvement in crime were often common.

Keywords: Exploitation, Discrimination, Identity, Suppression of Black.

I. Introduction

In order to determine Chicago's worst neighbourhoods, we had to give each neighbourhood an actual concrete score: we call this a neighbourhood's overall 'Snack ability'. To get this score we looked at the latest census data on income levels, unemployment rates, crime, and home prices for 77 Chicago neighbourhoods with over 2,000 residents. In the mid-1950's Chicago suffered its first post industrial crisis as the major meatpacking companies began to close their production facilities, more African Americans had filled Chicago than ever before. More African American gangs had been established and the number of white ethnic gangs had nearly diminished. Street crime was a very low priority for authorities. From the 1930's to the 1950's an artistic movement focused in and around the Hyde Park community area. The South Side of Chicago was considered the "capital of black". African –American culture, also known as Black-American culture, in the United States refers to the cultural contributions of African Americans to the culture of the United States, either as part of or distinct from American culture. The distinct identity of African-American culture is rooted in the historical experience of the African-American people, including the Middle passage. The cultural is both distinct and enormously influential on American culture as a whole. Understanding its identity within the culture of the United States it is, in the anthropological sense, conscious of its origins as largely a blend of West and Central Africa.

II. Slavery and Its Impact in *Native Son*

Although slavery greatly restricted the ability of African-Americans to practices, values and beliefs survived, and over time have modified and blended with European cultures and other cultures such as that of

Native Americans. African-American identity was established during culture that has had and continues to have a profound impact on American culture as a whole, as well as that of the broader world. Wright's fiction shows that his characters' world is filled with fear as one form of neurotic disorders. Fear is defined by psychologists as "an intense, primitive response to danger; a condition during which, according to the emergency theory, the body is being prepared to run, to elude detection by 'freezing, or to fight'. According to psychologists, fears "originate in traumatic experience of helplessness in painful situations". African-Americans in Wright's works are always afraid of the white oppressor who segregates them, terrorizes them, lynches them, and keeps them in menial jobs; they are afraid of their own impotency that always fails them in decisive moments; in a word, they are afraid of their own fear which keeps them inferior and prevents them from ever facing their tormentors. In *NS*, Wright shows that the world of his characters is based on fear.

III. Capitalism and Its Impact in *Native Son*

Bigger is able to find a job through a Chicago relief agency. Such agencies were common at the time, partly because the U.S. as a whole was still dealing with the economic devastation wrought by the great depression. Chicago was badly affected by the depression, as were most other large cities. Bigger is employed by Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, wealthy white people who support the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but who also profit financially from the high rents their real estate company charges to black people living in the ghetto. Mr. Dalton, Bigger's employer, positions himself as a liberal, progressive white citizen of Chicago. In reality, he's pretty much a racist. Sure, he's not actively evil or cruel, but he fails to recognize how he actively exploits the system of racial segregation in order to gain more wealth. Bigger's lawyer points out that Mr. Dalton attempts to soothe his conscience by donating gen-

erous amounts of money to money to “uplift” the black citizens of Chicago. Mr. Dalton is a confirmed believer in capitalism which, as presented in *Native Son*, is another system that extracts cheap labour from the working classes in order to enrich the already wealthy upper class. His distaste for the revolutionary exploits of Mary and Jan is mitigated only by his love for his daughter. This is ultimately what makes him a sympathetic character. The narrator presents him as a misguided philanthropist understanding of social realities.

The novel notices that African-Americans are anxious and afraid of whites. Also illustrates Wright’s naturalistic representation since he views the white people as strong forces that shape and direct African-Americans. In the existence of Wright’s protagonists is dominated by fear. Near the end of *NS*, for instance, when Max, the white Communist lawyer, asks Bigger what exactly he is afraid of as an African-American, Bigger utters only one word which indicates that fear is part and parcel of his entire being.

According to psychoanalyst, fear may develop into an uncontrollable state with incalculable consequences. When a person senses a greater level of menace, his fear may develop into another form: “As danger increases, fear may escalate into panic. At that time thought deteriorates into distorted mental images, into complete irrationality”. This is exactly what happens with Bigger in his relationship with Mary Dalton. A close reading of *NS* shows that the source of Bigger’s anxiety lies in the abnormal race relations in their society, for example, Bigger is anxious and confused in the presence of white people. When Bigger goes to meet Mr. Dalton, anxiety accompanies him. As he approaches the picket fence of the house, “only fear and emptiness fill him”. He stands in front of the house perplexed. The mere arrival at a white neighbourhood

made him so anxious that he hoped that he “could have stayed among his people and escaped feeling this fear and hate. This was not his world”.

IV. Forwardness of Mary Dalton and Insecure Fears of Bigger in *Native Son*

As a white woman, Mary Dalton in *NS* is another source of Bigger’s anxiety and bewilderment. Her behaviour cannot be expected by Bigger. She is frank, easy-going, and unreserved, things which Bigger as an African-American does not grasp or expect. On first meeting him, Mary keeps asking Bigger if he belongs to a union and speaks to him frankly in front of her father. This confuses Bigger who feels that her words may lead him to lose

his job. Sensing the menace embedded in Mary’s words, “Bigger wished the girl had not said anything about unions. May be he would not be hired now. Or, if hired, maybe he would be fired soon if she kept acting like that”. When Bigger is finally hired and given a comfortable room, he feels that this would be a good job, except for Mary: “She worried him. She might cause him to lose his job if she kept talking about unions. Never in his life had he met anyone like her. She puzzled him. She was rich, but she didn’t act like she was rich”. As he drives her, Mary tells Bigger her secrets; she is not going to university, as she had told her father; she is going to meet her Communist friend Jan Erlone. She talks with him freely as if he were her equal, but because Bigger is not used to this feeling, being a member of an oppressed minority and she being one who belongs to the oppressor, he does not feel safe; he grows anxious and baffled by her forwardness: “She was an odd girl, all right. He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him. She responded to him as if he were human, as he lived in the same world. Blind to the many obstacles that separate her from Bigger, Mary confused Bigger with her overly kind manner. Mary seems to be an irresponsible personality whose conduct baffles Bigger. Similarly, Wright’s work became the target of black femi-

nists in the 1970's, who agreed with Hurston and Baldwin's assessments, but through the lens of feminist literary criticism, also faulted Wright for his portrayal of women. This view was championed perhaps most demonstrably by poet and novelist Sherley Anne Williams, who in her essay "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright".

In many ways *Native Son* is indicative of Wright's desire to move away from the pathetic appeal employed in *Uncle Tom's children*. Instead, his most successful novel appeals to logos, addressing Wright's largely white 1940's audience in a way that insists readers realistically confront their own assumptions about race in America, especially if they believe themselves to be racially progressive. The work dramatizes the experiences of the young African American, Bigger Thomas, whose lack of opportunity in a racist 1930's Chicago sets him upon a destructive and naturalistic path. The result is the murder of two women and Bigger's death in the electric chair. One of the novel's most important motifs is the characters' deep psychological internalization of their racist environment and the ways in which this internalization perpetuates a deleterious cycle of racism and negative behaviour.

Meanwhile, the failure of white characters to understand the reality of race relations in America contribute to the circumstances that result in Mary's and Bessie's murders and Bigger's wasted life. Wright renders these psychic fractures and limitations of understanding often through symbolic imagery and extended metaphor that is at times overtly rendered as demonstrated in Mrs. Daltons's blindness, but sometimes more subtly manifested, as in Mary's well-meaning but ultimately hypocritical acts of kindness. While Wright explores the negative psychological effects of racism and segregation on characters that fall into dichotomy-oppressed and oppressor- he also examines the internalization of a racist environment on a notable third

group of characters in the novel, well - intentioned white liberals, most clearly represented in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, Mary, and Jan. As such, Wright demonstrates that the effects of racism are not only destructive to African Americans, but also to white Americans, indeed a threat to society at large. Through Bigger's violent, fearful, and hateful characterization, *Native Son* strives to wake American from its "self-induced slumber about the reality of race relations in the nation". By doing so, Wright confronts the effects of centuries of racially-based oppression, forever shattering the illusion that a 1940's reader might have been able to previously maintain: that the wrongs of the past and the inequities of the present might be easily mended, forgotten, and forgiven.

I. Ideologies of Identity in Native Son

Explorations of Bigger's fractured identity abound in the critical conversation that has surrounded *Native Son* in the seventy-plus years since its publication, while discussions of the damaged psyches of the novel's other characters have been few and far between. While there is much debate concerning what the disparate aspects of Bigger's personality might represent – ranging from folk culture to communism – there does seem to be the general consensus among scholars that Bigger suffers from some type of schizophrenia or existential identity crisis. Sheldon Brivic posits that Bigger's personality is divided between the emotional and rational and which are associated with the ideologies of Black Nationalism and Communism respectively.

The instability of Bigger's identity is shown to be a product of the psychological disorientation engendered by the environment of racial terror with which he must cope. While Elder is justified in his assessment, it is

worth nothing that racial terror is not the only aspect of society that Bigger Thomas is shown. Rather, he is also presented with intermittent – if hypocritical – kindness by the Dalton family and Jan, as well as fellowship in his group of friends, Gus, Jack, and G.H. These homo-social interactions have been explored at length by Aime J. Ellis, who noted that it is “Bigger’s sometimes compassionate and sometimes bullying relationships with young black men through which his humanity can be reconsidered”. Still, Bigger’s self-destructive path is never in doubt, largely because all of these actions occur in a racist environment, which manifests itself in sometimes overtly hostile ways as Elder notes, but also in more subtle incarnations that affect the interactions between Bigger and other characters who might wish him well, but also fall victim to the effects of a racist environment. The deeply internalized psychological effects of this environment in the consciousness of the novel’s characters prevent positive human connections and lead only to a cultural of confusion, fear, shame, and hatred, which sets the stage for Bigger’s destructive and naturalistic path.

There, Wright explores in depth Bigger’s internalization of his plight. The book’s opening scene sets the stage for this theme, which is paramount throughout the novel. Geographic segregation requires the Thomas family to rent a dilapidated one-room apartment at an exorbitant price on Chicago’s decrepit south side. With no privacy to be had, Bigger and his brother Buddy must keep “their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed”. Soon after, Wright introduces his first symbol of the novel in the form of a rat that has been terrorizing the family for days: Many critics suggest that the rat is representative of Bigger himself, noting that the rat’s relationship to the Thomas family parallels the relationship between Bigger and society at large. However, from a psycho-analytical perspective the rat seems more likely to keep hidden throughout the novel.

Though bigger often than not misdirects this fear in an attempt to hide his weaknesses and powerlessness, their source is a racist white society, which is manifested all around him. Often, Wright surmises Bigger understands of whiteness in metaphorical terms, but in each case it is an overpowering force that circumscribes his options to find freedom and agency, “that looming mountain of white hate”. The force is also omnipresent, demonstrated in one of Bigger’s most lucid and emotionally honest scenes, in which he discusses the phenomenon with Gus. Speaking of white individuals, he notes that they do not live over the line that separates wealthy white neighbourhoods from the Black Belt, but instead they are always with him.

The constant presence of white oppression is also symbolized in the Dalton family’s unnamed white cat, which constantly watches bigger when he is the Dalton home: “The white cat still contemplated him with large, moist eyes”. The feline witnesses bigger as he burns Mary’s body, foreshadowing his eventual failure and ultimate inability to challenge the oppressive white world: “Two green burning pools-pools of accusation and guilt-stared at him from a white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk it was the white cat and its round green eyes gaze past him at the white face hanging limply from the fiery furnace door”. The cat’s fascination with bigger can be seen as representative of the watchfulness of the white world, an ever-present voyeuristic gaze that grants that world power over the African American community, while keeping Bigger’s consciousness mired in fear and shame.

II. Conclusion

Wright's embedded symbolism filtered through Bigger's Consciousness lies in Wright's characterization of Chicago's weather. Bigger's understanding of the white world is often described as an aspect of nature of nature, but later becomes a full-fledged blizzard that aids the hostile mob in Bigger's capture. After Mary's bones are discovered in the furnace Bigger flees the house by leaping out a window, only to be snared in the snow's blinding whiteness: "It seemed at first that he hit softly, but the shock of it went through him, up down his back". The metaphor is an apt one, as not only does it connote the overwhelming nature of the white world, but it also implies Bigger's inability to understand it: "Every time I think about it I feel like there. We black and they white."

Wright renders through these symbols and metaphor how deeply internalized the effects of Bigger's racist environment have burned themselves into his consciousness. Thoroughly conditioned to white oppression, he will be incapable of processing the well-intentioned, but hypocritical attempts at racial reconciliation offered by the elder Daltons, Mary, and Jan. The fracturing of his personality, as well as these white characters' inability to understand the dangerous ways a racist environment has forged his consciousness both contribute to the circumstances that will lead to Mary's murder and Bigger's execution. While the effects of racism on Bigger's psychological state are at times none too subtle, Wright often expressly describes these effects in addition to employing symbolic allusion. A more careful read is required to discern the negative effects of a racist environment on oppressive white characters, even when they believe themselves to be well-intentioned. Though illusive, these are some of the novel's most rhetorically important aspects, as they establish the logical appeal between Wright and his mostly white audience, whom he implores for change. Undoubtedly, Wright's characterization of Bigger is a risky one, as readers with racial prejudices would have perhaps been inclined to view Bigger's ignorance and readers' violence as proof of their racist notions. While an exploration of the dynamics between Bigger and Britten is productive in character-

izing the effects of the dichotomy of oppressed and oppressor, *Native Son* is rhetorically even more effective by including an important third group of characters in the mix, well-meaning white liberals.

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