

CRITIQUING RACE AND RACISM: STEREOTYPES IN WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

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Abstract

This paper examines racism practiced in twentieth century America. This paper aims at exploring the racial prejudice, racial segregation and bigotry which were practiced in the institutional level and in other spheres of America. This paper tries to discover contrasts in split-second responses to pictures of individuals of various races to uncover bigotry. However, it may rather indicate that the subjects were as racist as most different whites (and likely most blacks also) in their intense attention to America's inescapable racial inconsistencies. For all we know, they may enthusiastically need to lessen those inconsistencies. We engage many generalizations, including racial ones, in view of anticipated probabilities, not antagonistic vibes. While Racism is seen as negative, and poisonous, Racialism may be deemed race consciousness without fostering any kind of hatred or segregation. It may include racial profiling without being discriminative. "Critiquing Race and Racism: Stereotypes in Wright's Native Son," deals with Wright's uncovering of the stark racial divisions of the 1930s Chicago Black Belt. Following the incident of the youthful protagonist Bigger Thomas, Wright seeks to convey coming of an age initiated by tragic conflict. Not exclusively is the reader embroiled in racial clashes in Wright, there are also clashes and tensions within various cliques in the black community. Through this novel Wright intends to uncover the dimness which frequently conceals the real tensions within and without the African American community.

Key words: *Protest and reconciliation, interracial and heterosexual issues, decoding societal structure, quest for identity, racial segregation and injustice in institutional level.*

Introduction:

Richard Wright's *Native Son* exposes the strong presence of racism in twentieth century American society and its negative consequences. The black fictional protagonists were subjected to helpless situations due to poverty, racial discrimination and prejudices. These protagonists could not escape the tribulations as they found themselves completely weak in almost every sense. Hence, facing pathetic and bitter experiences in almost every situation in their lives was

inevitable for them all. When Wright was in Chicago he was a member of communist party but he came to regard communism quite antithetical to the African American cause. Richard Wright mentions in the introduction of the novel how did he confront a number of Bigger like characters from his childhood days. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright's *Native Son* has been projected as 'bad boy' who struggles in the world of dark and light. Being segregated by the wall of white superiority from the native cultures of America he becomes rebellious who tries to come out from the realm of racial prejudice and hatred.

We may read this novel from a historical perspective. The novel exposes a vital picture of present days' scenario which is profoundly established in the past and the accomplishment with which the book has met the test is age making. The status of the Negro treated in this book has been so since a long time ago disregarded by the American individuals. While the book indicates how barbaric man may move toward becoming too man in America, this same America offers, in any case, an extraordinary open door for the lowest of the modest to ascend from destitution to popularity. The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes who violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. "They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken" (*Native Son*, 5). Three episodes (Fear, Flight and Fate) in the novel will serve to represent the racial measurement.

There were numerous varieties to this behavioristic example. Later on he experienced other Bigger Thomases who did not respond to the locked-in Black Belts with a similar furthest point and savagery. Be that as it may, before he utilize Bigger Thomas as a springboard for the examination of milder sorts, he would better show the way of the condition that created these men, or the pursuer will be left with the feeling that they were basically or naturally terrible. One must go up against the nearness of bias and its results in American culture. However, while one can agree that the book has a tendency in a general sense to white per clients, and doubtlessly develops an association between (White) partiality and (Black) wrongdoing, it doesn't take after that Richard Wright is talking about fault as it is ordinarily considered.

After the Civil War some parts of American South have been industrialized and urbanized but a balanced state of affairs has not greatly altered since the Civil war. Those colored people who had rebelled against the existing social taboos and discrimination were accused of lynching and were tormented by the white superiors. Racism was officially abolished after the Civil War but it was in literal sense not in reality. Humiliation and discrimination still exist there. Bigger Thomas is a mere example, lot of educated and uneducated colored people were segregated from institution. They lead the lives of poverty with a colored identity. This racial discrimination makes Bigger Thomas rebellious against the existing norms of the society. In the introduction of *Native Son*, Wright exposes the untold feelings of the Niggers, "Sometimes I'd hear a Negro say: 'God, I wish I had a flag and a country of my own.' But that mood would soon vanish and he would go his way placidly enough." (*Native Son*, 8) He perceives the frustration of a Negro ex-soldier from the deeper insight of his heart, "What in hell did I fight in the war for? They segregated me even when I was offering my life for my country." (*Native Son*, 8)

Bigger Thomas is a personification of victimized colored people, embodiment of racial discrimination and prejudice. Throughout the novel the white superiors treat the blacks as ape and non-human evil creature. The beginning of the book shows enough evidence to expose the universal approach to humanity. The reference of the skin color is simply evidence given to link Thomas and his family with Negros. The hysterical killing of the rat in the beginning of the novel is very symbolic. Thomas tries to kill the rat by throwing his shoe to the rat. The rat is the symbol of Bigger Thomas himself- when the rat enters to the domestic sphere of Bigger's house it is killed by him and in the same way when Bigger enters to the Dalton's home he is finally killed. This scene provides well evidence of how Bigger confronts the racial prejudices and traumatic situations in American society for being black. When he came to Drexel Boulevard and started to search for 4605 he became timid for being a black in a white occupied territory. He wound up noticeably feared when he saw a cop moved around the territory. He dreaded if the policeman would convict him as a rapist.

The novel shows the conflicting mind of Bigger Thomas whose psychological and mental condition is in a perplexed state. He finds his life in a pendulous state and fails to think about robbing a white man. His conflict with Gus proves that he is unable to rob Mr. Blum. "They felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policeman never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes." (Native Son, 44) He loathed his family since he realized that they were enduring and that he was frail to help them. He realized that the minute he permitted himself to feel to its totality how they lived, the disgrace and wretchedness of their lives, he would be cleared out of himself with dread and depression.

The contention in the vicinity of tense and feeling is found in the last part of the novel. On the off chance that we acknowledge the murder of Mary Dalton as an unwillingly happened occurrence, Bigger tries to make her quiet by opposing her mouth squeezing a pillow on her face. Society and the environment where he grows up compel him to do so. It has been done rationally. Wrongdoing makes him more defiant and it expands his strained yearning to satisfy his fantasies. Indeed, even after the shocking homicide, an abduct note requesting buy-off rather than Mary's life which demonstrates a momentous uplifting of his capacities. The treatment of Bessie's murder, similar to the topic of suicide, adds to Wright's depiction of his focal character as a casualty, a man whose vicious conduct has been forced upon him by a situation of abuse.

The catastrophe of death in the electric chair is not brought by the heinous murder of his black mistress Bessie, rather it is brought by the unintentional murder of a white girl Mary Dalton, the daughter of real estate operator. The pistol inside his shirt symbolizes his challenging attitude against the white world. The club boys Jack, Gus, G.H and Doc are shown as gambler, robber, criminal who are culturally lost and far away from the mainstream of a civilized world. Doc's poolroom has a symbolic significance. It symbolized a site of black male community that stood as a testing ground for measuring one's manhood and courage in the midst of perpetual racial assault. Bigger and his fellow friends are outcomes of reform schools and embodiment of blacks' anger in a white dominated world.

The very beginning of the novel gives the impression how Bigger's family leads a poverty stricken life in a small room. Everything Bigger does in the novel has a relationship to the color of his skin. Wright criticizes the existing racism in Chicago throughout the novel. The novel deals with the theme of power and how power operates the society. This power is apparently in the hands of the white capitalists. This power is highly interrelated with the issue of race. The colored people with whom Bigger came to touch with are constant reminder of the dominance of the white superior in Chicago. His mother, sister, and brother exist on public aid. Vera takes chewing classes; Bessie earns just enough as a cleaning woman to fill her empty stomach. These characters live on the edges of the capitalist framework and are accordingly partitioned the benefits of social personality in the domain of whites. This paper finds it that the racial mistreatment in the novel is organized into a system of social relations of power that are precluded by the dissemination from claiming riches. The first episode of the novel deals with the mental state of the protagonist which is obsessed with fear. Fear results from the lack of power to control one's own situation. Poverty and skin color stimulate this fear in the mind of the protagonist. He tries to escape from this mental state and it finally leads him to murder two girls in the novel. Bigger's criminal behavior is the consequence of the environment where he grows up.

The pigeon in the first episode symbolizes the freedom. The pigeon has the freedom where he wants to go, when he wants to go without the bondage of slavery. "Then their eyes were riveted; a slate-colored pigeon swooped down to the middle of the steel car tracks and began strutting to and fro with ruffled feathers, its fat neck bobbing with regal pride. A street car rumbled forward and the pigeon rose swiftly through the air on wings stretched so taut and sheer that Bigger could see the gold of the sun through their translucent tips. He tilted his head and watched the slate-colored bird flap and wheel out of sight over the edge of a high roof." (*Native Son*, 50) The flying plane has also a symbolic connotation. "I could fly a plane if I had a chance." (*Native Son*, 46). The white color of the plane symbolizes the white dominance. Encompassed by white leadership, typically spoke to by white words, white planes, white power, all Bigger and his friends could do was utter, "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go that aviation school, you could fly a plane," (*Native Son*, 46) and fantasize. He explores his anger, "Cause if I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along and drop 'em as sure as hell..." (*Native Son*, 47) Bigger wants to escape from the bondage of slavery under the white oppressors. He wants a life like the pigeon leads. The dread and disfavor Bigger feels about his blackness is upgraded by the savagery and absence of perceptivity he experiences in the white world.

When Ku Klux Klan declined in America during the period of Great Depression, racism became strong in the Northern part of America as well as in the Southern part. The growing presence of the colored people in the Southern American cities was a cause of tension for the white people. The charged 'Negro problem' in America as Baldwin sees it is not in truth a Negro problem but rather a white one. Not just have whites made the conditions which make being a Negro tricky additionally a mind boggling disorder of hardship, abuse, dread and blame has made the partial white an issue to himself and to society. Wright's contention is that racist America made Bigger anti-white; in this way, there are more probability to create Bigger like

figures. Toward the end, when Max neglects to comprehend Bigger, who can't be spared from the electric chair, Wright is blaming the Communist party for not grasping the dark individuals it depended on for support.

When Bigger opens the newspaper he finds something wrong accusation which has been made against him. There is a large picture of Bigger with a tall line of black type on the top of the paper, "24-HOUR SEARCH FAILS TO UNEARTH RAPIST". He reads the newspaper,

Today and last night eight thousand armed men combed cellars, old buildings and more than one thousand Negro homes in the Black Belt in a vain effort to apprehend Bigger Thomas, 20-year-old Negro rapist and killer of Mary Dalton, whose bonds were found last Sunday night in a furnace. (*Native Son*, 286)

Any disclosure of him in Mary's room will ineluctably prompt allegations of rape; Bigger incidentally substitutes the wrongdoing of murder for the wrongdoing of rape. But, even after Mary's scorched remains are found in the cellar heater, Bigger is still blamed for having assaulted Mary, notwithstanding the nonappearance of any physical confirmation. As turns out to be copiously evident when the arraignment requests that Bigger reenact the assault that never happened, the wrongdoing of assault is comprehended as equivalent to the wrongdoing of murder. Or, on the other hand more accurately, it is the "wrongdoing" of miscegenation that Bigger should have conferred, given that bigot belief system acclimatizes every sexual connection between dark men and white lady to assault.

If we make a comparative study of Edgar Allen Poe's detective story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* we find that the murderer in Poe's story is an animal who kills human because he is an animal. But in Wright's novel the murderer (protagonist) Bigger Thomas is a human character who kills Mary Dalton like an animal. The dehumanizing attitude of a black boy is exposed here. Wright gives a balanced view of white and black atrocity with an unbiased attitude. For the push to uncover the human behind the veil of animality likewise has the impact of re-inscribing the double amongst human and animal, and subsequently of reasserting racial chain of importance. In any case, the social coherence that Bigger accomplishes is predicated on the view of him as a danger to society. Headed to its deepest, ludicrous conclusions, the supremacist development of dark animality completely clears Bigger's responsibility, which implies that general society must attribute to Bigger negligible humankind with a specific end goal to consider him responsible for his activities. Subsequently, Bigger Thomas was displayed as a close subhuman prosecution of white mistreatment. In the introductory note of the novel, *How Bigger was Born*, Wright explores in a conscious level how the protagonist Bigger Thomas makes an impression in his mind. Wright goes back to his childhood experiences and talks about different kinds of Bigger Thomases he had to face. In clarifying the way of the condition that created the numerous Bigger Thomases, Wright precisely laid the cause at the feet of the nation he had known. The imperialistic pull of history had torn the Negro far from his African home and had put him unexpectedly upon the most fruitful ranch ranges of the South; and when the Negro was liberated, he dwarfed the whites in a large number of these rich zones. Thus, on the grounds that the blacks were so near their underlying foundations, there was a heap of responses, from out and out visually impaired resistance to a

sweet, other-common accommodation. So why did Bigger Thomas revolt? Wright clarified in 'How Bigger was Born':

“First, through some quirk of circumstance, he had become estranged from the religion and folk culture of his race. Second, he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the more imposing sight and sound of daily American life.”(*Native Son*, 8)

In his essay called ‘Many Thousands Gone’ Baldwin says,

One may object that it was precisely Wright’s intention to create in Bigger a social symbol, revelatory of social disease and prophetic of disaster. I think, however, that it is this assumption which we ought to examine more carefully. Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people-in this respect, perhaps, he is most American- and his force comes, not from his significance as the incarnation of a myth. (Extracted from African American Literature, pg, 1665, ed. by Nellie Y. McKay and Henry Louis Gates)

Those Negroes who encompass Bigger including his persevering mother, his driven sister Bessie, may be considered as far wealthier and much more unobtrusive and accurate illustration of the ways in which Negroes are controlled in American culture. The Negroes feared to raise their voice before the whites; sometimes they even failed to see their faces, “He stared at her in a long silence; it was the first time he had ever looked at her, and he was able to do so only because he was angry”(Native Son,103). Poverty stricken lives and desire to prevent appetite impel them to do certain heinous crimes like rape, robbery and murder. Existing norms and codes of society stimulate them to do so. If social systems do not change it is inevitable to remain a gap between the whites and blacks. Frustration, anger and an attitude of revenge were running inside their hearts. This is why Bigger’s murder of Mary can be referred to as an “act of creation.” ‘It is the blacks’ reaction to these hewers of wood and drawers of water that their image of Bigger was created. Bigger wanted to make himself free from the life of slavery and poverty. He had to work as a chauffeur for Dalton family because he was pressurized by his mother and the dream that he cherished in his mind to do a job, at least with minimum salary to run his family. His crime of lynching is also a consequence of this type of mentality cherished by the whites. His fantasies of some dark man who will weld all blacks together into a relentless clench hand, and feels, in connection to his family, that maybe they needed to live as they did decisively on the grounds that none of them had ever done anything, right or wrong, which mattered in particular.

Bigger cherished a feeling of love for Marry Dalton and perhaps it may be the reason for why he tried to make her quiet by squeezing a pillow on her face. He did not want Marry to face a critical situation when her mother entered in to her room. Her murder was not a intentional and preplanned murder. A long way from showing the scope of Bigger's enthusiastic profundity or his ethical mien, our heteronormative evaluation of the delicate side of Bigger verifiably reaffirms Bigger's absence of genuine regard for either black or white ladies. That is, Bigger's regard for and generalization of the physical excellence of a passing lady may recommend a level of regularity in his generally vicious persona, however it is not really a suitable sign of

Bigger's senses for an existence of progress and plausibility scarcely a sensible vindication from his beforehand unacknowledged humankind. In the depiction of numerous Bigger Thomases Wright knew, the dismissal by the human advancement of all methods for reward, accomplishment, versatility, status, brought about a man whose each development, each yearning, each fantasy, each expectation was a prelude to savagery. Bigger's attitude to do something in favor of his community is apparently focused in the "Fear" section. He suggests his guys of the gang to play "white game," and they intend to imitate the whites. Bigger insists Gus to play a role with him. Bigger's relentless endeavors to get Gus to play the pretending game make readers laugh but exasperating moment in the content, a moment that both appropriates and ruin utterly the onerous social and political standards of the prevailing society. Bigger calls, claiming to be the President, he reveals to Gus that as Secretary of State, Gus must be at a bureau meeting that evening. The underlying significance of this pretending game reflects for Bigger and Gus both a feeling of pointlessness and racial barrenness. He's wanting to take care of every one of those black individuals "raising sand" everywhere throughout the nation.

Bigger's humanity may be judged in connection to the biting strains that harass poor urban Niggers in Chicago. But how do we evaluate Bigger's humanity who has already murdered two young girls? Are Bigger's disobediently oppositional practices and brutality essentially the disguise of a background marked by hate and harm that has prompted him to a world where there is no humanity? Bigger's activities do not show much "progressive" in his endeavor to subvert the social and political request of racial oppression and control. Unquestionably, Bigger's insubordinately oppositional practices are ruinous now, especially his fiercely assaulting and killing his beloved, Bessie Mears, and his abusing Gus in the poolroom. In spite of the fact that Mary's murder was coincidental, Bigger finds psychological motivation from it, defending it as an existential decision confirming his own identity. He likewise justifies it as an outflow of race scorn against an exploitative white-commanded society. Soon after murdering Marry, Bigger decides the demise of another victim, his Negro beloved Bessie. He forces his beloved to going along with him in a coercion plot in light of Mary Dalton's murder. Indeed, even after the astonished Bessie has heard his admittance, she consents to run off with him to a left building, where he assaults and afterward lethally beats her, battering her head with a block and tossing her body down an airshaft.

No doubt, the underlying importance of the novel is racism that was practicing relentlessly in the twentieth century America. This chapter tries to offer a critical interpretation of racism, racial prejudices, discrimination or segregation on the basis of detail account found in *Native Son*. The author successes in portraying Bigger Thomas as harbinger of change the unethical codes of society in America. Bigger is a historical representation of the racially oppressed and discriminated people in America. He is the embodiment of racially Segregated Negro who challenges the white world in a very rude and crucial way. Wright himself was impressed by this character. The best thing one can detract from this story is an admiration for compassion and emotions other than our own. In spite of the fact that it is anything but difficult to hop to the conclusion that Bigger is an abhorrent man, on the off chance that we set aside the opportunity to think and truly read between the lines we can really effectively comprehend the moves which he makes all through the story and feel an association with him until the very end. We can contend

that this endowment of sympathy is Wright's most astounding outcome from this story. All things considered *Native Son* foregrounds issues of race and racism, crucial to Wright and every other African American writer.

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