

# How Much Native Is The Native Son ? Revisiting Richard Wright's *Native Son* As An Afro-American Novel

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## Abstract

The Harlem Renaissance was an important movement for Afro-American literature and Richard Wright was one of its leading spokespersons. He along with other writers of the group changed the then prevalent belief that literature in English language was predominantly the product of white writers. His own life was an embittered tale of racial discrimination, oppression of Negro people and so on. He found himself as an alien, and an outsider, the one who could never feel associated with the mainstream life of America. Like his other novels *Black Boy* and *The Outsider*, *Native Son* raises the issue of racial discrimination and its hazardous effects on the overall growth of the individuals as well as the nation. The novel brings home the message that social and economic disparities lead to grave injustices towards racial minorities and those injustices so distort the character and personality growth that criminal monsters such as Bigger Thomas are produced. Though concerned about the problem of the Afro-Americans, the novel assumes universal status because it warns the complacent humanity against any kind of discrimination which might result in an explosive and dangerous situation in the society

**Keywords:** Segregation, factional politics, blindness, philanthropy, slavery, Harlem Renaissance, outsider

## Introduction

The literature has traditionally been seen as "something defined by the dominant culture as a white male activity" (Stryz, Jan. "The other Ghost in *Beloved*" 140). In keeping with this, the literature written in English Language was predominantly the product of white writers, but that scene began to change in the first three to four decades of the twentieth century. At the turn of the twentieth century in America, non-fiction works by authors cum social activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington spoke against the racist policies of America and also debated about the ways to confront it. In the Great Migration during the world wars, black people left the American South to escape from the racism and lack of opportunities there and settled in Northern cities such as Chicago where they found works in factories and other sectors of the economy. This migration produced a new sense of independence in the black community. This in turn contributed to the development of black culture seen during the Harlem Renaissance<sup>1</sup>. This migration also empowered Civil Rights movement, during which writers like Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote of racial segregation and need for social equality. It was due to their constant efforts in this direction, supported and strengthened by other contemporary writers that Afro-American literature has been accepted both as an integral part of American literature and as one having a distinct identity. During this period and in the subsequent years, Afro-American writers like James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison started voicing the woes and problems of the Negroes living in America. Hans Bertens writes in *Literary Theory, The Basics* that "With the emergence of a black literary presence, race enters the agenda of literary studies. In one sense it also enters literature itself, in that it is now presented from the perspective of non-white writers. Racial discrimination is a recurrent theme in Afro-American writing ..." (104). In this context, it is important to quote the statement of Du Bois also that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (*The Souls of Black People* 110). It has become prophetic because the themes and issues



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raised in Afro- American literature are mainly the roles of black people within the larger American society, Afro- American culture, racial discrimination and slavery and urgent need to overhaul the socio-political set up.

Among the Afro-American writers of this period the one who changed the literary scene with his outright and outspoken stance in respect of racial discrimination is Richard Wright. "He symbolized in his life and works the themes which would concern a whole new generation of Negro writers" (*Native Sons* 20). This statement of Margolies brilliantly highlights the role of Wright as the true representative, the "emancipator" of the Negroes. The life of Wright is nothing but an embittered saga of racial discrimination, oppression of Negro people, their hope and their despair. Born on plantation near Mississippi, the early life of Wright consisted of a series of moves from one unsatisfactory place to another, of gnawing hunger, of parental neglect and misunderstanding, and of incredible humiliations inflicted by white employers. He was subject to the scalding humiliations in his youth the scars of which left him full of bitterness. He lived this life of the damned and rejected not just for a few nightmarish years, but as the historic inheritance of his people. In his autobiography *Black Boy*, he tells us that he learned at an early age - "the reality - a negro's reality of the white world. I was tense each moment. I did not suspect that the tension I had begun to feel that would lift itself into the passion of my life. I was always to be conscious of it, brood over it, carry it in my heart, live with it, sleep with it, fight with it" (135). Wright has been forced to realize that he is not a boy but a 'black' boy and this is the role he must play. He has also explored that the roots of racism are so deeply entrenched that they cannot be destroyed without destroying the whole cultural set up itself. He has pointed out that this racist approach is harmful not only for the healthy relations of the whites and blacks, but for blacks also. At the end of *Black Boy*, we find that Wright has created a base and initiated a loud voice whose echoes can be heard in his other works also.

Thus he was full of bitterness, anger, and anguish towards the social structure. He found himself as alienated, as an outsider, the one who could never feel associated with the mainstream life of America. This anger and bitterness, this feeling of alienation got reflected in all his writings. According to Wright, America has not yet changed to the extent that a Negro writer can deny, effectively suppress, or truly escape what is the inevitable race consciousness which three hundred years of Jim Crowe<sup>2</sup> living burned into the Negro's heart.

Wright made his ideas clear in an essay which forms the Introduction to a book titled *Black Metropolis*<sup>3</sup>, which is very relevant in this context. The essay discloses the central stream of Wright's entire development both as man and as writer. It reveals the sources of his thoughts and feelings. He read William James (the famous American psychologist of the late nineteenth century) and found objective philosophical confirmation of what experience he had already had.

The following passage quoted by Wright from William James shows the plight of Negroes in America :

No more fiendish punishment could be devised than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by the members thereof. If no one turned when we entered, answered when we spoke or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead' and acted as if we were non - existent things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would be a relief for these would make us feel that however bad might be our plot, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all. (*The Principles of Psychology* 293)

This is the ground of all Wright's works - fiction and non-fiction. It is the thought, the theme and the thematic design. To be a Negro is to be an outsider, not only in sociological sense but more decisively in moral sense as well. If the pathos of man is that he yearns to be whole, hungers for fulfillment, and strives for a sense of community with other, it is the particular tragedy of the Negro that no success gratifies his yearning, that great fame does not feed his hunger and no wealth can abate the struggle to be free, whole and naturally absorbed in the cultural oneness of his native land. It is a kind of bitter experience, but it sustained his great honesty and integrity as a writer. The same concept of alienation and otherness is reiterated in Wright's second novel *The Outsider*. Through the story of the protagonist Cross Damon (who gets involved in a series of murders), Wright seeks to highlight adverse impact of the alienation not only on Afro- Americans but on the white people and their socio- economic set up also. This novel also offers both a psychological and existential analysis of the treatment of Negroes as outsiders.

His novel *Native Son*, published in 1940 proved to be "a watershed in Negro letters" as described by Margolies in his book *Native Sons* because "it seized the imagination of readers and catapulted its author into fame, making him a source of controversy for years" (65). The novel *Native Son* summarizes the agony of Negroes who cannot connect themselves with the mainstream life of America. Despite the fact that they are American natives, their status is miserably reduced to that of mere 'outsiders' and the consequences of this unfair treatment sometimes prove to be disastrous, jeopardizing the mental and emotional health of the Negroes. In this case, the whites also cannot remain unaffected. Richard Wright through *Native Son* and his other works, has tried to awaken the conscience of both white and black Americans. The white people read him and are jolted out of their stupor to question the efficiency of their democratic setup. The Negroes read him and are flabbergasted at their own nature and behaviour as has been shaped or rather distorted by their country.

The importance of this novel has been acknowledged by many writers in various ways. In 1966, David Little John has labeled one section in his book titled *Black on White - A Critical Summary of*

*Writings by American Negroes* as "Before Native Son - The Dark Ages". In 1963, Irving Howe had written that the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture changed forever. James Baldwin (a contemporary of Richard Wright) wrote in 1951 that Wright's *Native Son* was the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet of what it meant to be Negro in America. Richard Wright gave a new definition of blackness in this novel. He made blackness a metaphorical state, a condition of alienation so profound that old values no longer applied. Wright's main purpose in this novel was to show that social and economic barriers against race lead to grave injustice towards racial minorities and that those injustices so distort the character and personality growth that criminal monsters, such as Bigger Thomas are produced.

*Native Son* is the study of a few months in the life of Bigger Thomas, a 20 year old Negro described by the local prosecuting attorney as "just a scared colored boy from Mississippi." His portrait was drawn, as Wright has explained in "How Bigger was born"<sup>4</sup> from the examples of five young Negroes he had known while growing up in the South (VIII - IX). What was unique about each of these Biggers was not their poverty or their want of basic human rights. All Afro-Americans had to undergo such difficult and challenging situations, but what set the Biggers apart was their defiant attitude. This defiance was not an organized or political act, but elemental, brutal and often dangerous. Through these Biggers, he wanted to give a warning to the white America that if its social and economic realities did not change, there would be a resurgence of / rebellion by the oppressed masses.

The novel *Native Son* is divided into three parts, Fear, Flight and Fate. The first part is quite significantly titled as "Fear" because it is the fear of the discriminatory and oppressive policies of the racist majority that leads Bigger to commit the gruesome murder, although unknowingly. He accidentally kills Mary, his wealthy employer's daughter. After he discovers the victim's death, "Fear" drives him to burn her body in the furnace and later kill his frightened girl friend who, he thinks, might betray his secret under police pressure. The murder of the white girl was purely accidental, accomplished by the pressure of a pillow over mouth to keep her from telling her blind mother that he, the chauffeur, had brought her upstairs in his arms when he discovered that she was too intoxicated to walk up on her own.

One of the ironic facts of the story is that although the murder was purely an accident, it need not have been for Bigger hated all white folks. He hated them enough to murder without provocation. He felt that he had been cheated out of everything good in life that he wanted and that white people, all white people, were responsible for his unhappy predicament.

The second part "Flight" describes Bigger's awakening sense of life at a time, paradoxically, when his life is most in danger. In killing Mary, he feels that he has somehow destroyed symbolically all oppressive forces of racism that have rendered his life into miserable helplessness. Further, the feeling that the whites do not know about his crime, gives him

more power and he starts making plans. He conspires to shift the blame to Jan, Mary's friend and a Communist and to extort ransom from the parents of Mary. However, this plan does not succeed because reporters discover Mary's charred body in the furnace. Bigger runs away with his girl friend Bessie to whom he discloses his secret, but kills her in a very brutal manner because he is afraid she might reveal his whereabouts to the police. This second murder clearly shows that "Bigger has opted to become a murderer and freely chooses his identity. In an absurd hostile world that denies his humanity and dichotomizes his personality, he has made a choice that somehow integrates his being" (*Native Sons* 77).

Thus the action of the story is sensational, containing such a ghastly spectacle as the furnace room scene, and a pathetic scene in which the fleeing murderer beats out the brains of his innocent, trusting and sleeping girl friend who has obediently agreed to stay with him until the end. The first two sections of the novel "Fear" and "Flight" cover this sensational part of the novel. Here we get the psychological analysis of a Negro's problems. From being a passive, obsequious Negro, happily acquiescent to his exploitation, Bigger now takes to the white folks' ways. Ironically, he has assumed exactly the role the white world thrusts upon the Negro in order to justify his oppression. He becomes a beast who must be caged to protect the purity of the white race.

The third and last section of the novel "Fate" quite significantly describes the trial of the murder case, and the power of the book lies in the sociological and ethical implications of the action/plot given in this part. According to Wright, environment and circumstances play a major role in shaping the personality of an individual. In fact, it was Wright's own experiences that he was trying to project in this part of the novel. During his early life, he learned that the rules and principles and institutions of White America did not apply to him. Since Wright could not accept abject submission as a way of life, he endured a constant state of anxiety and sought to discover for himself his own set of ethics, values and morality in a world that offered him little security and identity. This existential approach of Wright gets reflected in all his works and most notably in *Native Son*.

In this section, we find ample of evidences that support Wright's theory. It draws together all significant strands of Bigger's life, and shows how all white people have a responsibility / share in Bigger's crime. The defense attorney, Max, in an eloquent address to the jury, tries to explain Bigger's crimes in terms of the devastating psychological blows of slavery and racial exploitation. When the defense attorney asks Mr. Dalton why he does not charge Negro tenants less rent for such uninhabitable accommodation, the philanthropist replies that it would be unethical to undersell his competitors. When he is asked why rent for Negroes is higher than that for Dalton, the father of Mary whom Bigger killed, has donated huge sums of money to Negro charity and that he owns the Southside Real Estate company in Chicago, from which Bigger rents the one room, rat-infested apartment in which the mother, daughter and

two sons live. He replies that housing shortage exists in the Negro community. Although he admits that he owns houses in other sections of the city where no shortage exists, he says that he will not rent them to Negroes because he thinks Negroes are happier living together in one section. He further admits that of all the Negroes, his philanthropy has helped to educate, he has never employed one in the operation of his vast business enterprise. Thus, Negroes are deliberately kept away as isolated and segregated, so they can never develop the sense of belongingness and nativity.

The defense attorney therefore charges Mr. Dalton with the murder of his own daughter, for it was he who helped to prepare the soil in which Bigger Thomas could grow. It was he who closed his eyes to the deepest longings of Negroes for justice and equality, attempting to salve his conscience by donating huge sums to racial charities. It was he who had shielded his daughter from all Negro contact thus leaving her at the crucial moment incapable of wisely dealing with a rebel such as Bigger. If he had provided clean and decent apartments for Negroes as he had done for whites; if he had used his influence to open employment opportunities equally to Negroes and Whites, a monster like Bigger might not have arisen to take his daughter's life.

It is plain to see that this section of the book works upon the philosophy of racial and environmental responsibility. Bigger became what he was, not because he was free to choose his course of action but because circumstances over which he had no control had driven him to his doom. In the words of the defense attorney:

I plead with you to see a mode of life stunted and distorted, but possessing its own laws and claims, an existence of men growing out of the soil prepared by the collective but blind will of a hundred million people. I ask you to recognize the laws and process flowing from such a condition, understand them, seek to change them. If we do none of these, we should not pretend horror or surprise when thwarted life expresses itself in fear and hate and crime. (*Native Son* 245)

It is Max, the defense attorney (not the church, nor the family, nor the philanthropic liberals) who acts as the sole agent in humanizing Bigger, in civilizing the 'ape'. It is Max who opens communication with the sullen, withdrawn Bigger, but in doing so he opens a Pandora box, releasing ideas and impulses that demand immediate attention and speedy solution. Although the past of Negroes has long been one of subjugation and racial oppression, it is the urgent need of the time to overhaul the social and ethical set up so that no sense of alienation springs up among them, because "in mass, the isolated, the alienated are capable of consent or indifference to napalm bombs, nuclear holocaust, or extermination camps" (*Native Sons* 86).

The title of the novel *Native Son* is very significant because it ironically refers to the multitudes of young men like Bigger Thomas who have grown up in a society that constantly pushes them and

relegates them to the periphery, treating them as subalterns and telling them that they are worthless and therefore redundant for the socio-economic structure of America. The Daltons are all blind to the reality of what kind of life Negroes live. The metaphor that Wright uses best to describe the relationship between the races is "blindness". Bigger has blinded himself to the realities of Negro's life and to the goodness and humanity of whites like Mary and Jan. Mrs. Dalton's blindness is symbolic of the assumed blindness and indifference of white people to Negroes' plight. They are incapable of viewing black men as possessing sensitivity and intelligence. It is this blindness that leads black men like Bigger to rebel and behave in an inhuman manner.

It is in this sense that *Native Son* is still as relevant and disturbing today as it was at the time of its publication. It is the right of all citizens, irrespective of class and race, to dream American dreams. If an individual is denied to fulfill his or her dreams due to discrimination, the result will be an increase in the number of disconnected, disinterested, and discontented people whose presence in society can prove to be explosive and dangerous for one and all. In broader perspective and universal terms also, *Native Son* instills in us a drive to end up all sorts of segregations, discriminations and factional politics in overall interest of the humanity.

#### **Aim of the Study**

Discriminations on the basis of class, caste, creed, colour, race and gender are man-made. Their roots are deeply embedded in our socioeconomic setup. The result is highly devastating for the mental and psychological health of the individuals and overall growth of society. This paper aims to highlight the complex issue of discriminations and segregation and also inspires us to find out the solution.

#### **Review of Literature**

Since Richard Wright was an epoch making writer, a number of books and articles have been written on his novels. Some of them are enlisted below:

A Bigger Vision: Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the Great American Novel, March 2012 in the book titled *A Comparison to the American Novel*, written by Andrew Warnes who is trying to elucidate the ills of the system that seeks to segregate and differentiate on the basis of race, colour etc. and this fact makes it an epitome of protest literature.

The Conclusion of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, published online by Cambridge University press, 2020, written by Paul N. Seigel. The paper focuses on how Max, the lawyer seeks desperately to avert the cataclysmic end toward which he sees American society is heading, by striving to have wrongs removed, whereas Bigger finds a meaning in his life by accepting his feelings of hate.

Isolation and the Quest for Black Identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, by M. T. Shakir, 2017, Joell.in. This paper also seeks to stress the same theory that isolation of the blacks is responsible for this dangerous situation and is somehow related to the denial of identity to the blacks.

Violence and Identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, by Anna M.Gee, *Criterion Journal*, 2016. The writer examines how the correlation of race and violence produces devastation through the novel's main character Bigger Thomas. The paper tries to assert that violence is the only means left for blacks to establish independent identity.

*Native Sons: Or How Bigger was born again*, Feb, 2017, *Journal of American Studies*, written by Nicholas Rinehart. This article reconsiders Richard Wright's *Native Son* by comparing divergence between the published novel and an earlier typeset manuscript. It elaborates how the novel transcends both national and racial categories and becomes a model work of world literature and global minority discourse.

The Myth of Sisyphus in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, by Romanus Okpo, *Sage Journals*, 2018. The article seeks to analyse the novel in the context of the myth of Sisyphus and his story of crime and punishment. Bigger Thomas figures for us as a tragic hero who makes an effort to transcend the curse of individuation.

Racial Discrimination in Richard Wright's *Native Son: A Study*, by Dr. Sudhir P. Mathpati, in *Literary Endeavour*, volume 12, Issue one, January, 2021. The main concept is an argument that social conditions of deprivation motivate people to act in anti-social ways. The writer describes how the white racism forces blacks into a pressured, dangerous and unsecured state of mind.

#### Conclusion

By the end of this study, it becomes clear that violence and crime exist in society due to injustice done to individuals. In conclusion, we can say that wrongs perpetrated in the name of race and colour can cause great damage to the civilized society. So, efforts should be made to obliterate these ills from our midst and redress the sufferings of humanity.

#### Notes

1. Mainly a cultural movement, it was named after the place Harlem in Manhattan, spread in just three square miles. It became the hub and epicentre of Afro-American culture, art and

literature. The common feature underlying various art forms was a realistic presentation of what it meant to be black in America. Some notable writers of Harlem Renaissance were W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen and so on.

2. Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregations in the Southern United States. These laws treated Afro-Americans as second class citizens.
3. *Black Metropolis* is a study of Negro life in Northern America. It includes the original Introduction by Richard Wright and a new Foreword by William Julius Wilson.
4. After the publication of *Native Son* on March 1, 1940, Wright delivered the lecture titled "How Bigger was born" at Columbia University in New York on March 12, 1940. He gave this lecture four more times at other places. Harpers published this lecture in the subsequent editions of the novel.

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