

SEX AND RACISM IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON**Dr. Jitendra Nath Mishra**

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Richard Wright (1908-1960) was the first outstanding black writer to achieve a distinct place in the canon of Afro-American Literature. There had of course, been other successful black writers before him Charles W. Chestnutt of Cleveland, Paul Laurence Dunbar of Dayton and some other extraordinary talented writers but they were unable to knock the heart of the people of America. Richard Wright was a great American novelist, autobiographer, short story writer and playwright. He was the voice of those people who for centuries lived under the excruciating environment created by White people. The condition of black people was very pitiable; they were duped by white people in every phase of life. Richard Wright became a voice of those, who were suffered for a long time. He was one of the most important writers of his age. It would be not American wrong to say that he was the pioneer of a new genre of literature i.e. Afro American literature.

Richard Wright for the first time could move the white readers and was accepted as a powerful writer. His best works occupy a prominent place in the Afro American canon and a survey of Afro American literature would be incomplete without him. Born and brought up in Mississippi, his childhood was bitterly marked with racial prejudices, poverty and constant moves from place to place in the South. These excruciating experiences of his early life clearly reflected in his fictional and non-fictional work. He brought up in such environment from that we could only expect some notorious and bullied person. It is clearly reflected that he released his unhealthy emotions against white people through his work.

Richard Wright received the Christian name of his two grandfathers Richard and Nathaniel. Richard's paternal grandfather Nathaniel was strong and daring, was respected in the community because he had succeeded in combating certain shrewd white neighbors who had tried to cheat him out of his piece of land, such spirit we also find in Richard Wright, but he exhibited it through pen not by muscles. Sharecropping was the main source of income for the black in those days and that was the part of feudal system. His father was an illiterate person while his mother was a teacher; he had a brother named Leon. Richard's relationship with his father was not a happy one.

In 1940 Wright published his first novel *Native Son*, the work upon which more than any other his reputation rests. A Book-of-the-Month Club Selection, *Native Son* won for him the Spingarn Medal, and the NAACP's highest award for achievement by a Negro. *Native Son* is the story of a few months in the life of Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old black described by the local prosecuting attorney as just a scared colored boy from Mississippi. As is typically the case with southern authors' protagonists, Bigger grew up in the writer's home town, Jackson, Mississippi.

His portrait was drawn, as Wright explained in “How Bigger Was Born”, from the examples of five young blacks he had known there. Like Wright’s own broken family, Bigger’s family moved to Chicago during his teenage years to escape the oppression of life in the south. Unfortunately, Bigger Thomas has neither the will and the intelligence, nor the good fortune of Richard Wright, instead of a new life, he finds death.

In native son, Wright shows the negative consequences of sexual restraints on bigger Thomas who is shown as chained like an animal and develops serious psychic distortions owing to his inability to have sexual relationship with the white women. Unmindful of the injurious effect of the sexual taboos on the Negroes, the editor of The Jackson Daily Stars, arrogantly asserts that, “Down here in Dixie we keep Negroes firmly in their places and we make them know that if they so much as touch a white woman, good or bad, they cannot live.”¹ Thus, the social taboos are so powerful that, if a Negro tries to raise his protest against them, he cannot survive. It is with this hampered sexuality that Bigger goes to the house of Henry Dalton where he is employed as chauffeur. When he sees Mary, the symbol of, “sacred white womanhood”, he becomes revengeful and as soon as he finds an opportunity, he tries to rape her in her room and strangles her to death when he fears that he would be found out. Subsequently, he throws her body in the burning furnace. His sexual desire for the white female and violent impulses, which have hitherto been repressed by the whites, says Houston A. Baker find their expression in the intended rape and the murder of a white girl. Max, Bigger’s lawyer, rightly explains to the jury that Bigger had two outlets for his repressed self: work and sex, and that he developed a syndrome and violence as he was not allowed to have these outlets:, “He has had but two outlets for his emotions: work and sex- and he knew these in their most vicious and degrading forms”². That is why, Max argues, Bigger has become aggressive, irresponsible, frustrated, sullen, suspicious and neurotic; in short, he exhibits all the features of a sexually repressed personality.

The white American society plays a great role in making Bigger a criminal. Bigger is filled with nerves reactions: “He grew hotter, tighter; his nerves birth taut and his teeth were edge. He felt that something would soon snap within him,”³ when Gus consents to Bigger in the proposed robbery, Bigger’s anger rises “ Almost to frenzy”, he feels like slapping or stabbing Gus. Consequently, despite the environmental provocation; the nature of the hatred and violence is rooted in his own psychic structure moulded by a rigid social setup. When we first meet bigger in the much misunderstood rat scene, He is already a “time bomb tickling” in the heart of America. His killing of the rat , however does not presage his rattish fate because he attains a high level of consciousness before he dies. The heightened tone and the war like atmosphere of the scene only reveal , what Frantz Fanon calls , “Hampered aggressively ” , and the hero’s psychic need to give vent to his pent up anger and hatred. That is why even after the rat is killed, he takes a shop and pounds the rat’s head “crushing it, cursing hysterically”⁴, this partially release his accumulated violence; this gives him cathartic relief, he feels light and starts doing some work.

One critic rightly observes that Native Son is the first book in our literary history that represented the full, urgent sexuality of a young black man. Native Son is a book about the imperatives of the body- about Bigger’s panic-sweat beading on his skin; about his convulsive stomach pain when he gulps water after parched days on the run; about his struggle to will his erection to subside while a white woman and man have sex on the car seat behind him: “Bigger

was floating in the car and Jan and Mary were in back. Kissing, spooning”⁵ Bigger is a complex character whose injured psyche disables him to express an emotional solidarity: “He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair.”⁶ No doubt, Wright does concede a basic humanity to Bigger, as he does to the other black character in the novel, but holds that, despite good intentions, the crushed life of the Negro tends to disrupt personal relation. He shows that the grueling environment that snatched all right for his fulfillment, threatens to make his humanity un-co-operative. Because of his self defeating approach to life, the distorted part of his personality gets an upper hand and his essential humanity remains submerged. The main interest of the novel lies in the clash between Bigger’s humanity and his hostile environment. The novelist understands his character and shows that the sexual exploitation by the American power structure makes him a rapist and a murderer.

Wright, when he grew older, discovered that being black was, in the mind of the Southern whites equivalent to being a boy. Prohibition had closed the bars, but Richard used to carry contraband whiskey to the prostitutes of the hotel under the nose of the police. Since these girls did not consider the black servants human beings, they wandered about naked and completely uninhibited in their presence. There is no way of telling what effect this had upon the adolescent tortured by sex. One glaring example of sexual oppression occurred when he was called to a room in the hotel where he worked as a bellhop. The couple within did not bother to dress, assuming that he should have no interest at all in their being naked. The same sexual oppression has been highlighted in *Native Son* when Bigger was driving the car and Jan, a white man, and , Mary, a white woman had sex on the car seat behind him : “He looked at the mirror ; Mary was lying flat on her back in the rear seat and Jan was bent over her. He saw a faint sweep of white thing. They plastered, all right, he thoughtHe heard Jan whispering; and then he heard them both sigh”⁷ Wright admits that Bigger is a “snarl of many realities” and contain many levels of conflict in his character ⁸. The frightening incidents of rape, murder and violence in the present day America more than anything else justify Wright’s apprehensions. In this context, Bigger ceases to be a mere Negro; the merely a Negro phenomenon, nor an American phenomenon; he would be found wherever there is oppression.

References

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