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Richard Wright's Native Son: A critical evolution

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Abstract

In his masterpiece, 'Native Son', Richard Wright asserts quite forcefully that a prejudicial and capitalistic order, rather than any intrinsic human deficiency, is the cause of the frustration and rebellion of unprivileged Negro youth of America. The action of the novel takes only two weeks in unfolding. It is set in the middle of winter to create a gloomy atmosphere. Wright describes his hero, Bigger Thomas, very forcefully. Of the three books that 'Native Son' is divided into, the third lacks the vigour and the natural fire of the first two. Much space is occupied here by Richard Wright's Communist ideology. By this realistic novel, Wright was trying to shock the white liberals of the time in course of denouncing American racism. He makes the most of his violent attack on whites. His introduction of Communism is utterly useless artistically.

Keywords: Prejudicial Capitalistic, rebellion, Communist ideology, liberals whites.

Introductions

In 'Native Son', Richard Wright attacks racial prejudice, which is the ugly side of American civilization. Unlike James, Baldwin, Richard Wright made the 'portrayal of violence his main mode in his works. The chief appeal of 'Native Son' was due to the violence of Bigger Thomas, the hero of the novel.

Main thrust

The all-pervading thought of 'Native Son' is that a prejudicial and capitalistic order, rather than any intrinsic human deficiency, is the cause of the frustration and rebellion of underprivileged Negro youth of America. Gloster criticizes the American capitalistic order with its heartlessness with regard to racism, Racial prejudice is the ugly side of American civilization that Gloster refers to. The action of the novel takes only two weeks in unfolding. This is just to show the rapidity with which a black man is judged and condemned to death in America. The selection of winter is quite deliberate here on the part of the author. The action of the novel is set in the middle of this season to create a gloomy atmosphere. The novel begins in mid-February and ends in early March. The reasons behind the haste with which the black man is condemned to death are both social and political. The Chicago whites want him to be punished as soon as possible. This will stop the blacks on the South side from repeating his act on a larger scale. Another reason for the haste is that important elections are going to be held in April. That is why David A. Buckley, the attorney general of the state of Illinois is eager to close this case as soon as possible. White votes are very important for Buckley who wants to be reelected with them. Wright describes the social as well as political atmosphere of his novel very clearly. From this, it can be concluded that the action of Native Son takes place in the thirties, during the Great Depression.

In 'Book One' and 'Book Two', Wright develops his subject in a thrilling way. It lends a great force and appeal to the narrative. Here the action takes place within a span of sixty hours. From the rude awakening of the Thomas family on the morning of Saturday to the capture of Bigger Thomas in the Monday evening. Wright is a person who hates his environment and revolts against it. The environment and the revolt have both been described superbly. Wright uses his imagination to make the maximum of those two and a half days. The causes and the consequences of the act of Richard Wright's protagonist of the piece have been described marvelously by him. Bigger Thomas spends Saturday morning with the members of his gang. He goes to the movies in the early afternoon. In the afternoon, he goes to Mr. Dalton's house as his chauffeur. He resumes his duty properly. He is to take Mary to the university. On Sunday morning, the heinous murder takes place. Just an hour after the murder, Bigger reaches South Side again.

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He comes back into Mr. Dalton's house at about nine on the same day. He takes Mary's trunk to the station, behaving as if nothing had happened. Mary was supposed to take the train for Detroit that very morning. When he is back at Mr. Dalton's house, he convinces everyone that Jan is there behind Mary's disappearance. After this, he enjoys his day off. He goes to meet Bessie Mears. In the afternoon, he comes back to the Daltons. Now he realizes that he must make people believe that the Communists had a role in Mary's disappearance. Mr. Dalton's private sleuth is suspicious of Bigger, and the latter wants to deflect his focus elsewhere. Now he does one more thing to mislead the private detective. Bigger goes back to his girlfriend's house to write the note demanding Mary's ransom. From there, he comes back without losing any time to Mr. Dalton's house. Here he immediately slips the ransom note under the front door. A few moments after this, the Daltons announce to the media men that their daughter has been kidnapped. Shortly after that, one of the media men discovers some human bones and an earring belonging to Mary in the ash pan of the furnace. Bigger flees immediately, quite panicked. He goes to meet Bessie. He forces her to accompany him. They hide in an abandoned building. It is Sunday evening. When day breaks, the young black woman will be dead. Bigger does everything all Monday to dodge the Chicago police. The police are pursuing him everywhere to capture him. He is to be caught in the evening on the roofs of the black ghetto. Thus, Bigger is to be in the trap of the Chicago police.

The 'Third Book' of the *Native Son* lacks the vigour and the natural fire of the first two books. Much space is occupied here by Richard Wright's Communist ideology. The dramatic intensity of the earlier books makes them so lively in action. The action in the 'Third Book' takes a very political Marxist form. Communism is described here in more ways than one. Wright describes it from three angles, the first angle of Boris Max, the second one of Bigger, and the third one of his own. According to Marx, Communist ideology must enable the individual to acquire great human dignity. For this the colour of the skin does not matter at all. This utopian view was that of the white American Communist leaders during Wright's time. But Wright differs in his view point. For him, this attitude denied the individual's historical and racial past. Richard Wright wanted to be accepted as a black man. In course of his defense, Boris Max first highlights the tortured life of a man who has never known the meaning of life only because of the colour of his skin. That is why he asks that the young black man should be concerned to live in prison, and not to death. As he thinks this will give Bigger an understanding of human goodness and would enable him to know himself better. Max does not see Bigger as an individual. He sees him as a mere representative of the blacks of America living there at the time of *Native Son*'s publication. In this way, this white lawyer, who is also a Communist, denies the young black man any personality. Any attitude other than this, would have given this black man's action a black, nationalist aspect. Communism does not encourage anything like this. Richard Wright expresses his Communist point of view as a black man. He does it through the intermediary of Jan Erlone. When Jan comes to visit him in the prison, Bigger is struck by the frankness with which the young white man admits his blindness to him. Jan offers to help him by introducing him to Boris Max.

Jan speaks with humility. This humility is sure to arouse in Bigger feelings until then unknown to him. Kinnamon has to say this in this regard. "If Jan's good will is expressed in a bumbling and insensitive manner in his initial approach to Bigger, he more than compensates for this mistake by his heroic support of Bigger after Mary's death. Bigger had expected to find hate and rage in a person whom he had caused to be imprisoned by his lies. He understands that Erlone, through his sufferings, has learnt to recognize and accept his own mistakes. The young black man realizes that, like his own, the young man's sufferings have also enabled him to judge better the environment in which he lives. Wright has given Erlone his name deliberately. It suggests isolation. The thing that brings Jan and Bigger closer and makes them true friends in the raging storm is nothing but the solitude surrounding them. Here Richard Wright identifies entirely with Bigger.

Wright shows Communism as he sees it and accepts it. He does it by describing the development of an interracial friendship between two young people. A few days before his death, Bigger has complete faith in Jan Erlone and Boris Max. They happen to be the only human beings he will ever be able to know. The young black man knows nothing about Communism, He realizes, however, that these two whites understand it, and that they want to help him. He knows that their feelings are quite sincere since they attach great importance to his life. As about their membership in the Communist Party, Bigger is no longer frightened about it. He knows that they accept him as he is. They are the people who have helped him to discover his dignity as a man. Bigger is not just an individual. He is a symbol of revolutionary Black Nationalism. It is true that Bigger does not understand the Marxist ideology. But even if he did, that ideology would be of no use to him. Behind the American Communist Party's hesitation in not pronouncing it in favour of *Native Son* was perhaps Bigger's nationalist attitude. A man who does everything possible to make Bigger's condemnation to death certain is the Attorney General of Illinois. He wants to prove that the black young man is not insane but a monstrous two-footed beast that must be killed. For this, he makes more than sixty witnesses appear before the judge. The law officer in charge of investigating Mary's murder does make efforts with the same passionate intensity. He uses Bessie Mear's body to show the savagery with which Mary Dalton was killed. The whites in general believe that the black man incinerated Mary in order to hide all evidence of rape. Bessie's body only serves to illustrate a murder about which no one is sure. Nobody feels any compassion for her sad fate Bigger never loved her. He kills her to protect himself from the white people. The white judge condemns him to death. Richard Wright describes the white characters in his novel in a vague manner. He does it to bring out the utter destitution of the black world. He can also focus on the distance that separated the two worlds of blacks and whites. These separate worlds do not know each other. They also do not wish to make any effort in this direction.

By his realistic and even naturalistic novel, Richard Wright was trying to shock the white liberals of the time in course of denouncing American racism. Although Mr. Dalton helps in financing the activities of the National Association for the Advancement of colored People and gives pin-pong tables to the South Boys' club, he is quite ignorant of the real condition of the black world. He will understand his mistake

only after the violence of Bigger. He will then realize that his commitment must be deeper. Wright makes the most of his violent attack on whites. He also criticizes mercilessly the black American bourgeoisie. His hero, Bigger, knows that these blacks consider him a disgrace to the black race. Like the whites they, too, think that he has behaved like a two-footed beast. Bigger hates the lies and the hopes of the black bourgeoisie. He hates these blacks because they are ready to do everything to please whites great pride. He feels he has acted in the name of all oppressed blacks. When his mother, his sister, his brother and his friends come to visit him and show a sad look full of pity, he is surprised and disappointed. He is convinced that his action has registered a black presence in the American society. Realising that his country is finally granting him social and human importance, he would like all blacks to be thrilled about his act. He knows that he has done what every black always wished to do. Though the novel lacks dramatic intensity in first two books, Book Three enables Richard Wright to describe the action in proper period of time. It lends itself to his ideas. From the very moment of his arrest, Wright's hero is caught up in the cobweb of justice that wants only one thing – his death. Wright very accurately depicts the moments of the legal action. Only a period of eleven days elapses between Bigger's arrest and his condemnation to death. Bigger attends the judicial inquiry just three days after his capture. He is taken to Mr. Dalton's house for a recreation of the crime. After that, he is locked up in the Central Prison of Chicago. The very next day his indictment takes place. It is decided that his trial will open after three days. Then, the trial takes place at Chicago's Criminal Court. After three days, Bigger is condemned to die in the electric chair. A few days later, only the memories of Bigger Thomas will remain. Richard Wright wants to give the third book of his novel as real an atmosphere as that of the first two books. For this, he shows the extent to which a single black man can affect the lives of millions of white people. The mayor of Chicago encourages the police to step up their vigilance. He fears serious social problems. During the trial, the governor of Illinois demands two regiments of reservists. They will guard the court and the Central Prison. The atmosphere in which the trial of the young black man takes place is extremely tense both socially and politically. Bigger appears as a social symbol that has no human conscience. He represents modern man. Artistically speaking, Wright has introduced Communism quite uselessly. It serves no artistic purpose. Rather, it hampers the development of the novel. Wright's Marxism denounces the wrongs of American society. Richard Wright could have denounced the same without using Communist ideology. But this is also true that in those times this ideology was practically the only means by which the blacks could express their thoughts. In this manner, Wright enables his hero to confront a society that denies him human value. Bigger Thomas goes into action to attract the attention of people around him. He wants to prove his existence to those who have been blind until then. We know from Bigger Thomas's conduct that in his works Richard Wright had quite clearly formulated some rudimentary elements of existentialism. Robert Bone underlines the existential elements in 'Native Son' in these words. "Having rejected Christianity and Communism, Bigger finds the strength to die in the courageous acceptance of his existential self". In this novel, Bigger's action is not million blacks living in

America at that time. Bigger projects himself in order to establish the human value of the black man. Bigger's act and his privileged position in the eyes of the oppressed blacks make him the symbol and the hope of a race that has never ceased to struggle. The solitary aim of this struggle has always been to create a human identity. This identity must be respected by all races and ethnicities. Bigger becomes a central symbol of this identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

The hero of *Native Son* is no ordinary black so far as his action is concerned. His action is that the young black man who has become aware of his freedom as well as his acts. Bigger acts with the only aim of creating an identity for himself. He knows that his action will shape his identity. That he will be what he does. The future of his life will depend on how he conducts himself. He shows to his fellow blacks the path to follow by his own action. Bigger is not at all bothered when he hears about his imminent death. He has a deep feeling of having accomplished something important for his race. Richard Wright underlines Bigger's isolation to bring into focus his identity. Bigger trusts none. He only trusts himself, Richard Wright explains his existentialist idea that man is always alone and can count on no one. That is why both blacks and whites in Chicago reject Bigger's act not understanding its symbolic importance. A short time after the publication of Wright's *Native Son*, he gave a lecture at Harlem. The black audience permitted him to express his views freely on the manner in which he had conceived that novel. That lecture was an essay Wright had drafted and named it 'How Bigger Was Born'. That essay gives *Native Son* a complex meaning. In this novel, Wright relates certain events of his youth. He wishes to show by this work that there is a close relationship between real life and the imaginative work. He had been disappointed after seeing some bankers' daughters weeping on the pages of 'Uncle Tom's Children. Four Novellas'. He had decided then to reveal the reality of the black world. He did not want anyone to get over the plight of blacks by shedding some comforting tears. Hence he decided to make the reality of the black world as harsh and as violent as possible. The result of this resolve was this novel of his. Bigger Thomas was born in the mind of Richard Wright long before he was born in *Native Son*. There was a gap of many years between the two. Wright became aware of Bigger's existence long before he started writing 'Native Son'. The freedom of the North enabled him to express and analyse feelings that had been repressed until then. Wright's association with white writers in Chicago proved to be of immense help to him in his literary career. He admits it quite frankly in these words. This association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro life in fiction, for my race possessed no fictional works dealing with such problems, had no background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no movies that went with a deep and fearless will down the dark roots of life. Richard Wright sees Bigger Thomas not as an individual in a local and temporal setting. This was because of his Communist ideology. The latter enabled him to see the condition of the hero of his novel not as peculiar to blacks but as universal and human. Wright knew that he tried to be a Communist. "Why was I a suspected man because I wanted to reveal the vast physical and spiritual ravages of negro life, the profundity latent in these rejected people"? In this essay Wright underlines a very important fact. He rather

threatens through Bigger that the black masses can, if conditions deteriorate to that extent, subscribe to Fascism or Communism. Wright analyses in 'How Bigger Was Born' the oppression, and shows how man can be skillfully manipulated and kept in utter ignorance. Here, in a beautiful manner, he gives a number of examples to demonstrate that literary techniques may be adapted to social and political protest. He underlines the fact that Bigger is the product of an imbalanced society. The aim of his society is to destroy the blacks.

Unlike James Baldwin, Richard Wright made the portrayal of violence his main mode in his works. The chief appeal of native Son was due to the violence of Bigger Thomas. That was for Wright the only way to attract the attention of the white world to the miserable condition of blacks in America.

Conclusion

History is witness to the fact that Richard Wright's approach was not the right one. He preached and propagated violence unlike James Baldwin. Human problem must have a priority over racial problem. Richard Wright fails to recognize this.

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