

The Aping of Niggers with Special Reference to Richard Wright's *Native Son*

B.J.Geetha,
Assist. Prof. of English,
Periyar University,
Saem.
Tamilnadu,
geetprem05@gmail.com

In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the central theme is the doubleness of black existence in the United States. In particular, this novel explores the stifling limitations imposed particularly on blacks. Bigger Thomas, the hero of the novel, embodies this sense of exclusion and isolation. The central movement of *Native Son* is toward the development of self-awareness and self-actualization. Bigger's development is curbed by environmental and social pressures that make him feel that violence is his only way to self-realization. This fact, along with the struggle of being a black man in a world controlled by whites, is what leads to his self-destruction.

He is violent, inarticulate, aimless, lacking opportunity, uneducated, broken, coming from a broken home and thus having deep rooted psychological and emotional imbalances, angry, lacking a solid sense of identity, anxious, fear-ridden, impulsive and desperate. However, Bigger wants to be a man in a world that has taken his manhood away from him by constantly reinforcing his inferior status to the white man. Bigger and his buddies are living in pre-civil rights America where blacks are excluded from the rights and opportunities that whites take for granted. It is the fact that he has been denied these basic needs that make him feel excluded from the American dream.

Native Son opens with the ringing bell of an alarm clock—a wake-up call not only for Bigger and his family, but also a warning to America as a whole about the dangerous state of race relations in the country in the 1930s. The first page of this section begins with the appearance of a large black rat. The rat is just as afraid of Bigger as Bigger is of the rat, and their reactions to these fears are the same: defiance and violence. This first book might just as easily have been called “Shame,” as Bigger also feels that emotion acutely.

Bigger hates his family because of their poverty and suffering. His mother always warns him against his association with the gang who always indulge in robbery. She advises him to take the job offered by the white man Mr. Dalton. Bigger and his friends have a plan to rob a white man named Mr. Blum. Robbing a white man would mean entering into a new territory, “a symbolic challenge” to the white rule. Bigger is too afraid to challenge white authority.

Bigger takes a job at Mr. Dalton who tells Bigger that he is a great supporter of the NAACP—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—and that he is hiring Bigger because of this support for blacks. Mary, his daughter, worries Bigger as she behaves very politely something quite unusual. Every rich white woman he has met, in the past, has treated him in a cold and reserved manner. Likewise, Mr. Dalton’s charity is not unconditional. The Daltons may give money to black schools, but they do not acknowledge that Bigger ultimately should have the freedom and opportunity to determine the course of his own life, without their interference.

Bigger reacts to Mary with hostility because she crosses the tense social boundary between white women and black men. Mary is reaching out to Bigger. Bigger knows that he would be the one to bear the blame should something go wrong. Mary thus terrifies and shames Bigger on many levels. He does not know how to behave in her presence because she breaks the social rules he knows.

Mary introduces Bigger to Jan Erlone, her lover; Bigger becomes infuriated because Mary and Jan make him intensely aware of his black skin in their conversation with him. Mary and Jan insist on eating at a black restaurant on the South Side. Mary and Jan insist that Bigger should also eat with them—a gesture that horrifies Bigger. Mary and Jan’s attempt to treat Bigger as an equal only make him more conscious and ashamed of his black skin. Jan, Mary, and Bigger have dinner and then drink rum together. Mary, riding in the front seat next to Bigger, tries to engage in a conversation with him. She leans her head on his shoulder and asks him if he does not mind.

When Mary and Bigger arrive back at the Daltons’. Mary is too drunk to walk unaided. Terrified, Bigger helps her into the house and up the stairs to her bedroom, leaving the car in the driveway. In the bedroom, Bigger becomes sexually aroused and kisses Mary, when Mrs. Dalton suddenly

enters the room; Bigger is seized by hysterical terror. He knows that Mrs. Dalton is blind, but he worries that Mary may say something that unwittingly reveals his presence. Bigger places a pillow over Mary's face to prevent her from speaking. In his panic, he accidentally smothers Mary to death. When Bigger finds himself in Mary's room, he knows he has breached the most explosive racial rule—the sexual separation between black men and white women. Bigger feels Mrs. Dalton's ghostly presence, in the room, reminds him of the presence of whiteness that controls his life. He stuffs Mary's body into her trunk and carries it down to the basement. He stops in front of the furnace and decides to burn the body. Bigger contemplates his crime and becomes filled with a sense of invincibility. In murdering Mary, he feels he has created a new life for himself. He convinces himself that Mary's death is not accidental, but is actually something to which his whole life has been pending.

Mary's death represents a key turning point in the plot, both in terms of the narrative and in terms of Bigger's development as a character. In Book One, "Fear," Bigger is unable to analyze his behavior. In Book Two, "Flight," he begins to actively contemplate his identity and consciousness. At the beginning of the novel, Bigger writhes under the yoke of white authority, resentful of the line drawn between himself and white America. However, he does not cross this line until terror drives him to kill Mary by accident. Though this action threatens Bigger's life, it also, ironically, gives him a tangible goal: to get away with the murder. To Bigger, the deliberate murder of a white woman represents the ultimate rebellion against the crushing the authority of "whiteness." He feels that he now possesses a power that white America has used against him since his birth. Wright shows that the conditions in 1930s America are ripe for fascism to flourish and that millions of oppressed people are waiting to unite behind a powerful and charismatic leader, regardless of that leader's moral character.

The reporter, who has come to Mr. Dalton's house, finds out several pieces of bones in the furnace. As Bigger looks at these remnants of his gruesome killing, all of his old feelings return: he is black and he has done wrong. Bigger sneaks up to his room and jumps out the window. Bigger rushes to Bessie's house. Bessie packs some clothes to run away from there but he realizes he cannot take her with him. After she falls asleep, he brings the brick down on Bessie's skull. Like Mary's death, Bessie's death gives

Bigger a newfound vigour. Bigger looks for a vacant apartment in which to hide but he is caught by police and is put in prison. He reveals in the court how the murders gave him the identity he lacked in court.

Max, his friend, argues that Bigger murdered Mary accidentally, without a plan, but that he accepted his crime, which gave him the opportunities of choice and action, and the sense that his actions finally meant something. Bigger's killing was thus not an act against an individual, but a defense against the world in which Bigger has lived. Mary died because she did not understand that she alone could not undo hundreds of years of oppression. But he is given death sentence.

Throughout the novel, Wright illustrates the ways in which white racism forces blacks into a pressured—and therefore dangerous—state of mind. Blacks are beset with the hardship of economic oppression and forced to act subserviently before their oppressors, while the media consistently portrays them as animalistic brutes. Given such conditions, as Max argues in the court, it becomes inevitable that blacks such as Bigger will react with violence and hatred. However, Wright emphasizes the vicious double-edged effect of racism: though Bigger's violence stems from racial hatred, it only increases the racism in American society, as it confirms racist whites' basic fears about blacks. In Wright's portrayal, whites effectively transform blacks into their own negative stereotypes of "blackness." Only when Bigger begins to perceive whites as individuals does Wright offer any hope for a means of breaking this circle of racism? The novel stresses the point that only when sympathetic understanding exists between blacks and whites they will be able to perceive each other as individuals, not merely as stereotypes.

The deleterious effect of racism extends to the white population, in that it prevents whites from realizing the true humanity inherent in groups that they oppress. Indeed, one of the great strengths of *Native Son* as a chronicle of the effects of oppression is Wright's extraordinary ability to explore the psychology not only of the oppressed but of the oppressors as well. Wright illustrates that racism is destructive to both groups, though for very different reasons.

Mary and Jan represent subtler form of racism, as they consciously seek to befriend blacks and treat them as equals, but ultimately fail to understand them as individuals. This failure has disastrous results. Mary and Jan's simple assumption that Bigger will welcome their friendship deludes

them into overlooking the possibility that he will react with suspicion and fear—a natural reaction considering that Bigger has never experienced such friendly treatment from whites.

An important idea that emerges from Wright's treatment of racism is the terrible inequity of the American criminal justice system of that time. Drawing inspiration from actual court cases of the 1930s—especially the 1938–39 case of Robert Nixon, a young black man charged with murdering a white woman during a robbery—Wright portrays the American judiciary as an ineffectual pawn caught between the lurid interests of the media and the driving ambition of politicians. The outcome of Bigger's case is decided before it ever goes to court: in the vicious cycle of racism, a black man who kills a white woman is guilty regardless of the factual circumstances of the killing. It is important, of course, that Bigger is indeed guilty of Mary's murder, as well as Bessie's. Nonetheless, the justice system still fails him, as he receives neither a fair trial nor an opportunity to defend himself. The motto of the American justice system is "equal justice under law," but Wright depicts a judiciary so undermined by racial prejudice and corruption that the concept of equality holds little meaning.

Bigger allows the reader to feel that the reader is inside Bigger's skin. He represents the African American experience of oppression in America. Wright states in the introduction, however, that there are Biggers among every oppressed people throughout the world, arguing that many of the rapidly changing and uncertain conditions of the modern world, a modern world largely founded on imperialism and exploitation, have created people like Bigger, restless and adrift, searching for a place for themselves in a world that, for them, has lost many of its cultural and spiritual centers.

The effect of racism on the psychological state of its black victims is depicted in an elaborate manner. As a twenty-year-old black man, Bigger, is cramped in a South Side apartment with his family, Bigger has lived a life defined by the fear and anger he feels toward whites for as long as he can remember. Bigger is limited by the fact that he has only completed the eighth grade, and by the racist real estate practices that force him to live in poverty. Furthermore, he is subjected to endless assault from a popular culture that portrays whites as sophisticated and blacks as either subservient or savage. Indeed, racism has severely curtailed Bigger's prospects in life and even his very conception of himself. He is ashamed of his family's poverty and afraid

of the whites who control his life—feelings he works hard to keep hidden, even from himself. When these feelings overwhelm him, he reacts with violence. Bigger commits crimes to etch out an identity for him denied by the white society. One area of fascination has been Bigger’s name, which seems to combine the words “big” and “nigger,” suggesting the aggressive racial stereotype he comes to embody. The title of the novel implies that Bigger’s descent into criminality and violence is an inherently American story and American inhuman treatment of black community. Bigger is not an alien to or outside of American culture—on the contrary, he is a “native son.”

Black civil rights leader Malcolm X (1965) said- I believe this quote is appropriate to the theme of Wright’s novel. “We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary. ” —. The denial of these rights to exist in a society fossilizes the life of black people. Such denunciation as fellow human beings exposes the oppressed to turn against the oppressor violently where nothing but aping of the nigger happen. Thus, violence is a personal necessity for the oppressed. It is not a strategy consciously devised. It is the deep, instinctive expression of human being denied individuality.

Racism denotes prejudice, oppression and atrocities against a certain sect or group of people by other class of people. It exists in many forms throughout the world and is a big blot on the humanitarian cause, the foundation of a global harmonious society.

Works Cited

Britt, David. “Native Son: Watershed of Negro Protest Literature.” *Negro American Literature Forum*. 1.1(St. Louis University): 1967. 4-5.

Carreiro, Amy E. “Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: ‘Negrotarians’ in Richard Wrights Native Son.” *The Journal of Negro History*. 84.3 (Summer1999): 247-259.

Hamilton, Sharon. “Wright’s Native Son.” *Explicator*. 55.4 (summer 97): 3.
