



BIGGER THOMAS- THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS BLACKS IN THE NOVEL 'NATIVE SON' BY RICHARD WRIGHT

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Life could be lived with dignity; that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame and that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars.

-Richard Wright

INTRODUCTION

The articulation of the angst of blacks is characteristic of Richard Wright's novels. Through his black protagonists, Wright deftly depicts the collective experience of African Americans molded by experiences of slavery and apartheid. The Africans were uprooted from their native soil, culture, age old traditions and replanted in a soil that reeked of hostility, oppression, humiliation and brutality. Their misery deepened when white terrorist groups like Ku Klux Klan unleashed violence upon these hapless blacks. Slavery was legalized in Massachusetts State in 1641 and the condition of the blacks deteriorated further in 1890s with the introduction of Jim Crow laws which led to brutal Lynching of the blacks by the white people. Jean Paul Sartre in his introduction to Memmi's book defines oppression in the following words: '*Oppression means, first of all the oppressor's hatred for the oppressed which creates a petrified ideology that devotes itself to regarding human beings as talking beasts*' (Memmi 1965, XXXVII). It is, evident from historical facts, that oppression of such kind from the colonizer dehumanized the colonized American blacks. Aime Cesaire also stressed on the same aspect in the following words:

The colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.....They thought they were only slaughtering Indians or Hindus, or South Sea Islanders, or Africans. They have in fact overthrown, one after another, the ramparts behind which European civilization could



have developed freely (Nandy 1).

The years that followed the end of the Civil War in 1865 saw the abolition of slavery but ironically racial discrimination, hierarchies and prejudices emerged in new forms. Social and cultural inequalities and discriminatory practices against the blacks were rationalized and legitimized. The blacks were projected as inferior violent brutes. The government did not introduce any structural improvement to improve the economic and social condition of the freed blacks. The African Americans had to fight against insurmountable odds to improve their situation which they realized could be done only through active pursuit of education.

This virulent cultural topography thus, witnessed a growth in African American fiction towards the second half of the nineteenth century. There was a visible growth in black readership with the increase in the number of African American journals and with the belief amongst black activists and intellectuals that literature was a potentially powerful tool to fight the existing racial stereotypes, to foster racial upliftment and regenerating self-awareness among African Americans. The literary interventions of the African American writers could not magically wipe out the contemporary injustices but sowed seeds for the growth of African American fiction. Amongst the contemporary African American writers Richard Wright like a phoenix arose from a black ghetto in Mississippi to become a voice of the millions of voiceless blacks in progressive America. He was innately aware of his role as a black writer and wielded his pen to secure rights for his fellowmen from the racist American society. His well acclaimed proletarian novel *Native Son* published in 1940 has been translated into many foreign languages and interpreted by critics and scholars worldwide. Through this novel Wright unleashes his protest against the violation of human rights of the blacks who lived in a northern metropolis. The novel is considered a classic despite the chill that it sends to the heart of the readers through the violent acts of the aberrant Bigger Thomas. Wright in his comments on the novel stated:

I don't know if Native Son is a good book or a bad book. And I don't know if the book I'm working on now will be a good book or a bad book. And I really don't care. The mere writing of it will be more fun and deeper satisfaction than any praise or blame from anybody. (Native Son XXXIV).

Wright was the first black American novelist who dared to confront the racist American population and point a finger towards the inhuman treatment in complete



violation of all human rights, meted out by them to the American blacks. In the confrontation scene of the novel *Native Son* between the Southern whites and the blacks, Wright holds a mirror to the physical and mental agony produced by racial segregation and discrimination upon the blacks in America.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

The book is divided into three parts titled 'fear', flight and 'fate'. The book is set in Chicago in the 1930s and the first part 'fear' describes in detail the unintentional murder of Mary Dalton, the daughter of his white master by Bigger Thomas in a moment of panic. Bigger feared the girl would expose his presence in her bedroom. The action of the novel centers round the murder of Mary Dalton and the ensuing investigation into the causes of the murder. Bigger rapes and also kills his black girlfriend Bessie, suspecting that she might disclose this dark secret. The second part titled 'flight' is about Bigger's flight from the reach of the police and lawmakers. Bigger becomes the spokesperson of human rights of the blacks. The black people ironically fail to recognize the novel intention of Bigger. In the last and concluding part 'fate' despite the powerful arguments put in favor of Bigger by Max, the defense counsel, Bigger is sentenced to capital punishment for murdering Mary Dalton.

Bigger Thomas is a product of American soil- he is America's Native Son. Wright created the character of Bigger Thomas from the various real reports and clippings on American blacks that appeared in the newspapers. It was highlighted by Margaret Walker, Wright's friend and biographer that: *The major portion of Native Son is built on information and action from those clippings* (Walker 2) The American blacks who migrated from southern states to north in search of better life ultimately had to withstand racism, economic deprivation and injustice from the surrounding white society. This suffocative environment forms the backdrop of *Native Son* where Bigger's family also migrates to the Northern states. Wright's black consciousness that developed from his own childhood experiences of racism contributed towards the creation of this novel.

Bigger Thomas a poor young black man is the central character in *Native Son*. He lives in a congested shack with his mother, brother and sister. Thomas is caught in a trap of hatred, fear and violence. It is necessary for black men to understand the mechanisms of racism, to realize the varied form of oppression in order to attain adulthood. In the case of Thomas he reaches adulthood not through various stages of growth like other children but through a distorted and reversed process as he has to work and provide for the family rather than pursue formal education. Bigger is a



product of his environment as the *oppression that is unleashed by the white colonizer that makes the oppressed black Bigger Thomas 'a hardened criminal'* (3). He chose violence to create an identity for himself. The Plot of the novel seems to be contrived yet Richard Wright insisted that the plot could be a real possibility if one considers laws of that times that vanquished all civil liberties of the African Americans and propagated racial segregation through an elaborate system of social control that divided black and white Americans. Blacks were barred from using any public utility areas and services that were frequented by the whites.

The blacks were stereotyped as barbaric, uncouth and uncivilized. Bigger's fear and panic of being discovered in a white girl's bedroom seems to be logical once the reader considers the times in which the novel is set. Stereotypes percolate to every aspect of the novel. Bigger escapes from Mary's and Bessie's house relying on the inability of the police to think that a black man was capable of such crimes and subsequent cover-ups. For a while Bigger is successful in fooling the police and newspaper reporters and passes the blame of murder on Jan, a Communist party member and Mary Dalton's boyfriend, knowing full well the antipathy of American whites towards communists. Eventually Bigger is convicted and awarded capital punishment. Bigger is an amalgamation of all people that Wright had known throughout his life – most of these people had fallen prey to the brutalities of the dominant whites when they refused to accept the indignation of Jim Crow discrimination. Bigger emerges as an anti-hero who rejects the entire southern white ideology and resorts to brutality in order to break the racial barriers. *Native Son* is one of the *angriest black novels of the time depicting its protagonist at his most defiant self*. (4) His murder of the white and racially superior Mary Dalton gives voice to the voices of the innumerable blacks in America and their century-old oppression. Thus, in the end when he is sentenced to death, Bigger a rebel by instinct never breaks down as he is satisfied to embrace death for the cause of his own black community and their human rights. As Bigger says in the novel:

I believe in myself... I got to die...I ain't trying to forgive nobody and I ain't asking to forgive nobody and I ain't asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain't going to cry. They wouldn't let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain't fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn't want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am.....It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder....What I killed for must've been good...It must have been



good! (Pp.391-392)

CONCLUSION

Richard Wright's *Native Son* cautions people against denying the basic rights to all human beings in general and the blacks in particular. Bigger with his death proves to the world that the voices of the black people cannot be suppressed and every time there is injustice there would be people like Bigger who would become the voice of the hitherto voiceless blacks. *Native Son* is Wright's *unique contribution to the work of human rights and humanitarianism-sympathy, community building and activism, trauma and recovery* (5). According to Wright, racial oppression of the blacks should form the basis of all black writing. Thus, we see black consciousness permeates all his literary works and resists the oppressive white racist ideologies. *Native Son* sends a warning signal to all cultures that thrive on oppressing innocent people in the name of caste, creed, race, color and religion. This novel reminds all that hatred would always generate violence and hatred. All human beings have a right to live life with dignity and freedom and this is a fact that should be remembered by those who are in power so that needless massacres can be avoided and all can live in a peaceful and progressive world.

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