

Exploring The Environment To Find Self In Richard Wrights Native Son

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The history of mankind has been the record of man's endless quest for success and fulfillment. Literature, as mirror to life reflects this perennial quest. The eternal theme of all the great literature has been the search for the meaning and significance of life in seemingly meaningless and futile conditions. Man is just a tiny particle in this vast cosmos. He or she cannot make laws and set his/her terms on the world of universal applications. The universe is too ambiguous to be understood or know completely. This brings in the sense of inadequacy and incompetence vis-à-vis the vast inscrutable universe. The great heroes of literature have been facing this dilemma since time immemorial. At the same time the incessant quest for understanding the world and its inhabitants, goes on.

The present paper attempts to probe into the lot of an individual in his social milieu, the predicament of man in a world surrounded by inimical forces-both in nature and in human institution. How does man react to these forces and to the environment? Is he passive? Or is he protesting?

The conflict and crises emanating from the plurality of roles played by human being as father/mother, husband/wife, son/daughter and brother/sister, of a class, caste of group from a focal point of interest. Also an attempt has been made to find answers to question like: Are they at least trying to achieve the higher goals of life? Or are they just taking things lying down as part of their destiny? Are they conscious and aware of their status as a human being and trying to improve their lot?

The fate of an individual is dependent on so many other external and internal aspects. The environment that surrounds man, the institutions that are made by man, other persons-either friends or foes of man and also the man himself are the subjects

under examination and exploration. Hence Self-search is an eternal theme of all the great works of literature.

'Native Son' when it appeared in 1940 was without precedent in American literature. Previous black writing including Wright's Uncle Tom's Children had treated blacks as passive and innocent victims of racism suffering their lot in dignified silence in Native Son Wright created a character of Bigger Thomas, Who was neither passive sufferer nor innocent victim. Instead, Wright reminded Americans of the full cost of bigotry in social and human terms by dramatizing the deep anger, hate and fear that many blacks felt. Bigger Thomas is not merely one twenty year old boy, he is an entire race. Native son show that the underprivileged blacks is either the church loyal, praying submissive type or the embittered, criminal type. Year's after Native Son's appearance, James Baldwin would assert that every black person carries some degree of Bigger Thomas within himself. Perhaps so, but it is to Wright's credit that he was the first American writer to bring those feeling into the open. Readers are reminded throughout the work that Bigger is a native son and his experience is quintessentially a party of the American experience.

Essentially Bigger Thomas is a conscious composite portrait of a number of individual blacks. Wright had observed over the years. It that remarkable exercise in self examination, How Bigger was Born, Wright sketched five such bigger prototype he had known in the south. All of them were rebellious definers of Jim Crow orders, and all of them suffered for their insurgency. In Chicago especially when Wright worked at the South side Club; he observed other examples of the Bigger Thomas type fearful, restless, moody, frustrated, alienated violent youths struggling for survival in the urban jungle. The Biggers that Wright remember

stand out in his mind because they stubborn by challenged the system that sought the status quo 'Native Son is most clearly read and understood as a wrathful commentary on American Negro-White relations. It has often fascinated critics in its possibilities for being less specific and more universal than it seem.

Bigger Thomas lived in one-room apartment with his brother, sister and mother. Always penniless, hunted by a pathological hatred of white people; driven by an indescribable urge to make other before him Bigger had retreated into an imaginary world of fantasy. Wright opens Native Son with the grotesque scene of Bigger's chasing and killing the rat prowling his family's one room, slum apartment in Chicago Black Belt. The action is ironically symbolic. Later Bigger will assume the role of hunted animal and the rat will be interchanged in the minds of the whites with Negroes in general. Quickly Wright sets Bigger apart from the sharing of any warm and strong associations. When Bigger dangles the rat in front of his sister, Vera, to scare her he adds to a list of annoyances that have already alienated her; and his mother's outward, relationship with him is epitomized by her declaration.

(N.S.: 12) "Bigger honest, you the most no-countest man I have ever seen in my life" His gang members feel that he is different, that his hot temper and him. Throughout the novel Wright focuses his attention upon Bigger and how he encounters the white world and is met by it.

Although Bigger is estranged from both the religion and the folk culture of his race and Wright clearly and quickly establishes. This fact in the novel, Bigger can still represent the Negro in abstract in terms of Negro; Bigger is barred from entering the dominant white civilization. It is clear from his impassioned outburst.

"Goddammit, Look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we aint. They do things and we can't. It is just like living in jail" (N.S: 23)

These thoughts expressed by Bigger Thomas clearly throw light upon wretched condition of Negroes in America. Although Bigger is residing outside of the Negro folk culture. He carries within him the fears. Hatreds and frustrations of his black

culture. Bigger hovers in no-man's land between white and black, but he is imbued through experience and observation with the humiliations and suppressed reaction to them that appears to reside in every Negro breast.

At the beginning of Native Son, Bigger realize that because he a Negro, the span of his life can spell out only non-fulfillment. When he become conscious of this knowledge, he expresses his desire to break violently through the barriers imposed. Upon a whole life- "He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness he would either kill himself of someone else. (Bone: 34) Bigger aspire to merge with other and be part of this world. He wishes to live like others, even though he was black, Bigger embody the two strains that Wright apparently thought are common by the whites and the wish albeit buried into subconscious, to participate unnoticed within the whole group.

When Bigger and his gang plot to rob a white-owned and operated store, he is overcome by the fear of reprisal from alien white world, and he foils the attempt. When later he is invited by the white Mary Dalton and her Marxist boyfriend Jan Erlone, to communicate with them on a personal and private level, he chokes up with a fear and shame that accompany his awareness that he is a Negro. It is when Bigger is set loose, when he acquires an inner power to destroy both white and black life, when he is presented the occasion to plot alone against the white world, that Wright combines Bigger's search for meaningful identity with the specter of a violent rebellion of Negro American against white American "The "act of creation "That Bigger sees in his quasi-accidental killing of Mary is creative. It raises him, and with him his Negro-ness from the level of obscurity to realm of recognition. He accomplishes alone something sensational. In so doing, he projects his now unavoidable presence into the white world" (Bone : 35) All Bigger wants is to be accepted as a human being, wishing once and for all to shed his cloak of invisibility and to be respected as a man among man. He succeeds in forcing the world to admit his existence" (Fishburn: 62)

Throughout most of the book, Wright explains Bigger's downfall in proletarian terms. The

white capitalistic power structure has alienated Bigger, forced him into criminal activities. Society therefore, is directly responsible for creating this “monster” “In writing *Native Son* Wright began his examination of Bigger Thomas from the outside, exploring Bigger’s family, his friends, and surroundings. And they were certainly instrumental in forming him. But as one goes deeper into the character, he finds that social or psychological explanations are inadequate. For Bigger was not satisfied to be labeled and forgotten. He was rebellious enough to want to forge an identity out of his black experience” (Fishburn: 63)

“With *Native Son*, however, a third element appears – that of rebellion. For Bigger is not only an unwilling salve but unlike Fish and Jake- he acts definitely to end his repression, the deed which serves to free him being, of course his first murder. But ironically the key to his freedom is also a final blow to his hopes for social acceptance. Accordingly, although he dies a free man he also dies a lonely man. Moreover, the environment that Bigger has managed to transcend has in reality controlled his mode of expression, leaving him only one way to end his servitude. Because Bigger was not given the freedom of the means to develop a healthy personality, he became a mean – spirited, emotionally stunted delinquent. Poor and black and of limited intelligence, he is unable to fight his way out of the ghetto- physical and psychological through conventional methods since society has closed all its doors to him. The only way left is for him to rebel in the most dramatic and shocking way he can- by killing (Fishburn:100)

Although society has forced his act upon him, Bigger executes by rejecting society’s evaluation of the murder as morally debilitating. By interpreting the deeds as morally sound beneficent, Bigger is able to escape the confines of his environment and gain an identity. Instead of remaining a victim of naturalistic forces, Bigger, by the end of *Native Son*, has become the master of his fate.

In short *Native Son* must be counted among the major American novels. If the function of the literary imagination is to conquer new frontiers, to prepare unpopulated regions of the soul for permanent settlement, the Wright must be honored for his

pioneering role. He has shown us a nation divided against itself, a gulch so vast between the white suburb and the black ghetto that no kindly paternalism can span it. He has revealed the hatred and resentment of the ghetto masses and exposed a psychic wound so deep that only violence can cauterize it. In brief. *Native Son*, protest against man’s inhumanity to man, specifically that of whites in regard to the blacks. The protest in *Native Son* demands a change in the attitude of society. It also implies that man can bring them about.

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