

## Richard Wright's picture of Fear and Hatred in his fiction with special reference to *A Native Son*: A Brief Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to project Richard Wright not only as a healthy product of the Deep South, of the Depression, of poverty and of a broken home but also as an ideal writer known for vehement talk about the bleakness, the barrenness in Negro life. It clearly documents the immediate and tremendous success of his novel *A Native Son* just because of its focus on delineating the tragedies of his own people, the black race and examines Richard Wright's longing for self identity born out of American oppression through the portrayal of Bigger showing that *A Native Son*, as the first example of Negro protest writing in the history of American letters, gave an impetus to those Negro writers joining the *Wright School of Protest* focusing on a dominant theme in literary expression on the American Scene as 'theme of protest'.

**Key words:** Picture of Fear and Hatred.

It is universally acknowledged that as a product of the Deep South, of the Depression, of poverty, of a broken home, and of other handicaps which the black poor have, face and experience in life, Richard Wright is the ideal writer known for vehement talk about the bleakness, the barrenness in Negro life. He was out and out the self-appointed spokesman of his people. In an interview given to P.M. Magazine on April 14, 1945, Richard Wright himself said:

"I wanted to give, lend my tongue to the voiceless Negro boys. I feel the way about the deprived Negro children of the South. Not until the sun ceases to shine on you Shall I disown you" (Fabre 252).

Born on September 14, 1908 into the poverty of Sharecropper life on a plantation near

Natchez, Mississippi, Richard Wright grew up in Mississippi, Memphis, Tennessee and Arkansas. At the age of fifteen he left Memphis to go north. When he arrived in the ghetto of Chicago, he discovered with an atrocious sense of shock that North or South, farm or city was the same for a black in the America of 1920's. He was not free at all from his daily lessons in the curriculum of Jim Crow. As a result, Richard Wright had a deep-rooted hatred for the Whites like all Negroes. Like Ely Green, another Negro writer, Wright was determined to a man-not a "nigger" not a "boy" – as Blacks were generally addressed by the Whites. Richard chose to reject the social mask of inferiority and invisibility and in doing so, became a full-fledged rebel writer.

No doubt, Richard Wright was the breakthrough man who came all the way up from all the way down. He was suckled on resentment and hatred, nurtured on anger and fear, grew up on restlessness and tasted every violent flavor of alienation and hostility. But his bitter strong will to expose to White America the psychological disturbance produced by the resentment, rootlessness, violence, alienation and hostility that are the creation of the poverty and humiliations attendant upon racism led him to blaze a trail that opened new worlds to countless young blacks. Right from his childhood, Wright had been taught to fear and hate the Whites. These two negative feelings gave rise to his rebellious attitude, which in turn gave power and strength to whatever he wrote. The pen became the most effective weapon of warfare and Richard Wright got initiated into the weaponry of words which led him on to the reality of the world outside the South.

Though the medium of words, Richard Wright did express his fear and hate for the White man. He wanted the White man to listen to him. *White Man, Listen!* is a title of one of his books. Wright did not write for the black people but for Whites because the Whites know nothing of the problems confronting Blacks whereas Blacks know fully well all about them. Imitating Mencken in his later writings, Wright used the pen as weapon, the word as ammunition for

protesting against the life of the black Americans. *A Native Son* itself is a weapon, a looked pistol at the head of the White world. On the whole, the black writers including Richard Wright embarked upon a new direction and in so doing, emphasized the idea that the novel should be a vehicle for protest. Commenting on the use of words as weaponry by the black writers Addison Gayle Jr. remarks:

“It the beginning was the word, and it was the word that proved the greatest obstacle for the black writer. Words, to be sure, may be used as weapons; they are however, the property of protagonist and antagonist alike and like an unfaithful woman, capable of serving two masters simultaneously” (P 7).

To deal truthfully with the history, culture and sociology of the black masses is to deal openly with anger and hate, fear and resentment expressed in unabashed terms. To analyse accurately the life style of the poor and embittered Blacks who followed Marcus Garvey and Sufi Abdul, the writer had to attack the false premise upon which the middle class and the romantics had structured their cosmology. From the vantage point of the migrants, America was desperately in need of revolution and the writer who sought to function as their redeemer would have to record this desire for violet change. That *A Native Son* (1940) is the most celebrated novel of the post

Renaissance years evidences the black writer's disregard of the dangers inherent in accepting a new function for the black writer.

Richard Wright was a sensitive black intellectual in a racist society and he felt that he was a native son of America, so were they all-all blacks were the native sons of America. Wright maintained an affinity and affection for the state in which he was born, despite the ordeal that he underwent there. The plantation system grew and flourished in the South. It was a system structured upon White supremacy, White control and black servitude. Blacks in the Delta were not only disenfranchised; they were also forbidden access to education. They lived, for the most part, entire families in one room structures in which sleeping, eating and other essentials were carried out. Addison Gayle in his essay on *Native Son* remarks:

Here in the Delta he found unmistakable evidence of the human spirit crushed, of the desire for freedom not dormant but non-existent -and he hated it" (Gayle 27).

Addison Gayle, comment on the ordeal of a *Native Son* continues:

"Were black men and women ordained by heavenly decree to acquiesce in the destruction of their own individuality, their own personification? No, because he (Wright) was certain even then that such would not be his fate" (P 28).

That is why Richard Wright himself writes in *Black Boy*:

"I was always to be conscious of it, brood over it, Carry it in my heart, live with it, seep with it, fight it" (*Black Boy* 165).

The novel '*Native Son*' was published in March 1940. It was immediately accepted as the most powerful American novel. Richard Wright had prored through this novel *A Native Son* that he had enormous power, that is power to tell the tragedies of his own people, power to put them into prose writings so that they would get to the reading public of the White folks. The black race, as it really felt, had won a powerful champion in Mr. Richard Wright. The hero of the novel *Bigger Thomas* is a native son of America, who is ultimately sent to the electric chair for having murdered a White girl. Wright himself comments on *Bigger Thomas* in his article on "How *Bigger* was Born":

"I don't mean to say that the Negro boy I depicted in *A Native Son* is either a communist or a Fascist. He is not either, but he is the product of a dislocated society, he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this and he lives amid the greatest possible way out" (NS 14).

Wright represents *Bigger's* longing for self-identification which is the result of American oppression which in turn has not allowed for the forming of deep ideas of solidarity among Negroes. It is still in a state of individual

anger and hatred. Due to America's educational restrictions on the bulk of her Negro population, Bigger's density is in a nascent state, not yet articulate. Richard Wright says that he himself felt that fear felt by every Negro;

"As I contemplated Bigger and what he meant, I said to myself: 'I must write this novel, not only for others to read but to free myself of this sense of shama and fear' (NS 16).

According to Richard Wright, a right more immediately deeper than that of politics or race is 'a human right'. This personally felt human right bore hard upon him and he depicted this through the character of Bigger in *A Native Son*. Though *A Native Son* was certainly not the first example of Negro protest writing in the history of American letters, its popularity and the publicity it gained undoubtedly gave encouragement and impetus us to those Negro writers who would soon join 'the Wright School of Protest', a dominant theme in literary expression on the American literary scene was that of protest. Far from reversing a trend, *A Native Son* strengthened it and advanced its demarcations into the area of race relations. Wright's active contact with Marxism and the communist party had provided him with a new framework for his ideas. The three parts of *A Native Son*, 'Fear', 'Flight' and 'Fate' trace the social and psychic conditions building up to Bigger Thomas' involvement in the death

of a White girl. Mary Dalton, Bigger's Flight from the police with a Negro girl, his murder of Bessie Mears, and his capture by the police; and his trial, which allows his Marxist lawyer, Borris Max, to bombard Bigger and society with political propaganda some early reviewers went so far as to assert that the novel represented a malicious tract devoted to encouraging and increasing the black man's hatred of Whites. In the words of Nick Aaron Ford,

"Bigger hated all White folks. He hated them enough to murder without provocation. He felt that he had been cheated out of everything good in life that he wanted and that white people-all white people- Were responsible for his unhappy predicament" (P 28).

Bigger Thomas became what he was, not because he was free to choose his course of action, but because circumstances over which he had no control had driven to his doom. This is the philosophy of Karl Marx, of whom Wright at the time was a devoted disciple. The general nature of the novel is the tale of a Negro youth who hated and feared Whites. Bigger's hatred is to be understood as an outgrowth of his fear. Nick Aaron Ford further continues as:

"Beyond the broader implications *A Native Son* then, underlying the novel is a fear-hate combination earlier posed by Wright in the Southern settings of his short stories and insinuated in *Lawd Today*" (PP 30-31).

Bigger was always afraid that something awful was going to happen to him. Hence, his principal fear was self-knowledge and this, of course, is the theme and title of Book. The other fears that make up Bigger's life are by-products of this basic terror. All Bigger's actions spring up from his fear. He hates Whites because he fears them. He knows that they are responsible for his immobility, his frustration, yet to admit even this would admit simultaneously a profound self-hatred. So he channels his hatred and aggression towards other Negroes and thereby, momentarily assuages his ego. He is afraid-for example, to steal from a White store keeper and terrified that his friends can read his heart-he attacks them in order to prove his courage to himself. He hates Mary Dalton because he fears she will jeopardize his job, and he regards all her overtures as efforts to humiliate him. He kills her because he fears the help he has given her will be misunderstood. Bigger's nature then, is composed of dread and hate. He hates what he fears-and his bravado and violence are merely illusory compensations for his terror.

As a Negro, Bigger is barred from entering the dominant White civilization-"whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies and the more imposing sight and sound of daily American life" (P 10), says Wight in the introduction to the novel. Bigger is the passive victim of the society that had conditioned him, although

the motive of his actions would still be hatred, born of fear, but inspiring revenge worthy of a more positive character. It so happened that, that night a white girl was present in a bed and a Negro boy was standing over her, fascinated with fear, hating her; a blind woman walked into the room and that Negro boy killed that girl to keep from being discovered in a position which he knew would bring the death penalty. Richard Wright comments:

"After he killed Mary Dalton, the fear of having killed a White woman filled him to the exclusion of everything else. He would not react to Bessie's death, his consciousness was determined by the fear that hung above him"

In the trial scene, Max tells the court:

"This Negro boy's entire attitude toward life is a crime; The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality have become the justification of his existence" (NS 366-6).

Bigger then is the 'nigger', the Negro symbol, as Baldwin phrases it in ".....that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with, since the first slave fell beneath the lash" (PP 33-34). Though Bigger Thomas is stationed outside of the Negro folk culture, he carries with him

the fears, hatreds and frustrations of his black culture. Like Wright, Bigger hovers in a no-man's land between White and Black. There is a frustration caused by the restrictions maintained and guarded by the Whites, fear is always present and felt in the Negro's heart. When Bigger and his gang plot to rob a white-owned and operated store, he is overcome by the fear of reprisal from an alien white land.

What has to be taken note of here is that Bigger's tale, metaphorically affecting as it does an entire nation, is epic, its actions symbolizing decisions on the grand scale. In the *A Native Son*, Max, the lawyer draws attention to the fact that in the midst of America there is mode of life a mode of life stunted and distorted. It is the duty of every White America to change that mode of life. Max warns, "If we are none of these then we should not pretend horror or surprise when thwarted life expresses itself in fear and hate and crime" (NS 358-359). Max sums up the entire novel in one crisp, pithy sentence thus: "Fear and hate and guilt are the keynotes of this drama" (NS P357). After having unwittingly and accidentally committed the murder, Bigger turned away from Mary and a hysterical terror seized him as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. Towards the end of the novel, one can see in Jan Erlone, Bigger has discovered that for the first time in his life a White man became a human being to him. Boris Max thinks that most Negroes like Bigger, want to attain self-

realization and dignity. 'Because of the Whites' firm and cruel domination over them, they can only feel fear and hatred. Wright's unrelentingly honest creation of Bigger Thomas revealed the connection in national culture between rural black South of Mississippi and the urban black north of Chicago. The road from *Black Boy* to *Native Son* showed black writers how to travel out of their own lives into a sociological and psychological angry honesty in their works. Milton R. Stern and Seymour L. Gross have commented as:

"If there is one book that history will underscore as the novel that changed the possibilities of Negro literature, that book is 'Native Son', and even if he had not gone on to write the other influential works that bear his name, Richard Wright would be remembered as an epochal figure in American letters" (P 179).

Bigger's impending death in the electric chair is simply the crisis which forces a resolution of his inner conflict. Finally, Bigger dies with hatred in his heart. There seems to be no spiritual redemption for him. Robert A. Bone states in his book:

"As his shield of hope slips from his grasp, Bigger takes up the shield of hate which is his destiny" (Bone 150).

To conclude, it may be said that *A Native Son* is not a novel for the hopeful or the faithful but one which results from the inability of men to fulfill the tenets of their own tablets of

the law. To accept Bigger Thomas is to accept the reality of the world of the twentieth century.

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**Failure is the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently.**

**~ Henry Ford**