

CHAPTER I

Richard Wright, American Context and *Native Son*

Background

Richard Wright's *Native Son* depicts the social conditions of the people who are discriminately excluded from the contemporary American society. It illustrates African-American peoples' lives in the 1930s Chicago in the US. Forced to substandard houses, the black immigrants are offered such low-paying jobs that they cannot maintain secure living. They are not schooled; however, they are blamed for all of their problems.

When Bigger acts in an unfeeling way, killing and then disposing of the bodies of his victims, Wright argues that these are the responses to painful social condition. He further, through Boris Max, argues that the environment of the person where he grows up can cause him to act in anti-social way. Bigger, with his brother Buddy, his sister Vera and his mother, lives in one of the houses that Mr. Dalton has rented out in the black belt of Chicago and has very poor living conditions. When they wake up, the two boys have to avert their eyes while the other two get dressed. Moreover, the white society is also to be blamed for the environment in which Bigger lives because Mr. Dalton would not let any of the black families rent in any of the places besides small, run down black belt. Since Bigger is forced to live in this neighborhood, he has never interacted with a person of another race. Naturally, Bigger grows up to be scared of the white race because he has never related with them. In the 1930's Chicago, the blacks were enslaved, they could live in the certain places and have certain job, they were under the rule of white nation, and they were getting money for doing low-earning jobs. How would this affect Bigger? Ever since the blacks have come over to the new land, they have been searching for identity. They are part of the

lowest class in the nation. To the whites, every black man is the same. Bigger is negatively affected by these kinds of suppressions. A man who is lacking self-realization will try anything to establish himself in the society. He even goes as far as becoming an insane man and commits crime after crime. Bigger Thomas's id that has developed subconsciously deeper in his heart due to the suppression of the white society arouses and encourages him to commit crimes. He kills Mary Dalton and his own girlfriend; he does this to free real Bigger Thomas from suppressed Bigger Thomas. But his deed is taken as barbaric crime by the white society and he is sentenced to the death even after the powerful defense made by Boris Max, a communist lawyer. His deed is an aftermath of the oppression of white society, an effect of psychological corruption developed as a result of the domination he faces during the discriminatory African-American lives in 1930s Chicago. This way, I locate the complex set of social and political circumstances as the antagonist of the novel *Native Son*.

Wright was born in Mississippi in 1908, a state which was the most oppressive place in the country to be an African-American. His father deserted his family and Wright was raised by his grandmother and mother. Like many poor families, the Wrights moved around during his childhood. He lived in Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee. He moved to Chicago and struggled to support himself with menial jobs. He joined the John Reed Club, a communist group. In the 1930s, the Reed Club sponsored Wright in his writing several short stories and essays. In 1937, Wright moved to New York to become the editor of the Communist Party publication, *The Daily Worker*. His first group of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, depicts the conditions of African-American men who accommodate themselves into a submissive position to white people.

The protagonists of his short stories are characterized as the most vulnerable human beings in the initial stage to turning into aggressive protestors against a racist society afterwards. A Guggenheim Fellowship enabled Wright to write *Native Son*, published in 1940. About starting up the *Native son*, Wright, in *How Bigger Thomas Was Born*, writes:

For a long time, I toyed with the idea of writing a novel in which a Negro Bigger Thomas would loom as a symbolic figure of American life, a figure that would hold within him the prophecy of blacks' future....So with this much knowledge of myself and the world gained and known, why should I not try to work out on paper the problem of what will happen to Bigger? Why should I not, like a scientist in a laboratory, use my imagination and invent test tube situations, place Bigger in them, and, following the guidance of my own hopes and fears, what I had learned and remembered, work out in fictional form an emotional statement and resolution of this problem? (405-406)

This statement shows that Wrights himself faced the tyrannical American society in his life. He himself was one of the Bigger Thomases he met, talked and experienced in America. And, being influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, he wrote *Native Son* as a weapon through which he could reveal not only his experience as being Negro but of all the black people who were having very pathetic lives in America during the thirties and revolting against the whites' oppressive mentality or the Jim Crow laws.

The African people who had been uprooted and transplanted to a foreign soil were considered less than human. They had no autonomy, no voice, no power, and ultimately no home in America. Slavery silenced them and effectively rendered the

race invisible on the American landscape. Their languages, cultures, and families were eradicated. In such a condition, the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance attempted to give back their long suppressed voices, languages and cultures. Therefore, literature, language and culture were used as powerful devices to oppose the white domination as well as to maintain their own stance or power.

The racist society itself became the base to drag Richard Wright into the arena of politics. He adopted art as a weapon to fight against the same racist society. With the help of his writing, he articulated the long-suppressed and unheard voices of black people. He has depicted their joys and grieves, pains and sorrows without losing their strong racial flavor; he has molded them into swift patterns of musical verse. He remained constant in his focus on the problems of racism and the failure of African Americans to realize the American Dream. Therefore, Wright always took his writing as a social action. He always attempted to give space to the suppressed, unheard and neglected voices. That means he attempted to empower the marginalized people, especially the African Americans.

Wright attempted to raise socio-political and cultural consciousness in the minds of people from a literary point of view. Therefore, the hidden politics of his writing was to energize people with political sensibility so as to transform the overall structure of the society, which was based on racism, inequality, discrimination and exclusion. *Native Son*, which was revolutionary in spirit, explicitly depicts the hatred against the white oppression and development of consciousness of revolution for a meaningful transformation of the American society. Hence, he was a true revolutionary writer in rebellion against the socio-political institution of his society.

The Harlem Renaissance of 1920s and 30s, The Great Economic Depression of 1930s, The World War II of 1940s, The Civil Rights and other minority

movements of 1950s and Black Consciousness Movement of 1976 were some of the major historical events of America of which Wright experienced much. These all events, although not overtly political in nature, were hugely affecting and reshaping the political, social, cultural and literary scenario of America and were influenced by the New Negro Movement. In 1916–17, Hubert Harrison founded the New Negro Movement. In 1917, he established the first organization *The Liberty League* and the first newspaper *The Voice*. This movement energized Harlem. Therefore, Harrison is called the “Father of Harlem Radicalism.”

The political overtone of these events could be realized and heard in Wright’s *Native Son*. Indeed, he was deeply moved by the socio-political condition of the time, and thus responded to them through literature. And *Native son* was the response to the condition.

Harlem Renaissance emerged as the booster for the New Negro Movement. It was an African-American literary and cultural movement. Socio-political transformation was the focus of this movement. Most of the activities of this movement were centered in the city called Harlem. Black scholars, leading writers, artists including all classes of blacks considered it “the Mecca” for the African American people and started living in the city to support the movement. Every black was encouraged and motivated to fight for the rights. So, the movement became very crucial for the African American people. Basically literature, music, art, and culture were largely utilized in order to voice against the injustice and discrimination, and to demand equality, freedom and liberty. Later, Harlem quickly became the center of many of the most important African American cultural, political and literary national organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League. Many magazines and newspapers

worked hard to stimulate a cultural and political awakening. The prominent magazines like *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Messenger* and *The Negro* were proud of their radical leftist goals. Each was dedicated to social and political progress and upliftment of black Americans. Merging racial awareness for literary and artistic excellence, the articles published in these journals pointed up the need for socio-political transformation with a desire for a fresh achievement and independence in art, culture, and politics.

1920s was a decade of extraordinary creativity in the art for black Americans. Particularly the second half of the decade witnessed an outpouring of publication by African Americans that was unique in its variety and scope; so that it clearly qualifies as a moment of Renaissance. In poetry, fiction, and the essay, as in music and dance, African Americans worked not only with a new sense of confidence and purpose but also with a sense of achievement never before experienced by so many black artists in the long, troubled history of the people of African descent in America. During Harlem Renaissance, the anti-racist discourse was dominant and vibrantly circulating through different mediums. Indeed the movement highlighted the very spirit of anti-racist discourse and also stimulated many Black artists to embrace it.

Undoubtedly, Harlem Renaissance marked an extraordinary creative outpouring not only in the field of literature, art and music but also in the domain of culture, politics and other social sectors. While participating in the circulation of the anti-racist discourse, literature primarily came as a response to their dignity and humanity in the face of racism. Many artists of this movement exploited art as a tool of affirmation of their dignity, identity, and humanity in the face of poverty and racism. Writing largely had been a bold response to their social conditions.

Another equally important historical event was the Great Economic Depression of 1930s. Undoubtedly, it not only paralyzed the economic field but also

paralyzed other fields as well. This Economic Depression gave rise to unemployment, poverty, unrest and crimes in the society. Especially the poor people received terrible blow because of it. The condition of the working class people became more unbearable, serious and pitiable.

In response to the Great Economic Depression Wright swiftly moved towards the political left. He published anti-imperialist stories and novel. As the radical socialist utterance became the dominant tone of his writing, he began to emphasize the need for radical political action. Therefore, Wright, basically, wrote against the backdrop of the racial discrimination and suppressed dreams.

Native Son is one of the books which depicts the state of an intra-personal conflict and expression of wrath against the opposition group. Moreover, it portrays not only a powerful piece of political slogan that depicts the social conditions of the people who have been marginalized, deprived from the facilities and made them feel inferior to others but also the anti-social actions of those people as an aftermath of oppression. Through this book, Wright paints a clear picture of the impossible lives led by African-Americans in 1930s Chicago.

Negro Art against Racism

Negro art is not only a thing to be viewed, read and enjoyed, but also a thing to be used for social purposes - to generate a consciousness in the mind of the people for the social, political, cultural, and psychological upliftment of the Negro people. It is a dynamically effective tool to fight for liberty, freedom and justice against every type of discrimination, injustice and segregation. Therefore, socio-political orientation of Negro Art is common but bears paramount importance in the Negro community.

For Black artists, the socio-political role of Negro art is vibrantly important to spread consciousness in black community, to make them realize their position, or to

make their conditions better and to achieve better position. It is such a tool which can also be used to empower black people from diverse perspectives – social, political, economic, cultural and racial politics.

To celebrate their rich cultural heritage and call for equal opportunity for black citizens, the social role of the Negro artists remained an important issue during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. Negro art opposes the racist ideologies that have kept the black people politically subdued, socially oppressed and economically disadvantaged.

According to the Negro artists, Negro art should function as an effective weapon in the struggle of black people for their socio-political power. In his brilliant article, “Criteria of Negro Art,” published in 1926, W.E.B. Du Bois very boldly highlights the social role of Negro art. As he writes:

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. (985-86)

By this Du Bois boldly states the social necessity of Negro art. Therefore, for Du Bois, the primary concern of the Negro art is to play a potent role in the achievement of the ‘rights’ of black people. Rights may be of various types – social, political, cultural and economical, etc. To make these rights realize, to turn them into reality, and ultimately to create a fair and just world where black folks can enjoy life are the sole responsibilities of Negro Art. Indeed, it is a catalyst in this genuine struggle of black people. Commenting upon the aforementioned quotation of Du Bois, Rebecca L. Walkowitz in her article “Shakespeare in Harlem: The Norton Anthology”

argues, “for Du Bois, propaganda denoted a function; it demanded the recognition of what art could do; it announced art as a social and political intervention” (504).

Since the black folks were forced to live under the repressive conditions of racism and were denied socio-political rights, it is the unavoidable duty of Negro art, as Negro artists advocate, to break the shackles of racism in every aspects of life, and make a call to fight against them. Hence, purely political motives of Negro Art bear the profound importance. It has dual demands of art and politics. However, the later, according to Du Bois, should be the focal interest and practice among the Negro artists.

For them, Negro art should be utilized as a powerful weapon to launch a great fight to achieve “a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and they enjoy life” (Du Bois 982).

The quotation points out the need of Negro art to initiate a great battle against ‘the old things’ which cut off the black people from the rights of freedom, liberty and justice and denied the socio-political power. Everyone in the world has rights to live freely; he has rights to realize who he is and do what he is allowed to do. Therefore, the social role of Negro art is of profound importance for it will work as a forceful medium to realize and exercise the aforementioned rights and power respectively. This is further fore grounded by Du Bois that “our new young artists have to go to fight their way to freedom” (986).

The socio-political scenario is affected by the psychological attitudes of people. Therefore, to bring a change in socio-political condition, the change in the attitude of people is must. The point is that, besides having a social duty, Negro art has also another duty that is to change the attitude of people which is primarily

focused by Langston Hughes in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” To put his words:

[I]t is the duty of the younger Negro artist . . . to change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white’ hidden in the aspirations of his people, to ‘why should I want to be white? I am a Negro- and beautiful! (1316)

Here, Langston Hughes clearly asks all the Negro artists to change their attitude. Having white-like color does not reflect the whiteness of the people. Blackness is beautiful and all the Negroes should be proud of being black. An attitudinal interest developed among blacks’ mind for being white is harmful for the movement. Thus, he asserts that the Negro art has a serious responsibility to wipe out the hegemonic influence of white world upon black minds. To support his notion, Hughes again underlines the role of Negro artists.

Since the Negro people are crushed in the grind of racism and their socio-political rights are denied, the role of Negro artist is not to run away from such painful realities of black people towards the beauty of nature but to depict that bitter reality in their art. Therefore, for Hughes, Negro art is the response to the social climate. It should document the pain and suffering of the people, happiness and joy as well. Hughes also argues that Negro artists should not be afraid of documenting the pains and sorrows, laughter and smiles of the black people. By this, Hughes underlines the heroic action of Negro artists and boldness of Negro art.

In the same essay, Hughes further underscores the boldness of Negro artists to depict the “blackness” in their art. He puts:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people

are pleased we are glad . . . We know we are beautiful. And ugly too...

We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (1317)

Hughes concludes that the chief responsibility of the black is to produce a racial literature drawn from African American life and culture. According to him, only that art can serve black people and society which is free of 'fear' and 'shame' of its author. And such art helps to create 'temples for tomorrow', the temple where peace, justice, equality, freedom and liberty exist. Besides, the very art will enable black people to stand on the 'top of the mountain' – the mountain of victory – where gentle breeze of freedom blows.

For Hughes, as the job of Negro artists is to cross the racial mountain and be on the land of freedom, the job of Negro art is to destroy the very mountain of racial discrimination, injustice and segregation in order to secure the land of freedom. The most influencing African American poet and the vocal person of the Black Art movement, Amiri Baraka also believed that black writers have an obligation to help the race through such literary means as depicting the evils of racism, providing positive images of African Americans, and offering possible solutions to social problems confronting the black community.

By correcting socio-political evils and solving the problems, black art could serve its race, its people and society. Maulana Karenga, in his essay entitled "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function," views Black art as an important part of Black Art Movement "[I]t is this criteria (social) that is the most important criteria. For all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid" (173).

The given extract echoes the announcement of Du Bois that all art is ‘propaganda’ and the art which fails to fulfill its being ‘propaganda’ is a mere ‘damn’. By the same token, for Karenga, any art which fails to support the Black Revolution is ‘invalid’. Hence, both Du Bois and Karenga emphasize the active social role of Black art. Karenga further, even more boldly, underlines the social role of Black art in the same essay. He argues that:

Characteristic of Black art is that it must be committing. It must commit us to revolution and change. It must commit us to a future that is ours . . . This is commitment to the struggle . . . Art will revive us, inspire us, and give us enough courage to face another disappointing day. (176)

Here, the term ‘propaganda’ is understood as term ‘awareness’ for the social transformation. Any article or the art should be society-oriented. And, most importantly, art should be used to change the society. If the art is not determined in itself it cannot lead the society toward the right path. Black artists boldly accept this notion and take art as a strong and effective weapon to gear up the black revolution to accelerate change, and ultimately, to bring wonderful future.

Undoubtedly, Negro art or black art is a strong weapon for social change, even more important in the case of African American literature which has “focused on a number of recurring historical and sociological themes, all of which reflect the politics – the realities of political, social, and economic power – of black American experience” (Tyson, 388). As Negro artists advocate that Negro Art has a serious social role, the political content is an unavoidable part embedded in it which I can explore even in Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*.

Literature Review

Different critics have seen *Native Son* through different angles. Some are satisfied with the way it is presented but some seem unsatisfied with its pessimistic presentation. However, we can easily imagine how much blacks were forbidden by the white society through the conversation between Boris Max and Bigger Thomas in the cell. Answering one of Max's questions, Bigger says "I wanted to be an aviator once. But they wouldn't let me go to school where I was suppose' to learn it. They built a big school and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could go to it but those who lived within the line. They kept all the colored boys out" (272).

To live in a multi-cultural and multi-racial society is difficult. People fight for power. Everyone struggles for establishing his existence in the society. This exact situation was found in America during the 1930s. Comparing the social structure of 1930s with that of today is completely unreliable. People are having harmonious relationships in America today. There is no discrimination between black and white. There is no biasness. Blacks and whites are talking together, working together, walking together, eating together and sharing even the apartment together. Current social structure does not reflect even an ounce of then oppressive society. However, we can learn it from the history that America was once badly influenced by the racist mentality. Reading *Native Son* through new historicists' point of view we came to know how blacks struggled to establish their existence in the white society. Even in these days, for blacks, history has become a subject which they never forget.

In the essay "How Bigger Thomas was Born" Wrights himself commented on his writing by saying "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 a deeper satisfaction than any praise or blame from anybody" (406).

Thirty years after the novel first created a sensation, readers are still impressed by the tremendous revelatory power with which it portrays the situation of the black man in the American ghetto. During the fifties, the reputation of *Native Son* suffered an eclipse as James Baldwin attacked the book for its grim pessimism, its negative view of black culture, and the tendency away from moderate attitudes toward confrontation and "telling it like it is among blacks, the terrible, unsparing view of Wright's novel has been vindicated.

James Baldwin further writes "The failure of [Native Son] lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (23).

Eldridge Cleaver led the way, in *Soul On Ice*, to a reaffirmation of the absolute position of Wright's novel. Wright, he said, "reigns supreme for his profound political, economical, and social reference" (108). Until 1968, there were no books on Wright; by 1970, there were six books and two pamphlets. In the afterword of the novel John Riley writes, "*Native Son* has captured, as no other novel has, the powerful emotions and naked sufferings, the frustrations, the yearnings, the relentless and hysteria of all the Bigger Thomases. Richard Wright's gripping novel has become a classic; it is dramatic, unsentimental, and uncompromisingly realistic- difficult to put down, impossible to forget".

Strangely, however, even while virtually unanimous agreement exists as to the extraordinary merit of Wright's book, critics have generally agreed that there is something significantly faulty about *Native Son*, and that the book's faults spring from Wright's inadequate control of the ideology behind his novel. Robert Bone is

expressing critical consensus when he says, “As a work of art *Native Son* is seriously flawed” and speaks of “philosophical confusion at the heart of” the novel (23). Dan McCall, in his excellent study, *The Example of Richard Wright*, says that Wright’s book and its protagonist fall “out of focus” during the later section of the work because of the imposition of massive doses of communist propaganda on Bigger Thomas’ world (90). Edward Margolis emphasizes “inconsistency” and “irresolution” in *Native Son* and finds “philosophical weakness” because “Wright himself does not seem to be able to make up his mind” (113).

There are mixed types of criticism about Richard Wright’s *Native son*. Some say it is a powerful literary weapon that helps revolting against the whites’ oppressive society where as some say it is confusing and naïve in terms of writing. However, in my personal view, *Native Son* is not as confusing and naïve as these critics all say it is. In fact, long-suffering dreams (conflict of values) through the suppression are skillfully portrayed throughout the novel. This conflict is embodied in the plot, in American society as Wright sees it, and most centrally in Bigger’s mind. I do not even care what critics have said about how it is written, how the plot is knitted, why this novel became pessimistic and so on because all I need is how the black boy was psychologically imposed to commit crimes by the white society in Chicago. Moreover, I want to justify that the whole white society is responsible for Bigger Thomas’s acts.

Organization of the Study

The strong point which encouraged me to study *Native Son* to prove Bigger Thomas’s anti-social acts are not self-enthused but an imposition of the white society is that no critic has pointed out that Bigger Thomas can be described as a split personality character, and yet it is clear enough that *Native Son* is based on the most

famous literary example of racial oppression and blacks' struggle to safeguard their identity. And, to prove this statement, I will put New Historicism and Black Art forward as tools followed by textual analysis afterwards. Once the statement is clarified, I will come to the conclusion that will tell us how Bigger Thomas was oppressed by the white society which made him revolt against the antagonist to safeguard his identity.

To materialize the objective, to turn it into practice and to facilitate the project, *Native Son* has been analyzed in the light of the Negro Art and the New Historical theoretical model. The first chapter deals with the historical context of the 1930s America to show how blacks were dominated by the whites. It also deals with the life and ups and downs of Richard Wright's writing career, the context of how the *Native Son* was written and the responses that the book received after its publication. Moreover, the theoretical model of Negro art is also described in the same chapter. The reason behind placing the theoretical model here is to make the reader clear about how social context affects the people living in the society.

Second chapter of the study reflects the New Historicism can be used to unearth history throughout the study. Chapter three basically analyses the novel and the psychological qualities of the protagonist through New Historicists' point of view mainly based on how the protagonist is forced to act in anti-social ways. The same chapter comprises a Negro Art model to analyze the protagonist's conducts and the reason that makes the protagonist act antisocially, situations he faces while handling the case, responses from the society after committing the crimes and outcomes of the crimes he committed. And, lastly, Chapter four allows us to understand what result racial oppression can produce in the society? How an oppressed man expresses his wrath to safeguard his identity in the society?

This final chapter is allocated to answer all these questions. Bigger Thomas, who has been oppressed throughout his life, finally kills Mary Dalton and his own girlfriend Bessie. My assertion is that Bigger Thomas's acts are not self-enthused but imposed upon him by the contemporary white society. This is how, I have reached to the conclusion that too much oppression results in explosion or violence.

CHAPTER II

New Historicism: Unearthing History

New Historicism was introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in a special issue of *Genre* to describe a new kind of historically based criticism in 1982 and it gained widespread influence in 1990. New historicism is a theory that is basically used to unearth the 'historical' nature of literary texts and at the same time the 'textual nature of 'histories'. Instead of reading a text as 'self-sufficient entity' and 'autonomous body,' and viewing it in isolation from its socio-cultural historical context, new historicists primarily emphasize the historical and cultural conditions of its production and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations. New historicism has turned towards history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, etc. in interpreting any given text. It emphasizes the transdisciplinary approach and seeks to blur the generic boundaries between different disciplines. Therefore, for new historicists literary texts and non-literary texts bear equal importance. They read them on equal footing, not making any hierarchy of 'high' and 'low', 'good' and 'bad' 'interesting' and 'boring,' etc. It challenges the norms of texts and writers. Even within the literary field, some texts were paid much attention and placed at the top of the ranking whereas others were less valued and placed at the bottom of the ranking by traditional critics. New historicism boldly challenges such practice of vertical reading/ranking and advocates for horizontal reading/ranking. Indeed, this is one of the most important paradigm shifts - vertical to horizontal reading - from the traditional critical practices.

New historicists posit the view that history is neither linear nor progressive, neither factual nor authentic. Instead, like any piece of literature, it is a constructed body to fit some ideological purposes, embedded in the complex web of socio-

political networks. History itself is a text, an interpretation, and that there is no single history.

New historicists also acknowledge that “our subjectivity, or selfhood, is shaped by and shapes the culture into which we were born” (Tyson 280). For the new historicists, our individual identity is not merely a product of society. Neither is it merely product of our own individual will and desire. Instead, individual identity and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect and define each other.

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle further explicate the issue in *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*:

What is new about new historicism in particular is its recognition that history is the ‘history of the present’ that history is in the making, that, rather than being monumental and closed, history is radically open to transformation and rewriting. (115)

The history can never be complete and perfect. So, written history can also be rewritten and transformed because power and other elements in the society determine this. It is a process.

In this connection, new historicists argue that ‘man’ is a construct of social and historical circumstances and not an autonomous agent of historical change. There is nothing essential about the actions of human beings; there is no such thing as ‘human nature’. Instead individuals undergo a process of ‘subjectification,’ which, on the one hand, shapes them and, on the other hand, places them in a social networks and cultural codes that exceed their comprehension or control. Since each individual's way of thinking is shaped by this process, it follows that the historian is also a product of subjectification. Lois Tyson clarifies this idea as he writes:

Like all human beings, historians live in a particular time and space, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture. Historian may believe that they are being objective, but their own views of what is right and wrong, what is civilized and uncivilized, what is important and unimportant, and the like, will strongly influence the ways in which they interpret events. (279)

Hence, historians themselves are biased even though they are/seem unaware of it because they are controlled by certain discourses in a particular socio-political circumstance. Such circumstances are the main points from which they interpret the things. Thus, new historicism views historical accounts as narrative, as stories that are inevitably biased according to the point of view, conscious or unconscious, of those who write them. The historians operate within the horizon of her/his own worldview, a certain broad set of assumptions and beliefs. Therefore, it is impossible to overcome these beliefs to achieve objective history. Highlighting the same issue, Tyson further writes:

By and large, we know history only in textual form, that is, in the form of documents, written statistics, legal codes, diaries, letters, speeches, tracks, news articles, and the like in which are recorded the attitudes, politics, procedures, and events that occurred in a given time and place. That is, even when historians base their findings on the kinds of “Primary source” listed above, rather than on the interpretation of other historians (secondary sources), those primary sources are almost

always in the form of same sort of writing. As such they require the same kinds of analysis literary critics perform on literary texts. (283)

New historicism has attempted to eradicate distinction between literature and history, arguing that each shares certain quality of the other and that both participates in social networks and deploy cultural codes. In this sense, new historicism deconstructs the traditional opposition between history (traditionally thought of as factual) and literature (traditionally thought of as fictional). Because new historicism considered history a text that can be interpreted the same way literary critics interpret literary text, and conversely, it considers literary texts as cultural artifacts that can tell us about the interplay of discourse, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which those texts were written. Opposing the view that the categories of literature and history as intractably separate disciplines, new historicism argues that each partakes and influences each other.

Literary texts are embedded with the social political and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed. But what is important for new historicists is that these circumstances are not stable in themselves and are susceptible to being rewritten and transformed. From this perspective, literary texts are part of a larger circulation of social energies, both products of and influences on a particular culture or ideology.

In this respect, viewing a work of art as a discourse, Habib points out:

It (new historicism) saw the literary text not as somehow unique but as a kind of discourse situated within a complex of cultural discourses—religious, political economic, aesthetic—which both shaped it and, in their turn, were shaped by it. (761)

Therefore, new historicists emphasize the need to examine and reexamine any piece of literature “within the broader context of its culture, in the context of other discourses ranging over politics, religion and aesthetic, as well as its economic context” (Habib, 760). For them literature is neither a “transhistorical” category, independent of the social, political and economic conditions, specific to an era, nor a “timeless” body. Instead, a literary text is simply one of many kinds of texts configured by the particular conditions of a time and place. Like any kind of text, a work of literature is profoundly shaped by different socio-political, economic circumstances. Hence, new historicists “view literature as one discourse among many cultural discourses” (Habib 762). Therefore, it must be read against the backdrop of those different discourses of the complex web of social environment of the time and place.

Stephen Greenblatt argues that literary works themselves should be understood in terms of negotiation for any reading or writing of a literary text is question of negotiation, a negotiation between text and reader, and text and writer within a particular social and cultural situation.

Since literary texts, as new historicist argues, are situated within a particular social, cultural, political, economic climate, and since the writer operates within the horizon of her/his own world view (a certain broad set of assumptions and beliefs), the task of new historicists is to explore “the historicity of texts and textuality of histories” (Montrose 410). Therefore, while analyzing a piece of history, the questions like “is this account accurate? Or what does this event tell us about the spirit of the age? . . . What happened? And what does the event tell us about the history?” are of less important (Tyson 278). Instead, as Tyson further argues “new historicists ask

‘how has the event been interpreted?’ and what do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?’ (278).

Hence, the job of new historicists is to read a given piece in relation to other discursive practices in which it occurred. To put it differently, since the meaning of a literary text is situated in the complex web of discursive formation, the project of new historicists is to “analyze the interplay of culture–specific discursive practices” (Montrose 415). It attempts to explore how the given piece of literature or history or anything else “fits within the complex web of competing ideologies and conflicting social, political, and cultural agendas of the time and place in which it occurred. Besides, new historicists explore how the given piece serves or opposes the certain discourse of the time and place. To maintain dominance, control and power or to oppose them various discourse are circulated. Among them literature is one. In this respect, Habib in his book *A History of Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present* points out:

New historicists [. . .] have been profoundly concerned not only with situating literary texts within power structures, but also with seeing them as crucially participating in conflicts of power between various forms of social and political authority. (762)

By this, he points up that literary texts not only carry certain ideological needs of certain socio-political authority but also involve in the conflict between them. In the same book, citing Louis Montrose, Habib further highlights the issue that “new historicists variously recognize the ability of literature to challenge social and political authority” (762). Indeed, they have acknowledged the “subversive potential of literature” (Habib, 762). Besides, Hans Bertens in his book *Literary Theory: The Basics* points out the political nature of a literature text. As he writes, “literary text is

a time-and place-bound verbal construction that is always in one way or another political” (177).

Citing Foucault, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their book *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, further explain that “a discourse is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known” (70). Discourses provide a so-called vantage point to know the world. Indeed, discourses both influence and are influenced by socio-historical and cultural climate. As Tyson argues:

Discourse is a social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience . . . From a new historical perspective, no discourse, by itself can adequately explain the complex cultural dynamics of social power . . . There is, instead, a dynamic interplay among discourses . . . No discourse is permanent. (281)

Hence, new historicism has subverted the notion that history is purely objective and provide factual data, and literature is purely subjective and supply fictional data. Instead, for them, both options – literary texts may provide factual data and history fictional – are possible. In this sense, no longer does history act as the background to literary texts, and no longer are historical accounts considered reliable and unproblematic representation of what really went on during a particular time. New historicists argue that since works of literature are embedded in particular socio-political and historical realities, they both influence and are influenced by historical reality. Like any other discourses, a work of art is a discourse, and also is the negotiated product of a private creator and the public practices of a given society.

CHAPTER III

Native Son: Bigger's Revolution for Safeguarding Self-Identity

Native Son concentrates on the devastating effects of 'suppression' in the racist White American society. Besides, it makes us consider various disturbing psychological, emotional, and of course, physical circumstances African American people might have been experiencing due to the absence of realization of American dream of freedom, equality and justice. By presenting such a disturbing and painful condition of the Black people, Wright aims to transform the society. Hence, his commitment towards social change is explicit. To strengthen his idea, Wright uses the literary devices that accelerate the spirit of change by adopting a rebellious and revolutionary tone.

Since African American people were given impressive dreams of freedom, equality and justice, they hopelessly awaited its result. Unfortunately, those dreams were false ones. When promises are made and its practices are avoided, and when dreams are distributed and its actions are negated, frustration anger, pain and revolt overtake a person. So is the case with Black people. This results in the publication of *Native son*, emergence of Black art Movement and an environment for the development of deep pain, frustration, anger and revolt among African American people against white racist society. The novel is a piece of discourse that explores the internal experience of black people representing Bigger Thomas as protagonist by knitting a sensational and thrilling story. The implication of killing a white is that the erupted lavas of the oppression will cause a great devastation in the racist society. The society built after devastation, thus, will value equality, liberty, freedom, justice and dignity of life. Only then, African American people will cherish their long awaited goals.

The irrational elements of Bigger's mind have been so subverted and distorted that they can be mirrored through the title of chapter one i.e. "Fear": [He] kept his knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended on how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness" (44). These suppressed elements, however, go beyond fear itself to include a good deal of hatred, which may be built on fear and image of the white man which Bigger has built up within him: "You know where the white folks live?" he says to Gus, "Right down here in my stomach . . . every time I think of 'em, I feel 'em . . . that's when I feel like something awful is going to happen" (24).

This very sentence suggests that Bigger is very much broken from inside due to the suppression. He always thinks about the white domination and hates the whites for making him live a painful life. He wants to kill everyone who hates him. So, his anger outbursts emotionally when he talks to his friends.

In the first part of the novel, there is a development of the conflict between the violent emotions and his tense and unstable control. Bigger's mind is alienated by the impossibility of the social situation he lives in as a black man in racist America.

Wright introduces this pattern at the start of the book as Bigger looks at his family:

He knew that the movement he allowed himself to feel [...] the shame and misery of their lives, he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough. (13-14)

When someone like Bigger gets frustrated from life, he acts abnormally. He enjoys bullying others. So, he terrorizes his sister with a dead rat until she faints, or attacks his best friend Gus because he cannot admit to himself that he is afraid to rob a white grocery. Always his mind is torn between two sides which cause him to

hesitate: “These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger – like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force” (31). He constantly feels the pressure of the part of his mind that must be kept down and senses that this force will eventually lead him to do something terrible:

“‘Sometime I feel that something awful’s going to happen to me,’ Bigger spoke with a tinge of bitter pride” (23). This clearly tells us that Bigger is about to cross all the social boundaries. He himself is not convinced what to do or not to. He knows that something is going to happen but not sure what that will be.

Having recognized the revolting nature of Bigger’s mind, we are in a better position to understand the meaning of the murder of Mary Dalton. The most notable point about the murder for my argument is that Bigger is described during the action as beyond control, subject to subconscious irrational forces, moved by disparate areas of his mind that are out of touch with each other: “He felt strange, possessed . . . her lips touched his, like something he had imagined . . . Something urged him to leave at once, but he leaned over her, excited . . . a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream” (84). Immediately after the murder, “He felt that he had been in the grip of a weird spell and was now free” . . . He felt that he had been dreaming of something like this for a long time, and then, suddenly it was true” (86-88). Now, Bigger feels that he has been free from all the sabotages in his life. Though it was not a long-term solution, he breathes a happy and glorious air.

During the murder Bigger’s mind is subject to forces of which he is not aware or in control. Now the murder of Mary is the central action of *Native Son*. After the crime, the remainder of the book is devoted to exploring the meaning of this action, as the remainder of this paper will be. The external facts of the narrative present the

murder as an accident forced on Bigger by the circumstances of Mrs. Dalton's appearing when Bigger is with Mary in her room. If we believe the crime was an accident, then we must believe that Bigger has no idea on any level that he might be murdering Mary when he presses the pillow down onto her face: his only motive is to silence her. This is true on the conscious level, but on the other level of Bigger's mind the crime is not an accident and the text makes this clear not long after the murder:

Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident . . . He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim . . . all of his life had been leading up to something like this . . . the hidden meaning of his life . . . had spilled out. No; it was no accident, and he would never say that it was. (101)

Here, we have the central paradox of the book: whether the murder is an accident or not. The two sides of this paradox are the two sides of Bigger's mind. The murder has the effect of intensifying Bigger's internal conflict, and after the crime these two sides are developed as independent thematic streams in the novel. On the rational level, the crime is forced on Bigger by circumstances and society and he is a victim. On the emotional level he takes responsibility for the crime as an act of rebellion and becomes a hero. It is the later, positive response which is most emphasized in the parts of the book immediately following the murder: "It was a kind of eagerness he felt, a confidence, fullness, a freedom; his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act" (111). Feeling a sense of purpose and responsibility for the first time, Bigger gains power and ability such as he had never possessed. Before this, he was inarticulate and blighted in his personal relations with most

people, particularly whites. Now he can face them with a sense of being superior because he has fooled them:

Like a man reborn, he wanted to test and taste each thing now . . . feeling giddy and elated . . . his eyes shone. It was the first time he had ever been in their presence without feeling fearful. He was following a strange path . . . and his nerves were hungry to see where it led . . . He smiled a little, feeling a tingling sensation enveloping all his body . . . he was eager, tremendously excited. (106-8)

Now, he is completely free from the fear and has turned into a fearless fighter. He is proud of himself for accomplishing the long-intended task- devastation of the white tyranny. He transformed himself from the poor and hopeless Bigger Thomas to a powerful and confident Bigger Thomas. And this positive transformation of Bigger after the murder is remarkable. In his former state he was in threatening mode and incapable of doing any purposive action; now he is launching ambitious plans: “As long as he could take his life into his own hands . . . he need not be afraid . . . He was more alive than he could ever remember having been; his mind and attention were pointed, focused toward goal” (141). Bigger’s shifting of the blame onto Jan Erlone, his manipulation of Bessie and others, his writing of the kidnap note, and his elaborate plan for taking the ransom money all show a remarkable heightening of his capabilities. He has gone from slave to master, from a complete social liability to a dynamic managerial executive: “. . . he would plan and arrange . . .” (123).

It becomes apparent, however, as we proceed through the second section of the novel, that the effects of the murder on Bigger have not all been positive: “There was only one thing that worried him; he had to get that lingering image of Mary’s bloody head . . . from before his eyes . . . Hell, she made me do it! I couldn’t help it!

. . . She should've left me alone, goddammit!" (108). Bigger often feels it necessary to revert from the idea of being responsible for his crime to the idea that it has been forced on him. No matter how he justifies Mary's murder to himself, he cannot get her out of his mind, as he cannot get her body out of the furnace. In fact, the furnace, blazing in the underground of the white society, is a symbol of Bigger's mind, as we will see further. Bigger knows that he has to clear out the furnace, but every time he tries, the conflict within him renders him unable to act. Stopping to look at the mound of ashes that he must clear out:

He had a feeling that if he simply touched that red oblong mound . . . it would cave in and Mary's body would come into full view unburnt . . . a vivid image of Mary's face . . . gleamed at him from the smoldering embers and he rose abruptly, giddy and hysterical with guilt and fear.

(113)

On another occasion, he stoops and touches the handle; he imagines that if he shakes it he will see pieces of bone falling into the bin. He jerks upright and, smashes by fiery whips of fear and guilt, backs hurriedly and to the door. For the life of him, "he could not bring himself to shake those ashes" (161). This line suggests that Bigger may be motivated by self-destructive instincts in failing to empty the furnace, at least as much as he was motivated by a desire to kill Mary. Bigger must have known all along that if he killed Mary, he would die for it: insofar as his intentions were suicidal. Earlier, he felt that "he would either kill himself or someone else" (14). He feels a desire to destroy himself several times but his self-destructive tendency emerges most clearly in the long dream that he has in Book Two:

He stood on a street corner in a red glare of light like that which came from the furnace and he had a big package in his arms . . . and he

wanted to know what was in the package and he . . . unwrapped it and . . . it was his own head . . . and he was running over a street paved with black coal . . . and in front of him white people were coming to ask about the head from which the newspaper had fallen . . . and when the people closed in he hurled the bloody head squarely into their face. (156)

In a sense, every murder is an act of self-destruction. By this killing, which is accompanied by a desire to tell people about it, Bigger is figuratively hurling his head at white America. Imagery of red glare and black coal suggest that all these occur within the furnace and the furnace resembles Bigger. “He himself was a huge furnace now through which no air could go; and the fear . . . filling him, choking him, was like the fumes of smoke” (205). This rhetoric language is very much suggestive that when frustration, pain, despair and disappointment are too much, they are potential to explosion causing larger social and political damage. The idea is obvious- too much suppression results in explosion. Indeed African American people were largely exploited, heavily suppressed and terribly discriminated in all steps of their lives by the racist society. That is to say, they were denied the promised dreams.

Another side effect of Bigger's murder of Mary is his murder of Bessie Mears. He tells Bessie of Mary's murder with the purpose of joining her in his ransom plot. But after confessing his murder to her, he realizes that he will have to kill her: “He was afraid that he would have to kill her before it was all over. She would not do to take along, and he could not leave her behind” (170). Bigger knows his argument well, but seems uncertain about how it originates. As the murder approaches, he repeats to himself five more times that “[H]e could not take her and he could not leave her” (221). The obsessive repetition of Bigger's rationalization serves to emphasize on

revolt. His strongest reason for killing Bessie seems to be that for him murder is a form of self-expression, the most satisfying convenient form. Bessie predicts, right before her murder, “If you killed her, you’ll kill me” (168).

Here, in one sense, we can feel that Bessie, who was supposed to be Bigger’s girlfriend, seems skeptical of Bigger’s act. Conventionally, a friend in need is a friend indeed. But, Bigger does not find Bessie to be trustworthy. She denies his proposal at first. This situation helps develop a terrifying action- the murder of Bessie.

The murder of Bessie repeats many features of that of Mary. As Bigger prepares to strike Bessie, “. . . the reality of it all slipped from him” (222). As with Mary, he has trouble retaining, a sense of self control and has to keep insisting to him that his action is necessary: “. . . it must be this way. A sense of the white blur hovering near, of Mary burning . . . of the law tracking him down, came back . . . this was the way it had to be” (222). Both murders are preceded by sexual excitation and followed by celebration. Bigger feels the same positive feelings after Bessie's death that he felt after Mary's:

. . . there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. . . in all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened . . . He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. (224-25)

The treatment of Bessie's murder contributes to Wright’s portrayal of his central character as a victim, a man whose pathologically violent behavior has been imposed upon him by an environment of brutal oppression. And yet, the regeneration through violence which raises Bigger up is an important factor in the novel.

Wright, here goes on to clarify this by adding that Bigger is not either communist or fascist, but his dispossession and frustration impel him toward these

extremes. He started learning what society compelled him to learn and became what the society wanted him to be:

Of late he had liked to hear tell of men who could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from this tight morass of fear and shame . . . He liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. He was not concerned with . . . right or wrong . . . He felt that someday there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act . . . He never thought of this in precise mental images; he felt it. (109-10)

His interest of whipping black together into a tight band suggests us that he wants social transformation, a transformation that ensures the equal rights. He seems to be powerfully committed to build up the society in which the blacks can breathe freely. For this, he can choose any path: right or wrong, safe or unsafe, easy or difficult because the only goal for him is to get a society where he and his race can have better lives. In this state, people normally listen to the “Heart” than to “Head”. As Freud holds that children are born selfish and have to be taught to be unselfish, both with emotions and acquire reason. Thus, emotion and selfishness are primary, reason and unselfishness, secondary. Wright favors psychoanalysis, and he seems to share this view. He presents Bigger's quest for identity as an intuitive reaction springing from the deepest layers of his feeling. It means Bigger's Id (fighting against the oppressive society to safeguard his identity) which was developed deep in his heart became active when he killed Mary Dalton. His reason or the superego did not

arise because he had turned to insane from a normal man and the society was responsible for this.

However, his superego seems to have developed slowly in the latter part of the novel. Boris Max, who defended for Bigger, developed this within him. After the confrontation with Jan and regular meeting with Boris Max, he starts realizing that all whites are not as bad as he used to think. “Tell . . . Tell Mister . . . Tell Jan hello . . .” (392), this sentence articulated by Bigger at the end of the novel clarifies this.

Max’s long courtroom speech is taken as the main theme to support the statement why Bigger Thomas is not supposed to be guilty. From the start, Max’s speech emphasizes the American environment, context and the situation in which Blacks were living. It insists on the need to understand Bigger and uses scientific imagery, comparing Bigger to “a germ stained for examination under a microscope” (354). Max wants to drag “the sprawling forms of dread out of the night of fear into the light of reason” (354). Hatred, injustice and violence, products on the blind forces of history, are caused by misunderstanding in Max's view, and he therefore argues that no one can be blamed, all must be forgiven, and conflicts can only be solved by each side understanding the other and all sides coming together.

From Max’s point of view, Bigger is not responsible for his crime: it was imposed on him by America. Max says that Bigger has to be a criminal because his whole life has been defined as a crime by white America: “Any Negro who has lived in the North or the South knows that times without number he has heard some Negro boys being picked up on the streets and carted off to jail and charged with “Rape” (407). This type of contextual environment makes Bigger Thomas and other rebellious Blacks come on the street to raise voice against the then American white society.

The values Max describes here are nationalistic, based not on understanding or communion, but on self-assertion through conflict. In this perspective Bigger declares himself independent of white America by killing Mary and assumes self-determination. After speaking of the meaningfulness of Bigger's crime, Max goes on to point out the men are not supposed to feel guilty when they kill in war; and he speaks of blacks as a separate nation of twelve million, "stunted, stripped and held captive within this nation" (364).

Max is aware of the nationalist position, then, but does not sympathize with it. He goes on to warn that a civil war may proceed unless the races learn to understand each other and extend forgiveness. Ironically, for nationalists, white or black, usually adopt the rhetorical posture of facing reality: no use trying to live a dream of brotherhood when the fact is that both sides misunderstand, fear and hate each other, especially the other side. It is notable that virtually all nationalists eventually seek peace and brotherhood as their ultimate goal, but they believe that the other, the enemy, must be wiped out or put in their place before this goal can be attained.

Having established Max's position, let us return to the lawyer's relation to Bigger and the way in which Max draws out the side of Bigger's mind which a crucial interview preceding the trial in which the lawyer examines the prisoner on the major question of Max's speech and of the book, the question of Bigger's motive. Bigger's immediate response to this question reflects nationalism: "He knew that his actions did not seem logical and he gave up trying to explain them logically." He reverted to his feelings as a guide in answering Max, "She and her kind say black folks are dogs" (324). Wright, however, has presented Mary as intolerable, foolish and hypocritical, but not really evil. Max says:

But Bigger, this woman was trying to help you!

She didn't act like it.

How should she have acted?

Aw, I don't know, Mr. Max . . . To me she looked and acted like all other white folks. (324-25)

Here, we can clearly understand that a man who is already built up with the set mind can never be changed. Bigger Thomas is living in such a condition that he does not have opportunities to mix up with whites that have positive thought toward Blacks. All he sees around him is a group of white people who have hatred for Blacks. Though, Mary Dalton has sympathy towards him, he does not accept it. He takes this negatively and considers being under estimation. As Max polarizes Bigger's two motives for the killing: he could have killed Mary only because of the color of her skin or in rational terms the murder is the result of a series of misunderstandings on both sides: "White folks and black folks is strangers. We don't know what each other is thinking" (324-25). Both the reasons are reasonable from Bigger's psychological aspect because he hates the whiteness of the whites and the blackness of the whites' behavior.

As the lawyer questions searchingly, Bigger verbally expresses himself more completely than he ever has before, and the effect on him is significant: "He could not remember when he had felt as relaxed as this before . . . he had spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life; not even to himself" (333). It shows that he is satisfied from the actions he performed and this is the reason why he never regrets his deeds. However, he slightly changes his attitude towards other community: from aggressive to neutral. This can be realized through the communication with Max.

He wondered if it were possible that after all everybody in the world felt alike? Why would Max risk that white tide of hate to help him? If

that white looming mountain of hate were not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself . . . then he too would hate, if he were they, just as now he was hating them and they were hating him. (333-34)

When Bigger stops seeing things only from his side and perceives that there are two sides, begins to think in terms of understanding rather than conflict, he passes from the attitudes of nationalism toward those of communism. Racial nationalism can no longer help people go for long run and this idea develops within Bigger Thomas. And this knowledge of brotherhood appeals him so powerfully that he feels he belongs to humanity:

If he reached out . . . through these stone walls and felt other hands connected with other hearts . . . in that touch, response of recognition, there would be union, identity . . . a wholeness which had been denied him all his life. Another impulse rose in him, born of desperate need . . . he was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, the sun's rays melted away the many differences . . . and drew what was common and good upward. (335)

This passage, utterly removed from Bigger's reality, represents a level of idealism which Bigger cannot sustain for very long, though it is perhaps on more idealistic. Bigger reverts to the idea of conflict, but now he seeks a conflict based on knowledge rather than misunderstanding: "Was there some battle everybody was fighting . . . and if he had missed it, were not the whites to blame . . . ? Were they not the ones to hate even now?" (336)

Bigger realizes that he still has good reason to hate whites, for if he has been anti-social, a society ruled by whites has forced him into this mode of existence. He will probably always tend to hate whites, but he needs something more than his hatred

to face life and death, and this is the understanding he is seeking. Here again we see his internal division.

After the trial, Bigger has a last interview with Max. This time the prisoner leads in asking questions. The strain of Bigger's double vision is apparent as he hesitates between on one hand a distrust of Max, a feeling that the lawyer is not concerned or has abandoned him, and on the other his realization that Max has been the first man to communicate to him a sense of humanity. Bigger finally manages to say, quite impressively, "I'm glad I got to know you before I go" (386).

Max, however, disappoints Bigger soon after this by not appearing to remember the crucial importance of their first interview. And as Max proceeds to attempt to give comfort to Bigger through a comprehensive explanation of his own world view, the two men run into disturbing turns of thought. Max says:

They say that black people are inferior . . . They do like you did, Bigger, when you refused to feel sorry for Mary. But on both sides men want to live . . . Who will win? Well, the side that feels life most, the side with the most humanity. . . That's why . . . y-you've got to believe in yourself, Bigger . . . (391)

As the trial has demonstrated, reason alone will not solve the problem of oppression. Reason and unselfishness cannot operate effectively on the side of life without the power of emotion and selfishness. A little earlier, Bigger thought that "all his life he had been most alive, most himself when he had felt things hard enough to fight for them" (383). Now he says to Max, "When I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am. I didn't want to kill! But what I killed for, I am" (391-92).

We can see how absolutely true this last statement is if we look back at the first long interview between Bigger and Max. In the earlier scene Bigger communicated his deepest feelings, his inner self, to another for the first time; and this communication generated Bigger's conception of the bonds which tie him to humanity. Yet the subject of this communication was his motivation for murder.

Max is disturbed also by Bigger's speeches here, although he recognized their principle theoretically in the courtroom when he said that Bigger's life was a crime: "No; no; no . . . Bigger, not that . . . 'Max pleaded despairingly'" (392). But Bigger must go on asserting the only thing he has to assert: "'What I killed for must've been good!' Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish . . . 'When a man kills, 'it's for something . . . I didn't know I was really alive . . . until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em'" (392).

The validity of this last point rests on the fact that Bigger had no sense of moral responsibility for his actions until he committed the murder which was to lead him from 'Fear' to 'Fate'. Thus, he killed for something good in that the crime was an act of self-definition which made him capable of both action and understanding. It may be consistent, in a way, that he insists to Max that he is 'all right' and sends a friendly greeting to Jan Erlone at the end of the novel. If Bigger had not murdered, he would never have gained the self-confidence to relate to Jan as an equal: "Tell Mister. Tell Jan hello" (392). On the other hand, the reason Bigger sympathizes with Jan is that he has butchered his beloved.

Max is unable to look at Bigger as he goes out on the last page: ". . . like a blind man . . . He felt for the door, keeping his face averted" (392). This parallels the shame of Bigger and his brother on the first page of the book: "The two boys averted their eyes . . ." (1). In view of the profuse and complex use of images of eyesight and

blindness throughout the novel, it is clear that Wright intentionally makes the averted eyes of the last page recall those of the first. The shame and inhumanity which white America has visited on black people are coming back on it.

At the end, as at every stage, the central paradox of the book is present. Bigger is both the helpless victim of social oppression and the purposeful hero of a racial war. Shortsighted critics may seize on one aspect and claim that this is Wright's whole argument. If they do, they will then notice the contradictory evidence and conclude that the book and its ideas are mixed-up. The fact is that Wright has balanced both sides in dialectic, and it is because he keeps the book open ended that *Native Son* has the depth of perspective of a major work of modern literature rather than mere propaganda.

As said earlier, Max's defense is the main point that can prove that Bigger was not responsible for what he did. Max's first point on this subject led back to the slaves who first came over to the new land. Out of all the men and women who came over, the whites were lucky and ruled the lands. The blacks were enslaved, but eventually set free. Max then proposes the question of whether they were really set free.

Max points out that if Bigger went to prison, he would be happy because he would be identified, even though it would just be a number. Next, Max brings up the issue of war. He says, "Do men regret when they kill in War? Does the personality of a soldier coming at you over the top of a trench matter? No! You kill to keep from being killed" (337-38). How does this relate to the trial? Max goes on to tell how the soldier returns back to his land free. He then connects it to Bigger by saying, "This boy, with his hands stained with the blood of Mary Dalton, felt that he was free for the first time in his life" (339). He also talks about how people will feel free when they get caught up in a task. Bigger is so involved in the murder and trying to work

everything out, that he has felt free. Richard Wright had Boris Max talk about how people can get caught up in religion, politics, art, science, and industry, but how many of these can the black nation actually participate in? The blacks can only get involved in one! They can only get engaged in religion but it is only a primitive form. The point is that the black race has been denied all rights to any organization that would allow them to have a sense of unity and identification. Since Bigger and all other blacks were excluded from these activities, their every thought is a potential murder. Max says that it is a psychological and physiological problem. Max's most powerful point during the defense is when he says that when a man is hungry, he will do anything to get some bread, even if he has to commit a crime he becomes ready to do so. Likewise, a man who is lacking self-realization will try anything to establish himself in the world. He will even go as far as an insane man and commit an unthinkable crime.

Lastly, Wright through Boris Max wants this trial to be a victory for all African-Americans and other minorities. Bigger is at a big disadvantage when he came into the trial. First, he is black. Bigger has already been judged by the color of his skin. The media has already publicized the event and the mob had already grown to hate Bigger. Also, the white jury have read the newspapers and have their own ideas about Bigger before he has ever stepped foot into the court room. He continues on to say if one black boy is killed or even if one black person is killed every day of the year, the black revolts will not end. This is not a solution of the problem because the black race will just be outraged and more murders would be committed. Max feels that since Bigger is black, he fears the white race. His every thought and action is a potential murder. Bigger will keep committing more crimes but they will never find the evidence because Bigger has killed in his heart. However, Max does not view this

as a trial just for the black race. He then says that he is just a simple black boy who is deprived by the white world and is trying to make himself known in the white world by protesting the existing laws for the equality. Max compares Bigger's death to the ones of the blacks who has been hung. He proposes the question why this one death will be different from the killing of slaves.

Max's point is that only by killing one anti-white man does not mean the full stop of the revolution. If the whites kill one man there will be hundreds of other born. So, Bigger shall not be killed but give him a shock- a psychological shock which can help him being more human. A shock according to him is 'Forgive' him.

Wright dedicates almost half of a section on the defense of Bigger given by Boris Max not to show his beliefs in communism and capitalism, but to prove that the environment of person growing up can cause him to act certain ways. In *Native son*, there are three main points for the life of Bigger: his environment that caused him to live the way he does, it is an act of self-realization, and it will have a lasting effect on the minority groups. All these points help me to prove that an oppressive white society becomes the environment for the action and reason to fight for safeguarding the identity of the blacks. And, an anti-social act which Bigger Thomas conducted is taken as a revolution from the whole black society against the White America for the transformation of the better society.

CHAPTER IV

An Aftermath of Racial Oppression

After the thorough analysis of Wright's novel *Native Son* from the light of New Historicism and Black Art, the research has come to the conclusion that the novel is rich with moving political slogans with a power to awake, to excite, and to revolutionize people for meaningful transformation of society. Indeed, Wright intends his novel to be performative. Hence, he beautifully blends politics and narrative together.

Bigger begins in poverty and ignorance, anger and shame. He has been taught that white people are better than African-American people and that rich people are better than poor people. He has been prohibited from all contact with white women, but has also been driven to lust after them. When he encounters a friendly and kind white family, he feels shame at his skin color, his inarticulateness, and his lack of social manners. When two whites treat him as a friend instead of as a scorned, but pitied servant, he hates them. When he is called upon to help a white drunk woman, he kills her in fear of being seen to confirm the stereotype that says he lusts after her uncontrollably. He kills his African American girl friend in fear of being told about the murder. He is put on trial as the black rapist and murderer by the prosecutor and is defended as the inevitable result of an oppressive environment by his attorney. He is sentenced to death and ends with an imperfect conception of himself and his crimes. By the end of the story, Bigger Thomas desires the oneness of humanity. He catches brief glimpses of it with the help of his newly befriended supporters Jan and Max. He comes to the conclusion that all the white people are not as hateful as he thought before he committed crimes. However, he does not come to see the extent of his wrongdoing against the two women he kills. When he sees Bessie Mears's body rolled

out for the public view of a sensationalist press, he pities her, but he pities her as a victim of white oppression, not as a victim of his own oppressive actions as a man towards her as a woman.

This proves that Bigger Thomas's anti-social acts were not self-enthused but imposed by the racist society. Killing of two women is a revolt against the white society which, from the very beginning of his life, made him develop criminal attitude within himself not only to express his wrath but to establish his existence in the oppressive society.

As New Historicists argue that literary texts are cultural artifacts, they can tell us something about the interplay of discourses of the socio-political circumstances in which they were/are written. For them, as a literary text is a product of social milieu, it is shaped and, in return, shapes the socio-political and historical realities. Similarly, Wright's novel participates in the anti-racist and anti-capitalist discourse of 1920s to 1960s. However, the motive behind participating in those discourses is political. By participating in those discourses, Wright attempts to undermine the racist and capitalist discourses which viewed/view African American people and working class people as sub-human, an object to be exploited, and a thing to be enjoyed.

Indeed, racist discourse has denied the socio-political freedom to African American people. They have been marginalized, oppressed and exploited in every field of life. So, Wright sees the racist society as the root cause of Black exploitation and marginalization. Besides, he views capitalistic world order as another root cause of the exploitation of working class people. Therefore, using *Native Son* as a dynamic site, Wright attempts to pump the fuel of revolution into the veins of African American and working class people to subvert the racist and capitalistic world order for the achievement of socio-political and economic power.

Moreover, Wright appears as a strong advocate for Black liberation and freedom, and also for the liberation and freedom of working class people. Indeed, Wright is strongly committed to the use of literature as an effective weapon for social change. Therefore, his struggle through novel is to create a world of freedom – freedom from all exploitations – for Black and working class people.

Thus, Wright's employments of literary devices are politically oriented. They are used in such a way that they gear up political consciousness in black community. For instance, the image of killing a white compels us to envision a destruction of the racist society and the creation of a society based on justice and equality in which no one's dreams would be deferred. However, his political vision of transforming the racist and capitalist society into the world of freedom, equality, and justice is widely inescapable and deeply rooted.

This way, through new historicism, we come to know the socio political scenario of the then American life. This theory is most applicable to dig out the reason why Bigger Thomas is so much frustrated with his own life and how much he has been oppressed by the White community. On the other hand, Black art has been powerful theory to investigate the psychological state of Bigger Thomas. It has helped us to understand his psychology– a psychology that forced him to act in an anti-social way. Black Art Movement of (1960), Harlem Renaissance (1919-1926), New Negro Movement (1920) and Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa (1976) have also played a vital role to help analyze *Native Son* through historical and socio-political ways.

As a final point, I came to the conclusion that Bigger Thomas had been headed for jail from the very start of his life. It did not make any difference whether the crime was petty or the big one. He used to be accused of murder or rape because he was a

nigger in a white man's world, and his crimes upset the whole of Chicago. As a result, he killed two girls. He killed the first girl in an unpremeditated moment of panic- and he was caught up by forces he could neither understand nor control. Murder led to more brutal murder, and Bigger felt at last alive: he found a sense of freedom and identity in acts of violence which Bessie, with her whiskey, and his mother, with her religion, had not been able to give him.

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