

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**

**Wright's *Native Son*: A Powerful Explosion of Deferred Dreams**

**A Thesis**

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**Letter of Approval**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Wright’s *Native Son*: A Powerful Explosion of Deferred Dreams,” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Arati K.C, has been approved by the undersigned members of research committee.

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## **Abstract**

The research entitled “Wright’s *Native Son*: A Powerful Explosion of Deferred Dreams” explores the political dimension in the light of the Negro Art and the New Historicism. This novel is impregnated with a consciousness of revolution, revolt and resistance for a meaningful change and transformation of the American society. Like a political slogan, novel function to awaken the consciousness of revolution in the minds of the Afro-Americans and working class people to fight against the racist and the capitalist world order- a powerful explosion of deferred dreams. They strive for a world that is free of racial and class discrimination. Therefore, Wright has employed his writing as a dynamic location for staging rebellion against the most repressive features of racism and the most suppressive features of capitalism. However, his rebellion carries a deep political vision, that is, to achieve an equal socio-political rights for every citizen, and thus, to create a world of freedom, liberty, justice and equality.

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## I. Richard Wright and Politics

The research has analyzed the powerful exploration of deferred dreams of African Americans in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Wright, a remarkably revolutionary writer of Afro-American literature, has penned most of his brilliant novels against the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Economic Depression, World War II, and social unrest and minority. As new historicists argue that literary text is a good means of reading the history of the time, *Native Son* also exhibit the historicity of the contemporary scenario. The attempt here is not only to present how powerfully *Native Son* depicts or captures the spirit of the time but also to unearth how strongly they participate and forcefully circulate the discourses of the time. Anti-racist and anti-capitalist discourses were the prominent discourses of the time in which *Native Son* both participates and helps to circulate them. By participating and circulating the discourses, Wright attempts to uplift the socio-economic conditions of Black people as well as try to gain political power for them.

Richard Wright was born in Mississippi in 1908, a state which, according to Wright's biographer, was the most oppressive place in the country to be 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. Wright graduated valedictorian in his class. 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* (1938), plays on the popular term for African-American men who accommodate themselves into a subservient position to white people. The protagonists of his short stories move from being Uncle Toms to positions of resistance to their place in a racist society. A Guggenheim Fellowship enabled Wright to write *Native Son*, published in 1940. In 1944, Wright removed himself from the Communist Party. Wright wrote an autobiography, published in two volumes, *Black Boy* (1945) and *American Hunger* (1945). He died of a heart attack in France in 1960

During 1920s, when Harlem Renaissance was rapidly flourishing, 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. Sharyn Skeeter, in *Native Son: Richard Wright's Classic Novel writes:*

Wright presents a grim picture of human degradation its destructive results caused by racism. At Bigger's trial, through his communist-oriented lawyer, Max, Wright presents a worldview of a more equitable society that would, possibly, not have produced a person like Bigger. (2)

Therefore, many African American artists 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. 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. In this respect, Wright's novel also took part in the complex cultural dynamics of social power. Later, having been a victim of poverty and discrimination, Wright wrote about being seduced by the American Dream of Freedom, equality and justice - only to be denied its realization.

Racial persecution was perpetuated for several centuries in America. 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. From virtually the start of his career Wright had forged a special bond with the experience of African American people and their culture. He has depicted their joys and woes, 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 American.

Wright attempted to raise socio-political and cultural consciousness in the minds of people from 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. Thus, *Native Son*, which was revolutionary in spirit, underpinned the radical change of the society by boldly exposing the follies of the 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 1960s were some of the major historical events of America of which Wright experienced much. These all events, albeit not overtly political in nature, were hugely affecting and reshaping the political, social, cultural and literary scenario of America. 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.

In order to explore more authentic meaning of *Native Son*, it is necessary to unveil the relationship between the social contexts.

The exact date of the beginning and ending of the Harlem Renaissance, also known as "The New Negro Movement", is still debated. However it enjoyed its heyday during the mid 1920s. It was an African-American literary and Cultural movement. Socio-political transformation was the focus of this movement. The undercurrent, and perhaps the most important, focus of the movement therefore was political. However, the medium of doing politics was different and somewhat indirect. 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. In this regard, emphasizing the political aspect of the movement, Hortense Spillers writes:

That scholars and students of the phenomenon (The Harlem Renaissance) might arguably adopt the long or short view and account for "deep" and "immediate" forces at work that converge on the period would suggest that these years - years rich with the promise and project of political and

economic liberation - specify an especially dramatic moment in the long and perilous journey of cultural apprenticeship of African Americans within the context of the African Diaspora. (1985)

By the same token, he further highlights the same issue of politics associated with the movement that "The New Negro Renaissance pursued a fairly amazing idea- an art directly tied to the fortunes of a political agenda" (1987).

Most of the activities of the Harlem Renaissance were centered in the city, Harlem. Many scholars considered it as "the Mecca" for the African-American people that mean it became home to all classes of blacks, including the leading writers and artists. Therefore, it was crucial to the movement in the United States. 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 or renaissance. 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 with a desire 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 unprecedented 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. Jack Miles writes in *Los Angeles Times*:

This new edition gives us a *Native Son* in which the key line in the key scene is restored to the great good fortune of American letters. The scene as we now have it is central both to an ongoing conversation among African-American writers and critics and to the consciousness among all American readers of what it means to live in a multi-racial society in which power splits among racial lines.(507)

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.

This new edition gives us a *Native Son* in which the key line in the key scene is restored to the great good fortune of American letters. The scene as we now have it is central both to an ongoing conversation among African-American writers and critics and to the consciousness among all American readers of what it means to live in a multi-racial society in which power splits among racial lines

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 Harlem Renaissance attempted to give back their long suppressed voices, languages and cultures. Therefore, literature, language and culture were used as a powerful device to oppose the white domination as well as to maintain their own stance or power.

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 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 differed dreams.

Wright's novel *Native Son* is a didactic novel. 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 incited 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 woman, he kills her in fear of being seen to confirm the stereotype that says he lusts after her uncontrollably. He tries to play the authority figures of his life

against each other, but inevitably fails. He acts out the violence with which he is said to threaten white women on his African-American girlfriend. He is put on trial where he is said to confirm the stereotype of the black rapist 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. Bigger Thomas desires the oneness of humanity. He catches brief glimpses of it with the help of his newly acquired allies Jan and Max. He comes to see that the white people who hate him have been as conditioned to that hate as he has in his hatred of them. He does not come to see the extent of his wrong 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.

Native Son depicts the social conditions of deprivation motivate people to act in anti-social ways. Wright paints a clear picture of the impossible lives led by African-Americans in 1930s Chicago. They are forced into overcrowded, overpriced, and substandard housing, they are given such low-paying and transient employment that they cannot maintain a secure living, they are cut off from education, they are the victims of racist media misrepresentations that reduce their humanity and justify their further exploitation and deprivation, and 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 conditioned responses to overwhelming stimuli. Wright offers this system, this complex set of social and economic circumstances as the antagonist of his

novel. Bigger kills Mary Dalton, and thereby violates the ultimate taboo of his society while at the same time fulfilling its often repeated prophecy that he will do just that.

The main objective of the present research is to locate *Native Son* in the particular context in order to examine, explore and better understand the unrecognized vitality of political vision embedded in it. Wright used writing as a platform for his political views.

Therefore, *Native Son* is not only the beautiful piece of literature but also the powerful piece of political slogan. 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. Such attempt will explore the associative relationship between the novel and the political fervor of the time. All these things which are going to be taken into consideration for the final attempt of the present research are to propose Wright not only a brilliant writer of African American people but also as a brilliant and the most eloquent political propagator and the counter historian of the ignored, neglected and marginalized people, especially of the African American and the working class people.

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 deferred dreams about Negro in America.

## II. New Historicism as a Tool to Unearth the Buried Dreams in Black Americans

### The New Historicism

Introduced in 1982 by Stephen Greenblatt in a special issue of *Genre* to describe a new kind of historically based criticism, New historicism highlights 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 as formalists and new critics did, 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. Being above the practice of interdisciplinary approach and ultimately emphasizing the "transdisciplinary" approach, it 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 canonicity 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.

More importantly, new historicists don't believe in single, authentic and unified history as Louis Montrose in his famous article "New Historicism" argues, "[T]he various

modes of what could be called poststructuralist historical criticism including new historicism or cultural poetics, as well as modes of revisionist can be characterized by such a shift from History to histories (411). Old or traditional historians focused on monolithic history, which has single narrative line that is taken for granted. For them facts or historical realities could successfully be known through textual form and also could be handed down to next generation. Besides, they took it for granted that there is single and unified history. In contrast, new historicists challenge such so-called 'authentic' and 'Unified' narrative and put forward the idea of 'histories,' not 'History.'

Unlike most traditional historians, who believe that history is a series of events that have linear, causal relationship and we are perfectly capable of uncovering the facts about the particular historical events through objective analysis, new historicists argue:

Instead of a body of indisputable, retrievable facts, history becomes textualized; that is, it becomes a group of linguistic traces that can be recalled, but which are always mediated through the historian/interpreter. Objective history is therefore impossibility; every account is just that -- another text, and like any novel, play or poem, it is open to the same kind of critical interpretive scrutiny. . . . History itself is a large amorphous text consisting of various and often disparate accounts. (Childers and Hentzi 207)

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

History itself is a text, an interpretation, and that there is no single history. Lois Tyson in

his book *Critical Theory Today* emphasizes the new historical notion that "history is a matter of interpretation, not facts, and that interpretations always occur within a framework of social conventions" (286).

Emphasizing the same issue, in the essay "Histories and Textuality," Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh write:

For new historicists, however, there can be no such seamless, overarching unity, but only the shifting and contradictory representations of numerous histories'. History can only be a narrative construction involving a dialectical relationship of past and present concerns. Thus the critic is neither a transcendent commentator nor an objective chronicler because he/she is always implicated in the discourses which help to construct the object of knowledge. (252)

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 the book entitled *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. (112)

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 form their view point about the world and that is the vantage point 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 more unaware historians are of their biases,

that is, the more 'objective' they think they are, the more those biases are able to control their narratives. 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 partakes of the other and that both participates in social networks and deploy cultural codes that cannot be fully articulated. 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 intricably separate disciplines, new historicism argues that each partakes and influences each other.

In his famous article "Introduction: Professing the Renaissance: the Poetics and Politics of Culture", Montrose acknowledges new historicism as "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and textuality of history" (781). M.H. Abrams further explains the phrase in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. He writes:

[H]istory is conceived not to be a set of fixed, objective facts but, like the literature with which it interacts, a text which itself needs to be interpreted. 'Any text, on the other hand, is conceived as a discourse which, although it may seem to present, or reflect, an external reality, in fact consists of what are called representations—that is, verbal formations which are the 'ideological constructs' or 'cultural constructs' of the historical conditions specific to an era. New historicists often claim also that these cultural and ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the power-structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society. (183-84)

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 the same article, Louis Montrose himself further attempts to clarify the phrase in the following way:

By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing. . . . By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces . . . secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are constructed as the 'documents' upon which historians ground their own text, called 'histories.' (781)

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. 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). To put it in another way, "literary texts are bound up with other discourses" (Bennett and Royle 110). Therefore, it must be read against the backdrop of those different discourses of the complex web of social milieu 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. To clarify the issue, it is better to cite Greenblatt himself, who in the book *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, writes, "work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators . . . and the institutions and practices of society" (158)..

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 carries 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).

In the critical analysis and investigation of new historicism 'discourse' and 'Power' bear important position. 'Discourse' and 'power' give a certain stance to the critical practice of New Historicism. Indeed, new historicism owes much to Foucault for the concept of 'discourse' and 'power' by which it has strengthened its own critical stance. For Foucault "discourses are coherent, self-referential bodies of statements that produce an account of reality by generating 'knowledge' about particular objects or concept" (Childs and Hentzi 84).

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)

Group of statements -- discourses -- exist historically and get changed as their material conditions for their possibility change. Therefore, no discourse is final and permanent. Besides, for Foucault, "discourse informs and shapes subjectivity, including the possible activities and knowledge of the individuals" (Childs and Hentzi 84-85). Discourses both influence and are influenced by socio-historical realities. Hence, "discourses wield power. For those in charge, but they also stimulate opposition to that power" (Tyson 281).

### **Negro Art as a Resistance against the Racist Ideology of Deferring Dreams**

Negro Art is not only a thing to be viewed, read and enjoyed, but also, and far more importantly, 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 the 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 world/community.

For Black artists, the socio-political role of Negro Art is vibrantly important and a must as well. Whether to spread consciousness in black community, to make them realize their position, or to better their conditions and to achieve better position, Negro Art functions as an important tool- the tool "which has a direct bearing as the most vital American Problem" (Johnson 861). It is such a tool which can also be used to empower

black people from diverse perspectives -- social, political, economic, cultural and racial politics.

Either to prove racist argument wrong or 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 undermines 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, 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, 'Propaganda', Langston Hughes 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 the 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. Similarly further stressing the views of Du Bois on Negro Art as propaganda Vincent B. Leitch writes:

[H]e also stresses the market place conditions, and the racism, that black and undercut African American literary and cultural achievement, and he insists on the need for art to function as agitation, protest and racial propaganda . . . . Du Bois affirms that the central duty of African American writers and artists is to advance the cause of race. (979)

Hence, purely political motives of Negro Art bear the profound importance. It has dual demands of art and politics. However, the latter, according to Du Bois, should be the focal interest and practice among the Negro artists. Likewise, Langston Hughes also joins in the debate that whether Negro Art should orient towards the realm of art or propaganda. In this case, Walkowitz in the same article explicates the idea that "Hughes does not explicitly join or even cite the call for propaganda voiced by Du Bois, but he nevertheless asserts that a poet's identity as a Negro artist is its own political practice" (506).

For the Negro critics like Du Bois, 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). In the same article, Du Bois further highlights and clarifies the function of Negro Art. As he stresses:

And it is right here that the National Association for the Advancement of colored people comes upon the field, comes with its great call to new battle, a new fight and new things to fight before the old things are wholly won; and to say that the Beauty of Truth and Freedom which shall some day be our heritage and heritage of all civilized men is not in our hands yet and that we ourselves must not fail to realize. (984)

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. 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 foregrounded by Du Bois that "our new young artists have 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)

Thus, the Negro Art has a serious responsibility to wipe out the hegemonic influence of white world upon black minds. Otherwise some of the Black artists who are still unaware about Negro realities and are hegemonized by white culture, run away from their race and shamelessly forget the spirit, duty and responsibility of Negro Art.

In the same article, Hughes again underlines the role of Negro artists. As he points out:

I am ashamed, too, for the colored artists who runs from the paintings of Negro faces to the paintings of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does- certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose. (1316-17)

Since the Negro people are crushed in the grind of racism and since 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. In the article "Langston Hughes," radical poet and the 'En of Race' Anthony Dawahere further explicates the issue:

His idealistic conception . . . of this future 'temples', which, we can assume, will be the cultural centers of a divine black literati proclaiming freedom, led him to place an unwarranted emphasis on art as a way to gain equal citizenship in the US. (26)

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 subvert the very mountain of racial discrimination, injustice and segregation in order to secure the land of freedom. Thus, "The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility" (Wright, 1384). Therefore, in such a repressive society where black people are devoid of freedom, justice and equality, "a new role is developing upon the Negro writer. He is

being called upon to do so less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die" (Wright, 1384). In this connection, Richard Wright emphasizes the very effective role of Negro Art in their struggle of life.

The spirit of Negro Art which could be realized in the works of Harlem Renaissance of 1920s, and also be realized even more vibrantly in the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. In this connection, focusing upon the social role of black writers, Lois Tyson writes:

Some of the most vocal spokespersons for the movement, such as the poet Amiri Baraka, 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. (386)

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: "It must become and remain a part of the revolutionary machinery that moves us to change quickly and creatively" (1973). For him there are two levels -- social and artistic -- of judging the black art. But the former bears the primary focus. As he writes, "[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" (1973).

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. (1976)

Therefore, black artists boldly accept Black art as a strong and effective weapon to gear up the black revolution to accelerate change, and ultimately, to bring wonderful future as Larry Neal in his essay "The Black Arts Movement," announces, "Black creative artist can have a meaningful role in the transformation of society" (1962). Because he views, that "poetry is a concrete function, an action" (1963). Similarly, Audre Lorde, views black poetry, especially black women poetry, not a "luxury" but a "vital necessity of our existence" (2210). She further declares that "It is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realizable through our poems that give us a strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak and to dare" (2212).

Thus, Lorde highlights the potent role of Black art in materializing their dreams, hopes and aspirations. She further states: "[P]oetry coins the language to express and chatter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom" (2211).

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 be explored even in Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*.

### III. Wright's *Native Son*: A Powerful Explosion of Deferred Dreams

Richly replete with a series of images of decay, waste, wound and explosion, the novel, *Native Son* in a prophetic manner, concentrates on the devastating effects of 'deferred dream' in the racist White American society. Besides, it compels us to 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 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 like image, symbol, rhetorical, question, etc. The devices themselves carry political overtone as they accelerate the spirit of change by focusing on the rebellious and revolutionary tone of the poem.

Since African American people were given glittering 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. As a result of the deferred dream, now African American people are filled with deep pain, frustration, anger and revolt. The speaker in the novel prophesizes the powerful, yet disastrous explosion of deferred dreams. The implication of killing a white is that the erupted lavas of the deferred dreams 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 postponed dreams.

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, Ralph Ellison and others 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.

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. New York Times review of an impressive novel, Addison Gayle refers to the new works as the most important work of fiction by an Afro- American fiction and one of the key American novels of the century.

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). Harold Cruse condescendingly exclaims, “Poor Richard Wright! He sincerely tried, but he never got much beyond that starting point that Marxist represented for him” (166).

If *Native Son* was as confused and naïve as these critics all say it is, it could not have earned its present stature. In fact, Wright knew more than his critics, and in this paper I will demonstrate that the ambivalence which critics have attacked in *Native Son* is really a complexity that adds to its validity, comprehension and prophetic power; that deferred dreams (conflict of values) are skillfully developed and organized throughout. This conflict is embodied in the plot, in American society as Wright sees it, and most centrally in Bigger’s mind.

*Native Son* explores the internal experience of a murderer from the events leading up to the crime to his imprisonment and trial. The protagonist kills two women and there is some justification for the first time murder. Mary Dalton of *Native Son* enlists sympathy for her murderer by being the spoiled daughter of a slumlord, by tempting Bigger, and playing with him flagrantly. The author uses the second murder to show how far wrong the protagonist has gone morally in asserting his manhood through murder.

Bigger’s mind is divided 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)

The part of Bigger's mind which has the function of rational control must adjust to a monstrous outside world which tempts him with images of happiness and power while it withholds the possibilities of fulfillment. Because his reason must always suppress his major desires, a racial conflict exists in his mind between the rational and the emotional: "Bigger felt a curious sensation –half sensual, half thoughtful. He was divided and pulled against himself" (27).

The irrational elements of his mind which Bigger holds down have been so subverted and distorted by injury that they can be designated by the title of chapter one, "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 with in 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).

The first forty pages of the novel develop the conflict between the violent emotions Bigger suppresses and his tense and unstable control. In outbursts, he terrorizes his sister with a dead rat until she faints, or attacks his best friend Gus because he can't admit to himself that he is afraid to rob a white grocery. Always his mind is torn between two sides which cause him to vacillate: "These were the rhythms of his life: indifference

and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and . . . anger - - like 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).

Having recognized the revolt 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 through 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).

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 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 here. 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: the murder was an accident and was 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 latter, 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)

The positive transformation of Bigger after the murder is phenomenal. In his former state he seemed to alternate between brooding and snarling and to be incapable of 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). In portraying this regeneration through violence, *Native Son* essentially predicts many of the insights of extreme Black Nationalists such as Frantz Fanon and Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). As Clay Williams, protagonist of Baraka's play *Dutchman*, puts it succinctly, "All it needs is a simple knife thrust. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane" (35).

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 edifice, 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 stooped and touched the handle; he imagined that if he shook it he would see pieces of bone falling into the bin. He jerked upright and, lashed by fiery whips of fear and guilt, backed hurriedly and to the door. For the life of him, "he could not bring himself to shake those ashes" (161). This line suggest that Bigger may be motivated by self-destructive impulses in failing to empty the furnace, at least as much as he was motivated by a desire to kill Mary in pressing the pillow down on her. Bigger must have known all along that if he killed Mary, he would die for it: insofar as his intentions was suicidal. Earlier, he felt that "he would either kill himself or someone else" (14). He feels a desire to obliterate 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)

This passage has some resemblance to the spellbinding dreams in *Crime and Punishment*, and one of the implications here is illuminated by something that Rakolnikov says: "Was it the old hag I killed? No, I killed myself and not the old hag" (433). 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 suggests that all of this takes place within the furnace, another indication that the furnace corresponds to Bigger. This last point emerges clearly when, away, as he knew it would, by filling the cellar with smoke: "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 walks of their lives by the racist society. That is to say, they were denied the promised dreams. Rather those dreams were deferred, put off, postponed, or even thwarted.

Another indication of the negative effects of Bigger's murder of Mary is his murder of Bessie Mears. He tells Bessie of Mary's murder with the ostensible purpose of

forcing her to join him in his ransom plot. But on the page after confessing his murder to her (169), 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). Later, "it would be impossible to take her if she was going to act like this, and yet he could not leave her here. Coldly, he knew that he had to take her with him, and then at some future time settle things with her . . . He thought of it calmly, as if the decision were being handed down to him by some logic not his own, over which he had no control" (215). Bigger knows his argument well, but seems uncertain about how it originates. On the next six pages, 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 from accessible. Bessie suggests this when she predicts, well before her murder, "If you killed her, you'll kill me" (168).

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 exultation. 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

every happened . . . . He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. (224-25)

Here it becomes difficult indeed to accept Bigger's assertion that his crimes are a positive achievement. The treatment of Bessie's murder, like the theme of suicide, 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. This brings us back to the perception of two tendencies in the plot of *Native Son* which contradicts each other, two sides to the novel's truth. The violence embodied by Bigger is both something imposed on black people and their own weapon against their oppressors. This contradiction is reflected in the split in Bigger's mind, which is reiterated after the murder of Bessie:

What was he after? What did he love and what did he hate? He did not know. There was something he knew and something he felt; something the world gave him and something he himself had; . . . and never in his life, with this black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together; never had he felt a sense of wholeness . . . only under the stress of hate was the conflict resolved. (225)

Moreover, the split between Bigger's reason and his feeling – between what is imposed on him, the crime as accident, and his innermost desires, the crime as purpose is related to a split in the political values in the book. In his preface, "How Bigger Was Born," written in the year *Native Son* was completed, Wright says, ". . . I drew my first political

conclusions about Bigger: I felt the Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried within him the potentialities of either Communism or Fascism" (xx). He goes on to clarify this by adding that Bigger is not yet either communist or fascist, but his dispossession and frustration impel him toward these extremes. From the start, then, Wright conceived of the ideology of the novel as dualistic. And in fact he clearly delineates connections in the book between the communism-fascism duality and the others we have been discussing. The rational side of Bigger, which is forced into the murder, is linked to communism through Bigger's relations to Boris Max, while the emotional side, which takes pride in the murder, is related to fascism is Bigger's visions of himself as a criminal superman and his attraction to dictators.

The conflict between rationalistic communism and emotional nationalism in Wright's work was recently pointed out by Russell Carl Brignano in his *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and his Works*. Discussing the themes of Wright's nonfiction works, Brignano describes a conflict between Wright's " 'rational' Marxist" 'head' and the angry racial protest of his 'heart'. He sees this conflict as a source of disorder in Wright's fiction, however, and he does not apply the duality to *Native Son*. His conclusions about this work are the Wright takes "the Party line . . . at the end of the novel" and that "Wright's heavy handed manipulation of his Marxist materials . . . detracts from the . . . achievement of *Native Son*" (82). Such a formulation fails to do justice to Wright's development of both sides of his ideological conflict.

Early in Book Two of *Native Son*, as Bigger's regeneration after the murder is being described, Wright presents indications of political dangers in his protagonist's attitude:

He would know how to act from now on. The thing to do was to act just like other . . . and while they were not looking, do what you wanted . . . All one had to do was be bold . . . if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it. (102)

Bigger's feelings of superiority suggests the Nietzschean superman, and Wright makes the connection between these tendencies and Fascism clear in a passage in which Bigger reflects on his alienation from other blacks:

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)

It is appropriate to the division of values in the book that Bigger's fascist inclinations are defined in terms of feeling rather than thought. John A. Williams, in his brief biography of Wright, says that Wright understood ". . . that Nationalism . . . was brother to racism" (83). Nationalism and racism are both emotional attitudes and extensions of selfishness; they go back as far as history. Communism, on the other hand, is a relatively modern system, a product of rationalism which is based on unselfish principles, Freud held 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 favored psychoanalysis, and he seems to share this view. He represents Bigger's nationalistic pride as a visceral reaction springing from the deepest layers of his feeling. Bigger's connection with communism, on the other hand, develops slowly through the book, and whatever adherence to Marxist ideals he may gain is learned with difficulty.

The basis of Bigger's attraction to communism is his desire "to merge himself with others and be a part of this world . . . to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black" (226). If the desire for communion with others is the seed within Bigger of socialism, the agent who cultivates this seed is Boris Max. Max's attitudes are seen best in the speech he makes in Bigger's defense.

Max's long courtroom speech has been perhaps excessively attacked by critics, partly because of dogma that novels should not be expository (a dogma which would rest hard, for example, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*), but mainly because critics assume that it represents the only conclusion of a party line novel. Actually, the speech is an effective review of the themes of the book; and both the speech and its context are less simple than one-sided interpretation would have them.

From the start, Max's speech emphasizes rationalism. 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 of 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. Here we are reminded that communism has usually been predicated on the ideal of internationalism.

From Max's rational point of view Bigger is not responsible for his crime: it was imposed on him by America: "We planned the murder of Mary Dalton" (363). And yet there are other motivations involved in the crime than those which can be explained by reason, just as there are other motives involved in the writing of *Native Son*, and Max devotes part of his speech to this aspect of the case: "we must deal there with . . . emotions and impulses . . . as yet unconditioned by the strivings of science and civilization" (357). Although, Max says that Bigger had to be a criminal because his whole life was defined as a crime by white America, he also realizes that Bigger's killing of Mary was "an act of creation!" (366): ". . . the first full act of his life . . . the most meaningful . . . thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the . . . opportunity to act and to feel the actions carried weight" (364).

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 ensue unless the races learn to understand each other and extend forgiveness, emphasizing that the whites have the greatest debt to pay. Thus,

the speech presents both of the novels' ideologies, but stands up for the communist values of reason and community. The most immediate sign that Max's argument does not constitute the last word or only political conclusion of *Native Son* is the fact that it is not successful: Bigger is sentenced to death, and indeed, there is no other possibility. What this implies is that understanding and forgiveness may be ideal, but the selfish intolerance of nationalism, in this case the white nationalism of the court, generally prevails. In fact nationalists, white and 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). This answer is emotional and based on race: Mary must have been had because she was white. Wright, however, has presented Mary as obnoxious, 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)

Max polarizes Bigger's two motives, for by demonstrating to Bigger that he could have killed Mary only because of the color of her skin, he makes Bigger realize that in rational terms the murder was 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). The lawyer questions Bigger searchingly, eliciting from him both sides of his character, the "bitter and feverish pride" (329) in which he asserts himself, and the ultimate desire "to do what other people do" (326). Bigger verbally expresses himself here 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). Bigger's profound communication with max leads to important realizations:

He wondered if it were possible that after all every body 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. The Marxist ideal of international

brotherhood appeals to him powerfully because it gives him a feeling of belonging 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 more idealistic than passages in Eldridge Cleaver or George Jackson. 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" (337) is apparent as he

vacillates 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)

Max may well feel uneasy as he tells Bigger to believe in himself. By his own account, the injustice of their world necessitates conflict. 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.

To make this point in another way, look back at the diagram which we drew earlier and consider what it describes: both the ideological content of the book and the content of Bigger Thomas' mind. But all of the material on this chart constitutes Bigger's motivation for murder. Essentially all the Bigger is a drive to kill, whether that drive is imposed upon him or whether he generates it himself. No wonder James Baldwin was disturbed by Bigger!

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 no 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. Richard Wright is entirely horrified that Bigger's humanity is defined in these terms.

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 jumbled. 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 major work of modern literature rather than mere propaganda.

Wright builds a truly comprehensive and prophetic presentation of the ideology of the black liberation movement and of modern politics in general. If Wright had justified Bigger's murder from a nationalist perspective or if he had made Bigger innocent, as were the victims in some of his earlier, more purely communistic, fiction, his novel would be more acceptable to various, but it would no longer be as valid an embodiment of political reality.

Black men in America have to develop pride in themselves as black if they are going to make progress, and yet nationalism does not represent the solution to racism. This last point is true not merely because black nationalism may not be economically, politically, or militarily viable, but also because nationalism inevitably tends toward racism and black racism is no solution to white racism; for on thing, because racism injures the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

On the other hand, black people need Marx's ideas in order to overcome economic and political oppression. Marxism, however, cannot provide a full solution to the problems of blacks because it is not related to their specific racial problems. Moreover, almost anyone who examines the history of communist government over the past half-century must come to entertain doubts as to whether communism will ever be able to effectuate its ideals of internationalism, brotherhood, and unselfishness without coercion.

The conflict between nationalism and leftism which Wright portrays in *Native Son* has gone on among black activists. Since the twenties, but it has grown particularly pronounced in the last decade. This conflict was dramatically illustrated in September of 1970, when two opposing black liberation conventions were held. Jones-Baraka, the Black Muslims, and other presided over a black nationalist convention in Atlanta. At the same time, the Black Panthers held their convention at Temple University in Philadelphia. The Panther assembly was well integrated, and its keynote is, 'What America needs now is Socialism.' The fact that a number of activists managed to attend both conventions is indicative of the way in which most black radicals combine various degrees of nationalism and communism in a pragmatic fashion. Nevertheless, it is clear that the two conventions represent serious differences in ideas. There have been bitter quarrels

between nationalists and Panthers, and it seems likely that the ideological conflict which Wright embodied in *Native Son* will grow more pronounced if the black liberation movement expands in future years.

In a larger context, the division which Wright traces is parallel to the division between right and left which is universal in modern politics. The left, at its best, represents moving beyond selfishness into a reorganization of society in terms of reasons and internationalism. The right stands for regression into self-assertion of national power. Both principles, unselfishness and power, are necessary, just as reason and emotion are.

Most Americans live within an area of practical compromise between the two extremes represented by nationalism and communism. We do not feel a need to alter our society radically in the direction of any ideal. For poor blacks, however, the idea of compromise has no appeal because it tends to preserve the status quo. The pressures of a society shaped by white racism and capitalism force blacks into extreme position and apocalyptic attitudes. In this light, the polarization of Bigger's mind is brilliantly appropriate. As Wright suggested in his preface, we have here the mentality of the modern world pushed to its elemental extremes, pressed to the breaking point where degradation and heroism meet. It is remarkable that in the three decades since *Native Son*, despite the growth of radical black literature, there has been no other work of fiction which plumbs with such depth the mind of the ghetto black without hope. Even *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is about a special man, a man of extraordinary capability. *Native Son* remains the definitive presentation in our language of a person dehumanized by his society, of a son denied life by the land which gave him birth. African American people were put under White exploitation; it metamorphoses into something less

appealing, losing the charm and aura of life. Therefore, this dried image of raisin parallels the condition of African American people under racism. As behind the novel's obvious simplicity lies the complex lives of African American people, the simplicity of language used in the novel is very much helpful to convey that complex aspect to a greater number of people to excite them for the change and transformation of the racist society. Since he is speaking to the common Black people, the use of complicated language certainly cannot convey the message effectively. Hence, his simple use of language also strengthens his political message.

#### IV. Conclusion

After the through 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.

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.

Hence, 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 symbols and images 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' employment of literary devices like images, symbols etc themselves are politically oriented. They are used in such a way that they gear up political consciousness in black community. For an 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 pervasive and deeply rooted.

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