Racism and Violence in American Society: A Study of Racial Image and Violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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Abstract

Race has been one of the many structures of America since its founding years. Racism and violence are majorly idealized by Richard Wright to create an expostulatory discourse that affect the American world especially in the twentieth century when racial imbalance was high Bigger's involvement in Mary's death is a major preoccupation of what *Native Son* entails, which happened on the back of racial segregation and discrimination, creating a void that made happens the sorry event. The social world cannot not be thrown into disorder and chaos. Racial prejudice, segregation, stereotypes and may racial tones are capable of making a world a violent place as violence initiated by two opposing sides for the aim of control is fated to throw the world into imbalance. This is perhaps Mr. Wright's purpose in *Native Son*.

Key words: Stereotype, Violence, Discrimination, Racism, Segregation

Introduction

The idea about racial division and discrimination in America stretches back to centuries of time ago. After the discovery of America (The New World) by Christopher Columbus and his crew members. The Transatlantic slave trade kicked off. The consequent en-mass migration of Europeans into America and the purchase of African slaves to help in the plantations as well as the transportation and distributions of goods around the world which industrially ticked at the time. Black people were imaged as incapacitated, uncivilized and primitive group. They were treated like none entities. Black slaves were made to see their masters and white people as gods who could dictate the tunes of life to them throughout their miserable confined existence. They were slaves- bondmen, bondwomen, bond-children, and everything about the black skin was held in captivity and denied accentuation of being humans. They are held back from being educated, shoved into darkness through denying them education and informative knowledge until the American civil war was fought and won for their liberation in 1865. Despite the victory, perhaps one could have perceived the end to their miseries, little did they know that it was

the start to a long walk into the most racist period from the middle nineteenth century when slave trade was abolished in America to twentieth century when racist Jim Crow system subjected African Americans to egregious resentful, poor human level, denying them sociable relationship with others by viewing them as less human, animal-like and evil. Acquisition of education becomes an advantageous weapon that the intellectual blacks use in voicing out against the discriminating racial system. Literary and non-literary texts about blacks inhumane treatments flood the American society and the world at large. Information is power. A kind of power that evokes and re-awakes the Jonahs because literature has a role to play in setting the steps, actuating the tone of freedom, re-awaking the spirits of the oppressed, and achieving the common goal in the face of oppression and danger. Intellectual African Americans writers cannot be excused from the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done in the American society. It is a social responsibility that they must march right in front (Achebe, 162). According to Robert Taylor, "anywhere in the globe, the writer is a teacher, entertainer and the looking glass mirror of his society. He not only educates, cautions or gives pleasure, but also shows the society how it looks…" (13). It is understood that writers' commitment is with their society or the community they represent. The early African American writers are cognizant of this among which circle Richard Wright stands. They represent his African American people who are the oppressed of white supremacist power and will. They are blacks' social mirrors, mighty reflections of themselves which they see in all their intellectual writings. Therefore, Richard Writes in *Native Son* expressively shows the responsibility in which he, as an African American writer, one that belongs to that educated and gifted intellectual space among blacks, has obeyed this social call, matching in their front, voicing out from the wilderness of the oppressed the implications racism, manifesting in colour segregation, profiling, denial of life due to colour, vile racist abuse, racial discrimination in jobs, politics, religion and social areas, and laws like the Jim Crow and others of their kind have on individuals and the society. These implications have negative bearing on everyone. They do not only divide the society but, as injurious and deadly resultants, revealing physical, psychological, emotional and economical impairment on the society and every individual living in it.

Literature Review on Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Wright's *Native Son* has served as an expostulatory work of art in both academic and law discourse. An American scholar Irving Howe writes that about the effect of Wright's *Native Son i*n the following way

> The day *Native Son* appeared, the America culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book needed later, it made impossible

> the repletion of old lies…He told us… that Negroes…were scared by fear, that they hated every moment of their suppression even when seeming mot acquiescent, ad that often they hated us." (354).

Here in this study, critical observation, evaluation and conclusions are drawn on the purpose of the image of black life and violence in the racist society of the twentieth century American society are being discussed here. Our utmost focus is shed, perhaps pedagogically, as it is the purpose of studying the many portrayals of racial discrimination, segregation, poverty, crime rate, belief system, aggregated revolutionary militancy and the fundamental positions of individuals in Richard Wright's *Native Son* wherein Bigger's and other blacks' lives evoke social examination of race relation and the effects of racism on individuals and their society. Wright's *Native Son*'s is the primary text used, other materials which centred on race relations, violence, oppression, black living condition among others which are of great value to this study are also considered.

As it is of normal note, several scholars, like Howe, have had one or two things to discuss on the racial discrimination and violence in Wright's work. Some of them, like Baldwin through his notes about the novel, believe that the amount of violence in the novel, though exemplifies black image in white's world, is much to a great extent. Others believe white's treatment of blacks create black voice, that black violence is perforce and unavoidable. Studying the racial treatment during slavery and aftermath of slavery in America, Joyce states clearly that "while the system of slavery represents the most extreme division of American society into two basic subgroups, racism, its replacement, transforms the discriminatory practices of the 18th and 19th centuries into the cosmological order of segregation" (30). To comprehend this meaning by looking through black life in *Native Son*, Meryem Ayan states that "Bigger Thomas's fear, flight, fate and trial dramatize American racism, its pervasiveness, and the way racism prevents social and cultural understanding or compassion for others" (138). Two scholars in Khaled Al-Jezawi and Hamdi concur to Joyce's statement by focusing more on the subject of social violence of the American society to examine black life in racist white world in the following lines:

> Wright's *Native Son* is an excellent example of a text that explores how the life of black Americans and their existence are suppressed by violence and a racist system. Therefore, the violence presented in his writing is begot by the violence of the American system, which was founded on slavery and systematized racism. Wright shows and represents how black identity was moulded by these catastrophic events, resulting in a hybrid identity." (174)

Therefore, this work, like these scholars and many more of them in examining the major preoccupations of Richard Wright's *Native Son* with the sole aim of seeking a workable society, studies racial image and violence from the perspective of race relation in the multiracial American society in the novel and the world at large.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* has worthily enjoyed great accolades and high praise as well as being scathingly criticized by the likes of Baldwin and others who believe Bigger Thomas exists as abstracted character but never real because of the high stereotypes associated in him. Albeit, they all agree that every black American is a Bigger Thomas. The image created here implies that before African Americans are born, before they are taken as breathing entities of the world, before their very existence, they have the prejudicial marks that differentiate them not as special kind of humans but as lower human beings from a stereotypically uncivilized race. It is, of course, this image created about African Americans, their motherland Africa and their new society in America that births *Native Son* and other protest literary works in America. Richard Wright divides *Native Son* into three parts (Fear, Flight and Fate) to suite the socio-political, the psycho-physical and the economic conditions of blacks, as seen especially in the life of Bigger Thomas, and their community under the Jim Crow laws of racial segregation and discrimination. Each of the parts in *Native Son* is intrinsically linked with one another and help project black image and violence in America.

Racial Image as Expressed by Richard Wright in *Native Son*

In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, racial discrimination, segregation, stereotypes and other racist rhetoric that create negative image of blacks in America are lucidly described from the first page in *Fear* to the last page in *Fate*. Like the names of sections of the novel imply, whites create a divided but fearful society built on the "old custom"of colour differentiation between them and blacks (*Native Son,* 357*).* It is a world of inequality, fear, agitations and gut where Bigger and his family of four have to live at the South Side Area that is own by "SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY," a company owned by Mr. Dalton. The houses in this part of the city are aghast, dilapidated and rat-infested (*Native Son,* 204). They are houses "white landlords sure don't give much heat" (*Native Son,* 45). The streets are consumed and submerged in the darkness of neglect. They are "too old and too dangerous for habitation" (*Native Son, 279*). The "black people, even though, they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats" (*Native Son, 279*). The black populace are made poor by the system. This poverty, metaphorically, reflects their socioeconomic and psychological life. While the white citizens "own the world" (*Native Son, 52*), the African Americans are "on the outside of the world peeping in

through a knothole in the fence…" (*Native Son,* 50*)*. For they are the only people restricted by the Jim Crow law from going where they want to go and doing what they want to do (*Native Son,* 51). The whites' world is different. The best description that mirror white's world is given when Bigger goes to the Mr. Dalton's house for the chauffer job which he has been recommended for by the relief people. It is given in this manner:

> When he went out and walked south to sixty-six street…But while walking through this quiet and spacious neighborhood, he did not feel the pull and mystery of the thing as strongly as he had in the movie. The houses he passed were huge; light glowed softly in the windows. The streets were empty save for an occasional car that zoomed past on swift rubber tires. This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets and houses. He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605. When he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black, iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside. All he had felt about the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filled him now. (*Native Son,* 74)

Aside this foregoing description, there are comparison drawn out between the two contrasting worlds of blacks and whites, like two abridged buildings that are dissimilar in every area where one is in deplorable state while the other one shines through the refulgence of government's attention and care. The first of these drawn comparisons came after Bigger is reborn. Wright writes below:

> …and all because he had been in Dalton's home for a few hours and had killed a white girl. He looked round the room, seeing it for the first time. There was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and the ceiling hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds, four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop-leaf table on which they eat. This was much different from the Dalton's home. Here all slept in one room; there he would have a room for himself alone. He smelt the food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in Dalton's home; pots could not be heard rattling all over the house. Each person lived in one room and had a little world of his one. He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself. Why did he and his folks have to live like this? What had they done? Perhaps they had done anything. Maybe they had to live this way precisely because none of them in all their lives had ever done anything, right or wrong, that mattered much. (*Native Son,* 134-135)

Again, having gone so deep in this reborn, he elucidate further on the sorry image of black dwelling place. He states:

> …and walked through the quiet Negro streets. Now and then he passed an empty building, white and silent in the night…if one went into them, they might collapse. He walked on…there are many empty buildings with black windows, like blind eyes, building like skeletons standing with snow on their bones in the winter winds. But one of them were on corners…He looked round the street and saw a sign on a building: THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY. He had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he live. He paid eight dollars a week for a rat-infested room… Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. (*Native Son*, 204)

The racial image created here strikes the soul asunder. It makes the blacks to expect nothing significant from the society that has alienated them. Every black person is to a white's world "another black ignorant Negro" (*Native Son,* 242), "apelike animal" (*Native Son,* 306, 309), "black ape" (*Native Son,* 301), society's "dogs" (*Native Son,* 282), "Negro rapist and killer" (*Native Son,* 287), "shiftless immoral variety" (*Native Son,* 310), "a beast utterly untouched by the softening influence of modern civilization" (*Native Son,* 310), among many others. Therefore, every white man believes "whites and blacks are strangers" (*Native Son,* 380). They believe blacks "rape white women" (*Native Son,* 380). The whites act like "God" and use their power, according to them in Robertson's article, to "segregating all Negroes in parks, playgrounds, cafes, theatres, and streetcars." Residential segregation is imperative. Such measure tend to keep them as much as possible out of direct contact with white women and lessen their attacks against them" (*Native Son,* 310). Hence, black poverty and state is pictured in them and the cruelty from white's world whose citizens are standing "somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god[s]" (*Native Son,* 204). It is unsurprising that the racial image evoked in *Native Son*, as said earlier, starts from the first page to the last one and it concerns blacks as much as whites because they system blinds them from seeing the aberration in racism. Where many blacks are complacent in this blindness, whites see the "old custom" as not enacted by them; therefore, the social, mental, political and economic conditions of these African Americans are not their fault.

It is among the few deplorable jobs, like the chauffeur job, garden work, housemaid and others that whites offer black people, that Bigger is forced to take up the chauffeur job

vacated by Green, Mr. Dalton's former black chauffeur, at the Dalton's house. He has been told he lacks manhood, making him ambivalent about the Mr. Dalton's job. "He could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse and starve. It maddened him he did not have a wider choice (*Native Son,* 42). His mother influences his choice by reminding him of their state. She said bitterly, "if you get that job… I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not live like pigs" (*Native Son,* 41). The "comfortable" adjective she speaks here never means being acceptable by the whites either socially or economically. But the meaning it creates in the statement is a little twist in their state of living. They could feed enough to live better than their present condition and be better off, at least, to live on twenty dollars-a-week of Bigger's wages. But environmentally, she is cognizant whites make the "old custom" that keep "Negroes on the South Side, in one area" (*Native Son,* 357). Moving to a better environment where whites occupy would become violating "the line" whites people have drew which most time results in their death (*Native Son,* 381). Bigger's employment from the Dalton family introduces him into some first contacts with white people. Such characters as Mr. And Mrs. Dalton with Mary, their daughter, Jan, Peggy, Buckley, white's media that plant and water hatred in white's world towards blacks, the supremacist laws that limit or impede blacks' social growth and development and the white mob who believe in giving immediate jungle justice to black offenders who are alleged to have kill and rape white women. Each of this people and corporate entities play a critical roles in Bigger's *Fear*, *Flight* and *Fate*, a belief he has held before his very existence that "something awful's going to happen to him (*Native Son,* 50). Their faces makes him fearful, debasing himself through the use of "yessuh" and "yessum" as reverential worship (*Native Son, 104*); their quaking voices make him flee from them as they make him conscious of his black skin which he feels "naked, transparent" before them (*Native Son, 98)*; and their laws kill him before his existence because to whites black people do not have "physical existence at all" "and regulating his attitude toward death was the fact that he was black, unequal and despised (*Native Son, 98, 305).* It is not just only Bigger that this "badge of shame[,] which he knew is attached to the black skin[,]" is stamped on him but every single black person in America, Africa and the rest of the world. When he gets to the Mr. Dalton's house, Mary is introduced to Bigger as someone whose behaviour is weird and suppressive. Even though she means well and sociable irrespective of the colour and class difference between her and Bigger, acting like someone who cares about others alongside Jan to make Bigger feels like a human. But, to Bigger and other black people, every white person is the same. They are not to be related, socialized, dine with, shake hands with or have emotional relationship with. The racial image is evoked and alive in the social consciousness of the white world and the black world. Bigger's accidental murder of Mary zoomed unto a clearer picture of the roles the law agency and the media play in fanning the flames of racial hatred among white and black citizens.

Whereas, the media gives prejudicial description to stereotype blacks as evil, uncivilized and animal-like, the law gives the white world the official recognition and power that suppresses, segregates, impedes and kills African Americans with or without fair trial before it. Mary's death likewise open the blind eyes of both the citizens of both worlds. The system blinds the Dalton family (*Native Son*, 137), his family (*Native Son*, 138), his friends Gus, Jack, G.H. and Bessie (*Native Son*, 169), Jan, the black people, and the white people by which Jim Crow laws are made for. This blindness revolves around their inability to see clearly the negative effects of racism on them. For Mary's death, Bigger blames on the "Marys." This mental image is drawn from the fact that every white, to blacks, is a racial oppressor whose law confers on him (a white individual) the power to treat them (blacks) how he pleases. They believe black people are inferior. Therefore, "twelve million [blacks] constitute a separate nation, stunted, striped and held captive" (*Native Son,* 423)

Throughout Bigger's arrest and trials, the media plays some debasing roles in such manner as the instigation of hate, agitating mob violent revenge, protecting white supremacist ideas, justifying colour segregation and stereotyping blacks an beasts. For instance, *Tribune* uses "*NEGRO RAPIST FAINTS AT INQUEST"* as its headline and goes further to writes some derogatory sentential constructions in the following manner:

> Overwhelmed by the sight of his accusers, Bigger Thomas, Negro sex slayer fainted dramatically this morning at the inquest of Mary Dalton, millionaire Chicago heiress…. He looks exactly like an ape!... though the Negro killer's body does not seem compactly built…his skin is exceedingly black… reminding one of a jungle beast…. It is easy to imagine how this man …overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, beheaded her, then stuffed her body into a roaring furnace to destroy the evidence to his crime…he seemed out of place in a white man's civilization. (*Native Son*, 310)

Like *Tribune*, Edward Robertson, an editor at the southern region, uses barbaric connotations to qualify Bigger and the black people, stating without shame that "crimes such as the Bigger Thomas murders could be lessened by segregating all Negroes in parks playgrounds, cafes, theatres, and street cars. Residential segregation is imperative. Such measures tend to keep them as much as possible out of direct contact with white women and lessen the attacks against them (*Native Son*, 311). It is unsurprising that Buckley told Bigger "Boy, when the newspapers get hold of what we've got on you, you're cooked" (*Native Son,* 335). Like the media houses, Robertson, and the mob agitating for jungle justice

on Bigger, the law enforcers also are guilty in enforcing racism, doing so with strict and hate; the segregation spoken of in the cell being an apt example. Personally, Buckley represents this image of the law.

Richard Wright's novel is preoccupied with racial theme as a major reason for Bigger's death and the antecedent Mary's and Bessie's murders. The racial image that hovered on America, in the early twentieth century of Wright's time, denotes what has been before his time and what will be after him (as emphasis are placed on slave trade and the re-awakened militant minds of the oppressed). In the contemporary time, racism has shown to have negative and adverse effects on individuals and society even after many years of *Native Son*. It is therefore important that certain means should be made to effectively curtail it

Violence as Expressed in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Violence simply implies the use of force to achieve one's aim. This force can cause physical, mental and emotional sufferings that negatively affect individuals and their society. Literature has an inseparable relationship with society. By this single sentential construction, literary works do not exist in isolation or non-usefulness of the production of ideas. It is on this reason that literature is considered as a social mirror. Aside racial tones that best explicate in various forms - like colour discrimination, segregation, stereotype, profiling and deaths (conditioned by racial difference) which are all found - in Wright's *Native Son*, violence serves as a means to tell the general public how far negatively affected race relations have had on all. It is in violence that all forms of racism manifest. According to Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth,* "it is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject…throughout the process of liberation, the colonized people [subjugated group] become men and thus new men become a creation of decolonization." (2). Looking at this assertion, two groups are created. These groups exert violence - the violence from the oppressors through "colonized subjects" that usually come against the oppressed with force, and the violence from the oppressed whose spirits exert the force of "decolonization" after their reawakening. The study of the meaning of violence in these two cases becomes different but inseparable. In Richard Wright's novel, white violence and black violence are the shown to wrestle against each other. In studying this, the life of Bigger through his *Fear*, *Flight* and *Fate* is examined.

Native Son entails various degree where the many forms of various violence manifested in the American society, especially from the slave era to the modern time. For instance, examining violence perpetuated by whites, one could observes that financial violence manifests through black's poverty, unemployment, exorbitant house rent and poor

communal development. Their segregation from whites people in terms of neighbourhood, prisons, parks, theatres, hospitals and schools is gotten from social violence (of isolation). Physical violence manifests through unjust accusation, unfair trial and incarceration, mob lynching and death. While racist abuse and stereotype through words, hateful racial songs and idea of superiority and inferiority due too colour are created to create psychological violence. Both sides see each other's violence as evil. To whites, black violence is a force for evil. To blacks, every white person is "somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god." He is there drawing "the a line," making the rules, dictating the tone, as master to slave, to every black native of America which they must live and be ruled (*Native Son,* 204, 381). This is because the system considers African Americans as white's "property, heart and soul, body and blood" (*Native Son,* 361).

Violence acted upon by blacks is necessitated in their reborn and conscious reawakening. Bigger kills Mary Dalton, although accidental, in such case is justified by him. The 'strangerness' and "the line" between them makes possible the face of Mary[s] (Mary Dalton and all whites person) to be a catalyst for Bigger's shame and fear and consequently, Mary Dalton's and Bessie Mear's murders. A scene plotted aptly into his *Fear* and *Fate*. In *Fear*, he revolves about the unseen but yet known the impending *Fate*. It was not only Bigger that know this, every black character in *Native Son* is undeveloped, complacent, weak and fearful of the possible bitter end as Gus expresses such complacent aattitude that confirm his blindness:

> Aw, ain't no use feeling that way about it. It don't help none…You'll go nuts…aw, for Chrissake! There ain't nothing you can do about it. How can you want to worry yourself? You black and they make the laws… You think too much." (*Native Son, 50-51*)

However, violence creates identity and meaning in Bigger. He believe white world "pokes a red-hot iron" of racial discrimination and segregation on his nose which he cannot "get used to it" (*Native Son,* 49). Hence, this illustrates that rather than the unethical intentions on the part of blacks as seen in Bigger, it is racial defect that creates the idea of black identity through violence in *Native Son*. Every choice Bigger made is based on inclining self where he sees himself as dependent being on the white world therefore, he fails to recognize what his actions could lead to. He said, "it was like another man stepped inside of my skin and started acting for me…" (*Native Son,* 381). Many cases are found throughout the novel. The most notable one was Bigger's fight with Gus which was initiated by their fear to rob Blum's Delicatessen. Blum is a white man and so they boys were all afraid to carry out their operation out. An action where Bigger uses violence against Gus, in order

to escape from being perceived fearful, anxious and weak. (*Native Son*, *49-71*). Robbing Blum would have been daring a white world. But the system, being violent, is bent to be ruthless to blacks. The another man in Bigger denotes the violent man of resistance against the system that considers blacks as inferior. He helps him to see "a new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity" (*Native Son,* 305). Due to this, Mary's and Bessie's deaths become his first true killings that places him on a high new 'prideland' and the "new humility" that spring forth "a new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity" (*Native Son,* 305). According to Fanon, "when the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person" (154). Bigger's contact with the Daltons' world makes a collapse of the man who is somewhere watching and controlling black fates like a god. The only this that makes the world of the Dalton family hopeful is nipped through and murdered. Therefore, Bigger pull down the white's violence through vehement violence born in him through shame and fear.

Conclusion

The life of Bigger, Richard Wrights typifies, as a life whose violence is conditioned by another force. Bigger is imaged as a hope of resistance of Blacks. This could be seen in Buddy's action at the police station (*Native Son,* 326), his friend's reluctance to speak against themselves (*Native Son,* 328), and Jack's statement his friend to stand up against whites' treatments (*Native Son,* 282). All these and many more become the agitating minds of blacks. Their crime existed long before they are born and made them "as though their weakness made them ashamed in the presence before the powers greater than themselves" (*Native Son,* 331). Bigger's *Fate* has been foreshadowed right from *Fear,* which bears a similitude with literary race themed books.

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