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Bigger Thomas – The Hero in the Novel “Native Son” by Richard Wright**Dr. M. Ravichand & S. Pushpa Latha***Sree Vidyanikethan Engineering College, Tirupathi, (A.P.) India***Abstract**

Richard Wright is doubtlessly best known for his novel *Native Son*. Through his black protagonists, Wright deftly depicts the collective experience of African Americans molded by experiences of slavery and apartheid. The Africans were uprooted from their native soil, culture, age old traditions and replanted in a soil that reeked of hostility, oppression, humiliation and brutality. Bigger Thomas a poor young black man is the central character in *Native Son*. The blacks were stereotyped as barbaric, uncouth and uncivilized. Bigger's fear and panic of being discovered in a white girl's bedroom seems to be logical once the reader considers the times in which the novel is set. Bigger escapes from Mary's and Bessie's house relying on the inability of the police to think that a black man was capable of such crimes and subsequent cover-ups. Eventually Bigger is convicted and awarded capital punishment. Bigger is an amalgamation of all people that Wright had known throughout his life – most of these people had fallen prey to the brutalities of the dominant whites when they refused to accept the indignation of Jim Crow discrimination. Bigger emerges as a hero who rejects the entire southern white ideology and resorts to brutality in order to break the racial barriers.

Key Words: slavery, culture, traditions, oppression, humiliation, racial barriers

Richard Wright is among the members of oppressed community in 20th century America. *Native Son*¹ (1940) was a landmark in American literature, the first serious treatment of race to become a runaway commercial success. He depicted the poverty, the suffering of his community and the denial of rightful recognition to the Negro community in his works. In the U.S of the 18th and 19th Centuries, the Negroes, brought from an alien land against their will, had been oppressed and exploited by the dominant White community. *Native Son* was written at a time when the Negroes got awareness of their position in the society as a community, and as individuals. They were getting ready to explode and burst into the open for the denied identity. The fact that the pattern of false accusation on the basis

of the accused being a member of the minority race, the authorities' exploitation of racial prejudice in order to subvert the ends of justice and secure an unjust conviction, looms large in the novel.

The hero's resistance to injustice is the striking feature of the novel. This paper is an attempt to study the never-ending struggle between the rich and powerful on the one hand, and the poor and helpless on the other, to retain their exploitative power by the former, and to break out of the clutches of the former by the latter. It also aims at studying the distorting effects of racial prejudice on the perception of humanity, and identity of the members of the oppressed community. The novel highlights the emergence of the hero who belongs to the exploited group. Bigger

Thomas is called a “*Native Son*” but is treated very much like a hostile alien. Wright’s hero does not seem to learn so much from the experiences, but nevertheless develops a sense of responsibility for the members of his oppressed race and thus shows signs of spiritual growth. He overcomes his anger and outrage at the shameless oppression and exploitation of the Negroes by the Whites, and towards the end, begins to see himself as a member of his community, whom he hated at the beginning of the novel.

Black American writers like James Baldwin criticized *Native Son* for its being “overwhelmed at every point by the very cancer it wants to cauterize”². Though this is an overstatement, it is true that Wright’s work is propelled by anger at the injustice and inhumanity of the Whites and the hypocrisy of those Whites who pretended to be on the side of the Negro in the ongoing racial debate. In the novel there is a subversion of the legal system aimed at securing the conviction of the hero by subverting the legal process. In the words of David Daiches *Native Son* is “a powerful study of a certain type of Negro mind, a type of mind, as the book makes clear, which has been produced by the treatment of the colored people by the whites through generations”³. Wright portrays the protagonist Bigger Thomas of the novel as the champion of the suffering. Environment is the villain for both bigger and his creator. Both suffered from racial discrimination. Both hailed from the south. “The view he chose to express correspond to his own personal experiences”⁴. Wright and bigger learned how to survive in white society through their mothers. Both of them were fatherless. Wright’s father was

killed in a riot when he was still a child. Bigger’s father deserted the family. Poverty is the unwanted heirloom of protagonist and author and both lived in filthy tenements. Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* is a symbol of Negro suffering. Bigger starts his life in a filthy rat infested tenement where he is forced to live with his mother, brother and sister. Bigger’s family, like other Negroes, cannot afford a better dwelling, because their income is meager. It was the widespread poverty, which again is responsible for the forced Negroes to live in congested and gloomy apartments.

Bigger is forced into adulthood by the poverty of his family. But he wants to amuse himself with his friends. His lack of education, a consequence of his poverty, forces him to take to job he does not like. His association with delinquents like himself and his criminal propensities are a consequence of the conditions in which he lives. Against his will he is forced to take a job for his family’s sustenance. Bigger’s inability to improve his family’s financial position produces frustration in him. Even though Bigger is not eager to shoulder the responsibility of his family he could not escape it because he is the only source of support, the only adult male of the family. Another factor is the close-knit nature of the family. For all his recklessness, he can understand the strain of his mother, who bears the burden of the family.

Bigger and his friends plan to rob Blums store which is a white man’s store. But they cannot muster the courage to do so, due to their fear of white authority. It seems to them a way of challenging white authority and of asserting themselves. The motive behind the planned robbery is to assert their power, which stems from their

powerlessness, and to rob the whites of the wealth, which they themselves lacked. Previously they robbed many Negroes without any fear, because Bigger and his friends knew that white men would not pay any attention to the crimes committed against Negroes. But in the prevailing social system they will not condone crimes committed against whites by Negroes. They feel it is much easier and safer to rob their own people for they know that “white policemen never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes” (P.17). Bigger and other Negro children cherish ambitions, which they cannot fulfill. Bigger dreams of becoming a pilot, but they know that it is impossible, because Negroes are powerless against the whites. Whites forced Negroes to take jobs, which they did not like to do themselves. Bigger wants to join the army. But he knows that it is a Jim Crow army. If he joins the army he will have to dig ditches. If he joins in the navy he has to wash the dishes. In the social order of that time, Negroes were kept away from higher education and all the jobs that conferred power and status. What Negroes can do is to talk wistfully about such jobs. Bigger has no patience with the church. Religion, in which the Blacks of earlier generations including these of his mother found comfort, does not attract him. Though he cannot articulate it, he realizes that it is another of the white man’s instruments of perpetuating the iniquitous system and keeping the Negro in subjection. The poor Negroes found in it a sort of recompense for the long hours of underpaid labor, doled out by whites and the unending drudgery of their lives. Bigger’s mother is an example. Bessie, his girl, also works like a dog from morning till night. Bessie does not want to bother anybody. What

she wants after long hours of work is whisky. Negroes were made to live in such a way that they could not change their way of life and break out of the cage around them. Bigger and his friends playing at being the president and the secretary of state reveals their desire of power. The idea of playing at power is recognition of their powerlessness. Their dissatisfaction is evident from their deeds. “It’s just like living in jail”, (P.23). Bigger says to his friend Gus. Bigger is aware of the fact that whites do not want Negroes to break out of their poverty and are in fact afraid of such a possibility. Securing a job as chauffeur, Bigger enters the Dalton house, where he sees the glaring contrast between the worlds inhabited by Negroes and the whites. According to Bigger’s perspective the white world is a “cold and distant world” (P.45). Moreover he feels fear and hate towards the whites. He had not expected the job nor hoped for kindness from his employers. He is baffled by Miss Dalton’s violation of what she had told her father about her movements, and her affiliations with communist ideology. He is puzzled by her lack of fidelity to the class to which her father belongs, here implicit rebellion against capitalism.

Bigger being accustomed to an order where Negroes are in perpetual subjection to whites and accept it, cannot understand her easygoing attitude to Blacks. But he is afraid of her nature, which might lead to losing his job. Understandably, he does not want to lose the job because it is his one means to support his family. In the words of the narrator “The only thing he hoped was that she would not make him lose his job” (P.65). At first he was baffled by the friendliness of Mary and her friend Jan who is communist. Even though they are

communists, for him they are whites, which make him conscious of his Negro origin. He hates them for making him feel uncomfortable with their friendliness, but cannot escape from it, because such a move would cost him his job. His major concern is to keep his job and not to get involved in any situation, which might result in his losing it.

While helping an intoxicated Mary to get out of the car that night, Bigger feels that she is looking inside of him, who is a Black, because of her communist ideology. Bigger resents her looking into his mind, his self. "Again she was looking inside of him and he did not like it" (P.80). He is the prisoner of centuries of white repression of Blacks and the hatred and fear generated by such repression. This is evident from his words. "But for all that, she was white and he hated her" (P.81).

Bigger's attitude is rather ambivalent, since he does not hate Mary for any other reason but that she is white and he is black. Bigger's poverty and the milieu blind him to Mary's identity as an individual. Even though he does not understand fully what communism means, he hates it because he senses danger in it; he fears that it will cost him his job. Even though her nature is sympathetic towards Negroes and she desires to improve their condition through communism, Bigger hates her because she is white, and her friendliness to him and his race might make him lose his job. This lurking fear makes Bigger feel tense and uneasy all the time in the company of Jan and Mary. He is totally confused by the unfamiliar friendliness of members of the oppressor race, and does not know how to respond. This is evident from his conduct in the pub. When he is with Mary and Jan he

feels helpless like an oppressed victim living in the midst of his oppressors.

Bigger is obviously a man of impulse, because he stifles Mary to death just to prevent her blind mother discovering his presence in Mary's bedroom. He has no specific motive for killing her, except his fear of being found in the bedroom of a white young woman. He kills her out of fear, out of his certain knowledge that he would be suspected unjustly of having raped Mary, a white girl. If a Negro of his background is discovered in that situation, he knows it means certain death, not by trial but probably by lynching. Even while acting in panic, he is rational enough to take care of details like destroying her body in the furnace and switching the exhaust fan of the furnace to eliminate the odor of burning flesh. The irony of the situation is that he destroyed the very evidence which might have proved his innocence and saved him.

Although Bigger's killing of Mary was an accident and could hardly be called murder, he decides to assume full responsibility for her death. In killing Mary, he feels that he had destroyed symbolically all the oppressive forces that made his life miserable. Bigger enjoys a "sense of potency, of power and freedom that he has never before experienced".⁵ when he visits his home after this decisive action, he is not satisfied with the way of their lives. When he compares his home with the Daltons, he sees things with a new eye. Though he had not killed Mary intentionally he accepts responsibility for it. But he did it, prompted by intuition, driven by the fear that he would be suspected of having raped the girl. In the society inhabited by Bigger, rape is a more serious crime than murder, if a black man

and white girl are involved in it. Strangely, his act of murder gives bigger a sense of power, of creation. He feels that there is power in and after murder. This is due to the inevitable accusations of rape and killing leveled by white society.

After murdering Mary, Bigger feels for the first time that he is living fully and deeply as a man is meant to live. He knows that for the whites Mary will be symbolic of all white women, and he, a Black, will be representative of all Blacks, lending all Blacks a criminal character. He feels pride for his hate against them, which lends a hidden meaning to his life. After attaining this new-sense of power, which is also a result of the whites being ignorant of Bigger's killing of Mary, Bigger faces his friends without fear.

“It was the first time he had ever been in their presence without feeling fearful. He was following a strange path into a strange land and his nerves were hungry to see where it led”. (P.107).

He desires for solidarity with fellow Blacks, and to bring them together, to rule them and get them to act in a desired way. He hates other Blacks for their inability but continues to hope. For Bigger, Whoever does not unquestioningly accept whatever he says is the object of his hatred. He is angry with his family and his lover Bessie when they do not accept his authority.

He wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl, a girl whose family was known to all of them. Yes; if he did that a look of started horror would come over their faces”. (P.123).

Bigger's lover Bessie was governed by the same principle, which he applied to his family members. He wants her to be loyal to him and obey him unquestioningly. But Bessie refuses to give her loyalty unless Bigger lets her into what he is doing. Bigger cooks up a story for Bessie in order to help him execute his plan. He needs her in his plan to defeat the hostile world. When she compels him to reveal his plan, he feels threatened, and feels compelled to kill her. This is a manifestation of his will to power. “He wishes he could clench his fist and swing his arm and blot out, kill” (P.133). He uses her, and she too uses him to obtain what she wants, namely liquor. He gives her liquor and she gives him herself. It is something like a trade-off. There is no real love between them.

The Negroes are denied education, and are made to live in perpetual poverty. Bigger hates all these aspects of the life of his race, which are the result of systematic oppression. He is not even interested in Blacks. He has rejected his family and Bessie, and is alienated from his own people. After the discovery of the charred bones of Mary by the journalists in the furnace, Bigger is seized by panic and runs away. He feels that he was fated to be in such a situation sooner or later, and now he is face to face with it. He feels “it was rape” when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. “That too was rape” (P.214). In reality, his crime is against a single White family, but it was discolored and misinterpreted, so that he is made the representative of the whole Negro race, and the despoiler of White women. Having made Bessie an accomplice in his crime, Bigger forces himself on her and then crushes her head in, an abandoned

building, since she knows too much to be left behind. The important point is that the idea of eliminating her had been in his mind much before he killed Mary, and later Bessie. He cannot take Bessie along with him and he cannot leave her because she knows too much. So he attacks her brutally and leaves her, mangled in face and almost dead, in a derelict building. Even in the midst of this turmoil, he feels a strange satisfaction. He is forced deeper into the quagmire of crime by the first crime of killing Mary. To extricate himself from his first crime, he commits another in murdering Bessie, his accomplice. Ironically, Bigger has both raped and murdered a Black girl, but the Whites pay no attention to it; but in relation to the white girl, they charge him with rape on the basis of nothing more than their racial prejudice.

Bigger Now wants to merge with others and be a part of this world. He wants “to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was Black”. (P.226). from this we can observe how the mind of a Negro under constant pressure works. Bigger finds that the world outside has now found that a Negro killed a white woman from a newspaper, and immediately they assume that he had raped the girl before killing her. In the distorted world of the novel, rape is a more serious crime than murder when the accused is a Negro, and the victim a white woman. There is a myth about the virility of Negro males, prevalent among the Whites. The whites want to protect their woman against this treat, while the women are interested in the sexual powers of Negroes. He feels the injustice of the White society to Blacks. He is himself an example of their injustice. Their accusation of rape is false.

A force of eight thousand white police who comb the city systematically hunts him. He feels trapped. The hunt for Bigger serves as an excuse for the whites to terrorize the entire Negro population. Arresting Blacks, dubbing them as one of these communists are methods of systematic oppression. The tone of the press, the silence of the church, the attitude of the prosecution and the stimulated temper of the people are of such a nature as to indicate “more than revenge is being sought upon a man who has committed a crime”⁶.

Bigger, starving and weak, and low in spirit, cannot resist the huge force. At one stage he wants to die without shame of being caught. He is treated like an animal when they drag him down the stairs. He feels fear and thinks of committing suicide, but surprisingly, he over comes the feeling of fear after he is caught. The feeling of power he experienced after killing Mary continues to propel Bigger’s consciousness. He is ready to face any situation. “He was surprised that he was not afraid”. (P.250). The recognition of not being afraid is itself a great psychological triumph for Bigger over his oppressors. He is able to hear the hysteric shrieks of the White mob, to kill him and to lynch him. According to them he is a Black Ape. Whites systematically exclude Blacks from the main stream of society. In such a society, with such hardened anti-Black sentiment, Bigger’s innocence could not be proved even if they know his innocence. Bigger’s trial is accelerated by Buckley who is also a White man. Buckley wants to get Bigger’s case out of the way as soon as possible, because he does not want the agitation to continue and endanger his popularity. He shows the

mob to Bigger, to stun him, and thus kill him psychologically. Buckley being the state Attorney wants to complete the case of Bigger before the April elections, so that he can be elected again as state Attorney. This is evident from Jan's questioning of Buckley at the trial.

"You're afraid that you won't be able to kill this boy before the April Elections, if we handle his case, aren't you, Buckley?" (P.271).

Certainly there will be no change in the attitude of the Attorney, since he is White, and the case involves a Black supposedly raping and murdering a White woman. This Black-Vs-White crime enables the authorities to whip up hysteria among the Whites against Blacks. They feel that they are defending White womanhood against predatory Blacks. By doing so, they portray themselves as the saviors of the Whites. Thus there is a complex web of motives for the Whites to crucify the Black Bigger on any kind of charge. He hoped for a release, though he knew it would not happen. There is a transformation in his thinking from here onwards, in that he offers no resistance and accepts suffering. He feels that he does not care anymore for what happens to him and refuses to cooperate with Max the lawyer who chooses to defend him in the trial. Max touches the heart of Bigger. Bigger feels comfort in Max's words and accepts communism. Bigger has within him unarticulated Marxist leanings and ideology. Max drew these latent feelings out into open. Bigger's acceptance of communism does not mean rejection of religion. Max explains the complexity of the issue. Max explains to Bigger that all Negroes stand accused in the eyes of the Whites. Max is Jewish lawyer, whom Wright uses as his

mouthpiece. He pleads with the court that Bigger's crimes were acts of impulse rather than premeditated villainies. He changes Bigger's plea from "Not guilty" to "guilty", and urges the court to reduce the sentence from death to one of life imprisonment or a 14 – year term.

Bigger's confession is "not of the murder which was not a murder, and of the rape which was not a rape"⁷, but of the obscure inarticulate causes which made him hate, and made him try to make up for his sense of inferiority by aggressive acts against the society in which he lived. Max rejects the Attorney's contention that he can ask for reduction of sentence of the accused pleads insanity. Max however argues that Bigger was not insane at the time of the accidental killing, but that Bigger was driven to it by a general apprehension of White prejudice against Negroes. There is no hatred against Mary as an individual in Bigger's killing her. After the act he accepts responsibility for the act, and realizes his hatred against the White society, which does not allow him to live as an individual. Bigger's crime is the result of the psychological pressure built up on the Negro mind by the age-old oppression of Negroes by Whites.

Bigger is not unduly worried about the punishment. He is aware of the consequences of this action and is reconciled to it. He knows his fate is already sealed, predetermined by a fanatic jury. He is not perturbed even to care even at the prospect of a death sentence. But he does not want to lose his courage and break down in court. At all costs, he wants to be a man. There is humanity in Bigger, evident in his actions. He feels responsibility for the oppressed; he even feels bad for killing Mary even though

unintentionally, and for having hurt Jan in the process; “ he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him” (P.268). Bigger treats Jan as his friend after he perceives the communist lawyer’s decency and humanity. His regret for his killing Mary reveals Bigger’s essential humanity. In the beginning, Bigger acted and lived for himself alone. But after accepting responsibility for his crimes, his personality acquires a social dimension. He knows that his killing is a result of the environment in which he born, and is forced to live, which induces youngsters like him to commit crimes. He could reject the burden of responsibility, but accepts it with a full awareness of its consequences.

Bigger is tried only for killing Mary; his killing of Bessie is almost ignored, which shows that the Black girl’s life is of no value in the eyes of the Whites. Max explains the reasons behind the killing. But his eloquence is lost on the Jury, and there is no change in the judgment. The judgment of the Whites had been arrived at much before the trial ended. Bigger is unable to overcome the brute authority. Wright has put into the mouth of Max the arguments on behalf of the Negroes who are stripped of opportunity and denied hope. Max asserts that the hate and fear that led Bigger to commit the crimes he did, are the product of White oppression. If the same attitude towards Negroes continues, Max warns, there is bound to be a civil war. He finally urges the Jury to spare the life of Bigger who has so far been denied identity as a human individual. Max’s speech shows Bigger as a representative Negro and a symbol of suffering.

By accepting responsibility and suffering, Bigger is raised to the level of Man, and

finally of Christ. In his speech to the Jury and to the gathered Whites Max brings out the naked realities and cruelties of the oppressors. He draws a vivid picture of the oppressors and their oppression, from enslavement of the Negroes to the justice, which has eluded them until now. He points out that oppression itself is a crime. But the justice system of the White society obsessed with perpetuation of its own interest and authority pays no attention to the speech of Max. The fact that Max, the defense lawyer, is a communist overrides the fact of his being a White man and does nothing to win over the jury. Bigger is sentenced to death. Towards the end, however Bigger develops a positive attitude and is ready to face imminent death. He is ready to die without hate for anything except the obscure circumstances, which compelled him to be what he now is. There is a meaning in his suffering and by experiencing the suffering he confers a value on his suffering, and on his own life. Bigger’s heroism consists in his overcoming his initial state of fear of death and in his triumph over his oppressors. Bigger is an existential hero, for whom there is no possible release from suffering, which is an element of life. But he defies the hopeless circumstances and accepts death in an effort to lend meaning to his suffering. This he does by refusing to put up the plea of insanity at the moment of the crime. Instead of abdicating responsibility, he willingly accepts it and accepts death. In this acceptance of death, he emerges as hero and his life acquires transcendent meaning.

The conscious assumption of responsibility confers humanity and heroism on him. The courageous acceptance is a result of his evolution into

an existential self. The tremendous power of *Native Son* has its ultimate source in a revolutionary vision of life. It is in the most profound sense a philosophical novel, a creative affirmation of the will to live, and to transform life. The novel is a dramatization of the tortured search for values by which Bigger Thomas is to struggle, live and die. A “bold conception of human dignity”⁸ gives this novel its stature. He is an existential hero because he emerges with strength of character towards the end. Bigger affirms his humanity when he sees his mother, brother and sister for the last time though he turns down his mother’s plea to accept religious consolation. The hero is a victim of racial prejudice in its worst form. The hero is not ambitious; apolitical man, who just wants to break out of their stifling poverty, and better their conditions.

Summation

The hero seeks to break out of the trap of poverty in search for opportunity and human dignity. The majority who control their destinies frustrate this quest, using slander, by subverting the laws and by every available means to keep the community in enslavement, ideally forever. These elements constitute the central drama of the novel. The hero emerges from passivity and irresponsibility to achieve resistance of justice, and accept responsibility. He emerges as human beings accepting responsibility for their fellow men. But he makes the transition at the end and emerges as a mature man with broader sympathy.

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