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THE SEARCH FOR (SELF) IDENTITY IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S "NATIVE SON"

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ABSTRACT

The search for identity of the Black race has been the subject of many works of fiction in American Literature. Starting from Harriet Beecher Stowe, a number of full-length novels dealing with the Blacks and their problem of identity have been published. In recent American fiction, Black American novels have carved a niche for themselves. Richard Wright has taken the world by storm through two of his epoch-making novels *Black Boy* and *Native Son*.

Key words: frustration, fear and shame, depression, racial injustice, search for identity

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Bigger Thomas is the protagonist of 'Native Son'. The title itself proclaims the identity of Bigger Thomas as discovered by the novelist himself. Bigger Thomas might have doubts over his Nationality, whether he was an African or an American. The novelist pronounces him to be an American, a Native Son. So the search for identity made by Bigger Thomas comes to an end in the minds of the novelist and his readers.

Bigger Thomas was none other than what Richard Wright might have become if he had not saved himself. Like Wright, Bigger had passed his boyhood in Jackson, Mississippi. His father had been killed during a riot and his mother-a hard-working, hymn-singing woman, like wright's mother, had brought up the family as best as she could. They had moved from Mississippi to the Southern Part of Chicago when Bigger was fifteen. Bigger's search for identity begins only from then onwards. As Nick Aaron Ford states,

"Wright's major purpose in this novel was to show that social and economic barriers against race lead to grave injustices toward racial minorities and that those injustices so distort character and personality growth that criminal monstrosities, such as Bigger, are produced".

Bigger's troubles with the law had begun at an early age. His tussle with the law only indicates his struggle for acquiring an identity. He thinks that he can atleast find his identity as a criminal. A Mississippi newspaper editor gives an unfriendly description of Bigger Thomas. According to him, Thomas comes of a poor Black family of a shiftless and immoral variety. He was raised there and is known to local residents as an irreformable sneak thief and liar. They were unable to send him to the chain gang because of his extreme

youth. Bigger had been accused of stealing tires and sent to a Southern reform school. He had not really done anything wrong. He had been with some boys and the police had picked them up.

Bigger quit school in the eighth grade because he had no money. In trying to earn a living, he suffered the frustration that Richard Wright knew so well from his own experience.

“You get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes, sweep streets, anything... You don’t make enough to live on. You don’t know when you going to get fired. Pretty soon you get so you can’t hope for nothing”. (Wright, *Native Son*, 239).

The Thomases lived in a single rat-infested room. Even during the depression, empty flats were scarce in the Black Belt. Whenever Bigger’s mother wanted to move she had to put in her request many weeks in advance. She once made Bigger tramp the streets for two months looking for a place to live. The rental agencies had told him that there were not enough houses for the Blacks to live in, that the city was condemning houses in which they lived as being too old and too dangerous for habitation.

He remembered the time when the police had driven his family out of a building that had collapsed two days later. Bigger had heard it said that the Black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kinds of flats.

He knew that Blacks could not find tenements outside the Black Belt; they had to live on their side of the “line”. No white real estate man would rent a flat to a Black in any section other than that which had been condemned to their use. Most of the houses in the Black Belt were ornate, old, stinking homes once of rich white people, now inhabited by Blacks or standing dark and empty with yawning black windows.

Institutionalized virtue could not touch boys like Bigger. One of Henry Dalton’s deeds of kindness had been to give a dozen Ping-Pong tables to the South Side Boy’s club; but Bigger asked bitterly that a guy could do nothing, with Ping-Pong. When lawyer Max asked him if the Boy’s club kept him out of trouble. Bigger replied that that was where they planned most of their jobs. The church was even less effective. All the churchgoers did, as Bigger complained, was to sing and shout and pray all the time. It did not get them anything. Only rich people received happiness from the church.

Bigger hated to be alone. He much preferred the camaraderie of the poolroom. In this, he obviously resembled Studs Lonigan; Farrell and Wright, in truth are interlocking novelists. They both deal with Chicago’s South Side and mention the names of the same streets. Farrell makes the explicit point that, the Blacks became exposed to the same corrupting influences as they took over the neighbourhoods evacuated by the Irish. In the last page of *‘The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan’*, he describes an unnamed fourteen-year old Black boy hanging around a corner, crap game and snitching a half-pound of butter left on a chain store counter by an absent-minded clerk. That boy could easily have been Bigger Thomas. As Nelson Manfred Blake declares, “yet despite the striking parallels, Bigger’s world was a harsher and more brutalizing one than that of Studs Lonigan”.

The Thomases were an unhappy family. Vera was a fearful adolescent. She seemed to be shrinking from life in every gesture she made. She burst into tears at every unkind remark and bickered continually with her brothers.

Buddy idolized Bigger, but the latter scorned his puppy like affection. The over worked mother could not cope with the wrangling children. She nagged at them all, but centered her most bitter reproaches on the shiftless and trouble-prone Bigger. Bigger hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve. He lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain, Bigger was even more tyrannical toward him. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough.

Bigger vented his anger not only on his family, but also upon other Blacks. He did this out of impotent frustration. In the pool room, one afternoon he provoked a quarrel with his friend Gus, kicked him to the floor, punched him in the head and threatened to cut his throat with an open knife. When Gus finally escaped,

Bigger wantonly ruined a pool table by slashing the green top with his knife, much to the indignation of Doc, the Black proprietor. Fear drove him to do these things. His gang had planned to rob a white pawnbroker that afternoon and the brawl in the poolroom saved him from going through with the job. His confused emotions had made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he did not admit this truth even to himself. He was sure that he had turned on Gus, because, Gus arrived late at the pool room. He felt no other responsibility to his conspirators.

“As long as he could remember, he had never been responsible to anyone. The moment a situation became so that it exacted something of him, he rebelled. That was the way he lived, he passed his days trying to defeat or gratify powerful impulses in a world he feared”. (Wright, *Native Son*, 36).

Bigger’s subconscious fear extended only to robbing the whites. Stealing from Blacks was easy. The gang had filched from newsstands, fruit stands and apartments. They had always robbed Blacks. They felt it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policeman never really searched diligently for Blacks who committed crimes against other Blacks. As Nelson Manfred Blake observes,

“The Negroes world in which Bigger played this rebellions role was a narrowly constricted one. Even within the ghetto, Negroes had few opportunities for legitimate money making.”

Jews, Italians and Greeks owned almost all business in the Black Belt. Most Black business was funeral parlors; white undertakers refused to bother with dead black bodies. White businessmen demonstrated their contempt for their black customers by petty profiteering. Chain stores in the Black Belt, charged five cents a loaf for bread, but across the ‘line’ where white folks lived, it sold for four.

In this jungle each individual took what he could for his own survival and gave to others only grudgingly. Bigger and his girlfriend Bessie needed and used each other. Bigger’s need was elemental, as he was an unmarried twenty-year old male. Bessie’s was equally simple. After a week of slaving in the kitchen of a white employer, she wanted release. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoon off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led. Most nights she was too tired to go out and all she wanted was to get drunk. She wanted liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her the liquor and she would give him herself.

The search for identity found in the character of Bigger Thomas is not to be seen in a character like Bessie. This need not surprise the reader as there were such Blacks who never worried about their identity. They resigned themselves to their fate and simple bore with whatever insults they had to face.

In the end, this sordid affair reached its appropriate culmination. Bigger found gratifications in Bessie’s embrace one final time, and then he beat her brains out with a brick. He could not allow her to live longer, because this would threaten his own slim chance of escape. How Bigger could do such a terrible thing and whether he loved Bessie or not are explained later in the novel. In arguing for Bigger’s life, Max explained that love was impossible for such a couple.

“Love grows from stable relationships, shared experience, loyalty, devotion, trust. Neither Bigger nor Bessie had any of these. All they had was a physical dependence upon each other, and that dependence engendered savagely mixed feelings. Their brief moments together were for purposes of sex. They loved each other as much as they hated each other. Perhaps they hated each other more than they loved.” (Wright, *Native Son*, 336).

Not all Blacks behaved as these two did. Religion was to Bigger’s mother what whiskey was to Bessie. In a passage that probably reflects Wright’s own internal struggle, he describes the fugitive. Bigger, lonely and afraid, watching the singing, clapping men and women in a nearby church.

“Would it not have been better for him had he lived in that world the music sang of? It would have been easy to live in it, for it was his mother’s world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart, which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world. And he would never do that” (Wright, *Native Son*, 215).

As Nelson Manfred Blake states, "Negroes who chose the path of accommodation hated the rebellious Negroes whose misdeeds intensified the racial prejudice of the whites".

During his flight Bigger overheard a conversation in which a hard-working Black laborer complained bitterly at being laid off because of the murder of Mary Dalton.

"Yuh see, tha'Goddamn nigger Bigger Thomas made me lose mah job. He made the white folks think we's all just like him! When another Negro protested that he would die before he would betray Bigger to the police, realist painted out that this was crazy talk. The Negroes were so far outnumbered that it would be futile to fight; the whites could kill them all."

"Yuh gotta learnt live 'n' git erlong wid people". (Wright, *Native Son*, 213).

Asked by Max why he had not appealed for help to the leaders of his race, Bigger showed how little the Black masses trusted the small Black elite. Bigger felt that these successful ones would not listen to him. They were rich. They almost like white people, when it comes to guys like him. They say that guys like him make it hard for them to get along with white folks.

As Nelson Manfred Blake puts it, "The most frightening thing about Bigger Thomas was his complete divorce from the values of Common humanity." Feeling no remorse for his terrible deeds, he was humiliated by the sight of his sobbing mother and terrified brother and sister. He thought that they ought to be glad. It was a strange but strong feeling, coming from the very depths of his life. He had taken fully upon himself the crime of being black. He had done the thing, which they dreaded above all others. Then they ought not pity him and cry over him. They should look at him and go home, contented, feeling that their shame was washed away.

Although the Chicago Blacks were forced to live in their own section of the city, many of them entered the white world every day as employees. Slaving for meager wages, they often felt no compunction about stealing from their bosses. When Bigger was trying to involve a reluctant Bessie in a scheme for exacting a large sum of money from the Daltons, he taunted her.

"You scared? You scared after letting me take that silver from Mrs. Heard's home? After letting me get Mrs. Macy's radio? You scared now?" (Wright, *Native Son*, 123).

Bessie's response was sensible; she saw the difference between pilfering and extortion.

"They'll look everywhere for us for something like this. It ain't like coming to where I work at night when the white folks is gone out of town and stealing something". (Wright, *Native Son* 124-125).

Mary Dalton continued to bewilder Bigger by her defiance of all the familiar taboos, she cut the university lecture that she was supposed to be attending and had Bigger drive her to a rendezvous with Jan Erlone; her communist boyfriend. Mary and Jan tried to offer friendship to Bigger, but he could not believe that they meant it. As Jan gripped his hand in a prolonged greeting, Bigger asked himself if they were making fun of him, what it was they wanted and why they did not leave him alone. He was more conscious than ever of his blackness. As Richard Wright says,

"He felt he had no physical existence at all right then, he was something he hated the badge of shame, which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent, he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold and inarticulate hate". (Wright, *Native Son*, 58).

Bigger knew that his hatred of the tender hearted white girl made no sense, yet he tried to explain it to himself. He felt that his murdering her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel. But he did not know what else she had really done to make him feel this way. It was not Mary he was reacting to when he felt that fear and shame. Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys. And now that he had killed Mary he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles, he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried. As Nick Aaron Ford rightly observes,

“One of the ironic facts of the story is that although the murder was an accident, it need not have been. For Bigger hated all white folks. He hated them enough to murder without provocation. He felt that he had been cheated out of everything good in life that he had wanted and that white people - all white people – were responsible for his unhappy predicament”.

He wondered when he had started hating Mary. Max wanted to know, and he replied that he hated her as soon as she spoke to him and as soon as he saw her. He reckoned and hated her before he saw her. Mary stood for the white people who would not let him do the things he wanted to do. They would not let him go to aviator school and learn to fly a plane. They would not even let him be a real soldier or a real sailor. All they want a black man for is to dig ditches. And in the Navy, all he can do is wash dishes and scrub floors.

By killing Mary Dalton, though inadvertently, Bigger Thomas gains a sort of spurious identity. The Blacks have been confined to a dungeon cell of the mind and forced to suffer. As James Baldwin goes on to say,

“It is only he (Bigger Thomas) who, by an act of murder, has burst the dungeon cell. He has made it manifest that he lives and that his despised blood nourishes the passions of a man. He has forced his oppressors to see the fruit of that oppression”.

In his search for identity, Bigger Thomas gets an unexpected supporter in Boris Max. In pleading for Bigger in the Court room, Boris Max used a provocative argument. To send this Black to prison instead of the electric chair would not be merely to spare his life, but to confer life upon him. He would be brought for the first time within the orbit of American Civilization.

“The very building in which he would spend the rest of his natural life would be the best he has ever known. Sending him to prison would be the first recognition of his personality he has ever had. The other inmates would be the first men with whom he could associate on a basis of equality”.

America’s twelve million Blacks constituted a separate nation, stunted, stripped and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic and property rights. If the misunderstanding of what this boy’s life means is an indication of how men of wealth and property are misreading the consciousness of the submerged millions today, another civil war may occur.

Bigger Thomas’s search for identity, which began right from his childhood days, ends in tragedy as he miserably, fails in his efforts. He tries to forge an identity by associating himself with the communists and then by getting the publicity as a murderer. But finally his search ends in goal and he goes to the electric chair as a man, as a human being with extra-ordinary courage. As James Baldwin observes,

“To present Bigger as a warning is simply to reinforce the American guilt and fear concerning him, it is most forcefully to limit him to that previously mentioned social arena in which he has no human validity, it is simply to condemn him to death”.

Hence, Bigger Thomas Search for identity is found to end only in his death. Literature as a powerful societal weapon has brought about very great changes in the lives of the American Blacks. No wonder they have started to exercise their own assertive roles in the present social fabric of American life.

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