Nemesis of Race in Richard Wright's *The Native Son*

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Racism is a man made, man enforced phenomenon which stands out as the basic element of the discourse of difference that pervades interracial relations. The fact that racism hurt many people in the ancient periods, especially during the twentieth century is expressed in the work of Negros writers such as Richard Wright who reacted against racism from what he had experienced during his life. Through his writings he attempts to illustrate the Black misery, depression and also examine how the Black can change conditions of his life through his novel *Native Son.*

The present study analyses Richard Wright's exploration of Bigger's psychological corruption which gives us a new perspective on the oppressive effect racism had on the black population in 1930s America. Bigger's psychological damage results from the constant barrage of racist propaganda and racial oppression he faces while growing up. It also discusses how the deleterious effect of racism prevents whites from realizing the true humanity inherent in groups that they oppress.

"What, then, is life to me? it is aimless and worthless, and worse than worthless"

The emotional outburst of the solitary reaper in Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* echoes the painful cry of the Black community that suffers a depleted sense of worth and identity. Though slavery was abolished, sociological fractures like economic oppression and geographic racial demarcation resulted in dehumanization of both the privileged and the oppressed in a society schematized by ideas of racial inequity. These discourses caused a psychological fracture of their identity and thereby reflected the fractured society that whites worked to maintain and blacks forced to accept.

Having witnessed and survived the lynching, and violent segregation of the pre modern Jim Crow South, Richard Wright, in a prophetic voice represents the consequences of the pernicious devices that form the dissociation and vacuity of identity among the urban African American population. Wright shows how African Americans' places are defined in mere spatial terms. They are confined to segregationist areas which are completely isolated from white places. According to Joyce Ann Joyce, *Native Son* is based on the idea that "social, economic and

political practices of segregation foster demeaning, destructive psychological attitudes that imbue the personalities of both Wright's Black and white characters" (30).

In the opening section, when Bigger and his friend Gus are watching a plane flying, they feel the socio-economic chains placed upon them. Bigger tells his friend: "Them white boys sure can fly ... [T]hey get a chance to do everything" (19). Three times Bigger helplessly expresses his hope to fly a plane; he desperately cries: "I could fly one of them things if I had a chance" (20). Gus faces Bigger with the reason why he cannot fly a plane; it stems from the notion of racial capitalism which aims at keeping African Americans economically in a subordinate status in order to preserve the wide gap that separates the two races: "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane" (20). But since Bigger is both black and poor, he would never be allowed to fly a plane; flying planes would indicate the African American's prosperity and economic independence. Contemplating all the "ifs" Gus mentions, Bigger realizes the scope of the social injustice and the barriers that prevent him from achieving his aspirations. He is so obsessed by this idea that his mind makes up unanswerable questions.

The non-acceptance that Bigger struggles with leaves him in incredible hatred of white people, because they hold him back in life and he cannot fulfil his dreams. The anxiety and hatred which Bigger experiences whenever he is confronted with the doings of white people is either expressed vocally by insulting those around him or through violence. The fact that he has to live with his family in a one room, rat-infested apartment makes him feel inferior and he turns his loathing onto his family and his brutality onto the rat that dares roaming around. This scene depicts the duality of his reaction to the circumstances he faces in his life. Wright says, "It would appear that resorting to violence is the only way in which Bigger is able to articulate his despair at the racially charged inequity which daily threatens to consume his life" (xiv).

Upon arriving at the Daltons' for a job interview, Bigger undergoes a metamorphosis losing his voice, partly because he feels inferior to the white people living there in luxury and partly due to the fact that he does not understand them. Bigger sees white people not as individuals, but rather as an undifferentiated "whiteness," a powerful, threatening, and hateful authority that denies him control over his own life and identity. The structure of American society and Bigger's own limited, restricted experiences prevent him from relating to white people in any other way. Though Bigger feels that wrong is being done to him, he has so deeply internalized the rules of race relations that he finds himself acting out the role he has always seen blacks assume around rich, powerful whites.

In fact, as soon as he enters it, more tension about his identity arises, as he feels alienated by those around him. Mrs. Dalton wants to reshape him according to her own wishes, disregarding his own desires. She also attempts to recreate him to incorporate her personal expectations, because he is an outsider in this world and will never be completely accepted in it, unless, he is supposed to stick to their rules and beliefs. After Mrs. Dalton, Jan and Mary Dalton believe that they can make him into the person they think he wants to become based on their political beliefs. However, Bigger is scared and confused by their behaviour towards him. They cross the colour line by having him shake their hands, seating him between them in the car and eating in a coloured restaurant where he is well known, which is a clear offence to the rules established. According to Frazier, "Eating with a person has strong symbolic value in many societies, and usually signifies social acceptance. … for colored and white adults to eat together under ordinary conditions is practically unheard of" (239).

While Mary and Jan feel at ease in this location, Bigger knows about the transgression which they committed and cannot be at ease with it. "He was puzzled as to why they were treating him this way (102-3). It is only natural that Bigger experiences this confusion, he has never learnt any other social behaviour and this goes by far beyond what he was supposed to assimilate. All three want to change him. Unfortunately, they forget him, as an individual, in the process. He is not permitted to have a personal identity, neither by society, nor by those who supposedly want to assist him in his development.

Bigger feels alienated in this environment and throughout his stay at the Daltons', he is submissive and does not utter his thoughts, which his employers do not ask of him anyway, except for Mary, their daughter, who is affiliated to the Communist Party through her friend Jan and wants to help the black community in fighting for their civic rights. While Bigger hates his employers, he deeply loathes Mary because she questions his desires and wishes and requests him to express them in front of her, which is asking for the impossible, as he never thought he would be confronted to such a situation.

Mary crosses the colour line, which scares Bigger as he knows that he will be held responsible for any trespasses, not her. After an evening with her, filled with transgressions of the segregation rules on her part (sitting in the car next to him, eating with him in a restaurant in the Black Belt part of the city), she ends up drunk and he has to carry her to bed.

As Bigger puts Mary to bed, he becomes excited and aroused. This excitement comes not because Mary is physically attractive, but that she is forbidden to him. When Bigger feels Mrs. Dalton's ghostly presence in the room, he is reminded of the whiteness that controls his life, and is

overcome by the magnitude of his transgression. Bigger once again finds his skin colour trapping him in a situation, in which the only option proves to be fatal. Racism destroys Bigger's innocence, awakening within him the capability to murder. ". . . . he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow. . . Mary's fingers loosened. He did not feel her surging and heaving against him. Her body was still. (116-17)

As there has never been any bonding between master and slave, there was no room for honest conversation and consequently, both races have not been able to entertain a real sort of communication between them. Already upon his arrival, Bigger is pushed into the role of the underling and racially inferior. Additionally, he has never learnt to confront a white person on an equal footing and therefore cannot relate the circumstances which led him to putting Mary to bed. The fact that Bigger is in Mary's bedroom would certainly have ended with trouble for him as he is not supposed to cross the line and be in this precise location, a white girl's sanctuary.

According to Psychoanalysts, fear may develop into an uncontrollable state with incalculable consequences. When a person senses a greater level of menace, his/her fear may develop into another form. Ondishko in his "A View of Anxiety, Fear and Panic" points out that, "As danger increases, fear may escalate into panic. At that time thought deteriorates into distorted mental images, into complete irrationality" (58). This is exactly what happens with Bigger in his relationship with Mary Dalton. Being increasingly aware of the inequality between his social and economic conditions and those of the Daltons', Bigger develops irrational hatred and fear of Whites, which leads him to accidentally suffocate Mary Dalton's daughter. The fact that he cannot speak up to Mrs. Dalton and explain the situation to her is rooted in slavery. It is the law's role in maintaining racial boundaries that results in Bigger suffocating Mary. As Barbara Johnson puts it, "Like Oedipus, it is through [Bigger's] efforts to avoid enacting the forbidden story that he inevitably enacts it" (224).

After Mary's accidental killing, Bigger realises that society will stamp him as a stereotypical "Negro murderer" (119) and that this identity is forced onto him without his consent and without questioning the circumstances surrounding the heiress' death. "… She was dead; she was white; she was a woman; he had killed her; he was black; he might be caught; he did not want to be caught; if he were they would kill him."(121)

To Bigger, the deliberate murder of a white woman represents the ultimate rebellion against the crushing authority of "whiteness." While he has in fact killed a white girl, Bigger convinces himself that he did not do so accidentally, but rather he consciously challenged and

defeated the unfair social order imposed upon him. Given that Bigger does not have the ability to determine life and death, he feels that he now possesses a power that white America has used against him since his birth. In Bigger's fantasy, his alleged victory is an act of creation: he believes that killing Mary gives him a new life, one that he himself controls. Bigger sees framing Jan as merely the first step in constructing and protecting his new life. Through these actions, Bigger claims equality with whites on his own terms, and feels that he has become more human because his life now holds purpose. A bitter irony pervades this entire idea of life-affirming transformation, as the transformation occurs only after a brutal, irrational act of violence.

His killing Mary and not being caught, empowers him further and he gloats about it. In the second part of the novel, Bigger continues his plan of concealment, deciding to send a ransom note to the Daltons', that implicates Jan and the Communist Party, and enlisting his girlfriend Bessie Mears in the plot to collect the ransom. When he meets Bessie to compose the note, he is irritated by her because she opposed him. A ray of violent thought to "take the butcher knife and cut her throat"(209) splashed. In spite of his thoughts he finds another way to subjugate her for the moment, by using her free will and character against her.

Before the ransom can be delivered, however, Mary Dalton's body is found in the furnace, and Bigger flees to Bessie's one-room apartment. There, Bessie confronts Bigger with the inevitable interpretation of Mary Dalton's murder saying, "They'll … They'll say you raped her" (258).

When Bigger first realizes that "they'll say you raped [Mary], he unlayers, deconstructs, and reconfigures the very concept of rape until it becomes, as Abdul J. Mohamed puts it, both a "paradigm of all modes of crossing the racial boundary" and a "metonymy of the process of oppressive racist control" (98-99).

Bigger thinks back to the shame, anger, and hatred he felt that night. He thinks that he has committed rape, but to him, "rape" means feeling as if his back is against a wall and being forced to strike out to protect himself, whether he wants to or not. Bigger thinks that he commits a form of "rape" every time he looks at a white face. He seeks refuge at Bessie's, who starts questioning him. He only answers in short replies, as if he has already given up. Nevertheless, he still manages to get her to run away with him by giving her clear orders to follow. He thinks, "If she stayed here, they would come to her, and she would simply lie on the bed and sob out everything" (256).

During their escape he turns into the rapist that society has already made out of him. He misuses Bessie mentally and physically and consequently, takes her identity from her. He moulds her the way he wants to and by doing this he ascertains his own power. All Bessie ever wanted

was to have a peaceful life, but Bigger first takes her dignity by using her sexually and then to top everything, he ends up appropriating her life. He adds a second murder to his count, which is not accidental at all, but rather a conscious decision. This deed does not abash him, which would be natural as he has just ended his girlfriend's life, but it empowers him as it further shapes his independent identity.

Suppression of Bigger's human identity renders him indifferent to the suffering of other human beings. Psychologists Brock Bastian and Nick Haslam describe the development of "cognitive responses to interpersonal maltreatment," asserting that "people enter into 'cognitive deconstructive' states when excluded. It involves emotional numbing, reduced empathy, cognitive inflexibility, and an absence of meaningful thought" (297).

As Bigger copes with maltreatment by whites, he experiences the symptoms of cognitive deconstruction; this is manifest in even his most intimate relationships: "I wasn't in love with Bessie. . . I don't reckon I was ever in love with nobody. . . You had to have a girl, so I had Bessie" (352). His attitude toward his lover, Bessie, is not one of understanding or humane connection but as one object observing and interacting with another.

To some degree, Bigger is able to distract himself from his guilt by concentrating on the new sense of power he feels after doing something significant for the first time in his life. The murders give Bigger a chance to "live out the consequences of his actions," freeing him from the image of blackness that white America has imposed upon him and giving him a chance to control his own fate. Ironically, Bigger has had to murder in order to gain that control, and he only feels freedom at a time when he is trapped in the city with the police closing in on him.

The newspapers brand him as a murderer and rapist, even though he did not abuse Mary and only accidentally killed her. Mob violence accompanies Bigger's arrest and trial and like a hunted animal, he is dragged by policemen. The racial Tribune describes him as an animal: "He looks exactly like an ape! . . . His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of the jungle beast" (260). Moreover, many African Americans lose their jobs and others are beaten and dismissed from their houses. This mob violence in the book shows how the race system seizes upon such individual cases to terrify African Americans. This recalls the many cases of violence and lynching in African American history which were done under the sponsorship of legal white authorities. When he is arrested he is beaten up and nearly lynched which is a direct outcome of the image that he received by the press. After his apprehension, he gives up on himself, by pushing everything from him. "He was not so much in a stupor, as in the grip of a deep physiological resolution not to react to anything" (304).

In fact, he has infringed the boundaries of racial segregation and for that reason he needs to be stripped of his newly acquired identity and freedom, in order to be brought back under the yoke and to suppress others who might desire to follow Bigger's example. "Though he could not have put it into words, he felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment; that they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control"(306).

However, he refuses to stand in as what they try to make of him and gives up on his physical and mental indifference, even if he cannot voice his contempt for the white authority. "And as he felt it, rebellion rose in him. He had sunk to the lowest point this side of death, but when he felt his life again threatened in a way that meant that he was to go down the dark road a helpless spectacle of sport for others, he sprang back into action, alive, contending" (306).

Wright also foregrounds the way in which law at various points itself metonymically represented by the whites racializes and sexualizes Bigger, while simultaneously racializing and en-gendering Mary. Buckley, in seeking the death penalty, refers to Bigger as a "worthless ape," a "cunning beast," a "demented savage," a "hardened black thing" with "black thoughts" who has perpetrated a deed "black and awful," a "black crime," but expressly urges the court to impose death so "that the social order is kept intact" (312). Although Buckley never explicitly spells out the social order he has in mind, it seems evident that he is referring to one that is based on racial and sexual hierarchy. This can be gleaned from Buckley's description of Mary Dalton as "one of the finest and most delicate flowers of our womanhood," (128) a "trusting white girl,'"(131) the daughter of "a wealthy, kindly disposed white man," (131) and from his argument that a death sentence is necessary to protect "our society, our homes, and our loved ones." (132) The role Buckley plays in entrenching race is obvious. However, Max, Bigger's defense lawyer, equally entrenches race, especially in his speech arguing against the imposition of a death sentence.

Under the law, it is not only Bigger who is disposable and less valuable, but also Bessie. As Bigger himself realizes during the inquest when Bessie's "raped and mutilated body" is brought in and offered in evidence as to "the exact manner of the death of Mary Dalton,"(298) the law's interest is only in seeking retribution for the death of the white girl in order to deter other blacks from transgressing racial boundaries: Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely "evidence." And under it all he knew that the white people did not really care about Bessie's being killed. He had even heard it said that white people felt it was good when one Negro killed another; it meant that they had one Negro less to contend with. Crime for a Negro was only

when he harmed whites, took white lives, or injured white property. Wright thus focuses on the role law and society play in limning race and gender and reifying race-based and gender-based hierarchies.

The problem with Max's approach is it requires him to both race and erase Bigger Thomas. Claiming that he must "speak in general terms," Max invokes the history of slavery, segregation and deprivation to argue that, Bigger is a "poor black boy," a "powerless [pawn].” In so arguing, Max fails to see Bigger. Instead, Max reinscribes Bigger, as “a type”, the "black criminal," or "a symbol, a test symbol." For Max, "every Negro in America's on trial out there today" (314). Even worse, in attempting to demolish the prosecution's construction of the black male as bestial, Max merely erects another, equally race-based construction: the black male as a bestial product of societal forces.

After a long conversation with Max, Bigger ultimately self-justifies his crimes. As Barbara Johnson notes, Bigger "reinterprets his criminalization," translating Max's argument that Bigger raped and killed because he was black "into the belief that because he was black, doing wrong was the right thing to do'" (193). This reinterpretation leads to Bigger's famous exclamation of "What I killed for, I am!'" (308). Hence, Bigger's conclusion, "[W]hen I think about what you say I kind of feel what I wanted. It makes me feel I was kind of right .... What I killed for must've been good!" (310).

Bigger takes responsibility for himself by deciding to accept his sentence, defying the authorities which want to incriminate him further and by denying them the pleasure to see him crumbling. When he says good-bye to Max before his execution, he accepts that his individuality comes with a price and he complies with it. “He still held on to the bars. Then he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut” (454).

It is important to note that Bigger does change in jail, accepting that the acts he has committed are part of who he is, but also that the hate for one’s oppressors is a natural feeling. It is the repression of these feelings - a repression Bigger has forced upon himself in order to survive, that leads to his violent acts. By the end of the novel, he has shed his hate and fear, and longs only to understand his place in the world and his relation to other people.

Native Son is certainly a work whose goal it is to awaken its readership to the injustices that prevail in society. “A fiction burning with a fierce sense of racial and social injustice, it is also a major historical novel and a narrative fully and provocatively in the American grain” (Gray 536).

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