Identity Crisis and Cerebral Oppression in Richard Wright's Native Son

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Abstract: The issue of identity heads and cerebral oppression in the chosen Richard Wright novel is the main focus of this study. Among the most well- known authors in American literature is him. Race, gender, nation, identity, language, and ascendance were the subjects of the maturity of his jottings. This study will use the character of Bigger from Richard Wright's Native Son to illustrate how societal prospects and treatment alter a person's life. This study also examines postcolonial proposition in the environment of literature, demonstrating post-colonialism as a theoretical approach that may be applied to reveal the social heritage's moping goods. Black- American opposition against white ascendance in the US has been examined using the frame of ascendance in the new Native son. This study is also explores how the society and its prospects and demand played a pivotal part in demolishing one's character. This study is also includes a short preface about the author, the literature he contributes, major themes of his other workshop eventually a kind of conclusion with applicable to Bigger's change of life.

Key words: identity -crisis, oppression, duality, poverty, quest for gender

INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright (1908-1960) stands as an eminent literary figure in American literature, a best-selling author and social critic. Most of his works dealt with harsh realities of racial injustice in the 20th century. Born in the deeply segregated South to parents who were children of former slaves, Wright's early life was marked by poverty, abandonment, and pervasive racism. His migration to northern cities like Chicago, while offering a semblance of escape from overt Jim Crow laws, exposed him to the more insidious forms of structural racism embedded within urban environments (Fabre, 1993). Wright's literary career consistently interrogated the complex interplay of race, power, and identity, often predating and presaging later civil rights movements with his stark portrayal of Black American life (Rowley, 2001).

Among his most enduring contributions, *Native Son* (1940) became an instant sensation, selling over 250,000 copies within three weeks and becoming the first book by a Black writer endorsed by the Book-of-the-Month Club (Wright, 1940). The novel introduces Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old Black man living in the cramped, impoverished South Side of 1930s Chicago. Through Bigger's tragic narrative, Wright not only critiqued the socio-economic conditions forced upon Black Americans but also delved deep into the psychological damage inflicted by systemic racism.

This study argues that *Native Son* powerfully illustrates how societal expectations, enforced racial hierarchies, and economic oppression lead to a profound identity crisis and cerebral oppression in the marginalized individual. By analyzing Bigger Thomas's psychological transformation, this paper will demonstrate how a repressive environment can deform character and agency. Furthermore, it will utilize a postcolonial theoretical framework to illuminate the enduring legacy of historical subjugation and the pervasive nature of white ascendancy that traps Black Americans within a cycle of fear, anger, and self-destruction. This examination will explore the mechanisms by which society's demands and limited prospects play a pivotal role in demolishing an individual's character, culminating in Bigger's desperate quest for a coherent identity.

Richard Wright: A Literary Pioneer and Social Critic

Richard Wright's literary output was deeply intertwined with his lived experiences and his evolving philosophical perspectives. His early life, moving from a plantation in Mississippi to Memphis and then to Chicago, provided him with a firsthand

understanding of racial discrimination and economic hardship. His engagement with the Communist Party in the 1930s, though eventually abandoned due to ideological conflicts, shaped his critique of capitalist exploitation and racial injustice (Fabre, 1993). Wright's early alignment with sociological theories from figures like Robert Park and Horace Cayton Jr. from the University of Chicago informed his realistic portrayals of urban Black communities as "ghettoes mired in poverty" (Wright, 1940; Drake & Cayton, 1945).

Wright's contributions extend beyond *Native Son*. His acclaimed autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), vividly recounts his oppressive childhood in the Jim Crow South, further elucidating the origins of the psychological states depicted in his fiction. Later works, such as the existential novel *The Outsider* (1953) and the anti-colonialist essays in *White Man, Listen!* (1957), showcased his intellectual breadth and his consistent commitment to critiquing various forms of oppression on a global scale (Rowley, 2001). Despite his philosophical shifts, Wright remained a staunch advocate for Black culture and Black protest, effectively laying groundwork for the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. His decision to move to Paris in 1946, eloquently expressed in his poem "I Choose Exile" (1950), underscored his belief that true freedom as both a writer and a Black man was elusive in the United States (Fabre, 1993).

Bigger Thomas and the Burden of Identity Crisis

Bigger Thomas embodies the quiet essential "native son"a product of American society's racial stratification and violent undercurrents. From the opening scene, where Bigger battles a rat in his cramped South Side apartment, his life is characterized by poverty, hopelessness, and alienation. He is "burdened with a powerful conviction that he has no control over his life and that he cannot aspire to anything other than menial, low-wage labor" (Wright, 1940). This conviction stems from a lifetime of cerebral oppression, where racist propaganda and social conditioning have distorted his self-perception and limited his aspirations.

Wright meticulously illustrates how Bigger's identity is perpetually in crisis, fractured by the overwhelming external pressures of a white-dominated society. Bigger views white people not as individuals, but as an monolithic, oppressive "whiteness" (Wright, 1940). This dehumanization is a direct consequence of his own dehumanizing experiences. He feels trapped, constantly oscillating between fear and explosive anger. As the novel states, he is "forced to hide behind a façade of toughness or risk succumbing to despair" (Wright, 1940). This internal conflict prevents him from achieving a sense of wholeness.

The concept of duality, particularly as articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), is highly relevant with this character Bigger.

> "two-ness" felt by African Americans: "One ever feels his two-ness an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3).

Bigger's internal thoughts explores this fragmentation. He is isolated not only from his community but also from himself; his "two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction," have never been unified (Wright, 1940). His desperate quest for identity becomes tragically linked to acts of violence, which, paradoxically, offer him a perverse sense of agency and self-assertion against the forces that have conspired to destroy him.

Postcolonial Perspectives: Ascendancy and the Moping Goods of Social Heritage

To fully grasp the depth of Bigger's oppression and the societal forces at play, a postcolonial theoretical approach proves invaluable. While post colonialism typically analyzes the aftermath of colonial rule, its tenets particularly concerning power dynamics, subjugation of the colonized mind, and resistance are highly applicable to the internal colonization experienced by Black Americans under systemic racism within the United States. White ascendancy, akin to a colonial power, has historically imposed its values, narratives, and structures upon Black communities, leading to what the abstract terms "the social heritage's moping goods."

The Daltons, for instance, embody the nuanced mechanisms of this ascendancy. As landlords who profit from overcrowded, high-rent apartments in the

South Side, they contribute directly to Bigger's poverty. Yet, they see themselves as benevolent philanthropists, donating to Black schools and offering token jobs (Wright, 1940). This facade of philanthropy, as Max later argues, serves to alleviate their own guilt, demonstrating a form of cerebral oppression where even the oppressor's consciousness is warped by the system they benefit from.

Even seemingly progressive white characters like Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone, who consciously seek to transcend racial barriers, inadvertently reinforce Bigger's sense of alienation. Their well-intentioned but naive attempts at friendship fail to acknowledge the deep-seated fear and suspicion instilled in Bigger by a lifetime of racial conditioning. Their assumption that Bigger will reciprocate their open-mindedness ignores the very real social taboos that govern Black-white interactions in 1930s America. Their failure to recognize Bigger's individuality, rather than seeing him as a representative of an oppressed group, is a subtle but destructive form of racial prejudice (Wright, 1940). This highlights how white ascendancy distorts perceptions on both sides of the racial divide.

Bigger's desperate acts of violence, particularly the murder of Mary Dalton, can be viewed as a violent assertion against this pervasive ascendancy. His subsequent feeling of "power and identity" and the bizarre "jubilation" (Wright, 1940) upon committing the murder illustrate the extreme psychological pressure under which he exists. In a world where his agency is constantly denied, violence becomes the only means through which he perceives he can exert control, however fleeting or self-destructive.

Societal Demands and the Demolition of Character

The societal demands placed upon Bigger are paradoxical and ultimately destructive. He is expected to be docile, subservient, and invisible, yet he is simultaneously feared and stereotyped as an animalistic brute by the dominant white society. The novel vividly portrays how the media, particularly the newspapers, fuels this negative portrayal, predetermining Bigger's guilt and punishment even before his trial (Wright, 1940). This relentless stereotyping and dehumanization is a primary mechanism by which his character is demolished.

The judicial system, far from being a bastion of "equal justice under law," is depicted as an ineffectual pawn caught between the sensationalism of the media and the political ambitions of figures like State's Attorney Buckley. Wright, drawing inspiration from real-life cases like that of Robert Nixon in 1938-39, demonstrates that for a Black man accused of killing a white woman, guilt is a foregone conclusion regardless of the facts (Wright, 1940). This systemic injustice further underscores the crushing weight of societal demands that leave no room for Bigger's individual humanity or the complex circumstances that shaped him

Max's impassioned defense, though ultimately unsuccessful, highlights the core argument: Bigger is a product of his environment. The "fearful, hopeless existence that he has experienced in a racist society since birth" is the true culprit behind his actions (Wright, 1940). Wright is not absolving Bigger of his crimes but rather exposing the societal complicity in his creation. The implication is clear: without a fundamental shift in societal structures and attitudes, more "men like Bigger" will inevitably emerge from the "vicious cycle of hatred and vengeance." The novel serves as a powerful indictment of a society that, through its demands and limitations, actively participates in the demolition of its citizens' characters.

CONCLUSION

Richard Wright's *Native Son* remains a searing exploration of identity crisis and cerebral oppression under the weight of systemic racism. Through Bigger Thomas, Wright reveals how generations of white ascendancy and its accompanying social heritage can deform the human spirit, pushing individuals to desperate acts in a tragic quest for self-realization. The novel masterfully dissects the psychological impact of constant racial prejudice manifesting as fear, anger, and a fractured sense of self and critiques a justice system that is anything but just.

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