CHAPTER III

QUEST FOR NEGRO IDENTITY:

NATIVE SON
Richard Wright's novel of outrage *Native Son* brought a sea change in Afro-American Fiction. A bitter outburst, a passionate cry for justice and an emotional autobiography, it is in the tradition of provincial Negro Writers. Being an honest, dreadful heart breaking novel, Native Son is a trend setter, and dominated the field for a long time. It shattered the stereotype - the comic, clownish, Jim Crow Negro.

Wright was an American first. His life in America embittered him but it sustained his honesty and integrity. With passionate vitality and with his skill to appeal to people, Wright transmitted his knowledge into *Native Son*. A self-educated, an self-disciplined writer Wright may not be equal to his white superior craftsmen like Hemingway, Sartre, Joyce but he could capture and move both the white and the black. Both were disturbed—the whites horrified at their own cruelty, the blacks
were dismayed by their helpless despicable condition which they never openly recognized. Richard Wright was the first to break the smug soothing illusion of Negro by presenting the Negro as he is. He did not shrink from picturing their nightmarish Native Son. His was a scream of anger and protest. He did not mince the matter. He did not yield. He was bold. His outspokenness was his literary creed. His talent was a comixure of honesty, observation, disgust, anger, shame. He knew what it is to be a Negro in the white world; a Negro forced to live in ignorance, to whom the white world was a natural force, a fatal force to which the Negro's reaction is only fear and shame. The Negro is nonman, cut dead, in whom rage and impotent despair are roused by the non-recognition of whites. No wonder if the Negro hates the white, the hatred being so keen would prompt the Negro to kill the whiteman with or without the slightest provocation. This is the theme in most of his books. He being the Negro in the
devilish White society had a nightmarish experience which haunted him all the time. He repeatedly described the gruesome details the same relation to engulfing evil society.

Wright is a man with a mission and message, the message for the white and the mission is to bring an awareness to the white and save the world. He translated the Negro experience into creative terms with great psychological detail, analysis and great attention to physical details. Wright wrote for the blacks only when he is pressed.

Wright wanted to show the impact of social, economic injustices done to a group on the basis of race. These injustices, Wright asserted, could hamper the normal psychology resulting in criminals, monsters (ex. Bigger Thomas). His works reveal blatant racial segregation that turn the helpless group as invisible and the hero's fight a waste against such racial bigotry. He accepted the Negro as he is, psychologically marooned, forced
to be a man no better than a beast or even lesser than one. But he maintained that it is the society that is to be blamed for. It is White America that perpetuated racial injustice, yet was complacent with its so called charitable action, philanthropist movements. *Native Son* is a tribute "to the Biggers he knew who refused to knuckle under, who declared their frustration with the world by engaging in crime and murder."¹

In *Theory of Literature*, Welleck and Warren say that "a work of art may embody the dream of an author rather than his actual life or it may be the mark of the actual self behind which his real self is hiding or it may be the picture of the life from which the author wants to escape. In the writings of Richard Wright there are glimpses at different times of all three of these purposes. But his dreams are often nightmares and his masks are designed to
reveal more than they hide, perhaps to a greater extent than any other contemporary American novelist. Wright's authorship is creature of environment and tortured memories.  

Wright's short stories help us in understanding more of Native Son and Black Boy. In four of his short stories in Uncle Tom's Children - (Big leaves Home, Fire and Cloud Long Black Sun, Down by the Riverside) the theme is that of a Negro killing the white man as protest against racial oppression. He is perfecting the technique that reaches the zenith in his major works.

Bigger Thomas, the hero of Native Son does the same thing (Negro Killing the White). He, accidental though it was, kills the white girl. But his hatred is so keen that he would have killed without any provocation. He was cheated out of every thing by whites and they are responsible for his unhappiness, so they must be killed. But as he was unable to kill all he would at least kill those whom he could.
The book is powerful not because of action but because of its social implication. Wright was much impressed by some niggers he met, who challenged the oppressing society and who fought for recognition and equality. If crime becomes their modus operandi it is the white society that has to be condemned and not the criminals.

_Native Son defies categorisation, it being the most controversial book that Wright ever wrote._

It is autobiographical, existential and a novel of naturalism, Marxism, quest romance, novel of violence, propaganda piece, novel of protest, surrealism ironic tragedy.

_Is it autobiographical? "If autobiography is a dialectic between what you wish to become and what society has determined what you are, Native Son confirms that rule."_\(^3\) The hero Bigger Thomas is (if not the epitome of all) one among many such Negroes who were forced to be criminals as crime is the only
way by which they can pour forth their venom on this cruel society. The environment in which Bigger lives, the terrible poverty, the nerve shattering invisibility, meaningless racial segregation predetermined him to be a criminal, gruesome murderer at that, who otherwise might have been a law abiding citizen, if the society is not what it is. In a way Bigger resembles Richard Wright whose life was a nightmare like any of the Negroes. Critics are of the opinion that Wright is Bigger Thomas.

Both are from Mississippi, both migrate to Chicago, live in slums, with mothers, always haunted by fear, both rebell and are violent. Wright, when a boy worked in White family whose daughter was kind within her limits. A Negro servant in a white family with a friendly daughter, and the attraction— all these of his life found way into his Native Son. So is the case of the Negro boy who killed a white, questioning of Dalton's real estate, International Labour Defence of his time
are ushered into the novel. And his leftist intentions are obvious in the last chapter and are implicit in the novel. In Wright's own words "He was an American because he was a native son, but he was also a negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way of life and mine, neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp." Katherine Fishburn endorses this view when she says that it is the emotional autobiography of a man unwilling to be either a thing or a criminal. Bigger Thomas forced recognition by killing. Wright by writing.

Native Son is in the line of Black Autobiography which is a "bid for freedom," an anguished cry for identity with a seething rage that tries to tear down the "iron curtain between 'I and You'." The writer's struggle for selfrespect, self-definition and the bitter resort to violence, are seen in this novel. And the typical restlessness of the hero
is in the tradition of Black autobiography (Black literature, for that matter). The black writer is inevitably drawn to politics as the promotion of self is linked with his group. This political movement compels the writer to write only factual materialistic details and use concrete language. Their obsession with facts, reporting data, their understanding of human social relations, clarity of thought and expression are the racial virtues and Wright possesses them in abundance, which are used in Native Son. Wright's gruesome slave experience forces him to render a detailed account of atrocities, understatement irony and indignation. Like all other black autobiographies Native Son brings home the willful blindness of white writers to the sickening stinking havoc done by them.

Most of the Negro Writers always appealed to whites or wrote only to change the public opinion. Wright of course tried to change by threatening and
by rebelling and not by shameless supplication of pity like some of the earlier writers. His Native Son, his Black Boy, almost all his short stories depict the hero as victim of circumstances who rebels against the meaningless shackles, fretters forged on him, and never hesitate even to turn to crime as the means. Wright hoped to change the world at large by depicting society as it is and did not mind even if he had to exaggerate.

One can also see identity crisis where Bigger is just a man not belonging to either white or black but was forced to belong to one by birth, and was rejected by the other only because he was born in the accursed class. He is cheated from everything in life (no education, no dignified labour) and is forced to live like a moron, as an encaged animal. He is humiliated. He is restless, aimless. His clamping environment is embedded with seeds of crime and such a man will be nothing but a criminal before
he thinks. He fails to cope up with this, fails to express the suffering which he himself could not understand, and the suffering is expressed only in slang, sex, drinks, none of which he enjoys. Bigger does all the crimes only to spite the society, a society which forgot his existence. "He was rebellious enough to want to forge an identity out of his black experience in spite of or to spite-society." He was enraged as he was treated as a beast and he was anguished to see the gaping gap between the gruesome real world and his world of all dreams. He was tense all the time as there was the clash between the two.

Yet it is not totally autobiographical. Black Boy is more from his life rather than Native Son. Wright himself agreed that Bigger Thomas is not one but four such people whom he met earlier and who impressed him much "Imagine Bigger Thomas projecting his own life in lucid prose guided, say by the in-
sights of Marx and Freud and you have an idea of this autobiography.\textsuperscript{6}

The hero in the black autobiography "is not an individual with private career but a soldier in long historic march towards canon."\textsuperscript{9} The hero Bigger Thomas never feels that he belongs to his class, nor does he feel it his responsibility to fight for his class. He does not have any such political identity. He is just a listless irresponsible boy. He does not share the sense of purpose. Neither he tries to get educated as education is viewed as a potent weapon to retaliate. Whereas Wright is a selfeducated man who understood the value of it like many other Negroes who wanted to be something in life. Glickberg's saying that Richard Wright is Bigger Thomas is aptly contradicted by Baldwin's acutely felt statement that there is 'bigger Thomas in every American Negro.' The aesthetic blending of subjective and objective elements make it neither
Statements like "They going to kill me any how.... And, under above it all there was the fear of death, before which he was naked and without, defence he had to go forward and meet his end like any other thing upon earth.... There would have to hover above him like the stars in a full sky a vast configuration of images and symbols whose magic power could lift him up and make him live so intensely that the dread of being unequal would be forgotten... He was balanced on a hair line now but there was no one to push him forward or backward, no one to make him feel that he has any value or worth - no one but himself." would make it clear that the novel focuses him as a private person. Emphasis is on the uniqueness of his problem but not on the race in general. "There is too much in Wright's novel which suggests that Bigger's response to his situation does not stem from his categorization, his
Negroness but his humaneness.\textsuperscript{11} "Race, social category does not have relevance."\textsuperscript{12} Neither he tries to get educated. Wright's efforts to create whites as real human beings capable of sympathy to Negroes (Jan Erlone, Boris Max) distinguished the novel from other autobiographies.

Native Son is partly existential and Wright's existential philosophy arises from his own observations of life and not through influence of other writers. He is the beginner of modern existential novels. His philosophy can be ascribed to, in the words of Donald Gibson "a mood arising out of exigencies of certain life situation rather than as fully developed and articulated systematic philosophy which one chooses to hold or reject,"\textsuperscript{13} Wright being Black is a "birth right existentialist."\textsuperscript{14} "He was existentialistic long before he heard the name for he was committed to literature of extreme situation both through the pressures, his rage and the gasping
hope of ultimate catharsis."\textsuperscript{15} Just as war led to an existential response in Europe, Wright's earlier plight - as a boy like any other southern Negro he was constantly under the fear of an enimical destroying white world, is the source of his existential outlook. As per Gibson, Bigger's response rises from his condition which confirms the precept "existence precedes essence"\textsuperscript{16} and the fundamental element is 'survival motion'. The existential philosophical queries such as what is to be human, the sadistic tendency to happily inflict suffering on others, the origin of anguishing loneliness dealt with by Wright in \textit{Native Son}.

Accepting the whole way of life Bigger emerges as an existential character. "Bigger resolved his self alienation by existentially creating a new identity for himself."\textsuperscript{17} Bigger rejects the white American culture, attacks the white idea of beauty and affirms black culture. He wanted to live in white
minds as visible and for him killing is creative as it helps him to be something to be seen, to have something that nobody can deprive him of. His actions are conceptualized in Maxe's words and can be summed up as in Sterlings words "as stranger getting strange." He is an existential hero in search of his identity. To get this identity he kills. And by dying he affirms that his life got value, if not he will not be killed for killing others. He succeeds by violently shattering the white symbol. Through Bigger Wright presents his philosophy that the negro is forced to think that culture must be won confronted like brute in the bullfight. He wanted to show what oppression has done to the negro wrecking his relation with whites as well as with his folk. "I had also to show what oppression has done to Bigger's relationship with his own people, how it has split him off from them, how it has baffled how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the
victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor." ¹⁹

Bigger Thomas' whole effort was to loosen the shackles of the society and to seek the real self without yielding to this relentlessly oppressing society that "dashes to him the moment it sees his colour. Paradoxically the society reminds him of his colour and then forgets his very existence. This Bigger wanted to retaliate. Camus says in the Myth of Sisyphus "that there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn, and that one must imagine Sisyphus happy. Native Son is the quest of Bigger Thomas for this transcendental, for the state of being able to assent life in the face of irrational world that seeks his soul. It is his journey into selfhood." ²⁰ Native Son reflects the American image of Negro life. It shows the two perspectives of Bigger (in a way of all Negroes) and the tension in
those contradicting two. As Baldwin puts it "to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in rage almost all the time." 21

"The Negro is American Metaphor. The Whiteman in America cannot escape the Bigger Thomas in his skull." 22

Yet it is not explicitly philosophical like his The Outsider in which the race issue is universalized. In Native Son its more of a individual rather than of a race and never of a universe. "The existentialism evident here is just a review of that in "The Outsider" whose hero cross Damon takes up the burden of complete freedom. The dramatization is not in the line of insistent philosophical works of Dostovsky or Sartre. The novel is not divided in the existential stages i.e. Dread, Dream Descent, Despair, Death Decision." 23 His existential scenes tend to only one factor, the blackness. His hero cannot get an adequate role for his pathos like those of European existential heroes. Wright could see the clash bet-
ween existentialism and antiexistentialism, he could see the deceptions and ambiguities but he could not present them properly fitting the requisition of existential novels. His crude craftsmanship, limited perception and the outlook cannot make his novel totally existential.

Quite a few critics readily branded *Native Son* as a communistic novel and substantiated their argument with speeches of Max, the lawyer who reflects the party outlook. Max is even equated with the party lawyer of Wright's period. No doubt to a great extent the speeches of, conversation with the lawyer do reflect Marxism. Wright was much influenced by communism and for a long time he believed that communism is the best solution for this class-clash ridden society. The party is a friend to Negro. It gives the hope of solution even to the country. "Man's eternal search for a way out of his human dilemma appears here also in the guise of communist
party". Wright has communistic point of view in the novel. According to him racial class prejudice is based on economic exploitation. Basic party concept of time is revealed in the lines, "Taken collectively they are not simply twelve million people; in reality, they constitute a separate nation stunted, stripped and held captive within the nation devoid of political, social, economic and property rights." Final chapters in the novel replete with communist material, and the references are sporadic in early parts.

But it is inexcusable to say that novel is a piece of propaganda. One glance at the communist review of the novel shows that Wright did not stand up to party's expectations. It was not accepted by them. There is no hint in the novel to say that the lawyer is a communist or party lawyer. He is referred as the best lawyer but not as a comrade by the party member. His speech at the end reveals
Wright's personal belief rather than that of party's: "Wright is too honest to simply allow the propagandistic message to constitute the last word." No doubt he admired their loyalty, but he portrayed their insensitiveness too. Communist ideology only gave him the intellectual framework within which his personal experiences were rendered with greater poignancy. Neither the party, nor Marx...are important. It's only Bigger that counts and nothing else. Bigger solves his problem all by himself, and comes to an awareness which baffles Max, whom the critics identify with the party. Bigger does not take the help of Max (Marx) or anybody else. He heroically confronts his situation and does not stand by the party, and the party is not behind him. The crisis is smoothened as he helps himself by his own efforts. He does not seek shelter in communism. In the words of Fishburn, "Wright straddles the opposing forces of naturalism, existentialism wearing the boots of
Marxist." Marx is cleverly exploited but not advocated for. Often prejudice against communism is depicted in the novel. In the chapter where Bigger goes to a movie the communist is shown in the picture as bomb throwing one. Jan Erlone, the young party worker whom Bigger meets remains insignificant throughout the novel. He does not help Bigger in any way though he is sympathetic. On the other hand he was exploited by Bigger who directed the police to him. Bigger's usage of party symbol in demanding ransom projects the party as an abused force and not in any favourable light. The reader who over emphasizes Marx and the party is in the danger of losing the sight of Bigger. Bigger becomes invisible once again even to the reader.

Native Son's other dominant feature is the quest for identity. Like all other negro characters the hero is in search of his real self. The identity struggle of a Negro who is oppressed by racial
invisibility and over burdened with imposed self can be found here. Bigger, like Wright is always guided by fear in different guises and lives in the shadows of death. He wishes to be seen, to be recognised, to be accepted, to be owned. There is a deep desire "to merge himself with others and be part of this world, to see himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others even though he was black." But he is an alien in his native place, a victim, an innocent victim at that. He knows his real self, a self different from the accursedly given one, and he wants to assert it. Not knowing how to assert he protests and he kills. He establishes identity by killing. His earlier fear of not being seen, and not recognized is wiped away by the killing. Let him be a criminal but he could force others to see him. He turns to violence not knowing other means. Act of killing leads him to death but death offered him a
new life. He is the scapegoat of white American and he is messianic. His self now gets value, though negative, as it is sought for, for killing of a white girl. Thus he succeeds in defining himself, a self different from any self given by others. In Bigger's own words "it is a new identity" "Pride" "dignity" which he arrives through feelings like guilt, hate, shame, fear and through his knowledge of his basic ideas. This new identity enables him to analyse his past. Bigger himself says "Never had he the chance to live out consequences of his action. Never had his will been so free....as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight."^{29}

The novel can be called a quest romance as the hero is in search, absurd novel because the hero is not of usual expected heroic qualities. On the other hand he is just a disgusting fumbling idiot. Its a novel of naturalism, surrealism, and it is many other things too. "Nàtive Son is one of those
books in which every thing is undertaken with seri-
ousness except the writing." In Katherine Fish-
burn's words "Wright's fiction certainly lends it-
self to the analysis since several recurring themes
and topics help to unify the work. His interest
in and use of Marxism, theme of black man's essen-
tial alienation, and invisibility, the concomitant
theme of living in a unreal world or nightmare world
as a blackman, the plea for brotherhood and the bitter
protest against a society determined to make slaves
of othermen, the refusal of blackman to accept the
identities fixed for them by whites, frustrations,
fears, dangers involved in being blackman in
America are always part of fabric of Wright's fic-
tion" fit the description of Native Son too.
It lends itself to number of categories but fail
to stand up to their expectations.

Though a trend setter, Wright is a beginner,
and has all the disadvantages of a beginner, in
addition to his slave background. Hence, he cannot stand in comparison with later novelists of greater talent and advantages like Ralph Ellison. His obsession with factual details makes the novel a statistical data. It appears more like an article in a journal and a political tract. It's language is crude and leaves us with no tears. He is a self-made artist and not a gifted one and his works suffer from blemishes. Blatant violence sickens the reader. "In his own writing he does not understate. He drives his irony like a truck and the most important things are presented over and over underlined and fairly left to seep through to one. His prose is hurried often, inattentive, he gives the impression of a man who has been forced so long to keep silent, when he finally opens his mouth, he cannot talk, but he must burst"\(^{32}\) and the bursting lacks the symphonic sound of Ellison." "Richard Wright is merely a historical sociological document."\(^{33}\)
His failure is a failure to decide either to be an artist or a spokesman. Mr. Howe gives the reason for this failure: "The distinction between objective rendering and subjective immersion becomes impossible. For a novelist who has lived through the searching experience that Wright has, there cannot be much possibility of approaching his subject with the matured poise." 34

Richard Wright stands apart with his merits and demerits glaring, if he is inferior it is only because he hails from a different background with different outlook. He can be summed up in Don Mc Call's words "R.W. was writing on a Wall. His urgency does not come from scaling that wall, nor does it come from any capacity to show as Ellison, Baldwin have been able to do how various members of the community sit on the wall, how the Negro community as a whole lived with it in history borrowing passage way for daily advancement or retreat. Wright's strength,
insight come from staring at the wall itself from various perspectives roaming close touching it, butting his head against it, measuring it shows us the wall on fire, it spurts into incandescence and begins to burn with all the heat of the nature's monstrous capability."  

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NOTES


2. Ibid.


4. Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was born" (New York), 1940.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.


22. Ibid., pp.24-45.


27. Ibid.

29. Ibid.


33. Ibid.
