Chapter II
CHAPTER II

A NATIVE SON’S ANGUISHED CRY

Richard Wright has invited massive critical attention. Richard Wright as a man, his life, outlook, his influence on politics, the sociological impacts his writings produced and how he feels as an African-American have all been subjects of discussion. It is important to remember his reaction, while he was engaged as a porter in a Jewish white woman’s shop, which is described in his *American Hunger* as follows:

Though English was my native tongue and America was my native land, she an alien could operate a store and earn a living in a neighborhood where I could not even live. ... Accepting my environment at its face value, trapped by my own emotions, I kept asking myself what had black people done to bring this crazy world upon them?

These words of Wright clearly express how frustrated he feels, personally suffering the effects of blatant inequality thrust on the African-American by the white oppressor.

II.1. The importance and relevance of Richard Wright in the study of African-American literature: Views of certain important critics on Richard Wright:

From the moment *Native Son* was published Richard Wright has drawn the attention of book reviewers and literary critics and he has been held in high esteem; he has received bouquets as well as brick bats. The following will illustrate this:
Harald Bloom considers Wright as "a universally acknowledged starting point for black literature in contemporary America". "His importance", he states, transcends the concern of a strictly literary criticism, and reminds the critic of the claims of history, society, political economy, and the longer records of oppression and injustice that history continues to scant. (1-6)

Katherine Fishburn while making a reference to Wright’s early life and his general attitude writes:

Wright never forgot nor forgave his father. Nor did he show more charity toward the whites, whose despotic caste system nearly destroyed him. Further more, Wright had little patience for those blacks who kowtowed to the whites; as a result of his early experiences, he remained critical all his life of those blacks who participated in their degradation. (6)

Edwin R. Embree begins his biography of Richard Wright with the following statements:

Richard Wright wanted to write not a book but a bomb. He wanted to tell what happened to Negroes under the hates and hurts of American life and to tell it with such hard, cold realism that people could not get away with it. (25)
Margaret Walker feels that "Wright was obsessed with the psychology of oppressed people and the creative depths of the unconscious mind". Commenting on Wright, the man, Walker says that Wright was not guilty of crimes described in his intense and grisly, violent and morbid criminal stories... He was on the surface a very gentle man. But this kindest, most vulnerable and tender-eyed fellow was also a brooding, frightened, angry, and ambivalent man. (1-10)

On the other hand there are people who differ in their opinion on Wright's achievement. James Baldwin would not approve of Wright's violence and he considers 'dehumanization' as a problem. He states,

Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves; the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his. Time and our own force acts as our allies, creating an impossible, a fruitless tension between the traditional master and slave. Impossible and fruitless because, literal and visible as this tension has become, it has nothing to do with reality. (665-680)

Zora Neale Hurston considered Wright's Uncle Tom's Children, "a chronicle of hatred with no act of understanding and sympathy" (32). She felt that Wright's stories failed to touch the fundamental truths of African-American life.

Such abundant material available on Wright and his writings increase one's interest on Wright though nearly half a century has passed after Wright made his
presence felt and forcibly called the attention of the world to look at him and his oppressed people in a never-before-and shocking new light.

II. 1.1. Wright’s beliefs:

Though his people were an oppressed lot, himself a victim of racial oppression, born and brought up in an atmosphere of hatred, violence, injustice and inequality, Wright had certain strong beliefs and more than that an equally strong belief in himself and in his capacity to change the world with his art. Joyce Ann Joyce states,

Richard Wright, too, had a strong faith in what he believed the world should be like. Because of his unflinching dedication to enlightening mankind and because of the enigmatic power of his art, no other black American writer has attracted as much attention as Wright. (xi-xvii)

II. 1.2. Wright’s Purpose:

It is relevant to note that Wright had a very clear idea of his purpose. Wright in his American Hunger states,

My purpose was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression, an accomplishment which seemed supremely worth struggling for. If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative. I strove to
master words, to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, each feeding and reinforcing the other, and all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader with the sense of a new world. That was the single aim of my living. (22)

II. 2. Wright, the African-American at his best in his anger:

It is safe to remember that a good part of Wright’s fiction and its patterns grow out of his being an American in general and an African-American in particular. Wright has always been conscious of his being an African-American and he is sensitive to the problems created by the oppression unleashed on the African-American for centuries. The frustration of being an African-American, made aliens in their own country, and the injustice meted out to the African-American as a race cause a lot of resentment and anger in Wright. Joyce mentions in this connection:

Too many scholars believe that Wright was at his best when he wrote out of anger aroused by his experiences as a child in Mississippi and as a young man in Memphis, Chicago and New York. (4-5)

The alienation of the African-American, the invisibility forced on him by a powerful and heartless oppressor, and the horror of living in an oppressive, nightmarish world are some of the frequently occurring themes of Wright as mentioned by Katherine Fishburn:
... of course, the frustration, fears, and dangers involved in
being a black man in America are always part of the fabric of
Wright’s fiction. (1)

Richard Wright, born in a Godless universe where the place and power of
God has been usurped by the all powerful white oppressor who does everything
possible to make the oppressed African-American an impotent victim, hates such an
oppressive world. The Jim Crow ethics forced on the hapless and helpless African-
Americans, making his white oppressor the law-maker, the law-giver, the judge and
the executioner – all in one and totally denying any chance to the oppressed African-
American in the American South meant facing the tyranny of Jim Crow laws and
accepting them without a murmur. This has a lasting influence on Wright. Russell
Carl Brignano, has stated that the most prominent baggage Wright carried was the
“color of his skin”, which he could never misplace or lose. This exerts a powerful
influence on his writings.

II. 3. Jim Crow ethics: Castration and lynching:

Castration of African-Americans followed by mob lynching was not
uncommon even in the beginning of the twentieth century in the American South,
filled with racial hatred, injustice and oppression. The African-American was
considered more of a beast than a human being, and suspected to have strong and
uncontrollable, beastly, sexual urges. This is not based on any scientific study or
observation but founded on hatred, bias and a latent fear of the potence of the African-
Americans. The white oppressor wants to protect his own women but he violates the
African-American female with nonchalance. Any African-American who was even remotely suspected of disobeying Jim Crow laws was ruthlessly oppressed, whipped, maimed, shot or lynched after invariably being castrated. The usual excuse of the oppressor, if at all he cares to give one, is that the African-American has tried to violate the honour, rape and murder the white woman, a considered symbol of innocence and purity. Margaret Walker says,

> During Reconstruction, lynching and mob rule became an accepted part of the social order in Adam’s County, as it did throughout Mississippi, the South, and the rest of the United States...Black male victims were usually accused of murder of rape or both, while black women were generally accused of incendiarism, arson, or poisoning. (15)

This illustrates the most inhuman and unlawful oppression let loose on the African-American.

Edward Margolies makes a different and equally interesting observation:

> “The Negro, they discover, who submits to white oppression is as much castrated psychologically... Thus for them the lynchings become symbolic of the roles they are expected to play in life”. (150)

One who has tamely accepted his oppressed status remains psychologically castrated; The one who refuses to oblige, showing a glimpse of disobedience will be shown his place, by the oppressor, by resorting to physical violence of castration and lynching.
Whether the oppressed remains tame or he resents the oppression, the result will be the same: violence and injustice let loose on the oppressed. This reveals a more horrible and dreadful aspect of the oppressor-oppressed relationship, where the oppressed is forced to remain always a tragic, helpless loser.

II. 4. Wright’s Creative Writing, the result of his anger:

The painful experiences of his race make Wright an angry man and his anger urges him to creative writing with the intention of making the white oppressor realise his crime of oppressing and violating a helpless people, who differ from them only by the colour of their skin. Walker describes the pain and rage felt by Wright and feels that one of the stimuli that caused his forceful writing is his anger. Wright’s reaction to the world of injustice and inequality caused by racial hatred and oppression is described as follows:

In addition to the pain of racial, class, and caste prejudice, and violent white racism, he seethed inwardly with anger against these indignities, cruel and inhuman circumstances. This anger or rage drove him to create and to achieve. The wellsprings of his creativity were deep welters and dark pools of realistic and neurotic anger, which he sublimated into imaginative writing.

(5)

Richard Wright’s nightmare begins in Memphis at an early age of six. His father had deserted the family and his mother was rendered jobless. The misery, the hunger and the helplessness that Wright feels at a tender age, leaving scars of
separation on this “innocent child full of pride and full of anger” would “remain for a life time” as Walker mentions. Walker states in this connection:

He would grow up to become an angry man, and he would learn to write as a means of that anger. His anger would have many targets: his family, the society, the white man, the white race, and the more fortunate. (23)

II. 5. Richard Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children: Big Boy Leaves Home, Down by the Riverside, Long Black Song and Bright and Morning Star: the Four Novellas:

The deeper memories of racial encounter – always painful and always giving an upper hand to the white oppressor – are recognisable in the four novellas, forming a part of Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children. (23)

II. 5.1. Big Boy Leaves Home:

Big Boy Leaves Home is the first of the four novellas. It is the story of a young African-American boy, whose innocence is turned into violent experiences created by racial hatred, forcefully driving him away from home. The loss of boyish innocence serves the purpose of a ritual initiation. The innocent young boy is initiated into manhood not by any sexual experience but by the horror of racial violence and oppression.

Big Boy Leaves Home, like many other stories in Uncle Tom’s Children, shows the struggle for survival and freedom by the oppressed African-American. In this story four adolescent African-American boys are discovered naked by a white woman. These boys have trespassed the forbidden white property, a swimming hole.
The swimming pools and other recreational centres were not open to coloured people. The presence of a group of African-Americans in the street corners by day or night, their presence in swimming pools or recreational centres, becomes an open defiance of law, and such acts attract definite punishment.

As the white woman spots four “black and naked” boys in the swimming hole, their ‘black’ nakedness is more threatening for her than the nakedness itself and the woman’s escort kills two of the boys. The other two manage to overcome the escort armed with a gun and the escort gets killed in the ensuing encounter. The boys have been entangled in a “kill or get killed” situation, for two of them had already been killed and they too would meet with the same fate, if they do not stop the white woman’s escort. The only way to do that is to kill him and this has been done by these adolescent boys in their instinct of self preservation. But such reasonable, logical and human laws are not applicable to the African-Americans, for these ‘laws’ had been made by the oppressor and such laws do not stop to ask questions; they would shoot first, never even caring to think of their deed either as murderous or as oppressive.

Big Boy, the leader of the group, flees home and is advised by the elders of his community to conceal himself in a kiln on the hills on the outskirts of the town. Arrangements will be made to pick him up in a truck next morning and drive him to Chicago. While hiding, Big Boy views the brutal murder by burning, of his colleague, who had escaped earlier but who cannot escape the mob.

Wright is extremely good in depicting the feeling of terror of the trapped Big Boy. As Big Boy arrives at the abandoned kiln, he encounters a rattle snake – deadly
diabolic – in the depths of the pit. The horror resembles the horrors of hell: the feeling of helplessness against unknown dangers, the humidity and darkness; the rattle snake; and the nausea of witnessing a companion being burnt to death. Every one of these horrors contributes for the completion of hell.

If Big Boy has to survive he has to survive this hell not by remaining a passive, powerless, impotent onlooker but by facing the challenge and meeting the enemy in his own ground. This is symbolically revealed in the methodical and impassioned killing of the rattle snake by Big Boy. His killing of the snake shows the terror and the burning hatred Big Boy has for his oppressor. He goes to the extent of killing the whites in his fantasy in the same way he killed the rattle snake. He fantasies dancing on the prone, powerless whites and kicking their heads against the sand. He dreams of glory, where in the news headlines he would be described as the killer of twenty white lynchers.

In a way Big Boy’s sojourn in the underground pit may be equated to the experiences of Fred Daniel in *The Man Who Lived Underground* and those of Ralph Ellison’s nameless narrator in *Invisible Man*. The hellish experience may also symbolise the experiences of Big Boy and his three companions in the larger context as the experience of their oppressed African-American race. This is supported by Robert Lee when he states,

‘Big Boy’s journey down into this kiln-pocked Hell is heralded by “six foot of snake”, racism’s devil serpent made incarnate, which he kills with his stick... His underground hole, like Fred
Daniels’s in *The Man Who Lived Underground* and that of Ellison’s unnamed narrator in *Invisible Man*, particularises the larger historical hole into which Big Boy and his three friends and the black race in general have been cast since slavery. (109-126)

As the pick-up truck arrives, Big Boy enters the driver’s cabin through a trap-door above the back of the driver’s seat. As he lands with a thud on the bottom, the conversation becomes terse:

“Wheres Bobo?”
Big Boy stared.

“Wheres Bobo?”

“They got im”,

“When?”

“Las night”.

“The mob?”

Big Boy pointed in the direction of a charred sapling on the slopes of the opposite hill. Will looked. The trapdoor fell. The engine purred, the gears whined, and the truck lurched forward over the muddy road, ...

Big Boy’s story – divided into five parts – showing his progress from idyllic innocence to his initiation of manhood through violence, misery, terror and finally his escape reveals the traumatic influence the violent American South has on young
Richard Wright, and it is probable that his fiction grew out of his first nineteen years of life in the American South. The words of Walker,

His imagination would forever be colored by the impressions of southern folklore. He would carry the South with him everywhere he went: the nightmare of lynching, the trauma of Jim Crow, the psychological fear and intimidation of white oppression and violence mixed in his mind with sex and the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden – the white woman.

(42)

throw light how Wright’s writing is shaped by the oppressive conditions and the resultant frustration and anger.

By their unexpected and naked encounter, Big Boy and his adolescent companions have unwittingly trampled upon the “forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden – the white woman” and hence they must face the furious mob of the white oppressor who will not stop short of lynching them. For Big Boy and his companions paradise turns to nightmare, pleasure to pain and innocence into deadly experience.

The horror of racist oppression does not make the oppressed African-American cower. Though two of Big Boy’s companions have been killed, though all the odds are against them, though their opponent is a soldier armed with a gun, Big Boy and Bobo overpower the white woman’s soldier lover – their opponent – and kill him. The observation of Edward Margolies,
Here, for example, one finds Wright’s incipient Negro nationalism as each of his protagonist rises to strike out violently at white oppressors who would deny him his humanity. (128-150)

is applicable to Big Boy and his companions, the innocent victims of oppressive white racism.

For the oppressed African-American, it is a question of survival in the jungle, “where violent and rank injustices cry out for immediate decisions”. Their “flight after having killed a white person” and “their recognition of their hatred is their first sense of freedom” (128–150) states Margolies. Big Boy’s killing of the rattle snake, his fantasies of hitting the headlines of news papers as a killer of twenty white lynchers are all actions of recognizable and deep hatred, which in turn pave the way for his escape from oppression and for probable freedom.

It is equally true that Big Boy’s escape is effected through the will of the oppressed African-American community in spite of the obvious risks. If Big Boy and Bobo can be saved, they shall be saved at any cost; If Bobo has become the victim of mob lynching, then Big Boy, the only one who has escaped the violent mob will have to be saved. The oppressed community as a whole try to help a fellow-oppressed and will resort to do anything to prevent further damage. This reaction of the oppressed community to face the challenge and help and rescue a fellow-oppressed is one of the finer aspects in the study of oppressor-oppressed relationship.
Big Boy’s escape shows how he beats his ferocious white oppressor-hounds keen on driving him out of existence. Big Boy mutters, “Gawddam them white folks! Thas all they wuz good fer, t run a nigger down like a rabbit. Yeah, they git yuh in a corner n then they let yuh have it”. But Wright makes oppression’s traditional scenario get thwarted in Big Boy’s case. Big Boy’s maturation had cost him dear: he has to witness the sudden and unexpected death of two of his companions, and the slow and torturous murder of the third friend. His maturation also leads him to his realisation of his own responsibility for killing a white man in self defence. All these have happened so suddenly and so irrevocably, by “the apparently innocuous violation of boundaries, i.e., trespassing at the swimming hole, and the ensuing coincidental sexual confrontation” (191-228) as stated by Abdul Jan Mohamed. In the words of Kinnamon, “Into the pastoral innocence of Big Boy’s world intrudes violent white racism, driving him from the southern garden toward the uncertain freedom of the North”(86).

Big Boy Leaves Home presents an individual, young, and innocent African-American boy suddenly thrown into unexpected and violent maturation by his oppressors. He is made to recognise his oppressed status by the violent killing of his companions. His loss of innocence, paves way for his probable freedom through the recognition of his hatred and anger for his oppressor and through precipitated violent action and through the voluntary and selfless help extended by the members of his oppressed community. Robert Lee’s statement,
Big Boy, as it were, has internalized the historic penalty of being black and a sexual fantasy figure within the white American South... To call a story like ‘Big Boy Leaves Home’, simply naturalistic leaves out its genuine command of tone, Wright’s organizing pattern and cadence; in effect it leaves almost all the work still to be done. (109-126)

presents one with the relevance of beginning a study of Wright’s fiction with **Big Boy Leaves Home**.

II. 5.2. **Down by the Riverside**:  

*(1945)*

**Down by the Riverside** is the story of an African-American’s brave struggle for survival against odds in the American South. Mann is an African-American farmer, his wife Lulu is in her fourth day of labour, and Mississippi is in floods; Mann and his family are marooned in their house with no food. To add insult to the injury, the crisis of the rising floods “will inevitably intensify the normal persecution of blacks by whites” (87) as mentioned by Kinnamon.

Bob, Mann’s brother-in-law returns with fifteen dollars, the low price he received for his mule and a stolen rowboat. Mann sets out in the stolen boat against the current with his son Peewee, his wife Lulu in labour and his mother-in-law.

Mann’s ill-luck drives him to the place of Mr. Heartfield, the white owner of the stolen rowboat. Mr. Heartfield starts shooting at sight, totally ignoring Mann’s appeal for help. In the ensuing shoot out, Mr. Heartfield gets shot, and Mann rows away in darkness. The soldiers need Mann for his rowing efficiency, but they ignore
Mann, as an African-American, cannot even indulge in grief over the death of his wife. He is given one task after another, until he is sent to rescue the Heartfields, by the quirk of his fate. Though Mann has his opportunity to kill his possible accusers and identifiers, they are rescued by Mann. Strangely enough they do not commend Mann for saving them to the Army Colonel, but identify him as the killer of Mr. Heartfield. Mann is taken away to be executed. As he dashes away toward the water, he is shot. His body rolls down by the riverside, making the title of the novella emotionally significant.

**Down by the Riverside** is obviously a story, which reveals the blatant ill-treatment of the oppressor, highlighting the scant respect he has for the suffering African-American. It is relevant to quote Kinnamon here:

> Racial prejudice emerges constantly in the story when the two races meet or think of each other. Communication between the races is thus difficult or impossible because whites simply will not listen to blacks, preferring instead to consign them automatically to a category of subhuman stereotypes. (91)

Even in the face of a natural calamity such as Mississippi floods, an African-American — either as an individual or as a group — is expendable. The natural calamity only adds to the sufferings and misery, already existing for the oppressed African-American. This is seen in the behaviour of trigger happy Mr. Heartfield who is worried more
about his stolen boat, and starts shooting at him, while Mann is pathetically calling out for help.

When Lulu is dead and Mann is sobbing at his wife’s death, one of the soldiers says, “Shucks, nigger! You ought to be glad you are not dead in a flood like this”. These soldiers reflect the indifferent, general attitude of the oppressor that the life of an African-American is expendable. The whites are so heartless that they utilise the rowing prowess of Mann, an African-American to save the marooned whites, but they will not care to grant the immediate, necessary medical attention to a suffering African-American woman in the agony of labour. The dead woman’s husband will not even be allowed to sob over his wife’s death, for the dead woman as well as her husband are African-Americans after all. More importantly Mann’s prowess in rowing can be utilised better by the white oppressor to save his own marooned people. The whites won’t care whether an African-American is dead or alive but if a live one can be utilised to save whites at the risk of his own life, they welcome it shamelessly.

The story represents various other dimensions of the oppressor-oppressed relationship. The defeatist and escapist religious attitude is represented by Grannie and elder Murray. Kinnamon while referring to their religious point of view says that by evading “confrontation with the white oppressor”, their religion guarantees their “continued subordination” (92).

Mann represents another way of dealing with the Southern white oppression by his individualism. He is heroic, courageous and resourceful but he prefers to
undergo his trial alone. But Mann’s death has been rendered meaningless, by adding one more futile death to that of his wife. Commenting on the futility of Mann’s struggle Kinnamon states:

Mann’s tragedy is not the Son of man’s for there is no redemptive power in his suffering and death. Nor, indeed, is Mann’s tragedy man’s, for it is conceived too strictly in racial terms. (93)

and

‘Down by the Riverside’, then, demonstrates the failure of both religious faith and pragmatic individualism in coping with white oppression. The answer is not to lay down the sword and shield by the riverside in meek Christian submission; the war is real and must be studied. One cannot wage it alone however. The only viable answer is collective action... Black racial solidarity would seem necessary for successful resistance to naked white racial oppression. (94)

These statements reveal the bitterness of the situation and the agony caused by racial oppression. But the oppressed African-American cannot wage his war alone and the racial solidarity of the African-American may invoke a possible way out. But in the case of Mann his tragedy lies in that he stands alone, realising that the other African-American “would not and could not help him even as he in times past had not helped other black men being taken by white folks to their death...”
It is worthwhile to remember that Big Boy, an adolescent is forced into maturation by racial violence and oppression and though he fights his battle alone, he is allowed an opportunity to escape the clutches of racial violence and given a probable hope for freedom by the collective advice and help rendered by the oppressed African-Americans. But Mann, as an oppressed African-American can have only self pity for his inability to help the other African-Americans and the tragedy of the oppressed African-American precisely lies here in that the individual as well as the community of the oppressed cannot help each other but only indulge on impotent self pity.

II. 5.3. *Long Black Song*

*Long Black Song* is the third story in *Uncle Tom's Children*, though looks explicitly simple, reveals certain other new dimensions of the oppressor-oppressed relationship. This story presents Sarah, a simple, young, Northern-Mississippi farmwife, seduced by a white travelling salesman. When her husband comes to know of this, he gets infuriated and sends a few whites packing to their death, before he gets killed by the white mob. Wright has skillfully used this story to illustrate an African-American's angry rebellion against the oppressive society for its blatant and nonchalant aggression and injustice.

Sarah, wedded to a man much elder to her, awaits her husband's return from the town where he had gone to sell his cotton crop. Her sharp feeling of loneliness sets her thinking on Tom, her first lover. She is interrupted by a young white man, a travelling salesman, selling phonographs during vacation to finance his studies. He
seduces an easy and unprotesting Sarah and departs after love-making, promising to return the next morning.

Sarah’s husband Silas returns that same night, having sold his cotton at a good price, with which he had bought an additional ten acres of land. But his happiness evaporates when he discovers his wife’s infidelity. He tries to beat Sarah, but she escapes with her baby into the darkness of the night.

Next morning, from her hiding place on a nearby hill, Sarah sees her husband standing in front of their house, with a whip in his hand. The salesman, who seduced Sarah the previous day arrives and his arrival leads to the inevitable confrontation. Silas strikes the man with his whip. Now, a second white comes to the help of the striken salesman. Silas in his fury shoots one of them with his rifle, while the other escapes driving the car.

After this, events move at a faster pace and toward the most obvious end. Though Sarah tries to persuade Silas to flee the lynching party, he sends her away, expresses his hatred and anger for the whites and his resolution to fight them to death. A caravan of whites armed to the brim, soon arrives, their rifles blazing. Silas will not die lying down, but he has resolved to take a few whites with him and he stays inside the blazing house to die.

In Silas one finds a fierce pride in his ability “to emulate the white success, to play the white man’s own game, and in this way to demonstrate his equality” (98), states Kinnamon. Sarah says, “Always he said he was as good as any white man. He had worked hard and saved his money and bought a farm so he could grow his own
crops like white men”. Silas feels that he could only emulate white man, but he can earn neither his respect, nor his right, and being an African-American can never be treated an equal by the whites. Having failed in his desire to emulate and to live like a white man, Silas will not fail at the moment of his death. He will play the white man’s game with the whites themselves and try to play the game with a vengeance. Realising fully well his imminent and fiery death at the hands of the whites, Silas is determined to play the game hard to prove himself and his oppressors a point. “Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So help me, Gawd, Ah’m gonna be hard! When they come fer me Ah’m gonna be here!” utters Silas in his defiant attitude. Silas does not cower in the presence of his oppressors, but repays their murderous fury in kind until he gets killed, and realising fully well the futility of his defiant death, his words expressing his futile fury: “It don mean nothin! Yuh die ef yuh fight! Yuh die ef yuh don fight! Either way yuh die n it don mean nothin…”

The words of Margolies, while referring to the last fight of Silas, “... the Negro’s plight is no better as a result of his own determination to fight his oppressors with their own weapons. He is hopelessly outnumbered” (128-149), reveal once again the futility of the oppressed African-American, waging a lone war against his oppressor where he will be beaten and eradicated. It is a no-win situation for the oppressed African-American, where he is outnumbered.

Silas resents more the exploitation by the white than his wife’s infidelity, as mentioned by Kinnamon: “What he resents most is white exploitation in general, of which sexual exploitation is only a part” (98). The words of Silas,
The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give
no black man a chance! There ain nothin in yo whole life yuh
kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom!
They take yo women! N then they take yo life!”
reveal his disgust and anger at his white oppressor. In his anger and disgust for the
oppressor, Silas becomes the representative of the oppressed African-American, who
has lost everything dear to him: his land, his women, his freedom and his life.
Kinnamon says in this connection:

His outrage is the cumulative outrage of a life of deprivations,
of a continual violation of the integrity of his personality. In
giving utterance to his sense of indignity, he is the collective
voice of his people. (98)
The wishful thinking of Silas, “alla them white folks wuz dead! Dead, Ah tell yuh!
Ah wish Gawd would kill em all!” expresses the justifiable anger of the perpetually
oppressed lot. By his defiance Silas also breaks out in one powerful stroke “against
the way the cards are stacked against him as a black man in the universe”(19-36),
mentions George E. Kent. Though the fight of Silas is hopeless, though it is true that
his fight can change neither his nor his race’s oppressed status, “the point is that he
fights not for survival or some abstract notion of power but for his honor”, and though
Silas dies fighting, his action “also fulfills Big Boy’s fantasy of killing as many
members of the mob as possible before they murder him” (191-228), Mohamed
remarks on Silas’s last fight.
Another dimension of the oppressor-oppressed relationship lies latent in Silas's story. Sarah's infidelity, the immediate cause for Silas's fury is the result of Silas's inefficiency to sexually satisfy his wife. Silas is much older than Sarah and Silas has long been aware of his wife's love for Tom, her first love. In other words, his outrage is partially caused by his sexual inadequacy as well. But being a male he takes it for granted that it is his wife's duty to be submissive and bear with him in spite of his sexual inadequacy. By refusing to cater to the physical desires and by refusing even to acknowledge the existence of such natural desires of his young wife Sarah, and thrusting his will on her, he scarcely realises that being oppressed himself, he has unknowingly assumed the garb of an oppressor on his wife. He resents being oppressed and exploited but he is not even aware of his own role as an oppressor of his own woman. Though Wright has not delved deep into this aspect it is suffice to say that Wright is not unaware of the dominant role exerted by the African-American male overlooking and ignoring the rights of his own female counterpart. It can be said that even while depicting the southern rural pleasures, Wright heightens the contrast with the racial violence and inequality occuring in these settings, and also hints at the painful fact how the menfolk conveniently ignore their own women, adding insult to injury, of the already exploited African-American women.

II. 5.4. Fire and Cloud:

Fire and Cloud^Wright's next story is "A recognition that the white and black oppressed share a common human heritage"(128-149), as mentioned by Margolies. This story departs significantly from the previous stories in that, it
juxtaposes the suffering of the individual with that of the society, exploring the relationship of the individual with his society. The suffering of the individual is not for protecting his own life or honour but it has got something more and is in turn intensely connected with the community. The individual suffers and through his sufferings he matures into realising that the individual as well as the community can be established, not by fighting a lonely fight, but through the committed action of the suffering, oppressed community.

The suffering of the individual becomes more meaningful if the society gets liberated. In other words, the ultimate suffering, the literal death of the biological individual accomplishes little; in the long run it is the eradication of the slave mentality – of the subject position based on the acceptance of social death – that is politically efficacious. (191-228)

states Mohammed.

Fire and Cloud presents Taylor as not only an individual, but also as a representative and leader of the oppressed African-American community. His responsibilities as a leader and a religious man compound the experience of oppression, revealing the community of African-Americans suffering the ills of deprivation and powerlessness, often reminding them of their historical backdrop of powerlessness and impotence against oppression.

Taylor as a preacher and leader realises that he has failed to persuade the white authorities to provide relief and food for his hungry people. Strangely enough
‘his hungry people’ include the poor whites also. The poverty stricken white, by virtue of his belonging to the community of have-nots, also becomes a companion of the suffering, poverty-stricken, hungry, oppressed African-American.

Though Taylor thinks that a massive demonstration might make the rich, power wielding whites to relent, he is extremely reluctant to anger the white power structure. His powerlessness and inability will lead to further suffering and starvation of his people.

Taylor has to make cautious and calculated moves for he is aware of Deacon Smith, “a black Judas”, one from his own oppressed class, but willing to collude with the oppressor and intentionally eager to inform on Taylor to the whites. Deacon Smith will do anything in his selfish interest to secure a position of power, for he is prepared to be a black watch-dog appointed by the white oppressor. He is prepared to be a ruler in hell – though a slave to the white oppressor – and he will spare his fangs on his own oppressed African-American community. Taylor is fully aware of the rumour campaign, the propaganda let loose by Deacon Smith against his abilities and leadership.

In addition to facing the problems created by Deacon Smith, Taylor has to satisfy the members of his family. He cannot take lightly his wife’s anxiety and fear of their son’s future being jeopardised by the turmoil. Taylor’s son belongs to the group of restless, impatient and angry young African-Americans, who are not prepared to take oppression and injustice lying down, advocating drastic action and retaliation against the repressive authorities. Taylor is aware of those bands of white toughs
roaming the streets in automobiles and frightening the African-Americans into staying home, and warning them of dire consequences if they participated in the proposed march of defiance.

Taylor is equally conscious that the African-American community, a large portion of it starving, look upon him to solve its problems. Taylor as a leader of the community cannot ignore their problem.

In addition to all these, pressure is brought upon Taylor by the white and black members of the Communist party urging him to lead the march against the city government.

It is obvious that Taylor’s position is unenviable. He cannot confront the city officials directly, for he owes his position of leadership to these officials. He cannot ignore the plight of his starving people also, for he has to do something constructive to mitigate their suffering. He does not want to send his people – a starving army marching on its belly – into a march of death facing police bullets, as he realises that without his endorsement, the demonstration will be a total failure breaking his people, with corpses littered all around.

Taylor has a feeling that defying the white establishment so openly is tantamount to declaring a kind of civil war. Alienating his powerful white friends would jeopardise his future usefulness as an African-American leader. He realises that he cannot extract any more favours for his suffering community by openly alienating himself from the powerful whites.
Taylor’s separate meetings with the different groups – the members of his family, the deacons of the church, the white official authorities and the communists – conducted unknown to each of the other group, resolve nothing and put Taylor in a pressure-cooker situation. He realises that each one of these groups is motivated by their direct and indirect ambitions. He can feel the ambition of the members of his own community willingly colluding with the oppressors.

This kind of pressure-cooker situation leads to Taylor’s transformation, but his transformation is hastened by the brutal and physical violence unleashed by the oppressor. Till such time Taylor is kidnapped and beaten mercilessly by the white thugs for not cooperating with the mayor, he remains confused, unable to take a decision. The physical violence of being whipped, erases his position as an obedient servant and removes his paralysis. The violence of whipping and the resultant burning sensation serves as a revelation, as a ‘Fire Sermon’ for Taylor. He rather dies into life, thereby discarding the old, meek, powerless, obedient Taylor and reborn with a new realisation, a new power to fight oppression and injustice, and reborn with a new wisdom. The fire of whipping had also burnt and removed the shame felt at the dishonour and powerlessness of the African-American, by providing him with defiance and resolution. This fire sermon has made him affirm his willingness to “die fer mah people ef Ah only knowed how”.

This transformation has the power to transform others, who cannot see eye to eye with Taylor. He finds a new articulation, on which Mohamed states:
His articulation, Wright implies, is the most important aspect of his attempt to create a new subject position, for the struggle must be carried on as much in the discursive/hegemonic realm of cultural contestation as in the dominant realm of violent physical confrontation. (191-228)

Through his new articulation, he can reveal his new discovery of the efficacy of communal solidarity and power. Taylor through this articulation makes his angry son Jimmy learn a more important lesson than blind revenge. “This lesson, so painfully learned, is the importance of solidarity”(103), states Kinnamon. Taylor’s words, “It’s the people, son! Wes too much elrone this way! Wes los when wes erlone! Wes gotta be wid our folks…” reveal his new enlightenment. Articulation has thus become an effective tool in the hands of the oppressed, for it helps not only to re-create but also to persuade others, thereby creating a new universe paving way for an enlightened and liberated new community.

As the enlightened Taylor enters, the people are ready, in spite of the terror and oppression let loose on them. They are ready to march, with or without Taylor. Taylor speaks to them empowered with his new enlightenment and new articulation, advocating and urging united action.

Now the function of God has been replaced by his people and Taylor had already echoed this sentiment:

Its the people! Theys the ones whut mus be real t us! Gawds wid the people! N the peoples gotta be real as Gawd t us! We
cant hep ourselves er the people when wes erlone. Ah been wrong erbout a lotta things Ah tol yuh, son. Ah tol yuh them things cause Ah thought they wuz right. Ah tol yuh t work hard n climb t the top. Ah tol yuh folks would lissen t yuh then. But they wont, son! All the will, all the strength, all the power, all the numbahs is in the people! Yuh cant live by yoself!

With the dawning of the new revelation, Taylor will serve his people with unflinching dedication, willing to die for their liberation. He feels one with the community, loosing his identity as an individual and with that comes the feeling “… whatever would or could happen could not hurt this many-limbed, many handed crowd that was he”. By feeling so Taylor “can merge his personality into the collective will of his people and learn that freedom resides in collective strength” (106), states Kinnamon in this context.

The demonstration is so large that the police are afraid to disperse it. The frightened mayor promises food to the hungry and Taylor realises that “Freedom belongs t the strong!”

The story may be considered “a strikingly successful study of a black leader under multiple and conflicting pressures” (106), according to Kinnamon. Kinnamon feels that the device of three separate groups waiting to see Taylor ‘stagy’, and the union of poor whites with the marching African-Americans not too convincing and “essentially unrelated to the basic black themes” (106). However, it may be said in defence of Wright that he thought at this stage that there is not much of a difference
between a poor white and a poor African-American. The mere colour of his skin does not save a white, as long as he belongs to the class of poor, have-nots. One can foresee a prediction of Johnny-Boy's, "Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black. Ah sees rich men n Ah sees po men", in *Bright and Morning Star*, here in *Fire and Cloud*.

Taylor to begin with is motivated by religion and his concept of nature as communal. Like any other ordinary African-American he would have remained content with the tilling of the land that brought a great organic satisfaction. But the land has been taken and nature has been confisicated by the oppressor. Though oppressed, Taylor's will is strong, all the more strengthened by the 'fire sermon' of beatings given by the oppressor and he comes out with the realisation that unity makes the oppressed stronger and freedom belongs to the strong. The new dimension of bringing pressure on the oppressor, by the unity of the oppressed, standing as one man is illustrated in *Fire and Cloud*, which is an advancement over the earlier novellas.

**II. 5.5. Bright and Morning Star:**

*Bright and Morning Star*, the last of the novellas to be discussed from *Uncle Tom's Children*, is superior to *Fire and Cloud* and the three other preceding stories. Kinnamon observes,

'Bright and Morning Star’ attempts to make even more explicit the theme of ‘Fire and Cloud’, itself a thematic culmination of the previous stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*. In 'Bright and Morning Star’, there is again a movement in an individual from
a belief in a consolatory Christianity to a militant collectivism.

(113)

**Bright and Morning Star** was first published in the *New Masses* of 10 May 1938, and it was later published with *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow*, in an enlarged edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, published in 1940, after the grand success of *Native Son*. *Bright and Morning Star* has a female protagonist, Sue, her governing passion being her maternal love. She is a middle-aged, African-American widow, living near Memphis airport. Her sons Sug and Johnny-Boy are dedicated Communist Party organisers, working along with African-Americans and whites, the poor sharecroppers of the area. Sug has been jailed for several weeks and Sue is anxiously waiting for the return of Johnny-Boy, who has gone out in a stormy night to notify the members of an important party meeting. Reva, a white girl and in love with Johnny-Boy, arrives to warn that her father’s house, the proposed venue for the meeting, is under surveillance by the sheriff’s men. Hence it becomes imminent that the meeting be cancelled forthwith, to prevent disclosure of the identity of the party members. With this most urgent information Johnny-Boy goes out again into the rain and dark night to forewarn his comrades.

After Johnny-Boy has left, Sue is threatened and thrashed mercilessly by the sadistic Sheriff and his men. Her defiance to part with any information infuriates them and makes them more brutal and they leave Sue beaten and unconscious. As it happened in Taylor’s case in *Fire and Cloud*, Sue has been branded with fire and transformation on her part becomes imminent.
As she regains her consciousness, she sees “a vast white blur... suspended directly above her... Gradually the blur resolved itself into a huge white face that slowly filled her vision.” The symbols connected with whiteness are consistently used by Wright to represent white oppression. She recognises the face of Booker, a newly enrolled white member of the party. “Sue feels a visceral distrust of white people” (114) as mentioned by Kinnamon. However, her beaten and shocked state, combined with the persuasions of Booker makes her reveal the names of her son’s comrades in her moment of weakness and Booker has left with the promise that he will complete her son’s mission of forewarning the party comrades.

Now Reva returns with the shocking news that Booker is an informer. Sue’s worst fears and apprehension that Booker is not dependable are proved right. Though beaten and tired, Sue is now a transformed woman of staunch determination. It is true that she has inadvertently betrayed her son’s comrades, but she will set right the damage on her own, by a careful execution of her plan.

She takes a wind sheet for her son, as threateningly suggested by the Sheriff, wraps it around a gun and sets out by shortcut for Foley’s woods, where Johnny-Boy is held. She knows the terrain better than Booker and she knows that she can reach the place before he does. She bids her time, pretending that she has come to collect her son. She is obliged to muster all her strength and discipline as she watches the Sheriff’s men break Johnny-Boy’s legs, and smash both his ear drums. She boldly endures witnessing the torture of her son with a sole purpose. “When Booker finally arrives, Sue shoots him before he can reveal the names she has confided to him” (191-
228), states Mohamed. The enraged mob of the Sheriff then kills Johnny-Boy and Sue, his mother.

All the events in this story are covered during the course of a single day and though it is drenched with a constant rain, the title **Bright and Morning Star**, is perhaps appropriately symbolic. In Mohammed's opinion, "In many ways this story bears the fruits of the entire anthology" (191-228). The story also reveals the oppressor-oppressed relationship in a different light. A purely racial African-American conflict is replaced with a multiracial struggle against an authority that is still racist. For the first time, one can notice a change of equations in the oppressor-oppressed relationship. Though Sue distrusts white people, Johnny-Boy rises above racial feeling: "Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black"... "Ah sees rich men n Ah sees po men". This disagreement in the perception of the whites as an oppressor by the mother, and as just rich or poor men by the son reflects "the growing political awareness of the younger generation" (114,115) states Kinnaman. In the opinion of Mohamed, "some of the substantive personal relations between members of different races are represented positively" (191-228), in **Bright and Morning Star**.

**Bright and Morning Star** reveals that Wright feels that political resolve is necessary to carry on a successful struggle against a strong oppressor. The racial oppression has made Sue seek calm and strength through religion. But her religious faith leads to a painful realisation born out of her maternal love for her sons, staunch followers of the Communist Party: One has been jailed already and the other is being
ruthlessly hounded by the oppressor and is in danger of awaiting the same cruel fate. Sue is torn between her religious faith and her motherly love for her sons.

The oppression and rowdyism let loose by the Sheriff, on her sons in particular and against the community in general, present her with an opportunity to reveal her resolution: "There was nothing on this earth, she felt then, that they could not do to her but that she could take. She stood on a narrow plot of ground from which she would die before she was pushed". Her resolve to fight the oppressor – at the cost of making the supreme sacrifice at her own chosen moment – is the result of not only her love for her sons, but also that of her determination to nullify oppression let loose on the community. Her worst fears that the whites are not trustworthy have been proved, but she will undo the damage by shooting Booker, an agent of the oppressor, before he spills out the most wanted information on the party members, and she does not mind getting killed for the sake of blunting the oppressor. She has now transcended her religious faith and she has embraced the faith of her sons, her new found faith giving her the strength to willingly choose her death at her own terms, never to let her be pushed by her oppressors.

For Sue and her sons,

The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meagre beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection; and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her new strength went.
The words of Kinnamon are worth mentioning here. He states:

For her the change takes place under the tutelage of her sons, like Jimmy in “Fire and Cloud”, more militant than the older generation. From the “wondrous vision” of the Savior, Sue turns to the “new and terrible vision” of Sug and Johnny-Boy.

(114)

In the opinion of Mohammed, “Bright and Morning Star ends with a valorization of Sue’s voluntary death” (191-228). She has shot Booker and has retreated into herself and waiting, “giving up her life before they took it from her”. After Johnny-Boy has been killed, and she herself shot by her oppressors, she uses the last vestiges of her strength to yell at her tormentor-oppressors: “yuj didn’t get what yuh wanted? N yuh ain gonna never git it! Yuh didn’t kill me; Ah come here by mahsef”. Sue’s body as it lies in the rain is described as follows: “growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies”, immortalising her.

II. 6. Uncle Tom’s Children: Four Novellas and Bright and Morning Star: Role of death in the oppressor-oppressed relationship:

Death may be considered as purely physiological. But the impact of death does not simply end at the physiological level, and the physiological death of the individual has a cascading effect on the psychological, sociological and political thinking of the characters of the fiction in the immediate context and of the readers in the general context. Death is used as an effective tool by Wright. Death occurring in
an abrupt, unexpected and shocking way leading to maturity and manhood; death becoming inevitable, but chosen voluntarily and yet revealing the inherent helplessness; death though inevitable leading to the determined action on the part of the protagonist to fight to the end, killing before getting killed, thereby causing at least a temporary reversal of the roles of the hunter and the hunted; a symbolic ‘dying into life’ leading to the realisation that the death of the individual alone will not bring about the desired change, unless the oppressed stand united against the oppressor; and death by choice, used as the supreme sacrifice, revealing the strength, determination and will-power of the protagonist, now powerfully revealing the finer aspect of irreversibly reversing the roles of the hunter and the hunted. In other words, death is used as an effective weapon to defy being oppressed.

In almost all these stories death is the result of racial conflict and physical violence. In these stories violence takes the form of homicide of both whites and African-Americans, the oppressors and the oppressed. In the first three novellas, violence takes the form of homicide of a white by an African-American and then of African-Americans by whites. In the fourth, violence takes the form of lynching, but stops short of death. In this novella, it is a new dimension of death experience – ‘dying into life’ – by Taylor. In the fifth, one encounters a lot of violence, leading to the death of a white and two African-Americans, a son and his mother. In this regard Kinnamon states,

Within this pattern of similarities, however, there are significant differences developed by the arrangement of the stories into a
thematic design that gives the volume as a whole measure of
unity and a meaning that transcends the meaning of any of the
separate stories, though “Fire and Cloud” comes closest to
expressing this general import. (106-107)

In his analysis Kinnamon has taken into account only the four novellas of Uncle
Tom’s Children. However one can add Bright and Morning Star also to the four
novellas referred to by Kinnamon.

The fear caused in the minds on account of violence and death is very often
one of the most significant emotions in the construction of the African-American mind
set.

Death is used as an effective tool ranging from the unexpected, rapid and
gruesome, to the voluntary and wilful choosing of death and as a means to the
achievement of physical, psychological, social and political liberation. But in all these
one finds that “… neither dominance based on violence nor hegemony based on
discursive control is ever able to subjugate the oppressed entirely and completely”
(191-228) observes Mohamed.

Fear of violence and death, the oppression let loose by the oppressor, the
inevitable and constant struggle against oppression, the society consisting of both the
oppressor and the oppressed indulging in arbitrary violence lead to highly dramatic
situations.

Initially, it is just the instinct of survival. In other words, the oppressed kill
only to survive. Big Boy is forced to kill a white, a rattle-snake and a dog, purely by
his instinct of survival. But at the same time, the unexpected experience of death, so violently thrust on him, paves the way for his maturation into adulthood. The innocence of childhood and his boyish paradise have been irrevocably snatched away. The sight of the remains of a blackened, burnt out sapling standing on the edge of the mountain will remain etched for ever in his mind. Big Boy is taught a cruel lesson, through a common experience to be encountered in the oppressor-oppressed relationship. As mentioned by Mohamed, "... it is virtually impossible to become a mature "man" – either one can try to become a man by facing actual death or one must remain a "boy" forever (191-228).

For Mann death serves as a kind of physical and psychological liberation. He realises fully well his plight that he has no chance as an African-American even under normal circumstances. With Mississippi in floods, priority will be given only to the whites and of course, it is obligatory on the part of the African-Americans to serve the whites to the best of their ability. An African-American cannot use his prowess of rowing to take his wife in labour to a safer place. An African-American life is expendable after all. He cannot even wait to shed tears for his dead wife and child and he knows fully well that death awaits him, being the penalty for killing a white. Perhaps as one of the oppressed, he has the sole liberty of choosing his mode of death. Instead of being found guilty and condemned to death, he prefers to be shot at the back pretending to escape from his captors.

For Silas death does not invoke the feelings of helplessness and self-pity as in the case of Mann. On the other hand he is driven by a passion of fighting for his
honour and he will do it the hard way. Silas also knows that his death is inevitable because he will be outnumbered and outgunned by his oppressor, but still he will die fighting, with his guns blazing, and having at least the momentary satisfaction that he can play the game of a hunter with equal efficiency and deadly accuracy. Silas also chooses death for preserving his honour, but he chooses his death on his own ground on his own terms and conditions.

Mann and Silas, in choosing to die, rather than being killed, define death in a positive rather than a negative manner. Mann is helpless, whereas Silas is determined to take a stand and fight. In the words of Mohamed, “... he (Silas) sets out to affirm himself by negating the negation... He also fulfills Big Boy’s fantasy of killing as many members of the mob as possible before they murder him” (191-228). His death reveals that “… the ability to die for personal honor and pride is an important and necessary step in the developments of Wright’s fictive exploration of social death” (191-228).

For Taylor, death of an individual may not be powerful enough to cause a change. Tailor will die for the sake of his people if only he knew how. The sufferings and problems of his people and a possible way out is more important for Taylor. His people include the poor whites also. Hence for the first time a new dimension of the problem is explored. Those who have power, position and governance and those who do not have these, form two different and distinct classes. Oppression does not distinguish between a white and an African-American as long as both belong to the helpless group of have-nots. Thus Tailor gains – through his ‘fire sermon’, an
experience of violent lashings, burning like fire and forcibly placing him almost on the portals of death – a new knowledge. Taylor’s statement that he is willing to “die fer mah people ef Ah only knewed how”, not only reveals his newly acquired knowledge, but also reveals the fact that an individual is a part of the society and the efficacy of death is to be measured in terms of its ability to socially and politically liberate others. Taylor’s feeling of oneness, his getting amalgamated with the community makes him realise that no force can hurt that “Many-limbed, many-handed crowd that was he” – the oppressed joining in unison, speaking with one voice and having one purpose.

Taylor’s experience differs from that of Silas. Silas feels,

The white folks ain gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep ‘em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! ... N then they take yo life!

But Taylor feels empowered with the new knowledge that this oppressor-oppressed equation cannot remain the same forever, he feels a “baptism of clean joy” and mumbles out loud and exultingly: “Freedom belongs t the strong!”

In Bright and Morning Star, the concept of death is carried to greater heights. The story is quite reflexive and it establishes in emphatic terms that in the realm of death there is no difference between the oppressor and the oppressed. Death can be violent and cruel and death does not differentiate between a white and an African-American. The same bullet made of lead can kill an African-American or a white. In other words, death does not require a gold bullet to embrace a white. Death
becomes an effective instrument pooh-poohing the mentality of the oppressor, juxtaposing it with that of the oppressed. A determined African-American can challenge and defy death. Sue has achieved her purpose through her voluntary death, and her body lying in rain remains a testimony to “the doomed living and the dead that never dies”.

II.7. **Uncle Tom’s Children: Four Novellas** and **Bright and Morning Star**: A Summing Up:

Though **Uncle Tom’s Children** was the first published book written by Wright, the book was received with varying degrees of critical estimate. The stories form a unified work of fiction by their arrangement, similarities in theme and method. The stories revolve around the basic African-American experience, violence becoming an integral part of life, the inequalities of Jim-Crow society and the resultant oppressor-oppressed relationship, and how such a relationship affects the African-American psyche.

Sudden and unexpected oppression thrust on Big Boy shatters his innocence of boyhood for ever, forcing him to become a “man” through violence. In Mann’s story, the difference between a white and an African-American and the resultant inequality are exposed right from the beginning. His story shows Wright’s careful use and repetition of colours in achieving symbolic overtones. Black and white represent the status of the oppressed African-American and the oppressing whites. Wright also makes use of yellow and brown, two racially significant colours. The description of the floodwater will illustrate this:
Through a dingy pane he saw yellow water swirling around a corner of the barn... In the morning the water was deep brown. In the afternoon it was a clayey yellow. And at night it was black, like a restless side of liquid tar... He squinted at a tiny ridge of white foam where the yellow current struck a side of the barn and veered sharply. For three days he had been watching that tiny ridge of white foam.

"The sinister implications of the foam's whiteness are suggested whenever the colour recurs in this story" (90) remarks Kinnamon in this context.

The stolen boat brought by Bob is painted white and stolen from a white man. "... its white n yuh couldn't git erway wid it". The encounter Mann has, emphasizes the significance of Heartfield's white face as well as the white boat. Mann remembers his encounter with Heartfield in the following words: "The man was wearing a white shirt and was playing the yellow flare over the black water". All these colours, white, yellow and black have a deadly significance for Mann. Being an African-American he stands condemned for killing a white. Kinnamon states that colour is used in a singularly appropriate way to reveal racial persecution and conflict:

Racial prejudice emerges constantly in the story when the two races meet or think of each other. Communication between the races is thus difficult or impossible because whites simply will not listen to blacks, preferring instead to consign them automatically to a category of subhuman stereotypes. (91)
Comments Kinnamon, highlighting the plight of the African-American.

Grannie and Elder Murray represent the religious point of view in *Down by the Riverside*. Their religion guarantees their continued subordination by evading confrontation with the white oppressor. Murray leads the prayer, pleading with God to “Soften the hard hearts of them white folks there in town”.

Mann being a pragmatic individualist deals with southern oppression in his own solitary, heroic way. But his weakness lies in that he undergoes his ordeal all alone, and his individualism is bound to be a failure with all odds against him.

“Down by the Riverside”, then, demonstrates the failure of both religious faith and pragmatic individualism in coping with white oppression. The answer is not to lay down the sword and shield by the riverside in meek submission... The only viable answer is collective action. (93)

states Kinnamon in this context.

*Long Black Song* takes into account the viewpoint of the female protagonist, Sarah also. The action in the story is the result of Sarah’s diffused sensibility. She remains passive and she does not participate directly in the interracial violence, but only in interracial sexual intercourse. Sarah is considered as one of the possessions by her husband Silas. Silas provides adequately for Sarah, but he is distinctly Sarah’s second choice sexually. When even Silas has been away for a week, she becomes an easy target for seduction by the young white man. Silas is infuriated, but he never realises that his sexual inadequacy is equally responsible for
Sarah’s easy seduction. It is a pity that Silas never realises that Sarah is more oppressed. He resents the oppression of whites never realising for a moment that he too is playing the role of an oppressor nonchalantly, his wife being the oppressed in this case. He resents most the whites’ exploitation in general, and sexual exploitation by the oppressor is only a part. He wants to emulate white landlords, but though he is in possession of lands and has added a few more acres recently to his possession, he cannot be accepted as an equal by the whites. Now his wife also has been seduced by a white and so his life has turned into a life of deprivations. His indignation,

The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give
no black man a chance!... They take yo lan! They take yo
freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!
is not only his, but serves as the collective voice of his oppressed people. His desire, “alla them white folks wuz dead! Dead, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill em all!” expresses his and his people’s anger against the oppressor. Giving vent to his anger he fights to the last, killing at least some of those oppressors before getting killed.

**Fire and Cloud** projects Tayor, an African-American leader, one in the unenviable position of representing a group of poor African-Americans and whites, and as the leader of the community having the responsibility of protecting them. All the odds are against Taylor: he cannot antagonise his authorities to whom he owes his position; among his own people, there are selfish interests who will stoop – to betray and undermine Taylor – to occupy position of power; the group of angry young men
represented by Taylor’s son thirsting for action but not caring to bother about the consequences, his white authorities who are not ready to listen to the poor and ready to use brute power on the poor, hungry, agitating masses, with nonchalance and the gang of hooligans let loose by the authorities roaming the streets to terrorise the people to stay indoors; these are the elements working against Taylor. The abduction of Taylor by these hooligan whites into the countryside and subjecting him to a vicious whipping exposes Taylor to a totally new and hitherto unknown experience. He has been pushed close to the portals of death. Now he is resolved, and he has learnt his lesson through pain and suffering, and he has learnt the importance of solidarity, learnt in a hard way: “It’s the people, son! Wes too much erlone this way! Wes los when wes erlone! Wes gotta be wid our folks…” Taylor now speaks with his new found wisdom to his people advocating united action. The demonstration is so large, consisting of crowds of poor whites and African-Americans and the frightened mayor promises food to the hungry, making Taylor’s conviction “Freedom belongs t the strong!” a powerful truth, not to be slighted.

**Bright and Morning** Star may be considered a reflexive story, bearing the fruits of the entire anthology in a number of ways. Sue, the protagonist becomes a representative of the African-American experience. The story takes the theme of multi-racial existence a step ahead of **Fire and Cloud**. Mohamed’s opinion, “The story in effect examines the strength of political resolve that Wright feels is necessary to carry on a successful struggle against oppression” (191-228) is worth mentioning here. In the days crowded with trouble she has learnt “to love hardship with a bitter
pride”. She is torn between the love for her son which allows him to continue his activities, living in perennial risk of being jailed and trying to stop him at the risk of negating both their lives. In her enthusiasm to prove her strength, she has betrayed her son and his party and she has the mental and physical strength to make amends for her unintended betrayal by sacrificing her life and making sure that the white informer Booker is shot before he spills out the names. She is triumphant in her death proclaiming, “yuj didn’t get what yuh wanted? N yuh ain gonna neveh git it!..”, making her self-sacrifice, “simultaneously personal and political” (191-228) in the words of Mohamed.

In Uncle Tom’s Children, Wright makes use of the Southern African-American dialect, making the dialogues crisply terse and realistic. Violent conflict, both physical and psychic, between the races being Wright’s special subject, Kinnamon feels, “… in Uncle Tom’s Children this subject is presented with an intense dramatic immediacy” (108). Thus even in Uncle Tom’s Children, the first book of Wright to be published, one finds the various dimensions of the oppressor-oppressed relationship portrayed in an intense and highly dramatic way.

II. 8. Native Son

Following the publication of the first edition of Uncle Tom’s Children, Wright moved from Harlem to Brooklyn and in 1938 he started writing Native Son. The award of two thousand and five hundred dollars he received by way of Guggenheim Fellowship in 1939, sustained him for a year, till his novel Native Son was published by Harper’s on 1 March 1940. The arrival of Native Son had an
explosive impact, making Richard Wright one of the most important writers of the twentieth century American fiction in general and African-American fiction in particular.

Edwin R. Embree writes in his *13 Against the Odds*,

Richard wright wanted to write not a book but a bomb. He wanted to tell what happened to Negroes under the hates and hurts of American life and to tell it with such hard, cold realism that people could not get away from it. (25)

This statement absolutely befits *Native Son* and its lasting impact.

II. 8.1. How “Bigger” was born: An account of Richard Wright:

Prior to venturing an attempt on the study of oppressor-oppressed relationship in *Native Son*, it is relevant to have an idea based on the first hand information provided by Wright. In his *How “Bigger” was Born*, added as an introduction to *Native Son*, Wright presents the various influences that have gone into the making of the novel and its protagonist Bigger Thomas. Even at the outset Wright presents his concept of a novel:

In a fundamental sense, an imaginative novel represents the merging of two extremes; it is an intensely intimate expression on the part of a consciousness couched in terms of the most objective and commonly known events. It is at once something private and public by its very nature and texture.
Having said this he mentions that the birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to his childhood, and “there was not just one Bigger, but many of them...”, more than he could count and more than what one may suspect. He recalls five, mentioning them as Bigger No. 1,2,3,4 and 5. Wright reveals the powerful influence exerted by these Bigger Thomasses in the following words:

The Bigger Thomasses were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken.

Wright mentions the existence of two worlds – one white and one black – where there are even “a white God and a black God”. The intention of the white population consisted of a “program of oppression” in a brutal and violent form. The armoury of white oppression consisted of limiting the amount of education the African-American may receive; keeping him off the police force and out of local national guards; segregating him residentially; Jim Crowing him in public places; restricting his participation in the professions and jobs; building up a vast, dense ideology of racial superiority of the white, justifying any act of violence taken against the African-American to defend white dominance and further conditioning the African-American to hope for little and to receive that little without rebelling. It is to
be noted that the very foundations of oppressor-oppressed relationship are built on these highly biased, discriminative, physical, sociological and psychological factors.

Oppression seeks to keep out the African-American from a civilization and since the African-American is a part of that civilization, living so close to it, he cannot help but “react in some way”, and in a dominant civilization of incentives and prizes, oppression spawns among the oppressed African-American, “a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright blind rebellion to a sweet, other-worldly submissiveness”.

The reaction of the oppressed African-American is varied; some find consolation in religion and feel that the bitter life here will be compensated by a life hereafter, some employ a thousand ruses and stratagems of struggle to win their rights; some project their hurts and longings through blues, jazz and swing; some labour under hot sun and kill their restless ache, and themselves by alcohol; There are also those striving for an education, and when they get it, enjoy the financial fruits of it in the style of their “oppressors”. Usually they go “hand in hand with the powerful whites”, and help the oppressor to keep their groaning oppressed “brothers in line”. Having risen from the oppressed classes themselves, they work “with those who oppressed”, and thereby assume the role of an oppressor, themselves. These call themselves “leaders”, and in real terms they are leaders only in allowing the oppression to continue. In this connection, Wright states,
...I can tell you that I lived the first seventeen years of my life in the South without so much as hearing of or seeing one act of rebellion from any Negro, save the Bigger Thomasses.

II. 8.2. Why does Bigger revolt?:

Wright feels that no explanation based upon "a hard and fast rule of conduct" can be given for the revolt of Bigger Thomasses. But there are certain dominant psychological factors in the personality of Bigger Thomas, such as his becoming estranged from religion and folk culture of his race. His reaction to the dominant civilization and the bombardment made by the daily American life, make his emergence inevitable as a distinct type. The emptiness of his life and his wild and intense "longing to belong, to be identified, to feel" as he is alive as other people are, are also factors contributing to his rebellion. In addition to the Southern oppression, he is dragged into a far vaster and more ruthless, impersonal "commodity-profit machine".

The urban environment of Chicago, affording a more stimulating life, makes the Bigger Thomas react more violently than even in the South. No doubt Chicago environment has more to offer, but it also offers more tensions of unfulfillment and dissatisfaction. He feels a deep sense of exclusion, and experiences a feeling of "looking at things with a painful and unwarrantable nakedness", a feeling and an experience transcending "national and racial boundaries".

Wright remembers that,
... the civilization which had given birth to Bigger Thomas contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and had left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities, a hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchannelized impulses.

Such a situation creates many Bigger Thomasses – both white and African-American – “tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless”. Bigger Thomas is a product of a dislocated society and becoming “a dispossessed and disinherited man” in the process.

Moreover, the world outside, a world where fundamental assumptions can no longer be taken for granted, a world ridden with national and class strife, a world in which God no longer exists as a daily focal point of men’s lives, a world where religion and faith have no longer any meaning, a world constantly urging men to satisfy only their organisms and a world that exists “on a plane of animal sensations alone” also renders its powerful and many-faceted impact on Bigger Thomasses. Bigger Thomas “is the product” of such “a dislocated society” and “he is a dispossessed and disinherited man” says Wright.

Wright states categorically,

Bigger was attracted and repelled by the American scene. 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.

This emphatic statement of Wright reveals the paradoxical plight of a native American
son, compelled to feel like an alien in his own land. Such an alienation creates a
relationship whose effects are carried by every African-American, “like scars,
somewhere in his body and mind”.

II.8.3. Uncle Tom’s Children and Native Son:

The publication of Uncle Tom’s Children, and some of the reviews the book
received made Wright feel that he had made an awful mistake. He felt that he had
written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good
about it. He resolved that if he ever wrote another book, “no one would weep over it;
that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the
consolation of tears”. This feeling, “hard and deep”, “without the consolation of
tears” is the one that differentiates Native Son from his earlier published work.
Wright had spent years learning about Bigger and “what had made him and what he
meant”, constitutes Wright’s plot.

Wright informs that while writing Native Son he “was guided by but one
criterion: to tell the truth” as he saw it and felt it. Though told in Wright’s words,
“always, from the start to the finish, it is “Bigger’s story, Bigger’s fear, Bigger’s
flight, and Bigger’s fate” that Wright tries to depict. “throughout there is but one point
of view: Bigger’s”. Wright states that this makes for “a richer illusion of a reality”.

II. 8.3. **Native Son: The novel:**

Richard Wright’s novel **Native Son** has been divided into three sections consisting of Book One: Fear, Book Two: Flight and Book Three: Fate. As mentioned earlier the novel is Bigger’s story and the point of view there is Bigger’s point of view.

The title **Native Son**, by itself is quite significant. Any one born in America, is an American, a native son, by virtue of his birth. The African ancestry of any African-American cannot change this and hence an African-American also has equal rights and status of a native son of America. But herein lies the paradox and problem of the African-American, created by feelings of racism and oppression. The American white world view forbids the African-American, a native son, to expand beyond the social, economic and political limits of his African-American community. Carl Milton Hughes reinforces this idea and suggests that irony is the controlling device out of which the story unfolds:

> The title **Native Son** suggests ironically the contents, and this means, in context of American society, that a member by right of birth is a citizen of the country enjoying all the rights and privileges which go along with citizenship. As the story unfolds, the venomous irony and frustrating paradox in the title become unmistakably clear. (50-51)

The epigraph of **Native Son**, along with the title, hints at the genesis of the novel and its emotional climate. The epigraph,

> Even today is my complaint rebellious,
My stroke is heavier than my groaning.

is from the Book of Job, revealing that "Bigger is far more than a victim of his environment and that Wright elevates the environmental forces in his novel to a level comparable to those that characterize Job's world" (34) mentions Joyce.

Joyce states further,

In addition to evoking the psychological and social limitations of a segregated society, the epigraph proposes that there is justice in Bigger's complaint... Bigger, a "native son" of America, does not deserve the alienation and maltreatment bestowed upon him by a caste society. (34)

Book1 With the title "Fear", in addition to representing Bigger's response to his environment also introduces the background inducing Bigger's emotional and physical reactions.

The novel opens with the ringing of alarm clock in the dark and silent room. The setting is the single-room apartment occupied by Bigger Thomas's family, consisting of his mother, sister, brother and himself. Very often they have unwelcome visitors, big, ugly, black rats. "There he is again, Bigger!" the woman screamed, and the tiny one-room apartment galvanized into violent action. The rat hunting is described with all the dramatic intensity.

"There he is" the mother screamed again.

A huge black rat squealed and leaped at Bigger's trouserleg and snagged it in his teeth, hanging on.
... The rat squeaked and turned and ran in a narrow circle, looking for a place to hide; it leaped again past Bigger and scurried on dry rasping feet to one side of the box and then to the other, searching for the hole...

Wright has mentioned in *How “Bigger” was Born*,

... Chicago was overrun with rats. I recalled that I’d seen many rats on the streets, that I’d heard and read of Negro children being bitten by rats in their beds... the rat would not leave me, he presented himself in many attractive guises. So, cautioning myself to allow the rat scene to disclose only Bigger, his family, their little room, and their relationships, I let the rat walk in and he did his stuff.

and this reveals that the rat has been significantly introduced even at the beginning, forewarning Bigger’s psychological fears and his scurrying like a rat, desperately searching for his ‘hole’ to hide in.

Bigger and his brother talking about the dead rat, makes one wonder, whether similar words are meant for African-Americans, when they become the central point of discussion by the whites. “How in hell do they get so big?”, “Eating garbage and anything else he can get”. This conversation sounds ominous, and one can surmise that very soon Bigger will be the focal point of discussion.

Joyce makes an interesting observation:
The purpose of this first book is to introduce the environmental forces that have already shaped Bigger’s life when the novel opens... through Wright’s use of setting and its effect on Bigger’s consciousness, we understand that Bigger’s stifling daily routine and that of the rest of the Black belt results from a mechanized, systematic environment with a sharp dichotomy between the rights of Blacks and that of whites. (35)

It is obvious that Bigger’s family depends on the “relief” and if he does not accept the job offered the relief will be cut off. Bigger is extremely apprehensive of the whites and he is in an obvious dilemma.

He was sick of his life at home. Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering... he could take the job at Dalton’s and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action.

Bigger’s environment is stifling and he has no choice of action. His friends Gus and G.H. and Jack, being African-Americans are in no way better. They can always rob the other African-Americans, the job being “easier and safer”. But robbing of Blum’s would be a violation of ultimate taboo.

Bigger’s yearning that he could fly an aircraft, if he had had a chance and the observation made by Gus, “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” are thought
provoking. In short, the whites will always try to oppress the African-Americans and will not allow them to do anything worthwhile and positive. Bigger has a feeling that “something awful” is going to happen to him and he says,

I don’t know. I just feel that way. Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me...

These African-Americans are the only “things” in Chicago “that can’t go where we want to go and do what we want to do”. They are forced to live in such a stifled and oppressed environment.

Bigger’s plan to rob Blum’s stores is filled with anxiety and apprehension. Bigger has “a mounting feeling of fear... he was scared. But he had to go through with it now”. He has now his gun but feels “a ball of hot tightness growing larger and heavier in his stomach and chest”. He throws his scare “to rob a white man” on Gus and uses that excuse to quarrel with Gus and bully him. Bigger is fully aware of his fear of robbing a white man and his reaction after the aborted attempt reveals this:

Like a man staring regretfully but hopelessly at the stump of a cut-off arm or leg, he knew that the fear of robbing a white man had had hold of him when he started that fight with Gus;... his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness.
It is equally true, “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”.

His meeting with the Daltons takes place at “a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded”. Bigger regrets his being compelled to enter such a world. He grows angry. He feels that “he could have stayed among his own people and escaped feeling this fear and hate. This was not his world”. Facing the Daltons, sitting in a white home with strange objects challenging him, he feels “angry and uncomfortable”. He feels uneasy, like a rat trapped and trying desperately seeking the safety of his hole, however stifling, and detestable the hole may be.

Bigger is given a job, at twenty five dollars a week with an “extra” five dollars which Bigger can keep for himself. He is shown round the building and told that driving a car would be a part of his job.

Bigger’s fears, apprehensions and confused reaction to the whites is revealed by his nervous reactions. While referring to Bigger’s first encounter with the Daltons, Kinnamon states the following:

At the Dalton house Bigger replies to his white interlocutors in monosyllables; communication across the racial barrier is almost impossible. Bigger’s reactions to whites, it should be emphasized, are determined more by the total configuration of his crippled personality than by the specific circumstances of his encounters with them or by their actual attitudes toward him.
He is so conditioned by the racial situation that he cannot respond to individual whites, as separate persons, but only as abstract embodiments of white power — "that white looming mountain of hate". (131)

These words reveal that at the core of Bigger’s problem is his inability to distinguish individual whites from the total group of white oppressors, his inability being the result of his fear and hatred.

In this connection, it is relevant to quote Joyce’s statement:

Though his personality conforms to the strictures of the white world, environmental oppression is paradoxically responsible for his rebelliousness, which defies physical and emotional confinement. (32)

His first encounter with Miss Dalton creates feelings of uncertainty and fear in Bigger.

"Is this the new chauffer?"

"yes", said Mr. Dalton. "This is Bigger Thomas".

"Hello, Bigger", the girl said.

Bigger swallowed. He looked at Mr. Dalton, then felt that he should not have looked.

Miss Dalton’s talk about the union, its membership and such things are unknown to Bigger, causing feelings of confusion, fear and distrust.
Even when he is alone in the company of Peggy, another servant of the family, Bigger does not feel comfortable, and her words that Mr. Dalton has done a lot for his people only adds to his confusion.

“My people?” asked Bigger, puzzled.

“Yes, the colored people. He gave over five million dollars to colored schools”.

Bigger is aware only of his mother, brother and sister as his people, and it takes sometime for Bigger to realise that his people are coloured, who have received a lot, in millions of dollars, owing to the philanthropy of Mr. Dalton. Bigger has a strange feeling, that not only Mrs. Dalton is blind, but many others are also mentally blind, if not physically like Mrs. Dalton.

While driving Miss Dalton, her words that she is on his side further adds to his confusion. Bigger is all the more confused by her talk about communists. His reaction turns apprehensive:

He didn’t want to meet any communists. They didn’t have any money. He felt it was all right for a man to go to jail for robbery, but to go to jail for fooling around with reds was bunk.

His angry reaction on shaking hands with Jan, makes him stiff and he “was desperately trying to understand”. He feels miserable in their presence:

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.

This anger, this dumb, cold and inarticulate hate continues throughout, making him all the more confused, angry and suffocated, leading to latent dangerous situations.

When Jan offers to drive the car, Bigger is made to sit between Mary and Jan, and it is a new and alien experience for Bigger. His being sandwiched between Mary and Jan is described in the following words: “There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls”. The whiteness of Jan and Mary become ‘white looming walls’, crushing and suffocating Bigger. “These people made him feel things he did not want to feel. If he were white, if he were like them, it would have been different. But he was black”, the last two sentences highlighting the African-American psyche.

Living in a stifled and oppressed environment, Bigger cannot understand Mary when she states,

... I’ve been to England, France and Mexico, but I don’t know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so little about each other. I just want to see. I want to know these people.
Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They’re human.... There are twelve million of them.... They live in our country.... In the same city with us....

This conversation Mary has with Bigger is full of emphasis, revealing Mary’s concern for the African-Americans, and her wistful shame in being partly responsible for playing the role of an oppressor, and living in a society totally unresponsive, and uncaring for the African-American. The irony of the situation makes Bigger feel all the more miserable, described in the following words:

... Why didn’t they leave him alone? What had he done to them? What good could they get out of sitting here making him feel so miserable?

Their visit to Ernie’s Kitchen Shack and their insistence that Bigger should accompany them makes Bigger foresee the reaction fo his people. “if he went in they would ask one another: who ‘re them white folks Bigger’s hanging around with? – the term ‘white folk’ clearly indicating that the whites are aliens in the world of African-Americans. Joyce’s observation in this context is noteworthy:

Wright’s emphasis indicates the impact of the word white or any reference to white people on the minds of Blacks. Embodied in the phrase white folks are over three hundred years of intuitive cultural associations. These associations make up what Ellison refers to as the ritualistic social forms that
characterize a Jim Crow society. Wright demonstrates how Blacks and whites pay tribute to these rituals and illustrates what happens when any member of either social group violates the taboos which restrict the interaction between Blacks and whites. (42)

These taboos get violated, by Jan and Mary on the one hand and by Bigger on the other. These taboos remain an unwritten law in the oppressor-oppressed relationship and the moment these get violated the results become disastrous and irrevokable. Bigger's fears haunt him and his position is unenviable:

Bigger felt trapped. Oh, goddamn! He saw in a flash that he could have made all of this very easy if he had simply acted from the beginning as if they were doing nothing unusual.

The very statement “as if they were doing nothing unusual”, suggest that something unusual is happening. Bigger constantly feels, “In his relations with her he felt that he was riding a seesaw; never were they on a common level”.

Bigger is used to drinking beer and rum, but not used to having them in the company of whites. He is more confused by Jan's talk on communists and the Party. “He said nothing. He drained his glass and Jan poured another round. He was getting drunk enough to look straight at them now”. On their drive back to Mary’s home, the remaining liquor finds its way into the systems of Jan, Mary and Bigger. Jan has left by the street car and Mary staggers in her walk.

... she swayed before him, smiling.
"I sure am drunk..."

He watched her with a mingled feeling of helplessness, admiration, and hate. If her father saw him here with her now, his job would be over. But she was beautiful, slender, with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people. But, for all of that, she was white and he hated her.

Bigger's fear, the influence of liquor on him and Mary, and his hatred for the whites all join to undo him. He is forced to carry a virtually unconscious Mary into her bedroom – a territory where an African-American cannot trespass – and to make matters worse, he encounters Mrs. Dalton there, before he could safely leave Mary's bedroom: "...A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. It was Mrs. Dalton".

Bigger's fear of the consequences of being discovered in Mary's bedroom, compel him to try desperately do anything, so that his presence will not be revealed. Though he is aware of Mrs. Dalton's blindness, he is extremely afraid that Mary may be awakened, and in his desperate effort to prevent Mary from mumbling, Bigger holds his hand against her mouth.

Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught...
... Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him... Again Mary's body heaved and he held the pillow in a grip that took all of his strength...

He clenched his teeth and held his breath, intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him. His muscles flexed taut as steel and he pressed the pillow, feeling the bed give slowly, evenly, but silently. Then suddenly her fingernails did not bite into his wrists. Mary's fingers loosened. He did not feel her surging and heaving against him. Her body was still.

This long, detailed description reveals Bigger's state of mind, his fear and helplessness leading him to the accidental and unexpected murder of Mary. His intense shock on realising that he had murdered Mary make him shudder and benumbed:

The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of the white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman.
The fact that Bigger, an African-American had committed the murder of a white girl, in a society governed by Jim Crow laws and its taboos, becomes more of a deciding factor, than the act of murder itself. Joyce, while commenting on “Fear”, the title of Book One mentions:

... the title of Book I, becomes a function of setting, symbolizing the effects of the environment on Bigger’s psyche and emphasizing that aspect of his character which makes him succumb to the irrationality and blindness of frenzy. ... His murdering Mary diminishes his extreme fear of the white world and enables him to see himself and his family as they appear to whites. (43)

The irrevocable act of murder committed as a result of Bigger’s fear of the whites also serves indirectly as a source of self-realisation for him.

The action in Books One and Two and the rapid movement of events take place in about sixty hours, from the battle with the rat in the Thomas flat on Saturday morning to the capture of Bigger on late Monday night. Once the murder has been committed the tension relaxes and after Bigger’s capture, the pace slows down in Book Three, as the emphasis shifts “from Bigger the individual to Bigger the social symbol” (129) as mentioned by Kinnamon.

Bigger’s act of burning away the body of Mary in the furnace though appears to be an act of self-preservation, is the result of whatever little observation and analysis Bigger has made of the whites. He is aware that they are ‘blind’ in different
ways; Mrs. Dalton is physically blind, but the other whites are blind in that they cannot see an African-American servant commit a murder nor can they see him disposing off the body in the furnace. In his blindness the white oppressor considers the African-American as one sans feeling, sans brains, sans reaction, and sans intelligence. It is this blindness that makes an African-American just a thing, an object and not at all a human being.

This blindness of the white society allows Bigger some more time and perhaps Bigger would not have been caught but for an error committed by him, in not cleaning the ashes of the furnace. Bigger makes use of their ‘blindness’ to escape from the scene of crime.

The blindness of the whites as felt by Bigger is revealed in Book Two, ‘Flight’:

The whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him blind, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it... What he had done last night had proved that Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one... Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind....

Bigger’s act of murder opens new possibilities of his journey inward and makes him feel “like a man reborn”, and this leads to his loss of fear: “It was the first
time he had ever been in their presence without feeling fearful”. He realises that he could utilise the blindness of others in his strategy of camouflage. “He saw it all very sharply and simply: act like other people thought you ought to act, yet do what you wanted”. By using this he could see without being seen and observe without being observed, making himself an invisible man.

Bigger’s relationship with Bessie has no sentiments attached to it. His physical need makes him seek the company of Bessie. “She only wanted to get drunk. She wanted liquor and he wanted her. So he would give her liquor and she would give him herself”. It is obvious that Bigger cannot afford to keep the company of Bessie for ever and if he does so she will become a liability:

he had not thought of Bessie’s being with him. A woman was a dangerous burden when a man was running away. He had read of how men had been caught because of women, and he did not want that to happen to him.

This reveals that Bigger, himself being a member of the oppressed community, does not consider it wrong to exploit another poor helpless member of his own community. He is always conscious of the fact that he is an African-American and that he had murdered a white girl.

There was just the old feeling, the feeling that he had had all his life: he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would soon accuse him...
would not let him go even if they were not certain whether he had done it or not.

This again reveals how an African-American is liable to be accused by the white oppressor, even in the presence of lingering doubts about the possibility of the crime ever being committed by the African-American. Bigger also realises that all odds are against him: “They would say he had raped her (Mary) and there would be no way to prove that he had not”. It is this thought of helplessness of being trapped that makes him commit an act – almost a rape – by forcing an unwilling Bessie, over her helpless pleading: “don’t Bigger don’t don’t”. Realising his unenviable plight “He could not take her (Bessie) and he could not leave her”, he is forced to murder her. As he has become an expendable commodity, Bessie too has become expendable. He smashes her head and dumps her body to the bottom of the building by dropping her through the air-shaft.

Bigger has a feeling,

In all his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes... never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight.

The core of his problem, the problem of the oppressed is revealed by his yearning “to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it. So he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others even though he was
black”. The denial of the oppressor to allow a chance for the oppressed African-American to live like others is the crux of the problem leading to explosive and violent situations.

James Baldwin’s analysis in his *Many Thousands Gone*, on the psychology of African-Americans,

The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro’s heart, and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality. Then he, like the white enemy with whom he will be locked one day in mortal struggle, has no means save this of asserting his identity. This is why Bigger’s murder of Mary can be referred to as an “act of creation” and why, once this murder has been committed, he can feel for the first time that he is living fully and deeply as a man was meant to live. (48-62)
is worth mentioning here.

But almost at the moment Bigger feels that he has had a chance to express himself — though through an unexpected murder, closely followed by another deliberate one — he realises that he is doomed. The newspapers report the crime and Bigger can see the writing on the wall:

He paused and reread the line, AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME. Those words excluded him utterly from the world. To hint that he had committed a sex crime was to pronounce the
death sentence; it meant a wiping out of his life even before he was captured; it meant death before death came, for the white men who read those words would at once kill him in their hearts.

Bigger realises that it is now only a question of time, before he is captured, tried and condemned. "He had an almost mystic feeling that if he were ever cornered something in him would prompt him to act the right way, the right way being the way that would enable him to die without shame." Simultaneously with his realisation that he has no chance in the world ruled by the whites, Bigger’s journey inward, and his self-introspection commence. One sees here Bigger Thomas, the private person. Here the emphasis "is upon a problem that he (Bigger) faces as an isolated, solitary human whose problem is compounded by race though absolutely not defined by racial considerations" (96-108) as stated by Donald B. Gibson. Bigger’s perception that he has no hope, comes true, the moment he is captured and the mob reaction of the whites: “Kill ‘im!”

“Lynch ‘im!”

“That black sonofabitch!” The angry reaction of the white mob proves Biggers’s premonition that his capture “meant death before death came”.

Book Three, “Fate” shows Bigger in a different light. He has already overcome his fear and hate:

Toward no one in the world did he feel any fear now, for he knew that fear was useless; and toward no one in the world did
he feel any hate now, for he knew that hate would not help him.
He yearns for a new pride and a new humility... a humility
springing from a new identification... forming the basis for a
new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity.

His realisation of the truth that “not only had they resolved to put him to death, but they were determined to make his death mean more than mere punishment”; makes Bigger seek his salvation through his inner strength. Bigger’s understanding of himself and the role that he had had to play makes Baldwin’s observation: “… he (Bigger) wants to die because he glories in his hatred and prefers like Lucifer, rather to rule in hell than serve in heaven” (48-62) irrelevant.

Bigger loaths the company of Reverend Hammond and realises that religion with its empty abject submission cannot give solace to him. Even during the trial, Bigger is not very much involved, nor is he capable of understanding all the legal jargon. He can understand that Max is representing and defending him, but beyond that Bigger is incapable of realising the nuances of his arguments. Moreover, Bigger is now coming to terms with himself and he knows from the beginning the verdict condemning him to death, will be on expected lines.

Though he knows that he will be condemned to death, still certain facts cause bitterness and pain for Bigger:

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... crime for a Negro was only when he
harmed whites, took white lives, or injured white property.
There is a clear line dividing the white and the Black, the oppressor and the oppressed.
The burning cross of the Ku Klux Klan reveals all this, and this was a symbol of their
burning hatred and the cross of salvation round his throat looses all its significance.
"he (Bigger) wanted to tear the cross from his throat and throw it away". He actually
does so and feels, "I can die without a cross!". "When Bigger eventually pulls the
preacher's cross from around his neck, he demonstrates his final rejection of the
humiliation linked to his blackness" (82) states Joyce in this context. Max remains the
one and the only source sustaining Bigger. Bigger’s answers like,

"They kill you before you die".

.....

"I wanted to do things. But everything I wanted to do I
couldn’t".

.....

"I don’t know. It (happiness) wouldn’t be like this".

.....

"I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn’t want
that kind of happiness. The white folks like for us to be
religious, then they can do what they want to with us".
reveal Bigger’s state of mind and especially the statement mentioned last highlights the situation where even religion is being exploited by the oppressor.

Bigger also knows that the so-called leaders of his race are just tools in the hands of their white masters and imposed as ‘leaders’ by the white oppressor. The leader of the oppressed more often than not become effective oppressors of their own people. “They almost like white people,...” says Bigger on these imposed leaders. Before the trial commences, Max tells Bigger, “Well, this thing’s bigger than you, son. In a certain sense, every Negro in America’s on trial out there today” – though Bigger may not understand the significance of these words in their entirety.

Surely Bigger cannot understand the arguments of Max that Bigger being not only a criminal, but a ‘black criminal’, comes into that court under a handicap, their pretensions that all are equal before law, the question of mobs “incited”, the feeling of guilt by the whites, and “Fear and hate and guilt are the keynotes of this drama!” Max’s argument, “What is happening here today is not injustice, but oppression, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life...” is beyond the comprehension of Bigger. But at the same time Max presents Bigger’s case with a strong sense of conviction: “… Bigger Thomas is not here on trial for having murdered Bessie Mears. And he knows that” – stressing the point that there are obviously different kinds of application of law for different people, one for the oppressor and the other for the oppressed. Max’s speech also incites a positive reaction from Bigger: “It was not the meaning of the speech that gave him (Bigger) pride, but the mere act of it. That in itself was something”. When Bigger has this realisation, a positive one, the verdict,
“In Number 666 – 983, indictment for murder, the sentence of the Court is that you, Bigger Thomas, shall die on or before midnight of Friday, March third, in a manner prescribed by the laws of this state”, does not create any overt reaction on his part. “He did not move; he stood looking up into the judge’s white face, his eyes not blinking”

In his final conversation with Max he realises fully “...Max had given him the faith that at bottom all men lived as he lived and felt as he felt”. He tells Max, “You asked me questions nobody ever asked me before. You knew that I was a murderer two times over, but you treated me like a man...” (Wright’s ellipses). Again when Bigger says,

I ain’t trying to forgive nobody and I ain’t asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain’t going to cry. They wouldn’t let me live and I killed. May be it ain’t fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn’t want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am...

(Wright’s ellipses), he has come a full circle. As he sees Max backing away with compressed lips, Bigger feels that he has to make Max understand how he sees things at that point of his life.

“I didn’t want to kill!” Bigger shouted. “But what I killed for, I am!...” Bigger has attained true ‘Nirvana’ with this realisation. Thus according to Irving Howe, in Native Son,
He (Wright) examines the life of the Negroes and judges it without charity or idyllic compensation — for he already knows, in his heart and his bones, that to be oppressed means to lose out on human possibilities. (63-70)

It is to be noted that Bigger on the eve of his ‘Nirvana’, “advances to the point at which he recognizes that salvation for him can come only from himself, from his own effort and knowledge” (96-108) as mentioned by Gibson. This recognition is vital while analysing the oppressor-oppressed relationship, for the change has to come from within. With this realisation, with his salvation coming from within, Bigger cannot and does not die in hatred. On the other hand he calls out to Max to say, “Tell Jan Hello...”, thereby indicating that his contradictory feelings about himself and his situation have been resolved and Bigger has “accepted the consequences of his actions and hence himself” (96-108), as mentioned by Gibson. Bigger has overcome the prominent commandment of the Jim Crow society by addressing Jan without the epithet of ‘Mister’.

Kinnamon presents a different view-point, regarding the oppressor-oppressed relationship. He states:

Insofar as Bigger is representative of black people, this is the final social meaning of the novel: white American society has so oppressed the black man that except for the narcosis of religion, the only outlet for his tortured emotions is a futile,
murderous, and self-destructive rebellion; Bigger can attain a sense of life only by inflicting death. (141)

The comment made by Richard Wright on his Native Son is very relevant here:

If there had been one person in the Dalton household who viewed Bigger Thomas as a human being, the crime would have been solved in half an hour. Did not Bigger himself know that it was the denial of his personality that enabled him to escape detection so long? The one piece of incriminating evidence which would have solved the “murder mystery” was Bigger’s humanity under their very eyes.

II. 9. Native Son, Lawd Today and The Outsider:

Native Son may be considered as the peak of Wright’s creative achievement. Juxtaposing Native Son with Lawd Today on the one hand and with The Outsider on the other may be useful for a better understanding of the pattern of oppressor-oppressed relationship revealed in Wright’s novels.

II. 9.1. Lawd Today, though Richard Wright’s first novel, got published posthumously in 1963. Wright had his own personal reasons for not publishing his first novel. But it is obvious that Wright has used his first novel as an explicit social comment. As mentioned by Margolies,

the social comment derives from the way Wright structures the novel – twenty-four hours in the life of a Negro postal worker –
and the theme does not confine itself to Negro oppression but says something about the very quality of life in urban America.

(07-17)

Here an African-American worker Jake Jackson, belonging to the oppressed class is portrayed. But Wright seems to present one of the oppressed whose misery is not caused by the white oppressor and Wright suggests that Jake’s environment itself is sick.

Lawd Today is divided into three sections, “Common place”, “Squirrel Cage”, and “Rat’s Alley” and since the novel covers the happenings during twenty-four-hours, a day – in Jake’s life, one can assume that these three sections cover approximately eight hours each. Jake begins the day waking up from a disturbing dream, beating up his wife and ends the day beating his wife mercilessly, himself lost and beaten.

Jake is presented as an African-American anti-hero. According to Kent,

... Lawd Today is very important in the study of Richard Wright... It defines at least an essential part of black life,.... and enables us to see Wright examining a slice of black life practically on its own terms. (19-35)

By presenting just twenty-four hours in the life of an African-American worker, and by choosing “Lawd, Today”, - an African-American expression meaning “from day to day” – as the title for his novel, Wright presents the plight of the oppressed, “To live from Day to Day is not to live at all”, as Conrad Kent Rivers put
it in his poem on Wright. Wright presents the idea that an oppressed African-American cannot make his choice. His very survival depends on “his not making choices, upon his ability to adapt to choices (the will of others) made for him. He hated this”, states Wright.

This idea – of an African-American hating the very idea of others making a choice for him, and his ability to survive by adapting to choices made for him – finds a place in Native Son. Bigger resents that he has never been allowed to make any choice, and he survives at least for a short while by his ability to adapt to choices made for him by the white oppressors.

Though Jake and Bigger are different, the world in which they live is not. Theirs is a universe of violence, magic, hard liquor and sex, numbers playing and dream books and a universe of the rich and the powerful exploiting the less privileged. Jake as well as Bigger realise that something is missing in their lives, though they cannot pin it down to something tangible and exact. So sometimes they turn to films, at other times to hard liquor, sex and violence, giving them an “illusion of triumphant living” (19-35) as mentioned by Kent. In Bigger’s case he is forced to live in a rat’s alley. The term “Rat’s Alley” being highly symbolic is used as the sub-title for the third section of Lawd Today.

The idea of loss and denial of reality is also used in Lawd Today. Jake’s dream of trying to climb a long, endless flight of stairs, without making any progress and apparently remaining in the same place reveals that “all of Jake’s energies are directed towards denying the reality of his situation. In his way, of course, much of
the time Jake is denying to himself that he is a Negro...” (07-17), states Margolies. On this aspect of denial of Jake’s identity Margolies states, “In denying his identity, he denies his experience as well” (07-17).

That day being Lincoln’s birthday, February 12, it only reveals the “glorious” career of the Great Emancipator serves as an ironic contrast to the enslavement of the bondsmen’s progeny.

For Wright makes it clear that despite Jake’s legal freedom, he is indeed a slave. (07-17)

mentioned Margolies.

Wright through his Lawd Today tries to expose the fact, for some of the African-Americans like Jakes, their sense of oppression stems principally from their spiritual poverty, rather than from overt racial and social causes. When he forcefully tries to suppress his own identity as an African-American, it is natural that he sees all women as “meat”, and by his beastly treatment of his sick wife he proves that he can be a hateful oppressor on his own woman.

Thus in a number of ways, Lawd Today enlarges our perspective of Native Son, for it creates the universe of Bigger Thomas in terms more dense than the carefully chosen symbolic reference points of Native Son. (19-36) mentions Kent.
II. 9.2. **The Outsider**:

The first section of the novel *The Outsider*, is derived partly from the then unpublished *Lawd Today*. Cross Damon of *The Outsider*,

will lie, kill, burn a church, drive to suicide the woman who loves him, act like one of those “little Gods” he so vehemently condemned for their ruthless power, only to discover finally the necessity of human solidarity and some kind of moral law. (37-56)

says Michel Fabre in his *Beyond Naturalism?*, and in a way Cross Damon of *The Outsider*, can be considered as the twentieth-century African-American of “alienation par excellence” (109-126) according to Robert Lee.

The novel on Cross Damon, an anti-hero consists of five books: Dread, Dream, Descent, Despair and Decision in that order. The identity crisis faced by an African-American – being one of the important themes of African-American writers – finds expression in *The Outsider* in a different way. Cross Damon chooses a new identity, the result of an extraordinary coincidence created by a subway accident and mistaken identity. It is this extraordinary coincidence that allows total freedom to Damon and urges him to use his newly acquired freedom in an absolute way. In the process Cross Damon keeps on changing his name and identity as Charles Webb and then as Addison Jordon and finally as Lionel Laura. It is interesting to note that the last name assumed by Cross Damon is that of a dead man. By this process of changing names, Cross Damon makes several attempts at discovering his identity and
Fishburn states, “Part of becoming a person is taking a name, and Cross takes several as he attempts to discover what he is going to be” (113) in this context.

Cross Damon’s is a peculiar problem in that he wants to create a new identity by escaping from his real identity.

It was for much more than merely criminal reasons that he was fleeing to escape his identity, his old hateful consciousness.

There was a kind of innocence that made him want to shape for himself the kind of life he felt he wanted, but he knew that that innocence was deeply forbidden.

Though “being a Negro was the least important thing in his life”, Cross Damon realises that as a result of his race, “he has never been and never will be an integral part of the American fabric” (116) as mentioned by Fishburn.

While fleeing to escape “his identity, his old hateful consciousness”, Cross is simultaneously searching for a new identity and a process of solidifying such an identity. He realises that no party or political movement has “neither sincerity nor any relevance to his past life of enslavement or his present life of complete freedom” (110) as mentioned by Lynch. He also realises that even the communists have only the will to earn power, and acquire it by any means.

Cross has the ability, boldness and superiority of accepting his freedom and creating his own values. Even Houston, a clever character in the novel, acknowledges this by saying: “You made your own law. And, by God, I, for one, am going to let you live by it... you are your own law, so you’ll be your own judge”.
Cross by his violence, by his self-imposed freedom to kill, tries in vain to erase his identity as an African-American. But by his act of killing, he manages not to create a new identity, nor does he manage to identify his own identity, but becomes more and more criminal. Fishburn says,

Through him (Cross) Wright explores the possibilities of absolute alienation where man becomes his own company, confessor, and god. This is Man Alone, who without help, creates his own values, his own identity, his own world. (121)

Cross by becoming his own god, becomes an intellectual criminal and “he kills because he believes that he has the perfect right to. He holds himself innocent even at death” (134) as mentioned by Fishburn.

Born of an oppressed people in a “free” country, Cross Damon accepts his freedom and by his “free” acts, “he is in reality saying “no” to the world of white America” (134), as mentioned emphatically by Fishburn. By becoming a self-made god, Cross becomes a lawless outsider, reveling in death and murder.

Cross Damon, a representative African-American, marked from birth as an outcast, gets alienated from the society and he desires to create an identity, a god-like identity for himself which he can do so only by his acts of violence and killing.

Liewd Today illustrates the plight of an oppressed black worker but Cross Damon becomes an outsider by his being born an African-American.

Wright’s Native Son and The Outsider reveal the struggle of the individual to realize and test his freedom. As mentioned by Lynch, “Wright in Native Son and
The Outsider gives freer rein and qualified approval to the explorer of "absolute" freedom, even if this freedom involves the violation of others' most basic rights" (04). Here one finds Bigger and Cross attain a kind of 'freedom' by their acts of violence and killing.

Though Bigger and Cross do not feel guilty, they ultimately own responsibility for their murderous deeds and, "in Native Son and The Outsider, murder becomes an experiment in self-will and self-definition, a groping for some kind of responsibility if only to oneself over against all others" (57) as stated by Lynch. His comment,

Wright works this theme with Bigger and Cross, suggesting that each man's life of consciousness and freedom begins only with the commission of a murder. Bigger's acceptance of a minimal level of responsibility for the unintentional killing of Mary Dalton does indeed signal the beginning of his consciousness as a free moral agent. But Cross Damon's new consciousness begins with passive, external event of the train wreck and his subsequent prospect of creating a completely new life for himself; his killings are virtually gratuitous acts so far as the development of his personality is concerned, and he never accepts any responsibility for them, denying their significance and his guilt upto his death, (93)
reveals how Wright juxtaposes Bigger and Cross in their attitude to violence as a means of realising their 'freedom'. Cross differs from Bigger in that he "has made himself as monstrous as those oppressors whom he had sought to remove" (118) as mentioned by Lynch.

Marxist propaganda, a tool mishandled and misused while dealing with the oppressor-oppressed relationship, finds its place in Native Son and The Outsider. Native Son reveals the Party members sympathising with Bigger and trying to understand his problems. But The Outsider, reveals the Party members as more interested in their bid to exploit Cross, though he outwits them. The Party members are ultimately responsible for the murder of Cross.

It is relevant to conclude this chapter on Wright by quoting Fishburn:

In his stories, Wright chose the Negro not only to be emblematic of all oppressed peoples but also to be the metaphor for modern man. Isolated, alienated, and haunted by a sense of dread, modern man and the black man have much in common. (193) ... The final impression of his (Wright's) hero that one takes from reading his fiction, therefore, is that of a man beaten to the ground but determined to rise from his subjugation to join his fellow men in perhaps a godless world, but one where mutual respect gives life some dignity. (195)