CHAPTER III
NATIVE SON : FEAR AND HATE

"Richard Wright's Native Son is the most powerful American novel to appear since The Grapes of Wrath. 1 When the novel was published in 1940, it brought him wealth and critical acclaim. Many critics felt, "For the first time a creative writer had effectively and artistically pointed out the brutalizing and dehumanizing results of American racism; for the first time a novelist had dramatized effectively the latent violence and the revolutionary potential in the oppressed Negro masses." 2 "The novel is Wright's bitter condemnation of the American moves and laws that have ravished the Negroes' spirits since slavery. It is also Wright's tribute to the Biggers he knew who refused to knuckle under, who declared their frustration with the world by engaging in crime and murder." 3 As Nelson Algren says,

1. Clifton Fadiman, New Yorker, 16 (March 2, 1940), 52-53.
2. Evelyn Gross Avery, Rebels and Victims, p.152.
"Native Son is the emotional autobiography of a man who refused to be either a thing or a criminal."  

Bigger is twenty years old. He lives in a single bedroom apartment with his mother, sister, Vera, and his younger brother, Buddy. He develops considerable hostility towards his mother because she is, in spite of her professed love, an inhibiting instrument of an oppressive system. Even as she demands that Bigger act like a man, she displays little confidence in him:

"Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you...." (p.11)

"We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you....." (p.12)

He's just crazy .... Just plain dump black crazy." (p.12)

As William Grier and Price Cobbs observe,

The black man remembers that his mother underwent frequent and rapid shifts of mood. He remembers the cruelty. The mother who sang spirituals gently at church was capable of inflicting senseless pain at home. These themes of

gratification and cruelty are consistent enough to suggest that they played a critical role in preparing the boy for adulthood.

Not only does Bigger hate his mother, but he is alienated from the entire family:

He hated his family because he knew they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair.

So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserves he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. (pp.13-14)

It is not only the suffocation of the one-room apartment but also the suffocation in the white world that frightens Bigger and he tries to overcome this fear by becoming violent, but the fear remains in him.

For instance, though he proposes to his friends a plan to rob a white businessman, he himself is afraid of committing the crime. But he wants to cover up his fear by making Gus a scapegoat:

He had argued all of his pals, but one into consenting to the robbery, and toward the lone man who held out he felt

a hot hate and fear; he had transferred his fear of the whites to Gus. He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as he even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery. (p. 28).

The following passages clearly show the violent nature of Bigger:

.... Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind, dry and fast, vanishing. He could stab Gus with his knife; he could slap him; he could kick him; he could trip him up and send him sprawling on his face. (p. 30)

..... He could have taken one of the cue sticks and gripped it hard and swung it at the back of Gus's head, feeling the impact of the hard wood cracking against the bottom of the skull. (p. 30)

This desire for violence arises in Bigger whenever he loses his self-trust. He thinks that he can regain confidence only through violence:

These were the rhythms of his life; indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger—like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force. Being this way was a need of his as deep as eating. He was like a strange plant blooming in the day and wilting at night; but the sun that made it bloom and the cold darkness made it wilt were never seen. It
was his own sun and darkness, a private and personal sun and darkness. He was bitterly proud of his swiftly changing moods and boasted when he had to suffer the results of them. It was the way he was, he would say; he could not help it; would say, and his head would wag. (p.31)

Katherine Fishburn discusses how Bigger suffers from the five main components of alienations as identified by Melvin Seeman: normlessness, powerlessness, meaninglessness, social-isolation, and self-estrangement.6 Normallessness is the state in which a man experiences uneasiness and anxiety. Bigger has forboding about the future, fearing that eventually he will lose control and strike out at society;

Everytime 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 .... (p.23)

He is powerless to control his own fate. Since he has no skills valued by society, he is forced to accept the post of chauffeur. Out of this feeling of powerlessness evolves a sense of meaninglessness. To forget it, he indulges in activities that stimulate his senses: sex and drinking. But his sex with Bessie

is without love and his drinking doesn't give him any joy. Bigger is prevented by society in its meaningful activities. He too wants to have money, status and an interesting job. But he is not allowed to: "I could fly a plane if I had a chance..." (p.20). He is also a victim of self-estrangement, alienated from himself as a result of societal influences and pressures. As a self-alienated person, Bigger suffers from an identity crisis.

Bigger's first job when he wakes on the morning of his story is to kill a black rat that has got into the room. When Bigger tries to kill the rat, the small animal attacks him in order to save its own life. This scene prefigures Bigger's own fate. When Bigger takes his girl friend, Bessie, to the deserted building where she is to wait for the ransom money, "something with the dry whispering feet flitted across the path, emitting as the rush of its flight died a thin, piping wail of lonely fear" (p.71). Another rat appears when they enter another building as they flee from Bigger's fate. Bigger encounters still another rat as he searches for a vacant apartment in which he can hide. The final "rat" is Bigger himself, who
likewise fights his pursuer when further flight is hopeless.

When Bigger goes out, he remembers the robbery he and his friends have planned but he himself is afraid of robbing a white. As Bigger thinks, "the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to" (emphasis added) (pp.17-18). Like Fish and his friends in The Long Drag, Bigger and his friends also "play white". Bigger's isolation from the society in which he lives is evident from start to finish. He tells his friends, "we black, they white. They got things and we ain't... Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence..." (p.23).
Bigger himself is afraid of robbing Blum's. But he does not like to express his fear.

He had argued all of his pals but one into consenting to robbery, and toward lone man who held out he felt a hot hate and fear; he had transferred his fear of the whites to Gus. He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery. Like a man about to shoot himself and dreading to shoot and yet knowing that he has to shoot and feeling it all at once and powerfully. He watched Gus and waited for him to say yes. (Emphasis added) (p.28)

Bigger succeeds in sabotaging the entire plan with the usual weapon, violence.

The film that Bigger sees with his friend Jack, 'Trade Horn', influences him to accept the post of chauffeur but he wants to be sure of his security:

.... He was going among white people, so he would take his knife and his gun) it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness. (p.44)

He feels "the Daltons for whom he was to work were like the people he had seen and heard in the movies" (p.45). But he is afraid of entering the compound of the Daltons. He thinks, "He could have stayed
among his own people and escaped feeling this fear
and hate" (Emphasis added) (p.46).

In spite of his hatred of whites, the moment
he is invited into the house of the Daltons, he
behaves like any other Negro: "With cap in hand and
shoulders sloped, he followed ..... (emphasis added)
(p.46) and "He felt that the position in which he was
sitting was too awkward and found that he was on the
very edge of the chair" (p.47). He

..... stood with his knees slightly bent,
his lips partly open, his shoulders
stooped, and his eyes held a look that
went only to the surface of things. There
was an organic conviction in him that this
was the way white folks wanted him to be
when in their presence; none had ever told
him that in so many words, but their
manner had made him feel that they did.
(p.50)

When Mrs. Dalton asks Bigger whether he would go to
the night school, he does not show much interest:

The difference in his feelings toward
Mrs. Dalton and his mother was that he
felt that his mother wanted him to do
the things she wanted him to do, and
he felt that Mrs. Dalton wanted him to
do the things she felt that he should
have wanted to do. (p.62)
It is here that Bigger meets Mary — the young daughter of the Daltons — whose actions ultimately decide Bigger's fate. She and her friend Jam make a sincere attempt to understand him, not realizing that political pity is more offensive to a Negro than class prejudice. Not only do Mary and Jam teach him frequently, but they make him sit in the front seat of the car between them and take them to a black restaurant where they all eat together, to Bigger's shame. Mary unconsciously reveals the enormous chasm between the races when she wonders aloud how blacks live:

You know, Bigger. I've long wanted to go into those houses ....., and just see how your people live .... 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 .... (p.70).

As Fishburn says, "these intellectual liberals are twice removed from Bigger, by race and by class." 7

7. Katherine Fishburn, Richard Wright's Nigger, p.69
But Bigger cannot understand their behaviour.

What was it that they wanted? Why didn't they leave him alone? He was not bothering them. Yes, anything could happen with people like these. His entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single sharp point of attention. He was trying desperately to understand. He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting white men hold his hand. What would people passing along the street think? He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this? Why was Mary standing there so eagerly, with shining eyes? What could they get out of this? May be they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and other smiling. 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 he amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold and inarticulate hate. (pp. 67-69)

There is also a detailed description of how Bigger feels when he's asked to sit between Mary and Jan.
His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into so small a space, but he dared not move. He knew that they would not have cared if he had made himself more comfortable, but his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that. 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. So he sat still, his arms and legs aching. (p. 69)

We have here what Frantz Fanon calls "consciousness of the body", which is, "solely a negating activity." Maybe it is this confused state of mind that creates in Bigger a desire to touch and kiss Mary when he almost carries her to her bedroom. But he is so afraid of what he is doing, that when the blind mother of the girl stands at the door, he, in trying to keep the girl silent, kills her. Many critics feel that the killing of Mary is too sudden and accidental, and that it has nothing to do with Bigger's hatred of whites. For instance, Henry Seidel Canby says, "he did not mean to kill her, he did not want to kill her, though he hated patronizing whites. Had her blind mother not come in at the fatal moment, the girl would have slept off

her drunkenness, and Bigger would never have got beyond petty crime." The answer to this charge is provided by Howard Mumford Jones, when he says that the murder follows from

..... the same thesis that Dreiser set forth in "The Hand of the Potter" and "The American Tragedy". It is determinism. Men do what they are born to do. Bigger happens to be a colored man. But if he had been of any other race, he would still have acted as his nature compelled him to act. He did not murder the white girl to avenge the black race; he murdered both girls because he was born that way. His sociological background does not "explain" the murder in terms of race-relationships, though his inheritance may "explain" his character.

Part One comes to an end at this point. The title, "Fear", is very appropriate because it is fear that controls Bigger's life. He has to repress his fear and hide it from his conscious self:

..... his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness ....... As long as he could remember, he had never been responsible to anyone. The moment a situation became so that it exacted something


10. Howard Mumford Jones, "Uneven Effect", Boston Evening Transcript, March 2, 1940, Book Section, 1
Wright deliberately chooses the word "Dalton" as the name for the rich family. Daltonism is a form of color blindness. Wright seems to suggest that the Daltons, who tried to be color blind and not see Bigger's color, really do not see him at all. As Fishburn points out, "since they are totally blind to his reality, Bigger will be able to get away with murder right under their eyes. The physically blind Mrs. Dalton is the only witness to Bigger's crime, but the others do not even suspect him because he is invisible to them." 11

What is surprising in the novel is not the murder as such but the change that we notice in Bigger. Bigger, who is like any other "normal" Negro till he accidentally kills Mary, behaves after the murder almost like a professional killer who tries to hide his crime and at the same time exploits the

situation so that he can extract money from the people to whom he caused misery. He realises that in killing Mary, he has created a new life for himself:

The "act ofcreation" that Bigger sees in his quasi-accidental killing of Mary is creative. It raises him, and with him his Negro-being, from the level of obscurity to the realm of recognition. He accomplishes alone something sensational. In so doing, he projects his now unavoidable presence into the white world. His satisfaction is, of course, perverse; but, Wright implies, it is legitimate—the logical outcome of an acknowledged release from a consciously subservient group.

The murder becomes

.....a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself..... it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him. (p.101)

The following passage clearly shows what Bigger feels about the murder he has committed:

Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident.

He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said. And in a certain sense he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill. His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this. It was no longer a matter of dumb wonder as to what would happen to him and his black skin; he knew now. The hidden meaning of his life—a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide—had spilled out. No, it was no accident, and he would never say that it was. There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had in obscure but deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed. (p.101)

Bigger realises that everyone is blind — has always been a Dalton. Robert Bone observes:

Bigger learns to exploit the blindness of others, 'fooling the white folks' during his interrogation and this is again something deep in his racial heritage, springing from a long tradition of telling whites whatever they want to hear.

13. Quoted in Katherine Fishburn, Richard Wright's Hero, p. 93
But Bigger is not totally free; he wants to blot out any person who makes him uncomfortable — members of his family, his own girl friend, Bessie, and also the image of the half-burnt Mary. (The image of Mary that appears in his mind reminds us of the white woman in the newspaper clipping that appears to Fish in The Long Dream).

There was only one thing that worried him; he had to get that lingering image of Mary's bloody head lying on those newspapers from before his eyes. If that were done, then he would be all right. (p. 108)

The if-clause clearly shows that he cannot blot out Mary's dead body from his mind. Bigger not only blots people out but blots things out and at least temporarily "blot(s) out the fear of death" (p. 141). As Fishburn suggests, "This 'blotting out' becomes a major motif in the novel." From the time of the murder up to the point of his capture, Bigger is nothing but the rat he himself killed. He runs from one rat-infested building to another, making dirty rooms his temporary hide-outs. Wright compares Bigger to an

animal and his movements to those of the animal whenever he sees some danger. For instance, Bigger turned "his head like an animal with eyes and ears alert, searching to see if anything was amiss" (p.112).

Immediately after the murder, Bigger goes to his house. He starts observing the members of his family and compares them with the other people he knows. For instance, he compares Vera with Mary:

How different Vera was from Mary! He could see it in the very way Vera moved her hand when she carried the fork to her mouth; she seemed to shrinking from life in every gesture she made. (Emphasis added) (p.104).

When he is about to leave his house, his mother asks him when she will see him again and Bigger says he does not know. Probably Bigger knows that this is his last visit to his house. After leaving the house, he goes to his friends and spends sometime there. In spite of his firm confidence that he will not be caught, on many occasions Bigger thinks whether it is better for him to run away from the place. It is this wavering (and the hope of getting the ransom money) that shows the difference between Bigger
and Fish in The Long Dream. Fish successfully fools everyone and in spite of the police trying hard to ensnare him, he succeeds in going to a place of freedom and happiness. As he walks on the pavement, Bigger evaluates his condition:

He did not feel sorry for Mary; she was not real to him, not a human being .... It seemed that her actions had evoked fear and shame in him. But when he thought hard about it it seemed impossible that they could have ..... it was not Mary he was reacting to when he felt that fear and shame. Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys. And now that he had killed Mary he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried. (pp. 108-109)

Bigger remembers the fight he had with Gus in the poolroom:

It was fear that had made him fight Gus in the poolroom. If he had felt certain of himself and of Gus, he would not have fought. But he knew Gus, as he knew himself, and he knew that one of them might fail through fear at the decisive moment. How could he think of going to rob Blum's that way? He distrusted and feared Gus and he knew that Gus distrusted and feared him and the moment he tried to band himself and Gus together to do something, he would hate Gus and himself.
Ultimately, though his hate and hope turned outward from himself and Gus; his hope toward a vague benevolent something that would help and lead him, and his hate toward the whites; for he felt that they ruled him, even when they were far away and not thinking of him, ruled him by conditioning him in his relations to his own people. (p.110)

In order to cover up his tracks and get some money, he writes a letter to Mr. Dalton, making it look like the communists have kidnapped his daughter and are demanding the ransom. He wants to make Jan the scapegoat. R. Orlowa observes:

The nineteen-year old boy from the black ghetto who is rude and brash with his family and friends, who is tightlipped and laconic around whites, who has never thought seriously about his own life, of life around him and knows only the shortest, simplest thoughts and dull, ordinary passions—this boy, in the days following this unintentional act of murder, comes to a new knowledge of himself—just look what he’s managed to do! A previously unknown, unprecedented feeling of strength wells up inside him. Because he could go now, run off if he wanted to and leave it all behind, he felt a certain sense of power, a power born of a latent capacity to live.

But his plan fails and people start suspecting him. Immediately, Bigger leaves the Dalton's house and goes to his girl friend Bessie. After he commits the murder, Bigger feels secure only when he has a weapon in his hand, especially his gun. For example, when Bessie asks him about Mary, "he felt suddenly that he wanted something in his hand, something solid and heavy; his gun, a knife, a brick" (p.137).

Bessie is sorry for and afraid of her association with Bigger. But Bigger's influence on her is too strong to reject his proposal. He takes her to an old delapidated apartment. He uses sex and liquor to blot out the world. After sexually having Bessie, he wants to blot her out because he thinks that she will be a burden to take with him and a great risk to leave alone. He kills her by smashing her head with a brick. This is a murder in cold blood. If we compare the two murders that Bigger commits, we can notice a great change in Bigger. He is not the innocent chauffeur who killed Mary, without knowing that he was killing her, in order to save himself from an uncomfortable situation but one who does not hesitate to mercilessly kill the woman
who gave pleasure — maybe only physical — in order to unburden himself of her because she is of no use to him now.

In spite of the well-planned murder that he commits, Bigger feels a sense of guilt:

He did not want to see her face again. He felt that if he should ever see her face again he would be overcome with a sense of guilt so deep as to be unbearable. (p.224)

But the very next moment, he feels immensely satisfied with his actions:

In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him... Never had he had chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight. (p.225)

He feels that, "he had been so conditioned in a cramped environment that hard words or kicks alone knocked him upright and made him capable of action" (p.225). Bigger, for a moment, regrets losing any possible chance of living a better life but finds satisfaction in the fact that "he had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself"
Bigger does not want to be put to shame by people when he is captured:

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. (p. 242)

In spite of his best efforts to run away from the place, he is captured in an exhausted and stupified state after being hunted down like an animal, like the rat he killed.

Book three of the novel is given an appropriate title "Fate", in the sense that,

Toward no one in the world did he (Bigger) 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. (p. 254)

Perhaps it is only after his arrest that Bigger almost succeeds in blotting out everything from his mind, at least in suppressing it:

Not once during the three days following his capture had an image of what he had done come into his mind. He had thrust the whole thing back of him, and there it lay, monstrous and horrible. He was not so much in stupor, as in the grip of a deep physiological resolution not to react to anything.
Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life; having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people and having demanded ransom money to enable him to do it—having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle any more. (Emphasis added)

(p. 255)

Bigger decides to accept his fate almost passively: "there was the fear of death before which he was naked and without defense; he had to go forward and meet his end like any other living thing upon the earth" (p. 256).

What is not surprising, at least to Bigger, is that the whites charge him with not only murder but rape and murder; rape is the most hated characteristic of a black for the whites. The news about the inquest is the Tribune that Bigger reads is a very good example of how the whites will not let go an opportunity to make the entire black race responsible for the crime committed by an individual member of that race. Even the newspapers are eager to rouse the wrath of the entire white race against a single black, Bigger:
... felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment; that they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control. (p.257)

Some critics feel that the report published in the Tribune is greatly exaggerated in its racism. Hubert Creekmore charged that

... the press is shown as chiefly concerned with unsubtle inspiration of hatred and intolerance. The manner and content of these newspapers exceed belief. Again Mr. Wright makes them present incidents and ideas which reflect his own mind rather than an editor's mind or the public mind.

But as Richard Wright says in "How 'Bigger' was Born", when he "was halfway through the first draft of Native son a case paralleling Bigger's flared forth in the newspapers of Chicago." This was the famous case of Robert Nixon and Hill Hicks, two young blacks with a background similar to that of Bigger. Though no evidence

of rape adduced, the *Tribune* from the beginning called
the murder a sex crime and exploited the apparently
false accusation. Nixon was referred to as "brick
moron", "rapist slayer", "jungle beast", and "sex
moron". In the news items in the novel, Bigger is
referred to as "jungle beast", "brutish Negro", "black
killer", and "ape". The strongest of all racial
taboo in the sexual, and the newspaper says,

"Down here in Dixie we keep Negroes firmly
in their places and we make them know that
if they so much as touch a white woman,
good or bad, they cannot live." (p.261)

The above passage clearly shows the irony of the
situation. Bigger is accused of a crime he has not
committed and this "crime of rape" gains prominence
over the crime he has really committed, murder of
Mary Dalton. Another point to be noted here is that
Bigger seems to be more worried about what people
think of him and his crime —his eagerness to read
reports in newspaper proves this point —than what
actually is going to happen to him.

Most of Wright's protagonists reject the
Church. Generally, they defend themselves by
repudiating the church and its values and symbols. Bigger thinks, "What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's Whiskey was his mother's religion" (p.226). His mother's docility disgusts Bigger who is driven to deny her religion in order to feel manly. When she visits him in prison and begs him to pray for their reunion in heaven, Bigger, though he does not want to hurt his mother's feelings, is nauseated. Though he wears the cross given by Reverend Hammond, he feels betrayed by the sight of the K.K.K.'s flaming cross. The cross becomes "bloody, not flaming; meek, not militant" (p.313). He rips the cross from the throat and dashing it to the ground "discards the whitman's religion and his mother's illusions".17 When Max tells him that nobody hated him in church, Bigger says, "I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it .... The white folks like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want to with us (p.329). Bigger rejects not only Christianity, but also Communism.

17. Evelyn Gross Avery, Rebels and Victims, p.83.
When Jan Erlone offers him a vision of human fraternity from which no one is excluded on grounds of race, Bigger rejects their vision as inauthentic, false to his experience. But, as Fishburn says, "Aware of America's predilection for punishing innocent blacks for its own crimes, Wright symbolically presents Bigger in Messianic images, as a black Christ sacrificed for his race." For example, when Bigger is captured, the police "stretched his arms out, as though about to crucify him" (p.253). When his family visit him in jail, Bigger feels like Christ. He knows that they are ashamed of him, but he is convinced that they should be proud because he has "taken fully upon himself the crime of being black" (p.275). He feels that they ought to "look at him and go home, contented, feeling that their shame was washed away" (emphasis added (p.275). After seeing the burning cross set up by the K.K.K., he rips off his cross, asserting "I can die without a cross" (p.313). When he is angry with one of the guards who wants him to take back the cross, Bigger's body "seemed a flaming cross" (p.314).

As Fishburn suggests, like Camus's rebel, Bigger is acting in the name of certain values which are still indeterminate but which he feels are common to himself and to all men.\(^\text{19}\) According to Brignano,

> Although Bigger is estranged from both the religion and folk culture of his race.... (he) can still represent the Negro in abstract terms of Negro responses to their being placed outside of many aspects of the American Dream.\(^\text{20}\)

Bigger starts thinking that "whatever he thought or did from now on would have to come from him and him alone, or not at all" (p.315). "He did not want to talk to the whites because they were white and he did not want to talk to Negroes because he felt ashamed" (p.316). But for Bigger, Max is the only person, in spite of his resolve not to trust anyone, who can save him though he hates himself for putting his fate in the hands of Max:

> Bigger felt that he was sitting and holding his life helplessly in his hands.


\(^{20}\) Brignano, *Richard Wright*, p.32.
waiting for Max to tell him what to do with it; and it made him hate himself. An organic wish to cease to be, to stop living, seized him. Either he was too weak or the world was too strong; he did not know which. (p.319)

Bigger's conversation with Max gives us a glimpse of what Bigger, or, for that matter, any Negro who cannot accept Jim Crowism, feels about his condition in relation to his family, his race and to society which is dominated by whites. Max wants Bigger to fight because Bigger is "facing a sea of hate now that's no different from what you've faced all your life" (p.320). When Max asks him how it all happened, Bigger tells him in plain terms, "It just happened, Mr. Max" (p.322). He is not sorry that Mary is dead. He says, "She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog" (p.324). This statement of Bigger's can be taken as the reaction of a Negro to the sympathy that a white shows towards him, maintaining at the same time the distance between the whites and the blacks. It is appropriate to quote here what Mary tells Jan in the presence of Bigger:
"I want to work among Negroes. That's where people are needed. It seems as though they've been pushed out of everything." (p.76)

She tells Bigger,

"I've long wanted to go into those houses and just see how your people live. We know so little about each other. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They're human." (p.70)

It is not sympathy a Negro wants. The irony is that Mary is not able to understand the psychology of the Negroes. What they require is not one or two sympathetic whites to live with them. They want the distance between the two races—physical, social and psychological—to be put an end to, so that they can call themselves free citizens of a great nation. The absence of this equality is clearly seen when we find Bigger asking himself, when the young man in his cell talks about his wish to tell the President about the treatment meted out to the Negroes, "Who was the President the man yelled about?" (p.318).

His feelings toward Mary are ambivalent, his fear and hatred ("I reckon I hated her before I saw
her" (p.326) combining with an attraction to her. He refuses to agree with Max that she wanted to be kind to him. "Mr. Max, we're split up. What you say is kind ain't kind at all. I didn't know nothing about that woman. All I knew was that they kill us for women like her. We live apart. And then she comes and acts like that to me" (p.324). When Max questions him on this point, Bigger analyses his feelings:

"Heah, I reckon it was because I know I oughtn't've wanted to. I reckon it was because they say we are black men do that anyhow. Mr. Max, you know what some white men say we black men do? They say we rape white women when we got the clap and they say we do that because we believe that if we rape white women then we'll get rid of the clap. That's what some white men say. They believe that Jesus, Mr. Max, when folks says things like that about you, you whipped before you born. What's the use? Yeah, I reckon I was feeling that way when I was in the room with her. They say we do things like that and they say it to kill us. They draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line. They don't care if there's no bread over on your side. They don't care if you die. And then they say things like that about you and when you try to come from behind your line they kill you. They feel they ought to kill you then. Everybody wants to kill you then. Yeah; I reckon I was feeling that way and maybe the reason was because they say it. Maybe that was the reason?" (p.325)
As mentioned earlier, the strongest of all taboos is the sexual. As Kenneth Kinneman points out, this taboo "stimulates the attraction, so that sexual contact with white women becomes a form of defiance, of rebellion against the white creators of the taboo." 21

Bigger feels that his actions were not logical and so he has to fall back upon his feelings for a guide in answering Max's questions:

"Mr. Max, a guy gets tired of being told what he can do and can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes, sweep streets; anything .... You don't make enough to live on. You don't know when you going to get fired. Pretty soon you get so you can't hope for nothing. You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say. You ain't a man no more. You just work day in and day out so the world can roll on and other people can live. You know, Mr. Max, I always think of white folks .... They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die." (pp.326-327)

There is only a passing comment on how rich blacks treat poor Negroes. When Max asks Bigger why he didn't approach black leaders, Bigger says

"They wouldn't listen to me. They rich, even though the white folks treat them almost like they do me. They almost like white people, when it comes to guys like me. They say guys like me make it hard for them to get along with white folks."

(p.330)

From the moment he is captured to the time of his sentencing, Bigger alternates between defiance and depression. His struggle to find direction and comfort is agonizing—he even toys with the idea of suicide. He thinks he can put an end to the troublesome inner desires only if he dies.

When the trial begins, Max feels guilty on behalf of Bigger but at the same time he says that what is more important is not whether Bigger has committed the crime or not but why he was responsible for the deaths of two innocent women. Max says that if Bigger is given death sentence, "that would be the end of this case. But that would not be the end of this crime. That is why Court must do otherwise"

(p.355).
According to Max,

"... the tone of the press, the silence of the church, the attitude of the prosecution and the stimulated temper of the people are of such a nature as to indicate that more than revenge is being sought upon a man who has committed a crime." (p.356)

He says that the mob of would-be lynchers knows of the oppression of the Negroes and is as possessed of guilt, fear and hate as Bigger is: "Fear and hate and guilt are the keynotes of this drama" (p.357).

In order to understand the full significance of Bigger's case, he feels one must rise above such emotion. To do so, Max requests the judge to look at it from a historical point of view. The enslavement of the Negro, the "first wrong" was "understandable and inevitable" (p.357), for in subduing this "harsh and wild country" (p.359), men had to use other men as tools and weapons. From that first wrong came a sense of guilt, in the attempted stifling of which came hate and fear, a hate and fear that matched that of the Negroes. Injustice practised on this scale, and over that length of time, "is injustice no longer; it is an accomplished fact of life" (p.360). This fact of life is a system of oppression squeezing down
upon millions of people. These people can be stunted, but they cannot be stamped out. As oppression grows tighter, guilt, fear and hatred grow stronger on both sides:

"... injustice blots out one form of life, but another grows up in its place with its own rights, needs and aspirations. What is happening here today is not injustice, but oppression, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life." (pp.360-361)

Killing Bigger will "swell the tide of pent-up lava that will some day break loose, not in a single, blundering, accidental, individual crime, but in a wild cataract of emotion that will break no control" (p.361). Max continues:

"The all-important thing for this Court to remember in deciding this boy's fate is that, though his crime was accidental, the emotions that broke loose were already there; the thing to remember is that this boy's way of life was a way of guilt; that his crime existed long before the murder of Mary Dalton." (p.361)

For Max, the whole American Society was responsible for the death of Mary Dalton:

"We planned the murder of Mary Dalton, and today we come to court and say:"
"We had nothing to do with it!" But every school teacher knows that this is not so, for every school teacher knows the restrictions which have been placed upon Negro education. The authorities know that it is not so, for they have made it plain in their every act that they mean to keep Bigger Thomas and his kind within rigid limits. All real estate operators know that it is not so, for they have agreed among themselves to keep Negroes within the ghetto-areas of cities. Your Honor, we who sit here today in this courtroom are witnesses. We know this evidence, for we helped to create it? (Emphasis added) (p.369)

Max is fully aware of the fact that the crime that Bigger committed is not against a single individual. He also knows that this act—though criminal—made Bigger achieve an identity that had been alluring him:

"This boy's crime was not an act of retaliation by an injured man against a person who he thought had injured him. If it were, then this case would be simple indeed. This is the case of a man's mistaking a whole race of men as a part of the natural structure of the universe and his acting toward them accordingly. He murdered Mary Dalton accidentally, without plan, without conscious motive. But, after he murdered, he accepted the crime. And that's the important thing. It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him."
He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight.

(Emphasis added) (pp.363-364)

Max says that society made him do what he did:

He was living, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. The actions that resulted in the death of those two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one's eyes. (Emphasis added) (p.366)

Max is surprised that Buckley has said little about Bessie:

"Does not the life of a Negro girl mean as much in the eyes of the law as the life of a white girl?" (p.367)

There seems to be an attitude of apartheid not only towards culprits but also towards victims.

Finally, Max opines that Negroes constitute a separate nation within a nation:

"Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property of rights." (p.364)
He concludes his speech by pleading with the judge to spare Bigger's life and sentence him to life imprisonment so that he could build a meaning for his life: "I beg this in order that not only may this black boy live, but that we ourselves may not die" (p.370).

Paul N. Siegel points out, "It has been frequently pointed out that in Book III, which is entitled 'Fate', we see realized the doom of Bigger that has been foreshadowed from the beginning. This is entirely true, of course, but 'Fate' also refers to the doom of the United States." 22

What we have in Max's speech is Bigger's feelings moulded into an intellectual argument. Bigger himself does not understand Max's speech though he knows Max tried his best to save him;

Bigger was not at that moment really bothered about whether Max's speech had saved his life or not. He was hugging the proud thought that Max had made the

speech all for him, to save his life. It was not the meaning of the speech that gave him pride, but the mere act of it. That in itself was something. (p.371)

All the argument that Max presents before the judge becomes meaningless to Buckley and the judge who are both part of the white society and who have their own selfish motives in not agreeing with any of the views of Max.

Not surprisingly, Buckley starts giving more importance to rape that is supposed to have been committed by Bigger than the crime that he actually committed. We can easily understand his motive. Buckley very well knows that in order to rouse the wrath of the mob gathered in and outside the court and the judge himself, he should shift the emphasis in his final plea from murder to rape. Because Buckley knows that it is his duty to enforce the sexual taboo, he wants the white society to punish the violator. He uses terms like "black lizard," (p.373), "black mad dog," (p.374) "sly thug", (p.374) "rapacious beast", (p.374) piece of "human scum", (p.375)"black sun", (p.376) "coiled rattler", (p.377) and "demented savage", (p.378) to describe Bigger. He wants the judge to give death
sentence to Bigger so that people may "not tremble with fear that at this very moment some half-human black ape may be climbing through the windows of our homes to rape, murder and burn our daughters."

(p.373)

As noted earlier, rape is given more emphasis than murder:

"He planned to rape, to kill, to collect he burned the body to get rid of evidence of rape! He took the trunk to the station to gain time in which to burn the body and prepare the kidnap note. He killed her because he raped her! Mind you, Your Honor, the central crime here is rape! Every action points towards that!"

(p.377)

As expected, Bigger is sentenced to death. Max's attempt to seek the Governor's intervention also fails.

Max meets Bigger for the last time in the cell. Bigger thinks that Max is the only man in the world who treats him as a human being: "You know that I was a murderer two times over, but you treated me like a man" (p.387). Max tells Bigger that the distance that has erupted between the blacks and the whites is the result of the lack of belief and faith;
"the people who hate you feel just as you feel, only they're on the other side of the fence" (p.391). When he wants Bigger to believe in himself, Bigger says,

"Ah, I reckon I believe in myself...
I ain't got nothing else, .... I got to die .... I'm all right ....
Sounds funny, Mr. Max, but when I think about what you say I kind of feel what I wanted. It makes me feel I was kind of right ... 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.
Maybe it ain't fair to kill, and I reckon I really did not want to kill.
But I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am .... I didn't want to kill ! .... But what I killed for, I am !" (pp.391-392)

As Robert Bone says, "The novel moves, in its development, toward values that we have learned to recognise as existentialist. Having rejected Christianity and Communism Bigger finds the strength to die in the courageous acceptance of his existential self".23