Chapter VII

Summing Up
To Richard Wright, novel writing is not only finding a voice but also disclosing the innermost life of a community thereby fulfilling the prerequisite of the African American novel, the quest for the centre of Blackness. As a social critic, as an articulator of the black anguish, and as a writer in a country that boasts of its classless temperament, Wright left an indelible impression on the American literary tradition as well as on the minds of his ardent readers.

In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright characterizes the socio-economic conditions that led to the treatment of the black man as the subject of American fiction. He relates himself to the American literary tradition:

I feel that I’m lucky to be alive to write novels today, when the whole world is caught in the pangs of war and change. Early American writers, Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne, complained bitterly about the bleakness and flatness of the American scene. But I think that if they were alive, they’d feel at home in modern America. True, we have no great church in America; our national traditions are still of such a sort that we are not wont to brag of them; and we have no army that’s above the level of mercenary
fighters; we have no group acceptable to the whole of our country upholding certain humane values; we have no rich symbols, no colorful rituals. We have only a money-grubbing, industrial civilization. But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him.¹

Wright’s works, exposing the facts of racial prejudice and discrimination, provide a new definition and make “blackness” a metaphysical state of alienation so profound the old values no longer apply: blackness is a disturbing, complicated, ambiguous creation of contemporary civilization. In the white world, which is very cold, harsh and cruel, Wright, with a sense of detachment and curiosity, shaped the artist in him. Melancholy, recollection of the past, astonishment, and disdain formed the core content of his memory.

His major works revolve around the themes centripetal to the constant conflict between white racial oppression and black
racial militancy. The rhythm of action in his novels is an upsurge of violence as is evident from *Native Son* and *The Outsider*. Rage is the pride and power of the heroes in these two novels. *The Long Dream* contains some nodes of violence though not perpetrated by the central character. *Laud Today!* and *Savage Holiday* are also not free from violence. Violence is seen as the profound expression of the ravished and enraged black spirit:

The theme of initiation into violence and escape from it is one Wright was obsessed with; it was to recur in the autobiographical *Black Boy* as well as in most of his fiction: *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *The Long Dream*, and several of his short stories. It is in fact, the major Wrightian theme. ²

Bigger Thomas seeks violence as the means to liberate his mind, body, and soul; blotting, hitting, and killing are the actions that prompt him to heave a sigh of relief. The two murders make his spirit of freedom fortified. His clamouring for recognition as murderer speaks of the decisive forces that provoked his sense of violence. Cross Damon too, with multiple murders in succession, moves on to replenish his sense of selflessness. Worst of all the heinous crimes are his self-killing
and the resultant self-annihilation. Prompted by his mind and soul, in quest of freedom and its ultimate defense, he embarks upon a killing spree. Victimized by the family and societal constraints, he embraces violence as the correcting method to restore normalcy.

*The Long Dream* offers new insights into Fish’s position as a black man by means of violence. Fish learns a lesson from Chris’ castration and gory killing. His own plight, when he is arrested on a petty trespassing charge and is threatened by the police of a possible castration with a pen knife, moves him violently. After his release, while coming home, he seeks refuge in violence by putting an end to the suffering of an injured dog. This is to overcome his overt shame and disappointment with his father. Finally, his father’s death results in his witnessing the peak of violence. His initiation into adulthood through violence paves the way for his escape.

In *Lawd Today!* Jake Jackson, a victim of frustration and economic insensitivity, meets with violence in the end in his attempt to kill his wife. Erskine Fowler in *Savage Holiday* resorts to stabbing Mabel repeatedly in order to put an end to the bloody affair. As a victim of psycho-sexuality, he derives a new sense of freedom in killing his love, who he fails to love tenderly. But
these two novels are not exemplars of the point of view that display of violence is the subtlest way of expressing the anguish of the protagonists.

However, *The Long Dream* and *LAWD Today!* mark the beginning of black oppression, rebellion, and estrangement, and *Native Son* bears the extension of it. Wright conceptualizes the "fear" of Bigger and this fear leads to "flight" accentuated by action in forty-eight hours in Bigger's life, and makes him wait to find out his "fate." This reminds us of Leopold Bloom's day in *Ulysses*. At the end of *Native Son*, Bigger is no more a victim of naturalistic forces as he rejects the appraisal of society and remains the master of his fate, defining a new "self."

*Native Son*, set in the stark urban realities in its first two books, makes Bigger familiarize the readers with himself as more or less the product of a defective environment. The potential for violence is stimulated by the presence of the white district in the vicinity. The writer in Wright is conditioned by the dread of the whites. He asks his readers to identify themselves with his heroes and understand their motives and actions. This talent for making the reader identify with his heroes is one of Wright's most impressive accomplishments as a novelist.
Wright's phrase "blotting out" becomes a major motif in *Native Son*. Bigger tries to blot the Daltons out but is blotted out at the end. Dalton ruins his composure to the extent that Bigger blots himself out. He plays the role he thinks is expected of him:

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 in their presence. . . . (*Native Son*, 50)

This is similar to the role-play enacted by the heroes in *The Long Dream* and *The Outsider*. Tyree Tucker, as a master of the art of accommodation, trains his son Fish to imbibe the traits of an "actor." But he fails to understand his rebellious son. In *The Outsider*, Cross Damon plays well the role of another black while obtaining the birth certificate in the guise of Lionel Lane.

Like Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Bigger has no impact on the Daltons. Mary and her Communist boyfriend Jan make Bigger fill himself with despair. He goes to the extent of blotting
himself; his self-hate is so high. But after the murder there is in him a new awareness of himself and the world and he thinks that others are blind. He tries to cash in on the world's blindness by collecting ransom from the Daltons. This awareness makes him form a new composure: "Now, who on earth would think that he, a black timid Negro boy, would murder and burn a rich white girl and would sit and wait for his breakfast like this? Elation filled him" (Native Son, 102).

Ellison dramatizes in his Invisible Man the basic ironies of Negro existence, which becomes a metaphor for human existence, because it is hearing without being heard, feeling without being felt, and seeing without being seen. Ellison's hero is invisible. Wright's hero longs for identity. Bigger in Native Son yearns to get identity as the murderer of Mary Dalton. In this novel only two murders prompt the protagonist to achieve existentialist heights. Wright's outsider, Cross Damon in The Outsider, is credited with multiple murders in order to retain his outsiderness. He longs for recognition as an outsider. On a similar plane, Fishbelly Tucker too longs for his identity in The Long Dream.

Flight is the ultimate upshot of fear compounded in the minds of the protagonists because of their violence. Bigger's
flight is similar to Cross Damon's and in turn to Fishbelly's. Though there are different parameters to each flight, the commonness remains the core. Jake Jackson is also on a similar flight while seeking the enjoyment of "real life." Fowler's plight in the elevator, moving up and down, for fear of his nudity getting exposed, indicates a different flight. His flight is not prompted by a sense of freedom.

Rejection, alienation, and selflessness are also the characteristic features of Wright's heroes. When the white majority society rejects them, they in turn isolate themselves from society. But the wrath continues to fume within. Katherine Sprandel observes,

This anger smolders in the pages of Lawd Today and sears the pages of Native Son. A similar rage to live in freedom drives Cross Damon to violence in The Outsider. But it isn't until The Long Dream that he gives us a fictional character who can explain the alienation and violence of his earlier characters. 4

Bigger rejects the rest of the world in his isolation. This leads him to search for his existential self. Though he surrenders to the omniscience and omnipotence of the white world, his spirit
remains unfettered. Cross Damon too rejects family and society when he feels ignored and rejected. His selflessness draws its strength from his alienation. Fish rejects the world that has crucified him emotionally. Because of his special status and riches among blacks, he cannot befriend the ordinary blacks and because of his racial inferiority he cannot mix with the whites. His fleeing to France is his virtual isolation from the whites as well as his own people. Jake Jackson is also subject to the pangs of isolation. He feels this in the canteen looking at the whites that he cannot mix with. Fowler, child of a bad mother, is rejected by the lads of his age, and rejects them to remain a lonely child.

The initiation as well as the plight of most of Wright’s heroes resembles his own. He seems to enjoy the relationship in *The Long Dream* between a passionate father and an obedient son that he lacked in his life. In *Native Son*, Wright makes his hero move from the strictures of naturalism into the freedom of existentialism:

After demonstrating that whites are responsible for making Bigger an outlaw and finally a murderer, Wright lifts Bigger out of this morass, permitting him to make an existential decision. Rejecting the
necessity of scapegoats, Bigger accepts himself for what he is, a murderer, an identity which he embraces after being invisible for twenty years. Although he dies victorious, he dies alone: his crime and identity have condemned him to social alienation.  

*The Long Dream*, Wright’s last novel, contains his more sophisticated fictional skill: impressive use of symbols, dream sequences, and a strong narrative line in the background of a complicated functioning of black community. Based on Wright’s own childhood, the novel presents the initiation rituals of a black boy in Mississippi, Fishbelly’s estrangement from his own black race and from the majority white society of Clintonville. Wright seems to protest “against the injustice that destroys (a man’s) spirit, crushes his dignity.” The novel is an invaluable prelude to a study of *Native Son* and *The Outsider*.

*Black Boy* is reiterated in *The Long Dream*. Both offer Wright’s conception of black life in America and the victimization of the innocent in a racist society. *The Long Dream*, a tragedy in the ironic mode and strong in condemnation, seems to suggest that sex is the primary cause of racial tension, for Fish’s agony and alienation are both intimately related to sex. The “dream” is
the image that governs the entire book. The section titles, “Daydreams and Night dreams,” “Days and Nights,” and “Waking Dream,” reveal the tension between desire and reality. In Lawd Today! Jake’s refusal to identify himself with the poor blacks and his longing to be one with the successful ones are part of his delusion of his self-image.

Lawd Today! and Native Son depict the consequences of the dreadful ritual of the continuous confrontation with the special status of being black. Unlike Native Son and The Outsider, Lawd Today is free from overt propagandizing.8 It lacks the commitment to Marxism that Native Son contains. Wright placed homiletic essays in the mouths of the central characters in Native Son and The Outsider. Bigger is an outright rebel while Jake Jackson is a helpless black man, a slave of the American prejudice and the American economic system. He confines his rebellion to self-pity and brawls. George E. Kent observes,

Lawd Today enlarges our perspective on Native Son, for it creates the universe of Bigger Thomas in terms more dense than the carefully chosen symbolic reference points of Native Son. The continuity of Wright’s concerns stand (sic) out with great clarity and depth. Running through all Wright’s works and
thoroughly pervading his personality is his identification with and rejection of the West, and his identification with and rejection of the conditions of black life. *Laud Today* is primarily concerned with the latter.9

Bigger's significant step, more than fleeing and fighting, is murdering and seeking metaphysical freedom. The alienation Wright's characters experience is alienation from themselves. This gets resolved when a new identity by existentialism is created. Cross Damon in *The Outsider* and Fred Daniels in Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" realize that all are trapped in a meaningless world.

"The Man Who Lived Underground" is about a black man who finds sanctuary in the stench and darkness of the sewer system of the city. He is falsely accused of murdering a white woman and compelled to confess the crime by the police. He later escapes and hides in the sewer. Through a basement window he witnesses a service in a black church. The author writes, "Pain throbbed in his legs and a deeper pain indeed, at the sight of those black people grovelling and begging for something they could never get, churned in him." 10 He glances into a film theatre without seeing the screen, only the audience.
“These people were laughing at their lives, he thought with amazement. They were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves.” 11

Ellison’s unnamed narrator records the blues of his black life, with the accompaniment of extraordinary psychedelic effects. 12 Ellison makes use of blackness as both a physical state and a metaphysical condition whereas Baldwin in his novels gives a religious dimension to blackness considering it a mark of pain and hardship which whites can share or sympathize with. Gwendolyn Brooks suggests that the racial element is “organic” to a black artist’s work, by which she probably means that blackness is woven into the texture of a black artist’s reactions even when the subject of his art is not racial. 13

The greatest achievement in black American art is a synthesis of elements in the general tradition and qualities of spirit and resources of experience associated with being black in American society. It seems that black art is wedded to black militancy and black power to black writing. Black Boy, as pointed out by Stanley Edgar Hyman and others, owes much to Wright’s disillusionment with Communism. It is an autobiography close to fiction in which one finds Richard Wright’s admission of cultural isolation and his vulnerability to
all forms of deprivation—physical, emotional, social and intellectual. It is a blend of personal experiences and the universal experiences of his race. The rich use of sense experience reminds one of Richard Wright’s black past, and

at the same time, Wright imposes a structure upon his narrative which is distinctly modern. Though action is important, what counts more is the internal exploration that gives significance to the act. We are reminded constantly of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as Richard struggles to escape from the pitfalls placed before him by family and society and to achieve liberation of body and imagination. 14

George Kent says that Wright’s major strategy in *Black Boy* was to portray the tension springing from the conflict between a black outsider and his group’s protective reactionary tactics. Wright’s intellectual rebellion never yielded him to the compliance of the whites’ expectations of him. Exploring folklore and traditions, Wright attacked the blacks’ way of surviving and their aiding the white man in his emasculations of the black man. This can be noticed in his short stories also. In “Uncle Tom’s Children,” Silas kills the white salesman who has violated his wife and succumbs in a blazing holocaust rather than
compromise his honour. In “Down by the Riverside,” the hero saves the family of the white man he has killed in a moment of justifiable desperation, knowing full well that his own destruction is paired with the family’s salvation. Black violence is reaction stimulated by white perversity.

“Big Boy Leaves Home,” the most memorable of the tales, shows that security and happiness are possible for blacks once the distorting pressure of the white society is removed. It seems Wright is in touch with his black past. “Fire and Cloud” is Wright’s serious effort to reconcile Reverend Taylor’s Christian principles with the demands for a more militant resistance to entrenched white injustice. “Bright and Morning Star” is a demonstration of the operation of political ideas unchecked by an adequate concern for art. Improbable to the impossible is the movement of the action.

Richard Wright’s faith in the common realities of life is the reason for his rejection of religion. In Native Son Bigger, having realized the healing power of his self and thereby putting an end to the terrible ordeal of a black rebel, rejects religion. When he has rejected society, religion has no significance to Bigger. Bigger’s predicament is similar to that of all those blacks who were torn of their homes and enslaved. When Jan meets Bigger
in the cell, he tells him that he has loved the girl he killed but he can control his grief as it is inferior to the grief experienced by the black community:

I was in jail grieving for Mary and then I thought of all the black men who've been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery. I thought that if they could stand it, then I ought to. (Native Son, 268)

Wright's superb artistry in the portrayal of his protagonists like Bigger Thomas and Cross Demon owes to his own reflections that were the product of his encounters with similar people in real life. Being black and bearing the brunt of racial discrimination and societal segregation, he was able to authentically endorse the plight of blacks. During his childhood and adulthood, many real Biggers compounded his emotional and psychological mind-set to find expression in Native Son. James Baldwin, writing of Native Son, says,

Every Negro carries about within him a Bigger Thomas, but the characterization by itself is unfair in that there are complexities, depths to the Negro
psychology and life that Wright left unexplored. To depict Bigger exclusively in terms of unsullied rage and hatred is to do the Negro a disservice. \footnote{15}

However, Wright's struggle in a society that attached a stigma to the pigmentation of his skin and in a country which disputed his birthright as native son of the soil seeks full meaning in *Native Son*.

The commonest and easiest weapon used by whites in the process of elimination of the black rebel when they cannot tolerate the existence of the black and feel it is a threat is to charge him with rape of a white girl. Any Negro who has lived in the North or the South knows how a Negro is picked up on the streets and carted off to jail and charged with rape. Bigger's murder of Mary loses its significance in comparison to his crime of sex. Ironically, Bigger is charged with the rape of Mary Dalton, a crime which he has not committed. Similarly, Fishbelly is also charged with raping Clarson when the Chief of Police, Cantley, thinks of intimidating him in order to procure the cancelled cheques. Chris's brutal killing also testifies that such things are not uncommon. Many are the mute victims of assumed rape charges.
It is surprising to observe that blacks, though they have fascination for the white skin, try to resist from falling a prey to it for the dread of possible death. In *The Long Dream* Fishbelly, who always nurtures the imagination of the rape of a white girl, runs away at the sight of a white girl. When Tyree croons on, deprecating white women and praising black ones, suddenly there flashes in the memory of Fish the white waitress who served the cops. He thinks of the possibility of the white girl participating in his sexual experiences:

... despite his having fainted when the police had “played” at castrating him, despite the cruel crucifixion of Chris, he knew deep in his heart that there would be no peace in his blood until he had defiantly violated the line that the white world had dared him cross under the threat of death. (*The Long Dream*, 157)

Such kind of imagination of Fishbelly takes its flight in despair dreaded by the guile of the Chief of Police, Cantley when a white girl enters his room on the pretext that she is sent by Maud Williams and she needs a hiding place as her life is in danger. He rushes out of the room and tumbles down the stairs to avoid her and the predictable charge of rape. But he is closed
in on from all sides by the police and is charged with the crime that he has not dared to commit.

Similarly, in *The Outsider* Cross Damon is accused of killing Gil Blount desiring to possess his wife Eva Blount, a white woman. He has to struggle a lot to convince Ely Houston that he never touched her before Gil was killed and never even looked at her with desire in his eyes though he was living in the same apartment. In the works of Richard Wright we find that lacks are targetted, castrated, and killed as in the case of Chris, and white girls lure them to the possible trap. Perhaps the possible realistic account that the writer wants to provide for his readers is based on his real-life experiences.

Further, how blacks are terrorized into obedience and how their behavioural patterns are regulated by whites are realistically presented. Bigger's standing posture in the presence of the Daltons in subdued awe, Cross Damon's in the guise of a darkie, Lionel Lane, seeking the birth certificate before the whites, and Tyree Tucker's as well as Fishbelly's in the presence of the whites reveal that the ages of servility and the wages of cruelty have not escaped them.
The conflict between the real self and the idealized self leading to self-alienation is all pervasive in the works of Richard Wright. Bigger is subject to a similar conflict and seeks refuge in self-annihilation that recreates a new self. His real self is incapable of comprehending the idealized selves of Mary Dalton and Jan. After killing Mary and Bessie, he longs for the existential self that makes him stand firm even in the face of death. The existential self refuses to be shackled by spiritualism in terms of religion represented by the priest and idealism in terms of Marxism as viewed by Max. The real self is masqueraded as self-hatred.

Cross Damon’s ineptness on the domestic front entices him to recreate a new self. Confronted by his mother, his wife Gladys, and girlfriend Dot, Cross finds himself at the crossroads. His “killing” himself is an act of quest for a new self and his killing Joe can be construed as a means to the fortifying of the new self. Herndon, Gil Blount, Hilton, and Eva Blount are also victims of the existentialist tug of the new self. In the constant nourishment of the new self, he struggles to remain an outsider. His outsiderness is fostered by the innocence of the new self.

Fishbelly, against the odds of the white dominance, allows himself to fight down his real self with the bludgeonings of his
feelings of inferiority. His manhood is the loss of his real self and acquisition of his idealized self tempered by the dictates of the white world. Unlike in the other heroes of Richard Wright, we see a kind of reversal in Fishbelly, self-hatred to self-glorification. His dreams often reveal the intrapsychic conflict in him:

In his conscious mind he may be the master mind, the savior of mankind, the one for whom no achievement is impossible; while at the same time in his dreams he may be a freak, a sputtering idiot, or a derelict lying in the gutter. Finally, even in his conscious way of experiencing himself, a neurotic may shuttle between a feeling of arrogant omnipotence and of being the scum of the earth. 16

We hear lectures on Africa and black pride through Sam’s father when Fishbelly goes to collect rent. But Fish is blind to such pride and is bothered about his rent collection to buy whiteness. Similar glorification of black race as well as origin is found in both Native Son and The Outsider. The conversation between Boris Max and Bigger, and Ely Houston and Cross Damon reveal that the writer is nostalgic of his ancestry.
Fishbelly, in his assignment of collecting rent, encounters many blacks and comes to know about their experiences of the horrible existence of being blacks. While reporting about their oppression and eternal degradation to his father, Fish feels that there is no initiation on their part for collective struggle to end this disgust. Bigger also thinks of bringing his folks together and making them act in unison towards the accomplishment of the task of restoring a classless and creedless society. Similar vision is found in Cross Damon. Richard Wright's dream of the restoration of a world in which the existence of the humanity persists only on the chords of perfect human relationships but not on the nodes of exploitation, oppression and racial discrimination is not an anxiety-dream. The protest of his protagonists is characteristic of Wright's literary genius.

In the alliance of Wright, Ellison and Baldwin, Wright was the principal figure, offering guidance to them. But Ellison was discrete and expressed his rejection in an interview published in *The Massachusetts Review*.

... most friendships have their vague areas of mystery and the older member of a relationship between writers might himself project the younger in as role which obscures the extent of his intellectual
maturity or the extent and variety of his experience. One of my early experiences with Dick Wright involved such an underestimation, with him assuming that I hadn’t read many books with which I was, in fact, quite familiar . . . Well, among others, he assumed that I hadn’t read any of Marx . . . Conrad . . . Dostoevsky . . . Hemingway- and so on. I was somewhat chagrined by his apparent condescension, but instead of casting him in the role of misunderstanding “father”, I swallowed my pride and told myself, “Forget it, you know what you know, so now learn what he thinks of in terms of his Marxism and the insights he’s gained as a developed writer of fiction.” And that was the way it went.¹⁷

Baldwin’s attack was directed against Wright in a famous essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” According to Baldwin, Native Son and “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” failed to qualify as high art. The potential for leadership is abundantly found in both Ellison’s hero and Wright’s hero. However, they remain ploys in the hands of circumstantial chance, ultimately coming to terms with their own destiny. For Ellison, escape is just a short-term remedy and Wright destroys the conduit between man and man. This is quite
evident in Cross’ assertion that “starting from scratch every time is . . . is no good” (The Outsider, 439). In Wright’s novels philosophical points count more than personal relationships and their investigation.

Wright’s novels pay a rich tribute to the spirit of struggle in a society that draws it sustenance by its racism and prejudice. They have given the form of universal human condition to the African-American nonidentity. Wright’s angry sensibility, in bringing about racial equality, conveys the message that a society that refuses to recognize the right of human existence makes its beings inhuman and often criminals. Ellison is right in his acclaim that Richard Wright is a writer who remains to be tested not in terms of his race but in terms of his talent.18 Wright’s assertion that he made at the age of thirty-six holds good even now:

I have always taken the writing of literature very seriously and I’ve looked upon fiction and writing in general as a means of revealing the truth of life and experience rather than purely as a means of entertaining people. 19
REFERENCES


5. Katherine Sprandel 181.


8. Kenneth Kinnamon 76.


13. Charles T. Davis 27.


