

**The Unbearable Heaviness of Being: Analyzing Bigger Thomas from Richard Wright's
Native Son as a Character Beyond Good and Evil**

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requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

Published in 1940, the reputation of *Native Son* as one of the most significant African-American literary texts is due to its fascinating plotline that follows the story of an unusual protagonist named Bigger Thomas living in Chicago. By committing murders, Bigger revolts against white rule for causing the plight of black people due to racial discrimination. Although Richard Wright constructs Bigger as a character whose crimes are horrific in nature, he also narrates the circumstances that lead to such extreme actions. This dissertation analyses the character of Bigger Thomas, and identifies him as an ambivalent character that readers can neither accept with complete sympathy nor reject with utter aversion. Dissecting his actions as self deceptive, his crimes and aggressive nature as the locus that expresses the polarity of his character, the ambiguous assertion of his masculinity and subjectivity, and the transformation he undergoes throughout the novel, this study accentuates the dichotomy of Bigger Thomas through a close reading of the text.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The oppressive history of black people in America has impelled the artists of African-American descent to address their representation in literature. Most of the literary writings provide an insightful account of the horrifying maltreatment of black people and their brutal racial degradation by the whites. As such, the usual pattern of these literatures has most often been the portrayal of black protagonists victimized by racism, and their feeble resistance against it. Diverting from this tradition, Richard Wright's *Native Son* offers an intensely gripping story of an African-American protagonist, Bigger Thomas, living in the racist America. Set during the Great Depression of the 1930s, *Native Son* narrates the story of the twenty year old Bigger Thomas whose method of rebellion against racial disparity unsettles the readers. Contrary to the previous works, *Native Son* brings the accumulated rage of the oppressed to the spotlight, and thereby aims to make readers question the system responsible for racial abuse instead of mere sympathetic feelings towards the victims.

1.1. Brief Overview of the Text

Published in 1940, *Native Son* constitutes of three parts titled "Fear", "Flight", and "Fate" which traces Bigger's life that suddenly changes and leads him towards his death. The first part of the novel provides an account of how Bigger having lost his father in a race riot at a young age lives with his mother, sister, and brother in extreme poverty and depraved condition in a fixed corner of the city. With limited opportunities for job and movement, Bigger is frustrated with his monotonous life, and idles away most of his time watching movies and playing ping pong with other black boys or committing petty crimes with them against other black people.

However, the relief group offers him a job as the chauffeur of a rich white family named the Daltons, and Bigger accepts it: partly, because of his mother's bickering, and mostly, because he fancies that a job at a rich house will bring excitement in his life and open new doors for him. Prior to his interview at the job, readers see him being angry at the white dominion responsible for restricting his scopes in life, convincing his friends to rob a white store owner to symbolically challenge the white rule, and then picking a fight with them and cancelling the plan out of fear. Contrary to his expectations, a job at the rich white household makes Bigger painfully aware of his racially inferior position in the society, and the friendly attitude of his employer's daughter Mary Dalton and her lover Jan Erlone baffles him and transpires shame, hatred, and anger in him. Caught in the tempest of these emotions, Bigger accidentally kills Mary to avoid being caught in the same room with her. What shocks readers is the grueling visualization of how Bigger decapitates her body and burns it in a furnace, does not feel guilty about killing her, and instead, finds her murder meaningful as it enables him to defy the white domination.

The second part of the novel narrates how Bigger wittingly conceals Mary's disappearance, diverts the suspicion of it on Jan, and manipulates his girlfriend named Bessie Mears in devising a plan to extort kidnapping ransom from the Daltons. However, Bigger's plan fails as Mary's unburned bones are discovered, and he confirms his crime by running away. Forcing Bessie to run away with him, he rapes her and eventually kills her mercilessly. Bigger is ultimately caught by the police, and the third part narrates his thoughts about death, his trials in which Jan's lawyer friend, Boris Max, defends him, and his reception of the expected death sentence. Through Max's speeches in the court, Wright highlights the socio-economical disadvantageous condition of the black people and the impact of racism in shaping Bigger's psyche to commit these crimes. Wright also calls attention to how the evidences against

Bigger are distorted to fit into the stereotypical myth of the black rapist. The novel ends with Bigger coming to terms with himself, explaining the sense of meaning and freedom the murders conferred to him, and calmly accepting his death.

1.2. Context of the Text

Wright mustered the courage to write a novel with a violently revolutionary protagonist that would stir controversy after experiencing several impactful incidents in the different stages of his life. Born and initially raised in extreme poverty in the same plantation that his grandparents worked in as chattels, Wright passed many years of his life in orphanages and with his abusive grandmother before joining the Great Migration to the north. While working at different menial jobs in the north, he met many black people who fearlessly rejected the laws that emphasized racial segregation. The encounters with these people along with his firsthand life experiences and the various forms of racial discrimination pitched the idea of Bigger Thomas in his mind. Kenneth Kinnamon finds the resemblance of some aspects of Wright's own life in the novel. He states that the fifteen year old Wright's job at the white household of the Bibbs is similar to that of Bigger's at the Daltons (66). He also says Wright himself used to live in a cramped apartment and visited many such places during his work as an insurance agent, which justifies the accuracy of the explicit depiction of the dwelling and livelihood of black people in the novel (67). Thus, the fusion of reality with a strong imaginative power and artistic ability laid the ground for the emergence of the novel.

In his essay titled "How 'Bigger' Was Born", Wright discusses his encounters with five people after whom Bigger's character has been modeled. He confesses that Bigger is also the product of the realization of his own feelings about life and that of those Biggers in the racist

America after he came in contact with the ideologies of the labor movement (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 514). Furthermore, the representation of characters affected by the American civilization in works of white writers inspired Wright to depict the “dark roots” of the lives of people living in the Black Belt areas through Bigger Thomas (515). With the objective to show the emotional dysfunctionality fostered by American racial oppression that many black people have learnt to mask, Wright constructs Bigger to possess and exhibit those in the form of anger, aggression, instability, resentment, frustration, depression, and so on. In forming the plot and scenes of the novel, Wright has used the stereotypical myth of the black rapist along with the on-going cases of crimes committed by blacks published in the newspapers (532).

To provide an honest and complete portrayal of Bigger, Wright also shows “what oppression had done to Bigger’s relationships with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him; how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor” (529). For this purpose, he shows Bigger to be aggressive towards others and resort to murders. Keeping racial oppression as the cause behind Bigger’s choices, Wright portrays the possibility of the terrifying outcome stemming from its continuity. By doing so, he tries to paint the picture of a future where the Bigger Thomases will strike back in unimaginable ways, and the blame for the horror of that future is as much on the people upholding racist ideologies as on the Biggers. Moreover, Bigger has emerged from Wright’s desire to create a character that will shock the readers and force them to acknowledge the ills of racial disparity despite the character’s appalling approach of rebellion.

Wright does not intend to justify Bigger’s actions. Instead, he shows Bigger’s choices to be wrong as the recipients of his anger are innocent people. By emphasizing the history of racial

tyranny, Wright tries to convey that the continuity of it will produce people like Bigger whose traumatic experiences will only impel their desire to rebel without any consideration of towards whom their rebellion is directed. Wright wants to fixate the readers' gaze on the underlying implications of the frightful story by communicating the life of a character whose knowledge and experience of racism causes emotional turmoil to such an extent that the desire and necessity to revolt surpasses his distinction between right and wrong.

1.3. Research Purpose and Thesis Statement

With *Native Son* as the primary resource, this dissertation is a qualitative research that aims to analyze Bigger Thomas's character. With reference to other critical perspectives on the novel, this paper does a close reading of the text to establish Bigger as an ambivalent character whose actions cannot be categorized as merely good or evil. For this purpose, this paper studies Bigger's actions in view of the concept of 'bad faith', the scenes of his conflicted thoughts and feelings that reveal his duality, the disparities in his exhibition of violence towards others, the ambiguity of the assertion of his masculinity and subjectivity, and his transformative journey throughout the novel. Since the objective of this paper is to establish Bigger's ambivalence, I trace the techniques Wright adapts to display it, one of which is the frequent and simultaneous portrayal of Bigger's extreme behavior and his emotional turmoil. The motive to read Bigger as an ambivalent character is to provide an alternative interpretation of the overly emphasized aspects of his character and the novel, and to locate the often overlooked areas which put readers in a dilemma regarding Bigger's reception; making him neither a hero that readers can love thoroughly nor a villain that they can hate unreservedly.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Since its first publication, Richard Wright's *Native Son* has received numerous interpretations by critics, and has been widely studied by scholars as one of the prominent texts of African-American literature. As such, there is a vast availability of resources providing detailed understanding of the novel from multiple perspectives. This chapter is going to thematically review the existing literature most relevant to the topic of the paper.

To begin with, a critical appraisal of *Native Son* requires an understanding of the prevalence of racism in the United States/America, which is why a brief historical discussion of the transformative practices and impacts of racism is mandatory. Two articles that comprehensively discuss it are "Race and Ideology: An Essay in Black Sociology" by Robert Staples, and "The Uses of Violence in American History" by Michael Wallace. Staples' article traces the history of blacks in America, analyzes the dimensions of black-white relation through a sociological framework to provide an understanding of the methods and ideologies through which the blacks have been subjected to racism, while Wallace's article exposes the horrific instances of violence on the blacks by the whites throughout the years. Both identify violence as the weapon used by whites to subdue the blacks and by the blacks to resist the whites.

As already established, violence is one of the detrimental impacts of racism which Wright also uses as a significant theme in the novel. Bigger's violence powers the plot of the novel which is why several scholarly works have been dedicated to understand it. Focusing on Mary's murder and Bigger's manipulation of evidences by using the white stereotypical images of blacks, Lale Demitürk's "Mastering the Master's Tongue: Bigger as Oppressor in Richard

Wright's "Native Son" attests the reversal of the black-white power relationship in which Bigger elevates from his position of an oppressed to that of an oppressor (269). She claims that "his violent attitude is his response to the white definitional framework that represses his individuality", and through violence he victimizes and otherizes the whites (272). Demitürk's discussion excludes Bigger's violence towards Bessie and his friends, the former of which has been addressed by Robert James Butler and Masaya Takeuchi and the latter by Aimé J. Ellis. Ellis inspects Bigger's relationship with the other black males, and discusses the social bond formation within the black community during the Great Depression era.

Butler and Takeuchi identify the women as the external representation of the opposing extremities of Bigger's self. Bigger's act of violence towards them, as per Butler, stems from "his deep-seated fears of what he realizes they represent in him" (11). According to him, Bigger finds characteristic resemblance of what he cannot achieve in Mary and what debases him in Bessie, and since he cannot come to term with either, he annihilates them (11). Takeuchi extends the discourse on Bigger's duality by categorizing Bigger's self division as assertive among blacks and submissive among whites, a disruption in the balance of which induces violence. Takeuchi explains Bigger's violence to be his identification with white model of masculinity, and hints at his desertion of black masculinity, which Alexander Nejako, Andrew Reads, and Kadeshia L. Mathews also point at (Takeuchi 64). He claims both murders to be an assertion of masculinity (68). Complying with these readings, I contend that Bigger's violence is a tool through which Wright portrays Bigger's ambivalent nature. Using violence as a catalyst in executing the racial conflicts of the plot, Wright models Bigger as a character who adopts different stances throughout the novel that makes him a hero as well as an anti-hero.

Similar to Takeuchi's finding, Alan W. France affirms that the novel "reduces women to property, valuable only to the extent they serve as objects of phallogentric status conflict" (414). France's reading focuses on how Bigger's sense of selfhood and authority is recovered by terrorizing and eliminating the women. In other words, Bigger as the other in relation to the white male self transcends his position by otherizing the women, and therefore, ends up representing what he fights against- which I argue offers as a locus of locating his ambivalence. Feminist readings, such as France's, can be accused of diminishing the significance of the racial plot which is why she clarifies:

It must be stressed that the pathos of Bigger Thomas' diminishment, the stunting and warping effects of racial oppression that form the text's reigning dialectic, is in no way reduced by reading the repressed dialectic, the violent and phallogentric appropriation of women. Both belong to a system in which the Other is marginalized and dehumanized. This system of ownership uses racism and sexism to reduce the Other to objects of appropriation in the struggle over property relationships that determine status. (422)

Contrary to France's perspective, Sondra Guttman's article titled "What Bigger Killed For: Rereading Violence Against Women in *Native Son*" acquits Wright of misogynist portrayal of the female characters by pointing the differences in their depiction and explaining its meaning. She establishes Wright as a critic of the capitalist system that also pillars racial disparity through class discrimination, and Bigger, Mary, and Bessie are victims of it. She says that through Mary and Bessie, Wright highlights two different ideological issues of the capitalist system one of which is that the rich white woman is victimized because of "her refusal to be the dis-embodied symbol of white wealth and power" (180). The other is that violence against black women goes

unnoticed in the capitalist system, and through Bessie's murder and the nature of its reception, Wright draws "attention to the historical invisibility of black women's rapes and of their continuing devaluation in American society" (185). She states, "Native Son demonstrates that while white and black women alike are victims in the struggles between men, the myth of the black rapist ensures that black women, not white women, are most often the victims of rape" (186). About Bigger, she affirms that his "violent need to destroy others" arises from his need "to rise up and create a true place" in order to vanquish the feeling of "placelessness" Jan and Mary incite in him (176).

Andrew Read studies Wright's use of Bigger's violence as demonstration of "how the lived experience of racist oppression shapes black subjectivity in ways which produce violence" (100). He observes that "interracial sexual attraction and the conflation of sex with violence are taboo desires which white society projects into black men", and Wright exposes this aspect by what Read calls "demonization" of Bigger's character through extreme violence (102). Moreover, Read argues that Bigger's violence is also a part of Wright's objective to show how white imaginations influence violence by blacks, and the fissure in the psyche of the black man due to white gaze is recovered through violence.

Bigger's violence has often been read as his assertion of masculinity which is why understanding the notions of black masculinity is crucial for this paper. bell hooks's influential book titled *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* addresses the topic. She establishes that the notion of masculinity to black people has been transformed gradually after their transportation to America as slaves. During slavery, black men have been taught patriarchal masculinity, and that "it was acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power" (hooks 2). Moreover, "by the time slavery ended patriarchal masculinity had become an accepted ideal for

most black men, an ideal that would be reinforced by twentieth-century norms” (4). Averting the normalization of misguided notions about manhood, and adaption to the oppressive model of white manhood as the central reason behind black men’s violent attitude, hooks explains that, black men are bound to use violence to dominate and control since they do not have alternative ways to establish their agency in a society that injects them with the white patriarchal ideals of manhood but also politically and socially disenfranchises them from exercising it (53-54).

The study of Pierre et al. on African-American men’s psyche also makes argument similar to hooks. They state that “psychological and interpersonal distress” along with “violence to assert their masculinity in the dominant culture” is the common outcome of African-American men’s “attempt to adapt to a mainstream culture that does not validate their existence as integrated” (Pierre et al. 25). Moreover, the inability to express their anger and frustration towards discriminatory practices leads to the internalization and intensification of these accumulated negative emotions (30). Pierre et al. and hooks’s study of black masculinity is effective in analyzing Bigger since this paper also claims that his enactment of the dominant/white masculine ideals impels his aggression. However, through textual analysis, I show that Bigger does not hold fast to one masculine ideal. Rather, he shifts between black and white ideals of masculinity; both of which contribute to his violence.

Wright’s construction of Bigger as an ambivalent character is accomplished by showing Bigger’s transformation from a symbolic Negro to an universal human being. Both Donald B. Gibson and Charles De Arman’s analysis highlights this transformation. Bigger’s realization that “salvation for him can only come from himself, from his own effort and knowledge” indicates his formation of an identity separate from the one ascribed to him, and thereby the assertion of his individuality and humanity (Gibson 730). This enables him to recognize his actions, and take

responsibility for them which also point that his newly constructed sense of self “has been drawn from within, from introspection and inspection of his relation with others, the world, and, most importantly, with himself” (De Arman 64). To these contentions, I add that, Bigger’s abandonment of white validations of his subjectivity completes his conversion. Additionally, I argue that, despite his motivations behind the murders, Bigger’s inability to recognize that Mary and Bessie were innocent shows the ambiguity of his character.

Along with racial disparity functioning as the prime motivation behind Bigger’s actions, Wright also shows Bigger to be actuated by what Jean-Paul Sartre terms bad faith. In chapter two of part one of Sartre’s philosophical book titled *Being and Nothingness*, he defines bad faith as a condition in which one develops self deceptive lies, internalizes those and hides the truth from their own consciousness (49). He explains that bad faith is not an unconscious occurrence, rather it is a freely chosen project, and through bad faith, a person tries to escape from the assertion of freedom which according to Sartre is an inherent aspect of human beings. Regarding this, David Detmer explains that “due to the equivocal nature of human existence, bad faith can be accomplished by trading on ambiguities, and through selective looking and avoiding (that is, by emphasis and omission)” (78). This means that one maintains bad faith by ignoring the clarity of any incident, and by prioritizing the aspect that strengthens self deception while dismissing others in appropriating an event. In my discussion, I show that Bigger justifies many of his actions in the novel through bad faith, and ultimately evades taking responsibility for these.

To sum up, existing literature on the novel mostly focuses on violence, the representation of masculinity and power dynamics, the portrayal of the female characters in comparison to the male characters, the symbolic representation of Bigger and his individuality, his psychological functioning and conflicted values. Referring to the resources on these concepts, I develop and discuss the central argument of this paper in the following chapters through a textual analysis that adds to the prevailing perspectives on the novel.

Chapter 3

Bad Faith and Bigger Thomas

An alternative reading of racial discrimination propelling Bigger Thomas's actions is that of bad faith prompting those. Through a close reading of the text, this chapter shows the illustration of Bigger's bad faith through feelings towards his family and himself, through the reception of Mary's death, and assurance in successfully evading being caught after extorting money from the Daltons with Bessie's help. Bigger's bad faith, I argue, is Wright's attempt to portray the duality of his character.

French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre has defined 'bad faith' (*mauvaise foi*) in his book titled *Being and Nothingness*. He writes, "... one determined attitude which is essential to human reality and which is such that consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself. This attitude, it seems to me, is bad faith (*mauvaise foi*)" (48). In simple terms, bad faith is a condition wherein people lie to themselves. A person in bad faith hides the truth from his own self, and deceives himself with the lie while simultaneously dismissing the realization of both the truth and the lie. As David Detmer explains, "bad faith requires that I both know the truth (so that my denial of it constitutes a lie, rather than a mere error), and not know it (so that I am genuinely deceived)" (75). Therefore, one in bad faith is both the deceiver and the deceived which is why bad faith indicates "the unity of a single consciousness" (Sartre 49). A person in bad faith internalizes a lie while subtly concealing the truth from his consciousness.

Since one cannot simply believe a blatant lie told to oneself nor can one completely hide the truth from their own consciousness, one must adopt certain methods to uphold and exhibit bad faith. In his discussion of Sartre's philosophical ideas, Detmer explains some of these prominent methods. He states that selective denial and acceptance of particular perspectives regarding a matter helps facilitate bad faith. By choosing to turn a blind eye to the truthfulness, or by avoiding the falsehood of a situation, one retains bad faith. In other words, through selective omission and emphasis on certain dispositions, one can maintain bad faith. In his words:

I can perhaps learn to avert my gaze, scrupulously and consistently, from certain unpleasing matters, while keeping uppermost in my mind (and perhaps exaggerating) others, and thereby convince myself of misleading partial truths. Similarly, I can become skilled at making sure that unwanted but dimly and hazily perceived truths never receive from me the sustained, clarifying gaze that would remove their vagueness, and that similarly unclear but comforting falsehoods never receive the critical scrutiny necessary to establish their falsehood. And these principles, in turn, are facilitated by (and in some cases require) the nihilating powers, self division, and ambiguous being that Sartre claims characterize my consciousness. (77-78)

Readers are first acquainted with Bigger's feelings about himself and his family shortly after the novel begins. Wright writes, "He hated his family because he knew that 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" (*Native Son* 13). This implies that Bigger does not allow

himself to acknowledge the miserable life he and his family lead. However, this denial is paradoxical under the given circumstances of their living condition, because it is impossible to not feel the discomfort of their living condition while the reality of four people living in a single tiny-rat-infested apartment hangs over them day and night.

The fact that their mornings start with the boys facing the opposite side while the mother and the sister dress and vice versa, bears evidence that Bigger cannot but be aware of their miserable living condition. After accommodating four people's physical presence, their cramped room does not have any space left to keep one's eyes occupied except fixating and oscillating each others' gaze among themselves. This subjects Bigger to his sister's occasional accusation of him ogling at her and frequent disputes, which is yet another parameter that is bound to make the Thomas family's reality as apparent as oil suspended in water. Therefore, it is not that he does not realize the woe of their lives in its entirety but that he chooses to dismiss it at times and deceives himself to think otherwise. Thus, Wright presents a collision between Bigger's reality and his reception of it to stress the duality of his character.

Even though he claims that he is powerless to help them, it is revealed from his mother's bickering that he does not accept the jobs offered to him by the relief group. Therefore, he is not entirely powerless to help them as he claims; rather he chooses to not help them. About his daily life, Wright says: He was sick of his life at home. Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering. But what could he do? Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a blank wall and he stopped thinking. ... It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action. What was he to do with himself? (16)

While Bigger laments about the unavailability of choices in life, he is entirely disregarding two definite choices still open to him: firstly, severing ties with his family by running away from home, and secondly, committing suicide. Either of these choices would spare him from the agony of surrendering himself to their needs and bearing their responsibility. Although he often contemplates the latter option, he does not resort to it. His choice to dwell on his powerlessness signifies his attempt to justify and validate his inaction in improving their lives, and thereby escape from shouldering his responsibility.

The most significant evidence of Bigger's bad faith is his attitude towards Mary's unintentional murder. Initially, he is struck by despair when the fact of Mary's death and that he is the killer seeps into his consciousness. Although, he is scared of the consequences that will follow the murder, he composes himself, dismembers her body, burns it, and devises his escape from being convicted. Regarding Bigger's sentiments about the murder after disposing the body, Wright tells the readers:

Gee, what a fool she was, he thought, remembering how Mary had acted. Carrying on that way! Hell, she made me do it! I couldn't help it! She should've known better! She should've left me alone, goddammit! He did not feel sorry for Mary; she was not real to him, not a human being; he had not known her long or well enough for that. He felt that his murder of her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel. (108)

It is seen that he does not consider himself guilty of murdering Mary. He even justifies the murder by ascertaining that she deserved to be killed for acting friendly towards him, and dismantling his mental peace. Instead of reflecting on the heinous act which the murder is, he

directs his attention towards other factors. On one hand, he blames Mary for bringing upon her own downfall, convinces himself that the murder is not a crime and acquits himself on all accounts. The very act of conferring the act of killing as the inevitability of circumstances denotes bad faith as Detmer states, “When I tell myself that I am a victim of circumstances, that I had no choice but to do what I did, and that I am not to blame for the mess I’ve made of things, I am, Sartre claims, lying to myself. His name for such self deceptive lying is “bad faith”” (75).

On the other hand, Bigger also feels that “... he had been dreaming of something like this for a long time, and then, suddenly, it was true” implying that his whole life has been proceeding towards a crime just like this; a crime that would allow him to challenge, blur and transcend the racial domination and unjust segregation (Wright, *Native Son* 88). Bigger directs the cause of Mary’s murder on her actions and avoids taking responsibility for it, whereas he readily embraces the meaning of her murder. By assigning duality of values to a singular act, Bigger maintains his bad faith. Even though he frees his conscience of the murder, we see him being overcome with fear and hysteria every time a situation arises that requires him to deal with the furnace in which Mary is burnt.

Contrary to his claim, he is not indifferent about the murder. In fact, the frequent surging of grotesque images of Mary’s unburnt head or disfigured limbs in his mind indicates his guilt. In a state of bad faith, Bigger makes himself believe that the murder is not his fault, and hence he is not to feel bothered by it. However, the repercussions of the murder and the emotional toll that it takes on him depict otherwise. Through the deliberate portrayal of such contradictions, Wright models Bigger as neither the demon conjured by white stereotypical imaginations nor as the completely innocent victimized black. Instead, he constructs Bigger as a grey character whom

readers treat with aversion for his crime and with tenderness for his sufferings and emotional turmoil.

Furthermore, to turn the situation to his advantage, Bigger devises the plan of extorting kidnapping ransom from the Daltons with Bessie's help. Despite being aware of how risky the plan is and that a slight mistake would mean his death, he proceeds with the belief of being successful. However, in a previous episode, we see that he is scared and nervous of robbing the white store owner, Blum. After urging his accomplices to rob Blum and even though the plan contained fewer casualties and ensured more success, he ends up picking a fight with them to cancel the robbery under the pretext that his friend's fear will get them caught. On the contrary, even though Bessie is scared and refuses to participate in the extortion plan, he forces her involvement in it.

In both cases, Bigger is well aware of his angry and violent nature, and his lack of calmness required for the success of the plans. This is why, in each case, he exhibits the possession of "the most important skill needed for successful self deception [which] is an ability to allow oneself to be persuaded by weak evidence" (Detmer 94). He puts off Blum's robbery by persuading himself of the fear of being caught despite other factors being in their favor. Similarly, he carries the extortion plan with the intense desire to do so and in spite of the feeble possibility of success. Against his knowledge that "a woman was a dangerous burden when a man was running away", "how men had been caught because of women" and that Bessie would "sob out" everything instead of shrewdly concealing their plans if investigated, he involves her in it (Wright, *Native Son* 135).

He dismisses the stronger evidence that unless Bessie has the same enthusiasm as him in committing the crime and erasing its traces, the possibility of him getting caught with her involvement is more. Instead, he involves her thinking that “he could handle her through her fear” by prioritizing the weaker evidence that the police could track him if he left Bessie behind and she gave an account of his habit and lifestyle (138). If it comes to being exposed, Bigger knows that he will have to leave the city by avoiding the routes that the police will suspect he might take which is why Bessie’s account would be invalid. Therefore, using Gus’s fear as an excuse to cancel the robbery and using Bessie’s fear of having no way out to execute the extortion plan, Bigger exhibits an “additional technique of bad faith ... [through] unscrupulous and inconsistent sliding back and forth between different standards of evidence” (Detmer 85).

To conclude, by depicting the situations in which Bigger’s thoughts and emotions collide with his reality and his assigning of different values and reasoning to similar situations, Wright highlights the ambiguity of his character. By outlining the methods in which Bigger maintains these conflicts, Wright foregrounds the polarity of Bigger’s character.

Chapter 4

The Vicious World of *Native Son*: Reading Bigger's Violent Attitude

Wright's choice to use the plot of the stereotypical myth of the black murderer and rapist in contrast to that of an innocent victimized black has been questioned and evaluated time and again. Bigger Thomas as an angry and resentful protagonist who commits visually disturbing murders has been of much controversy among the scholars. This chapter appraises the murders, and claims Bigger's violence to be the medium through which Wright stresses on the ambivalence of his nature by subverting the historical representation of black and white masculinity, relationship, and power dynamics.

4.1. Of Convention and Exception: Analyzing Bigger's Murder of Mary and Bessie

Throughout his entire life, Bigger's interaction with the white world has been either of one from a distance, or that of imaginations conjured from movies and the gossips of other people. As such, before coming to work for the Daltons, Bigger assumes that "Maybe Mr. Dalton was a millionaire. Maybe he had a daughter who was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money; maybe she'd like to come to the South Side and see the sights sometimes. Or maybe she had a secret sweetheart and only he would know about it because he would have to drive her around; maybe she would give him money not to tell" (Wright, *Native Son* 36). Yet, when all of these assumptions take the form of reality, Bigger is caught out of place.

This is because, in his imaginations, he had only assigned himself the role of a passive observer of the white world just like the one he has been his entire life. As "in all of the white women he had met, mostly on jobs and at relief stations, there was always a certain coldness and reserve; they stood their distance and spoke to him from afar", he is conditioned to expect the

same from Mary and in return act out his role (60). However, when she behaves different from convention, and her friendly attitude invites him to participate in their world, he is overcome with the familiar feelings of shame and anger, and realizes that “she was not a bit the way he had imagined she would be” (55). It is Mary’s divergence from convention that prohibits Bigger to accept her friendliness, rather react to it with the feelings he knows- shame, hatred, anger, and aggression. As Andrew Read says, “Wright tries to depict the radical distortions racist ideology inflicts on black men and white women’s perception of each other as the major cause of black violence” (112).

Mary’s friendliness incites emotions unknown to Bigger’s consciousness as Wright states, “He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him. She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she. And he had never felt that before in a white person” (*Native Son* 66). Having accepted the social inferiority imposed on him, Bigger cannot accept this new gesture from a person of the race responsible for the imposition, and therefore, Mary’s colorblind attitude towards him only makes him overly conscious of his own blackness and his actual position in the society. The sense of “placelessness” evoked in him by the white world is reinforced through Mary’s behavior which is why he feels the need to vanquish this feeling through violence (Guttman 176).

Even though Mary and Jan act in goodwill in recognizing his humanity, and insisting that Bigger eat with them, they also deny his subjectivity simultaneously. Bigger was already frustrated with white people telling him what to do all his life, and hence, though Mary and Jan are being considerate of him through their intimacy, he, nevertheless, feels the same frustration devouring his consciousness. By forcing him to act in a way that he did not want to, in spite of their good intentions, Jan and Mary also reject his subjectivity and agency. Therefore, in

Bigger's perspective, they also become the same as other white people. This is why, "he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, inarticulate hate" (Wright, *Native Son* 68). Perhaps, more than their acknowledgment of the miseries of Bigger and his people's lives, Bigger wanted in them the recognition of the values and the system responsible for it. This is why, when Mary talks about the black people's plight and getting to know them, Bigger is overcome with negative emotions and wants to destroy her.

Furthermore, Wright tactfully uses and subverts the historical phenomenon of the lack of recognition of the humanity of black people by the whites. He fashions Bigger's psyche after the very white psyche that does not recognize his humanness. Hence, Bigger too does not recognize Mary's humanness and stereotypes her. To him, Mary was 'like a doll in a show window: black eyes, white face, red lips' (63). Mary belonged to the group of people whom Bigger did not really perceive as people, rather as "a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark" (109). Therefore, just as the white people have stripped Bigger of his humanity, he also stripped them of their humanness and reduced them to the state of objects.

Moreover, Mary is the symbolic representation of the world that has denied him of his basic human rights, and has inflicted tortures on him for generations. As a result, murdering Mary equals to violating that white world, gaining an upper hand over it, and also seeking vengeance for the sufferings of the blacks. For this purpose, Bigger resorts to violence since historically " ... violence has been used most frequently and effectively by dominant groups seeking to preserve their power and less effectively by subordinate groups seeking to protest or improve their situation" (Wallace 82). Consequently, Mary becomes a sacrifice that dismantles the power dynamics between the blacks and whites. As Lale Demitürk affirms, "Although it is an

accident, Mary's murder has given Bigger a chance to reverse the power relationship between Mary and himself: for the first time he has been able to destroy the dominant image of the whites" (269). Besides, her murder "dramatizes the conflict between a black male's enactment of subjectivity and the social prohibition against this enactment" (Takeuchi 64). The accomplishment of Mary's murder and the subsequent attempts to dispose the body are evidences of the subversion of Bigger's image as a black man in the white minds. As opposed to the stereotypes of a dumb and powerless black, Bigger shrewdly disposes the body, puts the blame on Jan, and calmly handles the situation while driving suspicion away from him. Mary's murder provides him an opportunity to victimize his oppressors, and gain a sense of superiority over them (Demiturk 269-270).

The murder becomes a parameter through which Bigger measures the value of his life. It gives his life a new meaning, and direction that was amiss before. It is neither out of murderous intention that he kills Mary nor it is out of any vileness that he tries to hide it. Rather, the course of actions that follow the murder are all product of a subconscious awareness of what getting caught and escaping conviction meant. Instead of facing his crime, Bigger evades it as "the daring associated with such actions formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (Wright, *Native Son* 101).

While Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton can be received with a tint of sympathy due to the psychological implications leading to it, his murder of Bessie Mears is absolutely unforgivable because of its horrific nature. Bessie's rape and murder has been a topic of debate among critiques. The most common opinion to prevail the debate is that of the misogynistic attitude

towards the black woman, and the consequent silencing of her voice in the novel. Complying with the critical readings of Bessie's murder, my reading of it is additionally going to contend that through Bessie's character, her rape and murder, the ambivalent stance of Bigger's character is emphasized.

To begin with, Bessie Mears is Bigger's girlfriend and a black woman who shares the same social and economical standing as Bigger. She appears in the restaurant where Bigger reluctantly goes for dinner with Mary and Jan. Sitting with two white people amidst the curious and scrutinizing gaze of other black people, Bigger wants to shroud himself in the veil of invisibility conferred by the white world. He transfers this feeling upon Bessie by responding "gruffly" to her greetings and giving no recognition to her presence (73). Towards her, he shows that same lack of acknowledgment that whites do towards the blacks.

He is overwhelmed by the hatred Jan and Mary induced in him through their disregard of his emotions, whereas he does not consider how Bessie will feel from his cold reception of her greetings while being in the company of white people. He subconsciously transfers the lifelong indifference received from the whites on Bessie without considering the emotional impact it may (and does) have on her. After this fleeting encounter, Bigger visits Bessie only when "he had to forget and relax" from the tiring task of cleaning up after Mary's murder (123). It is evident that Bigger views Bessie as an emotional outlet that offers him momentary escape from the sheer chaos and later, terror, unfolding his life.

Regarding Bigger and Bessie's relationship, Sondra Guttman attests that Bigger "is able to vanquish his feelings of placelessness when he is with her" (181). Indeed, "the thought and image of the whole blind world which had made him ashamed and afraid fell away" when he is

with her (Wright, *Native Son* 128). However, this fleeting forgetfulness of the white world provided by Bessie does not come without his submission to her tantrums and whims to test how much power she has over him. Hence, in some way, Bessie is also a weak extension of the white world to which Bigger is subdued all-time. The shackle he tries to escape from infiltrates his private world as well, which is why Bessie becomes the default recipient of his aggression.

Robert James Butler claims that Bessie represents the naturalistic aspect of Bigger's divided self as her life too is "conditioned by the economic, political and, social pressures of his actual environment" (11). Belonging to the same race and class, both are eventually victims of discriminations and racial hatred. In a similar vein, Demitürk also attests that "Since Bessie is in the same boat sharing the same lot with Bigger, he identifies himself with her, as opposed to Mary. He kills Bessie, for she represents his own self-image—his own blackness—to him" (271). Bessie depicts "the impotence that her poverty forces upon her" which is also applicable to Bigger, and which he wants to transcend but does not know how to (Butler 16). Since he can neither accept what she represents nor he can escape from it, the only plausible way out of it is through her elimination. Therefore, he is ultimately able to respond to her through violence only. By killing her, he attempts to sever ties with his own blackness (Mathews 283). This is where the ambivalence of his character is strongly portrayed.

Bigger himself is unable to come to terms with his own blackness while expecting it from the whites. As a result, he ends up failing to acknowledge the blackness of other people as well. Earlier in the novel, we see that Bigger reflects on Bessie's hardships: "He felt the narrow orbit of her life: from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the furthest she ever moved. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off ... " (Wright, *Native Son* 131). Although he realizes her struggles, he becomes blind to those just like

the white world, and mercilessly kills her. He fails to grasp that as long as he thought that “it was his life against hers”, he would be enacting the very ideology of the white world that he so earnestly despised (222). In his desire to negate the white world, he ends up following their footsteps.

While wanting to ascend from his ascribed otherized position, he ends up otherizing Bessie, and in a broader sense, the entire black community. He deflects from his own desire “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” by negating Bessie from that world (226). Moreover, under the pretext of escaping the punishment for Mary’s murder, he uses Mary as a weapon to eradicate Bessie. The appropriation of exploiting white female subjectivity to abolish black female subjectivity further affirms Bigger’s compliance with the oppressive cycle that he tries to break free from.

Guttman argues that through his artistic articulation, Wright brings attention to “the historical invisibility of black women’s rapes and of their continuing devaluation in American society” by the portrayal of Bessie’s rape (185). Indeed, though her rape remains an issue of secondary importance to convict Bigger, it is her rape that strengthens the assumption that Bigger has also raped Mary. The rape acts as a tool that subjects him to the abhorrence of whites for Mary’s death and of the blacks for Bessie’s. Although Bigger ends up enacting the myth of the black rapist in order to avoid it by disposing Mary’s body, it is Bessie’s rape that marks him as the rapist. While Bessie’s rape implies black male survival through the erasure of black female subjectivity, it also becomes the reason that threatens it. Hating the stereotypical assumption about himself and yet conforming to it through Bessie’s rape, the ambivalent nature of Bigger’s character is maintained.

Violence against both women can also be attested as Bigger's assertion of masculinity that has been conditioned by white ideologies since black men's arrival in America. Because black men's existence is disregarded and subordinated by the whites, the necessity to reenact the white model of masculinity in order to equate their status to the whites is accomplished by adapting to the values of the dominating culture (Pierre et. al 25). The dominating culture consists of white patriarchal masculinity that appropriates the use of violence to establish their power by dominating women (hooks 2). Moreover:

If black males are socialized from birth to embrace the notion that their manhood will be determined by whether or not they can dominate and control others and yet the political system they live within (imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy) prevents most of them from having access to socially acceptable positions of power and dominance, then they will claim their patriarchal manhood, through socially unacceptable channels. They will enact rituals of blood, of patriarchal manhood by using violence to dominate and control. (53-54)

Therefore, Bigger's use of violence is his enactment of the oppressive white model of masculinity. Regarding this, Wright subverts the historical tradition of white's dismembering of black bodies, as found in Wallace's study, through Bigger's decapitation of Mary's body (Wallace 87-88). In doing so, Wright criticizes the white culture that has been appropriating violence throughout the ages, and makes Bigger act as a mirror that shows the whites the horror of their own doings. Furthermore, through Bigger's rape of Bessie, his distortion of her face and murder, Wright shows Bigger's desertion of black masculinity, and once again, his identification with "white masters who took their sexual chattel by force" (Takeuchi 67).

To conclude, Bigger's need to rebel springs from the realization of his denied black masculinity and agency and the urge for its assertion, but his method of rebellion signifies his adoption of white masculinity. Wright's emphasis on this transition through the subversion of black-white power and relation status highlights the ambiguity of Bigger's character as both the victim and the oppressor, and as a result, makes readers' categorization of Bigger as either good or evil fluctuate.

Chapter 5

Lost and Found: Bigger's Metamorphosis?

From kicking his heels in the alleys of Chicago's Black Belt and fantasizing the life beyond it to perpetrating ghastly murders and looking squarely at his imminent demise, Bigger Thomas's fate changes drastically within a short span of time. This chapter is going to pursue Bigger's transformative journey in terms of his relation to the other male characters, his views about life and death, and his reconciliation with humanity in order to situate Wright's endeavor in sketching him as a grey character.

5.1. Boys in the Poolroom and Men in the Court

A complete comprehension of Bigger's character requires an understanding of his relation with the other male characters in the novel. To begin with, three boys by the name Gus, Jack, and G.H. and a man named Doc who is in charge of the poolroom where they hang out are a part of Bigger's daily life beyond the four walls of his home. The boys are the friends with who Bigger spends his time, and fights the battle of survival in the adverse conditions of Chicago by committing petty crimes against other black people. Bigger encounters Gus on the way to meet his friends in the poolroom. Bigger urges Gus to "play white" which is a game where they assume the roles of white political leaders and light-heartedly act out some exaggerated and unrealistic scenes. Through this role playing, they attempt to gain the sense of belonging and power denied by the white authority, and as Aimé J. Ellis states "their scrutinizing rendition of white male authority ... functions as a form of mimicry in which Bigger and Gus question, oppose, and ultimately attempt to subvert racial negation, subordination, and second-class citizenship" (188).

However, the initial mirth of the game escalates to gloom and rage as it only makes their own subdued reality apparent. This is revealed in Bigger's frustrated proclamation that "Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail" (Wright, *Native Son* 23). To his angry lamentation, Gus replies dismissively that, "Aw, ain't no use feeling that way about it. It don't help none" (23). When Bigger continues the topic, Gus suggests, "There ain't nothing you can do about it (23). Although both of them are victims of racism, Bigger and Gus's feelings towards the issue are significantly different. Gus has conceded to the white domination, has readily accepted the way things are, and does not question the system that makes them suffer like Bigger does. From this, it is understandable that Bigger and Gus are emotionally and ideologically distant.

Furthermore, Bigger's friends fail to perceive his motive behind planning to rob Blum's store. For him, accomplishing the robbery amounts to defying the white authority and challenging it, and thus, feeling free. As Ellis states, "Psychologically, the challenge of robbing a white-owned store — especially those white establishments within the Black Belt — constituted for Bigger and his friends the site of a phantasmal liberation from white domination" (190). Though his friends share the fear of accomplishing this feat with Bigger, they are blind to the meaning behind its fulfillment. Their initial refusal indicates that they also become representative of the lingering shadow of the white world that violates Bigger's authority. As a consequence, Bigger feels victimized and becomes aggressive towards Gus, picks a fight with the other boys and Doc in order to "feel equal of them" and restore the lost sense of power (Wright, *Native Son* 43). Regarding this, Read observes "Bigger's psyche is fissured by the need to repress

the traumatic pain and anger created by the conditions of his life and keep his consciousness anaesthetised. At moments of crisis, he is overwhelmed by these powerful repressed emotions, and he has to project his mental turmoil into apparently gratuitous violence to restore his normal psychic state” (103).

Because his friends are not able to see through his hatred towards the white rule and the justifiable causes of it but are able to see through his fear and hesitancy in violating the white authority, Bigger uses violence against them which acts as a mask shielding him from their accusing gazes and his own impotency. Moreover, since Bigger cannot rebel against the white world responsible for his despair, he is aggressive towards those who are within his reach. As Ellis asserts, Bigger’s “projection of violent behavior onto his buddies problematically constitute both hypermasculinity and fearlessness as sites of empowerment, status, and self-worth” (190).

Several critics have identified Bigger’s ferocious attitude towards Gus where Bigger threatens him to lick an open knife by using physical force as a symbolic act of rape that restores Bigger’s power (Ellis 191). Indeed, before meeting Gus, Bigger’s mother chides him for lacking “manhood” and marks him as “the most no-countest man” (Wright, *Native Son* 12). This subjection to humiliation at home is revoked when his friends do not comply with his plan to rob Blum. As a result, in order to reassert his manhood and authority among his friends, he is violent towards them and Gus becomes the central object of this aggression. By exercising physical prowess over Gus and terrorizing him to submission, Bigger feminizes him and regains control over his own trampled authority.

In this regard, Ellis states that such behavioral exhibition depicts “a dysfunctional response to racial terror ... emerging from a historic legacy of political, social, and physical

emasculation dating back to black men's enslavement and continuing into the twentieth century" (192). In fact, the brutal history of the blacks has rendered them unable to resort to an outlet other than violence to assert their subjectivity and manhood which is why "for many young black males growing up in Jim Crow, strength and toughness was a social necessity that reflected both the past and impending brutalities of racial terror" which is evident in Bigger as well (192).

However, in asserting his own subjectivity, Bigger denies his friends their subjectivity. By terrorizing them into submission, Bigger also becomes the same as the oppressive white force that makes him suffer. Hence, on one hand, Bigger's violence towards his friends helps him regain his own agency, but on the other hand, it becomes emblematic of the friends' refused agency. This causes a divide in their friendship and marks Bigger's separation from the black community (Mathews 286). In light of these explanations, it can be said that Wright illustrates Bigger as both a victim whose actions are conditioned by racial abuse and a tyrant whose actions are wrong despite the justifiability of those.

After his capture, Wright offers Bigger's reconciliation with Jan. Induced by the shame and anger of his racially subjugated position, Bigger feels the same magnitude of hatred towards Jan as he does towards Mary. However, his feelings are changed when Jan offers him a lawyer who would defend him in the court. Jan forgives him for murdering Mary which signifies his recognition of Bigger's victimization by racism. This forgiveness softens Bigger's previous feelings towards Jan which is evident through his thoughts that, "For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him; and the reality of Jan's humanity came in a stab of remorse: he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him" (Wright, *Native Son* 268).

Mary's death acts as the medium of reconciliation between the men, but even so, Bigger does not acknowledge the wrongness on his part in murdering her. Bigger does not feel remorse about the fact that Mary was an innocent person he murdered, but that Mary's death has hurt the white man who has offered him a hand of friendship. Even at the end of the novel when he has been sentenced to death, he claims that "What I killed for, I am!" which further affirms the acceptance of his crime but not his guilt in killing an innocent person in course of his rebellion (392).

In my opinion, Wright portrays the crucial fallacy of Bigger's character through his nonconformance to the guilt of Mary's murder. He tries to show that Bigger's revolt against white oppression becomes invalid when he does not realize and admit the unfairness of Mary's murder. Even though the circumstances and the psychological implication behind her murder evokes readers' empathy for Bigger, what also deprives him of it is his lack of acknowledgment of her innocence and denial of his guilt, and therefore, makes him a grey character. Moreover, this reunion in contrast to his separation from the black friends calls attention to how violence is a crucial factor conditioning Bigger's relationships.

Bigger's momentary bonding with another white male, Max, does not find fulfillment by the end of the novel. Even though Max is one of the few people who try to save Bigger, he is unable to understand Bigger's psyche entirely. In trying to defend Bigger, he establishes the plights of black people, and communicates what possibilities the future hold if the present condition of disparity continues. In doing so, Max views Bigger as representative of a historical/critical problem that requires to be solved with the aid of social and political reformation. As such, he fails to acknowledge Bigger as an individual separate from his social roles. This is why, even when he interrogates Bigger about the murders and what leads to those,

Max does not understand what the murders mean for Bigger even when Bigger, for the first time, trusts another person and expresses his feelings truthfully. In Gibson's statement, "Max is indeed a sympathetic character, but for all his good intentions, he has limitations. He never, for example, entirely understands what Bigger is getting at during their conversations" (735).

Although Max understands how Bigger is a victim of racial discrimination which plays a role in his crimes, he fails to perceive what exactly drove Bigger and what he wants to establish by owning up those crimes. In Demitürk's words: "Max is humane but is blind to the degree to which the white proscriptions of blacks' social conduct can push Bigger into such a frenzy" (273). He pleads Bigger guilty as a final attempt to save him from death. What Max fails to understand is that Bigger is not truly guilty of his crimes as those released his frustration, signify his defiance of the white rule, and provides him a scope to experience freedom. Moreover, Bigger's reiteration that he would rather die than live at the cost of compromising the significance of his rebellion by pleading guilty confounds Max. Therefore, "Max fails to read the unbearable pressure and the mental constructs of white myths, such as that of the black rapist, that can be imprinted on the black consciousness, and make the black unable to distinguish between what the white myth says about the black behavior and how the black "feels" about himself" (273). As such, Bigger is not able to bond with Max as he does with Jan. Thus, Bigger's reconciliation with other men remains incomplete.

5.2. Bigger's Humanity and Self-Regard

During the initial days of Bigger's confinement, he has been shrouded in a cocoon of indifference and occasional dread of death. However, "regulating his attitude toward death was the fact that he was black, unequal, and despised" (Wright, *Native Son* 256). In the recess of his mind, he still has the awareness of the disparity imposed upon him. Along with this, he realizes that the lawmakers "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. ... they were going to use his death as a bloody symbol of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world" (257).

Understanding the fact that his death would become an advantageous tool for the whites to further subdue the blacks, he springs "back into action, alive, contending" (257). Until now, Bigger has been preoccupied with the meaning his crimes provides to his life without considering how his community is going to be affected by it. Realizing that his outcome does not determine his fate only but that it aggravates the fate of his community as well, he decides to not let the white force "use him for whatever they wanted" (259). Bigger, the captive, comprehends that "He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer" (277).

Bigger's acceptance that "His family was a part of him, not only in blood, but also in spirit" testifies his realization that they also endure the brunt of his deeds (277). As a result, he regrets acting tough and not being honest with them about his feelings. Besides, his realization that "Was there some battle everybody was fighting, and he had missed it?" testifies that he is finally able to reflect on the previously ignored hardships of the people around him (336). Bigger

symbolizes the blacks through this acknowledgment, and therefore accepts his own blackness which he hitherto tried to escape from. Despite his symbolization with the blacks in the United States, Bigger is also able to retain his discreet identity. Earlier in the novel, he wants to disclose his crimes in order to instill fear in the whites, and thereby abandon the cloak of invisibility imposed on him and restore the subjectivity denied due to his racial identity. However, after being caught, he does not want to tell what feelings drove him to kill. He thinks that stating his emotions and motives behind the murders would render the meanings signified by those futile. Moreover, the people determined to put him to death not for what he has done but for who he is are likely to not understand his perspective.

Hence, by choosing to keep silent, he decides not to let his inner thoughts be tainted by the white gaze and reserves those for himself only. As Wright proclaims, “He would have gladly admitted his guilt if he had thought that in doing so he could have also given in the same breath a sense of the deep, choking hate that had been his life, a hate that he had not wanted to have, but could not help having” (286). Additionally, he does not give in to the authority’s pressure to admit the crimes he had not committed. Even under their forceful attempts to make him reenact Mary’s murder and confess other crimes, he strongly declares that “You can’t make me do nothing but die!” (312). Therefore, by resisting the authorial force directly and keeping his determination intact, Bigger expands “his fight for meaning beyond the parameters set for him by the ‘white force’” (De Arman 63).

Bigger accepts his death without remorse/fear, and lets Max know his true feelings. He confesses that he never really intended to hurt anyone but was helpless in face of his emotions. Furthermore, he says, “I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ’em. . . . It’s the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, ’cause I’m going to die. I

know what I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way" (Wright, *Native Son* 392). This implies that Bigger is able to attain a degree of salvation through acceptance of his own self. Besides, his last greeting to Jan, and message to his mother that he was all right and not to worry about him also reinforce it.

Through the portrayal of the complex range of Bigger's emotions on the verge of death, Wright depicts the transformation Bigger undergoes and manifests him as a rebellious character worthy of sympathy. Wright offers Bigger redemption in his own eyes and a chance to reconcile with his humanity and that of others through his realization of the sufferings of other blacks, identification with them, and the reception of his death. However, his wrong approaches of revolution and blindness towards it till the end obstructs the scope of his complete metamorphosis to a humanized character from a demonized one, ultimately hindering readers' complete sympathetic reception of his journey, and thus, bestowing him an ambivalent categorization.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Richard Wright's brilliance as a novelist is perfectly demonstrated through the phenomenal story of Bigger Thomas, a man of African-American descent living in Chicago's Black Belt, who struggles to come to terms with the racial discrimination prevalent in America. Unable to unquestioningly accept the rules of a system that undermines his human rights and chances at life, Bigger is overcome by a plethora of emotions, such as fear, shame, anger, frustration, and despair, the continuous repression of which damages his psyche. In order to conceal his emotional vulnerability, he adopts self-deceptive practices that condition his perception and showcases extreme violence that conditions his relationship with others.

In the course of events, he murders his white employer's daughter and his black girlfriend. Ironically, the murders act as a liberating force and give him a sense of power over white rule. However, the subversion of power dynamics through the murders also signifies his resemblance with the very oppressors he rebels against, since, historically, the methods of white brutality on blacks have been as gruesome as these murders and even far more atrocious. Therefore, in trying to recover his own humanity and blackness, Bigger reenacts the approaches of his oppressors.

Furthermore, the scope for an assertion of his masculinity, denied him by white America, is recovered through these murders and Bigger's terrorization of his black friends. Again, his forceful dominance over people powerless than him indicates his adoption of the white model of masculinity that appropriates aggression to establish power and control. Throughout the novel, Wright depicts that the killings are not motivated by Bigger's murderous intent, rather by the

conflict between his painful experience of racism and emotions that he can neither accept nor reject. Additionally, Wright shows Bigger's realization of the impact of his crimes on his community, his subsequent identification with them and acceptance of his death as his reconciliation with his humanity. However, he also depicts with finesse that Bigger ultimately embraces his fate but does not accept the guilt of killing innocent people.

All of these establish Bigger as an ambivalent character whose struggles soften readers' reception of him but whose methods of rebellion weaken his sympathetic reception. Hence, readers can neither like him nor hate him, though they mostly empathize with his plight. In conclusion, it can be argued that Richard Wright portrays Bigger Thomas as a character inhabiting the 'gray zone' of the fictional cosmos of Black American literature through the representation of his self-deceptive methods, the ambiguous assertion of his subjectivity and masculinity, the disparities in his exhibition of violence, and the transformative journey he undertakes throughout the novel.

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