

The Slavishness in the Blood: Black People's Compromise in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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The slave trade has exerted an enormous influence on the black people especially who live in America so that this phenomenon has generated many great African American writers whose subject matter is always about the racial discrimination. Richard Wright, as one of the celebrated African American writers, creates an unprecedented image, Bigger, in his work *Native Son*, which has aroused many scholars' research. With the help of detailed analysis of the text, this essay aims to explore and study why most of the black people in this book especially Bigger subconsciously grovel and lower themselves, that is its characters' innate inferiority and their slavishness in the blood when they are facing with the white.

Keywords: Richard Wright, *Native Son*, slavishness in the blood

Introduction

As the well-known novel of an African American writer Richard Wright, the *Native Son* has an epoch-making significance in the history of American literature because in this book, the artist creates a violent black image of resistance which is against all the depicted traditional black figures.

Richard Wright was very active during the Harlem Renaissance and was the leading writer of the protest novels of which *Native Son* is a part, thus making a name of himself. Therefore, there are many book reviews or research papers dealing with this brilliant work.

Literature Review

Previous studies on this novel mainly focus on the various interpretations of Bigger's violence, complexity of the protagonist's personalities as well as the symbolic meanings of the title and different names.

Firstly, in Robert James Butler's article, he believes that Wright is always in full artistic control of the violence in his best fiction, *Native Son*, his masterwork, using violence extensively but as a necessary and powerful reflector of the deepest recesses of its central character's radically divided nature (1986, p. 11). Secondly, Sara D. Schotland tries to analyze Bigger's violence in her article and claims that "Bigger is a violent young man with a pathological split personality" (2011, p. 3). Thirdly, Masaya Takeuchi mentions that "Bigger's identity splits into two conflicted selves, an assertive one among blacks and a submissive one in front of whites" (2009, p. 58). Fourthly, Takeuchi also reckons that Bigger's struggle to balance the two selves not only produces his gender-divided views of two women—Mary as passive and subversive and Bessie as obedient and strong-willed—but also provokes his violence against them (2009, p. 58). While the above

An early study of *Native Son* in China is interpreted from the perspective of Bigger's complicated personalities and his new image as a black man. Wang Nuo and Fei Fan hold that in addition to fear, shame, and hatred, Bigger's another driving force is the search for his self-realization (1992, p. 86). Then Hu Tiesheng adopts the method of psychoanalysis, from the perspectives of sociology, philosophy, psychology, and literary aesthetics to analyze Bigger's psychological motive and the fission of his personality which are caused by social existence (1997, p. 64). Similarly, researchers in China do not notice the innate inferiority in Bigger's personality either.

To sum up, critics all point out that this novel is of great importance in the literary field. The previous studies are very impressive and deep, but there is one element that they've less studied; in spite of those scholars' momentous research achievements, the book *Native Son* can be read from another angle, that is why all the blacks in the novel subconsciously grovel and lower themselves when facing the whites. This essay aims to testify the reason why Bigger commits two crimes is that, in essence, the strong impact of racial discrimination makes the black people's slavishness in the novel rooted in their blood.

Fear, flight, and fate. The novel begins with “Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!” (Wright, 1970, p. 7). The warning effect of the alarm clock also reminds us of the earth-shattering things that the protagonist will do next in the novel.

Bigger Thomas, living in a rat-infested little room with his other three families, his mother, his sister, and his brother, refuses to accept the religious beliefs and fools around with his friends who's planning to rob a white man's store. During the robbery, Bigger with his gang of friends goes to see a movie telling the story of a rich white man and woman, which makes Bigger decide to take the job of being a driver in Mr. Dalton's house who's wealthy but white. On the first day of his work, Bigger encounters Mr. Dalton's daughter Mary, and his first mission is to drive Mary to her school, while on the way, Mary asks to stop and invites her boyfriend Jan to join with them to have dinner and drink alcohols.

After their having fun, Bigger has to take the dead drunk girl Mary home, which makes Bigger commit an accidental murder of her in a moment of panic. In the hostile white world, he becomes a fugitive, committing another brutal murder of his girlfriend Bessie, but enjoys for the first time a sense of freedom and

self-realization. After he gets caught, a passionate lawyer Max makes a defence speech for him at the trial, which turns out to be futile to Bigger's crimes. At the end of Bigger's day, he seems to understand himself and the world more clearly.

So the first part of the novel is about Bigger and other black people's fear for the white society, then the second one is his flight after the accidental murder of a white girl, and finally his destined fate. Compared with some traditional black figures in the literary canons, Bigger makes a great rebellion against the ideology dominated by the white but something deep in his heart, that is his innate inferiority and slavishness in front of white people which can also be smelled.

Bigger Thomas's incomplete rebellion and slavishness. From the whole plot we can see that the character Bigger has been portrayed so vividly and unforgettably as a violent black under the white supremacy.

At the beginning, when Bigger and Gus lean their backs against the red-brick wall of a building, smoking and playing the game of imitating the ways and manners of white folks, Bigger wonders that why white people make the black live in one corner of the city and why they do not let the black get the opportunity to fly planes and run ships (Wright, 1970, p. 23). This conversation reflects the injustice of the American society at that time as well as the doubt and unwilling that is rooted in Bigger's heart and also sets a hint foreshadowing Bigger's later crimes and rebellion in the story.

He makes a lot of resistance against the white world and the black traditions. At first, after his watching several movies, he's attracted by the white man's abundant life in the newsreels, but later when he really gets the job in a white man's house, he is disillusioned with the white world so that he begins his resistance. For example, he accidentally murders the only daughter of Mr. Dalton but he is so calm to burn the corpse to destroy the evidence without any fear and hesitation that later the police does not believe it is Bigger who has done all this by himself. The black character's coolness and resourcefulness is the resistance to the white world.

Bigger is a character with complex personalities, such as violent, resistant, ambitious, dignified, ambivalent, and brave, while his race, the environment he lives in, and his urgent desire for justice between the black and the white determine that he is unable to get rid of the oppression caused by racial discrimination which further leads to his subconscious lowering when he faces with white people, so in this situation, I hold that Bigger's rebellion is incomplete.

An instance that can disclose Bigger's incomplete resistance is that when Bigger plans to go to Mr. Dalton's house, he takes his knife and his gun which will make him feel that he is the equal of them and give him a sense of completeness. He thinks to himself that he just feels he would be safer if he takes them and he's not planning to use them because there is nothing in particular that he is afraid of (Wright, 1970, p. 44). This extra need for weapons not only reflects the inequality between the two races but also shows Bigger's feeling of inferiority and self-abasement in the blood to the white society, which of course is deeply influenced by the oppression from the white world.

One of the most frequently used words in the novel to describe Bigger's feeling and situation when he is in Dalton's house is the word "bewildered", because he is perplexed by the white world, their language, and their behavior, all of which make him feel uneasy, tense, and strangely blind.

Another case is that when he is facing with Mr. Dalton, he's so self-contemptuous that he wants to blot himself out and he does not raise his eyes to the level of Mr. Dalton's face. Bigger just stands with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped (Wright, 1970, p. 50). There is an organic conviction in him that this gesture is the way white folks want him to be when in their presence.

Even when Mary shows her kindness, accepts Bigger as a human being, and tries to help him, he just thinks that she makes him feel like a dog, and makes him so mad and want to cry (Wright, 1970, p. 324). This case is the same with Jan and Max, two Jewish people, who endeavor to help Bigger out of the prison.

The above examples explain that because he suffers from the racial discrimination so deeply, and there is innate inferiority and sense of insecurity in his subconsciousness, if there are any white people showing their kindness to him, he will become bewildered and feel more shameful about his color of skin. So his hatred toward Mary can be referred to his detestation to all the white people, their oppression and hypocrisy.

A Brief Analysis of Bigger's Mother's Slavishness

An overview of other black people. The role relationships in the novel are not so complicated to analyze. The black figures in this book include Bigger's mother, his sister, his brother, his friends, and his girlfriend Bessie. It is worth mentioning that the black women characters in *Native Son* actually are all depicted as negative ones.

Firstly, according to Bigger's own words, he thinks that his families, especially his mother, are all "blind" (Wright, 1970, p. 102) who do not care his spiritual world and also do not know what he really wants. Even though he commits two crimes, instead of telling his families what happened the first time, he gets along with them acting like nothing was wrong. Subconsciously, he blames his disappointment on his mother.

Another role worth mentioning is Bigger's girlfriend Bessie who works for white men very hard to earn a living and serves as a sexual tool for Bigger. She is portrayed as an image who is mortally afraid of death when she comes to know that Bigger has committed a crime and she is regarded as a dangerous burden when a man is running away. Unfortunately, she is brutally murdered by Bigger in the end.

Bigger's mother: Representative supporting role's slavishness. The female figures in the novel suffer from two kinds of oppression, the one is that they have to face with the racial discrimination from the white world and the other is that they also need to endure the prejudice of men within their race. In such kind of situation, it is common for them to subconsciously grovel and lower themselves when they are facing the whites.

Here this essay tries to explore Bigger's mother briefly. Bigger's mother is a religious believer who puts everything in God's hands and seeks solace in her religious beliefs where, however, Bigger holds different views towards his mother's behavior that he claims only rich white people and poor black people go to church. (He does not believe in God so that is why he turns his back against them when some preachers come to the prison and pray for him.)

In the first part of the story, Mrs. Thomas (Bigger's mother) complains about Bigger's unemployment and consistently forces her son to take the job of being a driver in a rich white man's house because according to her, working for the white is somewhat superior and can get more salary.

While after Bigger's sentence, she is very powerless when her son is sent to jail and she can only mumble prayer for him and even kneel down on the floor at Mrs. Dalton's feet, begging for Mrs. Dalton's forgiveness and not killing her son, which makes Bigger paralyzed with shame and feel violated (Wright, 1970, pp. 279-280).

Bigger's mother, caring about her son's life and death, compromises with whites through the price of her dignity. But what she gets from her son is just his feelings of shame and anger on her. Just like Bigger, she's also the victim of racial discrimination, and she is so helpless that she shows her slavishness again in front of a white woman even other whites and then subconsciously grovels herself too.

Conclusion

The slavery of black people by the white went through several hundred years, from which all the blacks had suffered with great pains and agonies. The black characters in *Native Son* are afflicted by racial discrimination depriving them of the equal rights as the white, forces them to be inferior to the white, and even makes them subconsciously lower themselves when they are in the face of the white. Violent and resistant as Bigger is in the novel, his sense of innate inferiority to white men is unavoidable because just as all the black figures in the novel, Bigger is tormented bitterly by the unjustified white-dominating world. Including Bigger's mother, a black female enduring two kinds of oppression, she has to compromise with the white too.

Some other black figures in the novel share the same problem with Bigger and his mother that is their innate self-abasement and slavishness in the blood; due to the space limits, here I just briefly analyze the two characters. By depicting such kind of heroes, Wright means more than this and this topic can be further studied.

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