

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## The Unbearable Blackness of Being: De-Signifying the Signified in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Zareen Choudhury

Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

### Abstract:

*Native Son* dramatizes Bigger's struggle against the inhuman, deleterious cycle of white racism which effectively transforms blacks into their own negative stereotypes of blackness. He revolts against his socially constructed image and a socially assigned role that deny him identity and dignity. His self-perception is governed by the racially prejudiced images imposed on him. Throughout his life, he suffers for being black. The infamy of blackness darkens his existence, making him a victim of white oppression and white racist ideology. With his diminished capacity and depleted sense of self, he tries in vain to disentangle himself from the crippling impact of ideological and racial dominance. The significance of blackness changes for Bigger with the accidental killing of a wealthy white girl. Bigger's personality assumes a new self and his life takes a new turn after the murder, as he attaches new meanings to his black skin. The paper aims to explore Bigger's attempt to attain freedom from the negative self-image by subverting white people's definition of blackness and gain a potential self-hood and meaningful existence.

**Keywords:** Racism, signifier, popular culture, Jim Crow Law, stereotype

### 1. Introduction

In *Native Son*, Wright places his protagonist Bigger Thomas in one of the squalid apartments of Chicago's South Side, where he lives with his widowed mother, his sister Vera and his brother Buddy. The suffocating rat infested room reflects his cramped existence in a racist society. The city's cruel indifference and inscrutable maze bewilder and frighten him. Chicago's physical aspects make him continually aware of the advantages available to whites, while simultaneously underscoring the impossibility of achievements for blacks. As he says: "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 like living in jail." (Wright, 23) Ghettoized in a prescribed corner of the city, an area 'tumbling down from rot' (Wright, 164) and excluded from the world of opportunities and privileges, he grows up with a profound and boundless fear and hatred of whites. Throughout his life, he seeks recognition and self-worth in a world that offers him none. Deprived of identity, subjectivity and autonomy, he navigates clumsily in an inimical world of racial bigotry. Racism not only distorts his psyche and vision of life, but through ideological dominance destroys also his interior sense of self-hood.

### 2. Bigger's Self-Perception as a Black

The fear and disgrace Bigger feels about his black skin are enhanced by the cruelty and lack of perceptivity he encounters in the ubiquitous presence of white people. It is not only the constricting laws of Jim Crow South that imprison Bigger; he is equally trapped within the stereotyped image that oppresses him. Bigger's inability to control that image makes him a victim of racist ideology which forces him to internalize his own inferiority and impotence. He sees himself through the eyes of whites whose demeaning gaze shrinks him into insignificance. The negative self-image fills him with self-loathing that results in self-estrangement. He does not have an identity of his own, nor is he allowed to create one for himself. He is defined and dominated by the whites' supremacist ideology and his self-perception is constructed by the derogative image created by the racist notion of whites.

Everywhere Bigger's aspirations turn, the color-line looms, confining him within an orbit of subjugation and suppression. He wants to be a pilot but the school of aviation "built a big school and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could go to it but those who lived within the line. That kept all the colored boys out." (Wright, 327). He also wants to be in the army. But there black men are only required to 'dig ditches'. In the navy, all he could do is "wash dishes and scrub floors". (Wright, 327). A black has no chance in business either. As he says: "We ain't got no money. We don't own no mines, no railroads, no nothing. They don't want us to. They make us stay in one little spot..." (Wright, 327). He fails to live the fullness of his life because "a guy gets tired of being told what he can do and can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes sweep streets; anything... You don't make enough to live on. You don't know when you going to get fired. You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say. You ain't a man no more." (Wright, 326). The narrow limits of his life prevent him from moving beyond the boundary set by whites. Whenever he thinks about his helpless predicament, "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." (Wright, 16). His black skin is a badge of shame and guilt that dooms him to perpetual misery and

despair. A black figure is perceived as beast, criminal or sexual threat by whites. They must be segregated and locked in an impoverished and unprivileged corner. Fear, frustration and violence constitute Bigger's very being. The racist notion that labels blacks as bad or evil, is so strongly ingrained in his consciousness that it disables him to be other than what this negative signifier signifies.

His frustration and hatred at his being black are also reinforced when he faces his family. He hates his own family because of their passive submission to a poor and shabby life. He feels guilty as he is powerless to help them in the face of suffering. He retreats behind a wall of indifference to escape a reality he neither can accept nor alter: "He knew the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So, he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain." (Wright,14). His hatred for black skin alienates him also from his own black community. He does not want to belong to the invisible masses of blacks whose personalities render them incapable of questioning or challenging the social system that confines them in racial cages.

For Bigger, a meaningful existence is only attainable in the world of whites. If black signifies contemptible subservience, racial inferiority and primitive sub-humanity, then whiteness is a signifier of authority, superiority and God-like potency. As Bigger says "Well, they [whites] own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. They like God...They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They kill you before you die." (Wright, 327). He spends his free time "playing white", assuming the roles of J. P. Morgan, the President of the United States and white generals, imitating lines as he hears them in movies. He assents to the values of those who oppress him because this is how he thinks he can transcend the stigma of his own blackness. This role playing supplants his sense of unworthiness with a sense of self-importance and self-fulfillment.

### 3. Impact of Popular Culture on Black's Self-Image:

Movies, magazines and newspapers are also instruments of dominance used against blacks. It is towards this media that Bigger hungrily turns. What movies offer him is precisely that for which he longs: a dazzling world of dreams, affluence and opportunities. What Bigger finds in the movie-house and the pulp magazines is a portrait of a life of plenitude, wealth and power. Movies present him with an alternative vision of an existence beyond his experience. His immersion in popular culture implies not only a denial of the dark realities of his own devalued life, but also an acknowledgement of the white ideology as superior and better. When Bigger and Jack visit the Regal Theatre to watch movies, he is fascinated by *The Gay Woman's* portrayal of "images of white men and white women lolling on beaches, swimming and dancing in night clubs" (Wright,32). Beside this glamorous presentation of white society, *Trader Horn* featuring pictures of "black men and black women dancing against a wild background of barbaric jungle" (Wright,32) holds no significance for Bigger:

"He looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing. Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it." (Wright, 36)

His mind is more occupied with the desired reality of opulence and power presented in the celluloid projection of the white world. His rejection of *Trader Horn's* African life is indicative of his aversion to the grim and dismal reality of black existence. The films give him access to a world which stands in contrast to his own circumscribed world of poverty, deprivation and hardship. He wants to identify himself with those white people because he wants to dissociate himself from his own inferior self-image. It's by being a white he can achieve success and dignity. Movies make him feel more intensely his own deprivation and exclusion. His life appears bleaker and bleaker in front of the gorgeous and luxurious white society mythologized in films.

This media-fostered world of whites tempts him to accept the job at Daltons. He thinks he can get out of his socially handicapped existence by doing that job. His stimulated imagination makes him fantasize the Dalton's world: "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." (Wright, 36). But as he walks through the Drexel Boulevard, the wealthy white neighborhood, he realizes that far from being glamorous and alluring, this is 'a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses. All he had felt in the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filled him now.' (Wright, 45). Inside the house, everything seems to be enveloped in a gothic mystery that confuses and frightens him: "He had not expected anything like this; he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him. He was sitting in a white home; dim lights burned round him; strange objects challenged him; and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable." (Wright,47).

### 4. Blackness of Black

Reality breaks through fantasy and heightens Bigger's physical awareness of his black skin in a white space. He shrinks in fear and shame by every look and gesture he confronts there. The housemaid Peggy's derisive gaze diminishes Bigger's sense of self. As he says infuriatingly: "What's so damn funny about me? I'm just like she is..." (Wright,47). Mr. Dalton looks at him with an amused smile that makes him "conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body." (Wright, 47). Mrs. Dalton's counsel to "inject him into his new environment at once" (Wright,48) exposes her insensitivity to Bigger's inner discomfort. Even the white cat freezes him 'stone-still' (Wright,49) in terror, making his impulses

'deadlocked' (49) in front of its 'large placid eyes'. (49). He sees his blackness as a racial signifier which turns him into an object of mockery to be gawked at. Again, a deep repulsion for his black skin turns into a repulsion for his own self.

Mary and Jan's condescending attitude further intensifies Bigger's fear, anger and shame. To show their progressive ideals, they drive to the black ghetto, eat in a blacks' restaurant, shake hands with Bigger, try to befriend him and treat him as a human being. But when Mary refers to the blacks as 'your people' and herself and Jan as 'us', it unveils her inherent racial biasness. Bigger interprets all this as a cruel ridicule at his blackness: "He was very conscious of his black skin ...He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon." (Wright,67). Their apparent generosity and sympathy for the oppressed are tinted, nevertheless with a racial dominance as they make Bigger comply to their whims, ignoring the embarrassment and humiliation they arouse in him.

His repressed anger, shame and hatred find their climatic outlet through the murder of Mary. When he carries the drunk Mary to her room, he steps into a forbidden territory and trespasses the barrier that distinctly separates the two racial worlds. When Mrs. Dalton enters the room in search of Mary, Bigger is seized by a 'hysterical terror'. (Wright,84). She, though only a 'white blur' (Wright,84), is immensely threatening as an embodiment of the implacable power of a white world. He feels trapped between unconscious Mary and blind Mrs. Dalton. Apparently, neither of these two white figures is in a position to harm Bigger. But the fact of their being white is enough to paralyze his senses. For Bigger, "white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark." (Wright,109). He has no thought of killing Mary; his intention is to keep her quiet so that Mrs. Dalton does not come over to the bed and discover him. He knows that if he is discovered, then death is the only destiny he is going to meet for crossing his limits. So, in a desperate attempt to escape detection, Bigger silences Mary with her pillow, inadvertently smothering her. The murder is not premeditated. But "He was black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore, he had killed her. That was what everybody would say anyhow, no matter what he said." (Wright,101). Because criminality is a common attribute attached to black skin, to be black means to be condemned in white society. Blacks become criminals by virtue of their very existence whether they literally commit any crime or not. As he explains later: "I'm black. I don't have to do nothing for 'em to get me. The first white finger that point at me, I'm a gonner, see?" (Wright, 325).

### 5. Signifying the blackness:

Mary's murder vanquishes Bigger's fear and shame, bringing him his first sense of power and self-worth. His life gains value and significance because it is saved at the cost of a precious white life. Murdering a white girl in her own room seems to him as a great achievement which fills his meaningless existence with heroic exultation: "He had murdered and had created a new life for himself... it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not... There was in him a terrified pride in feeling and thinking that someday he would be able to say publicly that he had done it." (Wright, 101). The white mother's inability to save her daughter endows him with a sense of victory over the tyrannical white power. The horror of the crime is alleviated by the knowledge that he, who is considered insignificant by whites, has actually killed a member of their race and outwitted them in their attempts to discover his identity. "Would any of the white faces all about him think that he had killed a rich white girl? No! They might think he would steal a dime, rape a woman, get drunk, or cut somebody; but to kill a millionaire's daughter and burn her body? He smiled a little, feeling a tingling sensation enveloping all his body." (Wright, 108). Thrilled by his newly empowered self, he, instead of fleeing, defiantly remains among the Daltons. He begins to think, plot and plan: what to tell the Daltons, how to burn Mary's body in the furnace, how to cast the blame for Mary's disappearance on Jan and the Communists, how to go about acting normally so that no one will suspect. With a definite role to play, he feels he can control the white people for the first time. To beguile whites, he manipulates the same debased image of obsequiousness and subservience that whites have created to oppress blacks.

The murder is an existential imperative for Bigger because he kills Mary to save his own life. But it is also a transcendental imperative because it changes his self-perception. Through this act of violence, he subverts the pre-conceived notion of blackness, making it a signifier of power, worthiness and self-assertion. He feels liberated from the disgrace of his blackness: "Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys. And now that he had killed Mary, he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried." (Wright,109). He has been tired of carrying the burden of a sub-human, purposeless and meaningless existence. Now he wishes "he could be an idea in their [whites'] mind; that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy." (Wright,123). In his view, he has overturned the white racist assumptions about black skin, transforming it from a signifier of fear-ridden submissiveness to fear-generating vengeance. He wants to instill such a terror in "the vast white world that sprawled and towered in the sun before them" (Wright, 21), which will continue to haunt their consciousness. His life-long accumulated anger and hatred find a violent expression through the murder: "His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like that." (Wright, 101). Hence, he does not regret his act or feel sorry for Mary. Not once does Bigger consider shirking responsibility for murder. He accepts the image of himself through which society will judge him: "She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman." (Wright, 86). He creates an identity through his crime. When he sees the newspaper reports about him, he feels proud to have a story of his own. He even risks exposure by leaving his hiding place to spend his last two cents on a newspaper.

However, it does not take long for Bigger to realize the ephemerality of his exhilaration .His crime is eventually revealed and he is hunted down on the snowy rooftops in South Side. Again, the white society traps him in its own constructed negative image. Again, his black skin becomes the signifier of evil, moral depravity and bestiality. Bigger is labeled as a rapist-murderer by media. The uncommitted crime of rape is attached with the committed murder to magnify his guilt. The highly prejudiced rhetoric of media describes him as an 'ape'...his lower jaw protruding 'obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beasts'...'he seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization,' he acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed out of place in a white man's civilization'. (Wright,260). This is how media dehumanizes Bigger, making his elimination inevitable. His crime is also taken as a pretext for massive assaults on black community:

"Police and vigilantes, armed with rifles, tear gas, flashlights, and photos of the killer...are searching every Negro home under a blanket warrant from the mayor. Reports were current that several Negro men were beaten in various North and West Side neighborhoods. Several hundred Negroes resembling Bigger Thomas ...are being held for investigation. It was reported that several hundred Negro employees throughout the city had been dismissed from their jobs." (Wright,229).

## 6. Conclusion

Bigger's attempt to transcend his sordid existence and negative self-image brings his tragic destruction. He revolts against the racial prototype and whites' perception of blacks in a repressive hostile world. By changing the connotation of blackness, he thinks he can reshape his world to attain self- definition and self-recognition. What he fails to understand is that when he is manipulating the representative image of the "genial, grinning, southern darky" (Wright,260), he is being manipulated by another stereotype which he has chosen to assume - that of the 'bad nigger', the antithetical 'Other' whose presence justifies racial segregation and racial oppression in white society. To de-signify the pre-defined significance of blackness is an act of defiance as blacks are compelled to act in accord with the stereotype imposed on them. So, Bigger could not finally go beyond the stigmatic image that has entangled him in its detrimental cycle. Simply by being black and being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he finds the image of a monstrous criminal thrust upon him. His principle crime is the crime of being black. The real power of the white society does not really lie in extinguishing Bigger's life. It lies rather in forcing Bigger to fit into their constructed image. He could not become what he wanted to be. He had to become what they wanted him to be and he has to embrace the fate they have decided for him. Whites are really God like and they really 'choke him off the earth' at the end.

## 7. References

- i. Bloom, Harold. (Ed). (2009). *Modern Critical Interpretations: Richard Wright's Native Son*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- ii. Bryant, Jerry H. (1985). Wright, Elison, Baldwin-Exorcising the Demon. In Kar, P.C & Ramakrishna, D. (Eds), *The American Classics Revisited: Recent Studies of American Literature* (pp. 681-995) Hyderabad: ASRC.
- iii. Graham, Maryemma. (Ed). (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to African American Novel*,New York: Cambridge University Press.
- iv. Haley, Michel. (Ed). (2000). *Readings onNative Son*.San Diego: Greenhaven Press.
- v. Kinnamon, Keneth. (Ed) (1990). *New Essays on Native Son*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- vi. Wright, Richard. (2001). *Native Son*, NewYork: Perennial library Edition.