

Resistance and Reconstruction of the Black Self in Richard Wright's *Native Son*: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study also aims to analyze Bigger's character as an embodiment of violent resistance which helped to humanize black identity, avoid objectification, and remove indifferences.

Methodology: The critical and close analysis of Richard Wright's *Native Son* significantly highlights that Wright's construction of the main character Bigger, a colonized black native engaged in the struggle for freedom and self-definition, subscribes to Frantz Fanon's concept of violent resistance.

Findings: For Fanon, the use of violence when no option is available helps to build safety and freedom. Wright depicts the theme of violence to create Bigger's black identity in a white-dominant American society where blacks are dehumanized and completely alienated.

Conclusion: Resistance encourages colonized and enslaved people to struggle and liberate themselves, transforming them from suppression, injustices, and unequal power relationships to freedom, equality, and self-esteem. The centuries-long plight of the African Americans and their resistance to liberation are worthy of representation in the literary world.

Keywords: Resistance, Violence, Fanon, Colonialism, Slavery, Identity.

Introduction

Resistance literature depicts the voice, struggle, and revolt of colonized people for identity, dignity, freedom, equality, injustice, and selfhood against colonizers. Kanafani (1966), a Palestinian writer introduced the concept of resistance as a postcolonial discourse. He used a specific term "Adab Al-Muqawama (Resistance Literature)" to depict the struggle of Palestinians for liberation against occupation and atrocities of Israeli forces. Resistance literature imagines and considers people who share a collective cultural identity, and geographical boundaries, and criticizes the presence, and occupation of colonizers (Arif, 35). Harlow (1987) explains that resistance narrative in literary texts especially poetry and novels helps to open cultural & political debates in the light of past, present, and future. These debates highlight the suppression of natives and, the existence of colonial forces, and pave a roadmap to deconstruct occupation. Kanafani also depicts resistance within a specific cultural and historical context to highlight liberation struggles against Western domination, and colonization of Africa especially the Middle East

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(4). He further argues that the literature of any country or nation is always into three categories: colonial, cosmopolitan, and national. In a literary context, writers of that country move from colonial narrative to assimilation of colonial and indigenous literary elements, and finally adopt native and cultural elements, and deconstruct the colonial literary framework. Harlow termed it a *resistance narrative* that helps to challenge colonization and expresses indigenous feelings (10).

The building of postcolonial literature primarily stands on the theme of resistance. The relationship between postcolonial literature and resistance literature is colossally obvious as both of them trace the contexts of colonization, its effects on colonized people, and their response. Postcolonial studies not only investigate the political and cultural implications of colonialism but also provide ground to deconstruct the colonial narrative and objectification of indigenous people. As a dominant theme of postcolonial discourse, resistance focuses on representations of natives as uncivilized, culturally bewildered, and intellectually failed as and response to colonized people (Mahmoud, 75). In the context of postcolonial discourses and practices, there mainly four main models of resistance. The first model of resistance was described by Edward Said in his groundbreaking writing *Orientalism* (1978) in which he exposes and criticizes the misrepresentation of *Orients* as *savage, uncivilized, barbarian, and irrational* by Western political theorists, poets, novelists, and philosophers. Edward Said emphasizes on cultural resistance and rewriting colonial narrative to deconstruct negative images, expose colonial discourse, and reconstruct positive, civilized, and soft images of colonized people (Hamadi, 40). The second model of resistance refers to Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "Third Space" to subvert colonial domination and create *in-between space* to counter the cultural monopoly of colonizers. Bhabha called the third space cultural emancipation which combines two different identities, and goes beyond the past and present establishing a new cultural identity (Bhandari, 172). The roots of the third model of resistance are primarily derived from David Jefferess's *Postcolonial resistance: Culture, liberation and transformation* (2008). Jefferess modified the concept of social and material transformation as resistance against colonizers and subverting their hegemony. In this context, he also refers to Ghandi's strategy of resistance through reconciliation (96). Jefferess argues that transformative resistance focuses on deconstructing established dichotomies of *colonized* and *colonizer, self* and *other, civilized* and *uncivilized* along with transformation of material change to undermine the framework of social differences and structural exploitation of colonized people (105).

Forth model of resistance principally refers to Frantz Fanon's concept of *violent resistance*. In his famous work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon got most inspiration from the works of Richard Wright especially *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945) which provided a theoretical framework for Fanon to describe nature of violent resistance as an option to challenge colonial hegemony and construct cultural and native identity (Mehrvand, 7). For Fanon, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is based on violence. Colonizer exploits native people by imposing violent designs of suppression. To counter and deconstruct colonial designs, the natives must respond in a more violent way (10). Fanon says, "No gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them" (21). By doing so, the native discovers reality and struggles to transform it into the practice of violence and his ultimate struggle for freedom (58). In African-American literature, the issue of resistance prevails. African-American literature in its historical and cultural context is no more different than postcolonial literature. Both African-American literature and postcolonial literature depict the oppressive designs of colonizers, the exploitation of indigenous people, and the misrepresentation of native culture. Since its emergence in the Eighteenth century, African-American writers have significantly advocated the case of the black community to show the darkest face of slavery imposed upon blacks by whites (Greve, 3). The principal characteristic that makes African literature unique is slave narratives and representation of resistance that helped to expose the ugly face of whites. Writers like Frederic Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, William Edward Burghart Du Bois, and Richard Wright revolutionized the course of African-American literature. Themes such as racism, identity quest, cultural exploitation, injustice, representation of slavery, and suppression of the black community dominate African-American literature.

In African-American literature, Richard Wright is considered the most prolific writer who truly exposed the racist schemes of whites. He remarkably advocated the case of a black identity crisis in a white-dominant society which has dehumanized, and objectified black natives (Johnson, 1). Wright's writings have not only deconstructed white dichotomies, but also encouraged blacks to resist for equality, justice, and selfhood to end marginalization and objectification. His famous work *Native Son* (1940) is considered a landmark in African-American literature that artistically exposed white racism by portraying black violent resistance to identity construction and selfhood.

Critical Analysis

Richard Wright's master piece *Native Son* (1940) manifestly highlights the struggle of black man Bigger Thomas to construct his black identity in white dominant society. The plight of African Americans and unyielding exploitation in the hands of whites for centuries are significantly encountered by Wright. He advocates the case of blacks being dehumanized and envisaged as a race of slaves and savages. For whites, blacks are mere "property, heart and soul, body and blood; what they did, claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking; it colored life and dictated the terms of death" (261). The construction of such a narrative has always helped whites to imprison blacks in a specific framework. In his introductory essay for *Native Son*, Arnold Rampersad mentions that "the sound of alarm that opens *Native Son* was Richard Wright's urgent call in 1940 to America to awaken from its self-induced slumber about the reality of race relations in the nation" (6). The absence of violence strengthens the objectification and alienation of blacks whereas violent resistance helps to construct a black identity.

Frantz Fanon also emphasizes on prevailing misrepresentation and misperception created by whites that blacks are naturally uncivilized, intellectually inferior, and culturally unable to contribute something valuable to white society. Such kinds of imagination and narrative further construct blacks' sense of marginalization. The dominant strategy of colonizers is to structure natives as incompetent and represent their culture as incapable of contributing valuable and morally acceptable principles and practices. They portray indigenous people as aliens with backward mentality and wasteful approaches. Such kind of designed belief structures the mentality of the colonized community to accept the supremacy of colonizers. As Robert Birt argues that:

"Blacks alone are reduced to being a color... and though they are not the only victims of racism, blacks alone have been set apart, degraded, and ostracized exclusively based on race and color. Thus the striving to create and affirm our identity and humanity in defiance of racial essentialization and domination forms the common ground of the black liberation struggle. The struggle for identity entails a struggle for a liberated 'black consciousness.'" (qt by Ali, 2)

In *Native Son*, Wright represents the same notion of black discrimination designed by whites that blacks are unsocial, unable to adjust themselves in American society and live normally. When Bigger and Gus, leaning their backs against the red-brick wall, are smoking in the burning sun, a tiny plane flies over, veers, and disappears, Bigger says to Gus, "I could fly a plane if I had a chance." Gus at once replies "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane" (25). There is a huge social and racial depiction in this conversation. Bigger Thomas like other blacks wishes to become an active part of the world, but being a man of color doesn't permit him to do so. The word "chance" represents the scarcity of opportunities for blacks to play a role in American society which is strongly controlled by whites. The environment has so dehumanized and stereotyped blacks that they accept marginalization. Gus reminds Bigger that you are a black man who is prohibited and restricted from becoming part of a fluid world. In other words, blacks are made to accept segregation and alienation as a reality that if you are black, you should not expect opportunity. This is the most objectified and destructive sense of black alienation and marginalization which stops them from thinking freely. Even Bigger also reckons segregation of blacks and their otherization in white dominant society. Bigger says to Gus:

“Every time, I think about it I feel like somebody’s poking a red-hot iron down in my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We are black and they are white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and can’t. It’s just like living in jail” (Wright, 28).

Bigger Thomas draws a line of demarcation between blacks and whites in the above lines. Poking a red-hot iron refers to his growing sense of being marginalized and deprived. The development of such thinking is, in fact, food for Bigger’s thought which helps him to question the established racial division, and challenge it. Terming his world as *jail* is a clear indication that Bigger is willing to resist and react to build selfhood, and reconstruct his dehumanized black identity. In his famous writing *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon highlights this discrimination in the following lines:

“The black man has two dimensions: one with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question” (53).

This very sense of exclusion in an environment that stops blacks from availing any opportunity significantly compels Bigger to enter into the destructive state to construct a humanized identity. The development of curiosity that “Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don’t they let us fly planes and run ships...?” (Wright, 28), helps Bigger to challenge the long-established perception that being black means being socially inferior. Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), also discusses the same apathetic state of colonized people living in dirty and wretched quarters in one part of the city, and colonizers in another part of the city with large and comfortable houses (39). Bigger’s living standard is no more different than that of Fanon’s description. Fanon calls it the “Manichaeic world” (39). While visiting the black house, the racial statement of Mary Dalton highlights black invisibility and alienation from the American privileged and central Society. Mary says:

“You know, Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into these houses”, she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment building looming to either side of them, “and just see how your people live... We know so little about each other. I just want to see. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They’re human.... There are twelve million of them.... They live in our country.... In the same city with us....” (Wright, 67-68).

The way Mary was talking about black people proves Bigger’s opinion of ‘self & other’, and supports his sense of shame & separation. Mary’s selection of specific words like *your people*, *these people*, and *our country* brings shame to Bigger further. Bigger’s development of self-recognition and classification between whites and blacks, “I reckon the only things in this city that can’t go where to go and do what we want to do” (Wright, 29) paves the way for his violent resistance to humanize his black identity. In other words, Bigger feels the necessity of interaction with whites. His experience with whites is embarrassing, and much alienated and dehumanized. The absence of social interaction is a leading factor behind objectification of blacks, and making them invisible.

Invisibility is racial and degrading which ultimately helps the victims to act violently to ensure their presence and individuality are denied by ruling elites in society. In Bigger’s case, invisibility is intertwined with shame and deprivation. The way Mary and Jan were talking about Bigger’s community and their lifestyle, further increased the sense of alienation and invisibility in Bigger. Mary was unintentionally choosing words like “your people”, “Negro”, and “our country” which were adding more to Bigger’s sense of marginality and shame of being black. Though Mary didn’t intend to hurt Bigger, the surrounding environment has structured Mary in such a way as to communicate in a white racist style. She, like other whites, was blind towards black people. For Wright, black invisibility can only be subverted with resistance to end white racism, and create a black presence in white American society.

Furthermore, in *Native Son*, fear of whites which has preoccupied Bigger also prevails in the entire novel. Wright depicts fear as the leading cause that has legitimized whites' supremacy and dehumanized blacks. Frantz Fanon also advocates this point that the presence of violence and fear created by colonizers strengthens their hegemony to suppress colonized people further. Fanon adds that to overcome fear and construct identity, indigenous people should react in the language of violent resistance. Bigger's character is also an embodiment of fear until he murders Mary and Bessie. He is firmly ruled by fear and shame of invisibility.

“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” (Wright, 20).

Depicting the invisibility of blacks, creating an environment of black objectification, and portraying fear of whites, Wright creates a ground for Bigger to practice violent resistance. Bigger is psychologically restricted in a state of fear where every black is dealing with this dilemma in a white dominant society. The presence of fear and dehumanization of black identity become driving forces that encourage and compel Bigger to violence to overcome prevailing psychological issues. The function of violence helps Bigger to deconstruct established stereotypes of black invisibility, and the blindness of American society that has denied his presence and human identity.

American novelist Ralph Ellison wrote the novel *Invisible Man* in 1952 to showcase the black presence in racially maligned American society. Ellison quotes that American society has denied the presence of blacks. They are considered invisible which directly refers to the denial of black existence (Allal and Derguini, 53-54). In Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger also faces the same state of blindness thoroughly:

“Jan was blind, Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind, yes, blind in more ways than one... Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind....” (94).

To construct a humanized identity, the use of violence remains the only option for Bigger to resist and eliminate blindness, invisibility, and segregation of the black community in white society. He finds no way other than violence to deconstruct the aforementioned stereotypes and quest for survival. Unavoidably, due to the surrounding environment and social conditions, Bigger's self is now fully developed to act consciously. In such an environment, the development of consciousness is categorically violent. Bigger also accepts that “He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else” (Wright, 20). For Bigger, entering into a state of consciousness means self-recognition, and challenging the surrounding environment of fear which has restricted him, and denied his native identity. Fanon also argues that the use of violence marks colonization. The exploitation of natives is carried out by the dints of bayonets and cannons. The fear and suppression can only be dealt with through the use of violence (36).

In his article, “The function of violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*”, James Butler argues that Wright has created an environment of fear and violence. Throughout the novel, fear and violence are marching side by side (15). The surrounding environment, social conditions along heredity have fully turned Bigger into a naturalist one who uses every possible option to quest for survival and avoid consequences against the environment which has denied his black identity. Richard Wright has intentionally created an environment of violence in the novel. In most cases, Wright's characters interact violently. Threatening Gus with a knife, asphyxiating and killing Mary Dalton, grinding Bessie's skull, and striking out a policeman with his revolver represent Bigger's overwhelmed sense of insecurity. Peaceful meetings and love remain absent in the novel. The environmental conditions are depicted in a dehumanized way where people interact only for survival and hegemony. When Bigger meets Jan for the first time, Jan shakes his hands very indifferently. Bigger remembers it as “an awful moment of hate and shame” (87).

Moreover, Mary Dalton also behaves in the same way and makes him feel like a man of color who isn't a complete human at all. In Mary Dalton's car, when Bigger is prodded with a leg by Mary, Bigger again feels embarrassment and shame. In his note *on Native Son*, Wright argues that Bigger's unwelcome interactions with white people placed him at the center of violence. Wright writes, "Bigger's wild and intense hatred of white people, but because his hate had placed him, like a wild animal at bay, in a position where he was most symbolic and explainable" (340). The feeling of inferiority, being alienated, and the shame of being Negro makes him panic all the time. The unending discrimination and suppression swelling day by day brought Bigger to the brink of violence. In the evening, when Mary is lying on the bed after drinking, Bigger's desire to kiss her is thwarted by social conditions that he is a black man, and if caught in the room of white Mary; he will face very severe punishment. Fear and the consequences of crime put him in a dilemma about whether to kiss Mary or not.

"Bigger made a move towards her, but stopped his hands outstretched, frozen with fear"... "He watched her with a mingled feeling of helplessness, admiration, and hate. If her father saw him here with her now, his job would be over" (Wright, 78).

The feelings and fear of marginalization and consequences respectively were the leading factors that pushed Bigger to break the established patterns of rules, and fear created by white people. Even in his drunken state, Bigger is haunted by feelings that, as a black man, he will face the worst if he is caught kissing a white girl. As he kisses Mary Dalton, the blind Mrs. Dalton walks in. Beggar, afraid of being caught with Mary, puts a pillow over Mary's mouth to muffle her voice and breathing. Bigger is left with no other option but violent resistance. The environment of fear turns the kissing scene into a murder scene:

"He clenched his teeth and held his breath, intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating towards him. His muscles flexed taut as steel and he pressed the pillow" (Wright, 81).

Frantz Fanon also says that when there is no other way, the only way to break colonization and free ourselves is violence. Bigger is left with violence only to practice to fight against the circumstances. In his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre, referring to Richard Wright's *Native Son*, advocates Bigger's act of violence as the only available option to avoid punishment, and avert threats set by colonizers. In concluding remarks, Sartre has also favoured the indispensability of violence as a tool for the oppressed and colonized. Bigger's act of suffocating Mary was the only option to divert the chances of being caught in Mary's room. The absence of opportunity is the principal factor behind encouraging the oppressed to violence. In this regard, Sartre writes:

"When your back is to the wall, you will let loose at last that new violence which is raised up in you by old, oft-repeated crimes" (Fanon, 31).

Similarly, when Bessie discusses the reason behind raping and killing Mary, Bigger calmly describes "Rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not" (Wright, 190). Frantz Fanon argues that when a colonized is left with no option then violence becomes the only tool to overcome the sense of deprivation, ensure freedom, and establish identity. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon draws his arguments on the image of Bigger that the natives are pushed to violence in a situation where, "The native's back is to the wall, the knife is at his throat (or, more precisely, the electrode at his genitals): he will have no more call for his fancies" (58). Wright has also drawn attention to the necessity of violence by portraying Bigger in a state where he has no way other than violence. For Fanon and Wrights, violence is a tool to deconstruct oppressive colonial legacies, bring positive social and political change, and construct native identity.

In the final conversation with Max, Bigger accepts that he has developed a new human identity that he didn't previously possess. He can think freely as a human. Undoubtedly, Bigger is happy that violence has helped him to regain his lost selfhood and feel alive. He is hopeful that "there would be union,

identity; there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life” (Wright, 284). Bigger reckons that his violent end is also the result of white society’s fault. For Bigger, the unending objectification further nourishes black violence against whites. When Max prepares to leave, Bigger explains “What I killed for must’ve been good... It must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for something.... I didn’t know I was alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for’ em.... It’s the truth, Mr. Max” (Wright, 327). Bigger’s expression vividly represents that acts of violent resistance helped him to recognize himself, overcome his shame, end invisibility, deconstruct objectification, and humanize his identity. Frantz Fanon accepts that though violence also impacts the oppressed, it helps to establish his lost native and cultural identity. Bigger also suffers from the impacts of violence, but he develops an identity that has been denied all his life. The violence helped Bigger to feel alive, get sympathy for Jan, win the support of Max, and leave positive impacts on whites to rethink blacks and their native identity.

Conclusion

To sum up my analysis, resistance helps to deconstruct colonial stereotypes and reconstruct the native cultural identity of the colonized. Postcolonial literature has colossally advocated the case of colonized people and reverted their false and negative images represented by colonizers. Frantz Fanon rightly explained that violent resistance helps colonized people to deconstruct colonial stereotypes, and pave the way for indigenous identity construction and freedom. African Literature in its long struggle of depicting objectification and dehumanization of blacks by whites has remarkably helped African Americans to establish their native and cultural identity in white dominant society. In *Native Son*, the use of violent resistance by Bigger Thomas played a crucial role in deconstructing objectification and humanizing his black identity in white dominant society.

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