

The Voice of Protest in *Native Son*

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Abstract. *Native Son* is the masterpiece of Richard Wright, black American novelist (1908-1960). It is thought as the landmark of American black literature. After its publication, the novel shakes the American literary circle and American society as well. The thesis analyzes the psychological cause of crime of black, and takes apart the social cause of black crime, points out that racism is the social cause of black crime. Blacks begin to fight against the unequal social system. This is also the voice of protest of the novel.

Introduction

Wright's Reputation

Richard Wright (1908-1960) is considered a figure as milestone in the history of Afro-American literature and one of the most highly respected American spokesmen for Black problems and the oppressed black American in the late 1930s and 1940s, who is also one of the founders of “novel of protest” in American left-wing literature. As a black writer, Wright knows American social environments well; he can understand the life of blacks and give the reasons that cause their subhuman life. He is the first black writer who portrayed about racism in American Northern cities, applied realism to his writing and deeply digs the meaning of life to expose the negative side of American society. *Native Son* is his masterpiece that is thought of as the landmark of American literature. After its publication, the novel shakes American literary circle and American society as well. The success of the novel mainly results from its profound social significance: the exposition of the racial discrimination and class oppression existing in American society of that time. [1] “His masterpiece, *Native Son* is the successor of literary tradition of Naturalism and Realism, profoundly demonstrated the life of blacks in Chicago ghetto, called ‘American tragedy of blacks’.” This novel represents the voice of protest of American blacks.

The History of Racism in American Society

America has a long history of racial discrimination, which has become a social problem infiltrating all aspects of society. In 1929, the United States has a serious economic crisis, the social contradictions acutely sharpen and the worker’s movement surge upward, the whole society has been in turmoil. The poverty rate and the employment rate, especially blacks, are very high. At that time, in the U.S, although all races have equal legal status and rights, the racial segregation has been already abolished; the racial discrimination and prejudice exist in the real life. The whites are the majority in American society, they still hold the legacy of history—social status advantage in their domination of society, blacks pursuing equal rights is still an elusive dream at that time. As the long history of racism with black slavery coexisted in U.S, therefore, many Americans believe that the resolution of the issue of black slavery in the south, the issue of race is solved too. Actually, it is not.

The Psychological Cause of Crime of Bigger

This novel is divided into 3 parts: Fear, Flight and Fate. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas is a poor black youth, who accidentally takes a job as a chauffeur for the white Daltons', accidentally kills the white woman Mary Dalton, and burns her body to cover up the traces, subsequently murders her girlfriend Bessie, is finally sentenced to death. Throughout the novel, the author Wright uses his extraordinary ability to explore the psychology of black crime, profoundly demonstrates the suffering and complex feeling of American blacks and raises a series of serious social problems.

Bigger Thomas is always overwhelmed by anger, fear and shame, he always feels trapped inside himself, unable to acknowledge the misery he feels, and he will not control this kind of complex feeling one day. He finally reacts with violence, the only weapon at his disposal, but he becomes the victim of racial discrimination and prejudice.

Why does Bigger commit a crime? As a black youth, his criminal psychology is connected with his knowledge and attitude to whites' world. He has a burning, eternal hatred for whites, because racism has severely constrained his prospects in actual life. Meanwhile, he is afraid of whites that control his life—feelings he works hard to keep hidden. He can never break the blacks' taboo, and only yearning for the freedom belonged to whites.

It is known that Mary's death is an accident, but he insists that it is a liberate action of his own term. To Bigger, the deliberate murder of a white girl represents the ultimate rebellion against the powerful authority of "whiteness." While he was actually killed a white girl, Bigger also insists that he did not do so accidentally, but rather he consciously challenged and protested against the unequal social order imposed upon him. Given that Bigger does not have the ability to determine his life and death, he feels that he now possesses a power that American whites have used against him since his birth.

The Hatred of Bigger to the Whites

The Terrible Living Condition of Blacks. [2] *Native Son* begins with the ringing bell of an alarm clock—a wake-up call not only for Bigger, but also a warning to America as a whole about dangerous state of race relations in the country in the 1930s. Bigger shares a crammed apartment, which has only one room, which forces him and his brother to turn their backs to avoid the shame of seeing their sister and mother dress. Bigger suddenly sees a huge rat scamper across the room, which he corners and kills with a skillet. Wright sees a black population that, though freed from cruel slavery, still lives under terrible conditions; many blacks still live in a desperate poverty. The suffering his family endures while living in such a terrible condition constantly reminds Bigger how helpless he is to do something for family. He has felt trapped his whole life, complaining and hating the whites that define the narrow confines of his existence. Throughout the novel, we see that when Bigger is cornered, like a rat, he is overwhelmed by shame and hatred, and lashes out with violence, the only weapon at his disposal.

No Freedom of Choices in Blacks. As blacks have no choice in real life, they always feel frustrated and hopeless. [3] When Bigger and his friend Gus watch a skywriting plan, he states: "I could fly one of them if I had a chance." Gus agrees that Bigger could, but only if he had money and were not black. After discussing the impossibility of accomplishment in the white-controlled world, Bigger complains: "...we live here and they live there, we black and file white, they got things and we are not, they do things and we can't, It's just like living in a jail...". Throughout the portrayal, confronted by racism and oppression and left with very few options in their lives, they display increasingly antisocial and violent behavior, and were, in effect, disasters waiting to happen. Bigger's discovery of "freedom" came to him in both cases while committing murder, with the death of Mary Dalton, he starts to realize that for the first time he has a new life, one that he himself controls. He claims equality with whites on his own terms, and feels that he has become more human, because his life now holds purpose. A bitter irony pervades this entire idea of life-affirming transformation, as the transformation occurs only after a cruel, gruesome act of violence.

Whites' Law, Not Blacks'. The motto of American justice system is "equal justice under law", but the law is whites', not blacks'. When Bigger brings up the plan to rob Mr. Blum's store and accuses

Gus of being afraid to rob a white man and hates Gus for that fear, but Gus accuses Bigger of being afraid of himself, Bigger flies into rage and threatens to hit Gus. It was actually Bigger's fear anyway. He is too scared to challenge white authority; he transfers his hatred and fear of whites onto his friend Gus. As a matter of fact, they have robbed blacks several times before, but whites and law do not pay attention to it at all, if they will rob whites, it would mean entering new territory, a symbolic challenge to white law, they will feel pressured, as the words of Bigger: "I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat", because he always sees whites and law as a natural, oppressive force—a great looming "whiteness" pressing down upon him. Especially after Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton, as well as Bessie's, it is indeed guilty of him. Nonetheless, the justice system still fails to be equal with them. In the vicious cycle of racism, a black man who kills a white woman will be sentenced to death regardless of factual circumstance of killing, but white authority does not care about the death of Bessie at all, they just want to use Bessie only to ensure that Bigger will get the death penalty for killing Mary. Therefore, the law in America is made and dominated by whites, which is actually protecting the whites and rich, not the blacks and poor. When Bigger watches the words "If You Break the Law, You Can't Win" adorn the top of the campaign posters, he complains: "You let whoever pays you off win!" (Richard Wright, 1984: 51) The State's Attorney is a powerful member of the institution of white justice, and his poster forecasts Bigger's losing battle with white authority. Wright portrays the judiciary so undermined by racial discrimination and corruption that the concept of equality holds little meaning.

The Fear of Bigger to the Whites

The Embodiments of Fear of Bigger. During the 1930s, blacks were programmed to be afraid of whites. When Bigger is around whites he hangs his head down as if ashamed and he speaks only by mumbling in a soft, low tone. When Bigger help the drunken Mary to her bedroom, he finds himself in Mary's room, he knows he has breached the most explosive racial rule—the sexual separation between black man and white woman. As Bigger puts Mary to bed, he becomes very excited, the excitement results not so much from the fact that Mary is physically attractive, but from his experience that she is forbidden to him. When Bigger feels Mrs. Dalton's ghostly presence in the room, he is reminded of the whiteness that control his life, and suddenly realized that his foolish behaviors will lead to a serious problem for himself. In order not to ask Mary to respond to her mother, bigger accidentally smother Mary to death; this is mainly caused by his horrible fear to racial segregation and oppression. A life of oppression, anger and fusion about the white race causes Bigger to become a ticking bomb, just waiting to explode into a violent rage sooner or later.

The Original Criminal Model of Bigger. Richard Wright explains in one of his essay that Bigger is a fusion of men he had himself known while growing up in the south. An important idea that emerges from Wright's treatment of racism is the terrible inequity of the American criminal justice system of Wright's time. Drawing inspiration from actual court cases of 1930s—especially the 1938-39 case of Robert Nixon, a young black man charged with murdering a white woman during a robbery and was finally sentenced to death penalty. Wright used many details from those articles, especially the descriptions of Nixon as an animal, in his writing of *Native Son*. Actually, in popular culture, whites attempt to reshape Bigger's identity with some terrible details not only to deface him, but also to whip up white violence and threaten the black community into submission. Whites also warn the black community to behave well or risk a return to the kind of oppression many of them have left behind in the south. The whole black community gets into terrible fear under racism consequently. Wright wants to reflect the situation in his writing *Native Son*, Bigger is just similar to Nixon in the actual society. It makes us reflect oppression and ourselves how hateful the racial discrimination.

Racism—The Social Cause of Tragedy of Blacks

[4] Bigger has lived in a racist society, whites give him no choice but to take a job at Mr. Dalton's, he is a product of his environment. Bigger once wanted to be an aviator, but he knows that black men are forbidden to go to aviation schools; He wanted to join the army, but it is constrained by racial

segregation and racist laws; He sees the white boys from his school go on to the military or university when he could not.

He is taught his whole life by whites that he is humble and horrible, when he committed all of his robberies and murders, he was doing as he was expected to do. He needs to create an identity for himself, accidentally he become a bomb to explode into a violent rage—he kills a white girl, a foolish act, but whites have already thought that the Negroes are absolutely horrible people. The white society can only give him the same chance: be miserable and work, or be miserable and do not work, nothing better can ever come of someone constantly being told how horrible they are. Actually, Bigger perceives earlier that the narrow boundaries of his life were already made since his birth. A long-standing unfair division of power between white and black, rich and poor has trapped him within a humble race and a humble class. He feels disturbed and controlled even when white people are not present, as if white people occupy all of his body. He feels like a man forced to a degraded existence and bad fate. And in fact, Bigger's yearning for a person who can bring solidarity to the black community represents a warning on Wright's part. When he looks to the fascist leaders of Japan, Italy, and Germany, he finds so much that he admires. He does not pay attention to whether these leaders are morally right or wrong, but only that they point to a possible avenue of escape from great looming "whiteness" force that oppresses him and black community. Through the character of Bigger, Wright shows us that the conditions in 1930s America are ripe for fascism to prosper and that millions of oppressed blacks are waiting to unite behind a powerful and glamorous leader, regardless of that leader's moral character.

Just like Max argues in court, based on a sociological analysis of American society, that social cause of crime of black is not their inherent ethnic qualities, but prolonged racism and prejudice.

The Protests of Some Whites to Racism

Mary and Jan

Throughout the novel, there are some whites who want to ignore the racial discrimination and strict boundary between white and black, but they are never able to understand Bigger fully, and they do not have enough power to protest against racism and class oppression in the white-controlled world.

Mary Dalton breaks the taboo between white woman and black man, Bigger reacts with confusion, thus in his limited experiences, white woman speak to him only from afar, with coldness and reserve, but Mary breaks the only social rules he knows. Once Bigger drives Mary to pick up Jan, Mary introduces Bigger to Jan, and Jan actively shake his hands and insists that he can call Jan by his first name, which confounds him. Bigger knows that such actions would anger most white people, who would see them as disrespectful. Jan insists that he drive the car, all Bigger can do is comply, so he sits in the front seat between Mary and Jan, he knows that most other white people would be furious to see him sitting in the front seat with Mary. Mary states that she would like to know how people live and she wants to be friends with them, but most of other whites will oppress them not to do that, and they do not have enough power to do that at all.

The Lawyer –Max

Another white is Boris A. Max, who is a Jewish lawyer worked for the labor defenders, an organization affiliated with the communist party. Max is one of the whites who can see and understand Bigger as a human being rather than simply as a Negro or a murderer, which gives Bigger the opportunity to tell his own story for the first time in all of his life that it is possible to make friends with a white; And also for the first time in his life, he can talk to a white person without being conscious of his own skin color. Max once encouraged him to believe in himself as a human being, and then Bigger begins to see that "whiteness" is really individual people.

When Bigger give the defense during the trial, he argues that Bigger is a "test symbol" who embodies the sickness of American society, and just the conditions in American society that have

created him. Bigger has no motive to kill Mary and that the murder is “as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one’s eye”, it is a mix or accumulation of hate and fear, which is just like a time bomb to explode then. Max points out that the authorities intentionally whip up the public hatred on Bigger, which stems from a mix of guilt and fear; they want to use the case as an excuse to terrorize the black community, labor groups and the communist party into submission. Bigger’s murder is not an act against individual, but a defense against the whole society he suffered. Max warns that killing Bigger will not restraint millions more like him and that, if change does not come, these conditions could cause another civil wall. Despite Max’s efforts, the oppressors finally get their bitter vengeance and sentence Bigger to death; he becomes the victim of racial discrimination and class oppression.

Conclusion

“Does society create people or do people create society. Does one’s surroundings create a person or does a society create that person’s surroundings, ultimately creating a fate for that person.” There is really suitable portrayal of Bigger in all of his lifetime; he seems to meet a bad fate anyway.

When racism is obviously rampant in American society, Bigger agrees and accepts from the popular culture that portrays white as civilized and blacks as humble savage. He is ashamed of his family’s poverty and afraid of the whites that control his life. He has no options and freedom, and can never to do what he wants to, suffers greatly from the whites he has great hatred on them. All of the factors and feelings mixed together lead to the inner conflictive impulse of his tragedy, but the structure of American society—racism is the cause of his crimes. His death is an inevitable end of his miserable life; he becomes the victim of racism.

This novel permeates with the style of strong realism from the beginning to the end. The author has his own clear tendency with rejection of violence and racism, sympathy and respect to blacks. This is the voice of protest of American black writer to American society. The protests represent the feelings, psychology and position of American blacks, which clearly demonstrates that we are blacks living in the United states of America, we are subjected to racial oppression and prejudice, we are full of fear, we can never go on enduring, we must stand up to complain and protest.

As the profound demonstration of social reality in *Native Son*, it shakes the American literature circle and is thought of as the landmark of American black literature, which represents the voice of protest against racism. The voice of protest against inequity in blacks finally emerged in American literature. It warns that blacks begin to stand up and fight against racial discrimination and oppression and go to shake the unequal social system. [5] The whites must know that the social cause is the structure of American society itself, they must change the American social and economic realities, and the social contradictions will be finally solved.

Reference

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