

প্রতিক্রিয়া the Echo

An Online Journal of Humanities & Social Science

Published by: Dept. of Bengali
Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India.
Website: www.theecho.in

Ethnic Modernism: Reading Richard Wright's Native Son

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Abstract

Literary modernism as stated by Rita Keresztesi , “grew out of a prejudiced, racially biased often xenophobic historical context that necessitated a politically conservative and narrow definition of modernism in America “. Modernism emphasizes neutrality of culture and in the context of American modernism it is important to question this claim and focus on the importance of the contribution of African American writers writing in what is taken to be the period of American literary high modernism. From the early decades of the 20th century there was a marked change in the racial, ethnic and cultural makeup of the nation and with this change literary modernism also changed in its form and context. The active participation of African Americans and other minority groups , as immigrants and ethnics , advanced the course of literary modernism in the United States of America . Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Cambridge History of American Literature : Prose Writing 1910 – 1950* refers to Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) as “ the high point of achievement of American Ethnic modernism ” .It is pointed out that this African American Text is modernist in its concern with “ psychological scrutiny, bohemian self searching , increasing ethnic expression , and engagement with new ideologies “ .The contention of this paper is to highlight further development of American ethnic modernism in a seminal African American novel : Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Apart from psychological scrutiny and ethnic expression, Richard Wright’s novel is an engagement with certain important issues such as generational tensions, urban space and alienation which are important ethnic thematic concerns as well as issues underlying modernist emphasis.

Modernist literature highlights the significance of space in literary representations. At the turn of the century Thomas Hardy brings to focus the metaphor of the century’s “corpse outlaient” in ‘The Darkling Thrush’, T.S. Eliot writes about the wasteland to suggest the cultural space of the interwar period. A similar use of the space metaphor is noticed in African-American modernism, as evident in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. A cultural mapping out

of the space is used to define the moment- of horror, violence and revulsion.

The legacy of institutional racism and sexism shaped and continues to space the consciousness of the African- Americans in America. This in turn fosters a negative and opposing feeling about their own culture at times. Since the struggle for social justice continued in the 20th century, most modern African-American novelists, like their predecessors of the 19th century did not

neglect the moral and social issues in their narratives. They are concerned with issues that focus on the truths of the perversity of American racism and the paradoxes of African – Americans' double consciousness. They have also started rediscovering their own folk tradition and culture.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) can be regarded as a hybrid of mainstream modernist technique and theme and an experiment in what many critics have called African – American modernism. Influences of modernist language experiment, Freudian psychology, existential philosophy, Marxism,

"a tendency toward fragmentation, elements of violence, the pre-eminence of subjectivity which takes shape in a sense of loss and dislocation on the part of major characters" (Rosenblatt.p-7), etc can be traced in the novel and each becomes a reference point for Wright's understanding of European and American modernism. It also used the tradition of African – American folklore, African-American standpoint on urban environment, and a keen sense of African- American alienation to supplement modernism's prevailing themes and ideas.

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright focuses on the South side slums of Chicago and also analyses the character of Bigger Thomas. He presents him as a representative figure of the inconspicuous values of American society. The racial segregation has confined him and other blacks in a particular corner of the town thus preventing them from developing their potential. Bigger Thomas is controlled by forces which are both social and psychological which lead him to hate himself, to reject his family and community, finally leading to a complete alienation. Wright, thus, in his portrayal of Bigger,

"affirms the myth of the Bad Nigger and attempts to develop it into a kind of modern Everyman"(Bell.p-157).

The black hero, in most of the times, is hardly seen to get his way through the novel without passing through the phase that he is frightening to the white world or to his own self. He also finds himself either lost or isolated in the vast world.

Black is the colour which is associated with failure, gloom, rejection, frustration, etc. The black hero not only bears the black skin but this black becomes the external force against which he struggles. Bigger Thomas moves

"ensnared in a tangle of deep shadows as black as the night that stretched above his head"(Wright.1966.p-72).

Darkness remains a constant presence in his life. While in prison.

"he saw a dark vast fluid image rise and float, he saw a black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells in which people lived, each cell had its stone jar of water and a crust of bread and no one could go from cell to cell and there were screams and curses and yells of suffering and nobody heard them, for the walls were thick and darkness was everywhere".(p.334-335)

This darkness was manifested in his inner self and he, from the very beginning was burdened with a sense of alienation. Like the blacks in the United States of America, he could not see himself as one among the white Americans nor could he adjust himself within his family and community. Being unable to do so he began to hate himself. His awareness of the shame and misery of the way they are forced to live also engulf him with fear and self hatred. His frustration could even be seen in his relation to his friends. Bigger and his friends knew that if they succeeded in their attempt in robbing a Whiteman than it would mean a

“challenge of the white world’s rule over them” (p.18).

But, Bigger was afraid to commit such an act and knew that Gus, too was afraid and to hide his feelings laid all the blame on Gus. Soon they were in conflict with one another. Bigger's violent action made his friends “hate and fear him as much as he hated and feared himself”(p.31). The contrasting themes and setting of the two movies that were seen by Bigger ‘ The Gay Woman’ and ‘ Trader Horn’ further intensify his alienation. He could not relate himself with both the worlds- the white and the black. This also

“symbolizes the dilemma of Bigger’s socialization as an Afro- American”
(Bell.p.158-159).

The psychological impacts of the external factors were such that Bigger could not trust others even when the others had no ill feeling towards him. Bigger was so accustomed to the inhuman treatment of the whites that he felt Mary’s and Jan’s behavior to be odd. They both treated him as a friend and spoke to him about the equality of blacks and whites. They sat with him in the same seat of the car which made him feel uncomfortable. They also ate and drank with him in such a manner that made him more perplexed. When in prison, even Jan’s caring attitude towards him was felt like a trap.

An important thematic concern underlying modernist emphasis is generational tension. In the novel, the generational tension between the mother and son is highlighted. It is very much true that like the other blacks in the United States of America, he could not see himself as one among the white Americans nor could he adjust himself within his community. He at the same time felt himself as someone outside his family. His family, especially his mother did not seem to understand his feelings and that made his sufferings more

acute. It was Mrs. Thomas who always coaxed him for his inability and even branded him as a selfish man who cared only for his own pleasures. He was regarded by her as

“the most no-countest man” (p.12).

She was so engrossed in the daily business of living that she forced her son to take the job that he hated.

Bigger, who earlier felt himself separated from his family and friends realized that he was a part of his family and community in the prison. On meeting his family and friends in the jail and seeing their shame in front of the whites, Bigger felt that they should rather feel glad for what he had done. He had done the thing which they feared most. He had always acted hard and tough towards his family to hide the feeling of hate and shame. He even began to feel the pain and sufferings of his mother. Bigger, who, all along regarded himself as alone, now realized that was not so. What he did had an impact on their lives. He just could not leave his family and friends nor could they forget him. Bigger, who was unable to cope with his friends, once again wanted to meet them. He felt

“like a man reborn.....like a man risen up well from a long illness.....”
(p.106).

Bigger at times thought that all the Blacks should unite and take a stand against the oppression of the whites. He felt that the whites were not people in the real sense of the term, rather they were

“a sort of great natural force”(p.109)
who cause destruction to the others. He had a feeling that he was different from the other blacks. Though in appearance they were alike, but their thinkings were different so as to bind them together. Deep in his heart he had a hope that a day would come when all the blacks would become one and act together to end the fear and shame. He was so much psychologically affected by the

presence of the whites in his life that he felt they ruled not only them but their relations to their own black people.

In terms of Marxism Wright's *Native Son* becomes important for understanding the racializing effects of capitalism through the creation and segregation of space. Also one can see the role of race in the making of contemporary capitalism. Bigger's experiences also defines and determines his social relationships. Bigger's reaction to his own environment (city of Chicago) .

"In both instances the deep sense of exclusion was identical. The feeling of looking at things with painful and unwarrantable nakedness was an experience, I learned, that transcended national and racial boundaries. It was this intolerable sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality where the look of a world which one did not make or own struck one with a blinding objectivity and tangibility, that made me grasp the revolutionary impulse in my life and the lives of those about me and far way "(p.xvii).

produces the consciousness necessary in order to re-imagine new social relations in the modern world. The novel begins with a description of kitchenette apartment occupied by the family of Bigger Thomas. This apartment is leased out to the Thomas family by Mr. Dalton, who also becomes Bigger's employer. The Kitchenettes were formerly large houses owned by whites and rented at high rates to black immigrants. Wright himself said in *Twelve Million Black Voices*

"the kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks"

(Wright.1988.p.105-106).

The kitchenette and Dalton's home in *Native son* thus marks both class and race restriction.

"He looked round the room, seeing it for the first time. There was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceiling hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds, four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop- leaf table on which they ate. This was much different from Dalton's home. Here all slept in one room, there he would have a room for himself alone. He smelt food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in Dalton's home; Pots could not be heard rattling all over the house, each person lived in one room and had a little world of his own."(p.100)

Finally the murder of Mary Dalton had become "an act of creation for Bigger"(Bell.p-160). His desire to do something was at last fulfilled and he had done the thing which other blacks were afraid to do. Paradoxically the fear which he should have felt after the murder had in reality given way to a new freedom, a new achievement. His achievement, to some extent can be related to the American Dream. He has risen in his own way; it is very much true that he has realized his vision of the American dream in a world that is completely different. He has indeed become a man of importance and has created a space for himself.

"The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, 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 had created 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." (p.101)

Though his action was an accident, he did never try to console himself rather he felt proud of what he had done. All that he wanted to believe was that he was a black and "had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her."(P101) He soon realized that all his life had been leading to an action like that and so his murdering of the girl was very much natural. He even felt that one had to be bold enough to "do something nobody thought of" (p102) He had done that thing which nobody thought that a black boy could do and so was filled with pride. He at one moment even wanted to tell the whole world that it was he who had done the daring deed. He was in such a position after the murder that he felt "he had just learned to walk."(p.123) He had become a man of some importance to the whites for they would now like to know from him the whereabouts of a white girl. Even the death sentence could not change Bigger's feelings; he did not repent his killings "what I killed for must've been good."(p.392)

Richard Wright's portrayal of Bigger needs to be looked into against the backdrop of Alain Locke's concept of the New Negro, which caught the imagination of the Black intellectual world since 1925. Throughout *Native Son* Bigger felt His own fragmentation and was actually aware of his own lack of wholeness. Bigger's internal response to his fragmentation passes through several distinct phases. Gradually, his initial disorientation gives way to exhilarating sense of himself as questing hero, which in turn disintegrates into a

numbling sense of total meaninglessness. The final stage of Bigger's metaphysical wandering involves an extended meditation on what it means to murder and create.

His perception swings wildly between extreme subjectivity and extreme objectivity. He experiences himself as a cipher, surrendering all sense of control to the mechanical world around him. An extreme separation from the external social realities that condition his consciousness accompanies Bigger's growing awareness of the world of images. As the external forces reassert their power, Bigger struggles to maintain a grasp on his internal reality, which Wright images increasingly in terms of total isolation. The final stage of Bigger's existence seem to relate directly to Eliot's 'Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' "There will be time to murder and create" His claim that he had murdered and had created a new life for himself is essentially based on a momentary exhilaration associated with his discovery of his own significance, with the power of the external world reasserted in the capture scene, Bigger's sense of creative power vanishes almost entirely. He is back in a wasteland where even the murder lacks meaning. Richard Wright's portrayal of the problem of identity confronted by Bigger Thomas shows the difficulty of the African-American at a particular moment just after the Harlem Renaissance and its decline. In a way it represents the larger modernist problem of alienation and the failure of making sense when confronted with fragmentation.

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