Angst and Rebellion in Black American Literature

Dr. Payal Khurana
Assistant Professor
The North Cap University
Sector-23A, Gurgaon- Haryana

Abstract
Black American writers have highlighted their quest for identity in the racist, American social scenario. Black American literature staged a revolt against the depiction of the black protagonist as a stereotyped figure at the hands of white writers’ community. The denial of humanity to the Blacks by the white community on the basis of colour is still embedded in the Afro-American narratives. This paper is a study on the fiction of Richard Wright’s Native Son. Being a Negro himself, Wright is able to dwell on the racial discrimination with finesse. Through Native Son, he has shown the dehumanizing and brutalization of the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, both physically and spiritually due to unsettling crisis of identity. The novel is written against the backdrop of white domination in America that instils fear and hatred in the black psyche and leads to angst and rebellion against society.

Keywords: angst, rebellion, Negro, discrimination.

Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940) highlights the fear, hatred and violence that have engulfed the Black Americans’ identity. It is a struggle to break free from the shackles of exploitation from the white community. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist, a black, resorts to violence to gain identity and freedom for himself. In fact, the novel depicts the most appealing and emotionally turbulent tale of the central protagonist, Bigger Thomas, on his journey from a rat infested Chicago slum to the electric chair. He lives in a rat infested single room apartment in Chicago, along with his mother, sister and brother. He is motivated by his environment to enter into a life of crime. He loses his temper on trivial things as well which signifies his fury and rage against a hostile and dehumanized environment. Bigger’s violence triggers off a chain of events with one heinous crime leading to another which seals his fate and earns him the identity of a black criminal who must be sentenced to death. An exorable element of the plot brings Bigger into contact with forces that he fears, forces represented by the white family of Daltons, their daughter Mary, her lover Jan, and the white lawyer Buckley.

The novel is divided into three books: Book I (Fear), Book II (Fight), Book III (Fate). Book I traces a day in the life of twenty year old Bigger Thomas since morning when he kills an errant rat in a dingy one-room apartment that he shares with the other members of the family, till evening when he goes to sleep after mercilessly killing a white girl. Thus Bigger was leading a meaningless life.

He goes for a job interview and lands up with a job where Mr Dalton, a philanthropic white, hires him. His daughter, Mary Dalton, for whom Bigger has to work as a chauffeur, is a university student. His first assignment is to drive Mary Dalton to the University, who redirects him to another address, to meet her lover, Jan. Mary and Jan want to befriend Bigger so they take
him out with them to dinners and for drinks. Bigger’s reaction is that of suspicion and fear because he can’t understand the reason behind the generosity shown by the white couple:

“Bigger felt trapped….he distrusted them, really hated them. He was puzzled as to why they were treating him this way. But, after all, this was his job and it was just as painful to sit here and let them stare at him as it was to go in.” (Native Son, 71-72)

After dropping drunken Mary to her house one night, he ends up being with her in her bedroom. Mary’s mother, a blind woman comes to check on her daughter and Bigger is petrified that Mary would tell about him so he prevents her from speaking by putting a pillow on her face. This action of his leads to unintentional murder of the girl.He is full of fear and puts her body in a furnace and burns it.

Book II (Flight), highlights the fear inside him and carries the theme of Book I further. His act of murdering the white girl, Mary, is justified by him by saying that it was a revenge taken against the white community. There is no remorse in him for killing Mary:

“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 created a new life for himself….The hidden meaning of his life….meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide – had spilled out.” (Native Son, 101)

He feels great joy as he unintentionally did something which he couldn’t have dared to do. He plans to get Jan convicted in Mary’s murder by sending a ransom note to Mary’s parents and succeeds in his plan when police arrests Jan. In his plan, his mistress Bessie is an accomplice. She on insistence by Bigger agrees to collect ransom amount from the Dalton’s but the plan fails because Mary’s bones are found in the furnace and Bigger elopes. He has deep fear in him which leads to his flight. He doesn’t even spare his mistress, Bessie, due to the fear that she will give his details to the police and smashes her head with a brick and kills her also. This time the murder was pre=planned and intentional, therefore he feels powerful and ecstatic:

“And yet, out of it all over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained in him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these murders were the most meaningful things that ever happened to him.” (Native Son, 225)

This only reflects his psychological condition. He couldn’t change and fight the system but finds happiness in taking life. This reflects his anger and rebellion against the system. Through
Bigger, Wright has highlighted the nightmarish world that was deep rooted in violence and mayhem. He continues with committing crimes and creates fear in the minds of people. Later he gets arrested for the murders he had committed. He is a rebel as well as alazon. He suffers at the hands of the society and goes out to take revenge but again becomes a victim.

In Book III (Fate), we see Bigger’s death. Everyone tries to use him for their selfish gains by making him a scapegoat. There is a clash between whites and Blacks in the society. Whites are hungry for his blood. While in jail, Bigger contemplates on his actions and his thought process is more profound:

“….he had to go forward and meet his end like any other living things upon the earth….Passively, he hungered for another orbit between two poles that would let him live again; for anew mode of life that would catch him up with the tension of hate and love… a new pride and a new humility springing from a a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived and this identification forming the basis for a new hope that would function in him as pride and identity.”(Native Son, 256)

Bigger, in fact, yearns for another chance given to him so that he can live to the new found meaning of his life. In fact, he is portrayed as a:

“…black person…who must at all costs accept his personality, he must be visible…visible not as a stastic or sociological phenomenon but as an individual coping like other individuals with the impositions of society, and…living through all sides of ambiguity.” (Miles, 154)

His lawyer, Max, tries his best to save him by giving examples of racial discrimination and oppression that led to Bigger’s debacle:

“Every time he comes in contact with us, he kills! It is a physiological and psychological reaction, embedded in his being. Every thought he thinks is potential murder. Excluded from and unassimilated in our society, yet longing to gratify impulses akin to our own but denied the objects and channels evolved through long centuries for their socialized expression, every sunrise and sunset make him guilty of subversive actions. Every desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal, is a plot of conspiracy. Every hope is a plan for insurrection. Every glance of the eye is a threat. His very existence isa crime against the state.”(Native Son, 367)
These words by the lawyer highlight the mindset that propelled Bigger to act on violence. The hatred and injustice given by the whites acted as a catalyst and spelled doom for him through this actions. Before his death, Bigger says:

“I didn’t want to kill!...What I killed for must have been good!
When a man kills, it’s for something…I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for them…” (Native son, 392)

This clearly exhibits that Bigger’s anger and rebellion led to his death. The oppression and racism had a great impact on his psyche that he forgot about his own self and became a sacrificial victim to strengthen others.. The hero, Thomas Bigger, gets defined as a black human individual who finds himself utterly helpless in the quagmire of life.

Thus there existed a crisis of identity, and the protagonist has to meet a tragic end that ends up in his inevitable death.

References: