

# Influence of the Novel *Native Son* on Contemporary Afro-American Society and Literature

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## Abstract

**Native Son is a masterpiece of Richard Wright, and has an important position in Afro-American literature. In the novel the author succeeds in creating the new black image--- Bigger Thomas. Through Bigger Thomas major behaviors and his psychological activities, Richard Wright shows the Black's protest to racial discrimination and their request for the sense of self-recognition. This thesis tells the background of the Native Son, and further shows the racial discrimination that is the original reason of misunderstandings between the black and the white, demonstrating the blacks longing for self-determination, freedom and fair. Besides, It analyzes the novel's impacts on the Afro-American society and later literature, aiming to make the readers view Native Son from a new respective and deepen the understanding of the development of the Afro-American literature.**

## Keywords

**Afro-American literature; protest novel; racial segregation; racial discrimination.**

## 1. Introduction

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright showed us a vivid description of a poor black young man who lives in the urban ghetto and later becomes a murderer. It tells us that the reason for this astonishing or shocking change or transfer is because of the oppressive society which is dominated by the whites. This view, which is completely different from the previous works describing the cities, makes the *Native Son* well-known and more thought provoking than any other novels. And its tragic ending placed itself as a great realistic novel and was always compared with Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

After the World War One, the African American literature in the United States had developed greatly. And at the end of the 1930s, there appeared the Harlem Renaissance in the dwelling place for the blacks. Among those black writers, there is no doubt that Richard Wright is the most outstanding and successful one. His brand new writing angle and skill in the *Native Son* helped to create a so called "the Wright School". It has an enormous and profound influence on the later literature. Throughout the forties and early fifties the younger black writers regarded the *Native Son* as an example and molded their own writings along "the Wright School". And one of those successors was the author of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Waldo Ellison. And *Death of Salesman* write by Tennessee Williams.

Richard Wright (Sept 4, 1908-Nov 28, 1960) was born in a plantation in Roxie, Mississippi. His grandfather was a slave and his father worked in the plantation. As a schoolteacher, his mother, Ella Wright, received some education and affected him a lot. After his family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, his father abandoned them. When Richard was six, his mother became ill and his two brothers were sent to an orphanage. In 1916, he, his brother, and their mother moved back to Mississippi to live with his grandmother.

Later, the family moved in with Wright's aunt and uncle in Elaine, Arkansas. But the family fled to West Helena after his uncle Silas Hoskins was murdered by the whites. After that they moved

for several times. When Mrs. Wright suffered a stroke in 1919, Wright reluctantly moved to live with his aunt Jody and his uncle Clark because his aunt and uncle placed restrictions on him and made him an emotional wreck. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, he was permitted to return to live with his maternal grandmother, who tried to force him to pray that he might find God. Early strife with his aunt and his grandmother left him with a permanent, uncompromising hostility toward religious solutions to everyday problems. His childhood in Memphis and Mississippi shaped his lasting impressions of American racism.

In 1927, Wright moved to Chicago. There he read other writers and studied their styles during his time off. When he lost his job in a post office during the Great Depression, he joined the Communist Party in late 1933. At first Wright was pleased by the positive relations with white Communists in Chicago, he was later humiliated in New York by some who rescinded an offer to find housing for him because of his race. To make matters worse, some black Communists denounced that Wright was a bourgeois intellectual and overly assimilated into white society which was totally different from the fact. After experiencing many unhappy things between him and his comrades. In 1946, just as many American writers, Wright moved to Europe and became an expatriate. In 1960, he died of a heart attack in Paris.

## 2. The Background of Native Son

### 2.1. The Development of Afro-American Literature

African American literature has come a long way. It is a unique literature because it is all tied up with the unique experience of the African American people and the phase of their growth. In the 1920s African American literature has come to be known as the "Harlem Renaissance", which is a symbol of the rise of African American literature and art. In the vigorous movement emerged out of a large number of black artists and writers, who not only praised the national culture, but also greatly promote the black music, dance and literature. With the Great Depression coming, the black art, like other art suffered a great impact. Richard Wright who used of realism in the creation of the strokes, deeply digging the foundation, exposing the contradictions of American society and the dark side like other Black novelists. As the Depression on the verge of economic collapse supply a strong evidence. In 1930s-1940s the communities file a complaint and protest, and as the result of the novel form the protest in American literature. It shows a beautiful landscape at that time. Native son is such an outstanding representative of this novel when it was published in 1940s. Besides, it reveals the blacks interior pain inflicted on them by evil American slavery and the blacks unique psychological world with the artistic reality.

Native Son is a masterpiece of Richard Wright. It take Chicago as it background, the novel described a poor black youth Bigger Thomas accidentally killed a rich white lady--Mary Dalton. So Bigger was sentenced to death for it. Literary fiction plays an very important position in the United States, because it not only created a precedent for the novel protest, but also successfully portrayed the new image of black Bigger Thomas. At the same time, it revealed the racial discrimination existence of American society. By the way, the art of writing is quite special too.

### 2.2. Black Individual Consciousness Awakening

Wright, in his molding of the protagonist's image, intends to make use of Bigger to reflect the protest and conflicting psychology of black as a whole gradually evolves to acquire its rational sense of self-recognition. The racial discrimination phenomenon of social existence in the United States: Native son revealed the existence racial discrimination in American society. Although the work did not appear the cruel persecution of blacks, in which it carried out by the image of white racists. The reader was able to obviously feel the oppression to the blacks. Rich white man Dalton sympathetic to blacks. On one hand, he was sympathizing with the black at

subjective, charity the donations of blacks work to improve blacks' life. On the other hand, he had a lot of real estate in the black community and had become black (including the Bigger family). He is the direct exploiters, and the pain life is the chief culprit in causing evil work. In the works, the relief department introduced he to the Dalton house as an engine driver, and expressed if he did not accept the commission, their family would not be relieved again. As to say, the reality was desperate not forced to Dalton house, but in emotional speaking, and how he felt reluctant to go into the white world where is strange and fear to. But he had no choice, from the day of birth, he was one white ruled society of their right to choose, their life only in accordance with the provisions of the white life way. Originally, it is a kind of good action to look after a drunken woman return home in white society, and it may be regarded as a gentlemanly behavior. But the same behavior occurred in black what had become a crime, and this unreasonable race discrimination system was direct social reasons why led to the tragic fate of the hero. Although Dalton's daughter--- Mary tried to enter the world of Bigger, she wanted to make friends with blacks. It was unfair that the attitude of blacks and whites contact with each other in her mind. So "you blacks" "you people" liked this call often using when she spoken with Bigger. She fell love with the radical communist ideology Jan Erlone, when Jane spoken with Bigger, he was also used with such words" they are human beings" "you is one of human" etc. The implication was that distance between white and black. On the surface, Bigger was to be treated like one white friends of Mary. But because Mary was the ignorance of black life, so she cannot understand that Bigger would lose his job after helping her to conceal movements. She ignored the white women and blacks strict social distance. In the end, her behavior make lit the flame of anger serious inside the deep heart of Bigger, and she pushed herself to the abyss of death. It is worth mentioning that most of white who appear in the text is negative image. Even Jane, Max and other representatives of trade unions were to satisfy their desire to gain what they want to. Nevertheless, Jane just wanted to understand black life, and he gave Bigger help what was superficial. He was simply trying to enter the black union, because he knew" a revolution cannot do without them." but at the same time, he did not know the true thinking of Bigger, even when Bigger pushed the blame to him, he thought it was also a white looking for the trouble of Black. The white and Max was actually insensitive and indifference as the defense counsel of Bigger. with the ethnic bias language, Max was also using the word "your nation", "you and your kind" in conversations with Bigger. In addition, the black leaders' real purpose was not the defense that did not concern the fate of Bigger but to restore the party's reputation. Blacks and Whites cannot understand each other, and even a number of misunderstandings emerge the high tension hostile state, lead to conflicts inevitable. all because of long period of racial discrimination and oppression of the gap. Therefore, the chance factors of Mary was killed, but in fact, it dad its inevitability. Bigger himself was clear that the girl's death was not accidental, since many times he fell his life in this life would lead to such an outcome. Such a crime did not frame. It revealed the cruel fact that African Americans and violence only in extreme situations, which would arouse the attention of white society, the crimes do not frame and Bigger was sentenced to death was actually the wake up of white society.

### **2.3. The Impact of the Racial Discrimination in the Native Son**

Unlike his ancestors, Bigger was born in America. Though he was black, he had no idea about his people's original culture. He was assimilated in this "cultural furnace" but was rejected to enter the world by the mainstream---the whites. He was not satisfied with his conditions and was brave enough to fight against for his fate. He was young and had his own dreams---he wanted to be a pilot. The title of this book just tells us that Bigger was not an exception of the American Society. He became a person that the oppressing society forced him to be. He was produced by the society where fulfilled with the racial discrimination.

Native Son on the distinctive writing art. Article nuanced performance of the characters inner activities, rendered in line with the successful the terror plot of work, especially the successful use of the symbolism. In the long term tangible and intangible, Blacks face to varying degrees under the generated pressure abnormal psychology. Wright more focus on the morbid psychology of the characters on the analysis and description in the creation, but this psychological fact was also his ruthless dissection. He dared to confront their own inner thing and by their own as a specimen what put under the microscope for careful observation, and then infer the black nation. AS the book said: "Bigger Thomas psychology by 12 million, you can get the black people's psychological". In order to express the author's profound the differences understanding from the races. Wright used a lot of symbolic images. Such as "white" and "black" in contrast. When the novel begins, Bigger and his partners played a game imitating the demeanor of the white showed that the eyes of Bigger were one piece "in front of them is an extending and towering of vast white world under the sunlight." To others only can see a small white hand; The employer Dalton's wife who is a blind white ghost; when asked who was the murderer by the journalist; even with their employer's big white cat were a suddenly jump to the shoulder of Bigger indicate and confirm him, other eight thousand white face when Bigger arrested in front of the white, there was a vast of whiteness piece of heavy snow in his eyes. "White" and the image had become a "black" relatively strong religious, which tied with specific content concept constitutes. There was a powerful and ruthless oppression of the Apartheid. It led him to take risks and embark on the road of killing. Then the "blind" symbol was also very meaningful. The couple of Dalton were good, sympathize with the blacks, gave them donations, gave them jobs and opportunities, on the surface, but they did not understand the situation what was the reason of blacks. they could contribute, donations which were high income from the exploitation of black. they refuse to sell cheap and good house to black, while leaving them prone to the commit crime in which a filthy crowded area lived. White people had a strong racial prejudices and condescension etc. They had done good things just to content themselves growing restless soul and tried to alleviate the hatred of the blacks.

Mrs. Dalton was a completely blind. Mary and Max enthusiastic themselves counsel, and did not understand the true idea of Apartheid, and the leaders of the party were only concerned with their votes....., ironically, The black resistance was also blind. for example, Bigger had killed a innocently woman. Bigger had been in a symbolic "aphasia" status, he could not catch his true thoughts and express them, he repeated a worlds of the sentence "they did not see me, and I did not see them." The origin of tragedy was lack of communication, which led to scenes of the blindness.

### **3. The Influence of Native Son**

#### **3.1. In the Aspect of Afro-American Literature**

##### **3.1.1. Switching in the Tradition of White Thoughts**

There are three chapters in Native Son: Fear, Flight, and Fate. It mainly talks about how Bigger Thomas, a poor black young man from the black ghetto, killed Mary Dalton accidentally, who is a wealthy white girl. At first, Bigger was very afraid but he soon calmed himself down with a perfect plan. After he burnt the body in the furnace, Bigger began his plan to blackmail the Daltons and frame up Mary's Communist boyfriend Jan who showed his sympathy on the blacks and once tried to persuade Bigger to join in the "Union". When the detective Mr. Britten put Bigger and Jan in the same room and confronted them with their conflicting stories, Jan was surprised by the story of Bigger but still willing to offer him help. After received the kidnap note from Bigger, Mr. Dalton called the police. And the journalists came to the house. Though Bigger was afraid, the idea of leaving things to chance and a sense of pride controlled him and he didn't leave. When Bigger was ordered to take the ashes out of the furnace and make a new fire, he

was so terrified that his behavior was very unnatural. Curious about that, then a journalist discovered Mary's bones and earrings. At that time, Bigger stormed away from the house.

Then, Bigger asked his lover Peggy, who was a waitress and very cowardice, to run away with him. But when Peggy couldn't stop scolding Bigger and expressed her regrets, Bigger killed her with a brick at night and threw her into a air shaft. He quickly realized his only money was in her pocket and felt vexed. Then Bigger run through the city and read newspaper to know what the police was doing. After a wild chase over the rooftops of the place where the blacks lived, the police finally caught him.

During his first few days in prison, Bigger didn't eat, drink, or talk. But Jan visited him and recommended a lawyer Mr. Max, who was a Communist and spent many hours with Bigger. And Bigger told Max about his sufferings and pains. At first Bigger thought that Max knew him very well and totally understood his mind. But when Bigger told him that the crime was not an accident since it made him alive and visible, he realized that neither Jan nor Max who said they would like to help the blacks had no idea about what the blacks really thought and felt. At last, Bigger was sentenced to death.

Whit shocked the white readers, as soon as the new black image Bigger Thomas appeared. Previously, it appears in mostly black image, which was submissive and small role. For instance, "Uncle Tom"(Uncle Tom's Cabin)"Prissy"(Gone with the Wind) etc. but Bigger is full of hatred and violence, the new image black. Bigger is a genuine American, a "Native son", represents the blacks have their own American dream. However, owing to their ethnic and class origin. He was denied the right to pursue success and happiness, as the margins of society people. In the eyes of whites, he was a "bad black". Because long suffered racial discrimination and oppression, he extremely hatred the white within the heart. He said: "I think this town these blacks want to go where we cannot go, to what cannot dry." His soul has been seriously distorted, and he wanted to use violence to release his dissatisfaction with the heart, ", he make him forget all the violence, restoring his confidence Now. This is the rhythm of his life: indifference and violence.....", "he knows that once he let himself have fully conscious what kind of life, he would either commit suicide or commit murder." Bigger accidentally killed a white lady, the practice can be said to be a metaphor. Bigger from the criminal acts of murder found him, even though recognizing that he was a black. But he has become his own master, aware of their power against the white world. Therefore, comparing "Uncle Tom" type who was the image of honest black in the history of American literature with the new black image who was so cruel and smart, who was the representative of black individual consciousness. After the novel was by publication, Richard Wright delivered the lecture, "How 'Bigger' was born," at Columbia University in New York City. He said he would like a number of reality young people like Bigger generalize and refine. This character was so shape and opposite the new black image. In the view, the oppression of human being social systems that made people spiritual depression, it leads to a pathological heart. And the majority of blacks stuck in the bottom of American society, or as to the oppressors as submissive "Uncle Tom". Bigger neither as narcotic of religion, as his mother, or as the mistress of Peggy who was a alcoholic. With their savings anger would make him to a terrible thing to challenge the social order when it burst out.

### 3.1.2. Creating a New Style in Literature

For a long time the image of the Afro-American in mainstream American literature had been presented in a distorted manner. For example Mark Twain were unable to overcome their prejudices. In his book The adventures of Hackle berry Finn, Jim is made out to be very funny and is important in the novel only for helping to reveal the growth of the social awareness of the white boy ,Huck Fine. Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the wind tells about the happy slaves happy to wait for their white masters, which is a gross distortion of Afro-American life in the American South. Go Down, Moses by Faulkner depicts at one stage the ideal idyllic life of the

past with happy Afro-American as part of the picture, which tends to disgust Afro-American readers. Others, Eugene O'Neil's *Emperor Jones*, and the famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is free of prejudice and condescension (from *A Survey of American Literature*).

*Native Son* is an extremely fascinating book. Dealing with one of the thorniest problems with which American had been beleaguered, the racial question, the book pushed it into the reader's mind in a manner no one had ever done before. For the treated as such, and that if nothing else can help to their dignity and identity, then it is legitimate to resort to violence. For the whites, the message is equally clear, that the moment has arrived when they have to come to terms with their Afro-American fellow men, if they are not ready yet, they have got to be quick or they will have to take the consequences.

Richard Wright's influence on subsequent Afro-American writing has been great. To say that he began the contemporary American literary tradition of violence self-assertion is not exaggeration. He is now a famous writer in American and world literature. After he, there are Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon & Beloved*, Alex Haley's *Roots* etc.

## **3.2. In the Aspect of Afro-American Society**

### **3.2.1. Imposing the Protest in Afro-American**

*Native Son* is a story about an African American adolescent's growth of awareness. "The vehement violence which breaks out of Bigger and which eventually leads Bigger to the electric chair has been brewing in the bosom of his race for over three centuries, ever since the first of Bigger's ancestors were brought to the land of their enslavement over three centuries ago. The bitterness has fermented, and the patience and humility of the African American are perfectly ready to take the law into their own hands." Thus Bigger Thomas, in him and his actions, the African American saw their identity and the whites their folly and obligation."

African American literature is literature written by, about, and sometimes specifically for African Americans. Among the themes and issues explored in African American literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African American culture, racism, slavery, and equality. In the contrary, the works of the African American authors have a clearly purpose. And Blacks read them, understand them, so to gain the equal rights like the white, who fight American government and others organizations. For example: Segregation of white and black children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation, with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to inhibit the educational and mental development of Negro children and deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system. One thought of the blacks is that they want to be a truly "man" other than the servant of "white". And they don't be satisfy with the condition where they lived in, they don't petition on that they don't allow live in the white's society, don't learn in the same school, and they don't treat as a man. So when we open the book which published after the *Native Son*. Such as "Irving Howe said: *Native Son* is the first strike of whites. It forces each person to discover that from the oppressors. It is also the first strike against to blacks, so that each black recognize the cost of compliance. "The irony is that they do not represent mainstream American society by the black exclusion and oppression of American society. it is precisely the *Native Son*. Here, the '*Native Son*', it will have a double meaning in the word. First, he is born and bred in American; Second people who is created by American society and racism, consequently in a deep sense speaking, the causes of Bigger commits crime completely should blame on the United States racism thought, system and law."

### 3.2.2. The Influence on the Racial Discrimination after WW II

After 1940s, there are some meeting hold in the station where have a long history of slave system. For example, the famous speech I have a dream by Martin Luther King junior. With the blacks fighting, the government of American had descended some of racism discrimination policy.

As we all know, after the world war two the African American had contribute to the state a lot. They demand that the government should break the distance of the south. So likely the African American writer, Richard Wright who told the rest of the black that they were treated as a second people. That is the reason why the unfair right existed between the whites and blacks. For example, we know the spontaneous action of women, Rose Parks, who broken the segregation laws which kept black people from having the same rights as white people. She was arrested by the police for not giving her seat to the white man. So she award that called the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Color People and asked help. We would say that because of the books guide the blacks forward. After that thing, the black holed up the Civil Rights Movement for themselves, which grew support for protest against segregation. More ever the movement began to spread all over the south. At the end, segregation was breaking down in the 1960s. Nowadays, we can see a larger number of black who live in the same neighborhood, the same school and so on. The Most progress in the part of racism, what I think, is that the states president is Obama. What is the first time a African American selected in the history of US. At the moment of delight, we should not forget the pioneer Richard Wright est. There were they continued sticking and effort in the Civil Rights of American. So we can see the first black president in the history of American.

## 4. Conclusion

In a sense, the Native Son evoked the longstanding and depressive dissatisfaction and protest inside the blacks and examined the indifference within the whites. When it became more popular and influential, people thought it would change the direction of the American literature and the African Americans said that because of this novel, their culture would not be destroyed and assimilated by the white people's culture. It was the first novel provided a psychological probing of the consciousness of the outcast generation lost in the slums of American civilization. The novel is filled with some solid dramatic dynamic fragments, rarely to be artificially controlled, directly into the reader's life thought language and experience, the plot is very smooth.

Native Son is a good protest novel. The paper aims to investigate how the relationship revolves and interpret from different perspectives of the racing discrimination. The Western commentators have considered only not after the publication of Native Son by Wright. till black literature was made in the status of American literature by the critics the attention, even among the people have a certain impact. Native Son written by Right, is forever one of the greatest American Novel works.

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