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Beyond Individual Affliction: Societal Violence in Wright's Black Boy and Native Son

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Abstract

This paper examines how the pervasive violence in Richard Wright's Black Boy and Native Son is not merely individual but a direct consequence of the oppressive societal structures and dehumanizing conditions faced by African Americans during the Jim Crow era and the Great Migration. By examining the experiences of Richard Wright and Bigger Thomas, the protagonists of the respective texts, the study argues that violence is a naturalized response to the oppressive conditions of systemic racism, economic disenfranchisement, and social marginalization. The analysis reveals how these novels expose the psychological and environmental forces that shape Black identity and behaviour, emphasizing how institutionalized racism and dehumanizing environments compel African Americans toward violent resistance as a means of survival and self-expression. The paper highlights Wright's literary effort to critique societal injustice and prompt a deeper understanding of the roots of racial violence. Ultimately, the paper argues that Wright's novels reveal how racism and discrimination force individuals into violence, with Black Boy showing internalized violence and intellectual resistance, and Native Son portraying violence as Bigger's only way to affirm his existence in a dehumanizing urban environment.

KEY WORDS: Oppression, Violence, Racism, Discrimination, Society, Injustice

Richard Wright is remembered as a distinguished figure in American literature, whose works exposed the brutal realities of racial oppression in the early to mid-20th-century United States. His novels, particularly *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, are important texts in African American literature, offering profound insights into the psychological and social impacts of systemic racism. This paper argues that the pervasive violence depicted in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son* is not merely a consequence of individual affliction but is fundamentally shaped by the oppressive societal structures and dehumanizing environmental conditions faced by African Americans during the Jim

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Crow era and the Great Migration. Through the experiences of Richard Wright, who is the protagonist of *Black Boy,* and Bigger Thomas, who is the protagonist of *Native Son*, Wright shows how people are driven to violence as a desperate way to survive, protect themselves, or assert their identity. This happens because of systemic racism, a lack of economic opportunity, and living in constant fear. The narratives are deeply embedded in the historical realities of the American South under Jim Crow laws and the urban North during the Great Migration and the Great Depression. These periods were marked by organized segregation, economic hardship, and widespread racial terror. The violence portrayed in Wright's novels does not emerge in a vacuum; it is deeply rooted in the historical and societal conditions of early 20th-century America. This paper highlights the oppressive backdrop against which the protagonists' lives unfold, demonstrating how systemic forces created an environment where violence became an inherent feature of daily life for African Americans.

The American South, during the period depicted in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, operated under a formal, codified system of racial apartheid known as Jim Crow, which dominated for three-quarters of a century starting in the 1890s. These laws authorized segregation across virtually all aspects of daily life, including schools, parks, libraries, drinking fountains, restrooms, buses, trains, and restaurants, frequently enforced by "Whites Only" and "Coloured" signs. Public facilities designated for Black individuals were consistently inferior or, in many cases, non-existent. Apart from calling for physical separation, Jim Crow systematically denied Black Americans the right to vote. This effectively disenfranchises a significant portion of the Black population from getting their political rights.

Economically, Jim Crow aimed to suppress Black progress by limiting geographic mobility and unequally dividing educational resources. Black families faced significantly lower income, education, and wealth compared to their white counterparts. They were largely confined to poverty, often working as sharecroppers, with severely limited opportunities for quality education or well-paid jobs. Richard Wright's experiences in *Black Boy* exemplify this pervasive economic disenfranchisement, as he encountered explicit barriers in the job market and felt reduced to a "mere tool" rather than a valued worker.

The Jim Crow system was not merely upheld by legal decrees but was aggressively reinforced by white supremacist organisations like the Ku Klux Klan. Lynchings were common incidents, with hundreds of African Americans killed without trial in the 1920s. Race riots also led to widespread destruction of Black property and lives. There were often no convictions, and this highlights the

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profound lack of justice for African Americans in the South. The legal and economic structures of Jim Crow were not simply discriminatory, but they were designed to necessitate violence as a primary mechanism of enforcement. By systematically denying Black Americans agency and opportunity, the system created conditions of profound terror to suppress any challenge to the racial hierarchy. This establishes violence as an institutionalized feature of the environment which directly contributes to the nature of violence observed in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*.

Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, vividly portrays violence as a constant presence that is a direct consequence of his oppressive environment. The narrative recalls how this violence shapes his development and his eventual forms of resistance. Richard Wright's upbringing was marked by a violent and poor family environment, where he endured abuse and animosity from his mother and other older relatives. His early suffering was significantly shaped by his mother's frequent beatings and his father's desertion, which fuelled his intense dislike for his father. This domestic aggression is presented not just as personal mistreatment, but as a tragic consequence of internalised systemic violence. The inescapable danger from the white community also compelled Black families to enforce strict discipline, unintentionally continuing a cycle of violence within their households as a desperate survival tactic. Wright had a tendency towards nonconformity, which could easily incite white hostility. This was viewed by his family as a serious risk, leading to their severe treatment of him. On the other hand, his mother even instructed him to "stand up and fight for yourself" (15) when confronted with bullying by other black children, suggesting that violence was seen as a desperate means of survival in a society that offered no legal protection to Black individuals. Richard's initial violent acts, such as burning his grandmother's house and killing an innocent kitten, can be understood as fundamental expressions of his frustration and defiance against the limitations and constraints of his surroundings. He recounts the dismal environment in which a young black boy grew up, like his memory of constant hunger, drinking at the age of six, even before he had begun school, the bullying from neighbourhood kids, frequent beatings by his mother, etc. Moreover, racial discrimination and violence inflicted by the Whites created a profound mental trauma on African Americans. Richard, from his earliest childhood, experienced intense fear leading to a state of chronic hypervigilance, anxiety, and agitation. This constant dread of random violence, exemplified by the murder of his Uncle Hoskins by white men, instilled a deep and pervasive sense of insecurity and vulnerability. The threat of death or violent treatment from White people was a constant danger, forcing Black individuals to navigate their lives with extreme caution.

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Richard Wright draws heavily from his own experience of growing up as a young boy in the American South in writing his novel *Native Son,* which deals with racial tensions in 1930s Chicago. It follows Bigger Thomas, a young Black man who, angry at how society treats him, accidentally kills a white woman named Mary Dalton and burns her body. Later, he also kills his girlfriend, Bessie. Bigger Thomas's violent actions in *Native Son* are not simply acts of personal cruelty or moral failure. Richard Wright presents his violence as the tragic result of systemic racism, social conditioning, and psychological pressure. In this way, Wright forces readers to consider how American society, especially in the 1930s, creates the very fear and rage that explode in Bigger's actions. In the essay *"*How Bigger Was Born*,"* Richard Wright explains the inspiration behind the character Bigger Thomas from his novel *Native Son*. Wright argues that Bigger is not just a fictional figure but a composite of real people he had known throughout his life—young Black men who were angry, fearful, and confused, shaped by the harsh realities of racism and poverty. He describes five "Biggers" he met growing up, each reacting differently to the limitations placed on them by a racist society. He writes,

"The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect." (viii)

Some were rebellious, others violent, and some were deeply afraid, but all felt trapped. In the essay "Richard Wright's American Dream: A 'Native Son' In Chicago"*,* Daniel Walden also emphasises that Bigger's violent behaviour is not simply the result of personal failings but a response to a society that has denied him opportunity, respect, and identity. He writes that Wright created Bigger to show how racism distorts human lives and to make readers confront the psychological and emotional toll of oppression. He says,

"Wright was deliberately writing about the Bigger Thomases of the world, those deformed persons so alienated from traditional values, restraints and modes of behaviour that for them murder was what he called an act of creation. As Wright knew firsthand, when he described the many Bigger Thomases he knew, the rejection by the civilisation of all means of reward, achievement, mobility, status, resulted in a man whose every movement, every desire, every dream, every hope was a prelude to violence." (45)

Wright intentionally wrote about people like Bigger Thomas—individuals so damaged and cut off from society's values and rules that, for them, committing murder became a way to assert themselves or feel alive. From his own experience, Wright understood that when society blocks all

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paths to success, recognition, or progress, it creates individuals whose thoughts, actions, and hopes are shaped by frustration, which ultimately leads to violence. As a poor Black man living in Chicago during the 1930s, Bigger is constantly reminded that society sees him as inferior. He is trapped in poverty, denied access to decent jobs, quality education, and fair treatment. These circumstances strip him of hope and identity, making him feel powerless in a world that doesn't value his life. His violent actions can be seen as a desperate way to reclaim a sense of control and autonomy in a society that constantly dehumanises him. Rather than being born as a naturally violent person, Bigger is responding to the crushing weight of a system that leaves him no other way to assert himself.

Years of living under racial and economic injustice fill Bigger with a deep, seething anger. He feels smothered by a world that constantly limits him and sees him only as a threat. He resents the way white people look at him, the way his family struggles, and the way he has no real chance to shape his future. With no healthy outlet for his emotions, this anger turns inward and then erupts outward as violence. His rage becomes a response to being unheard, unseen, and unloved. Violence, in this sense, becomes his only way of expressing feelings that he cannot otherwise communicate in a society that silences him. In "How Bigger was Born", Wright says rebellion against the white rule became a way to vent their frustrations,

"The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell" (xi)

Bigger's cramped, one-room family home exemplifies the dehumanising effect of poverty and lack of privacy. His mother blames him for their filthy living conditions, amplifying his feelings of powerlessness and self-hatred. She asks Bigger to get a job so that she could fix up a nice place for them and they would be comfortable and not have to live like "pigs" (15). The novel opens with Bigger killing a huge rat in this confined apartment, an act of violence that reflects his entrapment and defiance. He identifies with the rat's strength and defiance, even as he brutally ends its life, an act that foreshadows his later, more tragic, violent acts. The physical environment in *Native Son* is not just a backdrop but an active agent of dehumanisation and a direct catalyst for violence. Bigger's act of killing a rat in Chapter 1 establishes a realistic framework where Bigger's violent acts are presented as almost a natural response to the oppressive conditions of his existence, highlighting how the environment can distort human behaviour and influence individuals to aggression when all other options are closed.

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In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, who was recently employed as a driver for the affluent white Dalton family, was tasked with driving Mary Dalton and her friend Jan, both of whom were heavily intoxicated after a night of drinking. Mary and Jan, exemplifying a well-meaning but dangerously naive white liberalism, attempted to transcend racial boundaries by treating Bigger as an equal, inviting him to eat with them and questioning him about his life. This gesture, intended as progressive and friendly, profoundly disoriented and horrified Bigger. He felt trapped, acutely ashamed, and mocked, intensely aware of the vast racial chasm and his perceived inferiority. The situation escalated dramatically when Mary, too drunk to navigate on her own, required Bigger's assistance to enter the house and go up to her bedroom. Once in the bedroom, Bigger, in a moment of confused arousal and profound transgression, kissed Mary. After helping the drunken Mary to her bedroom, Bigger is caught off guard when her blind mother enters the room. Terrified of being discovered in such a compromising he instinctively tries to silence Mary to avoid suspicion. In his desperation to avoid being caught, he unintentionally smothers her to death, acting more out of fear for his life than any intent to kill. His fear is not irrational; in the racist society he lives in, such an incident could easily lead to false accusations of rape and a brutal punishment, likely lynching.

On the other hand, Bessie's murder is deliberate and cold, driven by Bigger's growing paranoia and loss of trust in others. After Mary's death, Bessie becomes a threat because she knows too much and is emotionally fragile. Bigger fears that she might reveal his crime, either intentionally or under pressure from the authorities. Unlike Mary's accidental death, Bessie's murder is a calculated attempt to eliminate a perceived danger. While talking to his lawyer, Mr. Max, Bigger told him that he killed Bessie to "save myself" (326). By this point, Bigger has become emotionally numb and consumed by the survival instincts born of living in a world that continually devalues his existence. Killing Bessie reflects his complete descent into hopelessness and the dehumanizing effects of the society around him.

Bigger Thomas' conversation with his lawyer, Mr. Max, near the end of *Native Son* reveals a deep and complex mix of resentment, fear, confusion, and a yearning to be understood. Through this dialogue, Bigger expresses his long-standing feelings about white people, which were shaped by a lifetime of oppression, exclusion, and dehumanization. Bigger admits that he has always felt trapped and invisible in a world controlled by white people. He recalls his dreams of being an aviator, an army man, a businessman, etc, but these dreams were thwarted because no matter what he did, white society had already defined his life for him, limiting his opportunities, instilling fear, and viewing

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him as something less than human. He resents white people not just for their power but for their indifference to his suffering. He says,

"Well, they own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. They like God...." He swallowed, closed his eyes and sighed. "They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die." (327)

During Bigger's famous trial, Boris Max, Bigger's lawyer, argues that Bigger's actions aren't just individual crimes, but are directly caused by a flawed social system. Max contends that society is partly to blame and should show leniency. This scene turned the whole trial effectively into a critique of political and racial inequality. Bigger himself tells Max that killing Mary Dalton gave him a feeling of liberation from lifelong oppression by white people, highlighting how violence became his desperate attempt at control. At the beginning of the trial, Max urges the courtroom that "the mental and emotional life of this boy is important in deciding his punishment" (349). Max does not deny that Bigger committed murder; instead, he seeks to explain why Bigger committed those violent crimes. He argues that Bigger is not an isolated monster, but a product of the racial and economic forces that have shaped his world since birth. He explains that every time Bigger comes in contact with a White person, he kills because it is a "physiological and psychological reaction, embedded in his brain" (367). He goes on to say that:

"Every movement of his body is an unconscious protest. Every desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal, is a plot or a conspiracy. Every hope is a plan for insurrection. Every glance of the eye is a threat. His very existence is a crime against the state!" (367).

This statement reflects Richard Wright's broader aim in *Native Son,* which is to expose the brutal realities of racism and challenge readers to see its effects not just in society, but in the minds and souls of individuals like Bigger Thomas. In giving Max this voice, Wright forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about American society and to consider Bigger as a symbol of a nation's failure to grant dignity and humanity to all its citizens. Max becomes the voice of reason when he says that Bigger was "living only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live" (366). Rather than seeking to pardon Bigger for committing the gruesome crimes, Max calls for understanding. He warns that executing Bigger will not solve the problem, because the conditions that created him will continue to produce more like him. He urges the court to see Bigger not just as

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a defendant but as a symptom of a diseased society. Max's speech thus becomes a plea for compassion, reform, and a broader awareness of how racism and inequality affect human lives.

In conclusion, the novels Black Boy and Native Son reveal how racism, injustice, and discrimination compel individuals to engage in violence, whether as a means of survival, self-preservation, or assertion of identity. *Black Boy* demonstrates how violence becomes internalized within the Black community as a way of coping with white oppression, and how Richard eventually channels that reactive violence into intellectual resistance as a means of escape and self-expression. In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas is depicted as a creation of an urban environment built to confine and dehumanize him, where violence appears to be the only way he can affirm his existence and momentarily feel in control. The enduring relevance of *Black Boy* and *Native Son* lies in their unflinching examination of the roots of violence and the struggle for self-identity within a prejudiced society.

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