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**Different Psychological Manifestations of Violence in  
Richard Wright's Native Son (1940)**

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## **Dedication**

*We dedicate this work to*

*Our Families who have been our source of inspiration who continually provided their moral, spiritual, emotional, and financial support.*

*To our mentors, friends, and classmates whose untiring support assistance, and encouragement have made possible the fruition of our efforts.*

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## Abstract

Throughout history, African American writers restricted their novels only to racial violence denying the existence of any other type. It was through Richard Wright's masterpiece, *Native Son* that the different forms of violence in African American society are thoroughly covered. Therefore, the current study attempts to investigate the multiple facets of violence exercised on and by the African American community through analyzing the major psychological motives behind them. Relatively, this research examines the different levels of violence manifested in the novel by Africans themselves, not against the whites only, but against their own people as well. In this sense, Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*, is not restricted to racial violence. Rather, there are other manifestations of violence in the novel that needs to be tackled. Also, the study attempts to understand the character's motivations behind violence via psychology. Sigmund Freud's theory will be used to better understand the character's violent acts.

Key words: Violence- African American literature- Slave Narratives- Whites- Blacks- Psychoanalysis

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## Introduction

Behind every successful writing is a very strong motive or purpose. In his essay “Why I Write”, George Orwell lists four major reasons for writing, the fourth of which is political purposes. He explained: “desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias” (05). Writers write out of a need to share their experiences of injustice, oppression, and inequity and expose them as they really are to the world hoping for change. African American literature, as a post-emancipation phenomenon appeared in the United States, and was shaped in the form of novels, poems, and plays, that had emerged for the same purpose.

African American literature emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in parallel with the construction of the United States when its citizens enjoyed total freedom and owned slaves. It was the conditions of slavery that led to the appearance of a genre of writing called Slave Narratives. However, despite all the dehumanization and mistreatment African Americans were subjected to, black writers produced many notable works of fiction in African American history.

As African American literature developed throughout the centuries, it served different purposes. The one common purpose was always to serve as proof of the brutality of slavery and the racial segregation that African Americans had to struggle with even after emancipation. The issues of race and tension of color pushed African American writers to use their talent to establish a place for themselves in this community, to present African Americans as humans and individuals not as a property of whites, and most importantly, to create a powerful impact on the minds of the readers and bring change by establishing a new area that embraces black people altogether.

Themes such as violence, racism, and fear represent the heart of the African American literature. In fact, African American writers usually include sensitive topics in their writings as if they speak directly to the reader's emotions in order to have their attention and sympathy. This literature is not meant to please white audiences, but to raise their awareness of the dehumanization of black people. Whatever manifestations it takes, violence is a never-ending cycle in which those who have the power, i.e. the Whites use all possible means: physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, spiritual, cultural, etc. to oppress the ones who are in the position of losing power, i.e. the Blacks. As violence breeds violence, there had emerged two different categories: the one practiced by the whites and the one practiced by the Blacks.

African American writers have written since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the purpose of addressing the terrible sins of whites against blacks. However, their writings were only restricted to one type of violence which is the interracial one; in most cases writers stereotyped the white violence against the Blacks to produce victims, while the black violence against the Whites to produce heroes. Unlike the other African American writers, one prominent writer, Richard Wright, was unconcerned with black subjectivity. In his masterpiece, *Native Son*, he tackles the different levels of violence that structured the society they survived in.

Richard Wright, a novelist, short story writer, and poet, is an African American writer who wrote about racial issues. In his first published novel, *Native Son*, he tells a story of a black boy who murders two girls because he was driven by rage and anger instilled in him by the oppressive society which has circumscribed his life to the borders of the South Side of Chicago slums. Richard Wright, as any other African American writer, had used violence as a major theme in his works including *Native Son*, for which he had been heavily criticized. What people and mainly critics fail to grasp is that the violence practiced by blacks is nothing

but a mere reaction to the white violence experienced through the oppressing conditions that the African Americans had endured in northern America.

The novel, *Native Son*, appeared as a perfect portrayal of racial discrimination during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its manifestations. It shows the struggle of being an African American in the 1940s. It did not only reveal the injustice of that time, but also the serious problems between the oppressors and the oppressed where neither side could see the other as human beings with wants, desires, and faults of their own. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is considered one of the most important violent and revolutionary works of African American literature. His explanations of criminality and racism continue to be a source of concern for critics in African American culture and around the world.

Therefore, this dissertation is conducted with the aim to investigate the different psychological dimensions of violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In addition, the study will attempt to examine Freud's theories in the analysis of the characters by applying his theories to the protagonist of the case study. Furthermore, an analysis of the themes and forms of the text will prove that Richard did not limit his novel, *Native Son*, only to racial violence. Beyond this concern, Wright sheds light on various other aspects of violence and their manifestations on the main characters of the novel. This paper is conducted to showcase the other different levels of violence that he manifested in the novel.

Structurally, it will be built upon three main chapters. The first chapter will serve as a theoretical background to the subject matter. It will deal with the concept of violence in literature and its different psychological dimensions. Here, a close insight will be made on the psychoanalytic approach, specifically Freud's theories on violence to analyze the psyche of the characters. It will also discuss the Fanonian's view on violence. In addition, the chapter will provide a historical background of the appearance and development of African American



literature, which presents the history of their people through slave narratives. In addition, the chapter will also cover African American literature during the antebellum and postmodernism periods. Further, it will explore the development of African American literature during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which the Harlem Renaissance played a remarkable role in the appearance of new concerns in black literature.

The second chapter will include an overview and a thematic study of Richard's Wright *Native Son*. It will be briefly devoted to aspects of Richard Wright's life and works. Also, it will shed light on the main themes displayed throughout the novel that led to the protagonist's violent actions.

The third chapter is an analysis of the same novel yet in terms of violence. The various levels of violence manifested in the book will be revealed in this chapter. Then, the focus will shift to the protagonist's violent scenes that will be approached through psychoanalysis and referring to social, cultural, and economic factors as well to portray the changes the protagonist went through throughout the novel.

# 1 Chapter one: Theoretical Background

From its beginnings to the present, from one decade to another, African American literature has taken on different dimensions and addressed several important themes. The representation of the tragic past of Africans, i.e. the legacy of slavery, was the main concern of anti-slavery literature of the 18th and 19th centuries. Then, with the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, the focus of African American literature shifted from describing people's experiences and escapes from slavery, which was autobiographical, to advocating for the abolition of segregation and racism. Henceforth, this chapter starts with an overview of the term violence in literature and its psychological dimensions based on Freud's psychoanalytic theories. Then, it investigates Frantz Fanon's point of view on violence. Moreover, it provides a historical background of how African American literature saw the light of day and flourished, leading to the emergence of the slave narrative genre and its key features. Further, the chapter gives an insight on the antebellum and postmodern African American literature. Finally, it provides African American literature during the Harlem Renaissance moving to the concept of double consciousness experienced by African American writers.

## 1.1 The Multiple Facets of Violence:

In his foreword to *World Report on Violence and Health*, Nelson Mandela asserts that "the twentieth century will be remembered as a century marked by violence" (I). In other words, cruelty and inhumanity have become an integral part of human characteristics. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has done so to such an extent that words are helpless to describe the ongoing massacre that is part of this century's history. It may not be known for its great industrial revolution, but it is known for the invention of ever more efficient weapons of mass destruction that facilitated the eradication of human life.

Etymologically, the word violence is derived from the word of Latin origin “violentia” which means “vehemence”, an intense and passionate force (Bufacci 194). The World Health Organization (WHO) declares that violence is “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (5). This means that violence has various consequences. It is not restricted to physical damage, but also leads to psychological harm to the individual and the community as a whole.

Moreover, several scholars have provided different definitions of violence. One of many is the American pragmatist, John Dewey, who argues that “energy becomes violence when it defeats or frustrates purposes instead of executing or realizing it. When the dynamite charge blows up human beings instead of rocks, when its outcome is waste instead of production, destruction instead of construction, we call it not energy or power but violence” (246). Dewey’s definition emphasizes the fact that only actions that bring destruction and harm can be turned into violent acts, i.e. actions are counted as violent only when they are intentional.

Furthermore, Thomas Foster contends in his book, *How to Read Literature Like A Professor*, that “Violence is one of the most personal and even intimate acts between human beings, but it can also be cultural and societal in its implications. It can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, Romantic, allegorical, transcendent” (100). In this vein, Walters & Parke both view that culture determines violence, that is to say, people choose violence over those who come from a different cultural environment (5).

Jamil Salmi, a Moroccan education economist, explains that any action that violates people from their human rights or deprives the realization of a basic need falls under social violence (17). In this regard, Nelson Mandela asserts

Violence thrives in the absence of democracy, respect for human rights, and good governance. We often talk about how a “culture of violence” can take root [...] It is also true that patterns of violence are more pervasive and widespread in societies where the authorities endorse the use of violence through their action. (1)

The reasons why some countries suffer from violence are mainly related to the lack of democracy, security, and law enforcement that does not respect human rights. In addition, the public’s distrust in state institutions to protect citizens and provide justice is the reason for the culture of violence. A society built on a stronger culture of violence and weaker authorities is therefore more likely to experience armed and violent conflict.

Robert Audi, an American philosopher, proclaims that a violent act can be either physical or psychological stating that

Violence is the physical attack upon, or the vigorous physical abuse of, or vigorous physical struggle against, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous psychological abuse of, or the sharp, caustic psychological attack upon, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous, or incendiary, or malicious and vigorous, destruction or damaging of property or potential property. (59)

That is to say, real violence is an act of aggression that involves physical force and is intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something. It is also any act that causes psychological harm to a person or animal. Destruction of property can also be considered an act of violence.

Consequently, Audi's definition emphasizes on the fact that violence has countless of psychological dimensions.

Overall, violence is the deliberate cause of real physical harm or injury on people as individuals or a community. It is one of the human behaviors that characterize the twentieth century. From the above definitions, it is clear that violence is not limited to physical violence, but has a broad range of connotations and consequences that can lead to psychological damage, rights violations, deprivation, and even death.

### **1.1.1 Violence in Literature**

As far as literature is concerned, violence has always been a quite debatable topic to be tackled. In literature, the theme of violence has constantly been depicted and symbolized primarily to show the underlying conflicts in all social relationships and the human motives and passions. In order to explain the meaning of violence in literature, real-life events need to be analyzed because the main purpose of literature is to portray reality in a dramatic, effective and perhaps fictional way. To do this, authors may also choose certain characters and settings that have strong similarities with people or experiences that are familiar to readers.

In his book, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Foster asserts "Violence is everywhere in literature. We'd lose most of Shakespeare without it, and Homer and Ovid [...] much of Milton, Lawrence, Twain, Dickens, [...] and on and on" (107). By admitting so, Foster points out that several writers would be nowhere if they did not integrate the theme of violence in their works. This shows the high status of violence in literature. In other words, violence serves various motives in literature. Literary authors aim to go through people's interests by depicting violence as an undeniable reality, which in turn helps the reader to understand and perceive it.

In *Violence in Literature: an Evolutionary Perspective*, Joseph Carroll, a literary scholar, assumes that writers deal with the idea of violence with the aim to get a deeper understanding of human nature. Nevertheless, people have different concerns. Therefore, it is a challenge to uncover the motives for using violence in literary works (33). He later adds:

Violence in literature has no inherent valence or significance. Violence can be heroic, triumphant, cruel, vicious, or fertile and ineffectual. The value attached to any particular instance of violence derives from occasions and circumstances, the motives of characters, the author's attitude toward the depicted characters, the author's general outlook on life, and the responses of readers. (36)

Hence, Carroll suggests that violence can imply good as well as bad intentions; these intentions are determined by the author's motives and life's experiences that are plainly mirrored in the characters. Moreover, Foster persists that acts of violence in literature are almost always symbolic of a larger form of suffering, claiming that violence falls into two categories: one when a character harms himself or another character; one when the harm is caused by the writer themselves (102).

Consequently, it is safe to say that there is a strong relationship between violence and literature. As authors' literary works are more likely a reflection of their inner conflicts and experiences. Simultaneously, Writers try to portray in their novels and poems the real events that their community, and sometimes they themselves, experienced and how much violence they were subjected to. By addressing the issue of violence, their narratives sound purely realistic; they can reach a wide audience and ultimately lead to change.

### 1.1.2 Different Psychological Manifestations of Violence

From the Renaissance to the middle of the twentieth century, European colonial powers invaded and dominated a considerable part of the world. Throughout this long period of history, colonialism exhibited various ideologies. The encounter between the native populations of colonized countries and European colonists resulted in “the most complex and traumatic relationship in human history” (Loomba 8). This lengthy traumatic relationship had a profound impact on both the colonized and the colonists’ psychologies, profoundly influencing their perspectives on themselves, other peoples, and the world at large. The colonial experience contaminated the cultures and identities of colonized people. Even long after independence treaties were signed (Robertson 303).

Violent events may involve either psychological harm or actual physical injuries, or a combination of both. However, threats of violence may represent a larger psychological burden than actual physical violence, as psychological effects usually are not limited in time. Through experiencing psychological violence, the victims often suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidality, substance abuse (Friborg et al 2-3).

Colonialism is a long-term process in which individuals from one territory establish colonies in another, and the dominating territory takes full control of the colonized life. The purpose of colonization was usually to raise profits or economic benefits by exploitation, to grow authority through land appropriation, or to expand religious realms while demeaning and subjugating indigenous peoples. Thus, the colonizer positions himself as intellectually and culturally superior to the colonized. The colonial agenda within psychiatry has been exposed for enforcing its social, cultural, and political goals based on white, Eurocentric, male, neoliberalism. While demeaning all what is indigenous and utterly repressing their

identity. The Western methods organize the knowledge produced in a way that silences and excludes the history/voice and identity of the oppressed Colonial Western psychiatry (Joseph 4-5).

The current social, psychological, and health illnesses that have been imposed on indigenous people “belong” to settler society (Dupuis-Rossi 110). Prior to the invasion and occupation by colonial invaders, indigenous elders from various nations taught us that there were structures and protocols to deal with unstable behavior when it manifested. However, illnesses such as schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, suicidality, etc. were non-existent before colonization. These are the devastating effects of genocidal violence ( Dupuis-Rossi 111).

Colonialism locates the pathology within the indigenous nations rather than acknowledging the negative effects of psychological violence on the latter’s mental health. The DSM diagnosed the colonial violence’s impact as a personal deficit. These psychiatric diagnoses assigned to the violence victims a label connected with individualized disorders such as personality disorder, anxiety disorder, or depression. Rather than acknowledging the disorder of colonization, the impact of continuous colonial violence on one’s mental health is completely ignored. Thousands of years of peaceful coexistence have been erased from these places. Indigenous resistance to colonial aggression has been disregarded for hundreds of years. Their psychological struggle is very normalized and this is yet another manifestation of ongoing colonial psychological violence ( Dupuis-Rossi 111-2).

The chaos and brutality of colonization have impacted all Indigenous people in one way or another. Beginning with the mere confrontation and coexistence with colonialism, up to dealing with new circumstances imposed by the latter, stating: poverty, homelessness, discrimination, stereotyping, police brutality, and the list goes on. All of the above leads to the creation of a heavy psychological burden that makes functioning practically impossible.



The disease of colonial brutality inscribes itself on their spirits, and it is the basis of their marginalization, alienation, disorganization, and instability leading to their psychological torment (112-3).

Individuals subjected to the brutality and desecration of psychological violence can experience it at the most vulnerable time of their lives as children. As a result, disturbed youngsters in conflict areas become hostile and violent not only against the settlers and their police forces but also against their families. A study undertaken by Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland, questioned 3000 schoolboys from Northern Ireland and discovered that the majority approved of violence and grew highly accepting of it. But they also formed a sense of rejection towards their country; many of them expressed a desire to leave when they were older (Leavitt and Fox 17).

Literature makes use of culture, religion, and politics to explain certain events or provide comprehensible arguments for ambiguous character behavior or plots. To accomplish this purpose, literature has largely been subject to psychology. In order to create authentic work, authors employ approaches related to psychology to analyze writings. He defines it as a crucial tool to dive deep into the meanings of any literary work (Aras 251).

One of Sigmund Freud's theories is the unconscious. It was crucial to comprehending the mind of the twentieth century by providing significant theories for how these unconscious impulses are manifested. According to this hypothesis, the human mind is divided into two parts: the conscious side which is the awareness of the self, and the unconscious side which we can only access to throughout indirect ways such as dreams or neurotic symptoms. He assumes that much of the mental life is unconscious, and it is the part of our brain responsible for forging one's character and behavior. He adds that much of our behaviors are directed by

our unconscious mind not by our free will as we might believe (Cherry 7). Julie Rivkin argues that:

His discovery was that the human mind contains a dimension that is only partially accessible to consciousness and then only through indirect means such as dreams or neurotic symptoms. The unconscious as he called it, is a repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives, many of which, according to Freud, have to do with sexuality and violence. (Rivkin and Ryan 389)

Repressed urges, sentiments, childhood experiences, and impulsive drives are all stored in the unconscious. These suppressed desires and emotions might find their way out through dreams and other methods. When Freud attempted to present more explanations, he focused more attention on the effects of sexual depravity and violence on the human psyche. He believes that sexual suppression and being subject to violence leads to unjustified behavior. To put it another way, Freud resumes that the unconscious regulates behavior.

Things that individuals tend to temporarily forget are mostly alarming, painful, or shameful experiences. As a result, these events are cleansed and utterly erased from one's consciousness. According to Freud, in the neurotic, these strong unappealing impulses and sentiments, are basically expunged and erased yet temporarily for they still exist in the unconscious mind, they are to be restored later. The instinct responds by seeking satisfaction through repression which is a defense mechanism. The latter will cause the ego to protect itself from the renewal of the repressed desires. Freud looked at repression as the chief reason behind the neuroses, and the understanding of repression is the key to the psychoanalysis analysis (Ntara 3).

According to sociologist Fanelli Alexander, Freud attempted to ground his theoretical notions in literary criticism by publishing *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* And many

other works. Some of his psychoanalytical theories were based on dream interpretation and childhood memories. In one of his best works *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explains the insights we can retrieve from analyzing one's dreams, all of the masked desires the fears manifests in one's dream (Fanelli 33). He also explained his theory of personality where he divided the brain to three components: the id which is the unconscious and biological part responsible especially for sexual desire, the superego in the conscience guided by morals and principles, and the ego which is guided by logic and reality. The three components interact and conflict in order to shape the personality. Theories of childhood experiences and the Oedipus complex are extremely influential. Psychoanalytic literary criticism may all use Freud's theories to gain more understanding of the ambiguous literature. Psychoanalytic literary criticism looks for the influences of all three parts of the mind in literature (Stangor and Walinga 7-9).

The biographical background of a writer plays a significant role in understanding the literary message conveyed by its creator. Putting it within a Psychoanalytical frame will help scholars and critics grasp the conditions of those writers. Freud argues for instance that the characters employed by the author reflect a lot about his mental and psychic state. Like his background, childhood memories, relationships, and life experiences. Psychoanalysis also includes detecting the author's motives and the meaning beyond the use of specific symbols. Freud's theories were too extended that his psychoanalytic literary criticism analyzes both the form and content of the work in relation to the author's psychology and biography (Aras 252).

## **1.2 The Fanonian's View of Violence**

Frantz Fanon's perspective on violence and how it affects individuals stems from his personal experience. Being born in the capital of the French colony of Martinique, Frantz was raised as a colonial subject. In France, he attended medical school and received psychiatric training. He joined the French army in World War 2 and it was right after this experience that

he wrote his first masterpiece *Dark Skin, white Mask* which was published in 1952. Later, he was appointed as a psychiatrist in Algeria, where he eventually joined the revolution against the French. In his book, Fanon describes both the positive and negative aspects of violence. His most famous and contentious remarks concern the cathartic and self-actualizing effects of violence on a colonial or oppressed subject (jha 359-360).

According to Fanon, violence can be derived from the racialized view of the superior white man, who frequently imbue their subjects with notions of backwardness, barbarism, and lack of rationality. They thus dehumanize their subjects to the point of “turning him into an animal” (Fanon 140). Since the dehumanized subjects will not respond to anything, it becomes natural for the colonizer’s superior race to use violence in different contexts. Violence was used as a tool for maintaining power and imposing the authority of the colonial regime over their subjects: “their first encounter was worked by violence and their existence that is to say their exploitation of the native by the settler was carried on by the dint of a great array of bayonets and cannon” (Fanon 36).

The term Violence was tackled by the author in a variety of ways. For instance, Fanon used the word violence and force interchangeably in his writing; “between the oppressor and the oppressed everything can be solved by force” (jha 360). His definition of violence includes all forms of political compulsion, as it includes physical or psychological harm, aggressiveness, and coercion. Fanon on the other hand placed a high value on violence. According to him, it is through violence that man can create himself. Revolutionary violence liberates man’s consciousness and gives birth to a new man (360).

No gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them. The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler

through force of arms. When his rage boils over, he rediscovers his lost innocence and he comes to know himself in that he creates his self. (Fanon 21)

It is only in and through violence that the dehumanized subject becomes a human being again, frees his soul, and liberates his conscious. As a psychiatrist, Fanon argues that violence can be employed as a catharsis. Violence serves as a healing force in the process of getting rid of the feeling of humiliation and inferiority complex of the oppressed. As put in Fanon's own words

At the level of individuals violence is a cleansing force it frees the native from his inferiority and from his despair and inaction it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. (94)

Fanon states that "the catharsis experience" is basically the act of the colonial subjects stepping up to free themselves using violence. The term "Catharsis" was defined by Oxford as The process of releasing and thereby providing relief from strong or repressed emotions. Releasing the accumulated pressure of aggression and oppression throughout violent intervention. Only by this violent intervening event that the feeling of self-loathing and denigration can fade away. Thus, they can restore their sense of who they are. With this being said violence is a type of catharsis that allows the oppressed to reach their final self-actualization (Pallas 5).

Thus the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner...for if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone. (Fanon 45)

Another reason why Fanon embraces the violence's effects is that he believes it plays a massive role in unifying the natives towards their common goal. Solidarity comes right after liberating one's consciousness. It is the key to overthrowing the colonial grip. To quote Fanon

The practice of violence binds them together as a whole since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning. The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people. It throws them in one way and in one direction. (93)

Violent moments strengthen the idea of solidarity and instill in the individual's consciousness the idea of the common destiny and collective history. The journey does not top with the deconsolidation, where violence was used to fight oppression. Rather, it extends to the reconstruction phase where it will be used again to fight against poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment (jha 361).

When violence is used in taking the national liberation, the natives are their own hero their own liberator. They recognize that the violent struggle toward national independence raises their political and general awareness leaving a smaller scope for the demagogues to rise. As fanon calls it "illuminated by violence" (jha 361-2). Colonized People can choose their new reality they are no longer the creation of history. It is in this way that revolutionary violence raises consciousness and awareness about social truth. Accordingly, decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself (Fanon 36-7).

Frantz Fanon's depiction of the positive and bad outcomes of colonial violence on individuals is very significant. Violence has the ability to be liberatory and cathartic in the sense that it permits a colonial subject to be free and build a positive new identity after experiencing colonialism for a long time. However, violence, on the other hand, has negative consequences. The most evident effect of violence on individuals and their families is physical and mental harm. Fanon emphasizes that the damage done by the colonizer is not limited to physical violence, as the colonized individual lives in an environment where violence is constant, multidimensional, and diffused into everyday life (Pallas 6). Finally, violence will create frustration and confusion for people who try to rebuild their identity, the psychological trauma of living in terrifying conditions for so long makes the process of reclaiming oneself again extremely challenging (Oranlı 9).

### **1.3 The Appearance and Development of the African American literature**

There was literature before the Civil war, but most of it did not survive. According to Barbara Stanford: "Before the Civil War, most of the black literature was oral literature: songs, poems, and tales produced by slaves to help them cope with plantation life" (qtd in Cunha Maciel 10). This oral tradition was known by all slaves and played a major role in the formation of African American literature. When Africans came in touch with Christianity for the first time, they found in the rituals of the bible some resemblance to their own situation like stories of freedom and slavery. Though the religion is the same, Africans managed to have their own specialized worship behaviors; as a result, the whites found them strange and scary, so they forbid them from any religious meeting. To make the work in plantations more fun and to forget the endured pain and hardships, slaves used to sing songs known as "negro spirituals" or "spirituals". According to an article published by the Library of Congress "A

spiritual is a type of religious folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African American people in the American South” (Cunha Maciel 10). In a description of the black slaves’ songs, Harry T. Burleigh writes

Their [songs] worth is weakened unless they are done impressively, for through these songs breathe a hope, a faith, in the ultimate justice and brotherhood of man. The cadences of the sorrow invariably turn the joy, and the message is ever manifest that eventually deliverance from all that hinders and oppresses the soul will come, and man – every man – will be free. (10)

It was believed that some of the Negro spirituals had hidden purposes like helping slaves escape the evils of slavery in the south and reach the north. The spirituals did also help the blacks by inspiring and giving them the sense of courage and confidence to pursue their freedom. Frederick Douglass recalled that the plantation spiritual “Run to Jesus” had first suggested to him the thought of making his escape from slavery. When slaves sang “I thank God I’m free at last,” only they knew whether they were referring to freedom from sin or from slavery”. (Andrews 693). Although the oral tradition was very rich, written literary works by African Americans were very poor.

African American writers started publishing their literary works during the 18th century. The hard conditions of slavery are considered the main reason behind the shift from oral to written expression. Africans felt the need to express themselves and speak out against the inhumane and brutal circumstances they endure every day. “We black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. Accepting the challenge of the great white Western tradition, black writers wrote as if their lives depended upon it...” (Cunha Maciel 08). Starting from the 18th century till nowadays,



Africans produced the most qualified and notable works which consisted the African American literature and contributed to the formation of American literature. African American literature can be defined as “a literature written by, about, and sometimes specifically for African Americans” (African American Literature). William L. Andrews defines it as well as a “body of literature written by Americans of African descent” (Cunha Maciel 6).

The terrible sins of slavery, equality, racism, segregation, freedom, culture, and discrimination are the most tackled themes and issues by Africans through their literary works. It appeared during the 18th century with early prominent writers like poet Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and orator Frederick Douglass. Then, it developed through the 19th century with the appearance of the Harlem Renaissance and continues nowadays with groundbreaking works by the most famous and acclaimed writers like Walter Mosley, Toni Morison and Maya Angelou. African American literature has evolved through time; before the American civil war, African writers devoted their works to merely addressing the terrible sins of slavery by producing a literary genre called slave narratives. Later on, with the rise of the abolitionist movement, there was a huge demand for a shred of evidence for the atrocities the blacks went through; as a result, many African American writers provided their works as an eyewitness for the damage caused by slavery on Africans. However, in the 20th century and late 19th century, the focus of the African American literature shifted to speaking against the racist attitudes, stereotypes, and racial segregation the enslaved blacks suffered from. Slave narratives which constitute a big part of the African American literature are one of the prominent forms of literary expression that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries and gave an account of the brutalities of slavery (Graham and Jr 51).

### 1.3.1 Slave Narratives

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, African American writers thought that it is high time to start addressing the continuing inhuman practice of slavery; as a result, a literary genre called slave narratives came into being. Slave narratives are “an account of the life or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally” (Andrews pp 1). In other words, it is a type of literature, mostly consisting of stories told by slaves or ex-slaves and mostly written by the slaves themselves or passed orally and written by others. Additionally, the narratives portrayed the cruel methods by which the blacks were captured, separated from their families, and sold as slaves.

Indeed, James Olney asserts that slave narratives “may be understood as a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life- the present-, looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how the past history has led to this present state of being” (47). In the same vein, Sharon Monteith maintains that slave narratives are “One of the new genres that the United States contributed to the literary canon is the slave narrative, the autobiographical account of a former slave’s life once he or she has escaped to freedom” (26). As a matter of fact, both Olney and Monteith argue that slave narratives are a literary genre used purely by fugitives or prior slaves to describe how severe and brutal the slave life was.

Moreover, John Sekora believes that “the journey back in the study of black American life has of course always led to the narratives, long recognized, notwithstanding their diversity, as chronologically and psychologically the ground upon which later black writing is based” (482). Indeed, slave narratives are an indispensable part of African American literature in particular and American history in general. Therefore, Oualdah Equiano and Phillis Wheatly are considered the pioneers of the slave narratives, along with Frederick Douglass, Harriet

Beecher Stowe, Henry Bibb, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Richard Wright and many others who set the ground for the African American literature (Olney 65-72). Besides, Monteith approves that slave narratives were very popular; Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* sold 30,000 copies; the narrative by William Wells Brown saw four editions in its first year in addition to other narratives that were translated into many other languages (26).

Subsequently, these narratives were not written with the purpose of focusing on the individual lives of slaves as known internally and subjectively. Rather, the focus is on slavery as an action experienced by blacks. In this sense, Olney states "The lives of narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like" (51). In the same context, John Sekora states "slave narrative is far different from the creation of a self, and the overarching shape of that story is mandated by persons other than subject. [...] what Douglass calls "the fact which I felt almost everybody must know" (509). The narratives, then, are personal life experiences that reflect the suffering and unbearable conditions to which the entire community was subjected.

All in all, the dehumanization and violent mistreatment of whites towards African Americans putting them in the most horrible, ugly, and inhumane conditions, pushed African Americans to rise up and address the misery and violent actions of white Americans and create a new literary genre, slave narratives. The latter became the voice of reality for slaves in particular and blacks in general. Slaveholders kept whitewashing the image of slavery and showing it to the world. As put in Sekora's words "in moral terms the slave narrative and its heirs are the only histories of American slavery we have. Outside the narrative, slavery for black Americans was a wordless, nameless, timeless time. It was a time without history and time without imminence" (512). Most of the influential and celebrated literary works of this

period in the United States were slave narratives written by African American writers. Since the events described are factual and realistic and were really experienced by the author, this ultimately hits the reader directly in the heart.

### 1.3.2 Slave Narratives' Common Patterns

Like any other literary genre, the slave narrative has certain characteristics and motifs that define and distinguish it. Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo and Remi Akujobi summarize slave narratives' patterns into some elements. According to them, the narratives represent vivid scenes of violence and terror to satisfy the public's hunger for sensation. They describe life in the South. They serve as propaganda weapons during the period of slavery abolition (58).

In his book "*Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*" Frances Smith Foster states:

The plot of the nineteenth-century slave narrative is informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure on both the material and the spiritual levels. The action moves from the idyllic life of a Garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land. In addition, the plot of the slave narrative incorporates the parallel structure of birth into death and death into birth which also distinguishes the Judeo-Christian myth. (84)

In other words, the slave narratives are chronologically divided into several phases. The first phase is when the narrator loses his innocence, as he is brought from the state of the safe zone, as Smith puts it, the Garden of Eden, to the state of evil, where he learns about and realises life in slavery. Second, it is the point at which the slave begins to leave slavery and seek the path to his freedom. The third phase describes the getaway to freedom. Here the

narrator describes all the pitfalls, the ups and downs he experienced on the way to freedom, and finally the stage when he successfully achieves redemption and freedom.

According to Olney, the most distinguishing characteristics of slave narratives are that they include portrait of the narrator, epigraphs, poems, newspaper clippings, anti-slavery essays or speeches, etc... (49). In the same context, Foster states that “slave narratives were presented as non-fiction. Prefaces, letters of references, affidavits, newspaper clippings, copies of legal documents, or other materials were published with each narrative to assure the reader of its validity (x). This means that the African American writers are trying to show what was done to them by providing concrete documents or evidence of the validity of their statements. Besides, Foster continues that these writers tended to rely on simple and direct language in their writings to meet the needs of their audiences; “slave narratives were didactic writings” (3, 4). In other words, because of the illiteracy of many blacks at the time, the writers use a simple style to meet the expectations of their audience. Therefore, the majority of slave narratives’ titles have the subtitle of “Written by Himself or Herself” (Morrison 89) for African American writers who wanted to prove their recognition and authorship to white readers via a well-written literary work.

Furthermore, Toni Morrison argues that all slave narratives are written with the aim to highlight two main things “One: This is my historical life - my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race. Two: I write this text to persuade other people - you, the reader, who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery” (86). Thus, the main purpose of these narratives is that the narrator can reflect the voice of his race through his individual life story, and that these people, like all other people, deserve to live their lives away from segregation.

All African writers investigated the same issue through their stories, and sought to serve one common principal; thus, the themes and the plot of the story lines are always the same since writers came from the same conditions. Hence, it serves a purpose, namely to show the evil and reality of slavery and slaves' striving for freedom. In this vein, Olney claims that narratives share the same theme, content, and form. The theme is the real suffrage from slavery and the urge to eradicate it; the content is a series of vivid scenes and events that the reader through them will see and sense the psychological, physical, and spiritual damage caused by slaveholders; "the form is a chronological, episodic narrative" (53).

However, despite the fact that slave narratives share the same narrative features and themes, they have some differences related to the writer's own experience, personal life and public recognition; "a white Unitarian minister claimed that despite certain differences in slave narratives, the story that the formerly enslaved ones had to tell had a universal value – these were stories of human struggle, stories of enslavement that actually proved to be stories of the essential importance of freedom, and they were stories "calculated to exert a very wide influence on public opinion" (Miniotaité 10).

#### **1.4 The Antebellum African American Literature**

African American literature, as the name clearly defines itself, is the literature; prose, poetry, plays, music, novels...-written by people of African descent in the USA, who ended up in North America mainly via their ancestors who were brought as slaves in the 17th century. It's nearly impossible to separate African American literature from American history because the latter is a narration of what black Americans lived in racist America.

The term African American literature has always conjured with it some canonical names such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T Washington, Dubois, and many others. Many may think that the reason that these bold names are put under the category of African

American literature and not only American literature is that they were Africans born in America. However, the reason is much more complex. The birth, as well as the evolution of this genre, was from within the wombs of an oppressive and racist society. Thus, the narratives that came to birth documented the tragic history of African American victims who fought against horrific slavery and racial segregation in America (The British Library).

Although, since 1970 African American writers have received widespread recognition, this literature has been nationally as well as internationally acclaimed since the late 18th century. Prior to the Civil war, African American literature focused mainly on slavery and freedom as well as religion and human conflicts. The period from 1845 to the Civil war have witnessed the birth of what is called abolitionist literature which was mainly anti-slavery literature. Books, pamphlets, poetry, newspapers, and many other forms were African American writers' way to fight against slavery and call for abolition. During that period, there was a huge demand for literary works which accurately depict the horrors of slavery, sexual abuse, inhumane workload, family separation, and the cruel segregation of the American society against the enslaved blacks. This genre became a political tool that African Americans used to sway sentiment against slavery and call for the abolition of slavery as well as to show that African Americans have a mastery of language that allows them to write their own history (Graham and Jr 34).

### **1.5 Post-Modern African American Literature**

The African American literature has deep roots that go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the United States came into being. In the mid-twentieth century, a new cultural movement known as postmodernism emerged. This new phenomenon emerged to distinguish itself from the preceding movement "modernism". Whereas Hutcheon asserts that postmodernism did not appear as a mere contradiction to the previous movements for postmodernists cannot

totally refute modernism; however, they can question its beliefs. In other words, postmodernism comes as a successor to modernism ( Ficza 5). Postmodernism is characterized by paradox, humor, pastiche, and more. In the same vein, Dubey denotes that postmodernism is “characterized as a postindustrial society or a new stage of “multinational” or “disorganized” capitalism” (17).

Additionally, Dubey says “The 1970s marked a decisive turn in the African-American literary tradition, when the emancipator promise of urban modernity was widely felt to have been exhausted” (4). It means that the 1970 brought a change in the literature of African-Americans because those who were freed from slavery and had been promised that they will be equal to the white man in rights turned out to be unable to be reached; thus, their literature was directed towards this unkept promise. He asserts that postmodern African-American writers convey not only the dwindling credibility of racial representations existence but also a sharp distrust of printed literature (6). He adds that although Postmodern African American writings call on representing racial difference, they are generally far from tackling the particularities of African American lives (7).

Hogue entails that almost no postmodern African American female writer represents postmodernism similarly to their Caucasian counterparts. They do not tend to neglect the discussion of racial and sexual values in their literary works. Instead, victimization, inferiority, and devaluation of the Other as a result of racism and sexism are a major concern for them (7)

Postmodern African American literature is the literature written by black people of African descent living in America (Okolo and Akujobi 10). It emerges as a reaction to modern literature, patriarchy, white supremacy, Western reason, and other Enlightenment ideas. Some see it as continuity to modern literature, others see it as a criticism of the failure of modern



ideas to achieve their aim. Dubey points out that their literature is at the heart of postmodernism. He states “it is difficult to write about late-twentieth century U.S culture without taking on the term postmodernism which, without a clear consensus about its meaning circulates widely as a periodizing concept” (17). In fact, postmodernism brought a noticeable shift from modernism at the social, cultural, and economic levels.

### **1.6 African American Literature during the Harlem Renaissance**

The period of the Harlem Renaissance, also labeled The new negro Renaissance, is supposed to be the Golden Age of African American literature; “It is a movement in music, art, literature, and politics from the early 1900s to 1940s, emphasized the importance of freedom- political, economic, social and artistic - for African Americans” (Smith and Jones 163). The Harlem Renaissance was a turning point in African American culture. New York was the heart of this influential movement. The Harlem district attracted talent and intellectuals from all over the world and served as the symbolic capital of the new African American culture. It was considered the center of African American life.

At the beginning of the 1900s, African American life was shaped by a couple of aspects, most notably the depression which redefined the African American political and economic life. During this period, the demand for human rights increased. African American soldiers risked their lives for freedom in World War I, but they were not treated equally in the United States. Another major aspect was the Great Migration when 7 million African Americans moved from rural southern states to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West. They were mainly focused on the largest cities in the USA like New York, Chicago, Washington, and so on. At a time when those cities had a central influence over the United States (Graham and Ward 256- 260).

Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance laid the ground for African American Literature. The main reasons behind this cultural blossoming were the popularity of pan-Africanism among influential African American thinkers such as Du Bois. It encouraged a dynamic real awakening of arts, music, and literature. In fact, music was a dominant aspect of the Harlem Renaissance movement, which gave rise to blues and jazz, the most popular musical genres of the time (Okolo and Akujobi 95- 98).

In the same context, Graham asserts “painters and poets, jazz musicians and blues singers, actors and orators, dancers and composers, poets, playwrights, and novelists all crowded in night clubs, lecture halls and salons which justifies Langhe’s celebration of the era as a time when the negro was in vogue” (257). In other words, Jazz becomes very popular among whites which contributed to the emergence of Negro Vogue in The American community. At the time when blackness was seemingly coming to vogue, the cultural shifts that define the era were mind-blowing for a society that has long devalued blackness and the black community (Varlack 237). The eminent writer of the Harlem Renaissance is undoubtedly Langston Hughes, who broke away from white poets’ way of writing and wrote in the rhythmic meter of jazz and blues (Okolo and Akujobi 98).

In short, The Harlem Renaissance is an undeniable era in which Blacks produced literary and artistic innovations. This movement grew out of the intolerable living conditions of African Americans in the south, which caused many blacks to emigrate to northern cities like New York City, specifically in the Harlem district, when jobs occupied by whites were vacated and replaced by blacks during the First World War. Nevertheless, Harlem Renaissance writers were able to create their own distinctive forms that influenced the spiritual meaning of the black life experience in a time of accelerated change. African Americans sought to break the concept of the Negro from white stereotypes and show the world what a black man could do and achieve.

### 1.6.1 African American Writer's Double consciousness

Originally, the term was coined by W.E.B Du Bois as a theoretical tool it reveals psycho-social divisions in any society. Du Bois engaged throughout his long career in the attempt to understand both the socio-historic conditions facing “Black folk” in the American twentieth century and to show the impacts of those conditions on the consciousness and “inner world” of the human beings subject to them. He mainly focused on the black American experience because of their racialized oppression in a white-dominated society (Graham 272).

it is a peculiar sensation this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 02)

Du Bois maintained the need to gain self-consciousness to merge his double selves into a real and more authentic self. Throughout the merging process, he does not wish either of the two selves to be lost nor does he wish to Africanize America. However, he would still not bleach his Negro blood for white America's sake because he believes in the message that his blood carries. Du Bois persists that a man can be both a Negro and an American without being cursed, and without having doors of opportunity slammed in his face (Du Bois 02).

In the words of Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” goes forth “to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smitty of my soul the uncreated consciousness of my race” (Graham 275). “Creating the consciousness of my race” The expression conveys different meanings for both white and black fellows. Euro-American Modernism was self-consciously experimental, obsessed with

developing new forms of expression to represent radically new forms of human consciousness. Likewise, the modernist self-expressions represent a profound sense of fragmentation and alienation, variously understood in political (Marxist) or psychological Freudian terms. Since early times African American writers confronted hard life conditions; as a result, black modernists knew psychological and social alienation. Far from being a new experience, fragmentation was uprooted from black people's lives, it shaped their geographical, cultural, and linguistic homes while they were always forced to adapt to the white world (275).

Double Consciousness lead to the appearance of new stylistic approaches like "Masking" which was developed during slavery as a survival strategy. It was a coded form of communication; the approach relies on a shared understanding of the ironic distance between image and reality. It brought a wide range of new aesthetics added up to the modernist fascination with ambiguity. African Americans developed a wide range of literary strategies for self-expression in the presence of the white, it was double voiced, that is, based on manipulation of linguistic motifs and poetic images (260-1).

African-American modernism worked out the crossroads of cultural traditions. The distinctive aspect of them is that it brings together both horizontal experience (social relationships and political pressure) and vertical experience which is psychological (complexities of consciousness). Texts of crossroads Modernism attempt to uplift the two modes of awareness so they can stand against the white supremacist culture which denies African American humanity (262).

The double consciousness played out not only in the black-white relationships but also in the African American community. It was manifested in gender sexuality, class, and color. Black feminists have introduced their concept of the triple consciousness. Black women not

only have to see themselves through the lens of blackness and whiteness but also through the lens of patriarchy. In her pamphlet *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, she claimed that capitalism was the direct forbearer of racism because the system was indirectly a way to destroy the humanity of black people. In any society where men are not yet free, women are less free because we are further enslaved for being African American and women. We are enslaved by our sex (the triple consciousness and the black woman).

Many African American women turned towards feminism in their fight against oppression because there was more awareness. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, black women poets like Georgia Douglas, and Anne Spencer, playwrights like Marita Bonner, novelists like Nella Larsen Fauset tackled in their womanist discourse matters of equality between men and women, it was a necessity in order to reach an adequate understanding of the black society. They focused on the internalization of white supremacist notions of color like favoring light-skinned women, Wallace Thurman's "*the blacker the berry*" 1929 and Nella Larsen's "*Passing*" 1929, discussed the ways in which double consciousness can distort their personal intimacy. Gay and bisexual black writers were also active during the Harlem renaissance but they did not express their homosexuality in their themes (Graham 264).

Black writers were aware of the double consciousness, it provided them with a central theme and structural principle, writings like Jessie Redmon Fauset's "*There is Confusion*" 1924 which gave a classical description to the black men's struggle while writing and Richard Wright's "*Black Dog*" 1945 which depicted other relationships dimensions within black society. Joyce Pound, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner created new kinds of books setting the model for African modernists by using black vernacular material (folklore, music...) and a mixture of prose and poetry like in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* 1922.

A masterpiece of African-American modernism was James Weldon Johnson's novel "*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" 1912 whereby he redefined the possibilities of the African American vernacular. The commercial success of Johnson's musical colloquies with a number of black musicians including his brother Rosemond Johnson Elaborated the representation of black life and language, whereas in his poems he was connected to black equality and the black rights to full citizenship. In his poem "Fifty Years" 1917:

This land is ours by right of birth  
 This land is ours by rights of toil  
 We helped to turn it to virgin earth  
 Our sweat is in its fruitful soil. (Sutori 2)

Double-consciousness is an idea that comes from W.E.B. Du Bois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, explains how people of color often have to learn to navigate their own culture while also learning to navigate the institutionalized systems of the dominant culture. The playwright of this adaptation adds a character into the play, "The Black Rat", who speaks the inner thoughts of Bigger, which are often very different than the ones he speaks. The Black Rat symbolizes, in many ways, this idea of double consciousness.

Literature, as perceived by the early African American authors was regarded as a weapon and the writer as a combatant. It was a way to achieve self-definition, belonging, and self-esteem in a community that denied them equal status with the whites. As a matter of fact, whites in North America feared not only the revolutionary power of the physical violence of African Americans but also the power of their intellect. As a result, the Blacks were legally prohibited from obtaining any form of literacy. However, African American writers refused to

remain silenced and decided to speak out against all forms of subjugation and injustices producing a series of distinctive literary accounts known as slavery literature or slave narratives.

## 2 Chapter two: Richard Wright in *Native Son*

Richard Wright, as Debbie Levy claims, was the most famous African American writer in the United States. In addition to *Black Boy*, *Native Son* is considered as one of the most best-selling books (12). This chapter will attempt to provide an overview of the author's profile and a summary of the novel's major events as well. Also, it will discuss the themes of the novel in relation to the major theme, i.e. Violence and how they impact the novel's protagonist.

### 2.1 Author's Biography

Richard Nathaniel Wright is a novelist and short story writer. He was born in Natchez, Mississippi. His grandparents were slaves. He is the son of Ella Wilson, who was a teacher, and Nathan Wright, who was a sharecropper. His father left him when he was young. Due to his poor condition, he dropped out of high school and started looking for a job; the author of *Native Son* escaped his native land searching for a better life (Levy 13 - 25). So, he moved to Chicago. After working in unskilled jobs, he got an opportunity to participate in the Federal Writers' Project. In 1932 he joined the Communist Party and in 1937 moved to New York City, where he became editor of the communist *Daily Worker* in Harlem. In 1942, he left the party because of restrictions on the freedom of blacks to protest racial discrimination and injustice. (*Britannica.com*)

Richard Wright's first work is entitled *Uncle Tom's Children* (1936). Besides, he wrote *The Outsider* (1953), *Black Power: A Record of Reaction in the Land of Pathos* (1954), *White Man, Listen!* (1957), and *The Long Dream* (1958). Moreover, the pioneer African American author's notable works are *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* (1945) (*Britannica.com*).



*Native Son* was Richard Wright's best work. The book immediately made Wright a major author and a spokesman for the situation of African Americans (Levy 11-2). Wright's novel portrays elements of the poverty, conflict and fragility that black people still experience in America. Wright managed to reflect this situation in *Native Son* through the characters.

Richard Wright is now ranked with African American luminaries such as Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. His two books, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, are recommended in high schools and universities across the country. *A Father's Law*, his last unfinished work, was recently published posthumously. He died in 1960 (Wright 349).

## **2.2 Synopsis of Richard Wright's Native Son:**

*Native Son* by Richard Wright is a book that clearly recounts how can oppression, fear, and aggression turn a person into a murderer. By the time the book was published, fugitive slaves witnessed the most horrible living conditions in a racist and oppressed society. Wright had the urge to show through his literary works the terrible consequences of racism, violence, and dehumanization imposed by the whites on the black people

The novel is about a young African American boy, twenty years old, from Chicago's Black Belt called Bigger Tomas. He lives a miserable life with his family in one room where they share life without privacy, freedom, or respect. Bigger shares a kind of homosociality with his gang of friends that is based on pride, fear, resentment, and violence. In order to support his family, he takes a chauffeur's position with a rich white family.

Bigger's first task at the Dalton's is to drive their only daughter Mary to the university. On their way, they pick up her communist boyfriend Jan Erlone. After spending a long night in the town and heading back home, Bigger was forced to carry Mary to her room for she is too intoxicated to make it upstairs. After putting her in the bed, Bigger stays there for a while

excited by the idea of his presence in the room of a white girl. While he is trying to kiss her, her blind mother suddenly enters the room and he panics. Fearing being caught, Bigger chokes Mary with a pillow to keep her quiet, unconsciously killing her. Bigger gets rid of her body by beheading her and putting the corpse in the family's basement furnace. Taking advantage of her disappearance, Bigger tries to blackmail the family by composing a ransom in which he tries to frame Jan and engage his black girlfriend, Bessie.

After being exposed, Bigger flees with Bessie and hides in the empty buildings catching news from the newspapers and the voices of people. Out of fear of betrayal, Bigger kills Bessie in a monstrous way after raping her. Finally, he is caught after a long chase and put in jail. Bigger is defended by a Jewish communist lawyer, Max, who tries to argue that the social and moral reality experienced by the African Americans is the main reason behind their aggressive behaviors. While the prosecutor, Buckley, tries to emphasize that Bigger's blackness is the reason behind his bestiality. Despite Max's consistent attempts to save Bigger's life, he was sentenced to death.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part which is "Fear", introduces in detail the main character, Bigger Thomas. His family life, street culture life, and daily routines were thoroughly portrayed. In this part, Wright introduces to the readers the personality of this black boy who resents the passivity of his own people and struggles to endure a life that is the source of rage, fear, and violence. He describes the torments which Bigger is struggling with and that are beyond his control and ability. It is in this part that Bigger is introduced to the world of the whites by meeting the Daltons and inadvertently killing their daughter.

In the second part, "Flight", Bigger undergoes many events from pretending that nothing happened to consciously killing Bessie and finally being accused, caught, and put in

jail. Bigger challenged the whites and wanted to win the battle. In this part, all his thoughts and choices are clear to the readers, and it is obvious that fear is controlling most of his behaviors.

In the last part, "Fate", the story is taken inside the court where Bigger's trial is happening. The whole judicial system is presented, Max attempted to speak before the whole black people not only Bigger. This court episode gives the readers' insights about how can words fully picturize the already described way of life and panic. The trial depicts how a black teenager is turned into a monster by the racist population who already decided his destiny before hearing the final verdict of the court.

Wright employs characters and settings that provide a vivid portrayal of the economic and psychological effects of racism and violence. *Native Son* is considered as a third-person limited narrative situation. One may say that it is the voice of the central character, Thomas Bigger. The others are the flat characters because they do not change in the novel, just Bigger who is considered as a dynamic character. Whereas white folks may consider as foil characters because they are the enemy of Bigger. Back to the settings Wright attempt to portray racism, fear, and violence in his novel as his main themes. These themes are vividly introduced to show the struggles of Bigger Thomas with poverty and racism throughout the book.

### **2.3 Thematic Aspects of Violence in Native Son:**

In writing *Native Son*, Wright used various themes throughout the novel. These themes were indeed treated in such a way to represent how they influence and affect the protagonist's state of mind and ultimately manifest to create a violent character.

### 2.3.1 Racism in *Native Son*

It should be noted that Wright wrote his novel, *Native Son*, during a time of conflict between blacks and whites, a time when there are different racial forms in American society and in the world at large. In fact, racism, as a violent act, is one of the main themes of the novel. In America, there is a line between blacks and whites. Blacks are not allowed to dwell with Whites in private or in public.

Indeed, Wright has succeeded in portraying racial discrimination in the novel. The novel begins with an alarm clock awakening Bigger's family. The alarm clock is symbolic of the urge that Bigger in particular and Blacks in general have to wake up and break their silence in the face of American persecution.

"Let us kill them all. They are not human. There is no room for them all" (Wright 311).

"Down here in Dixie, we keep Negroes firmly in their places and we make them know that if they so much as touch a white woman, good or bad, they cannot live." (Wright 311).

The rats and the white cat in Wright's novel have different connotations. After the Alarm scene, Wright opens the novel with a rat in Bigger's one-room house. The rat is a symbol of miserable and poor living conditions. Rats are usually found in poor houses, and in this context, they are the houses of Blacks. However, a rat is rarely to be found in the houses of Whites. They invade houses that have holes and garbages.

"How in hell do they get so big?"

"Eating garbage and anything else they can get." (Wright 17).

However, Mrs. Dalton's white cat represents the luxurious life of American society and white supremacy. Thus, Wright portrayed Bigger as a worker and Mary Dalton as a capitalist.

Racism in this novel, however, affects not only blacks, the oppressed, but also whites, the oppressors. In this sense, Bigger's psychological damage is due to the constant racist and

oppressive acts to which he was subjected throughout the novel. Additionally, Bigger proclaims that he cannot achieve his dream of becoming an airplane pilot because African Americans are not allowed or encouraged to receive even basic training in Chicago. This shows that African-American people are being deprived of minimum and basic rights simply because they are black. The harmful effects of racism extend to the white population as well.

Many white characters in the novel, such as Britten and Peggy, become victims of the racist actions of whites themselves. Wright tries to show that the sense of white superiority is nothing but weakness, as Bigger manages to avoid suspicion of his Mary's murder. In his novel, Wright uses Bigger as a symbol for an oppressed black man who commits murder crimes to get rid of the feeling of oppression (Takeuchi 66).

In addition, the mass media plays an important role in the portrayal of American racial discrimination in *Native Son*. The film that Bigger visits give a taste of the luxurious and glamorous lives of white people: "Though the Negro killer's body does not seem compactly built, he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength. He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast" (Wright 221-222). In this scene, the whites are portrayed as attractive, cultured, and civilized, in contrast to the blacks, who are depicted as savages from the jungles of Africa.

The voice of the commentator ran with the movement of the film: "Here are the daughters of the rich taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida! This little collection of debutantes represents over four billion dollars of America's wealth and over fifty of America's leading families..." (Wright 38). What Wright was trying to convey here is that only rich white people have the opportunity to appear in movies.

“In order to buy a magazine and go to the movies, he would have to have at least twenty cents more. “Goddammit, I’m always broke!” he mumbled” (Wright 50). In the previous example, Bigger needs more money to buy a magazine. The high price of the magazine shows the buying power of whites as opposed to blacks. This means that it is produced only by whites and for whites.

A newspaperman wrote about Bigger’s terrible crime when they found out he had murdered Mary Dalton. They insulted him with many different cruel words, especially the word ape:

“Kill’ im!, lynch’ im!, that black sonofab\*\*\*!”

“They let go of his feet; he was in the snow, lying flat on his back. Round him surged a sea of noise. He opened his eyes a little and saw an array of faces, white and looming”

“Kill that black ape! (Wright 216)

A crime committed by a white person is never comparable to a crime committed by a black person, especially when the victim is a white American. Therefore, the reaction of the press and all the people calling for him to be killed is not because of what happened, but because of who is responsible for it; it is his black skin color that has caused all this media hype.

### **2.3.2 Fear**

The theme of fear in *Native Son* is an important one that runs throughout the novel. Fear and panic are evident in the feelings of Bigger's family when the rat enters their room:

...the tiny one-room apartment galvanized into violent action. A chair toppled as the woman, half-dressed [...] scrambled breathlessly upon the bed. Her two sons, barefoot, stood tense and motionless, their eyes searching anxiously under the bed and chairs. The girl ran into a corner, half-stooped and gathered the hem of her slip into both of her hands and held it tightly over her knees. (Wright 15)

The fear is also shown in the fact that Vera is afraid of the rat after Bigger has killed it.

“Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister’s fear.”

“Bigger! Vera gasped convulsively; she screamed and swayed and closed her eyes and fell headlong across her mother and rolled limply from the bed to the floor”(Wright 18).

“The rat’s belly pulsed with fear. Bigger advanced a step and the rat emitted a long thin song of defiance, its black beady eyes glittering, its tiny forefeet pawing the air restlessly” (Wright 17).

Although Bigger is stronger than the rat, he is afraid the rat might escape and be free. On the other hand, the whites’ fear of the blacks is undeniable and leads them to exercise their authority over them. In the same way, Bigger is also afraid of the white community. The fear between Bigger and the rat is thus based on mutuality, just like the relationship between blacks and whites, which in *Native Son* is based on mutual fear.

Fear is also clearly shown in Bigger’s fear when he tries to rob a white man’s shop. He is not afraid of the robbery itself, but of the fact that the owner of the shop is a white man. He has never robbed a white man before. In addition to that, although Bigger is overwhelmed by fear throughout the novel, it is a feeling he does not like to face. In fact, he prefers not to think about his own sense of fear: “But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in

him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness” (Wright 46). Bigger tries to overcome the thought of his fear, and so this fear sometimes leads to anger and violence against those who cause it in the first place.

Another major display of Bigger’s fear was the murder of Mary, which landed him in custody: “It was not because he had thought any the less of Bessie that he had forgotten her, but Mary’s death had caused him the most fear; not her death in itself, but what it meant to him as a Negro” (Wright 261). The reader learns throughout the story that Bigger’s greatest fear was not the act of killing itself, but the person he killed, a white woman. This means that crimes in America are handled differently depending on who and to whom the crime was committed. All in all, Bigger’s overwhelming sense of fear is the main motive for his two crimes and it is the one that evokes violence in him.

Richard Wright, as the American writer Arnold Ampersand proudly claims, was “perhaps the most significant and influential African American author of the Twentieth century” (Matthews 02). Through describing and analyzing the whole existence of black people as an oppressed nation, he was the one who opened doors that were once closed for African American writers. James Baldwin, Wright’s most insistent contemporary critic, admits that he viewed Wright as his “spiritual father” and Wright’s work as “a road-block in my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself” (Matthews 02).

There is no doubt that Wright was among the first American black writers to protest white treatment of blacks, notably in his novel, *Native Son*, in 1940. The novel became a bestseller and received great success by selling more than 2000 copies a day. The masterpiece established Richard as the spokesman for African American struggles. He depicted the life of the Negroes with all the oppression and atrocities they undergo in the slums of Chicago. The



novel highlights American society's responsibility for the violence practiced against blacks and stresses the consequences that must occur as an end to these acts (Rinehart 165).

### **3 Chapter Three: Different Psychological Manifestations of Violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son***

There is no doubt that Wright was among the first black writers in America to protest the treatment of blacks by whites, especially in his novel, *Native Son* (1940). His literary works received a lot of criticism concerning his concentration on violence and attracted many analysts. However, the major concern of these critics and analysts was the manifestation of interracial violence in the novel, ignoring the other types that Wright explicitly described in detail. This chapter is an analytical one; it is an analysis of the different manifestations of violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and a proof that the novel was not restricted only to interracial one. Further, it aims at showing the changes in Bigger's character from a psychological perspective taking into account some cultural and social factors as well.

#### **3.1 Violence as the Main Aspect in *Native Son***

Richard Wright's life was not different than that of any other African American. In 1908, Wright was born in South America where the violence of slavery continued under the tremendous discrimination of the Jim Crow regime and the terror of the Ku Klux Klan lynchings. As a child, he was taught to submit and endure racism and segregation in order to survive. Growing up, he had seen his father abandoning the family for not being able to feed nor protect them from white injustice, his uncle being lynched for nothing but being black, and his mother struggling to make a living. After his mom's sickness, Wright was shifted from one relative to another and then he was moved to an orphanage but spent much of this time in bars, clubs, the streets, and the railroad (Patrick 4). In December 1927, he escaped the brutality of the south hoping for better economical possibilities in the north; however, his hope was undercut as soon as he arrived in Chicago. Life in the north was not different than that in the south and the injustice of the white society followed them even there. The newly

arrived southerners were forced to live in the poorest neighborhoods called the black belt where they struggled to assert their humanity (Rinehart 175).

Violence has been a matter of question in American society for decades. In this novel, Richard Wright accuses the white society of oppression and emphasized the psychological impact of violence on African Americans, receiving praise, as Irving Howe wrote “for bringing out into open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture” (Moore 665-9). Wright used the character of Bigger in *Native Son* to depict the collective psyche of suppressed poor urban blacks, including himself, who found themselves living in the poor slums of the black belt of the American north during the 1930s. Also, to demonstrate how the white violence, practiced against Blacks since the beginning of slavery, forced them to unconsciously become violent back.

The novel *Native Son* presents the negative impact of violence on the psyche of African Americans; it shows the results of racial oppression on the behaviors of blacks. Violence plays a fundamental role in the works of African American writers. The reason for its use, as most authors explain, is that it is the only means to establish justice and give power to the oppressed minority. Violent behavior is of the psychological need to get rid of oppression, sometimes violence is merely a natural response to violence, and the latter may impose heavy mental and psychological disorders on its victims.

Violence is one of the most important emotions in *Native Son*. Violence was manifested in different ways throughout the novel; the most important is the violence of black people against their own skin, of white society and the police against Negroes, and violence against female characters of the novel. Violence was portrayed as a psychological state of mind hunted by anger, hatred, and oppression. It is clear that Bigger Thomas, the novel’s protagonist, turned into a violent person as a result of his environment and its influence upon

his personality. Enduring and witnessing the daily oppression, racism, and miserable conditions, have negatively affected his state of mind and shaped his aggressive behaviors. As a result, Bigger is considered as a tragic victim of implacable social forces (Van Hoose 1).

Despite all, nothing would happen in the novel without the violence of Bigger Thomas because it is the driving force behind the protagonist's actions; it is also a motivator that pushes him to commit murder crimes. The hostile violent act extends to include almost all characters surrounding Bigger. Beginning with his behavior towards his mother, as well as towards the rest of the Thomases, the circle of victims of violence widens to include his male friends and even his girlfriend Bessie, to whom the most terrible act of violence occurs, ending with her death (Takeuchi 58).

The Psychologist Brock Bastian describes cognitive responses to violence as cognitive deconstructive states. It involves emotional numbing, reduced empathy, violent reaction, and absence of logic (Bastian and Haslam 297). Bigger experiences the symptoms of cognitive deconstruction as the result of white people's violence, its impacts are manifested even in his most intimate relationships: "I wasn't in love with Bessie ... I don't reckon I was ever in love with nobody ... You had to have a girl, so I had Bessie" (352). Bigger became indifferent as he lost empathy towards people, he can no longer truly hate nor love. He never considers the impact of his actions (Gee 15).

### **3.2 Different Manifestations of Violence in *Native Son***

Violence invades almost all literary work of Black American authors where white violence against blacks produces a victim and black violence against whites produces a hero. Richard Wright had often been subject to criticism because of his heavy preoccupation with such violence in his writings and was sometimes accused of promoting violent acts through his novels. However, as Patrick Wilmot argues in his work *The Role of Violence in The Works*

of Wright and Fanon “these critics failed to understand that this violence is not the creation of either writer but is derived from the violence that structures the society they lived in” (02). Indeed, what was ignored in the criticism of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was the fact that Wright was born and raised in an oppressive and racist society which means that he, himself, was the product of violence and he needed to put into words the experience he shared with his black fellows to the world.

### 3.2.1 White Colonizer vs. Black Colonized Forms of Violence

White violence against Blacks dates back to the early slave days and continues through the Jim Crow regime in the south to the dehumanizing injustice of a white society that followed southern blacks who fled to the north hoping for a better life. Black Americans, especially new arrivers from the south, were the most affected by the great depression of the 1930s; they were subject to extreme racial, economic, and political violence. Living in the miserable slums of the black belt, they shared rooms infested with rats and roaches and could hardly afford the rent or food. They were denied the opportunity for school or employment and excluded from the social, political, and economic spheres of life. Perhaps the most expressive way to describe the white regime that Blacks survived, whether in the south or in the north, is that it was a system that punished them for their mere existence; an existence suppressed by irrational violence by white racist society (Ellis 3).

What critics have missed in their readings of *Native Son* is that these brutal social, cultural, and economic factors were the real motive behind Bigger’s aggression (an imaginary character that represents black Americans of Chicago’s black belt) and a major agent in shaping his character. Lewis’s reading of violence is worth taking into consideration: “Violence is fundamentally a form of dehumanization; any effort to create a human place in response to violence is inevitably caught in a swirl of continued violence. This is because

inhumanity, dehumanization, forces human beings into unavoidable cycles of action and reaction and dirties everyone's hands" (Ellis 06). Bigger, as any other American black male or female, was "prevented from realizing his full potential as a human being and excluded from full and equal participation in civil and political society" (Ellis 07). According to the Frustration-Aggression hypothesis, Freud explains that based on the causal relationship between frustration and aggression, we can interpret that the violence committed by the Blacks is unconscious and inevitable in its nature. It was the frustration of being denied the least rights as human beings and the opportunities to realize their dreams that provoked the Blacks' aggressive behaviors.

However, Biggers' violence is different. Bigger does not represent the typical protagonist of earlier African American fiction. Considered passive by the whites, he chooses to take full responsibility for his actions to prove his consciousness. Bigger consciously claims his humanity and manhood in a racist culture of terror. Kadeshia L. Matthews in her article *Black Boy No More; Violence and The Flight From Blackness in Richard Wright's Native Son* argues that "Wright appears to innovate that violence is necessary for manhood that makes Bigger so new"; an idea that is deeply embedded in Western civilization (Ellis 03). Manhood or being a man in the United States is commonly associated with having certain rights, privileges, and control over property and women's bodies; things that are closely aligned with being white (Matthews 03). In white culture, Blacks, males, in particular, have been unfairly denied all the already mentioned privileges; thus, their manhood and masculinity. "The masturbatory act" between Bigger and Gus in the theatre displays a way to liberate themselves from white control (Ellis 14). and an attempt to assert themselves and regain their violated humanity or masculinity. The "stealing from whites" is another scene in which Bigger and his friends challenge the white rule and consciously seeks self-assertion in a

white dominant society. For Bigger and his friends, the challenge of robbing a white-owned store represented phantasmal liberation from white domination (Ellis 10).

The murder of Mary was the central event of the story. It was a perfect illustration of how a victim of violence can become violent himself, whether consciously or unconsciously. The act of killing itself was an accident caused by the violence that held the society together with whites on top and blacks at the bottom. Bigger gets drunk Mary into her room and into her bed. Filled with orgasmic pleasure, he starts approaching her body with hesitated yet desirous touches until he panics and kills her when her blind mother suddenly enters the room. Bigger's sexual approach to Mary, full of hate, fear, and desire for white women, was a way to assert his lost masculinity; however, the interruption of Mrs. Dalton prevented his assertion. Bigger killed Mary because he had no choice. It was the white racist society that made him believe that "no matter how non-racist his employer is, he would have dismissed him, or even have him arrested if he knew he was alone with his daughter in her bedroom" (Wilmot 05).

Although it is true that the murder was an accident, Bigger decided to accept it and not feel guilty about it. Unlike the traditional African American characters, Bigger here is not seeking to prove his blackness but rather to prove his humanity through accepting his consciousness. Wright explains that Bigger had advanced to this stage when he decided to accept the consciousness of his individuality as a result of the violence he committed and his confrontation with death. Before, he had been an object of unthinking white rage, the sub-human incapable of taking responsibility for his actions, because of the violence which pervaded and defined his existence: "I didn't want to kill! Bigger shouted. But what I killed for, I am! It must have been pretty deep in me to make me kill!" (Wright 453).

Throughout the novel, Wright puts great emphasis on the social environment and how it influenced the development of Bigger's character. The white violence against blacks had been deeply rooted in Black people's consciousness to the extent that the notion of darkness and whiteness became a racial marker and a dominant concept within their thinking (Van Hoose 02). Wright excessively used imagery to portray this idea in the novel that it is impossible to depict all of them here. The novel starts with the Thomas family in a dark room hunting a big dark rat. It was not until a sudden burst of light entering from the window that they were visible (wright 05). Another similar imagery is represented in the movie theatre where Bigger and Gus were roaming the street under the sunlight and then entered the dark theatre room to find their seats, and it was not until the light of the projector hit the screen that they could see the movie (Wright 29). These imageries show how whiteness and blackness are perceived inside Bigger's mind reinforcing the idea that the Whites overpower the Blacks. In Bigger's mind, Whiteness and blackness were associated not only with the appearance of a person's skin or with the social structure only but also with visible lightness and darkness (Van Hoose 08).

Suddenly...the door behind Mrs. Dalton filled with a flowing white presence. It was Mrs. Dalton, her white eyes held wide and stony, her hands lifted sensitively upward toward her lips, the fingers long and white and wide apart. The basement was lit up with the white flash of a dozen silver bulbs. (Wright 201)

From the description of the presence of Mrs. Dalton's whiteness to the more abstract forms as white snow and white sunlight to the white light of the camera flashes. Wright succeeded to take the reader into Bigger's head and provide an understanding of how he perceives these signs and the power that they have in determining his attitude.



### 3.2.2 Black People vs. Black Forms of Violence

Wright through his novel, *Native Son*, succeeded in showing that there are other multiple manifestations of violence that existed in the Afro-American societies besides the racial, Black vs White. A significant form of violence present in the book is the one issued by the blacks against their own people. Bigger, the major character of *Native Son*, clearly exemplifies this form of violence. He hated his living conditions as much as he hated the Whites. Bigger lived in a world where he was completely alienated and detached from any kind of relationship whether with his own people, the folk culture, the whole south, or the religion. He rejected the whole south, and more precisely, the whole Black Belt for the brutal and inhuman way of living forced on them by the whites, and the passivity and cowardice of his own people. The black life in the south represented void, lack, negation, and nothingness. This is clearly stated in the book when Bigger confesses to Jan and Mary that “he grew up in the South and has only been in Chicago about five years” (Wright 71).

Four people living in one tiny room suffering from poverty, lack of privacy, hopelessness, humiliation, and dangerous conditions due to the apartment’s disrepair and unsanitary is what Bigger suffered from every day, and no wonder that he is “sick of his life at home” (Wright 22). Bigger despises his family as much as he despises the Whites: “Goddamn! He wanted to wave his hand and blot them out. They were always too close to him, so close that he could never have any way of his own” (Wright 88). He fully recognizes that “His family was a part of him, not only in blood but in spirit” (Wright 234); however, he still feel of too much aversion and shame towards them. His family is hopeless, weak, and submissive whom he shares with the “world without spaciousness” (Matthews 15). It unconsciously pushed him more toward becoming an aggressive person while he is trying to assert his humanity and masculinity.

Bigger sees his mother who is supposed to be a role model for him as “defeated, wanting nothing more from life than what the Whites are willing to offer. Mrs. Thomas, with her constant talk of death, seems old before her time” (Matthews7). She is a religious, weak and passive woman who accepted the fate and injustice imposed on her by the Whites and did not work hard for the betterment of her life. For instance, in the opening scene when Bigger kills the big black rat and tries to scare his sister with it, Mrs. Thomas’ clear weak personality becomes evident for she collapses from weeping. Throughout the novel, she is shown as the powerless, feeble, and nagging mother who keeps denigrating and emasculating her son. She even kept blaming him for their poverty and despair: “We wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” (Wright 19).

His brother, buddy, on the other hand, is just a “soft and vague [...] aimless, lost [...] like a chubby puppy” (Wright 95). Vera is no different from them; she represents the foolish young version of her mother. As a result, his resentment to his mother’s attitude, constantly bullying his sister, and almost killing his buddy is clear evidence of his hatred towards his own people, and his strong desire to “wave his hand and blot them out” (Wright 100). Bigger’s feelings went beyond frustration and annoyance for the toxic family dynamic he experienced. Even thinking about them caused him significant emotional distress. He rejects their way of living, and wants to establish his own new life far from them; he even rejects Bessie’s desire to be by his side. Eventually, Bigger becomes an angry, shameful, and violent man for the nothingness of the black life, the lack of hope, identity and purpose that his family, in specific, and the blacks, in general, suffer from.

According to Freud’s theory of childhood memories, it is psychologically proved that one’s personal development is related to the early events of his childhood. Hostile childhood experiences including poverty, maltreatment, constant crucial criticism, or the death of a parent increase the risk of developing mental health problems. Bigger’s father was killed by

the whites when he was very young. Growing up without a father, he developed a very tough and self-destructive personality. He felt the responsibility of replacing his father and supporting his family. As a result, Bigger adopted two-sidedness, he is firm among his family and own people and submissive among the whites. He becomes violent and destructed in his struggle to balance between the two personalities. The absence of a father greatly affected Bigger and he became a melancholic person. Someone who has “incorporated a lost love object into the ego through an unconscious identification with it. This identification, Freud argues, enables the ego to take on attributes of that object and preserve the object within the very structure of the self” (Takeuchi 4). He identified his melancholic personality with losing his father. Bigger’s complicated feelings towards his father, a big love mixed with hatred for not being there for him affected his perception of relationships.

Bigger did not have any hopes, ambitions, or pathways to live a meaningful life, have a decent job and accumulate wealth. Wright states that *Native Son* is “the story and the psychological portrait of a young Negro who lives in the black ghetto of Chicago, unemployed, with all roads closed and with the constant logical temptation to escape the law” (Schotland 16-17). When he starts his new job at the Daltons, he witnesses the vast gap between his life and theirs and confirms his belief that living in the south is like living in jail: “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. He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself” (Wright 93).

Bigger is as distant from his family and black folks as he is from their religion. He is totally ignorant of the various religious traditions and spirituals practiced and repeated by his mother. He despised black people and considered them an act of cowardice, humiliation and

submissiveness. This is clearly evident in different moments throughout the novel, for instance, when Bigger was hiding in one of the empty buildings, he kept hearing a singing from a nearby church

The singing filled his ears; it was complete, self-contained, and it mocked his fear and loneliness, his deep yearning for a sense of wholeness. Its fullness contrasted so sharply with his hunger, its richness with his emptiness that he recoiled from it while answering it. Would it not have been better for him had he lived in that world the music sang off? (Wright 205)

The song is providing a sense of fulfillment, “a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed” (Wright 205), yet Bigger’s ignorance of the religious spirituals made him misunderstand the passage: “the music sang of surrender, resignation. Steal away, steal away, Steal away to Jesus . . .” (Wright 205). This song has a history for it had been used by the slaves to “voice their hopes for freedom in the afterlife, but also to signal their plans to seize freedom (Matthews 10). Bigger wants to enjoy his life to the fullest in the present time and not after his death; therefore, he rejects going to the church and be a religious man as he sees it as a place for “whipped folks” (Wright 280). those passive people who accepted their defeat. Wright illustrates in the last part of the novel and in another scene Bigger’s rejection of his own people and religion when he yells in the preacher Reverend Hammond’s face

I told you I don't want you! If you come in here, I'll kill you! Leave me alone!  
... Bigger ... caught the steel bars in his hands and swept the door forward, slamming it shut. It smashed the old black preacher squarely in the face, sending him reeling backwards upon the concrete. (Wright 267)

His violent reaction is another sign for not wanting to have any kind of relationship with the Black people or their religion, and for his exigent desire to raise his hand and blot them out. At the end Bigger changed and reached the state of mind he desired though he was sentenced to death.

The only intimate relationship that he had with his own people is with his black girlfriend Bessie, yet Bigger sees her as just a body to fulfill his sexual desires. Their love is built on Bessie's sexual compliance to Bigger in a complete silence. When she tries to have a normal relationship with him that is built on communication, understanding and sharing, he wishes to be able to "swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face, and leave [her body] helpless and yielding before him" (Wright 120). In the end, Bigger fulfills his wish by raping and killing her in a monstrous way. The act of rape, smashing her face and throwing her body out of the building proves that he thinks of her as just a body (Matthews 9). "Yes, that was what he could do with it, throw it out of the window, down the narrow air-shaft where nobody would find it until, perhaps, it had begun to smell" (Wright 195). Bigger sees his killing of his girlfriend Bessie as a survival act "It was his life against hers" (Wright 195). He believes that she does not deserve to live for the void and purposeless life she has, "Thus it is not Bessie's knowledge that compels him to kill her. She becomes the victim of his murderous rage because Bigger recognizes the pathetic compass of her life, which entails "long hours, hot and hard hours [in] the kitchen of the white folks" (Matthews 9).

Besides Bessie, Bigger did have different unique relationships with his friends Gus, Jack, and G. H, "for through them he may be connected to the street culture of urban black males" (Matthews 11). However, they were not such close and deep relationships, for he still felt alienated and separated from her world. Bigger sought to assert his masculinity and manhood denied him in the white oppressed world by constantly taking out his fury and

aggression against his friends for “signifying and street culture provide a space where Bigger can claim verbal and physical authority denied him in the white world” (Matthews 11).

Bigger and his friends were desperate and poor to the extent that they robbed their own black people. Wright states that “They had always robbed Negroes. They felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policemen never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes” (Ellis 10). In stealing Bigger and his friends enjoyed the pleasure of challenging the whites’ oppression; however, robbing their own people is nothing but a sign of “Bigger’s detachment from and disregard for black communal harmony” (Ellis 10). In attacking his friends, Bigger tries to assert his empowerment, masculinity and self-worth. His violent behaviors constitutes both hypermasculinity and fearlessness “for it frees Bigger of his inferiority complex and functions to restore his self-respect” (10). However, such behaviors threaten their homosociality and the harmony of the black community. In the poolroom scene Bigger takes out all his anger against his friend Gus by humiliating and emasculating him for he questioned his inability and fear to go through the robbery:

Lick it, Bigger said, his body tingling with elation. Gus’ eyes filled with tears. Lick it, I said! You think I’m playing? Gus looked round the room without moving his head, just rolling his eyes in a mute appeal for help. But no one moved. Bigger’s left fist was slowly lifting to strike. Gus’s lips moved knife; he stuck out his tongue and touched the blade. Gus’s lips quivered and tears streamed down his cheeks. (39)

Bigger dehumanizes and feminizes Gus by putting him under his body and forcing him to lick the knife which resembles his penis; the whole scene symbolizes the act of fellatio. Bigger

through this behavior tries to assert his power and fearlessness over Gus. Consequently, his friends fear and resent him rather than respecting him; however, after killing Mary he feels “cut off from them forever” (Wright 111). The physical and sexual violence are the only ways available to Bigger to regain his manhood and masculinity. This form of violence present among black men is discussed by Mercer in his analysis:

the kind of power acted out in the brutal violence of rape and sexual abuse is, in fact, a further expression of powerlessness, as it does nothing to challenge the underlying structure of oppression, but only passes on the violence of the dominant white male, via the psychic process of internalization, into the black community and onto black women [and men], their oppression at the end of the chain of colonial violence. ( Ellis11)

Bigger and his friends desperately neglected their fears by playing tough, yet this will never help them to get free from their psychological discords. Bigger’s brutality in murdering his girlfriend Bessie and assaulting his friend Gus are among his destructive violent behaviors through which Bigger is “able to gain consciousness, restore his self-respect, and assert his humanity” (Ellis 6). Bigger became free when he broke the shameful connections to his black people, family, Bessie, and friends.

The Whites are considered the main reason behind Bigger’s hatred of his blackness. They made him feel the difference between his dark black skin and their white skin, his inferiority and their superiority ( Schotland 4). Bigger’s blackness is the reason behind all his troubles; he accidentally kills marry for the fear of being caught in her room and directly be accused as black people are not supposed to be with the Whites in one place. Moreover, the mob groaned and sentenced Bigger to death before even listening to the court’s final verdict for Bigger is a Negro, and it is crystal clear that he committed those crimes. Even Buckley

and the press could easily describe Bigger as a rapist and monster, for he is just a black boy from the slums of Chicago. Throughout the novel, Wright kept using the two terms black and Negro to “emphasize on Bigger’s dark skin, which Bigger is exceedingly conscious of when in the presence of white people” (Matthews 16). He depicted what it is like to be a Negro in the no Man’s land. Placing a great emphasis on the darkness of his characters and associating it with violence, submission and terror proves his “unconcerned with blackness subjectivity” (Matthews 3).

Bigger struggled to prove his manhood rather than his blackness which is why he “marshals only violence, repeatedly rejecting both the black domestic space and black people in his project of self-creation” (Matthews 4). Through violence he manifests his rejection of his blackness “That is, at the moment they create themselves through violence, as men, Wright’s heroes simultaneously reject blackness, as represented by the black family/ community and black cultural practices, in favor of a presumably more encompassing identity: first, American and, ultimately, man.” (Matthews 7). Bigger seeks to prove that the widely believed idea that the Black people are not always conscious of most of their deeds is nonsense. He admits and takes the full responsibility of his criminal acts as his only way to self-realization and consciousness; as his lawyer, Max calls it “an act of creation” (Wright 400). Bigger is taking out all his aggression against his own people regardless the kind of relationship and connection he has with them; he even considers the act of rape “not what one did to women” (Wright 190), but rather as the “hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day” (Wright 190).

Bigger saw violence towards his own people and the whites as his only way out of the desperation and oppression he lived. He represents the native Frantz Fanon is talking about in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, only violence “frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inactivity: It makes him fearless and restores his self-



respect” (Wilmot). He is restricted and imprisoned in the black belt, as a result, “the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and aggression. The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor” (Matthews 15). Violence is the only mean of self-liberation, livelihood and manhood. Fanon describes the native son who is just as Bigger as “a product of the colonial encounter, and he can only recreate himself as a man through decolonization” (Matthews 13).

What amounted to Bigger’s aggression and hate is the sense of not fully belonging to neither the black world nor the white one. Wright highlights his resemblance to Bigger in suffering from a nationalistic complex: “Bigger was attracted and repelled by the American scene. He was an American because he was a native son, but he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way of life and mine; neither Bigger nor I resided fully in either camp”. Bigger inhabits a “No-Man’s land, hovering unwanted between two worlds between powerful America and his own stunted place in life” (Schotland 5- 6).

Bigger explains that he acts violently for it is a must and part of his personality that he cannot control, he tells Max: “I hurt folks’ cause I felt I had to; that’s all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room” (Wright 355). His environment made him always feel that one day he will do something terrible, he tells Gus that he believes “like something awful is going to happen to me . . . Naw; it ain’t like something going to happen to me. It’s . . . It’s like I was going to do something I can’t help . . .” (Wright 22). He represents the native that fanon describes as someone who knows “from birth [...] that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence” (Matthews 15). In the first scene where Bigger kills the big black rat Wright gives us the first image that symbolizes Bigger himself, the image “reinforces the fact that the violence in Bigger is a product of the violence around him” (15). His crashing of the black rat symbolizes

his violent behaviors toward his own people, fanon states that Bigger “first manifests this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people” (15).

### **3.2.3 Gender-based Forms of Violence ( Male vs Female)**

Subsequently, and as a result of Bigger Thomas’ conditions, the only answer to manhood was through violence. He became a violent young man with a pathological personality; female characters received the lion’s share of Bigger’s violent outrage. Bigger justifies his murder crimes against Bessie and Mary as an act of self-creation. Murder gave power and ownership over the victim: “Here’s a strange fact: murder a man, and you feel responsible for his life—possessive, even. You know more about him than his father and mother; they knew his fetus, but you know his corpse. Only you can complete the story of his life” (wright 38). Through violence, Bigger breaks free from all the racial and social restrictions that held him from fulfilling his manhood. the protagonist of the novel Bigger Thomas ends up committing brutal killings as he seeks to escape oppression, in both instances the killings give rise to a sense of newfound freedom and fulfilled manhood (Guttman 171).

In this novel, the writer describes the relationships between the protagonist and the female characters. both black and white women bear the consequences of violence, he distinguishes two types of violence exerted on the female victims for there is a wide difference between the motifs behind the acts of killing and even between the way the black and white women were portrayed. In America, it was crucial to protect the sexuality of white womanhood, for white women were stereotyped as the inaccessible symbol of white power and capitalism. The position of white women in American society restricted the interaction and regulated the behavior of black men in their presence; the myth of Black rapists terrorized the black community with the threat of lynching. While the antithesis was black women were

stereotyped as the easy and accessible symbol of the uncivilized. By emphasizing the protection of white women's chastity, womanhood totally ignored black women (171-2).

Bigger Thomas was conscious of the way black males were conceived by the white society, yet he had a burning desire to possess the unattainable white female body which symbolizes the system that oppressed him. He was eager to break the taboo and avenge his oppressed blackness. In Bigger's first meeting with Mary, she asks him whether he is a part of the union or not. Bigger notices her interest in political activism right away, he felt that Mary refuses to be the American humble, passive virgin. Rather she is pushy, sexual, and aggressive. Bigger thinks,

in all of the white women he had met [...] there was always a certain coldness and reserve; they stood, their distance and spoke to him from afar. But this girl waded right in and hit him between the eyes with her words and ways". (Wright 67)

Mary's behavior Presumably leads to her brutal death because she violated her given place. And she broke the boundaries between the two worlds.

Mary was presented as a superficial character influenced by her communist lover Jan who encourages social relations between races. Mary insists on ignoring the traditional physical distance between black and white by sitting in the front seats of the car with Bigger, Bigger has never been this close to a young white woman before, "Never in his life had he been so close to a white woman. He smelt the odor of her hair and felt the soft pressure of her thigh against his own" (77). Mary's every word and action aroused Bigger's desire. He was fascinated by her softness and mostly by the economic and social power for which she stands. On their way to a communist party she told Bigger "am on your side" reminding him that although she is on his side, they come from totally different worlds and levels which evokes

opposition in Bigger. Then she continues with her naive and degrading words to Bigger about how she wants to “go into these houses [...] and just see how your people live” (79) “I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro Home Yet they must live like we live. They’re human [...] There are twelve million of them”

The attempts to erase the distance between the two worlds fail. Mary reminds Bigger of how different they are; she reminds him of his blackness and she triggers his rage, turmoil, and emptiness. He felt like disembodying himself and her “Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out—with himself and them in it” (Wright 80). When Bigger carried Mary while drunk to her room, he manipulated her body so that it seems as if she is responding to him “He eased his hand, the fingers spread wide, up the center of her back and her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined.” (96). Mary represented the white’s untouchable symbol of wealth and power. Bigger could not tolerate his desires towards her, he felt the urge to act, to recognize his manhood and identity by killing the symbol of America’s wealth. Bigger was drowning in confusion and mixed feelings, the white American girl provoked both his sexual and violent desires. He admired and desired Mary but he could not separate his dream of possession from hatred: “But she was beautiful, slender, with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people. But, for all of that, she was white and he hated her . . . And, too, in spite of his hate for her, he was excited” (82). In killing her, he acts out both of these impulses.

Mary was objectified by Bigger; He used her as a weapon to find himself thus his voice: “He wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl, a girl whose family was known to all of them He took away her life in his way of self-realization “I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill

for 'em" (429). The verdict that Bigger gives to himself about his deeds was that "feel all right" about it (429).

While on the other side, the second female character Buddy was both treated and described differently. When Buddy tells Bigger that Bessie has been talking of marriage now that Bigger has a job, Bigger's response was silence, he rejects the thought of domesticity with her (104). Bigger knew that Bessie had warm feelings toward him and he fully took advantage of her emotions to satisfy his physical and emotional needs as a man. He was sexually using her; he was neither in love with her nor fond of her personality. She was silent and sexually available and she made him feel at peace; however, when she questions his actions and motives, he wishes he could "swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face, and leave her body helpless and yielding before him" (140). Bigger's sexual intercourse with Bessie allowed him to blot out his oppression. The fact that Bessie too was blotted out by Bigger reveals that the peace and comfort that Bigger gains from their lovemaking are not a peace shared with Bessie rather she was merely an object to fulfill his desires. Bessie's desires and actions meant absolutely nothing to him; it was simply a matter of what he wanted. When Bessie showed unwillingness to engage in sexual intercourse with Bigger he gets more excited. He is more aroused by her standoffish behavior; Bigger does not really mind her rejection he was intending to satisfy his desire either way. "He wanted to kiss her again, but deep down he did not really mind her standing off for him; it made him hunger more kneely for her" (114).

Bigger even uses Bessie's body to imagine his interrupted rapprochement with Mary: "He placed his hands on her breasts just as he had placed them on Mary's last night and he was thinking of that while he kissed her" (134). Thus, Bigger realized his sexual fantasies for Mary through his penetration of Bessie's body. Later, when he forced himself on Bessie he wanted to show her "huge warm pole of desire" (23). Bigger was thinking of Mary; his

unconscious effort was to prove his masculinity before the white woman he had always desired, and that was once out of his reach. On the other hand, Bessie offered him something more than this fantasy she was honest, real, and promising “willingly dragged into a warm night sea to rise renewed to the surface to face a world he hated” (135). Yet, Bigger was a sadist, he enjoyed Bessie’s pain over his committed crime, and her terror about him being caught “he felt the worth of himself in her bewildered desperation” (148).

Bessie’s murder was not necessary; He could just easily have escaped without telling her the details of Mary’s murder or his destination (Function of Violence 16). Therefore, It was not the fact that Bessie was aware of his secret that compels him to kill her, she became the victim of his rage because her pathetic life did not mean much, and he was persuaded that no one would feel the absence of that black girl unless her corps started to stink “Yes, that was what he could do with it, throw it out of the window, down the narrow air-shaft where nobody would find it until, perhaps, it had begun to smell” (235). Unlike the previous murder, which was almost an accident, Bigger was conscious of his decision of killing Bessie, he disregarded her resistance and raped her. Bigger’s thoughts after the rape make clear that he thinks of Bessie merely as a body.

A thing to be disposed of, Bigger’s murder of Mary Dalton can be interpreted as a necessary means for creating a new self, yet his rape and murder of Bessie suggest a male-centric narrative that represses and silences the black female voice. Bigger was the product of frustrated manhood that ultimately seeks expression in a violent sexual assault. The objectification and stereotyping of women are seen throughout the novel through Biggers violent tendencies against women are often the result of misogyny, patriarchy, and the need to assert their feeling of power and control over women in their lives (Takeuchi 56).

In his novel, Wright disassociates his female characters from their stereotypical sexualities. Mary is portrayed as dangerously unconventional. While Mary will stand in with either Bigger or Jan, Bessie unlike the usual stereotype of the black woman stands off from Bigger; she is cold just like a white woman should be. Bessie, however, does not remain sexually distant once Bigger offers some money which reflects badly on her character, Bigger was sexually aroused by Mary, the symbol of white wealth and power, and Bessie likewise is aroused by money. Wright denies society's image of black women being presumed unrapable because of being promiscuous and the white woman is presumed sexually cold because of her inherent chastity (66). Instead, *Native Son* shows how both Mary and Bessie represent how violence against black and white women in 1930s America takes crucially distinct forms. There has been a fabrication of stories about white women being raped while ignoring the actual rapes of black women. In the case of Mary, Bigger is restricted to certain behaviour due to the power that her statue beholds. He feels "strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people" (Wright 79). However, Bigger feels free and invisible as he rapes Bessie knowing that those in power don't care about people like him.

Finally, the difficulty in evaluating the role of women in the novel is a consequence of Wright's decision to limit the book to Bigger's consciousness; therefore, we cannot represent what Bessie or Mary felt, so the reader's understanding is limited to what Bigger communicates. This is another way of erasing the female voice for the survival of black men. In *Native Son*, the women suffer the worst forms of violence. Certainly, the violence Bigger commits against his gang, Jan, and the resentment he feels towards his family cannot be dismissed, yet the victims of real physical violence in this novel are women. Both black and white women are exploited, raped and killed in this patriarchal society because they are women and not just because they are black or poor (Guttman 186).

### 3.3 Analysis of Thomas Bigger's Character

Claudia Tate states “Wright read widely in psychoanalysis, and he used his understanding of its tenets in his writing” (94). Hence, studying Richard’s Wright *Native Son* from a psychoanalytic perspective is a must; one cannot do a psychoanalysis of the novel without mentioning the psyche of the protagonist, Thomas Bigger, and the changes he has undergone throughout the novel that have made him what he has become. As put in the psychiatrist Louis Graham’s words “there is no question that Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is Bigger Thomas’ novel and that Wright places major emphasis on the social, cultural, and economic influences in the development of Bigger’s character”(19). Thus, to understand Bigger’s state of mind, one should look at the various elements that shaped his character

In the opening scene, his mother blames him for the family’s poor status: “We wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” (Wright 8). For them, manliness means being financially stable. For a black man, however, it is simply impossible to get a decent job in a white society. Therefore, Bigger’s failure to function as a man and bring stability to the family creates a sense of guilt (Harris 65). Fury is observable in Bigger’s attitude toward his mother (Takeuchi 58): “He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives [...] So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain” (Wright 20).

Indeed, Bigger, as Mathews states, is a “child of violence” (281). He wants to live the life and have the rights that every white man has, he wanted to become a pilot, but he cannot realize his dream in American society which, in return, makes him a violent man; “Bigger is a product of the violence around him” (Mathews 281) In this sense, Lingdi Chen states that



“they’re Black men [...] they have little chance to get an education [...] Since Bigger was born, he has been deprived by the society ruled by the whites of the right to choose and he has been ordered to live in the established situation”(1).

In fact, Bigger’s social influence in the construction of his character dates back to the murder of his father in a riot in Mississippi (Wright 75). His father was killed by Whites which in return creates a sense of hatred in Bigger against white people (Takeuchi 57). Here, Freud emphasizes that melancholia is directly associated with the loss of love (58). As the protagonist Bigger is our concern, it is quite clear that he has a lack of love and tenderness from his parents since a young age; his father left him and was killed by whites, and his mother as well did not compensate for the loss of his father’s love. Instead, she was so cold and harsh with her child to the point she wished she did not give birth to him. Hence, the love, care, and compassion that Bigger was deprived of are fundamental in the creation of his character.

Moreover, Wright maintains that Bigger was “constructed by social, economic, and psychological forces beyond his control” (3). Besides, Freud claims that a melancholic person tends to direct his anger toward himself, the ego, rather than others (24). In this sense, Bigger is “toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough” (Wright 10). Sara Schotland argues that “Bigger is a violent young man with a pathological split personality” (3). In this sense, Wright describes Bigger’s social life as Fanon calls “a world cut in two and occupied by two different species” (437) there two worlds, white and black, which are physically separated. “There are black schools and white schools, black churches and white churches...” (Fanon 437). Therefore, Bigger’s dichotomy in two worlds creates a pathological split in personality. Bigger was both

an American citizen, for he is a native, and a Negro, for he was not permitted to live the life of an American (Schotland 4).

Freud's statement "the ego can kill itself only if [...] it can treat itself as an object" (30) is depicted in Bigger's and Jan's scene shaking hands and calling each other by their first names (wright 65) provokes anger in him. He "felt that he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin" (wright 66). In this context, Freud argues that a melancholic person usually feels a sense of "an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale" (24), and ultimately results in self-castigation. Bigger's thoughts about whites can be summarized in this quote: "Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me" (Wright 28). Therefore, Bigger's urge to rape and kill Marry "results from a kind of outrage with the white world" (Harris 83). Marry's murder made him feel equal to white people.

"Rape was not what one did to women" (Wright 190). For Bigger, rape is never a crime. Rather, it is an instrument of resistance against the oppressor. In his desperation, Bigger seeks to find in sexual control and possession of women a means of violent resistance to oppression (Takeuchi 66). Bigger justifies his actions as a rebellion against the whites. He never had a guilty conscience about his actions: "He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim [ ... ] he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this"(Wright 94). So the urge and intention to kill were internal, he just did not find the "circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill" (wright 94).

After he killed Mary, a feeling of freedom came over him, because he was out of the circle of the accused: "They might think he would steal a dime, rape a woman, get drunk, or

cut somebody; but to kill a millionaire's daughter and burn her body?" (Wright 99). The idea that black people "had never done anything, right or wrong, that mattered much" (Wright 93) does not apply to Bigger anymore, for he has perpetuated "a supreme and meaningful act" (101), and ultimately he has "created a new world for himself" (Wright 198), a world in which he can achieve the manhood he has dreamed of all his life. For Bigger, a Negro can achieve the quality of manhood only through violence. Murder, for him, is a means of self-identification and the creation of masculinity. Besides, the action of killing the two women, Max claims, is "an act of creation" (Wright 308). Indeed, Bigger identifies himself as an American male only through the conformity of violent acts that comes with the rejection of blackness (Mathews 281).

Bigger's sexual desire for both Mary and Bessie immediately turns into a desire for murder. Wright elucidates that "Bigger does rape and when he does so he is in the same state of mind that he is when he kills Mary" (Guttman 186). Max could not understand Bigger's mixture of feelings between hatred and sexual desire toward Mary. When he tries to explain to Bigger that Mary was being kind to him, Bigger replies

"Kind, hell! She wasn't kind to me!" "What do you mean? She accepted you as another human being".

"Mr. Max, we're all split up. What you say is kind ain't kind at all. I didn't know anything about that woman. All I knew was that they kill us for women like her. We live apart. And then she comes and acts like that to me" (Wright 275). Therefore, Mary poses a serious threat to him, and her kindness would bring him nothing but harm and even death.

Bigger's famous saying "what I killed for, I am" (326) [...] reveals the process of the substitution of political desire for sexual desire. Having been identified as a black rapist and having become that rapist, Bigger killed for the right to have what white men have—white

women”(Guttman191). Bigger, ultimately, justify his crimes. He was raped and killed because he was black; for him doing wrong was the right thing to do. He thought that this was the best way to prove himself as being not less valuable than white men.

In a passage worth quoting at length, Wright explains why Bigger has committed his two crimes:

But there were always two factors psychologically dominant in his personality. First, through some quirk of circumstance, he had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race. Second, he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life. (Wright 333)

One of the main motives for Bigger’s actions was thus direct contact with the Americans, who indirectly influenced his state of mind through their media and mass culture, and eventually led him to reject the culture of his group

For Bigger, manhood in a white society can only be achieved through the acquisition of violent qualities. However, as Mathew argues “those around him will only read that violence by inserting it into the already existing narrative of the black rapist” (295). This violence that brought Bigger back his manhood is also what took away his freedom and his life. Mathews continues on to say “Bigger is indeed a native son, but as the closeness of his first name to the epithet Nigger implies, his blackness renders the American manhood he has achieved unrecognizable precisely because it is a manhood that depends on the maintenance of racial difference” (Mathews 295). Indeed, Bigger’s dream of living a life as a white man and possessing the rights of a white man is unattainable.

Through the chapters of the novel, one may see that violence concerned of both black and white, and it influenced both of them. Multiple forms of violence were issued by the whites to control the blacks and make their life unbearable. On the other hand, the blacks reacted with their own kind of violence to show their unwillingness, disapproval and intolerance of the terrible way of living imposed on them by the whites. Thus, violence expressed against the oppressed will react on the oppressor. Indeed, Wright throughout his novel depicted the different manifestations of violence that other writers did not implement in their literary works. He invites us to reflect on the relationship between black American conditions of oppression and violence as an outcome, and he stresses the fact that assuming one's gender identity is easier when it is not already raced.

Subsequently, Social, cultural, psychological factors played a major role in influencing and shaping the personalities and minds of the blacks. Bigger, *Native Son's* major character, is an evident example of how can the environment shape one's state of mind and consciousness. The novel depicts to what extent can racism, poverty and frustration implants the seeds of violence and crime in individuals as the only solution to escape oppression and self-hatred. The oppression threatens the aspirations for livelihood and manhood; thus, violence becomes a necessary rebellious and existential act.

## Conclusion

Many fugitive slaves escaped the south heading to the north based on the belief that they would live a decent life and enjoy their full rightful freedom. However, the north welcomed them with crucial racism, violence, discrimination and segregation. They lived a void and miserable life in a part of Chicago which was named the Black Belt where they witnessed the most terrible and inhuman living conditions. The north was an environment in which they were suppressed, humiliated and neglected of the least human rights.

Subsequently, the rationale behind the push in African American literature was recognizing that decades of disfranchisement, through racist and stereotypical depictions of blacks, had greatly damaged the perception of the black community in the United States and Global cultural imagination. In an effort to increase readers' awareness and to ensure a record of these abuses for posterity, they hold a mirror to the face of white society highlighting their inaction or complicity in the violence. Black intellectuals had to compose a work that could speak directly to the black masses, for they have been excluded from involvement in the creation of history. For this, African American literature emerged during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century with the aim to depict the tragic history of African Americans through the use of the literary genre namely slave narratives. The latter are personal life experiences of ex-slaves that reflect the suffering, violence and unbearable conditions to which black people were subjected in America. Also, the Harlem Renaissance, which is referred to as the Golden Age of African American literature, played a major role in the appearance of new concerns in black literature.

The issue of racial violence has always been the concern of contemporary African American writers. In addition to this obvious concern, Richard Wright is an author who has become an important voice for the poor conditions and ugly reality of black people in

American society. In his novel, *Native Son*, he highlights several other aspects of violence and its effects on the novel's main characters. It submits a meaningful vision of identity formation based on the violence and all the social, political, and psychological factors to which the protagonist was exposed. As a result, the exposure to violence sabotages his behaviours which is plainly expressed in his aggressive actions and committing two murders. Henceforth, it is safe to say that Richard Wright has ultimately attempted and succeeded in portraying the manifestations of this violence through symbols and imagery that elevate his novel beyond a mere depiction of racial issues and propaganda.

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## Resumé

Tout au long de l'histoire, les écrivains afro-américains ont limité leurs romans uniquement à la violence raciale niant l'existence de tout autre type. C'est à travers le chef-d'œuvre de Richard Wright, "Native Son", que les différentes formes de violence dans la société afro-américaine sont couvertes de manière approfondie. Par conséquent, la présente étude tentera d'enquêter sur les multiples facettes de la violence exercée sur et par la communauté afro-américaine en analysant les principaux motifs psychologiques qui les sous-tendent. Relativement, notre recherche mettra en lumière les différents niveaux de violence manifestés dans le roman par les Africains eux-mêmes, non seulement contre les Blancs, mais aussi contre leur propre peuple. En ce sens, nous émettons l'hypothèse que la violence raciale n'est pas au cœur de *Native Son* de Wright mais il y a d'autres manifestations de violence dans le roman qui doivent être abordées. La thèse sera divisée en trois chapitres : Le premier chapitre, purement théorique, traitera du concept de violence en littérature et de ses dimensions psychologiques. Une attention remarquable est consacrée à l'examen de la littérature afro-américaine des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles, qui dépeignait l'histoire tragique des Afro-Américains à travers le genre littéraire, à savoir les récits d'esclaves. Il explorera également le développement de la littérature afro-américaine du XXe siècle dans laquelle "The Harlem Renaissance" a joué un rôle remarquable dans l'apparition de nouvelles préoccupations dans la littérature noire. Alors que le deuxième chapitre sera une vue d'ensemble et une étude thématique du roman. Le troisième chapitre analysera les différents niveaux de violence trouvés dans le roman à travers l'utilisation de théories littéraires de la psychanalyse.

Mots clés : Violence- Littérature afro-américaine- Récits d'esclaves- Blancs- Noirs- Psychanalyse.



## المخلص

على مر التاريخ، حصر الكتاب الأفريقيون الأمريكيون رواياتهم على العنف العنصري فقط متجاهلين وجود أي نوع آخر . كان ذلك من خلال كتابات ريتشارد رايتس و ابرزها تحفته " الابن الاصلي" التي قد تطرق فيها إلى مختلف أنواع العنف في المجتمع الافريقي الامريكي. لهذا، ستحاول دراستنا الحالية التحري عن اوجه العنف العديدة التي مورست على و في المجتمع الافروامريكي. و هذا عن طريق تحليل و معالجة الدوافع النفسية وراء هذا الاخير . حيث ان بحثنا هذا سيسلط الضوء عن المستويات المختلفة للعنف المتداول في الرواية بواسطة الأفارقة أنفسهم ليس ضد البيض فحسب. بل على خلاف ما يظنه الجميع، العنف ضد شعوبهم أيضا. في هذا المضمون، نحن نفترض أن العنف العنصري لم يكن محور رواية رايتس. بل ان هنالك العديد من العنف الممارس في الرواية الذي وجب معالجته. سيتم تقسيم هذه الأطروحة إلى ثلاثة فصول. الفصل الاول، نظري بحث، سيتعامل مع مفهوم العنف في الأدب و ابعاده النفسية. لقد كرسنا اهتماما خاصا للفحص في الادب الأفروامريكي خلال القرنين الثامن و التاسع عشر و الذي صور التاريخ المأساوي الأمريكيين الأفارقة الذي أدرج تحت الأدب المسمى ب روايات العبيد. كما أننا أيضا توسعنا في تطور الادب الافروامريكي للقرن العشرين الذي لعبت فيه نهضة "هارلام" دورا ملحوظا في ظهور اهتمامات جديد بأدب السود. في حين أن الفصل الثاني سيكون لمحة عامة و دراسة موضوعية للرواية. اما عن الفصل الثالث، فقد كرس لتحليل مختلف مستويات العنف الذي وجد في الرواية من خلال استعمال نظريات التحليل النفسي

الكلمات المفتاحية: عنف - أدب أمريكي أفريقي - روايات عبيد - بيض - سود - تحليل نفسي