

Destruction and Reconstruction of Self --- An Authentic Native Son

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Abstract. As a native son of America, Bigger is a natural product of American society. He does not know where he belongs to, and how to find his way out of his bewilderment. He is a marginal man, and lives between white and black. During his life, Bigger experiences social and cultural destruction of manhood and reconstruction of his identity with authenticity. In this process, Bigger feels elated, contented with his right of making choice, with his treatment as a true human, with his sense of existence, with his ability of reaching out. It is all this satisfactions and disillusionments that make Bigger to realize his true self and become an authentic native son on this piece of American land.

Introduction

During the past hundreds of years, African Americans have a long history of hardship, blood and tear, and all their life they have been endeavoring their efforts to make their voices heard and their identity recognized in a white dominant society. Under great pressure of race, society, culture and economy, African Americans constantly adjust their traditions and life styles to be integrated in American social life. However, persistent social, racial and cultural oppression and wretched life experiences usually force African Americans to develop double consciousness, divided identity, through which they often see themselves from the eyes of whites. Their twoness of being black and American endows them with two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings and two warring ideals in one dark body, and lives vigorously in their deep inner being (Washington 215). In Wright's different works, several characters reveal, "implicitly, an attempt to live 'authentically', to recognize the existence and demands of moral freedom". (Arman 61)

Analysis of characters

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright creates a new type of black image and tries to give a realistic vision of black's miserable life. In addition to Uncle Tom's traditional submission and obedience, what Bigger Thomas exhibits more is his rebellion and self-affirmation. Bigger feels discontented with the miserable life brought by his black skin, and he aspires to be integrated into the mainstream society and get the recognition from white world. However, the cruel reality always deprives him of everything and positions him in constant plights. Bigger always suffers from the conflicts of his dual identity, which includes a submissive self before white and affirmative one before black, and this "tangle duality has damaged him at the very center of his being" (Bulter 14). No matter how hard he tries, Bigger still could not find his true self and prove his authenticity in his life. In addition, Bigger is only a marginal man of both white and black worlds, who has no sense of belonging because of white's exclusion of black and his rejection of black world. Thus, in his interaction with others, Bigger touches the other in violence, almost never in love or friendship (Bulter 15). Bigger is the natural product of a society where social injustice and racial prejudice imprison him with fear (Savory 56). Without and hope and love, Bigger is dehumanized as beast that acts on impulse, and has to maintain manhood, gain freedom and prove identity through his brutally unfeeling acts of violence (George 497).

Existentialism in *Native Son*

As Crowell summarizes, existentialism is the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to grasp human existence (4). As a theory, existentialism is not an abstract conceptual philosophy, but it focuses more on human life and human existence, and such existence does not refer to the physical being, but the spiritual one. Living in a white ruling society, on the one hand, African Americans aspire to the same living condition and opportunity as white, and on the other hand, they feel depressed over the deprivation of their equality with white. For millions of blacks, it is really hard for them to feel and prove their existence in this depressing world. Without a feeling of existence, how can they truly know who are they, and what is the meaning of their life?

In *Native Son*, Bigger and his family live in a rather awkward rented house, where four people crowd in one bedroom, Bigger and his brother must turn their heads away when their mom and sister are dressing. Without job and money, Bigger and his family have to live on relief. He is blamed for the terrible family condition by his mom because of his inability of earning money and supporting the family. Like his friends, without job, money and decent education, Bigger loafes about the streets, watches cheap movie, plans robbery, and has nothing important or decent to do. He could only feel like a white when he plays a game in which he intimates the manners of white folks. However, this feeling is not that authentic, and cannot provide everlasting satisfaction. “Springing out of the depths of his despair is Bigger’s sincere hope for achieving human solidarity and transcending racial categorization” (Takeuchi 57). Bigger aspires to be a real man, to feel his real self, to listen to his own voice. But cruel white supremacists would not allow Bigger and his black brothers to desire that most basic essence as a man.

Destruction and Reconstruction of Self

In a white-ruling society, Bigger has been searching for a way out of his awkward condition all the time. He wants to join the army, enters the aviation school, flies a plane, and runs some business of his own. Unfortunately, the wall of harsh reality stands in front of him wherever he turns to, and he could not find an outlet leading to his destination. The army wants the black to dig the ditches, but not to fight as a real soldier. The door of aviation school is open for white, but never for Bigger and his black brothers. The chance of running a business comes to rich, but not to the one who has no idea of where is his next meal from. Subconsciously he has to accept the social customs and obey these social and racial restrictions casting upon him, thus has his affirmative self suppressed. Meanwhile, his submissive self looms here and there all the time, and “he performs his subservient feminized self in front of white people” (Takeuchi 60). When he cannot get aggression of his assertive self unleashed consciously and directly against his oppressor, Bigger has to endure its destruction turning inward (Takeuchi 60). He fails to adjust the conflicts of his dualself, Bigger has to think and act as an American and as a black. Without a united self, how can Bigger possess consciousness of an authentic identity? This wretched young man could not encounter his real self, could not define himself, and could not prove his authenticity. Definitely, Bigger has no idea of what is the meaning of his life, and what is the significance of his existence, because he is the “other” in opposition to white, and has never truly existed in this sordid world.

“The images of ‘others’ depend not upon ethnic difference but upon particular types of hierarchical relationships” (Demiturk 1). Within this hierarchy the powerful is defined as the ‘Same’ and the powerless as the ‘Other’, and image of the Other is stereotyped as opposite of the Same to sustain Same’s power and perpetuate Other’s inferiority. “White stereotyping of blacks demonstrates the power of preconception over perception, leaving the white oppressor with no ability to see, and the oppressed blacks with no chance to be seen” (Demiturk 1). In his *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explains that in the most basic human relationship as the face-to-face encounter, the Other is treated as a material body from a spiritual world, within the context of ignoring facing (39). Therefore, the Same

could not see the Other, and more sadly, the Other could not clearly see the Same, and even himself. The Other is always in a position of powerless and inferiority.

Before his murder of Mary, Bigger could not choose from the available options freely due to black's passive submission desired and stereotyped by white. Bigger and his people grow up with veil that blinds them, and are endowed with second-sight in America that deprives of their self-consciousness, and they only see themselves through the revelation of other world and measure their soul with contempt and pity (Washington 214-215). When he first visits Mr. Dalton's house, Bigger responds with a submissive 'Yessum' and 'Yessuh' and subconsciously acts in an opposition desired by the Same.

"While Bigger's misogyny enables him to feel superior to his mother and Bessie, Mary does not fit the binary opposition in his mind between a controlling man and a controlled woman and between blacks and whites" (Takeuchi 62). On the first night of his job, Bigger is sunk into unwillingness for so many times, he has to obey the arrangements of Mary and Jan and behaves as a 'yes' man. Bigger is asked to sit nowhere, but between two whites, as if "sitting between two vast white looming walls" (Wright 67-68). He has to dine with Mary and Jan with the presence of his familiar black brothers and sisters. Bigger could not utter a single "no" to this strange friendliness, and is "intensely conscious of that black skin as to cause momentary self-annihilation" (Takeuchi 62). Although Mary and Jan try to show their "kindness" to him and treat him fairly in their own way, they really have no idea of how, because of their inability to see Bigger from his inward.

However, this is not all for constructing a new self and fully realizing one's identity, but only the very first step toward the final destination. In addition to his own realization of self existence, more importantly, Bigger needs affirmation of his authentic being from white man, which could help awaken Bigger's united consciousness completely. With limited consciousness, Bigger sees and feels himself, but still he could not see all the others in his life as a real man, he does not know how to relate to others in a normal way. After his murder of Mary, Bigger's defining system of the Same and the Other has changed, but that of white man remains unchanged. On the one hand, Bigger continues his usual submissive behavior before white to make them feel that they control him, but on the other hand he controls his own life through his image outside of their frame of reference (Demiturk 8). While he can destroy the imagery of white's domination in his own mind, he cannot change the mental set of white labeling that determines the social space he is confined to (Demiturk 8). He is still inferior. He is still the same totalization as white have ever categorized. He is a primitive ape in the jungle. It is this incomplete understanding of Bigger that causes his inability of understanding others, his impotence of relating others with the sense of authenticity. As for Bigger's murder of Mary and Bessie, he totalizes them as "thing" to use or be used (George 499). Rather than treats them as human being, Bigger uses them as commodities to trade for money and self protection. Bigger's failure of acknowledging other's hardship and transcending his totalization of others prevent his acquisition of humanity and identity. To fully construct his identity and prove his essence, Bigger must transcend his limited categorization of others for his egocentric purpose; break the confinement of absolute "otherness" to come to a new revelation of infinity, and to start the purest and most ethical human interactions (George 498). Is Bigger able to start to "touch others" and "reach out to the world in love rather than violence" (Butler 19-20)? Definitely he is. The real salvation of Bigger's united consciousness comes in book three, when he further interacts with Jan and Max. When he is first sent to prison, Bigger loses all hope for his life and realizes that something inside himself drives him in here. "Out of the mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill. But this time it was not directed outward toward people, but inward, upon himself" (Wright 274). He aspires to get rid of his hate for white who have long been enslaving his consciousness, but he does not know how to hold it back. He has nothing to do except but takes his crime, waits for his death sentence, and leaves this secular society to free himself from shame, uneasiness and reproach brought by white, and even his own black brothers and sisters.

After Jan's humane action makes Bigger to open the door of his secluded world, Max's sincerity and earnest help him walk out of the darkness of his inner world, further and complete his transformation. Whenever Bigger feels frustrated over the irrefutable proof against his crime and his doomed death, Max would be always there and keep encouraging Bigger to look ahead, to express his true feeling. Max tries to evoke something inside Bigger, whether it is excitement or aspiration. Having found in Max's recognition of his life and his feeling, Bigger feels the strings of hope and tries to see himself in relation to others (Takeuchi 70). Though Bigger could not think and explain his actions logically, finally he unites his dual self, feels his real self, tells his true feeling. More importantly, Bigger "can now see beyond himself into the larger possibilities of communing with others without any regard to race" (George 502), begins to sympathize with others, thinks from the standpoint of others, and wants to live to feel this real life more deeply.

Conclusion

Construction of Bigger's true self finally is completed with his willingness and ability to express him. For most part of Bigger's interaction with Jan and Max, the strong power of white supremacist ideology conditions Bigger's impotence to talk or talk voluntarily before white. He is unable to verbalize his apology for Jan, his gratitude for Max. But after his death sentence is pronounced, Bigger longs to talk with Max more than ever and "feel with as much keenness as possible what his living and dying meant" (Wright 419). He trusts Max and believes that this man knows how he feels. Unfortunately, when the final talk comes, Bigger feels disappointed at Max's failed comprehension of his own feeling. In spite of his theoretical and impersonal defense for Bigger's crime, Max could not move beyond seeing Bigger as "the Symbolic Oppressed Negro" (Charles 87), could not completely understand Bigger because he has lived outside of the lives of Bigger (Wright 422). However, this will not stop Bigger from articulating the reality of his living, the causes of his destiny and the feeling deep in him. Once again, Bigger reverses the relationship of white Same and black Other. Contrary to his previous talk with Max, this time Bigger controls the conversation like Max ever did to him. From this sense, Bigger has gained equality with white, since he can also be the dominant voice, which makes all he does not dare to and want to say to be heard, --- "But what I killed for, I am" (Wright 429). "Bigger's acceptance of the individual responsibility for his own act of murder erases the image of Bigger as a type" (Demiturk 15). He is no longer a man that is stereotyped by white, but a man with a united identity, undisturbed consciousness and moral progress.

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