

**The Art of Restitution: Wright's Tryst with Modernism in *Native Son***

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**Abstract:**

Present paper endeavors to explore the modernist strain of African American writing through Wright's magnum opus *Native Son*. The novel captures the spirit of modernism but with its African American nuances. Its existential engagement and exploration of African American psyche evinces Wright's exploration of black unconscious. Yet, Wright's experiment with African American vernacular and racial stereotypes to delineate the African American alienation expands the range of his modernist experimentation. The novel serves as a psychological mapping of black consciousness that formulates Wright's black urban hero, who is mysteriously reincarnated in his isolation and disorientation. The paper aims to bring out how the African American modernist discourse voices the core of black experience in its distinctness and novelty.

Key words: Modernism, African American fiction, psychological mapping, black experience, anti-hero, subversion

**Multiple Modernisms: A Theoretical Outline**

Modernism has been a term multifariously defined, ambivalently interpreted, widely debated and equivocally understood. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar in their "Introduction" to *Modernist Literature and Culture*, brings out the complexity of modernism in the words:

Pound, in his ill-considered tract *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, suggested that genius consists in the ability to see a dozen different things where the ordinary man sees just one; Eliot in "*Ulysses*, order and myth," had more or less said just the opposite; that Joyce's genius, and by implication his own, lay in finding the

hidden unity that lay beneath the apparent incoherence of modern life. And both these positions are modernism. (Dettmar3)

As reflected in the above statement, the question “What is modernism?” remains a dubious ground. It is a site of enquiry to discover variegated versions, which shape the wider contours of an artistic movement witnessed in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Various scholars have attempted to define it at the level of philosophy, art, scientific revolution, technological innovation, and economic and political change, but it becomes more and more slippery to hold in a single fixed shape. In fact, the irony becomes intense, when a movement which strives to attain ‘unity’ through the form, appears fractured and fissured in its indefiniteness of the form. In fact, if beheld from literary perspective, one may say that the texts of the modernism were scripted by multiple undercurrents that acted upon its central idea of being ‘modern’, a break from the past.

Modernism’s literary foundation may be traced in the oft-quoted Ezra Pound’s phrase, “make it new”, a phrase which Pound himself stolen from the bath tub of a Chinese emperor. It reflects the borrowings of modernism. How much and how far the modernism borrowed from various sources? What were those possible sources and what ‘new’ did they introduce? Was that widely celebrated ‘new’, as referred to by Pound in his famous ‘quote’, singular in its dimension? Or the modernism, being underwritten by the openness of this staple term ‘new’, from the moment of its beginning consists of end number of possibilities.

With indefinite meaning and multiple strata of undercurrents, modernism saw its origin, development and decline with the passage of time. And, while viewed from a distance, today it appears a wide spectrum which, perhaps, “was never really one thing, never really unified.” (Dettmar4) It was examined and interrogated even at the time of its prevalence as it is done today. It was not only contributed to from different sources but also viewed from multiple sites revealing its conflictual ground. Today modernism is characterized as an ambivalent mood, a theoretical stand, an artistic experimentation, a cultural change, in fact, all at the same time.

The modernist ‘new’ could neither be imagined nor taken in one standard form ever, as usually presumed in the central European intellectual experience. Despite being future oriented, modernism remains rooted in the past. Despite being defined in European terms, it was always available with other sites to be appropriated equally. Despite presenting an account of concrete social and economic forces operational in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it shaped an abstract formulation of one of the popular ‘isms’, a lens with its own underlying assumptions.

What modernism bears in its connection with the process of modernization is a theoretical question seeking an accurate answer at multiple grounds:

Modernism... was a pan-European and cosmopolitan phenomenon, one promulgated by an international community effectively removed from the contingencies of time and place. Indeed, one key component of this account was the assertion that it was modernism's central achievement to have devised rigorous, difficult, yet coherent forms that were set over and against the chaotic contingencies of present.... Here, in short, was another story one could tell about modernism, one in which its more unruly energies were seen as disciplined and controlled under the aegis of form, form dictated by mythic and symbolic structures located outside and against the historical horrors of the modern world.... Modernism as an *-ism* ... Modernism, in short, is related to modernization, perhaps a product of it, perhaps a symptom of it, perhaps a reaction against it, or perhaps something that emerges in tandem with it. (Rainey xxii)

### **The Turn of the Century and African American Avant-garde:**

Modernism in literature is traced back at the turn of the century when literary avant-garde's formalist overture attempt to hold the internal ruptures and socio-cultural disintegration of contemporary era through their art. As widely claimed by varied definitions of modernism, modernist writers tend to reject the conventional way of writing that was commonly used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The avant-garde writers try to open the minds of readers by providing newer and more complex aspects to their writings. They tend to place the settings of their stories into urban locations and emphasize on diverse cultures and people throwing light on the complicated forms of behavior and psychology. To quote Baldick, "Modernist literature is characterized chiefly by a rejection of 19th-century traditions and of their consensus between author and reader, conventions of realism ... or traditional meter." (Baldick 162)

While viewed in terms of African American fiction, it holds true with regard to the upsurge of novel practices displacing the earlier narrative conventions and overwrought thematic concerns of 19<sup>th</sup> century authors. 20<sup>th</sup> century is regarded as a turning point to voice the changed perception of black authorship. Heralding the new era of modernist experiments, it replaced many of the previous trends of African American fiction which were popular with the earlier generation of black writers. 19<sup>th</sup> century African American writing was restrained to its thematic and stylistic conventions. It followed a few fixed genres to facilitate the

articulation of the historical experiences of blacks in America. The middle of the 19th century witnessed the plethora of slave narratives written by fugitive slaves about their lives in the South and, often, after escaping to freedom, their writing envois the abolitionist rhetoric. 19<sup>th</sup> century African American writers wanted to describe the cruelties of life under slavery, as well as the persistent humanity of the slaves as persons.

Indubitably, the nineteenth-century African-American fiction was the groundwork for the approaching change that inaugurated the 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist revolution. African American literary tradition uncovers the literary artistry and ideological complexity of a body of work that lays the foundation for new socio-artistic movements like Harlem Renaissance. Standing at the juncture of a new century, many African-American authors such as William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, Charles W. Chesnutt, Sutton E. Griggs, James Weldon Johnson, Frances E. W. Harper, and Edward A. Johnson transformed traditional representations of blackness and moved to the new motifs. Fabi examines how the early 20<sup>th</sup> century black writers adapted existing literary forms, including the sentimental romance, the domestic novel, and the utopian novel, to express their convictions and concerns about slavery, segregation, and racism.

Although ‘native’ in its spirit yet the conception of ‘blackness’ in the early attempts of African American fiction was somewhere ‘whitewashed’ in its portrayal of black experiences. Like in their artistic engagement with tragic mulatto motif, African American writers use the notion of ‘passing’ to challenge the myths of racial purity and the color line. To quote Fabi, “Critics have had difficulties in accounting for these ‘white faced’ novels as the founding texts of a distinctively African American novelistic traditions, especially because African American scholars have long been confronted with a white dominated academic establishment unwilling to recognize the literary value of black literature as a whole.” (Fabi2) In critical opinion, mostly familiar with white literary stereotypes of the tragic mulattos as neither black nor white, the protagonist remained “an ill-fated-in-between figure who was nevertheless somewhat ‘better’ than blacks because supposedly genetically closer to whites.” (Fabi2)

The literary account produced at the turn of the century gives an overview of the canon-making enterprises of African-American fictional tradition. African American fiction embraced the artistic shift of the century in its transmutation from 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narratives to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Harlem literature. It inaugurated the African American encounter with pan-European artistic movement and its American offshoot; bound to carry forward by

black authors in their association and dissociation with a new mode of writing. It evinces the ongoing artistic experiments with black American experience and how black authors' concerns about crafting a particular image for African-American literature affected their perceptions of black fiction.

### **Wright's *Native Son*: Dis/engagement with Modernism**

Modernist writing is predominantly cosmopolitan, and often expresses a sense of urban culture... and multiple point of view challenge the reader to reestablish a coherence of meaning from fragmentary forms. (Baldick 162)

In the light of the attributes enlisted by Baldick, modernist writing is primarily characterized as a shift from the romantic notion of rural landscape to the reality of filth and fragmentation experienced in the emergent urban life. Whether it is Eliot's *The Wasteland* or James Joyce's *Ulysses* the literary backdrop is set up amidst the hostility and suffocation of urban surroundings. Adding a significant chapter in this regard, Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* heralds a new era of the African American authorship. It center stages a black hero in the harsh set-up of northern industrial-capitalist America. Wright's novel reveals the modernist strain of changing socio-political reality mirrored in African American writing. Incorporating the traits mentioned by Baldick, Wright's fictional configuration of black experience captures the spirit of modernism at multiple strata. It apparently evinces the underlying incoherence of a polygonal narrative discourse, reflected in the intrinsic polemical nature of the novel.

The protagonist of Wright's novel represents the new face of America's native son whose unleashed energy has the capacity to destroy the hypocrite racist American society. Although the dark silhouette of this black urban hero was drawn upon the already existing, long ascribed stereotype of African primitivism and brutality yet, it was new in its unanticipated forceful retaliation. Wright's *Native Son* is modern in its plot, urban setting, characterization, fragmentary form and narrative art with the interpolated 'stream of consciousness' flow. Yet, what is interesting to note is that, at the same time it subverts many foundational assumptions of the central conception of modernism.

Wright structures the tale of 'Fear', 'Flight' and 'Fate' of a black protagonist in the genre of a narrative. But underneath its cohesive novelistic form, the intrinsic fragmentation disbands its structural unity. The narration in its linear development transmutes into diverse formulations turning into a journalistic report, an interior monologue, a historical fact, a political document,

an ideological allocution, a legal interrogation, a cultural dialogue, a well-structured rhetoricas entreated by the author at strategic junctures. To illustrate from Max oft-quoted political speech in the court room while pleading from Bigger's side:

If only ten or twenty Negroes had been put into slavery, we could call it injustice, but there were hundreds of thousands of them throughout the country. If this state of affairs had lasted for two years or three years, we could say that it was unjust; but it lasted for more than two hundred years. Injustices which lasts for three long centuries and which exists among millions of people over thousands of square miles of territory, is injustice no longer; it is an accomplished fact of life. Men adjust themselves to their land; they create their own law of being; their notions of right and wrong. A common way of earning a living gives them a common attitude toward life. Even their speech is colored and shaped by what they must undergo. (Wright 360)

The novel aptly exemplifies what the critic Paul Gilroy prefers to call the 'counter culture of modernity'. Modernism strives to attain 'unity' through the form. But, the irony becomes intense in Wright's *Native Son* when the unity of the form appears fractured and fissured in its indefiniteness. Wright's magnum opus despite delineating a socio-political reality of American democracy simultaneously conveys its contrary picture foregrounding the age old injustice and exploitation practiced in this democratic society. It is the reality engrained in the peculiar African American experience that serves as an inverse portrayal of the long cherished 'American dream'.

*Native Son* represents a self-determining 'horror story of a black brute' and that too in a motley form. It echoes the unsung as well as the unheard 'blues' of Bigger Thomas. Its melancholic imprint is rooted in the African American ethnic reality and its socio-political and economic relationship to the larger sphere of Western thought and history. Wright's experiment with African American vernacular to delineate the African American alienation expands the range of his modernist experimentation. It attends to the psychological mapping of black consciousness that formulates Bigger Thomas. This 'black brute' appears as a mirror image of America's native son, who despite being visceral represents the foremost attempt to feel as human, who despite being the inborn progeny of a society finds himself illegitimate, isolated and disoriented.

The narrative in *Native Son* works at two levels of artistic enunciation of black predicament. On the one hand, it adroitly captures the external social reality and its dreadful insinuations in concrete form whereas, on the other hand, it alludes to the inner world of Bigger Thomas,

which appears shattering apart in its expressionistic delivery. One may notice the First person voice and melancholic note of ‘blues’ underlying Bigger’s closing remarks, surprisingly framing an unanticipated existential equipoise:

I ain’t trying to forgive nobody and I ain’t asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain’t going to cry. They wouldn’t let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain’t fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn’t want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am... I didn’t want to kill! ... But what I killed for, I *am*! It must ‘ve been pretty deep in me to make me kill!... What I kill for must’ve been good!... It must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for something... I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em... But I’m all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way... I’m all right, Mr. Max. Just go and tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none, See? Tell her I was all right and wasn’t crying none... Mr. Max...” “Yes Bigger”... I’m all right. For real I’m.” (391-92)

It is interesting to see how Wright transforms the concrete external reality into inner imprints on Bigger’s mind. Hence, Wright’s *Native Son* serves as an epitome of both Wright’s engagement and disengagement with the central notion of ‘modernism’ and how through such dubious act, it voices the core of black experience in its distinctness and novelty. It also demonstrates his artistic accomplishment in the contrived cohesion of modernist form but with its explicit fissions.

### **Bigger Thomas as an Anti-hero: A Rhetorical Sub/version**

In Wright’s *Native Son* the 19<sup>th</sup> century black hero is replaced by a new look of America’s native son who is neither a Southern slave coming from plantation with his tragic tale to tell nor a confused mulatto bearing the traces of American racial blending and interspersed with the guilt of ‘passing’. Wright introduces a new Black urban hero who is, in fact, an anti-hero. On the one hand, he appropriates all the weaknesses and embarrassments of a proletarian protagonist like Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*. He is weak and coward as indicated in the first section of the novel. Book One titled “Fear” traces all the different kinds of fear that determine Bigger Thomas’s actions. He is described as “incapable of warmth, love, or loyalty; he is a sullen bully-and he enjoys his first sense of humanity and freedom only after he commits two murders.” (105) On the other hand, he is feared by all for his new unanticipated strength. The white America is scared of his immense brutality and unpredictability of the actions.



Bigger is reincarnated in his isolation and disorientation. It shapes the existentialist dimension of his character. As an individual, Bigger tries to find meaning of his existence through a series of meaningless violent acts. But, what is seen as a senseless 'act' in European existentialist term, Wright's black hero reverses into a sensible exposition of human subjectivity. In view of Butler, Bigger is "outwardly chained to an absurd task but inwardly liberated by his awareness that he is psychologically stronger than the angry gods who punish him." (Butler 49) It presents a completely different picture of existentialism in which black hero instead of viewing meaninglessness finds the meaningfulness in his absurd experiences and creates himself.

While comprehended at aesthetic level, Wright's anti-hero appears to destabilize the modernist assumptions of art. The artistic detachment subverted by a historic anthropological association evinces Wright's aesthetic experiments in the African American fiction. A modernist text is seen in making. It is exhibited by the modernist writers who reveal their own practices to explain the creative process of the modernist text. Joyce elaborates the structural scheme of his work *Ulysses*, Stein comments on the narrative problem for *The Making of Americans*, and Eliot adds notes to instruct the readers of *The Wasteland*. But Richard Wright's *Native Son* addresses not only the making of the 'text' but also the re-making of America's 'native son'. He exposes the socio-cultural construction of his artistic rendering. The preface of the novel titled, "How Bigger was Born" throws light on the making of the native son, addressing who he is, how is he born and why does America need to pay cognizance to this terrible new face of its native son. It remains embedded in the sociological reality of the black experiences but is exhibited through African American modernist experiment in its artistic representation. In fact, the novel works as an aesthetic exposition of the central figure of its black anti-hero and Wright uses the preface as a vehicle for the proposition of his aesthetic theory as illustrated by Tim Armstrong while discussing modernist theoretical engagement, "from Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) to Richard Wright's 'How Bigger Was Born' (1940)" (Armstrong 59)

### **Wright's Experiment with the Language:**

The novel *Native Son* attempts to liberate the African American experiential reality from the semantics of the white world. Since neither Wright nor his protagonist Bigger can afford to imitate the language of the oppressor, Wright's art aims to counter the concrete language of projected reality. The novel presents the judicial proceedings of Bigger's crime through media verbiage which communicate the concreteness of Bigger's act as well as its social reception. The ideological underpinning of journalistic details defines the surrounding



exteriority of a black man in which he is irrevocably placed. Wright as an artist gradually replaces it with the impressionistic articulation of Bigger's experiences. He takes recourse to the linguistic flight from external discursiveness to poetic fulfillment of the self. The novelist captures this moment of intersection through arresting the linguistic gap between the society's standard parlance and Bigger's incoherent thoughts verbalized in the form of an individual's retrospection.

Wright successfully portrays the raucous pandemonium of Bigger's surroundings which remain restricted in seizing Bigger's real self. The narrative site of the novel exhibits how Max's story of Bigger's life, stories generated by Media and the frightened white populace all are limited in their delineation of Bigger's character. They fail to grasp the whole of Bigger. Hence, it becomes essential for Bigger not to lose himself altogether in their frenzied clamor. His attempt to incarnate himself in the language of his own stands as a prerequisite for the realization of his own existence. "Bigger must provide the terms for his own judgement by finding a language within which he can understand his actions. Bigger, in other words, must learn to read himself." (Afflerbach 104) And, the act of reading preconditions a verbal medium for facilitating the desired interaction. It expects the development of unrestrained thoughts and their embodiment into comprehensive ideas validating an assertive linguistic expression for which Bigger will need his own language.

In the same vein, Wright experiments with the symbolic insinuation occurring at narrative site. Narrative's double vision exquisitely demarcates the clash between Bigger as character and Bigger as a symbol. Besides that, the narrator's language divulges the fissures existing between the linguistic integrity of the narrator and disintegration of the denigrated individual soul framed in certain linguistic design. In the words of Laura E. Tanner, "The tension between narrative voice and subject exposed here erupts in a condescending tone that verges on racist objectification at several points in the novel. The narrator's command of language allows him an excuse for the generalizations he makes about Bigger; in lending a voice to those less articulate than himself, he exposes the prejudices of the language game through which he speaks." (Gates 135)

Moreover, the central metaphor of 'blindness' which pervades the action as well as the characters strengthens the narrative instrumentality of the novel. It also challenges the novel's wide critical acclaim which celebrates the success of the novel in protest genre. It avers the rebellion of Bigger, "he (Bigger) *wants* to die because he glories in his hatred and prefers, like Lucifer, rather than to rule in hell than serve in heaven" (Baldwin 44) But Bigger in his development transcends all kind of critical jargon ranging from realist representation to

impressionist delineation, and protest line to existentialist explanation of his 'being'. With his symbolism, he enters into the semantic zone of multiple significations. To quote Donald B. Gibson:

Most critics of Wright's novel see only the outer covering of Bigger Thomas, the blackness of his skin and his resulting social role. Few have seen him as a discrete entity, a particular person who struggles with the burden of his humanity. Wright has gone to great lengths in the novel to create Bigger as a person, to invest the social character with particularizing traits, to delineate the features of a face. The final meaning of the book, as a matter of fact, depends upon the awareness on the part of the reader of Bigger's individuality. (95-96)

No doubt, Bigger may be regarded both as a sociological reality and an individual being, yet his figural incarnation in narrative framework also renders him a narrative instrument. He is done and undone within the linguistic framework through his own ellipses, and symbolic signification. Wright seems to play with both subtraction and addition at the same time. Baron cites the example of Wright's shadowy protagonist's crucial moments of life like Mary's murder, whose narrative ambiguity might appear to leave certain lapses at the narrative site. But as cited by Baron, the novelist re-invokes the metaphor of 'blindness' to compensate it. What one may perceive here is an explanation. With regard to novel's protagonist whose "indirect sensory perception is the cause of Bigger's downfall" (Baron 22), such figurative devices accounts for the development of plot with due construal of causative relationship. Baron interprets it as, "It is his (Bigger's) own personal type of blindness" (Baron 22) that author may account for his unaccounted behavior. A syntactic account of Wright's *Native Son* gives insight into Wright's experimentation with figural devices to enhance the narrativity in his artistic representation of American's native son. He is reborn at the narrative site in new form with new face as an enigmatic force. And, author fills the gaps for reader to compensate the omitted concrete details with various figural images.

### **Conclusion:**

Within the theoretical framework of modernism one may begin with a number of canonical Anglo-American modernist texts that set the tone and tenor of a new mode of writing at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. To illustrate a few like T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, 1922; W. B. Yeats' 'Easter 1916', 1921; Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, 1899; May Sinclair's *The Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, 1922; and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the Anglo-American literary main stream witnessed a new paradigm to capture the contemporary cultural reality and its representation in the realm of literary art. But one may argue to place the

intertextual reworking and strategic reinventions of staple modernism in divergent literary sub-streams that broaden the ambit of modernism at the same time but hitherto remains less noticed.

Modernist experiments range from diverse geographical locations to specific literary expositions over the years in shaping the art of modernist writing. The notion of multiple modernisms signifies a recapitulation of literary history as well as discovery of the radicalization in the given versions of Modernism in terms of both content and form. In this regards, Wright's *Native Son* can be viewed as adeptly reinventing the modernism in African American context. At narrative stratum Wright uses the 'streams of consciousness' technique to map the African American consciousness and portrays it both at socio-political and artistic levels. While thematic concern of the novel undertakes a stimulating ideological experiment. Baker in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* complains against Anglo-American modernism of its lack of political and social impact:

Surely it is the case that the various isms of the first decades of British and American Modernism did not forestall wars, feed the poor, cure the sick, empower coal miners in Wales (or West Virginia), or arrest the spread of bureaucratic technology. (Baker 13)

What Wright does in *Native Son* is just addition of that desired socio-political impact in the African American model of modernism. Bryony Randall suggests the same in the "Case Studies in Reading 2: Key Theoretical and Critical Texts". In his view one may take into account "the implications of the works of Afro-American modernist writers for established Anglo-American paradigms of modernism, ("make it new", "objective correlative", "mastery of form")" and how they endeavor "to acknowledge the existence of alternative conceptions of 'modernism' which decline to acknowledge the privileging of Anglo-American and European models." (Randall 101-2)

African American modernism is marked with the subversive act of reversal at both content and form. On the one hand, it center stages the 'orality' in place of validating what constitutes the 'written' form. On the other hand, it replaces the European modernist conception of 'mastery of form' with, to borrow Baker's phrase, the 'deformation of mastery'. Wright's novel *Native Son* stands as an exemplar in both regard. The existentialist discourse of the novel recovers the fragments of Bigger's inner thoughts and turns them into melancholic notes. It dissipates the colossal deafening din produced at external level like the daily newspaper coverage of Bigger's case. The 'logocentric' presentation of Bigger is discarded in favor of overwhelming phonic 'sounds' echoed in the form of his 'blues'.

In the similar vein, *Native Son* opens the conflicting narrative sites within its unified novel form. The author conjures the multiple genres such as crime fiction, journalistic discourse, the legalwaffling, impressionist fragments, and of course, the rhetoric of political speech with its racist and communist overtone. It juxtaposes the subject matter with the artistic manner deliberately chosen by the author for the representation of African American experience. African American experiment with modernism is chiefly focused on nativism which remains an integral component in defining their American identity. The African American artistic commitment for cultural revivalism within the formalist formats prescribed by the modernism evinces the reconstructive process insistently operational in their version of modernist movement.

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