
FLIGHT INSTEAD OF FIGHT IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON* AND HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

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Abstract: This paper aims to understand the fear that is deeply lodged in the psyche of the black man that makes him abandon all reason and take flight in situations that involves confronting a white man using the novels *Native Son* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* as examples. The title 'Flight instead of Fight' does not imply the cowardice of the black man. The various possible reasons that lead to the black man's flight when accused or charged with a crime is detailed here.

Keywords: Discrimination, persecution, psyche, racism.

Introduction: The novels taken for the present study are Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Both the novels belong to the Post-War literary period. The African American culture and literature evolved in the midst of these aesthetic attitudes and has focused on the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what it means to be an American. This paper attempts to look at the select novels in this light.

In the *Native Son*, the author portrays a young black man named Bigger Thomas, struggling for acceptance in the south side of Chicago. The protagonist is a powerful symbol of black rage suppressed by centuries of slavery and misunderstandings. Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written twenty year after the publication of *Native Son*, it is obvious that little has changed for the coloured man. Here, Tom, another black man, is unjustly accused of the rape (and the actual murder) of a white girl and the all-white jury convicts him. His image too, like Bigger's, is governed by the whites. With reference to the American Archives, even though the novel is set in the 20th century, the protagonists' condition is none the better than the slaves of the 19th century where the slave code defined a slave as "a human being, who is by the law deprived of his or her liberty for life, and is the property of another" (Slaves and Courts).

This paper aims to explore the cause of fear lodged deep within the psyche of the black man that makes him abandon all reason and take flight in situations that involves confronting a white man with these two novels as examples. The title 'Flight instead of Fight' does not imply the cowardice of the black man. The black men under discussion are not petrified rabbits caught in the blinding glare of a vehicle's headlights; theirs is the flight of a terrified deer which has caught the scent of the predator crouching for a lethal attack. The various possible reasons that lead to the black man's flight (instead of fight) when accused or charged with a crime is detailed here.

To Kill a Mockingbird and *Native Son* are entirely

different in their depiction of the problem at hand but their similarities are quite palpable. The problem of slavery is the first and foremost issue handled when the black persons accused face the trial for murder. The plots take ideas from real incidents that the writers were aware of. Both the accused men were defended by outstanding white lawyers who take sincere efforts to exonerate their clients thus striving to bring a sense of justice into a society governed by unfair discrimination. Both the black men, however, meet with an unfortunate end. The novels lucidly present the hard truth that if racism does not end there will be no other choice than to revolt, either actively or passively; a black man would automatically be guilty of any accusations put forth by any white person while a white person would walk free for crimes they commit directly or indirectly on blacks.

The concern here is to address the question why the coloured man takes to his heels instead of justifying himself to the white authorities and proving his innocence. To illustrate this, the following incidents from *Native Son* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are examined.

In *Native Son*, Bigger kills Mary Dalton for fear of being misunderstood. It can be safely called an accident, and not intended murder, that rose out of fear fuelled by hatred. When he escorted the drunk Mary back home that night, the closeness of her body awakened in him strong desires that excited him. He laid the half conscious girl on her bed and kissed her. That was when blind Mrs. Dalton opened the door and stood there "silent, ghostlike" (NS 116). Bigger was seized with "a hysterical terror" (NS 116) that rendered him paralyzed. He couldn't move for the fear of knocking things over in the dark, he couldn't have left her alone in the hall and now he couldn't allow Mary to mumble because that would give him away. He was afraid of being discovered in his employer's daughter's room well past midnight. Though he had brought her up to her room genuinely to assist her, Bigger could see that there was no

possible way to explain how Mary's lecture at her University turned into a night of drunken revelry with a Communist. One might say that the Daltons were good folks and that they would have understood that it was not Bigger's fault if their wild daughter had been with Communist friends of hers even if they had not approved of it. But Bigger had not been at the Daltons' even for a day and the fear that welled up within him was the natural reaction of a black man caught within the confusing atmosphere of an overly-benign white custom.

He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. . . Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him . . . For a long time he felt the sharp pain of her fingernails biting into his wrists . . . Then suddenly . . . Her body was still. (NS 117)

In order to save himself and his new found job, he tries to stifle any sound coming from Mary and in his frenzied, desperate attempts to quieten her, he ends up smothering her to death. This was not a pre-determined act but it happens inadvertently when Bigger is confronted with a situation that demands an act of self-explanation to a white family. If Bigger had had the courage to own up to Mrs. Dalton about what had happened, Mary would have been alive and he would have had an easy conscience. But it was not to be. The black man's deeply rooted fear of the whites would not allow him to lead a normal life. Bigger mutilates and stuffs the dead body in the furnace in the basement and manages to conceal his act till the ashes had to be cleared out of the furnace.

Bigger saw come into full view on the surface of the ashes several small pieces of white bone. Instantly, his whole body was wrapped in a sheet of fear. Yes; he should have cleaned those ashes out; but he had been too excited and too scared; he had trapped himself. Now, he must leave; they must not catch . . . (NS 249) Mary's remains tumbled into full view of detective Britten and his men. When they were examining it in unexpected shock, Bigger takes the opportunity to flee from the house. In *Native Son*, the motif of flight is vividly elaborated. Bigger is constantly on the run, wary yet defiant and brings out the picture of being hunted. "He tiptoed to the rear of the furnace" and "then he leaped" (NS 250) through the window to avoid being captured and sent to jail. Flight becomes a motif in *Native Son*.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* there is no motif of flight but the mockingbird becomes a symbol for the helpless black man. Atticus' advice to Jem "Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember

it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (MB 99) again portrays the image of being hunted. The case of Tom Robinson, the accused in the novel, is worse than Bigger's. He is accused of assaulting and raping Mayella Ewell who is a white girl. At the trial, everything seems to point against him – the witness, Mr. Ewell, Mayella's father positively convinces the jury that he had seen Tom raping Mayella. But slowly Atticus lays out the idea that Tom is not guilty. It is clearly proved that the defendant was incapable of such an act as he had only a stump for his left hand.

Tom tried to resist Mayella's advances as best as he could "thoutbein' ugly to her" (MB 215). Being a respectable man, he could not strike or hurt her even in self-defense. Young Scout's narration gives a clear picture of Tom's fear "Until my father (Atticus) explained it to me later, I did not understand the subtlety of Tom's predicament: he would not have dared to strike a white woman under any circumstances and expect to live long, so he took the first opportunity to run . . ." In truth Mr. Ewell had seen what had actually taken place and screamed at his daughter; Tom had taken the opportunity to get out of that place, and that was misconstrued as a sure sign of guilt. When questioned as to why he chose to flee the scene instead of holding back, Tom gives the standard answer, ". . . if you was a nigger like me, you would be scared too" (MB 215).

Tom cannot be called a coward because he himself makes it known to the court that he had once been sentenced to thirty days in prison for disorderly conduct.

'You were given thirty days once for disorderly conduct, Robinson?' asked Mr. Gilmer.

'Yessuh.'

.....

 Atticus raised his head. 'It was a misdemeanor, and it's in the record, Judge.'

'Witness will answer, though,' said Judge Taylor.

'Yessuh, I got thirty days.' (MB 216)

He was not a man who buries his head in the sand when faced with trouble. He had owned up to his mistake and had accepted the punishment meted out to him. His answer remains steady throughout the investigation – he ran off because he was scared; he was scared that he would end up in court, he was scared that he would have to face being punished for something that he did not do.

Both Bigger and Tom were arrested; the former for a crime that he had committed and the latter for a crime that he was framed for. Both men were afraid of the consequences and hence fled the scene. Bigger could not 'flee' the scene as Tom had done. Tom grabbed the first opportunity to put as safe a distance as possible between himself and his persecutors;

Bigger did not immediately run, he tried to first hide the murder and finally, when there was no other option, he bolted. Their fear is nothing out of the ordinary, it arises from the prejudice and discrimination that a coloured man faces in the white dominated society. These are powerful reasons that give rise to such a feeling of insecurity.

The fear of persecution that the coloured man nurtures in his bosom is gruesomely proved true in both the novels: the black men facing trial meet a sad end when they are found to be so-called guilty of any accusation of a white. Just as Tom was framed for the assault and rape of Ms. Mayella, so also Bigger was pictured as a rapist and a killer because the dead body of Mary Dalton was charred and the only evidence they had was Bessie's abused dead body.

Bigger's explanation to his accidental murder fell on deaf ears – the Coroner and the State Attorney successfully built up their own theories on the cause of Mary's death making Bigger a monstrous cold-blooded animal. Tom who had not committed any crime was pronounced guilty and sentenced to prison till a higher court reviewed his case. Later he was shot as he was trying escape from prison during his exercise period. The seventeen bullet shots in his body makes one wonder whether he had really made a run for it, or was another victim of racist anger.

In a deeply racist society like the ones portrayed in the novel under discussion, there can be no hope for the lesser privileged black society. They struggle to

rise up from their present situation only to be thrown back humiliated and broken. It is people like Atticus, Max, Jan, Calpurnia and Ms Maudie who try to cement the rift between the black and the white community. Both novels show that there are still traditions and habits so ingrained in the citizens that justice and humanity seem like a distant dream.

The law does not apply to the coloured man. It is the white man's law. A white man in the same circumstances would have received and altogether different treatment. The fear of the coloured man is hence rightly justified. He doesn't have a chance to defend himself and is completely at the mercy of the white community. In a situation like this the safest option is that the coloured man has is to put as much distance between himself and his prosecutors as possible.

Conclusion: If the plight of the coloured man is such in a world of equality, justice and liberty then he is not mistaken if he thinks that a confrontation with a white man will evidently land him in trouble. The humane and generous acts of the lawyers in both the novels cannot be taken as the nature of the entire white community – they are merely exceptions; exceptional people with a compassionate heart. The whole idea of coloured people being inferior to the whites has its roots in the history of the country. The ideas have taken hold so deeply that desiring to uproot it would be equivalent to demanding a re-writing of history.

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