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Transcendence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*:

An Existential Psychoanalytic Reading

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Dedicated to all those who sacrifice their lives for the welfare of others

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A List of Abbreviations:

A: Abbreviated works of Jean-Paul Sartre

BN..... *Being and Nothingness: an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*

CDR..... *Critique of the Dialectical Reason*

EIS..... *Existentialism Is a Humanism*

HN..... *Hope Now: the 1980 Interviews: Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Levy*

NE.....*No Exit*

NFE.....*Notebooks for an Ethics*

RP.....*The Respectful Prostitute*

SG..... *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*

SM..... *Search for a Method*

TE..... *The Transcendence of the Ego*

B: Abbreviated works of Richard Wright

“HBWB”..... “How Bigger Was Born”

NS..... *Native Son*

Abstract:

Richard Wright's *Native Son* depicts the psychic plight of being oppressed and dehumanized in a racist society. As a writer who was acquainted with "Existentialism", Wright disapproved Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy due to its overemphasis upon the human beings' freedom, a claim which was modified due to Wright's further friendships with Sartre on the one hand and his further reflections on "Existentialism" on the other. There are critics who have read *Native Son* in terms of Bigger Thomas's scope of freedom; either calling the novel an existentialist or a naturalist work. Due to the existence of several existentialist thinkers, this study is limited to Jean-Paul Sartre's views. Regardless of the category to which the novel belongs, the aim of this study is to examine the competency of Sartre's "Existential Psychoanalysis" with its emphasis upon "Transcendence", "Fundamental Project", and "The Other" in analyzing the problems of the colored people in a racist society. The results of this dissertation underscore that: first; in light of Sartre's psychoanalytic insights revolving around ontology, Bigger Thomas can be considered as an autonomous individual with absolute "Transcendence". Second; employing Sartre's reflections on socio-economic elements fettering one's transcendence, the situated transcendence of Bigger Thomas is demonstrated. Third; in light of Sartre's ethical views, Bigger Thomas's ethical relationship with the "Other" is illustrated. The main conclusion to be drawn from this dissertation is that existential psychoanalytical reading of *Native Son* provides a tenable understanding of Bigger Thomas's psychic transformations. The dissertation recommends the application of other existentialist thinkers' ideas to analyze *Native Son* to appraise Bigger's anguish, or restoration to ethical critics to delve into the moral aspects of the novel.

Key Words: Existentialism, Existential Psychoanalysis, Transcendence, Fundamental Project, and The Other.

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چکیده:

رمان پسر بومی اثر ریچارد رایت، مخلصه روانی حاصل از نا انسان شدن در یک جامعه نژاد پرست را به تصویر می کشد. حد آزادی «بیگر تامس» در پسر بومی، در بین منتقدان بسیار مناقشه آمیز بوده است: برخی، او را یک شخصیت ناتورالیستی بی بهره از هر گونه آزادی می پندارند و برخی دیگر او را یک شخصیت اگزستانسیالیستی برخوردار از آزادی به حساب می آورند. مطالعه حاضر، تلاشی در راستای بررسی تحولات روانی شخصیت اصلی رمان با استمداد از دیدگاه های روانکاوانه ژان پل سارتر موسوم به «روانکای وجودی» می باشد. نقطه نظرات روانکاوانه سارتر بر محور مفهوم «تعالی» استوار است که به معنای کُنش آگاهانه فرد در فرا روی از خود می باشد که ماحصل آن تجربه، تحولات روانی است. مفاهیم دیگر، مانند «دیگری» و «طرح اندازی بنیادین» نیز به همان نسبت «تعالی» در «روانکای وجودی» حائز اهمیت اند. مطالعه پیش رو، بازتاب دهنده تکامل نظرات سارتر در خصوص قابلیت انسانها برای «تعالی» می باشد. در این راستا، اولاً؛ دیدگاه های روانکاوانه اولیه ی مبتنی بر هستی شناسی سارتر ارائه می گردد که بر آزادی مطلق انسانها تاکید می کند؛ بدین ترتیب، دغدغه های بیگر تامس به عنوان موجودی مستقل صرف نظر از پیش زمینه اجتماعی-اقتصادی او تبیین می شود. ثانیاً، تاملات متاخر سارتر در مورد عناصر محدود کننده «تعالی» نظیر نژاد پرستی و وضعیت اقتصادی که «تعالی» بیگر تامس را مقید می کنند، ارائه می شود. ثالثاً، با به کار بستن ملاحظات اخلاقی سارتر، رابطه اخلاقی بیگر با «دیگری» و روش او در گشودن فضایی برای «دیگری» برای «تعالی» خویش، مورد ارزیابی قرار میگیرد. مهم ترین نتیجه به دست آمده از این پایان نامه این است که در مقایسه با مطالعات جبر گرایانه و یا مطالعات منحصر به نظرات اولیه سارتر مرتبط با آزادی یا «تعالی» بی قید و بند، خوانش پسر بومی بر اساس «روانکای وجودی» سارتر توضیح بهتری را برای وضعیت روانی بیگر تامس ارائه می کند.

کلید واژه ها: اگزستانسیالیسم، روانکای وجودی، تعالی، دیگری، و طرح اندازی بنیادین

Introduction

Although some believe that philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are the forerunners of existentialism, it was not until the 1920s and 1930s that the term “philosophy of existence” was recurrently used for the philosophy of German philosophers like Martin Heidegger. In later decades, 1940s and 1950s, that term was replaced with “existentialism”. Regardless of their different methodologies and viewpoints, there is a common point among existentialists, that is, the question of being and existence. The difference between existentialism and traditional philosophy lies in their different orientations: “existentialist thinkers are concerned with the life of the particular existing individual” (Daigle, *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics* 11). Existentialists “are not interested in the general but in the particular, not in the abstract but in the concrete. This is how existentialism stands apart from traditional philosophy” (11).

It was with the name of Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher that the term “existentialism” came to the fore in 1940s. Existentialism “gained currency in France as a label for the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre” (Michelman xiii). After the World War II, the intellectuals and elite throughout Europe faced a new situation which did not seem promising. As a generation deprived of its hopes, ideals and morality, the war-stricken Europe was looking forward to gaining a new identity and meaning in an apparently gloomy and devastated world. That epoch “intensified existential concerns with freedom, responsibility and death” (Reynolds 1).

Sartrean version of existentialism can be defined shortly in his “pithy formula” (Michelman1) that “existence is prior to essence” (Sartre, *EIH* 17), that is to say; a human being “materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing” (22). In order to revive the despair-stricken man of 1940s, Sartre devoted himself to writing and speaking about the tangible problems and disasters of the age: modern human’s

despondency and his desire to lead a meaningful life. Sartre put his finger on human agency and its determining role in getting engaged in an incessant meaning-creating process. In Sartre' view, taking the daunting task of defining himself, man finds himself utterly free for what he makes out of himself and this awareness of his utter freedom renders angst:

Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility. (Sartre, *EIH* 25)

Sartre's early philosophy, reflected in his works like *Existentialism Is a Humanism* and *Being and Nothingness*, was concerned with ontology. Due to its emphasis upon sheer freedom, his philosophy is associated with "consciousness". He arduously fathomed the very facet of consciousness in his most acclaimed philosophical book, *Being and Nothingness*. Borrowing the major concepts from the prominent phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, Sartre argued that to be conscious meant to be conscious of something. Firstly, it is the world that Sartre means is to be conscious of. In this regard, the existence of world is a prerequisite to be conscious, because consciousness "exists as conscious of something, this something must already be there for consciousness to be conscious of it" (Daigle, *Jean Paul Sartre* 21) or to put it in Sartre's words, "consciousness is born supported by a being which is not itself" (*BN* 23). Secondly, to be conscious of something entails one's being aware of his being a conscious creature, so it always appears in the form of "self-consciousness" (Daigle, *Jean-Paul Sartre* 21).

Posing the idea of consciousness, Sartre was a critic of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis which revolved around unconsciousness. In the last chapter of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduced his own version of the issue entitled "existential psychoanalysis". Expressing his position against unconsciousness, Sartre wrote: "Existential psychoanalysis rejects the hypothesis of the unconscious; it makes the psychic act coextensive with consciousness" (BN 570). Highlighting the significance of unconsciousness, Sartre complained that empirical psychoanalyses neglect "everything which could evoke the idea of transcendence" (557). He believed that by reducing a person's state of being to his "desires" the practitioners of those psychoanalyses applied reductive methods which could not lead the psychologist to fruitful results (558). He was against those psychoanalytical schools which did not take the "unification" of each individual seriously and limit their investigation to a particular aspect of being, i.e. desires (561). Therefore, from a Sartrean viewpoint, it is not desire per se which is significant enough to be investigated psychoanalytically; rather, it is each individual's desire "to be" which is worth reflecting. Fundamentally, Sartre declared, "man is the desire to be" and "existence of this desire is not to be established by an empirical induction" (565). This desire is crystallized in the form of transcendence, or freedom.

As it was mentioned above, Sartre criticized traditional psychoanalysis due to its deterministic methodologies, since "it absolves individuals of responsibility for themselves by attributing thoughts and behaviors to unconscious motives" (Michelman 59). Sartre stated that people in attempting to flee the heavy burden of their absolute freedom resort to some strategies by which they deceive themselves not to acknowledge their transcendence. He affirmed that the above-mentioned psychoanalyses paved the way for excuses concerning humankind's being condemned to some predetermined states. Sartre called this self-deception

“bad faith” which “is a lie to oneself” (*BN* 48). He distinguished different types of bad faith which I will elaborate in the subsequent chapters.

One of the core tenets of Sartre’s early philosophy is the concept of “nothingness”. Sartre stated that “man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world” (*BN* 24). He meant that: “Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower. Prior to that projection of the self, nothing exists” (*EIH* 23). This nothingness is a “cleavage between past and present” (*BN* 27) and it renders anguish, thus: “For-itself [a human being] spends its life in a futile pursuit of Being and tries in vain to escape the nothingness which it is” (*BN* xxvi). Nothingness is related to consciousness because it is “a total emptiness, for the entire world is outside it” (Medhidhammaporn 49).

Sartre believed that human existence had two aspects: “transcendence” and “facticity”. In Sartre’s terminology, “transcendence” is the very human reality. Commentators like Gregory McCloch equate Sartre’s “transcendence” with “freedom”, asserting that by transcendence, Sartre intended to emphasize that there was no specified human nature which can determine how people would act or live (Webber 22). Sartre maintained that the origin of this transcendence was “its own surpassing toward what it lacks; ... Human reality is not something which exists first in order afterwards to lack this or that; it exists first as lack ...” (*BN* 89). He added that this “transcendence” or freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness” (28). Thus as a lack, each individual is engaged in giving his existence a meaning, shape and fullness.

Other dimension of human existence is one’s “facticity”. By facticity, Sartre meant the situation in which every individual was being thrown without his own volition, which is, “being there in the world” (*BN* xv). In Sartre’s view, facticity “simply resides in the for-itself [human being] as a memory of being, as its unjustifiable presence in *the* world” (*BN* 84). He

intended to delineate his awareness of the impediments which might appear in front of each individual's transcendence, thus it is facticity which is to be transcended or surpassed. Sartre enumerated five modes of situation or facticity: One's place of birth, past, environment, fellowmen and death (Medhidhammaporn 68-70).

Having regarded human beings either as free agents aware of their responsibility to define and make themselves authentically or as bounded creatures, who in bad faith deny their responsibility to create themselves, what Sartre sought to investigate was one's "fundamental project". "Fundamental project" is what "represents one's most basic attitudes toward the world, others, and oneself" (Michelman 274), that is, "it is a *project*, or a throwing of oneself forward from the past toward the future in a particular way" (Cannon 19). For Sartre, fundamental project is a choice or "a way of being" which "is grasped in the midst of living and connecting with the world and not in some state apart" (4).

This project is future-oriented. It must be noted that "the 'fundamental project' in existential psychoanalysis takes on the same importance as the 'complex' in Freudian psychoanalysis" (19). In Sartre's opinion, "The free project is fundamental for it is my being" (BN 479). Fundamental project is one's view toward oneself and others and either considering oneself and others as subjects or viewing them as objects, each of which I will go through in the upcoming chapters.

The ontological tone of early Sartre's career which seemed to be neglecting other aspects of human freedom led him to reevaluate the concept of "transcendence" in his later works. He endeavored to reflect on material and social constraints which might shackle one's freedom. Furthermore, he went through the psychological implications of such limitations in every individual.

In both *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre endeavored to illustrate the complex web of impediments which distorted each individual's desire to

transcend, to be a subject. In *Search for a Method*, for instance, Sartre tried to show how one might get distracted from his fundamental project by external forces in a material world. He intended to integrate Marxism with “the psychoanalytic method which discovers the point of insertion of man and his class” (*SM* 62). Almost in the same trajectory with *Search for a Method*, Sartre underwent to illustrate the role of economic forces in curbing people’s choices to transcend in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. He substituted the term “need” with “desire” as a fundamental situation of human beings. Shifting his former attitude, conflict of consciousnesses and dominance of desire to be, Sartre affirmed that the basic cause of violence in the world was “need”. By need, Sartre meant human being’s survival in a world whose fundamental state was scarcity. For Sartre, scarcity was “a human fact, rather than the malignity of a cruel nature” (*CDR* 140). Despite his shift of attitude in his later philosophy, Sartre never put the concept of transcendence aside: “transcendence remains the key to Sartre's later philosophy as well as to his ethico-political position” (Cannon 172).

Later Sartre was concerned with economic determinants in transcendence and he was obsessed with the problem of “racism” in modern world as well. His account of this issue was phenomenological in his early philosophy but he moved from abstract analysis of the case to a more tangible portrait of the problem in his later studies. His early understanding of racism was mostly focused on “look” and its power to petrify a black individual, for instance; however, describing racism in the United States Sartre added a new dimension, that is, “institutionalized oppression of blacks” (Judaken 29). Sartre wrote some prefaces for some books written by black intellectuals like Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon. Ultimately, He regarded “violence” as a force to provide the black with their transcendence and disentanglement (220); an idea which he seemed to modify as an aging man.

The question of ethics and morality always preserved its significance in Sartre’s philosophy and psychoanalysis. Of course, it must be noted that he never managed to provide

his readers with a classified and complete book in this regard. His unfinished work to be published in the field of ethics was *Notebooks for an Ethics* which was published posthumously in 1980. Due to his emphasis upon human subjectivity, Sartrean version of ethics does not follow any prescribed codes of behavior; rather it is a situation-bound and relative one, differing from a situation to another. Despite refuting any predetermined morality, Sartre was aware of any subject's responsibility toward the Other. Since human beings are regarded as legislators of value in the world, their desire to be and interactions with others entail ethical connotations (Cannon 174). Sartre's ethical views underwent somewhat drastic changes throughout his lifetime. Being concerned with hellish presence of Other in his early philosophy which was reflected in *Being and Nothingness* alongside with his literary works like *No Exit*, Sartre outspokenly contended: "Hell is other people" (NE 45). It goes without saying that such an attitude leaves less, if any, room for ethics. Later on, early Sartre opened up a place for Other emphasizing that "I am ... responsible for myself and for everyone else, I am fashioning a certain image of man as I choose him to be. In choosing myself, I choose man" (EIH 24). However, again in his later philosophy, as in *Search for a Method*, Sartre considered ethical and psychological transcendence to be unattainable in a world which "scarcity" was predominant (SIM 34). Of course, as in his latest interviews with Benny Levy published as *Hope Now: the 1980 Interviews, Jean Paul Sartre and Benny Levy*, Sartre acknowledged that ethics and respect for the Other's presence is highly significant regarding one's transcendence (68).

Richard Wright, the father of African-American literature, was born on September 4, 1908 near Natchez, Mississippi. Having been abandoned by his father when he was five, Richard was largely raised by his mother. Despite being gifted with words and being an enthusiastic reader, Wright only managed to get a ninth grade education. The inception of his

literary career as a writer was dated back to the publication of his first short story in a newspaper when he was only sixteen.

In 1927, Wright left the South and moved to Chicago, where he worked at a post office as a clerk and also swept streets. Due to the Great Depression, he was leading a poverty-stricken life in that period. Being always against capitalistic system, recurrent in the United States, Wright joined Communist party in 1932. When he could, he continued to immerse himself in books and write. He eventually joined the Federal Writers' Project, and in 1937, with dreams of making it as a writer, he moved to New York City, where he was told he stood a better chance of getting published.

A year later, Wright published *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of four stories. The book proved to be a remarkable turning point in his career. The stories earned him a \$500 prize from Story magazine and led to a 1939 Guggenheim Fellowship. More acclaim followed in 1940 with the publication of the novel *Native Son*. The book brought Wright fame and freedom to write. It was a regular atop the bestseller lists and became the first book by an African-American writer to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. A stage version (by Wright and Paul Green) followed in 1941, and Wright himself later played the title role in a film version made in Argentina. However, it was not so successful as the book itself.

In 1945, Wright published *Black Boy*, which offered a moving account of his harsh life condition in his childhood and youth in the South. It also depicted extreme poverty and his accounts of racial violence against blacks. The book greatly advanced Wright's reputation, but after living mainly in Mexico (1940–6), he had become so disillusioned with both the Communist Party and white America that he went off to Paris, where he lived the rest of his life as an expatriate. He continued to write novels, including *The Outsider* (1953) and *The Long Dream* (1958), and nonfiction, such as *Black Power* (1954) and *White Man*,

Listen!(1957), and was regarded by many writers as an inspiration. Wright died of a heart attack on November 28, 1960 in Paris, France.

Native Son is the story of a twenty-year-old black boy, Bigger Thomas, living in a ghetto in South. Being poverty-stricken and in need of money, Bigger's mother urges him to work for a well-to-do white family, Daltons, as a driver. At the first day of his work, Bigger is told to drive Mr. Dalton's daughter, Mary and her friend Max who was a Communist. Having Communist tendencies, they treat Bigger as equal and offer him dine with them. Being accustomed to racial segregations and discrimination, when offered friendship and gentleness by his white employees, Bigger ironically feels contempt and rage. When Bigger takes Mary home that night, she is too intoxicated to stand on her feet, thus Bigger takes her upstairs in his arms. When he puts Mary on her bed, her blind mother Mrs. Dalton comes in and Bigger, in fear of being accused of rape, accidentally smothers Mary with a pillow. Mary's murder gives him a sense of identity and power. To conceal his crime, Bigger burns Mary's body in the Daltons' furnace. With the aid of his girlfriend Bessie and his awareness of Mr. Dalton's hatred of Communists, Bigger decides to write a ransom letter pretending that Mary has been kidnapped by Jan and his Communist fellows. To Bigger's despair, Mary's bones are found in the furnace and his plan ruined, he flees the Daltons' house. Afterward, Bigger who is frightened that Bessie will fail to accompany him kills her with a brick hysterically. Eventually, Bigger is captured by a massive white mob. In jail, Jan's friend Max is introduced to Bigger as his lawyer. Arguing that Bigger's crime is the product of a racist and unjust society, Max gives a vehement lecture in defense of him in the courtroom; however, Max's endeavor to save Bigger's life seems to be of no avail and he waits for his impending death.

The possibility of transcendence in *Native Son* has often appealed the critics and scholars. In this regard, there are two groups of critics; the first group fall into the ones who presume it is not possible for Bigger to transcend his circumstance and the second group are those who maintain it is possible for him to acquire transcendence through his free will. Critics and scholars like Sam Bluefarb, Yoshinobu Hakutani, Jeffery Atteberrey and Charles E. Wilson are among those who fall into the former and Katherine Fishburn, W. Laurence Hogue, Donald B. Gibson, Benjamin D. Carson, Gregory Alan Jones and Julian Coomlan Hounkpe belong to the latter one.

In *The Escape Motif in the American Novel: Mark Twain to Richard Wright* (1972), Sam Bluefarb remarks that having a naturalistic fate, Bigger Thomas's life is like a labyrinth in which he is entrapped either from within or without. Not having a realistic expectation from life on the one hand, and ignoring his incapability to circumvent the circumstance on the other, in Bluefarb's opinion, the beginning and the end of the novel is the same; Bigger lives in a cage from which he attempts to escape in vain because "his escape has been blocked; it is doomed to failure even before it begins" (135). Any sort of escape arises from Bigger's desire to extricate himself from an environment which does not care for his suffering. Such an escape, as Bluefarb points out, is doomed to failure; a useless tactic which arises from one's discontent: "Escape seems to express the discrepancy between what life is and what it could be—in the minds of the escapers at least" (162).

In his essay entitled as "Richard Wright and American naturalism" (1988), Hakutani contends that Richard Wright's use of crime as a thematic device in *Native Son* bears witness to the novel's being a naturalist one. This critic believes that the only factor which distinguishes Wright from other naturalists, traditional ones, is his focus. Wright focuses on the consequences of a crime rather than the crime per se. Hakutani contends that it is Bigger's

disgusting environment which makes his violent actions inevitable, thus the novel is a full-fledged example of a naturalist piece of art without any possibility for transcendence.

Hakutani, in “Two on Wright” (1991), maintains: “Richard Wright criticism since its inception has been saturated with references to literary naturalism and existentialist philosophy” (491). He suggests that according to Trudier Harris, “Wright deliberately assigns Bigger the idea of existentialism while prescribing a subservient attitude, a way of life dictated by slavery, for each of the women in the novel” (496). That is, the novel is a mixture of naturalist and existentialist elements.

Wilson in *Race and Racism in Literature* (2005) argues that since the novel is to explore the race and racism, Richard Wright employs the literary phenomenon of naturalism. He acclaims Wright’s mastery of naturalistic elements and meticulousness in providing the reader with a determinism-bound oeuvre in which harsh and abominable life conditions abound. Wilson proceeds to emphasize that “in *Native Son* Wright does not use Naturalism to present Bigger as an animal by virtue of his racial or ethnic composition... Instead, Wright uses Naturalism to describe a state of affairs when a human being (in this case, a black one) finds himself trapped in a world where he can exercise few, if any, choices” (22). Wilson implies that there is no place of transcendence for Bigger and existential reading of the novel may not shed light on what Wright intends to say.

Fishburn in *Richard Wright’s Hero: the Faces of Rebel-Victim* (1977) evaluates Richard Wright’s owe to naturalism and existentialism in depicting Bigger’s life. She highlights the novel’s being a medley of naturalism, existentialism and Marxism: “*Native Son*, is without question, a proletarian novel, it remains something more. In this powerful novel Wright straddles the opposing forces of naturalism and existentialism, wearing the boots of a Marxist” (71). She believes that employing violence is another point, indicating the sovereignty of naturalism and existentialism in *Native Son* (75). However, Fishburn affirms