

Research Article

From Silence to Representation: The Subaltern Image in 1930s Chicago in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Hasan Mahmood* 

Department of English, Bandarban University, Bandarban, Bangladesh

Abstract

This study focuses at Richard Wright's *Native Son* through the lens of subaltern theory, exploring how the novel shows the lives of marginalized African Americans in 1930s Chicago. Focusing on the "Subaltern Image," it examines how Wright turns socially silenced figures—especially Bigger Thomas and Black women like Bessie—into complex literary characters. The analysis highlights how racial segregation, poverty, gender inequality, and media distortion work together to keep these characters silenced. The study also focuses at urban space, showing how areas like the South Side Black Belt act as restrictive environments that control, surveil, and make marginalized people invisible. Through a novel methodological approach combining close reading with intersectional and spatial perspectives, the study offers a fresh way to understand subaltern representation. Using symbolism, imagery, and narrative perspective, Wright gives partial voice and agency to his characters, while also showing the limits of their self-expression. The paper critiques white liberal characters, like the Daltons, whose well-meaning actions fail to challenge structural inequalities. It also draws on recent research in subaltern studies and African American literature, including work on systemic vulnerability and climate-related issues, placing Wright's novel in a contemporary theoretical context. Ultimately, *Native Son* is both a literary and social intervention, giving visibility to silenced lives. By examining race, class, gender, and urban space, the study shows why Wright's work remains important for understanding oppression and the challenges of representing marginalized voices.

Keywords

Subalternity, Silence, Representation, Race, Class, Segregation, Power, Marginalization

1. Introduction

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) is widely recognized as a groundbreaking exploration of race, class, and systemic oppression in early twentieth-century America. Set in 1930s Chicago, the novel portrays the life of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man whose experiences reveal the harsh realities of segregation, poverty, and social marginalization. While much of the scholarship on *Native Son* has focused on naturalism, psychological determinism, or Marxist critique, this

study examines the novel through the lens of subalternity, drawing on Gramsci's notion of the subaltern as socially and politically excluded groups and Spivak's inquiry into whether marginalized voices can be heard within dominant discourse.

This paper investigates how Wright transforms the silence of the subaltern—manifested in societal constraints, racial stereotyping, and systemic injustice—into literary representation, giving voice to characters who are historically silenced.

*Corresponding author: hasan@bubban.ac.bd (Hasan Mahmood)

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In doing so, it considers the interplay of race, class, and gender, highlighting how both men and women experience compounded marginalization in urban Chicago. By situating *Native Son* within its historical and social context, this study argues that the novel not only critiques the structural forces that oppress African Americans but also foregrounds the complexities of subaltern existence, illuminating the tension between silence and articulation in literature.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, combining close textual analysis with intersectional and spatial perspectives. Key narrative episodes are examined in relation to historical, social, and cultural contexts, providing a structured framework to trace the movement from silence to visibility. This approach clarifies how Wright constructs subaltern representation while situating it within broader theoretical and literary debates.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Richard Wright's *Native Son* has traditionally emphasized psychological, social, and political dimensions of the novel. Early criticism focused on naturalism, Marxist readings, and the determinism shaping Bigger Thomas [1, 2], while historical studies highlighted 1930s Chicago—segregation, economic marginalization, and systemic oppression [3, 4].

Recent scholarship has expanded these discussions, although none directly frame the analysis in terms of a “Subaltern Image”. Mathpati [5] explores racial discrimination and social silencing in 1930s Chicago, highlighting the marginalization of African Americans, while Edujets [6] examines the intersection of race, poverty, and societal expectations in Bigger's identity formation. Studies drawing on Critical Race Theory and postcolonial psychology similarly explore the psychological impact of systemic racism on marginalized characters. These works collectively underscore the ways in which Wright portrays oppressed individuals whose voices are constrained by social and structural forces.

While these recent studies provide valuable insights, they do not explicitly conceptualize Bigger Thomas or other marginalized characters as a “Subaltern Image”. This study addresses that gap by framing *Native Son* through subaltern theory [7, 8] and investigating how historically silenced figures are represented in literature, tracing the movement from silence to representation. By emphasizing this conceptual lens, the study offers an original contribution, demonstrating how Wright gives visibility and complexity to subaltern figures in 1930s Chicago, while interrogating the intersecting structures of race, class, and gender that shape their marginalization.

3. Methodology & Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology to

explore how Richard Wright's *Native Son* transforms the subaltern image of African Americans in 1930s Chicago from silence to representation. The analysis is primarily text-based, relying on close readings of key narrative episodes such as Bigger Thomas's interactions with the Daltons, his relationship with Mary and Jan, the killing of Mary, and the courtroom trial. These moments are examined for how Wright dramatizes the historical silencing of the Black subject and simultaneously constructs a resistant voice against dominant cultural, racial, and class discourses. The research design follows a cultural-materialist approach that integrates literary analysis with sociological and historical contextualization. Data are drawn from Wright's novel as the primary source, with secondary materials including critical studies on Wright, African American literature, Marxist literary criticism, subaltern studies, and 1930s Chicago's socio-economic history. Contextual grounding is further provided through historical records on segregation, labor struggles, and urban poverty, which frame Bigger's existence within systemic oppression. Analytical procedures include close reading of narrative form, symbolism, and character construction; tracing interrelations between race, class, and power; and situating Bigger's silences and violent outbursts as emblematic of subaltern disruption. The scope is limited to Wright's *Native Son*, with broader African American texts invoked only for comparative context, ensuring depth of analysis. This methodology maintains balance between textual fidelity and historical-theoretical rigor, positioning the novel as both a cultural document and a site of resistance.

The analysis is guided by four intersecting frameworks. First, *Subaltern Studies* [8, 9] provides the lens to examine Bigger's silence and inability to speak within dominant discourses, echoing the question of whether the subaltern can speak or is always mediated by hegemonic structures. Second, *Marxist Criticism* [7, 10] frames the novel's depiction of class struggle, ideology, and racialized labor exploitation, reading Bigger's condition as the outcome of structural oppression rather than individual pathology. Third, *Critical Race Theory* [11, 12] situates the racial dynamics of 1930s Chicago, analyzing how systemic racism, white liberal paternalism, and urban segregation shape Bigger's identity and fate. Finally, *African American Literary Studies* [13-17] extends this framework by incorporating recent debates on Black subjectivity, affect, and representation. These perspectives illuminate how *Native Son* bridges African American experience and global subalternity, articulating both the psychic and social dimensions of silence, resistance, and human agency. Together, these frameworks uncover Wright's project as one of ethical and political urgency: turning the historically silenced subaltern figure into a disruptive representative of systemic contradictions in American modernity.

4. Critical and Literary Analysis

This chapter undertakes a close reading of Richard Wright's *Native Son* to explore how the novel represents the

silenced voices of the subaltern in 1930s Chicago. By analyzing themes of silence, representation, gendered marginalization, class oppression, and urban spatial segregation, the discussion reveals how Wright constructs a literary space where the subaltern condition is both exposed and interrogated. The chapter further examines Wright's narrative strategies, highlighting their significance in understanding structures of power, resistance, and social justice.

4.1. Introduction to the Subaltern Concept in *Native Son*

The concept of the subaltern originates in the writings of Antonio Gramsci [7], who used the term to describe groups excluded from power and denied access to dominant social, political, and cultural institutions. Later, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expanded the idea in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" [8], arguing that the subaltern is not simply marginalized but rendered voiceless, unable to represent themselves within the hegemonic structures that define meaning. In this sense, the subaltern is not just oppressed materially but silenced symbolically.

When applied to African American experience in 1930s Chicago, the subaltern concept illuminates how systemic racism and class exploitation forced Black communities into invisibility. Segregation, economic deprivation, and legal discrimination restricted African Americans to what Gramsci would call a subaltern position, outside the spheres of influence where narratives of power were constructed. Richard Wright's *Native Son* presents this reality through the life of Bigger Thomas, whose very existence reflects the tension between silence and visibility, oppression and resistance.

In the novel, Bigger and others like him are not given a voice within the social order—they are spoken about by white characters, institutions, and the media rather than speaking for themselves. This recalls Spivak's concern that even when the subaltern appears in discourse, they are mediated through the voice of authority, never directly self-representing. Yet Wright's narrative complicates this question by making Bigger both a subaltern figure and a literary construct through which Wright conveys the experiences of the silenced. Thus, the novel becomes a paradoxical site where the subaltern is simultaneously represented and yet unable to "speak" on his own terms.

By introducing the concept of the subaltern into the analysis of *Native Son*, we can better understand the structural mechanisms of silence that define Bigger's life, as well as Wright's attempt to transform that silence into literary visibility. The term "Subaltern Image", as applied in this study, therefore refers to the ways in which the novel portrays the marginalized, voiceless figures of 1930s Chicago, making their condition perceptible to readers while questioning the limits of representation itself.

4.2. Silence of the Subaltern

The subaltern condition in Richard Wright's *Native Son* is

most powerfully expressed through silence, a condition that emerges from the social, economic, and legal structures of 1930s Chicago. African Americans during this period faced systemic exclusion that confined them to segregated neighborhoods, denied them access to fair employment, and placed them at the margins of political and civic life. Segregation in housing policies forced Black families into the South Side "Black Belt," an overcrowded urban space that restricted not only their movement but also their opportunities for upward mobility. These historical realities resonate in the novel's opening scenes, where the Thomas family is cramped into a one-room apartment, their lack of privacy reflecting their lack of voice in the broader social order. The social geography of Chicago becomes a physical manifestation of silencing: African Americans are visible in their segregation, yet unheard in the civic discourse that shapes the city.

Bigger Thomas, as Wright's protagonist, embodies this voicelessness. His inability to articulate desires or grievances stems not from a lack of intelligence but from the constant awareness of social boundaries. In conversations with Mr. Dalton, Jan, and Mary, Bigger's speech is hesitant and guarded, often reduced to monosyllables or silence. At one point, Wright describes Bigger's inner struggle as "a dumb, sullen, baffled, and lawless mood that lived in him" [18], capturing how speechlessness is internalized as anger and confusion. This silence arises from fear: fear of transgressing the racial codes that regulate his behavior, fear of being misunderstood, and fear of punishment in a society that criminalizes Black presence. Bigger's voicelessness is thus not a personal failure but the consequence of systemic oppression, which denies him the security to speak freely or assert an identity outside of what society prescribes for him. His silence becomes a survival mechanism, reflecting the subaltern's condition of being unable to "speak" in Spivak's sense [8]—not merely unheard but structurally prevented from self-representation.

The silencing of the subaltern in *Native Son* extends beyond individual interactions to the realm of media and public discourse. Once Bigger is accused of Mary Dalton's murder, the press constructs his image in ways that reinforce racial stereotypes, portraying him as a "black beast" and a threat to white society [18]. Wright emphasizes how the media transforms Bigger into a spectacle: "He felt that the newspapers had taken hold of him and fixed him in the gaze of the world, branded him as a thing to be hated, feared, and destroyed" [18]. In this process, Bigger loses any possibility of representing himself; the narrative of his life is hijacked by white-controlled media that speaks over him. The sensational headlines and distorted representations amplify fear and prejudice, ensuring that Bigger's voice, already fragile, is completely erased. In this sense, the media operates as a powerful tool of silencing, reducing the subaltern to an object of spectacle rather than a subject of agency.

Thus, the silence of the subaltern in *Native Son* is multi-dimensional: it emerges from social and economic exclusion,

is embodied in Bigger's muted responses shaped by fear and oppression, and is reinforced by the media's manipulation of public perception. Segregation in housing policies, as documented historically [19], placed Black families in constrained spaces that reinforced both physical and symbolic silences. Wright's depiction of silence exposes the pervasive mechanisms that deny African Americans their voice, situating Bigger not just as an individual character but as a representative image of the silenced subaltern in 1930s Chicago.

4.3. Representation in Literature

Richard Wright's *Native Son* marks a turning point in American literature by giving narrative visibility to those traditionally excluded from representation. Bigger Thomas, who might otherwise have remained a voiceless figure in history, is instead placed at the center of the novel. Wright does not allow him to remain an object of sociological description or newspaper caricature; rather, he becomes a subject whose inner fears, desires, and contradictions are revealed in painful detail. Wright positions Bigger not merely as a social case study but as a complex literary subject, giving the subaltern a form of literary presence [20].

The opening scene, in which Bigger wakes to the sound of a rat in his family's cramped apartment, symbolizes more than poverty: it gives the reader direct access to his environment and consciousness, grounding the narrative in the lived reality of the subaltern. By telling the story from Bigger's perspective, Wright refuses the silence imposed by society and insists that the world be seen through the eyes of the oppressed. Wright's narrative aligns with the African American literary tradition of representing marginalized lives, as discussed in canonical anthologies [21].

Wright's use of symbolism, imagery, and perspective functions as powerful tools to represent the subaltern experience. The recurring image of blindness—whether in Mrs. Dalton's literal inability to see, or in the metaphorical blindness of white society—highlights how African Americans remain invisible in dominant discourse. At the same time, Wright frequently employs imagery of confinement: the small apartment, the narrow streets of the Black Belt, and eventually the prison cell all symbolize the limits imposed on Black life. These images not only externalize Bigger's condition but also force the reader to confront the structural violence that shapes it. Importantly, Wright uses free indirect discourse to immerse the reader in Bigger's thoughts: his fear when chauffeuring Mary and Jan, his panic after the accidental killing, and his brief moments of empowerment. In one pivotal moment, Wright writes, "He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at the world with new eyes." [18]. This perspective allows the subaltern voice, usually muted, to resonate with a clarity that challenges the silencing structures.

However, Wright also contrasts this representation with the limitations of white liberal characters, especially the Daltons.

While Mr. Dalton presents himself as a philanthropist who donates ping-pong tables to Black communities, he fails to recognize the deeper structural injustices of housing and employment that he profits from. Mrs. Dalton's physical blindness becomes a potent symbol of this liberal failure to "see" the subaltern's reality. Even as she stands in the same room with Bigger on the night of Mary's death, her inability to perceive him represents the broader social blindness that denies visibility to Black existence. The Daltons' liberal gestures—charity and polite conversation—do not bridge the gulf between them and Bigger, but instead reinforce their dominance by ignoring his actual condition. Wright thus critiques not only overt racism but also the paternalistic liberalism that claims to "help" while perpetuating invisibility.

In this way, *Native Son* becomes a literary act of representation. Wright brings to voice and vision those who have been silenced and unseen, while simultaneously exposing the blindness of dominant society. Like Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* [22], Wright's novel captures the interiority and existential pressures imposed on individuals by societal structures. By narrating Bigger's inner world and contrasting it with the superficial gestures of white liberals, Wright transforms the subaltern image from an absence into a presence—complex, flawed, but undeniably human.

4.4. Gendered Subalternity

While Richard Wright's *Native Son* primarily centers on Bigger Thomas, the novel also reveals the layered oppression faced by Black women, who are doubly marginalized by race and gender. Figures like Bessie Mears exemplify how Black women in 1930s Chicago were not only trapped by the same racial hierarchies that shaped Bigger's life but also subjected to gendered exploitation, both within their own communities and by the wider society. Their invisibility in the narrative of justice and progress underscores the concept of gendered subalternity—a position of silencing that intersects racial oppression with patriarchal structures.

Bessie's role in the novel reflects this dual marginalization. She works long hours in a menial job, her economic dependence limiting her ability to resist Bigger's demands. When Bigger drags her into his flight after Mary's murder, she expresses exhaustion and despair: "I ain't got nothing to do with it. I'm just tired. Tired of living and scared of dying" [18]. Her words highlight the profound hopelessness of a life marked by both racial exclusion and gendered vulnerability. Unlike Bigger, who at least imagines moments of power or rebellion, Bessie has no outlet for resistance; her social position offers no space for her voice. Her eventual death—murdered by Bigger in an act of desperation—becomes emblematic of how the subaltern woman's life is rendered expendable and unremembered.

This erasure reflects the broader invisibility of Black women in 1930s Chicago. While African American men were criminalized as threats in public discourse, Black women

were often ignored, their struggles relegated to the private sphere. Historical records of the era, including sociological studies of Chicago's Black Belt, focus primarily on male labor and crime, with little attention to women's experiences of poverty, domestic labor, or abuse. Wright mirrors this social invisibility by portraying Bessie not as a fully developed subject but as someone whose life is defined through Bigger's perspective. Yet, in her fleeting moments of speech, she offers a piercing glimpse into the exhaustion of the gendered subaltern, bearing a burden that is both racial and patriarchal.

The contrast between Bessie and Mary Dalton further illuminates this dynamic. While Mary's gender does not prevent her from enjoying the privileges of whiteness—her rebellion against her family's values is possible precisely because of her social security—Bessie's gender compounds her vulnerability. Mary is protected by her whiteness, even in death, as the media sensationalizes her murder, whereas Bessie's death is hardly acknowledged, reflecting how the lives of Black women remain unvalued within both white and Black communities. Wright thus critiques a system in which subaltern women are denied voice, visibility, and even the dignity of recognition.

African American women in segregated urban spaces faced compounded constraints, which Wright illustrates through characters like Bessie [23]. Through Bessie and other minor female figures, *Native Son* exposes the reality of gendered subalternity: the double silencing of Black women who are marginalized by both race and gender. Wright's depiction, while limited in depth, nonetheless points to a crucial truth—that the subaltern is not a singular figure but shaped by intersecting axes of oppression.

4.5. Intersection of Race, Class, and Power

Richard Wright's *Native Son* does not portray racism as an isolated prejudice; instead, it reveals how race, class, and power are intertwined in shaping the lives of the oppressed. Bigger Thomas's story is not simply one of racial exclusion but also of economic exploitation and political subordination in 1930s Chicago. The Great Migration had brought thousands of African Americans northward in search of opportunity, yet they found themselves trapped in segregated neighborhoods and confined to low-paying jobs. This structural reality demonstrates how racial oppression was reinforced by capitalist interests, producing a hierarchy where Black labor was necessary but kept powerless.

Bigger's employment with the Daltons illustrates this intersection clearly. As a chauffeur, he is dependent on the very family whose wealth is built in part on Black housing exploitation—Mr. Dalton profits from real estate in the Black Belt, charging high rents to African American tenants confined by restrictive covenants. Thus, Bigger's livelihood ties him directly to the economic system that sustains his oppression. His job is framed as an "opportunity," yet it is actually another form of control: his wages barely support survival,

and his daily work serves to reinforce white comfort rather than his own advancement. Wright dramatizes this when Bigger reflects, "He felt that the world had shut him out, and he was to live in it on the outside of it" [18]. His exclusion is both racial and economic, showing how the subaltern exists at the margins of power with little chance of mobility.

Class dynamics also intersect with media and law enforcement, which wield power unevenly along racial lines. When Mary Dalton disappears, suspicion falls immediately on Bigger, not only because he is Black but also because he occupies a servant's role in a white household. The newspapers and police amplify this bias by portraying him as a dangerous predator, reducing him to a stereotype that justifies swift punishment. This reflects how systemic power protects white property and reputation while criminalizing Black existence. Bigger's trial becomes a stage where both race and class collide: as a poor Black man, he has no resources to defend himself against the full machinery of state power. Even when Boris Max attempts to argue for Bigger as a product of systemic injustice, the court's decision demonstrates how deeply entrenched the structures of power are in preserving racial hierarchies.

Wright also emphasizes the limited solidarity available to Bigger across class lines. Characters like Jan Erlone represent a leftist, communist vision of class struggle that seeks to unite workers regardless of race. Yet Bigger mistrusts Jan's overtures, reading them through the lens of his lived racial experience. The novel here reveals the difficulties of bridging class struggle with racial struggle in a society where race is the dominant marker of power. In practice, white radicals like Jan still possess a form of privilege that prevents them from fully inhabiting the subaltern perspective.

By weaving together race, class, and power, Wright shows that oppression is never singular. Urban segregation and the economic marginalization of Black residents shape Bigger's social positioning and the structural forces that constrain his mobility [19, 23]. Bigger's condition is not simply the result of racial hatred, nor only of economic exploitation, but of their fusion within the social order of 1930s Chicago. His story demonstrates how these intersecting forces create a closed system where upward mobility is denied and survival itself becomes precarious.

4.6. Urban Space as a Site of Subalternity

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright portrays 1930s Chicago not only as a backdrop but as an active force that shapes the subaltern condition. The city's geography mirrors colonial structures, where African Americans are confined to segregated ghettos under conditions that resemble domination and control. The Black Belt on Chicago's South Side, overcrowded and poorly maintained, functioned as a kind of internal colony: Black residents were legally and economically restricted to these neighborhoods through restrictive housing covenants and discriminatory real estate practices. This Black

Belt functions as a spatial mechanism of subalternity, restricting movement and visibility while consolidating racial hierarchies [19]. Sociological studies of the time, such as those by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, documented that African Americans paid disproportionately high rents for inferior housing, while white landlords like Mr. Dalton profited from this racialized exploitation. Wright incorporates this reality directly into the novel, where Bigger's family lives in a one-room apartment with little privacy—an environment that embodies both material poverty and symbolic marginalization.

Urban space in *Native Son* is not neutral; it enforces silence and invisibility. The narrow, decaying streets of the Black Belt limit Bigger's movement, marking him as out of place whenever he steps beyond them. His journey to the Dalton household dramatizes this tension: he leaves behind the crowded tenement and enters a space of white wealth, yet he does so as a servant, with his presence strictly regulated. Wright's urban settings dramatize the interplay of race, class, and space, making the city itself a character that enforces subalternity [23]. The physical separation of neighborhoods reflects the broader social order, where proximity to power does not translate into belonging. Bigger's awareness of these spatial boundaries shapes his silence—he knows instinctively that he cannot speak or act freely in spaces controlled by white authority.

The city also reinforces subalternity through its instruments of surveillance and spectacle. Once Mary Dalton disappears, the urban environment turns hostile: newspapers plaster Bigger's face across the city, police flood Black neighborhoods, and the streets become sites of manhunts and raids. In this moment, the Black Belt is not only a place of confinement but also a stage where the subaltern is displayed as criminal for public consumption. Wright captures this when he writes, "Everywhere he looked and went he felt that the city was after him" [18]. The city itself becomes a metaphorical colonizer, controlling movement, visibility, and even identity.

Thus, Chicago in *Native Son* operates as a site of subalternity where space itself is weaponized to maintain racial hierarchies. The ghetto confines, the white neighborhoods exclude, and the city as a whole enforces a structure of silence and marginalization. By situating Bigger's story within this urban geography, Wright demonstrates that oppression is not only social and economic but spatial, embedding the logic of colonialism within the very landscape of the modern American city.

4.7. From Silence to Voice

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas's journey can be read as a tentative movement from enforced silence toward a precarious form of voice. His acts of defiance—most dramatically, the accidental killing of Mary Dalton and the subsequent flight from the law—function as a partial assertion of agency within an otherwise constraining social order. These actions,

though morally complex and legally condemnable, signify an attempt to disrupt the rigid structures that have silenced him. Wright presents these moments not as triumphs but as intense expressions of frustration and constrained power, showing that the subaltern's voice often emerges through conflict rather than peaceful articulation. As Wright writes, "He had done something for himself at last, something no one could stop him from doing" [18]. This moment reveals that even in the act of rebellion, Bigger's agency is both limited and fraught with consequence, emphasizing the tension between action and structural constraint.

However, Wright also exposes the limits of representation. Bigger's voice, while central to the narrative, is mediated through Wright's literary perspective and constrained by societal structures that ultimately suppress him. The courtroom scenes and media coverage demonstrate that society frames his story, imposing interpretations that he cannot control. Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?" [8]—resonates here: even when Bigger acts, the meaning of his actions is filtered through dominant discourse. His defiance, therefore, signals both empowerment and continued subjugation; his voice exists only in the liminal space between personal expression and societal control.

The implications of this dynamic are profound for understanding power, race, and social justice. Wright shows that systemic racism and economic inequality deny agency to marginalized groups, yet literature can render subaltern experience visible, forcing dominant society to confront its injustices. Bigger's struggle highlights that empowerment is never absolute; it is always constrained by intersecting forces of oppression. At the same time, the novel itself becomes a platform where subaltern realities are articulated to a broader audience, bridging the gap between silence and recognition. This duality illustrates the paradox of subaltern representation: visibility can be granted, but true self-determination remains elusive in a society structured to marginalize.

In conclusion, *Native Son* charts the movement from silence to voice, portraying Bigger's actions as both a response to oppression and a commentary on the limits of agency. Wright's narrative demonstrates that the subaltern can partially "speak," [8] but this voice is mediated—by literature, social perception, and power structures—revealing the complexities of oppression, representation, and the pursuit of justice in 1930s Chicago.

4.8. Contemporary African American Literary Context

Contemporary African American literary scholarship has shifted from purely resistance-based readings toward exploring the affective, existential, and ontological dimensions of Black life. Writers and theorists increasingly challenge the assumption that African American identity is solely defined by struggle or visibility. Instead, recent scholarship articulates modes of being that exist *beyond resistance*, attending to

quietness, interiority, and creative self-formation within oppressive structures [13-15]. These evolving frameworks illuminate new ways to interpret Richard Wright's *Native Son*—not merely as a protest novel but as a complex narrative that anticipates later inquiries into Black subjectivity and the politics of representation.

The concept of living “in the wake” of slavery underscores how the afterlife of racial violence continues to structure Black existence [13]. The notion of “wake work” reframes survival itself as an act of creativity and care. In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas's consciousness and fear reflect this wakeful existence, where systemic racism defines the very conditions of life and death. Similarly, theorization of fugitivity [14]—the improvisational movement of the Black body and voice against containment—offers a lens to view Bigger's flight not simply as criminal escape but as a fragmented gesture toward autonomy. His silence, motion, and fragmentation become forms of resistance within an order that denies his subjecthood.

The idea of “the sovereignty of quiet” [15] challenges the expectation that Black identity must always be expressive or resistant. This notion resonates with Wright's rare depictions of introspection and tenderness, particularly in moments when Bigger reflects on fear, guilt, and desire. Such moments reveal an inner life often overlooked in traditional naturalist or Marxist readings, aligning Wright's vision with contemporary efforts to recover Black emotional depth and individuality.

The inclusion of *Subaltern Studies Reader* [16] and *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* [17] situates African American experience within a broader postcolonial and planetary discourse. Both highlight how subalternity operates across historical and environmental scales, linking Wright's Chicago to global systems of inequality and marginalization.

Through these intersections, *Native Son* can be understood as anticipating twenty-first-century concerns with human vulnerability, systemic violence, and the ethics of representation. Thus, recent African American literary debates reframe Wright's work as both historically grounded and enduringly relevant in the ongoing re-imagination of subaltern voices and Black being.

5. Conclusion

Richard Wright's *Native Son* offers a profound literary intervention by transforming the lives of the marginalized and silenced into complex, visible images. Through Bigger Thomas and other subaltern figures, Wright exposes the structural mechanisms of racial, economic, and gender oppression in 1930s Chicago, giving voice and presence to those who are otherwise excluded from society's narratives. By portraying both the internal consciousness of the subaltern and their interactions with white-dominated institutions, Wright constructs what this study terms the “Subaltern Image”—a representation that captures the tension between invisibility and visibility, silence and voice.

The novel's critique extends beyond individual experience to the broader social system. Wright illustrates how housing discrimination, economic exploitation, legal injustice, and media distortion operate in concert to confine African Americans to positions of voicelessness and vulnerability. Through the contrasting perspectives of white liberal characters like the Daltons, Wright underscores the limits of benevolence when it is unaccompanied by structural change. The human cost of social exclusion—the fear, desperation, and constrained agency experienced by Bigger and women like Bessie—emerges as a central ethical concern in the narrative.

Connecting these findings to broader postcolonial and subaltern studies, *Native Son* demonstrates that the subaltern is not only a theoretical category but a lived reality, shaped by intersecting hierarchies of race, class, gender, and urban space. Wright's work resonates with Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak: while Bigger's voice is mediated by the narrative and societal structures, literature allows it to be perceived, opening space for critical reflection on oppression.

Finally, this study points toward the potential for further research. Comparative analyses could explore how African American subalternity, as represented in Wright's novel, parallels or diverges from depictions of other marginalized groups in global literature, including colonized populations, indigenous communities, or women under patriarchal oppression. Such studies would extend the conceptual framework of the “Subaltern Image,” demonstrating its relevance across cultural, historical, and literary contexts.

In sum, *Native Son* is not only a story about a single individual but a profound exploration of systemic silencing and the partial, mediated ways in which the subaltern may be represented. Wright's literary vision transforms social invisibility into a form of critical visibility, inviting readers and scholars to confront the realities of oppression and the possibilities of representation.

Author Contributions

Hasan Mahmood is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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