Crime, violence and apartheid in selected works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard: a study.

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DECLARATION

I, Rodwell Makombe, do hereby declare that this work is entirely a product of my own personal effort except for those specific quotations that have been duly accredited to their original sources. This thesis is hereafter submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Literature and Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Fort Hare. It has not been and will not be submitted for any other purpose at any other university.

Signature…………………… Date……………………………………
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late father, Rabson Makombe, my son Tapfuma Emmanuel and my wife Theresa. Indeed, they have been an inspiration.
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Firstly I want to thank God, not as a matter of habit as some are inclined to do, but because I strongly believe there is a divinity that shapes our ends. I also thank my supervisor, Dr. M. Blatchford, who has been very friendly and frank. We went up the valleys and mountains of reason together. We fell, but we never despaired, we disagreed but we also reconciled. Thanks Doc. I cannot forget Govan Mbeki Research Centre which provided the funds that enabled me to undertake this research.

I have also made friends throughout the period of brooding over this thesis, some of whom are also struggling to make their lives meaningful by way of reading many books. I am indebted to them, for they always afforded me time to share a smile and pray about those things I thought were beyond my comprehension. Without them this project could have been very different but perhaps not better. Prudence (now Dr. Khumalo), Timothy (who is battling to understand tiny organisms) and Njongehle (my son-in-law) - I sincerely appreciate their comradeship.

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My wife, Theresa and son, Tapfuma, cannot be left out; they provided what the library had taken away from me. Against all odds, they reminded me to smile and cheer up.
ABSTRACT

Different forms of racial segregation have been practiced in different countries the world over. However, the nature of South Africa’s apartheid system, as it was practiced from 1948 until the dawn of the democratic dispensation in 1994, has been a subject of debate in South Africa and even beyond. Apartheid was a policy that was designed by the then ruling Nationalist Party for purposes of dividing and stratifying South Africa along racial lines - whites, blacks, coloureds and Asians. It thus promoted racial segregation and/or unequal stratification of society. In South Africa’s hierarchy of apartheid, blacks, who constituted the majority of the population, were ironically the most destitute and segregated. Some historians believe that South Africa’s racial policy was designed against the backdrop of Jim Crow, a similar system of racial discrimination which was instituted in the American South late in the 1890s through the 20th century. Jim Crow and apartheid are, in this study, considered as sides of the same coin; hence for the sake of convenience, the word apartheid is used to subsume Jim Crow.

Although South Africa’s apartheid system was influenced by different ideologies, for example German missiology as applied by the Dutch Reformed Church, historian Hermann Giliomee (2003: 373) insists that ‘the segregationist practice of the American South was particularly influential.’ Given the ideological relationship between apartheid and Jim Crow, the present study investigates the interplay of compatibility between apartheid/Jim Crow and crime and violence as reflected in selected works of Richard Wright (African American novelist) and Athol Fugard (South African playwright). The aim of the study is firstly, to examine the works in order to analyse them as responses to apartheid and by extension colonial domination and secondly to investigate crime and violence. The three criminological theories selected for this study are strain theory (by Robert Merton), subculture theory (Edwin Sutherland) and labelling theory (Howard Becker). While criminological theory provides an empirical dimension to the study, postcolonial theory situates the study within a specified space, which is the postcolonial context. The postcolonial is, however understood, not as a demarcated historical space,
but as a continuum, from the dawn of colonization to the unforeseeable future. Three postcolonial theorists have been identified for the purposes of this study. These are: Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft. Fanon’s psychoanalysis of the colonized, Homi Bhabha’s Third Space and hybridity as well as Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation are key concepts in understanding the different ways in which the colonized deal with the consequences of colonization. It has been suggested particularly in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) that the discourse of orientalism creates the Oriental, as if Orientals were a passive object of the colonial adventure. This study uses Bhabha’s and Ashcroft’s theory of colonial discourse to argue that the colonized are not only objects of the colonial enterprise but also active participants in the process of opening survival spaces for self-realization. The various criminal activities that the colonized engage in (as represented in the selected works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard) are in this study viewed as ways of inscribing their subjectivity within an exclusive colonial system.
CHAPTER ONE

Crime, violence and apartheid: the postcolonial/criminological approach.

Statement of the Problem

The study critically interrogates the interplay of compatibility between crime, violence and apartheid in selected works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard in the wake of ideologically-inclined readings that ascribe labels to the works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard, thereby reducing the complexity of their works to the conceptual limits constructed by and implied in those labels. On one hand, Richard Wright has been dismissed as a sensationalist who unfairly exploits social reality (Baldwin, 1985: 42) while on the other, Athol Fugard has been compartmentalized as a white liberal who ‘writes about the degradation of blacks and coloureds while himself being afforded the privileges enjoyed by South African whites’ (Wertheim, 2000: 2). Ralph Ellison in Andrew Warnes (2007: 39) argues that ‘Wright could imagine Bigger (his character in Native Son), but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright,’ implying that Bigger is an exaggerated creature of Wright’s sensationalism. It is these critical taxonomies that the study seeks to question/deconstruct in an attempt to broaden perspectives and move away from readings that are limited by those critical labels. This investigation is thus necessary as it fills a gap in available literature. The tendency has been to polarize and compartmentalize the two authors on the basis of their ideological convictions, real or ascribed, while neglecting the underlying thematic and conceptual similarities in their works. I do not believe together with Edward Said ‘that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure’ (1994: xxiv). While Athol Fugard has been defined as a white playwright whose skin and Eurocentric education prevented him from knowing the South African black majority and their problems in a truly intimate and therefore meaningful way (Wertheim, 2000: x), Richard Wright has been characterized as revolutionary in some circles and as merely sensational in others. These categorizations
are convenient for academic purposes yet they are also limiting and limited.

Firstly, it must be understood that apartheid and by extension colonialism was a criminal enterprise, therefore it is appropriate in analysing texts written under apartheid circumstances to use criminological theory. In order to answer the research question---how crime, violence and apartheid interact-- the study applies Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of cultural hybridity, ambivalence and the third space of cultural enunciation. The study exploits parallels between selected postcolonial and criminological theories, for example Bhabha’s Third Space and Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation, to conceptualise crime and violence as a way of negotiating and translating hegemony in the third space of cultural enunciation. On the other hand, the subculture theory which conceptualizes crime and violence as embedded in subcultures (a subculture being an alternative culture that runs parallel to conventional culture), can be matched with Bill Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation which celebrates subtle ways used by the oppressed to embrace and in the same breath transform dominant discourses and regimes of power. While parallels can be drawn between the subculture theory, Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation and Bhabha’s cultural hybridity, the labelling theory of Howard Becker is also conceptually similar to Frantz Fanon’s and Bhabha’s concepts of colonial discourse and stereotype.

**Background**

The study is situated in the history of Jim Crow and/or apartheid as practiced in the American South (from the 1890s through the 20th century) and South Africa (from 1948 to 1994). Some historians argue that South Africa’s system of apartheid was influenced by Jim Crow which was instituted in the Southern states late in the nineteenth century. Historians, David Brown and Clive Webb (2007:1) argue that ‘dilemmas of race and racism have afflicted modern nations, but in the twentieth century, only the South African apartheid regime was built on the same fundamental rationale of racial inequality as the American South’ In an essay entitled, *The Making of the Apartheid Plan 1929 - 1948*, historian Hermann Giliomee (2003: 377) argues that ‘in introducing the apartheid legislation, the Nationalist leadership made it clear that their point of
reference was the American South. Piloting through parliament the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Bill of 1949, Eben Donges, Minister for the Interior, justified it by reference to the existence of a similar law in 30 states in the United States of America.’ One of the architects of apartheid, Valerie Strydom ‘was also influenced by segregation in the USA and the idea of black separatism expounded by some black leaders in South Africa. In 1937 he addressed a North Carolina audience and, after his return, wrote of “the policy of apartheid here in our land and the United States of America.” He held up the American South, with its segregated schools, churches and suburbs, as a model to be emulated for both coloured people and Africans in South Africa” (Gilliomee, 2003: 11). The selected works by Richard Wright and Athol Fugard are written against this historical background as counter discursive responses to the deeply entrenched effects of what I shall henceforth call apartheid.

Jim Crow was a political strategy that was designed by white America after the withdrawal of Federal troops and the ending of Reconstruction; it was, however, formally endorsed in 1896 by the Supreme Court’s ‘separate but equal’ ruling. Its mandate was to stratify the South on racial lines and consequently subordinate African Americans physically and psychologically in the same way that apartheid South Africa would designate and relegate blacks to a position of inferiority in all spheres of life. Given the deeply entrenched effects of apartheid on African American and South African societies, the representation and critical reading of crime, violence and apartheid has been characterized with controversies. In African American works of fiction, particularly in the works of Richard Wright, the representation of crime and violence in the context of apartheid has culminated in what has been termed the race-crime debate in African American literature. Wright’s assumption, which sparked off this debate, was that the conditions of racial discrimination and oppression in the Deep South encouraged a life of crime and violence among black people. The debate was also spurred by the publication of *Native Son* in 1940, a novel in which Richard Wright portrays inter-racial crime and violence as arising from the effects of Jim Crow on African American society. While most critics praised Richard Wright for sending a warning signal to the white world through Bigger Thomas, a character that epitomized a
violent response to racial oppression, James Baldwin (African American writer and critic) was not impressed by what he perceived as Wright’s failure to acknowledge the African American capacity for resilience. According to Baldwin, Wright had repeated ‘the same stereotypical representation pioneered by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’ (1985:14). As far as Baldwin was concerned, Bigger Thomas was a stereotype because he had accepted the colonial theology that projected him as subhuman. Moreover, in Bigger Thomas, Baldwin argued, Wright had painted a character limited by his racial categorization, thus imprisoning the black man once again in the castle of his skin, to borrow a phrase from the Caribbean writer, George Lamming.

Ralph Ellison (African American author and critic), also protested against Wright’s depiction of Bigger Thomas as isolated from the rest of the African American community, arguing that Bigger’s violence was a product of Wright’s sensationalism (i.e. Wright was exploiting Bigger for political purposes). Ralph Ellison also criticized Wright for failing to portray America with ‘an awareness of its rich cultural diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, free from the burden of narrow naturalism which in his view led to the unrelieved despair that runs through his fiction’(in Howe, 1963: 3). However, according to Irving Howe, the violence in Wright’s narratives cannot be wholly accredited to Wright’s sensationalism or obsession with shock and violence as some critics say; instead it is also a true reflection of American social reality. ‘If literature is a reflection of real life experience,’ asked Irving Howe (1963: 4), ‘what then was the experience of a man with a black skin, what could it be in this country [America]?’ This was an important question posed by Irving Howe in defence of Wright’s protest literature because as far as he was concerned African Americans had no other experience in America apart from that of crime and violence. Eldridge Cleaver (1968: 24) on the other hand, dismissed Baldwin’s criticisms of protest violence arguing that ‘it is the baby [the facts of oppression] we want and not the blood of after birth [the way of presenting it].

The foregoing presentation shows that the representation of blacks in relation to crime and violence has been shrouded with controversy in Africa-American literature,
particularly in the works of Richard Wright. Similar points have been made about the work of Athol Fugard, a South African playwright whose work also deals with the impact of apartheid on South African society. The objective of the present study is to bring out continuities and points of departure in their selected works by exploiting these similarities.

Athol Fugard’s presentation of the political violence of apartheid has also met with some negative criticism. Some critics dismiss him as a white liberal English speaker smothered in impotent guilt, while others accuse him of not doing much by way of militantly advocating a change of the system (Stephen Gray, 1982:26). Probably, these critics subscribe to a school of thought associated with Ngugi, Achebe and some South African ‘protest’ writers, that sees the writer as having a responsibility, not only to expose social injustices, but also participate in the struggle for a better society. Many of these critiques pre-eminently arose out of the apartheid era and this position was often a way for academics and aspiring writers to position themselves for success by taking advantage of anti-apartheid rhetoric. Yet for Athol Fugard, witnessing the plight of the oppressed is in itself both a way of unveiling the injustices of apartheid and a contribution to the liberation enterprise. Fugard’s work may not be deliberately political or ideological in Ngugi’s sense, but it obviously emanates from the prevailing socio-political realities of apartheid South Africa. ‘His theatre has always been politically conscious and particular plays amount to organized assaults on legal statutes that maintained the apartheid state’ (Gray, 1982: 26). Blumberg (1998:63) argues that Fugard’s plays ‘dramatize oppressive structures and their effects on the voiceless and dispossessed of South Africa.’ Responding to criticisms of Fugard’s liberal vision, Dennis Walder (1993:10) insists that ‘all writing is one way or the other ethnocentric; a writer is brought up in the tradition of a particular group or culture, with all its codes, taboos and values.’ Probably, being a white liberal writer, Fugard is also limited by that categorization and as a result he cannot be as revolutionary as some critics expect him to be. However, it is a facile view to argue that a white writer is not capable of writing cogently about the lives of blacks (Wertheim, 2000: x). In his book entitled, *In defence of history*, the historian, Richard Evans dismissed the idea that each group in society
should write its own history, arguing that ‘the ultimate implication of such a view would be that the history of religion would have to be left to clergymen, of war to the generals, of fascism to fascists. In the end no history would be possible, only autobiography’ (1997:213). I also borrow this argument to debunk criticisms that discredit Fugard on the basis of the colour of his skin.

Michael Billington has been the most militant critic of Fugard’s liberal vision, arguing that ‘it is not enough for the white liberal dramatist to offer his coloured contemporaries his pity, his compassion and his despair. What surely is needed in the context of [apartheid] South Africa is an affirmation of the fact that that country’s tragedy is man-made and therefore capable of change: in short some political gesture’ (in Stephen Gray, 1982:27). Apparently, what Wright has been accused of overdoing with the African American is approximately what Billington expects Fugard to do. This study does not intend to give judgments on either Wright or Fugard’s ideological views, rather it seeks to evaluate their works with the hope of reaching a better understanding of the issues at hand, particularly with regards to how crime and violence and apartheid intersect in their works. The study pursues an interdisciplinary conceptual framework in order to broaden its perspective and interrogate critical taxonomies that have been ascribed to Wright and Fugard.

Fugard’s works, particularly his theatre have, in some circles, been read as politically conscious, attacking specific pieces of apartheid legislation that promoted criminal behaviour among blacks, for example the notorious Immorality Act in Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act, the Group Areas Act in Tsotsi and the pass system and the Bantu Education Act in Sizwe Bansi is Dead (Stephen Gray, 1982:26). Yet in other circles he has been dismissed as politically toothless. The position of this study is that every reading of a literary text ought to consider the socio-historical context in which it was produced rather than read it through the lenses of a particular ideology.
Aims of the research

The aims of the study are threefold, firstly to examine a selected number of works by Athol Fugard and Richard Wright; secondly, to analyse these texts as responses to the effects of apartheid and by extension colonial domination; and also to investigate the interplay of compatibility between crime, violence and apartheid in these texts using insights from criminological and postcolonial theories. There has been a general tendency to assume, almost as a matter of fact, a cause and effect relationship between apartheid and crime and violence particularly in nationalist rhetoric. This study intervenes by way of investigating how the selected works of fiction portray crime and violence vis-à-vis the system of apartheid. In light of this, the study contextualizes crime and violence and uses postcolonial theory to project it into the postcolonial futures (Ashcroft, 2001), and by contextualizing I mean that crime and violence will be examined within the social, economic, political and ideological context of apartheid. By projecting the study into the postcolonial futures, I mean that the study could be used as a starting point (a springboard) to analyse crime and violence in future contexts of the postcolonial. It must be repeated that the term apartheid is being used generally in this study to subsume Jim Crow and South Africa’s institutionalized segregation up until 1994.

The objective is to correct certain long held misconceptions on crime and violence and its interplay with apartheid. For example, Gary Kynoch (2005), a South African social historian, has pointed out that there is a tendency, particularly in South Africa’s ‘struggle’ literature, to merge criminal violence with liberation violence. For example, Alex Laguma’s Michael Adonis in his novella entitled, A walk in the night, kills an innocent white man, Mr Doughty, in a bid to avenge his unfair dismissal at work. These criminal forms of resistance have been conflated with politically motivated resistance as Kynoch (2005) points out. Moreover, I have already established that there is an inclination to isolate authors and put them on pedestals when there are actually useful similarities in their supposed differences. Although Richard Wright is black and Athol Fugard is white, their works explore the brutality of apartheid and the various strategies
adopted by the disenfranchised groups to navigate and/or confront this brutality. Perhaps the difference is that Wright is a victim who later becomes a writer (an interlocutor) while Athol Fugard is a witness who belongs to the oppressor-race.

Theoretical framework
The study is informed by three criminological theories, that is strain theory (Merton, 1938, 1968), subculture theory (Sutherland, 1939, 1947), labelling theory (Becker 1963) and three postcolonial theories/theorists, that is Frantz Fanon (1952, 1961), Homi Bhabha (1994), and Bill Ashcroft (2001). The three aforementioned criminological theories have been selected for this study because they explain criminal behaviour in terms of the social environment in which it arises, just as literature also attempts to ‘mirror’ society. Some of these theories have been applied elsewhere, for example, Clive Glaser (2000) used subculture theory to study gangsters in apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, postcolonial theoretical concepts as articulated by the aforesaid theorists help contextualize the study within a specific historical and ideological perspective, allowing us to interrogate the intersection of crime, violence and apartheid in the context of colonial domination and its aftermath as presented in the works of Athol Fugard and Richard Wright.

One might ask why it seems appropriate to use criminological theory to study literary phenomena. Firstly, it must be understood that literature is a product of society and it seeks to project social reality. Ngugi wa Thiongo in his book, Writers in politics, argues that literature reflects aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in society (1997: ivi). Therefore literature is conceived out of the same social realities that are of concern to the sociologist, the criminologist and the psychologist. Ngugi goes on to say that ‘literature is about living humans, that is actual men and women and children breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, growing, struggling, organizing, people in history of which they are its products, its producers and analysts’ (1997:68). Edward Said (2003: 27) also intimates that his study of Orientalism has convinced him that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together. Commenting on Fugard’s writing, Temple Hauptfleisch et al (1982) insist that
the roots of Fugard’s writing have been in the complex and multifaceted society which had come into existence in apartheid South Africa.

It is also imperative to note that, apartheid, the other subject under scrutiny in this study, still has implications on present day society, hence I find it appropriate, in this study, to use postcolonial theoretical concepts, which explain how postcolonial societies negotiate and translate vestiges of colonial domination (Ashcroft, 2001). In fact the postcolonial preoccupation in Third world literature has been characterized as ‘natural and logical’ rather than ‘misplaced and belated’ because ‘Africa’s contact with Europe has impacted greatly on its socio-cultural, political, economic and psychological well-being (Kehinde, http://www.africaresearch.org/papers). In his foreword to Ngugi's *Homecoming*, Ime Ikeddeh, (quoted in Kehinde-http://www.africaresearch.org/papers) argues that ‘there can be no end to the discussion of the African encounter with Europe because the wounds inflicted touched the very springs of life and have remained unhealed because they are constantly being gashed open again with more subtle, more lethal weapon’(p.41). This being a literary study, based on the assumption that literature reflects social reality, it analyses the selected texts as representations of particular existing phenomena. Hence the study also seeks to apply criminological theories often used by criminologists to explain criminal behaviour in society to the literary analysis of society presented in the selected texts. While criminological theories provide a scientific/empirical perspective, the postcolonial theories are the literary tools with which to analyse the representations of crime, violence and apartheid in the selected texts.

I want to start off by explaining the selected criminological theories in order to situate them in the study. Robert Merton’s strain theory focuses on the position of the individual within the social system. The theory states that in a meritocratic society, which is implied in ‘the American Dream,’ conventional values of hard work and delayed gratification must, in the long run, be rewarded with material success. Yet in real life, this is not the case. Social constraints such as class, race and gender often bar some individuals from realizing culturally acceptable goals, thus encouraging them to resort to illegitimate means of attaining those goals. According to this theory, individuals respond
to environmental strain caused by the disjunction between culturally acceptable goals and the means of realizing them in different ways. Merton identifies five ways, which are conformity, retreatism, ritualism, rebellion and innovation. Apparently, this theory has overtones of the postcolonial discourse of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha among others in that it deals with how individuals respond to prevailing circumstances of life. Subjects of colonial societies, for example Styles in Athol Fugard’s *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and Richard in Wright’s *Black Boy*, are not passive victims of colonial oppression. Styles becomes a self-styled business man, a photographer, who captures and preserves the history of his people. The protagonist, Sizwe Bansi in Fugard’s play also fabricates his particulars so as to acquire right of domicile in Port Elizabeth. On the other hand, Richard in *Black Boy* interjects laws of segregation by masquerading as a ‘good nigger’ so as to obtain books from the library and develop himself intellectually. Colonial discourse imposes a Manichean worldview that seeks to fix and fabricate the colonized. However, the colonial subject is never fixed for he/she manipulates the system to his/her own advantage. Merton’s strain theory also points out that those who cannot realize goals legitimately find alternative ways of doing so.

Conformity, as Merton puts it, is the process whereby individuals accept their position in society in the hope of attaining their goals in that position. Retreatism is the rejection of both the cultural goals and the means of attaining them. This is the category of social drop outs i.e. vagrants, chronic alcoholics, psychotics etc. Ritualism, on the other hand, refers to a situation whereby individuals adhere to the rules for their own sake. The difference between conformists and ritualists is that conformists follow the rules in the hope of attaining their goals while ritualists stick to the rules without focusing on particular goals. Innovators are those who, having realized that the legal means are blocked, invent their own means to attain the culturally extolled goals and finally rebels are those individuals who do not only reject the system but also wish to change it.

Clearly, the concept of innovation is similar to Bill Ashcroft’s (2001) theory of postcolonial transformation. The theory says that the colonized do not necessarily counter colonial domination with open violence; rather they reinvent colonial culture to
suit their place of habitation. Essentially, strain theory assumes that individuals engage in criminal activities if there is a disjunction between culturally accepted goals and the legitimate means of attaining them. The theory has been variously modified over the years to explain criminal behaviour in different socio-economic contexts. One weakness of Merton’s theory is that it does not tell us why individuals facing the same social circumstances of strain respond differently. Although there are similarities between strain theory and Bhabha’s Third Space and Bill Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation, there are significant differences too. Firstly Merton’s strain theory is empirical and the other two are cultural theories. Strain theory also implies that individuals who cannot attain goals through legitimate means find alternative means outside the dominant discourse. However, Bhabha and Ashcroft argue that the disenfranchised do not necessarily oppose (rebel) or conform; rather they find subtle ways of positioning themselves within the system. Strain theory also makes the assumption that all citizens ascribe to the goals of pecuniary success (Lilly, et al, 2002:58) that is to say it assumes that everyone has a goal to achieve. There is also an assumption in strain theory as in Said’s Orientalism that power is possessed entirely by the dominant culture (the colonizer), which, in Bhabha’s (1994) words is a ‘historical and theoretical simplification’ because in the colonial context power is negotiated. However the idea of strain that culminates in social anomie is fascinating especially in colonial society because colonization indeed puts a strain on the colonized which ultimately causes them to engage in various forms of resistance.

According to the subculture theory (Sutherland, 1939, 1947), a subculture refers to a set of values and norms parallel to conventional culture. A subculture upholds a way of life which is normally considered criminal or deviant by those who subscribe to the values of the conventional culture. Certain social groups cherish values and attitudes that encourage crime and violence. These social groups are normally stigmatized and considered ‘wayward’ by those who subscribe to the dominant culture. The relationship between subcultures and dominant cultures is reminiscent of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized where the colonizer sees the colonized as primitive because of their different culture and race. Evidently, the idea of a subculture
recognizes difference and empowers minority cultures (the marginal) the way Bhabha’s concepts of the third space and hybridity accommodate the culture of the vanquished. Although a subculture recognizes and in a sense empowers the colonized, it is somewhat parasitic because, as a subculture; it can only exist in relation to the dominant culture. One must, however, note that members of a subculture never see themselves as parasites; rather they see themselves as victims who can only survive through illegitimate means. The use of violence in a subculture of violence is not necessarily viewed as illicit conduct and the users therefore do not have to deal with feelings of guilt about their aggression (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 2002:95). The concept of a subculture is slightly different from Bhabha’s hybridity because it perpetuates the rift between cultures. Hybridity seeks to harmonise, rather than divide, cultures. Edwin Sutherland’s (1939) differential association (subculture) theory, which I have adopted in this study, was influenced by the Chicago school of criminology. The theory proposes that a person is more likely to offend if they have frequent and consistent contact with others involved in such activities (Cote, 2002:26). Thus criminality according to this theory is learnt through association with criminal tendencies. Albert Cohen (1955) modified Sutherland’s theory and noted that juvenile offending was not necessarily motivated by the striving for financial success, rather adolescent gang members stole for the fun of it and took pride in their acquired reputations of being tough and hard. Thus, according to Cohen gang subcultures were spurred more by the search for status rather than by financial success because most of the criminal activities committed by gangsters, for example, vandalism and aggression had nothing to do with the strive for financial success. Braithwaite (1984) used the subculture theory to explain corporate crime and he argued that certain crimes were acceptable within some corporate structures. For example, bribing health inspectors was normal and acceptable practice in the pharmaceutical industry (in Burke, 2005:110). In some countries, for example Nigeria and Zimbabwe, bribing the police is fast becoming a subculture which is normal in some circles.

Hopkins Burke (2005) has also used the subculture theory to explain hate crimes in America. People of the same racial or ethnic group often share similar group
sensibilities that bring them together against other groups. For example, in most
societies, the police force shares the same group sensibility which pits them against
perceived often stereotyped law breakers. The concept of a subculture is comparable to
Homi Bhabha’s (1994) concept of cultural hybridity ‘which reverses the effects of the
colonialist disavowal, so that other denied knowledges enter upon the dominant
discourse and estrange the basis of its authority’ (in Young, 2004:189) and Bill
Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation which celebrates subtle ways of subverting
hegemony. A subculture is a culture that resists conventional culture and as Bhabha
puts it ‘resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention nor is it the
simple negation or the exclusion of the ‘content’ of another culture … [but] the effect of
an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as
they articulate the signs of cultural difference’ (1994: 24). As is the case with Salman
Rushdie’s Doctor Aadam Aziz in Midnight’s Children who has to negotiate the space
between his western training and the Indian reality of his medical practice, criminals
formulate their own hybrid cultures in order to realize their goals within the hegemonic
strictures of conventional culture. Thus, theorizing the postcolonial, Bill Ashcroft argues
on a similar line of thought: Contrary to the Manichaean conception of resistance as
opposition, colonized subjects do not necessarily confront the colonizer with open
political violence as a form of resistance; rather they use various subtle means of
refashioning themselves in relation to the imposed colonial culture. In view of this
theory, the little crimes of theft and telling lies to the white employer among the
colonized become a way of translating the challenge of colonial domination.

All in all, subculture theories share the perception that certain social groups within a
dominant conventional discourse have values and attitudes that enable and encourage
crime and violence. Hopkins Burke (2005:105) notes that subculture theories were built
on Merton’s strain theory which claims that people may turn to deviant conduct in order
to gain otherwise unobtainable rewards or failing that seek alternative goals. Subculture
theory falls short in that it cannot explain individualistic crimes e.g. crimes of passion or
other impulsive offences by people who have had little contact with deviant values (Lilly,
et al, 2002:41). Since subculture theory suggests that one becomes criminal over time
through associating with other criminals, it is particularly difficult to test this scientifically for it is impossible ‘to measure accurately over the course of a lifetime how a person’s association with criminal definitions outweighed his/her association with conventional definitions’ (Lilly, et al, 2002:42).

The study also evaluates the interplay of crime, violence and apartheid using the labelling theory which was first propounded by Becker (1963) and has been modified and applied to various contexts over the years. According to Becker (1963 in Burke, 2005) social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders (Burke, 143). In other words, society i.e. those in authority and the criminal justice system confer criminal tags on an individual until the individual begins to identify with the worldview implied in those tags. In a modified version of the labelling theory, Goode and Yehuda (in Burke, 2005) noted that society or those in authority may label some groups or individuals as criminals as a result of a moral panic. For example, the American Bush administration provoked a panic among its populace and immediately declared war on terrorism all over the world. According to Said and Barsamian (2003: 89) ‘the very idea of terrorism has become a screen created since the end of the Cold War by policy makers in Washington, it is fabricated to keep the population afraid, insecure and to justify what the United States wishes to do globally.’ De Haan (in Burke, 2005) observed that violence in society seems to be rising because of the way in which previously non problematic actions are relabelled as serious and criminal. Any threat to American interests, argues Said, (in Said and Barsamian) ‘whether it is oil in the Middle East or its geostrategic interests elsewhere, is all labelled terrorism.’ The same applies to ‘people’s resistance movements against deprivation, against unemployment, against the loss of natural resources, all of that is termed terrorism’ (2003: 89-90). Labelling theory is similar to the colonial discourse of representing the other, what Edward Said (1978, 2003) calls Orientalism. In this study, I have juxtaposed it with the ideas of the postcolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon, who argues that colonial discourse constructs/labels colonial subjects negatively --- as subhuman, ugly, mean, dirty and licentious --- until the colonized begin to identify and be identified with those stereotypical labels.
Admittedly the parallel is not exact; while labelling theorists claim that incarcerating criminals hardens and/or engraves on them a permanent criminal label, some criminals are deeply involved in crime before coming to the attention of criminal justice officials (Lilly, et al, 2002:114).

Radical and conflict criminological theorists argue that labelling theory does not go far in its analysis, pointing out that the origins and application of criminal labels were influenced fundamentally by inequities rooted in the very structure of capitalism. Radical criminological theorists insist that differences in power determined that the behaviour of the poor, but not that of the rich, could be criminalized.

Apart from the criminological theories, which provide a general empirical theory of criminal behaviour, the study also incorporates postcolonial theoretical paradigms as represented in the works of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft among others. Over the years postcolonial thought has been particularly preoccupied with representing the different ways in which the postcolonial world has been responding to the influence and discourse of the colonizer, what Salman Rushdie characterized as writing back to the empire with a vengeance. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) clearly articulates how colonial discourse constructed an image of the colonized through stereotypical representations in literature, anthropology, history, sociology etc. The tragic clash between Europe and the rest of the colonial empire, politically, economically and culturally, also gave way to various forms of resistance in those spheres. While Orientalism and/or colonialism sought to conceptualize the world in Manichaean terms - black and white, colonizer and colonized, civilised and primitive --- postcolonial theorists particularly Homi Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft seek to deconstruct these taxonomies and reveal how the colonized transform and translate the culture of the colonizer for their own purposes. The culture of the colonized is thus located, not in the past where we have to go and retrieve it, but in the ‘third space of enunciation’ as Bhabha puts it, a phenomenon which suggests the ability of the colonized to negotiate colonial culture and transform it. Locating the culture of the colonized in the Third Space does not necessarily imply that the colonized are capable of retrieving an authentic culture, what
it means is that the colonized are actively involved in the writing of history. The point must be made, however, that the colonial dent will forever follow the colonized; the ‘post’ in the term ‘postcolonial’ signifies this failure by the colonized to divorce the colonial master.

The term postcolonial has indeed caused a stir in postcolonial studies. What is the postcolonial? Definitions are important, for it is through definitions that areas of study are mapped out and shaped. Definitions enable us to situate perspectives and eliminate semantic ambiguities. Bill Ashcroft states that post colonialism ‘embraces a dizzying array of critical practices’ (2001:7-8) ‘that need to be distinguished for analytical purposes.’ The term postcolonial has in general terms been associated with the aftermath of official colonization and the dawn of political independence in formerly colonized, now Third World countries. This, however, has been problematic in that it excludes the Fourth World postcolonial, for example the Native American and the native Australian, both of whom have not attained political independence, though they are equally engaged in postcolonial resistance. Native Americans, Australians and other indigenous oppressed communities such as the Palestinians undeniably continue to draw much inspiration from the struggle for independence while black theorists and activists in the United States and Caribbean inspired much of the colonial resistance despite not being under conditions of independence. Tripathy (2009: 42) argues that ‘postcolonialism as a signifier of geography and period autonomous of colonial presence de legitimises the claims of many cultures and societies to be postcolonial just because their resistance against colonial powers has not been successful.’ This perspective has also been criticized for assuming that political independence translates to cultural independence yet in reality the colonizer, even in the so-called independent countries, still has a strong cultural influence. This is also the problem with Bhabha’s hybridity which celebrates marriage of cultures without considering the power matrix within so called hybrid cultures.

As the term postcolonial implies ‘one of the central features of postcolonial theory is an examination of the impact and continuing legacy of the European conquest, colonization
and domination of non-European lands, peoples and cultures’ (http://www.photoinsight.org.theory). Tripathy (2009: 42) goes on to argue that ‘postcolonialism is not a marker of colonial pastness, but a condition that emerges with the beginning of colonial encounter and occupation. Thus the postcolonial moment starts with the first colonial contact and not necessarily its demise.’ Postcolonial theory is thus preoccupied with all forms of resistance to colonial encroachment, politically, culturally, epistemologically- it is ‘a position of resistance to colonial discursive practices’ (Tripathy p, 43).

In this study postcolonial theory is particularly relevant in that it situates crime and violence within the resistance paradigm in which the postcolonial is situated. While resistance has been theorized from different perspectives, the most popular is championed by Frantz Fanon and other liberation theorists like Amilcar Cabral and Ngugi wa Thiongo. These theorists have, in various capacities, emphasized the importance of a common cultural centre as a way of resisting colonial domination thus they advocate the revival of indigenous knowledge systems. This essentialist form of conceptualizing resistance was doubtlessly necessary for liberation purposes for it enabled the colonized to gain confidence in self, as we see in the Negritude writings of Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor. The notion of liberation which translates into denying the trinkets of the master, as Ngugi suggests in his refusal to continue writing in English, has, however, been supplanted by the concept of hybridity associated with the writings of Homi Bhabha. In this study, Bhabha’s hybridity is central because it accommodates and allows for the emergence of alternative cultures by transgressing ‘problems of suppression and exclusion involved in notions of (cultural) purity (Frello, http://www.uel.ac.uk/documents), notions of which are also implied in some rhetoric of nationalist resistance.

I am particularly aware of the criticisms that have been levelled against the concept of hybridity, especially Bhabha’s failure ‘to adequately conceptualize the historical and material conditions that would emerge within a colonial discourse framework analysis' (Meredith, 1998: 3). I do not posit this conceptual framework within a political and
cultural vacuum, rather I seek to position it within the apartheid/segregationist context, enabling a more complex strategy of negotiating crime and violence in the postcolonial reality. While hybridity celebrates cultural fusion as opposed to purity, critics like Jonathan Friedman (in Frello, http://www.uel.ac.uk/documents) have argued that ‘the idea of “mixture” implied in hybridity presupposes the existence of something that can be mixed, yet cultures were never pure.’ In that sense ‘the concept of hybridity tells us nothing since all of us are and were always cultural hybrids.’ While Friedman’s observation is plausible, particularly as an attempt to depoliticize Bhabha, it ignores the rhetorical purism which lies at the heart of colonial racial segregation. Friedman also fails to realise that the mixture implied in hybridity does not necessarily suggest purity, it also implies the continuous fusion of cultures and in this fusion no purity is implied because even mixtures can be mixed too. It has also been argued that hybridity is an elite concept because it is only the elite, particularly intellectuals in western academy, who can take advantage of the liberating potentials of transcending cultural boundaries. The majority of people that cross cultures (as refugees and exiles) never consider it a privilege for they are always faced with possibilities of being alienated or even ostracized.

It is imperative, however, to note that hybridity is not about mixture per se as it is about dislocation and displacement, both of which are central tenets of the postcolonial experience. Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that ‘it is the indeterminate spaces in-between subject positions that are lauded as the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices.’ The concept of hybridity deconstructs the assumption that colonialism was so hegemonic an enterprise that it destroyed indigenous cultures, pointing out that ‘a new hybrid identity emerges from the intertwining of elements of the colonizer and colonized’ (Meredith, 1998: 2). Some critics have criticized Bhabha and Ashcroft for seeming to absolve colonialism. The term ‘intertwining’ is too natural and innocent for a culture which arises largely through colonial force.
The concept of hybridity shows us that the marginalized have always been interlocutors of domination. Thus, echoing Spivak’s (1995) popular contention that the subaltern cannot speak, Tripathy argues that the subaltern has always been speaking; the problem is that we have not been listening. ‘No identity can ever speak in one voice, not even those appearing to be uniform. So the problem we have to address, more than the subaltern’s capacity to speak, is our capacity to listen’ (2009: 52). The concept of hybridity is pivotal in this study as it accommodates minority cultures that have been buried under the palimpsest of totalitarian cultures. Bhabha’s hybridity, located in ‘the third space of enunciation’ is juxtaposed with the subculture theory to interrogate subcultures of violence that interrupt and interject domineering cultural regimes as presented in the selected texts. The subculture theory, like Bhabha’s hybridity, has the potential to supplant conventional culture and challenge its totalizing tendencies.

Bhabha has developed his concept of hybridity to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity (Meredith, 1998: 3). The third space is an ‘interruptive, interrogative and enunciative’ (Bhabha, 1994) space of new forms of cultural meaning, a space which allows for the emergence of alternative cultures, even criminal cultures as implied in subculture theory. Bhabha’s hybridity conceptualizes culture as unstable and thus in a state of continuous flux. He argues that ‘the interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy’ (1994:4). In this study Bhabha’s hybridity is crucial in that crime and violence will be conceptualized as ways of manipulating and negotiating fractures within dominant discourses in the process of formulating hybrid subcultures. One of the problems with Bhabha’s hybridity is that it appears to absolve cultural imperialism. The question is to what extent are some cultures swallowed and rendered obsolete in the process of hybridization. Is the margin, in relation to the centre, equally responsible for postcolonial cultural formations as implied by hybridity? The point, however, is that while the colonized may be perceived as subdued and erased by the colonizer, they still find subtle ways of inscribing themselves onto postcolonial culture. The same is true about
crime and violence. Although perpetrators of violence perceive themselves as negotiating a survival space, the victims continue to see them as criminals.

Frantz Fanon’s works, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin White Masks* take a militant, revolutionary stance against colonial domination. For Fanon, ‘the colonized masses intuitively believe that their liberation must be achieved and can only be achieved by force’ but the question is ‘what aberration of the mind drives these famished, enfeebled men (…) to think that only violence can liberate them faced with the occupier’s military and economic might’ (2004: 33). Frantz Fanon (2004: 149) maintains that colonization is a violent process which ‘is not satisfied by merely holding a people in its firm grip and emptying the native of all form and content’ but ‘by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.’

If colonialism is such a violent enterprise, argues Fanon, decolonization must of necessity be also a violent process of confronting the violence of domination with the greater violence of national liberation. Fanon goes on to argue that violence against colonial oppression has a cleansing force because it puts the colonized, who has always been a victim, at the same level with the colonizer. This is the reason why Frantz Fanon, upon reading Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was impressed by Bigger Thomas’s passion for subjectivity. ‘In the end, Bigger acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world’s anticipation’ (2004: 139). ‘Instead of being passive objects of history as in colonial discourse, natives must not appear as others of European civilization as in colonial discourse, but as the latter’s interlocutors’ (Tripathy, 2009: 43). Bigger Thomas’ response is, according to Frantz Fanon, inevitable because that is the only response that makes him an interlocutor of colonial discourse. ‘Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known’ (Fanon, 1967:115). Fanon sees colonial culture as the one that produces the violence of the colonized and perhaps his own intellectual violence.

Bill Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation, on the other hand, maintains that while
‘opposition is necessary, the appropriation of the forms of representation and forcing entry into the discursive networks of cultural dominance, have always been a crucial feature of resistance movements which have gained success’ (2001:19). In fact, ‘it is these subtle and more widespread forms of resistance, forms of saying “no” that are most interesting because they are more difficult for imperial powers to combat’ (p.20). Although Bill Ashcroft does not use the term hybridity, his concept of postcolonial transformation is related to Bhabha’s hybridity. Firstly, it recognizes the role of the minority or the subaltern, to use a term associated with Spivak, in postcolonial resistance. Unlike nationalist historiography that has been ‘dominated by either colonialist elitism or bourgeois-nationalist elitism- both of which share the same prejudice of attributing the rise of nationalist consciousness solely on elites’ (Taib, http://www.thereadinggroup.org.Articles p, 3), Ashcroft recognizes the subtle resistance efforts that interpolate and transform colonial discourse. These so called ‘subtle ways’ may also be ‘strategic’ ways of conforming to the imperial.

Ashcroft has however been criticized for sounding apologetic to colonial discourse, especially as he advocates negotiation as opposed to confrontation. While he rightly defines interpolation as ‘the capacity to interpose, to intervene, to interject a wide range of counter discursive tactics into the dominant discourse,’ (2001:47) he refuses to give it the status of a separate oppositional discourse. Ashcroft is perhaps careful not to present subtle means of resistance in the Fanonian fashion of outright opposition. His argument is that the most effective form of resistance does not confront, rather it negotiates, and manipulates fractures within the hegemonic structures of the dominant discourse. It is also possible that Ashcroft is focusing upon such negotiations in part in order to evade having to commit himself, in vaguely postmodern fashion. Contrary to the Manichaean conception of resistance as opposition, Ashcroft insists that colonized subjects use various subtle means of circumventing the imposed colonial culture. Like Spivak herself, he is making it possible to analyse modes of resistance which are not directly controlled by revolutionary and/or violent confrontational forces. Although aspiring towards total control is the essence of totalitarianism, Ashcroft (2001) believes that no discourse is ever totalitarian (absolute) in its exercise of power. This is perhaps
the point that was missed by advocates of cultural renaissance, for example Ngugi Wa Thiongo who rejected the English language in favour of Gikuyu, arguing that language is a vehicle of culture therefore embracing English is embracing the English culture.

Bhabha’s and Ashcroft’s theoretical positions are indeed central to this study because they engage with the way in which the colonized have interacted with colonial culture over the years. Since this study focuses on the interplay of crime, violence and apartheid, it is fascinating to understand how subcultures of crime and violence have developed and interlaced with dominant discourses over the years. The strength of postcolonial theory, particularly Bhabha and Ashcroft, is that it engages with the past, the present and the future, all of which are crystallized in the term postcolonial. The colonial past is pertinently unforgettable because it still has implications in present day society. Postcolonial literature in general and the works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard in particular, represent various attempts by societies and individuals to resist domination. Crime and violence in the works Athol Fugard and Richard Wright is in this study viewed as a strategy of interrupting, interpolating and interjecting the apartheid system. This is the preoccupation of postcolonial theory, to engage with the far reaching, ever-shifting paradigms of the colonial encounter.

**Significance of the study**

The study is particularly significant because it is interventionist. It seeks to deconstruct categories that have been ascribed to both Wright and Fugard using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that broadens perspectives and identifies key conceptual similarities that have been overlooked in their works. Richard Wright, as has been pointed out, has been accused of portraying black people in a stereotypical light and thus some critics have dismissed him as one who relies on shock and violence. Athol Fugard has also been accused of lacking political commitment in his preoccupation with the lives of the subaltern. Popularly known as a liberal writer, it is this categorization that has actually fixed him and thus limiting our understanding of his overall mission. Although one might argue that Fugard has been complicit in this categorization through his self-representation which is decidedly liberal, this category is a reflection of the left-
right polarities of what Dennis Walder (1999) has called ‘ideological criticism’ which assumes that white liberal writers are incapable of articulating the plight of the marginalized blacks or if they do, they do so in a fashion which serves their own interests. The problem in Fugard’s fiction as some critics have noted, is ‘the difficulty of reconciling a liberal humanist approach with the reality of the oppressive power hegemonies in South Africa’ (Kehinde, http://www.africaresearch.org/papers). The tendency among critics has been to associate his liberal position with collusion, if not betrayal. This study seeks to bring out Fugard’s persistent attempt to represent those that Spivak (1995, 2006) has conceptualized as the silent/silenced. Fugard may not be able to retrieve the voice of the subaltern as Spivak argues but surely something can be gained from his representation. On the other hand, Richard Wright has been ‘pedestalled’ both as a revolutionary and an anti-racist racist, to borrow a phrase from Jean Paul Sartre. Critics have thus tended to blinker themselves by reading texts from a fixed ideological perspective.

In fact, most critics have written about Fugard and Wright independently. Few have placed them side by side, perhaps because black American literature and white South African literature have been placed in separate canonical ghettoes. This study reconsiders comparative reading which has the capacity to ‘enliven one work against another with the potential to clarify and amplify meaning and dominant perspectives’ (Preece, 2008: 6).

Gary Kynoch (2005) has also pointed out that available social history tends to explain crime and violence in South African society as an escalation of the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s. This position has serious political implications (it criminalizes resistance) yet it cannot be ruled out for some criminal elements, for example the Russians of Kynoch’s We are Fighting the World (2005), manipulated this wave of political resistance for their criminal ends. Given these diverging schools of thought and limited perspectives, this study seeks to bridge the diverging views and fill the gaps therein. This being a comparative study of authors dealing with similar themes in different settings, it seeks to harmonize the two authors’ visions rather than study them.
Reading Fugard and Wright together ‘reveals them as writers whose words “speak back” as they speak to each other and thereby reveal the postcolonial dimensions of their works’ (Preece, 2008:18). Using the selected theories, particularly the postcolonial theories; the study further brings out the ever-shifting paradigms of crime, violence and apartheid especially in the postcolonial space.

Chapter Outline
The study is divided into seven chapters. The introductory chapter consists of the research problem, aims of the study, the theoretical framework and background to the study, as shown above. The second chapter focuses on Richard Wright’s biographical novel, *Black Boy*, which has been analysed using the subculture theory together with Fanon/Bhabha’s concept of stereotype as theoretical anchors upon which the analysis leans. I have positioned Wright’s biographical text at the beginning of the study (though it was published after *Native Son*) for strategic reasons. It is in *Black Boy* that Wright traces his roots both biographically and ideologically. The third chapter will be devoted to *Native Son*, Wright’s worldly acclaimed publication. Fanon’s concept of stereotype as espoused in *Black Skin White Masks* and Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation, alongside Merton’s strain theory will be used in analysing this text. This novel comes before *The Outsider* and it is the climax of Wright’s search for subjectivity in the segregationist South. Chapter four deals with Wright’s overtly existential text: *The Outsider*. Here Bhabha’s cultural hybridity and the third space of enunciation are useful critical tools. The fifth and sixth chapters are preoccupied with Athol Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena; Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *Tsotsi* respectively. The first two texts will be analysed through the lenses of Ashcroft’s postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of habitation, place and space. In analysing the gang violence in *Tsotsi* (Chapter six), the subculture theory as well as Bhabha’s interstitial space have been isolated as useful analytical tools. The last chapter, which is the conclusion, brings together all the issues raised in the preceding chapters, showing how crime, violence and apartheid intersect and thus establishing the thesis of the study.
CHAPTER TWO

Stereotype, discrimination and inter-racial violence in Black Boy

Richard Wright was born in 1908, in Natchez, Mississippi, ‘one of the most destitute and racist parts of the Southern American states of the twentieth century’ (Fabre, 1985: 77). His experience of racial violence and white domination inspired most of his writings from Uncle Tom’s Children, Native Son through Black Boy, an autobiographical narrative which is the subject of this chapter. Owing to the manner in which Richard Wright depends on his personal experiences to represent the hostile nature of the Southern apartheid/segregationist environment, most critics have read his works as sociological studies of the plight of the African Americans in the South. Michel Fabre (1985) has found it handy to read Black Boy alongside Richard Wright’s non-fictional work, Twelve Million Black voices, which trace the history of African Americans in the South with specific emphasis on folk culture and its role in mitigating the imperatives of racism. On the other hand, Hakutani (2006: 85) maintains that Black Boy ‘though not intended as such is a convincing sociological study. Like sociology, it not only analyses a social problem but offers a solution to the problem it treats.’ What is explicit in such readings is a conceptualization of Wright’s work as an artistic reflection of problems affecting the society of his time. The social problem that Wright addresses in Black Boy is that of racial violence and crime as it interjects and translates Jim Crow repression. This chapter looks at racial violence and crime in Black Boy from the perspective of strain and subculture theories of Robert Merton and Edwin Sutherland respectively. Parallels are drawn between criminological and postcolonial theory in relation to the protagonist’s experience of the racial fundamentalism of the South.

Black Boy is an autobiographical narrative which creatively traces Richard Wright’s plight for freedom and self-realization against the white supremacist ideology of the South that intended to fix the African American to a position of docility and obsequious servitude. While Wright is sceptical about the possibility of escaping the hegemonic structures of white supremacy in Native Son; in Black Boy he sees the appropriation of
discourse as a possible leeway to self-liberation. Richard Wright's own life is a testimony to the latter, for having been denied a voice in the racist South; he flees to Chicago, New York and then Paris. Michel Fabre (1985:89) asserts that Wright's interpretation of the racial problem in the South was influenced by his readings in criminology, psychology, psychiatry, contemporary American literature and a variety of studies about African Americans, mostly sociological. The autobiography is Wright's way of authoring himself into existence against the exclusive discourse of the Deep South, and also 'witnessing' the stunted existence of other “Negro boys” of the South in the same way that Athol Fugard witnesses the lives of the victims of apartheid in South Africa. His personal experiences thus exemplify the challenges encountered by those who attempted to rebel against Southern white hegemony. *Black Boy*, like *Native Son*, is a counter discourse of resistance that interrogates established representations of the African American other. However, while he may be intending to dismantle colonial hegemony, Wright has perhaps lapsed into another hegemonic discourse of intellectual elitism, which is equally exclusive. His alienation from the rest of the black community, which is evident in his failure to identify with black culture and his journalistic view of black life, compromises his otherwise noble plight to witness the lives of the black boys of the South. What is evident here is that blacks who acquire western education are usually torn between two worlds --- the world of the colonial master and that of their people. They cannot fully identify with Western culture because they are born and bred in a different culture while at the same time they can longer identify with their own culture because western education has taught them to despise it. Richard is the enlightened one, entrusted with the responsibility of enlightening others among his own people, yet his attitude towards the culture of his people tells us that the education he acquired has at once liberated and ensnared him.

The novel opens with the protagonist's restless yearning for adventure which culminates in his burning grandmother's house. Apparently, this act of petty criminality is a way of resisting the suffocating environment of the South metonymically embodied in the values of grandmother’s home. Philipson (2000: 156) asserts that *Black Boy* portrays Wright's inability to become a part of the black community as it has been constructed by
the dominant white ideology. The tyrannical narrowness of his granny’s household keeps him from any kind of social intercourse.’ Richard’s domestic space is small and restrictive and as a young boy, he has a yearning for adventure which the environment of grandmother’s home and the South in general cannot allow. Grandmother is a staunch seventh day Adventist who does everything strictly according to the letter. The house is like a prison for the young adventurous Richard because he wants to play and talk, yet grandmother will not allow anybody to play and make noise in her Christian house. Adventist doctrine functions as a repressive discourse that colludes with racist America to further confine and silence the black child which is reminiscent of Althusser’s ideological state apparatus that include the church.

Richard’s search for a voice echoes the postcolonial plight of the colonized to appropriate discourse (knowledge/power) in order to inscribe a sense of agency within the colonial system. His guardians, particularly his grandmother, are unconscious agents of the discourse of apartheid because they deny him a voice, the only way he can register his thoughts and feelings. They are, in a sense, appendages of the larger oppressive system. In restricting Richard, they perpetuate the Southern legacy of inculcating fear and docility among African Americans. Although authoritarian religious practices are found even in non-racial societies, the repressive nature of Adventist doctrine in a society which is already racially polarized worsens Richard’s situation. The fact that Richard’s family helps to put him ‘in his proper place’ affirms Ngiugi wa Thiongo’s point, that once the mind has been colonized, the colonizer does not have to be physically present to inculcate colonial values, naturally the colonized allocate themselves an inferior space. This is to say that mental ‘control can change not only how people look at one another but how they look at their relationship to those controlling them’ (Ngugi, 2000: 122). Richard is not simply inferior to the colonizers, but also to other folks in his family. This is clearly shown in the incident when grandmother gives him a telling blow for interrupting elders’ conversation. Richard’s itching for space and speech are acts of resistance that attract violent reactions from his conformist grandmother. It is probable that grandmother is executing a genuine responsibility of inculcating values into the young Richard. Yet the values she inculcates are obviously
‘over determined from without,’ to borrow a phrase from Frantz Fanon. She is a vehicle (consciously or unconsciously) of the culture of silence and fear which is endemic in Jim Crow, the same culture which limits Bigger Thomas’ world in *Native Son*. At this early stage in the text, we can see that the socio economic atmosphere of grandmother’s home is a centre for what Spivak (2006) has theorized as structural domination. The environment is so hostile that we are not surprised when Richard later takes to the streets.

Like his protagonist, Richard Wright likes ‘to see himself as an individual who happened to be born in a poor black Natchez family and had to carve for himself not only his identity through rebellion but to seek a chosen place, a place of freedom versus servitude, knowledge versus cultural void, action versus apathy. He is a man seeking a place where he could be fully human from Mississippi to Memphis, to Chicago, to New York’ (Fabre1985: 77). In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright views the environment of the South as particularly unsupportive of individual nourishment. According to Philip Anger (2000:4) ‘the black culture that Wright addresses is one that is effectively disenfranchised by the dominant discourse of white racism of the early twentieth century,’ what Wright (1991) in his essay ‘How Bigger was born’ calls ‘a whole panoply of rules, taboos and penalties’ designed to ‘keep blacks in their place.’ Southern culture is clearly exclusive and totalitarian in that it is hostile; however black culture is ‘no supportive environment by itself’ (Fabre, 1985: 81). The culture of the South, white and black, is comparable to the authoritarian attitude of the British middle-upper-class family of Dickens’ novels which is later transported to the colonies. The unsupportive nature of the Southern environment is portrayed through grandmother’s house - small, overcrowded and run on strict religious principles. Due to the limiting atmosphere of the house, Richard ends up burning the curtain and consequently the house in search of more space and something to do. He is simply bored by this cold, restrictive environment without recreation. As a metaphor of resistance to apartheid oppression, Richard’s response is rather unproductive in that it is self-defeating. Frantz Fanon (2004: 16) has characterized this behaviour as typical of the oppressed whose
repressed rage ‘never manage to explode; [rather it] goes round in circles and wreaks havoc on the oppressed themselves.’

The violence in grandmother’s house is a microcosm of the violence of Southern apartheid. When Richard burns the house (which is a way of transferring his own frustration to his immediate environment), his mother beats him unconscious, with the approval of the rest of the family including grandmother in spite of her religious disposition. Implicit in grandmother’s response is Wright’s conviction that Christianity is just as authoritarian as communism. Why is there so much violence instead of peace in this religious home? The conflict between Richard, the unbelieving ‘heathen’ and grandmother, the Adventist, is a struggle for power. Grandmother represents the dominant discourse which is responsible for setting the rules and constructing others. Richard’s petty acts of resistance are statements of insubordination in the eyes of grandmother’s ruling Adventist ideology -- thus showing that ‘ideology is simultaneously a strategy of domination and a terrain of struggle’ (Fiske, 1996: 212). Like communism in The Outsider, the racial ideology of the South in general and the Adventist ideology in particular seem to thrive on the exercise of absolute power to crush their enemies. Richard testifies thus;

‘I was beaten so hard and long that I lost consciousness… I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed…my body seemed to be on fire and I could not sleep. Packs of ice were put on my forehead to put down the fever (p. 8-9).

After the beatings, Richard experiences a nervous breakdown, plunging into a delirium that keeps him abed for a week. ‘Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows suspended from the ceiling above me’ (p. 9). Grandmother’s exercise of violence on Richard is not only a way of disciplining a naughty grandchild but also a complex way of negotiating her frustration within the hegemonic structures of the South. In that sense we realize that she is not only an agent of Southern repressive culture, but also a victim, opening her own spaces for survival. At face value, Richard’s grandmother is a staunch Adventist who sees the
world in black and white, the good and bad, self-consciously trapped in the binary of religion. From this perspective, she is so blinkered that she does not see anything beyond the confines of religion. Worldly pursuits like reading and critical self-reflection are taboo in her world. She is, from this perspective, white America’s ambassador in the black community, helping to further restrict the African American, ‘I want none of that devil stuff in my house.’ “She bared her teeth and slapped me across my mouth with the back of her hand” (p.39). Nevertheless, grandmother’s predicament seems to be much more complex than that.

We are told that grandmother is so white in complexion that she could have passed for white yet she is classified as coloured. To be classified as coloured in a world where skin colour is a mark of privilege and a criterion for determining one’s station in life, is a nerve-breaking experience. We see it through Zechariah, the dark-skinned brother in Athol Fugard’s play, *The Blood Knot*, who, because of the colour of his skin feels estranged from his blood brother, Morris. Grandmother’s violence is a response to the way she has been fixed by the racialised discourse of the South. She embraces religion for strategic purposes like Father Seldon in *The Outsider*. Perhaps this is the reason why Richard Wright views the culture of the South as incapable of nourishing the individual, and this is also the point at which James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison depart from Richard Wright. The postcolonial theorist, Bill Ashcroft (2001) argues that there is no discourse which is totalizing in its exercise of power. The oppressed find and capitalize on certain fractures or points of weakness within dominant regimes of power. Richard’s resistance to domestic violence comes when he realizes that those that unleash violence on him, particularly grandmother and Aunt Addie do so not to right a wrong but to relieve their own personal strain. Wright’s point is that Richard’s relatives have exceeded what he is willing to take as discipline. Thus, on realizing this, he resorts to violent ways of interpolating the ruthless exercise of power by his guardians. When Aunt Addie threatens to beat him for eating in class, Richard defends himself with a knife. Although Richard’s behaviour further alienates him from the family and disrupts potential unity among the oppressed, it reflects an emerging generation gap between him and other family members, particularly grandmother, Aunt Audie and Uncle Tom.
This gap also developed in apartheid South Africa and is evident in Mtutuzeli Nyoka’s *I Speak to the Silent* (2001) where we see the youth defying the old generation and challenging repressive laws.

In *Black Boy*, as in most of Wright’s works, religion has an ideological function. It seeks to control by exercising the power of the supernatural. ‘Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn’ (p.130). We also see violence emanating from this desire to control through Uncle Tom who threatens to beat Richard because he has ‘never heard a sassier black imp than (him) all (his) life’ Uncle Tom is infuriated by Richard’s response when he asks him what the time is. In the brawl that ensures, it is evident that besides being a frustrated retired teacher, Uncle Tom has internalized the language and behaviour of his white masters. In beating Richard, he is metaphorically disciplining a sassy nigger as any white man would do (p. 150). Uncle Tom is thus a reincarnation of Beecher Stowe’s obsequious Uncle Tom who survived through ‘a bow and a hat in hand,’ a typical patriarchal man who has also embraced the values of the colonial master.

Frantz Fanon gives a comprehensible analysis of this behaviour. He argues that ‘whereas the colonist or police officer can beat the colonized subject day in and out, insult him and shove him to his knees, it is not uncommon to see the colonized subject draw his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive look from another colonized subject’ (2004: 17). Similarly, Richard testifies about the misunderstanding with his aunt, ‘I leaped, screaming and ran past her and jerked open the kitchen drawer... I grabbed a knife and held it ready for her’ (p.104). This violence is a vicious cycle that circulates among the oppressed. It is ‘a state of rage’ as Fanon calls it, which the colonizer instills in the colonized and prevents from ‘boiling over’ through maintaining internecine feuds. These conflicts are not progressive because they divert the attention of the oppressed from the disease (the oppressor) to symptoms (other victims of oppression). A case in point is that of Richard and his grandmother. At one point, Grandmother tries to assault Richard for expressing his mind, but Richard dodges the blow; ‘the force of her blow
was so strong that she fell down the steps, headlong, her body wedged in a narrow space between the fence and the bottom step’ (p.128). Internecine feuds of this nature are in the interest of white America or at least that part of white America that profits from the suppression of blacks. We also see this clearly in the case of Richard and Harrison who are made to fight for the pleasure of white men. ‘We were not really angry with each other; we knew that the idea of murder had been planted in each of us by the white men who employed us’ (p. 228).

The white employers on this occasion use their economic power to plant hostile relations between the two boys. Both Harrison and Richard desperately need money to survive, so they allow themselves to be used as objects of white recreation. This can be interpreted as a version of the neo-colonial predicament whereby the Third World is torn between adopting dictations from the West in return for financial hand-outs (Harrison’s option) or holding on to national pride and languishing in poverty and underdevelopment (Richard’s option). Harrison needs the money to buy clothes. He says ‘I wanna make a payment on a suit with that five dollars’ (p.227). The question that comes to mind is whether survival is possible in this sense? Where do we place values of self-worth, identity and personal integrity in the pursuit for survival? Is survival so urgent that one can forfeit one’s very humanity for it? While Richard and Harrison fight for the five dollars, their white employers smoke and yell obscenities (p.231).

It is explicit in this incident that the white employers and their compatriots enjoy the spectacle of black people fighting among themselves. Yet the question remains as to why it is in their interest to see African Americans fighting. In fact, in this story, Richard’s employer goes to the extent of purchasing a knife for him so that he could ‘protect’ himself, but when we discover that Harrison has no intention to fight Richard, we come to the understanding that the fight is a creation of the white employers. Through this incident, Wright affirms that internecine feuds among African Americans are, at least on this occasion, determined from without. Perhaps, this is a system of divide and rule designed to divert black people from serious issues that affect their lives to petty conflicts among themselves. Frantz Fanon (2004:18) maintains that such behaviour (of
maintaining violence among blacks) ‘reinforces the colonist’s existence and reassures him that such men are not rational’

Thus in leaving the South, Richard takes the proverbial African American journey to the north, a journey which symbolizes a quest for freedom, ‘I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if I could grow differently, if I could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns and perhaps bloom’ (Fabre, 1985:82). Travel is a self-liberating enterprise which however smacks of escapism and selfishness. In travelling to the north, Richard is preoccupied with individual freedom, yet this freedom is treacherous in that while it is ‘new’ and ‘cool’ and ‘warm,’ it is also ‘strange’

Richard’s restlessness (a yearning for freedom), is a metaphorical exposition of his longing for broader horizons of self-expression and imaginative freedom. ‘There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads’ (p.9). The sparrows are an enviable sight because they are exercising the kind of freedom that Richard needs. We see a similar kind of longing in Bigger’s admiration of the bird’s freedom to fly- to go wherever it wishes to go. One aspect of the apartheid South is that it physically restricts mobility among blacks. There are areas where blacks are not allowed to venture unless they are servants or in the company of a white man. The black boys of Wright’s novel are barred from crossing over to the white section. As a result, Richard and his friends team up to fight and protect their territory from trespassing white boys. Although colonial objectifications always benefit the colonizer, they objectify both the coloniser and the colonised. Black boys fight to protect their territories, while white boys, having been schooled in the doctrine of white supremacy also retaliate to protect their supremacy. Ideological fundamentalism, epitomized in these childish conflicts, compartmentalizes society and generates violence on the basis of group prejudice.

Richard Wright tells us in his introduction to *Native Son*, that the protagonist in *Black Boy* represents ‘the voiceless Negro boys of the South’ Richard is alienated from his
family and the rest of the black community, not because he is educated like Cross, but because he is not satisfied with the space that has been carved out for him by his environment. Like Bigger Thomas, he feels a need for a whole life and he acts out of that need (Wright, 1991:871). Wright considers the African American society as having accepted the values of the white society, perhaps for fear of the ruthless violence of apartheid that seeks to eliminate the Bigger Thomases and black boys of the South. In an interview on his novel, *The long dream*, Richard Wright argues that the novel ‘deals with a black human plant that has to draw its nourishment from abnormal conditions of life. Men not only take their cultural and economic values from the society in which they live, but they also take the direction and the pitch of their sexual attitudes and drives’ (Fabre, 1985). Similarly, the violence in *Black Boy* is nourished by the circumstances of racial discrimination in the South. If anything, the African American community colludes with the larger white society to break the African American and keep him in his place.

Taking a leaf from Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, the explanation for this behaviour is twofold. Firstly, black Southerners have imbibed the values of the colonizer. Secondly, black on black violence may, in a psychological sense, be the colonized subject’s way of negotiating the trauma associated with the ‘fact of blackness’

In theorizing the postcolonial, Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that colonial discourse represents the other as fixed, knowable and predictable. In the same way, apartheid constructs an essentialised social place for the African American. Richard Wright’s ‘How Bigger was born’ informs us that Bigger Thomases were often shot, maimed, broken, lynched or generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken (Wright, 1991:856). Being black means being satisfied with the given. However, for Richard, the home environment is suffocating. Fabre (1985: 80) observes that if he ‘had stayed in the South, Richard Wright, the great writer could have ended up a sharecropper like his father’ Like Bigger Thomas, who is not satisfied with the given, Richard is also battling to circumvent or escape the hegemonic structures of Southern apartheid.

If burning the house is Richard’s first childish quest for adventure, killing the cat is indeed his first attempt at outright rebellion. No wonder why this criminal act, petty
though it may appear, is taken seriously and meted with a harsh punishment. Richard is forced to bury the cat and suffer a guilty conscience as if he has committed murder. In a sense, this incident is an initiation which prepares him for bigger crimes. In fact, when Richard kills the cat, the intended victim is his father, who, in his sleepiness, tells him to kill the cat. So for Richard, killing the cat is metaphorically an act of killing his father. ‘I knew that he had not really meant for me to kill the cat but my deep hate of him urged me toward a literal acceptance of his word’ (p.12). Richard hates his father particularly because he is not exemplary. He has imbibed the fear that Southern whites instil in blacks. As a representative of ‘the voiceless Negro boys of the South,’ Richard has aspirations that have been and are being suppressed by his environment- these aspirations find expression in acts of vandalism. This explains why he is ‘deeply satisfied’ after killing the cat. ‘Now, Papa can sleep. I said deeply satisfied’ (p.13)

By killing the cat, Richard has challenged his father’s authority and by implication the authority of the South. ‘He could not punish me now without risking his authority’ (p. 13) Killing the cat and burning the house are forms of resistance not only against the despotism of his father but also the values of his guardians. ‘I had made him know that I felt he was cruel and I had done it without his punishing me’ (p.14)

What comes out clearly through Richard’s destructive adventures is a confirmation of Bill Ashcroft’s assertion that ‘no subjective body has a special existential quality fundamentally distinct from its signification’ In other words, we become what the world has made of us. ‘In a real sense,’ Ashcroft (1998:209) argues ‘the body is not only the site of sensate access to the world, but is an extension of the textuality of that world- an extension of the fabric, the tissue of quotations that make up that world’ Richard’s behaviour is thus an extension of the textuality of his world. His behaviour is a result of the psychological displacement that culminates in his absurd gestures of wanton destruction.

Killing the cat is Richard’s first act of insubordination which prevails. It gives him the courage to confront bigger challenges. He has prevailed against domestic authority symbolized by his father and grandmother who deny him a voice in the domestic space, though perhaps with good intentions for the young boy’s future. However, making noise,
which is taboo in granny’s house, is, for young Richard, a means of self-expression and registering his presence. Talking about his father, Richard tells us that ‘He is the lawgiver in our family and I never laughed in his presence… He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote’ (p. 12). The absence of filial love between Richard and his father is fostered by the environment of the Deep South. Firstly, his father has to be tyrannical in order to prepare his son for the tyranny of the outside world. Secondly, Richard’s father is also a victim in that he has no time to perform his fatherly responsibilities. When he comes home from a long day’s work, he is so tired that he has no time with his children. Bessie Mears in *Native Son* tells us that blacks in the South no longer have a life of their own. The life they live, they live for their white masters.

Although Richard bears the moral guilt involved in the act of murder when he kills a cat, white people engage in more hideous acts of violence (for example pushing Richard off a moving truck), without bearing any moral guilt. In fact, when Richard is thrown off a moving truck, the perpetrators make it a subject of laughter. Eldridge Cleaver (1968: 73) intimates that ‘the racist conscience of America is such that murder does not register as murder, really, unless the victim is white’ Richard’s mother accuses him on moral grounds, the way the apartheid state uses religion to ‘call [blacks] not to the ways of God but to the ways of the white man’ (Fanon, 2004:7). Grandmother orders Richard to ‘go out into the dark, dig a hole and bury the kitten’ (p.14). The irony is that although apartheid America commits criminal acts of violence against the African American community, it is never held responsible for it or made to suffer a guilty conscience. Yet Richard is forced to bear psychological torment, ‘The kitten dropped to the pavement with a thud that echoed in my mind for many days and nights’ (p.15). It must be noted that Richard is being tormented by his own people and not by whites. His mother forces him to make a prayer asking God to forgive him for killing the cat yet whites commit worse crimes and go scot free. Although we cannot absolve Richard for killing the cat, the fact that he bears a guilty conscience gives us a picture of how the racial ideology of the South functions. White violence in the South is sanctioned by religion which functions as an ideological state apparatus.
Richard’s departure from the racist South is thus a rejection of religion which is characteristic of Wright’s existentialist thought. Richard has a similar experience when his sick mother is denied medical treatment because of her skin colour. The suffering that he sees through his mother’s sickness [felt life] and the uncaring attitude of white America makes him distrust everyone and everything. His mother’s perpetual sickness ‘set the emotional tone of [his] life, coloured the men and women [he] was to meet in the future, conditioned [his] relation to events that had not yet happened, determined [his] attitude to situations and circumstances [he] was yet to face’ (p. 18).

Richard’s violent behaviour is also determined by these traumatizing experiences of his life. His failure to overcome the psychological torment of violent experiences is reminiscent of Fanon’s clinical studies of psychopathology in the Algerian war. In his analyses of psychopathology, Frantz Fanon observes that such experiences or what Richard Wright calls ‘felt life’ have a way of causing eccentric behaviour including violence. In Black Boy, we see that Richard’s experience of the South is lodged in his subconscious even after he has successfully escaped to the north. He physically rejects the South out of frustration, but in actual fact, he cannot escape its influence, ‘I could never really leave the South for my feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South’ (in Fabre, 1985: 82). Wright’s insight is rather totalizing here as it suggests that one can never escape the power of dominant discourses. Colonial power does not reside with the colonizer; rather it is negotiated. ‘It is difficult to conceive of the process of subjectification as a placing within Orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant being strategically placed within it too’ (Bhabha, 1994: 71). There is a way, as Ashcroft (2001) has argued, in which victims of oppression interrupt dominant discourses for their own purposes.

Apparently, Black Boy, like Native Son, deals with the plight of the African American in the context of what Wright (1991: 858) calls ‘the dense racial ideology of the South.’ The only difference is that Bigger Thomas’ plight is doomed, while Richard’s is successful.
Wright’s analysis of the racial problem in the South is influenced by his own experiences. This is explicitly portrayed through the social problems that Richard faces - hunger, unemployment, poverty and lack of money for better education. When his father deserts the family, Richard is always hungry, as he says ‘now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly’ (p. 30). Hunger is presented as an accomplice to Richard, a reality he has to live with. He and his brother spend the whole day on ‘a loaf of bread and a pot of tea’. ‘I knew hunger, hunger that made my body aimlessly restless, hunger that kept me on edge, that made my temper flare, hunger that made hate leap out of my heart like the dart of a serpent’s tongue, hunger that created in me odd cravings’ (p.98).

Apart from the hunger which has become a part of his life, Richard is psychologically devastated by his father’s decision to desert the family for another woman. It is after this incident that Richard resolves to do with ‘something unclean’ (p.34). While his mother is crying throughout the court session the father is laughing and this makes Richard hate him permanently. ‘If someone had suggested that my father be killed, I would perhaps have become interested’ (p.29). The fact that Richard’s father is allowed by law to abandon his family shows that the legal system of this society is questionable. The legal system does not cherish family values for the black community. ‘From the white landowners above him; there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition’ (p.35). These values could not be passed on to Richard’s father because he has been brought up in the legacy of his masters, ‘the landowners,’ which is a legacy of slavery. When Richard meets his father after twenty five years, he cannot identify with him because the two are on two separate planes of consciousness, ‘my mind and consciousness had become so greatly and violently altered that when I tried to talk to him I realized that though ties of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality’ (p.35).
Wright’s rejection of his father, which is also metaphorically a rejection of his past, is dramatized in this historical encounter with him in 1940. In rejecting his father, Richard also rejects the South and everything that is associated with servitude. After so many years, his father is still a sharecropper breaking his back on a white man’s land. Since his father is part of this repressive environment, Richard rejects him together with the environment. According to Michel Fabre (1985:78), the meeting functions to slay the father symbolically, to dismiss him forever, or as Robert Stepto puts it ‘to bury him alive’ Fabre goes on to argue that Wright is not only settling accounts with Nathan Wright, the inadequate father he could not forgive, but with the white exploitation and racism which reduced blacks to ‘creatures of the earth’ and with other visions of the South and the African American, particularly Faulkner’s statement about his African American characters that ‘they endured’. It is imperative to note that Richard’s rejection of his past, particularly his father, has overtones of intellectual bigotry. There is an element of condescension in his attitude. Perhaps because he is educated, Richard feels better and smarter than his father.

It is also plausible that Richard has not forgiven his father in particular and the rest of the South in general, for neglecting his childhood. Owing to the hardships of life arising from the father’s desertion of the family, Richard is initiated into the violence of the streets. Surprisingly, he is apprenticed into street-violence by his own mother as if violence in the black community has become a kind of subculture, a way of life. Life in the South is survival of the fittest. One has to be violent if one is to survive. As Richard narrates the story of his encounter with street gangs, we see that gang life in the black belt is a subculture one must embrace in order to survive. ‘The gang of boys grabbed me, knocked me down, snatched the basket, took the money and sent me running home in panic’ (p. 18). Instead of cushioning her son in motherly care, his mother gives him a stick and tells him not to come back into the house without the groceries. This is a subculture of violence which is triggered by abject conditions of poverty in the African American community. After beating the boys with the stick, Richard graduates into the world of delinquency.
The way Richard attacks the boys with the stick; it is as if his whole life depends on his winning the fight. ‘I fought to lay them low, to knock them cold, and to kill them so that they could not strike back at me. I flayed with tears in my eyes, teeth clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow’ (p.19). The way Richard fights suggests that this is a test to be passed if he is to be part of this society. Thus by winning the fight, he graduates into ‘adulthood’ even though he is still a child. ‘And for the first time in my life I shouted at grownups, telling them I would give them the same if they bothered me’ (p. 19). After this incident, Richard is co-opted into a gang to protect their territory from white boys. ‘Whenever we caught a white boy on our side we stoned him; if we strayed to their side they stoned us’ (p.20). The white and black gangsters are formed against the background of racial segregation. This fighting may at a literal level appear like childhood adventure, yet every child’s behaviour is informed by the environment in which the child is brought up.

Frantz Fanon (1967:144) notes that the kind of social curricula a child is exposed to has a bearing on his behaviour and attitude to life. Although Richard promises his mother that he will not fight again, he cannot stop because he is bound by allegiance to the values of his gang. ‘I promised my mother that I would not fight, but I knew that if I kept my word I would lose my standing in the gang, and the gang’s life was my life’ (p.80). However given the mother’s rather complicit attitude to gang violence, she is not likely to punish him for it. On this juncture, Richard Wright’s interpretation of criminal behaviour reflects the influence of the Chicago sociologists of the 1930s to 1940s. Chicago sociologists analysed crime within the context of the social environment that supposedly bred criminals. In this case, it is Richard’s environment that compels him to engage in violence. When Uncle Clark takes him to school, he has no choice but to fight his way into an unfamiliar school environment. ‘I fought tiggerishly, trying to leave a scar, seeking to draw blood as proof that I was not a coward that I could take care of myself’ (p.88).

The ‘right’ to the streets of Memphis is acquired through violence. However, the fact that his own mother orients him to violence implies that she has accepted the situation and
expects her son to master it in order to survive. One way or the other, one is forced to conform. Wright differs from some naturalist writers like Faulkner and Dreiser who celebrated what they perceived as the African American’s ability to endure hardships. Although Richard Wright presents the South as bleak, for Ralph Ellison, his long-time literary friend, *Black Boy* reads like a blues. ‘The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic-near comic lyricism’ (in Philipson, 2000:156).

It is the circumstances of the racialized South that isolate Richard to a kind of existential individualism. Some critics have thus argued that Wright became an existentialist through ‘felt life’ rather than through the influence of Sartre and Camus. Although Richard is only twelve years old, the racism of the South compels him to question the status quo. ‘Why could I not eat when I was hungry? …I could not understand why some people had enough food and others did not’ (p. 30). Hunger keeps him restless and potentially a criminal. ‘I now found it irresistible to roam during the day while my mother was cooking in the kitchens of the white folks’ (p. 30). The more he patronizes the streets, associating with morally decadent adults, the more he becomes corrupted. ‘I was a drunkard in my sixth year before I had begun school’ (p.23). Richard comes to realize that whites eat well and are never hungry while blacks are always hungry and envious of white people. Following behind his mother to white folks’ kitchens, hungry Richard feeds on occasional scraps of bread and meat from white tables. ‘If the white people left anything, my brother and I would eat well, but if they did not, we would have our usual bread and tea’ (p. 28). The implication is that poverty and desperation may force one to engage in criminal activities. Richard himself makes a resolution to do with ‘something unclean’ (p. 34) because of the naked reality of his life. His father has deserted the family, the money earned by his mother is not enough for him to eat and attend school. She ends up sending him to an orphanage where he is once again subjected to hunger. ‘Many mornings I was too weak to pull the grass; I would grow dizzy and my mind would become black’ (28) The fact that Richard is separated from his mother too early in life and subjected to the ruthless environment of apartheid
makes him a stranger to his own people, an outsider. ‘I was rapidly learning to distrust everything and everybody’ (p.30). Richard’s environment is so hostile that his life, like that of Bigger is dominated by fear.

It is explicit; however, that Richard’s tragedy is, from the onset, directly influenced by racist America. Apart from his childhood adventures, which are perhaps ‘normal,’ his real predicament starts when he stumbles upon the racial divide through the story of a white man who beat a black boy. In his childhood innocence, Richard had taken the story for granted because he thought that the black boy was the white man’s son. ‘…I felt that the “white” man had the right to beat the “black” boy, for I naively assumed that the “white” man must have been the “black” boy’s father’ (p.24). The visit to Granny’s place further exposes Richard to the realities of Jim Crow society. ‘When I boarded the train I was aware that we Negroes were in one part of the train and that the whites were in another…I wanted to understand these two sets of people who lived side by side and never touched, it seemed, except in violence’ (p.46). Richard’s traceable degeneration from an innocent boy to a drunkard and a thief cannot in any meaningful way be attributed to his personality. What Wright clearly articulates is that the more Richard becomes acquainted with his society, the more he becomes delinquent. Thus, he consciously decides to liberate himself through engaging in a criminal act, like Eldridge Cleaver (1968) who sees himself as free after raping a white woman. Richard resorts to theft because all the legitimate means of self-realization are closed. ‘I knew that the very nature of black and white relations bred this constant thievery. The Southern whites would rather have Negroes who stole, work for them than Negroes who knew however dimly the worth of their humanity’ (p.191). Richard chooses to steal because that is the fastest way he can earn money to finance his journey to the north. In a sense, he is playing the white game, like Sizwe Bansi, in Fugard’s play who uses a fake identity document in order to acquire right of domicile in Port Elizabeth. However, one should note that Richard, like Sizwe Bansi, only considers crime as a last resort, at that point where he feels he has nothing to lose. ‘I knew that if I were caught I would go to the chain gang. But was not my life already a kind of chain gang? What, really did I have to lose?’ (p.19).
Some critics, particularly Ralph Ellison have criticized Richard Wright for being rather pessimistic about blacks in the South. Although the South was racist, Ellison argues that African Americans ‘survived’ through cultural activities like singing the blues. However, Wright maintains that ‘what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure … Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of Negro life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of western civilization; that they lived somehow in it but not of it’ (p.37). Wright has been accused of stereotyping the African American because he characterizes African American culture as bleak. Critics such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin celebrate black culture; especially the blues which they say help to sustain blacks in difficult times. However what is clear in Wright’s argument is the African American’s traumatic experience of living ‘in-between’ as Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon have conceptualized the predicament of the colonized. The experience of ‘living in’ but being ‘not of’ is implicitly responsible for the African American’s desperation that unleashes itself as open violence, theft and internecine feuds. As Richard Wright has argued in ‘How Bigger was born,’ the black boys of the South respond to this nervous shiftiness of ‘being in’ but ‘not of’ in different ways. Some take to drugs, alcohol and women while others go for religion, ‘a fatalism which relieves the oppressor of all responsibility since the cause of wrong doing, poverty and the inevitable can be attributed to God’ (Fanon, 2004:18).

The experience of ‘living in and not of’ may cause strain which expresses itself through violence. We see this exhibited in the character of grandpa who is perpetually tense because the white man has not released compensation for his participation in the Second World War. Similarly Uncle Tom itches to unleash violence on Richard whom he calls ‘the sassiest nigger (he) has ever met’. Uncle Tom served as a teacher for many years but now he is retired and moneyless, hence the frustration. In fact almost all the characters in Black Boy are inclined to violence one way or the other because they are constantly negotiating a void in them, a void of being in America but not of it or more directly, they are all frustrated and unable to find conventional modes of expressing this.
Compared to other forms of colonial exploitation, the African American experience is exceptional particularly because black Americans are not being exploited by an alien (like the colonizer in the Third World) who has no relationship with them. James Baldwin argues that racial relations in America are complicated in that the African American is tied to his slave master in a blood relationship. ‘The relationships … are not merely oppressor versus oppressed or master versus servant, they are relationships of blood and these relationships contain the force and anguish and terror of love’ (Baldwin, 1985: 42). The same applies to apartheid South Africa where coloureds are segregated against in spite of their blood relationship with the colonial masters.

As Richard puts it, the real trouble with Jim Crow is that it denies the very humanity of the Africa American. ‘I would have agreed to live under a system of feudal oppression, not because I preferred feudalism but because I felt that feudalism made use of a limited part of a man, defined him, his rank, his function in society’ (p.253). Although this is a clear overstatement on Richard’s part, the point he is making is that the discourse of racial segregation does not allow blacks to express their relevance to society. Since the African American is excluded and treated as subhuman, he also begins to hate himself. ‘Hated by whites and being an organic part of that culture that hated him, the black man begins to, in turn hate in himself that which others hated in him’ (p.253). The violence of the black man is therefore the struggle within himself triggered by his rationalization of the way he has been constructed. ‘A good part of the Negro’s energy is spent in keeping control of his unruly emotions; emotions which he had not wished to have, but could not help having’ (p.254). ‘Culturally, the Negro represents a paradox. Though he is an organic part of the nation, he is excluded by the entire tide and direction of American culture’ (p.260). America categorizes and essentialises black people so as to mark them subhuman and thus suitable for exclusion. As we see in the works of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Edward Said (1978), to be known is to be fixed. The colonizer claims to know the colonized and thus fixes him in a particular, predictable representation.
Although the intention is to ‘fix and know,’ it is not possible for the colonised to be seen as a single unit. Arguably, the colonized African in the Congo or the Arab in Algeria was “known” in a way that the African-American under Jim Crow was not – just as, under late apartheid, the black South African was deprived of South African identity via the Bantustans. Wright argues that America is ‘aggressive because it is afraid, it insists upon seeing the world in terms of good and bad, the holy and the evil, the high and the low, the black and the white, our America is frightened of fact, of history, of processes, of necessity. It hugs the easy way of damning those it cannot understand, of excluding those who look different, and salves its conscience with a self-draped cloak of self-righteousness’ (p.260). The tension between white and black is therefore lodged in the binary construction of ‘black and white’ In other words, American society degenerates into violence because it has embraced a Manichaean conceptualization of the world and thus obsessed with othering.

Violence in African-American literature has always been associated with the colonial system of subjugation, stereotyping and exploitation. Beginning with the historic abduction and transportation of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean as so vividly portrayed in Alex Haley’s (1976) *Roots*, to the forced labour of the slave era, as presented in the slave narratives, through the systematic dehumanization of apartheid; racial violence has always emanated from the white man’s attempt to define the African American and subject him to the condition of that definition. In *Black Boy*, we see tension emanating from Richard’s refusal to abide by the white man’s representation. On two occasions, Richard narrowly escapes being lynched for failing to present himself as ‘a docile Negro’ in the presence of his masters. At one point he is thrown off a moving truck for failing to say ‘sir’ to a white man. White America has constructed the African American as a servant and to that end he engages in violence. Fanon (2004: 15) argues that ‘the first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep his limits.’ Apparently, the African American’s place is not his by choice, it is a place created for him by the white master. In fact violence between black and white is also aggravated by the fixed place or social status that African Americans are subjected to.
Bill Ashcroft (2001) in his book *Postcolonial Transformation* argues that the concept of place is capable of being transformed and it is in the process of transforming the given place that the African American is victimized. This is the reason why one of Richard’s employers tells him that he will never become a writer and on another occasion Richard laughs when his prospective employer asks him if he were a thief. The white woman says ‘we don’t want a sassy nigger around here’ implying that a sassy nigger is one who thinks or expresses thought and thus moving away from his designated place. This story shows that some white people believe the stereotypes constructed by white America to define and represent black people. ‘Now look, we don’t need a sassy nigger around here’ (p.139). A sassy nigger is one who rationalizes his prescribed identity while a good nigger is one who affirms the image of the white man’s fabrication like Shorty who bares his ‘tough’ ass for a white man to kick and laugh.

Richard and Shorty are perhaps different ways of responding to Southern hegemony. While Richard’s approach is too confrontational and rather dangerous in the face of white violence, Shorty’s approach is subtle and thus a way of opening survival spaces within the racist regime. Bill Ashcroft (2001:20) asked a very important question that is useful in understanding Shorty: ‘can one resist without obviously opposing?’ The answer is yes because as Ashcroft puts it ‘it is these subtle ways … forms of resistance, forms of saying ‘no’ that are more interesting because they are difficult for imperial powers to combat’

Since the white world has essentialised the African American, Richard’s aspiration to become a writer is a wild dream. When he tells his white employer that he wants to write stories, she says ‘you will never be a writer…who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head’ (p. 141). The white woman is fixing Richard to a pre-determined position by foretelling what he, as a black man, is capable of doing. She speaks about Richard’s destiny with finality because she believes she knows the ‘Negro’ This reminds us of the conviction of most colonial rulers that blacks will never rule themselves, otherwise there will be chaos. Ian Smith in the then Southern Rhodesia vowed that blacks will not rule
Rhodesia in a thousand years. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher in 1987 firmly pronounced, ‘anyone who thinks that the ANC is going to run the government of South Africa is living in Cloud Cuckooland’ (Bonynton, 1997: 18) When Richard is selected to be the valedictorian, the principal takes it upon himself to write a speech for him. ‘But listen,’ he says, ‘take this speech and say it. I know what’s best for you’ (p.167). In this sense stereotype does not only displace the African American’s sense of self-worth, it also blurs the white man’s vision to the point of believing his own lie. On the other hand, Richard tells us that he ‘faced a wall in the woman’s mind; a wall that she did not know was there’ (p.142). The wall refers to the falsehoods and stereotypical representations behind which both blacks and whites hide and dramatize false roles. Richard’s boss at the mill also salves his notions of racial supremacy by emphasizing the perceived difference between blacks and whites. ‘A dog bite can’t hurt a nigger’ (p. 156) he says. The implication being that a nigger is not human enough to suffer any harm from a dog bite.

However as Frantz Fanon (1967) argues, colonial violence is double edged for it dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed. Richard witnesses an incident where two white men beat a black woman until their hands are bloody and as they wash the blood away, they break into laughter saying ‘that’s what we do to niggers when they don’t pay their bills’ (p. 172). What is apparent in this bloody incident is that racial violence does not only objectify and dehumanize the African American; it also upsets the white man’s claim to racial supremacy. The act of washing away blood and chuckling at the same time is undoubtedly sadistic although these white men may be thinking that they are acting on God’s behalf or their financial interest.

The story of Bob who is killed for flirting with a white prostitute at the hotel echoes the white man’s fear of the ‘Negro’ he has created, a fear which is akin to Bhabha’s (1994) conception of stereotype as fetish. Bob’s behaviour is both an affirmation and a deviation because while the ‘Negro’ is a child, the fact that he has slept with a white woman makes him a different kind of child- a monster. Taking after Freud’s assertion that ‘affection and hostility in the treatment of the fetish... are mixed in unequal
proportions in different cases…” Homi Bhabha observes that the stereotype takes a wide range of forms, ‘from the loyal servant to Satan, from the loved to the hated; a shifting of subject positions in the circulation of colonial power…” (1994:76). The African American is like ‘the white man but not quite’ (Bhabha, 1994: 86) because he has super human sexual powers which if left unchecked will wreak havoc in society. The white man’s fear of the ‘Negro’ is also aptly captured through Pease and Reynolds, two white men who refuse Richard the opportunity to learn a trade- ‘I heard that a nigger can stick his prick in the ground and spin around on it like a top’ (p.180). Implicit in this statement is the white man’s fear of the so called ‘Negro super masculinity’

Bob is killed particularly because he has ‘overstepped the limit’ As one character in Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice (1968) puts it; the African American’s love for the white woman is a sickness. The white woman is an ogre ‘that has its claws buried in the core of [his] being and refuses to let go’ (p.159). The black man’s sickness for the white woman is dramatized by Cleaver himself who he gets angry with a prison guard for pulling down his white pin up girl. ‘I was shocked and enraged to find that the guard had ripped my sugar from the wall…it was like seeing a dead body in a lake’ (1968: 7). Apparently, the white pin up girl, a mere object of fantasy presented in human terms, has become an emblem of his aspirations. The white woman is a temptation because the dominant machinery of representation has portrayed her as the acme of beauty and for the African American, falling in love with her is an irresistible passion. ‘All our lives,’ observes Butterfly, Cleaver’s inmate, ‘we have had the white woman dangled before our eyes like a carrot on a stick before a donkey: look but don’t touch’ (Cleaver, 1968: 9). This ambivalent portrayal of the white woman, this attraction coupled with destruction is what draws Bob to his own death.

The violence of the South as projected in Black Boy is twofold. There is the violence of the master which seeks to maintain the notion of white supremacy and the violence of the African American which is reactive and psychopathological. The African American’s response is also ‘transformative’ in Bill Ashcroft’s (2001) sense rather than confrontational and self-deluding. The violence of the African American, exercised
physically among themselves and imaginatively against whites, is self-destructive; though it is also, at another level transformative because it allows the perpetrators to relieve themselves and ensure survival from one moment to the next. A case in point is Richard’s ‘tiggerish’ fight with the boy who challenges him on his first day at school. This form of violence is necessary as much as it is an apprenticeship and therefore ‘a license to survive’ in this environment.

In *Black Boy* Richard’s questions destabilize established falsehoods in American society. Firstly, he realizes that although granny is white, she is categorized as coloured. How does she become coloured when her skin is white? Did she become coloured when she married a coloured man? ‘My grandmother was as nearly white as a Negro can be without being white, which means that she was white’ (p. 39). Grandmother is white in colour; yet she is not classified as white according to the official system of racial classification. Richard’s mother tells him that granny did not ‘become’ coloured, she was ‘born’ the colour she is now. What this means is that granny is coloured by birth because she was born into slavery and no white man has ever been a slave. So, whiteness is not all about skin colour, it is also about origin. By virtue of her being a product of slavery, granny is therefore coloured, a construction of white America. Her name, Bolden was given to her by a white man, just like the names of the rest of her ancestors. Richard asks a very critical question which has been at the heart of strife and racial violence in American society.

The African American is a creation of white America by abduction, subjugation and stereotyping, but does the white man have the right to name him? Giving a name is an act of representing and defining what one knows. But how could white America define and represent a people they do not know. ‘Who gave her that name?’ Richard asks his mother and she replies, ‘The white man who owned her’ (p. 47). Implicit in this response is the notion that white America names by virtue of ownership. The blacks cannot name themselves because they don’t own themselves; they are property of their white masters. The idea of naming by conquest is also evident in South Africa where most cities and streets are named after white heroes and heroines. In Athol Fugard’s
Boesman and Lena, all the places that Lena has been are named in Afrikaans, no wonder why she does not remember the sequence in which she has visited them.

Richard’s questioning mind probes into serious questions about African American identity. ‘What has papa got in him?’ he asked. ‘Some white, and some red and some black,’ she said… ‘Then what am I?’ ‘They'll call you a coloured man when you grow up,’ she said. (p. 48). African American identity does not come from what the African Americans say about themselves, neither does it come from their own experience of life. In fact, it comes from white America’s view of the African American which is based on racial prejudice. Frantz Fanon’s character, Jean Veneuse in Black Skin White Masks laments this predicament thus ‘I am a slave not of the ideas others have of me but of my own appearance’ (1967:116). The African American’s predicament as Fanon puts it in Black Skin White Masks (1967:115), is worse than that of the Jew because unlike the Jew who belongs to the same family as the white man and whose differences with the white man may be nothing but mere domestic squabbles, the African American is ‘over determined from without,’ on the basis of the colour of his skin. The case of Richard’s grandmother renders all these racial classifications artificial. Fanon comes to the conclusion that whatever the African American stands for is a construction of the white man, ‘it is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject’ (Fanon, 2004: 2). However Fanon’s position has long been supplanted by Bhabha’s concept of hybridity which states that the colonized is far from being a tabula rasa. The colonized is not wholly a fabrication but a hybrid; he is a combination of two conflicting worlds.

Stereotyping the African American and representing him as the inferior other elevates the white man. It assures him of his humanity as Fanon (1952) puts it while at the same time emphatically fixing the African American because while the black man ‘is black in relation to the white man,’ the white man is also white in relation to the black man. To stereotype, therefore, is to exclude. This is clearly depicted in the story of Uncle Hoskins, a thriving black business man who is hunted down and shot dead by racist whites. The logic is that if a black man is less human, then he should not venture into business and prosper, otherwise he threatens the white man’s perceived and actual
sense of security. The murder of uncle Hoskins by white business rivals testifies white America’s attempt to define the African American and confine him to a place which is perceived as appropriate for him. Richard tells us that he ‘learned afterwards that Uncle Hoskins had been killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business’ (p.53). Aunt Maggie, his wife, is not allowed either to see the body of her dead husband or even to claim his assets.

In an essay entitled ‘The fact of blackness’ Frantz Fanon (1952, 1967) dramatically shows how stereotype constructs both the colonizer and the colonized. The fear that is inspired by the stereotype is two dimensional. Firstly, the black man is always afraid because he does not know how to behave in the presence of a master who aspires to be ‘the creator’ too. In other words, blackness, as defined by whites is conceptually unstable. We see this predicament explicitly portrayed through Richard’s nervousness and uncertainty every time he gets a new job- he has to find a way of fitting into the straitjacket of the white man’s ‘good nigger’ Secondly, while the African American is being tormented by this fear, the white man is also afraid of what the African American is capable of doing, especially to the white woman. When white America says in Fanon’s terms ‘the Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, and the Negro is ugly’ (Fanon, 1967:113) it creates a monster which must be kept in check. Fanon recounts the story of a black boy who was shivering from cold, ‘that cold that goes through your bones’ and as he was shivering, a little white boy was so terrified that he threw himself into his mother’s arms: ‘Mama the nigger is going to eat me up’ (p.114). Similarly, the stereotypical manner in which Jews are represented in Black Boy makes young Richard fear and hate Jews before he met them. ‘All of us black people who lived in the neighbourhood hated Jews, not because they exploited us, but because we had been taught at home and in Sunday school that Jews were ‘Christ killers’ (p. 59). In their childhood innocence, Richard and the other boys in the neighbourhood deride and ridicule Jews on the basis of the discourse that has been passed down to them. Negative representation of the other has far reaching consequences, similar to the way ideology may be manipulated by the ruling class to stigmatize, demonize and eliminates its enemies.
Such songs like ‘Bloody Christ killers/ Never trust a Jew/ Bloody Christ killers/ What wont a Jew do?’ (p. 59) may seem plain innocent since they are being sung by little children, but they are based on stereotype rather than fact. It is probable that songs like these derived from anti-Semitism which played a major role in the Ku Klux Klan, and in lieu of Edward Said’s extensive work on Palestine, these songs may as well constitute the cultural bedrock of genocide. Such stereotyping and name calling as Fanon shows us in his essay ‘The fact of blackness’ incites violence and racial hatred. Like Richard in *Black Boy*, the white child in Fanon’s essay is terrified by the shivering Negro, fearing that the Negro might pounce on him yet the poor Negro is just feeling cold. Fanon’s little white boy is reacting to what he has been taught at home and in Sunday school like Richard.

Through his autobiographical narrative, Wright shows that resistance is not only about direct opposition, but also about moving the centre (to borrow a phrase from Ngugi Wa Thiongo) or defining oneself from one’s own way of seeing the world, maintaining one’s core values and refusing trinkets of the oppressor. Bill Ashcroft (2001) has argued that this is the way most societies subjected to colonial domination managed to use the values of the colonizer to transform themselves in their own way. At one point Richard, the protagonist in *Black Boy* gets so hungry that he decides to sell his dog for a dollar. He tells us that ‘One afternoon, hunger haunted me so acutely that I decided to sell my dog, Betsy and buy food’ (p.67). A white woman offers to buy the dog at ninety seven cents but Richard refuses because he does not want to sell his dog to white people. The white woman assures him that ninety seven cents is almost a dollar but he cannot sell the dog because he knows his pride is at stake. Richard knows that the white woman is deliberately taking advantage of him because she ‘knows’ what a hungry African American can do. Perhaps the question is what comes first, survival or self-esteem. On this occasion, Richard chooses the latter. This reminds us of some criticisms that have been levelled against Athol Fugard’s work that most of his characters are mere a-historical desperados who can do anything for survival. On the contrary, history tells us that in some cases the oppressed had to stand their ground and defend their integrity.
In this case, Richard refuses to live within the confines of the idealized African American, to be knowable and therefore exploitable. Richard’s refusal to take the ninety seven cents potentially symbolizes decolonization, a process of stepping outside the limitations of the West’s projection of the colonized. ‘Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen from within’ (p.70).

Making things happen ‘within’ is perhaps the strategy that Shorty uses to get money from white people. He accepts the white man’s fallacy of the nigger with so tough an ass that he cannot feel any pain; ‘the white man bared his teeth and swung his foot into Shorty’s rump with all the strength of his body. Shorty let out a hailing laugh that echoed up and down the elevator shaft’ (p.218). Shorty’s laughter is not of joy; he is laughing at the white man’s ignorance and thus in the process ensuring survival. Similarly, Richard uses the white man’s stereotype to cheat the system and educate himself. We see this when he forges a note to the library asking for books by H.L Mencken. ‘Dear Madam, will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L Mencken’ (p.235) It is through Mencken that Richard realizes the power of words as weapons of self-liberation. Although Mencken was a subversive who was in many ways conservative, Richard manages to take out what he needed in his writings for personal ends.

In Black Boy, black people also respond to white violence by constructing fables and a discursive space that deals with white violence. Blacks circulate stories, true and false, on how other blacks valiantly challenged the white man’s authority. This discourse, like the story of Mrs Green who is said to have told her white mistress ‘if you slaps me, I will kill you and go to hell and pay for it’ (p.76) is a of means of mitigating fear for the oppressor and thus ensuring survival. This discourse imaginatively captures the violence that the African American wishes to unleash on the white world in revenge. In addition, the story of the African American woman who pretended to be humble and subservient to the white folks so as to revenge the death of her husband also celebrates African American resistance, thus in some measure boosting self-esteem. ‘The woman,
so went the story, knelt and prayed, then proceeded to unwrap the sheet; and, before the white men realized what was happening, she had taken the gun from the sheet and had slain four of them, shooting at them from her knees’ (p.71). What is explicitly articulated in these fables is that the violence of resistance emanates from and in opposition to the circumstances of oppression. It is from these fables that resistance is constructed to counter white oppression. Put differently and more succinctly, violence is dialectical in the Marxist sense. The violence of the oppressor begets the counter-violence of the oppressed.

Richard is different from Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son* in that he articulates and seeks to liberate himself through ‘controlling discourse, having some power over language and thus having the power to define the self’ (Anger, 2000:3)Reading or writing is neither innocent nor impartial. Reading is, for Richard, an attempt to escape the frustrations of his environment and discover an alternative life- it is a way of re-creating oneself. ‘I would go to my room and lock the door and revel in outlandish exploits of outlandish men in faraway, outlandish cities… and I was claimed by it. I loved it. Though they were merely stories I accepted them as true because I wanted to believe them, because I hungered for a different life, for something new’ (p.123). Reading is therefore an alternative to strife and violence. ‘In his act of creation, the creation of the novel itself, Wright reproduces hope, opening more discursive space for future acts of black male self-determination’ (Anger, 2000: 3). However, it is plausible that Richard’s reading and writing is a form of intellectual escapism, a clearly self-centred way of seeking emancipation.

Richard’s outsider consciousness or double vision is deepened as he begins to read and write. Seemingly, reading gives him an opportunity to explore other worlds, thus distancing him from the world of his people. In fact Richard’s attitude to the black community becomes more and more judgmental as he finds his way through the labyrinths of western civilization. Although he has imbibed western cultural tools, and ‘he now speaks like a book,’ Richard remains an outsider- torn between the world of his people and the world of western civilization. Ironically, he takes advantage of his
education to cheat his people. We see this when he takes a job as an insurance broker. ‘I saw a bare bleak pool of black life and I hated it; the people were alike, their homes were alike, and their farms were alike (p.131). When Richard visits the protestant church where most of his classmates fellowship, he also remains aloof. ‘I liked it and I did not like it, I longed to be among them, yet when with them I looked at them as if I were a million miles away. I had been kept out of their world too long ever to be able to become a real part of it’ (p.145). With this kind of attitude to his own people, it is questionable if his education will be a useful tool for liberating the people. Is colonial education capable of liberating the colonized? Frantz Fanon (2004) tells us that this kind of education produces elitist intellectuals who are mere appendages of their educators. Yet, Bill Ashcroft (2001) insists that the tools of domination, particularly the white man’s language, can be appropriated for purposes of liberating the colonized. Although Richard is illuminated and politically conscious, his holier-than-thou attitude compromises his intention to speak for the ‘voiceless black boys’ of the South.

It is explicit; however, throughout *Black Boy* that Richard Wright conceptualizes the interplay between crime, violence and apartheid from a sociological perspective. He maintains that the environment of the apartheid state is fertile ground for the proliferation of violence and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Richard, the protagonist and narrator tells us thus, ‘my reading in sociology had enabled me to discern many strange types of Negro characters, to identify many modes of Negro behaviour, and what moved me above all was the frequency of mental illness, that tragic toll that the urban environment exacted of the black peasant… My knowledge of how Negroes react to their plight makes me declare that no man can possibly be individually guilty of treason, that an insurgent act is but a man’s answer to those who twist his environment so that he cannot fully share the spirit of his native land’ (p.271). Implicit in this assertion is the naturalist perception of the individual fighting to circumvent difficult circumstances of life. While writers like Theodore Dreiser tended to end their narratives in despair, with the protagonist failing to overcome social laws, Richard Wright takes an existentialist inclination that gives a sense of agency to his protagonists.
Perhaps existentialism is attractive to Wright in that it empowers the individual in its claim that man makes himself. While in *Native Son* subjectivity is attained through murder, in *Black Boy*, Wright’s protagonist creates himself through writing his own story. The novel ends with the protagonist’s desire to ‘build a bridge of words between [him] and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal’ (p. 365). Thus in *Black Boy* Wright uses words or discourse to link the oppressed African American with the outside world- to make the world know the problems of the South. However, while this approach internationalizes the African American’s plight, it is also in a sense, the intellectual’s safety valve which enables him to talk about oppression in the comfort of western cities instead of participating in the struggle to bring it to an end. Incidentally, one is reminded of some critiques of Athol Fugard which question his credibility as a witness of the experiences of blacks. White and therefore, privileged, can he speak for the disempowered?

While this chapter has focused on *Black Boy*, a biographical text that encapsulates Wright’s racial pride and thus foregrounding a sense of subjectivity against the objectifying tendencies of the dominant discourse, the next chapter is preoccupied with *Native Son*, and immediately in that title, we are confronted with a transition, from a novel that deals with a state of dispossession and objectification (*Black Boy*) to that which claims the right to belonging and legal ownership. A black boy may be conscious of his race, he may be subversive or even rebellious yet he still remains a boy, but a native son is an heir with specific legal rights. The question addressed in the next chapter is how blacks find space to develop themselves in an exclusive and racist environment.
CHAPTER THREE

Apartheid fostered violence and existential liberation in *Native Son*

From the year it was published (1940), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* has remained a subject of controversy in critical circles especially in relation to the way Richard Wright addressed the question of racial violence in American society. Philip Goldstein (2008) notes that there are two established, though incompatible, readings of crime and violence in *Native Son*. Firstly, crime and violence can be viewed from the ‘naturalist protest’ perspective in which the protagonist’s quest for freedom is pitted against established social rules and restrictions. ‘The usual naturalist novel is written with detachment, as if by a scientist surveying a field of operations, it is a novel in which the writer withdraws from a detested world and coldly piles up the evidence for detesting it’ (Howe, 1963, http://www.writing.upenn.edu). This form of protest is recognizable in naturalist works like Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, which projects social forces so insurmountable that the individual’s search for freedom ends in regret and despair. However, *Native Son* is ‘a work of assault rather than withdrawal’ (Howe, 1963, http://www.writing.upenn.edu). To the traditional naturalism of his predecessors, Richard Wright adds modern existentialism which celebrates ideals of self-determinacy, self-creation and self-liberation. *Native Son* is therefore revolutionary in that sense; that Richard Wright is not withdrawn but passionately denounces the segregationist South in an attempt to mobilize sympathy for his protagonist. In this chapter I intend to evaluate crime and violence in *Native Son* from the naturalist-existentialist perspectives against the backdrop of the apartheid-segregationist South. The main theoretical input comes from strain theory and Fanon’s stereotype although cross references are made, where appropriate, to other relevant theories. The chapter argues that Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, is brought up in a society that predisposes him to various forms of strain (hence Merton’s strain theory) – socially, economically, psychologically – thus leaving him with no option but to embrace a subculture of violence. The highly impulsive character of Bigger Thomas is read in line with Frantz Fanon’s idea of
stereotype as a discourse that seeks to fix, negate and define the other in a way that makes him/her feel inadequate and inferior.

*Native Son* is the novel that, because of its world-wide publicity promoted Richard Wright to the enviable position of spokesman of the African American race, especially in the eyes of the young generation that believed in militant action of the Bigger Thomas type. The novel raised heated controversy among literary critics particularly because of the way Richard Wright painted the character Bigger Thomas. From Booker T. Washington through WEB Dubois, there has been a concerted effort by black intellectuals in African-American literature to portray a better picture of black people in an attempt to counter stereotypical representations pedalled by white America. Therefore, when *Native Son* came to the literary scene, it turned the tables on the Uncle Tom legacy of Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* which venerated passive resistance at the expense of the confrontational approach. Nevertheless, some critics like James Baldwin (1985) pointed out that *Native Son* was still trapped in the Beecher Stowe legacy in that it attempted to solicit the sympathy of the white man by exaggerating the condition of the African American. ‘Below the surface of this novel,’ argues Baldwin, ‘there lies as it seems to me a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend that it was written to destroy’ (1985:22). It was perhaps in the spirit of elevating the black race that Baldwin expressed his misgivings. For him, Richard Wright was symbolically dragging black people back to the violence that had always been part of African American society since slavery. In Bigger Thomas, Richard Wright had created a voiceless lonely victim, driven by circumstances of his racial categorization, with neither a friend nor a society, and thus destined for the guillotine.

Irving Howe (1963) notes that Baldwin’s rebellion against Richard Wright who had served him as a model was of course not an unprecedented event as literature is full of such painful raptures. Although Irving Howe, a socialist critic, acknowledges some of Baldwin’s criticism, he also notes serious inconsistencies in it. For example, in an essay entitled ‘Everybody’s protest novel’ Baldwin (1955) claims that ‘literature and sociology are not one and the same’ and yet in the same essay he goes on to argue that ‘one
writes out of one thing only- one’s own experience’ (p. 19) In the first assertion Baldwin intended to dismiss Wright’s version of the African American experience, yet in the second he acknowledges that literature is embedded in one’s personal experiences within the social milieu. Moreover, Baldwin, among other critics has also accused Wright of relying on violence and shock and dismisses the violence in Native Son as sensationalism rather than a true reflection of the social reality of the Deep South.

This critical school was perhaps stirred by Wright’s confession in ‘How Bigger was born’ that after Uncle Tom’s Children he had resolved to write a book ‘so hard and deep that (the reader) would have to face it without the consolation of tears’ (Wright, 1993:874). Irving Howe (1963) contends that violence in Native Son is not only evidence of Wright’s dependence on shock and violence; rather it is also a true reflection of the reality of the racial stalemate in the Deep South, as experienced by Bigger Thomas. It is however noteworthy that Irving Howe’s position was possibly influenced by his inclination to Trotskyist socialism and his Jewish background. It is plausible that as a member of an ostracized minority group who had been involved in demonstrations against American racial policy advocating a socialist system, Bigger’s revolutionary stance inspired him.

Native Son is thus from this perspective an indictment of the social malaise in the American South; a malaise that paralyzed black people and condemned them to a life of crime and violence. In his essay ‘How Bigger was born’ Wright (1991) states that Bigger Thomas, as a symbol of African American violence, is a choice inspired by the conditions of racial segregation in the black belt. It is a choice in the sense that not all black people facing the same circumstances of racial oppression became Bigger Thomases. Some became religious fanatics, some acquired the white man’s education and became professionals, yet others went for alcohol and drugs (Wright, 1991: 858). These taxonomies are not rigid though because most Africa Americans did none of these. Ralph Ellison, who was an ardent admirer of Richard Wright, later questioned this list of possible careers for black people. Wright’s implication in this list is that the Southern environment was unsupportive in itself yet Ellison argues that in this
seemingly bleak environment, African Americans managed to escape outright despair through music particularly the blues.

Although African Americans respond to racial hostility differently, James Baldwin intimates that there is no American Negro who does not have his own private Bigger Thomas in his skull (1985: 42). Perhaps, the difference between Bigger Thomas and the rest of the ‘Negro boys’ in the South is that he is isolated from the culture of his people and thus his tragedy is that he confronts the racial ‘Southern night’ as an individual. Elkholy (2007: 201) argues that Bigger’s predicament is that ‘he has no place he can call home. Completely estranged from black folk and religious culture, Bigger lacks ‘enrootedness [or] a community to which he may contribute and within which his life may be preserved in particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future’ (Elkholy, 2007: 201).

Like Albert Camus’ Meursault, Bigger Thomas is an alienated voice questioning and challenging the ‘falsehoods’ upon which American society is built. Yet without support from his fellow kinsmen, he becomes a monster both to white America and his own people. In that sense, ‘he has finally fit into the world that whites have carved out for him’ (Elkholy, 2007:208). Native Son is ‘in a certain American tradition, the story of an unremarkable youth in battle with the force of circumstance, that force of circumstance which plays and which has played so important a part in the national fables of success and failure. In this case, the force of circumstance is not poverty merely but colour, a circumstance which cannot be overcome, against which the protagonist battles for life and loses’ (Baldwin, 1985: 31).

The predicament of the African American race in the Deep South is aptly captured in the rat scene at the beginning of Native Son. Black people or to be more precise, the Thomas family is portrayed as facing a ‘vermin’ dilemma in a system which singles out white pigmentation for preferential treatment. Robert Washington (2001) argues that Bigger’s violence is a natural outcome of his living in this cold and uncaring social order where belonging to a racial class inevitably translates to poverty. The state of being
cornered, ‘the rat predicament’ is life threatening, hence it calls for immediate action if one is to save one’s life. The action taken in this situation is often impulsive and instinctive. Incidentally, this inevitable life-saving action is what white America often constructs as rape. ‘Rape was what one felt when one’s back was against the wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one’ (p.658). Bigger Thomas ‘felt’ rape particularly because in the Deep South, rape is an accusation that lynch mobs use to justify lynching. Any kind of offence committed by blacks is categorized as rape. In his book entitled Soul on Ice (1968), Eldridge Cleaver asserts that merely admiring a white woman could as well be characterized as rape culminating in a death penalty. Of course, Eldridge Cleaver himself committed rape though he was not sentenced to death.

In Native Son Richard Wright’s intention is to project Bigger Thomas as a typical victim of a ruthless racist society, who inevitably rebels. This is where James Baldwin disagrees with Wright, arguing that Bigger does not represent the ideal African American because ‘Negroes do not want to rebel,’ (1985:24) so according to Baldwin prophesying a rebellion is unfair exploitation of social reality. However, it is unfair also for Baldwin to dismiss Wright’s experience as if he alone has a final say on what constitutes the African American experience.

The rat scene at the beginning of the novel portrays violence as a survival strategy. In the same way that the rat fights and clings onto Bigger’s trousers, Bigger will also murder Mary Dalton, his master’s daughter and Bessie, his girlfriend, only to hide in old houses and run across rooftops like a rat in an attempt to escape the wrath of the lynch mob. Bigger releases pent up anger and frustration as he brutally kills the rat. Apparently, he is expressing his own discontent with the depraved state of his life. Firstly, his family house is small, overcrowded and rat infested. The room provides no space even for individuals to enjoy petty freedoms like changing clothes in privacy. The apartment is characterized as ‘a tiny one room apartment’ (p.541) galvanized with violent action as family members help each other to kill the rat. ‘There were two iron beds, four chairs on an old dresser and a drop leaf table on which they ate…Here all
slept in one room’ (p.541). Richard Wright has told us in ‘How Bigger was born’ that Bigger Thomas’ restlessness is guided by his continuous search for a whole life. The squalid condition of the tenement does not offer him a whole life. We see him and his brother literally turning their backs and closing their eyes so as to enable their mother and sister, Vera, to remove their night wear and put on new clothes.

This scene explicitly presents the subhuman conditions that some blacks experience as life on a daily basis in the black belt. In projecting Bigger as a restless character, Wright shows us that Bigger is not just a subhuman brute, but also a human being with self-pride and ambition like any other person. In a conversation recorded by Michel Fabre and Kinnamon (1985: 26), Richard Wright argues that in Bigger Thomas he was trying to show ‘a type of Negro, but even more than that, a human being reacting under pressure, reacting the only way he could because of his environment’ The implication being that Bigger is hopelessly at the mercy of an insensitive society.

The relationship between Bigger and his family members is ever tense and on the verge of exploding into open violence. Most of their actions are indirect reactions to the broader system of racial separation that relegates them to a squalid lifestyle. Bigger’s mother accuses him of being lazy and incapable of settling down to a job in order to earn a living. These are the socially constructed parameters that Bigger Thomas wishes to challenge. In Bigger’s view, African Americans have only two sad choices in the South, either one takes up a job and works for a paltry wages, or one remains idle and becomes a victim of hunger and starvation. This crisis may not necessarily be isolated to blacks but the very presence of the colour bar, which the white man enforces, narrows Bigger’s worldview. He believes that he is manacled by his racial categorization. In that sense, Baldwin has a point when he argues that Bigger’s tragedy is that ‘he has accepted the theology that denies him life, he admits the possibility of his being subhuman’ (1985:22). However, it is also rather parochial to dismiss Bigger simply as someone who has imbibed an inferiority complex. Bigger is a type of revolutionary, albeit an incomplete one. His sensibility is, in some measure, comparable to that of Albert Camus’ existentialist hero in The Stranger, who refuses to conform to
society’s ‘lies,’ opting rather to die for the ‘truth’ Although Bigger is, in a substantial way, a creation of white America; he cannot be compared to Lucifer, (the devil) as Baldwin puts it, which ‘prefers to rule in hell than serve in heaven’ (p. 44). For one thing, Bigger never moves beyond rebellion to ruler-ship. Perhaps only his attitude at the end of the story can be compared to that of Lucifer because he refuses to repent. However one can also say he has no choice because either way he will still face the guillotine. Although Bigger may have allowed his environment to make a monster out of him, surely America is not heaven; not unless one accepts American propaganda which often compares America with a “city on a hill”, the archetype of the Puritan heaven of Pilgrim’s Progress. Bigger’s desires are ‘bigger’ than those that white America has prescribed for his race. As Elkholy (2007:201) puts it, ‘Bigger knew nothing but frustration his entire life. He was frustrated by being poor. He was frustrated by feeling inferior because he was black. He was frustrated by his thwarted desires and even more by being robbed of having any desires of his own’

The fact that Vera faints when Bigger waves the dead rat into her face may imply a psychological breakdown in the face of a dehumanizing environment. Even conformists like Vera and her mother are not spared the trauma. Typical of Merton’s ritualists, Mrs Thomas and Vera do not overstep their racial limits; yet they still struggle like every other African American. Bessie works honestly without rest, yet she is so frustrated she seeks happiness in beer and sex. Bigger is different from the rest of the family members in that he is not satisfied with the condition of his life. It frustrates him to realize that he cannot do anything to alleviate the abject poverty in his family. Thus far from merely affirming stereotype as Baldwin puts it, Wright portrays Bigger first and foremost as a human being, not only a monster; and secondly as a rational person, like Albert Camus’ Meursault, whose aspirations and desires (flying the plane for instance), though thwarted and suppressed by the society, are only human.

His mother has resigned herself to the limited survival space carved out for her by the white world. She has accepted her position as a poor black woman, surviving on handouts from relief. Religion is her only source of hope and all she needs is to raise her
children on those principles that will not jeopardize their safety in a society that has denied her a living space. On the other hand, Bigger is restless and anxious. His wishes, imaginations and desires are not only external for they seem to be fused together with the African American’s socially and historically determined emotions of fear and hatred. African Americans ‘bear the fear instilled in them by over four hundred years of slavery’ (Cleaver, 1968: 159). This observation reminds us of postcolonial theory which deals with the aftermath of years of colonialism in formerly colonized countries. Although it is a historical fact that slavery, like colonialism, instilled fear in the colonized, it is rather unconvincing to explain inferiority complexes among African Americans in terms of their past as if they were the only people that were ever enslaved the world over. Bigger’s problem as Elkholy (2007: 202) puts it, is that he has ‘internalized the other’s gaze,’ or what W.E.B Dubois calls double consciousness- ‘this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on (you) in amused contempt and pity…seeing himself through the eyes of hating whites, Bigger felt it was only a matter of time before he would be rooted out’

In *Native Son*, unlike in *Black Boy*, Richard Wright slightly goes beyond the confines of social determinism because Bigger does not remain a silent victim of circumstances. Instead, he reaches a point of subjectivity and self-determination (Hakutani, 2006: 2), a moment of decolonization which reminds us of nationalistic uprisings. For all the stereotypes that Bigger has internalized as some critics have argued, he is not only an epitome of brainless emotions. Faced with ‘the fact of blackness’ in the South and the racial theology of stigma and stereotype therein, Bigger does not merely succumb or remain a passive victim.

His frustration and quest for subjectivity is expressed through the way he violently kills the rat. ‘Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat’s head, crushing it, cursing hysterically’ (p.450). Killing the rat is for him a ritualistic process of self-exorcism; an expression of the vengeance, ‘the simple, naked and unanswerable hatred’ within him, that Baldwin (1985: 38) talks about. It is as if he has found an outlet for the violence couched in his
veins. Home does not provide the care and love that is associated with family life; instead it is a ground seething with endless quarrels and misunderstandings. The mother is always complaining about Bigger’s movements. Vera shouts and frets at Bigger whom she accuses of peeping under her dress as she undresses. Bigger and Buddy are also strangers who sleep on the same bed because even though they are brothers they rarely speak to each other or share secrets.

It is apparent that home is oppressive for Bigger, so we only see him indoors when he is either in bed or hurriedly having breakfast before he goes out into the streets. What makes the blacks’ experience unique is not necessarily the magnitude of their suffering but the existence, within this society, of a racist discourse akin to orientalism, a discourse that prescribes a place of poverty for African Americans and a place of wealth for white Americans. As long as the colour line and/or racism are in place, black people will keep blaming all their problems on the white man and not on themselves. For example, Bigger does not want to acknowledge that he is lazy and there is also no way of proving his laziness. He lives in a limited world and so does the rest of his people. Hence, in the same way that some formerly colonized countries blame colonial masters for underdevelopment, Bigger also blames the white man for all his problems. Bigger could be right in doing so as formerly colonized countries could be right also in blaming their colonial masters, but surely there must be a point at which one is responsible for one’s actions.

Ralph Ellison (1995) has criticized Wright on the basis of Bigger’s alienation from his family and the African American society at large. Bigger is so alienated that when Jan and Mary talk to him about his oppression and the liberation of his people, he is confused. ‘He does not know what they mean by his ‘people’ He has never felt a connection with any blacks outside of sharing in the feeling of shame over having black skin’ (Elkholy, 2007:204). For Ellison, Wright is affirming the stereotype that African Americans do not have a culture to sustain themselves. ‘It is this climate,’ argues Baldwin (1985: 36) ‘common to most protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in the negro life, there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or
intercourse, such as may for example, sustain a Jew even after he has left his father’s house’

Perhaps Wright’s point is, arguably, that Bigger is a type of Negro who refuses to be confined to his proper place or to grin and sing the blues as white America expects him to do. The rich African American culture that Ellison and Baldwin talk about is indirectly constructed by white America. It is true that blacks have a rich folk culture as reflected in their music, for example the spirituals and the blues. However, Wright’s *Native Son* overlooks this culture, perhaps because he considers the race question as the most immediate challenge American society is facing. Myrdal (in Hakutani, 2006: 4) argues that the concept of blackness in American culture is born out of white oppression; it is shaped by the circumstances of being black in America. Arguably Wright’s point is that African American culture is not anything to use as a counter discourse because it is a dose/prescription that white America expects African Americans to take. Singing Negroes are happy Negroes, so goes the stereotype. Richard Wright refuses to consider the idea of cultural survival arguing that one way or the other; the African American was thwarted and broken by the violence of white culture. This is what Richard in *Black Boy* calls ‘the essential bleakness of black life.’ Nevertheless this is an extremely radical idea which overlooks the transformative potential of culture. Bill Ashcroft’s theory of cultural transformation insists that,

> Just in the same way that colonial discourse constructed the Negro, the Negro takes up the same strategies of representation to represent himself- to produce a counter discourse, not of a pure Negro identity, but one that captures the Negro’s ability to embrace the colonizer’s values and use them for his own purposes (Ashcroft, 2001: 5).

Quoting Ralph Ellison, Ashcroft goes on to argue that ‘negroes have taken …cultural styles, whatever they could of European music, making it that which would, when blended with the cultural tendencies inherited from Africa, express their own sense of life’ (2001: 24)
Whether he has internalized a stereotypical theology or not, the burning hatred and fear within Bigger can only end in one way and Bigger himself is aware of it, either he will kill someone or he will get killed (or both). This is the narrow destiny that Bigger conceptualizes, ‘a place carved out for him by whites who viewed him as nothing but a lowly and dangerous creature’ (Elkholy, 2007: 201). As Wright puts it in ‘How bigger was born’ the destiny of any Bigger Thomas is predictable—it is definitely violent. At least Bigger has two options, either to disobey and face imminent starvation or to conform and take up a disgracing job among the white folks and earn a living. Neither is attractive but his mother advises him to take the latter. ‘You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs’ (p.455). The question that arises is whether the job at the Daltons will be able to stop them from living like pigs. ‘If you don’t take that job,’ she says, ‘the relief people will cut us off. We won’t have any food’ (p.455). Bigger’s problem is not that he cannot take up a job and work, his problem is that he cannot be allowed to do anything out of personal choice. ‘They don’t even let you feel what you want to feel…they kill you before you die’ (p.252). He does not want to live a predetermined life. The fact that his life is designed for disappointment paralyses him so much that in the end one feels as if Bigger is taking an easy way out instead of acknowledging his weaknesses. The refrain, ‘but what could I do’ (p. 252) is a kind of wall that he has erected in order to console himself, yet ironically that very wall could be distracting him from seeing opportunities if there are any.

It seems as if both the society and the family collude to crush his individual will. ‘He was sick of his mother. Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering’ (p.456). The scenario is typical. The violence of the apartheid world is transferred to the domestic space. Bigger’s mother offloads her frustration onto Bigger through the shouts and bickering. While shouting at Bigger all the time shows that she has accepted her situation, Bigger’s escape into the streets is a survival strategy. His escapism is, however predictably short-lived. His predicament is similar to that of the rat he brutally murders in the tenement, cornered and desperately hanging on to his trousers. ‘Yes he could take the job at the Daltons and be miserable or he could refuse it and starve’ (p.
Although taking the job guarantees food on the table, Bigger must accept less than he is worth; the way Richard in *Black Boy* is given ninety seven cents for a dog whose worth is a dollar.

Bigger’s immediate enemy is fear. Using Heidegger’s theory of friendship, Elkholy (2007:202) argues that ‘fearing and what is feared are inseparable, for it is fear that brings about that which is threatening, and not the other way round’ Bigger negotiates his world out of fear hence everything associated with the white world is a threat to him. That’s why when his lawyer, Max asks him what he fears he says ‘everything’ (p. 489). Most of the time he reacts instead of acting- his life is therefore substantially master minded by the circumstances around him. ‘He needed more money, if he did not get more than he had now he would not know what to do with himself for the rest of the day’ (p. 457). It is this desperation (the predicament of the rat), that pushes him to conceive the idea of robbing Blum’s shop. At this point, James Baldwin insists that Bigger’s predicament is self-inflicted because there are many African Americans living Jim Crow without having to resort to crime. For instance, in one of his most controversial statements in ‘Everybody’s protest novel’ Baldwin argues that ‘our humanity is our burden, our life we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult… that is accept’ (1985:24). Bigger is consumed by self-hate, or what Cleaver (1968) calls a death wish. Having failed to accept ‘his humanity,’ he acts impulsively out of fear, destroying himself and everything around him in the process. Perhaps Baldwin assumes that Bigger has a humanity of his own, which is problematic because, for Bigger, accepting his humanity means accepting what they say he is.

However, one way of conceptualizing Wright’s argument in *Native Son* is that the circumstances of life are so overwhelming that they do not even allow Bigger Thomas not to battle for his life. ‘The only way a man with a black skin can liberate himself is through struggle’ (Wright in Howe, 1963). One can argue with Baldwin that Bigger’s struggle is doomed because he has accepted what white people call a Negro. ‘You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white man calls a nigger’ (*The fire next time*, 1963: 13). Bigger looks at the world around him with envious eyes,
like Fanon’s colonized man. Wright (1993) tells us that one of the things that frustrate Bigger Thomas is the fact that he has been dispossessed and disinherited amid the greatest possible plenty on earth (‘How Bigger was born,’ p.866). Bigger and his colleagues sharpen their craving for material possessions by coveting what they perceive as the flamboyancy of life in the white world. They watch a plane writing in the sky and movies of white people enjoying themselves on the beach. The flying plane reminds Bigger of the colour line that denies him the opportunity to pursue life skills that can free him from want.

The act of flying itself is an act of exercising freedom and it is this freedom that Bigger longs for. ‘They get a chance to do everything…I could fly one of them things if I had a chance’ (p. 532). Bigger feels isolated and excluded and this feeling stirs up hatred for the whole white race. The only safe option for Bigger in this situation is to ‘get drunk and sleep it off’ as Gus advises him to do, yet at this point, Bigger cannot even afford to get drunk because he is broke. The implication is that all the nonviolent avenues are closed and Bigger is left with one option – crime and violence. As indicated before, Ralph Ellison particularly questioned Wright’s despair or what he calls ‘the essential bleakness of black life’ in Black Boy. What becomes apparent through these conflicting views is that the African American experience is not a single monolithic mass but a multifaceted one and one’s point of view cannot be universalized since it is based on one’s background and experiences. ‘Wright’s youth in the plantation South of Mississippi contrasted sharply with Ellison’s urban boyhood in Oklahoma, which was never officially a slave state and thus afforded greater flexibility in negotiating the limits of racial caste’ (Jackson, 2000: 350). Although this distinction is possibly exaggerated, it goes a long way in showing that it is not possible to have a single image of the African American.

Given Bigger’s complaints in Native Son, it is plausible that Richard Wright is blaming the compartmentalization of society for awakening feelings of racial hatred among African Americans in general and Bigger in particular. ‘If you wasn’t black and you had some money and if they would let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane’ (p.532). Fanon (2004) has rightly stated that in a colonial society the infrastructure is
also the superstructure to imply that social relations determine economic relations. Bigger’s present material conditions determine his future. In other words, there are some things that he cannot do no matter how hard he tries. The way society is organized predetermines the future of blacks. It is the ‘if-mentality’ nursed and developed by Bigger and his colleagues as they watch the opulence of white life which tempts them to commit crime.

The play-acting scene in which Bigger and Gus assume the roles of white folks imply a psychological wish to be white or at least to own property and enjoy the privileges that are hitherto a preserve of the white race. This is what Bill Ashcroft (1998:207) means when he argues that the human body is constructed by the environment in which it exists, just as much as that body creates the world around it. In this case, Bigger and Gus have internalized a white world view. Their idea of pleasure is limited to basking at the beach as whites do. When they realize that they are doomed even before they try something, they give up and wax into a life of despair. Mr Blum might be armed and he might shoot them but this thought is shoved to the back of their minds because the primary thing is not the possibility of death but the opportunity to make some money and earn a living. The implication is that ‘living’ has been translated to this opportunistic theft.

Bigger and his colleagues remind us of Tsotsi and his gang in Athol Fugard’s novel. They are jobless, idle and thus restless. It is this situation that renders them potentially criminal. Bigger’s remark that ‘they don’t let us do nothing,’ (p. 463) comes as a concrete resolve (an impulsive one), to smash the system which has created such injustices. It is a resolve to dismantle, by any means necessary, the limited world framed out for him by the white world. Bigger is different from his friends and the rest of his family members because he can’t bow down to oppression. He feels something rising within him each time he comes into contact with prejudices based on skin colour. ‘I just can’t get used to it’ (p. 463) he says to his cronies.
Some critics have noted a disjunction between Bigger’s level of education (Grade 8) and the kind of questions that he asks in relation to the injustices of Jim Crow. As a result, they accuse Richard Wright of speaking his mind using an undeveloped mouth piece. This claim is indeed plausible as much as it takes cognizance of the difficulty involved in separating the writer from his creation. Since most of Wright’s fiction, for example *Black Boy*, *Native Son* and *The Outsider*, seem to echo factual experiences in Wright’s life, readers are always tempted to confuse Wright’s views with those of his characters. In the same way that *The Outsider* has been criticized for imposing existentialism on Cross, Bigger is regarded as uneducated and therefore unfit to articulate existential tenets. Yet, Bigger’s existentialism is possibly born out of his experience of racial segregation in the South. Wright himself became an existentialist before he met either Sartre or Camus. His experience of the race problem in the South spurred him to search for alternative ways of liberating himself and his characters.

*Native Son* is a politically engaged narrative which refuses to be confined to the old school, the Booker T Washington School to be precise, that presents blacks and whites as fingers of the same palm. According to Irving Howe, ‘the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book may later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies’ (1963, [http://www.writing.upenn.edu](http://www.writing.upenn.edu)). Firstly, Wright makes it clear that the Negro has moved away from the Uncle Tom sensibility of ‘a bow and a hat in hand’ Bigger Thomas is a native son, meaning that he is American and the circumstances that shape him are also American. Richard Wright also portrays Bigger Thomas as a reflection of the violence of the system that created him. The violence that seems to exude from every part of his body is the violence of the white man, the Hitler in every white man as Aime Cesaire puts it in his *Discourse on colonialism* (1972).

For Bigger, the white man does not live over there across the colour line, ‘he lives right down here in (his) stomach’ (p. 464). This tells us that the violence of the white man is a continuous presence in his psyche, a presence akin to Fanon’s nervous colonial experience that leads to psychopathological disorders. The hunger that grips his belly is
metaphorically the hand of the white man. Since the white world seems to be responsible for his condition, anything white is an enemy; even the big white cat and blind Mrs Dalton seem to conspire against him. The passionate hatred that Bigger feels is the force that plunges him into violence. Bigger's obsession with violence is not peculiar to him alone; the difference is that he fails to contain the tension, so he finally relinquishes the strain and acts. Baldwin (1985:38) tells us that 'there is no negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, the simple and naked unanswerable hatred, who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate out of motives of the cruelest of vengeance their women, to break the bodies of all white people…' This is the feeling that inspired most liberation movements in the Third World as explicitly portrayed in Pepetela's *Mayombe* (1980).

The fact that Bigger Thomas is a native son confirms that he is American by birth-right and being a son, he has a legal right to live in America, yet he lives in a rat infested tenement. The crime and violence that rocks this society is orchestrated by a system that seeks to exclude on the basis of race. 'We black and they white. They got things and we aint… half of the time I feel like I am on the outside of the world peeping through a knothole in the fence…it's just like living in jail' (p.463). Frantz Fanon conceptualizes racism as an ideology that thrives on stigmatization (Look, a Negro!) and exclusion (they and us); for not only must the black man be black, he must be black in relation to the white man (Fanon, 1967:110). According to this school, Bigger is worthy of our sympathy because he is a victim of society. Yet a closer look into Bigger's predicament reveals that he is also extremely paranoiac. His world is either black or white just as it has been *constructed* by his masters, and it is this paranoia that fixes him. Bigger's character encapsulates the complexities of postcoloniality. The postcolonial character is caught up in the shiftiness implied in the prefix 'post' and the backward-looking transition of 'post'-colonial. He attempts to dissociate from a system that is part of him, his history. This, in my view, is the source of Bigger's monstrosity and his eventual self-destruction- that he fights against the white man inside of him (right in his stomach).
The fact that blacks are portrayed as standing outside, and peeping through a knothole implies an anxious (rather voyeuristic) disposition that culminates in crime (rape). Peeping through a knothole carries connotations of exclusion and the curiosity that goes with it. It keeps Bigger on tenterhooks; the way Lewis Nkosi’s Ndi Sibiya in *Mating Birds* peeps through a crevice to see his mother wailing under Big Joe’s body and through the window to savour Veronica Slatter’s smooth white skin. Apparently, Richard Wright presents Bigger’s predicament as symptomatic of the identity problem facing the American Negro. The crisis of the African American as perceived by Richard Wright is that he belongs nowhere—neither to America, his country of birth, Europe, ‘the citadel of civilization,’ nor Africa, his historical motherland. Bigger is therefore an outsider in this sense. When Gus says, ‘you black and they make the laws’ (p.463) it is as if being black is a mistake in this society since it comes along with a host of disadvantages. In *12 Million Black Voices* (1947) Wright speaks of himself as a rootless man because when he met African and European intellectuals in France, he discovered that he belonged neither to Europe nor to Africa. Similarly, Bigger perceives himself as an outsider in American society and like Richard Wright; he fails to identify with the African toms which are part of his history.

Although crime and violence is the African American’s response to the violence of apartheid, most of the African American’s anger is directed at fellow blacks. We are told that Bigger and his colleagues engaged in petty criminal activities like snatching things from shops, newsstands and vendors in the ‘Black belt’ Bigger’s gang is afraid of robbing Mr Blum’s shop, because Mr Blum is a white man, fully protected by Jim Crow laws.

In ‘How Bigger was born,’ Wright notes that Bigger Thomas cannot be revolutionary in a progressive sense because of his lack of an inner organization. His very action is predicated by his obsessive fear of the white world (MacDonald, 1992:326). Although Richard Wright makes an effort to explain away Bigger’s obsession with violence, it is clear that this obsession is his major weakness. His intense, almost religious fear and
hatred for the white man is translated into the maniacal descent on Gus. The attack on Gus is a psychological transfer of his own fear for the white man. Bigger seems to be offloading his personal weaknesses, particularly his fear of fear, to his colleague.

His plan to rob Blum's shop is seemingly disrupted by Gus who comes late. Thus in beating Gus, Bigger is figuratively performing the act of robbing Blum's shop. It relieves him of the fear and builds his self-confidence. The beating makes him appear courageous and strong (like a man!) hence it can also be seen as an affirmation of manhood. However, the incident diminishes Bigger's image as a victim of circumstances. We also see a similar psychological disposition through Tsotsi (in Fugard's novel of the same title) who nearly kills his compatriot in order to protect his position as leader of the gang. Athol Fugard may not have been directly influenced by Richard Wright but both were influenced by French existentialism, particularly Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. Bigger, like Tsotsi, engages in violence to consolidate his self-proclaimed leadership of the group and thus satisfy the deep seated appetite for a sense of agency within him. 'The hysterical tensity of his nerves urged him to speak, to free himself. He faced Gus, his eyes red with anger and fear, his fists clenched and held stiffly to his sides' (p.468). Bigger uses vulgar language to insult Gus; he calls him 'sonofabitch' and bastard' (p.468). This is ironic because Bigger uses terms that are normally used by white oppressors to refer to black people.

Bigger's stomach burned and a heavy black cloud hovered a moment before his eyes and left. Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind, dry and fast, vanishing. He could stab Gus with his knife... (p. 468).

The hunger in his stomach is transferred to his mind and immediately he contemplates stabbing his friend. The implication is that this kind of violence has its roots in social conditions that make Bigger hungry and ill-tempered. Bigger's knife, which he carries on him everywhere he goes, is a weapon of defence against other marauding black criminals like Gus. This culture of carrying knives, which is also common in apartheid South Africa (as portrayed in Can Themba's Sophiatown stories); springs from a sense
of insecurity and fear of the unknown especially in a world where one has no legal protection. The law serves the interests of the white world and as Ellison puts it ‘the law was to be obeyed in everyday affairs, but in instances of extreme pressure, it was to be defied, even at the cost of one’s life’ (Schneck, 2008: 3). Although Wright tries to construct Bigger and his gang as victims, there is an element of delinquency in their behaviour. Like Tsotsi and his gang in Athol Fugard’s novel, they need money to drink and smoke, hence the planned robbery.

In the black communities, the individual has to find ways of defending himself. Athol Fugard’s Tsotsi faces the same dilemma at a tender age, there is always this mentality that the world is a hostile place and one must be constantly on guard. ‘Bigger whirled and kicked him hard. Gus flopped on his face with a single movement of his body… Bigger laughed, softly at first then harder, louder, hysterically feeling something like hot water babbling inside of him and trying to come out’ (p.470). Bigger’s laughter signifies contentment; the act of violence has boosted his ‘manhood’ He gains a sense of worthiness by subjecting the other to the very shame and disgrace to which the white man has subjected him. The ‘something like hot water babbling inside of him’ is perhaps a reference to his unfulfilled wishes and dreams which find expression through violence.

The character of Bigger has raised eyebrows in critical circles because of Wright’s emphasis on Bigger’s emotions, a fact that makes him appear like an impulsive brute without reason. His impulsiveness is often perceived as a trait that renders him incomplete. The hysteria that is a part of Bigger emanates from an internalized nervous condition of being black in a white world. The major limitation is that Bigger is fighting against historical forces that created him and apparently he fails to overcome, though at a metaphysical level Bigger creates himself through murder. ‘What I killed for, I am’ Bigger says to Marx, his lawyer.

Some critics (Baldwin for example) have put it as if Bigger has been portrayed as a completely silent ape yet Bigger thinks and makes decisions, though he does so within the limited circumstances of an unusually underprivileged black. Although we cannot totally absolve Bigger of all that happens in his life, he is, except for his wish for
resistance; an inadvertently created monster. Bigger is not a problem to the powers that be until he kills Mary Dalton. No one can forgive him for killing that innocent girl, yet it is sad to note that beneath brutal Bigger, lies a good nigger, timid and grinning. Bigger’s situation is sad because he cannot explain to anyone that he did not intend to kill Mary Dalton. He is a murderer because he killed. For all good reasons, Bigger would not have made a choice to kill a white man/woman and when he kills one, it is a mistake which he regrets. Perhaps Bigger can be forgiven after all. Or can he? He cannot be forgiven because we know that he is a murderer even before he killed. The authorities cannot forgive him, his own people cannot identify with him; the reader can hardly go through the ghastly experience around Mary’s death. Is it because his victim is white? Is it because of Bigger’s callous confessions? Or, is it because Wright manipulates public sentiment in order to present white America as cruel and unjust? I want to argue that as a character Bigger Thomas exhibits so many weaknesses that by the time he kills Mary Dalton, no one is on his side. While the white community cannot forgive him for Mary’s death, blacks also see him as a menace, especially when he goes on to kill Bessie. The latter’s death, brutal as Mary’s, undermines any role he might have as an ur-revolutionary

The point is that Bigger is implicated in his demise. He makes decisions, like killing Bessie that undermines his credibility and robs him of the reader’s sympathy. His feelings, which are a residue of all his aborted plans and aspirations, also constitute the sum total of his personality. For example, Bigger and the boys make a plan to rob Mr Blum’s shop and there is no doubt that this plan is designed with some degree of informed calculation. However, it turns out to be a flop because they are all overwhelmed by fear- the fear which has been instilled in them by Jim Crow law and practice. The failed plan translates into an impulsive Bigger and the consequent assault on Gus. ‘The muscles of his body gave a tightening lunge and he saw his fist come down on the side of Gus’ head; he had struck him really before he was conscious of doing so’ (p. 480).
Bigger acts as if there is an outside force that controls the very movements of his body, as if there is a demon inside him, a monster akin to what the white man calls 'nigger'. Although this may be an incarnation of the socially constructed Negro inside him, this may also be a failure by Bigger Thomas to moderate his character. The fight between Bigger and Gus is reminiscent of the great battle royal in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Some whites, for example, those sitting on the terraces and shouting obscenities in Ellison’s novel, enjoy to see blacks fighting amongst themselves because it keeps them (blacks) busy with trivial issues while they (whites) concentrate on fundamentals without being disturbed. Similarly in *Black Boy* white folks go to the extent of sponsoring the fight between Richard and the Harrison boy. The white masters purchase knives for the two boys to cut each other. The two take up the fight out of desperation because they need money to survive. The implication is that the white world is directly responsible for the violence in black communities.

The knife is usually associated with physical brutality while the gun is a modern sophisticated weapon of self-defence. Bigger uses the former to threaten and intimidate Gus, ‘he was on top of him, with the knife open and ready’ (p. 480). The knife carries the image of a callous, bloody attack. Bigger uses his bare hands in attacking Gus to suggest the colonized’s ‘head in the sand’ attitude as Fanon (2004: 17) puts it. The murder of Mary Dalton also appears barbaric because of the manner in which Bigger cuts her head off with a hatchet. The way Bigger treats Gus in this fight shows that this is more than just an assault. It is an inner search for status that society has denied him. While the white man asserts his humanity by perpetually treating the black man as subhuman, Bigger believes he has gained self-esteem by unleashing violence on Gus. ‘Gus’ lips moved to the knife, he stuck out his tongue and touched the blade’ (p. 481).

Bigger regains his manhood by beating and subjecting his friend to the same fear and shame that white America has subjected him to. He tramples on Gus’ humanity in order to elevate his own. The way Bigger cuts the green cloth on the table ‘with long sweeping strokes of his arm’ (p. 481) implies that he derives a sense of pride in defying authority. Adam Ashforth (2005:21) argues that in apartheid South Africa for example, robbing
whites was considered to be a form of forcible redistribution of wealth that was more like a job than an opprobrious crime. Peter Schneck (2008:3) maintains that for African Americans ‘the law is less of what it says and more of what it does. Sometimes it is necessary for the law to be broken’

After this incident, Bigger graduates to a higher level of selfhood. He has challenged his friend and won. This, for him, is the first action that defines him or at least shows what he desires for himself. It assures him that he is still in control of his destiny. This is a landmark incident because it bolsters a sense of subjectivity in him. All along he has been made to feel insignificant, completely emasculated by the system of racial discrimination. The beating is thus a rite of passage for Bigger. It fosters in him a sense of self-determination. ‘Bigger walked slowly past Doc; looking at him, not hurrying, and holding the open knife in his hand’ (p.482). Walking slowly is a sign of defiance and looking at him suggests confidence in what he is doing. The knife in his hand is the weapon for self-liberation. Bigger has thus matriculated not only to the level of his friends but to that of Doc too. ‘At least the fight made him the equal of them. And he felt the equal of Doc too’ (p.483). Although victimizing fellow blacks is problematic as a means to self-affirmation, it gives Bigger the confidence that he needs to tackle bigger challenges.

When he goes to see the Daltons for the job, Bigger carries with him the knife and the gun. ‘He was going among white people, so he would take his gun and his knife, it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness’ (484). The reason for taking the gun is firstly because he is going among white people and secondly because he has a complex of inferiority that he wants to cushion with these weapons. Here, there is also an implication that Bigger knows white people as potentially violent so he has to be on guard. Bigger needs something to galvanize his sense of completeness because he is a product of the history that has always treated him as subhuman. The knife and the gun constitute the other half of Bigger Thomas to make him complete. The point is that with a gun Bigger is capable of killing a white man
just as the latter can accuse him of a crime (say rape) and lynch him. So, theoretically they are now operating on the same plane

Bigger’s journey from the South side to the Daltons interrogates the material divide between the races. The white neighbourhood is ‘quiet and spacious’ (p.485) and ‘the houses he passed were huge, lights glowed softly in windows… this was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded’ (p.486). The racial divide displays the riches of white folks as opposed to the squalor of black people in the South. The physical presence of this material discrepancy between blacks and whites makes some black people blame the white man for all the problems in their lives. When Bigger Thomas sees this outstanding opulence he is reminded of the poverty in his family. It does not occur to him that these people could have worked very hard to attain the wealth that he envies. Apparently, it is also difficult in such a system to absolve the white man, whether he is directly complicit or otherwise, because he is benefiting from the system. The call by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu for South African whites to pay ‘wealth tax’ for example echoes the fact that whites, whether by design or by default, benefited from apartheid and as such they ought to take responsibility.

When Bigger arrives at the Daltons, the question that confronts him first and foremost is whether to enter through the front or the back door. The laws of racial separation specify the place of the African American even in such trivial matters. ‘Would they expect him to come through the front way or back…suppose a policeman saw him wandering in a white suburb like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody’ (p.486). Bigger does not have to commit crime to become a criminal. It only takes a policeman seeing him loitering in a white suburb after dark. The question that Bigger asks himself shows that he is aware of the limited world that has been marked out for him by apartheid. Apartheid laws do not allow blacks to use the front entrance, theirs is the back door. According to Eldridge Cleaver (1968), the real source of violence in America is the racial falsehoods that the white society has constructed. Firstly, the African American is conceived as the ‘super masculine menial’ and owing to this perceived excessive sexual energy; he is labelled a potential rapist. Cleaver
(1968:159) goes on to argue that most African Americans, including himself, become rapists because they want to taste the white woman, who according to white America is the symbol of beauty.

Among the Daltons, Bigger makes sure not to overstep his limits. He knows what it means to be a ‘nigger’ among the white folk thus he tailors himself in that image. He enacts the role of the timid Negro, dump and obsequious. Yet it is apparent that the artificial role of a timid boy that he assumes cannot last mainly because it is too superficial. Secondly, Bigger’s fear of the white man is beyond control. It is because of this fear that he fails to play the role of the perfect nigger. Fear makes him hyper conscious of his surroundings, thus he ends up behaving more like a machine than a human being. Bigger views the Dalton family through the lenses of white America’s racial propaganda. His first encounter with Mrs Dalton dramatizes the distrust that exists between the two racial groups. ‘He saw a white face. It was a woman’ (p.486). The ‘white face’ is a symbol of authority. She speaks like a master and in response Bigger answers like a servant “yessum’ Bigger is already a servant before he is offered a job. In all her blind innocence, Mrs Dalton goes on to ask, ‘Are you the Thomas boy?’ and once again Bigger confirms in the language of a servant, ‘yessum’ The irony is that Bigger is twenty and Mrs Dalton calls him a boy. This reminds us of Fugard’s play, Master Harold and the boys, in which young Harold is ‘master’ while the servants, who are far older than him, are ‘boys.’

Bigger’s challenge amongst the Daltons is that he must not appear to be an intelligent ‘nigger’ because white people do not like ‘sassy niggers’ He must be a ‘good nigger’ Hence all his actions are nervous and uncertain. He has to put on a new countenance of the docile nigger, to live up to the prescribed label. Given the tension in the relationship between Bigger and the Daltons, especially the fake character that Bigger assumes, the tragedy that happens later is predictable. The suspicion and distrust created by the colour line makes it difficult for Bigger to be comfortable. In other words, the social climate of apartheid does not allow for peaceful human relations. Bigger cannot even sit properly for fear of upsetting his new masters. ‘He felt that the position
in which he was sitting was too awkward and found that he was on the very edge of the chair' (p.487). One may be tempted to blame Bigger for being unnecessarily nervous at this juncture. If he has not imbibed the white man’s conception of a nigger, then he is exhibiting a historically fostered inferiority complex that many black people feel in front of whites.

It is fascinating to note that Bigger is equally uncomfortable when white people become friendly to him. Mr Dalton tells him that his wife has a very deep interest in coloured people. Bigger is justifiably suspicious because throughout his life he has been socialized into the stereotypical discourse that separates the races. He feels patronized each time a gesture of goodwill is extended to him. Bigger is not to blame because the system has double standards and blacks have to be careful. James Baldwin is particularly critical of Bigger’s behaviour on this juncture citing his Uncle Tom-mish subservience as an affirmation of the stereotype that categorizes him as subhuman. However, Bigger cannot be expected to brush aside the years of dehumanization that his people have endured.

‘Why was he acting and feeling this way? He wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this… he stood with his knees slightly bend, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped and his eyes had a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence’ (p. 489).

Looking at the surface of things implies thoughtless servitude. Bigger’s first encounter with Mary is shrouded with tension because Mary fails to take cognizance of Bigger’s socio-historical background. She just plunges into a close friendship that might put Bigger in danger of being lynched. She asks him if he belongs to a union yet she knows that ‘good niggers’ are not supposed to be unionists. If he is one, he will lose his job for it. ‘Bigger hated the girl, then. Why did she have to do this when he was trying to get a job?’ (p.493). The mistake that Mary and Jan make is that they attempt to turn around the whole history of coloured people in one day. The way they relate betray their limited understanding of what it means to be black in white America, as Baldwin puts it,
‘whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves’ (1963:44). I want to argue that Jan and Mary, like Bigger, fail to rise above the connotations of their racial affiliation. The ‘fact of whiteness’ makes them limited in their understanding of Bigger and his experience. They may understand him in an intellectual sense but they cannot share his feelings and prejudices and preconceptions. Bigger believes and rightly so, that there is a hidden agenda behind the Daltons’ professed interest in coloured people. It is surprising that Mrs Dalton claims to be a supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, yet Bigger, the very person whom they ought to advance is not even aware of the organization. The implication is that this organization is not addressing the needs of the poor African Americans which it purports to represent. In fact at this stage, the NAACP was reformist-liberal in politics and it tended to serve more middle-class interests than those of the majority poor blacks.

The Daltons represent the American capitalists who make their riches out of exploiting coloured people. Mr Dalton masquerades as a sympathizer of the black cause yet the money he donates to the black communities comes from the exorbitant rentals that he levies on them. In other words, the likes of Mr Dalton are hypocrites who pretend to be on the side of black people while working to further impoverish them. In his defence, Max points out that what black people need is a decent life, better housing and education, not the ping pong that he donates. Mr Dalton’s donations are not relevant to the needs of the community. They are given to boost his image among blacks since they are his customers. Bigger may not know of this political twist to Mr Dalton’s magnanimity, but he knows that ‘if a man could give five million dollars then millions must be as common to him as nickels’ (p. 514). Mr Dalton does not like communists because they are fighting for an equitable distribution of wealth, not the hand-outs that he donates.

Bigger Thomas is conscious of the exploitative relations in his society. He knows that white people have millions while his people live in a rat infested tenement. Although some critics have seen Bigger as a potential communist vanguard because of his
consciousness, he still lacks the inner organization of a leader. Lenin’s vanguard is a group of individuals who, because of their consciousness, have a responsibility to mobilize the masses and lead a communist revolution. Bigger is aware that he has been disinherited as evidenced by his desire to go to the aviation school. However his weakness is that he is not educated; hence his consciousness simply burns inside him without being translated into politically-progressive action. He fights a lonely battle because he does not make an effort to come together with other black people in the same predicament. He tends to think of his predicament as something isolated to him alone. According to Robert Washington (2001: 163), Bigger does not fit the Marxist theorization of society because he belongs to no union and has no group solidarity. Washington goes on to argue that ‘Bigger is a lumpenproletariat, a crude and corrupted manifestation of the larger political struggle’ As a result when he is apprehended for Mary’s murder, no one identifies with him, even his own community. In light of this, Bigger becomes more of an existentialist hero in the fashion of Albert Camus’ Meursault rather than a Marxist one. His conception of freedom is individualistic and not collective.

Given the frustration engendered by the racial divide, Bigger’s murder of Mary Dalton, though accidental, brings him to a higher level of subjectivity. After killing Mary, Bigger experiences a sense of freedom- thus implying that he has fulfilled a deeply felt desire. Such confessions make Bigger appear like a callous monster, yet when we look at what actually happened on that night; we can see that Bigger had no intention to kill Mary. We see him carrying the drunken Mary in his arms to her room, cautious not to awaken the Daltons in case he would be seen and be accused of rape. The first point is that Bigger does not need to physically rape Mary to be accused and convicted of rape. Rape in American society is more of a construct than a physical action. Psychologically, Bigger rapes Mary because he passionately nurses the thought, though he does not put it into action. ‘He kissed her again and felt the sharp bones of her lips move in a hard and veritable grind… he tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now, his lips trembled’ (p. 523). It is quite explicit that the temptation to rape her nearly overtakes him on this juncture. In current law, he could probably be convicted of sexual assault. The incident is a dramatic
representation of the stereotypical African American desire for the white woman. Bigger experiences the bitter-sweet excitement of stepping beyond the limit of American apartheid, the limit beyond which he becomes free. Beyond this limit, as we see in the case of Lewis Nkosi’s hero in *Mating Birds*, there is the prospect of experiencing unique pleasure coupled with the certainty of a death penalty. Eldridge Cleaver (1968: 14) conceptualizes this dilemma poetically;

White witch  
Symbol of the rope and hanging tree,  
Of the burning cross.  
Loving you thus  
And hating you so  
My heart is torn in two  
Crucified.

Wright has fallen under heavy criticism for implying through Bigger the psychological wish to rape Mary Dalton. The scene reads like a confirmation of what the white world has always said about black people. However, given the circumstances, Bigger cannot be wholly blamed for stretching his fantasy into the forbidden territory. This is the first time in his life, not only to be in the same room with a white woman at night, but also to carry her in his arms, caress her breasts and kiss the tender white lips. ‘He helped her and his hands felt the softness of her body as she stepped to the ground…her hair was in his face, filling him with its scent. He gritted his teeth feeling a little dizzy’ (p.523). Bigger is not at all bringing down the black race as some critics put it, if anything, he proves that he is just as human, with active feelings, desires and a functional imagination. It should also be pointed out that although Bigger may not be drunk like Mary, he is surely tipsy and hence his desire for Mary is understandable. ‘He felt her brush his lips. His skin glowed warm and his muscles flexed, he looked at her face in the dim light, his senses drunk with the odour of her hair and skin’ (p.523). In these lines, one can read through Bigger’s curiosity emanating from the restrictions of apartheid. For Bigger, as it is for Eldridge Cleaver, ‘the white woman is more than a
woman to him. She is a goddess’ (Cleaver.1968:159) Mary is not an ordinary girl like Bessie. Firstly, she is white, the daughter of a white magnate; so for Bigger this is a unique risk worth taking. Secondly, she is not sexually hostile at this moment.

Although Bigger has been expressing some reservations regarding Mary’s character, at this point, he has no intention whatsoever to kill her. The question as to why Bigger kills Mary is clear. ‘He wanted to move from the bed but was afraid he would stumble over something and Mrs Dalton would hear him…Frenzy dominated him’ (p.525). Before Mrs Dalton walks into the room, Bigger is arguably in control of the situation. He is afraid as usual but his fear has not overtaken him; he still can see what is going on. He is even aware of the consequences involved if he takes the chance to rape Mary. That his mind is at work is doubtless because he interrogates himself for every move he takes. Yet the moment Mrs Dalton walks into the room, everything collapses; the calculating Bigger dies and the impulsive one takes over. ‘His eyes were filled with the blur moving toward him in the shadows of the room. Again Mary’s body heaved and he held the pillow in a grip that took all of his strength’ (p.525). Apparently, Mary is a victim not only of ‘nigger’ brutality but also of apartheid legislation symbolized by the authoritative, sightless figure of Mrs Dalton.

This is perhaps what Max refers to in the court defence when he says the Daltons colluded in creating the system that led to Mary’s death, though Baldwin (1985: 45) has castigated this defence as one of the most desperate performances in literature, ‘a dream of all liberal men, noble but all the same, a dream’ Bigger’s behaviour at this point is characteristic. The moment Mrs Dalton walks in, fear takes control because the white presence can simply accuse him of rape and consequently he may lose his job or be lynched. In other words, Mrs Dalton’s presence in the room makes Bigger suffocate Mary. He does not want her to produce any sound.

In the presence of Mrs Dalton, Bigger loses his person and becomes some kind of an automaton. His behaviour at this juncture echoes Fanon’s argument that years of colonial domination instil in the minds of black people the notion that the white man is
better than a black man at anything. The moment Mrs Dalton comes in, Bigger automatically hands over all responsibilities to her as a representative of white power. The fact that Bigger completely forgets that she is blind implies that he does not see her as merely Mrs Dalton but as a symbol of the whole white community. ‘He went to the sink watching her as he walked feeling that she could see him even though he knew that she was blind’ (p.525). She, on the other hand, manages to paralyze him effectively regardless of her disability. The point, as Ngugi, has also argued is that when you colonize the mind, you don’t need to tell the colonized what to do or where to belong, he/she knows his/her place. One can see the extent to which Wright wishes to present Bigger as determined by his environment. It is fascinating to note that Bigger only realizes that Mary is dead after Mrs Dalton has gone out. This is an indication that he is psychologically bound by what the white world means to him. He still fears the white world even in its blindness.

Throughout Native Son, Bigger frequently gets possessed by intense feelings of hatred and fear beyond his control. Wright might have exaggerated this experience in the case of Bigger, but the point is that society contributes a stake to our lives. While man makes history, as Karl Marx has argued, he does not make it as he pleases. History also makes man. According to Baldwin, ‘it is a sentimental error to believe that the past is dead, it means nothing to say that all is forgotten, and that the Negro himself has forgotten it. It is not a question of memory. History leaves marks’ (Baldwin, 1985:28).

Immediately after Mrs Dalton gets out of the room, Bigger begins to realize what has happened. ‘The reality of the room fell from him, the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place... he was a murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman’ (p. 527).

In the essay ‘How Bigger was Born,’ Richard Wright (1991) argues that there were many Biggers in the South who ended up being shot dead, maimed or imprisoned. There are two issues that matter in this incident. Bigger is black and Mary is white. Soon after Mary’s death Bigger ‘knows’ that he is done for because he believes there is no way the real facts behind the incident could be verified. Bigger embraces a criminal
status by attempting to make money out of Mary’s accidental death. So much naivety on Bigger’s part! One can see that Bigger has to a certain extent internalized what the white man calls nigger. Wright tells us that ‘if a wave of crime sweeps across a city, squad cars cruise the black belt and grab the first Negro boy who seems to be unattached and homeless’ (1991: 874). After Mary’s death, Bigger writes a kidnap note to the Daltons demanding ten thousand dollars for the ‘release’ of their daughter. When this racket is unearthed Bigger becomes ‘homeless and unattached’ as he flees from the police, thus making himself a potential target. To make matters worse, he has killed a white woman.

When Bigger realizes that he has suffocated Mary to death, the thoughts that race through his mind interrogate the racial problem behind his impulsive action. ‘She was dead; she was white; she was a woman; he had killed her; he was black; he might be caught; he would not want to be caught, if he were they would kill him’ (p.529). Bigger’ reflections at this point suggest that all the socially constructed evidence is against him; and there is no doubt that he will be killed. The white cat stands for these false social constructs; silently condemning him for every action he takes. As the ‘two green burning pools stare(s) at him from a white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk’ (p. 531). Bigger feels confronted and accused. It is the cat, i.e. the social constructs or stereotypes about coloured people, that witness the death of Mary and when Britten and the newsmen come to find out about Mary’s death, the cat perches on Bigger’s shoulders affirming that he is the culprit.

If Max’s court presentation is ‘one of the most desperate performances in American literature’ as Baldwin puts it, then Bigger’ nervous frenzy after Mary’s death is one of the most daring commitments to survival. When Bigger sees that Mary is dead, he knows right away that he is in trouble. Therefore, his decision to throw Mary into the furnace and burn her, gruesome though it may appear, is not really a sign of an inert brutality, rather it is an overreaction, a naïve one though, based on the irreversible fate that awaits him once the murder is discovered. The point is that Bigger must save himself by any means necessary because apartheid laws will never support him. Apparently, in
burning the corpse Bigger does not assume a super-human status, he is just as terrified as we are, but for him, this is the only alternative course of action that presents itself, given that his time is very limited. ‘Gently he sawed the blade into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder’ (p.531). The incident is so ghastly that one is left wondering if Bigger will ever survive the trauma of it.

However, Wright’s point is not to ‘confine the Negro to the very tones of violence he has known all his life’ as Baldwin (1985) would argue. In fact he shows us the extent of the Negro’s desperation in apartheid America. This is the degree to which black people have been dehumanized. The brutal murder of Mary Dalton is a desperate attempt by Bigger to hang on to life. If one cannot imagine Bigger looking at Mary’s neck and bringing the hatchet down, one may as well have to imagine the enthusiasm of a blood thirsty lynch mob as presented in the story ‘Big Boy Leaves home’ (Uncle Tom’s children). In Native Son Bigger is determined to dispose of Mary’s body because, if it is not discovered, he has a chance for survival. ‘He whacked harder, but the head would not come off… He got the hatchet, held the head at a slanting angle with his left hand, and after pausing in an attitude of prayer, sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off’ (p.532). The fact that he pauses ‘in an attitude of prayer’ is reminiscent of the way apartheid often ratified its brutality with a biblical endorsement. The Ku Klux Klan often burned the cross to invoke a religious sentiment to their atrocious actions.

Although the murder is not planned, it is at a certain level a fulfilment of every black man’s secret wish. Wright has confirmed in ‘How bigger was born’ that there is a wish in every man of colour to kill a white man, to revenge the humiliation that he has endured at the hands of the white society. The feelings of power and freedom that Bigger experiences after killing Mary may not be possible for a man awaiting imminent death, yet, Wright’s point, which is to some extent true, is that the oppressed often feel vindicated each time they get an opportunity to bruise their oppressor. Bigger has, though accidentally, transcended his fears and executed his deepest desire. The act of
killing a white woman is Bigger’s private consolation, ‘that which I killed for I am’ (p. 542).

On this juncture, Bigger feels he is a master of his own destiny. This is the same kind of feeling most liberation war fighters felt, for example in Pepetela’s *Mayombe*, each time they killed a white man; it was something to brag about. Beating Gus only boosts his self-esteem but killing Mary gives him a psychological consolation or ‘freedom’ in the face of the guillotine. If the black man is a creation of the white man as Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin White Masks*, then in killing Mary, Bigger Thomas has metaphorically killed the creator— that’s why it is only through this ‘act of high treason’ that he experiences a sense of ‘freedom’ akin to the Sartrean existentialist humanism which claims that God is dead, therefore man is now responsible for his actions.

Sartre’s existentialist humanism claims that ‘existence precedes essence,’ meaning that ‘we are what material life, that is, our existence here on earth, makes of us’ (Sartre, 1948: 28). Therefore man has no essence apart from his experience of life. While this view seeks to put man at the centre of the universe, it also in the same breath represents man as inevitably susceptible to worldly whims. Without God, man is master of his destiny, but he is also at the mercy of other fellow beings. Similarly, as far as Bigger is concerned, the white man reigns supreme like a god, hence when he kills Mary, he metaphorically dethrones God. He is no longer accountable to anyone other than himself. ‘For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of’ (p. 545). Although Bigger attempts to shape his destiny in the fashion of existentialist humanism, he deviates from Sartrean existentialism because he is inflated by absolute power, thus failing to acknowledge that ‘we live in a world of ‘inter-subjectivity’; and that the other is indispensable to our existence and equally so to any knowledge we have of ourselves’ (Sartre, 1948: 45).

‘He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had something that others could not
take from him … His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time, it added to him a certain confidence which his knife and gun did not’ (p. 542).

The implication here is that he has transcended the limitations society imposed on his life. Killing a white woman frees him from the fear that goes with carrying a knife and a gun all the time. Yet the ‘new life’ that Bigger conceptualizes is more of a fantasy or a self-delusion than a reality, because he is definitely going to die. Perhaps, the life that Wright prophesies is embedded in the legacy that Bigger is supposedly going to leave behind; however Bigger’s ending does not promise any resurrection. The ‘new life’ is, surely psychological rather than objective. There is no one among his people who admires what he has done. Baldwin calls Wright’s prophesy ‘a dream, not at all dishonourable but nevertheless a dream’ (1985:45).

In committing such a brutal crime, Bigger sends a message to white America. The message as Irving Howe (1963) puts is that the African American’s silence should not be mistaken for acquiescence. Throughout Native Son, Bigger has been conspicuously silent and his silence has been misconstrued for the African American’s proverbial docility. Nevertheless, Bigger is a type of the new Negro, a manifestation of Uncle Tom’s suppressed violence masked in grins and bows. Even in Uncle Tom, Baldwin notes, there is violence awaiting an opportunity to erupt. Bigger realizes that ‘the thing to do was to act just like others acted, live like they lived and while they were not looking do what you wanted’ (p.542). Wright seeks to show that the ‘dangerous Negro’ is created by unjust laws of Jim Crow America. This is the reason why Baldwin accuses Wright of going back to the Beecher Stowe School of appealing for white sympathy. Ekholy (2007:205) notes that in executing his deepest desire ‘Bigger is guilty of regarding all whites equally as oppressors and haters of blacks’

In adopting the oppositional resistance paradigm, Richard Wright sidelines subtle forms of resistance which, as Bill Ashcroft argues, were more efficient than Bigger’s outright rebellion. More importantly, Wright has been accused of being misogynist for his failure to acknowledge the agency of women in resisting oppression. Bessie Mears’ experience
of life in racist America and her consequent death at the hands of her fiancée bears testimony to the all-pervasive violence of apartheid America. Bessie has had her fair share of toil in her life. Working as a housemaid for the white folks, she has absolutely no time to rest. The only time she has to herself is Sunday afternoon which she drowns in sex and alcohol. Bessie’s experience echoes the predestined life of the black youth of the South presented in Baldwin’s *The Fire next time*. ‘She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off and when she did get off she wanted fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led’ (p.573) The relationship between Bessie and Bigger dramatizes the plight of black women in racialized America. Bessie is the mule of the world as Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie puts it in *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Although it is true that the African American woman was in most ways silenced, it is an overstatement to say that she suffered silently as Bessie does.

Wright portrays Bessie as an object of Bigger’s sexual appetite. Her life is stunted in the sense that circumstances do not allow her to grow in her own direction. If she is not satisfying Bigger’s sexual appetite she is working for some white madam or sleeping in her bed. She is so objectified that she has no voice over her own life. As far as Bigger is concerned, Bessie is there to give him sexual pleasure and help him forget his problems. When he kills Mary Dalton, he expects her to become an accomplice, a clever and agile one for that matter. The moment she fails to live up to her role as Bigger’s appendage, she is raped and battered to death. The fact that Bessie dies of cold in the snow implies that it is her cold, domineering environment that finally kills her. However, the way Wright portrays Bessie is questionable. Bessie is almost an inverted female version of Bigger Thomas himself. Both are objects with no voices. Bigger is perhaps better because he has someone on whom to relieve his frustration.

When Bigger is confronted with psychological unrest after the gruesome murder, he seeks Bessie for solace and comfort. However, this does not deter him from raping and pounding her to a pulp with a brick. ‘Blood and lips and hair and face turned to one side and blood running slowly’ (p.668). The reason Bigger gives to justify the murder is that
she will be a burden and she might get him caught. This is, surely, a rationalization of his attempt to develop spurious power, the way Cross makes himself a god in *The Outsider*, with power over life and death. This is an extension of what he does to Gus. The sad part about Bessie’s death is that she is never presented as a subject. She is literally a lackey of Bigger’s fears and hysteria. The decision to kill her is taken and executed the way one disposes of one’s property. Perhaps this could be Wright’s dependence on sensationalism intended to portray Bessie’s environment as unsupportive in itself. On the other hand, Wright wants to construct the African American as one who has not progressed significantly since slavery so as to lampoon the establishment. When Bigger kills Bessie, we are told, it is to conceal evidence and when her remains appear in court they are also being used as evidence to prove Mary’s murder. ‘Bigger looked and saw the pile of white bones lying atop a table, beside them lay the kidnap note, held in place by a bottle of ink’ (p. 682). Bessie’s death, Mary’s remains and the kidnap note serve the same purpose; they are state evidence against Bigger.

Notwithstanding the accusations of deliberate sensationalism by Richard Wright, *Native Son* is indeed a double edged indictment of the phenomenon of crime and violence in apartheid America. Wright castigates the racist South for creating Bigger and fostering in him an inner sense of disorganization that makes him a half-baked revolutionary. The mob that shouts for Bigger’s head outside the court is an embodiment of white violence; the violence that arguably gave birth to Bigger, culminating in two horrifying murders in the novel. According to Richard Wright ‘the imposed conditions under which the Negroes live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outlining the blueprints for the production of machines’ (Jackson, 2000:335). Wright’s argument is that the African American sensibility is socially and historically conditioned. Ralph Ellison has; however, pointed out that Wright’s vision in *Native Son* omits the rich African American cultures which in his view ‘produces an emotional catharsis that enables blacks to transcend tragic experience by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism’ (Jackson, 336). Yet Irving Howe (1963, [http://www.writing.upenn.edu](http://www.writing.upenn.edu)) insists that the appearance of *Native Son* in African American literature made impossible the repetition of the old
stereotypes that misconstrued African American silence for acquiescence. ‘In all itscrudeness,’ concludes the socialist critic, ‘melodrama and claustrophobia of vision, the novel brought out into the open as no one ever had done before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture’

Finally, the development of Richard Wright’s thought is evident in the titles of his novels, from *Black Boy, Native Son* to *The Outsider*. *Black Boy* portrays the American South as a racist society that used skin colour as a yardstick to discriminate against African Americans. *Native Son* captures a transition not only from a boy to a son but also from petty acts of insubordination to outright, politically conscious rebellion. Unlike black boy, Bigger Thomas engages and translates the dominant discourse at a higher, though not necessarily better, level of political consciousness. The next chapter focuses on *The Outsider*, a novel that takes the black experience beyond the confines of America’s borders to the international arena. It adopts an existentialist framework that allows for a broader and more complex conceptualization of the Africa American experience. The protagonist of the novel, Cross (as the name suggest) is one who crosses and/or negotiates new cultural borders and intellectual horizons.
CHAPTER FOUR

Negotiating western modernity, ‘the interstitial space,’ and existential crime and violence in The Outsider

While most of the criticism on Richard Wright’s Native Son, as I have argued in the previous chapter, portrays the text as naturalist protest, The Outsider has, on the other hand, been popularly regarded as an existentialist text. Indeed it is undeniable that the novel is seriously influenced by the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky particularly his Crime and Punishment. In this chapter, I argue that while The Outsider is a novel of ideas as most critics have aptly put it, it is also in a substantial way a racial discourse, an attempt by Richard Wright to deal with the changing paradigms of racial or race-related violence in the American South, especially in the wake of cross-cultural intercourses that transcend and blur the racial taxonomy. Yoshinobu Hakutani (2006:107) insists that ‘it is high time critics began to read this novel as racial discourse just in the same way we read Native Son, Uncle Tom’s Children and The Long Dream because Cross Damon is not only an embodiment of a half-baked philosophy but also a genuine product of the African American experience.’ Although Richard Wright consistently tells us that Cross’ tragedy is not determined by his racial affiliation, I intend to show in what ways the novel qualifies as racial discourse. This chapter draws from Merton’s strain theory and Bhabha’s hybridity and ‘Third Space’ in order to analyse firstly Cross’ social problems in Chicago leading to his decision to abandon his family and move to New York and secondly, his attempt to apply western philosophy to his life and reject social inhibitions.

Unlike Bigger Thomas whose plight is contingent upon the racial problem of the Deep South, Cross Damon is portrayed as a self-made hero, alienated from his environment and in many ways responsible for his actions. Wright’s intention is perhaps to create a universal man yet the question still remains as to the position of race or ethnicity in the quest for cultural universalism. Is it possible for African Americans to embrace universal values or more specifically western values and completely escape the influence of their
racial sensibility? Stuart Hall (2006: 437) argues that the term ethnicity (or race in this case), ‘acknowledges the place of history [...] and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated’. The fact that all discourse is ‘placed, positioned, situated’ implies that even the discourse of self (who am I?) finds meaning in a context. This, to a great extent, is Cross Damon’s tragedy; that in rejecting his past, he loses his bearings and the meaning of his life. Without a past, a future and a people, he breaks down into an existential murderous psychopath. His predicament can thus be conceptualized as that of a man lost in the complexity of alien philosophy; without a past and a people; he also finds himself without any landmark of orientation.

Cross Damon epitomizes what JanMohammed (postcolonial theorist and critic) characterizes as the border intellectual. Border intellectuals reside neither inside nor outside the dominant culture and their dilemma is that they have ‘to constitute themselves as the border, to coalesce around it as a point of infinite regression’ (1992:103). Cross’s plight compares favourably with that of his creator, Richard Wright, who suffers a ‘black Atlantic’ cultural dislocation, to borrow a phrase popularly associated with Paul Gilroy (1993). JanMohammed collapses Wright’s experience with that of Edward Said, the path-finding postcolonial theorist, in that;

…both are descendants of people forced to leave their original cultures, and, like immigrants, both operate more or less effectively in their new culture. However neither becomes a full-fledged subject of the latter: Said because he chooses not to, because he does not wish to rush into what he calls an ‘uncritical gregariousness’; Wright because racism would not permit blacks to become full members of white American culture...Hence both are confined to the predicament of border intellectuals, neither motivated by nostalgia for some lost or abandoned culture nor at home in this or any other culture (1992:102).

The condition of ‘border intellectual’ which also affects Cross in The Outsider is a debilitating condition; it is in Jean Paul Satre’s poignant phrase a ‘nervous condition’
which pushes some intellectuals to extremes. A case in point is that of South African writers Nat Nakasa and Can Themba, who, having failed to find space in apartheid South Africa went on to adopt a reckless and fatalist attitude to life. Cross Damon adopts a similar attitude. Although he does not commit suicide- he is undoubtedly implicated in Eva’s suicidal leap and a series of murder cases in the text.

Although Cross Damon and Bigger Thomas are pitted against the same social, cultural, historical and ideological circumstances, it is their level of consciousness and degree of complicity in their crimes which is different. In _The Outsider_, Wright has fully consolidated his conception of the oppressed not only as victims of society or lackeys of circumstance but also as active subjects capable of taking full responsibility for their actions. This is perhaps because in the earlier texts, for example _Black Boy_ and _Native Son_, Wright was an existentialist through ‘felt life’ or an unconscious existentialist as Brignano (in Carson, 2008:28) puts it.

_The Outsider_ is a product of Richard Wright’s encounters with the French existentialism of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, hence its highly philosophical texture and somewhat derivative title. It is crafted on the existential view that ‘man makes himself’ While Bigger’s crimes are, to an extent (depending on one’s interpretation), thrust upon him by circumstances beyond his control, Cross’ are deliberately premeditated criminal decisions. In other words, while Bigger’s tragedy is directly linked to the state of his social milieu and the African American history of slavery and racial segregation, Cross’ manslaughter dramatizes the African American’s struggle with forces and ideals of western modernity, particularly existential idealism. Cross symbolizes the ‘modern’ African American negotiating with and attempting to adjust to the tenets of western epistemology, to practice the ideas that he has grasped in his partial study of western philosophy at the University of Chicago.

Hakutani (2006) intimates that although Wright partly intended the book to be social protest, his chief aim was to mould an African American man’s life upon existential tenets. As argued in the previous chapter, Richard Wright tells us, in his introductory
essay to *Native Son* that Bigger Thomas is constantly tantalized by the unattainable promises of the city, yet in the actual text we see that Bigger’s criminality is linked more to the racial problem than to the influence of city life. It is in *The Outsider* that Richard Wright demonstrates the effects of modern industrial life on the African American psyche, particularly on one who has been exposed to western education and culture. Paul Gilroy (1993: 147) notes that *The Outsider* provides a useful opportunity to extend our considerations of issues arising from the relationship of blacks to western modernity or what George Kent calls ‘blackness and the adventure of western culture’

In a comparative study of Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger* (also published under the title *The Outsider*), Yoshinobu Hakutani (2006: 101) argues that Wright’s initial work (the Harper version of 1953) shows that he intended *The Outsider* to be clearly racial discourse in the tradition of *Native Son*. It was only due to pressure from his publishers that he was forced to cut out sections (in the Rampersad version, 1991) implying social determinism particularly in relation to Cross Damon’s criminal behaviour.

> In the Harper edition, as Rampersad has shown, the original 741 typescript pages were shortened to 620 pages, a 16.3 deduction of the original manuscript. The difference between the two versions is partly stylistic but it is also related to Wright’s intention for the book as racial discourse. (Hakutani, 2006: 101).

Wright’s publishers exerted this pressure on him because they felt that the novel was rather inappropriate for its time. It had sexually inflammatory sections that could have put Wright at risk of being labelled a misogynist. Passages including sentences like ‘the lips of her vagina,’ ‘Sarah’s breasts heaved’ and ‘her lips hung open and she breathed orgiastically’ were deleted (Hakutani, 2006: 105). Wright’s departure to France had obviously distanced him from trends and current events in American society, thus according to the publishers the ‘Negro’ problem had long taken a new twist since *Native Son* -the novel that had put Richard Wright on the international market and elevated him to the enviable position of spokesman of the African American race.
Reading this novel (*The Outsider*), it is evident that Richard Wright is at pains to omit and explain away the influence of American racial segregation on Cross’s wanton manslaughter, insisting that Cross has no sense of racial affiliation whatsoever, what he does could have been done by any other man, of any other racial group. Apparently, this claim is questionable because on several occasions in the text Cross is confronted by realities of his racial categorization and he acts, almost instinctively with a passionate ‘African American sensibility’ (as constructed by white America). For example, while on the train to New York, Cross Damon finds himself unconsciously defending Bob Hunter, a fellow black man who is about to be unjustly assaulted by a white woman. Although he wants to transcend the limits of racial particularity, Cross cannot do so without acknowledging his racial affiliation.

American apartheid has created in the minds of both racial groups a group sensibility which obliges them to defend each other even to the point of violence. In this incident, Cross is defending not only Bob Hunter but also the generality of the black race. When the white woman says ‘you are not hitting me nigger,’ Cross counters in a confrontational manner ‘you are not hitting anybody neither’ (p.495). As Bob later says, Cross’ reaction at this juncture is guided by the idea that ‘we coloured folks got to stick together’ against white aggression (p.502). Sticking together implies a defensive oneness constructed by the perceived and real offensive of the other. The response of other white passengers on the train, particularly the district attorney and the priest shows that whites also feel they ‘got to stick together’ against the perceived ‘Negro menace’ –thus affirming that both races are still psychologically bound by lessons they learnt from the years of American apartheid. In this case, both the master and the subject are victims of the objectifying and ‘fixing’ tendencies of the oppressor discourse.

While the previous chapter projected Bigger Thomas’ criminal violence as an inevitable response to his social environment, this chapter delineates how African Americans negotiate their way into the complex world of modern western civilization. As much as *The Outsider* is an existentialist novel as most critics have affirmed, Cross’ violent
murders are also a reflection of the effects of apartheid consciousness on the modern American national psyche. It is not accidental that Cross Damon experiences the kind of problems that compel him to reject his past. In America and in this text in particular, we do not see Cross’ problems affecting men of any other racial pigmentation, so it is rather unconvincing to claim that Cross is a type of Everyman of the twentieth century, who lives ‘individually as modern man lives in a mass each day’ (Gilroy, 1993:164).

Hakutani, (1995: 56), notes that the realistic details woven into Cross Damon’s life are those of the problems caused by living in the city. Firstly, Cross is being overworked at the post office- he is physically and mentally a tired man, he is bored with routine work just like his fellow workers, black or white. He is also moneyless and in perpetual debt. All these are problems experienced by industrial men the world over as we also see in the Russian novels of Dostoevsky and Gogol. Yet African Americans in the modern industrial world experience these problems ‘with a difference’ particularly because their subjectivity and identity, as Stuart Hall argues is determined by their history, culture and language. Is it possible for African Americans who have acquired western philosophical idealism amidst racial segregation to adjust and live a normal life like any other white man? That is the question. This is particularly a problem for Africans Americans because of their dual identity. Unlike Africans for example who are still in touch with an ‘African’ milieu (at least physically) and therefore have something to hold on to, African Americans seem to have no centre on which to stand as they interact with other cultures. If African Americans were to move the centre as Ngugi recommends in Moving the Centre, what would be their centre?

Wright seems to imply that the only way black people can negotiate their way into western modernity is through refashioning or even shunning their past and starting on a blank page. Marc Bekale (2009: 5) argues that ‘Cross Damon’s retreat from the world is a personal choice and underlies an attempt at re historicizing himself’ After blotting out his past Cross ‘[is] without a name, a past, a future; no promises or pledges [bind] him to those about him’ We can see here an attempt by Richard Wright to enable his hero to escape what he calls the tyranny of history. Through rejecting his past (he abandons his
family and girlfriend in Chicago), Cross gets an opportunity to rewrite his own past and thus determine his future. This is an insurmountable task because there is the question of authenticity. Is it possible for a man to reject his past and start afresh without a point of reference? Is identity something that can be constructed by an individual outside the orbit of history? Although Cross’ experience is more or less a fantasy, it is one that is tempting- the idea of having one’s sins forgiven and forgotten is appealing to everyone who has made a mistake in life.

Talking specifically about the impossibility of going back to the past to recover an authentic history, Stuart Hall (2006: 436) insists that ‘the issue is not rediscovering an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the retelling of the past’ History can surely be rewritten, just as much as stories can be retold from a different perspective, but is it possible to change a lived experience. We can possibly rewrite the history of the colonized, as Achebe has told us, to teach our people that their history was not one long night of savagery, from which the first white man, acting on God’s behalf awakened them, but is it possible to deny experiences, to say ‘it never happened, I am a new creation.’ Cross’ is a convenient falsification of history, akin to propaganda. His dilemma is not of retelling his past as is the case with other postcolonial characters, for example Lena in Fugard’s Boesman and Lena. His problem is that he wants to change that past and live as a ‘born again’ Stuart Hall argues that identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ which means it transforms itself from somewhere, and does not create itself from nothing. Men make their own history, as Marx has argued, yet not as they choose. By rejecting his past, Cross has also cut himself from the process of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ The point is that he can only ‘be’ if he be coming from somewhere. This is the reason why his life has no meaning to him. Identity according to Stuart Hall ‘belongs to the future as much as to the past’ (2006: 436). Cross is confronted by these questions when Eva and Sarah ask him about his true identity. He cannot go into the future with Eva because he has no past.

As Umar Abdurrahman (2008: 135) puts it, his relationship with Eva fails because it is founded on falsehood and deception. In the ‘normal’ world, ‘true’ love requires authentic
identity. Fake identity, as we see in the case of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, is possible yet its life span is precarious and ultimately predictable. Moreover, it comes with a price, which in Sizwe Bansi’s case is equivalent to a cultural death. The question that immediately comes to mind is: is it worthy after all. Is this not a case of losing four in pursuit of eight? In addition, the way Cross goes about the business of creating his new identity is also problematic. In shunning his past he wants to be a free man without social obligations and responsibilities, yet this objective is defeated in the very act of adopting a dead man’s identity. Abburrahman (2008: 132) goes on to argue that by assuming the identity of Lionel Lane, ‘Cross Damon is affirming the Sartrean existentialist maxim that man makes himself, he is not ready made at the start’ Nevertheless, it can also be argued that Cross Damon is not necessarily starting a new life but continuing Lionel Lane’s, as if to imply that one cannot start from nowhere. There is always need for a template, a point of reference to be precise. Yet as Cross learns from the postman, his template, Lionel Lane, was an irresponsible womanizer who lived all his life ‘pulling at the neck of a bottle (p.540). Cross’ existential freedom is based on a fraudulent identity and it is in the interest of this identity that he goes on a murderous rampage. I say it is in the ‘interest’ of this fraudulent identity that he commits murder because anything that is fake needs to be maintained or canvassed by a semblance of authenticity, one way or the other- and Cross’ way is that of permanently silencing his opponents.

Perhaps because of the influence of his publishers as Hakutani (2006) has pointed out, Richard Wright is also attempting, desperately though, to explain Cross’ predicament in terms of his irresponsible behaviour, particularly the fact that he dropped out of college after impregnating Gladys and that he went on to hook up with Dot leading to the fateful collapse of his marriage. Yet Cross, like the other workers of his day, is clearly a victim of industrial capitalist exploitation. Working at the post office throughout the night, he is always sleepy, tired, bored, ill-tempered and drunk. Available criticism has paid little attention to this background which in my view cannot be separated from Cross’ life after the subway accident. Cross has been so brutalized by the circumstances of his life- to some extent as a result of his reckless behaviour that he can hardly stand on his own. We see this in the incident when he tries to rest his tired body against his friend who
tells him ‘to stand on his own two big feet’ (p. 369). ‘Standing on his own two big feet’ implies self-reliance, being a master of his own destiny.

Wright’s interpretation of Cross’s plight as a worker projects the callous heartlessness of industrial capitalism. Cross is mortgaged- he works very hard yet he can hardly sustain himself, so to get rid of the frustration he takes to alcohol in the same way that his mother casts her burdens on religion. Abdurrahahm (2008:130) maintains that ‘the patterns of his life, which include his unhappy marriage with Gladys, financial instability, abhorrence of the middle class mentality of his wife, monotony of his clerical duty, disenchantment with the societal values and social doctrines, of which he remains sceptic, accusation of rape by Dot and aversion to certain societal norms, all cause him mental anguish’ Cross gets to a point where he cannot do without alcohol, he just cannot face the bleakness of his life. As he says, his ‘engine won’t run without it’ (p.370). For him, drinking becomes a way of seeking happiness, of seeking to forget the problems of his life. Cross' nagging wife, Gladys, his under-age girlfriend, Dot, his conformist mother and the job at the post office constitute the strain of Merton’s theory, which degenerates into social anomie.

Cross is hemmed in; he is in search of a way out of the entrapping circumstances of his life. His meagre wages at the post office go towards sustaining his wife Gladys and his mistress, Dot. For all his toil he cannot enjoy the fruits of his labour. We are not surprised when later in the text he embraces the opportunity to reject his past and start a new life. Unlike Bigger Thomas and black boy who are fighting to escape social restrictions, Cross is running away from the consequences of his decisions. Although the way Cross is being treated by his wife is unbearable, we also know that he is partially responsible for this situation. Gladys has emasculated him so much that she literally tells him what to do and he does it. ‘Number one: you are signing this house over to me once. Number two; you are signing over the car to me. Number three: you are going to the post office tonight and borrow eight hundred dollars from the postal union on your salary…I want that money to clear the titles of both the house and the car…I am squeezing you like a lemon’ (p.437).The point must be made, however, that
Gladys is not just an evil wife who enjoys inflicting pain on her husband. Cross failed to deal with his own frustrations preferring to load them on to his wife whom he has reduced to a punching bag. At this point, Gladys is tired of Cross’ irresponsible behaviour, particularly his wasteful drinking and womanizing habits.

The question that immediately comes to mind is where Gladys is getting all this authority. Richard Wright shows us that the predicament of the African American man has taken a new twist. Gladys has the support of the law which binds Cross to be responsible to his family. Apart from Gladys who is ‘squeezing him like a lemon’ Dot is also holding onto a promise he must fulfil, failure of which she will sue him for rape. Although Dot is guilty of fabricating her age to Cross, she clings on to the fact that she is underage and clearly Cross has no way of escaping. Like Camus’ hero, Meursault, Cross fails to think through the consequences of his actions. He would prefer to rape Dot and continue to live ‘freely’ without any accusations. As far as Cross is concerned, the law is depriving him of his personal freedom by thrusting responsibilities upon him. Yet he does not seem to realize that freedom is in itself a responsibility and that ‘he cannot be anything… unless others recognize it as such’ (Sartre in Carson, 2008:32). It is, however, in this regard that Cross’ life before the subway accident is socially determined. These are the problems that compel him to fake a psychopathological breakdown so he could unleash retributive violence on his wife, Gladys. Cross Damon rebels against society because ‘it oppresses him by depriving him of the values he and society share, such as freedom of association and opportunity for success. When he later kills the egoistic communists and a fascist, Cross is in a sense murdering his women’ (Hakutani, 2006:111).

While in *Native Son* Richard Wright implicates social factors in Bigger Thomas’s plight and thus in a way depriving him of a sense of agency, in *The Outsider*, Cross is endowed with an existential sense of agency. Firstly, Cross plunges himself into an unprepared marriage with Gladys consequently dropping out of University. In this sense his predicament becomes a ‘payback’ experience for the bad decisions he has made in his life. ‘He dropped out of University right after he married Gladys and after that nothing
went right’ (p.380). His crisis is that he cannot carry all the responsibilities that are expected of him. His mother expects him to stop drinking, embrace Christianity and settle down to a decent family life. On the other hand, Dot continues to pester him with the demand for marriage. ‘You made a promise and I want you to keep it’ she says (p.379). Dot is holding on to a promise which was perhaps made impulsively. She wields power over him because she knows that she is pregnant and if Cross does not marry her she will sue him with statutory rape. Her illicit pregnancy is the weapon she uses to hold Cross accountable to her condition.

Owing to the meaninglessness of his life, Cross comes to a point of contemplating suicide. We are told that ‘he sprang to the dresser and yanked open a drawer and pulled forth his gun’ (p.381). The gun has become a possible avenue of self-liberation as with Bigger Thomas but in a different way. He carries it on himself so that if the social situation of his life becomes worse he may shoot himself. ‘If the pressure from within or without became too great he would use it; his gun would be his final protection against himself’ (p. 381). His situation is so desperate that his whole life is determined by his ability to satisfy demands from Dot and Gladys. Even after surviving a life threatening subway accident, Cross still considers his social milieu as more menacing. ‘If he had lost the eight hundred dollars, the only thing left for him would have been to jump into the Chicago River’ (p.449).

Throughout the text, Cross remains a lonely character, a man who feels isolated even in the company of other people. Like Bigger of Native Son he is alienated from the rest of the black community because he is trying to exist as an island independent of social parameters (obligations and expectations). While Bigger Thomas may be conceptualized as an epitome of liberation violence, Cross Damon is an existential individualist who unfortunately fails to realize that personal freedom is contingent upon the freedom of others. ‘It is the paranoia of this alienation that leads him to maniacal actions’ (Abdurrahman, 2008:130). Moreover, Cross seems to magnify his problems because he does not share them with anybody. He has a sense of pride to nurse and an ego to protect -that is why he does not want his mother to know that he impregnated
Dot. Cross comes to the point of hating himself because of the mess that is his life, ‘his mother’s scolding intensified his mood of self-loathing, a mood that had been his longer than he could recall, a mood that had been growing stronger with the increasing complexity of the events of his life’ (p. 384). Cross’ mother, like Meursault’s in Camus’ *The Outsider*, symbolizes society and the responsibilities that it thrusts upon individuals. In Meursault’s case, society expects him to take care of his mother and mourn over her death. His failure to take up social responsibilities is used as evidence of his negligence. Similarly, Cross’ mother expects him to settle down to a married Christian life and when he fails to do so, he becomes an outcast. We are told that ‘it was the restrictions of marriage, the duties to children, obligations to friends, to sweethearts, and blood kin that he struck at so blindly-and gallantly’ (p.775).

Like Bigger, Cross responds to the circumstances of his life with violent emotional outbursts. The conditions of his life keep him tense and taut, ready to break into violent action. When his mother reprimands him for seducing Dot, Cross ‘imagined himself rising and in a single sweep of his palm slapping her to the floor’ (p.389). This murderous fantasy reminds us of Bigger Thomas’ reactions towards the racial divide, particularly the debilitating fact of blackness. Cross’ suicidal and murderous thoughts are, on this occasion, inspired by shame for what he has done and an inner revolt against society’s moral prescriptions. He does not want anybody to police his life or impose responsibilities on him. His mother torments him by questioning his morality and eroding his sense of self-worth. ‘Promising a child when you know that you don’t mean it…how can men do that,’ she says (p.389). His mother’s question, plausible though it may appear, serves the ideological purpose of constructing Cross in her image, yet Cross does not want anybody or anything to influence his personal will. Evidently, Cross’ mother is also speaking out her bitterness towards the men in her life. Her own husband, Cross’s father, abandoned her when she was pregnant so there are high chances of her wanting to influence Cross’ life on the basis of this experience, which is altogether reasonable.
Cross’ situation is in many ways similar to that of Albert Camus’ hero. The two are outright individualists who aspire to live outside social confines. Both Cross and Meursault commit murder specifically due to circumstances of the moment. Cross kills Joe to cut links with his background in Chicago, to make sure no one knows that he is still alive. On the other hand, Meursault shoots the Arab in the heat of the moment and in self-defence. ‘Meursault, who had no desire to kill the Arab, merely responded to pressures applied by natural forces. The blinding sun and the glittering knife held by the Arab caused Meursault to fear and forced him to pull the trigger’ (Hakutani, 2006:108). Yet both Meursault and Cross are convicted on moral grounds. Part of the evidence used to convict Meursault for the murder of the Arab includes his callousness towards his mother. Cross is also in a way judged by his mother because at the end of his life, he realizes that she was correct after all. ‘Life is a promise my son, God promised it to us and we must promise it to others. Without that life is nothing’ (p.389).

Apart from the existential paradigm, Cross’ outsider mentality or what Homi Bhabha calls ‘cultural hybridity’ is not only influenced by his existential philosophy, but also by the mere fact of being black in America. As one character in The Outsider puts it, Cross cannot escape the years of denigration that the black race has experienced at the hands of white America. ‘For four hundred years these white folks done made everybody on earth feel like they aint human, like they outsiders’ (p.395). In this sense therefore, Cross becomes a metaphor of the postcolonial male character whose identity of ‘otherness’ has been constructed and thrust upon him by the West. This is perhaps the point of divergence between Meursault and Cross Damon. While the former is a colonizer in Algeria, Cross is a Negro negotiating the shiftiness of Bhabha’s interstitial space. This tension is clearly captured in his very name Cross Damon, a combination of Christianity (Cross) and the the daemon of a Godless nihilist philosophy (Damon).

As an African American, Cross is negotiating the challenges of living in-between. The West has stigmatized his race and it is these stereotypes that he is grappling with. ‘What’s a black man to a white man? An ape made by God to cut wood and draw water, and with an inborn yen to rape white girls’ (p.396). It must be noted that in opposing
these western representations of the other, some black people have refashioned their history so as to upset the white man’s fabrications. We see this clearly in the story of the mysterious saucers which has been reconstructed by African Americans to be a story of their brothers visiting them from Mars and Jupiter. Apparently, this is a counter discourse that seeks to upset white America’s exclusive culture. Kevine Gosine (2002: 83) states that ‘the black community in the United States has developed an oppositional subculture that rejects virtually everything associated with the dominant white culture, including such mainstream (i.e. white) success ideals as educational achievement.’ This is what the criminological theorist Robert Merton theorizes as the rebellious category which rejects both the culturally accepted goals and the prescribed means of attaining them.

Perhaps it is because of his migration to France, the influence of existential thought and also because of pressure from his publishers as Hakutani has pointed out, that Richard Wright deliberately attempted to make Cross a universal man, not just a Negro. Thus, we see Cross refusing to be limited by his racial categorization. ‘Were there not somewhere in this world rebels with whom he could feel at home, men who were outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusions’ (p.396). However, the question still remains as to how possible it is for one to think his way through the many veils of illusions. Is thought capable of liberating one from these illusions? Has Cross Damon’s study of existential philosophy made him any better than his predecessors?

Clearly, in Cross Damon, Wright has created a different kind of monster, one endowed with intellect - not one determined by his environment like Bigger Thomas- but one capable of crafting his way through murder. As Bill Ashcroft (2001) argues, the post-colonial subject is far from being a passive consumer of colonial discourse because even Bigger with his Grade eight is capable of cleverly forging a letter to deceive the Daltons. It is explicit that one does not have to be an official intellectual to be intellectually able. In spite of his university education, Cross is still comparatively more monstrous than any of his forebears, Bigger and black boy, for example. Although his
existential philosophy allows him to question his environment and refashion himself in
his own image, it does not make him any better. While Cross gets the credit for utilizing
western ‘cultural capital’ for self-liberation, his mistake is that he denies his past without
which he cannot have a future. It appears as if Wright wishes to counter criticisms on
his previous works, particularly Native Son where the character of Bigger Thomas-all
emotions with little intellect- has been criticized for affirming white America’s
stereotypical image of the African American. But is ‘thought’ capable of liberating
humanity? Edward Said’s, (1994) reflections on the representation of the intellectual
shows that some intellectuals have been high-jacked by institutions and governments to
parochially think in support of particular causes in return for recognition, money and
accolades.

While most critics have focused mainly on Cross’ life after the subway accident, this
chapter insists that Cross’ life in New York cannot be separated from his past
experiences in Chicago. Throughout the text, Wright shows that the past is a part of us
and there is no way we can extricate ourselves from its influence on our lives. Cross
accepted his assumed death in the train crash and changed his identity from Cross
Damon to Lionel Lane, yet his past keeps stalking and haunting him. The investigations
into the murder of Gil Blount leads Elly Houston, the district attorney and the FBI to
Chicago where they disinter Cross’ past. Drawing similarities between Wright’s The
Outsider and Camus’s The Stranger, Yoshinobu Hakutani (2006: 111) maintains that
there are marked differences between these two existential works. While Camus’s
Meursault refuses to play society’s game (he does not defend himself in court), Cross
plays it whenever it suits him to do so. He rejects social ties and responsibilities but he
goes on to embroil himself in social obligations by making promises to Gladys, Dot and
his mother which he fails to fulfil.

The subway accident is indeed a landmark event both in Cross’ life and in the text.
Before this incident, Cross has not committed any other crime apart from his failure to
take responsibility for his wife and girlfriend. Before the subway accident, Cross remains
a half-baked existentialist bound by his social environment. Before this fateful accident,
Cross expresses a yearning for freedom but social obligation to his family and his mother cannot allow him to enjoy individual freedom.

The existential journey begins with Cross’ escape from the train wreckage where he steps on a dead body and jumps out through the window. This incident heralds the existential egocentrism that later becomes ingrained in his character. The act of stepping on a dead body to save one’s life smacks of existential callousness as if to say ‘man is nothing in particular’ This is a prelude to Cross’ selfishness which develops to a murderous dimension later in the text. He kills Joe Thomas and metaphorically builds a new past and a new future on his dead body. The way Cross steps on the dead body also signify a transition of self through rejecting his past and in a sense, rejecting the past is a form of dying. Cross’s escape from the train wreckage reads like a ritualistic rites of passage. ‘The girl was dead but if he was to get through the window he had either the choice of standing upon her crushed body or remaining where he was. He stepped upon the body feeling his shoes sinking into the lifeless flesh and seeing blood bubbling from the woman’s mouth as his weight bore down on her bosom’ (p.446).

Similar situations will confront him in the future and to save himself he would have to step on or eliminate someone. In the future Cross will not only step on dead bodies; he will kill and step on the corpse to save his life. Unlike Camus’ Meursault, who stands for his existential philosophy to the verge of death, Cross does everything to save his life (Hakutani, 2006: 117). While Meursault is a consistent or rather principled existentialist who is ready to die for his beliefs, Cross is an opportunistic one who for life’s sake, is ready to flout his own beliefs. ‘If his earlier life is not worthy living, a new one must be created’ (Hakutani, 2006:117). Wright’s existentialism is different from that of Camus’ because his character is not out-rightly against social norms. Cross does not necessarily murder for a principle or in defence of a philosophy, his murders are in defence of life. Although this is equally true for Meursault especially when he shoots the Arab, the point is that Meursault is ready to give up his own life for a principle. It is highly improbable that Cross would have remained silent in court as Meursault did. Cross’ claim at the end of the novel that he is innocent confirms that he is not prepared
to lose his life. In this regard, some critics have explained Wright’s existential vision as a combination of Nietzschean nihilism and French existentialism. However, there is also a possibility that Wright is representing the African American’s unique experience of western philosophy and culture.

The subway accident with all its existentialist undertones is a starting point for Cross’ criminal journey. Just as in Native Son where Wright deals with the psychology of crime in the character of Bigger Thomas, in The Outsider Wright focuses on crime as a product of human thoughts and feelings. It is fascinating that Cross begins to conceive himself as a criminal before he commits any crime. When the thought of abandoning his past and starting a new life dawns on his mind, he begins to feel as if he is committing a crime. ‘In a way he was a criminal, not so much because of what he was doing, but because of what he was feeling’ (p.455). Richard Wright brings a new dimension to the conceptualization of crime. Is crime the act itself? Or is it the criminal mentality and the criminal disposition? This idea is developed later in the text through the character of Elly Houston, an outsider who has decided to domesticate his criminal instincts by working for the criminal justice system. If crime is not only the act but also the process of conceptualizing the act, then Cross Damon’s first crime is the very idea of faking his death. Faking death and adopting a new identity has a promise of freedom but it also has a price to it. Cross must sacrifice his mother, wife, girlfriend and children. ‘He had to break with everything he had ever known and start a new life’ (p.454).

According to Marc Bekale, (2009: 2) the evolution of Wright’s heroes from Big Boy to Cross Damon reflects strikingly the moral and psychological experience of contemporary African intellectuals most of whom go through a painful process of ‘Westernization’ in order to realize themselves. Cross is a type of mimic man whose direction of progress is towards the white man and away from his people. Cross can only be free if he has no social ties, as Jean Paul Sartre puts it ‘our hell is other people’ (1948:45 yet ironically Cross’s hell does not include Eva, it includes Dot and his wife who, as he says are dependent on him. Cross’ idea of freedom is rather weird; he also has difficulties embracing it. We see this when he clandestinely goes back to his house
just to have the last glimpse at his children before he goes away. According to Sylvia Bowman (in Abdurrahman, 2008: 129) Cross appears to make ‘the existential leap to overcome all human restrictions, social, political, religious, and moral: but he learns belatedly that, despite their arbitrariness, it is conventions that make one human. In dispensing with regulation, Cross ironically becomes nothing and does not escape Nothingness’

After separating with his family, Cross begins to feel lonely. He realizes that rejecting his past also entails losing the company of familiar fellow humans. ‘Nothing made meaning; his life seemed to have turned into a static dream whose images remain unchanged throughout eternity’ (p.453). Apparently, Cross’ search for absolute freedom is vain because we cannot be whole by ourselves. It is important to note that The Outsider also has elements of a detective narrative or what some critics have termed pulp narrative. Cross’s excitement at separating with his unpleasant and imprisoning past is reminiscent of Richard Wright’s flight to France, escaping the American South which, in his view was not supportive in itself. Under normal circumstances, it is not possible to abandon one’s family with a smile. As much as our humanity is linked to other humans, our freedom also is contingent upon the lives of other people. This is evident in Cross’ relationship with Jenny, the prostitute. Her life has no meaning because, like Cross she is also running away from her past. Yet when the two begin to share their experiences they seem to discover meaning in their lives. Here it is evident that it takes two to make a human society.

Cross’ world is also devoid of the supernatural. Having rejected the hopes and inhibitions of the last two thousand years, Cross becomes the pre Christian man incarnate, as his name Damon suggests (Damon is also, ironically, the name of a proverbially faithful friend in Greek mythology). Elly Houston goes on to inform us that Cross Damon;

…is a man living in our modern industrial cities, but he is devoid of all moral influences of Christianity. He has all the unique advantages of being privy to our
knowledge, but he has either rejected it or has somehow escaped its influence...And what’s there to guide him. Nothing at all but his own desires, which would be his only values (p.403-404).

Cross believes that man creates himself and the world around him. Yet it does not occur to him that while man makes his world, the world also makes man (Bill Ashcroft, 1998). In other words we are ‘an extension of the textuality of the world, an extension of the fabric- the tissue of quotations that make up that world’ (Ashcroft, 1998: 209). What this means is that it is not possible for Cross to refuse the influence of the society in which he lives. According to Stuart Hall (2006: 435), cultural identity ‘is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark’ It is the mark of history that Cross is attempting to bleach out of his life. By attempting to escape the influence of history and society, Cross exiles himself into the marginal ‘Third space’ which degenerates into the psychopathological violence of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*.

Having embraced the false status of being dead, Cross takes it upon himself to create a new life. ‘It was up to him to make it work’ (p.454). Wright tells us that ‘there was no racial tone to his reactions; he was just a man, any man who had had an opportunity to flee and had seized upon it’ (p.455). One can sense an attempt by Wright to make us see Cross not as a victim of racism like Bigger Thomas but as a modern man responsible for shaping his destiny. The question is how we go about re-presenting our past. Do we discard some lived experiences because they interfere with our aspirations? There lies a problem because as a modern man Cross must come from somewhere, must have a history from which to mould his present and future.

As I have argued before, there seems to be a racial subtext behind Cross’ existential subjectivity. Wright is deliberately making an effort to create a universal man whose tragedy is also universal. But it is surely questionable to claim that Cross could have been any man. Cross is a black man and as Wright himself says about *The Outsider*, ‘I
was trying to grapple with the big problem – the problem and meaning of western civilization as a whole and the reaction of Negroes (emphasis mine) and other minority groups to it’ (in Bekale, 2009: 1). Clearly as Wright puts it, this is a problem encountered by ‘Negroes and other minority groups’ as they interact with western modernity, not by any man. I want to argue that as a spokesman of the black race, Wright is perhaps thinking about those recipients of western modernity, particularly in the third world, the majority of whom are African Americans grappling with years of cultural exclusion.

Cross’ predicament is therefore that of a black man in the fragmented milieu of the modern world. Throughout The Outsider, he comes into contact with representations (akin to Said’s western representations of the Orient) which he must deconstruct in order to reinvent himself. However, in this noble pursuit, he lacks consistency because he is not a principled existentialist like Meursault, but an outsider aspiring to be an insider. We have said that Cross differs from Camus’s hero in that he plays society’s game each time it suits him. Hence, in his quest to be a race less man transcending the strictures of white America’s image of the African American, we see him, when it suits him, manipulating the same stereotypes to secure an identity document. Firstly, at the Vital Statistics Bureau, Cross puts on the mask of the ‘timid Negro’ so as to cheat the system and earn a birth certificate. We also see him taking Hilton, the communist’s advice to construct a false story representing Herndon as the aggressor on the basis of the latter’s attitude towards African Americans.

Many critics have discussed Cross’ existential transition or shift from Bigger’s essentialism to his hybridized identity. For many critics, this transition is emblematic of Wright’s own geographical transition from America to France and ideological shift from his ‘attitudes as a Negro and a communist’ to a universal conceptualization of the African American problem. It is within this context that Abdurrahman (2008: 127) views The Outsider as ‘an existentialist novel in which a black man struggles to discover his own identity in his passage to becoming a universal man’ Firstly, there is no doubt that Cross’ crisis affects him as an African American and as Richard Wright has told us, the
same predicament affects other minority groups who have suffered the same tragic experience of western imperialism.

However, Cross’ quest for cultural universalism is problematic in that it goes along with self-denial or what Eldridge Cleaver (1968) calls a ‘death wish’ To be universal is not the same thing as being rootless or alienated from one’s environment. Wright’s attempt to separate Cross from his racial category is problematic because without a firm cultural anchorage (roots), Cross is likely to embrace western culture with an inferiority complex. The question is whether we have to shun our racial affiliation in our quest to embrace universal values. Paul Gilroy (1993: 19) argues that ‘diasporic identity is about roots as much as it is about routes in the diasporic journey’ Evidently, Cross’ existential leap from American ‘Negro’ exceptionalism of Bigger Thomas to the existential ‘man of the world’ is contentious in that it is founded on self-denial as Eldridge Cleaver has put it.

The cultural point of reference that Cross has shunned in Chicago is the one he is desperately seeking when he kneels before Eva. The name ‘Eva’ reminds us of ‘Eve,’ the original woman who ironically deceived the first man in the Garden of Eden. This, essentially is Cross’ predicament, that after abandoning his own culture he embraces deception or a culture with double standards. For all her confessions of love for blacks, Eva is not strong enough to stand Cross, the monster; hence she jumps through the window and dies. What is Wright’s point here? Is the white woman a symbol of freedom as Eldridge Cleaver has argued? It appears as if the white woman is portrayed as the Janus-faced devil that entices black people to their demise.

Like Bigger Thomas, Cross is still a victim of complexes of self-hate which can only be traced back to the years of slavery and racial segregation in America. Particularly because his idealism is western in origin, Cross is bound to question his past before he embraces it. Yet the question is: Do white people question their race before they conceive of themselves as universal? Even in Camus’ and Sartre’s existentialism we rarely encounter characters that shun their race and aspire for another. Both Mathieu in Sartre’s *The Age of Reason* and Meursault in Camus’ *The Stranger* are only searching for absolute individual freedom but their identity as white Europeans is not an issue.
This, in my view is Cross’ tragedy. His conception of universalism is narrowed to embracing western idealism.

Cross has attracted a lot of attention in critical circles because he moves away from the existentialism of his predecessors (Bigger Thomas and black boy) which is based on ‘felt life’ to one which is based on ideas. One of the criticisms that have been levelled against him and perhaps against his creator also is that he tends to impose western ideas on his society. In reading The Outsider, one can clearly pick out the influence of Sartre and Camus, yet in the earlier novels, Black Boy and Native Son for example; individual subjectivity grows out of ‘felt life’ rather than on experimental idealism. Cross’ maniacal actions of murder therefore, testify to his dislocated mind-set. Shunning his racial anchorage, he plunges into a shifty individuality, which worsens his already precarious life. The western existentialism that Cross has embraced is in itself problematic because it breaks down everything only to leave man as an island of thought, without any meaning. Like Sartre’s Mathieu in The Age of Reason who encourages his girlfriend to abort for fear of responsibility, Cross does not want to commit himself to anything or anybody, but is life meaningful without allegiance to anything or anybody?

Cross’ first murder reminds us of the way Bigger Thomas suffocates Mary Dalton to death in Native Son. Although Cross’ murder is premeditated, the actual act takes place in the heat of passion. At a time when Cross thinks that he has successfully escaped his past, Joe shows up. Joe is part of that nasty past which Cross is running away from. ‘This clown was tearing down his dream, smashing all he had so laboriously built up’ (p.478). Cross kills Joe because he is standing in the way of his freedom. He smashes Joe’s head with a bottle and pushes his body through the window. As far as Cross is concerned, Joe’s body signifies a problem. ‘He pushed it through the window at once, all in one swift, merciless movement’ (p.478). As has been said earlier, Cross is different from Camus’ hero in that he loves life. Confronted with a threat to his life, he does not remain indifferent as Meursault does in the courtroom, he takes action.
Since he has also rejected religion, Cross’ life is now being guided by his own personal instincts. He has nothing outside himself to control his impulses. Put differently and more succinctly, Cross’ problem, which is what makes him commit crime, is that he has no sense of society.

That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And his acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom. He would do with himself what he would, what he liked (p.457).

Clearly, his idea of freedom does not take cognizance of other people’s freedom. His concept of ‘perfect freedom’ is egocentric and thus brutal and murderous in its implementation. This is perhaps a result of his alienation from the culture of his people. Bekale (2009: 2) argues that ‘The Outsider is filled with echoes of historical mutation, which forced the Third World people to leave their tribal, ancestral anchorages of living by being sucked into the orbit of industrial enterprises’

The point is that Cross’ predicament is both cultural and intellectual. Given the tendency of dominant discourses to displace the culture of the other, the latter has a challenge to refuse being bought into the dominant discourse. Father Seldon, the priest Cross meets on the train to New York, is at peace with the world because he is guided by a religious philosophy. He finds anchorage in religion. The lesson we derive from Father Seldon’s case is that man needs a humanizing philosophy of life. Father Seldom hides under the cover of religion while Houston humanizes himself under the mask of the law. Owing to the anchor provided by his religious affiliation, Father seldom ‘was secure and walked the earth with a divine mandate, while for Cross ‘mere breathing was an act of audacity, a confounding wonder at the daily mystery of himself’ (p.494). The priest, according to Cross was a ‘dressed up savage intimidated by totems and taboos that differed in kind but not in degree from those of the most primitive of peoples’ (p.494). Both Father Seldon and Houston may be savages as Cross puts it, but they have philosophies of life to canvass their savagery and thus maintain some degree of integrity. It is Cross, who,
after failing to domesticate the savage in him, becomes a menace not only to his loved ones but also to himself.

In a philosophical discussion with Cross, Houston uncovers the cause of Cross’ criminality. ‘Negroes as they enter our culture are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference’ (p.494). African Americans will experience these problems with a difference because as much as they are within modern culture they are not of it, so they live as outsiders on the margins of western modernity. The experience of living in this No man’s land or what Homi Bhabha calls ‘the liminal space’ or ‘the third space’ is in part responsible for Cross’ psychopathological condition that drives him to manslaughter. The fact of being an outsider for Cross is not exactly the same experience for Meursault particularly because Meursault is a colonizer while Cross is an educated ‘black boy’. Unlike Meursault who is an outsider because he does not agree with social lies, Cross is an outsider because he has no world of his own. He is torn between two worlds.

It is no coincidence that Wright decided to call his protagonist Cross Damon. His name embraces two conflicting philosophies of life. Umah Abdurrahman (2008: 129) argues that ‘Cross’ tragedy is precipitated by several factors, the most important being symbolic: the contradictory nature of his name ‘Cross’ for the Christian cross, a symbol of redemption and ‘Damon’ for the devil’ It may also imply Cross’ complex quest for a cultural cross over. The name Cross was given to him by his mother who, in that name intended to give him her religious world. It reflects her dreams about her son. Firstly, she does not want him to be like his father, a drunkard who abandoned her when she fell pregnant, and secondly she wants him to be a Christian. In this regard Cross is torn between his father (the past), who is a symbol of failure and the Christian faith, which promises salvation.

Bekale (2009: 4) argues that ‘Cross Damon is like the westernized and tragic elites of the third world, outsiders who exist ambiguously on the margins of many cultures…Having travelled to and studied in European nations, African and Asian elites
are in western culture, but not of that culture’ Houston reiterates that since Negroes live on the margins of western modernity, they ‘are going to be gifted with a double vision, for being [African American] they are going to be both inside and outside of our culture at the same time’ (p. 494). I want to argue that the predicament of the Negro is not as simple as that. It is evident through Cross’ case that African Americans are desperately striving to be insiders and the first thing that they are ready to do is forget everything associated with their own culture. We also see this mentality in Frantz Fanon’s Martinicans who once they get to France forget their black identity and mimic the white man. The problem is that the two cultures are not on the same level, one is the culture of the colonizer, the other is the other culture, that’s why Cross is hopelessly attracted to Eva, neglecting Sarah, a lonely black woman whose husband has just been banished and is perhaps looking for company. When Frantz Fanon’s Martinicans get back to their own country, they are intellectually armed with one vision, the vision of the white man.

Here, we can clearly see that Cross’ predicament is not any man’s predicament. It is specifically an African American predicament. As an outsider, Cross is privileged because he stands in between cultures. Stuart Hall, (1998: 363) maintains that the outsider is only privileged if he appreciates his hybrid status. ‘You have to be familiar enough with it (the home culture) to know how to move in it. But you have to be sufficiently outside it so you can examine it and critically interrogate it’ We know that Cross dropped out of University before he completed his philosophy degree, so he is perhaps not familiar enough with the culture (intellectually) to be able to move in it (though as a black American he has some knowledge of white culture). Cross makes no effort to critically examine and interrogate his culture. He suffers from a cultural amnesia, a passion to forget and start afresh

As the district attorney puts it, before African Americans could be fully integrated into the western world they must adjust themselves to living in the No Man’s Land. The No Man’s Land is apparently a place of nowhere ness, neither American nor European. It is this psychological space that Cross is murderously negotiating. Most critics have analysed this phenomenon as if Cross has successfully apprenticed through the No
Man’s Land. Yet throughout the text, he remains fixed between blackness (which he refuses to acknowledge, though it clings on to him because he is black, culturally and historically) and modern European culture (which is not all that receptive because he does not belong to it). The No Man’s Land is also equivalent to negative existentialism, a stage Cross never passes because he gets overwhelmed by his crimes.

Kaam and Healy (in Abdurrahman 2008: 128) argue that when an existential crisis leads to personal fulfilment, ‘it is a sequence of psychological death, decision and rebirth. But man may remain fixated in the negative stage of existential crisis’ Cross goes through the psychological ‘death’ and ‘decision’ phases as evidenced by his flight from Chicago and the consequent murder of Joe, Blount and Hilton, yet instead of experiencing a rebirth, he remains fixed in his continuous search for ultimate freedom. His never-ending quest for freedom confirms the existentialist view that ‘man’s actual situation never coincides with his possibilities, that his being is essentially being-in-want-of’ (Marcusse, 1948:315). Thus instead of becoming free, Cross has become a prisoner of the very obsession with freedom. In theorizing intellectual freedom, Edward Said (2003: 201) argues that knowledge is ‘constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance and by stabilizing influences like schools, libraries and governments’ What we know is one way or the other dependant on what was known by others before. One’s thought can therefore not be free from other people’s thoughts.

In Native Son Bigger’s problem is undoubtedly the racial inhibition of American society. When Bigger laments the racial restrictions of apartheid America, we are tempted to sympathize with him especially at the beginning of the novel. Our wish is to see the colour line removed and Bigger Thomas flying the plane like his white counterparts. Yet in The Outsider, ‘Richard Wright elaborates a view of blackness and the relational ideologies of race and racism which support it, not as stable and fixed identities to be celebrated, overcome or even deconstructed, but as metaphysical conditions of the modern world’s existence that arise with and perhaps out of the overcoming of religious morality’ (Gilroy, 1993: 160). Gilroy’s point is rather elusive here because blackness,
race and racism are not always metaphysical except in the sense that they are constructions. Yet these constructions are real and have determined lives (including Cross’) for centuries. Perhaps the point is that these are not ‘stable and fixed identities’ Wright realizes that ending apartheid is not an end in itself. In his conversation with the district attorney, Cross says that once certain psychological inhibitions have been lifted from the African American, ‘then the problem of the Negro in America really starts, not only for whites who will have to become acquainted with Negroes, but mainly for Negroes themselves’ (p. 500).

The question is when the African American has been given the so called rights ‘will he be able to settle down and live a normal vulgar day to day life of the average American?’ (p. 500). This is in fact the challenge that is being faced by the postcolonial character and Cross is already beginning to experience it. How does a man or woman who has been oppressed for hundreds of years live as an equal of the man who has been oppressing him/her for those years? *The Outsider* clearly articulates this dilemma. Although Cross is intellectually able in relation to whites, for example Houston, Father Seldon and the communists, he remains an inferior other because he has nothing of his own. His education does not add value to him in the presence of whites because he is educated in what the white man already knows. The erstwhile master’s past is Cross’ present. Once again, we are prompted to ask: How can a man or woman who has lived as a slave master/imperialist for hundreds of years accept his former slave/subject as an equal?

Both Houston and Cross Damon share a similar but not the same predicament. Both are outsiders suffering some kind of deformity. While Houston’s deformity is physical (he is crippled). Damon’s is psychological owing to his existential psychosis (Abdurrahman, 2008:135). Cross’ experience is psychotic in the sense that he is trapped in a shifty, unpredictable no man’s land. One may argue with Richard Wright that ‘the race issue is human, not merely ethnic’ and ‘all sensitive men must recognize their black experience’ (Abdurrahman, 2008: 127). Cross fails to recognize his black experience and consequently, he also fails to humanize the criminal instinct that has
been whetted by his view of life as meaningless. While he criticizes society for living pretence, we find that his existentialism is also a mask to cover up his past and his fake identity. As he ponders over the issue of his newly found identity, Cross wonders ‘But what kind of man would he pretend to be? What kind of beliefs would he pretend to have?’ (p.530) implying that even his existentialism is pretence, a mask to cover his marred past. One is tempted to argue that the existentialist philosophy itself is pretence. ‘The identity he was seeking did not have to be fool proof; he wanted a mask of normality, just airtight enough to enable him to start living again without too much fear’ (p.535). Perhaps this is the peculiarity of ‘black existentialism’ as opposed to the ‘white existentialism’ of Sartre and Camus.

The drive behind Cross’s violent behaviour is twofold. Firstly, he has abandoned a familiar life and fled to an unfamiliar space where he can hardly find landmarks of orientation. In Chicago, his mother always acted as a moral barometer to constantly check on his behaviour but in New York he is plunged into the new world of communists and fascists. According to Reylea (2006: 10) ‘Wright’s concern with the situation of black intellectuals in the west and his increasing engagement with existentialism and psychoanalysis, led him to the central problem of The Outsider -- a black man’s attempted escape from stable, essentialist forms of identity, including race. Fleeing his former life Cross enters new spaces – a passenger train, the communist party- that permit the blurring and destabilizing of identities.’ The communist party is a potential haven for Cross because it does not require identity documents as criteria for membership. However, Cross’ obsession with absolute freedom clashes with the Communists’ obsession with power. Secondly, the world that confronts him in New York is too much for him. He now feels that he has acquired ‘too much freedom’ and his murderous actions can be linked to his attempt to exercise this too much freedom. Cross has acquired ‘too much freedom’ because his personal freedom has transcended and overshadowed the freedom of others. It has taken an out-rightly nihilistic inclination. Yet Jean Paul Sartre insists that we ‘cannot obtain truth whatsoever about ourselves except through the mediation of another’ (Sartre, 1948:45). In other words Cross' isolation is, if Sartre is right, his specific problem.
The more he searches for individual freedom the more he gets entangled in criminal activities. The further he goes from his people, the more confused he becomes. New York, which is an epitome of European modernity, is overwhelming and confusing. Cross can hardly find ‘landmarks of orientation’ in its alien social milieu.

One walks along a street and strays unknowingly from one’s path; one then looks up suddenly for those familiar landmarks of orientation and seeing none one feels lost. Panic drapes the look of the world in strangeness, and the more one stares blankly at that world, the stranger it looks, the more hideously frightening it seems. The wish is a hunger for power, to be in command of one’s self (p. 526).

Cross is shrouded in the confusion of this No Man’s Land and for him to have a sense of anchorage he desires power. His search for power and subjectivity clashes with Gil Blount’s communist ideology which also thrives on the exercise of absolute power. Being outsiders or cultural hybrids, both Cross and the communists understand the centrality of power in the construction of identity. The communists have constructed Cross as a potential demagogue for the party, yet Cross sees through the hypocrisy of communism—particularly its Janus face, reflecting the conflicting interests of the workers and the vanguard. The tension between Cross and the communists is inspired by their need for power to define and construct the other. Thus, killing the communists is for Cross a way of imposing his conceptualization of the world on them, the way the communists would impose theirs on the workers. Given the way Wright parted with the communist party, one may see this fantasy as his way of revenging.

Edward Margollies (in Hakutani, 2006: 116) argues that when Cross murders two communists and a fascist, his motives seem to derive more from what he regards as his victim’s desire to ‘enslave him psychologically rather than from any detached, intellectualized conscienceless compulsion on his part. What the communists would do to Cross if they had him in their power is precisely what his mother, wife and mistress have already done to him.’ This incidentally corresponds to American conservative
imagery, which tends to demonize both Communists and strong women. Richard Wright’s analysis of the use of power reminds us of his experiences with the communist party in New York that culminated in his disillusionment and resignation in 1944. Wright resigned from the party because of its tendency to control and suppress intellectual freedom. The communists’ desire for absolute control often degenerated into violence, which Wright condemned.

The ideological ruthlessness of communism is clearly demonstrated through the story of Bob Hunter. Bob Hunter has been organizing black people for the communist party and without explanation the party orders him to stop. When Bob tries to find out why, he is accused of being a counter revolutionary, blacklisted to the police and banished to Trinidad. Apart from its violent exercise of power, what is striking about the communist party is that all of its top leadership is white. Black people are only recruited into the party as organizers. To this end therefore, *The Outsider* is still preoccupied with the issue of race. The way Bob Hunter is treated reminds Sarah of her mother’s experience of the brutality of American apartheid which she says will ‘stay in (her) mind till (her) dying day’ (p.575). Although Bob Hunter is not directly victimized because of his race, the fact that he is not given a chance to appeal or even to know what he did wrong raises questions about the leadership of the party which, incidentally, is white.

The communists are inspired by the obsession to control and define the other, the zeal to subject the other to an essentialised world view. Frantz Fanon (1952, 1961: 131) argues that;

> Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being that his own human worth and reality depends. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed.
The communists want to destroy human subjectivity by exercising physical power on their victims. ‘It was power not just the exercise of bureaucratic control, but personal power to be wielded directly upon the lives and bodies of others,’ (p.582) yet for Cross ‘his subjectivity was the essence of his life and for him to deny it was as impossible as it would have been for him to deny himself the right to live’ Gary Oslon (2004:92) argues that once the relationship of dominance and submissiveness has arrived at this point, the move from paternalism to hatred seems effortless. This is the point of divergence between Cross and the communists which later leads him to the murder of Gil Blount, the communist and Herndon, the Southern fascist. Hakutani (1995: 56) asserts that ‘if Cross’s New York landlord is a painful reminder of the Ku Klux Klansmen of the South, his communist companion equally stands in the way on the road to his freedom and independence’ Although Cross kills the communists on the pretext that they are behaving like gods, in killing them he also assumes the role of a god or of course, of a fascist.

One of the things that have sparked controversy in the criticism of The Outsider is the issue of the motive behind Cross’ murders. We have said that Cross killed Joe Thomas to make way for the construction of a new past which for him is important if he is to start a new life. Yet looking at the double manslaughter of Gil and Herndon, it is difficult to come up with a single motive. Perhaps the double murder is a fulfilment of Wright’s promise to write a book that will be read ‘without the consolation of tears’ Considering the facts of the incident we see that when Cross enters the room where Blount and Herndon are fighting, the two are utterly exhausted and Cross towers above them like a god. For Cross, this is an opportunity to exercise power over the very people who have been standing in his way all along.

While it is plausible to say that Cross killed Herndon for his blatant Southern racism, the same explanation does not suffice for the murder of Gil Blount. We are informed that when Cross came to Blount he ‘stared for a moment’ then realized that ‘he was not through… The imperious (italics added) feeling that had impelled him to action was not fulfilled’ (p.612). Cross went to the extent of referring to Blount as an insect. ‘Yes this
other insect had to be crushed, blotted out of existence’ (p.612). Apparently, killing Bount is a way of fulfilling an ‘imperious’ feeling in him. When he labels him an insect, he is fetishizing and objectifying his enemy in order to eliminate him. Thus, in killing both Herndon and Blount, Cross is metaphorically conquering two worlds- the world of ideological bigotry and that of racial fundamentalism. Cross’ attitude is that of one with power over life and death and in this case it seems there is some pleasure in the exercise of absolute power.

It is in fact Houston, the hunchback who comes close to the most plausible motive for the double murder. Cross kills Herndon first because Herndon is an enemy of the African American race. This clearly shows that Cross is still guided by feelings of racial hatred. For Cross, Herndon stands for the ideals of white racial supremacy and killing him is an act of vengeance. However, he goes on to kill both Herndon and Blount because of the way they exercised their power over him. Herndon does not want Cross in his building because he is black and Blount wants to use Cross as a lackey in his plan to boost publicity for the communist party. Thus Cross kills them as a way of resisting their grip on his life. ’I killed two little gods…but they would have killed me too if they had found me like that’ (p.613). Although Cross is responsible for the death of Blount and Herndon, the communist party wants to use Blount’s death to stigmatize white America. Thus, to this end Hilton keeps quiet about Cross even though he knows that he is guilty. What comes out of this is the reconstruction of the murder case for the egocentric purposes of the communist party. Even the media is also influenced to publicize a fabricated version of the story to give the impression that Gil was an innocent victim of Herndon’s aggression. Cross’ defence is also crafted against the backdrop of the criminalization of blacks in America. One of the communists, Menti tells Cross to clear himself of suspicion because ‘cops are your enemies, boy. Look at what they have done to your people’ (p.630). Here we see that the communists are selfishly manipulating Cross’ racial affiliation to gain political mileage.

Although many critics have hinted on the implications of Cross relationship with Eva, they have not seriously considered this relationship as a possible motive for Cross’s
crimes. There are however suggestions in the text to the effect that Cross killed Blount and Hilton for Eva. According to Hakutani (2006: 115) ‘Cross murders the fascist Herndon as a reprisal but he intentionally kills Blount out of his desire for a white woman’ To begin with, Cross is conspicuously struck by Eva’s beauty the very first day he moves into her apartment. Through his rejected history in Chicago, we learn that Cross in a womanizer. He fell in love with Dot, his now abandoned girlfriend in a queue for rum and on his way to New York, we also see him paying for sexual intercourse with Jenny, the prostitute. Cross is a man who usually acts on his impulses. The very day he walks into Blount’s home, he is attracted to Eva and immediately takes advantage of a conversational interlude ‘to observe Eva who sat with her shapely nyloned knees close together and regarded him with wide enigmatic eyes’ (p.559). Beholding Eva’s irresistible beauty, he asks, ‘Did this man want him in the same house with a girl as beautiful as Eva? He was crazy' (p.563). Later in the text, we see Eva and Cross becoming closer and closer. Information from Eva’s diaries also reveals that Eva herself had fallen in love with Cross before Gil’s death. ‘That’s why I am beginning to adore coloured people; I could live my life with sun burnt people' (p.596). As for Eva, she has every reason to fall in love with Cross because she is frustrated in her relationship. Gil married her for political reasons; as such he gives more attention to the party than to her.

However, what is more striking about Cross and Eva is that Cross is genuinely in love. This is astonishingly ironic because here is a man who has abandoned his family and a pregnant girlfriend in Chicago, both of whom are black, now hopelessly in love with Eva, a white woman. In his relationship with Eva, Cross does not fret and complain about freedom and responsibility as he does in his marriage with Gladys. If anything, Cross is ready to help Eva each time she needs financial help though she refuses it. What is more fascinating is that Cross goes to the extent of kneeling before Eva to confess his love. ‘He went to his knees and clutched his arms about her legs. He would beg and plead for his life’ (p.795).This desperate display of love is questionable because when his wife and kids are brought before him after a long time of separation, Cross does not
seem to be perturbed. He manages to live up to the hard heartedness expected of a man slayer.

Yet when it comes to Eva, he kneels and begs. We are thus reminded of Eldridge Cleaver’s observation in *Soul on Ice* (1968: 160) that for the African American a white woman is more than a woman, she is a goddess. ‘Men die for freedom but black men die for white women who are the symbol of freedom’ ‘Yes he would make of that girl his life’s project, his life’s aim, he would take her hand and lead her and, in leading her, he would be leading himself out of despair toward some kind of hope’ (p.795). Doubtlessly, Cross is fetishizing the white woman. The ‘kind of hope’ that he expects from Eva is the freedom that he has been fighting for all along. Apparently falling in love with Eva, a white woman is for Cross a psychological journey from the ‘despair’ of his blackness to the ‘hope’ of whiteness, with all that it symbolizes. Given this scenario, one is prompted to ask if this is the object of Cross’ restlessness; his final destination.

Cross’ love for Eva comes close to the Fanonian Negro desire for white women in that after Eva’s death, Sarah, a Negro woman, whose husband has been banished to Trinidad, is desperately in need of someone to lean on, yet Cross walks out on her. In his confession (and he only confesses to Eva!) he actually goes to the point of asking Eva to save him as if she were a goddess or Jesus Christ. ‘Eva save me’ He says (p.715). Since the name Eva may be associated with Eve the mother of humankind, perhaps Cross is in a metaphysical sense returning to the source to discover himself. But does Eve necessarily have to be white?

If Cross is the cross of Christ, then it is possible that in falling in love with Eva, he has succumbed to the tricks of the devil: the American white woman is often associated with death by lynching. Hakutani (2006: 112) notes that ‘Damon associates black women with bondage because of their economic overdependence on him’. Black women are over dependent- so goes the argument but in his relationship with Eva, Cross pampers her; he attempts to make her rely on him. Perhaps in this case one can argue that Cross’s picture of black women is a construction of white America, just as much as his
view of Eva is also a construction. These stereotypical conceptions were instilled in him by his experience of American apartheid. Eldridge Cleaver (1968:160) points out that ‘the white man made the black woman the symbol of slavery and the white woman the symbol of freedom’

Most importantly, Cross’ desperate need for someone in his life is a realization that freedom is not possible without other fellow human beings. In his confession to Eva he realizes that it is important to believe in something. ‘You see Eva I don’t believe in anything’ (p.797). A man ought to believe in something; otherwise he becomes an animal, a man slayer like Cross. In his confessions, Cross also reveals the role of his experience of blackness in shaping his current behaviour. ‘When I stood in that room I saw more senselessness and foolishness right before my eyes and I felt a way to stop it…And I hated myself because all my life I was unable to do anything about it’ (p.797). This is reminiscent of Bigger Thomas’s confessions after killing Mary Dalton that he was free because he had done what he had always wished to do. What is it that Cross, an African American could have longed to do to white people all his life? It follows without saying: to kill the men and have sex with the women. This is perhaps a manifestation of an inter-racial Oedipus complex. This obsession is evident in Eldridge Cleaver’s passionate serial rape cases documented in his Soul on Ice (1968).

Cross also claims that he is not sorry for the murders because he knows he was right. In what way is he right? Perhaps he is right because he has done the very same thing that his victims could have done to him if they had acted earlier. However, there is a possibility that Cross is innocent because as an African American, he is unleashing vengeance on the white race for the crimes they have committed against his people for generations. It is ironic however that the communist party at this time (the 1950s) is probably the nearest thing to a non-racial organization in America. In that sense therefore Cross is blindly fulfilling a longing that has been suppressed for a long time, the same way Tsotsi in Fugard’s novel blindly unleashes a reign of terror in the ghetto killing innocent people of his kind. Cross, like Tsotsi, fulfils the longing, in part, by undermining a force which might help other blacks. As has been argued in the previous
chapter this desire for revenge is, according to Baldwin, inherent in every African American. Clearly, Cross’ existential journey is a failure because it is based on a dislocated world view. Although it is true that identities are neither static nor essentialist, their transmutation into the future is always based on history.

Cross Damon’s predicament can thus be summed up as that of an African American negotiating the intricacies of western modernity. Cross is, however not a conventional man and his mode of negotiation is also not conventional. Houston, the outsider investigator refuses to convict Cross for his crimes particularly because he understands Cross’ outsider mentality. We are told that Houston is also an outsider because of his physical deformation- he is a hunchback. However, it must be noted that while Cross, like Meursault, is militantly at variance with particular social norms, Houston is, on the other hand, a conformist with a double vision. It is not Houston who has taken a position against society, rather it is society that has stigmatized him and made him an outsider. Thus, he feels excluded the very same way Cross feels because of his skin colour. At one point, Blount’s friends are astonished to see Cross in the apartment implying that he does not belong.

Houston tells us that in Cross’ ‘we are dealing with a man who has wallowed in guilty thought’ Abdurrahman (2008: 127) summarizes The Outsider as ‘a psychological study of the human psyche and of an existential neurosis that has transformed an individual into a murderous psychopath’ In this regard, Cross becomes a psychological criminal though most of the evidence that is raised to prove him guilty implies that he is a moral criminal. Society classifies him as a moral criminal because it cannot know his thoughts. While we expect Cross to be convicted as a murderer, the appearance of his wife and children suggest that he is also guilty of failing to fulfil his social responsibilities. It is however not convincing to explain Cross’ crimes in terms of his existential idealism or ‘guilty thought’ as Houston puts it, without taking cognizance of his experience of blackness in America. Houston reminds Cross that he is a Negro, and he knows what fascism means to him and his people (p.823). This remark suggests that in his attempt
to formulate a new identity, Cross has not managed to transcend objective experiences that have been imposed on his race.

Thus again, we see that Wright’s attempt to project Cross as ‘any man’ is not successful. Since he is African American, the way he sees fascism in particular and the modern world in general is historically determined. Cross is deeply satisfied after murdering Herndon not only because he has killed a fascist (who is an enemy to his country), but also because he has killed a racist (who is an enemy of his race). The implication of Houston's judgment is rather complex because it seems to confirm Cross' claim that ‘in my heart I know… I am innocent’ (p. 839). Perhaps Cross cannot be given a judgment because all his victims were also potential criminals. The judge himself is an outsider, a potential criminal hiding under the cover of the law. Cross’ death in the hands of communists implies that he is finally defeated by the very god-like powers that he has been exercising on others. He is defeated by his longing for freedom without limits. He cannot be god because he loves life; a god doesn’t need to run away from circumstances. He is a god only in his own mind – which verges upon psychosis. Paul Gilroy (1993:164). maintains that 'his god like feelings may exist beyond the orbit of racial identity, but in spite of these inclinations Cross remained shackled by and to the voiceless condition of America’s urban blacks'

What is explicit is that Cross is a type of a postcolonial man negotiating the postcolonial trauma of standing in between cultures. Homi Bhabha argues that this 'in between space' provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative signs of collaboration, and contestation, in the idea of defining society itself’ (1994: 2). In his interaction with western modernity, Cross is negotiating a space and a place for himself in the modern world. The place of the postcolonial in a destabilized (postcolonial) world is one which is precarious and contested. Cross aspires to make himself relevant by refusing to be confined and positioned by western modernity. He embraces western culture so as to deconstruct it and curve a place for himself within it. Bill Ashcroft’s theory of postcolonial transformation maintains that marginal cultures transform by manipulating, negotiating
and translating the dominant culture (western idealism, in Cross’ case). for their own purposes. ‘The terms of cultural engagement,’ argues Bhabha, ‘whether antagonistic or affiliative are produced performatively’ (Bhabha, 1994: 3) and this in my view, is what Cross has failed to do. Cross’ ‘performance’ is unsustainable because it confronts and kills instead of circumventing and subverting. He does not understand that he can only find a place in western culture through subtle negotiation rather than through ‘imperial conquest.’

This chapter has established that Cross is first and foremost an Africa American. His tragedy is that he longs for universal (western) values at the expense of the values of his race. He is thus caught in between-cultures (in a No Man’s Land). The point is that one must first of all understand one’s culture, history and identity before one embraces universal values. Cross is a man who is searching outside for the things that are inside him. He cannot attain freedom by eliminating his enemies; rather he ought to free himself from historically fostered complexes that make him see western modernity as superior. The next chapter takes a leap into Athol Fugard’s plays, Boesman and Lena and Sizwe Bansi is Dead. Although Fugard has been isolated as a liberal writer and thus by implication a part of the apartheid system, his work also deals with similar issues that Richard Wright has been idolized for. In Boesman and Lena (the marriage of antagonistic cultural worldviews) and Sizwe Bansi is Dead (the cultural death of a nation). Fugard is dealing with questions of identity and self-recovery in the event of cultural displacement and dislocation.
CHAPTER FIVE

Survival and apartheid violence in *Boesman and Lena* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

This chapter focuses on Athol Fugard’s plays *Boesman and Lena* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* which were written and performed at the height of apartheid rule in South Africa. The chapter starts off by drawing parallels between Richard Wright and Athol Fugard in an attempt to underline the significance of both writers’ backgrounds (particularly the circumstances into which they were born) in shaping their world views. Bill Ashcroft’s theory of postcolonial transformation is the underpinning theoretical paradigm that I have adopted to interrogate the subtle tricks that were devised by the colonised in South Africa to subvert apartheid policies and open spaces for personal survival. As we have seen in Wright’s *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, the objective of apartheid is first and foremost to relegate its subjects to a position of inferiority in all spheres of life, to make them live on the margins with barely enough resources to sustain themselves. Using Ashcroft’s theory, this chapter argues that this objective was counteracted, not through violent means as Bigger Thomas does in *Native Son*, but through subtle techniques that could not be easily combated.

Athol Fugard was born in 1932 in Middelburg (Eastern Cape Province). His father was English (a descendant of the Manchester immigrants) while his mother was an Afrikaner of the Potgieter family, one of the Vootrekker families of three centuries responsible for the settling of the Transvaal. (Preece, 2008: 91). Athol Fugard grew up under the strong hand of his Afrikaner mother who ran a cash store in Middelburg and later a boarding house in Port Elizabeth. His background is, in some respects, similar to that of Richard Wright who was born in Mississippi, one of the most segregated provinces of the American South of the 20th century. Fugard’s father, like Wright’s, was for all practical purposes insignificant to his upbringing - he was an alcoholic, crippled and often bedridden. Similarly, Wright’s father was irresponsible and abusive, abandoning his family for another woman when Richard Wright was a little boy. Thus, both Wright and Fugard had poor backgrounds, with strong matriarchal foundations. Athol Fugard’s
background, like Richard Wright’s is of ‘peculiar interest and significance’ (Walder in Fugard 2000: xi) because it played a crucial role in the development of his craft. Most of his plays were inspired by personal experiences and encounters with actual people. Athol Fugard ‘assertively refers to himself as a “regional” writer who cannot exist and continue his craft independent of his home’ (Preece, 2008:92). Although Richard Wright was also influenced by his experiences in the Deep South (his home), he later rejected it and moved to France where he died in 1960.

Athol Fugard’s bicultural upbringing which embraces Afrikaner Calvinism and liberal English culture is evident in his works particularly in the way he adopts both English and Afrikaans as media of artistic expression. The Afrikaner culture was, however, more dominant because of the strength of his mother’s personality (Preece, 2008: 91). Growing up into the system of apartheid; Athol Fugard had to grapple with the imperatives of racial discrimination at an early age. First, there was the question of race prejudice explicitly dramatized in a childhood incident when young Fugard spit into the face of a black servant (Fugard, 1982: 26). This incident, which is documented in his play, Master Harold and the boys, reminds us of the racial tension of apartheid South Africa which he (Fugard) later encountered first hand at the Native Commissioner’s Court in Johannesburg where he worked for six months (in 1958) as a clerk. Fugard refers to that period as the ‘most traumatic for [him] as a white South African’ because he ‘saw more suffering than he could cope with’ (Fugard, 1994: vi). This experience reminds us of Richard’s early encounters with the colour line in Black Boy, for example, his realization on his way to Memphis that black people were supposed to seat at the back of the bus. Athol Fugard and Richard Wright deal with ‘lives of black people who are constantly threatened by white laws and black gangsters’ (Fugard, 1994: vi).

Unlike Richard Wright who encountered existentialism later when he moved to France, Athol Fugard studied philosophy at the University of Cape Town which introduced him to the works of Albert Camus and other existentialists. Apart from his academic training, he also, like Richard Wright, became an existentialist through ‘felt life’. We are told that when he abandoned his philosophy degree at the University of Cape Town, he hitch-
hiked across Africa with a friend and later found a job at sea, an experience that exposed him to different races and stripped him of the racial fundamentalism of apartheid South Africa. This was fortified by his experience at the Fordsburg Court where he came face to face with the brutality of apartheid legislation.

Athol Fugard’s work has attracted a lot of criticism particularly in relation to his liberal existentialist vision. Crow and Banfeild (1996:101) view Athol Fugard’s work as ‘some kind of collaboration between two distinguishable but in reality always interweaving impulses,’ that is ‘Fugard’s commitment to an existentialist vision of identity and behaviour, influenced initially by his reading of Camus, and his equally strong commitment to witness and record in his theatre the oppressive operation and effects of the social and political system of apartheid’ In his plays, Athol Fugard is preoccupied with witnessing the marginalized in the ‘non-providential’ universe of apartheid South Africa, particularly their endeavour to open survival spaces in the exclusive environment.

Following Michael Billington’s neo Marxist criticism that urged Fugard to add ‘some political gesture’ to his witnessing (in Gray, 1982), Martin Orkin (1991:62) characterizes Athol Fugard’s politics as ‘ultimately despairing and also promoting a sympathetic despair in others’ For Martin Orkin, Athol Fugard’s liberal existential discourse ‘invokes in audiences and critics alike a sense of helplessness in the face of any alternative to (for instance) Boesman and Lena’s destitution’ (p. 62). Therefore, by implication, it invokes a sense of helplessness in the face of the apartheid system. This critical reception is similar to the one received by Richard Wright after publishing Native Son. James Baldwin, for example, was concerned about the manner in which Wright had portrayed Bigger, arguing that Bigger was far from an accurate representation of African American reality. Of course, in the case of Athol Fugard, the political context of the play (1960s) must be considered, for this was a bleaker context as opposed to the 1980s and 1990s. Robert Kavanagh (in Durbach, 1999: 63) has also taken Fugard to task for his concept of ‘witnessing,’ arguing that ‘remembering, witnessing or surviving are
merely counterrevolutionary examples of the futility of talking about apartheid instead of changing the situation’

It is evident that Kavanagh, in the fashion of neo-Marxist criticism, expects Fugard to denounce apartheid and take an overt political position against it. Yet it is plausible that by ‘talking about’ apartheid oppression, Fugard is politically engaged because he is representing (as in speaking for) the marginalized. Given that Fugard is white and therefore a potential oppressor, his attempt to identify with the oppressed must be appreciated. Ngugi wa Thiongo, in his Writers in Politics has told us that the writer has a responsibility not only to record injustice but also to help change oppressive systems. However, in Fugard’s world, the two are not always unrelated- witnessing is itself a way of appropriating and using discourse to tell the story of those that have been othered by apartheid. Although Athol Fugard has, in some cases, been conceptualized as ‘a barking dog’ that ‘merely irritates,’ Dennis Walder maintains that ‘any ideological reading of Fugard is in itself parochial because it will necessarily delimit his complexity and push him towards the either/or formulations of propaganda’ (1999:61). Fugard has specified his mission as that of witnessing the lives of poor people ‘in this little corner of the world,’- thus he is ‘more concerned with people rather than politics’ (Gray, 1982: 26). The overwhelmingly huge reception of his plays in black townships at the height of apartheid repression bears testimony to this position. Fugard does not take particular ideological positions and defend them as Ngugi does. Even his existentialism, unlike that of Richard Wright in The Outsider, is placed within the local context of apartheid South Africa. Hauptfleisch etal argue that ‘Fugard should be judged in terms of the conditions that shaped his work’ (1982: 10).

The point that Dennis Walder is making, which perhaps has been overlooked by many critics is that witnessing, remembering and survival are equally important in any kind of resistance to oppression. Witnessing is what Richard Wright sought to achieve in Native Son, ‘to tell the truth as [he] saw it and felt it’ (1991: 874). Frantz Fanon tells us that in projecting the colonized as mean, ugly and without a history, the colonizer wants to destroy a sense of self-worth in the colonized; in other words to instil a culture of self-
hate. Remembering is ultimately what Chinua Achebe (in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989:126) is talking about when he says that ‘he would be quite satisfied if his novels, especially the ones set in the past, did no more than teach his readers that their past, with all its imperfections, was not one long night of savagery from which the first European, acting on God’s behalf delivered them’ Similarly, Bill Ashcroft (2001) contends that resistance to colonial cultural oppression does not take a confrontational approach at all times. Athol Fugard is not only fascinated by direct opposition but also the subtle ways employed by the oppressed of apartheid South Africa to resist the establishment. In some cases, violent opposition is retrogressive because the enemy has all the technical and ideological machinery to crash any kind of revolutionary fervor. These subtle forms of resistance are more sustainable considering the hostility of the apartheid regime at the time, which often used the force of law to confiscate what it considered subversive literature.

Subtle opposition in the form of Lena’s refusal to forget and to be forgotten becomes a very powerful way of perpetuating self within the dominant repressive machinery of apartheid. As Leela Gandhi (1998: 9) puts it, ‘memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity’ It is a way of re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present (Bhabha, 1994: 63). This subtle way of navigating and negotiating repressive hegemony is reminiscent of Richard Wright’s black boy and Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, both of whom have to mask their disgruntlement in order to navigate the apartheid laws of the Deep South. In his theatre, Athol Fugard also portrays how apartheid impacted the lives of ordinary people in South Africa, demonstrating how the marginalized often manipulated fractures within the system in order to carry on. Nowhere are these forms of subtle resistance aptly captured than in Boesman and Lena, Sizwe Bansi is dead and The coat. It is important to note that, in these works, Athol Fugard is fascinated with ordinary people’s quest for survival against the tide of apartheid’s repressive laws. The coat narrates the challenges of the anti-apartheid struggle, foregrounding the role played by women and children in sustaining the spirit of the struggle, even at those times when men were locked up.
In *Boesman and Lena*, Athol Fugard dramatizes the destitution constructed by the apartheid regime particularly after the enactment of the Population Registration Act and the Group areas Act that sought to classify and physically separate people on the basis of skin colour respectively. While plays like *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act* satirize the Immorality Act, a piece of legislation that sought to control interracial marriages and thus miscegenation, *Boesman and Lena* focuses on the lives of two coloured ‘reject characters’ who have been reduced to the status of white man’s rubbish. With their pondoks smashed to the ground in the name of slum clearance, Boesman and Lena become tramps walking in an endless circle without a defined destination. ‘Where their journey began is as uncertain as their destination’ (Preece, 2008: 37). The constant walking, from place to place, which seems to have no defined destination, reminds us of Richard’s journeys in *Black Boy*. The implication is that in the aftermath of colonialism, the colonized are dislocated both physically and psychologically. In *Black Boy*, Richard is searching for a place he can call home, a place where his intellectual faculties can grow without inhibitions.

Similarly, Boesman and Lena are displaced coloureds who traverse the South African Karoo in an attempt to make sense of the absurdity which has cast them adrift. As displaced and misplaced figures, they argue and fight to contest their own presence (Preece, 2008: 37). The search for a place of one’s own is not only physical but also psychological. In *The Outsider*, Cross is also looking for a kind of home; a place of universal ethos that can allow him to live as he pleases. Boesman and Lena are trying to ‘forge meaning and substance from the circular paths and seemingly meaningless routines of their lives’ (Wertheim, 2000: 57). Fugard tells us in the introduction to the 1998 edition of *Boesman and Lena* that the play was conceived out of a real life experience of ‘a coloured man and woman burdened with all their belongings whom [he] passed on the road near Laingsburg’ (Fugard, 1998: i). As the play opens, we see Boesman and Lena on an empty stage, heavily burdened just after their shacks have been destroyed. The way they are dressed speaks of poverty. Boesman is dressed in ‘shapeless grey trousers,’ ‘an old shirt’ and ‘faded and torn sports-club blazer’ (1). Lena,
on the other hand, is wearing ‘one of those sad dresses that reduce the body to an angular, gaunt cipher of poverty’ (1). Both are barefooted to suggest a simple, earth bound existence. Like grandmother in Black Boy and Mrs Thomas in Native Son, Lena has been ‘reduced to a dumb animal-like submission by the weight of her burden and the long walk behind them’ (1). The question that immediately comes to mind is where she is going. The answer as Boesman tells us is ‘here’ implying that the ‘two reject characters’ as Fugard calls them, have been condemned to live in the perpetual present, from one moment to the next. The system cannot allow them to do anything productive with their lives which reminds us of Bigger Thomas who says black people are the only ‘things (italics added) that cannot go where [they] want go and do what they want to do’ (464). Boesman and Lena’s lives are ‘here’ because their past has just been bulldozed and flattened to the ground. Lena is walking submissively behind her husband; she does not know where she is going.

The dilemma of walking without a destination echoes Cross’ in The Outsider who is searching for something undefined (perhaps freedom) from the beginning up to the end of his life. ‘In the play’s larger realm ‘Here?’ is an existential question for a Lena who will spend her time on the stage searching for the meaning of her life and for her value as a human being’ (Wertheim, 2000: 56). Like Lena, whose life is ‘here,’ Cross is also continuously evading the past so as to define himself in the present. History, as Cross sees it, is not given, it is made. On the other hand, Boesman and Lena are products of what happened to them in the past. They do not have a future because when Lena asks Boesman where they are going, he says ‘here,’ which means they are literally stuck in the mud as suggested by the mud through which they run away from the wrath of the white man.

Boesman and Lena’s circular and un-progresssive life gives us a picture of what apartheid intended to make of black people through the historical slum clearances. Marcia Blumberg (1998:64) characterizes Boesman and Lena as homeless and therefore predetermined by apartheid policy. The word ‘predetermined’ captures the way apartheid policy was designed to dislocate and keep them running like the nigger of
Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Boesman and Lena’s lives after the destruction of the pondok are an attempt to come to terms with the sudden reality of physical dislocation. Unlike blacks who had homelands to which they were relocated, coloureds had no homelands, hence the vagrancy of Boesman and Lena. The disruption of place and space caused by these ‘urban removals’ is explicitly articulated in Lena’s statement that they are always ‘on the wrong road at the right time’ or on ‘the right road leading to the wrong place,’ (p. 27) an epistemological paradigm that reminds us of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Camus’s absurdity in *The myth of Sisyphus*.

Martin Orkin (1991: 143) also argues that ‘the predicament of Boesman and Lena and their ensuing experience suggest the thousands upon thousands of squatters who still inhabit present day South Africa’ as a result of the historic removals in the name of influx control. In fact the so called ‘influx control was designed to facilitate a steady supply of labour and the perpetuation, in consequence, of the master-servant relationship in which the master can dictate all because the labourer he deals with has no rights of domicile, no home ownership, no rights to live with her/his family and is therefore totally vulnerable and insecure’ (Orkin, 1991: 144). The master-servant relationship that Orkin refers to is clearly demonstrated in the relationship between Isaiah and his mistress in the novel, *Tsotsi*. Although Boesman and Lena have been thrown away by the white man as rubbish, they still depend on the same white man for their livelihood. If they find one with ‘a soft heart’ and ‘a soft head,’ (p. 29) he will give them a job. Similarly Bigger Thomas seems to have no option but to take a job with the Daltons. If he does not take the job, the relief will cut them off and they won’t have any food (p. 456).

In *Boesman and Lena*, Fugard articulates the consequences of this so called influx control on the lives of those that were relegated to the lower rungs of the apartheid caste hierarchy. When we see Boesman and Lena heavily burdened and wearing old clothes the impression we get is that of destitution that is generated systematically. Boesman is ‘dragging a piece of corrugated iron’ while Lena has ‘a bundle of firewood under one arm’ (p.1). The two are in a very literal sense carrying a home on their backs.
Having been reduced to vagabonds, their conception of life has also been reduced to mere survival. The way Lena lets the bundle of firewood fall to the ground, followed by her deep breath, tells us that they have come a long way. Moreover, the piece of mud between Lena’s feet suggests that it has been difficult getting ‘here’. She has been running from place to place; she is confused, but she knows she has been to Swartkops because of the mud on her feet. Mud is associated with the suffering they are going through and the substandard earthbound life they are living.

Having been mocked and condemned by the system, it seems as if nature itself has condemned them too. Albert Wertheim (2000: p. 58) argues that ‘Boesman and Lena’s lives are earthbound, in the mud, mocked not merely by whites, but even by the birds’. The bird in the opening scene of the play is reminiscent of the one Bigger Thomas admires in Native Son, enjoying freedom yet Boesman and Lena are walking around homeless. Lena’s eyes follow it (the bird/freedom) as it glides out of sight (2). This also reminds us of Jesus’ words in Matthew 8 verse 20 that ‘foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head’. Boesman and Lena are in a similar position, as types of postcolonial characters, with neither holes nor nests (unlike birds of the air) to lay their heads.

The idea of mud further implies being stuck in the politics of apartheid. Boesman has been walking quickly, denying conversation with Lena, only to come ‘Here’. The emptiness suggested here echoes Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot where Estragon and Vladimir are stuck in the uncertainty of waiting. When Lena says ‘Boesman! What’s here?’ (p.2), the ‘here’ implied by Lena is double-edged. It can refer literally to the place where they are standing or it can also; on a metaphorical level, refer to apartheid South Africa, the place that she seems to be referring to later when she says ‘this piece of world is rotten’ (p.2). Athol Fugard tells us that his aim in capturing the life of his time is to ‘witness as truthfully as he can the nameless and destitute of this little corner of the world’ (Blumberg, 1998: 125). Alternatively, ‘here’ is the social and psychic space they inhabit.
Perhaps Boesman and Lena perfectly fit into this category of the ‘nameless and destitute’ because when the white man says ‘voetsek’ they run for their lives, as if they are intruders on the white man’s land. In his desire for more and more space, the white man in apartheid South Africa displaced coloureds and blacks, only to dump them in barren areas. Apparently, physical displacement is always a traumatic experience because it involves involuntarily leaving a home, traditions and cultures for a new and unfamiliar place. In a sense, Boesman and Lena are negotiating the postcolonial trauma associated with displacement and dislocation. Having been moved away from their shacks in Korsten, they now have the challenge of refashioning themselves within the new cultural milieu of ‘here’ Bill Ashcroft argues that ‘a sense of place may be embedded in history, in legend and language … without becoming a concept of contention and struggle, until colonization disrupts a people’s sense of place’ (2001: 125) through forced displacements and occupation. Or, as in colonialism, where the place still exists but now “belongs” to someone else. Boesman and Lena’s predicament is that their place has been disrupted, but the point that Fugard is making is that in spite of this alienating experience, they still find ways of carrying on, of holding on to life. What is extremely fascinating for Fugard and the critic alike is to investigate how ordinary people negotiate the trauma that goes with changing place. Don Maclennan (1982: 219) argues that Fugard is also preoccupied with ‘man’s survival. Sheer survival is not easy and if you are poor it is much the worse’

Boesman and Lena take liquor to ameliorate the magnitude of their suffering. When Boesman says, ‘Let’s have a dop’ (p.2) he is attempting to blot himself out so that he can forget Lena’s nagging and the trauma and shame of being a man without a fixed abode. We also see the same attitude, what Fanon calls the ostrich’s head in sand mentality, in the novel Tsotsi where the four gangsters take liquor and zol so as to forget traumatic experiences that they engage in for survival. Tsotsi and his gang use liquor to obliterate history and sever themselves from the past and live in the perpetual present. Lena also takes liquor to ‘cope’ and remember how she got ‘here’
Lena’s attitude to her situation is different from Boesman’s. While Boesman claims to be happy after the removals (p. 4), Lena refuses to live her life as constructed by the apartheid regime. Although she has been displaced from her traditional social milieu, she makes every effort through memory to disinter herself from the rubble of apartheid’s slum clearance. She is not overcome by what has happened in her life because she has other avenues of negotiating it—dancing, singing and remembering. On the other hand, Boesman has, to a certain extent, been bought into the system. He has internalized the values of the colonizer and in doing that, he begins to hate himself. The white man has constructed him as a ‘hotnot’ and has disseminated propaganda claiming that the forced removals are for the good of blacks and coloureds. In his naivety, Boesman accepts all these falsehoods. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks*, explicitly and dramatically presents the way in which the oppressed are bought into the discourse of the colonizer. After the Negro boy in his essay ‘The fact of blackness’ has been labelled an animal, bad, mean, ugly, he sits down and reminisces:

> All round me, the white man, above, the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me… I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there for who can tell me what beauty is? (1952:114).

The Negro boy, like Boesman, has been convinced that he is ugly and worthless. Boesman claims that he is happy in spite of what has happened to his family. ‘I was sick of it so I laughed’ (p. 4). For him, the white man has done him a favour in pushing over the ‘rotten old pondok’ (p.4). Although at first glance Boesman may appear as someone who has hopelessly succumbed to the system, it is plausible that this attitude is perhaps his own survival strategy just as much as Lena finds solace in dancing, talking and remembering. Like Shorty, in *Black Boy*, who bares his back to receive the white man’s blow, Boesman embraces the removals as his lot. Although his strategy allows him to survive, it is rather temporary and self-destructive; it cannot sustain and usher him into the future. It must be noted that apartheid, like colonization itself has always been a
highly patriarchal system. It was a man’s world, with the white man at the top, his wife, coloureds (men and women) and finally blacks (men and women) at the bottom of the hierarchical structure. Boesman’s predicament therefore is that of a highly patriarchal man who has been emasculated. He hates himself mainly because his values have been undercut and to cushion himself, he resorts to assaulting his wife. This can be compared to Bigger’s assault of Gus in Native Son, which is a way of transferring his frustration to his colleague.

Lena attempts to reorient herself by remembering the places she has been to- Veeplaas, Kosten, Redhouse etc. She wants to locate herself in the shiftiness of a dislocated universe, to find herself and avoid getting lost (p. 15). The names of the places where she has been evicted are placeholders for her space. Names may change as most of these have already changed in post-apartheid South Africa but Lena must have a mental cartography. She wants to keep these locations in her mind so as to remember her roots and routes. The questions that she asks, ‘where are we going? Who? What? How?’ (p. 7) are searching questions which probe into her past. Remembering is a way of rearranging the past so as to position oneself in it. Lena is asking ‘where am I’ because her physical and psychological universe has been disoriented. The way she has been moved, particularly the brutality of it and the cyclic route she took walking from one place to another, confuses her memory. The implication is that if she lost memory, she would also forfeit her capacity to reclaim the lost home, even imaginatively. When Boesman gives different directions, she says ‘don’t mix me up Boesman’ (p.11) to imply that a clear memory keeps her from being mixed up- it is the key to her history. Many of the displaced victims of District Six and Sophiatown, and the Palestinian victims of the naqba, kept the keys to their lost houses as tokens that remind them of their place. ‘Memory is something that can be carried, not only through official narratives and books’ (Said, 2003: 182). Lena is thus ‘as desperate to remember as she is to be witnessed: to dredge up from oblivion the ordering of events that evolve meaning out of chaos and identity out of confusion’ (Errol Durbach, 1999:66). When she mentions all the places she has been to, Veeplaas, Korsten, Redhouse etc, she is involved in a serious process of reorientation. ‘Remembering
means rediscovering history, resisting the insidiously programmed forgetting that deprives the dispossessed of the memory of their past’ (Durbach, 1999: 66). By dislocating natives from their culture, the colonial enterprise aimed to inculcate ‘a loss of memory which would make them forget who they are and where they came from’ (Tripathy, 2009:11). As a result ‘decolonizing mind and history involves remembering connections and knowing native histories’ (Tripathy: 2009:11). Lena is not necessarily looking for history with a capital letter H or an ‘objective and disinterested recording of the past,’ rather she is attempting to ‘comprehend and master history by means of a model that grants particular meaning to the past’ (Hutcheon, 2002: 61). She even tries to reorient herself physically, to get directions that she understands and believes in.

Her fantasies are not to be dismissed because they tell us where she wants to be in relation to where she has been and where she is. More importantly, Lena is not simply looking back nostalgically; she is reorienting herself in order to get a place on the map. ‘You won't mix me up this time. I remember, the Boer pointed his gun and you were gone, no-stop to Swartkops. Then Veeplaas. Then Korsten. And now here’ (p.12), she says. When Boesman tries to further disorient her, she becomes agitated, ‘is it wrong Boesman?’ (p. 13). In other words, she wants to know how it came about that she is here and that question is important because it begins a journey into the past. We see Toni Morrison’s protagonist taking a similar journey in Beloved to unearth the roots of gendered oppression in the slave system. Lena’s emphatic statement, ‘I know how I got here’ (p.10) is one which reconstructs her in the orbit of history. She knows the places she has been to, the experiences she has gone through and where she is now. The implication is that she knows her identity. Thus although she has been physically displaced, she is making efforts to recover her bulldozed world, at least imaginatively and this is the only way her life can have meaning. Memory is indeed a powerful weapon of self-liberation. Most people who engaged in wars of liberation were often inspired by memories of places they had lost, the values and traditions associated with those places.
In essence, Lena is recording history as she remembers it. Although some critics have condemned Fugard on the pretext that he merely ‘witnesses’ instead of showing some serious political commitment, his witnessing is equally important given that the colonialist is also busy writing the history of her displacement. While Lena understands the place of history in shaping identity, Boesman is blinkered to the prevailing circumstances of his life to the extent that he cannot see beyond his present life. He tells Lena ‘Now is the only time in your life’ but in response Lena says, ‘I wasn’t born yesterday. I want my life’ (p.17). Lena’s assertion is loaded with her understanding that she has been dispossessed and this understanding is critical not only for Lena but for the rest of the colonized if they are to meaningfully and gainfully negotiate the postcolonial future.

In an essay entitled ‘Cultural identity and Diaspora,’ Stuart Hall (1995, 2006:435) points out that cultural identity ‘belongs to the future as much as to the past’ which means our destinies are tied to our history. Because he has been ‘positioned and subjected to the dominant regimes of representation’ (Hall, 2006: 199) Boesman sees his life as stuck in the mud of apartheid. However, the point that Fugard is making is that we cannot be ‘here’ from nowhere. We can only be here if we are coming from somewhere and perhaps going somewhere. Since Boesman does not understand the transformative nature of history, he is ideologically static from the beginning of the play to the end. On the other hand, Lena transforms herself through recollections, song and dance so that at the end of the play we see her at a higher level of political challenge. She has overturned the power structures in her relationship because she refuses to comply when Boesman says ‘come,’ (p.52) thus challenging his authority for the first time.

According to Marcia Blumberg (1998: 133) ‘Lena performs metatheatrical moments of song and dance to rejoice for an instant despite her onerous circumstances’ On the other hand, Frantz Fanon, in an essay entitled ‘On violence,’ argues that it is through song and dance that the violence of the oppressor is ‘canalized, transformed and conjured away…the circle of dance is a permissive circle’ (2004: 19). What Lena is doing is perhaps what Ashcroft has termed postcolonial transformation. We see Aniko
going through a similar experience in the play, *The coat*, in order to negotiate the trauma of surviving in the absence of her jailed husband (bread winner). Thus, she functionally transforms the coat from being a symbol of her husband’s dignity to a commodity that can be exchanged for money. Instead of hanging the coat on the wall and waiting for her husband to come back after five years, she decides to sell it and get money for rent. This is a way of resisting domination without necessarily opposing or confronting the powers that be. Dancing, singing, remembering and using the coat transformatively, in Bill Ashcroft’s sense of postcolonial transformation- these are ways of survival in a totalizing political environment.

Lena uses her memory to keep reminding herself that she is still alive. Unlike Boesman who has allowed himself to live in the perpetual present, Lena wishes for a better life because she knows that life was not like this before. ‘It wasn’t always like this,’ she says. ‘There were better times’ (p.17). The importance of knowing one’s history is that history has a way of shaping one’s dreams or the kind of things one may wish for. Since Lena knows about better times in the past, she is capable of dreaming about a better future. What is more fascinating about Boesman and Lena is that they are likely to be dismissed as ‘mental cases’ Yet these are people who still have hope for a better time. That is why early in the play Lena makes a prophetic statement ‘one day something is going to happen’ (p.15). What is it that will happen? Perhaps she is predicting the demise of apartheid or the liberation of women from patriarchal bondage. Lena is equally prophetic when she says ‘nights are long but they don’t last forever,’ (p.33) implying that the night of apartheid will one day come to an end.

On the contrary, Boesman has accepted his present itinerant life as *the life* and hence he is incapable of predicting the future or acknowledging its existence. He does not even want to be witnessed or remembered because he is ashamed of himself, which is the reason why he tells the old man not to look at him, ‘musa khangela’ (p. 47). His conception of freedom is narrowed to the grave where he and Lena will lie together as ‘two dead hotnots living together’ (p.47). Boesman sees freedom only in death. This defeatist attitude to life has been inculcated in him by the discourse of the colonizer.
which claims that the history of the colonized started on the day he was colonized. This is clearly presented when Boesman says to Lena, ‘you want to live in a house. What do you think you are? A white madam?’ (p.17). The discourse of colonial domination as portrayed through the so called slum clearance has instilled in his mind the false notion that houses belong to whites. Through Boesman one realizes that to colonize is also to manipulate the mind, brainwash and obliterate from it any sense of history.

While Lena contains her frustration through recollections, dancing and talking, Boesman relieves himself by unleashing violence on his wife, Lena. Beating Lena is a psychological gesture of transferring the burden of oppression to his wife who unfortunately has to bear a double burden. In an introduction to one of his plays *The Blood Knot* (1998), Athol Fugard tells us, on the contrary that ‘Boesman and Lena is not as simple as Lena being the victim and Boesman the oppressor. Both are ultimately victims of a common shared predicament, and of each other, which of course makes it some kind of love story’ Boesman and Lena are victims in the sense that they have both been classified as rubbish by the white man. There is also a strong suggestion in the play that Lena, although she is being victimized, actually expects and looks forward to, that victimization. She identifies herself through those beatings, as she says, ‘when I feel it I know. I am Lena’ (p.16). For Lena life is inseparable from her experience of it, as a woman, she is confronted with two enemies, the apartheid regime and her husband. At one point, we see her begging Boesman to beat her so that the old African man may witness what he is doing to her and know who she is. ‘Hit me. Please, Boesman. For a favour.’ To the old man, she says ‘I have shown you the bruises. Now watch’ (p. 45). Of course, Boesman’s violence is on one occasion witnessed by a white man, who instead of rescuing Lena, simply laughs. His laughter implies satisfaction with what apartheid has produced in Boesman or mere lack of interest in the affairs of the colonised. Perhaps this is what Eldridge Cleaver (1968: 73) calls ‘the racist conscience of America’ which does not register murder as murder unless the victim is white.

The white man will not protect Lena from Boesman’s violence because she is his wife and as Boesman puts it, the white man ‘knows the way it is with our sort’ (p.44).
Boesman ‘stopped hitting when the white man laughed’ (p.44). While the white man’s laughter may signify his satisfaction, Boesman’s stoppage implies that the white man has become a moral barometer for the colonized. This is what Baldwin meant when he argued in his Notes of a Native Son that the white man and the black man are old acquaintances. As much as the white man claims to ‘know’ the black man, the black man also ‘knows’ the white man. Boesman is, at this point, manipulating and translating his knowledge of the system, though in a way which is self-destructive.

The implication of Lena’s attitude towards Boesman’s brutality is that the beatings and bruises are important to her in so far as they remind her of her marginal existence. Lena’s bruised body is ‘a visual mark of racial and gender oppression and evidence of Boesman’s attempted silencing’ (Marcia Blumberg, 1998:133). Boesman’s beating is racial violence by extension because his behaviour is a reaction to the violence of the removals. The hand that beats Lena is the same hand that has brought down the pondok. Boesman beats Lena to keep his life warm (p. 44). The relationship between Boesman, Lena and Outa shows that colonial power does not reside with the colonial master, in fact; it is mediated by various structures of the system (formal and informal). Boesman is also located within the power hierarchy, though his role destroys his own family. ‘If imperial power is constituted rhizomically,’ argues Ashcroft (2001: 52), ‘the acts of interpolation which characterize postcolonial discourse may be seen to be diverse, unsystematic, unpredictable, scattered and quotidian rather than programmatic and organized’ Lena’s ‘acts of interpolation’ are dancing and singing, while Boesman takes to violence.

Boesman is a castrated man who refuses to acknowledge Lena’s value in his life and eludes responsibilities by constantly unleashing violence on his wife. Instead of explaining things to Lena, for example, telling her where they are going and what will become of them, he resorts to outbursts of violence. It is evident that Boesman does not have the answer to these questions. He also does not know where he is going. His weakness is the very fact that he is a patriarchal man who does not realize that he has lost his power. Instead of coming to terms with this fact and perhaps mapping the way
forward with his wife, he hangs on to tradition and puts on a mask of manhood. Thus, for ‘all [her] bloody nonsense questions’ his fist is ‘the answer’ (p.16).

While Lena accepts the beatings as the lot of the subaltern, Boesman beats her to convince himself that he is still a man regardless of the way his manhood has been seriously compromised. It must be noted that ‘if Boesman doesn’t understand something, he hits it’ (p.53). Hitting is therefore a way of being and a mask for his ignorance. He does not understand Lena because instead of brooding silently and wasting herself inwardly as he does, she asserts herself through speaking out. By speaking out her mind, Lena appropriates a voice that the system seeks to deny her. This is what Fugard must be commended for, representing the plight of society’s rejects. With this weapon of self-representation (her voice), Lena is capable of super imposing her story onto the oppressive discourse.

Athol Fugard has also reminded us that Boesman and Lena is not only a story of apartheid repression, but also some kind of love story. Boesman and Lena are in love to the extent that one cannot do without the other like Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot. When they appear on the stage for the first time, Boesman comes first, followed by Lena ‘after a few seconds’ (p. 1). Werthein (2000:58) explicitly captures the nature of Boesman and Lena’s relationship when he says that ‘the most important word in Fugard’s title is “and” for the two characters are a bound unit - the word “and” defines their interdependence’ We are told that as they run away from the white man, Boesman and Lena never part ways, if they do; they always wait for each other and reconnect. They may lose all their items but they never lose each other, as Lena says, ‘run your legs off the other way but at the end of it Boesman is waiting’ (p. 10). To this end, Lena is an extension of Boesman, his tail, so to speak, and Boesman knows she is there without looking back. Boesman’s back is the scenery in Lena’s world (p. 5). Before she meets the old African man, even her vision is to some extent blurred because she sees nothing else but Boesman’s back. The relationship between Boesman and Lena is similar to that between Bigger and Bessie in Native Son. Bessie, like Lena, needs Bigger not only to satisfy her sexual appetite but also to relieve herself of the stress of
working in white kitchens. Bigger also, like Boesman needs Bessie both as a friend and sexual partner but that does not stop him from abusing her as Boesman does.

Unlike Bessie who dies in silence, without getting a chance to be witnessed, Lena has Outa, the old African man, as her witness. When Outa appears Lena immediately shifts her attention from Boesman and thus liberating herself from his male-centrism. She needs the old man because Boesman does not listen to her anymore (p. 18). In conceiving Boesman and Lena as a love story, Athol Fugard allows us to think beyond the heavily trodden ground of patriarchy and gendered oppression, to understand how the oppressed negotiate the mundane aspects of love and romance amidst the nightmare of displacement and homelessness. How do poor people, vagrants, evicted from their homes show love to each other? How do they negotiate the trauma of living under the open sky as husband and wife? Through Boesman and Lena’s relationship, Fugard articulates the complexity of making a life out of the horror aggravated by the apartheid state. For example, although Boesman batters Lena in view of the white man, the latter, being the law enforcer does not intervene. According to Frantz Fanon, these internecine feuds amongst the oppressed are crucial for the white man because they confirm his stereotypical view of the colonized. It also weakens the colonized’s capacity to resist. ‘Such behaviour,’ argues Fanon ‘represents a death wish in the face of danger, a suicidal conduct which reinforces the colonist’s existence and domination and reassures him that such men are irrational’ (2004:18).

Boesman has adapted to the discourse of apartheid so much that when he encounters the old African man later in the play, he addresses him as ‘kaffer’ to imply that according to the racial hierarchy of apartheid, he belongs to a superior caste. The word ‘kaffer’ is not only a racial category; it is also a derogatory term that speaks of someone inferior. In fact, Boesman is mocking Lena when he says ‘you wanted somebody. There is a black one’ (p.19) as if to say a black one is not human enough. Wertheim (2000: 57) notes that Boesman and Lena’s noticeably inappropriate names- Lena, a European name and Boesman or ‘bushman’ (one of the worst things a South African black man can be called). ironically remind us that they are a mixed breed, unwanted, unaccepted
by either race responsible for their being’ Also, for a coloured man, Boesman is a kind of ‘everyman’ The name ‘Lena’ is European as it derives from Helena, i.e. Helen of Troy and supposedly the most beautiful woman in the world. This is ironic given the manner in which Lena has been turned into Boesman’s punching bag.

Given the terrain of race relations in apartheid South Africa, Boesman and Lena’s predicament is a very complex one because although they are products of the historical exchange of goods (commerce) and bodies (sex) between the colonizer and the colonized, they belong to none of the racial groups responsible for their being. To make matters worse, Boesman and Lena are lower class South African coloureds who, because of their poverty, are a disgrace to white South Africa. According to Durbach (1999: p. 66), Boesman is an ‘inferior coloured who exist [s] in the lower depths of racial and genetic coding, bearing in his very name the generic abuse heaped upon those coloureds whose stature and features suggest a predominance of aboriginal blood’

The way Boesman treats the old man confirms Durbach’s (1999: 66) observation that ‘the greater the marginalization, the more brutal the struggle for power and position in the jungle of apartheid’ While Boesman is rubbish to the white man, the old man is in turn rubbish to Boesman. Lena also is ‘sies’ p. 45) not only to the white man but also to Boesman. Like Uncle Tom of Richard Wright’s Black Boy who calls Richard ‘a sassy imp’ Boesman calls black people ‘bastards’ (p. 19). The artificial racial categories instituted by the apartheid regime are lodged at the back of his mind when he refuses the old man water to drink. He says, ‘he doesn’t belong to us’ (p.20). Yet ironically, Lena reminds him that at some point his people gave them water. ‘They got feelings too. Not so Outa?’ (p. 21). Boesman clings on to apartheid’s racial caste system because it privileges him ahead of the black man. It is pathetic to hear Boesman saying of the old man, ‘he is not brown people; he is black people’ (p. 20). He does not seem to realize that these racial categorizations were constructed by the white man to exclude him from the political and economic affairs of the country. On the other hand, the Deep South, unlike apartheid South Africa, does not make a distinction between black and brown people. Richard’s grandmother in Black Boy is white in complexion yet she is still
classified as black. In South Africa’s apartheid system race is determined by skin colour while in the Deep South it is determined by origin. Boesman’s attitude towards Outa can be compared to that of Richard who looks down upon his people because he considers himself enlightened (educated) and better than them.

When Boesman and Lena meet the old man, we realize that Lena herself, in spite of her self-liberating efforts, is not completely free from the stereotypes of apartheid. She calls the old man’s language ‘baboon language’ (p. 20) echoing the white man’s strategy of elimination by stereotyping. If the old man’s language is that of a baboon, then by implication he is also a baboon. Although it is important to understand that inter-group stereotype predated the arrival of the colonists, there is no doubt that the colonist, particularly through apartheid, made it more systematic and perhaps scientific/empirical too. In fact Crow and Banfield (1996: 96) note that the legacy of almost fifty years of apartheid policies will not be easily overcome because it is not only physical but also psychological. Richard Wright’s Black Boy shows that some black people like Shorty actually embraced the stereotypes. Shorty allows white people to kick his ‘tough ass’ in return for a quarter. Uncle Tom also enforces the stereotype of the ‘dumb nigger’ by threatening to beat Richard for being ‘sassy’ As it is with Black Boy where blacks are expected to be docile ‘grinning’ servants, the old man symbolizes dumb blacks without a human language. Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks has done enough to illustrate the ‘scientific’ rationalizations that buttress these colonial stereotypes.

The fact that Boesman and Lena cannot speak Xhosa and the old man cannot speak Afrikaans yet they live side by side show the extent of the damage caused by the racist policy of apartheid. The apartheid culture of racial exclusion is also inherent in Boesman’s attitude. He is afraid that Lena will attract other blacks from the darkness and they will throng his private space. ‘Pull another one in here and you will do the rest of your talking with a thick mouth’ (p. 21). Implicit in this behaviour is the inherent struggle for position and power among the marginalized. Boesman’s fear is that blacks will ‘turn my place into a kaffer nes’ (p.21). Similarly, when the white man says ‘loop hotnot’ he is attempting to protect his space from the culture of uncivilised races.
However, Boesman’s selfish need for living space is ironic because we know that this place does not belong to him, anytime the white man will come and evict him. He is, of course, doing to others what has been done to him like Cross in *The Outsider* who becomes a god in his attempt to stop others from being gods.

Although Lena has not been totally decolonized, she realizes that the old man is facing the same predicament that she is facing. She takes him as a witness for her life. ‘You be witness for me...he is going to kill me’ (p.22). Lena shows the old man her bruises so that he can witness her suffering and sympathize with her. Unlike Boesman who does not have time for her endless conversations, the old man listens to her and calls out her name repeatedly. When Lena says to the old man, ‘my name is Lena’ (p. 23) she is declaring her identity, not only to the old man but also to those who have denied her a place in life. She comes to realize that although apartheid has separated her from the old man, she is no different from him. As a result, she provides him with basic needs in form of a blanket, food (tea and bread) and fire. She even shares her life with him, which is symbolized by the water she shares with him. The old man has taken the role of an audience who listens to her story. Unlike Boesman who does not listen, the old man ‘sits nicely and listens,’ (p. 25) allowing Lena an opportunity to purge her emotions. She wants the old man to know that ‘those little paths on the veld…Boesman and Lena helped write them’ (p. 26).

According to Lena the bread that she shares with Outa should ‘have bruises’ because ‘it’s [her] life’ (p.33) implying that she is sharing her suffering with the old man. This camaraderie of the oppressed or ‘chain of sympathy’ is the last thing that the white man would want to hear. Lena’s union with the old man suggests a potential league of the oppressed races against apartheid South Africa. As Lena and Outa come close to each other for warmth we get the picture of two poor people sharing a common fate—that is, their suffering. ‘Hotnot and kaffer got no time for apartheid on a night like this’ (p.24). This scene suggests that blacks and coloureds may unite because they share the same grievances. Moreover, since the oppressed share common challenges, they have to exhort each other in difficult times. Lena dances for warmth and when she feels warm,
she goes to the old man, ‘sit close now I am warm’ (p.43) she says. In sharing warmth with the old man, Lena has established a chain of sympathy that transforms the camaraderie of the damned into a community of sympathy (Durbach, 1999:71).

While Lena uses voice to define herself and the world around her, the old man is completely denied a voice. This is perhaps an allusion to the way some blacks were silenced and broken by the apartheid regime, reminding us of the institutionalization of nigger-breaking in the slave discourse of the American South. Although Fugard gives a voice to some of his characters, for example, Sizwe Bansi in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, their techniques of surviving within the system are not, in the long run, sustainable. One is persuaded to argue that Outa is the final destination of them all. ‘The old man's voiceless state metonymically conveys the political silencing of the black South African majority who effectively gained legitimate voice with their first votes in April 1994’ (Marcia Blumberg, 1998:133).

It is fascinating also to note that the old man comes in as a metaphorical replacement for Lena’s lost dog and, like the lost dog, his duty is to witness Lena’s life. He merely sits by the fireside mumbling Lena’s name. ‘All the things I did... he saw it,’ (p.24), Lena says as she reminisces over her lost dog. The similarity between the dog and Outa is perhaps an allusion to his underdog status within the system. Even Boesman behaves towards Outa the same way he behaved towards the dog. We are told that he used to throw stones at the dog and now he wants Outa to leave ‘his premises.’ The dog was crucial to Lena because it used to witness her life, it ‘saw’ all the things she did. What Lena remembers about her dog is exactly what the old man is doing, sitting silently and mumbling her name unintelligibly.

Although Athol Fugard clearly articulates the predicament of the black population in South Africa, the old man’s silent death remains metaphorically obscure. Important to note is the fact that he, like Bessie Meers in *Native Son* dies without saying anything about his own experience. Fugard is rather obscure and does not come out clearly why the old man should die silently. What is perhaps implied through the old man’s silent
death is some kind of passive resistance. Most protest writers, for example, Alex LaGuma in *A walk in the night*, have represented protest merely as opposition, yet they forget that there are many other subtle ways of resistance. The old man’s death leaves a mark on Lena’s memory. Ashcroft characterizes these subtle ways as more effective ‘because they are the most difficult to combat’ (2001: 20). By portraying the old man as silent, Fugard assumes his role as a witness whose responsibility is to capture events as they are. However, Zakes Mda, South African writer and critic sees this as a misrepresentation of history. He argues that in *Boesman and Lena* the ‘spirit of defiance is non-existent’ and the oppressed, ‘endowed with endless reservoirs of stoic endurance,’ ‘suffer in silence’ (in Blumberg, 1998:137).

Mda’s reading is interesting as much as it shows the school of thought to which he ascribes. It is important to note, alongside Durbach (1999: 62) that ‘every relationship in Fugard’s play, every action… resonates politically and critics according to their value systems, will pronounce Fugard more or less politically correct insofar as he conforms to or deviates from their beliefs’ Similarly Spivak has contended that nationalist historicism, in the fashion of western historicism, has marginalized the subaltern once again, by focusing, as Zakes Mda appears to be doing, on *the struggle* as a grand narrative while neglecting the subtle contributions of the common man. Most importantly, Fugard witnesses poor people’s lives in such a way that if one boy, as in *The coat*, helps his mother in difficult times, he is worth remembering and recording in the annals of history.

One of the things that have been controversial about Fugard’s liberal vision is that it tends to promote purposeless survival. Amidst all the oppression of apartheid, all that Boesman and Lena can do is run like rabbits with the white man cocking his gun behind them. Errol Durbach (1999: p. 62) asks: ‘what value is there in surviving deprivation by habituating oneself to the status quo’ Perhaps, ‘habituating oneself’ is the most effective way of slowly resisting the system. The white man is wasting his time because Boesman and Lena never give up, they keep erecting new pondoks. ‘Push this one over and I’ll do it somewhere else’ (p. 39). Lena’s survival strategy, as Blumberg argues, may
seem to delay meaningful change, yet it remains useful as a form of resistance in Bill Ashcroft’s sense of postcolonial transformation. Delaying change tactically and strategically is wiser than confronting a system which is obviously stronger and better equipped.

When Boesman talks about freedom towards the end of the play, it is a mockery because he is celebrating his homelessness as freedom. Although Boesman evinces a shallow understanding of the meaning of freedom with capital letter ‘F,’ Fugard is perhaps attempting to problematize the very concept of freedom. Are we really free if we don’t know what we are free from and what we are free for? Is it freedom to walk around without a destination? Boesman claims that he is free yet he does not know where he is going. Is freedom possible in that sense? Richard Wright’s Cross in *The Outsider* is also involved in an endless search for freedom. Both Wright and Fugard seem to suggest that freedom is not attained from outside, rather it comes from the inside. Lena insists ‘we had to go somewhere’ implying that freedom must have a destination, ‘couldn’t walk around Korsten carrying our Freedom forever’ (p.38). What Lena is articulating here takes us to Frantz Fanon’s essay ‘On national culture’ in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he characterizes independence for African countries as ‘an empty shell’ because of the inherent lack of ideological insight and/foresight among the leaders. The point is that freedom should have a purpose. Richard Wright’s Cross is looking for freedom but he does not know what to do with that freedom. Boesman’s statement that ‘freedom is a long walk’ (p. 42) prophetically echoes Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* and captures the fact that freedom comes with a price. When he goes on to say ‘our days are too short’ (p. 42) the implication is that freedom is unattainable. In existentialist terms, Boesman could be mocking the futility of grand pursuits like ‘freedom’ given that man is mortal and in that sense, incapable of attaining freedom outside himself.

On the other hand, Lena manages to free herself from Boesman by refusing to enter his pondok, which is a symbol of a debased life. She characterizes Boesman’s pondok as a coffin in which Boesman wants to bury her life. Her refusal to get inside the pondok is
an assertion of her freedom. In the past, Boesman treated her as his extension particularly because as a husband, he was providing her with basic needs. Yet on this juncture, Lena has found a way of living her own life without depending on Boesman. As a patriarchal man, Boesman salves his conscience with the notion that he is still responsible for Lena’s welfare. Although Lena has told him that she does not need his pondok he insists on ‘kicking her out’ (p. 41). Apparently, it is in ‘kicking her out’ that he finds his manhood. He wants Lena to grovel for shelter so that he can feel a man.

Both Athol Fugard and Richard Wright ascribe to the existentialist tenet that human beings have a responsibility for their lives. When Lena tries to lift the dead Africa man, she realizes that he is so heavy that she cannot lift him. ‘No wonder we get moeg,’ she says. ‘It’s not just the things on your head. There is also yourself’ (p. 47). This reminds us of Cross in The Outsider who is told to ‘stand on his own big feet’ (p. 369) when he tries to lean against a friend. The point is that man’s problems are not only caused by external forces like apartheid oppression; man himself (humanity) is to some extent responsible for his fate. Again we are reminded of Cross’s existential attempt to ‘makes himself’ in The Outsider.

*Boesman and Lena* has an ambivalent ending that leaves Fugard at the mercy of critics especially those of the neo-Marxist school who expect him, not only to portray the injustices of apartheid, but also to help bring about change. In his *Notebooks*, Athol Fugard expresses some kind of dissatisfaction with the way he presented Boesman and Lena. He is haunted by ‘doubts that [he is] opting out on this score; that [he is] not saying enough. At one level [*Boesman and Lena*] is an indictment of this society which makes people rubbish’ but ‘is this explicit enough?’ (1983: 181). Perhaps at a metaphysical level, this is explicit enough because at the end of the play, Lena, now at a higher level of political consciousness, stands free while Boesman is still heavily burdened; the very same way we see him at the beginning of the play. Although the curtain closes with Lena at a higher level of political challenge (she commands Boesman to ‘give!’ (p. 54) her bucket), the play still has overtones of pessimism in that the two ‘reject characters’ are once again on the move, implying a long walk to freedom.
*Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, on the other hand, interrogates strategies that black people in apartheid South Africa devised to survive its dehumanizing laws. In this play, Fugard provokes pertinent questions as to how the colonized subject responded to the hegemonic structures of the colonial administration. The first question is how ordinary people ensured their survival in an oppressive system like apartheid. Is survival possible in an environment that denies a people’s self-worth, pride and dignity?

At the beginning of the play, we are introduced to Styles, a self-made photographer, reading through stories in a newspaper. As he goes through the newspaper he comes across a story about Ford Factory, the transnational motor company that he once worked for. It is through his reminiscences that we get to understand how workers at Ford factory are exploited. Mr Henry Ford Number Two, an agent of international capitalism colluding with apartheid to exploit black people, has just arrived in South Africa. Styles' experiences at Ford factory brings out the hypocrisy of apartheid. Mr Bradley who mediates the exploitation of workers at Ford factory creates the impression that working conditions are good— he buys safety clothes, puts up safety signs and cleans the floors, yet we know that these workers have been working without these things for the past six years. The apartheid regime manipulates the press to give ordinary people the impression that the coming of Henry Ford Number Two will change the lot of workers in South Africa.

The story of Styles’ experiences at Ford factory also reveals the manner in which apartheid constructed black people for purposes of exploiting them. Styles and other workers at the factory are regarded as boys. Mr Bradley addresses all the workers as boys, ‘Come on boys! It’s got to be spotless’ (p. 150). By calling them boys, Mr Bradley is constructing them in such a way that he can justify his exploitation—they have to be given orders because they are boys, not men. We also see that Styles feels important if not elevated translating Mr Bradley’s speech to his fellow workers. Although he makes a mockery of Mr Bradley by altering his meaning in translation, Styles comes close to answering Fanon’s (1952) question: what does a black man want? Looking at Styles' behaviour, it is plausible for Fanon to conclude that what the black man wants is to
occupy the place of the colonizer. ‘That was my moment,’ says Styles. ‘Kneeling there on the floor…foreman, general foreman, plant supervisor …and Styles?’ (p.152). Apparently Styles has already positioned himself in the ranks of the oppressors. Styles’ ‘style’ gravitates towards the master’s position, like Cross’ search for freedom, which gravitates towards Eva, a white woman.

It is evident that Styles is using his education and literacy to mediate the oppression of his own people. He is an incarnation of the proverbial ‘kotma’ in Achebe’s novels trained by the white man for purposes of facilitating the exploitation of black people. Nevertheless, it must be noted that because of his level of education, Styles is capable of interrogating capitalist exploitation as evidenced by his observation that the ‘machines [and] bigger buildings’ that the capitalists are erecting never translate to ‘any expansion of the pay packet’ (p. 149). Although Styles is conscious in the Marxist sense of ‘consciousness as conscious being’ his consciousness does not lead to revolutionary action as Marx predicted. Instead of confronting the system, Styles opts for the individualistic route of self-business. Taking the route of the Fanon’s African intellectual whose attitude towards his people is so articulately presented in ‘Pitfalls of National Consciousness,’ Styles appropriates the white man’s language, not for purposes of liberating the people like Ngugi’s Njoroge in Weep Not Child, but for personal ends.

What exactly is Fugard’s ultimate goal in creating Styles? Is opting out a style? This is the question that most critics find themselves confronted with in reading Sizwe Bansi is Dead. It seems as if Fugard’s liberal vision is narrowed to depicting someone saving himself without saving others. Shava (1989:1333) argues that ‘Styles chooses personal assertion, not public commitment, in the interests of maintaining the family of which he is head and chief bread winner’ Perhaps Fugard’s argument is that apartheid is invincible (given the political situation of the time) the only way to survive is to dance according to its tune. Alternatively, he may simply be depicting the harm done to individuals in pursuit of survival. In his role as interpreter at Ford factory, Styles tells his fellow workers to ‘hide their true feelings’ (p.153). Mr Bradley wants workers at the South African plant to feign happiness so that they can be considered ‘better than those
monkeys in [Henry Ford’s] own country, those niggers who know nothing but strike, strike’ (p. 153).

The way in which Styles manipulates Mr Bradley shows that the colonizer and the colonized are old acquaintances as James Baldwin argues, because they know each other. Styles’ strategy is that of taking the white man’s fabrications and hurling them back at him in mockery- the mockery of which is ultimately ineffectual because it does not translate to political consciousness. It must be noted, however, that the very possibility of black workers duping their masters was a very subversive concept for most whites who were Fugard’s audience at the time. Apartheid South Africa has constructed and re-presented blacks as ‘monkeys,’ so instead of adopting a confrontational counter discourse, Styles acts out the stereotype so as to please the white man while at the same time ensuring survival. ‘We are South African monkeys, not American monkeys’ (p. 154). Implicit in this statement is Styles’ awareness of the duplicity of the apartheid/capitalist discourse. South African blacks must behave differently because they are different, not because their material conditions are better. The idea is to keep them disunited and unconscious of the situation they live in. This ‘divide and rule’ strategy is also evident in Black Boy where Mr Olin, Richard’s employer, creates enmity between Richard and Harrison, a black boy working at a nearby shop.

Styles’ business venture is one ‘individual and individualized’ (Shava: 1989:133) way of saying ‘no’ to apartheid oppression. By starting his own business, he refuses to be ‘somebody else’s tool,’ thus reclaiming his manhood and defining his own place in the dominant apartheid discourse. Although the photographic studio is a model of black empowerment in apartheid South Africa, as a survival tactic, it still remains self-serving and egocentric. We know that Styles used to work at Ford factory where he left other Africans suffering, yet in seeking emancipation, he does not think about them. He only thinks about himself. Styles’ photographic studio is characterized as ‘a strong room of dreams’ (p.159) because all black people whose dreams have been frustrated by apartheid come to act out their wishes as they take photos. The photos that Styles shoots are important especially for those ‘simple people who [are] never mentioned in
Taking photos, therefore, becomes a way of preserving history—the way Lena records her own history through memory.

Styles’ photography is perhaps similar to Athol Fugard’s mission to witness as truthfully as he could, the lives of ordinary people in apartheid South Africa. While photography may be a useful way of preserving the history of ordinary people, it is not without its own weaknesses. As a historian of the people, Styles is only concerned about ‘witnessing’ in the Fugardian fashion. His concern is to capture the dreams of the people, to get them involved in telling their own story. He tells us that ‘something you mustn’t do is interfering with a man’s dream. If he wants to do it standing let him stand’ (p.161).

Styles helps his customers to live their dreams, which is a subversive thing to do in an environment where the history of the colonized has been erased and his dreams (the ANC) banned. For example, he persuades Sizwe Bansi to take his photo with ‘pipe in mouth, walking stick in hand, newspaper under his arm’ to enable him to envisage and experience, imaginatively, the lavish life style that he covets.

The question is: If these photos are ‘false images,’ is the actual history of the people not being lost? What does this entail about Fugard’s idea of witnessing? Perhaps the point that Fugard is making is that these people have a history in their imagination parallel to the one determined by the white man. Photographic history – especially of studio photographs – is increasingly used by historians to trace how desire works. At a certain level, Styles is pre occupied with making money for his own survival rather than truthfully recording the history of the people. In other words, he is a businessman and not a historiographer. ‘He has become a ghost that haunts his own people and his will to survive is informed by the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest’ (Shava, 1989:136).

Styles’ photographic studio is adjacent to a funeral parlour to suggest that his business is in a way related to that of the funeral parlour. Styles is a type of a middle man responsible for documenting the history of his people before they go to the parlour. This is supported by the story of the man who, on coming to collect his photos, tells Styles that his father had died before seeing the photos. ‘We almost didn’t make it’ (p. 163) he says. The man has a consolation in that his father can still be remembered through his
photograph, even though he is dead. Styles’ customers seem to be obsessed with shooting photos before they die, as if to imply that they cannot do anything else. It is, however, probable that taking photos was the prevailing ‘style’ at the time. Styles tells the man that ‘there is nothing we can leave behind when we die, except the memory of ourselves’ (p. 163). This may be conceptualized as a subtle way of resisting apartheid - leaving memory is a way of connecting future generations to their history. The Palestinian thinker and critic, Edward Said (2003:182-183) characterizes memory as ‘a powerful collective instrument for preserving identity. It is one of the bulwarks against historical erasure, a means of resistance’

Although the photo is an exaggerated version of reality or a construct based on wishes rather than facts, it is also a way of perpetuating self within the dominant discourse of apartheid. Sizwe Bansi/Robert Zwelinzima smiles as he takes the photo so that his wife would not think that ‘her husband has all the worries of the world on his back’ (p. 166). Photographic history upsets the notion history as something unitary and unchangeable. Black people have a chance to represent themselves, to pose and be captured in a way they want their loved ones to see them. The card is a way of refusing to be confined to the place that apartheid has carved out. By smiling amidst the uncertainty of black life in apartheid South Africa, Sizwe Bansi keeps himself hopeful and helps his family not to succumb to despair. His lavish or luxurious posture, with ‘pipe in one hand and cigarette in the other’ (p.167) is a mask that focuses his mind on an imagined future and the possession of options rather than the grinding reality of the moment. In his imagination, he is not a poor black man who can be imprisoned any time for a wrong stamp in the passbook, he is ‘chief Messenger of Feltex sitting in his office with the world behind him’ (p.167). In Richard Wright’s The Outsider, Cross also wants to participate in writing his own history. He, like Styles’ customers, does not want to be a victim of history.

The camera therefore is a gadget that enables ordinary people ‘those that the writers of big books forget about’ (p. 159) to immortalize moments of happiness (real and imagined). It allows these people to traverse those lands that they cannot venture into in real life. The camera introduces a new way of viewing life which is relevant to people
living under apartheid: To pose is to be- I pose, therefore I am. For example, in Styles’ ‘movie,’ or photo that is taken in motion, Sizwe poses as if he were going home. When the picture reaches home, his wife and children would be happy because their father, as captured on the photo, is coming home. The image of Sizwe ‘coming home’ on the picture replaces the real Sizwe Bansi in Port Elizabeth in postmodern style.

It is through taking photos that black people living under apartheid enable themselves to forget the horrors of apartheid legislation. Having been endorsed out of Port Elizabeth, Sizwe Bansi no longer has any legal right to stay in the city and look for a job. The stamp that has been put in his passbook says he must report to the Bantu affairs Commissioner in King William’s Town for purposes of repatriation. What apartheid meant by repatriation was dumping unemployed black people to the so called home lands- in this case Sizwe Bansi is required to go back to Ciskei. Through Sizwe Bansi’s case Athol Fugard allows us to relive the dehumanizing effects of the pass laws on black people. Sizwe Bansi is illiterate, so he does not even know that the passbook he is carrying says he is illegal in Port Elizabeth. ‘If that book says you go, you must go’ (p. 171) says Buntu, implying that the passbook’s will is superior to that of the person it defines. The apartheid state has created such intricate a system that it is almost impossible to escape the instructions of the passbook. Moreover, the bureaucratic procedures that Sizwe Bansi must go through if he were to reverse the verdict of the stamp in his passbook are designed to make it difficult for him to avoid going to the homeland. Even if he throws the passbook away, the white man will see it in his big machine that he has been endorsed out. Apparently, apartheid is presented as a system that has all the technological tools in place to keep the black population ‘penned out’ to the homelands, to borrow and alter a phrase from Frantz Fanon.

Sizwe Bansi cannot even sell potatoes because even that requires a Hawker’s license- the latter of which can only be obtained if one’s passbook is in order. The only option for him is to go to the Mining Recruiting office and sign for a job in the mines. Thus fulfilling the purpose for which pass laws were designed -to create an environment that forces black people to take up dangerous and poorly paid jobs in the mines. Sizwe Bansi
cannot go back to King William’s Town because he is a bread winner, with a wife and four children looking up to him. Hence, when the opportunity presents itself for him to adopt Robert Zwelinzima’s passbook, he has no option. He seizes the option, like Cross Damon in *The Outsider* who changes his name to Lionel Lane. However the option of losing one’s name and adopting a new one is also problematic, though tempting. Lena has the same desire in *Boesman and Lena* to change her name. When Boesman asks her ‘who are you?’ she says ‘Mary. I want to be Mary’ Similarly Cross feels that his name will keep him tied to his past in Chicago hence he decides to get a new one. In each case the idea of changing a name is associated with criminality. It also involves pretending and/or living as a ghost. In a society where the vast majority is treated as a uniform, faceless mass, a name must assume extraordinary importance (Russel Vandenbroucke, 1982:192). If Sizwe Bansi adopts Robert Zwelinzima’s name, he will be able to stay in town, avoid trouble, find a job, work for his family and perhaps live a luxurious life too. However, adopting the new name will also mean Sizwe Bansi is dead. The metaphorical death of Sizwe Bansi is a challenge because it entails the death of his family too. Being a married man, his wife and children are using that name. How does he perpetuate his lineage under a false name? Is survival, in the sense of being able to provide for one’s family, more important than one’s identity? Sizwe Bansi’s option to adopt Robert Zwelinzima’s name is faced with these challenges. As it is with Cross who later realizes that Lionel Lane was a drunkard and a womanizer, Sizwe is likely to inherit more burdens of the nation, as the name ‘Zwelinzima’ suggests. In addition Sizwe Bansi’s safety, like Cross’ is precarious and likely to be short lived. He is only safe for as long as the white man does not check fingerprints.

It might be argued that Sizwe Bansi, the name which embodies the nationalist aspirations of the people, and the passbook, which is a creation of the apartheid state, are inseparable. Firstly the passbook does not recognize that Sizwe Bansi is a man, circumcised, with a wife and four children. The passbook is the white man’s way of creating, defining and positioning black people within the hegemonic regimes of apartheid discourse. The passbook objectifies black people in that it overrides their
personal will and tells them what to do, ‘it speaks good English too, and big words that Sizwe can’t read’ (p.180).

Yet, the passbook and Sizwe Bansi are so mixed up that Sizwe cannot lose one and remain the same. When he says ‘I don’t want to lose my name’ what he implies is that he does not want to lose his ‘bloody passbook’ (p.182). To this end Sizwe Bansi’s predicament is postcolonial. It deals with the difficulty of transcending the history of colonialism. How do we separate ourselves from the white man’s fabrications, when those very fabrications are superimposed on our identities? Bill Ashcroft (1998: 209) argues that what we are is how the world has defined us and what the world is, is how we have defined it. ‘We are conscious of the world through a body constructed by that world: the gaze of the world in which the body is constructed is at the same time the subject’s own gaze’ In other words, the world (society). and the individual shape each other. Through Sizwe Bansi’s predicament, we see the impossibility of attempting to recover an authentic past as Ngugi and the Negritude artists have implied.

Negotiating the interstitial space as Bhabha puts it, involves accepting history as a part of us without being imprisoned by it. The history that Styles’ customers imagine, for example, is not in any way ‘authentic’ because it has been influenced by western cultural commodities- the cigarette, the posture and the movie. It is only authentic in the sense that the people desire it. Authenticity therefore is not given, it is made. It is difficult for post colonials to extricate themselves from the colonial gaze just as much as it is difficult for the colonizer’s gaze to fix ‘know’ the colonized. In a sense, the photograph is an attempt to deceive the colonial gaze - to say the way you see us is not the way we are. By the same token, Sizwe Bansi cannot be free by merely abandoning the passbook and adopting another name. Firstly, the white man’s definitions inscribed in the passbook are part of his identity, the identity of which he has already passed on to his wife and children. His wife belongs to Sizwe Bansi, not to Robert Zwelinzima. Now that he has changed his name, does it mean he has to marry her all over again? If he does, what does that entail for his children?
‘How do I live as another man’s ghost?’ (p.185). The question has postcolonial innuendos, as if to say how do we go ‘past the postcolonial post.’ Buntu’s argument is that Sizwe Bansi must not worry about being a ghost because, as a creation of the white man, he is already a ghost. ‘Rather than being swallowed by the hegemony of Empire,’ argues Ashcroft (2001:15) ‘the apparently dominated culture and its interpellated subjects within it, are quite able to interpolate the various modes of imperial discourse to use it for different purposes, to counter its effects by transforming them’ Ashcroft’s cultural transformation refers to a resistance strategy that transforms the culture of the colonizer for the purposes of ensuring continuity for the colonized. Buntu tells Sizwe Bansi to ‘be a real ghost, if that is what they want… spook them to hell.’ The reason for becoming a spook is survival- this is the only way ‘if you want to survive’ (p.190). Buntu, like Harrison in Richard Wright’s Black Boy considers living for the moment as more important than self-pride and dignity. As far as Buntu is concerned the lives of Sizwe’s wife and children are more important than self-pride. ‘Shit on names man,’ he says, ‘if you can get a piece of bread for your stomach and a blanket in winter' (p.190).

In Richard Wright’s Native Son, Bigger Thomas is faced with this kind of predicament. His mother wants him to forego his pride and find a job to earn a living. In some cases, like that of Sizwe, it is wiser to forego self-pride and live. ‘If that is what you call pride, Buntu says, ‘then shit on it. Take mine and give me food for my children’ (p.191). How do we go about the business of survival within a dehumanizing oppressive system? Do we allow ourselves to be humiliated by fighting for the pleasure of the white man like Richard and Harrison in Black Boy? The issue of how to survive is a case in point for the rest of the postcolonial world. Fugard’s vision in Sizwe Bansi is Dead is that we might have to find space within the system even if it means sacrificing our names. Sizwe Bansi is Dead ends with Robert Zwelinzima-come-Sizwe Bansi, finishing off a letter to his wife Nowetu. Buntu is working out a plan to get him a lodger’s permit. If all goes well, he wants his wife and children to come to Port Elizabeth and spent some days. The problem with Fugard’s solution, as some critics have pointed out, is that it is individualistic, temporary and unsustainable. However, this should not imply that
Wright’s solution, for example, fleeing to Paris, is sustainable. Rather it is equally problematic like Fugard’s. Given the ruthlessness of the apartheid regime and its advanced systems of control, Sizwe Bansi’s happiness, like Lena’s dancing and Cross’ new identity, is bound to be short lived.

Clearly both Athol Fugard and Richard Wright are preoccupied with postcolonial challenges- how to negotiate and translate the postcolonial. Athol Fugard, as we have seen in this chapter, seems to insist that survival even at individual level is an important pre-requisite in any struggle against objectifying tendencies of hegemonic discourse. Hence we see Lena and Sizwe Bansi fighting for survival in their different ways. I have argued in the previous chapters, particularly in the fourth chapter, that criminal violence may be conceptualized as an attempt to negotiate and/or navigate the challenges of the postcolonial society. This argument is developed in the next chapter, focusing on the gang violence that became a part of South African township life during apartheid. While *Boesman and Lena* deals with the consequences of physical and psychological displacement at individual level, *Tsotsi*, which is the subject of the next chapter, focuses on how these historical displacements affected society at large. The tsotsi phenomenon is conceptualized as a subculture that developed parallel and in opposition to the apartheid structures of domination.
CHAPTER SIX

Apartheid repression, crime and gang violence in Tsotsi

The previous chapter explored the various ways in which victims of apartheid resisted the repressive regime in an attempt to open spaces for survival. This chapter focuses on Athol Fugard’s only novel Tsotsi, a work which, like most of his plays is an indictment of the repressive apartheid regime that ruled South Africa between 1948 and 1994. The chapter harmonises the major tenets of subculture theory, strain theory and postcolonial transformation to contend that criminal violence in apartheid South Africa proliferated in response to the segregational policies that were passed by apartheid. As we have seen in Sizwe Bansi is Dead, blacks faked identity documents (Sizwe) and opened small businesses (Styles) to cheat the system and avoid exploitation respectively. Similarly, in Tsotsi gangsters arose in black townships to challenge the system by openly denying work and opting to make quick money through crime and violence. The subcultures of violence that rule South Africa’s major cities, are in this chapter, viewed as a forceful means by the marginalised to claim a stake in the economy and register subjectivity in a society that has denied their existence.

Unlike in the plays where the focus is on particular pieces of apartheid legislation, for example the Group Areas Act and the pass laws in Boesman and Lena and Sizwe Bansi is Dead respectively, Tsotsi is preoccupied with the phenomenon of gang violence in South African cities during this period. Gary Kynoch (2005: 1) has debunked an argument that attributes violence and crime to the civil conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s. He points out that this argument is limited in its failure to consider the long-term dimensions of the prevailing crisis. Politically motivated conflicts did not create a culture of violence. In fact political rivalries turned into bloody conflicts because a culture of violence was already ingrained in township society. Criminal violence is particularly interesting to white South Africans because of its obvious racial connotations. One might argue that the “tsotsi” phenomenon is in part a product of apartheid urban “influx control” which disrupted traditional and familial structures. ‘The failure of the colonial
Clive Glaser’s work (Bo-Tsotsi, 2000) and Gary Kynoch’s (2005) study of the Marashea gangsters in his book, *We are fighting the world*, provide useful insight to the gang phenomenon in South African cities during the apartheid era. Both seem to be agreed that the conditions of life in the urban centres, the racialised police system of the time and the quest for survival among the poor urban black populations were fertile ground for the rise and proliferation of gang subcultures. Apparently, in Athol Fugard’s novel, the protagonist, Tsotsi and his gang are unemployed and homeless teenagers seeking survival within the constraints of apartheid repression. The collective story of survival, argues Gary Kynoch (2005: 3) reveals much about how Africans constructed their world within the structural constraints imposed by the white ruled state.

The merging of criminal violence and nationalist violence that Gary Kynoch refers to in his book is limited in that it narrows our understanding of this phenomenon to events of the 1980s and 1990s when political parties particularly the ANC (African National Congress) encouraged various forms of violence so as to render the apartheid state ungovernable. Yet what must be understood is that violence only escalated during this period but its germs had already been engrained in the social fabric of South African society. Johnny Steinberg’s (2004) invaluable survey of criminal violence in South Africa in his book *The Number* reveals that criminal violence was part of South African urban society as early as the establishment of the Rand in the nineteenth century. Van Onselen (1982), renowned academic and social historian has also, in his studies of the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, traced the emergence of social vice (particularly crime, alcoholism and prostitution) back to the period following the discovery of gold in the Johannesburg area in 1886. The demand for male labour on the Rand attracted a huge influx of prostitutes, pimps, gamblers and other undesirable elements from all over the world. ‘Perhaps inevitably,’ argues, Van Onselen, ‘prostitutes
and brothels attracted a fringe element of petty criminals, thieves and gamblers to the city centre where they constituted something of a social nuisance’ (1982: 104). Van Onselen locates the origin of gang violence in the new capitalist economy that attracted people from within and without South Africa to the Witwatersrand.

If the violence that is experienced in South Africa today were an escalation of anti-apartheid violence, surely seventeen years after independence the epidemic could be on a decline. This is perhaps the reason why Gary Kynoch (2005:1) insists that South Africa's endemic violence ‘is not a post conflict affair but rather a continuation of pre-existing conditions’ The question that comes to mind is what these pre-existing conditions are. Firstly, Clive Glaser (2000), Johnny Steinberg (2004) and Gary Kynoch (2005) have conceptualized South African society over the years as one which has embraced a subculture of violence particularly in response to the repressive violence of apartheid. Given the way in which political violence in the ‘turbulent decades of apartheid’ interlaced with criminal violence, one can argue that nationalist violence was in fact a subculture of a broader subculture of violence

From Jan Note’s Ninevites of the late nineteenth century to the Vultures of Don Mattera in the 1950s (in his book, Gone with the Twilight, 1987) gangsters ‘saw themselves as being in a state of rebellion against the government’s laws’ (Van Onselen, 1982:23). In fact it is believed that the name Ninevites was derived from the biblical story of the people of Nineveh who rebelled against God in the same way that Jan Note, in typical postcolonial ‘transformative’ fashion, rebelled against the new economic system of his time. Steinberg and Van Onselen’s works The Number (2004) and New Babylon/ New Nineveh (1982) respectively imply that there is a legacy of violence and criminality in South Africa which has been passed on from generation to generation, with each generation resorting to violence as a way of resisting political and economic marginalisation. Certainly the Ninevites ‘had a low level of political awareness, but they were able to perceive their followers as being in a state of rebellion in an unjust society’ (Onselen, 1982: 195).
Gary Kynoch (2005: 5) has also argued that the tsotsi phenomenon ‘took root as large sections of rapidly growing population of urbanized youth turned to violent crime’ This was not resistance violence in its nationalist sense; rather it was subtle ‘transformative’ resistance- a way of avoiding, manipulating, circumventing and adapting to the existing socio-political conditions of the time. Gary Kynoch (2005:7) insists that ‘most people living under colonial rule navigated the spaces available to them and created new spaces in which to realize their aspirations’ A case in point is that of Sizwe Bansi and Styles as argued in the previous chapter. The process of ‘navigating spaces’ meant that one had to seek alternative ways which were most accessible. Having been brought up in violent circumstances most young people in the ghetto ‘chose’ violence, which in the context of the time was a popular way of earning a living. Gangsters as we see in Can Themba’s stories (‘The Dube train’ for example) were often feared and highly respected. This is similar to what Bill Ashcroft; the postcolonial theorist refers to as postcolonial transformation. These subtle ways of resistance as opposed to the Fanonian out-out violence, ‘allowed colonial subjects more latitude to achieve their immediate objectives and the daily business of survival ensured that most people prioritized these immediate needs rather than focusing on resistance’ (Kynoch, 2005:7).

It is useful therefore in the light of this conceptual framework to view criminal violence of the kind represented in Athol Fugard’s novel as survival in Homi Bhabha’s sense of ‘survival as a way of living on… survival not as seclusion but as a living-on-ness and a living on the borderlines’ (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000:373). In the face of depersonalizing challenges like apartheid legislation, people were often forced to find alternative ways of living within the system, dehumanizing as it was. Although Sophiatown, a Johannesburg township of the 1950s which had become a symbol of African space and identity, had itself been famous for its gangsters, as Mike Nicol chronicles in A Good-Looking Corpse, its destruction created fertile ground for the proliferation of criminal violence. Having been displaced and dislocated from his habitat, Tsotsi (the protagonist of Fugard’s novel) has to find an alternative way of living on, a way of positioning himself within the exclusive structures of apartheid South Africa. His quest for survival is, however, egocentric because in seeking to liberate himself economically and
psychologically, he unleashes a reign of terror on fellow Africans who are also victims of the very system that has bulldozed his place. Tsotsi engages in what Fugard calls ‘the violence of immediacy’ (1983: 25) in that after he has been victimized by the white man’s bulldozers, he goes on to victimize others within his immediate environment.

Bhabha’s concept of survival as ‘living on’ gives us a clear picture of the challenges Tsotsi’s gang is grappling with. The gang does not necessarily want to change the system, what they want is ‘to stick with the alienating experience’ (Bhabha, 2000: 373). Gang violence, as represented in Tsotsi is not against the system of apartheid; rather it seeks to open survival space for the individual criminals. We see this clearly in the criminal adventures of Don Mattera’s Vultures in his autobiography, Gone with the Twilight (1987). Reminiscing over the violent activities of his gang in the street alleys of Sophiatown, he writes ‘We knew no other life except brutality and bloodshed. Whether you used your fists, or weapons, you knew it was the only way to survive’ (1987: 98). Here survival ‘is not only a sticking with something to the end: it’s also an experience of how, in motion, in transition, in movement, you must continually build a habitation for …your thoughts and yourself’ (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000: 373). Although Bhabha is talking specifically about theoretical survival, his point is relevant to Tsotsi and his gang, who are fighting to survive apartheid by preying on fellow black survivors, thus continually building a habitation for themselves within the system. The complexity of this notion of survival is that while the gangsters destroy others they also destroy themselves in the process (Mattera, 1987:133).

Athol Fugard’s novel was conceptualized in the 1960s, though it languished in the National English Literature Museum at Rhodes University for nearly two decades until its first publication in1980. It is in this novel that ‘the theme of the violence of immediacy, along with its concomitant images of plants or bodies distorted by an insufficiently nurturing environment, is given its earliest literary elaboration’ (Barnard, 2007: 102). In fact Tsotsi portrays the structural criminal violence that characterized black townships in the apartheid era. The apartheid policy of influx control in the urban areas sought to limit the number of unemployed Africans loitering in the streets by relocating them to the so
called homelands, hence all unemployed Africans were branded unfit to stay in the
cities. Following the enactment of the Group Areas Act which decreed ‘that different
races could not live in the same areas and that only whites could live in areas that were
the most fertile, mineral rich, beautiful and convenient to amenities’ (Anne Reef, 2010:
62), ‘illegal urban status was often equated with criminality. Those who had no fixed
abode who were unemployed or did not have their passes in order, were assumed by
the SAP (South African Police). to make up the criminal element’ (Glaser, 2000:101). It
should be noted, however, that although the pass-less were criminalized as
lawbreakers, not all of those without passes had criminal intentions. Some, like Sizwe,
in Sizwe Bansi is Dead needed to stay in the city in order to work for their families. This
situation explains the criminal violence that Athol Fugard represents in Tsotsi. Whereas
some (Styles and Sizwe) chose to use less violent illegal methods, ‘tsotsis’ as they were
so labelled, ensured survival by unleashing a reign of terror on fellow blacks in the
townships.

Clive Glaser (2000: 47) notes that although the term tsotsi is contentious in terms of its
origin, ‘it is useful to conceptualize the tsotsi [phenomenon] as a subculture’ Quoting C.
V Bothma, a sociologist of the 1950s, Glaser (2000: 47) adds that tsotsis constituted ‘a
society of the adolescent’ with a clear sense of identity forged in the furnace of a hostile
urban environment. In a sense, they were outsiders because they were, for the most
part, separated from traditional structures – especially the “initiation” practices of
traditional tribal and clan culture. The idea of a ‘society of the adolescent’ implies a
youth culture that developed out of the appalling conditions of apartheid South Africa.
The emergence of the word ‘tsotsi’ itself echoes an overlap of cultures that Bhabha
speaks about through his concept of cultural hybridity. Glaser argues that the word
‘tsotsi’ came from the word ‘zoot-suit’ which was used in American gangland to refer to
a type of narrow bottomed trousers (2000: 50). ‘The zootsued thugs that ranged the
townships in the 1950s drew their identity and their type from American films’ (Gunn,
2010: 6). Gunn’s contention is plausible as much as it emphasizes the influence of
popular culture on gangsters; however, the gang phenomenon in South Africa long
predated the zoot-suit fashion of the 1940s.
Some scholars, for example C. V Bothma as quoted by Glaser insist that the word came from the South Sotho word ‘ho tsotsa’ which means ‘to sharpen’ referring to the shape of the trousers. In each case, it is clear that the coining of the word ‘tsotsi’ dramatizes the emergence of a subculture and a subjection to an outside cultural influence. In other words, this rebellion is a different kind of submission to colonialism. The word is not only a name for the individual criminal, but in true representational style, ‘it defines the individual and symbolises a generation’ (Gunn, 2010: 6). ‘In the 1950s and 60s, the name tsotsi invoked images of a flamboyant, stylish and glamorous gangster who was a role model for many young people in the ghetto. However in its current usage, the word is more usually associated with younger street gangs whose lives are often far from glamorous. But one thing hasn’t changed: Most tsotis still come from underprivileged backgrounds’ (www.tsotsi.com/english/index). The ‘flamboyancy’ and ‘glamour’ of gangsters speak of cultural inversion of ‘acceptable’ norms and values.

The fact that ‘tsotis come from underprivileged backgrounds’ is also true of Athol Fugard’s hero who is an orphan, a destitute and consequently a criminal. Tsotsi is different from other victims of apartheid for example Sizwe and Styles, because he is separated from his parents at a young age (ten). In fact he is traumatized by the arrest of his mother and as he runs away, nervous and confused, he meets the river gang, which offers him food and shelter. Tsotsi is, in that sense, a product of the urban removals that have torn his family apart. Thus, within the first ten pages of Tsotsi, the gang has killed a man, Gumboot Dhlamini by shoving a spoke into his heart while he was caught up on a commuter train (Nel, 1998:183). The incident is brutal but what is more intriguing about it is that it takes place in a train which if full of people. The other passengers are probably afraid because they ‘don’t know who is who and what’s what’ (Steinberg, 2008: 128) hence their silence is a way of protecting themselves.

Although the four criminals are overtly selfish in this incident, circumstances of life have also limited their survival options. The opening lines of the story show that the boys are living an idle, uneventful, predetermined life. Unemployed, homeless and insecure; they
also have nothing to do hence the aimlessness of their sitting and prolonged intervals of silence. The insistence on the word ‘silence’ (the word is repeated four times in the opening paragraph) implies an absence of recreation which lures them into criminal activities. The narrator tells us that ‘it was not a deliberate silence, there was no reason for it, being at first just the pause between something said and the next remark, but growing from that because they were suddenly all without words’ (p.5). The idleness of the gang and perhaps its potential criminality is captured in the awkward gestures they make, ‘none of them moved except...to yawn and stretch then slump back in their chairs, ‘one might scratch himself...looking at the shadows and wondering if they were not yet long enough’ (p. 1). It is the same idleness that causes Richard (in Black Boy) to burn his grandmother’s house. Gangsters are sometimes motivated by adventure especially in an environment that does not provide recreational facilities. Clive Glaser argues that the tsotsi gangs of the 1940s and 1950s ‘were expressions of the young urban masculinity;’ their masculine identity was ‘hinged on fighting skill, independence, street wisdom, feats of daring, law breaking, clothing style, proficiency in the tsotsitaal argot and success in women’ Having been rendered nameless and insignificant, the gang seeks to register its presence – to be recognized by the society that has denied them living space. In his autobiography, Gone with the Twilight (1987). Don Mattera reiterates this inner quest for status among gangsters. After a night of violence, says the narrator in Don Mattera’s novel;

The journey home was one of misguided triumph and song. Bloodied hands; bloodied clothes, bloodied and broken lives, but no matter; people would talk about us in the streets of Sophiatown, for that was what we lived for- to be noticed, to be spoken of and to be feared (1987: 61).

Similarly, Tsotsi and his gang unleash a reign of terror in the ghetto and consequently they are noticed, spoken of and feared. It has been argued in the introductory chapter that criminals do not necessarily commit crime due to environmental strain; sometimes they do so to gain status. The gang in Tsotsi is nocturnal - most of its criminal activities are done during the night. This explains the curiosity (and anxiety) that grips them as
night approaches. Given the context provided by the social historians, Gary Kynock (2005) and Clive Glaser (2000), it is plausible to argue that this environmentally-induced idleness is what the gang is fighting against. The system of apartheid sought to define/confine and determine black people’s lives. We are told in *Tsotsi* that ‘there had been a silence, as always happened (italics added) at about the same time’ implying that their life had become a mechanical routine with nothing new to refresh them. The gang knows every detail of the next moment before they get to it. This, Fugard seems to say, is the life that the gang has been squeezed into by apartheid regime. Tsotsi and his gang constitute what Don Mattera calls the ‘jobless and wont-work brigades of tsotsis who owned the days and ruled the nights’ (1987: 50) of Sophiatown.

Evidently, the boys are attracted to gang life in an attempt to better their lives and ameliorate this boredom. Apart from their material needs, they are also in search of an anchorage psychologically, some kind of social institution to which they can offer allegiance. The narrator tells us that ‘your only escape to this predicament lay in a gang because that had had a leader and he decided what to do’ (p.46). The gang is wondering if the shadows are not long enough implying that they are anxious for something to substitute this stagnant life. Clive Glaser (2000:10) argues that for the youths of apartheid South Africa, ‘gang life seemed attractive because it offered companionship, a sense of belonging and a possible source of income’ Apart from these, gang life also promised ‘quick’ money with less work. Tsotsi’s gang is looking for someone to give them a sense of direction, to lead their lives and make decisions for them. This apparent lack of ideological insight is familiar, it enacts the inherent predicament of the postcolonial in the aftermath of the colonial encounter, the dilemma of how to map out a future, how to stand outside the structural domination engendered by displacement and dislocation. I want to conceptualize the crime phenomenon in South Africa as a postcolonial response to the structural violence fostered by apartheid. History tells us that apartheid only recognized and issued identity documents (passes) to those who were employed in the city. As it is, Tsotsi and his gang are illegal. The gang’s quest for subjectivity (as a strategy of interpolating the prevailing racial ideology) is commendable. However, its shortcoming is that it is narrowed to a selfish concept of
survival which, if one thinks in terms of the broader picture, does not benefit the wider community. Tsotsi’s survival strategy is similar to that of Sizwe and Styles because it saves the individual.

The gang’s search for leadership emanates from the physical and ‘epistemic violence’ fostered by the apartheid regime. This is evident through Tsotsi’s compatriots, Butcher and Die Aap who become desperate for Tsotsi’s leadership after the latter had gone solo following a violent misunderstanding with Boston. The gang gets divided and we see Butcher and Die Aap wandering aimlessly as if they do not have any other life apart from the gang. It is fascinating to note that the gang members actually miss each other. The gang is a source of strength; a social or anti-social institution that has taken the place of the family. It provides human warmth and a sense of community. Gang socialization inverts conventional culture in that gangs acquire, share and celebrate anti-social values. This mutual camaraderie based on a shared history of displacement gives way to a subculture of violence which reminds us of Bigger and his friends in Native Son. Since the four gang members can be conceptualized as a family, the absence of one causes emotional discomfort for other gang members. We also see Die Aap and Butcher becoming restless and morose in the absence of Boston, the story teller. Apparently they have been socialized into subculture of violence and as Richard Turner argues socialization ‘prepares individuals, not just for social living, but for living out specific roles in a specific social structure and ‘narrows down the individual’s range of choices to a predetermined social reality’ (1980: 9).

Like Boesman and Lena, in Athol Fugard’s play, the four gangsters drown their sorrows in beer and drugs (zol). They drink in an attempt to obliterate the monotony of their life. Bloke Modisane (1986:38) notes that ‘getting drunk is for the gangsters a ‘purposeful destruction of the pain of their lives, ‘a drowning of themselves’ Following the murder of Gumboot Dhlamini, Tsotsi and his gang go to Soekie’s bar for a drink. The murder is particularly traumatizing for Boston and it is on this occasion that we see them drinking and smoking to forget their criminal activities. Beer and zol are, however, not therapeutic for Boston who is still traumatized by Gumboot’s death. While the rest of the
gang members successfully drown their bloody adventures in debauchery, only Boston is traumatized. Boston’s act of vomiting symbolizes a physiological rejection of criminal activity. Thus, even after heavy drinking Boston cannot forget Gumboot Dhlamini, the big man they have killed in cold blood on the train. The difference between Boston and the other gang members is that he is educated and would have lived a better life were it not for his attempted rape case which saw him out of college. For him, gangsterism is an alternative life that he lives to regret. He is sick because, like Gumboot, he wants to be ‘decent’ He is one of those who would have preferred to find space within the system rather than oppose it. His concept of decency was perhaps inculcated in him during his days at college, where he nursed hopes of becoming a teacher. Yet in this society, decent people are killed while the indecent live on.

After the job on the train, a job that has just claimed Gumboot’s life, Boston ‘had sat down in the gutter and vomited. Tsotsi also heard the sobs that slobbered out with the bread and beer of their meal an hour earlier’ (p.14). Boston’s sickness and appeal to ‘decency’ foregrounds the fact that gangsters are ordinary people who have taken a ruthless lifestyle out of desperation. Boston feels pain for the big man they have taken on the train. ‘When we dropped that big one tonight it was like that inside me. I bled man’ (p.20). Unlike Tsotsi who suppresses his feelings and lives in the perpetual present, ‘he remembered no yesterdays and tomorrow existed only when it was the present, the living moment’ (p.19), Boston’s internal physiology is still sensitive to traumatizing experience. We also see on this occasion, through Soekie’s relationship with the crew that gangs are not always anathema to the communities they live in. Gary Kynoch notes that ‘the communities that harbour criminal groups do not view them solely as a destructive force’ (2005:9). In this case, Soekie is making business out of the gang’s loot.

Apparently, ‘Tsotsi heads a posse of talented social misfits: Boston is an intellectual type; Butcher is a cold-blooded gangster who uses his dagger without compunction; Aap (‘monkey’ in Afrikaans) is a sort of trickster who worries about Tsotsi’s safety even becoming afraid of his wild behaviour and his inscrutable personality’ (Borges, 2007:
The four boys represent different ways of responding to apartheid repression. Boston, a failed teacher, appropriates discourse and uses it to talk away his frustration and ‘sickness’ He also uses discourse in the form of storytelling to pass time and put some meaning to his seemingly meaningless life. Since gangs are usually neglected in the national narrative, storytelling is, for Boston, a way of inscribing his marginalized story into the dominant narrative. We see Lena doing the same in *Boesman and Lena*. Butcher is more inclined to action than words, so whenever he gets bored he wants something to be done; and expects Tsotsi to be ready with a job. ‘His stories are told in ten words or less’ (p. 6). Butcher’s name comes from his accuracy, ‘he had never missed’ (p. 8). Thus, each member of the group has a particular strength which unfortunately is being channelled in the wrong direction. Die Aap is a dim witted heavy endowed with strength, ‘inhuman strength,’ while Boston is clever, ‘he could think’ (p.26). Owing to this ability to think, Boston is the brain that powers the gang. On the other hand, Tsotsi is the leader responsible for planning ‘jobs’ and he also oversees the implementation of the plans. Crime involves technicalities that need one to be tactical, accurate and decisive and seemingly Tsotsi is an embodiment of these qualities. The gang’s delinquent behaviour typifies what Fanon conceptualizes as the colonised’s way of responding to oppression. Instead of unleashing violence on the colonizer, the oppressed engage in internecine feuds. Tsotsi and his gang have become predators, literally living at the expense of their own people who, ironically, are also suffering under apartheid exploitation. They are guided by the law of the jungle whose motto is survival of the fittest (Shava, 1989: 136).

Anne Reef (2010: 62) argues that ‘Fugard’s *Tsotsi* extensively models resistance in its critique of apartheid by exposing the destruction and misery that the imposition of apartheid brought about’ In *Tsotsi*, Athol Fugard seems to imply that apartheid’s racist policies, for example the Group Areas Act which culminated in the historic forced removals, created a favourable climate for criminal violence. Rita Barnard (2007:102) argues that ‘the callous inhumanity of Tsotsi, the gangster of the title, is the product of years of homelessness and abandonment’ The urban removals of the 1950s and 1960s saw many black families being evicted from their homes in the townships and ‘the social
and economic consequences […] in such places produced slums, rife with crime’ (Anne Reef, 2010: 62). Athol Fugard captures the misery that accompanied the slum clearances, ‘the disbelief, the angry impotence, the confusion in the faces that had followed the cart loaded high with sticks of furniture’ (p.8). The psychological trauma of this experience is aptly captured by Bloke Modisane (1963) in his book, Blame me on History. He tells us that something died in him, ‘a piece of [him] died’ (1986: 1) with the destruction of Sophiatown, an African township that was destroyed by the apartheid regime in 1958. Bloke Modisane sees the destruction of the township as the tragic decimation of those invaluable landmarks which are ‘milestones and signposts’ of a people’s history:

I stood over the ruins of the house where I was born in Bertha street, and knew that I would never say to my children: this is the house where I was born, that when I was a boy, Sophiatown was a bare veld, that there was once a tree here, perhaps the only one in the location… all that I can bequeath to them is the debris and the humiliation of defeat, the pain of watching Sophiatown dying all around me, dying by the hand of man (1963, 1986: 4).

While the destruction of Sophiatown was the last blow to Bloke Modisane’s hopes of living in apartheid South Africa, for Don Mattera it was an initiation into violent gang life. As Don Mattera puts it in his autobiography, Gone with the twilight (1987), ‘the houses had helped to shape my dreams and had given warmth to my spirit in the company and fellowship of my kin’ (p. 7). With the destruction of the houses, the human spirit in him was also destroyed. Similarly Athol Fugard reflects on this traumatizing experience. ‘The people were gone, those who had lived there, born there, [were] gone away as much as those who had died there’ (p.39). The victims, as we see in Boesman and Lena, end up loitering in the streets because they have nowhere to go. Rita Barnard (2007: 103) maintains that the destruction of the townships is both physical and psychological in that as the buildings go down, the victims are left in the open sky, without a sense of home. It was one of the ironies of colonial repression that in creating a ‘pastoral’ whites-only society, reminiscent of the metropolitan ‘homeland,’ the
colonizer destroyed the colonial subject’s home and relegated him to an a-historical life as depicted in Don Mattera’s *Gone with the Twilight*. Any form of a house, whether a pondok or a mansion is, in Fugard’s existentialist terms, an expression of one’s world, a way of reducing the world to a familiar comprehensible size. It is an ‘enclosure built to a scale commensurate to the human body,’ one that in the poignant phrase from *Boesman and Lena* ‘makes [the world] your own size’ (Rita Barnard, 2007:103).

Although in many cases new houses were provided in more ‘appropriate’ places, these houses were detached from history. If anything, they reminded the occupants of the day they were defeated. In the case of Sophiatown, the victors had to rename the location ‘triumph’ in celebration of their victory.

Thus, in destroying the township, the white man’s bulldozer also destroyed the township dweller’s world. Athol Fugard ‘insists on the importance of material conditions, especially adequate dwelling places, in the shaping of subjectivity and social identity’ (Barnard, 2007:103). Without adequate dwelling places, moral degeneration is inevitable. The destruction of Tsotsi’s world (his dwelling place, his parents and community) symbolizes the loss of a cultural heritage, without which he cannot chart his way into the future. Tsotsi is not proud of his past because it reminds him of the destruction of his family.

Gumboot Dhlamini, the man who has been victimised by Tsotsi’s gang, is an embodiment of the plight of the black South African man during apartheid. While he is attempting to earn an innocent living through the hardships of apartheid, Tsotsi’s gang has eyes wide open for his pay packet. Gumboot’s case is very sorrowful because he has left a pregnant wife in the village waiting anxiously for his return. Gumboot Dhlamini’s experience reminds us of the apartheid regime’s strategy of dumping black people to the dry and barren homelands that could not sustain life. In this case, he is forced to go to the city and sell his labour in the industries so as to provide for his family. Since he is desperate for a job, his bargain is also cheapened. Thus he toils from one day to the next, though his earnings are so little he can hardly afford to buy a new pair of shoes.
The way Tsotsi and his gang strike at Gumboot Dhlamini confirm Mike Nicol’s observation that ‘tsotsis study their victims carefully and take care to catch them off their guard’ (1995:46). Tsotsi and his gang carefully plan their jobs, stalk their human prey with caution and strike at the most opportune time. When they go for Gumboot Dhlamini each member has a specific duty assigned to him. ‘Butcher was behind him and Butcher knew with unfailing accuracy the position of the heart’ (p.11). Gumboot Dhlamini falls prey to the gangsters because of his ignorance about the ways of the city. Being a villager-come-to-the-city, he does not seem to understand that the values of the city are different from those of the village. The irony here is that in traditional white liberal literature, someone like Dhlamini would be considered a positive figure.

In his study of the Marashea gangsters in South Africa, Gary Kynoch (2008:630) observes that ‘tsotsis often preyed on vulnerable migrants unschooled in the ways of the city’ In the city the African has been detribalized so much that he/she no longer recognizes kinship ties. Although Gumboot Dhlamini is travelling in the company of a large number of fellow workers, each one has a world and destination of his/her own. Dhlamini makes himself an easy target of the gang because of his rural mind-set. His first mistake, as indicated in the text is that he smiled. A black man’s smile in apartheid South Africa implies that his life is in order. We are told that the play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* was based on a picture that Fugard and his partners saw. The picture was of a wide-smiling black man, crossing his legs and smoking a cigarette. The implication of the smile was that his passbook was in order. By the same token, Gumboot’s smile is mistaken for a sign that he has money. To make matters worse, Gumboot makes this highly suggestive gesture on a Friday, on payday. He is perhaps smiling at the prospect of meeting his wife since he has just been paid and is planning to go home.

His second mistake is the tie which he bought to impress Maxulu, his wife. ‘But it was a bright tie and made it easy for Tsotsi to follow him at a distance…” (p.11). The tie betrays him because it reverses the normal moral order of the ghetto. A tie, in the subculture of the ghetto, is a symbol of gentility and wealth. Gumboot’s last mistake is that he bought
the ticket with money from his pay packet. As a villager-come-to-the-city, Gumboot considers the people around him as his brothers and thus harmless. Yet what he does not understand is that the colonial city is a soulless place where people have been dislocated both physically and psychologically. They have lost the cultural homogeneity which is characteristic of rural communities. In a society that has degenerated into a subculture of violence, nobody cares about anybody’s welfare. Writing about his experiences in Sophiatown, Don Mattera (1987), states that ‘instead of chastising their delinquent children, families actually goaded them on to commit acts of violence, and profitable crimes such as theft, robbery and burglary’ (1987: 98).

Johnny Steinberg (2008:64) characterizes the city during apartheid as ‘a kind of no man’s land,’ ‘a world of strangers and estrangement’ because of its heterogeneity. It is a place of ‘strangers and estrangement’ because it does not observe any kinship relationships as is the case in the rural areas. Ironically, the city is not exactly a ‘no man’s land’ for the gangster is the man in charge. Evidently Gumboot is also rather absent minded and carelessly enthusiastic about the man who is coming to help him write a letter to his wife. The people that he identifies with are just an anonymous mass, not ‘his people’ as he thinks. Perhaps in a political sense, blacks are one people, but the atomization of city life has also depersonalized them. ‘It seems that in the anonymity of the city, the absence of ties frees individuals since there is no need to express their feelings in a compulsory form to anyone’ (Borges, 2007: 262). This explains why Tsotsi and his gang manage to drive a spoke through Dhlamini’s stomach in a train that is packed with people who in an ideal set up could have rescued him. Apparently the people on the train have no sense of community because they have been variously dislocated and misplaced. We are further reminded of the anonymity of the African in the city through Gumboot’s burial at the township cemetery. The Minister and the grave digger do not even know who they are burying.

It is fascinating to note that with every careful step that the gang takes towards its victim, the masses are inconsequential. No precaution is taken to disguise their intentions. The victim could have been anyone on the train. Don Mattera reminds us
that in Johannesburg of the 1950s, gangsters were revered and ‘to keep silent was one of several unwritten codes, and it often meant survival’ (p. 99). This shows that the gang is familiar with their place, the ghetto, particularly its individualistic nature. ‘Boston, who was nearest and who was also sick, sick right through his brain, through his heart into his stomach, and was fighting to keep it down, Boston it was who slipped his hand into the pocket and took out the pay packet’ (p. 12). It is interesting that the callous criminals who have just killed an innocent man (Gumboot Dlamini) are customers at Soekie’s bar. We also see Don Mattera in his autobiography buying groceries for his loved ones with stolen money. The Indian shop owner, Cassim is frightened when Tsotsi walks into his shop because he thinks he has come to steal but in the end Tsotsi turns out to be a customer. The circulation of money in the townships is a matter of robbing Paul to pay Peter and vice versa.

Dlamini’s death, in a crowded train, also points to the fact that black townships were neglected by the apartheid regime. John Brewer (in Kynoch, 2005: 5) notes that black people were left to their own affairs as long as white people were not affected. ‘Passes and documents were checked, raids for illicit liquor conducted and illegal squatters evicted, all while murder, rape and gangsterism flourished’ Gary Kynoch (2008: 639) also confirms that ‘apartheid police protected Europeans and to a lesser extent Asians. The African poor were left to fend for themselves’ The narrator in Tsotsi adds that ‘you could sit down on a chair in a corner and drag out one tot to last all night and no one would give a damn one way or another why your mother was dead or your woman dead’ (p. 13). Life in such a lawless society is risky because no one is accountable for anything. Butcher and Die Aap drag a drunken woman from Soekie’s bar and rape her in the night yet no one reports this incident perhaps because it is considered ‘normal’ in the ghetto. The black township is teeming with illegal dealings of one sort or the other. Soekie’s bar is possibly illegal, so nothing that happens in it can be reported to the police.

Athol Fugard invokes our sympathy particularly through Boston who, following the job on the train is traumatized and retching. Boston is the moral barometer of the group
because he has an active sense of feeling. On the other hand, Tsotsi is portrayed as a self-styled heartless criminal. ‘Orphaned at an early age and compelled to claw his way to adulthood alone, Tsotsi has lived a life of extreme social and psychological deprivation. A feral being with scant regard for the feelings of others, he has hardened himself against any feelings of compassion’ (www.tsotsi.com/english/index). Laike Bigger attacking Gus in Native Son, Tsotsi physically assaults Boston for appealing to his soul and exhuming his buried past. Boston goes to the extent of piercing himself in order to make Tsotsi understand what it means to ‘feel’ for a fellow human being.

This appeal to the human soul, as a liberal strategy of addressing the problem of crime is problematic. Some critics, for example protest writers like Njabulo Nbebele and Ezekiel Mphahlele have seen it as sympathetic to the establishment and thus apolitical. The liberal philosophy in South African literature has been widely contested over the years especially by neo-Marxists and Africanists such as Biko who expected liberals to abandon their neutral position and get more involved in the politics of the day. There was also an extensive internal debate within the liberal movement which was largely won by its more conservative strain. However, some scholars have a tendency to criticize the liberal school outside the socio-political context in which it operated. ‘Occasionally radicals have quoted out of context, mis-paraphrased or used pejorative or inaccurate slogans which have created the impression that liberal historians have said things that they have not actually said’ (Wright, 1977: 27). Hilder Kuper, (1979) notes that arguments against the liberal philosophy are spearheaded by scholars who criticize liberalism out of context. Ezekiel Mphahlele (1974: 50), perhaps one of the scholars Hilder Kuper is referring to, argues that ‘the liberal accommodates himself to the legislative machinery,’ hoping that ‘he can use the concessions by which he has come to occupy a certain position inside the machinery to persuade the oppressor to change heart’ Mphahlele seems to associate the liberal position with elitism and/or the acquisition and preservation of white privileges. Wertheim (2000: 3) notes that white writers like Fugard and novelist Alan Paton are now rejected for their moderation by post-apartheid critics, but one must remember that it was their moderation that drew world attention to the outrages of apartheid. Yet one might also ask why it was white
writers rather than black writers who received the attention. Was this not itself a far-from-subtle racism in the Western elite?

In defence of liberalism Kuper insists that ‘there is a strange arrogance in equating liberalism with whites when it is a humanist philosophy to which many peoples of different races have contributed in the long history of continuously renewed struggles for freedom’ (1979:13). The essence of liberalism, Kuper (p. 30) argues, ‘is an awareness of the value of freedom and the human worth of an individual’ and in the case of South Africa its ‘emphasis has been on non-racism, freedom from racial discrimination, and the protection of individual liberty’ It is important to understand the context in which the liberal school of thought was formulated in South Africa. ‘To reflect on the liberal as a scholar in South Africa is to consider the place of the intellectual as humanist in a hostile and repressive milieu’ (Kuper, 30). Evidently, Kuper is at pains to defend liberalism. What Kuper explains is perhaps the ‘theory’ of liberalism, which was different from the liberalism practiced by self-identified liberals. South African white liberalism was a self-identified issue, and before the 1980s very few liberals were not white nor were the self-identified liberals necessarily liberals in the sense that Kuper uses it (non-racist, humanist etc) – they were for the most part white supremacists who felt that apartheid would not work and needed to be toned down

Boston’s voice is therefore a liberal voice of reason which seeks to moderate excesses of gangsterism. Athol Fugard is aware of the conditions that have created Tsotsi but he also does not condone criminal violence, especially if it involves the murder of innocent civilians like Gumboot Dhlamini. Marxists have argued that the liberal initiative is futile because it is not possible to transform society by appealing to the conscience of the oppressor, or in this case to change criminals by speaking to the human soul in them. While Marxists (radicals) seek to right to excesses of apartheid by ‘revolutionary' means, liberals seek to mediate the two extremes- apartheid on one hand and violent nationalism on the other. Alan Paton (in Rich, 1993: 91) notes that ‘it is the role of liberal forces to hasten evolution so as to avoid revolution’ Most scholars, including Paton thought a revolution would upset the status quo; especially property rights hence the
Hilder Kuper (1979: 34) asks a very important question in relation to the liberal school of thought: Can the liberal really describe what is happening without emotion? Can white liberals speak on behalf of the oppressed without feeling for their fellow whites? This was the predicament of most liberals in South Africa: that they had to speak against a system that was supported by their colleagues and relatives. Liberals in apartheid South Africa were operating in a difficult environment where ‘to possess banned literature or to quote from speeches or writings of a person who was banned or from a book which was banned, was a criminal offence’ (Kuper: 1979: 43) but since liberalism required freedom of speech, submitting to this law one would mean ceasing to be an actual liberal. However, the point must be made that since most liberals were white they were also limited by their racial affiliation. Wertheim (2000: 2) notes that ‘as a white writer, Fugard necessarily sees black and coloured life at a remove, a remove that can provide some objectivity but that also always keeps him from truly understanding what it is to be ‘non-white’ in South Africa, what it is to live in a non-white township and suffer the human indignities, the physical and mental blows that blacks and coloureds know with terrible immediacy’ The point that Wertheim is making is that one cannot stand completely free of one’s socialization.

The appeal to Tsotsi’s soul may not make sense to someone who lived the circumstances that catapulted Tsotsi to gang violence. Richard in Black Boy became a drunkard at the age of six and subsequently, a criminal, because the white folks cannot give him a chance. The same can be said of Bigger Thomas. Tsotsi has no intention, as demonstrated in the text, of becoming a criminal until such a time the bulldozers destroyed his habitat and scattered his family. One would argue that Tsotsi’s conduct is wrong but perhaps understandable for him, and his victims are overall victims of apartheid. It is common in an oppressive society that the oppressed end up oppressing each other. Although Frantz Fanon disapproves this situation, his clinical studies have need to hasten evolution. Since the white man’s bulldozers smashed Sophiatown amidst tears of black folk, one would perhaps see Boston’s appeal to Tsotsi’s conscience as inconsequential.
demonstrated how this comes about. Thus, in addressing the crime phenomenon, Mphahlele seems to be advocating something more than a religious appeal to the human soul, perhaps Michael Billington’s ‘political gesture’ (Durbach, 1999: 62). He argues that ‘to be liberal you have to be white,’ (1974: 50) implying that liberalism is a luxury that blacks could not afford.

Radical scholars would view Boston’s appeal to Tsotsi’s conscience as a rather simplistic conceptualization of Tsotsi and what he symbolizes. Influenced by Marxist thought, radicals would see Tsotsi a victim of capitalism, ‘forced into the orbit of its exploitative world economy’ (Wright, 1977: 15). Michael Billington, as I have highlighted in the introduction, feels that it is not enough for Fugard to offer mere sympathy to his black counterparts. Although the criticism seems plausible liberals like Kuper (1979) would dismiss it as a-historical. Firstly Fugard is certainly aware of the conditions that created Tsotsi, which makes his presentation relevant historically. Tsostsi is an innocent boy who is forced into the streets by apartheid brutality. By suggesting that Tsotsi is a victim of circumstances Fugard might be making excuses for him. However, Boston’s appeal to Tsotsi may also be interpreted as an attempt by Fugard to reduce the gang problem to a moral issue. Liberals, as Wright (1977: 12) argues have always had a keen sense of moral virtue. When Boston says ‘you must have a soul Tsotsi…Every human being has got a soul’ (p. 21) it is as if he wants to persuade him to repentance. Yet we are told that Tsotsi’s name is ‘the name, in a way, of all men’ (p. 19), not only a name for a particular individual, which implies that Boston’s appeal for decency is not only directed at Tsotsi but humanity at large. When Boston says, ‘Tsotsi, answer me,’ (p.20), he is speaking to Tsotsi as a type of man. Since Tsotsi is human, Boston’s appeal disturbs him. The problem with Boston’s appeal is not only that it comes from one who is also a murderer but that it underscores the liberal assumption that ‘too much of the world out there is fixed, amenable to logic, fundamentally rational and open to persuasion. This assumption is clearly what lies behind the liberal rejection of violence and radical socialism’ (Dickie-Clarke: 1979: 48). Most radicals would argue that the liberal rejection of violence and radicalism was underpinned by the fact that they had so much to lose (economically) and feared the actual rather than rhetorical ending of racial
discrimination. However, Fugard’s point, as it appears to me, is that Tsotsi is not beyond redemption, he may not change immediately but the seed of his reformation has been planted. From now on, he is no longer the same person because Boston’s words keep ringing in his mind.

What is more interesting about Tsotsi is that he is the youngest yet he is the leader of the gang. He meets the criteria for a typical gang leader- ‘loved, worshipped, feared and emulated, a hero whose only classroom [is] the street and whose only code of conduct and survival [is] violence’ (Mattera, 1987: 98). The gang considers him the toughest and most ruthless. It is plausible that Tsotsi adopted this position as a survival strategy in response to the ruthlessness of his environment. ‘Ruled only by impulse and instinct, he is fuelled by the fear he instils in others’ (www.tsotsi.com/english/index). In spite of all this, Tsotsi’s transformation begins following the murder of the big man, Gumboot Dhlamini. The question is why Gumboot Dhlamini’s death is such a landmark event in the gang’s life? It is probable that he is not the only man they have killed in their lives. Firstly, Gumboot Dhlamini is an embodiment of Boston’s failed dream of becoming a teacher. He reminds him of his childhood dream. He says to Tsotsi;

You know what I wanted to be at your age Tsotsi...A teacher. I studied. I titcha boy Tsotsi. I wore a tie. Ja man, with dots and stripes, like that big one tonight. (p. 18).

It is as if by killing the man with a tie Boston has officially aborted his dream. Secondly, Athol Fugard has presented Gumboot as an innocent man who is trying to earn his bread through legitimate means regardless of the hostile political environment, which is exactly what Boston aspired to do. Like every other worker in the system he is toiling, walking to work until his pair of shoes gets torn. It is noteworthy that his wife back home is pregnant and anxiously looking forward to his return. Gumboot appeals to the reader’s sympathy because Fugard has portrayed as a man, who, in spite of his circumstances, has decided to live a peaceful life. Boston’s trauma comes from this callous act of killing an innocent man- a man who is equally a victim, a man who,
regardless of his imposing stature opts to live by legitimate means. The death of Dlamini is meant to stir our sympathies as readers so that when we see Boston retching, it is a consolation, for such a smiling man could not be killed so wantonly.

However, as we have seen through Bigger Thomas and his gang in Native Son, Tsotsi and his gang are also ruled by fear. It is fear that makes them overreact and engage in violence even among themselves. Tsotsi accuses Boston of hiding fear behind his smile, yet even his own accusation is inspired by fear. ‘You smile at me and your smile hides fear,’ (p. 6) he says of Boston. This fear is a constant reminder of the potential dangers of gang life. A gangster can kill/be killed any time. Tsotsi is afraid because Boston’s questions threaten to destroy his leadership. Once his past is revealed, Tsotsi cannot hold on to his image as a fearless gangster. Tsotsi’s image, which is feared and respected by the group, is based on his present exploits, his ability to plan jobs and get them done. Ironically, the same gang which is ruled by fear also rules the streets. As they walk in the streets, some people give way while others run indoors for ‘the four men passing that moment were harbingers of the night’ (p. 9). Tsotsi knows the fear that he instils in the township as ‘his meaning.’ This is his meaning because the prevailing conditions ‘have taught him no other’ (p.9).

Like Bigger Thomas in Native Son Tsotsi’s greatest enemy is fear. His behaviour in the gang is determined by his fear of fear. Thus to cover up his own fear he accuses fellow gang members of cowardice, the very same way Bigger attacks Gus for coming late for a planned job. Tsotsi unleashes violence on Boston the way Bigger attacks Gus to protect himself from being overwhelmed by fear. His attack on Boston is also a blind refusal to confront the reality of his life. Tsotsi is guided by the needs of the moment; he does not care about tomorrow, neither does he reflect on the past. His life is ‘here’ in the whirling vortex of the present like that of Boesman and Lena. Yet after Gumboot’s death, we see him going through a transformation that he cannot understand. ‘For some time now in a strange way, it had no longer felt the same’ (p. 25). He feels so restless that we see him prowling in the township. Boston’s words keep ringing in his mind,
‘when it comes to you, you won’t know what to do. You won’t know what to do with that feeling’ (p.21).

Although Fugard may be attempting to upset a convention that views criminals as inhuman, his attempt to redeem Tsotsi by converting him to Christianity is also problematic. We know through the history of colonial domination that Christianity has been manipulated and used for purposes of conquest and dispossession. For many years, the church, which is supposed to uphold morality and condemn oppression, has also been responsible for a whole lot of immoral activities. For example, the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church, like many other churches in apartheid South Africa, is on record for practicing racial discrimination (Modisane, 1963). Father Ransome’s church is an agent of colonialism because it does not want strangers (blacks!) in the church yard. The church cannot rehabilitate Tsotsi because it is biased. It looks at him with stereotypical lenses – he is black, therefore he is a potential criminal. The way Mrs Marriot and Father Ransome treat Isaiah does not befit ministers of the gospel. If anything they are part of apartheid’s repressive state apparatus.

Athol Fugard is thus politically conscious; his narrative exposes the hypocrisy of the church and the brutality of apartheid. *Tsotsi* is like most of Fugard’s plays an attempt to witness the lives of the disenfranchised. Through *Tsotsi*, one understands that gangsters are human beings with fears, feelings and needs like everyone else. All things being equal, they can live a ‘normal’ life. Criminality is only a choice that they made in order to earn a living. Tsotsi rejects the past so as to focus on his immediate needs. However, his tragedy like that of Cross Damon in Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*, is that he cannot successfully chart his way into the future because the future is always contingent upon one’s past. Thus, like Cross who kills the communists to maintain his fake identity Tsotsi attacks Boston particularly because Boston is asking questions that expose his past. His question, ‘What is your name Tsotsi… your real name?’ (p. 15) is significant in that it reminds us that gangsters are people with a history. Tsotsi’s real name will possibly exhume a lot of other issues about how he became a criminal, so it is
in denying the past that Tsotsi sustains his present life. This is the reason why he becomes emotional and violent each time Boston talks about his past.

All that the gang knows about Tsotsi is that he is ‘the hardest, the quickest, and the cleverest that had ever been’ (p.15). Tsotsi’s past is not welcome as a subject of discussion because it negates his present reputation, the latter of which is necessary if he is to maintain his position as leader of the group. Besides, Tsotsi ‘didn’t know the answers… neither his name nor his age’ (p.17). It is not that Tsotsi does not know these things; it is that he has made up his mind, for the purposes of survival in the here and now, to deliberately forget his past. We are told that ‘he was not only resigned to not knowing about himself, he didn’t want to know’ (p.27).

Tsotsi’s predicament reminds us of Boesman, the homeless victims of slum clearance who is living ‘here’ in the perpetual present. Such is the rootless life that apartheid has imposed on its subjects- a tragedy that is reminiscent of Richard’s endless journeys in Richard Wright’s Black Boy. It is this lack of a fixed abode (psychological and cultural) that keeps the gang restless and psychologically dislocated. When Tsotsi sees Petah, a childhood street pal being dragged by the police, ‘he close[s] his eyes’ even though Petah is calling out to him. ‘He heard it no more. He forgot it…Knowing it was a voice from the past he made himself forget’ (p.29).This mechanical way of forgetting betrays an inner quest for subjectivity; a yearning to live outside the limitations of the past and write history from the present to the future. We see the same logic in Cross Damon’s attempt to ‘bleach’ his African American history and become a universal man. Is it possible for us to live in the perpetual present, to close our eyes and forget? Where is the essence of life without yesterday and tomorrow?

Fugard conceptualizes Tsotsi’s lack of a history as darkness. As the narrator puts it ‘to know nothing about yourself is to be constantly in danger of nothingness’ (p.29).The implication is that life has no meaning if we do not know who we are. This is the psychopathological paralysis that leads Tsotsi to a criminal life. For him, criminality is a way of establishing an identity constantly under threat, a way of saying ‘I may be poor
and black and a criminal but I am here’ like Alice Walker’s Celie who says ‘I’m poor, black, I might even be ugly, but dear God, I’m here’ (Colour Purple, 1985). Tsotsi is in some measure unleashing vengeance on a society that has denied him a history and a future. Unfortunately, he is also denying his history and future to himself, and the vengeance he takes is not on the society oppressing him, but on the victims of that society. Clive Glaser (2000) has argued that a gang subculture is a way of life that seeks to invert the values of conventional culture. It is an attempt by the marginalized to create a survival space within the exclusive hegemony of the ruling discourse. ‘Delinquent subcultures provide alternative opportunities for upward mobility among those who have the least access to the legitimate channels of upward mobility’ (Glaser, 2000:7).

These ‘alternative opportunities for upward mobility’ are often blindly selfish and materialist as we see in the murder of Gumboot Dhlamini. We know that Tsotsi’s past like that of Boesman and Lena has been bulldozed by the apartheid regime in the name of slum clearance. His mother has also been dragged from her shack partially dressed and his father simply disappeared. Perhaps, the father was carried away during a pass raid and dumped in the homelands. Tsotsi is, in Kynoch’s (2005) terms, ‘fighting the world’ because firstly he has no place in apartheid society and secondly, because he has no concept of society to which he could offer allegiance. Like the Russians of Kynoch’s book he seeks to subvert the order of the world but only in relation to himself. Unlike Boston, for example, who has had an experience of family socialization; Tsotsi’s only ‘social’ institution is the gang, hence his anger towards conventional culture symbolized by Gumboot Dhlamini.

Soekie, the owner of the bar where Tsotsi and his gang spend their time drinking and smoking after a successful job, is a typical victim of apartheid’s policy of racial classification. She is a coloured woman ‘born in the best bed, in the biggest house of the best European suburb in the city’ (p.15). Her name, Soekie, which means ‘little searcher’ in Afrikaans suggests her search for identity in the complex continuum of apartheid hierarchy. She is a victim of what Don Mattera (1987:6). calls ‘the Boer's
denial of sexual responsibility’ Born in the best bed, in the biggest house, she is, ironically, always writing letters to her mother in the white suburbs enquiring about her birthday. Evidently, Soekie cannot easily access these details because she is coloured and her mother is white. Her case reminds us of apartheid’s racial reclassifications that saw ‘whole and stable families being shattered overnight as brothers, sisters, sons and daughters were ripped apart by the cruel laws of racial classification’ (Don Mattera, 1987: 26). The reference to the no man’s land between the township and the white suburbs is reminiscent of apartheid’s racial boundaries that are dramatized in Soekie’s case.

Unlike the township where Tsotsis wreak havoc, ‘the white suburbs near the township were well patrolled’ (p.24). The Township, on the other hand, is not properly policed; its inhabitants have to be responsible for their own safety. This is explicitly shown in the story of Cassim, the Indian shop owner and his wife who are literally terrified when Tsotsi walks into their shop looking for condensed milk. It is through this story that we get a glimpse into the risky life that Africans lived in apartheid South African townships. It is, however, clear from Cassim’s extreme caution while serving Tsotsi that tsotsis are people who are known in the townships yet nothing is done to apprehend them. Cassim even knows the typical criminal ‘the slim cool types of the street corners and the dice rings’ (p.32). In his study of gangsters in apartheid South Africa, Gary Kynoch (2005: 9) notes that ‘the communities that harboured criminal groups did not consider them solely as a destructive force’ In fact some township residents [like Soekie and Cassim in this case] shared in the spoils of the gang’s criminal exploits.

The fact that Tsotsi gets his name from an Indian shop owner dramatizes society's tendency, as reflected in Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks, to discriminate by stereotyping. Labelling theorists of crime also argue that ‘the search for the causes of crime should begin not with offenders and their environs but rather with the societal reactions that other people- including state officials- have towards offenders (Lilly, etal, 2002:109). Howard Becker (in Lilly, 2002: 110), one of the major proponents of the labelling theory, also adds that ‘criminalizing an otherwise reformable youth makes him
conscious of himself as a different human being. He becomes classified as a thief and the entire world about him has suddenly become a different place for him and will remain different for the rest of his life’ The point is that labelling, like stereotyping in Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*, creates a new world for the other, it makes him see himself/herself in a different way. Bhabha (1994) also argues that stereotype is renewed through repetition. The more one is called a criminal, the more one begins to identify himself/herself as a criminal. Tsotsi does not however see himself through the eyes of stereotype for the rest of his life, but the effect of the stigmatization is explicit. After his parents have been abducted and ferried away by agents of the apartheid regime, Tsotsi is confronted with a hostile world; a world that calls him names instead of giving him a habitat. Society has already labelled him a ‘tsotsi,’ hence we see him embracing the name and beginning to lead the life implied in that name. One may argue that Tsotsi was already a criminal before he was labelled, which is perhaps like saying Africans were already primitive before they were colonized and labelled ‘primitive’ Tsotsi knew that it was ‘wrong’ to be a criminal, that’s why he ran away from the river gang the first time he joined it. Yet he later embraced a criminal life. Bill Ashcroft (1998: 209) argues that ‘we are conscious of the world through a body constructed by that world: the gaze of the world in which the body is constructed is at the same time the subject’s own gaze.’ The world that creates Tsotsi is in turn created by him through the atmosphere of violence he maintains in the township.

Apartheid society has no way of rehabilitating the marginalized and the destitute, for example, orphans like Tsotsi and his gang; instead it isolates and objectifies. Tsotsis are stigmatized as unique people with identifiable physical features- ‘the slim arrogance of the body, the soft, idle hands and the head that pretended not to look but was doing so all the time.’ The man that Morris Tshabalala, the cripple meets at the Bantu Eating house also characterizes tsotsis stereotypically as ‘mad dogs’ that ‘bite their own people’ (p. 61). It is, in my view, parochial to see criminals as idiosyncratic individuals who have simply deviated from the norm. Tsotsis are not only mad dogs but also products of a mad society. Arguably, the Tsotsi subculture in apartheid society comes as a response to society’s failure to rehabilitate victims of circumstances. On this note,
Aime Cesaire (1972) maintains that a civilization that fails to solve the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

Apartheid is portrayed as a heartless system, what Richard Wright calls ‘a whole panoply of rules, taboos and penalties’ (1991:858) that cannot accommodate invalids as long as they are on the ‘other’ side of the colour line. Morris Tshabalalala, the cripple, ends up begging because he cannot be offered a job. The society calls him a half man. Morris Tshabalala’s predicament reminds us of apartheid as a capitalist instrument by which the minority oppressed the majority. Each time he tries to look for a job, he is turned down because of his disability. It is ironic, however, to note that Morris lost his legs in a mine disaster digging gold for the very white people who are now refusing him a job because he is crippled. While white people are enjoying themselves in ‘big cars [feeling] warm inside like wonderful presents in bright boxes,’ (p. 61) Tshabalala is crawling on his haunches in the streets, homeless.

Rita Barnard (2007: 103) argues that ‘inhabiting such a space [of comfort] tends to be the privilege of those with wealth and status. The cozy protective wrapping that the whites enjoy contrast starkly with the simple hand-worked fabric in which [Tsotsi] wrapped his existence’ (p.103). Tshabalala is bitter because ‘It is for [their] gold that [he] had to dig.’ ‘That is what destroyed [him]’ (p. 61). The wealthy motorists are in fact ‘walking on stolen legs,’ (p.61) says Tshabalala. In what sense are these white people walking on stolen legs? It is not only because Morris lost his legs digging for their gold, but also because he never got any compensation for it. The world of apartheid is so hostile that even cripples are expected to carry a pass and earn their living. ‘A police man might stop him and ask for a pass’ (p.61).

It is interesting to note that most South African whites experienced less violence during apartheid than after 1994. This is not surprising given the selective policing system of the apartheid era as portrayed by Kynoch (2005), Steinberg (2008) and Clive Glaser (2000). Graham Boynton (1997: 5) actually thinks that criminal violence replaced the political violence of the apartheid years due to failure by Mandela’s government to
provide employment to about twenty million unemployed black South Africans. What Boynton does not realize is that crime has always been rife in the townships throughout the apartheid years. The difference with the post-1994 era is that whites (for example Dodds in Bonynton's *Last Days in Cloud Cuckooland*) are also made to experience the violence that blacks have been experiencing all along. Most of Dodds’s friends are ‘diagnosed with something called low-level depression, apparently brought on by constant proximity to violence’ (Boynton, 1997: 10).

Since black people were not guaranteed security in this system, they devised their own strategies of transforming apartheid hegemony in order to survive. Gumboot Dhlamini, the big man, and Isaiah, the gardener, seek to earn a living by selling their labour to the white man. On the other hand, Tsotsi and his gang capitalize on the poor police system in the ghetto to unleash violence on migrant labourers like Gumboot Dhlamini. We are told that the most important asset for Tsotsi is his knife. It is a weapon of self-defence and intimidation that guarantees his survival. ‘The knife was not only his weapon, but also a fetish, a talisman that conjured away bad spirits and established him securely in his life’ (p.67). Tsotsi’s organic relationship with his knife is reminiscent of Bigger Thomas who feels complete once he puts a knife in his pocket. While Bigger uses the knife to defend himself against white hostility and perhaps intimidate his gang members too, Tsotsi uses it primarily to earn a living.

Tsotsi ensures his own existence through inflicting ‘pain, fear and death’ (p.29) on fellow Africans in the fashion of his ancestors, the Ninevites of Nongoloza, who ‘robbed small bands of mine workers making their way home from the Witwatersrand through the countryside’ (Onselen, 1982: 177, Steinberg, 2004: 7). ‘The problem of his life was to maintain himself, to affirm his existence in the face of his nullity’ (p. 29). Like Cross in Wright’s *The Outsider*, Tsotsi engages in violence to assert himself and register his presence. He must inflict pain, and see others feel pain as Gumboot does to remind him that he is still alive. Without a past, Tsotsi inevitably becomes a social misfit, a kind of social bandit, to borrow a phrase from the historian, Eric Hobsbawm. Mike Nicol (1991) also points out that in apartheid South Africa children from broken families often fell in
with the gangsters particularly because they were psychologically destabilized and thus in search of anchorage. Moreover, most of these children were brought up in violent communities where joining a gang was a logical career move.

Gumboot Dhlamini’s death catalyses the dissolution of the gang because it brings an epistemological rift between Tsotsi and Boston—thus for the first time we see gang members fighting. Boston goes through Fanon’s psychopathological experience following the murder of Gumboot Dhlamini. Although Tsotsi nearly kills Boston for his disturbing questions, we can see that he also is a changed man. His solitary journey into the night following the misunderstanding is a soul searching experience. It is a psychological journey into the inner self, with Boston’s humanizing voice evangelizing his subconscious. It is on this journey of self-discovery that he wrestles a baby from a woman, the baby that he later names David, after himself. The name David reminds us of the biblical legend who defeated Goliath. But it appears as if Tsotsi is the negative version of David, who killed his general, Uriah and married his wife. Arguably, Tsotsi is perhaps a potential liberator whose mission has been derailed by apartheid. When his parents gave him the name David, they possibly thought of him as a potential saviour, after David, the biblical warrior of Israel, who saved his people from the Philistines. However, this dream is aborted when the family is scattered.

After the misunderstanding with Boston, Tsotsi undertakes a fateful journey that brings him face to face with his childhood memories, through Petah, his first compatriot in gang life. ‘This search for understanding is something new and deserves our attention, since it points to the chasm separating subjective experience (a kind of inner experience) from collective histories, expressed in general terms’ (Borges, 2007: 263). ‘That incident and the memories it evoked, was the furthest Tsotsi had ever gone back into his past’ (p. 29). Tsotsi needs a solitary environment, the tranquillity of nature among ‘the trees’ (p. 26), far away from the excitement of the gang to reflect on his life. Alone, he recollects his past and begins to interrogate his present situation. During this interlude of self-reflection, Tsotsi accidentally wrestles a baby from a woman in the dark.
Perhaps Tsotsi intended to rape the woman because we are told that the sound of the baby crying 'had stopped him and saved the woman' (p. 31). Presumably, the woman is attempting to dump the baby but Tsotsi, not knowing what the shoe box contains wrestles with her until she escapes, leaving the box in his hands. This incident is once again a turning point in Tsotsi’s criminal life. The young baby is a symbol of new life. It heralds a fresh start and a new lease of life not only for Tsotsi but also for the gang as a whole. Evidently, the baby is also, in Fugard’s liberal sense an object of appeal to Tsotsi’s feelings. Babies are tender and innocent, so the baby is some kind of moral reassurance to the heartless Tsotsi. The baby answers Boston’s question- he is not truly heartless. It also mediates his transition to a new life, a process akin to Christian redemption. The baby is also a constant reminder of the sacredness of human life. All along Tsotsi’s life has been determined by the immediate needs of his life as when he plans Gumboot’s murder, yet the baby makes him experience ‘fatherly’ love. His remark ‘This was man’ (p.36) is a realization that he has been preying on his own kind. Throughout his criminal life, he never thought that by unleashing violence on the township, he was inflicting pain on man and by implication he was also violating himself. The use of a baby as a means to humanize Tsotsi and perhaps rehabilitate him back into society is rather strange and inappropriate. Is it possible in real life for a hardened criminal to feel what Tsotsi is feeling? The baby, as a means to Tsotsi’s transformation, is also not credible to the reader.

Perhaps Fugard seeks to emphasize the sacredness of human life and the need for moderation in life. It is through moderation that human beings are able to co-exist. Thus, Tsotsi feels proud when he takes responsibility for the baby. ‘Catching himself with a feeling of pride, he frowned, pursed his lips and worked on’ (p.36). The implication is that fatherhood can be a catalyst for the construction of new responsible masculinities. Commenting on David Hood’s film production of *Tsotsi*, Roger Ebert (2009: 700), an American conservative, argues that the baby does not necessary make Tsotsi ‘a nice man. He simply stops being active as an evil one and finds his time occupied with the child.’ The process of undressing the baby and enduring the smell is a humanizing experience for Tsotsi. It ushers him into the mundane aspects of human life. Perhaps,
this experience is also a metaphorical journey back to his childhood. Instead of taking human life as he is wont to do, he sacrifices to save the baby and takes responsibility for its life. We see him using his own shirt to clean the stool, implying that he is becoming more human [he can feel for other humans]. Taking care of the baby is an induction process that gives Tsotsi a new perspective on life. It is a kind of initiation into manhood that replaces the traditional one which he never did. For the first time in his life, he comes to realize that ‘babies need milk’ (p. 37), ‘they want to be fed, they want to be made much of, and they think that it is their birth-right’ (Ebert, 2009: 700). Tsotsi goes on to name the baby David, his childhood name. Naming the baby ‘David’ signifies a yearning to start a new life as it was in the beginning. Judith Gunn (2010: 6) states that ‘the principle of Tsotsi is to reveal to its audience that no thug or tsotsi, is a nameless human being and Tsotsi’s name is David’

Yet we cannot help but ask what Fugard’s intention is in presenting the baby as a humanizing agent mediating Tsotsi’s transformation. Is this a prescriptive remedy for the tsotsi phenomenon in South Africa or simply a way of ‘giving headaches rather than prescriptions’ to quote Chinua Achebe out of context? If this is a prescription, are we capable of ending crime by rehabilitating criminals back into society through humanizing them and appealing to their conscience or Christianizing them. Is it enough to appeal to Tsotsi’s humanity while the whole apartheid infrastructure is intact? Athol Fugard’s existential vision as espoused by Jean Paul Sartre asserts that man is responsible for his life. Therefore Athol Fugard could be implying that criminals have the capacity to stop crime even without the intervention of an external force. However, one may also question this position especially if it does not coincide with a meaningful socioeconomic intervention.

Although Tsotsi is uneducated, his encounter with the baby and the experiences thereof, provide him with some basic education relevant to his transformation. If he knows that ‘babies need milk’ by the same understanding he must know that Gumboot also needed his life. The most important development is that Tsotsi can now feel sympathy for fellow human beings. The baby revives memories that he has always
been putting behind, ‘with more pain than he had ever before in his life, light stabbed his darkness and he remembered’ (p. 42). The baby also helps Tsotsi to revive his childhood memories, especially the dog that he used to play with when he was young. ‘The two were tied up together, the baby and the dog’ (p. 42). It is through the baby that Tsotsi gets answers to his past. ‘He wanted the answers, he wanted the answers very bad, but he did not have them. That’s when he decided to take the baby’ (p.42). The baby is also a symbol of the primeval source of man and it is through appreciating this source that Tsotsi comes to appreciate humanity. He does not necessarily become ‘a nice man’ as Ebert (2009) has argued because we see him later in the text forcing Miriam (a woman staying in a neighbouring shack) to feed the baby at gunpoint.

Morris Tshabalala, the crippled beggar, also acts as a humanizing agent. Tsotsi fails to pounce on him because he reminds him of his past. He is hunched like the bitch of his childhood. However, Tsotsi ‘had felt (italics added) for his victim (p. 72), something that was anathema to him before. He sympathizes with Morris’ ‘desperation, and the agony of his futile effort to escape’ Fugard makes use of the cripple and the baby to invoke feelings of pity, care and empathy in Tsotsi. The moment Tsotsi feels for Tshabalala as a fellow human being, he begins to recognize him, to see him ‘in a way that he hadn’t seen him before or with a second sort of sight’ (p. 72). To feel for someone is also to appreciate them. Thus Tsotsi’s ‘second sort of sight’ is one that is accompanied with feelings of sympathy. In appealing to Tsotsi’s feelings, Fugard is by extension appealing to the white man’s feelings. Tsotsi cannot continue being a gangster if he feels empathy, so apartheid, by the same logic, could not be easily sustained by people with empathy. Being able to feel sympathy for the next person is a measure of one’s humanity. At one point, while prowling around the township, Tsotsi looks at himself in the mirror and what he sees is ‘nothing except the shape of a man’ This ‘I,’ argues Bill Ashcroft (1998: 207), is ever situated in the gaze of the other, even when that other is me looking in the mirror’ When he sees himself in the mirror, Tsotsi interprets his image and defines himself, thus building a self-concept. His gaze reflecting back at him through the mirror gives him a chance to consider what he lacks and what he needs to reconstruct his personality.
Some criminologists have argued that a ‘person’s self-concept is a feedback of the way significant others regard him. The interpretation of how others see him and the resulting self-concept determine the person’s reaction to life situations’ (Scarpitti and MacFarlane, 1975:21). In other words our humanity is shaped by other human beings in our immediate environment. In this case Tsotsi’s self-concept is not only determined by his environment, but also by the way he defines himself. What is implied here is that no one is born a criminal. We are all basically human and a criminal is also a human. Tsotsi is therefore not only a product of society but also of decisions that he makes as an individual. For example, he decides to leave his parents’ shack even though his mother has told him to wait. The point is that human beings may be objectified by society, but they still retain some responsibility for their well-being and thus the capacity to transform their lives.

Following Tsotsi’s transformation, the knife, which used to be his talisman, assumes a new meaning. ‘Instead of pacifying him, it started a separate new sequence of thoughts’ (p.114). The knife as we see through Bigger Thomas’ experience in *Native Son* is a weapon that gives a sense of security to the marginalized. When Bigger goes to take the job with the Daltons, his knife is a fetish that protects him from the whims of Southern racism. The knife may be inferior to the white man’s gun, yet it has potential to inflict pain and satisfy the oppressed’s desire for vengeance. In Frantz Fanon’s terms, the knife, at least at a psychological ‘fantastic’ level, elevates the oppressed to the level of the oppressor because it can cut and draw blood. In Bigger Thomas’ case the knife gives him power to physically inflict pain on his victims. The question is why Tsotsi sees the knife differently when the material conditions of his life have not yet changed? Perhaps Fugard is implying that the ‘fetish-ness’ of the knife has been constructed by Tsotsi as a response to the challenges of his environment. Now that his heart has changed, his way of constructing the world has also changed. However, this remains a liberal position, which radicals have criticized for colluding with capitalism (Wright, 1977:15).
Athol Fugard’s appeal to conscience or what appears as an invocation of the spirit of ubuntu in Tsotsi is indeed problematic especially if it is seen as a strategy of transforming deviants. Following his violence against Boston, Tsosti is no longer guided by his immediate material needs. We are told that his sympathy for Morris Tshabalala, ‘cut deeper until the time came when it felt as if his feet and his heart were pointing in opposite directions’ (p. 74). The war between Tsotsi’s heart and feet is symptomatic of the tension between the soul and the spirit. The question that should be asked is – what is Tsotsi going to eat, now that he has sympathized with Morris. The transformation of Tsotsi without the transformation of society will ultimately lead to a dead end because crime is not only a matter of individual choice but also a consequence of socio-political inequalities. As Tsotsi continues to interrogate himself on his way back to the township after his encounter with Morris Tshabalala, he is indeed a changed man. Yet, he does not seem to have a plan for his future. We are told that Tsotsi realized that ‘killing is a choice’ (p. 82) and thus he could also choose not to kill. Killing is surely a choice that some individuals like Tsotsi have embraced for personal ends, just as much as apartheid is a choice that white South Africa instituted, also for their own reasons. However for the neo Marxist critic, Athol Fugard seems to be opting out once again on this score as he has arguably done in Boesman and Lena. In the later text, Lena sings and dances to inscribe her story into the exclusive discourse of apartheid, yet her search for freedom does not go beyond the metaphorical level. Tsotsi also seems to be drifting towards finding a niche within the oppressive system. Durbach (1999: 62) asks a very important question, ‘What value is there in surviving deprivation by habituating oneself to the status quo?’

The story of Miriam Ngidi also bears testimony to the socio-economic problems that are fostered by apartheid. The pass system and the forced removals tear families apart. We are told that Miriam’s husband was whisked away during a boycott and he never returned (p.91) and she does not know what happened to him. Children who are brought up in such broken families, like Miriam’s Simon go through a psychological crisis in that they live without the real/imagined love of a father figure. In the case of Simon, his mother is always promising that one day his father will come back. The
manner in which the absentee father is reconstructed by Miriam keeps the boy harping on the possibility of his return though we know that he will never come back. Apparently, the apartheid regime seems not to value black family life. Tsotsi’s father is also whisked away and he never returns. His mother also keeps telling him that his father will come back, ‘this big, gentle, laughing man, his father was coming tomorrow’ (p.100). Yet, in no time we see Tsotsi’s mother being forced into a truck partially dressed. What exactly will become of these boys who grow up without parents? Fugard’s presentation in this case implies that the urban removals and the consequent broken families are conducive for the formation of street gangs. However, this is one among many other possible factors.

Clive Glaser (2000:5) argues that Tsotsi gangs in apartheid South Africa were expressions of the young urban masculinity. Gary Kynoch (2008:635) adds that ‘broken families and a lack of structure produced generations of township boys for whom joining a gang was a more or less natural choice’ The typical male township teenager of the apartheid era ‘lived in an unstable family unit from which one or both of his parents were absent. He was unemployed. There were no decent recreation facilities in his vicinity’ (Gary Kynoch, 2008: 635). This is, precisely, Tsotsi’s predicament. Both of his parents have been imprisoned, hence he has no one to provide for him and/or guide him through life.

Tsotsi comes to realize that the reason why his people are always brutalized is that they are defenceless. ‘It’s because we are defenceless… anything can get at us, fleas and flies in summer, rain through the roof in winter and the cold too and things like policemen and death’ (p.103). On this juncture Athol Fugard comes close to making a political statement by invoking township heroes of the struggle against apartheid, ‘Isaac Rabetla, Peter Madondo, Willie Sigcau etc,’ (p. 104). Tsotsi’s subconscious voice urges the aforementioned heroes to go on, ‘tomorrow is near and your baby is crying’ (p. 104) the implication is that freedom is achievable. Lena makes similar predictions in Boesman and Lena- thus challenging the infallibility of apartheid. Athol Fugard, unlike Richard Wright sees subtle means as the only possibility of dismantling apartheid. While
Wright is confrontational and demanding, Fugard seeks 'by indirections to find directions out'

The predicament of children growing up in dysfunctional families that we see in Black Boy is similar to that which is portrayed in Tsotsi. At the age of six, Richard of Black Boy is already an alcoholic prowling from one saloon to the other. Similarly, after Tsotsi’s mother has been taken away by the police, the young boy becomes destitute. His mother tells him to wait for her in the house but for how long could he wait in the house with nothing to eat? This traumatic experience captures the brutality of apartheid, and shows that it is this system, at least at this point, which breeds gangsters in black townships. This concurs with most sociological theorists who have argued that crime is to a large extent embedded in social structures. Robert Merton’s strain theory intimates that crime emanates from the disjunction between our desires and the available channels of satisfying them. Tsotsi and his gang have no access to legitimate channels of earning a living hence they resort to illegitimate means.

The separation of families exposes children to hunger and desperation. One old man says to Tsotsi, ‘they took your mother and the rest of the world’ (p. 104). Without a mother Tsotsi has no one to orient him into the world and thus at a tender age he is confronted with the challenge of how to find his way into the world. After the destruction of the shack and the abduction of his mother, he decides to run away from home in spite of his mother’s advice to wait. He runs into a gang that recruits him and takes him to the river. The gang is a group of homeless teenagers living in pipes by the riverside. The pipes ‘are warm’ and they ‘sleep well’ and ‘have bread and water’ (p.108). This confession from one of the gangsters shows that they have run away from home in search of these basic needs. It is here that Tsotsi meets Petah, the man he ignores later in the story because he reminds him of his past. Yet it is Petah who helped him make a bed the first day he joined the ‘river gang’ For Tsotsi, joining the gang is contingent for it is the circumstances of his life that thrust him into it.
Given this pre-amble to Tsotsi’s life, it is clear that the social circumstances of one’s life, where one is born and bred has a bearing on one’s choices in life. The first time Tsotsi joins a gang and sees the kind of life the gang lives, he runs away, which implies that he never intended to be part of it, but because he has no home, we find him coming back to the gang for food and shelter. ‘He hungered this way through the day, his stomach shrinking to a hard knot he held in his hand’ (p.113). The same kind of hunger, what Richard Wright calls ‘American hunger’ makes a delinquent out of his protagonist in *Black Boy*.

Tsotsi, the callous criminal that we see later in the story is born under these circumstances. He deliberately adopts a heartless attitude to life because society has also been heartless to him. ‘He learned to watch for the weakness of sympathy or compassion for others weaker than [himself], like discovering how never to feel the pain [he] inflicted. He had no use for memories’ (p. 113). Tsotsi does not need memories because they stand in the way of survival. From where does Tsotsi learn ‘never to feel the pain he inflicted?’ In apartheid South Africa, the most immediate teacher on this subject is the apartheid regime itself. Tsotsi learns not to sympathize with the weak from those who have mercilessly bulldozed the township and abducted his parents, leaving him homeless and street-bound. This is perhaps what Frantz Fanon refers to when he says that the violence of the colonized is in response to the violence of the colonizer. Homi Bhabha would argue that in demeaning the colonized, colonialism construed them as monsters that could be easily demonized. In Tsotsi’s case it is the white man’s violence that dialectically manifests as his own violence. The point is that the colonized seek to negotiate a sense of agency within the confines of existing structures of power. Tsotsi’s subjectivity as a criminal is a subjectivity for survival rather than for ‘decency.’ That is why most of his victims are fellow Africans.

The works of Van Onselen (1982) and Steinberg (2004) show that the system of apartheid fanned the flames of social vice in South Africa’s urban centres. However, the political demise of apartheid, like the end of colonialism, does not necessarily translate into the end or amelioration of crime and violence, partly because it does not
come with economic freedom for the formerly disenfranchised. Athol Fugard is aware of the role apartheid played in creating Tsotsi, but he also emphasizes that individuals are in some measure responsible for their predicament. This is of course true and Boston is a case in point. He was intelligent at school, with prospects for a bright future, yet he never ‘wrote the final examination for the diploma because in June that year he was expelled for trying to rape a fellow student’ (p.127). Expelled from college, Boston cannot go back home to face his mother who has been struggling to keep him in school. So he decides to remain in the city ‘sleeping at night wherever he could find shelter, waiting for some miracle to sort out the mess of his life’ (p.129).

It is evident through Boston’s experience that not all gangsters could hold apartheid responsible for their situation. Boston ended up engaging in criminal activities to survive in the city, for example forging previous employers on passbooks, owing to his irresponsible behaviour. However, given the circumstances surrounding Boston’s attempted rape case, one is left wondering why the authorities could not simply administer corporal punishment on him since he was still a teenager. The point is that if one weighs the authorities’ decision and Boston’s crime in relation to the havoc he is now causing in the ghetto, it becomes clear that there is something wrong with the justice system in this society. One would understand that rape is a fairly serious issue but Boston’s age could have been considered to mitigate his punishment. Boston’s level of education helps him understand the pass system and thus he manipulates its loopholes to earn a living in the city. Evidently, apartheid officials are also corrupt as implied in the case of a clerk who sells a passbook stamp to Johnboy and Boston, a case which nullifies the tendency by some critics (for example, Boynton, 1997) to associate post-independence with corruption.

‘Fugard’s only novel,’ argues Anne Reef (2010: 67), ‘though it critiques and protests apartheid and colonialism with integrity, its ending may undermine its own anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist sentiment’ This argument is tenable especially if we consider the redemption paradigm embedded in the religious rubric that dominates the concluding chapters. When Boston visits Tsotsi following the beating at Soekie’s bar, he
observes changes in him. ‘There were lights in those eyes. Where there had been darkness there was something like light’ (p.135). The metaphors of light and darkness in this quote imply that Tsotsi has moved from the works of darkness (criminal activities) to the works of light (visiting the church). Fugard’s religious metaphors are rather inappropriate, superficial and even disconcerting especially in the context of neo-Marxist criticism that accuses him of colluding with the establishment. In fact the idea of using religion, the same weapon which was used to facilitate colonial conquest, is disturbing to the point of compromising the credibility of Fugard regenerating project. Tsotsi’s route to reformation is idealized and accompanied with Christian imagery as if to prescribe salvation for him. We are told that ‘when [Tsotsi] thought of himself, [he] thought of darkness. Inwardly there was darkness, something like a midnight hour, only more obscure’ (p. 26). Darkness is normally associated with the devil and Tsotsi’s criminal activities are represented as ‘dark purpose’ ‘Tsotsi knew himself and his dark purpose’ (p. 27). Moreover, Tsotsi’s ignorance about his past is metaphorically presented as darkness while remembering is seen as a form of light.

In Christian circles, the devil’s kingdom is associated with darkness and his rule is said to be based on ignorance. The implication is that it is through knowing his past that Tsotsi can receive salvation and move forward. It is evident from the religious images that the narrator sees religion as capable of transforming Tsostsi. When Isaiah invites him to the House of God, Tsotsi feels ‘unnaturally light’ and ‘when he opened his eyes again, the buoyancy was spreading beyond himself,’ (p. 146) as if there is a higher authority that is now controlling his life. Perhaps the point is not that a tsotsi cannot repent and become a Christian, it is that the church should be ready to receive and rehabilitate him. However, Father Ransome’s church seems unprepared to receive strangers. The name Ransome is reminiscent of Christ who gave his life as a ransom for the salvation of humanity. However, Father Ransome is a caricature of what Christ represents. He is, in fact, an embodiment of the hypocrisy of some sections of the church during apartheid because instead of giving sanctuary to the troubled Tsotsi, he tells Isaiah not to entertain strangers. If the church does not allow strangers on its grounds as Father Ransome says, how will it get converts? Tsotsi may surely need
salvation; but the question is what kind of salvation? Athol Fugard’s salvation seems to be limited to the soul, yet Tsotsi has a body too which needs to be saved.

Tsotsi’s meeting with Isaiah (the dumb native who can hardly plant seedlings in a straight line) is also conceptually problematic. Isaiah represents a type of African who has navigated apartheid structures by masking his feelings. He is the ‘dumb, illiterate African’ that needs the white man to teach him elementary things, for example, planting seedlings in a straight line and ringing the bell. Like Uncle Tom of the Deep South, Isaiah has learnt the correct language and mannerisms that the white man expects from one of his kind. The relationship between Isaiah and his white mistress is quite dramatic because Isaiah has deliberately worn a mask of docility in order to fit into the image of the stereotypical native and curve a niche for himself within the system. We are told that when Mrs Marriot came to inspect his work, ‘he took off his cap, scratched his head and looked back along the row’ (p.139). Such mannerisms befit a loyal servant. Mrs Marriot, on the other hand, speaks to Isaiah with a condescending attitude as if she were speaking to a child. ‘We don’t want them (the marigolds) to die. Do we? Pause. ‘Do we Isaiah?’ (p. 140). She speaks to Isaiah patronizingly like a mother talking to a child. Isaiah, on the other hand, picks up the correct answers implied in the questions. The construction of the colonized as a child which is being enacted here is ambivalent in that Isaiah is at once nice and stupid, obsequious and mischievous. The fact that Fugard counter-poses Isaiah with Tsotsi suggests the Isaiah is the ideal that Tsotsi should emulate. However, if Ransome represents a perverted Christ, Isaiah is likely to represent a distorted prophet. Implied in this matrix is the fact that colonialism is part and parcel of the problems of the postcolonial.

Like Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom, Isaiah has learnt to co-exist with his master and mistress. He knows that ‘a peaceful existence is dependent upon knowing just when to say no and yes to the white man’ (p. 140). Isaiah’s silence should not be misconstrued for compliance; rather it is a strategy that he has devised to co-exist with the oppressor. Through Isaiah, we realize that the native is not a passive recipient of an oppressive ideology. Isaiah is an option for survival, just like Tsotsi- they are two sides of an
apartheid coin. While Mrs Marriot thinks that Isaiah is illiterate and therefore rough on the edges, Isaiah is mocking everything that she does. Mrs Marriot is busy issuing instructions, Isaiah is silently scrutinizing and mocking her attire, ‘and her shoes, where did she get those shoes?’ (p.139). The point is that although Isaiah has been objectified by the system, he still maintains his humanity by privately mocking the oppressor and thus asserting himself, which is rather reminiscent of Ashcroft’s (2001) postcolonial transformation.

Father Ransome and Mrs Marriot are typical missionaries on a civilizing mission. They want to teach the native how to ‘weed the church garden’ and ‘ring the bell.’ Having been ‘schooled’ in the ways of the master, Isaiah goes on to mediate and/or facilitate Tsotsi’s transformation. Ironically, Isaiah, the mediator is not fully acquainted with the teachings of the Christian faith he has learnt from his master. This is evident in his garbled narrative of the story of Noah (which he confuses with that of Moses) and his assertion that God is everywhere but mostly inside the church building (p. 145). He also misconstrues Jesus Christ for Jesus Cries, Christ the redeemer for Christ the dreamer. In his role as bell boy (evangelist) and caretaker of the church (servant), Isaiah gives Tsotsi, who is now restless and clearly in search of moral strength, a cup of tea (for physical strength) and invites him to the house of God (for spiritual support). Tsotsi’s desperate searches for divinity in the words ‘tell me about God old man,’ (p. 144) implies that his problem is spiritual and thus it needs a spiritual remedy. It is also likely that since Tsotsi has parted ways with his gang, he is in search of a human community. Perhaps he is also in search of a source of authority, although once again he fails to take personal responsibility, preferring to hand it over to an outside force.

The relationship between Tsotsi and Isaiah is indeed conceptually problematic as I have said earlier. Anne Reef (2010: 63) argues that ‘representing the colonial subject as passive is problematic in the postcolonial context and as much as the ethos of Fugard’s novel is anti-apartheid and anti-imperialist, aspects of the book’s representational strategies like Isaiah’s use of English, destabilizes its postcolonial message and may inadvertently support aspects of the colonialist systems.’ One may want to ask what
Isaiah (and by extension Athol Fugard) seeks to achieve by inviting Tsotsi to the church. Spiritual remedy may be useful for moral rehabilitation but Tsotsi’s predicament may not be rectified by that alone. If Tsotsi becomes a Christian, what are the implications? Anne Reef (2010: 63) notes that ‘although Tsotsi clearly narrates the destructiveness of apartheid, it concomitantly suggests that the path to redemption is through Christianity. Such salvation is one of the grand narratives of European imperialism and colonialism, which promoted the civilizing mission of western enlightenment and Christianity.’ If Tsotsi repents and comes to church as he promises, is that not equivalent to assimilation, given that Father Ransome’s church is an agent of colonial domination, teaching black people like Isaiah to be good servants to their masters. Of course, one can also argue that this might still be better than his former life. However the point must be made that it is not enough to encourage criminals to stop crime without giving them an alternative life.

The cup of tea that Isaiah gives Tsotsi is a gesture of Christian kindness that should bring him to Christ in a process of redemption. It reminds us of communion wine which Christians take as often as they remember Christ (at least according to the scripture). Although thoroughly misinformed, Isaiah attempts to evangelize Tsotsi, telling him that God wants people ‘to stop killing and stealing and robbing’ (p.145). The name Isaiah is symbolic as it reminds us of Isaiah, one of the greatest prophets in the Bible. The question is if God does not want people to steal, kill and rob as the white man’s church teaches, does he condone Mrs Marriot’s behaviour towards Isaiah. Perhaps this is the question that Athol Fugard has in mind. Reading the relationship between Mrs Marriot and Isaiah against Ashcroft’s theory of postcolonial transformation, Anne Reef (2010: 62) characterizes it as ‘pessimistic regarding a fertile outcome.’ Postcolonial transformation speaks of the colonized’s ability to navigate colonial systems and use them for his/her own purposes. Isaiah may survive but he does not seem to have an agenda for self-emancipation.

In fact, Fugard’s overall vision on the gang phenomenon is rather ambiguous in that while he finds shortcomings with the South African church, he still sees it as capable of
transforming Tsotsi through awakening his conscience and thus luring him away from
gangsterism. After speaking to Isaiah and having promised him to come to church, ‘his
body felt unnaturally light. Walking was no longer a weight of his legs coming down on
the hard, resistant earth…’ (p.146). The implication is that the church has the capacity
to usher Tsotsi into a new life. Perhaps in its Marxist function as the opium of the
people, the church would provide Tsotsi with moral strength without necessarily
changing the material conditions of his life. But is moral strength enough? Is religion
without political reform capable of changing society? Is Fugard’s agenda social change?
These are the questions that Fugard’s narrative raises especially at the end when the
reformed Tsotsi is crushed to death by the white man’s bull dozer.

The novel ends with Tsotsi completely transformed, perhaps a Christian, as implied in
his response to the milkman’s greeting: ‘peace be with you.’ This greeting is reminiscent
of Jesus Christ’s words when he appeared to his disciples after resurrection.
Nevertheless, the ending remains conceptually disconcerting especially with regards to
Fugard’s liberal existential vision. Anne Reef (2010: 63) characterizes the ending as
‘especially troubling’ It is as if Athol Fugard is merely finding an exit without proposing a
functional solution. It is an unsatisfying ending, whereas Fugard could have made the
ending either inspirational or open-ended. Presumably this is a choice of Fugard’s, but
the question is why he chose this particular ending. While we have been following up on
Tsotsi’s transformation and perhaps expecting him to chart the way forward as an
example of a reformed criminal, his death is an anti-climax that shatters all our hopes. If
this is not deliberate, it is possible that Fugard, at the time (1960s) found the
alternatives to be unbelievable. However the implication is that apartheid is first and
foremost a blindly racist ideology with no qualms about the humanity of the other. What
is suggested in Tsotsi’s death is the futility of any kind of regenerating project against
the tide of apartheid policy which is consistent with pessimistic radical liberalism, which
saw no hope of social transformation and, perhaps, did not desire it.

In his film production of Tsotsi, Gavin Hood (2005: 13) realized that ‘killing Tsotsi at the
end of the film was not as dramatically powerful as having him surrender with dignity.
He ‘felt that, despite the many socio-economic problems facing the new South Africa, there is a far greater cause for hope today than there was during the sixties under apartheid.’ It is plausible that in the context of the 1960s when the novel was conceptualized, Tsotsi’s predicament reflected the nature of the political climate of the time. Although Fugard’s ending may bear testimony to the uncertainty of the sixties that Gavin Hood refers to, it also reflects on Fugard’s position at the time, which is not necessarily the position of liberals in general. Stein’s *Second Class Taxi*, for example, ends with a negative resolution – the killing of the Mandela-figure by the police – but with the central character ‘Stuffness’ still free to act, so not all liberals felt the same way.

On a positive note, we are told that those who unearthed Tsotsi from the rubble ‘agreed that his smile was beautiful, and that when he lay there on his back in the sun, before someone had fetched a blanket, they agreed that it was hard to believe what the back of his head looked like when you saw the smile’ (p.150). This statement, especially Tsotsi’s strange and beautiful smile, suggests ‘self-reconciliation and peaceful joy in death, in marked contrast to the anxious vengeance of the youth’s adolescence’ (Anne Reef, 2010: 63). The smile is also a prophetic gesture that foretells hope for the future of South Africa. It is as if the bulldozer has only killed the body but his spirit is still alive. However, one can also argue that ‘peaceful joy’ is rather metaphysical and personal and does not suggest any hope for the wider collective.

By witnessing Tsotsi’s death in a hostile apartheid environment, Athol Fugard is representing the plight of the marginalized in the postcolonial society, which is what he does in all his work. However, if Tsotsi’s smile signifies hope, the question is what kind of hope. This, in my view is a hope that lives in death; it is a hope that defies the destruction of the bulldozer. It may, however, simply mean that Tsotsi is morally right even though his enemies are more powerful physically – which is another liberal trope. Martin Orkin (in Walder, 1999: 64) argues that ‘at best Fugard offers a delusive image of recuperative insight into the articulated pain of the oppressed, a visionary hope privileged by his liberal critics, despite the brutal negation of hope by the determining powers of apartheid. At worst his despair encourages “prevailing racist ideological
discursive formations” which in turn help to account for the licensing for performance of plays like *Boesman and Lena* by government dominated agencies’

Martin Orkin’s reading of Fugard reminds us of what Kuper (1979) calls un-contextualized criticism which does not take cognizance of the political environment in which the novel was conceptualized, which is possible. However, an alternative interpretation is that Fugard simply disagrees with a more liberal interpretation of the situation. Wertheim (2000: 3) notes that the dilemma is that Fugard has often been, and will continue to be, taken to task for writing about the degradation of blacks and coloureds while himself being afforded the privileges enjoyed by South African whites. However it must be remembered that the liberal position was revolutionary in the context of apartheid South Africa, and as Wertheim (2000) reminds us it is the works of liberals like Fugard and Alan Paton that drew the world’s attention to the outrages of apartheid. Although some may argue that liberal writers only provided sanitized narratives which were acceptable to the Western ruling classes’ wish to create the illusion of opposing apartheid, one would notice that such voices inspired other voices that finally brought independence. An example is that of Richard Turner whose work became a manifesto for the ANC.

The tsotsi phenomenon that Fugard is dealing with in his novel is similar to the experiences of Wright’s protagonist in *Black Boy*, though it is also different in many ways. Like Tsotsi in Fugard’s novel, Richard, the protagonist of Wright’s novel, is faced with the challenges of a broken family, hunger and a cruel society. It is in an attempt to negotiate and circumvent these challenges that both Tsotsi and Richard find themselves, inevitably, implicated in criminal/violent activities. On the other hand, one would notice that Richard does not leave his home permanently to make the streets his home. Unlike Tsotsi whose home has just been demolished by the apartheid regime, Richard has a home and only goes into the street by choice to run away from the rigid environment of his grandmother’s house. Richard becomes a street child for the sake of personal freedom but Tsotsi is forced into the streets to fend for himself and fight for survival. The preceding chapters, from *Black Boy* through *Native Son* to Fugard’s plays
have been making this point and have been read from such a perspective that crime and violence, particularly in the postcolonial text, is viewed as a vigorous attempt by the dominated, the silent/silenced to open spaces within the structures of the dominant discourse. Thus far from being an abhorrent social vice, which it is, especially in the eyes of conventional culture, criminal violence is in this study, seen as a way of communicating in the third space, a means of negotiating the fractures within a system that ‘orientalises’ to ensure survival and continuity. Tsotsi, like Sizwe Bansi, is not just a reckless criminal who deserves to be condemned. He is a man seriously involved in a process of finding a niche for himself in a society that has demolished his abode. In fact, the name Tsotsi speaks of a trick-star, one who always has a plan to upset conventions and systems. In view of this, the next chapter, the conclusion, synthesizes the various ways in which crime, violence and apartheid interact in the selected texts. It also harmonizes different ideas that have been raised in the selected texts with the theoretical paradigms in this study- that is the criminological and postcolonial theories.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have presented the interplay of compatibility between crime, violence and apartheid in selected works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard. What one can say by way of conclusion is that these three elements are intricately intertwined; hence the need for a broader theoretical approach in order to disentangle them. The three criminological theories selected in this study are useful thought-frames in understanding crime and violence, particularly in the racialised milieu of apartheid South Africa and the Deep American South. Robert Merton, as I have indicated in the introductory chapter, sought to interpret crime in terms of the social system in which it occurred. He argued that the disjunction between socially acceptable goals and the available institutionalized means of attaining those goals caused strain on some individuals culminating in criminal improvisations that were often at variance with social rules. Merton’s theory was propounded in the context of the American society’s emphasis on economic prosperity or what has popularly been referred to as the American Dream. One would notice that South Africa, like many other countries in the Third World, has often associated itself with American iconography and even some of its idealism. Gangs and musical groups in South Africa have adopted the Hollywood style which seems to celebrate values that are considered immoral by the conventional culture. ‘The Americans’ (a criminal gang based in the Cape Flats) for example, have named themselves after America, a superpower, to imply that they also are invincible while kwaito musicians, for example Mandoza, tend to model themselves against American hip-hop idols (the videos celebrate materialism and conspicuous consumption).

In societies where meritocratic ideals are celebrated, there is a general assumption that if anybody works hard, he/she will rise from rags to riches. Yet in a situation where class, gender and race inhibit access to desired goals, there are also high chances that one may not necessarily attain goals by mere hard work or merit. Therefore, the strain
that emanates from failure to obtain desired goals in spite of merit becomes a force that compels one to consider illegitimate means. One is reminded of the rise of Mafia in Sicily as portrayed in Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive rebels*. Mafia, which comprised a group of disgruntled marginalized citizens, provided ‘a parallel machine of law and organized power’ (1971: 35) which challenged and subverted the power of the State. This is the crux of Merton’s theory, that the gap between desired goals and the legal means of realizing them is hard to bridge particularly for those individuals who are socially handicapped by gender, class and race.

Merton’s ways of responding to environmental strain (retreatism, rebellion, innovation, conformity and ritualism) are reflected through various characters in the texts that have been scrutinized in the preceding chapters. For example, Grandmother in *Black Boy* is to some extent a Mertonian ritualist in that she insists on doing things ‘the right way’ even though her life is getting worse under the prevailing circumstances. On the other hand, Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and Richard in *Black Boy* can be characterized as both rebellious and innovative. Richard embezzles money from the hotel (innovation) to finance his journey to the north while Bigger Thomas kills Mary Dalton (rebellion) and expresses satisfaction about it—‘what I killed for I am’ Merton’s concept of innovation is derived from, though it is not limited to, invention. An innovator, according to Merton is not necessarily someone who invents something new; rather it is someone who devises an alternative way of overcoming a limitation. These Mertonian categories are equally relevant to Fugard’s characters, for example Styles and Sizwe Bansi can be seen as innovative while Boesman and Lena are to some extent rebellious because they keep on erecting new structures (pondoks) in spite of apartheid law that characterizes them as illegal. The disjunction that Merton refers to brings us to Homi Bhabha’s concept of the ‘third space of enunciation,’ which is an alternative cultural space that is constructed to accommodate and perhaps empower the marginalised. It is by interacting with this space, engaging with it, rather than confronting/opposing it, that new identities or hybrid identities, to be more precise, are formulated. The study has argued that the cultural identities formulated in the third space of enunciation and the strategic reversals of the process of domination include criminal/violent subcultures which are common in virtually
all societies. Elucidating Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space, David Huddart (2006) argues that the study and representation of colonialism ought to move away from the oppressor/oppressed discourse which tends to overshadow the subjectivity of the colonized. ‘We should not see the colonial situation as one of straightforward oppression’ because ‘alongside violence and domination, we might also see the last five hundred years as a period of complex and varied cultural contact and interaction’ (Huddart, 2006: 2). Although this position may sound apologetic and sympathetic to colonialism, the point is that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is complex and cannot be fully understood by a mere oppressor-oppressed theoretical paradigm.

If we are to pursue this argument, we realize that crime in the postcolonial context may be seen as a way of actively engaging hegemony and manipulating interstices within the dominant discourse. It is in negotiating this gap, ‘the liminal space’ that subcultures of violence emerge because in this space individuals seek to survive on the borderlines or in between cultural poles as Bhabha(1994) argues, knowing that a border is not the end of something but that from which something begins its ‘presencing’ (Heidegger in Bhabha, 1994:1). Where race, society and legislation are stumbling blocks to self-realization, as we see in the case of Richard in Black Boy, Cross in The Outsider, and Sizwe Bansi in Sizwe Bansi is Dead respectively, criminal violence is committed as a way of perpetuating self and responding to the socio-political conditions of the time. In other words, it is an attempt to find survival space, the way Tsotsi in Fugard’s novel joins the river gang following the removals and the arrest of his parents.

Unlike Shakespeare’s Caliban in The Tempest, who has appropriated the English language so as to curse his master, most of the characters in the preceding chapters are more interested in survival rather than open resistance. The thesis, if I should state it at this juncture, is that crime and violence in the selected texts is not only an abhorrent social vice as it is perceived by criminal justice institutions, but also a strategy used by some individuals to undermine and/or evade authority and ensure survival. It is a way of carving out a living space for oneself even if it means infringing the other’s space.
Resistance to cultural domination is not only oppositional, but also subtle and tactical. Elaborating Bhabha’s concept of the liminal space, Ashcroft (2001: 32) observes that ‘if resistance is sometimes ambivalently situated, it is also open to a wide horizon of possible forms, forms which often look very different from resistance but which stem from the desire for indigenous self-empowerment.’ These ‘possible forms’ of ‘indigenous self-empowerment’ would also include stabbing defenceless people with sharpened bicycle-spokes as Butcher does in Tsotsi. The protagonists in the selected works, for example Richard in Black Boy and Sizwe Bansi in Sizwe Bansi is Dead are mainly preoccupied with devising strategies and tactics, especially selfish ones in an attempt to beat the system and ensure personal survival. Although crime and violence subvert colonial discourse and ensure survival for some, it also affects the very communities that suffer colonial oppression. This is evident in the death of Gumboot Dhlamini (Tsotsi) which is a blow to his family, and Bessie’s murder (Native Son), which is Bigger’s selfish way of concealing evidence.

Looking at Richard Wright’s Native Son, Robert Merton’s theory is relevant particularly in relation to Bigger’s racial paranoia. Richard Wright argues, in the essay ‘How Bigger was born,’ that Bigger is a product of a dislocated society, he is a dispossessed and dispossessed man (1991: 866), hence his incompleteness. He is thus seeking to make up for this inadequacy transferred to him by the discourse of racial stereotype, by carrying gun and knife, weapons that make him feel secure. Bigger desired to go to the aviation school and train to be a pilot but owing to the racism of his society he could not. Within him, there remains a void of unfulfilled dreams, which he later satisfies through engaging in petty criminal acts (stealing from market stalls) and violence. Bigger’s strain is thus a result of the discrepancy between his dreams and what the society offers him. Merton’s concept of strain can be compared with what Frantz Fanon calls a psychopathological condition that arises from the difficulty of embracing complexes of inferiority instilled by the apartheid establishment. Fanon’s psychopathology, like Merton’s strain manifests itself in different ways and Bigger is just but one. There are other cases like Shorty in Black Boy who exposes his back to be kicked for a quarter and Harrison who fights his colleague for five dollars. The reality of Bigger’s life i.e. the
squalor of his family life, lack of enough living space and financial blues put him in a situation where he has to negotiate other avenues of self-upliftment/survival. Bigger manipulates spaces within the system to strike while ‘they’ are not watching. Although his act of murder is not progressive as a resistance strategy, it shows that blacks are far from content with their lot. They may look timid and subservient but if an opportunity avails itself they retaliate.

Bigger has, to some extent, internalized an inferiority complex, ‘the concept of blackness,’ which society has instilled in his mind. In a book entitled, The fire next time James Baldwin tells his nephew that ‘you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger’ (1963: 13). The implication is that the word ‘nigger’ is a construction which deliberately portrays blacks in a way which they are not. By embracing such a stereotype, one also embraces its constraints. To that end, Bigger’s predicament is explainable in terms of the labelling theory, comprehensively propounded by Howard Becker (1963). The labelling theory, as explained in the first chapter, claims that criminality is more of a societal construction than an endemic individual trait. This also reminds us of Orientalism which is a construction, ‘a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness and later, Western empire’ (Said, 1978: 203). Society, particularly the criminal justice system and the powers that be have the prerogative to label certain practices and individuals criminal. Once society has ascribed the label, some individuals may embrace it, see themselves as ‘different’ and begin to live within the confines of that label/stigma. Bigger Thomas starts off as a juvenile criminal but he later degenerates into a murderer because society does not have mechanisms to boost his self-worth. In fact he is made to feel like a criminal even before he commits a crime. For example, the Daltons expect him to use the back door and if he is seen loitering in the streets he will be arrested. Mary Dalton’s murder is not premeditated yet society makes no effort to consider the circumstantial evidence, instead Bigger is immediately labelled a dangerous element which must be eliminated. It is, to some extent, the intense fear fostered by the ‘hunt’ for Bigger Thomas which culminates in Bessie’s murder.
Michel Foucault’s studies of the origins of the asylum and the prison suggest that these institutions were created on the basis of a discourse that labelled, classified and recommended confinement to certain individuals. In France of the seventeenth century, candidates for confinement included the unemployed, beggars and the mentally challenged- in short the poor. ‘For the first time, purely negative measures of exclusion were replaced by a measure of confinement; the unemployed person was no longer driven away or punished, he was taken in charge, at the expense of the nation but at the cost of his individual liberty (Foucault, in Rainbow, 1984:130)….It was in these places of doomed and despised idleness, in this space invented by a society which had derived an ethical transcendence from the law of work that madness would appear and soon expand until it had annexed them’ (p.135). Although some critics have argued that Foucault overstated his case in order to emphasise his message that prisons, like mental institutions, are discursively constructed establishments rather than inevitable developments, the point is that the methods used by criminal justice institutions to classify and incarcerate ‘criminals’ are not consistent from time to time and from individual to individual. This situation casts doubt on the very idea of organizing society by apprehending ‘criminals’ and subjecting them to confinement.

This brings us, inevitably to Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism as ‘a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (1978: 3). Orientalism is, as it appears in this analysis, an extreme form of labelling. As is the case with labelling theory, ‘the objective of colonial discourse,’ Bhabha argues ‘is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction’ (1994: 70). Although Edward Said has been criticized for universalizing and totalizing orientalism, his argument is that ‘there were and are cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West’ (2003: 5). Edward Said recognizes that the lives, customs and histories of the postcolonial have ‘a brute reality’ but this reality is far different from what the western world has documented. Like Edward Said,
the researcher is not arguing that crime and violence are ‘creations’ of the apartheid environment and thus non-existent in reality. The point is that it is important when dealing with the question of crime and violence in the postcolonial to contextualize it- to expose its deep intricacies vis-à-vis the context in which it arises.

In *Native Son* we see that Bigger Thomas is subjected to a discourse of stereotype that allocates him an inferior place. As a result he hates everything around him and it is this hatred fostered in him firstly by his environment and secondly by his loss of self-concept [also produced by the circumstances], that leads him to the murder of Mary Dalton. While the white man creates the restrictive world in which Bigger must live, it is Bigger’s responsibility to negotiate a niche for himself within that world. If Bigger is reacting to the condition of being strained as Robert Merton has argued in his strain theory, then he is more of a ritualistic rebel than an innovator. His anger is ritualistic because it does not change his life. An innovator would calculate and strategize, but Bigger does not. He wants to destroy every perceived injustice at his disposal without prudently weighing the consequences. He does not seem to have control over his hatred and this makes him inadequate as an agent of change.

According to Merton, innovators accept the cultural goals that society prescribes yet they refuse to follow the prescribed legitimate means of attaining those goals. As a result, they resort to illegitimate means. Yet what we see through Bigger’s hatred is a refusal to accept both the prescribed cultural goals and the means of attaining them-which makes him a quasi-rebel. Although Merton’s categories are a helpful framework for understanding crime, they cannot be used to explain every kind of behaviour. Bigger Thomas’ character prevaricates between what Merton terms retreatism and rebellion. Hence it cannot perfectly fit into Merton’s categories. When Bigger reflects on his condition as a black Southerner, he becomes very desperate and hopeless (ritualist) and ends up taking refuge in petty theft and internecine feuds. Yet after killing Mary Dalton, he becomes defiant and rebellious.
Edward Said has told us in his *Orientalism* (1978, 2003) that stereotypical representations of the Orient (the colonized) were first constructed discursively and effected through colonialism. However, some have argued that in some cases colonialism came first (the Crusades) followed by the discourse of colonialism to support it. One would argue that the issue is not what came first, it is how the two worked together to achieve the same purpose. Said conceptualises orientalism as ‘the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period’ (2003: 3). In *Native Son*, Bigger has to some extent internalized the discourse of the white world which constructs him as inferior. When Mary and Jan attempt to break the racial barrier, Bigger is adamant because he has been conditioned to his inferior position. Homi Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft have defined spaces through which the dominated survived imperial cultures - the third space of enunciation, hybridity and cultural transformation respectively - but Bigger opts to confront the violence of colonialism with the greater violence of liberation. Bigger’s violence is reminiscent of the kind of psychological disturbance which Fanon identified in his clinical studies of colonial Algeria. Bigger’s violence ‘answers the world’s expectations’ (Fanon 1967:119) because killing Mary Dalton is a self-fulfilling prophesy - black is a symbol of all that is evil or as Fanon would put it, what can you expect after all, from a black man.

If Bigger’s response to his material conditions is rebellious in the Mertonian sense, his mother (Mrs Thomas), his sister (Vera) and his girlfriend (Bessie) stand out as ritualists. Merton classified as ritualists those individuals who conform to the institutionalized means of attaining desired goals for the sake of conforming or in this case, for fear of being attacked. A case in point is that of Bigger’s mother who takes to religion so as to escape the grinding reality of her life as an African American woman in the South. She expects Bigger to take up a job with the Daltons even if the job does not pay. Unlike her son who is always questioning his environment, Mrs Thomas, is a ritualist of the Mertonian order. She takes only what society has prescribed for her kind. She literally lives on hand-outs from the relief agency. On the other hand, Vera, perhaps taking after
her mother, keeps on going to the sewing school until her mother fails to pay the fees. According to Merton a ritualist is someone who does what is acceptable without having any goals in mind (cultural or personal). Bessie has retreated into a ritualistic work ethic because her life is centred on gain-less labour. The routine is such that she works six days a week and takes only one day off. When she gets her one day off, she drowns it in alcohol and sexual intercourse. Bessie is slightly different from Mrs Thomas though in that she does not rely on food parcels from the relief programme.

One criticism that has been levelled against Merton’s strain theory is that it does not explain why individuals facing the same strenuous circumstances respond in different ways. For example in *Native Son*, Bigger lives the same experiences as his mother yet he decides to rebel while she conforms. While this can be explained in terms of differences in character traits, with each individual having idiosyncratic qualities, for example Bigger is impulsive while his mother is pious and peace loving, it can also be a flaw in Merton’s theory. Although Merton’s theory is useful to our understanding of crime and criminal violence, it assumes that everyone aspires to the culturally acceptable goals that society offers. It also implies that those with high aspirations are likely to take the illegitimate route while those with low aspirations are likely to conform, yet in some instances individuals resort to crime without necessarily having high aspirations. In Athol Fugard’s *Tsotsi*, the gangsters do not seem to have goals that have been denied by society. In fact they seem to be living in a world of their own, a subculture where crime is equivalent to a lifestyle. Perhaps they have suppressed these goals because they find them unattainable in the existing system. This shows that there is a correlation between strain and subculture. Those individuals who cannot achieve their goals through the legitimate route (strained). are likely to form a subculture. In *Tsotsi*, Boston has suppressed his dream of becoming a teacher.

Criminological theory in general has proved indispensable in the understanding of crime in society; however it also falls short when it comes to specific settings and experiences. In the context of debates on the postcolonial future (Ashcroft, 2001) one of the questions that should be asked is how to understand crime and violence in the context
of the postcolonial space. Crime is of particular interest to the postcolonial world especially if one considers the continued interference of the West in the affairs of the postcolonial. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* has been a path finding text in charting the complex world of the postcolonial. The continuous silencing of the colonized is not only discursive but also ‘administrative, economic and even military’ (Said, 2003: 210). These mechanisms are not only designed for political domination but also for exploitation and profit. However, the fact that the colonized remain standing, in their various capacities, implies that they also have adopted strategies of resistance. Bill Ashcroft et al in *The empire writes back*, argue that African American literature should also be categorized as postcolonial because ‘its relationship with the metropolitan centre as it evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for postcolonial literatures everywhere’ (1989: 2). Although the African American space has its own peculiar challenges, for example, the fact that Africans-Americans have a dual identity and are in a blood relationship with the oppressor, one may still argue that Bigger’s tragedy is not only isolated to the African American community, thus legitimating a comparison of Wright and Fugard. What Bigger knows about himself is in part derived from what has been said about him and what he has experienced in the black belt. The self-hatred and the fear that grip him with demonic power derive from the fabrications that he has imbibed. Ashcroft (2009: 209) intimates that;

> all forms of knowing demonstrate the simple operation of signification, the role of the utterance in context…To anyone whose situation in this contested field is one of powerlessness, submission or minority, it is clear that the processes by which the body comes into being, those by which we know our bodies, are political ones; in our acts of knowing we exist. Knowing and being are inextricable, and it is in these contested acts that the postcolonial body emerges – as fragmentary, ambivalent, processual.

The situation of ‘powerlessness’ which Ashcroft refers to is explicitly illustrated in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s postcolonial novel, *The Book of Not*. Life ‘happens’ to Tambudzai, as Nyasha says (2006: 185), because her aspirations are defined and shaped by the
standards of the colonial master. Similarly, Bigger knows himself through the ‘imperial’ violence of the South. As Aime Cesaire (1972) has argued, this is the incarnation of the Hitler in every white man. Bigger is a creation of the white man in the postcolonial sense of the colonizer projecting the Colonial Empire as a blank slate upon which he inscribes himself while, in the same breath, deconstructing the other. In that sense, Bigger may turn out to be more than a mere Mertonian hero improvising illegitimate means of attaining culturally acceptable goals. He is not just a product of his immediate environment or of his impulsive whims, but also a product of the whole history of empire. Salman Rushdie in his novel, *Midnight’s Children* has a point in arguing that there is a way in which the past and our immediate environment ‘leak’ into us. Something in the immediate environment has certainly leaked into Bigger’s character. What could this be in such a violent and crime-ridden society? It is evident that Bigger is born into the criminality of imperialism and racism. Representing the postcolonial predicament, Salman Rushdie in his *Midnight’s Children* portrays India as a country which was born at midnight and no one remembers whether she cried or not. While being born at midnight may suggest a bad omen (the witch hour) a child who does not cry soon after birth is unusual and may even be called ‘abnormal’

Like *Native Son* which has been conceptualized in terms of Merton’s strain theory, *The Outsider*, though it takes an out-rightly existentialist stance, can also be understood in terms of the labelling theory. Although Cross experiences strain at various levels in his life, he is not only seeking ways of attaining culturally acceptable goals. Rather he is also attempting to break away from what he perceives as the tyranny of societal prescriptions that deny him personal freedom. In modifying the labelling theory, radical ‘Marxist’ criminological theorists pointed out that the very structure of the capitalist society is fertile ground for crime and violence given that the rich and powerful have the prerogative to criminalize the poor and the powerless. Likewise, Michel Foucault has traced the advent of sexual repression to the seventeenth century where it coincides with the rise of capitalism. ‘By placing the advent of the age of repression in the seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression one adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism’ (Foucault, 1978:5). Foucault's
point is that the advent of capitalism generated a new socio-political milieu that viewed human beings as labour—‘if sex is rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative.’ The implication is that some things that are considered natural are socially constructed. Society expects Cross to do what is ‘normal’ by imposing a nature on him—he must marry Dot and settle down to a family life.

Cross is evidently under a lot of strain (hence strain theory) and it is this strain that makes him consider the possibility of a new life. His wife has lawfully confiscated all his property from him, his car and house in addition to the eight hundred dollars that she is demanding. Once ostracized, because of his failure to conform to social obligations, Cross turns into a maniacal criminal. While Cross’s murders smack of Merton’s rebellion, they are also a psychotic retreat from society. Labelling theorists argue that society unwittingly create criminals by criminalizing certain behavioural traits. Cross is perhaps one of those individuals that society has failed to understand and thus in the process of getting him to conform, he becomes a worse criminal or exposes his criminal potential. Society, through its institutions like the church, marriage and the judiciary expects Cross to live within certain parameters. His wife and children, whom he abandoned in Chicago, are used in court as evidence of his negligence. Similarly, in Native Son, Mary’s bones are used to prove that Bigger is an undesirable element who deserves the rope.

In his labelling theory, Howard Becker (1963) argues that enforcing social control through the criminal justice system has the effect of hardening criminals. Cross may not be in a physical jail but the very society in which he lives has become a jail to him. He feels confined by social restrictions and what other human beings expect him to do. In Sartrean terms his hell is other people. People like Joe cannot allow him to live his life as he pleases, hence the murder. Cross’ shortcoming is that his idea of freedom does not consider the freedom of others. He could simply walk away from the communists or avoid them and get his freedom but because he also desires to rule (to take the place of the oppressor) he kills them.
Cross is, however, not just any other man. He is a black man in a world created by other men. This is the crux of his criminal rampage; that he is a black man (a postcolonial) attempting to position himself in the fragmented milieu of western modernity. More importantly, Cross is doing this in a strikingly unusual way. I have said that general theories of crime are useful to our understanding of general crime, but when it comes to particular settings they fall short. Homi Bhabha (in Huddart, 2006: 9) argues that ‘it would change the values of all critical work if the emergence of modernity were given a colonial and post-colonial genealogy. Modernity has repressed its colonial origins’ and it is this repression that Wright challenges in The Outsider. Cross is a black man, slightly more educated than Bigger, his predecessor, (in terms of the succession of texts) because we are told that he studied western philosophy at the University of Chicago. Philosophically speaking, there is a cultural disjunction in Cross’s psyche. A similar disjunction is evident in Salman Rushdie’s Doctor Aziz, a man caught in between western education and Indian traditions. Cross, like Doctor Aziz, is engaged in a cultural conflict that traps him in between his African American cultural heritage and the existential philosophy he embraced at University. His western philosophy is rather egocentric in that it teaches him existential humanism which says man makes himself, as if to imply that man lives in a vacuum. African American culture and the law, on the other hand, expect him to take responsibility of his wife, children and girlfriend.

In short, Cross’s double consciousness, crystallized in the two names Cross (which has Christian connotations). and Damon (the devil) brings us to Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity that ‘enables a form of subversion (sic) that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention’ (in Young 2004:189). Bhabha’s point is that characters like Cross reside on the borders of cultures. Such characters possess a double consciousness and seek to challenge the binaries of colonialism. Cross is an African American who has acquired the cultural values of the master. He is a type of man whose life subverts established conceptualizations of the African American. Caught in between cultures, in the stairwell of cultural enunciation, ‘the hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identity at
either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy’ (Bhabha, 1994:5). Cross is not an ideal cultural hybrid because he is not capable of accommodating difference. He adopts the self-righteousness and egocentrism of the communists. Although he has acquired western education, his experience of life is black - thus he is trapped in a no man’s land on the borderlines of culture. ‘At its simplest,’ argues Robert Young (2008:158) ‘hybridity implies a disruption and forcing together of any unlike living things, grafting a vine or a rose on to a different root stock, making difference into sameness’ Although Young portrays hybridity in simple horticultural terms, the fusion of cultures in real life may not be as simple. It may demand self-denial and adaptation and may even lead to outright confusion as evidenced by Cross’ experience in New York. Cross is confused because he cannot harmonize the two cultural formations that he has embraced. While Western culture is beckoning to him as we see through his relationship with Eva, his family (which is symbolic of his African American culture) is holding him back, making it difficult for him to cross the cultural divide. Cross can identify with Eva because a part of him is western (his training in western philosophy), but he cannot marry her because of the connotations associated with the colour of his skin. Cross cannot marry Eva and ‘move’ on with life without first of all changing his perceptions about race. He must marry Eva because he loves her, not because she is white. At the same time he must deal with the stigma that his race has acquired over the years. For, example the white communists look down upon him because of his skin colour and in trying to assert himself, he becomes a monster whom Eva cannot understand, thus she kills herself. Of course Eva has her own problems because of her failed marriage, but she realizes that Cross is a not an option because he is as selfish as her communist husband.

Unlike The Outsider which is largely existentialist, Black Boy can be easily interpreted through subculture theory. Edwin Sutherland (2002), one of the major proponents of subculture theory argues that criminal behaviour is learned through association. The more one associates with criminals the more one becomes schooled in crime. ‘A person becomes a delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law
over definitions unfavourable to violations of law’ (Lilly, et al, 2002: 40). We see this clearly in the character of Richard who becomes a drunkard at the age of six because he spends most of his time patronizing saloons and running errands for drunkards. Moreover, when he grows older, Richard’s environment teaches him that he cannot attain the freedom that he wants by adhering to the legitimate route. Thus, he ends up embezzling money from the hotel in order to raise money for his flight to the north.

Richard is also struggling to position himself within the exclusive discourse of the segregationist South. Thus apart from being an innocent boy who is finally spoiled by his environment, Richard is actively fighting to register his presence in a society that refuses to recognize his humanity. His predicament is therefore not only sociological in the Mertonian sense of negotiating the disjunction between cultural goals and the means of attaining them. Richard is militantly engaged with the colonial discourse of othering so as to re-present (as in art, to depict) and represent (as in politics, to stand for) himself within the fractures of that discourse. In writing his autobiography, he finds an opportunity to tell his own story, and in the same breath becomes [as he sees it] an ambassador for his people. He uses the master’s language as a bridge of communication that allows him to reach out to the world. When he finally takes to crime, he is making a statement that the only way to realize his goal in this callous society is through illegitimate means. The title ‘Black Boy,’ like ‘Native Son’ is assertive. It is an affirmation of black subjectivity akin to the negritude rhetoric of black is beautiful. Since Richard is negotiating his way through the strictures of a racist society; his crimes are part of this self-liberating enterprise.

The argument that has been presented in the preceding chapters is that crime and violence in the postcolonial context, particularly the apartheid context, as represented in the fictional works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard is an essentialist strategy, to borrow a phrase from Spivak, of dealing with power/knowledge structures, a way of opening survival spaces within the shifting hegemonic paradigms of postcoloniality. Can the subaltern speak; perhaps that is the question especially in the context of apartheid South Africa and the segregationist American South where marginal voices are
silenced? The colonized may not have a voice officially; he may be denied a space to express himself, but he can do something to keep alive. Bigger Thomas, Richard, Cross, Tsotsi and Sizwe Bansi are expressions of stifled black voices seeking platforms and avenues to be heard. Criminality therefore becomes a way of speaking, a way of perpetuating self in a disabling environment, even at the expense of others. The idea of finding voice through committing crime is double edged; on one hand, it empowers the individual, while on the other, it perpetuates apartheid violence. Is it possible for the marginalized to speak without denying others (especially their oppressors and the weak in their ranks) the very speech that they seek to gain? The social bandits of Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels* were reputable for upholding justice by robbing the rich to enrich the poor. A similar kind of logic is embedded in the criminal activities of the characters in the selected text, for example Bigger and Tsotsi as argued in the respective chapters.

It might appear as if criminal violence is being glossed over here through insistently scapegoating apartheid. One might ask why crime is still prevalent in postcolonial South Africa, for instance, long after the political demise of apartheid. To answer this question one may have to go back to the original question, slippery though it may be- what is the postcolonial? The question is important because it enables one to understand that the problems of apartheid and/or colonialism have been posted into the post-apartheid era. The postcolonial is not a specified ‘bordered’ historical space; it is best conceived as a horizon that keeps changing its borderline. The fact that apartheid did not die with the dawn of democracy suggests that crime and violence, which proliferated during apartheid, will also take new postures and continue to haunt society. The oppressive survival of globalised neoliberalism overseen by ruling elites entails that crime and violence will also continue in different guises.

It has been argued that Athol Fugard is fascinated with the plight of the poor, the marginalized (the silent/silenced), and those rejects of society that no one seems to notice. Fugard is particularly interested in investigating how these people, excluded by ideological systems like apartheid manage to subtly challenge the dominant regime of
power, inscribe their agency and survive within its strictures. Bhabha conceives this encounter of two social groups with different cultural traditions and potentials of power as a special kind of negotiation and translation that takes place in the Third space of enunciation (2009: 2). In conceptualizing the plight of the poor, Athol Fugard is aware that they do not simply give in to despair or relinquish their struggle for survival in the face of displacement and dislocation. Rather they devise ways of survival akin to Merton’s innovative means of attaining desired goals, negotiating and translating the dominant discourse for their own purposes.

A case in point is that of Boesman and Lena in Fugard’s play of the same title, a couple displaced and dislocated by apartheid both physically and psychologically. The destruction of the pondok, which is a microcosm of their world and habitat, makes them desperate but does not necessarily render them culturally extinct; rather it impels them to explore new avenues of dealing with the new reality. The pathos of the play is that Boesman and Lena have been subjected and dehumanized; however what is more interesting is their resilience in the face of adversity, the capacity to carry on in spite of the bleak situation. Lena is able to sing and dance without a roof over her head. This is what Homi Bhabha conceptualizes as ambivalence in the colonial context. ‘Ambivalence is not merely the sign of the failure of the colonial discourse to make the colonial subject conform, it is also the sign of the agency of the colonized - the two way gaze, the dual orientation, the ability to appropriate colonial technology without being absorbed by it – which disrupts the monological impetus of the colonizing process’ (Ashcroft, 2001: 126).

To dislocate Lena is simultaneously to render her destitute and politically conscious. This affirms Fugard’s political position- he understood that displacing Lena would only speed up the development her political consciousness which would culminate in a revolution. Now that she is homeless and wondering from one place to another, she begins to reflect on her losses. Walder (1984: 73) argues that ‘the list of places Lena names in Boesman and Lena refers to Lena’s struggle throughout the play to create meaning out of her existence by discovering the order in which she and Boesman have visited these poor little Port Elizabeth shantytowns’ Her destitution makes her realize the need for solidarity amongst the oppressed. Instead of treating Outa with contempt,
she begins to recognize him as a fellow human being. Lena’s relationship with Outa challenges the caste system that hampers unity among the oppressed (particularly between blacks and coloureds).

Once dislocated, Boesman and Lena start developing new ways of walking into the future. This ability to negotiate through the third space of enunciation is what philosopher Bernard Williams (in Ashcroft, 2001: 5) has misconstrued as the ‘moral luck’ that comes with the colonial enterprise. ‘Moral luck’ speaks of the things that the colonized gained through colonialism, for example a double consciousness that comes with being exposed to two cultural formations. Bill Ashcroft insists that viewing the plight of the postcolonial, particularly their capacity to manipulate and circumvent dominant discourse as moral luck ‘would be comparable to saying that the political prisoner has been fortunate because he has been able to write, in prison, an autobiography which caught the imagination of the world, as Nelson Mandela has with Long Walk to Freedom’ (Ashcroft 2001: 5). It would be preferable not to get into prison in the first place, however it is a positive attribute to get in and come out with something of value. Lena encapsulates this attribute characteristic of black people throughout the anti-colonial struggles – the capacity, when going through hardship, to endure it and get a positive value from it. The same can be said of the African-American slave who produced one of the world’s greatest musical compositions (the blues) amidst the reifying conditions of slavery. Lena is not necessarily lucky; rather she manages to survive on the margin by reminding herself of the good old days. Her days are only “good” by comparison given that Cape Coloureds were the descendants of slaves and were always on the margin of white Western Cape society. While Tsotsi and Cross deny history in order to survive, Lena relies on her memory to deal with the fact of displacement. She knows that ‘it wasn’t always like this. There were better times’ (p. 17) and it is by remembering the better times that she dances into the future.

Apartheid society has labelled Boesman and Lena ‘rubbish’ and has criminalized their right to home ownership, yet in their itinerancy they improvise ways of survival to keep themselves going. Boesman and Lena represent a stage in the history of South Africa
where it seemed as if all was lost [in terms of the anti-apartheid struggle]; yet it is this seemingly hopeless situation that bears the seeds of liberation. Lena is desperate but she is not crushed because she can still dream about freedom. She refuses to accept Boesman’s claim that ‘now is the only time in [her] life’ because she knows that she was not born yesterday (p.17); she has a history. The point is that the struggle for self-realization begins with self-reorientation. Thus we see her resorting to remembering and witnessing as strategies of recovering her bulldozed past and thus presumably projecting a future like it. Lena may not be the one to bring about change but the fact that she preserves her history means that she can pass it on to future generations.

‘Does a place exist for a conception of a subject which is not completely autonomous, yet which is active within, and against the boundaries of discourse?’ (2001: 103). The answer is yes; subcultures, as the subculture theory has spelt out, exist within dominant cultural formations. This is also what Bill Ashcroft has theorized as postcolonial transformation, that Lena, in her displaced condition, finds subtle ways of registering her voice, of subverting the dominant cultural regime by affirming her routes and roots.

On the other hand, Boesman, like Bigger has found a survival strategy in the violence that he unleashes on his wife. He keeps threatening to kick Lena out of his pondok. Athol Fugard has told us that the beatings that Boesman unleashes are as indispensable to him as they are to Lena. The latter has also found a way of taking the beatings as part of life, ‘when I feel it I know I am Lena,’ (p.16) she says. Whenever Boesman unleashes violence on Lena and she gets wounded, she is reminded of her existence. If Lena’s demand ‘give!’ at the end of the play is self-affirmation as argued in Chapter Five, one can argue that at this stage Lena is still defining herself in terms of Boesman, in classic subjection to patriarchy. So in Boesman and Lena we see violence as a factor that defines its victim and reminds her of her marginal identity. Boesman is not doing the right thing by abusing his wife, but having been subjected to a life of continuous displacement; he has to find a way of appearing relevant. He has to, as least at the level of fantasy; regain his patriarchal position, to assure himself that he is Boesman (a man), in as much as the beatings remind Lena that she is Boesman’s wife. Boesman and Lena are vagabonds, they subscribe to a subculture whose values run
parallel to conventional culture. This subculture is a way of existing outside the parameters set by the dominant culture. In creating Boesman and Lena, Athol Fugard is not only interested in mourning the destruction caused by the removals; he is also showing us how Boesman and Lena lived with the experience. Although she is brutalized from every angle, Lena rises to a higher level of political challenge at the end of the play by refusing to obey Boesman’s orders. This refusal to depend on Boesman is a repudiation of patriarchy, which by extension is a rejection of the broader colonial oppression which has rendered the two (Boesman and Lena) homeless.

In *Boesman and Lena*, Athol Fugard does not only witness, as in giving a truthful report about, the damage caused by apartheid, but also dramatizes the tactics which the marginalized use to refashion their lives and catapult themselves into the future. The story is not only about ‘the bleakness of black life,’ as Richard Wright says about blacks in *Black Boy*, (p. 37) it is also about the spirit of survival. In my view, it is not enough to see Lena’s dancing and singing and Boesman’s violence only as reactions to the alienating experience of displacement. That is the reason why Athol Fugard argues that the play is not as simple as Boesman victimizing Lena. It is a love story in the sense that the two characters need each other to make a life out of nothing. Lena feels alive every time she looks at Boesman’s back and Boesman also has developed a way of sensing Lena’s presence behind him without looking back. He may run down that hill like a frightened rabbit but he knows that Lena is following and she will certainly catch up with him. This is a symbiotic relationship that sustains them in the wake of displacement and dislocation. To put it differently and perhaps more succinctly, *Boesman and Lena* deals with the consequences of apartheid policies, particularly how the dispossessed manage mundane aspects of life, for example, love relationships, in the aftermath of dispossession. It also deals with marginalized existence, particularly the question of ‘vagrants’ and how they make meaning out of life without a fixed abode.

While *Boesman and Lena* deals with the collective experience of apartheid brutality through remembering, dancing and singing, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* brings new perspectives on survival tactics improvised by the dominated in colonial cities. Bill
Ashcroft has argued that ‘the fractures that exist in discourse are a prime site for the intervention of the theoretically weak, in their task of redeploying power and reshaping what appears to be an unassailable cultural dominance’ (2001:116). In fact what is dramatized in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is the manipulation of these fractures in discourse for the survival of the weak and disenfranchised. Firstly, Styles has taken to photography as a way of evading the exploitation at the Ford factory. In becoming a self-employed black entrepreneur, Styles negotiates the interstitial space and ensures his own survival in a system that is bent on culturally decimating the less powerful. So we see that the photographic unit becomes a site of negotiating and translating hegemony to serve Styles’s individual purposes, the same way Lena uses memory and/fantasy as a survival strategy.

In his book *On postcolonial futures: transformations of colonial culture*, Bill Ashcroft (2001: 116) argues that ‘transformation,’ which is what Styles is engaged in, ‘is not contrary to resistance but reveals that the most effective strategies of postcolonial resistance have not become bogged down in simple opposition or futile binarism, but have taken the dominant discourse and transformed it for purposes of self-empowerment…it is in this everyday practice that postcolonial futures are created’ Like Lena in *Boesman and Lena*, Styles is preoccupied with *living on* and in the process he preserves the history of his people which has been sidelined in official narratives. Photography in general and the family card in particular are subtle ways of inscribing the marginalized voice within the dominant narrative. It is in embracing both the culture of the colonizer, represented through the camera, and the culture of the people (genealogies in this case) that the colonized transforms culture and forges ahead into the postcolonial future. Styles takes up the white man’s technological gadget and uses it to capture and preserve the history of his people. Thus, the postcolonial future, as the example of Styles and Sizwe shows, is not likely to be preoccupied with the recovery of an authentic culture, as it is about grafting multiple cultures into a hybridized, multifaceted whole. For example, Styles’ use of a camera (foreign gadget) to preserve the dreams of his people and Sizwe’s swapping of identity suggest that cultures can be fused together and identities can be, at least in the postmodern sense, changed. The
photographic unit is characterized as a strong room of dreams, implying the luminal horizon of the postcolonial- within reach but always shifting position.

Bill Ashcroft argues that in the postcolonial setting, ‘exclusion and relegation constantly confronts one’s sense of being,’ as a result, ‘excess is sometimes a necessary feature of the attempt to make a space for oneself in the world’ (2001:116). Ashcroft is writing with the Palestinian experience in mind, particularly the destruction of villages and dislocations that force the marginalized to engage in excess (suicide bombing) by way of revenge. As I have argued in chapter five, Sizwe Bansi is driven to the excess of adopting Robert Zwelinzima’s identity because the system seeks to deport him to the dry and barren Ciskei province, where there is no possibility of finding a job. Yet what he wants is to stay in the city and fend for his family. In adopting a fake identity, Sizwe Bansi manages to manipulate the system and transform it for his own purposes. His strategy is cheating the system that is designed to exclude him, akin to Spivak’s essentialist strategy. Although Sizwe’s change of identity may not be equivalent to the Palestinian ‘excess,’ the consequences are likely to be dire because his decision involves a death and resurrection experience. By adopting Robert Zwelinzima’s documents, he, metaphorically, lays down his life for his family like Jesus Christ, so that he would rise and find it again.

Bill Ashcroft maintains that ‘excess is a fascinating feature of a power relationship, for the excess of the dominated subject is not so much opposition as supervening’ (2001:117). Sizwe Bansi’s strategy is not confrontational in the Fanonian fashion; rather it is a way of navigating and circumventing the dominant structures that seek to displace and dislocate him. Ashcroft’s ‘supervening’ is a tactic whereby the dominated subject intervenes by manipulation and circumvention rather than by direct confrontation. Sizwe Bansi’s decision to adopt Robert Zwelinzima’s particulars is thus ‘ambivalently supervening’ in the sense that while he manages to cheat the system, he loses part of his identity in the process. Homi Bhabha has reminded us that the third space of enunciation is a contact zone where both the colonized and colonizer lose and gain in the same breath. The metaphorical transformation of Sizwe Bansi typifies the process of
cultural transformation. ‘Sizwe’ or the nation does not remain the same after the colonial experience- there are losses and gains, just as much as Sizwe Bansi lost his name but gained right of domicile in Port Elizabeth. This is the essence of postcolonial transformation and cultural hybridity as espoused in the works of Bill Ashcroft and Homi Bhabha respectively; ‘that the appropriation of forms of representation and forcing entry into the discursive networks of cultural dominance has always been a crucial feature of resistance… (Ashcroft, 2001: 19).

The gang violence that we see in Tsotsi can be conceptualized as sub-cultural response to apartheid domination or the marginalized’s way of grappling with the depersonalizing tendencies of apartheid ideological egocentrism. Subculture theory contends that the oppressed subscribe to a subculture which opposes/contradicts conventional culture. In a subculture, conventional values are subtly challenged, twisted and subverted and those vices which society condemns are embraced and celebrated. In fact, subcultures emerge as alternatives in an environment where the institutionalized channels of self-realization prescribed by the dominant culture seem to disadvantage a particular group of people, perhaps owing to their gender, level of education, class or race. Subculture theorists argue that individuals embrace a subculture as an alternative route towards attaining their desired goals. The theory may not explain every minute detail of the gang phenomenon in Fugard’s novel, but it has helped to contextualize the violence that we encounter right within the first ten pages of the narrative. The gang in Tsotsi constitutes a society of delinquents; Tsotsi, Die Aap, Boston and Butcher who share the same values and attitude towards life. Killing Gumboot Dhlamini is not necessarily murder for Tsotsi, Butcher and Die Aap; it is a ‘job’ Killing is a force that gives meaning their life, which is why when Tsotsi fails to come up with a job, the gang becomes restless. This reminds us of Chris Hedges’ striking book, War is a force that gives us meaning, in which he points out that war is an enticing elixir that gives purpose and a cause to those who engage in it. ‘Human beings seek not only happiness but also meaning. And tragically war is sometimes the most powerful way in human society to achieve meaning’ (2003: 10).
It has been argued that the postcolonial theory, particularly Bhabha’s concepts of ambivalence and the third space have become an easy way of explaining the rest of the postcolonial experience. The marginalized are no longer seen as victims; rather they are now seen as interlocutors of colonial culture who devise strategies and tactics to ensure their own survival. As a result of this theoretical position, Bhabha and Ashcroft have been seen as ‘subtle’ apologists of the colonial enterprise especially by Marxist critics (for example, Tripathy, 2009) of postcolonial theory. The present study acknowledges that crime is a trans-cultural phenomenon, and generalizing about it across cultures may be myopic. Different situations call for different theoretical maps to navigate them. The postcolonial space is shaped by the history of colonial domination and the subsequent ways in which affected societies negotiated this alienating experience. Tsotsi in Athol Fugard’s novel is a product of the postcolonial experiences of displacement, debasement and dislocation. In fact the etymology of the word ‘tsotsi’ shows that it was coined in the 1940s to define a new hybrid culture that emerged among South African youths. Borges (2007: 250) notes that ‘the African tsotsi of Johannesburg urban areas is an almost completely detribalized, often illegitimate, usually teenage criminal delinquent, who neither understands nor respects the tribal customs and culture of his forefathers’ A tsotsi is someone who has been uprooted, culturally, historically- hence he has no landmarks of orientation. Clive Glaser (2000) traced the origin of the word ‘tsotsi’ and he argues that some scholars associate it with a kind of American attire of the 1940s and 50s that was adopted by South African youths in the townships. Yet others insist that it came from a Sotho word as argued in Chapter Seven. The point is that the coining of a word can be a linguistic act of opening space for the marginalized in the third space of cultural emancipation, which is similar to the way postcolonial writers use the master’s language transformatively to express their own worldview. Tsotsis are often perceived as streetwise and endowed with tricks (innovative) to overcome their victims. Similarly, Tsotsi, the character of the novel is a surviving remnant of the white man’s brutal removals and relocations/dislocations- an embodiment of the hybrid culture formulated in the interstitial space.
Having been bulldozed out of their homes and thus physically and psychologically dislocated, Tsotsi and his gang find space for survival in gang violence. The internecine violence that the tsotsis engage in is what Bill Ashcroft has characterized as the ‘excess’ of the postcolonial subject which is more of supervening rather than opposition. ‘As the Palestinian example forcibly reveals,’ argues Ashcroft, ‘excess can become the place in which the postcolonial is located’ (2001: 117). Edward Said’s *Culture and Resistance* (2003) shows that desperate Palestinians often hide bombs on their bodies and go into Israeli territories where they blast themselves to death in order to take revenge for Israeli aggression. Ashcroft is also referring to the advent of radical resistance movements like Al Qaeda which seek to oppose American imperialism through ‘terrorism.’ Movements like Qaeda are defined by and located in the continuous acts of violence they commit. Tsotsi is neither a terrorist nor a guerrilla but his actions affect innocent people in a way similar to the Palestinian suicide bomber who may also kill innocent Israelis except that the Palestinian is pursuing a collective political agenda.

Arguably, Tsotsi and his gang, being preoccupied with personal survival have fixed themselves strategically into a life of violence. Although the gang is caught up with the challenge of living through displacement and dislocation, they tend to adopt a parochially essentialist survival instinct which exposes their own weaknesses as individuals. Cultural transformation as Ashcroft (2001:116) puts it ‘is not bogged down in simple opposition or futile binarism’ but it takes the dominant discourse and transforms it for purposes of empowerment. Although engaging in criminal violence may be a viable way of negotiating and translating existing structures of hegemony at individual level, it is ultimately retrogressive in the collective sense. For example, Tsotsi and his gang survive by preying on fellow victims of the system that they seek to challenge. Unlike Lena who merges her present experience with her past and thus is able to chart her way into the future (at least at the discursive level), Tsotsi lives in the perpetual present and that is why he fails to survive sustainably into the postcolonial future. Living in the present entails a life without values and traditions; it entails a life without familiar points of reference. If Tsotsi were to live into the future, what values would he impart to the young David? Tsotsi fails to realize that the past cannot be denied, what one can do is
acknowledge it. Therefore, his death does not only signify victory for the mighty, it also suggests that Tsotsi is not an appropriate father for the new generation of South Africans.

Given the fabric of the arguments presented in the preceding chapters, it suffices therefore to conclude that crime and violence in the postcolonial milieu can be conceptualized in terms of Homi Bhabha’s concept of the third space of enunciation and Bill Ashcroft’s postcolonial transformation. ‘This is not a doctrine’ as Ashcroft puts it, ‘as much as an observation of the practice of colonial subjects’ (2001:6). The interdisciplinary approach that has been adopted in this study shows that useful insights can be gained by transcending disciplinary boundaries, for example the boundary between English literature and criminology. It has been demonstrated that some postcolonial theoretical concepts are similar to concepts in criminology. For example, the concept of ‘stereotype’ can be understood in the same way that one would understand the concept of ‘labelling’ in criminology. The same can be said of concepts like ‘subculture’ ‘third space’ and ‘hybridity’ which speak of cultures parallel to conventional culture. It must be emphasized once again that while the criminological theories are a useful framework for a general study of crime and criminal behaviour, postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft, is more informative in that it situates the study within the context it seeks to explore.

Postcolonial theory is particularly relevant to this study because it conceptualizes the various ways in which the post colonials (the various characters in the selected texts) engage with the consequences of colonization. In the postcolonial milieu of the selected texts, crime and violence is a strategic response to the condition of being displaced and marginalized. In short therefore, the fictional representations discussed in this study, from Bigger Thomas to Tsotsi are metaphorically, ways of responding to the condition of living on the margins.

Most importantly, this study affirms previous studies, particularly the works of Homi Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft which have challenged the authority of colonialism by
emphasizing the subjectivity of the colonised. By challenging colonial authority one is able to see the fractures and fissures beneath the grand design of domination and subjugation. These points of weakness are spaces which the colonized manipulate to inscribe their agency. The history of colonialism therefore is not the history of Europe in Africa; it is also the history of Africa interjecting, circumventing colonial hegemony and perpetuating itself in spite of the colonialist mission that sought to obliterate it. This study has shown, through the works of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard, that even in the densely racist Jim crow/apartheid worlds, the colonized were not submerged – they devised ways of dealing with and adapting to the numerous strategies of subjection designed by the colonial system. In South Africa, the historical works of Gary Kynoch, Jonny Steinberg and Charles Van Onselen have testified to the emergence of subcultures of crime and violence in black communities, which were in many ways, strategies of survival. It is explicit therefore that the interplay between crime, violence and apartheid is such that the domineering violence of apartheid generates spaces that are manipulated by the colonized. David Huddart (2006:6) observes that traditional analyses of colonial discourse (for example, Edward Said's *Orientalism*) ‘minimize spaces of resistance by producing a picture of the West (the colonizer) endlessly and brutally subjugating the East (the colonized). We should listen to the subaltern voice – the voice of the oppressed peoples falling outside histories of colonialism.’

Having harmonized the selected works with the various theoretical concepts adopted in this study, it is appropriate at this point, by way of conclusion, to establish parallels between Richard Wright and Athol Fugard. Richard Wright and Athol Fugard can be easily situated within the resistance paradigm because their works are largely preoccupied with the subjectivities of the marginalized. Richard Wright’s work ‘documents the destitution and emotional insecurity to which he was heir from his childhood in Mississippi while his mother’s endless illness filled him with an abiding sense of existential anguish’ (Faber, 1985: 4). Estranged from his environment, Richard Wright saw himself as an outsider torn between two cultures. Similarly Athol Fugard, who was born into a poor white family, with an English father and an Afrikaner mother, was also caught between the two worlds that apartheid South Africa had created. While
the colour of his skin set him apart for privilege, his liberal philosophy inspired him to sympathize with and witness the lives of the marginalized poor. Both Richard Wright and Athol Fugard were influenced by existentialism and saw it as a philosophy that was capable of accounting for the complexity of the human situation. Athol Fugard (in Wertheim, 2000: 98) insists that Boesman and Lena ‘interests him, not at a social or political level, but metaphysically as a metaphor of the human condition which revolution or legislation cannot substantially change.’

Unlike Wright’s radical clenched militancy (Sorin, 2002: 121) which has been discussed in Chapter three, Athol Fugard advocates subtle tactics of survival within the system as illustrated in the respective chapters. By fashioning a self-consciously monstrous protagonist, a tough-talking, tenement dwelling misogynistic murderer [in Native Son], Wright sought to engage white culture’s most virulent stereotypes about African American men (Entin, 2007: 239). On the other hand, Athol Fugard engaged the same stereotypes by mimicking, mocking and lampooning them as has been shown in Chapter Five. One would notice that Richard Wight’s vision evolved with time, from the environmental determinism of Uncle Tom’s Children and Black Boy to the self-determinism and self-direction explored in The Outsider. This could be attributed to the different influences on his life, starting from his readings in criminology, psychiatry and sociology, (Fabre, 1985: 89) and his affiliation with Marxism to his discovery of existentialism in France. Athol Fugard, on the hand, depended heavily on existentialism (he studied philosophy at the University of Cape Town) to explore the meaning of life in the non-providential universe of apartheid South Africa. ‘In a variety of plays, written between the late 1960s and 1970s, Fugard sought to portray the experiences (the suffering as well as the heroism) of ordinary black people in apartheid South Africa’ (Wertheim, 2000, 195).

Athol Fugard and Richard Wright were also inspired by personal experiences in their immediate environment or what Richard Wright calls ‘felt life.’ In an introduction to the 1980 edition of Tsotsi, Jonathan Kaplan says that Tsotsi is a product of Fugard’s experience of apartheid repression in 1958 when he worked as a court clerk in
Johannesburg. On the other hand, most of Wright’s works are autobiographical in nature because they capture some landmark experiences in his life. For example, his 1944 departure from the communist party is depicted in *The Outsider*. The preceding chapters have also shown that both Wright and Fugard are preoccupied with asserting individual rather than collective subjectivity. Characters like Bigger, Cross, Styles and Sizwe are a case in point. Commenting on Fugard’s *Boesman and Lena*, Martin Orkin (2001: 144) says ‘part of the tension in the play stems from the ways in which the individual struggles to win some private domestic space and also to establish a viable sense of identity or interiority – primarily in existentialist terms - is continually broken down by the social forces within which it is situated.’ Martin Orkin (2001: 141) further intimates that the central dramatic struggle in Fugard’s work is the need to discover some viable assertion of ‘self’ in the face of what is presented as a desolate and arid world. In general terms, Wright and Fugard portray apartheid as a system that fostered desperation in its subjects, the desperation of which degenerated into crime and violence among the marginalised groups. However, Wright is not only content with witnessing the lives of the marginalized as Fugard seems to be, he also suggests possible ways of dealing with the problems that he highlights. In his criticism of *Black Boy*, Hakutani (2003: 134) points out that the text does ‘not only analyse a social problem but offers a solution to the problem it treats.’ Richard in *Black Boy* liberates himself by appropriating discourse and writing his own story while Cross in *The Outsider* rejects his home and relocates to New York. Wright himself did the same when he migrated to France in search of a more receptive environment for the development of his craft. Although Athol Fugard has also moved to the United States where he lives with his family, he insistently refers to South Africa as his home, ‘the source of his inspiration and the fount from which springs the personality of his characters’ lives’ (Preece, 2008: 92).

Both Athol Fugard and Richard Wright occupy crucial places in the literature of their respective countries. While Athol Fugard has been hailed as the conscience of apartheid South Africa, Richard Wright has also been regarded as the international spokesman of the ‘Negro’ race. Marcia Blumberg (1998: 63) asserts that ‘the drama of
Athol Fugard, South Africa’s most prominent playwright, has long been considered synonymous with staging resistance against oppressive structures, culturally intervening when censorship, bannings, house arrest and detention without trial occurred routinely for individuals or groups who defied state politics or were even suspected of oppositional activities.’ While Richard Wright has painted a rather gloomy picture of the Deep South, characterising it as unsupportive and essentially bleak, Athol Fugard has managed ‘to conjure hope especially as it relates to individuals within a damaged society’ (Nel, 1998: 185). The adoption of the existential philosophy has, for both Wright and Fugard, enabled their works to gain a universal appeal. ‘Although [their] works are localised within [South Africa and America], the universal nature of their characters -- their ability to deal with cosmic forces beyond their control by grappling with their own situations -- sets [their] writing apart from that of the socio-political pamphleteer’ (Nel, 1998: 185).
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