

Self – Identity through Killing William Styron

Dr. Suchitra Vashisth

Associate Professor MRI University Faridabad India

Corresponding Author: Dr. Suchitra Vashisth

Abstract: Fiction is a great secular force of man. He expresses his views about important things of human life and even his reactions to its bitter part. A writer translates human life into print and claims truth to it. About the truth to life represented by a writer, an unknown poet has rightly said:

Friends, this is not a book, but a man

If you read this, you read a man.

Henry James also has expressed similar view about a writer as a representative of human life in a society. A writer describes manifesto facts of life. Such a writer is William Styron. Like James Baldwin, Styron may be called an angry black writer. But he is also an elegantly accomplished novelist who in a novel entitled *The Confession of Nat Turner* has represented himself as a Virginian who left himself intensely involved with the contemporary Negro struggle and has written a historical novel that reflects the racial conflict between the blacks and the whites and ultimately brings them together. Through this novel he has asserted the integrity of fiction. Certainly his strong approach as a liberal Southerner has not overridden his novel, which far from being oratorical in the evangelical style of Harriet Beecher Stowe (who also wrote a novel about Nat Turner) turned Nat Turner into an extraordinary sensitive and dreamy addict who once petted with another slave boy but died a bachelor, who organized an insurrection but could kill no one but the white woman he loved, whom he could possess only by standing guard over her corpse with a sword. The purpose of this article is to explore the cause and effect of the racial discrimination in American Society.

Keywords: William Styron, Nat Turner, Self-Identity, Killing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Styron's novel is full of sensitive landscapes that could apply to any Southern boys' growing up. They do not make the connection between slavery and insurrection that must have existed in Nat Turner's mind for him to organize the "only effective, sustained," the only significant slave revolt in American history. Styron's idea was to dispel the strangeness of the "Negro" -- especially in bondage, where ever the most concerned Southern defender cannot now imagine his individual feelings -- by showing him to be as complicated as one. But though many Southern white writers were deeply moved by Nat Turner, the novel was violently attacked by black nationalists. Styron's Turner was too responsive for them. Harriet Beecher Stowe had answered the angry Southern Critics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by providing documentation for every horror she described in her novel.

But Mrs. Stowe was not worried about "fiction" but about the violation of Christianity in a slave society. Styron was relevant to too many things at once; to the art of the novel, to the original twenty-page confession, and above all, to his contemporary belief that our psychology can illuminate the mind and heart of a Negro slaves in 1931. Entering into Nat Turner's "dreams" as confidently as we do, we reorganize that what our contemporary wanted most to do in this book was to become a Negro mind, to make "human" and "clear" what makes us afraid in the shadows we still occupy.

In 1967 Styron wanted to dispel the strangeness by dramatizing Turner's "feelings" that the blacks and the whites are kin. Styron has always been a novelist of feelings -- elegiac in *Lie Down in Darkness*, historically "wild" in *Set This House on Fire*. Nat Turner waiting for death talks about his dreams that he becomes our alter ego --- another Southerner, Styron, wants and needs for the sake of Justice and civil peace. From this understanding of Nat Turner, we cannot believe that this man has been a slave and the schemer of so many killings. The sense of violence in Styron's novel is missing Nat Turner's 1967 introspectiveness does not prepare us for it. The link between a tortured self and a violent self is not present in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Styron himself called the novel "a meditation on history". As Nat Turner was a "real person". So there is no end to the many meditations on history we can weave around him.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron has launched a rebel-hero, who, from his infancy, lives, suffers and reacts in the racist society of America and raises his aggressive tone against the system of chattel slavery in America. Styron has made Nat fully-developed character that accepts the challenge of the dehumanized system and makes his attempt to eradicate it even through killings of some adversaries. He encourages some other slave friends and makes them a party in the bloody act, the murders of the white people who are responsible for slavery of the blacks. So, in his action, Nat is a unique creation in American fiction. We do not know much about Turner. We have only a twenty-page confession dictated to Thomas Gray, the white lawyer, who served both the defense and the prosecution and who edited what he heard for the white, adjudicators and the white press. To understand the impelling motive of Nat Turner, Styron has kept in his mind the time of racial conflicts in the contemporary American society. The act of violence, the murder of the Whitehead, is much in tune with the time of black rebellion. It was the time when in America the racial conflicts between the blacks and the whites were very much visible in the society; the blacks were not ready to work under the system of slavery and were growing violent against the segregation and discrimination in the spheres of employment, housing, education, voting and citizenship. Nat Turner, one of the slaves and a sufferer at the hands of the white masters, felt bereft of God, bereft of his faith in social justice and bereft of hope and optimism. The story of the novel is the story of his redemption which he seeks in his own way. The redemptive pattern conflicts with an obscures the pattern of social and psychological insights. In this novel Styron deals with the callous system of chattel slavery. The matter of racial conflict has been explored completely. The story of Nat Turner had remained in his mind since he read the original confessions in the late forties, and he made a plan to write on Nat Turner's like as a subject of his second novel. Years later, having finally started to write the confessions he even went to the scene of the rebellion, and as he approached the house of Mrs. Catherine Whitehead, he tried to reflect its particular role in Nat's destiny. A Comparison of Nat Turner may be made with the anonymous character of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who also seeks his identity in revolutionary action. The novel is a fictional account of Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. This subject is Southern, historical and racial. It has inspired Styron for several years and the basis of the novel is the accounts of the rebellion led by an educated slave preacher. In the novel Styron has created Nat Turner as an introspective hero who rebels against slavery. His rebellion brought about severe repercussions and led to severe laws in Southern states regarding slavery.

The real revolt lies in Nat's assertions of self. He is an individual who represents the aspirations of all men held in slavery who conceived of freedom. What made Nat rebel against the whites? This question leads us to trace the system of slavery that resulted in Nat's insurrection. The story of the novel starts with the fact that the Negroes were not regarded as human beings. To the white people they had no sense, no character, no morality; Nat explains this fact in his speech: "..... Every Negro possesses when, dating from the age of twelve or ten even earlier, he becomes aware that he is only merchandise, goods, in the eyes of all white people devoid of character or moral sense or soul."¹

The Negroes were sold like animals and goods. Chained and loaded in ships they were brought from Africa to America for sale. Nat's family also was sold as slaves in America. Nat says: "My mother's mother was girl of the Coronate..... from the Gold Coast, thirteen years old when she was brought in chains to York town aboard a schooner sailing out of Newport, Rhode Island, and only a few month's older when she was sold at auction beneath a huge live oak tree in the harbor side town of Hampton, to Alpheus Turner, who was Samuel Turner's father."²

Nat's father died when he was a child of 8 or 9 years. He was then in possession of Samuel Turner. When Samuel Turner's fortunes declined, he sold Nat to the Rev Eppes, a homosexual, who tried to "ravish" him. Ultimately sold by the Rev Eppes for 460 to Evans and Blanding, two illiterate white auctioneers. Nat appears in the last scene lying in a wagon driven by Evans and Blanding on his way to Southampton country. Then they sold him to Mr. Thomas Moore of Southampton County. After the death of Mr. Moore Nat becomes the property of his son, Putnam and Mrs. Moore called Miss. Sarah. Miss Sarah married Joseph Travis, a childless widower of 56 and moderately prosperous. The sale of Negroes was quite common. It was made to a trade specializing in labour for the Mississippi delta. Travis had purchased two slaves. One is Hark. Born on a huge tobacco farm in Sussex Country, he was sold to Travis at the age of fifteen after the tobacco sucked the soil dry and the land went to stand and wreck. The other Negro, acquired through the Mississippi sale, was Moses, a hoarse, tar-black, wild-eyed boy of twelve or near there, whom Travis, finding he too late short-handed, had purchased at the Richmond bazaar quite a few months before the coming of Nat Turner. He was muscular and sturdy for his age and brilliant as much as necessary. But he never forgot the disconnection from his mother and "it left him bereft, trance us, and he cried a lot and kneed in his pants, occasionally even when he was at work."³

Nat's rebellion took place in the South. He was a slave, and the system of slavery regarded him as "animal chattel". His problem was to establish meaningful relationship with the society which did not accept him on human terms. Being a slave he had no legal existence beyond that of a chattel. The names of slaves

were mentioned in plantation account books, in the notice of slave auctions or in newspaper advertisements offering slaves for hire or rewards for runaways. There was hardly any glimpse of humanity beneath these statistical records. Gray, the white lawyer, reminds Nat of his precarious existence as a chattel in a white-dominated society. Nat was literate preacher and a slave of the Upper South. He was highly religious and was inspired by “visions” in his action: “I’ll swear that the Lord came to me in a vision. And the Lord said this to me. The Lord said: Confers, that all the nations may know Confess, that my acts may be known to all men.”⁴

The novel begins with the Judgment Day on which Nat is sentenced to die on the gallows. It then goes back in narration by visions, dreams, recollections to the “old times part” of Nat’s childhood and youth; it moves on to “study war”, the description of the massacre, and it ends with Nat’s execution in “It is done”. Styron has made language a fit medium to express the tangled emotions and meet the many needs related to a slave’s condition. Nat was temperamentally different from other black boys. Like most boys of sixteen or thereabouts he started feeling the pressures of his new manhood. The sense of self has been cultivated in Nat from his earliest days and was reinforced throughout his life. He refused to look at the line of Negroes going off to field work in the morning. He was a “house nigger” “Contemptuous and aloof, filled with disdain for the black riffraff which dwells beyond the close perimeter of the big house,”⁵ He had “soft the close perimeter of the big houses.” He had “soft pink palms” that never experienced” the grimy feel of the hoe handle and the sickle and the axe.”⁶ He was “the little black Jewel of Turner’s Mill.”⁷In a particularly meaningful scene he compares the Christmas gift he received –a book—to those other slaves happily hauling in for them. Sensitive and self-respectful Nat has compassion for Negroes. He is moved by their sorry plight and has taken up the mission “to free my people”. This deep reflection brings to his mind the existence of a Negro entirely ignorant of his human worth. A Negro lives “in the world of a fly” without the knowledge of life”. He is totally unconscious of his own existence as man. Nat wants to make the slaves realize the importance as man. Nat is a witness to the unspeakable misery of Negroes. The tradition of slavery made the slave owners the most callous taskmasters. The Negroes were starved, whipped and chained. The novelist explains the domination of the Negroes as follows:

“..... Beat a nigger, starve him, leave him wallowing in his own shit, and he will be yours for life. A we him by some unforeseen hint of philanthropy, tickle him with the idea of hope, and he will want to slice your throat.”⁸

The Negro slaves were more downtrodden than other human beings. Nat himself explains this truth when he says later: “I do not believe that I had ever thought of the future; it is not in the mood of a Negro, once aware of the in coverable fact of his bondage, to dwell on the future at all.... That something different might be fall my lot had never occurred to me.”⁹

The Negroes were put to hard field work, whipped by the white master, given half food for months together and sold like animals at auctions in pouring rain. The novelist has depicted the miserable life of the Negroes in the white racist society:“A poor field Negro may once in a while be struck by the whip of an overseer riding on a tall white horse, that same Negro may be forced onto short rations for a month and feel his stomach rumble daily in the tight cramps of near-starvation, again this Negro might someday be thorn into a cart and sold like a mule at auction in pouring to hate white man, he will come to understand that he is hating imperfectly, without that calm and intelligent and unrepentant purity of hatred..... Which is so necessary in order to murder?”¹⁰ Owing to poverty and segregation in and deprivation of education, the Negroes were not able to get good education and technical training required for certain jobs and employments. The life of American Negro was mechanical and miserable. When Nat thinks of Hark, his associate in the rebellion, who is now lodged in the cell next to his, he pities Hark for his imprisonment. Hark is about to die on the gallows with Nat. Had Hark been an educated man, his life would have been something elseThe slave workers were very much oppressed and tortured by the white masters, the job conditions were not conducive to their health, and they were not given even proper food. This is the reason that slave--workers used to run away from their work. The white masters hold that the Negroes could be put to any kind of work, without taking into consideration their likes or dislikes their merits or demerits in it. The Negroes felt enforced to do the work. This callous attitude of the whites to the blacks has been expressed by Benjamin Turner in the novel: “He (the white man) believes the slaves are capable of all kinds of improvement. so as to you can take a group of darkies and roll them into shop owners and sea captains and opera impresarios and army generals and Christ knows what all. I say differently. I do not believe in beating a darky. I do not believe, either, in beating a dog or a horse. If you wish my belief to take back to the Bishop, you can tell him that my belief is that a darky is an animal with the brain of a human child and his only value is the work you can get out of him by intimidation, cajolery, and threat.”¹¹

Nat was taught to read by his mistress, and he learned by heart great parts of the Bible. He was, in fact, superior to white preachers of the parish. His cleverness and skill won him love from all sides. He became by his own admission “a poet, the darling, the little black Jewel of Turner’s Mill.” His master, Samuel Turner, gave him support, vigilant instruction and even guarantee of freedom. He was given food- the food which the

white people used to eat. Samuel Turner, Nat's white master, gave him a chance to read and become a good man like the white. He made a promise to him to free him: "I shall draw up the papers for your emancipation. You will than at age of twenty five be a free man. Samuel has not promised to free his slaves. But he makes a promise to free Nat. Nat can come back when he cares to shoot the breeze with those still in bondage. Samuel Turner was sympathetic with Negroes and against the institution of slavery. He places his opinion before Dr. Ballard: "I have long and do still consistently believe that slavery is the great cause of all the chief evils of our land. It is a cancer eating at our bowels, the source of all our desolation, individual, political and monetary. It is greatest because a supposed free and enlightened society has been saddled with in modern times."¹²

Nat was given good facilities to sleep in a good bed with his follow – worker, Hark. He was given more time to "fish and trap" and make religious reading of the Bible. He explains his position in the house of his master, Samuel Turner: "I could fish and trap and do considerable Scriptural reading. I had for departing on to numerous years now considered the necessity of exterminating all the white people in Southampton country and as far beyond as destiny carried me, and there was thus available to me more time than I had been bad before to ponder the Bible and its exhortations, and to think over the complexities of the bloody task that was set out before me."¹³ He developed contempt for the field hand Negroes, about them as "lower order of people, a rag tag crowd, rude, rough, clownish, and uncivilized. "But this contempt of the blacks could not bring him near the whites. His position was like that of a mere pet. But this comfortable life of Nat could not last long as Samuel Turner went bankrupt and sold him to the Rev Eppes. Nat was condemned to "nigger work" by Eppes. Nat was twenty when he was denied the freedom promised for earlier. He then realized what slavery meant: "the true world in which a Negro moves and breathes. It was like being plunged in freezing water."

After his sale by Samuel Turner, his life became miserable, torturous and painful like that of other Negroes. All his comforts and sense of pride were gone. He himself reflects on his life: "During most of those years I slept on a corn-shuck tick on the floor of a dark little cupboard off the kitchen, sharing the space with some emaciated mice and several burst-ling and friendly spiders for whom I have trapped flies and lived with on the most genial terms."¹⁴

As a slave of Rev. Eppes Nat thought of getting long-anticipated freedom but in vain. Nat explains his feeling after his sale to Rev. Eppes: "I think that in handing me over to the Rev. Eppes he (Samuel) envisioned a charming, benign and mutually satisfying relationship between an adorable old bachelor preacher and his black acolyte – the two of us dwelling in perfect Christian concord as I celebrated with perfect labour the spiritual harvest that his age and wisdom might shower upon me."¹⁵ Nat's dream of and benign relationship was thwarted. He was treated as an ordinary Negro worker. During the span of life with the Rev. Eppes, Nat felt "transformed into a different living creature altogether – half-man, half-mule, exhausted and without speech, given over to dumb and reasonless toil from the hours before drawn until the dead of night."¹⁶ The life under the Rev. Eppes became intolerable to Nat, as he described: "Lord, what a time! How I yearned for the days and months to pass and for the winter to end; how I waited for the moment to come when I would be delivered from this pesthole, to Richmond and to freedom."¹⁷

Nat's life with the Rev. Eppes gives him an experience of pitiable and pricking life of Negro slaves: "..... For the first time in my life I began to sense the world, the true world, in which a Negro moves and breathes. It was like being plunged into freezing water."¹⁸ Soon the Rev. Eppes sold him to Evans and Blanding, the incorporated engineers, and they also sold him to Mr. Thomas Moore. Marking cruel behavior of the white masters everywhere, Nat makes a plan to kill such kind of the masters and make a search for those Negroes who may participate in his plan of killing. He generated hatred in Negroes against the whites: "During four a five years approaching 1831, when it had become first my obsession and then my acceptance of a divine mission to kill all the white people in Southampton, and as far beyond as destiny might take me, it was this matter of hatred – of discovering those Negroes in whom hatred was already ablaze, of cultivating hatred in the few remaining and vulnerable, of testing and probing, warily discarding those in whom pure hatred could not be nurtured and whom therefore I could not trust – that became one of my primary concerns."¹⁹ Nat's most important problem is a hindrance in the assertion of his self as a human being in a society which refuses to accept him on human grounds. Hence the discounts the comfortable life of an obedient Negro slave – a state where a modicum of comfort is brought by the surrender of human dignity. He realizes that even as a skilled man he can never enter into a meaningful relationship with the whites. Nat rebels in order to protest against the predicament of a Negro "all unknowing doomed and hopeless." His protest is the positive stance which gives him human worth denied by the white society. He proves once for all that he is out of "the world of a fly" and can think and act. Nat's rage is the product of the social conditions. It is twofold. He expresses his anger at the whites for making the Negroes into something less than a man and at the Negroes for their obsequiousness before the whites. His anger is justifiable against the white racist society which does not accept him as a human being like the whites. His range has its source in his individual feeling as a man, not in any ideology or religious belief. The seeds of Nat's revolt are in the promise of freedom. The promise of freedom fills him with religious fervor and affects his attitude toward his fellow slaves. But again events presage Nat's own situation

when Willis is sold by Turner. Despite his bitterness about Willis' sale, Nat remains optimistic about his own future. But in the end Turner cannot keep his promise and Nat remains a slave. He is sold to the Rev. Eppes. This behaviour of Turner makes him jealous of the white community. White working for the Whiteheads, Nat's hatred becomes so intensified that he regards it as a private cause of his rebellion. Margaret Whitehead represents white community and becomes a victim of Nat's hatred. His detestation against the whites is "so clean and obstinate that no compassion, no human affection, no glimmer of kindness can make the faintest notch or scratch upon the story surface of its being."²⁰

Nat's hatred against the whites has been enhanced by Hark's oppression by the white community. Hark represents the blacks who suffered greatly at the hands of his white masters. He was "quick-witted, resourceful and a strong as a bear". He was so much demoralized by physical torture and callous behaviour that "the very sight of white skin cowed him, humbled him, diminished him to the most fawning and service abasement..."²¹ Miss Maria finds pleasure in Hark's "crying and moaning and swaying". Joseph Travis sold Hark's wife named Tiny and his son to some slave trader in the South and did "unpardonable act". Hark's separation from his wife and son broke him utterly, Hark told Nat that when Joseph Travis was in misery, he sold his niggers, his property: "Well, amongst these niggers was Hark's wife and Hark's child-little boy about three or four years old he was then. Hark cared for that little boy almost more than anything."²² Hark could not forget his wife and his dear little boy. His separation from his family made his life miserable and tearful. He was in great anguish over missing his family. The impact of separation on him was so intense that he understood only that he had been separated from the all the family he had ever had and from the only home he had ever known. After a week at Travis's his misery and home – sickness and his general sense of loss became insupportable. The contemporary white society was so much replete with black oppression that events of black suffering and torture were frequent. Not only black men but also moaning black women were made victim to the white cruelties and sexual exploitation. They were shipped and forced for sex by the whites. Mc. Bridge, an Irishman, who was a drunkard, usually whipped Negroes. He beat even Nat's own mother and forced her for sex with him. To fulfill his hatred against the white and execute this plan of killing callous white masters, Nat takes with him two other Negro slaves who were severely oppressed and punished by Travis and his wife – Willis and Hark. They kill Mrs. Sarah and Travis. In that state of agitation he bears two times the voice of Samuel Turner, encouraging him to kill Travis: "Shit Kill dot firkin basted." Seeing this position of Nat, Willis comes forward and takes axe from Nat's hand and kills Travis and Nat then kills his wife, Miss Sarah, by turns. Thus the mission of Nat is fulfilled. It was, thus, an attempt to get events back on right track. In this way Travis gets due punishment for his failed promises to free Nat. We come to know that Nat's revolutionary interaction was long-time in the brewing; his rebellion was a reaction to the emasculation of himself and his people. One question arises here: his people were of central importance or merely tools to help him. To get an answer to this question, we come to the point that Nat stoked the hatred in the hearts of his people. He says this of Hark: "It was not easy to make of Hark a potential killer, to generate true hatred in that large – hearted breast. Without causing him, as I did, to brood on the sale of his wife and child. I might have failed. But of all the Negroes, Hark was the most surely and firmly under my domination."²³ Considering the phrase "my domination", we come to the conclusion that Nat is more important in his own mind than anyone else. But this is not case with Willis. He is a true rebel who acted on his own, as Nat says: "I could in no way control or govern him."²⁴ Nat started the "ruction" but he himself could not kill due to his mental construct. As Nat and band stood over Travis and his wife in bed, Nat's axe poised to split their skulls, he, for the first time, has an entirely different reaction to his owner. Nat calls Travis a man. And one of the causes of the hatred of the blacks against the white was that they did not grant their human chattel full dignity as man. If they had admitted their humanity, they could not have enslaved them in the first place. Many slave holders, instead, fought back the awareness of the blacks as men. It is true that brutalized by the system, Willis, Hark and others have had their humanity repressed and consequently underdeveloped, and hence they felt forced to "make their axes sing". After repeated failures he later kills Miss Sarah but with consummate inefficiency. He plunges a sword into her, missing the vitals entirely and finally must club her to death with a fence rail to put her out of her misery. Nat is a human being and proves his humanity even after killing Miss Sarah. Shortly thereafter, as the carnage reaches a crescendo around him, Nat sees "a young girl of fourteen or so" run screaming out of the Harris farmhouse and turn toward the Williams farm to warn them.

Nat represents black militancy which emerged in the nineteen sixties in America. He is the "New Negro". He too believes in bloody black revolution. The crime depicted in the novel symbolizes the race riots which took place in the 1960s in America. Nat, Willis and Hark were arrested and put in the Jail. Jeremiah Cobb, the Judge, gave them death sentence. About to die on the gallows, Nat tells Gray in revelation that "the spirit" wished him to take on the yoke of Christ to liberated black community. Nat reveals himself as a heroic man deeply religious wedded to the struggle. He has struggled in order to be accepted as an equal on human terms. He has vindicated by death that human dignity is a value which should be won even at the expense of life itself. He has found a meaning in the rebellion which proved his human worth. He has no regrets and clearly

affirms his meaningful existence joyfully. He does not plead guilty. In the cell he retrieves the Bible from the cedar plank just as he hears the executioner's 'unrelenting footsteps.'" "Yet steadfast the morning star rides in the heavens radiant and pure, set like crystal amid the still waters of eternity. Morning blooms softly upon the rutted streets of Jerusalem.... I feel the approach of gigantic, unrelenting footfalls. I turn and retrieve the Bible from the cedar plank and for one last time take my station by the window, breathing deeply in the apple-sweet air.... The footsteps draw near, suddenly cease. There is a rattle of bolts and keys. A voice says: "Nat". And when I do not answer, the same voice calls out: "Come"! We'll love one another We'll love one another by the light of heaven above. I feel the nearness of flowing waters, tumultuous waves, rushing winds. The voice calls again: "Come". "Come!" The voice booms, but commanding me now! Come, my son! I turn in surrender.

Surely I come quickly, men.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus

Ho how bright and fair the morning stars...."²⁵

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