



Self hood Crisis of Nat Turner in “The Confessions of Nat Turner”

Dr.SuchitraVashisth

Abstract: William Styron has assured his place in American letter because of his poetic imagination and strong convictions. He is a southern writer who has chosen southern settings for his novels. He has launched the rebel-hero against the dehumanized system of slavery and has entered into the consciousness of the blacks. As a prominent novelist of America, William Styron has addressed himself simultaneously to some of the fundamental issues of his own life and to a central dilemma of the history of the twentieth century. The novel “The Confessions of Nat Turner” is a fictional account of Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831. Nat represents aspirations of black man held in slavery, conceiving of freedom. Like other Negroes who were sold as animal in America, Nat’s family also was sold as slaves in America. Nat was sold into many hands and was made to realize the pains of slave’s life in the white-dominated society. He was regarded as animal chattel. Sensitive and self-respectful, Nat seeks his identity in bloody revolution which symbolizes black militancy of the 1960s. Like black activists, he stakes even his life to free the slaves. The historical rebellion of Negro slaves against their white masters took place under the leadership of Nat Turner. The portraiture of the blacks in the contemporary American Society is realistic and lively. Nat has been taught to read, he has learned by heart great parts of the Bible, he is a better preacher than a white one. It brings no difference in his life, and he remains a slave due to the prejudice of the whites against the blacks. He expresses black man’s attitude that even as a skilled man he cannot enter into a meaningful and respectful relationship with the whites. He, therefore, rebels against the white prejudice.

Keywords: Styron, Nat, Confession, Black, Slave, Negro.

Nat's rebellion is the positive stance which gives him human worth denied by the white racist society. He proves that he does not belong to "the world of a fly" and can think and act as a human being. Nat's revolt represents the riots of the 1960s in America. The seeds of his revolts are in the promise of freedom given by his white master, Samuel Turner. White head represents white community and is, therefore, killed. Nat's hatred for the whites is enhanced by Hark's oppression. Hark is a true representative of black community. He suffers greatly at the hands of the whites. Female oppression also has been depicted in the novel. Unwilling and moaning black women were forced for sex by the white people. Mc Bridge, a white man, forces even Nat's mother for sex. This incident generates hatred against the white community in the mind of Nat. An evaluation of Nat Turner may be prepared with the unidentified quality of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who also seeks his individuality in radical battle. The novel is a story bound description of Nat Turner's insurgence in 1831. This area under discussion is Southern, historical and ethnic. It has encouraged Styron for several years and the starting point of the novel is the accounts of the mutiny led by acknowledgeable slave vicar.

Throughout the description that follows I have hardly ever de ceased from the identified evidence about Nat Turner and the rebellion of which he was the head. The historical insurgence of Negro slaves in opposition to their white masters which took place under the headship of Nat Turner in the late summer of 1831, in a isolated section of South-eastern Virginia, provided the substance for 'Styron's novel. The short-lived rebellion took a toll of sixty white people. The rebel slaves were arrested, tried and executed. About two hundred Negroes were brutally killed by the whites during the reprisals that followed. Nat Turner, captured on Oct 30, 1831, was taken to the jail in Jerusalem, County seat of Southampton County. The next day a white court-appointed lawyer named Thomas R. Gray, eager to know as much as he could about the rebellion, visited Nat Turner in the prison dwell and found him ready for talk. Gray recorded Nat's statements and consequently published a 5000-word pamphlet titled "The Confessions of Nat Turner," together with a list of the white victims and the blacks who were charged with participation in rebellion. This transcript informs us of Nat's early life, his religious convictions, and the reasons when impelled him to rise up against the whites of Southampton County. When Styron read this pamphlet in the late 40s, he readily perceived "a tremendous theme" that lay concealed in "the violent aspects of the revolts, the bloodiness, the

massacre itself, which appealed to me as a kind of melodrama.”¹ In the novel Styron has created Nat Turner as an introspective hero who rebels against slavery. His insurgence brought about stern repercussions and led to stern laws in Southern states on the subject of slavery.

The authentic rebellion lies in Nat’s assertions of self. He is an entity who represents the aspirations of all men held in slavery who conceived of freedom. What prepared Nat mutineer in opposition to the whites? This question leads us to mark out the scheme of slavery that resulted in Nat’s mutiny. The narrative of the novel starts with the information that the Negroes were not regarded as human beings. To the white people they had no intellect, no spirit, no ethics. Nat’s father died when he was a child of 8 or 9 years. He was then in custody of Samuel Turner. He sold Nat to the Rev Eppes, a homosexual, who tried to “ravish” him. Eventually sold by the Rev Eppes for 460 to Evans and Blanding, two uneducated white auctioneers. Then they sold him to Mr. Thomas Moore of Southampton county. After the demise of Mr. Moore Nat becomes the possession of his son, Putnam and Mrs. Moore called Miss. Sarah. Miss Sarah married Joseph Travis, a sterile widower of 56 and moderately prosperous. The trade of Negroes was pretty ordinary. It was made to a trade specializing in labour for the Mississippi delta. He was strong and strapping for his age and bright enough. But he never forgot the separation from his mother and “it left him bereft, stuporous, and he cried a lot and kned in his pants, sometimes even when he was at work.”²

Nat’s revolution took place in the South. He was a slave, and the scheme of slavery considered him as “animal chattel”. His quandary was to set up significant connection with the society which did not understand him on human conditions. 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 runways. There was barely any glance of humankind under these numerical account. Gray, the white lawyer, reminds Nat of his shaky subsistence as a chattel in a white-dominated world. Nat was knowledgeable parson and a slave of the Upper South. He was highly religious and was inspired by “visions” in his action:

The novel begins with the Judgement 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. He was unusual in comparison with other boys "who found an easy outlet for their hunger with the available and willing little black girls whom they took during some quick stolen instant at the edge of a cornfield or amid the cool concealing grass of a stand of sorghum down at the edge of the woods. Isolated as I was from the cabins and such activity, I grew-up in almost total ignorance of these fleshly pleasures...."³ Nat was a "vigorous and healthy boy," able to resist such temptations.

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."⁴ 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." He was "the little black Jewel of Turner's Mill." In a particularly meaningful scene he compares the Christmas gift he received –a book, to those other slaves happily hauling in for themselves.

"Muffled up against the cold in the coarse and shapeless yet decent winter garments Marse Samuel provided for them, they straggled along in a single line, men, women prepared to receive their gifts – a beanbag or a hunk of rock candy for the children, a yard of calico, for the women, a plug of tobacco or a cheap Jacksnipe for the men. They were a disheveled, ragged lot, and as they clumped past on the frozen ground near the window I could hear the babble of their voices, filled with Christmas anticipation, and heedless, and loutish nigger cheer. The sight of them suddenly touched me with a loathing so intense that it was akin to disgust...."⁵

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". Even the deep concern for the fellow Negroes cannot bring him total identification with them. He has staked ailing order to free the slaves, though some of them have taken up arms in their defense when Gray, an

abolitionist narrator of Nat's statement, has left him alone in his cell, Nat ponders the pitiable plight of the Negroes and holds that the life of a Negro in white racist society is worse than that of a fly.

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 measured the requisite of exterminating all the white people in Southampton country and as far beyond as fortune carried me, and there was thus accessible to me more time than I had seen had before to contemplate the Bible and its exhortations, and to imagine over the complexities of the gory assignment that was set out before me.”⁶

He developed a disdain for the field hand Negroes, regarding them as “lower order of people, a rag tag mob, coarce, raucous, clownish, uncouth”. 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.”

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.”⁷ Nat's dream of and benign relationship was thwarted. He was treated as an ordinary Negro worker. He throws light on the situation: “As the only two – logged chattel in Shiloh, then, it befell my lot not only to do the chores for the Rev. Eppes – to chop kindling and haul spring water and feed Beauty – the sway – backed mare, and shell corn and slop the three pigs and build the morning fires, acting both as a sort of grotesque valet to the fires, acting both as a sort of grotesque valet to the preacher in the shack he called a parsonage

and as a sexton at the rickety church – but to be of service to the rest of the congregation as well.”⁸

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 dawn until the dead of night.”⁹ Even the living conditions in the house of the Rev. Eppes were not proper, as Nat explains: “In the tiny three – room parsonage I slept in what was called the kitchen, on a starw tick covered with rags near the back door; Bitter winds moaned through all the cracks in the house; even stoked to the limit the fireplace gave scant warmth; when banked at night it gave no heat and I lay shivering on the floor in the dim light I could see ice congealing on the surface of the preacher’s chamber pot.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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 two fold. 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.

While 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. 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 as strong as a bear". He was so much demoralized by physical torture and callous behavior that "the very sight of white skin cowed him, humbled him, diminished him to the most fawning and servile abasement..."¹² 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 could not forget his wife and his dear little boy. After a week at Travis's misery and home – sickness and his general sense of loss became insupportable.

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 fulfil 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. 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.

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. "I might have reached her in a twinkling.... but I suddenly felt dispirited and overcome by

fatigue, and was pursued by an obscure, unshakable grief. I shivered in the knowledge of the futility of ambition. Did I really wish to vouchsafe a like for the one that I had taken.”¹³

Nat represents black militancy which emerged in the nineteen sixties 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.’”

References:

1. Melvin J. Friedman and Irving Malin. The Confessions of Nat Turner: A Critical Handbook(Belmont: California, 1970), p.37.
2. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p.46.
3. Ibid, p.172.
4. Ibid, p.174.
5. Ibid, p.174.
6. Ibid, p.48.
7. Ibid, p.239.
8. Ibid, p.240.
9. Ibid, p.241.
10. Ibid, p.241.
11. Ibid, p. 241.
12. Ibid, p. 72.
13. Ibid, p.417.