



PORTRAYAL OF SUFFERINGS OF HEROES IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NOVELS

J. Jeeva* Dr.R.Gowrishankar**

**Assistant Professor of English, Presidency College (Autonomous) Chennai and Research Scholar of English, L.N. Government College (Autonomous) Ponneri – 601 204.*

***Assistant Professor, HoD and Research Supervisor, Post Graduate and Research Department of English, L.N. Government College (Autonomous) Ponneri – 601 204.*

Abstract

The writer who is most frequently credited with making the African – American man visible is Richard Wright. Offering historical and sociological as well as psychological insights into the character of the African – American, Wright examines the rebel, his behavior, motivations and background. Since Wright's rebels are products of a lower class African – American environment they are well acquainted with hunger, disease and poverty. From frightened mothers and beaten fathers they learn not to expect anything much from America. Ambition is discouraged and impotency is reinforced. All the entrances and exits are blocked. Since Wright's African – American man is trapped, he may choose to suffer his fate passively. Wright's rebels are mostly lonely, alienated individuals who seek affirmation only in action. Impulsiveness passion and very often violence characterize many of Wright's heroes. Most of them are non-reflective and unable to articulate their agency. Since they are driven by explosive emotion they seek escape in sex, alcohol and brutal encounters. Some of them leave the southern region for the Promised Land.

Key Words: Social suffering, Religious conflict, Disturbed protagonist and Richard Wright.

Richard Wright's black Christianity emphasizes humility, submission and other-worldliness, all of which consign African – American people to living deaths. There is a deathlike atmosphere in the churches of Wright. His myopic church cannot guide the people who are lost. Its promise of salvation is quite empty and its baptismal water is dirty and incapable of purifying the desperate African – Americans. In *Native Son*, Bigger becomes the target of the police and he is overwhelmed by rushing streams of freezing water. Later in prison, when he remembers the icy water, he is visited by the priest who preaches to him about the mercy of Christ and prays that the "Lawd" would wash his sins as white snow. This scene underscores the delusions of the church and the inappropriateness of the symbol of white Christianity and rituals for suffering African – Americans.

Most of the heroes of Wright reject the church. They cannot believe in their mothers' insatiable God who demands complete obedience and sacrifice of all the earthly pleasures. Wright believed that such a God worsened the plight of African – American, depriving them of dignity and Initiative. Some of the southern folk of Wright endure in a way that his other characters do not. They are the real heroes of his novels. Professionally Wright found himself dependent on Jewish liberals for they offered money, personal and literary advice, protection against racism, and love, all of which he needed and appreciated. But such assistance also emphasised his helplessness and dependency. Wright observed that antagonism towards Jews was bred in African – Americans from childhood and it was not merely racial prejudice, but it was part of their cultural heritage. Like James Baldwin, Wright also realised that Jews occupied a precarious position in America and therefore provided safe targets for African – American frustration. Both the southern African – Americans and Jews found it easier to turn on each other than on white Christians.



Wright's ambivalence towards the Jews is most fully developed in *Native Son*. Bigger Thomas resents the Jews who own so many businesses in Chicago's black belt, but he values his Jewish lawyer's assistance. For the first time in his life, he meets a white man who seems concerned about him. But the relationship also unsettles Bigger Thomas who becomes vulnerable after he learns to trust Max. By breaking down Bigger's defenses, his hatred of whites and by encouraging him to analyse racism and to communicate his feelings. Max acquires tremendous power over his native dark client. Max is responsible not only for his defense, but also for his soul. Bigger's confidence and faith can be shattered by one wrong glance or word. But unfortunately Max cannot truly empathize with the African – Americans.

According to Wright, America is a ghetto of the soul, also a boundary of the mind and a confine of the heart. Hence there is no wonder in the fact that Wright sought escape from it and tried to reject it. He believed that redemption lay in revolution and hence he became a Communist. Richard Wright was the first African – American novelist to deal with ghetto life in the northern cities. His *Native Son* marks a high point in the history of the African – American novel because it is a work of art in its own right, and it influenced a whole generation of African – American novelists. As **Houston A. Baker (1971)** comments "...The protest in Wright's novel was not a new element in black American literature, but the unflinching realism, the technical mastery and the magnificent dramatic sense marked *Native Son* as perhaps the highest point of black literary expression in the novel achieved before the fifties."(12).

Richard Wright represented the culmination of strong racial and social protest. The most important fact is the relevance of his work to American society, particularly to that social problem, the role of the American Negro in the national life. His main subject is the racial problem and his chief importance is as an interpreter of it in imaginative literature. Wright raised one of the main ideological problems of his century and never ceased to search for the values that would lead him to its solution. There is a place in his heart which is reserved for the disinherited and the oppressed.

Wright's later novel, *The Long Dream*, has been attacked for protesting against an American racial situation that by 1958 bore no resemblance to contemporary fact, the inspiration for Wright's protest was consistent with that for such diverse works was *Native Son* and *The Outsider* that man's reason could discover a way out of a history of injustices and irrationalities.(**Russell Carl Brignano, 1970, 171**) Wright very often painted grotesque pictures of compulsive violence. But he seems to have a hope in the future for man at his best. He hoped that his voice would not be a crying in the wilderness. Instead, he hoped that his works would educate his readers and inspire them to apply their reasons for the building of a rational world.

The African – American in America is a paradigm of the innocent hero who was victimized by a guilty society. Traditionally, renunciation has been the end of an African – American initiation. How the anger of a violated man stirs deep within himself is found in both *Lawd Today* and *Native Son*. A similar kind of rage to live in freedom drives Cross Damon to crime in *The Outsider*. Since Wright rejects the existential position, he is left only with the philosophy of love. To anyone who knows something about the works of Richard Wright, the motifs of crime and violence stand out as the important factor of his work. The source of this violence may be found in his own life, which was a combination of deprivation and denigration. As a child, Wright learned about the despair of the downtrodden because he was attacked physically by his own family and the white people with whom he worked. He turned to rebellion by rejecting the teachings of his own race and the laws of the white



people. Wright hoped to enlarge his mind by association and discussion with other artists, and to cultivate his individuality and to realize his powers as an artist. In the process of transforming himself he wished to promote the transformation of society. Wright's fictional treatment of the American scene is found in *The Long Dream*.

In the works of Wright, when an African – American man is found hacking a white woman to death, the very gusto with which it is done and the way it is described in the novel reveal a terrible attempt to break out of the cage in which the American imagination has imprisoned him for so long. Elements of heredity, of social environment both dark and white, of blind chance and misdirected attempts on the part of the whites to break down the color bar, are brought together to drive the hero of *Native Son* to the murder of a white girl and of his own girlfriend until he is caught, brought to trial, and sentenced to death.

Wright believes that the African – American man loves his country, but the country rejects him. He is always apart and alone. His talent is to smite the conscience of both the white and African – American people of America. When white people read his works they lament about what their democracy has done to the people. Wright's protagonists are in naked honesty himself and not imaginary characters that serve merely to express his complicated personality. The lives of the African – American people are not real to the whites. On more than one people are not existent. This is the basic theme in all of Wright's works whether it is fiction or nonfiction. It is the thought and dramatic design.

Though Wright's hero cannot believe anything, he believes that a moral order should exist somewhere. Lacking alternative meaning his search for the absolute through crime and dark hatreds comes back to the social limits of crime and violence. As in the words of **Kingslay Widmer(1960)** "Wright's monochromatic art of hatred, unfortunately vitiated by repeated turns to abstraction, may be the best of American intentionally existentialist literature".(19)

If there is a theme to Wright's life, it is freedom, and the various steps he takes in order to achieve it conditioned by his circumstances. Each of his works informed by the idea of justice and equality for all. His adoption of Communism many years later was only a variation of this theme. He never believed that freedom could be obtained under the present political conditions of American life. So he had to endure a constant state of anxiety, and discovered the necessity of forging for himself his own ethics, morality and personality in a world which offered him little security or identity. This has been called the existentialism of Wright.

Wright moved beyond inarticulateness and silent suffering. But when he wrote *Native Son* it was in the tune and perspectives of the inarticulate African – American people of America. The racial wisdom of an accomplished cultural heritage is found in *Native Son* and it is one of the most dynamic novels in the African – American literary tradition. The novel seems to be a naturalistic one, a novel of exposure and accumulation. The most impressive feature in the novel is its narrative drive. Through the character of Bigger Thomas, Wright shows the ultimate sense of horror.

The Outsider speaks of political parties which deny the humanity of the African – American man. As a result of his race Cross Damon can never be an integral part of the American fabric. *The Outsider* ends with wishful philosophizing. In the novel the word "alien" crops up again. The logic in the novel is



this/ that to be an African – American is to be an outsider not only in a sociological sense but also in a moral sense.

In the Long Dream the consistent theme is the curtain hanging between the black and white people. This curtain is not only an offshoot of white prejudice, but also a barrier against the elimination of that prejudice. In ***Lawd Today*** the main subject is of the African – American people living in a white dominated society. Richard Wright has outlined for himself a dual role to discover and depict the meaning of African – American experience in America. He was an African – American with a background of psychological suffering.

References

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