

“EXISTENCE THROUGH VIOLENCE” WITH REFERENCE TO RICHARD WRIGHT'S NOVELS

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Abstract: Richard Wright was a significant Afro-American novelist, essayist, journalist, communist, existentialist and firm believer of social reforms. He strongly advocated civil rights as stated “**All men and women are created equal**”. He raised a voice for the suppressed Black against the intolerable attitudes of the White. His works evidently disclose the innermost life of black community and sufferings of the depressed black survival. His writings deliberately dealt with racial discrimination, the quest for identity and the struggle for survival of African-American. He gave a vivid account of the social, economical, political, emotional, physiological, and psychological environment, and their influence on the emergence of Blacks in his novels. Not only through his characters but also Richard Wright ultimately recognized that violence has become the integral part in our life in order to show their firm existence and to exhibit an identity as a human being to the society. He treated violence, not as destructive force but a constructive and positive element in a formative way in the modern world.

Violence, the most important theme in almost all of his novels, is employed as a life giving force for survival. This paper aims at exploring how violence could help the black to establish their existence in the society which functions as a positive and formative way to shape their attitudes.

Key Words: civil rights, racial discrimination, violence as constructive etc...

One can distinguish the difference between mere existence and living; passing our days to exit, is the former and making the life more meaningful and beautiful, is the later. To exist, as means, primarily, all living and non-living creatures on Earth exist, we are very sure that all hardly know the purpose of our existence. They exit from the world until they understand the meaning of their existence. We assert our existence unless the world would never turn on us but it is not the easiest task in fact because we try to overcome so many external factors in order to ascertain our firm existence in the world. As Jean Paul Sartre stated, “The existence precedes essence. This means that man first exists, occurs, arises in the world, and he then defines himself”. Man needs to prove his existence to the world and defines that he is the survival of the fittest to the world. Human existence on earth depends on lingual, communal, cultural, social, economical and other factors which play a vital role in means of their existence. These social evils will not allow men to be treated as equal and will never help us to lead a harmonious life. Black people become the victim of any of these evils in order to affirm their existence.

If we had taken the account of the life of the black people and their existence, we would have witnessed the sufferings and struggle of the black. They would have never been treated as humans by the white. They were denied education and social status. They were treated as slaves as to fellow humans. They endured everything caused by the white for their survival. The social inequality, racial discrimination, identity crisis make the black to overcome all social evils by Law sand to ensure a firm existence to the white in the modern world. Some of the black firmly believe that violence would also help them to show their existence to the white. Finally, Violence becomes the integral part of their attitudes. Many advocated this for their survival.

The study of Afro-American Literature also deals with the life of the black and their experiences as slaves at primarily. The themes and issues explored in African American literature are the role of African

Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism and equality. Violence becomes the common theme in Afro-American writers. Many writers employ violence as a destructive one but few advocate that Violence as a constructive one, in a positive and a formative way. Richard Wright is the one who employs violence as the positive and the life giving force which helps Black to earn social recognition and which makes the black believe that violence is the integral attitude of their life. Richard Wright's novels *Native Son*, *Outsider* and his semi auto-biography *Black Boy* predominantly deal with the violent attitude of the protagonist which makes them realized that Violence against the white and society is inevitable. His characters strongly believe that their violent attitude towards the white makes them socially recognized and socially equal which also help to understand the meaning and the purpose of their existence on the earth.

Black existentialism is a school of thought that 'critiques domination and affirms the empowerment of Black people in the world'. Existentialism concerns with the existence and meaning in life. Black Existentialism is predicated on the liberation of all black people in the world from oppression. Existentialism, in the broader sense, is a 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans finds themselves existing in the world. The notion is that humans exist first and then each individual spends a lifetime changing their essence or nature. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. This philosophy mainly concerns on the belief of people and their search to find out who they are and what they are, throughout their life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs and outlook. Personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth.

Kierkegaard, a religious philosopher, Nietzsche, an anti-Christian, Sartre, an atheist, and Camus an atheist, are the pioneers for their works and writings about existentialism. Sartre is noted for bringing the most international attention to existentialism in the 20th century. Everyone basically agrees that human life is in no way complete and fully satisfying. Existentialism is the search and journey for true self and true personal meaning in life. Existentialism then stresses that a person's judgment is the determining factor for what is to be believed rather than by arbitrary religious or secular world values. An existentialist could either be a religious moralist, agnostic relativist, or an amoral atheist.

The concepts of Existentialism are free will, human nature through life choices, a person who considered the best when he struggled against individual nature, fighting for life, decisions are not without stress and consequences, there are things that are not rational, personal responsibility and discipline is crucial, society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary, worldly desire is futile and so on.

An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions. Richard Wright's Heroes are victims to the society and they are forced to choose their way and responsibilities without the help of the laws and rules.

Richard Wright's *Native son*:

Can violence create identity and meaning in the lives of black individual?

Native Son demonstrates that violence is perpetuated by white objectification of blacks, whereas a lack of violence continues to obscure black identity, violence allows blacks to recognize themselves as sentient, autonomous beings. In this paper, I assert that violence is the only means or tool provided for blacks to establish independence and separate themselves from objectification to form a new, albeit underdeveloped, identity. I argue that Bigger uses violence to overcome indifference and shame. I further show that the consequences of violence ultimately limit Bigger's newfound identity, exposing the weaknesses in the kind of identity that violence creates. Violent acts create a semblance of control and meaning which endows him with power.

Bigger uses violence as a means of proclaiming his freedom and self-realization. Also, he believes himself the equal of whites because he has destroyed their most prized possession. After Mary's death, Bigger begins to rationalize that he has destroyed symbolically all the oppressive forces that have made his life miserable. He kills white possession in the person of Mary Dalton, the ideal product of the system. Earlier in his life, Bigger himself knows he will use violent impulses as means of springboard and a technique of survival: He knew that the moment he allowed his life meal to enter into his consciousness, he will either kill himself or somebody else. (*Native Son*, 141)

The second odious act of violence results in the death of Bessie Mear who is Bigger Thomas' girlfriend. She is the object of sexual release for Bigger. He so trusts her that he involves her in his schemes to extort ten thousand dollars from the Daltons. When the remains of Mary are discovered in the furnace, Bigger turns again to Bessie. However, once she discovers that Bigger had killed the girl, she becomes untrustworthy in terms of Bigger needs. Bigger Thomas realizes that she becomes a threat to him. Therefore, he kills her horribly with a brick and feels a vague sense of power afterward. And yet out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never has his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight. (*Native Son*, 224 - 225).

Violence gives him a sense of freedom from oppression and power in the shaping of his destiny. Bigger Thomas is resorting to violence to mould his personality with his psychological transformation. Indeed he refers to violence as a means of proclaiming of his freedom and self-realization through the murder of Mary Dalton. In the process, he accomplishes the existentialist doctrine. That man's destiny is dependent on his own actions to free himself from the shackles of this world.

The paramount expression of Bigger's violence is an attempt to rid him of shame and his murder of Mary Dalton is created by the shame of being a black man caught in a white woman's bedroom. Later, as he reflects on his culpability in the crime, he isolates shame as a driving force behind his actions: "He felt that his murder of her was more than amply justified by the . . . shame she had made him feel" (114). Just as Bigger's shame ultimately stems from a lack of autonomy or control, his violence arises as a means to gain control. Through violence, Bigger inflicts emotional and physical pain on whites, alleviating his sense of inferiority by controlling white lives. Bigger is unable to control the outcomes of his own life through constructive means, he finds solace in controlling others through violence. Ultimately, this violence not only serves to alleviate shame but is also the driving force behind Bigger's ascent to human identity.

Native Son illustrates a depraved and "peculiar mentality" inherent to black humankind, it is white objectification that ultimately necessitates the formation of black identity through violence (281).

Some critics argue that Wright's discussion of violence in the novel is excessive while others, like Robert Butler and Obioma Nnaemeka, cite violence as a necessary demonstration of Bigger's complicated persona. Among critics who discuss the significance of violence in the novel, few connect violence with the formation of identity.

Professor Kadeshia Matthews, a specialist in twentieth century African American literature and culture, describes violence as a necessary component of Bigger's identity but does not explore the meaning of that violence and the significant role that whites play in its perpetuation. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of both white dominance on black self-perception and the kind of violence that ensues throughout *Native Son*. Wright forces us to enter into Bigger's mind and to understand the devastating effects of the social conditions in which he was raised. Bigger was not born a violent criminal. He is a native son, a product of American culture and the violence and racism that suffuse it.

Richard Wright's *Black Boy*:

In 1945, *Black Boy* was published and it was widely regarded as a masterpiece in the Black Literature point of view. The manner in which Richard Wright depicted the violence that was rampant at the time he was growing up was commendable. He was among the first writers who plainly described the atrocities associated with Jim Crow Laws and racism in Southern America and even forced in advertently the outbreak of the Civil War. He made a name for himself and was a pioneer in fighting for eliminating violence committed against the black community in America.

One of the themes of the novel *Black Boy* is violence. It so occurred that when Richard Wright was scolded he was beaten and he was even slapped at his cheek, that is to say other people used violence against him due to living under the Jim Crow Laws. He had numerous bad encounters with his pious grandmother. He was scolded by the “whites” when they found his attitude to be intolerable and they would either scold him with words or pour down a glass of whiskey or any alcoholic drinks they were having at the time on his head and face. Physical violence as shown in every corner of his autobiography was essential to its success. At times young Richard was very curious about his surroundings and he would experiment with things around him. For instance he set the curtains of his house ablaze only to see for himself how they looked (Wright 6).

Richard's environment could be termed a violent one due to largely the Jim Crow Laws. When Richard himself was not being scolded for his misbehavior, he would be the one who would use actual violence. He even narrated that when and his fellows would throw rocks and other small objects they would imagine that they were using more lethal and sophisticated means as weapon for they believed that their actions were justified as they being persecuted (Wright 84).

Richard Wright inherited violence since from his childhood; he started his novel by narrating an episode which happened in his young life. He had burnt the curtains and was scared of the repercussions of his acts, he ran away to a hidden place. But he was found by his mother hours later and was severely beaten:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. A doctor was called - I was afterwards told - and he ordered that I be kept abed, that I be kept quiet, that my very life depended upon it. My body seemed on fire and I couldn't sleep. Packs of ice were put on my forehead to keep down the fever. Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, when I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid. Day and night I begged my mother and father to take the bags away, pointing to them, shaking with terror because no one saw them but me. Exhaustion would make me drift toward sleep and then I would scream until I was awake again; I was afraid to sleep. Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well. But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me (Wright 8).

Narration of killing a cat which disturbed his Father's sleep:

The job of Richard's father takes place at night and during the day he is at rest so the children had to remain quiet at all times and not disturb him during his naps. The meowing of a neighboring cat deeply affected the peace that his father enjoyed during the day and he became very irascible by the sounds of the cat. He even told the boys to silence the cat for good if need be “Make that cat shut up” he would tell them but they cannot, Richard already despised his father for many reasons “Make it shut up. I don't care. Kill it if you have to. Kill that cat” (Wright 12). He was aware that his father would soon leave the family to fend for themselves as he was enchanted by another dazzling beauty. For Richard, it is most that particular kind of person: a rude, upset, abusive person that he loathed above all. His resentment over his powerlessness within the family burst out during this moment and Richard thinks of a way to play a revenge on his father.

He immediately acted upon the direct orders of his father and killed the animal by hanging it, "I will take his words literally; I will kill the cat," (Wright 13). Richard's mother finds out when his brother prodded it out of him, and the father cannot punish Richard. Richard has taken the father's words literally even though they were not meant that way, however, in doing so, in relying on his father's words in a sense, to protect him, even as he subverts them, he escapes the punishment that would surely follow.

Richard Wright's own vocabulary came into existence when he started using the very same words uttered by his much despised father and also certain words which he either invented himself or distorted other words to create new ones. He would then later use those same words in his essays to cause a vilifying effect. Thus, words became Wright's preferred weapons. To enhance his own intellectual power and development, he copied Mencken's idea of words as weapons in the view to achieve apolitical meaning. For Wright thought that he was now able to assert his own independence and have his dreams and ideas come to fruition. He was no longer under the dominance of his own father. But his mother was not to be fooled or even scared by this new found development. Richard's mother was more resourceful than his father and attacked her son in such a way that he it made him ashamed of what he had done earlier, that is the killing of an innocent kitten. Throughout the afternoon she kept on admonishing him with carefully chosen words that according to Richard started to create fears that the kitten would want revenge on him. This episode throws a light on how violent and rude Richard Wright is.

Richard Wright's *The Outsider*:

The Outsider is a novel by American author Richard Wright, first published in 1953. It is a story of epic proportions, a complex master narrative to show American racism in raw and ugly terms. The kind of racism that Wright knew and experienced racism from which most black people of his own time could not escape remained the central element in his fiction. *The Outsider* was written in France and published thirteen years after *Native Son*, suffers from a surfeit of internal explanation and a failure to provide a setting as rich as that of *Native Son*. Still, its portrayal of Cross Damon and his struggle to define himself, while too self-conscious, adds new dimensions to Wright's myth.

The Outsider is both an extension and a modification of Wright's earlier views; it is far more pessimistic than *Native Son*, and the influence of the French existentialists is more pervasive. Like earlier Wright heroes, Damon is engaged in defining the world and himself. "The moment we act 'as if' it's true, then it's true," he thinks, because each person, in the absence of a god, is able to create the world and its truth. From Fyodor Dostoevski, Wright again borrows the notion of underground man and the idea that without a god, all is permitted. Yet as each man plays god, as each becomes criminal, policeman, judge, and executioner, there are no longer limits. People desire everything, and desire is described as a floating demon. People are jealous gods here--the worlds they create are petty, their jealousy destructive. Cross Damon is loved in the novel, but that love, unlike the love in *Native Son*, which is held up as potentially meaningful, is here without promise. Although he creates his own world for himself in *The Outsider*, all that is made is violent and brutal, a world without redemption even in the act of self-realization. At the end of the novel, Cross Damon dies, not with Bigger Thomas's smile, but with the knowledge that alone, people are nothing. Searching in his last moments of freedom for a clean, well-lighted place in which to rest before he confronts the world again, Cross finds only death. Before he dies, he admits his final act of bad faith: He has thought that he could create a world and be different from other men, that he could remain innocent. Like Joseph Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Damon dies realizing the futility of that hope; having looked into his own heart of darkness, he dies with the word *horror* on his lips. Violence engenders violence in an endless circle. Through nowadays experiences, violence does not bring lasting solutions. Nobody can justify the realization of a moral end by immoral means. Such a conception is dangerous. Violence appears the easiest means. Moreover, we must not forget that the immorality of means influence necessary the end itself. The use of violence and murder is the avow of powerlessness of the person to incarnate real values. Wright's heroes are obsessed with the ideas of transgression of convention and the effects resulting from the breaches of these conventions. None of them ever has the least remorse of his act of violence.

Richard Wright's novels *Native Son*, *Outsider* and his semi auto-biography *Black Boy* predominantly deal with the violent attitude of the protagonist which makes them realized that Violence against the white and society is inevitable. His characters strongly believe that their violent attitude towards the white makes them socially recognized and socially equal which also help to understand the meaning and the purpose of their existence on the earth. None of his protagonists have ever remorse of their act of violence.

Violence gives him a sense of freedom from oppression and power in the shaping of his destiny. Bigger Thomas is resorting to violence to mould his personality with his psychological transformation. Indeed he refers to violence as a means of proclaiming of his freedom and self-realization through the murder of Mary Dalton. In, *The Outsider*, provokes the thought that world is violent and brutal, a world without redemption even in the act of self-realization. At the end of the novel, Cross Damon dies, not with Bigger Thomas's smile, but with the knowledge that alone, people are nothing. Violence, the most important theme in almost all of Richard Wright's novels, is employed as a life giving force for survival in order to assert Black identity.

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