

RICHARD WRIGHT, AN EPOCH, A VOICE OF THE BLACK PEOPLE

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Abstract:

Richard Wright, an afro American writer, according to him, “*literature is a form of protest*”. The themes of Afro-American Literature are African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, segregation, migration, feminism, a sense of alienation and more by the African American writers. Richard Wright is a nihilist, naturalist, realist, socialist, communist and a strong advocator of civil right movement. He breaks through all the conventions and made a firm Black Identity in his works which make a new beginning in the history of African American. Wright, identifying himself with his heroes, representing Black people, defines “*blackness*” as the revolution to liberate the “*whole of black man*”. He gives a vivid account of the social, economical, political, and psychological environment, and their influence on the emergence of Blacks in his novels. His works are in new the tradition of American novels which deal with the search for identity, rebirth, alienation and selflessness. Black people are subjugated by white under social segregation, identity, racial discrimination, alienation, violence against black, injustice which makes Richard Wright to think for their rights. This paper aims at presenting the themes of Richard Wright’s novels.

Key Words: protest novel, alienation, psycho-analytical, social segregation, racial discrimination

The Afro- American Literature has its root from Slave Narratives in the 19th century. It not only explores the issues of freedom and equality but also pictures the long sufferings of the Black Slaves under White objectification. The common themes of Afro-American Literature are African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, segregation, migration, feminism, a sense of alienation and more by the African American writers. Black people become the victims of these social evils. They have never been treated as humans by the White. They are denied education and social status. They are treated as slaves by fellow humans. They have 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 Laws and to ensure a firm existence to the white in the modern world.

Richard Wright is a predominant African American writer of the 20th century. He is a Man of the People who understands and expresses the views and opinions of the ordinary Black people. He stands for their entire community and represents their needs to the society through his works. He firmly wants to establish Black Identity against White objectification. The long craving for freedom and identity is in every Black’s heart. His voice for the Black marks a new beginning in the history of Black literature.

Richard Wright, an afro American writer, according to him, “*literature is a form of protest*”. As a writer he is endowed with the eye of a skilled reporter, the sensibility of a revolutionary poet. Wright, identifying himself with his heroes, defines “*blackness*” as the revolution to liberate the “*whole of black man*”. He gives a vivid account of the social, economical, political, emotional, physiological, and psychological environment, and their influence on the emergence of Blacks in his novels. His works are in the tradition of American novels which deal with the search for identity and rebirth. Rejection, alienation, and selflessness are also the themes of Wright’s novels. Immigrant are subjugated by white under social segregation, identity, racial discrimination, alienation, violence against black, injustice which make Richard Wright to think for their rights. This paper aims at presenting the themes of Richard Wright’s novels. The following novels of Richard Wright are taken for the study, “*Native Son*”, “*Black Boy*”, “*The Long Dream*”, “*The Outsider*”, “*Lawd Today!*”, “*Savage Holiday*”.

Native Son is widely regarded as the masterpiece of Wright. It is the text which refuses to compromise with many White expectations when it is published. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, is the inevitable product of America. In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas is in quest of his identity. His incapability to adjust himself to the Jim

Crow environment compels him to set out in search of his identity. He finds his identity and rebirth after committing two murders. Resorting to violence and crime gives him his essential freedom and real existence. Violence assuages his idealized-self. His longing for the public identification as the murderer reveals his growth from neurosis to joyful self-actualization. It is not the innate criminality of the hero but individual delinquency produced by the defective environment. In the words of Camus when Bigger rebels he unleashes a “raging torrent.”

Native Son is a psychological as well as a sociological novel and Bigger’s development is outlawed by shame, fear, and hate in the three sections of the novel. Book One, “Fear,” deals with one day in Bigger’s life. Different kinds of fear determine Bigger’s life, the major is being black. His nature is composed of dread and hatred. Devoid of warmth, love or loyalty, he possesses the freshening spirit of freedom only after committing two murders. Beginning with killing a rat and ending with killing a white girl, Bigger’s activity for the day from his waking up to sleeping is symbolic of meaninglessness. He experiences frustration resultant of the great white world’s titillations. Book Two, “Flight,” shows a tremendous acceleration of action in forty eight hours. The last section, Book Three, “Fate,” is the depiction of humanizing Bigger or socializing him with the resurrection of the self.

The act of unconscionable violence is the byproduct of Bigger’s fear sometimes that something awful is going to happen to him as he often confides in his friend, Gus. The hatred that he nurtures for the whites is generated from his fear of whites. When Bigger is the product of a defective environment, it can be construed that the presence of white district in the vicinity acts as a stimulant. In killing Mary Dalton he feels that he has destroyed all the oppressive forces that compel him to feel miserable. Killing Bessie is another act of self-liberation for Bigger.

In the cell Bigger allows himself to be confronted with all the people whom he has already met: the Daltons, Jan, a Negro preacher, members of his family and his street gang, Max, and the District Attorney. He rejects family and religion and opens up himself to Max after twenty years of mistrust. He trusts him to be a real human being who makes him feel a human being. Max considers his murders positive acts as he is prepared for the consequences. He is wonderstruck at Bigger’s unshaken conviction of self-knowledge. In his Marxist defense of Bigger, he makes the readers feel that Bigger enjoys a new sense of potency, a reverse racism, in his murders. Bigger’s alienation can be viewed as a psychological, sociological, and philosophical phenomenon.

Bigger suffers from the five main components of alienation as identified by Melvin Seaman: normlessness, powerlessness, meaninglessness, social-isolation, and self-estrangement. Bigger experiences uneasiness and anxiety. Fearing that he will lose control, he tries to strike out at society. He is powerless to control his own fate. Since he is a menial in the society, he feels powerless, and out of this powerlessness evolves a sense of meaninglessness. He is a brutalized, stunted creature who deludes himself into the thinking of two gruesome murders are the means by which he is redeemed. Bigger adopts violence as a means of proclaiming his freedom and self-realization. He also believes himself that he is equal to White because he has destroyed their most prized possession. *Native Son* demonstrates that violence is perpetuated by white objectification of blacks, where as a lack of violence continues to obscure the black identity, violence allows blacks to recognize themselves as sentient, autonomous beings.

Black Boy is an auto-biographical novel which narrated the events of his life. Since from the childhood, Wright is so curious to know what is happening around him and the society. He wanted to express himself to the society. He describes his violent attitude in this novel in order to exhibit his identity to others. Through this narration, it is evident that, violence is the only means for him to form identity.

In *The Long Dream*, Fishbelly is also in search of himself moving from rebellion to acceptance while growing from childhood into adulthood. His self-assertiveness is replaced by self-effacing nature, being educated by his father to the line of the whites. What black fathers have done throughout the generations, according to Wright, is teach their offspring to kowtow to whites until they have no pride left, in themselves or their heritage.

The conflict between desire and reality is the crux of *The Long Dream*. It is about the trials and tribulations, the naïve dreaming and the rude awakening of Fishbelly Tucker, a black native of Mississippi. Like the other heroes of Wright, the hero of *The Long Dream* is in quest of meaning and identity, on occasions becoming synonymous with an absurd hero. Where this quest enveloping his physical, mental, and moral augmentation from the age of six to eighteen takes him is the content of the novel.

The Long Dream, rich in imagery and symbols, is governed by the narrative pattern of the ritual of initiation. In general, the pattern in “white” literature as seen in William Faulkner’s *Light in August* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mocking Bird* is that a white woman is attracted sexually to a black man, who either denies her advances and is accused of rape by the outraged rejected woman or succumbs to her attraction and is accused of rape by the woman when she feels enough of him. The general public is of the opinion that a white woman never desires a black man. In both the cases, the black man is often castrated or even killed. In *The Long Dream*, Chris Sims, seduced by a white prostitute, meets with the same fate. He is captured and mutilated beyond recognition.

Fish struggles a lot to go through the phase of transformation experiencing the excruciating pain of the ritual of initiation. He resorts to sexual experiences to feel the liberation of his self. When Cantley, the Chief of Police,

encounters him but fails to extract the truth, he feels frustrated and says that despite their making them scared of the whites and then asking them to tell the truth, the new breed of niggers cannot speak the truth. However, this resistance can be seen as the means of shielding the self. During his detainment, Fish realizes that he does not know how to act in a reassuring manner towards the white enemy. His incapacity to cope with the white world is the result of his ingenuous belief that he could retain his self-hood while pretending not to. Ironically, his existence in the former world doesn't fulfill the quest for identity but takes to romancing and in turn registers failure and is rejected by society.

In *The Outsider* the protagonist's will to shape his destiny is extraordinarily portrayed. Cross Damon's elevation to a member of the local cell of the Communist Party in New York is significant in his unleashing of the black power. Wright struggled so hard to complete this novel that it remained essentially an intriguing philosophic exercise. The intellectual problems posed by a man who seeks liberation from all human bonds and who plays God with disastrous consequences form the thematic concern of the novel. *Native Son* is a prelude to *The Outsider* in which Cross Damon longs for individual freedom.

The Outsider is the result of Wright's post-war effort to find a philosophy to replace the Communism that he had rejected in 1942. His realization that Communism is nothing but lust for naked power makes him believe in nothing and he feels that he is an outsider in America for his black skin. Further he feels that he is much more than an outsider and that existence is senseless and human beings are nothing in particular. *The Outsider* bears its genesis to the three major general preoccupations of Wright: his disillusionment with the materialism and racial discrimination of American culture, the failure of Communism, and the shock of the explosion of the atomic bomb.

The thematic concern of *The Outsider* is also search for freedom that lies in his will to power. His existence in seeking freedom poses a challenge to the Communists' will to overpower him. The resultant clash finds in him a "metaphysical rebel", Edward Margolis in *The Art of Richard Wright* observes that "Moreover, since Cross equates freedom with power, freedom actually means the successful subjugation of the will of others; thus the dream of universal freedom is a logical impossibility."

Lawd Today!, centering not on the theme of Negro oppression but on the very quality of life in urban America, gives a vivid account of twenty-four hours in the life of a Negro postal worker in Chicago, Jake Jackson, a frustrated, hopeless no good. It is an expression of Wright's vision of life in the Chicago he knew. It depicts the brutalization of black life in the urban North. Some critics, like Nick Aaron Ford, labeled it as a dull and unimaginative novel, set during the depression era when Franklin Roosevelt was the President.

This was Wright's first novel but was published posthumously in 1963. It is different from his popular, radical fiction with which flight, violence, and oppression are synonymous. The novel is uncharacteristic of Wright's writings. Speaking of Wright, Baldwin observes, "Today's racial manifestoes are being written very differently." With Wright, the pain of being a Negro is basically economic-its site is mainly in the pocket. However, Jake's fantasies reveal his longing for Negro nationalism and the united African power.

Lawd Today accounts for the displacement of African life in a country that doesn't want it and seeking a meaning to its nothingness. Jake and his friends attempt to give meaning to their empty lives by sporting flashy clothes, indulging in drinking and merry making and spending their earnings on whores. Sex and drink compensate for and fill their empty and meaningless lives. The novel presents the anguish and ultimate violence associated with black life. We see this latent violence getting translated into action in *Native Son*. There is also a demarcation in the life of the blacks, some refusing to identify themselves with the poor blacks and wishing to identify themselves with the successful ones. George E. Kent points out, *Lawd Today!* Enlarges our perspective on *Native Son*, for it creates the universe of Bigger Thomas in terms denser than the carefully chosen symbolic reference points of *Native Son*. The continuity of Wright's concerns with great clarity and depth found in all Wright's works and thoroughly pervading his personality is his identification with and rejection of the West, and his identification with and rejection of the conditions of black life. *Lawd Today!* Primarily concerns with the latter.

Savage Holiday, a novel which portrays the psychosexual aspects, is essentially a connecting link between Richard Wright's earlier and later fiction. In general, Wright's hardships, unpleasantness, and tragic circumstances form the basis of his ideas that become the central themes of his works. But in this novel, he seems to concern himself with the modern psychology and psychoanalysis. Published in 1954, the novel may be construed as the reflection of Wright's own personality. He dedicated this novel to Clinton Brewer, a New York criminal.

Erskine Fowler in *Savage Holiday* is the same person who can be identified with Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, and Jake Jackson in *Lawd Today!* Richard Wright in *Black Boy*. The psychosexual aspects of Wright's fiction and his negative treatment of women are striking in the novel. The theme of oppression is the all pervading thought of Wright's works. In *Native Son*, as identified by Hugh Gloster, that the idea "that a prejudiced and capitalistic social order, rather than any intrinsic human deficiency, is the cause of the frustration and rebellion of underprivileged Negro youth of America. 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. As a social critic, as an articulator of the black anguish, and as a writer in a country that boasts of its classless temperament, Wright left an indelible impression on the American literary tradition as well as on the minds of his ardent readers.

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