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Racial Oppression and Social Prejudice in Richard Wright's Novels

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Abstract

Richard Wright's novel have direct or indirect link with his own life. This autobiographical note runs as an undercurrent in all the plots he has dealt with in his novels. The terms of racial oppression and social prejudice have been given the major treatment in all the novels mentioned above. Butler Brewton is of the opinion that "the themes of conspiracy and paranoia rise from the experience of certain classes within the organizational network of modern life, where institutional programming and personal meaningless are more and more apprehended as the universal rule. The same themes issue for self-evident reasons from the entire historical experience of black Americans under the mystifying coercions of racism, which teach that there is no human relationship whatsoever that cannot be assimilated into the system of domination and personal betrayal. Thus these themes enter quite naturally the fiction of Richard Wright.

Key Words: Social Prejudice, Racial Problem, Oppression

Introduction

Richard Wright is the first African-American novelist of really Major stature. He is the most articulate literary spokesman for the oppressed African-American minority in the late 1930s and 1940s. His is the first voice of the hitherto voiceless African-Americans, and besides giving a voice for them, he gives a 'face' also. Later, he becomes the most esteemed spokesman for the oppressed minorities of the whole world.

He has made an important contribution to American literature, in naturalistic, protest fiction. His choice of material is magnetic and the style of narration is electrifying. So it at once attracts the reader and shocks him to the utmost. He has a telling influence on and an inspiration to the writers of his succeeding generation. Robert Bone goes to the extent of espousing a Movement - 'Wright school' after Wright. As a writer he has almost succeeded in depicting the struggles of the man in a hostile environment. He uses writing as a Weapon for achieving his freedom. He is the interpreter of the sufferings and miseries of the African-American to the White people. He does this very effectively. **Saunders Redding (1970)** remarks that "His talent was to smite the conscience - and to smite the conscience of both white and black Americans. Whites read him and lamented. "Is this what our democracy has done?" Negroes read him a quavered, "Is this us?"

All his novels almost conform to one pattern i confrontation with family, defiance with the community and rebelling against the social oppression. In his first three books he concentrates on his childhood memories of racial oppression and prejudice anti the African-Americans' plight; and in his later wider arena and to the universal theme; the very existence of outcast. He depicts vividly the effects of racism and bigotry on the mind and life of Bigger Thomas. What is Bigger's problem? Why should he

suffer? His problem is the problem of his colour. It is black. So all his problems stem from his being African-American.

Blackness invites instant injustice. It receives spontaneous outbursts of insults and discriminations. In short, being 'black' is not human's it is 'something'. To achieve humanity Bigger rebels against the society. He struggle to attain freedom. Achieving freedom is achieving humanity. To become human means to acquire the universal nature of man. To create his humanity, he kills a white girl. And he becomes visible to others. Thus "on the rational level the crime is forced on Bigger by circumstances and society and he is a victim. As in the words of **Sheldon Brivic (1982)** "...On the emotional level he takes responsibility for the crime as an act of rebelling and becomes a hero... Bigger is both the helpless victim of a social oppression and the purposeful hero of racial war. (14).

Black boy is considered as Wright's masterpiece. It is thought to be of America's most eloquent and effective autobiographies. In this work also Wright depicts a questioning human being, seeking freedom and a voice, here Wright is pitted against the white racist culture and is suppressed by the survival oriented African-American family. There two forces try to cripple, the impulse of the protagonist to rebelliousness and individuality. The hypersensitive young Richard resists puritanical repressiveness, escapism and submission of his African-American culture. Wright intensely chronicles his moving away from family and community to encounter the society. It is the real problem for him it is more or less a struggle. "No matter, given Wright's first for knowledge, his longing to achieve a self-conscious independent manhood, has intense desire to live in a world elsewhere, he proves to be extremely vigilant in his fight against those including his grandmother, his uncle, his aunt, and his high school principal whom he calls his "tribal" oppressors".(**Horace A. Porter, 1975, 17**)

In his *The Outsider*, Wright moves from a particular ethnic group's plight to a wider and general area of suffering, that is the sufferings of the twentieth century man. In this novel, Wright probes the fate of a man in hostile world. Here, race colour, and other sociological aspects take backstage and the question which comes rushing to and

occupies the centre stage of the fiction is: the very existence of man. The protagonist, Damon, achieves freedom by chance and freedom gives him action. He after having achieved freedom transcends all human boundaries, limitations and ideologies, In short, the very culture from which he has come and in which he lives. So he at once leaps out of the American milieu to that of the universal one. For this Wright fuses the elements of the colonial suppression and ethnic discrimination of the people of the third world and his own personal struggle. Richard is moving toward a theory of man in the universe. Here, Richard uses African-American as a symbol, because the condition of African-American is the condition of modern man. "Blackness but provides special emphases of the more universal outside state. Similar perplexities of "freedom and dread" apply to all men, all of us guilty. The race is the broadly human, not merely ethnic one. All sensitive men must recognize their "black existence (**Kingsley Widmer, 1968, 172**).

Thus all the protagonists of Wright's major works are after freedom. To achieve this freedom they struggle, rebel, because they are bound by various external forces. Saunders reading sums up thus: "Speaking in defense of Bigger Thomas, the lawyer of *Native Son* spoke for all Wright's heroes. As in the words of **Donald B. Gibson (1970)**, "Excluded from and unassimilated in our society, yet longing to gratify impulses akin to our own but denied the objects and channels. Evolved through centuries for their socialized expression, every sunrise and sunset make him guilty of subversive actions. (12)

Wright's only these is interaction of forces for and against freedom. The central issue, for both coloured and white, is freedom. The African-American is after freedom but the white is against giving it to them. Whites deny freedom of speech, reflection and action to African-American. But Wright's heroes want to achieve, this three dimensional liberty. But the white force curtails this liberty. This curtailment of liberty leads to resentment and bitterness. When resentment and bitterness propel an individual into action it is violence. So struggle becomes inevitable. This is what Wright's fiction propagates. As **Maria K. Mootry (1987)** says, "Wright's fictions illustrate the maxim that the great writer has one story to tell

and he tells it over and over again.(118). Stripped of race, colour and culture, it is the story of man. One can identify Wright's cause with the cause of Negro Freedom, It is because Wright is a African-American, but careful analysis shows that Wright expressly moves himself from a community's spokesman to voice the agonies of the whole mankind. He generalizes from his experiences certain conclusions about problems of minorities everywhere. As **Esther Merle Jackson** (1963) remarks "It is, perhaps, fitting that the African-American should as a symbol, a sign of the total condition of man in the twentieth century. For in many ways, the African-American is the very ground of the human conflict of our time... It is this moral crisis the culmination of a long historical struggle – which engages the mind of our speech, its implications extend far beyond the projected solution of the African-American's immediate problem to the question of human survival on this planet."(130).

Conclusion

Richard Wright's novels consistently explore the profound impact of racial oppression and social prejudice on African-Americans. His works highlight the harsh realities faced by black individuals who are marginalized and dehumanized by a racially biased society. Through his compelling characters, Wright illustrates the psychological and emotional toll of systemic racism and the struggle for personal and collective freedom. The themes of defiance, rebellion, and the quest for autonomy are central to Wright's fiction. His protagonists, such as Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and the young Richard in *Black Boy*, embody the internal and external battles faced by African-Americans seeking to assert their humanity. Wright's portrayal of these characters emphasizes that racial prejudice not only restricts individual potential but also incites a deep and often violent response against the forces of oppression.

Wright's literary journey progresses from addressing the specific plight of African-Americans to tackling broader existential concerns. In *The Outsider*, he moves beyond the boundaries of race to examine the universal condition of human suffering and the quest for meaning in a hostile world. This thematic expansion reflects Wright's evolution as a writer and his commitment to articulating the struggles of all oppressed people.

Ultimately, Wright's works advocate for freedom—freedom of speech, thought, and action. His fiction underscores that the denial of these fundamental liberties fosters resentment and, inevitably, conflict. By documenting the African-American experience, Wright not only amplifies the voice of a historically silenced community but also reveals the universal struggle against injustice and the enduring human desire for dignity and self-determination. In conclusion, Richard Wright's novels serve as a powerful indictment of racial oppression and social prejudice while offering profound insights into the broader human condition. His works remain timeless, resonating with readers across generations and serving as a testament to the ongoing struggle for justice and freedom worldwide.

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