

Music of Survival: A Search for Identity in the Works of Richard Wright

Shadan Jafri

Associate Professor

Dept. of English

Agra College

Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

shadantanveer.1976@gmail.com

Abstract

The complexly changing nature of American life and the vigorous versatility and all-encompassing spread of the written record are the marks of American literature. Social forces always make their imprint on literature. Especially in America where the democratic processes bring the people into immediate familiarity with and sensitive response to cultural forces, the literature has responded quickly to such pressures. African American literature consists of the literary work by the writers of Afro-origin settled in USA. The category “slave narratives” were writings by people who had experienced slavery. It described their journeys to independence and their survival struggles. The concepts explored and issues raised were racism, slavery, and social equality.

Keywords: Negro, Rootlessness, Anger, Alienation, Violence, Hostility, Poverty.

The three quarters of a century has experienced world wide upheavals such as the two World Wars, the spread of Communism and the fall of Fascism. Many other localized or national events such as The Great Dust Bowl Disaster to Mid-Western agriculture, the Great Depression of the thirties, and the Prohibition experiment of the twenties. The increasing

urbanization and the concentration of population in suburban areas, the advent of the automobile, the radio, the moving picture theatres and the electrification of rural America have been factors modifying the social, cultural and literary scenario of the nation. Important for its influence upon writers and the reading public were developing interest in psychology, especially the channels emanating from Freud and Jung, the sociological studies of environmental influences upon the development of personality, and the concept of causality developed in the physical sciences.

The magnitude of American essence means that its literature has developed in part along lines – very loosely indicated to be sure – of regional patterns. It has had Southern writers, New England writers, Western and Mid-Western writers. There have been urban writers and writers of prairie or mountain life. The blended nature of the racial legacy has been a pronounced factor in the ethnic life and in American literature. America has had a documentation of the American-Indian, the Negro, the Jew, there has been the shortcoming of racial assimilation as a basis for literature. Thus, an incessant evaluative assessment of constituents in American culture has provided American literature a self-sentient criticism.

Violent or sentimental, driven towards extremes of perception, struggling with history (Time) even more than with the frontier (Space), American Literature develops a complete myth of itself against which every author feels that he must assert his own identity. Black literature also grows in diversity, in intensity with the growth of the Black Power Movement. More conscious of its ethnic heritage and political trials than ever before, this literature draws on the anger, dignity, and hope of new Black writers. Finally, cutting across styles and subcultures, a fantastic vision, grim, but also antic, challenging the assumptions of any culture, of being itself, looks toward the future. At ease in the void and erudite in absurdity, this post-existential vision still finds its inspiration in something other than contemporary nihilism; it wants to reform human consciousness even at the expense of its own art. Agnostic

desire to discern the human circumstances under the aspect of pure spirit trembles into language.

The nature of Black fiction changes rapidly as the Afro-American community develops a new cultural and political sense of itself. Negro writers like James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright grabbed the interest of readers with their powerful and soul-searching works. Richard Nathaniel Wright was the breakthrough man who came up all the way up from all the way down. I take up Richard Wright's search of identity and the various experiences that influenced his affinity for existentialism. Wright was born on September 4, 1908, on a Mississippi plantation 22 miles east of Natchez. All of his four grandparents were slaves. He had a difficult childhood. His father deserted his family when Richard was five years old. At the age of six, Wright turned into an alcoholic. He could not go to school because he did not have enough money. Unfortunately, Wright was mistreated mentally and physically by biased employers.

Black Boy(1945), the autobiography that chronicled the gall and wormwood of Wright's life up to its seventeenth year, details the lonely fear of being born black into the poverty of sharecropper. The paralysis that crippled Wright's mother forcing her to place her children in an orphanage led them to discover with an atrocious sense of shock that north or south, farm or city, a black in the America of 1927 was never free from his daily lessons in the curriculum of Jim Crow. Wright recalls his early life as: "After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passionate an

existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.” (Wright, Richard, 1945, p. 37)

An avid reader with extremely strong talents and intelligence, he was superior to the ignorant whites to whom he was compelled to abase himself for the few menial “black” jobs he was to find. Through his experience and his reading- especially the essays of H.L. Mencken, whose criticisms of American hypocrisy made Wright see that his foe was more than mere whiteness- he came to feel contempt for the comfortable abstractions taught in schools and even more bitter contempt for the fundamentalist Christianity that was represented by the Seventh Day Adventism of the aunt and grandmother who had taken him in for a time. Always lonely and shiveringly isolated, he dreamed violent daydreams of retribution against the people who represented the forces that created the circumstances of his life. Having learned from Mencken and the naturalists that literature may act as an instrument of social defense. Wright impelled America to realise how the “MONSTER NIGGER” was the inexorable consequence of fear, hatred, culpability and anger. Wright wrote in *Black Boy*: “At the age of twelve, before I had had one year of formal schooling, I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase, a predilection for what was real that no argument could ever gainsay, a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering.”(Wright, Richard, 1945, p. 100)

Richard Wright’s impact on American literature was immense. His implacable, forthright creation of Bigger Thomas, in his most forceful book, “*Native Son*” (1940), manifested the relatedness in inhabitant culture between the rural black, south of Mississippi and the urban black, north of Chicago. Bigger Thomas, murders a white woman out of dread of being caught and then dumps the corpse into a furnace. This kind of depiction and

portrayal of a black protagonist was a sensation in the racist America of those days. *Native Son* was a successful novel both commercially as well as critically. Three lac fifteen thousand copies were sold within merely a period of three months. It was selected in the Book-of-the-Month Club. It was also translated into various foreign languages, such as; Italian, Dutch, Czech French and German and it served as a popular plot for the theatre and motion pictures. The critic Irwing Howe said: “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright’s novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.”(Howe 1963, pg.323) The road from *Black Boy* to *Native Son* showed black writers how to deal with the sociological and psychological angry honesty in their works. If there is one book that history will underscore that changed the dimensions of Negro literature, that book is *Native Son*, and even if he had not gone on to write the other influential works that bear his name, Richard Wright would be remembered as an epochal figure in American letters. Jobless in the Depression, like many other rebellious writers both black and white, Wright joined the Communist Party in 1934. He wrote for many newspapers and journals of the left-wing press, and in 1937 he shifted to New York city as the Harlem editor for the party organ, *The Daily Worker*.

In 1938, he published “*Uncle Tom’s Children*”, short stories about the pride, hatred, and terror that are inextricable aspects of day to day lives of the young blacks who refuse to meet their existence with bowed submissiveness. This book acknowledged Wright as a mainstream writer and genuine commentator of the ruined lives he and other African Americans had suffered in the South US. The book consists of four stories that depict the brutal conduct of whites who treated blacks with inhuman demeanour. In the story “*Long*

Black Song”, the protagonist Silas, whose wife is raped and his house is about to be burned down, cries out: “The white folks ain never give me a chance! They ain ever give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yolan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they takeyo life!” (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, p. 125). Further, in the story, “Fire and Cloud,” Dan Taylor, a black minister, ponders on a hunger march by starving African American people: “Thas the way its awways been! Seems like the white folks just erbout owns this whole worl! Looks like they conquered everything. We black folks is just los in one big white fog.” (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, p. 221) But Wright became uneasy with his Party identity. As *Native Son* indicates, Wright’s insight is more existentialist rather than Marxist, and he observed that the Party oversimplified American experience into a formula that did not account for many facets of that experience, which Wright felt so deeply. Still proclaiming the principles that had led him into the Communist ranks, Wright left the Party in 1942, finding it, as did so many writers, artists and intellectuals, as a “god that failed”.

When World War II was finished, Wright found that he could stomach American racism no longer. He repudiated America and went to France in 1947, where he remained until his death. In France he discovered existentialist writers with enthusiasm which he had earlier turned to American naturalistic writers, and his works began to show the stamp of existentialism more clearly than had *Native Son*. The honesty and intensity of experience, which had followed the exercise of will that had liberated Bigger Thomas, is the stamp of novels like “*The Outsider*” (1953) and essays such as “*Black Power*” (1954) and “*White Man, Listen!*” (1957). Memories of slavery, protest and fury, the contradictory search for dignity in a world dominated by white values, the dissention between the artistic and political natures of the writer, his sexual complexities, the existential quality of his life, his need for an ethnic definition of himself- all these appear, sometimes in hints, sometimes fully developed, in

Wright's work. Richard Wright says: "The Negro is America's metaphor." The Negro may also be a reflection of man under certain conditions of urgency or stress, deriving life from an inner source as Mailer and Kerouac come to see, an outsider who nonetheless engages the guilt, fantasy and violence of others, and thus embodies an historic revelation. Richard Wright was suckled on resentment, nurtured on anger, grew up on rootlessness, and tasted every violent flavour of isolation and hostility.

With his old 'bitter will' two words that may serve as the title for a biography of Wright- he continued to dramatize his perception of the fearsome, 'violent black' as a paradigm of America itself. In the writings of James Baldwin, who was highly influenced by Wright, the very fearsomeness is but the mirror and the actuality of the society that created it. Wright's intellectual majority was reached when he understood that the personality of an individual is the meeting place of him and the society. It is Wright's cognizance into the dynamics of an individual in society that is his strength as a writer. Realistic fiction functions by creating characters that are simultaneously individuals seeking autonomy and representatives of a society larger than themselves. This is the manner in which Wright came to see his own experience; literature authenticated this experience and became the outlet for it.

Works Cited

Wright Richard, *Black Boy (1945)*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

Wright Richard, *Native Son (1940)*, Vintage Classics, 2000.

Wright Richard, *The Outsider (1953)*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

Wright Richard, *Uncle Tom's Children(1938)*, Blackstone Publications, 2020.

Moskowitz Milton, The Enduring Importance of Richard Wright; *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. June 9, 2021.

Howe Irving, *DISSENT (Autumn 1963)*, 1963.