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Richard wright: A critical evaluation

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Abstract

Richard Wright, The African-American writer is regarded as the father of black protest writing. He has always, through his writings, tried sincerely to explain the sickening reality of white racism of his country, America. His earlier writings have more fire than his later ones. This lack of comparative fury in his later works results in a literary laxity in them. As a result of this, the novels, short stories and essays of Wright, written after the forties are rather inferior in quality to those which precede that period. There is, however, a justification for that. In his later works, there is a very strong personal feature. This feature relates to the opening of his personality. He seems to have matured later. His thoughts in his later works seem more universal. In his initial works, Wright began with a lot of fire and smoke, but he settled later not only as a sober writer, but a sober person as well. Almost all the smoke of the initial period seems to have melted away.

Keywords: Protest, white racism, fire, smoke, evolution, whites

Introduction

Richard Wright is regarded as the leader of Black Protest Writing in the U.S. In this piece of writing, the literary career of this great black protest writer has been traced to bring to the fore his vehement opposition to the inhuman racism of White America against the black of that country.

Main Thrust

Richard Wright was a 'fighter' writer. This father of black protest writing always tried sincerely to explain the sickening reality of white racism of his country to the whites of America. His initial works have a lot more fire than his later ones. And as the fire burns slower in these later works, there is also a sort of literary laxness in them. The novels, short stories, and essays of Richard Wright, written after the forties are rather inferior in quality to those which precede that period. But there is a justification for that. In the later work of Wright, there is a very strong personal feature. It related to the reopening of his personality. The course of events seems to have matured him later, and made his thought more universal. Wright began with a lot of fire and smoke, but he settled later as a more sober person. Almost all the smoke of the initial period seems to have melted away. We see a clear evolution of thought in his historic career after following his writings through the years. This evolution of his thought concerning the African American problem had been influenced by various stages of his life- in the South of America, in the North of America, and in France, Wright wrote as he experienced. His writing follows his life. That is why the present study analyses his works as they are written. Towards the fag end of his literary career, we see him as a man with unexpectedly novel ideas and inspirations. But before he could flower into a fuller genius, he was rather prematurely taken away from our midst.

Though Wright addressed by his works mainly the racist and non-racist - if there happened to be some- whites of his own country, the reality is that he addressed all and everyone. He wanted to be understood by the whites and blacks of his own country, and by the world humanity at large. His main goal was to touch and arouse the human conscience everywhere. He wanted the whole world to know how ugly the racial situation in the United States was. His *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* took the whole of America by a storm. People, who had remained callous all along, were compelled not only to listen, but also to respond. The virulent, reaction of the Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo is a great example in this regard.

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Bilbo's intense anger was a great victory for the blacks of America. Before this angry reaction of the Mississippi Senator, the blacks there had received nothing but hatred and neglect from their white compatriots. The book of Richard Wright gave quite a new importance to the work of a black American and made people recognize the existence of a sinewy Afro-American literature. Wright's 'Native Son' had been published a few years earlier. It had already succeeded in making even the most rabid Negro haters recognize that there was a problem in the United States of America, known as the problem of white racism.

Charges have often been levelled against Richard Wright by critics like Robert Bone that the former had chosen exile for himself because he hated blacks. And as a result of this hatred, he also hated himself. Says Bone: "Wright suffers, no doubt, from rootlessness, but the source of that rootlessness is self-hatred." Bone is however, not completely right in saying this. As he thinks, Wright could have shown his great love for the black masses by staying with them. But if Wright would have done that, he would never have been the great writer of international repute that he became after settling in France. The fact is that Wright was proud of his race. He knew that it was impossible for him to forget his humble origins, even though they had been the cause of mental and physical sufferings during his youth. As about his love for his own race, Wright had his own designs and aspirations for it. He had written about it in a letter to a childhood friend in 1945: "There is a great novel yet to be written about the Negro in the South; just a simple, straight, easy, great novel, telling how they live and how they die, what they see and how they feel each day, what they do in winter, spring, summer and fall. Just a novel telling the quiet rituals of their life. Such a book is really needed." Hence it is not fair to say that Richard Wright hated blacks. But to say that he hated the American South will be quite correct. From whatever he had seen and experienced there, it was impossible for him to love it. He could only hate it.

Wright wrote for blacks. He wrote to improve their lot by writing about their wretched condition. And those who were responsible for this were none else than American whites. Had they not been there, the Negro problem would never have existed. In 'Big Boy Leaves Home' and in 'Long Black Song', Big Boy and Sarah live happy and carefree in the South, Wright's native place. This South was like a paradise on earth in those times. And blessed were the lives of Big Boy and Sarah. But this blessedness is poisoned by the intrusion of the white man like that of Satan in Paradise. Big Boy has to run away to the North to remain alive. And Sarah has to witness helplessly the violent death of her husband. If we take only these two examples, they are sufficient to prove beyond any doubt whatsoever that Wright loved his people very much. They also show that he was very attached to the land of his birth. Wherever Wright lived, he always had a very special place in his heart for the people of his race. Even while he was in France, where white American had forced him to take refuge, he had his brothers of colour always in his heart. And if he had any hatred for blacks in his heart, it was for a certain category of them. It was for the apathetic blacks who humbly accepted their tragic and inhuman existence that Wright hated. For him, they were as guilty as their white oppressors, because they made themselves a party of their own humiliation. Tom, in 'The Man Who Saw the Flood', represents this type

of stupid black, always submissive to the will of whites. Such blacks, Wright could never tolerate.

As has been pointed out earlier, there was a gradual ripening of Richard Wright's thought. Towards the close of his life, however, he had adopted a softer and a more tolerant attitude towards human life. This can be seen in his haiku poems. For the first time, nature played a subtle and serene role in these poems. Wright was very sensitive by nature. From his Marxist poems of the thirties, we can know about it. Though there is a lot of proletarian propaganda in these poems, we know from them that Wright was very sensitive to poetry. Seeing the limited canvas of poetry, this sensitive soul turned to novels and essays to give vent to his agonized feelings. But his poems lay bare his heart. His poem 'Transcontinental' has a lyric movement that produces a very symphonic unity. The rhythm here binds together varied ideas and descriptions into a unified whole. In 'We of the Streets', he uses distiches in a style that reminds the reader of the style of Walt Whitman in his 'Leaves of Grass'. Most of Wright's poems are written in free verse. This kind of poetic writing enables the poet to play on the expressive character of the rhythm of the vowels and consonants. Love of Nature was thus in the very nature of Richard Wright, and naturally, he preoccupied himself with nature when he turned again to poetry. No sensitive soul can keep himself aloof and away from nature for a very long period.

Nature was thus nothing new to Wright as a literary writer. Though a pessimist in outlook, he loved nature nevertheless. What was completely new for him, however, was his preoccupation with irony and humour. If nature played a new role by reappearing in his haiku poems, the five episodes of 'Island of Hallucinations' show that irony, and specially humour, had taken their place in a mind until then pessimistic. Wright was revealing the amusing side of the black problem in 'Big Black Good Man'. It's very name is humorous. 'Man God Ain't Like That' and 'Man of All Work', too, contain a lot of comic element in them. The name itself of the latter of those two is so amusing. 'Factotum' is the word that can substitute the name-phrase. This word of the lexicon, that has the meaning of 'do-all', has an amusingly humorous connotation. Richard had now acquired a comic vision of the world. Daddy Goodness presented the burlesque side of religion as some black Americans see and practice it. In this play of Wright, Daddy Goodness is an infinitely amusing character. He passes for a saint. In fact, however, he takes advantage of the simplicity and credulity of those around him. He does all this in order to lead a carefree and happy life. Some critics are of the view that the American theatre would have gained a great deal if Wright had specialized in the dramatic and humoristic Afro-American genre. But Wright himself was less concerned with the manner in which he presented his works. His primary aim was to draw the attention of the world to the condition of African American in his country. Wright had always his own country in his heart. This is evident from the dedication of his *Eight Men*. He dedicated it to the Bokanowskis, a French family well known to him. His words of dedication were these: "To my friends, Helene, Michel, Thierry, Maurice Bokanowski whose kindness has made me feel at home in an alien land." This dedication is proof enough that although Wright loved France, it was only an "alien land" to him. He always remained a true American living on that foreign soil. While in France, he could never

feel really at home, his French was never a fluent one. He knew perfectly well that he could never identify with the French people. He was really at ease there only when he was in the company of American blacks. There is another very strong proof of his love for his country, America. He never gave up his American citizenship. The future of America and of American blacks was so close to his heart, and of ultimate consideration for him. 'Eight Men', though it strongly evokes 'Uncle Tom's Children': 'Five Long Stories' does not possess their maturity and balance. In 'Uncle Tom's Children', we can follow, from one short story to the other the social evolution of the American black from the South. In 'Eight Men', Wright tries in vain, however, to fuse five short stories, two radio plays, and an autobiographical essay that took twenty-five years to be written. There is, all the same, a great variety of situations and characters in 'Eight Men'. It very clearly reflects Richard Wright's eventful literary career at an important moment in his life. 'Eight Men' delineates the broadening of Wright's literary panorama.

Since Wright's exile in France, many social and racial changes had occurred in America. Wright, who always kept himself well-informed about whatever was happening in his homeland, realized these changes. He also knew, however, that the position of the man of colour in his country was very fragile and that it would only take the slightest incident to make the white man suddenly put him back in his place. He was convinced that it would take long before the black man was really treated humanely. He also thought that the same destiny awaited the natives of the new independent countries of Asia and Africa. We find all these hopes, aspirations, fears, and ponderings of Wright in his 'A Father's Law'.

Richard Wright was in need of a word of his own to be the lord of it: "I am the lord of all that I survey." Around the late twenties and early thirties, he took refuge in reading. He learned little by little to create an imaginary world for himself by writing. This new world of his enabled him to control the reality. Prior to the creation of this imaginary world, the reality made him suffer as he had no control over it. He in a way even succeeded in avenging himself for it. 'The Man Who Lived Underground', Fred Daniels enjoys trampling on diamonds and paying with stolen jewels. In writing this part of novel, Wright had taken recourse to the memories of his life in Jackson and Memphis, where he had worked in an optical goods establishment. In 'Island of Hallucination', he presents characters and situations closely resembling the people and the atmosphere that had involved him in the Richard Gilson case. According to Michael Faber, it is impossible to identify the characters. And, as Fabre says, "it is obvious that Wright makes them do what he wishes." This technique of deforming the reality in order to write a novel or a short story was a common practice on the part of Richard Wright. He based his imaginative writings on his experiences and on personal observations. The fact is that he wanted to depict reality in its bluntest trueness to life. Commenting on H.L. Mencken's 'A Book of Prefaces', Wright had said: "...this man Mencken was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as weapon, using them as one would use a club." He would never have had the slightest idea then that he would one day do the same thing to those who had tormented him so much. Wright was strongly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe in the beginning of his literary career. He was a great admirer of

this noted writer of thrill, horror, and suspense. The influence of Poe is especially apparent in his first imaginative works. It is more especially apparent in his first imaginative works. It is more specially so in 'Superstition', and in 'Native Son'. For a writer, knowledge of literary theories is a must in every case. Wright had almost no knowledge of these theories before 1940. It was only during the forties and fifties that he gained knowledge of psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, criminology, and philosophy. 'The Outsider', 'Savage Holiday', and 'The Long Dream' show the pronounced influence of psychology and psychoanalysis. Had Wright lived longer, he would have given American and the world at large works of a certain degree of serenity and equilibrium that we do not find in his earlier works.

Wright's protest was, however, more tolerant and sober if we compare him with many of his successors. It was always controlled and dominated by reason. American blacks of today have gone beyond that stage. They express themselves in quite a violent manner if necessary. During the forties and fifties, Wright tried to reason with the white man. He would have been even more tolerant if he had been granted a longer life. We find such possibilities in him. He protested for years openly against the unworthy treatment of the man of colour in America and in the world. After his death, the American black lost patience and decided to use force. In Wright's 'White Man, Listen!' There is still a glimmer of hope, whereas in 'Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America', by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, and in *Soul on Ice*, by Eldridge Cleaver, hope no longer exists. Carmichael, Hamilton and Cleaver do not have the poise and balance of Wright to enable them to reason like him. In spite of their anger and aggressiveness, these champions of Black Power movement could not, however, get anything substantial. And whatever was gained in a major way, was gained otherwise.

It is not that Wright showed any laxity in his fight against racism. It is true that today the American black feels no hesitation in judging his country or government severely and it was not that Wright did not judge or protest with the same severity. But he also had his special way of criticizing what was displeasing to him. Words were for him the ultimate weapon. In 'Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos' and in 'The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference', he angrily and indignantly accuses British and Dutch colonialism of having let millions of human beings grovel in ignorance and poverty in order to take advantage of them and their lands unashamedly. In 'White Man, Listen!' he advises the white man to accept the man of colour as his equal. In 'Black Power', 'The Colour Curtain', 'Pagan Spain' and 'White Man, Listen!' Wright is in search of an orderly and sensible world where there is no place for hatred and violence. In 'Pagan Spain', he attacks Franco's authoritarian and Fascist regime. He also censures severely the omnipotence of the Catholic Church in a country in which Protestants and Jews form two oppressed minorities.

Richard Wright had willingly taken upon himself the task of being the spokesman of the oppressed clacks of America, because he wanted to see the improvement of their lot. In his introduction to 'Black Metropolis: A study of Negro Life in a Northern City', by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Wright says, in 1945: "They [Drake and Cayton] willingly shouldered the risks of having gross and fantastic motives

imputed to them, for they know that violent events will soon flare forth, prompted either by whites or blacks', and they know that white Americans will stand transfixed in bewilderment at the magnitude and sanguinity of these events."

Conclusion

Richard Wright had willingly taken upon himself the task of being the spokesman of the oppressed black of America, because he wanted to see the improvement of their lot. And, through his writings, he became successful to a great extent in this self-imposed responsibility.

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