

CHAPTER-I

RICHARD WRIGHT

It is very interesting to know about the endless conflict between the 'black race' and the 'white race' since the origin of man over the issue like 'supremacy'. After the discovery of America, the adventurous mighty men of curiosity and commercial instincts, who landed on the shores of America had seen the original inhabitants of it. Then they dragged the 'African-blacks' to this strange land to toil in the field, to construct the bridges over rivers, to erect the huge buildings as it was the business of the blacks all over the world. And within a few centuries the modern America was built. It was built with the hard working black hands and the foresighted white brains. Both the blacks and the whites had their equal share in this building of modern America. However, the dignity of labour was always ignored and undermined. The blacks were never given opportunities to have a sense of power or rather a sense of belonging to the main stream of Western Civilization.

Some basic misunderstandings led the supreme whites to despise the blacks. We can always measure the superiority of men in terms of their achievements, their multi faceted successful relations in the cultural environment provided that they are given equal opportunities to flower and develop in the world. But how can we do it in terms of 'the pigments present in the body cells under our skin'?

To a large extent, the human history is but the story of endless tyranny of one race or one class over the other. It is a tale of the oppressed and the oppressors. How, then, the American World can stand an exception to it ? The Americans have proved that the whites are whites and the blacks are but blacks and their cultural streams would never meet, merge into a mighty torrent of Western Civilization. As a result, the American black people, who had joined hands with the whites in emerging America as the world's unchallenged super power, one of the mighty continents in the world since the discovery of it, began to feel the inherent inferiority.

Some of the black intellectuals and social thinkers of the 19th Century like David Walker, Rev. Lewis Woodson, Frederick Douglass, Martin R. Delany and Dr. MacCune Smith in their writing and speeches tried to create the 'racial consciousness' among the blacks.¹ They tried to uplift their drooping human spirits. Moreover, they tried to get them rid not only of racial but of intellectual inferiority. These figures paved the way for 'black-pride' and 'racial-solidarity'. As a result of this, for the first time, the blacks began to think of gifted race, their inherent traits and their super power of endurance than any other branch of human family while facing the adverse environmental elements.²

The 'search for identity'- a typical black American identity on the part of the 20th century writers, thus has its origin not only in the 19th century writing but also in their newly

affirmed 'black sensibility'. The Negroes, for the first time, cherished vehemently their own identity of origin and race. The writers of the 1920s and 30s of Harlem Renaissance Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson and especially, the poetry of Langston Hughes and Melvin Tolson announced the coming of a new epoch in black American life. Later on, after the 1940s the writing of the trio-Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin gave a dramatic turn to it. These writers were destined to give the innate voice of the blacks, their longing for a separate identity in American literature.

Richard Wright, the authentic angry voice and one of the finest artists of black American culture, was born in a small black family of Ellen and Nathan Wright at Natchez in Mississippi black belt on November 4, 1908. His father was an uneducated tenant while his mother Ellen was an uneducated and enduring woman. Very early in his childhood, his personal family ties were abruptly broken because his father abandoned his mother and left the family- Ellen, Richard and his younger brother to suffer the pangs of grinding poverty in the white south. His mother helplessly migrated in search of a shelter in the black belt. They moved from Memphis to Jackson, from Jackson to Elaine, Arkansas and from Arkansas to Jackson. Their migration was another name of struggle for existence. It made Richard rootless. The critic Edward Margolies comments about Richard's childhood days:

"He was left to himself so much of the time in his childhood, while his mother was away foraging for work, that he had to rely almost exclusively on his own inner resources to survive."³

Very soon his mother fell a victim to paralysis of the body. It cut short most of his conversation and affection which she couldn't shower on him in the rest of his life.

For some days Richard and his brother were enrolled in the orphan home. Later on, Richard was adopted temporarily to bring him up by his uncle Clark who lived in Greenwood near Jackson. The sense of belonging to nowhere, moreover, the sense of having no powerful parental figure that could protect him, affected his mind.

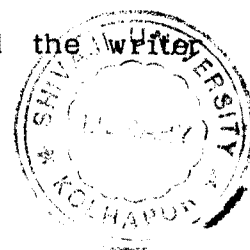
Richard suffered from the pressure of his cruel relatives like his grand-mother, aunt Addie and his uncles who were going to nip out the budding flower of his personality, as much as from the mighty white South that had deprived everything of the blacks and denied their very human right to exist. His South was favourable only to the whites who by clinging to 'aristocracy of the skin' had reduced all life's values to the protection of white supremacy⁴....Though Richard couldn't continue his education in any school more than one academic year due to his forced migration, he was fortunate enough to pass the ninth grade in 1925 from the public school specially meant for Negroes. There, in Smith Robertson public school, for the first

time he sensed his 'real-self' when he, despite the threat of his principal and relatives, read the speech prepared by him in the valediction function.

When he grew up, he brooded upon the Negroes' position in the white south, a firm resolution seized him, and the desire to give voice to the voiceless million blacks, to be a spokesman of them overwhelmed him.

The more he tried to adjust with the white civilization, the more disturbed he was. Now the thoughts about his weak mother got receded, and he dreamed of going to 'the promised land'-North where he was told that the whites were less cruel than the whites of the South. Hunger, starvation, fear of whites and search for new jobs were his constant companions. He struggled against odd jobs. He worked as a news paper boy, a waiter, a dishwasher, a messenger and an unskilled worker. Richard, then, went to Chicago, to New York, and during his twenty-year-stay in the North, established himself as one of the leading artists of the black American literature.

It seems that three major factors were playing important roles in shaping his career as a writer : Wright's White South-the bed of his culture; his strong will power to live out of it and seek out his new identity and the eminent impact of literature on his mind. Michel Fabre, a well known critic of his life, places him as 'the son of Mississippi and the writer out of South not of it.'⁵



His first hand experiences in the South-the white South because it was absolutely dominated by the whites as I said earlier, made him conscious not of his poverty, hunger, destitution, and helplessness or rootlessness but of his new role to be played on the background of Mississippi. And fortunately he found a way out of the South. He bid farewell to the smothering South in order to embrace the North.

Throughout his childhood and youth he had been learning how to act in the white world of the white South. No doubt, his childhood and youth was engulfed by mounting anxieties, tensions, fear, threat of death and lynching, the endless conflicts-internal as well as external, the pressure of dogmatic, religious and hot-headed relatives, the existential anguish of his mother's prolonged illness, shamefully dirty life, and ceaseless job-hunting, what utterly uprooted Wright was the separate place given to the Negroes by the whites. The ethics of living Jim Crow; the bifurcation of the Southern life into separate lines, signals, signs and coaches in the vehicles with inscriptions like 'for colored' and 'for non colored'; the economic, physical and mental exploitation of the blacks; blocking of free relationships between the whites and the blacks and the lynching and shooting of the youths who dared to trespass the man-made boundaries of white civilization. All these things first twisted his heart and then made him hard enough to hate what was white and everything related to the white life.

What he most detested was the 'slavish mentality' of his own black people who wanted to cling to the three century old shackles of slavery. He hated them because he hated slavery. He said, one day, hopelessly to God :

'Oh, Christ, I can't be a slave.'⁶

His white south had almost sapped out all the nerves of all the black boys. They had to think, therefore, before speaking, acting, doing and behaving all the time in front of or in the company of the whites. Most of their psychic energy would waste in this futile effort because none of them ever could please a single whiteman. The whites had barred them. Wright remarked in an interview shortly before his death :

'Mississippi is only an immense black ghetto, a vast prison where the whites are the jailers and the Negroes are the prisoners'⁷

He could not find sufficient food to fill his hungry belly. Moreover, the white South was not genial to nurture his spiritual and intellectual flowering. In his autobiography he says :

I embraced the simple nakedness of my life...The White South said that I had a "place" in life. Well, I had never felt my "place" or, rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject the "place" to which the white South had assigned me...yet, deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings

had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of South. So, in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if I could grow differently... with ever watchful eyes and bearing scars, visible and invisible, I headed North. 8

The signs of his identity were gleaming in his childhood and youth. Very early in his life, his own sensibility had revealed to him all the uselessness of the religious practices which brought all the helpless Negroes under the same roof. His conscience was never ready to accept the earnest prayers sung by his mother, grand mother and the clergy. 'Religious shows' were at the most to quieten the restless souls, to lull their new senses of new life to sleep, to make them fall back upon the bones of the Bible; but such shows had nothing to do with the spheres of human rights like liberty and social equality. Richard knew that his men were repeatedly mentioning their failures in getting the human rights, and begging, all in vain, all things from God. Their guilt of being failures drew them towards the church. Richard found his men begging God for what they themselves couldn't get with their own hands. This was a poor show. And as he was merely a poor black boy he couldn't stop it. His impression about religion is noteworthy :

Granny bore the standard for God,
 but she was always fighting. The
 peace that passes understanding never
 dwelt with us...
 Whenever I found religion in my life,
 I found strife, the attempt of one
 individual or group to rule another
 in the name of God.⁹

Again he comments :

'This business of saving souls had
 no ethics; every human relationship
 was shamelessly exploited.'¹⁰

So he felt out of place in Mississippi; he had no desire
 to live there. He had seen many of the well established and
 educated Negroes, always turning their faces against rest of
 the members of their community. Nevertheless, he was made
 restless by the racial discrimination, the supreme oppression
 of the blacks in the South and their exploitation, especially
 done in the name of race.

Circumstances had taught him the meaning of life. He
 always reflected upon the white world and the black world:
 The white men and the black men, the white hospitals and
 the black hospitals, the white blood and the black blood,
 the white Churches and the black Churches and the white
 God and the black God. And he decided to seek out his own
 role in the Western Civilization. Wright wrote in his
 autobiography :

Whenever I thought of the essential
 blackness of black life in America,
 I knew that Negroes had never been
 allowed to catch the full spirit-

of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of blacklife, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in¹¹ ritual from one generation to another.

He thus started the search for his identity, search for the human qualities and values that were denied purposely by the white culture. Somewhere deep down in him in the dark ghetto of his soul was a spark divine, an acutely strong will-power to develop fully as a human being, and a power to reject what was showered on him in the name of race.

If he had not had this strong will-power, and self-educating and actualizing attitude, he would never have been both a great man and an artist.

There had been an endless debate over the functions of literature from the Greeco - Romans to the mid nineteenth century. The world has been uprooting, eradicating the age-long ugly habits; dethroning the tyrants; throwing into the dusts the evil ways of life and the worms of time have been eating them. Needless to say, this difficult task is done by the inspiring literature-'literature of power' in the words De Quincey.¹² The world has not yet forgotten such inspiring figures. Literature, as Harry Levin remarks, is 'not only the effect of social causes but the cause of social effects.'¹³

It is clear that the strong liking for literature was innate in Richard. The buds of his literary career were seen when he was simply a child in his grand mother's house at Jackson where Ella a boarded school teacher had whispered to him the romantic story of 'Bluebeard and His seven wives'.

Richard Wright wrote about its effect on his mind :

'and I ceased to see the porch, the sunshine, her face, everything...The tale made the world around me be, throb, live...As she spoke reality changed, the look of things altered and the world became peopled with magical presence. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things different, somehow.'¹⁴

Ella, the school teacher thus opened the gateway of the romantic field of literature for him. He, then, read some articles in the newspaper on H.L. Mencken who, according to the whites, was making much fuss about them. His curiosity to know this white man Mencken who was talking against the established white culture drew him closer to Mencken's writing, his style and outlook.:

'Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words'¹⁵

He decided to tread the same path. Moreover, Mencken gave him force, courage, boldness and concreteness regarding what to write and how to write. Being a black skinned person, he was not entitled to enter the public library. And how could a blackboy read ! So he managed to get a borrow card from Mr.Falk an Irish Catholic, and many a time forging notes like-

' Dear Madam :
Will you please let this nigger boy,...have
some books by H.L.Mencken ?'¹⁶

He read covetously Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and then in the North he almost touched the great literary figures of Russia like Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev. Among his selective books were those of Shakespeare, Swift, Byron, Thomas Hardy, George Moore, Joseph Conrad, H.G.Wells, James Joyce, Henry James, D.H.Lawrence, Proust, Flaubert, T.S.Eliot and Many more.¹⁷

He first short story entitled 'The Voodoo of Hell 's Half-Acre' was published by the editor of the local Negro news paper who motivated him by saying :

'I'm going to offer you something
more valuable than money'.¹⁸

When Wright was in Chicago and in New York, he was in touch with the literary clubs and the communist party of America. He , then, studied American Socialists and Marx. However, he couldn't sustain his relations with the party when he understood that it had little to do with 'racial discrimination'.

There is no doubt that Wright's
consciousness as a writer was shaped
by the writings of Proust and
Dostoevsky.¹⁹

Wright's work roughly falls into two broad categories : Fictional and non-fictional. He is known to the world as the writer of Native Son (1940) and Black Boy (1945). There are only four novels, two collections of short stories and two autobiographical novels to his credit. His novels are Native Son, The Outsider(1953) ,

Savage Holiday (1954) and The Long Dream (1958). While his collections of the short stories are entitled Uncle Tom's children (1938) and Eight Men (1961). Black Boy is his autobiography and the posthumously published American Hunger (1977) is a sequel to Black Boy.

There was a gap in his artistic output. After 1945, he almost stopped writing fiction for nearly eight years till the publication of The Outsider in 1953. After his brief visit to France, he returned to his native land America but very soon he realized that the concern for him as a man and artist was but a temporary phenomenon. " When he was suffering the 'old and ancient agonies' at the hands of his white neighbours... , after a short and frustrative stay in the United States he departed once more for France and never saw his native land' says Houston A.Baker,Jr.²⁰ There in France he got new friends like Gertrude Stein, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Heidegger. Wright's original stance reflected in his first books is absent in the novels like The Outsider, Savage Holiday and The Long Dream. However, these works contain his new thoughts and philosophy, existential philosophy of his and the exploitation of the blacks on a larger scale.

But these last novels suffer from a cold reception though worthy of much genuine critical apprehension. The critic Warren French appropriately remarks :

"Wright told us more about 'what it meant to be an artist in an insensitive world' than what it meant to be a Negro"²¹

Native Son was the off-shoot of long suppressed voice of all the Negroes in America. About this novel the critic Edward Margolies says :

'It seized the imagination of readers and captured its author into fame making him a source of controversy for years to come- a controversy that has not yet subsided.'²²

It had such a power, latent violence, protest, hope, a vague desire of having new black identity that not only America but the whole world was alarmed. It told the world about the mounting tension of the oppressed blacks and taught to look into the heart of darkness of America. Black Boy is about his childhood and youth spent in the white South. It is mostly the sad tale of sufferings of the blacks in general. While American Hunger, published posthumously in 1977, is a sequel to his Black Boy, about his life in the North. Wright's The Outsider comes with the oriental alienation of any Negro from society while The Long Dream again picks up the typical Mississippian climate. But nothing of his rest of writing can come up to the level that the 'Native Son' had achieved.

This Uncle Tom's children contains four novellas and Eight Men has some new and some old stories previously published

in the Magazines. His stories, more or less retain the same original tone of the writer.

Apart from this, Wright contributed something valuable to the non-fictional world of his nation by writing Twelve Million Black Voices (1941)- a folk history of the Negro in the United States. He wrote three books about his journey to Africa (Gold Coast), Indonesia and Spain respectively Black Power (1954), The Color Curtain (1956) and Pagan Spain (1957). These books have some imprints of the socio political and historic aspects of the peoples of the countries. Wright's White Man Listen ! (1957), a collection of his lectures and speeches embodies his political and philosophical views. Wright is bold and straight forward in his dealing with the whites in this book. He directly attacks the whites, adhering to his firm opinion that all the whites have destined the misfortunes of the blacks. He blamed the whites because, to his surprise, they had no guilty feelings about their misdeeds. Nobody but only Richard Wright, in the history of black literature in America, ventured to do this. Three books -Lawd Today, Eight Men and American Hunger were published Posthumously after his death on November 26, 1960.

Wright led the American whites to a broader and deeper concept of liberty and democracy. He told them what things are about the Negroes and how should they be. He, with his writing stopped the peaceful nonsense of the Negro Renaissance and implanted consciously and unconsciously the lava of rebellion and revolution in the souls of the Negroes.

He was the literary spokesman of the 'Black Power' which vaulted high up in the Western world during the late sixties of this century. R. Orlova Comments :

He used his new voice to affirm his difference and even his opposition. He tore off the masks and covers with which his kind friends and Uncle Tom's partons had adorned him, tore off the bandages with their soothing blam designed to heal his wounds. With his hands covered with the grime of work, with blood as well, he wiped out the make up which was supposed to soften his appearance, distorted as it was with pain, fear and hatred.²³

His writing has not only simple 'representational value' as the critic Theodore Gross thinks,²⁴ but also universal human values because he wrote of the oppressed and destitutes, the real sufferers of the world, in the true sense an area largely neglected by many great writers. Though throughout his life he spoke only one truth- the 'Negro truth', it applies to the depressed people of all nations and of all historical ages. And herein lies the greatness of the writer who used his whole voice, in his native black dialectics while dealing with his subjects with the wider vision.

Literature should ultimately end in the knowledge and understanding of human nature. Some literary artists are more interested in human nature while they deal with man's relations with the world. They strive for revealing the complexity of human nature. And while giving the 'artistic expression of human nature' they give us something more valuable than the psychologists can. David Daiches suggests :

'Psychology... can help to explain the creative process in general, it can provide a means of illuminating a writer's work with reference to his life and vice versa, and it can help to elucidate the true meaning of a given text'²⁵

The psychological approach is an extrinsic approach to the study of literature. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren comment :

Though the 'extrinsic' study may merely attempt to interpret literature in the light of its social context and its antecedents, in most cases it becomes a 'causal' explanation, professing to account for literature, to explain it, and finally to reduce it to its origins (the 'fallacy of origins'). Nobody can deny that much light has been thrown on literature by a proper knowledge of the conditions under which it has been produced; the exegetical value of such a study seems indubitable.²⁶

Richard Wright was more interested in the psychology of a Negro, black psychology. He gave much stress on secret thoughts, suppressed and sub conscious feelings and the sudden rise of the blind instincts in the activities of his characters. With the microscope of introspection, he observes his own experiences and those of his characters, because fortunately he happened to be a Negro. One can, therefore, use the modern psychological theories as means of elucidating and interpreting Wright's work.

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