

**AN INSIGHT INTO THE MARGINALIZED SOCIETY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
IN THE NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT**

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Abstract

Though the United States claims to welcome and foster diversity in many instances, it does not. Plucked away from their mother land, the Africans were forcibly brought to the new land for the service of the new masters. Racism paved way for several social maladies such exploitation of the weaker section. The fear of insecurity embedded in the minds of African American pushed them to the corner and the racial prejudice never gave them the opportunity to live peacefully, until recently. Richard Wright as one of the prominent Black writers gave the insight of the life of an ordinary black in the White society.

In political economy, economics, and sociology; exploitation involves a persistent social relationship in which certain persons are being mistreated or unfairly used for the benefit of others. This corresponds to one ethical conception of exploitation, that is, the treatment of human beings as mere means to an end – or as mere “objects.”

En.wikipedia.thefreeencylopedia.org/wiki/exploitation

Racial segregation, ironically, influenced the ideology of exploitation against blacks, whilst the dissimilar form of segregation is still practiced in several parts of the world. In different terms, “exploitation” means the use of people as a resource with little or no consideration of their well-being. Exploitation can also be seen in local relationship where one person is “using” the other for his own personal benefit.

In the four hundred years of American history, the black American was kept ignorant of his true history for generations, agonizingly, never was he allowed acting on his own. As reviewed in “Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880 - A South Carolina planter summed up the mood of his class when he said, “The nigger, sir, is a savage whom the

almighty maker appointed to be a slave. A savage! With him free, the South is ruined, sir ruined”.”

The White not only kept the Blacks under his thumb and within the jurisdiction of white society, they made the Black women always dependent and begging for job, food, clothing and shelter, not to state, how deprived they were in getting the knowledge and education. St.Claire a kindly master in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” remarks, “As to honesty, the slave is kept in that dependent, semi-childish state, that there is no making him realize the rights of property or feel that his master’s goods are not his own, if he can get them.” (Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 255)

Richard Wright as a black writer belonged to the category of writers known as protest writers. His influence helped to establish an exploration of naturalism of African-American through his protagonist. Wright felt the need to speak for his people, he therefore, confronted exploitation and championed against the social discrimination as he exposed the relationship between the Whites and the Blacks.

He characterized the revolutionist in him, for a few who think it as a sensational one, as quipped by James Baldwin “Richard Wright has been dismissed as a sensationalist who unfairly exploits social realities” (42)

It is perceptible that blacks suffer psychological injury due to the dishonest treatment of whites. The alienation and exploitation force a sense of insecurity and makes one to be withdrawn from the society, plunging him into the unstable hollow world. According to Senna (1971:8) “Black children must never strive to be more than the white children, if they do, not only will they suffer terrible fate but their families will as well”. It becomes a nightmare not only for the black children, but also for the adults. The suppressed fear grows as a gigantic monster and the insecure life leads them to a state of fear and hatred. Due to this fear, they look everyone with suspicion throughout the life. This state of helplessness and self-pity make them to indulge in the acts of revenge.

Likewise, in *Black Boy*, the Protagonist’s mother leads a life with her three children without her husband. A fatherless house is meant to be a foodless house and poverty stands at the doorsteps to enter and hug them. Thus, unfortunately, from childhood a black child grows as an alien in the white dominated society, primarily because most of them are deserted. As result of the turbulent childhood and abandoned by the father, Wright’s mother Ella moves the family to Maggie and Hoskins house, they find a happy life, much away from the emptiness and hunger they were facing earlier. Uncle Hoskins, an economically successful person owns a saloon that caters to the Blacks who work in the saw mills. Even though successful economically, the White Society which surround them does not cherish the economic independence of any black. They are always in the constant fear of any untoward incidents that they may need to face.

A cautious man, Hoskins, always holds the gun with him and Richard watches him having it nearby even when he was in bed. Because, there was a fear in the family that anytime the whites would take away their life, their earnings and their peace. “Often I would

creep into his room while he slept and stare at the big shining revolver that lay near his head, within quick reach of his hand.” “I asked aunt Maggie why he kept the gun so close to him and she told me that men had threatened to kill him, white men.....” (Black Boy, 51)

Uncle Hoskins always leaves for work in the evenings to work in the saloon. One morning he fails to return, “I awakened to teach that uncle Hoskins had not come home from the saloon.” “He did not take his gun I wonder what have happened.” (Black Boy, 52) At dinner time, the family learns that he was shot by the White men who were envious of his success. “Mr. Hoskins..... He done been shot. Done been shot by a white man” the boy gasped. “They’ll kill you if you go there!” the boy yelled. “White folks say they’ll kill all his kin floks!” (Black Boy, 53)

The exploitation by the Whites and racism reduced the blacks to “Creatures of the earth”, but the characters in the novels of Wright could not accept the maltreatment, hence always fought back. He justified the behavior of blacks because they were exploited beyond reasons and forced to get engaged in violence to get justice. As a rationalization for exploitation the colonial mindset of whites branded the blacks as racially inferior who deserve no respects. Their only right, in the eyes of the whites, was the right to be exploited. The basic human dignities and courtesies were denied altogether. As Garry Wills quotes from Du Bois “Black workers of America bent at the bottom of a growing pyramid of commerce and industry, and they not only could not be spared, if this new economic organization was to expand, but rather they became the cause of new political demands and alignments, of new dreams of power and visions of empire. (5) The life remained, for a black, extremely difficult as equal to walking on a double edged sword. The death of Hoskins leaves the family in fear and search of a new place to live.

Since fear drowns out their grief, they pack all their belongings and runaway in a farmer’s wagon. Hoskins could not get a decent burial and the pain is shared by Wright “There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There were only silence, quiet weeping, whispers and fear. I did not know when or where Uncle Hoskins was buried. Aunt Maggie was not even allowed to see his body nor was she able to claim any of his assets. Uncle Hoskins had simply been plucked from our midst and we, figuratively, had fallen on our faces to avoid looking into that while white hot face terror that we knew loomed somewhere above us.... Why had we not fought back, I asked my mother and the fear that was in her made her slap me into silence.” (Black Boy, 53) Such annoying questions are reprimanded by the parents who are unsure of their safety, when it comes to questioning the brutalities committed by the whites; they were silenced by punishments or a slap on the face. Richard points out that this attitude is a slap on the face of the oppressed society who is denied of their legitimacy to live and exist. Ralph Ellison too supports such a notion,

In discussing the inadequacies of democratic living, typical of the education provided Negroes by the South; a Negro educator has coined the term Mis-education within the ambit of the black family. This takes the form of training

the child away from curiosity and adventure, against reaching out for those activities lying beyond the borders of the black community. And when the child resists, the parent discourages him; first with the formula, that, those are for white folks. Colored can't have it," and finally with a beating (RW's Blues – Ralph Ellison) Douglas, 57.

The very nature of Richard fighting back with his foes with a rebellious nature made him to suffer and face the enmity of the other race and his futile anger subsided when his wits make him realize that a black's anger would be put out soon like a raging fire under the rain. A sense of distrust evades in him and makes alert. The societal frame work creates more opportunities for warring tendency even at the tender age. He becomes a part of the gang and this gang lore gives them the protection and keep them away from being exploited.

We were now large enough for the white boys to fear us and both of us, the white boys and the Black Boys began to play our traditional racial roles as though we had been born to them, as though it was in our blood, as though we were being guided by instinct." All the frightful descriptions we had heard about each other, all the violent expressions, of hate and hostility that had seeped into us from our surroundings, came now to the surface to guide our reactions. "...Our battles were real and bloody; we threw rocks, cinders, coal, sticks, pieces of iron, and broken battles, and while we threw them we longed for even deadlier weapons. (Black Boy, 7)

Richard learns to survive among the street gangs of white and black and how to elude them. The never ending enmity of two races was experienced by him in the streets of Memphis and Mississippi. It was believed that the two races which live nearby cannot run in a parallel line. Their meeting point is 'violence and brutality'. William Andrews the critic opines on this as

"Besides learning how to survive in the streets and taverns of Memphis, Richard has also to learn how to deal with the bitter friction which exists between the two races. While he had witnessed the beatings of a Black Boy by a white police man and had heard stories of violent encounters between blacks and whites, it is not until he visits granny in Jackson that he begins to understand the seriousness of the hostility which exists between "the two races who lived side by side but never touched. It seemed except in violence", (Andrews & Taylor, 121)

On similar ground, Tyree Tucker in *Long dream* runs an underground establishment. A black with determination, to come up in life, he runs a whore house with the help of the white Police Chief Cantley. He wanted to lead a comfortable life and financially stable. As a determined black, he had the killing instinct in his mind to raise the standard of his status. His never ending dream was to have a car, a house, a wife, and a space for him in the society. Society plays a major role and it gives a recognition that every person seeks. He takes all the efforts and succeeds in it. But the Dance Hall of the whore house which he runs goes on fire,

accidentally. The poor black girls of the dance hall became the victims of the fire accident. The Police Officer Cantley tries to trap Tyree and frames a case against him for the accident in the Dance Hall. His business gets closed and Cantley threatens him with dire consequences, if Tyree does not surrender himself. To checkmate the blackmailing of the police office, Tyree uses the crossed cheques given to him as a trump card. He keeps them hidden and uses as a weapon to escape from the trap, or to blackmail the white police to free him. But, finally the entire drama comes to an end with the killing of Tyree. His life, his dream of becoming a notable person in the society, his aim of bringing up his son as equal to the whites, his dream of making his son Fish Belly as a leader to the black people at Clintonville, all gets shattered with the trick plotted by the whites against him.

When Tyree Tucker laments about the risky and uncertain life of blacks in Clintonville, to his son and his wife Emma, the whole concept gives a single hazardous meaning “insecurity”.

You a woman and you don't know what life is in the south for all black folks.

Lissen: When the folks get all roused, when they start thinking of us like black devils, when they start being scared of their own shadows , and when they git all mixed up in their minds about their woman- when that happens they want *blood!* When white folks feel like that *somebody's* got to die. . (Lawd Today, 65)

In the same novel, the happenings in the Farm Fair open up yet another page of how the blacks (Niggers) are treated. First, when Fish Belly approaches his father to go for the Fair gets a negative answer, because Tyree has had two burials to attend to on the same day, but Fish insists that only Thursday is the ‘For Colored Day’, whilst the blacks are permitted to attend the fair. It is the saddest reminder of segregation prevailing in the society. Accompanied by his friends, Zeke, Tony and Sam, Fishbelly goes to the fair. Once when the boys are inside the Farm Fair, in one of the stalls, they witness a black man's head protruding from a hole in a thick canvas. The banner of the stall announces “HIT THE NIGGER HEAD – Three baseballs for 50c”, with a Barker shouting “Come on, folks, and hit the nigger! He's chained and can't run! ... Here's a chance to hit a nigger like you really want to hit ‘im!” (Lawd Today, 41) It is a worst treatment anyone can expect in a human society. Fishbelly's anguish and frustration is revealed when he mutters “Wouldn't let folks do that to me,” ... “Me neither,” Sam said. ... “I'd starve 'fore I'd make it that way,” Tone said” (Lawd Today, 42) This incident makes a deep impact in Fish's mind and confronts within himself on the plight of the blacks in the white society, when he thinks, “That obscene black face was his own face and to quell the war in his heart, he had either to reject it in hate or accept it in love. It was easier to hate that degraded black face than to love it.” (Lawd Today, 42) It shows the extreme level of exploitation that is forced over an entire culture and degrading them just because of they were black. The pain is open for contemplation and the action of the whites deserve a thorough condemnation from the society.

As the whites take pride in their race and act as masters over other races, they draw a firm line in projecting their women. They feel and act as though they had the eternal privilege of taking any women if they wish. At the same time, the sadist nature of the whites will go to any extent, even to kill, whenever they feel like their women are touched by the blacks. The very thought of flirting with a white woman make the black to shiver and sure to bring them death. To thwart the blacks from leaping out from their den, whites use killing as the weapon and also as a sign of warning. The discontented and unsafe life of the blacks was the creation of whites and their perception that blacks are criminals, harmful, drug addicts, and also rapists. The blacks were taught to keep away from the white women. Tyree thus advises his son Fish, "When you in the presence of white woman, remember, she means death! The white folks hate us, fight us, kill us, make laws against us." (Lawd Today, 60) This makes the blacks to view life in a pessimistic vision. They were not daring enough to chat in front of a white man in the fear of outpouring their views publicly. Their usual mockery and jovial talks among them was stopped up when they happen to steal a glimpse of white people. The mere presence of the whites makes them paralyze in order to avoid unwanted consequences. He confusedly remarks, "Why were black people so silent all the time in the presence of white people?" (Lawd Today, 63) and he throws answer to his own query, "You are nothing because you are black and proof of your being nothing is that if you touch a white woman, you'll be killed"... (Lawd Today, 144)

The blacks can be divided into two categories one is the dependant niggers and the other one is independent niggers. The dependant one work for the whites and the independent run their own business like underground establishments, saloons, parlors and liquor shops. Finally, however, both these group of blacks are unfortunately dependant to the white society.

The shadow of exploitation glooms over every black. Their life looms with no meaning and unaware of their destiny they face death everyday, though they look to be happy. Tyree asks his son to collect the rent from black neighborhood, the depressed, Fish complains, "Papa, this rent collecting's showing me something ... Our folk is sick papa. All the black folks I meet's worried to death about white folk-talking about'em all day and all night. They laugh, sing, and dance, but they *worried--*" (LAWD TODAY, 181)

Richard reflects his thoughts with several dimensions in his other narratives. The expressions of the characters in *Native Son*, *Long Dream*, and *Eight Men* speak volumes of the feeling of insecurity and the tendency to break away from it.

Apparently, while suppressing and exploiting the blacks, the whites trickily lure them to steal and indulge in unwanted activities. They enjoy in corrupting the minds of blacks, ultimately the blame falls on the blacks as though they are evil, they become the victims in the hands of whites. Richard had to do some menial jobs to make the both ends meet. But, it was a tough task for him to control his anger when he witness the atrocities imposed on blacks. His helpless society makes him to feel outrage. He was the mere spectator everywhere he was to face the injustice, inhuman practice was carried out on innocent blacks. It was difficult for him to digest, and face his own people are exploited by the whites. The

curse of living in a gloomy hell and the state of defending for their legitimate rights drove him hysterical and sick.

“I held a series of petty jobs for short periods, quitting some to work elsewhere, being driven off others because of my attitude, my speech, and the look in my eyes.” (Black Boy, 175)

He had to figure out in his mind how to act in front of a white, and what kind of polite words to be used, and what kind of gestures would suit to satisfy the white's ego. It is unwritten law that blacks should always live in a state of fear, and dilemma. They should shed their self-respect, self-confidence, and optimistic views towards life. To put it in a nutshell, they have to consider, and view themselves as a mere corpse, a corpse which cannot move, think, and decide things on their own life.

In the American society, black became a color for exploitation, it became concomitant with and inseparable from slavery. It became a yard stick to judge the character and make a comparison, as Winthrop D. Jordan notes, “.. the Negro's color attained greatest significance not as a scientific problem but as a social fact.” (Jordan D. Winthrop, 20) However, Ralph Ellison simplifies that such an attitude was inert with the white American society, “Since the beginning of the nation, White Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of Black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of the limits...” (Ellison, Ralph 583) The feeling of insecurity and humiliation in the minds of blacks tend them to indulge in the act of petty crimes and sometimes, if it demands, it takes them to the extent of murdering the white. It is evident in the story in *The Man Who Killed a Shadow*. The very word ‘nigger’ and the fear of the womans’ screaming exasperate Saul, out of fear, to kill the woman even though there was no intention at all. In the same way Bigger Thomas the Protagonist of the *Native son*, also indulges in a crime. He murders the Dalton's daughter Mary, when he carried her to her room as she was drunk. In order to hide his presence in her bedroom from her mother Mrs. Dalton, to stop her from moaning he tries to press her with a pillow and was suffocated to death.

The very thought of whites create a whirlpool of fear in his stomach. They were considered as a natural calamity which affects the innocent lives unexpectedly with a threatening force. “They were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark.” (Native Son, 550)

Wright skillfully merges his narrative voice into Bigger Thomas so that the reader can also feel how the pressure and racism affects the feelings, thoughts, self-image, and life of a Negro person. “You make us live in such crowded conditions ... That one out of every ten of us is insane. ... You dump all stale foods into the black belt and sell them for more that you can get anywhere else. .. You tax us, but you won't build hospitals, the schools are so crowded that they breed perverts... You hire us last and fire us first...” (Native Son, 318).

It is pertinent here to speak about “Maya Angelou” the African American woman writer who wrote her autobiography “*I know why the caged bird sings.*” Afro-American women suffer sexual exploitation in the white society and they become the victim of sexism and racism. They underwent several sexual assaults helplessly and it was conveyed by several Afro-American authors, especially by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. ‘*Sula*’ and ‘*bluest eyes*’ and “Maya Angelou’s” “*I know why the caged Bird sings*” (1969). It speaks about the hardships of woman who was born as black in the white society. They underwent gender adversities in the insecure society. Women felt insecure and had to expect exploitation anytime, anywhere from the hostile hands. At the age of eight Maya was raped by her mother’s ‘live in’ partner. “*I know why the Caged Bird sings*” reveals the physical and mental pain, and humiliation, she was subjected to at the age of eight.

The male characters in Richard’s novels played both virtues of a feminine and masculine. Wright projected the black womans’ suffering of sexual exploitation during his period only through the male characters. His concentration was much on male protagonists in all his oeuvres who were exploited by their white bosses. They became easy victims even while a white man rapes or harass a white woman; the blame goes on the poor black to shoulder. This is a social sacrifice which expected out of every good black man to save boss from humiliation and whites do not see this as exploitation of the poor blacks but a social obligation from them. In one of his pursuits as a Bell-boy in a hotel, Richard encounters humiliation from the prostitutes. When Richard was working in a hotel as a bell-boy, he had the experiences of humiliation by the treatment of prostitutes. Black-boys were never considered as men and the white prostitutes never gave heed to them. They are not expected to express their feelings and even a slight change in their body language invited wrath and reprimand. They were expected to behave like human with five senses. The white prostitutes too do not care the presence of a black as he was never considered a human. Richard states,

One of the bell- boys I knew in this hotel was keeping Study Company with one of the Negro maids. Out of a clear sky the police descended upon his home and arrested him, accusing him of bastardy. The poor boy swore he had had no intimate relations with the girl. Nevertheless, they forced him to marry her. When the child arrived, it was found to be much lighter in complexion than either of the two supposedly legal parents. The white men around the hotel made a great joke of it. They spread the rumor that some white cow must have scared the poor girl while she was carrying the baby. If you were in the presence when this explanation was offered, you were supposed to laugh. *The Ethics of living Jim crow.*, 233.

In all his works, Wright has taken strain in bringing to the forefront several maladies blacks had gone through in the society. Survival of the fittest applies to every living being. The fear and insecurity takes the front stage when this survival becomes a big question thereby creating two groups of haves and have-nots. The haves exploit the have-nots on several reasons. In American society, the have-nots were prejudiced due to color. This

played in keeping them in a corner, suppressing them on several fronts and Blacks over the centuries have fought their way upwards. Civilizations have cropped over the other by mere subjugation and overpowering. In today's modern world, the negative attitude of the society has taken the back stage and mankind has realized its zeal and potentiality. Richard Wright beyond any argument is America's most prominent writer who portrayed the values of blackness against the ideological and cultural hegemony of the dominant white society.

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