

AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION AND MIMESIS: REPRESENTATION OF RACIAL DISSONANCE IN SELECTED NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT

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Este artículo pretende ser un estudio crítico de la forma en que se trata el motivo del racismo en la ficción afro-americana. El estudio se hace a partir de una selección de las novelas de Richard Wright, partiendo de la premisa teórica de que cada texto y cada lectura pasan por unos códigos previamente establecidos, es decir que, de entrada, la ficción afro-americana se encuentra sometida a la jurisdicción de otros discursos socio-políticos e históricos que le imponen su propio universo. Finalmente, se concluye que en sus novelas Wright habla con su propia voz sobre asuntos que siguen teniendo resonancia en el corazón de las vidas norteamericanas. Con todo, la intromisión de la política en el arte de Wright no afecta a sus méritos estéticos y en esto estriba la brillantez duradera de su ficción.

In this paper, an attempt is made to critically examine the treatment of the motif of racism in African American fiction. Selected novels of Richard Wright's are used as the launching pad of the discourse. The theoretical framework of the paper is that every text and every reading depend on prior codes. That is, from the outset, African American fiction is under the jurisdiction of other socio-political and historical discourses that impose a universe on it. In conclusion, the paper asserts that Wright, in his novels, speaks his own voice about matters that still resonate at the centre of American lives. However, the intrusion of politics on Wright's art does not affect its aesthetic merits. Here lies the enduring brilliance of his fiction.

It is axiomatic that a people's literature evolves out of their individual or communal experiences. This is perhaps why African American literature is essentially a protest literature. Actually, the slave journey and experience of slavery have created a profound coincidence between African American literature and history. Thus, in the various periods of the literature, the idea of black African Diaspora is foregrounded in texts through the employment of some grounding metaphors and the foundational act of slavery. The technique of personal testimony has been a very important aspect of African American literature since the period of slavery. There is, therefore, an intimate connection between the thematic preoccupations and ideological thrusts of the works of African American writers. Whatever else may be said of it, African American literature has been from first to last a "literature of necessity". In what sense and to what extent this statement might be applied to all American writings need not detain us here.

In the works of African American writers, there is a harmonious interplay of history and social realities. This has been christened "faction" in postmodernist parlance. In fact, their art has been shaped by some social, political and intellectual factors. In the words of Nancy Crampton, in African American literature, "certain themes recur. There is the search for an identity, the search for self-esteem in an often hostile social climate ..." (1989: 3). The tension that the realities of their society generate in them leads to the urge to convey these to their readers in unmistakable terms. However, this does not make their works lack in imagination and artistic merits.

Also, Charles Johnson has rightly observed that African American literature is a utilitarian one. To him, the African American writers privilege "Literature of Commitment". In Johnson's words:

The writers of the new Afro-American renaissance reveal themselves to be as diverse and individual as their predecessors in the 1920s, though all are clearly united in the common task of examining the social and political forces that have shaped American culture (1989: 9).

Unlike many white American writers who, in recent times, have retreated into "minimalism", or recording hermetically private lives with little or no connection to the nation's multicultural past or common future, African American literature, of today, has become a literature central to the ongoing effort to define the American experience and the adventure of democracy in the modern age. In his

illuminative essay, "The African American Literary Tradition", Bernard Bell catalogues some of the thematic concerns of African American writers:

Thematically and structurally, therefore, from Brown and Wilson to Reed and Morrison, the tradition of the Afro-American novel is dominated by the struggle for freedom from all forms of expression and by the personal odyssey to realize the full potential of one's complex bicultural identity as an Afro-American.... In short, the Afro-American canonical story is the quest, frequently with apocalyptic undertones, for freedom, literacy, and wholeness - personal and communal - grounded in social reality and ritualized in symbolic acts of African - American speech, music and religion (1990: 1142).

Hence, like the literatures of all national and ethnic groups, African American literature has its roots in the historical experience of the group's relationship to nature and society. Actually, a lot has been written on the issue of themes and ideological leanings in African American literature. Of recent, some African American texts have been accorded the status of a classic. William Andrew, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Allen Shockkey, Amiri Baraka, Sandra Richards and others have commented on the themes of race, class and gender in African American literature. To these critics, the enduring success of the contemporary African American literature arises from its thematic relevance.

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing exploration that this paper attempts to do a critical examination of selected works of Richard Wright. The main task of the paper is to isolate and foreground the characteristic themes and concerns of the selected works of the writer. The theoretical framework of the discourse hinges, in part, on the semiotic notion of intertextuality which was introduced by Julia Kristeva. Thus, in this paper we believe that a text has two interlocking axes: a horizontal axis, which connects the author and the reader of the text, and a vertical axis which connects the text to other texts (Kristeva, 1980: 69). Uniting these two axes are shared codes: every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it (Culler, 1981: 105). In the main, in this paper, we attempt to situate Wright's fictional works within the totality of previous or synchronic texts on the problem of racism in American society. It is also believed that the selected prose works of Wright, examined in this paper, are a transformation of the general corpus of "Literature of Racial Dissonance in America" (Houston, 1990).

Wright was born on September 4, 1908, in Adams City, Mississippi, United States of America into a life of poverty and racial discrimination. Due to his background, his literary goal was to bring two worlds together, one black, and one White, and make them one. He possessed an indomitable spirit to write about the experience of a black man in America. His works mostly dwell on the high invisible fence that separates black and white Americans (Fabre, 1993). In his life, he was noted for his many virtues that included courage, bravery and determination. Both as a writer and a public intellectual, he had the courage to speak out. He always grappled with the idea of being an interloper. Actually, he successfully heeded the idea of committed literature advocated for the postwar world. Therefore, his writing provokes passionate responses, from deep admiration to vehement hostility. Such steam abounds Wright as a writer because his task to build bridges across racial lines was and is always misconstrued. And some critics often condemn him for allowing the intrusion of politics on his art. These critics fail to link the man, his enabling socio-political milieu and his writing. As a part of the Communist Movement and an expatriate, it is expected that his works should be coloured with partisanship. This is why Aduke Adebayo opines that Wright's novels make him a living triumph over the expression of the American system of his time (1995: 65). Wright ascended rapidly to major rank among American writers regardless of his race. He was a novelist powerful enough to break out of the narrow compartment previously occupied by black writers (Butler, 1991). He was acutely aware of his person, and it did not take him long to conclude, as some critics have done (Willfried Feuser, J.A Ramsaran and McCall Dan), that American fiction was and had been for generations a projection of the value system of the dominant class in the society.

Taking advantage of the panic into which his society had been thrown by the Depression, Wright allied himself with the critics of its basic assumptions and demanded that the society hear him through his texts. Indeed, the reader of Wright's works believes that he handles his themes with authority, and he manages to be the conscience of the society. He also expresses himself with power and eloquence; he is therefore entitled to the place he had won in the literary firmament of the African American (Gates and Appiah, eds, 1993).

Richard Wright, the author of *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945), *The Outsider* (1953) and others, has often been acclaimed as "... one of the most perceptive social critics of his time" (Fabre, 1993: 179). He was once, no doubt, the most

prominent of protest writers in the United States of America; he dedicated his literary talent to the battle against racism. In his novels, Wright aims at:

liberating the black people from their mental and physical alienation by revealing the meaning of black existence and in this wise re-investing the black man with dignity (Adebayo, 1995: 207)

Uncle Tom's Children, the first, in sequence, of Wright's major works is a collection of novellas written while he was employed by the Illinois Writers Project. It is about a poor and angry ghetto. Drawn from the memories of his Mississippi boyhood, the stories were almost evocations of cruel realities, which the nation and the world had in the past been unable or unwilling to face. Wright's thematic purpose, his determination as a prose writer, was to force open closed eyes, to compel America to look at what it had done to the black peasantry into which he was born (Butler, 1995). In a competition offered by a publisher for the best fiction book submitted by writers in W.P.A. in 1938, *Uncle Tom's Children* was judged the winner. The critical reception was enthusiastic, and its author was launched.

The stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* give a searing account of racial injustice, especially in "A Long Black Dream" and "Bright and Morning Star", which are early examples of the rebellion that is to blossom in all its ferocity in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. The stories draw extensively on Wright's experiences in the South and are perhaps among the most militant of his works. Wright, whose stand as an artist and political activist is that every literature is protest, gives, in his collection of short stories, a biting and iconoclastic account of racial oppression in the deep South. *Uncle Tom's Children* first drew the attention of the American reading public, mostly Whites, to the unbearable ordeals of the African Americans in the glittering American civilization. The stories are really shocking in their exposure of the unbelievable vindictiveness, callousness and barbarity of whites with centuries of "civilization" behind them. The psyche of these men and women, with their orgasmic enjoyment of the lynching of a young Negro boy, is steeped in lores of Negro inferiority as well as the black man's propensity for crime, especially his lust for "lily-white" womanhood. More importantly, these stories correct the stereotypic image of "the good Negro" found in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The protagonists in the stories, far from being the traditional passive Negroes of popular opinion, are rebels, iconoclasts, engaged in throwing off the yoke of oppression.

The events in the first story of the collection "Big Boy Leaves Home" are triggered off when a white woman is suddenly confronted with the "terrifying" picture of four naked black adolescent boys swimming in a creek. Rape immediately jumps to her mind, and her screams bring her male escort running. In no time, at all, two of the boys are shot dead, and to prevent himself from sharing the same fate, Big Boy attempts to disarm the white man who is killed in the process. This single overt act of self-preservation, and by implication rebellion, brings the anger of the white. Big Boy makes it to the deserted kiln in his bid to escape north on a truck, but Bobo is not so lucky. Big boy is forced from his hiding place to watch his friend being tortured and then being burnt at the stake. At the end of the story, three of the boys are dead, but the fact that Big Boy escapes shows that Blacks will no longer remain passive under the yoke of oppression.

Wright's close attention to small details, especially in the lynching scene, his ability to capture the indifference cruelty and the perverse and sadistic pleasure of the white perpetrators of this atrocity all go to show his command of the ultra-realistic mode of writing. And, from the first story in the collection ("Big Boy Leaves Home") to the last ("Bright and Morning Star"), one can detect a gradual political maturity and a ripened militancy. As J.R. Giles rightly declares, there is thematic progression from "a spontaneous, fear-motivated reaction by a black character against the 'white mountain' of racial hatred to a realization of the necessity for concentrated, Marxist organization of the poor" (1973: 256-57). In fact, the last story in the collection ("Bright and Morning Star") is perhaps the story in which the central character's political consciousness is most articulated. Discovering the inadequacy of Christianity in the face of the "cold white mountain of the white people" and their racist laws, Sue, an old, work-worn Black mother, embraces Marxist ideology and works for the party just as her son (Johnny-Boy) does.

Native Son (1940) is undoubtedly Wright's most successful and best-selling work. Since its publication, Wright has been one of the most widely read writers of his time and hereafter. The story is an account of racially motivated violence that shocked the public at the time of its publication, and it forced the readers to be aware of the horrors of racism in America. The critical reception of the text was also like that of *Uncle Tom's Children* (Baker, 1990). From the Mississippi locale, Wright had moved his setting to Chicago, and the narrative vigour which has impressed readers of the first work has been intensified by a deeper probing into the society that alienates the characters and

produces the grim tragedy. *Native Son*, a Chicago story about a Mississippi boy, Bigger Thomas, in New York, has an autobiographical tone. It paints, in vivid colours, a picture of the corrosive effect of the oppressive, brutal, emasculating and restless life in a racist society on the African Americans (Skerrett, 1979). The novel is a sophisticated study of the effects of racial oppression particularly an exploration of the way racial oppression dehumanizes the psyche of the oppressed. Critics who claim that Richard Wright does not understand the basic psychology of the labyrinthine interiorities of the human soul, and that he made no allowance for human existence having anything other than a purely socio-historical dimension surely have attempted a facile, literal and peripheral reading of his novels. *Native Son* shows how racial oppression affects the psyche of not just the African Americans but also the oppressed people everywhere.

The hurt and pain of his early years in the South drove Wright to write as he did. In *Native Son*, he deals with social issues, such as oppression, racial discrimination, class tension, alienation, power lust, uses and abuses of nature and betrayal of trust. Wright has effectively blended these into the story of an individual consciousness developing in a society that, in its turn, is battling against many odds. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, grows through some dehumanizing experiences, which can be rightly described as a "rite of passage". In the novel, Wright creates an intense degree of alienation – so severe that the protagonist occasionally suffers mental derangement. The traumas of Bigger Thomas's personal and domestic history have combined with his experiences of the dehumanizing agonies of America to make him a 'neurotic' person. Thus, the story foregrounds some fundamental issues relating to colonial Manichean dichotomies of "metropole and colony", "capital and labour".

Bigger Thomas comes from a family without a male bread-winner. No doubt, he is subjected to the racial oppression prevalent in the South before he migrates with his family to Chicago. The family is faced with abject poverty, living in a rat-infested, one-room kitchenette. Even the family is threatened to be removed off the dole if Bigger does not take up employment with the Daltons who are 'philanthropists'. Bigger's political consciousness is inarticulate; his anger and frustration express themselves in the form of extreme violence. Although many of Frantz Fanon's observations about the psychological effect of oppression are based on the colonized people of the Antilles, many of them are applicable to Bigger's case. For instance, according to Fanon:

Nothing could be more traumatizing or neurotic for a man whose only weapon is reason than contact with the 'unreason' of the hatred of racial prejudice where a man is hated, despised and detested for his colour (1981: 118).

The result is that the black man suffers from a sense of shame and is oppressed by the whole weight of his blackness. His contact with white people brings out, in full force, his shame for being born black in an agonizing manner. Because of this, he hates white people all the more and judges their reactions to him in terms of his colour. Bigger Thomas is a young man, in his twenties; he is a second-class black citizen in a predominantly white society. He is a totally stunted person, devoid of political, social and economic rights. He belongs to that class of people whom Frantz Fanon has rightly described as "the wretched of the earth", the downtrodden who are exploited by the capitalist class. Bigger, in his bid to improve his social ladder in a few rungs up, has to go through the affluent in the society who consciously or unconsciously thwart his efforts, thus forcing him to commit crimes.

It seems Wright explicitly hints that bigger has just causes to kill his "white enemy". He inadvertently smothers Mary to prevent his being discovered with her. Realising that he has committed murder, he burns up her body in the furnace and uses his ingenuity to foil detection. For the first time in his life, he considers himself an achiever – "an Avenging Angel". He sees this crime as his first creative act, and he is euphoric about it.

Bigger's life has been a series of humiliations and choking hatred for a lot of things in a discriminatory society. He sees the whites as obstacles to his natural development and human progress. He lives in a compartmentalized world of racist hatred and has therefore developed racist attitude, the so-called "anti-racist racism", as immunity against the society in which he operates. He sees the "white" as a mountain of hatred, hard and inhuman, until he is led to have an insight into a Marxist interpretation of the meaning of his life. It is only then that he realises that racism is fostered by economic exploitation, and that his problem basically stems partially from class conflict rather than simply racism.

Bigger is made to inadvertently commit crimes against the capitalist class, which consists mainly of white people. Wright provides an opportunity for examining the behaviour of the capitalists once they turn their backs against a common enemy from a lower class. In *Native Son*, therefore, the roles of capitalist institutions like the

bourgeois press, the law courts and church are elaborately described as they hound the protagonists out of their society (Berube, 1997). The press, through its crude headlines and sensational reportage, immediately transforms the murder into a sexual crime by playing on the obnoxious prejudice that "black men are sensuous savages who are excessively fascinated by the bodies of white women" (Adebayo, 1983: 77). Thus, the press, instead of fostering unity in diversity, fans the embers of race-hatred and successfully alienates the public's sympathy by using insinuations and quotations from imaginary commentators. Bigger is prejudged by "The Tribune", who refers to him as the "Negro Rapist" and uses zoological images to signify him as a monster. The press of the nation also already conditions the jury's mind. One of them says:

... the slayer will undoubtedly pay supreme penalty for his crimes... there is no doubt of his guilt... what is doubtful is how many other crimes he has committed (Native Son, 290).

Furthermore, the bourgeois church is portrayed as incapable of saving the soul of Bigger, who refuses the artificial comfort of a religion of hope in an apparently hopeless situation. This is why Bigger is hostile to the priest who is sent to pray for his 'lost' soul:

"I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it", says Bigger. "I didn't want that kind of happiness. The white folks lie for us to be religious, then they can do what they want to us" (302).

Thus, the novel thematizes black man's alienation in the modern world, the ordeal of extreme situations and the isolation of the individual. The novel has an unrelenting bleak landscape, with a view to mimetically depicting black men living at violent odds with the white world around them. Through the text, Wright is able to foreground his views on racism and his fascination with what can be called "the struggle of the individual in America." The novel is widely acclaimed as one of the finest books ever written on race and class division in America. It reflects the forces of poverty, injustice and hopelessness that continue to shape American society. A psychoanalytical scrutiny of a racially divided society would, in part, reveal the problems of assault and petty larceny, but in the novel the reader is also confronted with the gory problems of murder and rape which depict a black man caught in downward spiral. Thus, the killing of a young white woman in a brief moment of panic by Bigger

Thomas depicts what it means to live in a multi-racial society in which power splits along racial lines.

Black Boy (1945) marks the culmination of Wright's best-known period, his so-called Marxist period. The title of *Black Boy* sums up the whole pre-individualistic ethic or the ethics of living "Jim Crow". Obviously, Wright did not think of himself as a "black boy"; the very term is a social judgment not just used by white society but also inherited by the black folk in Richard's life. Richard's family sees him as bad (black), just as the whites do, because he expresses himself as an individual. At the same time, he is viewed as a boy, one who waits for and obeys orders before he acts.

Black Boy, more than any other texts in African American literature, foregrounds the plight of African Americans to public notice. As Dan McCall rightly points out, Wright, writing before the Civil Right Movement, was writing to,

an audience that had little sense of the Negro in America other than could be acquired in small talk with the maid of chauffeur on a Saturday night in 'Darktown'... (1969: 6).

Indeed, *Black Boy* spans the history of the black race in America from slavery, through emancipation and reconstruction to the great south-north migration. Both Richard's maternal grandparents in the novel are ex-slaves. Grandpa (his grand father), having fought in the civil war, is one of the victims of society because his war pension is not paid to him. The wanderings of Richard's mother (Ella Wright) in search of a livelihood are typical of black people's abject poverty following emancipation. Richard's own flight to the north is representative of the mass migration from the South to the industrial north.

Social segregation controls the life and outlook of the African Americans completely. It effectively keeps them in the lowest-paid jobs as sharecroppers, domestic helps, bellboys, porters or Ministers and teachers in the black schools and churches. One cannot escape the boy's ever-present and gnawing hunger in the text. His waking hours are plagued by hunger after the family's desertion by his father, in the orphanage, in his mother's wanderings from town to town in search of a livelihood and even in Granny's home in Jackson where he comments:

Once again I know hunger, biting hunger, hunger that made my body aimlessly restless, hunger that kept me on edge, that made my temper flare, hunger that made hate leap out of my heart like the dart of a serpent's tongue, hunger that created in me odd cravings (113).

Black Boy is not merely a historical and sociological document. Apart from giving a detailed account of all the facets of the African American's racial experience, it shows the effects of oppression on the psychological make-up of the oppressed and the oppressor. Richard interrogates the ideal of "Uncle Tom"; his first rejection of "Uncle Tomism" occurs when he is chosen as a valedictorian. All attempts by the principal to make Richard read a prepared speech are rejected and seen as "... baits that snared black young minds into supporting the southern way of life" (194).

Black Boy thus textualizes the effects of racial oppression, particularly an exploration of the way racial oppression brutalizes and dehumanizes the psyche of the oppressed. While *Native Son* shows how racial oppression brutalizes and dehumanizes the psyche of not just the African-American but the oppressed anywhere, *Black Boy* spells out the brutality and suffering of the blacks in the south.

A vicious new form of racism swept through America at the end of the Second World War. Therefore, after the publication of *Black Boy*, Richard Wright moved his family to Paris and promptly became one of the most celebrated American expatriates in Europe. Discouraged by the racism of America, Wright moved his family to France, where he spent the remainder of his life writing and supporting the cause of American independence. He stayed away of America, because, as a black man and as an independent thinker, he did not feel a free man in America. He did not publish another book for eight years, and when he did – *The Outsider* (1953) – his second full-length novel, shows him bringing to bear in his writing the attitudes of French existentialism of the post-world war II era (Margaret Bass, 1994).

It appears that Wright's physical removal from American racism dampened his enthusiasm for exposing the crippling effects of oppression on the psyche of the oppressed African American and advocating for social change. *The Outsider* shows the influence of existentialism and has been seen as a virulent attack on communism. In fact, Wright, in France, is less of an engaged writer than Wright in America. His thematic preoccupations, as a writer in exile, are more with the cause of mankind in general than with the African American in particular. He speaks with his own authorial voice about matters

that still resonate at the center of American lives (Butler and Hakutani, eds, 1995).

What we see in Wright, especially in his pre-exile days, is a crusader for the downtrodden African Americans, a writer prepared to shock and offend his white audience if that will open their eyes and goad them to a re-appraisal of the situation with a view to changing things. Thus, we can summarize the thematic preoccupation of Wright's fiction with the words of a blurb in his *Eight Men*:

The work of Richard Wright, in book after book, in fiction after fiction and non-fiction, has followed the rise and expansion of Black American from the first racial skirmishes in Mississippi to the burning realities of today's ghetto revolutions.

In sum, African American literature is replete with issues of social realities. Statements or protests, grievances and disabilities are realistically presented, with the ingredients of fear, hate, paranoid, schizophrenia and sex – all cumulatively amounting to an indictment of American democracy. Also, the theme of identity and integrity appears to be an obsession with many African American writers and with the African American intellectuals generality. The achievement of Richard Wright as an African American writer consists in his ability to foreground the abject situations in the African American society in a uniquely readable style. In Wright's writings, there is a very exciting approach to African American literature (in both content and form). Indeed, one is bewildered by the outstanding qualities of his works. The panoramic survey of the foibles of racism in American society and the realistic diction to express certain opinions, facts and components of nature are just superb. The stories of Wright stand as beautifully, pitifully and terribly true. They possess the power of shocking the reader because they present straightforwardly a brilliant Black American's point of view. They also provide a veritable insight and understanding of human relationships in America, even when occasionally twisted by sorrow.

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