

**Richard Wright's Perspective on the Afro-American Predicament:
A Study of the Impact of Racial Oppression
in *Native Son* and *The Long Dream***

**A Thesis Submitted by
Ashraf T. M. Quota
For the Degree of MA in American Literature**

**Supervisors
Dr. Azza M. H. El-Kholy
Dr. Sahar A. M. Hamouda**

**Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts
University of Alexandria**

2003

Preface

Racial oppression, the quest for freedom and the struggle for survival are the major aspects of Afro-American history. From the advent of the seventeenth century up to the twentieth century, Afro-Americans were exposed to various forms of oppression and discrimination that devastated their psyches and forced them to resort to escape mechanisms necessary for survival. Therefore, Afro-American writers, among whom Richard Wright (1908 – 1960) is a leading figure, have always been concerned with pinpointing the Afro-American predicament within the socio-political context of that history. Wright's works are considered an exploration of how the pressures and racism of the American cultural environment affect Afro-Americans, their feelings, thoughts, self-images and, in a word, their entire lives.

The main objective of this thesis is to explore Wright's portrayal of the Afro-American predicament in the first half of the twentieth century and to examine his views about the impact of racial oppression on Afro-Americans, especially in *Native Son* and *The Long Dream* in which the history of racial oppression produced psychologically disordered Afro-Americans. In other words, the study has two main purposes: first, it analyzes the psychological agonies that tortured Afro-Americans due to racial oppression such as fear, hatred, self-hatred, anxiety, castration complex and loss of identity. Second, this work illustrates how these agonies generated divergent escape mechanisms like projection, sadism and psychopathic behavior on the one hand, and non-violence, debauchery and self-exile on the other.

Wright's *Native Son* and *The Long Dream* are selected for this study because they fulfill the requirements of comparison and contrast and are representative of Wright's ideological beliefs. Both novels tackle the race problem of the 1930's and the 1940's and introduce characters who undergo similar racial agonies. To escape their trauma and get their freedom, however, the characters of the two novels choose discrepant paths. While

Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* asserts himself through violence, which takes the form of sadistic and psychopathic behavior, Fishbelly Tucker in *The Long Dream* escapes passively through sex, submission, and exile.

Therefore, *Native Son* and *The Long Dream* parallel two different stages in the development of Wright's perspective on the racial problem. Wright wrote *Native Son* in 1940 when he was advocating violent protest; he was then a member in the Communist Party. Conversely, *The Long Dream* appeared in 1958 after eleven years of self-exile Wright spent in Paris, where he became strongly attached to existentialist thinking. In other words, the change in the two protagonists' psychological reaction to their trauma and search for freedom coincides with Wright's own ideological change in his search for freedom. Thus, dealing with these two novels provides a form of comparison and contrast between two different stages in Wright's vision of the Afro-American predicament showing the similarities and differences between his pre-exile fiction and that written in exile.

Wright was born in 1908 on a plantation at Roxie near Natchez, Mississippi, where the legacy of slavery survived and was still practiced. His was one of the most backward and poor areas of a racist community. Everything in his environment conspired against his healthy psychological growth. He was a wanderer who moved from one place to another in a ceaseless search for a cultural identity. He always sought to escape the restrictions that would consign him to the traditional role of a docile black. He fled to Memphis in 1925 and from there to Chicago in 1927, then to New York in 1937. In 1947, his restlessness led him to Paris in an attempt to find himself a niche in the world. He sailed for Ghana in 1953, traveled to Spain in 1954 and attended the Congress of Cultural Freedom in Bandung in 1955. These travels inspired the writing of *Black Power* (1954), *Pagan Spain* (1956), and *The Color Curtain* (1956). Thus, in the last seven years of his life, Wright got involved in tracing different forms of oppression as he observed them in his travels. He

identified the predicament of Afro-Americans with that of all the oppressed races. Wherever he went, he retained his childhood suffering in the South and everything he wrote was an attempt to convey that experience.

Not only was Wright a geographical wanderer, but he was also a man of intellectual oscillation, moving from one ideological resting place to another. Communism was his first ideological stance; he joined the Communist Party in 1933, making one of the strong pledges in his life. He recognized that the Party gave him a role, value and sense of belonging to a group. Wright's political poetry of the 1930's, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), and *Native Son* (1940) tend to be crude Marxist propaganda. When he published his first novel, *Native Son*, he was entirely convinced that there was no agency in the world more capable of changing the conditions of men than the Communist Party. He believed that Communism was a refuge for Afro-Americans from a hostile, racial environment.

Wright's second ideological stance witnessed his break with the Communist Party in 1944, his self-exile in 1947, and his attachment to existentialist thinking. His anti-Communist ideas are obvious in his exile works like *The Outsider* (1953) and *Black Power* (1954).

Wright, at that time, believed that exile is the result of racial oppression as well as the best answer for the Afro-American quest. He came to the conclusion that it was almost impossible to be black and fully human in America because the society did not allow Afro-Americans the psychological space to develop and cultivate the human spirit. Thus, alienated in his own native land, Wright preferred self-exile, considering it a sequel of racial oppression; he made France his home from 1947 until his death in 1960.

As a writer, Wright's perspective on the Afro-American predicament focuses on two cardinal themes: suffering from racial oppression, and the impact of such trauma on the Afro-American's psyche. As for the first theme, Wright, as a naturalist, permanently sought to expose the atrocity of racial oppression and the psychological agonies it

generated. Wright's characters in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, *Black Boy* (1945), *The Long Dream* (1958), and *Lawd Today* (1961), are prolocutors of frustration, repression, fear, self-hatred, loss of identity and anxiety. Those characters are chained by racial oppression; they are not allowed to exceed certain limits and are deprived of everything the white man enjoys. The novelist's view is that twentieth century Afro-Americans still suffer from the repercussions of the past centuries of slavery.

The impact of racial oppression on Afro-Americans constitutes the second theme in Wright's perspective. This impact, according to Wright, is illustrated in two divergent directions, each of which parallels a different stage in his ideological oscillation. In the first direction, reflected in his writing from 1933 to 1945, Wright saw the impact of racial oppression from a Communist point of view. Therefore, he considered violence the only possible reaction of oppressed people. According to Wright, Afro-Americans did not become rebels, sadists, and psychopaths out of free choice but rather because of circumstances over which they had no control. Thus, he maintained that racial oppression could lead to violence. This viewpoint is best illustrated in his novel *Native Son* where the hero demonstrates clearly how oppression and racial segregation can lead to violence.

The second direction of Wright's vision witnessed his break with Communism and his self-exile. It is here that Wright focuses on other outcomes of racial oppression especially debauchery, and self-chosen exile. These two paradigms of passive escape are particularly traced in his exile novel *The Long Dream*. Because of the psychological agonies the white world visited on Afro-Americans, they sought outlets for their repressed feelings in sexual involvement and exile. The white man's encouragement of debauchery among Afro-Americans, together with the fear of castration that the white oppressor imposed on them, helped extinguish their furious moods and made it impossible for them to assert themselves through violence. Here, Wright seems to suggest that in addition to debauchery, the Afro-American is forced to leave not only the South but also the United

States. In *The Long Dream*, the protagonist and two other characters, leave the country and flee to France, as Wright himself had done a decade before he wrote this novel. Wright leaves the readers with the message that the Afro-American's only realistic solution is to leave the country altogether.

The thesis aims at crystallizing Wright's perspective on the impact of racial oppression, and is divided into four chapters. The first chapter entitled, "Mapping Afro-American Culture", is an expository chapter which presents a panoramic view of Afro-American culture, with more emphasis on the status of Afro-Americans in the twentieth century, since it is this period that directly produced and influenced Wright as well as his characters. The chapter first surveys the political, social and economic aspects of Afro-American culture from the years of slavery up to the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950's, tracing the factors that led to the genesis of slavery and the race system. It then moves on to show that due to racial prejudice, Afro-Americans clearly testified to different forms of oppression like slave codes, segregation, mob violence and disfranchisement. These forms of oppression are examined as forces that affected Afro-Americans psychologically, socially, economically and educationally. The chapter also highlights the Afro-American struggle for freedom and survival, and, finally, explores the Afro-American literary scene, showing how literary forms like slave narratives, folklore, autobiography, music, and fiction documented the Afro-American ordeal and struggle for survival.

"Richard Wright: The Man and His Art" is the title of Chapter Two which is an account of Wright as a person and a writer. Wright's works cannot be studied in isolation from his own life and views because these works represent an integral part of his experiences and cultural development. Moreover, analyzing Wright's life throws light on racial oppression and its impacts because he drew his material from the very racial milieu that confined him and millions of his color. The chapter outlines and discusses Wright's

background and the kinds of influence he was exposed to, drawing on his own autobiography *Black Boy* and the views of his friends and fellow Communists.

In Chapter Three, "The Labyrinth of Racial Oppression", the different aspects of racial oppression that Afro-Americans experienced are traced in *Native Son* and *The Long Dream*. Some of these aspects are lynching, castration, segregation, inequality in learning and job opportunities, poverty, hunger and disfranchisement. The chapter detects the psychological agonies that plague Afro-Americans in these two novels and proves that racial oppression has produced psychologically crippled personalities trapped in a vicious circle of fear, hatred, self-hatred, anxiety, loss of identity, and sense of worthlessness. The chapter also explores how Wright illustrates that Afro-Americans are the product of their racial environment. Relying heavily on Wright's autobiography, the chapter proves that Wright's *Native Son* and *The Long Dream* are a portrait of his own life and ideology and that the experiences and reactions of his characters are simply his own.

In Chapter Four, "Divergent Escape Models", the focal issue is a comparison between the protagonists of *Native Son* and *The Long Dream* as two different escape paradigms. The chapter also examines the sadistic and psychopathic behavior of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* as the inevitable outcome of racial oppression and shows how Wright applies the Communist Party doctrine in accounting for the motivation of his protagonist. On the other hand, the chapter proves that the protagonist of *The Long Dream*, contrary to that of *Native Son*, is driven to seek another path of salvation in non-violence, passivity, debauchery, and exile. Moreover, the chapter attributes this divergence in the reactions of Wright's characters to their trauma, showing that these opposite trends are reasonable consequences of coercion. Here, the research also illustrates that this divergence parallels two different stages in Wright's life and racial ideology.

The conclusion sums up the preceding chapters and crystallizes the argument of the research. The thesis arrives at the conclusion that racial oppression devastates the

psychological makeup of oppressed people and exposes them to neurotic disorders like fear, hatred, self-hatred, anxiety, loss of identity, and castration complexes. This, in turn, forces them to search for avenues to blot out their dilemma. The thesis also suggests that oppression could generate, among the oppressed, sadists, psychopaths or, on the other hand, passivists, and escapist. It also reveals how far Wright succeeded in portraying the impact of racial oppression and conveying the message that whether the Afro-American resorted to the model of violence or that of passivity and exile, the entire blame should be laid upon the white racial system.