



Richard Wright: A Personality Fringed With Rebellion

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Abstract:-

Richard Wright is regarded as a great essayist, poet, story writer, novelist, journalist and editor of the 20th century. He is a pioneer of Negro or Black literature. Richard Wright who spent his life in many countries, had a great influence on 20th century American literature. Through his literature, he raised a voice against the established system by portraying the worse, unjust and painful life of the Negroes in America. He had suffered the brunt of racism, religion and discriminatory politics. What he and his people endured, what painful experiences they had, he expressed through his literature. What truly can be called as Negro or Black literature begins with Richard Wright's writings. He was the first versatile writer to bring to light the dark life of the Negroes and sow the seeds of rebellion among them. This research paper aims at introducing the entire literature written by Richard Wright to the readers as well as to acquaint the readers with the themes, characteristics and style of his writings.

Keywords:- Negro, American, theme, Style, Rebellion, novelist, essayist.

I. Introduction:-

Richard Wright was the first highly talented writer to express the pains and sufferings of the Negroes very powerfully in American literary world. The stories and poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Du Bois, Jean Toomer show the literary and classical geniuses of the Negroes. But the so-called white American writers did not pay attention to these black writers. White America had not opened its eyes to see the literary brilliance of the Negro writers. In white America's view, Negro writers and Negro literature remained insignificant or unimportant. They and their literature could not find much place in the literary scenario of America. But Richard Wright broke this trap. His collection of five long stories "Uncle Tom's Children" was

published in 1938 and the white people's tumultuous edifice around the existence of the Negroes caused a great upheaval. In his first novel 'Native Son' which was published in 1940, he hung all the rags of the lives of the Negroes at the gateway of America. He independently contemplated and analysed the life of the Negroes and started presenting to the world, the acute agonies of the Negroes' soul, especially through novels. "Wright had a first rate analytical and independent mind. He was blessed with the sociological imagination and uncanny psychological insight. Yet within the African American intellectual tradition he is known as an author of fiction."¹ The outcry started by Richard Wright has not stopped till today. Richard Wright freely and enthusiastically expressed through his literature the sufferings and fears of three centuries that had been buried in the souls of the American Negroes. White America had never seen such a firestorm before. Three centuries of sufferings, anger, vulnerability and discontent of the Negroes was never noticed by the white Americans. This storm served to bring to the world all the sorrows of the Negroes in one moment.

➤ As a Novelist :-

Richard Wright's first novel, 'Native Son' which was published in 1940 became a huge hit at that time. In this novel Wright has created a subversive and rebellious image of the American Negro. In 'Native Son' Bigger is a symbolic figure which symbolizes American life. Bigger's provocative personality still casts a dark shadow over the American literary world. Richard Wright wants to suggest from this novel that he is not an outcast but he is also the son of America. In the year 1953, a novel 'The Outsider' was published. Although, this novel got less fame and popularity than 'Native Son', this novel is also evident of Richard Wright's astounding and powerful literary talent. While his residence in America, he extensively read a number of philosophers and the



writers. Therefore, by reading the books of these various thinkers, he got a vision, a new angle to look at the racism in America from a different perspective. Therefore J. W. Ward says, "By engaging with issues of international scope he finds a new angle from which to approach both nature and race. His contact with black revolutionaries in late 1950's, particularly Frantz Fanon, broadened his outlook on American racial problems by putting them in an international context."²

Richard Wright's "Savage Holiday" (1954), is a physiologic thriller novel which is based on an insurance official named Erskine Fowler. This Erskine Fowler is held responsible for accident death of a neighbour's young son on a weekend day. This novel shows Richard's deep insight into human nature and reflection on the human mind. 'Lawd Today' (1963) is the story of Jake Jackson, a trouble black young man who lives in Chicago and works in the post office. Youth in the Negro community, their struggle is the favourite subject of Richard Wright's writing. His character directly or indirectly express his own thoughts. The social and political thoughts of Richard Wright can be known through the characters of his novels or stories. Cedric J. Robinson rightly puts it, "Some commentators attempt to reconstruct Wright's political thoughts relying primarily on his fiction, even sometimes treating his characters as mouthpieces for Wright's political and socio theoretic views."³ "A Father's Law" this unfinished novel was written before his death but was published posthumously in 2008. It is actually a crime story and strongly criticize on class based society, racism, family tensions and social inequality. The novel 'The Long Dream' (1958) show the hopeful nature of life. Today's life full of pains will surely not be dark tomorrow. Life will be dark but inner strength, thinking of brightness and adoption of good goals can definitely remove our darkness.

Richard Wright was writing his last novel, 'Island of Hallucination'. He was actually aware that he was helpless, support less and he had no support from any country. We do not own the land under our feet. He wanted to paint a fantasy picture of a utopian world that would never materialize. A gifted writer is always restless. A restless writer dreams of a fantasy world because he finds the bright world of dreams more pleasant and hopeful than the sad world of reality.

➤ **Wright's World of Story :-**

In 1938, Richard Wright's collection of five short stories 'Uncle Tom's Children' was

published. This anthology has five stories, 'Big Boy Leaves Home', 'Down by the Riverside', 'Long Black Song', 'Fire and Cloud', 'Bright and Morning Star'. All these stories depict the inferior, vulnerable and miserable lives of the black Negroes. Through these stories he had violently attached the helpless lives of the Negroes and the white men's exploitation with harsh words. The city of Chicago provided an effective platform for his rebellion and agitation. His literary mindset was formed in the city of Chicago. The lives of the Black people in the South, the starvation condition of the teenage Negroes, the problems of the adults are expressed by the author through personal experience. 'Uncle Tom's Children' symbolically present the conflict between whites and blacks by depicting the fights of children. The climax of violence and brutality has been reached in this story book. This story collection provided him an immense popularity. Richard got a social recognition as a writer. After this book, he achieved a number of milestones in the field of literature by creating one quality literature after another. His collection of stories 'Eight Men' (1961) narrates the conflict between eight Negroes and the white people who harass them. He expresses his condemnation of racism in America through all these stories and asserts that this struggle is not a solitary work but we have to fight against the super caste only by uniting. "Richard found in foolish and impossible thing to fight lonely against the white, He would think of the unity of the black. He would express before his black friend that the white people's treatment enrages him."⁴

In 'The Man who was almost a man' he asserts that he is no slouch, saying that he understands the racist political diplomacy of America very well. 'The Man Who Lived Underground' describe a black man imprisoned on false charges of murder and suffering heavily at the hands of the police. In 'Big Black Gold Man' he describes how the merits of the Negroes are better and greater than that of the whites. In 'The Man Who Saw the Flood' Richard describe a heart - wrenching description of how white people exploit flood - ravaged, destitute and indebted people. In 'Man of All Work' (1957), a character named Carl represents the disrespect Americans have for African blacks. The story 'Man, God Ain't Like That' has an eye watering description of the young hero who is accused of molesting a white woman and thrown in jail and force to confess the charge. 'The Man Killed a Shadow' is a story of a different style depicting a man named Soul who is afraid of his own shadow. 'The Man Who Went to



Chicago' captures the mental dilemma of the young Negroes by describing the black Negro living in the so called world of the whites, dealing with themes of racism, identity struggle, loneliness, conflict, violence etc. Like his other stories 'Rite of Passage' is an eloquent depiction the pains and suffering of the Negroes.

➤ **As a Poet :-**

Richard was a poet by birth. He started writing literature with poetry. In the later part of his life, Richard Wright turned to poetry again. Due to a number of bitter experiences, struggles and humiliations in his life, he became very introverted. He realized that there is no better tool and medium to communicate with himself than poetry. From busy, cruel and oppressive human life, he had turned to nature which gave him the experience of spiritual happiness. He was constantly striving to solve the complexities of human life. He was struggling to find the connection and meaning of human life. Human life is not entirely autonomous. Wright realized that nature has control over human life. He was convinced that there is more evil in human life than in nature. That is why human suffering became the soul of his poetry.

In the later half of his life, he turned to poetry which was his actual genius. His command and love of Japanese poetic form 'Haiku' and 'Hokku' is well known. His favourite poetry forms are 'Haiku' and 'Hokku'. A Japanese poetic form 'Haiku' is a poem of three lines and five syllables. 'Hokku' means the opening stanza of Japanese ranga poem written in single vertical line with the help of cutting words. He wrote over 4000 haikus in English. But only 817 of those haiku were published in an anthology named 'Haiku: This Other World' posthumously in 1998 after Wright's death. Although his haiku poems are not in the original form of Japanese haiku to some extent, these haiku came from a genuine sense of racism. It was a new experiment in American literature. "Wright creates unique avenues of exploration into questions surrounding race by way of stylistic experimentation. Once this trend towards thematic and formal innovation is acknowledged, his haiku can be read in the context of innovation rather than in the context of other traditions." His haiku on the theme of racism and exploitation of the Negroes by the so called whites seem to have gained more popularity than his haiku on other themes. He preferred serializing his haiku rather than providing titles to his haiku poems. He had made a wonderful interweaving of nature and the hard life of the

Negroes in these haiku poems. He writes in about 1374 haiku.

"Yelping bloodhounds
Are blackening the wintry sky
Speeding rain into trees."

In this haiku poem, Richard imagines that after being chased by blood-sucking dogs (white man), the black Negro people hanged on trees and are still hanging. The meaning of these and such haiku poems can be understood by informed readers who are aware of African-American racism and struggle. Through his haiku, Richard Wright was able to depict accurately the oppression, exploitation and slavery of the Negroes.

➤ **Wright as an Essayist :-**

Actually, Richard's life was just like a terror dream or a 'nightmare'. He has lamented on his own fate, own condition, cried and asserted to the whole world that American society, history and culture are the causes of this nightmarish dreams. In an American city of Chicago, Richard Wright got a good opportunity to write for magazines, newspaper, journals and periodicals. Being burnt in fire pit of poverty, inequality and casteism throughout his life, rebellious inflammation started to emerge in his writing. He went to New York in 1937. There he was appointed to the editorial board of a newspaper named 'Daily Worker'. He wrote his famous article 'Blueprint for Negro Literature' in the same year. This article is an important historical document as well as Richard Wright's literary manifesto. Despite being born in a lower society of the blacks, he is one of the great writers who have influenced and inspired the literary field by gaining a place of honour in the world literature. As Tommie Shelby puts it: "As a true proletarian writer, he won international recognition and long lasting influence and his trajectory not only is remarkable but remains inspiring." In a famous essay titled, 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow', Richard Wright has made an unforgettable analysis of what kind of miserable life the white America who treated the Negro as Jim Crow has to live and what inhumane values he has to accept.

The communist party which spoke the language of caste struggle, did not move forward to remedy the injustice caused to the Negroes by the apartheid. Wright had to leave this communist party in 1944 as Negroes were not treated as equal and fraternal under the banner of the communist Party. In an article titled, 'I Tried to be a Communist' Wright has described his disillusioned experiences while working in the communist



party. In 'Introduction to Black Metropolis' (1945) he has made an honest attempt to depict the social, economic and cultural life of African, American, Racism, Classism, Inequality in urban life are discussed in this article. In the article 'I Choose to Exile' (1951), he describes why he has chosen to live in France after being born in America and spending 38 years of his life there. In the article 'The God That Failed' (1949) his entry into the Communist Party, the failure of communism, the blasphemy created by Communism are highlighted. After adapting a French citizenship in 1947, he continued to travel through Asian and African countries. He got the topics for a number of articles from the trips. Although financial hardship throughout his life, Wright always refused to compromise his principles. Many of Wright's writings were published posthumously. Richard's life was spent like a refugee whenever he lived and so he was striving very forcefully on social malpractices, exploitation and inequality through his articles and essays. As Richard Wright faced the terrible realities in life, his essays reveal the content of brutality of reality.

➤ **Other Writings :-**

Richard Wright was undoubtedly a revolutionary writer. A writer should use words that are committed to revolution. The writer's writing should be prone to revolution. His / her literature lacks meaning and emotional power if he cannot find words to ignite a rebel against the established section of the society. Richard Wright held an opinion that literature must have an unbreakable commitment to society. Some critics have named this kind of literary writing as 'literature of necessity' or 'literature of survival'. All of Wright's literature depict the inferior and vulnerable lives of the Negroes. He wanted to find the meaning of human existence. Above all, man is ultimately bound to some nation, culture, race or religion. Wright wanted to explore these bonds. In 1954, Richard went to Africa to find this bond. He wrote a book 'Black Power' based on this visit. In it, he tried to understand the mind of Africans who were yearning for freedom. In 1957, he went to Spain to explore the human mind and wrote a beautiful book based on it called 'Pagan Spain'.

Wright was writing for the marginalized, deprived section of the society from humanitarian point of view. In a book 'The Colour Curtain' (1956), he tried to find the identity of the third world. In 'White Man, Listen!' (1957) Wright called upon the whites

of the world to welcome the new era of equality and fraternity. Although, Wright didn't receive a technical education in journalism and his journalism do not belong to African - American journalism tradition, he always raised his voice against injustice and exploration through journalism and editing. "Richard Wright's journalism has been largely unexamined by Wright scholars. He has never been studied as a literally journalist nor placed in an African - American tradition of journalism or literary journalism." His 'Black Power', "White Man, Listen!" and 'The Colour Curtain' these three books are altogether known as 'Three Books from Exile'. In 'How Bigger Was Born' (1940), he has effectively explained how the character Bigger in 'Native Son' was born in his mind.

'The Black Boy' (1945) is his autobiographical, memoir sketch, in which he has drawn many incidents of his own childhood, selected events of his youth, his wanderings in different cities, his entry into the Communist Party etc. His criticism of racism in this book made the book very controversial. Wright's other autobiographical memoir is 'American Hunger' which was published in 1977. In this book Wright describes his hatred of communism, his exit from the party and neglect of the Negroes etc. 'Later to Joe C. Brown' (1968) contains letters to his childhood friend Joe C. Brown. In '12 Million Black Voices' (1941), Richard Wright tells the history of the social status of the Negro Blacks in America.

II. Conclusion :-

Wright was writing for the downtrodden in the spirit of humanism. During his time many Asian and African countries were struggling for independence. Their struggle to ignite the whole world is reflected in his literature. His writings are the offerings thrown in the sacrifice of Asia and Africa. He powerfully told the whites that the steps of time and changing and so the white should not be proud of their present status. Through his stories, poetry, novels he has appealed to the white people of the world to welcome the new age. He strongly asserted that the world of tomorrow belongs to the Negroes, equality and humanism.

All of Wright's writings have a particular protest. If this element of protest is subtracted from his writing, nothing will be left in his writing. A famous English critic therefore rightly puts it: "His writing what his manhood, his assertion that he was whole. It was his sanity and his undestroyed self." His writings are definitely evidence of



this. The question of identity always haunted him. This writer was greatly pained to see the blacks fed up with the operation of the upper castes have no support. He lived his life with mind riddled with racism. He was actually aware that no nation support the Blacks. It is extremely painful for anyone to realize that they do not own the ground under their feet. His life knew no stability. Like other Negroes, Wright tried to make himself understood that this land belongs to us, this world belongs to us. His rebellious literature is a result of the life burnt in the wildfire of racism. He believed that to fight against injustice, one should take up the pen and not the sword, therefore he made the pen a sword and thought a shield. His pen continued till the last moment for all the elements and nations crushed under the heels of imperial world to get the healthy wind of freedom, equality and prosperity.

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