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## The Racial Prejudice In The Novels Of Richard Wright

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**K.Velmurugan**

Assistant Professor (Senior Grade), Department of English,  
University College of Engineering, Panruti  
(A Constituent College of Anna University, Chennai)

**Corresponding Author- K.Velmurugan**

Email id: [kvelueng@gmail.com](mailto:kvelueng@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Studies show that number of domestic workers in any society rise with the level of inequality. It means that in order for this occupation to flourish, there has to be people who are desperate enough to do the work that no one else wants to do, and people well enough to pay them for the work they do not want to do. Thus “domestic workers occupy one of the lowest rungs in the social hierarchy, have little or no dignity, labor, and or exploited in both everyday and egregious way.” (Ray, Raka, 11) “The Help” a film about the relationship between African American maids and their employers in 1960s Mississippi gives the in-depth rationale of discrimination and alienation shown towards the black maids.

**Key words:** Domestic workers, social hierarchy, discrimination, prejudice, individual identity, segregation, slave

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### *The Long Dream, Black Boy*

Wright expresses his concern for the “for colored” signs, which psychologically disturbed the blacks in depth, in several of his novels and circumstances. In Richard Wright’s last novel, *The Long Dream*, which was published in 1958, the impact of “for colored” sign was vividly depicted through the protagonist Tyree Tucker and his son Fish belly. When Fish belly wants to visit a Farm Fair in a nearby village, he asks permission with his father to take him there on a Thursday. For this, Tyree the father of Fish belly says he would be able to accompany his son Fish to the Farm Fair on another day, since he had two burials on Thursday. But Fish replies to his father that only on Thursday the blacks are allowed to visit the fair as it is the “colored day”, a day when the “colored” are permitted to visit the fair.

“Thursday?” His father echoed.”

I got two burials on Thursday.”

“Aw, Papa!” Fish belly wailed in disappointment.

“Sorry, Fish. I can take you on Friday.”

“But Thursday’s the only day for colored folks, Papa.” (LD, 37)

Further, *The Long Dream* reveals the protagonist’s state of insecurity in the

White’s world and the struggle which he goes through to come out of the knitted web of slavery by the whites. Tyree Tucker breaks the old saying that, “The dream of a black will not come true” in a white society by his stance against White in the “Long Dream.” Not only that, he also made his son Fish a man of identity who tries to stand on the victory stand in the black race with the whites. It is Tyree’s dream to make his son a unique person amidst the blacks and among the whites. He induced Fish belly’s (his son) ever burning fire to out shine by breaking the blocks and attaining the dreams in a hostile and the race prejudiced world.

Richard Wright makes his protagonists to sense the difference between blacks and whites in the early stage itself. Fish, Tyree’s son, realized this for the first time when he was seven years old. When he happens to wait in the office, for his father’s arrival, he views at calendar that held the photo of a laughing white girl. Suddenly he realizes and whispers to himself about the woman who was “with his father at his father’s underground establishment” (LD, 22). Though his mind comprehends with the color, Fish says, “She is Black.” He thinks of himself and his father by saying, “And he was black . . . and his father was black . . . He

sensed a relation between the worlds of white skins and black skins, but he could not determine just what it was." (LD, 22, 23)

The author attempts to trace the difference between the white world which is at the top of the ladder and the black world which is at the feet of its hostile force through Fish belly, the protagonist of "*The Long Dream*". The photograph of a white woman in the calendar emerges as a swirling question in his young mind. He compares the white lady with the black woman, he saw few minutes ago with his father. The contradiction of white and black color conflicts in his mind and he was confused and could not decide the criteria which divide both the worlds.

Since whites are the dominant and "significant others" in American society, and black children derive their conceptions of themselves largely from white society and its institutions. The attitude of racial prejudice and segregation made a negative impact on the mindset of the black writers to contemplate them to seek for their individual identity. Several black writers joined this band wagon and made exemplary research on the attitudes of children and how they look up at the whites and what their expectations were. James has given a catalogue of writers whose concern is the difference between black and the white people.

Lusker's (1929) pioneering research on children's attitude indicates that young children are aware of racial differences, and illuminates some of the emotional components which accompany racial prejudice. An early study by Minard (1931) also suggests that children's racial attitudes are formed during the earliest years of life. Since the seminal research by Lusker and Minard, a number of other researchers have studied race awareness and racial self-identifications of young children. This research has generally confirmed Lusker's early findings. Horowitz (1939) found that most of the nursery school children, which she studied, were able to correctly identify race. (qtd., Banks, A James, 10)

The deep rooted segregation made the black child look down upon him and to feel inferior. The education which was given and the area where they were brought up were far from appreciation. Therefore a kind of self-hatred started developing in the mind of every black child. Margaret Walker feels that

it was due to lack of proper education and lack of confidence forced the blacks to devalue their culture and their upbringing and also their outlook.

With segregation the white child was educated to regard race as more important than humanity, and the black child was educated to regard a white world as superior to his own. And thus, taught to hate himself. (Walker, Margret, 49)

The seeds of hatred and race prejudice are sown even at the earlier stage itself among the white children through their parents or teachers or by the white royal society. At the same time, the parents of black children have a tough time in introducing about the racial discrimination and social disjunctions and disparities to their children and in teaching how to avoid facing the white world and to tackle situations tactfully with the whites.

James A Banks reasons the words of Goodman. In a research, done by the critic Good Man, among the children, the black children suffer alienation at the hands of white children and they were segregated when the white children play. Black children were not allowed to play along with the white children. "Goodman noted, as the Clarks and Morland were to later confirm, that white children make more correct racial self-identifications than black children" (qtd., Banks, James. A, 10). This attitude of segregation is deep rooted in the minds of whites, since the days the blacks were brought in as slaves. Alienation was a fact of life, glorified by the whites because of the class and color prejudice. Richard had undergone the life style of a deprived black during his childhood which reflects in his novels *Black Boy* and *The Long Dream*. Moss and Wilson give an account of the racism applied by the whites;

...by early twentieth century, all southern states had passed a law institutionalizing the separation of the races, public places was segregated, including churches, schools, libraries, phones, restrooms, beaches, water fountains, parks, auditoriums, buses, sports and recreation facilities, hospitals, the military, orphanages, prisons, asylums, and courthouses. There were separate white and black funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries. Blacks are in their own restaurants. Lived in separate boarding houses, and attended different theatres.

Richard Wright grew up in a time when segregation touched nearly every aspect of southern life. (Moss, Joyce & Wilson, George, 47)

It is evident that in every aspect of Negro (Black) Life, segregation was implemented by the whites under the Jim Crow Laws. When Fish and his friends had an argument about their race, i.e., where they belong to, whether they are American or African, Zeke, one of his friends answered,

"I am an American" Zeke thundered.

"Nigger you dreaming" Sam preached. "You ain't no American!" You live Jim Crow. Don't you ride Jim Crow trains. Jim Crow buses? Don't you go to Jim Crow restaurants? Jim Crow schools? Jim Crow churches? Ain't your undertaking parlors and Jim Crow grave yards?" (LD, 32)

The attitude of Fish belly reflects the mindset of every black child. Richard points out the cue towards the antagonizing Whites, because these invisible forces hold the whip and control the lives of blacks in such a manner that the unfortunate blacks do not feel the pain of being kept aside, as it was considered normal. In his own words Richard further adds, "To Fish belly it was clear that those white powerful invisible white faces ruled the lives of black people to a degree that few black people could acknowledge themselves." (LD, 62)

#### ***Black Boy, Native Son, Lawd Today***

It is seen from the study that the racial indifferences implanted from a very young age. As a living example, Richard brings out this concept in three of his early novels, *Black Boy*, *Native Son* and in *The Long Dream*. In *Black Boy*, the main character tells that in West Helena the black boys fought regularly with their rivals, the white boys. Whereas in *Native Son*, Bigger and his friend Paul, Gus and others play among themselves and imitate as though they mock at the blacks by behaving like a white. He pokes at the whites through a conversation. They play the roles of white mockingly:

"Hello", this is the President of the United States Speaking" Bigger said.

"Oh Yessuh, Mr. President" Gus said "Well You See, the niggers is raising and all over the country. We have got to do something with these black folks . . ."

"Oh, if it is about niggers, I will be right there, Mr. President", Gus said. They hung

up imaginary receivers and leaned against the wall and laughed. (NS, 462)

Richard with a different tone summarizes the reflections of acting as white by the black children in *Lawd Today*. Blacks in general tried their best to seek the attention and acceptance of whites by changing their looks by adopting different ways like straightening the hair etc., Sam, the friend of Jake, questions the reason for straightening the hair like whites and imitating them. The inability of the blacks to join the mainstream and being neglected makes them to select any alternative so that they could come out of the segregation.

As the life was difficult for the blacks, jobs were not easily available too. There were many restrictions for the blacks to do any businesses either. While, the profit rendering businesses were under the control of the whites, the blacks were compelled to take-up works that are looked down by the society. Blacks were permitted to run the funeral parlors in the black belt area, which was considered as the job of an out-cast. Richard Wright pictures this disparity in his fiction *Native Son* with irony as, "Almost all businesses in the Black belt were owned by Jews, Italians and Greeks. Most Negro businesses were funeral parlors, white undertakers refused to bother with dead black bodies. (NS, 679)

Similarly, the central character of *The Long Dream* also runs an underground establishment where he buried only the black bodies which the whites hate to take at their parlors. This ill treatment hurts the ego of Tyree Tucker, but he sarcastically remarks, "I make money by gitting black dreams ready for burial. Mebbe you don't know what I mean, hunh? "A black man's a dream son, a dream that can't come true." (LD, 73)

Tyree Tucker, being a black and having realized his state in the white world has learnt to lead the life within the boundaries destined by the whites. He does not rebel as he knew the consequences. Hence, unlike the other protagonists of Richard, Tyree, with a strong determination, facilitates his business by bribing the whites, prospering in his profession without entering into the foe's ground. When the protagonist in *Black Boy* faces suppression in all his menial jobs, he could not contain his emotions which eventually come as an outburst. Tyree, on the other hand, grins at

the white's face, bow in front of them, but behind the screen he runs the show and becomes the head of the "Black Belt". Tyree achieves what he wants with a grinning face and a submissive posture unlike Richard in *Black Boy*. Richard shows the two faces of a black with two different characters and attitudes, a father who wants to achieve with the available means showing a grinning face and his own son who vehemently acts the opposite, through the character of Fish belly. Richard maintains and shows his own individuality. He tries to prove his opposition and hatred towards this "grinning" attitude. The act of "Uncle Tomism" by Tyree makes Fish belly feels ashamed and his self-respect crumbles.

The overpowering "Jim Crow Law" was yet another draconian virtue that bulldozed every opportunity for blacks for their decent survival. A majority of American states enforced segregation through "Jim Crow" laws from 1880s to 1960. From Delaware to California, and from North Dakota to Texas, many states (and cities too) could impose legal punishments on people for consorting with members of another race.

The most common types of laws forbade intermarriage and ordered business owners and public institutions to keep their black and white clientele separated. White racism throughout America, particularly in the South is the culprit in the tragedy of blacks' life. Richard Wright sketches out these in the epics of Jim Crow. He narrates an incident how a black could easily be set aside, shown his place where he belongs to and make it acceptable to him that he is an outcast and estranged. The mind set becomes so ridiculous that he is ready to live with it, though his inner conscious wants to rebel, wants to come out but disdained to accept this as the way of life.

The second part of *Black Boy* (American Hunger) begins with Wright's arrival at Chicago, where, he finds various short term jobs as porter, dish washer and postal clerk. With the onset of the great depression, unfortunately, employment opportunities depleted, as everyone was looking for a work that it became extremely difficult to find a job. Richard with no alternative, applied for relief at the local department of public welfare. The department assigned him a position as an Orderly in a medical research institute in a

hospital. Richard noticed that almost all jobs of respect and attention were engaged with Whites, whereas the blacks were chosen to do the subordinate works and hard labor. Moss and Wilson support this point of view in their theory stating, "...the lowest jobs, those of Orderly and Janitor were held by Blacks, while the nurses and doctors were all Whites." (Moss, Joyce & Wilson, George, 41)

Bigger Thomas, a twenty year old protagonist, had to live in a slum environment (in Chicago) to challenge and face unfairness. He, along with his friends, Gus, G.H, is jobless and roaming around the black belt and trying to steal from a black's shop because, stealing in black's place by a black is safe. The living environment of the blacks is aptly described by Manak Kumar as "The blacks live in a dingy, segregated dirty, polluted, rat infested area. Slave cabins were simple and crude, mostly consisted of a single dark room with a fire place for cooking and heat." (Dey, Manak Kumar, 53)

Bigger and his family too lived in a rat infested dingy flat, but it was owned by Mr. Dalton, the white man, under whom Bigger Thomas goes to work as a Chauffeur. Even though Mr. Dalton offered charities to the Negro organizations, Bigger Thomas, was unaware of the charity Mr. Dalton had provided to his sect (the blacks). Where as in reality, Dalton had kept the blacks separately by providing them the worse and dirty flats and kept them away from whites. He never considered it as worthy to improve their living condition, it suited him to exploit the black race and to keep the whites happy and, eventually, follow the diktats of whites.

It speaks clearly about the status of the blacks in society. They belong to none, they are unaware of the happenings in the society; either it is their welfare or the disaster. They are kept in a dark corner of the society with their eyes and ears shut to the occurrences around them. This shows the segregation of blacks by the white dominant people, the atrocities which blacks face and denial of the basic amenities and a healthy environment to lead a normal life.

When they were in need, they did not belong to anyone. They (the blacks) were left alone painfully, pathetically to face the consequences of the horrors of white's way and will for survival. The blacks were forced to adopt a frustrated life as slaves and the

whites inflicted this misery on the blacks without any remorse.

The racial prejudice which is implanted in the hearts of whites since their childhood reflects in the society towards black by their dehumanizing acts. The same hatred and hostility of whites make the black to face the white world, always with fear and insecurity. This basic tendency of hatred of whites and the fear of blacks replicate not only in the American scenario but also in all the protagonists of Richard Wright's works. Bigger in *Native Son* implicates through his annihilating act and Richard in *Black Boy* has shown his resistance by suppressing his violence through his silent state. But the protagonist Fish, unlike Bigger Thomas or Richard Wright stood on his stance till the end and fought for his rights even though he had so many injuries and wounds on his soul owing to the unsympathetic white world.

At the time of the publication of *Native Son*, (1940) it brought a great furor and cultural change and paved the way for the world to know and realize what is happening to the blacks in the real America. Critic Irving Howe wrote "the day the *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed for ever . . . it made impossible repetition of the old lies . . ." (Howe, Irving, 355). There is an old saying; "the greatest lie, that the devil ever told was, that he no longer existed." Well the same may be said today about the white racism. Till today, racism had spread its dreadful claws to cling and crush the underprivileged and deny their rights.

The whites denied many basic rights, one among them was education to the Negroes (blacks), subsequently, when provided, and it was insufficient and inefficient. The feeling, that the blacks could go to school, study and make themselves knowledgeable, was beyond the comprehension and acceptance of the whites.

As a recurrent theme of discrimination, he endeavours to appraise the various obsessive stimuli that breed alienation in his life. *Black Boy* gives a glimpse of the experience a maid goes through. Richard Wright with the help of one of his friends goes to a white lady's house to do the household chores. The first question she asked him was "Do you steal?" the sarcastic answer by Richard Wright was "If I steal, I will not tell that" (BB, 141).

Realizing the white lady's rage he answers quickly that he would not steal. The same scenario is depicted in *Native Son* too, when Bigger was interviewed by Mr. Dalton, he questions him "If you had a job, would you steal now?" (NS, 492). This is the general opinion of what whites have on the blacks. They consider the blacks as criminals and liars, which makes them uneasy. At a later sequence in *Black Boy*, the lady witnesses him in the kitchen reading some books, she questions him about it and Richard answers that he would like to become a writer. This angers the lady and she reciprocates by uttering that "Who on earth put such ideas on a nigger's mind. You will never become a writer." (BB, 141)

Richard brings out through his narratives the expression of his dream, because he himself wants to be a writer, who was denied of education, which he rather longed for. In *Black Boy*, he pictures America to analyze the scenario of the Afro-American in the Southern belt and he highlights the fictional portraits he had earlier offered. Wright utilized the wide range of publicity, his book received, to say his piece on racism.

The scream of his sister Vera at the sight of the rat and Bigger's anger proves the desperation of the family. Richard compares the rat's condition with the living condition of every black household and Bigger's anger is emitted out by killing the rat, which he could not show towards the whites.

### Conclusion

The racial prejudice and the suppressive attitude of whites made them to neglect humanity and they refused to take black blood even during the emergency period of war and they considered Negro's (black) blood as dirty. Richard was interested to serve in the Army as a soldier, but like every other blacks, he was given odd jobs like washing the dishes and digging ditches. No black was considered for a dignified duty in the army or in the navy. It was painful for any black that both the social and governmental agencies did not accept them or gave them their dues.

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