

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 9 Issue 3 June 2023

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

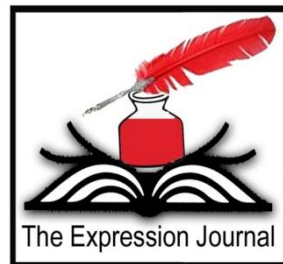
Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132



RICHARD WRIGHT'S WOMEN: THEIR CHARACTER AND PASSIVITY

DR. JANET ANDREW SHAH

Department of English

Nirmala College, Hinoo

Ranchi, Chhattisgarh

.....

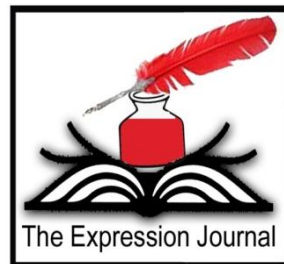
Abstract

It is interesting to examine the depictions of women in the works of one of the foremost Black male writers; Richard Wright's male-centered narratives often treated women characters as objects or props in male-ordered worlds. Feminist literary critics usually take issue with Wright's treatment of gender in his work, and this affects his position within the American literary canon. When examined critically within the breadth of his published and unpublished works, his women characters, both real and fictional, contests this interpretation by demonstrating an archive of black women's experience unlike any from the era. Wright's oeuvre is composed of a complex array of black women who are portrayed as mothers, workers, leaders, activists, and theorists. They are representations of the world as it is. Richard Wright's exploration of women in his works reveals a nuanced analysis of their character and societal passivity. This paper highlights the intricate balance between individual agency and external constraints, illustrating how women's passivity often emerges as a survival strategy rather than mere submission. Wright's narratives demonstrate the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class, which shape women's experiences and actions. By dissecting these themes, the abstract underscores Wright's sensitivity to the multifaceted nature of women's lives, inviting a reevaluation of their roles beyond conventional interpretations of docility. This paper explores how women's sexuality is also depicted as a form of power in the novel of Richard Wright, especially with this lineage of black women both real and fictional which also evolves alongside the author's political consciousness.

Keywords

Richard Wright, Women, Character, Passivity, Power, Representations, Objects, Sexuality, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Feminism, African American Literature.

.....



RICHARD WRIGHT'S WOMEN: THEIR CHARACTER AND PASSIVITY

DR. JANET ANDREW SHAH

Department of English

Nirmala College, Hinoo

Ranchi, Chhattisgarh

.....

Trudier Harris when commenting on Wright's depiction of women, has been known to have famously depicted, in his opinion, Wright's very limited vision and portrayal of the Black Woman:

"When we think of Richard Wright, the portrait of black womanhood that immediately comes to mind is that of Bessie Mears, the drunk, victimized, desperate young woman in "Native Son" who is killed by Bigger Thomas and whose body serves as a piece of evidence in the case concerning Mary Dalton. (206).

In his novels Richard Wright shows the power of white women in a racist society, which can radically alter or destroy black men's lives. What is most interesting however is that Wright's depiction of the power of women goes far beyond this theme. In fact, he portrays two major ways in which women can control men. The more obvious of the two is a threat presented by women independence, and in addition Wright shows how a man can feel that a woman's dependence can be a form of control over his existence. We see in *Big Boy Leaves Home* how this force that is shown through the entity of a white woman, who stumbles upon naked black boys who have been swimming. Her screams sets in motion a chain of events that results ultimately in the death of three boys at the hands of White men, and Big Boy's flight from town to escape lynching.

Main Body

Wright stresses the manipulative nature of the women whom Bigger encounters through his character in "Native Son". When Mrs. Thomas visits Bigger in jail, for example, she pressurizes him to promise her that he will pray. Not only is Bigger pressured from his mother but also from Mrs. Dalton. When he first comes to work for the Daltons, Mrs. Dalton implies that she thinks he should continue his education. These women without being overtly dominating, force Bigger to behave the way they think he should be seen in society.

The relationship in which the role of power is most interesting is between Bigger and Bessie. In examining this section of the novel, one might consider Gayle's reservations in *The Way of the New World*:

The murder of Bessie Mears is the weakest incident in the novel. To murder this woman, of his color and race, means that Bigger severs all ties with the universe,

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

becomes a man completely alone. Further, for a black to murder another is to commit the most heinous of crimes, to substantiate the argument made by Attaway, in *Blood on the Forge*, that the black man who engages in violence becomes so obsessed with hatred and rage that he is incapable of distinguishing between friend and foe, not able to separate the oppressor from the victim. On this level Bigger fails as both rebel and revolutionary. (171)

Women's power to negate male independence is also a central theme of the long dream. In this novel right depicts the kind of mother figure who appears in native son. He also presents women as bullies who oppressed the protagonist personality and as forces who sexuality pose a threat to men on the whole right paints a picture of women as unsavory and at times as dangerous creatures. Women's sexuality is depicted as a form of power in Richard Wrights novels; in fact, an essential element of Wrights depiction of psycho-sexual aspects of the racial problem can be found in his books. He emphasizes the potentially catastrophic consequences of Black men's involvement with White woman in the South. He shows how this danger can affect Black men's views of the White woman, for example, we see Bigger when he fears the consequences of being caught in Mary Dalton's room. Similarly, in "The Long Dream", the characters know that such involvements are extremely dangerous and risky. For example, when Chris dies, Fish's father, Tyree emphasizes repeatedly to him, to "never look at a white woman! when you are in the presence of a white woman, she means death, remember that!" (83-84)

We find that in Wrights novels the female characters frequently function as vehicles through which the hero's problems and difficulties are increased or solved. The women do not develop the symbols and stereotypes with which they are described in the beginning. In fact, the described attributes of blacks and women reveal that they have traits that are usually common to both- that are usually alike and to the black populace, that is, inferior intelligence, sensual gratification, an imagined prowess for sexuality, a sly deceit, and ingratiating or supplicative manner intended to please. To these characteristics we may add, especially for women an added facility for passivity and slyness, and the inability to grasp subtle principles of conduct. Most of rights female characters fit into the stereotypes that the white populace has thrust on them. They are shown as child-like and stupid. Wright did not attribute mature human mentality to them, in fact his male characters have the ability to rationalize but the female characters seem to be completely at the bottom of the scale of human intelligence.

In *The Long Dream*, we glimpse Fish's personal life where his environment and his interaction with his peers has shaped his ideas of what a woman is or should be.

Black girls, with their giggling and talking, were no longer negative creatures who did not "understand," but a substratum of life whose chief traits were marking time until he and his black brothers were old enough to go to them and give them their duties and destinies. And, to Fishbelly, this interpretation of woman was as it should have been; it was in this fashion that his environment had presented woman to him. Indeed, the pending gift of woman was something delightful, a gratuitous pleasure that nature had somehow showered down upon the male section of life alone, and he waited for that gift as one would wait for a new and different kind of Christmas with Santa Clauses going up instead of coming down chimneys. He and his gang joked loud and long about the physical pleasures they would inherit, but as yet their knowledge was hearsay. (*Dream*, p. 77)

Wright's patriarchal bias becomes evident in his portrayal of the major female characters in *The Long Dream*, *Native Son*, *Gawd Today*, *The Outsider*, and "Bright and Morning Star". *The*

Long Dream portrays Gladys as an unintelligent and passive woman, full of gratitude because Fish plans to save her from living out the rest of her life in the whorehouse. While taking her for a ride through the streets which is predominantly a White area, he wants to talk to her about the inequities of Black and White. However, Gladys's responses disappoint him with her almost apathetic acceptance of her life coupled with the traumas and memories of her own sad experiences with whites, and Fish realizes "that her mind was incapable of comprehending the elementary complexity of it all" (*Dream*, pp. 190-91). Gladys symbolizes Fish's spending ability and status, so his desire to set her up in an apartment reflects the impression he wishes to give the world. Her reaction, on being told that she will be rescued from the predicament of her immediate circumstances, is one of utterly grateful submission: she flings herself into his arms and cries. Wright's women whimper and cry easily; after all, "A woman's business is emotion and her trade is carried on in cash of tears."¹ Gladys looks at Fish, after he has told her of his intention to set her up in an apartment, with "eyes that were begging redemption, salvation" (*The Long Dream*, p. 192). "He had never before seen a woman in the throes of redemption, had never before witnessed the light in the face of a woman whose destiny had been changed in the twinkling of an eye" (p. 192). And of course, it is a man who redeemed poor little fallen Gladys "in the twinkling of an eye.". Wright's patriarchal streak becomes evident again.

Bessie in *Native Son* and Lil in *Gawd Today* are equally apathetic and without imagination or liveliness, and the little individualistic thinking they could have done is swamped by either liquor or religion. Both function as road blocks to the actions and pursuits of the male characters. Neither Jake nor Bigger is an intelligent, rationalizing man. However, simply because they are shown up in contrast, they seem active and energetic, whereas the women are portrayed as passive and submissive. Lil is, in the beginning of the novel, like a bullied child who is continually ordered around, which, in the hero's view, degrades her while it aggrandizes him. At the beginning of *Gawd Today* Jake sits at the breakfast table and reads the newspaper, while he thinks aloud on the state of the country, about Roosevelt, Hitler, Einstein, crime, Communism, and race problems. All "Male Topics". No matter that his reasoning or understanding could be flawed. As is usual every morning, Lil is absorbed in reading *Unity*, a religious pamphlet, and does not respond to his thinking aloud or his remarks. Her silence provokes Jake to an angry response.

Woman, what makes you so dumb? ever try using your brains sometimes? never think of nothing that's serious?"

....

"I don't know, Jake." (*Lawd Today*, p. 31)

The intellectually inferior woman, primitive, childlike and instinctual is another stereotype that Wright fits another of his female characters in. Sarah in "Long Black Song" is portrayed as being highly sensuous while her thoughts, nebulous and half formed clutch at images of her child and her former lover. In fact, when a White man who is selling gramophones makes overtures to her and gets physically intimate with her, she tries to fight her growing desire by focusing on the fact that he is white. But her simmering desires cannot be held in check and she takes him to her bedroom. Silas her husband finds the white man's handkerchief and is full of rage at the realization that his wife has cheated him, and that a White man has taken advantage of his racial superiority.

Sarah functions as a vehicle in the story to show the tragedy of a hardworking Black man whose wife has cheated on him with a white man. Her thoughtlessness makes way for Silas to

assume tragic proportions when he proudly and courageously kills the white man and wounds his partner when they come back in the morning to get the money for the “graphophone.” Before the sheriff comes to kill him, Silas stands before his house and talks ‘out of his life, out of a deep and final sense that now it was all over and nothing could make any difference.’² The white men set fire to his house and Silas burns to death. Sarah runs across the fields to rescue herself and the baby. Her thoughts are confused and haphazard: “... she could not put her finger on it [her thoughts on life] and when she thought hard about it it became all mixed up, like milk spilling suddenly” (“Song,” p. 126). The imagery of the spilling milk is typically a woman’s, and Wright has accurately described Sarah’s thought processes here. This would have never come to a man’s mind.

Gladys and Eva, women characters in *The Outsider* are more articulate in their thinking. However, their main purpose is to increase Cross’s figurative and literal entrapment. This function is particularly evident in the first part of the novel, which leads to Cross’s desire to leave his old life for a new one. He is weighed down with the emotional and revengeful demands of Dot, his mistress, and Gladys his wife.

His mother, with her ever-increasing demands of religiosity, also plays havoc with his peace. “He had just left one woman, his mother, who had hurled at him her life draped in the dark hues of complaint and accusation, who had tried futilely to rouse compassion in him by dramatizing the forlorn nature of her abandoned plight; now he was on his way to struggle with yet another woman. And after Dot there loomed the formidable figure of his wife’. (*The Outsider*, p. 34). Cross is entrapped by the three women—one of whom, Dot, is threatening to sue him for rape. The second one, Gladys, will not give him a divorce; and his mother is entangling him in a net of complaints and accusations. All three contribute in their own ways to shape his final decision to escape this world and his surroundings when he gets a chance during a train accident and he fakes his death to live a life away from the pressures that he was facing in this one,

It is apparent that Wright’s female characters fit into the stereotypes summarized at the beginning of this study. They do not exist as equal partners and full human beings but function as conveniences for the resolution or development of masculine dilemmas. This treatment of female characters is inconsistent for a writer like Wright, who describes in most of his works the effects of being a member of an oppressed minority in a racist and hostile environment. He describes the need of Blacks to live a whole life without suppression, and in his essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” defends “a human right, the right of a man to think and feel honestly.” Wright claims to be striving for the realization of the charters of the Bills of Rights so that every man and woman should have the opportunity to realize himself, to seek his own individual fate and goal, his own peculiar untranslatable destiny. However, Wright gives his female characters neither the attributes nor the opportunities within the narrative context to think, act, and feel freely. Although he depicts clearly the oppression of Blacks, he appears unconscious of creating female characters who, regardless of race, are exploited and suppressed. And it becomes more and more clear that Wright seems to be unaware that a free and equal relationship between men and women has to exist in order to liberate truly a whole race and society.

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

Works Cited

Gayle, Addison, Jr. *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son*. Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980.

Harris, Trudier. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. University of Tennessee Press, 1985.

Margolies, Edward. *The Art of Richard Wright*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1969

Maryemma, Graham. *The Cambridge Companion to African American Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Harper and Row, 1940.

---. *The Long Dream*. Doubleday, 1958.

---. *The Outsider*. Harper and Row, 1953.