

## **Anguish of the Black Psyche in Richard Wright's *The Outsider***

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### **Abstract**

Richard Wright is a significant black writer who ushered in a profound change in the twentieth century American literature. His novels primarily deal with the problems of racism and oppression of the black people in America. His famous novel *The Outsider* (1953) portrays the existential outlook, transformation and tragic fall of a highly intelligent black protagonist Cross Damon. This paper explores the anguish experienced by his psyche when he embarks on a journey of rediscovering his identity and meaning of life by becoming an outsider and removing himself from ethics, law and humanity.

**Keywords:** Richard Wright, American literature, black people, *The Outsider*, Cross Damon, psyche, anguish

### **Introduction**

Richard Wright is undoubtedly the most influential black writer in Afro-American literature. All his grandparents suffered from slavery and racial oppression. His father was a poor farmer and his mother was a schoolteacher. When they moved to Memphis, the father left the family. Richard's family moved from one place to another and lived in great poverty. His life offered very limited scope for any joy and formal education. As a boy of five, he was beaten severely by his strict mother for small mistakes and racially abused by his white employers.

Richard's bleak boyhood experiences found powerful expression in his early works like *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. They depicted the sufferings of the Afro-Americans living under the harsh Jim Crow times filled with cruel practices like lynching, castration, tarring and burning of black people. Wright's early works had a far-reaching influence on the Afro-American literature and American literature, and they established him as a reputed black writer. He is one of the acclaimed and widely studied writers of the Chicago Renaissance. He is "often understood as an isolated literary figure and one of the period's few

black writers worthy of note...” (Gene Andrew Jarrett, p.279) Today he is seen as a pioneering black writer who exposed the oppression of Negroes in America using simple language and in a most appealing manner.

*The Outsider* is a realistic and existential portrayal of the general human condition and the human society. In her introduction to the perennial edition of Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*, Maryemma Graham points out that Wright’s novel *The Outsider* is “...a story of epic proportions, a complex master narrative designed to show American racism in raw and ugly terms”. (Richard Wright, *The Outsider*) Tyrone Williams aptly states, “*The Outsider* is a “novel of ideas” in which he (Wright) attempted to clarify, and perhaps contribute toward a solution for, an issue that he saw as larger than racism. He was concerned about the possibility of identity, meaningful action, and fulfilment in the modern world, in which judgments of good and evil ... cannot be made on the basis of faith in the existence of a transcendent being or scheme regarding the value of humanity. (Tyrone Williams, p.1245) Winslow judged “*The Outsider* to be worthy of comparison with the work of Homer and Strindberg, an achievement “hardly equalled by any other American novelist who ever lived.” (Maryemma Graham, p.182)

Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* is divided in to five sections as Dread, Dream, Descent, Despair and Decision. The name of the titles suggests the fateful trajectory that the black protagonist of the novel, Cross Damon takes while rediscovering his identity and meaning of life with relation to his racist society. The title of Book I, ‘Dread’ refers to the inner state of the black protagonist Cross Damon. Wright suggests that this is the condition shared by humanity as a whole in today’s materialistic and godless world. Cross Damon, the anti-hero of the novel suffers from the dread of living the life of a black person in America. Unlike most other black men, he is intelligent and has the capability to make his own choices in life.

Cross Damon works at the post office in Chicago. He dislikes his job but still works in order to support his family. Like the other black people, he has to endure white racism and oppression in his workplace. Additionally, he has to suffer poverty and the lack of opportunities to learn and grow. He is married to Gladys and has two children. To make things complicated, he has a pregnant girlfriend Dot who is a minor. Damon’s life is dreadful and filled with pressures of all sorts. His job, his family life and his social life all are complicated. His religious mother always advices him and his wife and children constantly demand attention. His job is boring and tedious and makes him face racist white people. To make things worse, his fifteen-year old girlfriend compels him to marry her. Damon tells her to abort the baby, but she refuses firmly and threatens to sue him. She also tells his wife and mother about the affair. Damon does not like his wife but is not divorced. These pressures numb and alienate him from his family and society. He is always in a state of dread and is highly unsure of his life and his future.

When Cross Damon's life revolves around dread and uncertainty, something unexpected happens. He draws some money and tells Gladys that he will meet her the next day. This comes after Damon's girl friend Dot meets Gladys and tells her about Cross Damon's extramarital affair. Cross is upset and travels in a subway train. In the train, he feels restless and moves to the front window to distract himself. Suddenly, he hears a loud noise and his train carriage derails and turns upside down. He is thrown away violently and jammed between the other passengers. He finds men and women caught between seats and crushed to death. He realizes that he was fortunate to escape with his life. In a cafe, he hears a news report announcing his death.

Cross Damon sees this incident as his opportunity to free himself from his past. He stays in a motel and plans to leave for New York the next day to begin a new life with a new identity. He meets one of his friends Joe in the hotel. When Joe recognizes him, Cross has no way but to kill him. On the outside, he thinks he is free from the past and behaves recklessly. However, deep within, he carries the memories and identity of his past life but continuously denies it like a dream. He feels guilty for his past and present. Amid these inner struggles, he finds himself living in a world that is racially sensitive and craves for power and control. He assumes the names of Charles, Addison and Lionel to create a new identity and mix with new people. He is now an outsider who watches his own life from a distance with detachment. He witnesses the ways of the power hungry and exploitative society much to his dissatisfaction. He feels existential and entangles himself with the communist party.

In the train, he meets Bob Hunter, a communist and Ely Houston, a district attorney. Bob instantly recognizes Damon's intelligence and plans to use him for the party. Ely Houston recognizes Cross Damon's lawlessness and his outsiderness. He allows Damon to make his law and live as an outsider. Initially, Cross Damon finds the members of the communist party to be humane and rational. However, he soon discovers that their only intent is to gain power and control others. The party knows the minds of others and uses the knowledge to serve their own interests. It is made of a power hierarchy and all the members craved for control. Being an intellectual, Cross Damon wishes to find a solution for this problem. Meanwhile, the party uses Damon to bring down Herndon, a racist and Nazi landlord. Bob obtains a permit for Damon to live in the apartment where Gil Blount, a member of the Central Committee lived with his wife Eva Blount. Bob expects protest from Herndon for bringing in Damon, a black man to live in his apartment and use this as an excuse to sue Herndon on behalf of the party. The party uses Damon's intellect and writings to promote their campaigns against white racism and oppression. He realizes neither the political parties are not concerned with the welfare of the people but with their own growth.

Damon finds that the more he rationalizes, the more he tends to justify his own criminal and unethical behaviour. He is driven by his own desire to live freely and achieve power. His

descends when he begins to feel disillusioned with the realities of the Communist party. Unconsciously, he begins to reflect the party's traits of power, deception and manipulation. He acts like a god in the name of liberty and kills racist Herndon and communist Gil Blount as they both try to exercise power and have control over him. Instead of running away from the scene of murder, he uses his intelligence to save himself. He erases his fingerprints and makes the police believe that Herndon and Gil killed each other for some unknown reasons. Damon's freedom goes hand in hand with destruction and violence.

Cross Damon now in the guise of Lionel reads Eva's diary and comes to understand her. Her marriage had been arranged by the party to show its 'concern' for promoting artists. Eva did not want to live with Gil and he was cheating on her. Lionel is moved by Eva's plight and falls in love with her. His killing Gil frees Eva from her bond of marriage. He begins to love Eva, but she loves his apparent innocence. Houston collects the evidence of his Cross Damon's involvement in various crimes against the communist party. He allows him to live as an outlaw because he shares some of Cross Damon's views about life. Cross now has nowhere to go as he killed all the people that he came across. He goes to Eva to tell her his past and present crimes and somehow get her forgiveness and acceptance. When Eva comes to know about Cross Damon, she could not accept the truth and all her expectations are shattered. Unable to reconcile with the shocking truth, she jumps from the window and kills herself. When the party members learn about Cross Damon's involvement in the murder of the party members, they sent thugs who shoot and kill Cross. Before dying, Damon tells Houston that his life was horrible and all his attempts to mend it only made it worse. He claims innocence saying his life and society drove him to violence and crime.

Cross Damon is a complex and intellectual character. "He was the man who had killed and fled, man who had broken all of his ties and was free..." (Richard Wright, p.132). His suffering makes him realize life's true significance. In the process of his transformation, he understands that one should not distance oneself from people or society as it is in relation to others that one's personal and social identity is formed. Humanity as a whole is needed for a man to sustain himself and find fulfilment and meaning in life. His alienation from people makes him feel lost and purposeless. His attempts to intellectualize life and its problems, makes him justify his acts of violence. Damon learns that his bond with the humanity is his promise to it and he must never break it. His problems begin when he loses his commitment to his wife, mother and children and goes astray to live a reckless life. His upbringing and the values infused in him go to make his psyche. His anguish has its roots in his mother's religiousness and his inability to commit himself to anything or anyone. His intellect and his affinity towards existentialism make him more violent and unethical.

Cross Damon's mother uses the name of god to guide her son in the right direction. She tells him "I named you Cross after the Cross of Jesus" (Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, p. 37). Cross Damon is religious, but his environment is highly uncongenial and promotes violence. In his essay on Wright's universality, Jack B Moore points out that, "the Outsider's environment is as much the philosophy of existence within him as the world outside" (Harold Bloom, p.9) His intellect substitutes his religiousness, makes him crave for power and act like a god. He becomes that which he tries to defeat. He is an outsider to his family, society to himself. He is also an outlaw who violates law or takes it in his own hands. His outsideness at once becomes his freedom and his anguish. One can find that in the novel, the concept of outsideness is deeply embedded in almost all the characters. Cross Damon's mother is engulfed by her deep religious values and this makes her disconnected to the outside world, which is materialistic and unreligious. Damon's wife Gladys and his lover Eva are both outsiders as they live in their own world of imagination. The members of the communist party are also outsiders in a way. They are self-absorbed and they wish to control others. They walk away from humanity in the name of serving them. Houston shares some common traits with Cross Damon as he acknowledges the idea of an outsider and outlaw and leaves Cross Damon to go free even after finding him guilty. He shows no commitment to law and fails to fulfil the promises that he has for the society.

Wright seems to present the character of Cross Damon from multiple perspectives when he portrays his inner anguish. Damon's alienation, his intellect, his craving for freedom and making choices in life are influenced by his attitude towards life. He weaves the ideas of Marxism and existentialism in to the psyche of Cross Damon to render him violent and complex. Marxist practices that Cross Damon observes in Bob and others show him how to control others and gain power in the name of a working for the welfare of the community. Existentialism on the other hand, makes Cross feel like a free person who can make his own choice in life and act as he pleases. It replaces his religion, society and human values with ideas of individuality and liberty. Wright uses these ideologies to complicate the personality of Cross Damon and thereby increase his inner anguish by distancing him from the equation of normal life. Some critics identify the autobiographical elements in the novel and one among them Jerry W. Ward, Jr. remarks, "Wright's long and distinguished career as a writer only serves to confirm the fact that the hungers of the mind and spirit are implacable; like Cross Damon, the hero of Wright's existentialist novel *The Outsider*, Wright longed to be existentially free, ultimately responsible for the 'self' he endeavoured to create through the act of writing." (Daniel Rees, p.111-112) Cross Damon's alienation and his loss of identity are a result of his choosing to be an outsider. During his descent, he realizes that he needs people to become who he wishes to be. He expects understanding and kindness from fellow human beings, but he could not find it nor can he find someone who can understand and accept him for who he really is. His choices and his actions lead to his fall and that of the others around him. Thus, Cross Damon is a complex human being who chooses to live his life in his own terms as an outsider.

## Conclusion

Cross Damon's dread and anguish is intense and morbid, and it haunts him throughout his life. It arises from his racist environment and his existential outlook. It is also self-inflicted and can be said arise from his alienation from fellow human beings. As Wright suggests Damon's inner plight is shared by all the people living in today's uncertain, material and godless world. Great leaders and successful men seek riches, power, control and domination at the cost of peace, liberty, equality and human values. Damon's life, struggle, loss and his eventual fall symbolize the descent of modern man. The idea of Cross Damon is a paradox in itself and signifies a voluntary exclusion to create a mirage of freedom and power.

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