Richard Wright and Africa

CHIKWENYE OKONJO OGUNYEMI, *University of Ibadan*

During his visit to the then Gold Coast in 1953, the manifestation of the African way of life repelled Richard Wright as intensely as his fictional representation of black-American reality in his famous novels—*Lawd Today, Native Son,* and *The Outsider*—bewilders and horrifies the African reader. In recoiling, the African feels an immediate urge to dissociate himself from these works where beastly characters and vulgar facts are mystified. To him, Wright's novels are psychologically distant because his heroes are propelled by unfamiliar ideologies. The African inability to empathize fully with the heroes (perhaps less so in the case of Jake Jackson of *Lawd Today)* is not unique since the black-American middle class had expressed dismay at Wright's free and unflattering depiction of the plight of the black American.

What then prevents the average African reader who has not lived in America or understood the nuances of the black struggle there from grasping the impact of and fully understanding Wright's intentions? An examination of the characters and "messages" developed in *Lawd Today, Native Son,* and *The Outsider,* from an African viewpoint, will be instructive.

Dorothy Padmore, the friend who suggested that Wright should go to the Gold Coast, criticized the Africans for failing to nurture the relationship between them and Wright. "Unfortunately," she writes in a letter, "Africans have received the impression that . . . American Negroes . . . consider themselves a cut above the African whom they regard, as a rule, as primitive . . . This puts the African on the defensive in his communication with these descendants of Africa from overseas societies. . . . [The African reaction] put him [Wright] in his place as an outsider, so that he was unable to wrest their confidence and find his way among them with ease."[1] Dorothy Padmore fails to consider that Wright courted Africa in whirlwind fashion and that psychologically he needed Africa more than Africa needed him. In reading *Black Power,* Wright's work based on the visit, it is obvious that Wright must share part of the blame. The African has not just merely "received the impression," but is bombarded with the fact that Wright did look down on him while he (Wright) turned himself into an outsider owing to the fear of being emotionally involved with the African as an individual. Wright sounded as if he desperately needed to collect exotic material for a book, and time and money were running out.

Of Wright's three novels under consideration, *Lawd Today* presents the least difficulty to a reader with a cultural gap. Its accessibility is mainly due to its lack of preoccupation with some pet ideology; instead it unveils the black hero's humanity in a simple manner. The narration is progressive as it deals with the events of a single day in a man's humdrum life. Jake Jackson, the protagonist, might have been a Lagosian from Yaba or Isale Eko, suburbs of the Nigerian capital. As wife beater, pleasure seeker, wine bibber, debtor, dupe, who hates his job since he never makes enough money to be comfortable, he is comparable to the average African urban dweller, dissatisfied with the qualify of his life yet

[1]"A Letter from Dorothy Padmore," *Studies in Black Literature,* 1, No. 3 (Autumn 1970), 6-7.

inexorably held back by circumstances from improving his lot. Because the African reader knows many more in similar straits to Jake Jackson, he identifies himself with him; they are all members of the "Third World,"[2] the oppressed majority.

The talismans which keep the hero going are the inevitable drink, women, gambling, and the brotherhood that each black person in his circle extends to the next in a tribal or racial manner. He is further sustained by the belief in medical quacks and religious fanatics who encourage the lost with a hope of better things to come. In beneficence, they play the role of the African juju.

Lil, the stereotypic, long-suffering black woman, is Jake Jackson's wife; she unwittingly makes his life more tolerable by serving as the butt in his difficult and meaningless existence. As his scapegoat in a world gone awry, she saves him from imminent insanity. Lil, in her part, bears her cross religiously. Her sterility and sickness, following a disastrous abortion, is symptomatic of the illness of the Third World. Benumbed, she, like the other characters, blunders on, hoping for a miracle. That, however, is a dream. Thus the dream with which the novel opens serves a double function: it introduces us to the nightmarish quality of the characters' lives while it makes a gibe at the idea of the American dream. The unending steps climbed by Jake Jackson in the dream establish the couple's prolonged, agonizing, arduous life.

Wright scoffs at the idea of hard work, an accepted cure-all in American society, by depicting characters who work hard in life but are humiliated at every turn. Home here is a "Commonplace" where uncommon events occur. The workaday life takes place in a "Squirrel Cage" while the black workmen, so many little animals, are watched by the white zoo keepers to see that they work hard though for a pittance; with their freedom thus curtailed they are slaves of some sort. Their outdoor, social life ends appropriately in a "Rat's Alley," to emphasize that they are the scum of the earth. Brother Rats (not Brer Rabbit or the Tortoise or Anancy with his folk wisdom) attack them in a vicious battle for survival. Finally, "Outside an icy wind swept around the corner of the building, whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep black pit."[3] Nature goes on relentlessly; it underscores the quality of pain of human existence.

In the Wrightean oeuvre, Jake Jackson appears to be a middle-aged version of what Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* could have been if he had grown up accepting the status quo: a veritable Uncle Tom. For his part, Bigger is like an older version of the belligerent, romantic, petty thief of *Black Boy,* fatherless, rudderless, violent. Bigger's ambition was to fly; this craving emanated perhaps from the black collective unconscious and is significant since, concomitant with the need should be a supernatural ability to flee from any scene of danger, in accordance with African myth. However, it is the vicious Bigger that the African reader must contend with. The difficulty arises from the fact that the colonial situation did not always bring about an open confrontation or close contact between the majority of Africans and whites in order to create a "Bigger" in the African skull. Bigger therefore remains enigmatic to the African.

On his arrival in Africa, Wright had permitted the influence of American propaganda from making him keep an open mind about what he encountered. Indeed, he acknowledged that "so long had Africa been described as something

[2]John A. Williams, *The Most Native of Sons* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 134.

[3]Richard Wright, *Lawd Today* (London: Panther Books, 1969), p. 219.

shameful, barbaric, a land in which one went about naked, a land in which his ancestors had sold their kith and kin as slaves—so long had he heard all this that he wanted to disassociate himself in his mind from all such realities."[4] With this background Wright was welcome to his conclusions about Africa though they were premature: "The kaleidoscope of sea, jungle, nudity, mud huts, and crowded market places induced in me a conflict deeper than I was aware of: a protest against what I saw seized me" *(BP;* p. 37). Several months and pages later, he denies the African: "I knew that I'd never feel an identification with Africans on a racial basis" *(BP;* p. 219). It is noteworthy that in *Black Power* Wright assaulted Africa as he had earlier flagellated black-American in *Black Boy* and *Native Son.* His protest against and denial of Africa are reciprocated when the African encounters *Native Son* and he has to battle with disbelief.

The immediate African reaction is repulsion. For psychological health, therefore, the African reader prefers to interpret *Native Son* as a thriller. The more careful reader, however, cannot escape so easily; he notices, for instance, that the "hero" is an anti-hero. Bigger focuses the problem when he goes to the movie house and in this episode we see the influence of Western propaganda on Wright. "Two features were advertised: one, *The Gay Woman,* was pictured on the posters in images of white men and white women lolling on beaches, swimming, and dancing in night clubs; the other *Trader Horn,* was shown on the posters in terms of black men and black women dancing against a wild background of barbaric jungle."[5] The movie scene as much as the opening rat scene (which critics have generally acclaimed) makes the racial theme explicit. Importantly, it sets the tone of the white world against the black, the racial-sexual aspect, the communist element, the dichotomy between the rich and the poor, and significantly, the Western world and the African. The idea of the black man as jungle dweller, and as Jack (Bigger's friend) graphically put it, "a gorilla broke loose from the zoo" with a tuxedo on *(NS;* p. 33), links the work with the African on the racial level. Bigger is the African's brother. He is thus a stereotype of the black man as conceived by whites; the African cannot run away from that fact. So he reluctantly claims kin with the beast, Bigger.

On the emotional level there are more problems, for "The imagination that we meet here . . . is extremist and melodramatic, feeding on the horrific themes of alienation and violence and abysmal fear, and its single occupation is with the racial tragedy."[6] Involved in this dimension is a problem of plot. If the reader is to base his interpretation on the facts given in the novel, Bigger's fear at the point when he smothers Mary is unwarranted and inexplicable. Indeed, if Wright had retained the original plan in which Bigger did rape Mary and not just momentarily think of doing so, his fear would have been justifiable. This omission in the final version has created a barrier preventing Africans from fully grasping the nature of Bigger's predicament.

Nevertheless, the analysis of society[7] in the novel would be stimulating to the young African who approaches literature from a Marxist viewpoint and bases

[4]Richard Wright, *Black Power* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1954), p. 66. All further references are to this edition and appear in the text, after the abbreviated title *BP.*

[5]Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), p. 32. All further references are to this edition and appear in the text, after the abbreviated title *NS.*

[6]Nathan A. Scott, Jr. "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright," in *Five Black Writers* ed. Donald B. Gibson (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 16.

[7]For a consideration of *Native Son* as propaganda see: Phyllis R. Klotman, "Moral Distancing as a Rhetorical Technique in *Native Son:* A Note on 'Fate,'" *College Language Association Journal,* 18, No. 2 (Dec. 1974), 285 ff.; and Amritjit Singh, "Misdirected Responses to Bigger Thomas," *Studies in Black Literature,* 5, No. 2 (Summer 1974), 5-6.

much hope on the redemptive powers of literature. Bigger's amorality is a defence mechanism in a situation where history and a stressful life demonstrate that society is guilty of producing Biggers. The capitalist society which sanctions exploitation and dubious methods of salving the exploiter's conscience must bear the brunt of the so-called criminality. To Bigger the murders are "creative" acts that mark him as somebody that exists, an individual who has to be taken into consideration. Ellison's metaphor of invisibility is not applicable to him after the murder. The murders serve as acts of initiation that mark him out as a man particularly as his mother had earlier nagged him to the point of emasculation. Dalton, the white liberal, like any colonialist or neocolonialist, brings baubles as gifts, in this instance ping-pong balls, while he makes his millions by exploiting blacks. He symbolizes the white exploiter since the days of slavery.

Approaching *Native Son* from an African viewpoint will prevent an unhealthy reaction such as we find in African theaters with foreign plays or such as Wright found in the Gold Coast Legislative Assembly and in a movie house in Accra: "It was a Western movie, packed, as they say, with action. In the Legislative Assembly the Africans had made believe that they believed in Western values; here, in this dark movie, they didn't have to pretend. Psychologically distant, they mocked at a world that was not their own, had their say about a world in which they had no say"(*BP;* p. 173).

Wright's existential novel, *The Outsider,* with its philosophical underpinnings that clash with African moral sensibilities, poses more of a problem than *Native Son.* From the cultural perspective, it is hard for the African to accept the melodramatic aspects of the novel. The hero's boring, ideological harangue merely assaults the reader.

Cross Damon, the hero, is another rebel in the Wrightean fashion. His cross presents itself in the form of tiresome middle-class ideals of responsibility. As the story of a rebel, the novel is aptly titled *The Outsider.* Cross Damon is a typical twentieth-century man, alone and without a god, having become godlike himself.

Wright dedicated his *Black Power* to the unknown African whose "vision of life [is] so simple as to be terrifying, yet a vision that was irreducibly human." Unfortunately, the vision of life in *The Outsider* is so diametrically opposed to the African's that it is hard to appreciate Wright's thesis. Cross Damon's dire need for freedom, his nihilism, his godlike aspirations, his desire to sever all his roots, are longings alien to the African. The murders he commits are symbolic gestures to secure freedom. Yet he is not really rid of the communists, according to the plot, because, ironically, the party kills him in the end. There is therefore a clash of purpose between the symbolic and realistic presentation of the events in the novel.

Unlike the legendary Damon, marked for his loyalty, Cross Damon feels no loyalty to anybody. In freeing himself from his relations he becomes more entangled with others. Although man might be nothing in particular, according to him, he cannot help but associate with others, hence his desire for the emotionally crippled Eva and the hunchbacked district attorney, Ely Houston, both outsiders like himself. *The Outsider* is therefore outside history but deeply immersed in sociology; hence Cross Damon destroys religion with its enslavement of the black mind by burning a church. His abhorrence of war is registered when he burns the office for Selective Service. Yet he prostitutes himself by posturing as an imbecile (in accordance with the white man's conception of the black man) in order to obtain a false birth certificate. He can

obviously not be free from the ideas bandied round in the society; in his quest for freedom, this unconscious dependence becomes tragic.

In the final analysis, Cross Damon, the intellectual-felon-murderer is as absurd to the African as the African Chief is to Wright. It will be appropriate here to quote at length Wright's impression of the African Chief since, by some quirk in the creative process, an uncanny semblance between the character of Cross Damon and that of Wright's African Chief materializes. "I must plead guilty to a cynical though cautious attraction to these preposterous chiefs . . . their formal manners, the godlike positions that they have usurped, their pretensions to infallibility, their generosity, their engaging and suspicious attitudes, their courtliness, and their thirst for blood and alcohol and women and food. . . . But that guy (He intrigues me no end!) called Okomfo-Anotchi, that joker who evoked the Golden Stool from the sky on golden chains, that guy who drove that sword into the earth and nobody can pull it out, that chap who climbed that tree and left footprints that can be seen even now he could not have been completely serious all the way! His deceptions are of so high an order that they imply a cosmic sense of humor" *(BP;* p. 308). Cross Damon, who is so incredible that the African reader cannot willingly suspend his disbelief in order to accept him, is as much of a sham as is Okomfo-Anotchi or a chief. It is curious that in bringing Cross Damon to life Wright seems to have gone to the mystifying though, to him, unacceptable aspects of his African heritage, albeit unconsciously, to produce an Afro-American Chief without any visible roots.

Because of the psychological block that Wright's works generate in the African reader, *Lawd Today* and *Native Son* are more acceptable than *The Outsider. Black Power* with its forthrightness and occasional gross misinterpretations[8] is quite as revealing of Wright and his fictional characters as it is of the African. Through his works, Wright has bequeathed us powerful insight into the American situation and, indirectly, the African situation plagued as they are by racism, economic exploitation, and neocolonialism. Through this insight he has underscored the fact that the black man has to be aware to emancipate the Third World.

[8]See Winburn T. Thomas, "Personal Impressions," *New Letters,* 38, No. 2 (Dec. 1971), 28, where he mentions Ghanaian reaction to *Black Power,* whose flaws are partly due to Wright's approach to Africa as a Yankee rather than a black man. The Ghanaians felt betrayed that they accepted him as a black only to find out that "he was not one of us."