
DOUBLE JEOPARDY: A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S SELECT NOVELS

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Abstract: The literatures of early twentieth century African American writers have pictured the problem of racial discrimination. Generally, most of the protagonists are male and least works have women as the central figure. As readers, everyone has either sympathised or empathised with the sufferings of the African Americans. One might have hardly given attention on women characters and noticed how women are treated in the novels. The women characters, almost in all the works of Richard Wright in which the protagonists are male, are portrayed as subordinate to the male characters. This paper attempts to find how the African women suffer double jeopardy, especially in Richard Wright's select novels.

Keywords: African American Novels, double jeopardy, racial discrimination, Richard Wright.

Introduction: African American literature from the mid of eighteenth century to the late twentieth century, has become a predestined part of African American literature, as it has mirrored the predominant values of the society. One can say that the African American literatures are responsible for the cleansing of the problem of discrimination that has prevailed in the American Society. Though the literatures of the early twentieth century has concentrated much on the problem of discrimination the whites have exercised on the blacks, it is worth to be noticed how the black women were treated in the African American literatures. The questions of gender and race have made a black woman's path an everyday struggle, which the readers have usually either unnoticed or forgotten or did not read. This paper attempts to locate the position of African women in the society, especially during the 1940s. The novels that are taken for study are Richard Wright's *Native Son*, *The Outsider* and *Lawd Today!* The female characters of the above mentioned novels exemplify Richard Wright's patriarchal bias.

The issue of racial discrimination is more at stake in Richard Wright's works; nevertheless the women characters have suffered the double form of discrimination. The novels of Richard Wright itself are a proof of discrimination perception of an African American, and so it is clear that the African women in the novels are discriminated racially. On the other level, one should perceive how these women characters are looked at by the African Americans, especially by the protagonists. There are instances in which the black woman is perceived "with [sensuous] desire" (*Native Son* 218) by Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, "body of woman" (*The Outsider* 421) by Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, and as dull headed by Jake Jackson in *Lawd Today!* He at times hungers "for her [African woman] as an image of woman as body of woman" (*The Outsider* 421). These are a few examples which suggest that the African women have

encountered the double jeopardy in the dominant society. They are marginalised in double fold; racially and biologically, and are fit into the stereotype of the helpless and dependent women.

Richard Wright was the son of a sharecropper and a school teacher. He was born in Mississippi. Richard Wright's mother was left to support herself and her children. Since the father had left the family, Richard Wright and his brother spent a period of time in an orphanage. Richard Wright's family moved from one place to another for various reasons – especially the challenging economical background. During the nomadic life, Richard Wright involved himself with reading fictional books, and developed a desire to write creative works. He published his first short story "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre" at the age of fifteen. After the first publication of the short story, he aspired to become a writer.

Ma the mother of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, expresses the sense of compromise and sacrifice that she provides for the family. She feels that if the family members, especially Bigger Thomas, along with her work systematically, they can be placed in a better living space. As far now, they live in a single room apartment. Their miserable situation is crystal clear with the following description: "The two boys averted their eyes and gazed into a far corner of the room. The women rushed out of their nightgown and put on a pair of step-ins. . . . The two boys kept their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed; and the mother and the sister did the same while the boys dressed" (*Native Son* 7, 8).

Ma is the one who negotiates and makes Bigger to take up the job of a chauffeur at a white man's house. She is economically deprived, which is the penalty of being born as a black. Though she argues with Bigger to work under a white man she never commands his son. Bigger's mother says, "If you don't stop running with that gang of yours and do right you'll end up

where you never thought you would" (*Native Son* 13). She knows well that Bigger is involved in criminality along with his ghetto friends, and the commanding words of her would certainly place Bigger in a worse situation by making him go away from home and subsequently being arrested for his illegal deeds. Ma fits the stereotype of the helpless woman.

The second African character who suffers double jeopardy in *Native Son* is Bessie, Bigger's girl friend. When Bigger accidentally kills the daughter of the white man, Dalton, where he had been the chauffeur, he turns to nobody but to Bessie to quench his fear of the whites. Though initially Bessie hesitates, Bigger makes her accept the plan of sending a kidnap note to Dalton, and thereby collect a ransom for the dead white girl. Bessie has nothing to do with the death of the white girl, but she is compelled to be involved in it by Bigger. When the bones of the white girl are found in the furnace, Bigger goes to Bessie's house. Bessie is the only person whom he can depend. He wants to take Bessie along with him throughout his fleeing away from the whites. Bigger and Bessie go to an old building and hide themselves there. Bessie's perception is understood when she laments thus:

God only knows why I ever let you treat me this way. I wish to God I never seen you. I wish one of us had died before we was born . . . All you ever caused me was trouble, just plain black trouble. All you ever did since we been knowing each other was to get me drunk so's you could have me . . . I been a fool, just a blind dumb black drunk fool. Now I got to run away and I know deep down in your heart you really don't care. (*Native Son* 215)

Bessie's lamentation proves that she is abducted by Bigger Thomas.

When Bigger finds that Bessie's lamentation would make his life miserable he decides to kill her. However, Bigger molests her physically before killing her. Bessie is weak in asserting herself against Bigger's sexual attack in the old building. Bessie is "still, inert, unresisting, without response. He kissed her again and at once she spoke, not a word, but a resigned and prolonged sound that gave forth a meaning of horror accepted. Her breath went in and out of her lungs in long soft gasps that turned finally into an urgent whisper of pleading" (*Native Son* 219). The sexual act is described from Bigger's perspective: "Imperiously driven, he rode roughshod over her whimpering protests" (*Native Son* 219). This shows that Bessie is refused to be given any autonomy. Bessie seems to the stereotype of the helpless woman. In *The Outsider*, the double jeopardy that the black women characters, especially Gladys and Dot, encounter is caused by Cross Damon, the protagonist. Gladys is the wife of Cross and Dot is the mistress of Cross Damon. Once when Cross and

Gladys is in the South Side night club, Cross holds Gladys in his arms and he "hungered for her as an image of woman as body of woman" (*The Outsider* 421). The "desire for her leaped in him [Cross] and carried an extra urge to bind her to him" (*The Outsider* 421). Cross is sensuously attracted towards Gladys. If his love for Gladys had been a truthful one, he would not have spent two days with "a brown skinned girl" (*The Outsider* 424), after sending his wife to hospital who is in violent labour. Cross has developed a sense of sensuousness attached to women, which shows that women are devalued objects.

The second stereotype is the helpless woman. This stereotypical image of the African woman can be noticed while Gladys looks for someone to kill the thought of racism. As a nurse Gladys has been invited to attend a party by the White and Coloured Nurses' Association. Cross while courting Gladys notices that Gladys is passive towards the whites. She believes that there is an outside force that governs her existence. She feels uncomfortable amidst the whites. Cross also assumes that Gladys "as a woman of his own color . . . was longing to conquer the shame imposed upon her by her native land because of her social and racial origin" (*The Outsider* 421). But according to Cross it is the other way around. When Gladys says that the whites think "they're something and we're [the blacks are] nothing" (*The Outsider* 420), Cross replies "A man creates himself" (*The Outsider* 420). When Gladys is invited to attend the cocktail party, she asks Cross to accompany her and she says, "I'd feel better if you were with me" (*The Outsider* 420). It implies that man is independent and woman is dependent on a man. Gladys's feminine instinct placed him at once in the role of a strong and reliable man" (*The Outsider* 420). This is the stereotype of a helpless African woman portrayed by Richard Wright. The autonomy of Gladys is restricted by Cross's thinking. She is doubly marginalised.

Lil in *Lawd Today!* is portrayed as dull headed character. She is continuously ordered by Jake in the beginning of the novel. The constant command over Lil humiliates her at the same time it increases the power of Jake Jackson over Lil. While Jake is reading the newspaper, Lil is busy reading a religious magazine. When she does not respond to Jake's reading, he becomes agitated and asks, "What makes you so dumb? Don't you ever try using your brains sometimes?" (*Lawd Today!* 31). Keady says "Lil fits into the stereotype of the passive and dependent woman who will carry her lot rather attempt to change it" (125). Jake's attitude replicates the idea of male's domination over the female, and Lil's behaviour depicts the nature of the dependent woman.

The women in the novels – *Native Son*, *The outsider* and *Lawd Today!* are considered as depreciated sex objects. These women characters “serve as ego-boosters, tension relievers” and “tranquilizers”(66) writes Nagueyalti Warren writes in his article “Black Girls and Native Sons: Female Images in Selected Works of Richard Wright”. Warren also adds, “When they have served their purpose, they no longer have any value and are discarded, either physically as

Bigger does with Bessie, or emotionally through withdrawal, as Cross does with Gladys” (66).

Conclusion : The male characters in Richard Wright’s three novels, *Native Son*, *The Outsider* and *Lawd Today!*, represent the victory of masculinity over the female characters, and the female characters portrayed by Richard Wright are suppressed in double fold, by racially and biologically. Thus, there is double jeopardy found in the women characters.

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