

## Research Paper

## Literature



## Struggle for Existence and Black Presence in the Outsider by Richard Wright

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### Keywords :

Sartre is quite of my opinion regarding the possibility of human action today, that it is up to the individual to do what he can, to uphold the concept of what it means to be human. The great danger, I told him, in the world today is the very feeling and conception of what is a human might well be lost. He agreed. I feel very close to Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. (Hakutani 165)

This is how Richard Wright (1908-1960), one of the African American writers wrote in an unpublished journal about his intention to write *The Outsider* in 1953.

African American writers expressed their concerns, anxieties and anguishes in their writings. They have a quest for their existential identity, for their visibility. They excavated their long, at time almost, forgotten past, in order to trace the fossils of their forefather's existence and also visualize their future. Their literature was indeed a creative effort to find the real essence of their heritage.

As a voice of Africans in America, Richard Wright's contribution to the Black writing is noteworthy. It is rightly said by a well known critic Arnold Rampersad that, "Among African American writers he is perceived certainly as one of the landmark authors in the two-hundred-year history of the literature" (Rampersad 1-2).

In an interview, Richard Wright mentioned his own isolation as a reason for his migration from America to Paris. He says,

In all my life though surrounded by many people – I had not had a single satisfying, sustained relationship with another human being and not having had any, I did not miss it. (Bryant 23)

Bryant further writes, "Loneliness is a Wright trait" (Bryant 23).

Like his own existential crisis, his novel *The Outsider* begins, evolves and ends with the possibilities and opportunities given to a black man for reclaiming his visibility in the world surrounding him, the world which has never noticed his presence. The protagonist of the novel, named with great symbolism, Cross Damon, represents the 20th century man in frenzied pursuit of freedom and in search of self identity. The name itself suggests that the word 'Cross' belongs to the holy religious essence, the pious cross, while 'Damon' stands for man's darker insight, evil.

Unlike the Black characters depicted in most of the African American literature, Cross is a shrewd and manipulative Negro. He is the product of a culture which rejects him. He is further alienated by his own habit of incessant reflection, his feeling that the experiences and actions of his life have so far taken place without his free consent, and a profound conviction that there must be more to life, some meaning and justification which have until then eluded him. The entire character sketch of Cross Damon is drawn with the shades of

existentialism. The fundamental questions like 'Who am I?', 'Where am I going?', 'What am I doing?', 'Why am I doing?' etc are discussed by the existentialists. Yoshinobu Hakutani observes about the novel that:

The Outsider represents a version of existentialism in which human action is viewed as the result of an individual's choice and will. (Hakutani 165)

Cross Damon's actions and consequences of the actions, have been willful and full of determination. For any decision, one may have dread and danger to accomplish it. The first part of the book is called Book One: Dread. About the element of dread in human life, Kierkegaard, a forerunner existentialist writer says:

Dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for one fears what one desires. (Wright 1)

In the beginning, Damon is dreadfully trapped by his life. His post-office job is unfulfilling, his wife Gladys is threatening, and his underage mistress Dot is pregnant. His mother is too much religious. Being trapped among three women, his mother, his wife and his mistress, he can't even breathe freely. Damon desires desire, but there is no way for that desire to be fulfilled. Damon believes that a man creates himself, but the self, Damon has created, is a nightmare. Like a terrible existence, "his life was a delicate bridge spanning a gaping chasm and hostile hands were heaping heavy loads upon that bridge and it was about to crack and crash downward" (Wright 19). His self, his past is an epitome of his helplessness, his lovelessness and his isolation.

Later, in a train accident, he is reported dead and so he sets out to create his own identity. This was an opportunity for creating a new self out of his unhappy existence. Wright writes,

He was without a name, a past, a future; no promises or pledges bound him to those about him. He had to become human before he could mingle again with people. (Wright 175)

En route, he encounters totalitarianism in its most-likely-to-succeed form, Communism. Though he agrees with these other 'outsiders' that power is the central reality of society and that 'man is nothing in particular' (Wright 135), he is outraged by their acceptance and cynical exploitation of these facts.

His rebellious nature enables him to re-create his own self. From the beginning of this life, Damon is remarkably successful at the mechanics of creating a past. His character is drawn with such intelligence that he easily obtains a birth certificate and a draft card. In order to attain visibility and identity, though in a wrong way and for a wrong purpose, he goes to this extreme level. At a deeper level, however, he traps himself as surely as he has been trapped in his old life, so that his new one becomes a continuous act of bad faith. Even before he

leaves Chicago, he hides in a brothel where he encounters a co-worker who recognizes him. Damon murders the man Joe Thomas and throws his body out of a window. The pattern of violence, so typical of Wright's characters, begins in earnest for Damon. The act of murdering was essential for Damon to hide his real identity and for reclaiming his visibility. Each moment he was in great dilemma about his own actions and their reactions. The author states,

Each night he vowed that on the following morning he would do something practical about his problem of identity, but the morning found him ready with excuses for inaction. (Wright 179)

It is Cross Damon who is forced to do certain actions disregarding their consequences. His indecisiveness compels him to initiate certain actions without thinking about their results. Yoshinobu Hakutani writes,

Wright's hero is compelled to act. Damon's revolt is not so much against the nothingness and meaninglessness of existence as it is against the futility of man's attempt to make illogical phenomena logical. (165)

Being an existentialist, Cross Damon desires full freedom and faithful love. He was unknowingly ready to go to any extent. That extent is going to be a series of murders. Absolute freedom for Damon results in absolute anarchy for him. And so he ends up becoming a shadow of what he really wanted to be. Abdurrahman notes,

Wright himself offers the reader his warning against too much freedom; for if man can be anything he chooses, he is without form, a void. (Abdurrahman 5)

Too much freedom makes a person irresponsible too. That irresponsibility of the protagonist is seen throughout the novel. At a time, Cross Damon confesses, "Well, here I am . . . I've made no promises . . . I'm nobody . . . I'm responsible for nothing . . ." (Wright 174).

As an existentialist, Damon firmly believes that his life is governed by unseen force. His decisions are not his, but are governed by someone else. And so at the end of the novel, he considers himself innocent even after having committed four murders.

When the District Attorney asks Cross Damon about what he has found in his life, Cross Damon replies: "Nothing . . . . The search can't be done alone, . . . Never alone . . . Alone a man is nothing . . . Man is a promise that he must never break . . ." (Wright 585). This makes Damon a perfect example of an existentialist character. Yoshinobu Hakutani describes Damon as "an existentialist actively in search of an essence in the meaningless existence, ..." (Hakutani 165). In *The Outsider*, Cross Damon is an outsider from different perspectives. Maryemma Graham describes,

Damon is racially outside (a black man living outside of a dominant white racist society), spiritually outside (an atheist living outside of Christianized Western society), materially outside (a postal worker who is deeply in debt), and emotionally outside (involved in a marriage-family situation which he abhors). (Wright xxiv-xxv)

*The Outsider* is considered as the first African American Existentialist novel. Basically, Wright's writings deal with the problems of racial discrimination. But this work of literature, *The Outsider*, is more universal as it deals with the human nature in the realm of existentialism. What Srinivasan says is true that

...the Existentialist emphasizes that the truth of existence is what is to be realized and experienced, but not what is to be observed and objectively known. (Srinivasan 10-11)

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