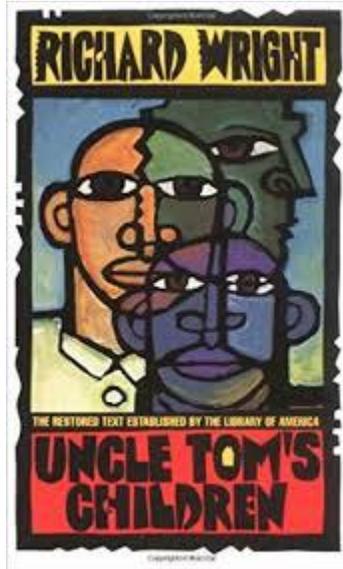


## Racism and Black Reality in Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*

Prof. C. N Annadurai, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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### Abstract

Richard Wright (1908-1960) was an acclaimed American novelist, short story writer, poet and non-fiction writer. The present paper explores the theme of black reality in Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, which is a collection of novellas based largely on Wright's own experiences as a black man growing up in America. It contains tales of the horrible racist violence and oppression of the black men and women. Through his realistic work, Wright shows how the reality of the black people is rendered completely unliveable by taboos like white racism, misuse of law, colour discrimination, oppression and violence.

**Keywords:** Richard Wright, Afro-Americans, black, *Uncle Tom's Children*, Jim Crow, Big Boy

### Introduction

Richard Wright is well known for his influential works *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. His works voiced the predicament of the American Negro. His works including *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are seen as seminal works of black protest literature. Today, Wright's works continue to affect the readers deeply and draw their attention to the terrible times

of racism in American history. Many of Wright's works emerge from his experiences as a black man. He was "raised in a world of stark poverty and systematic discrimination, a rigidly segregated society that was designed by those in power to make sure that he and other black people would stay forever in their place, which was calculated...to reduce him to subhuman level and relegate him and his people to the extreme margins of American life." (Jerry W. Ward & Robert J. Butler, p. 2)

Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940) is a collection containing an introductory essay *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow* and five novellas—*Big Boy Leaves Home*, *Down by the Riverside*, *Long Black Song*, *Fire and Cloud* and *Bright and Morning Star*. They deal with the plight of Afro-Americans suffering racism, discrimination and oppression at the hands of the whites. Novelist James T Farrell was impressed by Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and said, "It is a book of bitter truths and bitter tragedies...It is not merely about a book of promise. It is a genuine literary achievement." (Emmanuel Sampath Nelson, p. 501)

*The Ethics of Living Jim Crow*, an autobiographical essay serves as the opening piece in Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*. It recounts the author's experiences of living in the harsh Jim Crow times. It begins in Arkansas when young Richard was playing a game of war with some white boys. When the white boys throw a glass bottle instead of cinder Richard gets hurt. Richard's mother notices his wounds and beats him severely for fighting with the white boys. Then, she teaches him lessons of living in the Jim Crow world.

As a black boy, Richard tastes the cruel racism of the whites on several occasions. These bitter experiences directly influenced his works. After his schooling, he gets a job in an optical company. His white co-workers Moorie and Pease bully and force Richard to quit. Then, he obtains a job of a porter in a store cloth store. There, his white boss and his young son beat a black woman. When the injured black woman struggles to walk away, a white policeman arrests her on charges of drinking. When Richard rides his bicycle to make a delivery, his cycle tyre goes flat. A white man riding a car offers him a ride. A white man in the car asks if he wants a drink and Richard refuses and forgets to say 'sir'. The angry white man strikes with a bottle and throws him out. Then, the white men warn him that he would be dead if he did not behave. Working as a porter in a hotel, Richard witnesses many brutalities of whites against the black women. The whites treated black people as subhumans.

Richard's moves to Memphis and gets work in a different branch of the same optical firm where he worked earlier. The white co-workers were social to the blacks. One of the white co-workers sympathised with Richard and helped him to borrow books from a library. Yet the black people had to learn Jim Crow laws and customs to stay alive. These lines clearly bring out the reality of the blacks: "...in Memphis...it was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel. Here...I learned to play that dual role, which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live." (James A. Emanuel & Theodore L Gross, p. 247)

In *Big Boy Leaves Home*, Wright narrates the fate of a group of black boys who played in a white man's creek. On that day, Bobo, Buck, Big Boy and Lester played truant from school and had some fun in the woods. In Old white man Harvey's land, there was a creek. Harvey

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hated black people playing in his creek. When the black boys were playing in the creek, a white woman begins to shout at them. The startled boys get out of the water covering their groins and run to get their clothes. When Big boy and Bobo try to take their clothes the white woman calls Jim. The boys hear a shot and see Lester falling dead at the woman's feet. When Buck tries to runaway, he is shot. The white man points his rifle at Bobo and the latter begs not to shoot him. Big boy snatches the rifle and hits the white man with it. When the white man tries to grab his gun, Big Boy shoots him. Then, Big Boy and Bobo flee from the spot. Big Boy rushes to his home and tells his people about the happenings. His family members plan to hide Big Boy in a kiln and take him to Chicago the next day using Will's delivery truck.

Big Boy's house is burnt down and Bobo is tarred and burnt alive by the rabid white mob. Hiding in the kiln, Big Boy sees the horrible tarring and burning of his dear friend. He says, "Bobo was struggling, twisting; they were binding his arms and legs...He saw a tar-drenched body glistening and turning... The flames leaped tall as the trees...heard screams...each shriller and shorter than the last..." (Big Boy Leaves Home from *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) Big Boy loses his best friends and leaves his family but he escapes to Chicago with his life. Thus, ends the 'playful' trip of Uncle Tom's children.

*Down by the Riverside* is about Mann, a black farmer, who desperately tries to save his wife Lulu and his family members from the floodwaters. His wife had been in labour for four days and he could not take her to the hospital, as he did not have a boat. His cousin Bob returns with a boat stolen from a white man. Mann takes Lulu, his son Peewee and Lulu's mother and rushes to the Red Cross hospital. On the way, he tries to use the telephone at the first house he sees. However, it turns out to be the boat owner's house. Heartfield, the white man begins to shoot at Mann. Mann fires back and kills Heartfield. When he reaches the hospital, the doctors tell him that Lulu is already dead. Mann's family is saved.

Then, Mann helps the white soldiers who rescued men from a falling levee. He saves many people at the hospital. Then, he rushes to save a woman and two children who had called for help. The woman was Mrs. Heartfield. Heartfield's son recognizes Mann as the nigger who killed his father. Mann saves them. In the camp, he is hit on his head from behind and captured. The little boy had told the soldiers that Mann killed his father. The white soldiers take Mann to the General. Mann tries to explain that he did not intend to kill Heartfield. The General summons the Colonel and confirms that he borrowed the stolen boat from Mann. The General orders his soldiers to shoot and kill Mann. Man realises that he is going to die. He feels that "his knees buckled ... for a moment, he seemed not to breathe. Then with each heave of his chest, he cried "Gawd, don let em kill me! Stop em from killin black folks!" ..." (Richard Wright, p.325) He tries to runaway in to the woods and he is shot many times until he falls dead just a few steps from the waters. Thus, ends poor Mann's life whose efforts to save his family failed and whose timely service for the whites is returned with death.

Richard Wright's *Long Black Song* is a touching story of a hardworking black cotton seller named Silas, who lived with his wife Sarah and their little baby Ruth. When the story begins, Silas is on his trip to sell cotton. Sarah is struggling all alone for almost a week to look after herself and her little baby. She feels lonely and recalls her passionate love with Tom, a

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soldier who had gone to war a year ago. Just then, a young white salesman comes to Sarah's house and compels her to buy a costly graphophone. When Sarah tells him that she did not have the money, he tells her that she can pay in instalments. The salesman asks for some water. When Sarah goes to the well to draw water, the white man follows her inside and rapes her.

Silas returns after his trip. He tells Sarah that he managed to sell all the cotton and bought some land with the money. He has brought some clothes and shoes for Sarah. He sees the gramophone and asks about it. Sarah tells about the salesman, his offer and his interest to meet Silas the next day. Silas sees the white salesman's hat in his bedroom and becomes highly suspicious of Sarah. He finds the white salesman's handkerchief and pencil lying on his bed. He becomes very angry and threatens to beat Sarah. Sarah is scared and runs out of the house. She gets Ruth and rushes to her aunt's house. She plans to find her former lover Tom and leave the place. Meanwhile, she wants to stop Silas from killing the white salesman when he comes to her house the next morning. Therefore, she sleeps outside her house and waits for the white salesman.

In the morning, Sarah sees the white salesman's car coming and Silas waiting for him with a whip in his hand. Silas beats the salesman and two other white people descend from the car and join the fight. Silas kills one white man and fires at the others while they drive away. Sarah begs Silas to leave but Silas asks her to go to her aunt's house. Soon a white mob arrives and burns down the house. Silas kills some white men with his gun and accepts a fiery death calmly. All his hard work for years is reduced to nothing because of one white salesman. Before fighting the white mob, Silas says, "Fer ten years Ah slaved mah life out t fit mah farm free..." His voice broke off... "Now, its all gone. Gone...Ah ain got nothin...Gawd! Gawd!...They ain never give no black man a chance!...They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!" (Richard Wright, p. 351)

Wright's *Fire and Cloud* is about a noble black preacher named Dan Taylor, who fights for the rights of his black community. Once starvation threatens black people and the whites refuse to provide food supplies. Unable to get any help, Taylor returns empty handed to his church. He has to meet his people's need for food somehow and deal with the law and order situation in his community. When Taylor is thinking deeply about this situation, his son Jimmy informs him of the arrival of the mayor Bolton and the police chief Bruden at his home. In another room Taylor's communist friends, Green and Hadley wait for Taylor. Taylor does not want both parties to meet at any cost, as it will not only threaten his life but also put his community at risk. Taylor somehow meets the communists and the mayor separately in his house and sees them off.

At the same time, the starving black people wait anxiously for Taylor in the church. The situation in and around the black community is already growing tense as a black man dies of starvation and the whites warn the blacks to stay off the streets to avoid any problem. The black people with the communists plan to march against the whites. The mayor threatens to arrest the blacks if they marched. Not knowing what to do, he gathers the hungry blacks and prays to god seeking help and relief.

Taylor meets the Deacons Smith, Bonds and Williams to discuss the problem. He realises that Smith wants to depose him and lead the church. When they are talking, six white men arrive in a car, forcibly take Taylor to a remote spot and whip and humiliate him until he falls unconscious. Taylor struggles to reach home and his son tells him that the communists came to meet him many times and Deacon's Smith made the Deacon Board vote against Taylor. Taylor comes to know that the communists and many black people are beaten mercilessly by the whites. In the church, the wounded and hungry people had gathered in large numbers. They want to march with the communists in protest against the whites. Taylor tells his people that he was beaten by the whites for asking food for them. He says that God has now shown him what to do. Saying so, he moves forward and all the black people begin their march against the whites. On the way, they are stopped by Mayor Bolton and hundreds of white policemen. The Mayor promises to provide food for the black people if they disperse peacefully. Taylor feels that freedom has to be won through struggle and belongs only to the strong. "...This is the way! He thought... His eyes grew wet with tears, blurring his vision...He mumbled out loud exultingly" "Freedom belongs to the strong!" (Richard Wright, p. 406) Finally, after a lot of pain and struggle, Taylor succeeds in leading his people to the land of promise.

When the *Bright and Morning Star* begins, Aunt Sue, an old black woman is waiting for the arrival of her son Johnny Boy, an active communist party worker. When his mother asks Johnny Boy why he is including white people like Reva in his party, he says that they needed both black and white people to grow and win the struggle against the whites. As soon as Johnny Boy leaves, the sheriff comes to Sue's house, threatens and then beats her to reveal the place where the communists meet. Sue falls unconscious and when she wakes up, she sees Booker, the white man who joined the party recently. Booker tells her that Johnny Boy is arrested by the police and is being tortured. He is actually a police informer who works for the sheriff. He tells Sue that he has to warn the other communists and asks their details. Sue decides to warn the activists herself. She is weak, yet she musters all her strength and goes to save her men. When she reaches the woods, she finds the sheriff beating and torturing her son Johnny Boy. She remains stubborn when the police ask her to speak to her son to reveal the truth. When she refuses, they break Johnny's kneecaps. Again, the sheriff asks her to speak to her son and make him yield. When she refuses again, the sheriff damages Johnny boy's eardrums so that he cannot hear anymore. Sue sees Booker coming there. She fears if he would tell the sheriff about the other communists. She shoots him in the head with the gun that she had brought hidden. Then, she tries to shoot Johnny Boy to save him from torture. However, the police grab her and snatch her gun. They shoot her in the chest first and then kill Johnny Boy. Having fulfilled her purpose in life, Sue falls dead on the ground. Before she dies she mumbles, "Yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah git it! Yuh didnt kill me; Ah come here by mahsef..." (Richard Wright, p. 441)

## Conclusion

Richard Wright was the first black writer to write extensively about the lives and suffering of the black people. He rose from poverty and nothingness to a global literary phenomenon. His remarkable work *Uncle Tom's Children* uses autobiographical material to appeal to the readership. It is a shocking narrative of white racism and brutality against the innocent black people. It tells how the whites systematically exploited and destroyed the lives of

black people and make them suffer endlessly. They unleashed unimaginable acts of violence and hatred to impose their supremacy. Black reality is moulded by the whites using discrimination, lynching, tarring and burning.

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Prof. C. N Annadurai, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of English,  
Government Arts College (Autonomous),  
Kumbakonam – 612002, Tamilnadu, India  
[cnannadurai@yahoo.com](mailto:cnannadurai@yahoo.com)