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The Existential Predicament in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*

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Abstract:

The Outsider portrays the unfortunate world of Cross Damon, a twenty six year old young negro who recognizes himself an outsider in his home compelled by his utter loneliness, anger and untold suffering. To escape from the hard life of a postal clerk in the South-side he decides to go to New York to discover his real identity and unrestrained freedom. In his, *The Outsider* Wright has moves from a particular ethnic group's plight to a wider and general area of suffering that is the sufferings of the twentieth century man. In this novel, Wright probes the fate of a man in a hostile world. Here, race, colour and other sociological aspects take backstage and the question, which comes rushing to and occupies the centre stage of the fiction is the very existence of man. Wright has moved partly out of himself to deal more directly and objectively with the relation of man to society. The central issue is the choice of man's action in a hostile environment.

Keywords: loneliness, suffering, race, , fate, existence, environment.

The social set up is such that no reasonable relationship is viable; distrust dominates the family scene which in turn leads to disruption of social life. As Nick Aaron Ford states,

Wright believed...that the greatest tragedy of mankind lies in the inability of the individual to find satisfactory fellowship in the group. This theme is apparent in '*Native Son*' takes on added significance in '*Black Boy*' and becomes the underlying assumption of '*The Outsider*'. (Wright 142).

The Novel is on one level a thriller of the most sensational type; on the other level, an anti-communist. In the very beginning of the novel Wright tries to look upon existentialism as one way out of the wretched position into which modern man feeling isolated and lonely, has allowed himself to fall. In such a world, man has freedom to choose and that is what the protagonist of the novel Cross Damon does.

In *The Outsider* Wright repudiates with vehemence many of the ideological and philosophical tenets he had espoused in *Native son*. No longer does he believe that environment and the social milieu creates the man. To him now, man is the product of his own free choice, and

his destiny cannot be changed to any force or forces outside himself. He illustrates this theory by permitting the protagonist Cross to become suddenly freed of all previous commitments which may have been entered into by some type of compulsion or by pure chance.

The Hero, Cross Damon, is a post office employee in Chicago. He is caught in a pattern of self-loathing and hatred for the three women through whom he believes he has allowed his life to get out of control. His mother whose Christian moral strictures had aroused in him the very desires they were meant to stifle: his wife Gladys, whom he has tortured into releasing him from family life and the care of their three children and Dot, his 16 year old mistress whose unborn child threatens his hope for decent behaviors still further.

At this crisis in his affairs, a terrifying subway crash offers him a way out, a chance to change his desperate identity. As Cross who has escaped stunned but almost uninjured reads of his death and this awareness grows in him, so does the complexity of beginning again. He is uncertain that he wants so uneasy a freedom until it is accidentally threatened and he finds he has killed an innocent friend to preserve it.

Fleeing to New York, a nameless man, suspicious of the world of strangers, uncertain how to plan a life on his own assumptions, he is witness to an unpleasant incident on the train – an accident that is to seal his destiny. It involves him with Ely Houston, a celebrated District Attorney, also an outsider who is to become a strange kind of spiritual father as well as Grand Inquisitor. It draws in still another direction, into an orbit of communist activity.

Assuming a dead man's name, he is taken by Gil Blount, a member of the central committee, to live in his apartment as an open affront to Gil's Fascistic landlord, Herndon. He is emotionally attracted to communism and feels greater affinities with its turbulent spirit than with its professed aims. He believes almost religiously that communism was the one thing that could transform his sense of dread. But Cross is soon shocked by Party ruthlessness and cynicism, by a bad faith greater than he had dreamed could exist.

He is soon aware that the Party is using him as they are also using Gil's wife, Eva, a painter who later becomes Cross' mistress. Cross is rapidly drawn into a nightmare of violence: in sickeningly brutal scenes he kills again-not once, but three times more. Guilt fevered, he confesses only to the unbelieving Eva Blount. Realizing slowly that it will be difficult to prove him guilty, that he is suspected only because of his unknown past, he submits coolly to relentless questioning by Blimin, a Party leader and later by Ely Houston. It is at this point, as Cross is being brought to a rough kind of justice outside the law, that Wright's novel widens into a full-scale ideological melodrama which allows him to elaborate his views of the human condition and the twentieth century's totalitarian drift. As Kingsley Widmer says,

Cross Damon's destructive acts, of course, also reflect psychological compulsions, he finally recognizes that he was partly in rebellion against his puritan mother. "It had been her moral strictures that had made him a criminal..." His "ungovernable compulsions" to murder his enemies also

reflect the social oppression and outcastes of those who “live in but not at the normal rounds of ritualized life”. But Wright also wants to fuse these circumstances with the existential outsider crux in which a man can propound gratuitous crimes, i.e., make a “free” selection of assertions by a “petty god” in a “Godless World”. (Wright 176).

The greater importance of *The Outsider* lies in its thoughtful portrayal of a man searching vainly for personal freedom in the American Society. Although Cross Damon is an outsider by race, it is more important that he is alienated by intellect. He is a sensitive and weak-willed man. He is humiliated by the terms of all human existence. He has read and thought his way through most of the illusions which surround men’s activities and he is convinced that bad faith is an intrinsic part of living.

He has been brought up in a protected way by his puritan mother. She has instilled in him the acute conscientious reflection on the rightness or wrongness of personal behaviour. But it has affected an entirely undesired result on him. One of his friends estimates that his four A’s are reasons for his downfall: Alcohol, Abortions, Automobiles and Alimony. He rebels against his mother. She typifies an older generation which urged the Black children to live according to the ethics taught in Christian churches and prescribed for Blacks by a society dominated by white men. But he wants to free himself from the slavery of cultural totems and taboos that tend to stifle him.

Cross Damon experiences rebirth in a more obviously symbolic way. Having plunged in a subway train, he finds himself trapped inside the overturned car. His legs are wedged to the wall by a train seat held in place by a white man’s head. The only way he can free himself, is to smash the dead white man’s head, after having freed himself from the pinned position behind the seat, Cross escapes from the train by stepping on the body of a dead white woman. By specifying the race of the individuals blocking Damon’s path, Wright emphasized his belief that the Blacks can find freedom and new life only after they have first crushed the male and female white forces that trap them in a separate and submerged world.

After having attained a new lease of life, Damon seizes the opportunity and to safeguard the new life he kills his friend and takes the train to New York in search of a new life, a new meaning for his recreated existence. He develops a special intuitive sense of identifying “Outsiders”, He spots other “Outsiders” –people who feel a wall of separation between themselves and the surrounding society because of one reason or the other –prostitutes, communists, women and non-whites in general and a hunchback such as the District Attorney Ely Houston whom he meets in the train to New York.

Damon has a keen understanding of the murderous self-hatred that rules the lives of most Black Americans and has a clear focus on the problems of modern life and the Black man’s place in it. The depth of his alienation indicates that it is a social malaise and not a psychic imbalance. The need to authenticate oneself in a stultifying environment leads to an undying craving for freedom. As Phoebe Adams states,

Cross Damon is an outsider in every sense of the word. As a Negro, he is outside the majority pattern of American life as a shrewd, self-centered cynic, he is outside the claims of family and friendship as a casual atheist, he is outside the morality demanded, if not enforced by religion, when a subway crash gives him chance to be officially dead, he takes it, and gets outside even his own identity. There are no strings on Cross. (Wright 228)

On arrival in New York, Cross takes steps to give himself a new name and identity-Lionel Lane, the name of a man who had just been buried in the neighbourhood graveyard. He manages to procure duplicate birth certificate and draft card to close his tracks against possible discovery before he contacts Bob Hunter. Hunter has lost his job as waiter and has just joined the communist party to organize the works. He introduces Cross to Gil and Eva Blount who would like to use Cross to dramatize the discrimination against Blacks in housing. Cross moves into the apartment of the Blount's and soon discovers that the Party has tricked Eva, a non-objective painter with inherited wealth, into marrying Gil, in order to keep her and her wealth within the party. Here Orville Prescott says,

Cross relations with several leaders of the communist party and Cross (for Mr. Wright's) analysis of the driving force behind communism as nothing except a lust for naked power. If power over the nation is a remote ambition power over lesser members of the party is a present and delicious satisfaction. Idealistic talk about crusading for the working class is just hypothetical can't, which the communist leaders don't believe themselves Cross realized. Believing no faith or idea or ethical restraints, the communists just want to reorganize the world, with themselves in positions of power on top. (Richard 194).

His relationship with communists makes him feel that he understands the communists because, he too, believes in nothing. He is an outsider in American Society because of his black skin and he is much more of an outsider, because of his conviction that existence is senseless, and society has no moral claims upon him and there are no divine or traditional or logical laws that applies to him. Cross believes that life is an incomprehensible disaster and human beings are nothing in particular, so, if no ideas are necessary to justify his acts, he can kill impulsively to satisfy a passing whim or for his own convenience.

Cross has reached these nihilistic depths only after reading widely, particularly in several existentialist writers. He is a highly intelligent and widely informed man, but he uses his intelligence and his information only to destroy himself and others. He despises the communist for their cruelty and duplicity.

... to hold absolute power over others, to define what they should love or fear, to decide if they were to live or die and thereby to ravage the whole of their beings-that was a sensuality that made sexual passion look pale by comparison. It was non-economic conception of existence. (The Outsider 198).

So, Cross becomes entangled with the other type of outsider, the communists. Their absolute freedom of conscience has focused on power and other men. The communist party has a hard time with Cross, suffering anxiety and the loss of several valuable members before getting the upper hand. Cross refuses to accept systems, and communism happens to be the system in his way at the moment. He comes Cross to realize that godhood is uncomfortable and impractical. “Tell them not to come down this road, in his final comment on his career of impersonation, arson and murder” (Richard 228).

Cross Damon and Eva are attracted to each other as Victims of deception. Soon, Blount’s neo-fascist landlord Herndon discovers Cross in the building. Later in the evening the confrontation between Blount and Herndon leads to violence wherein Cross kills both. For Cross both are insects, one a new fascist and the other a condescending totalitarian. He has earlier killed Joe Thomas for purely practical reasons but his killing of Herndon and Blount is a conscious choice. Like Bigger Thomas of *Native Son*, Cross too must exercise his existentialist choices, must expand through deadly violence.

The universe seemed to be rushing at him with all its totality. He was anchored once again in life in the flow of things; the world glowed with an intensity so sharp it made his body ache. He knew exactly what he had done; he had done it deliberately, even though he has not planned it. (The Outsider 227).

He manages to cover the clues that might expose his complicity, depending on the police to believe the strong possibility of Herndon and Blount killing each other. Cross hopes to discover some meaning in his life through his genuine love for Eva which she reciprocates to meet her own needs. He does not stop with the murders of Herndon Blount alone. Finding that John Hilton, a party man, has betrayed Bob Hunter to the immigration authorities, Cross decides to kill Hilton too. By this time, both the Police and Party have focused on him as a suspect Houston Confronts Cross with his discarded identity but in the absence of definite evidence, leaves him to his own punishment. Thus

the reader simply realizes that the most extreme evils in the world-man as god and man as beast-are vis-a-vis. Within 24 hours Damon (man as beast) has killed Blount (man as god) and fascist Herndon (man as superman) and another. But he has also come upon Eva Blount, betrayed, innocent and lovely, who seemed to him “the cure of his nameless malaise”.

She represented what he had to live for. She was the justification for life. She was humanity’s essence. But in another forty- eight hours she too is dead, prompted to self-murder by the guilty knowledge of his evil, senseless crimes. And in the same span of time, Cross Damon, brought to his deathbed by communist thugs, realizes that the life he had lived was full of horror because only beasts can be truly innocent and free (Richard 226-27).

This Black intellectual, Cross Damon, tries to analyze objectively the struggle for power in the modern world and to relate himself subjectively to it, that is, to make his own life whole in the mad sweep of the social and psychological forces about him. Because he is a Black in

America, he has a special perspective on life, he is, of course, living within the cultural, but being a Black he is outside of the dominant myths of the time and society. He, above all others, should see life as it really is. He has less excuse for being naive. In the truest sense, he should be a sophisticated and modern man.

We are all of us alone, all of our lives are one sense, but there are ties of love and selflessness that help us bridge the river of despair. To Cross Damon this simple truth seems never to have occurred. Family, marriage, and church—all have failed him. His passion is ideas, but he finds no solution in the dominant ideas—democracy, capitalism, fascism and communism. Damon, having sought and failed to find meanings in life, believes in nothing, he has cut himself off from all the sustaining or confining codes that are the heritage of mankind. Thus, his principle is violence of a particularly gratuitous sort.

It is significant that Cross Damon's interpretation of modern life lies almost entirely in individual and subjective terms. Fear, he believes, may well be the most important part of it. As Wright sees him, Cross Damon is symbolic of all mankind whose sense of life needs correcting. Wright says that his hero could have been of any race. Yet into this melancholy story he has woven the moving theme that American Blacks having been made "outsiders" in America are forced by the very nature of their position to view life with a soul-shattering detachment. They share this fate, Wright shows, with the physically deformed, the crippled and all others who are set apart.

Cross Damon stands outside, with no discernible pattern of loyalties, beliefs, motives or commitments. His chief problem is the relationship of himself how to callous (sic) the fear that is universal, how to become reconciled to the terms of existence he believes every sensitive man must accept and wish to reject.

Though Wright insists that his hero could have been of any race, the fact remains that Cross is a Black. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. expounds this further:

The logic, in other words, is this, that to be a Negro is to be an outsider, not only in a sociological sense but also and more decisively in a moral sense as well. And the mission of the outsider, like that of Camus's Caligula, is to reveal to mankind that the human city is really a jungle and that all the disciplines and restraints of civilization are just screens which men have used to throw a kind of veneer of order over the disorder that still seethes beneath the surface. (Richard 236).

Kingsley Widmen echoes this point in the light of the predicament of the Blacks in the white society to stand outside the world in the moral and social darkness, for Wright's protagonist, depends on the actual as well as metaphysical alienation of the black man from the white rationalizations of ordinary life and social order.

Addison Gayale, one of Wright's biographies is of the opinion that the novel *The Outsiders* is partly auto-biographical. "The Outsider was as much of his own spiritual odyssey as it was that of his hero, Cross Damon. His

experiences in America, his disaffections with communism, his view of a Europe in turmoil based on exile, the long nights spent with Sartre and De Beauvoir debating the meaning of freedom., the silent questioning in his journal of the meaning the nature of man, and his often deeply felt periods of alienation combine to present a picture of solitary individual intent upon re-creating the idea of man in the modern world (Richard 236).

And this is what the protagonist Cross Damon tries and fails. Cross has started out thinking of himself to be in control of his life, that is, to function in the subjective, but eventually he was seen himself as object, an object created by others. Cross Daman commits his murders out of the necessity to be alone, since the society of (white) men had made it impossible to survive otherwise.

Thus Cross Damon begins his life after the accident anew and almost succeeds in relinquishing the old burdens of responsibility and obligation. But in course of his new life, he becomes involved with much more complications and problems than ever before. Kingsley Widmer discusses Wright's intention of showing cross in such a situation. Part of his purpose seems to be the revelation that neither the logic of ideologies (communist, racist etc.) nor the logic of circumstance (psychological and social compulsions) can create authentic being which is to suggest that both salvational faiths and empirical truths destroy actual life.

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