

CHAPTER IV

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF RICHARD WRIGHT
AND
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIVE SON

Richard Wright was born 4 September on a plantation outside Natchez, Mississippi, to Nathan Wright, a sharecropper, and Ella Wright, a country schoolteacher. He grew up in one of the most poverty-stricken and rigidly segregated parts of the South. His life proceeded from the masses of America's 'Black Belt', a dense Southern body that had thinned since the turn of the century and became the mass of America's urban ghettos. When he was nineteen years old, Wright was nurtured on the values, modes of adaptation, patterns of social and religious organization, bitterness, aspirations, and violence of the Southern black American folk. In search of better employment, the Wrights moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where Nathan worked as a night porter in a hotel and Ella worked as a cook for a white family. The Wrights were left destitute when Nathan deserted Ella and children for another woman. In 1915 Ella contracted an

illness than eventually reduced her to the status of an invalid for the rest of her life. Along with his mother and brother, moved to Jackson, Mississippi, to live with his maternal grandmother, Margaret Wilson, and then to Elaine, Arkansas, where they lived with his aunt Maggie and her husband, Silas Hoskins. They were all forced to leave Arkansas when Silas was murdered by whites who threatened to kill the entire family. For the next two years, the Wrights moved back and forth between Helena and Jackson. During this time Wright's schooling was sporadic, and he became acutely aware of Southern racism and violence, both of which leave indelible imprints on his consciousness and became important preoccupations in his fiction. Hunger, fear, father who deserted the family, the violence of whites who killed one of his uncles in order to take over his property, the malignity of a sporting 'professor' who was courting his aunt and murdered a white woman with whom he was having an affair and burned the house that contained her lifeless body -these were but a few of the grim elements of Wright's early life. During 1918-1925 it was a period of serious and widespread racial discrimination against blacks and other minorities. Racial rioting took place in many American cities in the years immediately

following World War I. Wright attended, with many interruptions, public and Seventh Day Adventist school. In 1923 he entered the Smith-Robertson Public school and in 1925 graduated valedictorian. Increasingly aware of the Southern racism and violence -brought to a sharp focus when the brother of a high school friend was murdered by whites, he decided to leave Mississippi. Saving enough money from from an assortment to menial jobs, he arrived in Memphis, Tennessee, in November 1925.

In 1926, he began to read widely and was especially drawn to H.L. Mencken's ideas criticizing American society and modern life. At this point he also began to read seriously such American naturalists as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson., and Sinclair Lewis and was also strongly influenced by European realists like Henry Ibsen, Emile Zola, and Fyodor Dostoyevski. His period in Memphis was a profound psychological awakening that transformed his life and confirmed his desire to be a writer. He then moved to Chicago. He developed a strong interest in Edgar Allan Poe and also began to read works by T.S. Elliot, Charles Baudelaire, Andre Gide, Thomas Mann, Friederick Nietzsche, Gustave Flaubert, and Nickolai Gogol. Soon after the stock market crash of 1929 he lost position as a postal clerk and

was forced to support himself and his family with a series of low-paying jobs; for much of this time he had no choice but to live in slum housing very much like that depicted in *Native Son*. In the next years, he became interested in Marxism, listening to the Communist speakers in Washington park and attending meetings of the John Reed Club, organization of young writers committed to using literature as a tool for promoting Marxist idea. He then began publishing poems, stories and essays in *New Masses*, *Left Front*, and other leftist journals. Richard Wright, who became seriously interested in Marxist ideas in the early thirties and who formally joined the communist party in 1933, saw his fiction as a 'weapon' to be used in the struggle for transforming American society.

A year later, he became widely known in Chicago literary circles and developed friendship with the novelist James T. Farrel and Nelson Algren. His first novel entitled *Lawd Today* was published and followed by *Big Boy Leaves Home* in the *Negro Caravan* in 1936. By the end of the year, he completed all four stories that would later be published in *Uncle Tom's Children* and began to work on *Native Son*. Having ideological differences with members of the Chicago John Reed Club, Richard Wright moved to New York, where he

became the harlem editor of the *Daily Worker*. Keeping to a rigorous writing schedule, he worked intensively on *Native Son* throughout the year. While writing the novel Wright felt a healthy tension between his commitment to political ideology and his own sense of black American life arising from his personal experiences. His novel thus enriched his personal outlook with a political vision that gave it unity, depth, and resonance, but at no point did political abstraction distort or compromise the integrity of what Wright as an individual black man knew.

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright is in hard attempt to mirror the social condition of black Americans living under the domination of white social caste that had treated them less than human. Depicted from his own experience partly, Wright vividly figures out severe and harsh treatment of white crashing on his race. Segregation and discrimination are major points of *Native Son*.

Native Son for Richard Wright is a mockery toward the existence of *Declaration of Independence* in which its words state that all men are created equal are meaningless because blacks have less chances to make up and carry out their own life. White American could proclaim that all men are created equal yet they tolerate slavery as a legal

institution for almost a hundred years. Blacks' freedoms in fact to undergo their lives in fact are blocked. *Native Son* is also an embodiment of Richard Wright's revolt against Christian dogma which expresses all men should love each other, but in fact blacks in white American society still get severe treatment. This novel exploits the paradox underlying the black American condition is that, the black man is both an outsider and an early settler of America. Regarding the paradox and sharpening the irony is the contrast between the situation of black Americans and the idealism proclaimed by the Christian belief in the universal brotherhood and the statement of *Declaration of Independence*. *Native Son* has shocked American public especially and made the world's eyes wide opened. This novel has mocked the hypocrisy of white American as the founder of an idea of *Declaration of Human Rights* and their segregated treatment crashing on black race. *Native Son* can also be regarded as a hint of white Americans' underestimation upon the third world. The most important thing found in this novel that is, *Native Son* has touched our consciousness for human rights. It shares a description of black's struggle through the character of Bigger Thomas to search for the equality in human rights.

Adapted from the life of Richard Wright is himself experienced, the creation of *Native Son* is a weapon to expose his idea about equality. Some details go parallel with his own life. Like Richard Wright who comes into his consciousness after his participation in communist party, Bigger Thomas also deepens his consciousness in jail after hearing the speech of Mr. Max, a member of communist party. Bigger Thomas has no father; he has only memories of his father's being killed in a racial incident in the South. being paralled with the author's life, he is abandoned by his father for another woman, leaving the family burried in sorrow.

Wright's fierce devotion to portraying the realities of black life in America as he honestly left them eventually created problems for him with the Communist party, from which he resigned in 1942, following several years of increasing doubt. He finally saw communism as depriving him of the independence and freedom he needed to reveal fully his vision of American black life. As he observed in *American Hunger*, communism ironically took on many of the repressive features of the Southern life against which he had earlier rebelled "I had fled from men who did not like the color of my skin and now I was among

men who did not like the color of my thoughts".

Uncle Tom's Children was published in 1938, making Wright one of the communist party's outstanding young writers. He also became deeply interested in the Robert Nixon case, involving an 18-year-old black man accused of murdering a white woman. He did extensive research on the case and used it as a documentary parallel to characters and events in *Native Son*. Having won a Guggenheim Fellowship, it is enabling him to work fulltime on the completion of *Native Son* which was published a year later. Later in the year Wright collaborated with Paul Green on the stage version of the novel and began work on *Twelve Black Voices*, a documentary study of the black South featuring photographs by Edward Rosskam. He also received the Spingarn Medal awarded by the NAACP to an outstanding Negro. His doubts about being a member of communist party intensified, partly because of the party's turning away from American racial issues in order to pursue a broader struggle against Fascism in Europe. He began to feel sharply divided between his commitment to opposing racial injustice in America and his loyalty to party ideology. It brought him breaking officially with the communist party. *Twelve Million Black Voices* was then

published. He also completed a manuscript version of the *The Man Who Lived Underground*, a short novel notable for its existential rather than Marxist version of life. His trip on visiting the Deep South to give a lecture at Fisk University reacquainted him directly with the problems of the segregated South, triggering his desire to write his autobiography that covered his life up to his departure from Chicago in 1937. Next, his public disavowal of communism, "I tried to be a communist", was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He also published *Black Boy*, a shortened version of Wright's autobiography, covering his childhood and adolescence in the South as a Book-of-the Month Club selection. Later in the year he met James Baldwin and helped launch of Baldwin's career by assisting him in receiving a grant from Eugene Saxton Foundation.

A year later, he decided to 'exile' himself permanently in France, leaving the United States. His circle of friends in France included such existentialism as Andre Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simon de Beauvoir, as well as American expatriate writers Gertrude Stein, Baldwin, and Chester Himes. He also developed close ties with the West Indian poet Aime Cesaire, the Jamaican writer George Padmore, and the African intellectual Leopold

Senghor, each of whom was committed to viewing the situation of black people from a global, 'third world' perspective. He worked hard on two novels *The Outsider* and *Savage Holiday* in which both reflected his increasing interest in French existentialism. In 1953 Wright visited the Gold Coast, where he obtained firsthand an African nation in the process of liberating itself from colonial rule. He participated in the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, which focused on problems of the third world. His book *The Color Curtain* appeared and placed heavy emphasis on race as the crucial factor in resolving the problem of Western and third world cultures. He joined to help organize the First Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in Paris.

The first installment of the trilogy centering on a black man's experience in the South and his exile in France became a topic of his *Mississippi*. His next works *Long Dream* and *White Man, Listen!* next were published. He died suddenly from a heart attack in 1960.



CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS