

Racism In America And Apartheid South Africa: A Review Of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* And Alex La Guma's *A Walk In The Night*

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ABSTRACT

Racism and apartheid were common practices in America and South Africa. Legal segregation was employed by United of America and South Africa, being the only two countries to do so. The segregation in these two countries played out in different forms, but with similar effects. Segregation laws known as the Jim Crow Laws were in existence right from the late 19th Century after the abolishment of Slave Trade, forcing the blacks to use separate public facilities. Segregation laws were effective in South Africa from 1950 until the early 1990s. Researchers have looked at the practices of both racism and apartheid in the two countries and the resultant effects on the individuals concerned. The focus of this paper is on the similarity in the practice of racism and apartheid in America and South Africa in a bid to fully present the manner in which racism and apartheid were manifested in the two countries under study.

KEY WORDS: Racism, apartheid, race, slave trade, segregation, Jim Crow

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I. INTRODUCTION

The subject of racism and apartheid has been a lively topic for critical debate since the turn of the Twentieth Century, with scholars examining the treatment of various kinds of discrimination based on race, religion, or gender in literary works, as well as the attitudes of the writers themselves. According to Smedley, 'racism, also called racialism, is the belief that humans may be divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called races that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural and behavioral features...' On the other hand, 'apartheid is a former policy of segregation and political, social, and economic discrimination against the non-white majority in the Republic of South Africa' (Merriam-Webster). While apartheid was the system of racial segregation in South Africa enforced through legislation by the National Party Government, the ruling party from 1948 to 1994, under which the rights, associations and movements of the majority of black inhabitants were curtailed and minority rule was sustained. Racism in America was backed by racial segregation laws enacted from 1876 to the 20th century in the United States at the state and local level. They mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in Southern States. The separation in practice led to conditions for African Americans that were inferior to those provided for white Americans, systematizing a number of economic, educational and social disadvantages.

The different historical manifestations of racism have always been intimately linked to the different economic functions that the labor of the targeted groups fulfilled in the socio-economic system (Wilson 123). Wilson (123-126) identifies the following characteristics of capitalism feeding racism: the exploitation of subordinated groups, the existence of extreme inequality, the monopolistic and private ownership of productive property, the struggle between capital and labor, the development of hierarchical labor structures, and the presence of reserve armies of labor. Racism develops and increases where human exploitation, extreme inequality and oppression exist, in particular where structures of inequality overlap with differences of color or origin.

According to Hall, racism is a historically specific ideological construction (Hall 275). It changes with time and with the economic-political and social-cultural conditions in which it functions. Consequently, it has been studied in its specific historical and social context. In his book *Racism*, Miles, Robert points to the complexity of the process by which racism is ideologically reproduced. In his view, 'people construct and reconstruct ideologies according to their material and cultural conditions in order to better understand these conditions' (80). Hall warns against the misleading viewpoint that '...because racism is everywhere, a deeply anti-human and social practice, that therefore it is everywhere the same, either in its forms, its relations to other structures and processes or its effects' (Hall 435).

Thus, racism is a complex, contradictory, multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon that adapts itself to the conditions in which it functions. It is this multifaceted and dynamic character and this tendency to adapt that Goldberg (3) characterizes racism in biological metaphors as 'hybrid', 'chameleonic' and 'parasitic' on social and theoretic discourse. Racism is more than an ideology. It also involves discriminatory practices and effects in the functioning of elements of the social structure, such as institutions. 'Racisms are largely if not altogether exclusively expressions from dominance' (Goldberg 111). 'It is also a discourse of marginalization which is integral to a process of domination and those who articulate racism always necessarily situate themselves within relations of domination' (Miles 101). Omijie stated that 'one area of the world where white racism toward blacks has been prevalent is the United States. For much of the American history, true progress for blacks in the area of civil rights has been difficult to attain' (7). Ellison portrays the view of many whites in America towards civil rights in *Invisible Man* by a simple salutation: 'To Whom It May Concern: Keep this Nigger Boy Running' (Ellison 33). To Omijie, 'this idea is reflective of the bleak situation African Americans face in America' (7).

Finally, the racism which persisted in the United States of America becomes apparent when Ellison describes how 'the white folk tell everybody what to think' (Ellison 143). According to Omijie,

this declaration reveals how white dominance in America was so utterly complete that whites told blacks how to live, act, and even think. As Africans were moving to self-rule elsewhere in the continent, whites in South Africa were determined that to maintain their way of life, which to them is maintaining power. In other words, the whites would continue to deny power to the majority of Africans. A law had been passed creating what was called a Civilized Labour Policy, which protected the wage levels of white workers and left employers free to hire blacks at wages as low as possible. There was also the Bantu Act of 1953, which took schools away from missions and answered that whites would receive an education that was different from and superior to that of blacks. The movement of blacks in the urban areas had battered race relations, and in 1948 the most conservative of white political parties, the Nationalist Party, won the national election, an election in which no blacks participated (8).

He further paints a clearer picture of the situation of things when he states that:

The National Party was predominately rural and consisted largely of those with Dutch heritage, and it was the most adamant in maintaining a separation between whites and other races in South Africa. They set out to more than maintain the separation of the races; they tried to turn back the clock and undo what appeared to them to be unacceptable integration. Blacks were working in white owned factories, other white businesses and in white's homes. But they were largely segregated into black enclaves in the cities and had their own facilities and doors of entry to public places along other restrictions that were common in the South in the United States of America (8).

In Omijie's view, the segregation process was fully completed in the following lines:

New laws restricted blacks living in cities. They were forbidden to own their own homes in urban areas. They had to rent less than satisfactory housing from local administration boards. The old apartheid dogma that blacks were 'temporary sojourners' in the cities was applied. Those who had worked for the same employers for fifteen years or for different employers for fifteen years were allowed to continue living in cities and towns, and all others were regarded as migrant workers who must have special work permits, which were to be renewed every year. Blacks were now obliged to carry passbooks, open to inspection by any policeman or agent of the government whenever asked. Blacks had to acquire special permission for travel to various activities. Every square inch of South Africa was designated as belonging to a racial grouping, and blacks were removed from villages and lands where generations had lived and worked on fields they believed they owned, to be replaced by whites (8-9)

RACISM IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY* POVERTY AND HUNGER

Black Boy highlights the poverty of the black characters that are economically disempowered by the deprivation resulting from racial discrimination. According to Omijie:

The blacks are deprived of the right to equal job opportunity and because they have no good jobs, they cannot afford good accommodation, food and other basic necessities of life. The impact of racism is revealed to Wright in the form of hunger. Initially as a child, Richard does not understand racism. But soon, he sees reasons to why he and his brother have to feed on the leftovers of the whites: 'Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to wait until others were through? I could not understand why some people had enough food and others did not' (26).

Thus, it is through hunger, poverty and general lack that he first becomes acquainted with the realities of racism. Most times, Richard and his family have nothing to eat because of the great extent of poverty. Hunger

made Richard and his mother move to Aunt Maggie's house in Arkansas. Here, Richard gets to eat more because his uncle Hoskins owns a saloon that caters for hundreds of Negroes who work in his environment. At meals time, there is much to eat that Richard himself finds it hard to believe: 'Can I eat all I want? eat as much as you like uncle Hoskins said I did not believe him then I ate until my stomach hurt, but even then, I did not want to get up from the table' (42).

This is not real to Richard when he compares his experiences of hunger to the surplus in his Aunt's house. So he usually hides some biscuit in his pocket in case he wakes up the next day and discovers there is no food in the house. He had this belief because he had been brought up in a life filled with hunger and starvation. This is justified when he says 'when I am with my mother, I wake up to hunger standing beside me' (62)

DEHUMANISATION

Wright and other black characters are treated worse than animals. Wright recounts how he lost his job on the basis that he called a white man by name without adding 'Mr.' The whites deny the blacks what is considered 'a white man's job', thereby depriving them of a means of livelihood. Another incident of this dehumanization is the one Wright witnesses in his granny's place. Black slaves are held together by iron chains. Wright on seeing them mistakenly refers to them as elephants because of the way they are held and bundled together: 'As the strange animals came abreast of me, I saw that the legs of the black animals were held together by irons and that arms were linked with heavy chains that clanked softly and musically as they moved' (49).

Richard's mother explains to him that the elephants are slaves made to work. 'It's just what you see', she said; 'a gang of men chained together and made to work' (49). The blacks, even in Richard's days, are still used as slaves. They are seen not just as slaves, but also for amusement. Wright captures an incident where Mr. Olin, one of the foremen in his office, instigated a fight between him and Harrison, another black boy. Mr. Olin promises the winner five dollars just for the two boys to fight themselves while the whites watch them and laugh.

Shorty, a black boy who works in the same office as Wright once tells Richard that he will do anything nasty just to get a quarter from the white men. Shorty, to amuse the whites, never hesitates to poke out his buttocks for them to kick. Shorty even goes to the extent of calling himself degrading names, "but this black son of a bitch sure need a quarter... this monkey's got the peanuts" (199-200). To the white men, the blacks are more or less animals and they treat them as such.

SOCIAL INSECURITY

Social insecurity affects the life of Richard so much the he turns into a drunkard at the tender age of six. The blacks are so insecure in the white society as a result of violence, lynching, and murders. As a child, Richard is taunted and oppressed by the white kids who bully him. This insecurity makes his mother encourage him to fight by equipping him with a big stick to retaliate: 'Take this money, this note, and this stick', she said. 'Go to the store and buy those groceries. If those boys bother you, then fight. I was baffled. My mother was telling me to fight, a thing that she had never done before' (14).

Uncle Hoskins is also killed by the white mob for no just cause. The whites are envious of his thriving business, and so they come together to kill him: 'Mr. Hoskins ...he done been shot. Done been shot by a white man, the boy gasped. Mrs. Hoskins, he dead...I learned afterwards that uncle Hoskins had been killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business. He had been threatened with death and warned many times to leave...?' (46)

Ned's brother, Bob, is also killed just because he flirts with a white prostitute. He is taken to the country road and shot dead.

DISHARMONY

In *Black Boy*, there is disharmony not only between the blacks and the whites, but even among the blacks themselves. It is easy to identify the causes of this as the challenges of living in a racist society takes a toll on the blacks—there is more disharmony. As the problems of racism assail the blacks, they become frustrated and psychologically disturbed by lack, injustices, hunger and rejection, which cause disorientation of the each individual life. For instance, Wright's father cannot contain his frustration. Thus, he constantly takes out his anger on his wife and kids. After his father deserts them, Wright and his brother go to live with their grandmother in Mississippi.

Richard's Aunt, Addie, who is also his school teacher, punishes him at school out of her psychological frustration. She beats him at the slightest provocation and Richard, also frustrated and rejected by his society, attacks her too:

For a moment she hesitated, then she struck at me with the switch and I dodge and stumbled into a corner. She was upon me, lashing me across the face. I leaped, screaming and ran past her and jerked open the kitchen drawer; it spilled to the floor with thunderous sound. I grabbed a knife and held it ready for her....she stood debating. Then she made up her mind and come at me. I lunged at her with the knife....we crashed to the

floor...I bit her hand and we rolled, kicking, scratching, hitting, fighting for our lives as though we were strangers, enemies, fighting for our lives. (93-94)

Both of them, and so many others in that society caught in the web of racial discrimination seize any opportunity to let out steam in order to relieve themselves of pent-up emotions. Therefore, the result is disaffection and disharmony among family members and within the society.

REJECTION AND EJECTION

All the black characters in *Black Boy* are constantly rejected by the society. Richard's grandfather waits for many years for his pension which he is rightfully entitled to, but all he keeps getting are the rejection letters through which they deny him all his benefits: 'and I will read him the letter, reading slowly and pronouncing each word with extreme care telling him that his claims for a pension had not been substantiated and that his application had been rejected. Grandpa would not blink an eye, and then he would curse softly under his breath' (122).

Richard's mother is rejected in the hospital because the government makes no adequate health provisions for the coloured people. The hospitals provide good health care for whites, leaving the blacks who live in abject poverty to take care of themselves. Racism is shown in virtually everything involving the blacks and the whites. It permeates every sphere of the human life. Wright echoes this thus:

At last we were at the railroad station with our bags, waiting for the train that would take us to Arkansas; and for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a 'white' line and a 'black' line. During my visit at granny's a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died. I was aware that we Negroes were in one part of the train and that the whites were in another. (39)

Wright is also rejected by his white employers most of the time. He goes from one job to another as a result of racial discrimination. The blacks have problems with accommodation. Richard's family has to be ejected from their several homes often because they could not pay the house rent. This creates Richard's exposure to early street life, culminating in child crimes and psychological imbalance and suffering of the worst kind:

Inability to pay rent forced us to move into a house perched atop high logs in a section of the town where flood waters came. My brother and I had great fun running up and down the tall shaky steps. Again, rent paying became a problem and we moved nearer the center of town where I found a job in a pressing shop...yet again we moved, this time to the outskirts of town near a wide stretch of railroad tracks to which each morning before school, I would take a sack and gather coal to heat our frame house... (72)

Richard and his family move from one bad place to a much worse place because they were being constantly ejected. This also affects Richard's education. He has to do menial jobs to keep his family together, and there exist no health facilities for blacks, no legal coverage, no justice, no freedom, no decent jobs all as a result of the society which rejects the black race.

PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

The white never relent to take advantages of the black characters either physically or sexually. Richard is often bullied by white boys. He says: 'They came towards...they overtook me and flung me to the pavement. I yelled, pleaded, kicked...they yanked me to my feet, gave me a few slaps and sent me home' (13).

This incident happens when Richard's mother sends him to get groceries; he is beaten and tortured for nothing. Richard faces assault many times in his family, the white man's office where he works and so much more. Many Negro girls are employed as maids for the whites. The white man take advantage of them, even the lowest of them, the night watchman. He slaps a black maid playfully on the buttocks and when Richard asks why she allows it, she says 'they never get any further with us than that, if we don't want them to' (174). This is ironical because the black men are not even allowed to get near a white prostitute. Ned's brother, Bob, is shot for flirting with a white prostitute.

APARTHEID IN ALEX LA GUMA'S A WALK IN THE NIGHT

Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* portrays nothing but hostility between the world of the white man and that of the black man. The total lack of communication between the two worlds is brought out in the novel:

Michael Adonis turned towards the pub and saw the two policemen coming towards him. They came down the pavement in their flat caps, khaki shirts and pants, their gun harness shiny with polish and the holstered pistols heavy at their waists. They had hard, frozen faces as if carved out of pink ice and hard, dispassionate eyes, hard and bright as pieces of blue glass. They strolled and determinedly side by side, without moving off their course, cutting a path through the stream on the pavement like destroyers at the sea. (9-10).

The metallic hardness of the policemen's movements, dress and appearance convey their brute force and ruthlessness while the images of coldness, 'frozen faces', 'pink ice', make them out to be mechanical instruments of oppression. The policemen are a stark symbol of terror from which, wherever Adonis goes, he

cannot escape. As Michael Adonis, who has recently lost his job, walks aimlessly around the streets of Cape Town he is constantly menaced by this ubiquitous symbol of terror. This novel opens with a frightening scene in which a young man jumps recklessly off a moving truck and throws himself in the middle of a busy street: 'the young man dropped from the trackless tram just before it stopped at the Castle Bridge. He dropped off, ignoring the bobbed and checked the cars, buses, the big, rumbling delivery trucks, deaf to the shouts and curses of the drivers, and reached the pavement' (1).

Here, he begins his evening of aimless walking from café to café, smoking cheap cigarettes, drinking cheap wine and quarrelling. Earlier in the day, he has lost his job because he returned the insult of a white factory boss. The young man keeps swearing: 'I'll get him', but deep inside, he knows he won't and because of this frustration, he commits a pointless murder that same evening. Michael Adonis' wanderings which culminate in the killing of Doughty, a retired actor, his escape from the police and the immediate effect of this experience upon his life, form the central plot of the novel. The principal walkers in the night are Michael Adonis, Raalt, the white constable who is on patrol duty in Cape Town's District Six and Willie boy, the habitual loiterer and petty criminal who gets killed by Raalt during the hunt for the murderer of Doughty. As the lives of these people cross each other during the night, they meet a wide range of District dwellers. All these bar-tenders, drunkards, loungers, sailors and labourers are in some way or other victims of 'the foul crimes' of their society. Doughty the old drunkard ex-actor speaks for numerous members of his society when he recites the words from Hamlet: 'I am thy father's spirit, doomed for a certain time to walk the night ... and ... and for the day confined to fast in fires, till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away' (28).

When Doughty recalls the words of the ghost in Hamlet, he is recalling them for all the characters in the novel, all of whom, in one way or another, experience the terrors of the South African night, in a life punctuated by violent encounters, imprisonments and murders, the people fast in fires of hatred, fear and frustration. The rhythm of life in District six, Cape Town is one of violence, and the incidents, the language and imagery of the novel are carefully chosen to give the reader a lasting impression of this harsh rhythm. Michael Adonis, the protagonist, is described as 'trailing his tattered raincoat behind him like a sword-slashed, bullet-ripped banner just rescued from battle' (10). Wherever he goes he seems to be involved in a desperate fight in which he is doomed to lose. As soon as he loses his job, he becomes a potential recruit for the gangster groups that roam the streets of Cape Town. He spends most of the evening dodging and resisting the urgings of the petty criminals who want to assign 'jobs' to him. Before the night is over, he has succumbed to their urging and sets off with one of the gangs 'to fix some job'. Willie boy is addicted to habitual violence. To the gangster groups who want to recruit him he says; 'No, man, me I don't work. Never worked a booger yet. Whether you work or don't, you live anyway, somehow. I haven't starved to death, have I? Work, Off Work' (4). With a knife in his pocket, he is always wandering aimlessly, getting involved in quarrels and fights and occasionally robbing men who are weaker than himself. We see him knocking down a harmless drunkard, Mr. Green picking a quarrel with sailors in a café and finally, we see him dying violently.

Police constable Raalt is perhaps the most sharply drawn figure in the novel. He is an incarnation of the fears and complexes of the white man in South Africa. He is a dehumanized instrument of supremacy and terror. Raalt is frustrated by nights of boredom, of driving around on patrol armed to the teeth, without locating the enemy. He wants to come to grips with something which can absorb his anger against the failure of his marriage. His wife has grown seedy, dull and boring and she no longer cares for him. What Raalt would really like to do is 'wring her bloody neck' but he is afraid of possible consequences. She is a white woman. Raalt is therefore compelled to transfer his aggression to the non-whites—the blacks, the necks of whom he can wring without any fear of consequences. With this urge driving him, he goes around bullying non-whites in the bars and on the road, until the discovery of Doughty's dead body gives him the opportunity to fulfill his wish. His inquiries are rough and hurried. As soon as he learns that there was a man in a yellow shirt that ran out of the corridor of Doughty's tenement, he decides to get hold of any black man in a yellow shirt. He embarks on the chase with brutal efficiency, and does not rest until he has shot Willie boy twice in the chest.

The way Raalt, Adonis and Willie boy live through the evening shows parallel transfer of aggression. All characters are victims of a system that denies them the facility of living in harmony with fellow human beings and their frustrations find release in acts of violence against weaker members of their society. Their failure to see themselves as integral parts of any living community is their plight to which the novel suggests no solution.

The background against which the events are narrated suggests an atmosphere that is hostile to the well-being of man. La Guma often relies on the careful building up of physical details to characterize the environment in which the action of the novel takes place. The tenements of the coloured community in Cape Town are the main scene of action and it is the physical disintegration of the buildings, the filth and dampness which surrounds them as well as the scavenging insects which inhabit the dark corners that give the life in these tenements its special character.

The physical violence and decay of the whole area becomes the objective correlative of the moral and social disintegration of South African society. This is seen in the effective use of the description of a street as Michael Adonis walks through it:

He turned down another street away from the artificial glare of Hanover, between stretches of damp, battered houses with their broken-ribs of front-railings, cracked walls and high tenements that rose like the left-over of a bombed area in twilight, vacant lots and weed-grown patches where houses once stood, and deep doorways resembling the entrances to deserted castles. There were children playing in the street, darting among the over-flowing dustbins and shooting at each other with wooden guns. In some of the doorways people sat or stood, murmuring idly in the fast-fading light like wasted ghosts in a plague ridden city. (21)

The cumulative images of violence, sickness and war are used to emphasize the material discomfort and harshness of the environment in which the people live. The very game that the children play is evidence of the disorientation which is bound to result from living in such conditions. The sights, the sounds, the smells are used to give a powerful impression of the conditions in which people live. The episodic and disjointed character of the plot is part of the author's means of emphasizing the separateness of groups and individuals within the society. The sub-plots are loosely linked to the main plot. The lives of Raalt, Willie boy, Joe and Michael Adonis only cross accidentally. They do not form one coherent story. This device of multiple sub-plots sometimes threatens narrative continuity by giving the impression of arbitrariness as the author tries to keep our attention simultaneously on a number of episodes which at first seem unrelated. But the shortness of the work together with the vigor and peace of narration ensure that there is not moment of boredom.

It is also part of the overall design of the novel that there should be no resolution at the end. We are not interested in the life of one individual but in the lives of many individuals whose connection is that they are oppressed by the same system. The author makes the lives of these characters cross, but when they have crossed, each goes his own way to lead his own different life. They all remain lonely walkers in the night. The crossing of these different lives creates memorable impressions of urban life in South Africa and, through these impressions, the author bears witness not only against the apartheid system but against the oppression of class rule everywhere.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper's review of racism and apartheid in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* shows that despite the difference in language, climate and culture, there were similarities in the manifestations of racism in America and apartheid in South Africa. The novels portray a racist society where racism and apartheid is a phenomenon the blacks tried to alter. Racism turned them into animals: families were separated and innocent ones killed. Wright and La Guma give an insight into racism and apartheid; the psychological and sociological trauma that the people who live in racist society face. In Wright's *Black Boy*, and La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, we are presented with characters who are victims of racism and apartheid. The blacks are treated and classified as animals. The two texts portray the suffering and manipulation of the blacks by the whites of the colour difference. As a product of a racist society, Wright tries to provide solutions to the racial problems he faced. The findings of this research indicate that racism is comparable to a disease of the body whose origin is not known. There is no dispute as to the fact that the disease exists, after the entire infected person displays symptoms of the illness. Racism and apartheid are similar; they are like an ill of society whose genesis is unclear. While there is much research and theorization regarding their birth, there is no definitive or exact beginning or cause. Also like a diagnosed disease of the body, there is no doubt as to the existence of racism and apartheid, although the symptoms displayed vary from one society to another. In all, we see individuals that are neglected, suppressed, oppressed and excluded. There is a creation of two distinct societies; one black and the other white.

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