

Dialogue and Outrage in the Literature of the African Diaspora: Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*¹.

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Abstract

Regularly, African Diaspora Literature projects characters that are faced with serious challenges that appear to threaten their very survival. Such characters usually express displeasure with issues affecting them and with the general scheme of things in their milieu. Often, such displeasure reveals itself through anger and other blatant and furious outbursts that may lead to violence. The expression of anger occurs mostly after attempts to resolve knotty issues through dialogue have failed.

In African-American literature especially that produced in the heydays of racial discrimination and the consequent Civil Rights Movements such outrages are common. In this essay, three African- American writers debate and condemn racial discrimination in its entirety through subtle diplomacy that reveal the writers' creative endowment. In *Not Without Laughter*, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Black Boy*, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright present a raw and enduring picture of the devastation wrought by the ugly trend on the American society. The three writers were African-Americans who experienced raw white racial discrimination of blacks at first hand.

While Hughes and Hansberry tend to be subtle in their appraisal of the policy in the texts cited here, Wright is blatant and outrageous in recollecting his individual and black peoples' collective experiences in the American '*Deep South*' where the '*Dixie*' and '*Jim Crow*' tendencies prevailed in their most bizarre forms.

In the literature of the African Diaspora, it is common to find characters confronting problems that sometimes warrant expressions of extreme displeasure with the scheme of things in such milieu. Regularly, such anger manifests itself after dialogue to try to sort out the situation has failed. This scenario occurs often in African-American literature.

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Through subtle diplomacy, which reveals the writers' creative endowment, Langston Hughes and Lorraine Hansberry debate and condemn racial discrimination in its entirety in *Not Without Laughter* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. On the other hand, Richard Wright in *Black Boy* presents a raw picture of the destruction wrought by the ugly trend on the American society. Wright is blatant and outrageous as he recounts his individual and the collective black experiences during his childhood in the American 'Deep South' or 'Dixie Land' where, at the time, the notorious 'Jim Crow' practices of white Southerners prevailed.

Hughes, Hansberry and Wright are all African-American writers who experienced white racial discrimination of blacks in its most poignant and primitive forms. Hence, they are able to recount vividly such experiences that often involved their personal lives directly. However, the three writers – two males and one female, respond differently to the problems posed by the ugly tendency. In their writings that involve different genres and sub-genres consisting of prose fiction (a novel), drama (a play) and non-fictional prose (an autobiography), they amply oppose racism in the United States. While Hughes and Hansberry advance a subtle and mellow abhorrence of the situation, Wright is bitter, blatant and outrageous. He is therefore vehement in his opposition and condemnation of the practice.

In *Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes mirrors race relations between African-Americans and European-Americans through characters such as Sandy Rodgers, Aunt Hager Williams, Harrietta Williams, Mrs. Rice, Mrs. Barr-Grant, Paul Biggers, Annjelica Rodgers and Tempy Arkin Siles. These characters fit into two broad categories – the victims and the victimized. The African-American characters – foremost among them, Sandy, Aunt Hager and Harrietta, manifest either of two responses – the moderate or the extreme, to the thorny issue of white racial discrimination of blacks. While the African-American matriarch, Aunt Hager Williams is a moderate who views the racial problem philosophically and surrenders everything to the divine will of GOD, her young and talented daughter, Harrietta Williams is extreme and unsparing in her condemnation of white racism and its proponents. In her tolerant, patient, painstaking and deeply religious heart, Aunt Hager advises her grandson, sandy:

hese young ones what's comin' up now, they calls us ole fogies, an' handkerchief heads, an' white folks' niggers' cause we don't get mad an' rar' up in arms like they does 'cause things is kinder hard, but, honey, when you gets old, you knows they ain't no sense in gettin' mad an' sourin' yo' soul with hatin' peoples. White folks is white folks, an' colored folks is colored, an' neither one of 'em is bad as t' other make out. For mighty nigh seventy years I been knowing both of 'em, an' I ain't

never had no room in ma heart to hate neither white nor colored. When you starts hatin' people, you gets uglier than they is... (Langston Hughes 1930(1989 ed.): 179-181).

Here, Aunt Hager imparts a deeply moral lesson to Sandy, her beloved grandson. Her aim is to inculcate racial tolerance in him. She equally seeks to prove that racial harmony is practicable in America when cushioned in profound Christian tenets such as supreme love for GOD and neighbour. She rationalises by telling Sandy that skin colour does not really matter when considering the mettle that humans are made of, but that character content is what matters most and should thus be paramount in moments of evaluation. She further tells him:

An' since then I's met many a white lady an' many a white gentleman, an' some of 'em's been kind to me an' some of 'em ain't; some of 'em's cussed me an' wouldn't pay me fo' ma work; an' some of 'em's hurted me awful. But I's been sorry fo' white folks, fo' I knows something inside must be aggravatin' de po' souls. An' I's kept a room in ma heart fo' 'em, 'cause white folks needs us, honey, even if they don't know it. They's like spoil chilluns what's got too much o' ever' thing – an' they needs us niggers what ain't got nothing' (181-182).

In the true semblance of a Christian sermon from a loving, kind, gentle and experienced grandmother who is a matriarch with much to offer to the younger generation, Aunt Hager continues:

White peoples may be mistreats you an' hates you, but when you hates 'em back, you is de one what's hurted, 'cause hate makes yo' heart ugly – that's all it does. It closes up de sweet door to life an' makes ever' thing small an' mean an' dirty. Honey, there ain't no room fo' hate, white folks hatin' niggers, an' niggers hatin' white folks. There ain't no room in this world fo' nothin' but love, Sandy, chile. That's all they's room fo' – nothin' but love (183-184).

Conversely, Aunt Hager's daughter, Harrietta Williams cannot accommodate or sympathise with white folks as a result of their extremely cruel and uncouth treatment of her and other black folks. She is bitter, impatient and vehement as she blurts out:

All white people are alike, in school and out,' Harriett concluded bitterly, as she told of her experiences to the folks sitting with her on the porch in the dark. Once when she worked for a Mrs. Leonard Baker on Martin Avenue, she accidentally broke a precious cut-glass pitcher used to serve some out-of-town guests. And when she tried to apologize for the accident, Mrs. Baker screamed in a rage: "shut up, you impudent little black wench! Talking to me after breaking my dishes. All you darkies are alike – careless sluts – and I wouldn't have a one of you in my house if I could get anybody else to work for me without paying a fortune. You're all impossible" (89).

Harriett reflects attitudes of younger black folks who are not tolerant of white racism and are ready to fight back at the least provocation. This is revealed in her subsequent outbursts to her audience:

So that's the way white people feel," Harriett said to Aunt Hager and Sister Johnson and Jimboy, while the two children listened. "They wouldn't have a single one of us around if they could help it. It don't matter to them if we're shut out of a job. It don't matter to them if niggers have only the back row at the movies. It don't matter to them when they hurt our feelings without caring and treat us like slaves down South and like beggars up North. No, it don't matter to them... white folks run the world, and the only thing colored folks are expected to do is work and grin, and take off their hats as though it don't matter... O, I hate 'em!" ... "I hate white folks! ... I hate 'em all!" (89-90).

In Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, another African-American matriarch, Mrs. Lena Younger (Mama), presides over a family that confronts and successfully wards off white racial segregation of blacks in Chicago's *Southside* suburb. Unlike the settings of Hughes's and Wright's works, which are in the American 'Deep South', Hansberry's play is situated in the 'North'. This suggests that racism in the United States was not restricted to the so-called 'Deep South', but encompassed the whole sub-continent. The central point regarding race relations in the play is the sustained effort by whites in a residential area to prevent blacks from taking up residence there for the simple reason that their skin-colour is different and the subsequent rebuff by members of a Black family to White opposition which results in the Black family moving in and physically possessing the house they have

managed to purchase in the all-White Chicago neighbourhood. Such scenario often caused Whites who could not bear dwelling side by side with Blacks to abandon their houses and neighbourhoods and move further afield in search of other all-White locations.

In his attempt to discourage the Younger family from residing in the White suburb, the Clybourne Park representative, Karl Lindner argues that Whites should live with Whites and Blacks with Blacks so as to ensure peace and harmony. This is a core racist argument:

I am sure you people must be aware of some of the incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas...And at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better; take more of a common interest in the life of the community when they share a common background... It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities (*Lorraine Hansberry in Oliver and Sills, eds. 1971:97-98*)

The younger family – which is black, rejects Lindner's arguments and his attempts to buy them off. Instead, they resolve to move into the previously all-White Clybourne Park as the first African-American residents. When they telephone Mr. Lindner to discuss his offer further, he is under the impression that the black family has accepted the offer. However, to his greatest shock, the Younger family not only reiterates its determination to take up residence at the Clybourne Park, but it actually contracts moving men to convey their belongings to the new apartment immediately. Walter Lee Younger (the eldest Child in the family) tells the White representative:

What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this is – this is my son, and he makes the sixth generation of our family in this country and that we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father earned it for us, brick by brick... We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes- but we will try to be good neighbors. That's all we got to say... We don't want your money (118).

Thus, the dream of the black family to rise beyond its limitations is realized with this upward movement.

Richard Wright's *Black Boy* gives a more detailed and complete picture of the problems wrought by racism in the United States. According to Carl Senna, Wright's book, which is also a record of his childhood and youth:

Explores the theory of human behaviour determined by environment. Yet, innate in its fatalism is the author-narrator's ultimate escape from a rigid set of rules for survival. In Wright's boyhood there was virtually no chance for personality such as his to develop freely. Everything conspired against personal freedom-not only the white social structure but the black as well. He was treated brutally and tyrannically at home in order prevent his being treated the same way-or worse-outside the home. His parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents enforced the code of conduct given to them by white power structure: black children, if they do, not only will they suffer a terrible fate, but their families will as well. This way of life leads to a kind of society which has been called pre-individualistic'' (Carl Senna 1971: 8).

Senna goes to great lengths to explain the divisive racial order then prevailing. In the process he attempts to bring out issues which in their totality connive to afflict Wright and other blacks as victims hounded, made literally invisible and ravaged relentlessly by the searing white establishment:

Pre-individualistic behaviour is forced on one group of people by another. In this case, white Southerners separated groups of people according to race. The result was that the individuals in the oppressed groups became invisible; all that was left was a mass of faceless people. Yet the effects of this divisiveness are not limited to the oppressors. Within the oppressed community, individualism is considered dangerous; from the earliest age, a child is trained to behave according to the oppressor's view. If he does not obey he will not be the only one to suffer the consequences. His whole community will be in danger... (1971:8).

Senna views Wright as a kind of prophet or visionary for the African-American community. This, according to him, may have informed the black writer's inability to accept the racial situation as he found it. Simply put, Wright was too humane, moral and passionate to accept animalistic tendencies in a modern human society:

Richard Wright could not, from his earliest years, tolerate this repression, and *Black Boy* is the chronicle of this alienation, not only from white society, but from what the Spanish Writer Unamuno calls the tragic sense of life; that is, it is more than a record of personal abuses. In *Black Boy* the protest is both personal and metaphysical, a cry of anguish in the face of the human condition (8-9).

In *Black Boy*, the author, Wright is philosophical as he reasons why some folks have enough to eat and others have nothing. This implies overall material endowment or its lack:

Watching White people eat would make my stomach churn and I would grow vaguely angry why I could 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 (Wright 1945 (1970 ed):16).

He is therefore forced to draw a sad and apparently negative conclusion owing to his loss of faith in the system prevailing:

Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it (31).

From its beginning to its conclusion, *Black Boy* is a cry of deep anguish and frustration mostly for blacks (African-Americans) - who are the oppressed, but also for whites (European-Americans) - the oppressors. A generous share of the hell created by Southern Whites for Blacks also engulfs these Whites like wild fire and debases them further. They inevitably cannot escape from their evil schemes until they recognize the basic humanity of Blacks. It is therefore a miracle of supreme human determination, that Wright is able to escape from the scene and recall and then preserve these experiences for posterity. Senna therefore observes and attempts to explain the situation:

Although the whites don't know who he is, they have structured the society against ever knowing him; as a result, he and they are Inescapably bound together. His hatred for himself springs from his hatred for them. It seems that the only way Richard can redeem himself is

by finding some measure of forgiveness for them (Senna 1971: 34).

Indeed, the American society so ably portrayed by Wright is one that is so stained, so poisoned as to trap and destroy both the victims and the victimized. The writer's mother, Ella Wright is a symbol of the endless suffering depicted in *Black Boy*. She is visited by one disaster after another. These are either man-made or metaphysical. For instance, Ella's husband abandons her and her two young sons (among them, Richard). She is frequently sick and this culminates in a near-fatal stroke that paralyzes her. When they move in to live with their aunt, Maggie, a brief moment of stability in their lives seems to dawn for them. However, even though the situation appears to improve considerably, Maggie's husband, Uncle Hoskins is brutally murdered by racist whites that are jealous of his thriving saloon business. His corpse is carefully hidden and his business and possessions are confiscated by the racist white murderers. The extended family is further deprived of its breadwinner. Therefore, their problems are magnified and further complicated:

There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There was only silence, quiet weeping, whispers, and fear. I did not know when or where Uncle Hoskins was buried. Aunt Maggie was not even allowed to see his body nor was she able to claim any of his assets. Uncle Hoskins had simply been plucked from our midst and we, figuratively, had fallen on our faces to avoid looking into that white-hot face of terror that we knew loomed somewhere above us. This was as close as white terror had ever come to me and my mind reeled. Why had we not fought back, I asked my mother, and the fear that was in her made her slap me into silence (Wright 1945 (1970 ed): 46-47).

The situation increasingly becomes unbearable and unreal. The young Wright is therefore confronted with a tough choice – either to accept defeat in the face of the apparent vicissitudes or subvert the scheme of things through some other mechanism. The struggle for survival entailed life or death:

His mother, trapped within her sickness as they all are trapped within their environment, has once again unknowingly contributed to his independence. It is through her sickness that Richard is changed from a rebel without a cause into an individual with a fixed

attitude toward life. It comes from being a witness to the helpless suffering of the person he loves most in the world. His mother's paralysis, in his own words, grows into a symbol in his mind – a symbol of the years that have come before and will come after. The futile wandering, the useless effort, the oppression and insecurity of their lives – and all life – is going to haunt him until his own death. Because of this view of the world, he will never be able to participate fully in happiness, and he will feel at home only with others who share his attitude (Senna, *Ibid* : 20-21).

He finally opts for life and engages in a fraudulent practice in a movie box office re-selling tickets with some accomplices just to get along. He also steals and pawns a gun and cans of fruit preserves to raise funds for his escape to the North. Apparently, the author here subverts a system that has been closed to him and his race. However, he feels bad and guilty about the crimes and the overall set up:

An hour later I was sitting in a Jim Crow coach, speeding northward, making the first lap of my journey to a land where I could live with a little less fear. Slowly the burden I had carried for many months lifted somewhat. My cheeks itched and when I scratched them I found tears. In that moment I understood the pain that accompanied crime and I hoped that I would never have to feel it again. I never did feel it again, for I never stole again; and what kept it from it was the knowledge that, for me, crime carried its own punishment (Wright, *Ibid*: 181).

It is apparent from an assessment of Hughes's, Hansberry's and Wright's works that dialogue played a pivotal role among the people we encounter. Outrage only set in when dialogue failed. In this case, the Black minority in the United States posed no serious danger or threat to the White majority, which had money and material possessions but still proceeded to brutalize, cannibalise and ostracize African-Americans in horrendous proportions owing largely to skin colour difference. It is also clear that the dominant White majority, in most situations, shut all avenues to dialogue with other racial groups that in turn provoked outrage among Blacks and other minorities so thoroughly oppressed in the texts explored in this study.

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