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INFERIORITY COMPLEX IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S LITERARY WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Living in a degraded state for generations, the Blacks in America started to believe that they are born degraded and they cannot do or live like the Whites. The long-time suppression has made them believe that they will remain as they are. An inferiority complex makes them feel that the privileged life is impossible for them. If a Black man desires to be like the Whites, the other Blacks call him mad.

Keywords: Inferiority complex, being black, and presumption

Introduction

The research paper studies the characters in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, *The Long Dream*, and *Lawd Today!*. It tries to trace the feeling of inferiority in them through their actions, conversations, and ideas. It further analyses how the social system has influenced their minds in a way that they hardly think beyond their typical Black personalities.

In *Native Son*, Bigger, the protagonist, thinks of a better life, but his friend, Gus, opines that there is no use in feeling this for he can do nothing for that. Gus finds this kind of thinking and desire of Bigger abnormal. He says that the Whites make the laws and the Blacks can do nothing against that. So it may produce nothing but make him insane and convict also.

Though Dalton tries to convince Bigger with his way of humanity, Bigger cannot believe it. He suspects that, like all the Whites, Mr. Dalton may expect him to be like other Blacks. So, he cannot be escaped from being conscious of his inferiority. "He had not raised his eyes to the level of Mr. Dalton's face once since he had been in the house. He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things" (*Native* 79).

This posture of Bigger is a symbol of total submissiveness. He does so because he thinks that it is the way the whites expect of the Blacks. When he finds that Mr. Dalton is looking at him closely, he feels that despite his full humbleness something is not right; and realizing this, he lays his cap down. Mary Dalton takes Bigger out with her. She introduces him to Jack who is free and frank like Dalton. Both try to make Bigger consider them friendly. But, Bigger is preconceived with his blackness. He feels embarrassed with them. He is ashamed that people will look at him with these Whites. Due to this inferiority complex, he suspects even the human and good treatment of Mary Dalton. He thinks- "Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun of him? What was it that they wanted? Why didn't they have him alone?" (*Native* 98).

Bigger has the preconception that white people always despise black skin. So he considers that people like Jack purposefully come close to the blacks to make them feel their blackness. Jack, standing by, looking at, and holding his hand, makes Bigger feel as if he hasn't physical existence, just something to be hated and ashamed of. Mary and Jack make him sit in the car, especially, in between them, being cramped into so a small place. He feels that even moving in between them would make him feel his blackness. He feels that these White people don't care but make him feel what he does not want. He thinks that he would not have been uncomfortable anyway had he been White like them. They make him eat with them. Jack convinces him that they are not doing anything with him that would make him feel bad. Mary also feels sorry for Bigger for not believing in their goodness. Skin consciousness lets Bigger not feel even hunger for he feels so much tortured in the company of Mary and Jack.

The inferiority complex makes Bigger feel that whenever a White (despite the goodness of Jack and Mary) looks at a Black person, he/she looks nothing but black skin; and, it makes the Black ashamed of himself/herself. Mary's continuous good approach makes Bigger feel for some moments that she does not hate him like other white people, 'But for all that she was white and he hated her' (Native 113).

In Black boy, Richard's friends are found living in an inferiority complex. They would advise him not to feel for what was considered wrong by Jim Crow society. His classmates would consider the wrong of his ways which may put him to death. For them, it is not the way of feeling in the concern of the blacks. When Richard finds a job, his friend, Greggs, warns him to be careful while working with the Whites. Greggs thinks that by getting the job Richard may, fortunately, learn the trade, but, he must be aware of his blackness. They were in such an inferiority complex that they could keep in mind unerringly what to aspire to and what not to. If some Black desires to be a writer, he will be considered crazy by other Blacks. If someone wants to be in business with the Whites, his friends will consider it a misadventure and would report it to the boss. If one wants to upgrade himself, some, with the feeling of inferiority, will oppose. Richard wonders why some of the Black boys even feel proud of suffering from a disease like gonorrhoea. Their mindset is cultivated in such a manner that most of the Blacks cannot think of themselves as the humans like the Whites.

In a hotel, where Richard works, Negro girls are employed. They are given not a bit of respect, and even the girls have considered it common. Richard accompanies a black girl. While entering the hotel, a White watchman slaps her playfully on her buttocks. She tries to keep herself out of his reach and passes ahead as if nothing uncommon happened there. She says, 'It don't matter. They do that all the time's' (Black 200). It is not only the black girl but almost all black women who have accepted the Jim Crow system and think of themselves as inferior.

Wright portrays how the Blacks presume their degraded state. The Blacks get cheap clothes at the rate the shopkeeper wants. They do not mind the humiliating treatment given by the shopkeeper. They can bear cursing and kick by the shopkeeper. The boss cruelly beats a Black woman for being unable to pay him, but the woman presumes it as his right. She screams that she is physically hurt and not that she is mentally hurt. Such long-time treatment given to them has made her and the other Blacks like her accept that they are not humans like the Whites.

The Blacks can quietly deal with injustice. They can laugh at their humiliation. They have assumed their degraded life so that some Blacks take pride in having a disease like gonorrhoea. They view it as a success if they can act their typical Blackness.

Black women/girls do not mind the humiliating treatment at the workplace. A Black girl, accompanying Richard, is slapped on her buttock by a White watchman; but she does not mind it. She does not dare to protest the humiliating act of the watchman. The Blacks quietly work without any complaint against unhealthy work and the humiliating approach of the Whites.

Richard's friend advises him on how to speak and act before a White boss. He says that Richard is foolish as he does not know how to play a typical black: 'Then for God's sake, learn how to live in the South! ... 'Dick, look, you're Black, Black, Black, see? Can't you understand that?' (Black 185).

In *The Long Dream*, the Blacks criticize Fishbelly for his wearing good clothes. The criticism makes him fear and feel ashamed to pass by his people. The Blacks feel suppressed even before the Blacks; it is because of the inferiority complex. Wright describes Fishbelly's experience: "...after he had entered, there was a loud burst of laughter that made him wince. They (the Blacks) were making fun of his White shirt, of the house in which he lived, of the fact that he was..." (Long 16). This criticism makes Fishbelly feel that he and his father are wrong as they are not like other Blacks.

In *Lawd Today!*, Wright portrays minor characters like Mr. Jake Lamb and Mrs. Lamb. They suffer from an inferiority complex regarding their physical appearance. Mr. Jake Lamb thinks that Blacks are inferior to Whites. There is a superstition in the Blacks like Jake Lamb that their biological difference causes Whites' superiority and Blacks' inferiority. Jake Lamb has listened from others that the Whites have their brains in the front of their heads and the Blacks have brains in the back of their heads. Such Blacks believe in racism that "assumes that performance limitations are related to differences of physiognomy or appearance...." (Powell 70). This false idea is cultivated in the mind of the Blacks.

Mrs. Lamb tries to make her kinky and greasy hair straight like the White people with burning oil fumes and an iron comb. Black women like her are ashamed of their natural color and appearance. They deform their natural Black beauty. They go to beauty parlors and try to artificially change their look. Wright describes a Black woman: "Her hair was shining jet, and was brushed straight back, plastered to her head. The contrast between the overdose of White powder and the natural color of her skin was so sharp that she looked like two people instead of one; it was as if her ghost were walking in front of her" (Lawd 109). The Black woman vainly makes up to impress her husband. The vanity of her attempts makes her more despised.

Conclusion

The study of the characters in the select novels of Richard Wright shows that, except for the protagonists and a few minor characters, the Blacks shrink with an inferiority complex. The consciousness of skin color holds the Blacks back. Most of them are found feeling helpless and yielding to their condition in life. They are not aware that their socio-economical condition is lowered not due to the color and shape but it is because of the racial politics.

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