

Racial Violence, Lynching, and the Struggle for Survival in Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home”

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ABSTRACT

Richard Wright is a noteworthy American writer of modern period. Wright is renowned multi-faceted literary figure who has represented racial themes and racial and racial tension with reference to the pathetic flight that was common in the 19th and 20th Century. His stories are picture of the complex jungle of human relationships. Saving this human jungle from the hands of the facists has had been the ideology of Richard Wright. Through his writings, Wright has projected the excruciating African American lives in the rural south, particularly, the Mississippi. ‘Big Boy Leaves Home’ is the first story in the collection ‘Uncle Tom’s Children’ published in 1938. Initially it appeared in the anthology ‘The New Caravan’ in 1936. This story explores the pathetic flight of Big Boy and the tragic account of the death of his three teenage friends owing to racial segregation.

Keywords

Racism, Discrimination, migration, lynching, identity crisis, placeless existence.

INTRODUCTION

‘Short Story’ is an interesting and impressive genre in the literary arena. ‘Short story’ began as an oral tradition. Stories were narrated to instill moral values, civic sense and ethnos. This is true with regard to African American tales and folk lore. They can be considered as one of the pillars of Black Literature itself. The African American short stories are a source of Black heritage and ethnicity. it helps the blacks in a rejuvenation of persevering spirit and black solidarity. This spirit is reflected in all the short stories that are written by the African Americans. The question of race, color, nativity, the quest for identity, struggle for equality, war against oppression and the battle for rights and opportunities- these are the recurring themes in the short stories.

“They are stories for all of us at the beginning of mankind as a species of America as a Nation, of the African-American as a full citizen.”

Richard Wright is a noteworthy American writer of this period. Wright is renowned multi-faceted literary figure who has represented racial themes and racial and racial tension with reference to the pathetic flight that was common in the 19th and 20th Century. His stories are picture of the complex jungle of human relationships. Saving this human jungle from the hands of the fascists has had been the ideology of Richard Wright. Through his writings, Wright has projected the excruciating African American lives in the rural south, particularly, the Mississippi. ‘Big Boy Leaves Home’ is the first story in the collection ‘Uncle Tom’s Children’ published in 1938. Initially it appeared in the anthology ‘The New Caravan’ in 1936. This story explores the pathetic flight of Big Boy and the tragic account of the death of his three teenage friends owing to racial segregation.

The story ‘Big Boy Leaves Home’ focuses on the single tragic day in the lives of four adolescent black boys who lived in the rural part of Mississippi. The story begins with a delightful summer afternoon for four boys Buck, Bobo, Lester and Big Boy which winds up too shortly as they are subjected to violent ordeal at the hands of the Whites. The boys are introduced with the usually gay, teen behavior. However, they are exposed to outsized, racially-provoked brutality by the Whites which throws light on the sinister world in which they are doomed to live or rather exist and ultimately embrace a choiceless death.

The five parts of the story begin on a peaceful summer day that gets transformed into a waking nightmare, as the boys participate in their lives as teenagers when life itself should have been a waking dream. Four friends Bobo, Lester, Buck and Big Boy leave school, pass through a forest sharing dirty jokes among them and they enjoy the warmth of the sun. They engage in a friendly tussle and then decide to take a swim to cool off from the heat. At the same time, Big Boy is worried that the nearest swimming pool would be a threat to their lives and that they may be lynched for there is erected a racist sign prohibiting the Blacks from going there. Therefore Big Boy senses the danger of being lynched if they swim in the particular hole. So he suggested that they could buy something to eat and relax. But the other three boys attack him. So to have a check on the group he takes Bobo hostage and explains

his deed stating the principle of divide and rule. He explains that the best way to confront a group is to pick off its members one after another and dilute its strength.

In part two, however, the boys are into the swimming hole that is actually marked to indicate the racial demarcation by the old man Harvey who does not permit the Blacks to swim there. While the other boys feel rather scary about swimming in that hole, Big Boy opines that being next to the swimming hole and being present in the hole is almost the same. Skinny, the four boys take a cool dip in the swimming hole and then lie down bare to dry their naked bodies in the Sun. The boys talk about taking a train to the North if they are caught by Harvey. In the course of this conversation, the boys are scared by the appearance of the White woman under whose feet lie their clothes. As they get near the woman to collect their clothes, the woman fears as if the black boys are approaching her and screams loudly for safety. Jim, her husband appears there like a soldier with a rifle and starts firing. Lester and Buck get killed in an instant. Big Boy and Bozo manage forcefully to seize the gun from Jim. A melee ensues. Unintentionally, Big Boy fires the gun in self defense when Jim is killed and the woman faints in a shock. Lester and Buck become a prey to the suspicion of the White woman. The woman's mind is socially conditioned in such a way that she grows suspicious about the approaching boys who actually become panic stricken and progress to collect their clothes under the woman's feet in order to conceal their naked selves. The hasty Jim shoots Lester and Buck. Big Boy manages to get away and he leaves home in pursuit of safety for his life.

In the third part of the story, the two boys reach a forest where Big Boy gets separated from Bobo as Big Boy always believed in divide and conquer dictum. The two boys decide to hide in their own houses for fear of being attacked. Big Boy reaches home and explains to his parents what had happened. Big Boy's father Saul ensures that he had no problem with the white woman. Saul scolds Big Boy for bunking school. Big Boy confirms that no one saw him or Bobo. The family gathers the members of its community to discuss the problem. The members declare that Jim was Harvey's son. Big Boy begs for permission to permit him to go to an alien place by a train unidentified for he is actually afraid of being lynched by the whites in public. However, the members assembled express their anxiety about being identified as the railway station is kept under vigilance and scrutiny. Big Boy is fed with some food and given clothes. He is now allowed to steal into some brick kilns until the dawn of the next day. The next morning Big Boy understands that Wills could drive him out to Chicago when Big Boy strongly believed that Bobo would also have a safe escape.

Part four describes how Big Boy spends a terrific night in the brick kilns afraid of bloody hounds. He managed to get into the biggest kiln where he notices the demonic presence of a snake and he kills the snake violently. He waits for the coming of Bobo when he broods over his mistake and fears Divine judgement. He also mourns the death of his two friends Lester and Buck. He also goes into a dream of attacking and murdering the lynch mob, making the newspaper headlines by encountering a valiant death. He wakes up from his dream as he is disturbed by the noisy people who discuss about him. They plunder Big Boy's house in search of Big Boy. When they could not longer find Big Boy they set the house ablaze. A White mob rushes carrying tar, feathers and gasoline and there is a triumphant cry. This mob joins another mob and they trace out Bobo. Bobo receives a violent treatment at the hands of the White mob. Big Boy Morrison desperately watches the lynching of Bobo.

Part five is a narration of the pathetic flight of Big Boy facilitated through Wills to the North. This incident is tragically ironic as Chicago is notoriously known for its race riots. Hence the journey of Big Boy does not or cannot provide liberation or solace to him. On the other hand, the memory of the death of his three friends has driven him out of his home for there is no hope for survival otherwise.

The story throws light on some of the key factors and themes in the lives of the African Americans. The boys are differently identified and they meet out injustice for no other cause than the fact that they are dark-skinned. The story evidences 'racism' that is rampant and the Jim Crow law of segregation that had been in practice in the South. The flight of Big Boy typifies the conditions that prevailed and prompted people take to the great migration northward. The story also is an eye-opener to the other side of racism which is the bitter fact of lynching.

The story provides ample details about the tragedy of lynching of an African American teenager Bobo. The graphically stark story is a daunting nightmarish experience to the readers. The story throws light on the social reality during the Jim Crow era of oppression and injustice. The fact that life suddenly changes into a terrific, nightmarish experience for the African Americans challenging their very existence in the American soil is realistically portrayed by Richard Wright – The story also alludes to the dark history of Red Summer 1919 or the Chicago race riots which is singled out and commemorated as a 'black day' in the history of the Blacks in the United States even after a century. A similar incident of a black boy named Eugene Williams aged 15 swimming near the white area was lynched. The 17 years old Eugene William swam across to the white area in Lake Michigan where he

was caught and brutally murdered by a group of white Americans. No legal step was ever taken against the lynch mob. This incident termed as the Red Summer of 1919 or the Chicago race riots evidences the brutality of racial discrimination where the Blacks were unofficially segregated near the beaches. Fifteen whites and twenty five of the blacks got killed in this incident. There is always a yearning desire for equality identity, peace and dignity in the minds of the Blacks. Their eternal search for happiness and freedom and how it ensues in a gloomy catastrophe could be witnessed in the communal riots of 1919. It has been quoted as an incident of embarrassment for the American democracy ever since. Among other factors, the 1919 communal riots had been a solid cause for the migration of the Blacks to the North.

Richard Wright's story is a faithful portrayal of the cruelties of lynching and its aftermath. In this story all about one is killed out of the four teenage friends. Only Big boy is alive but he is confounded in a state of pandemonium that he flees for the safety of his life. The NAACP records 4,743 lynching between 1882 and 1968 in the United States particularly in the South, About 72.7% of African Americans had become the victims of such lynchings. The lynch mobs executed lynching after a public announcement and the brutality was watched by a White mass as if they witness a sport. The heaviness of racism and the gravity of racial prejudice is highlighted during lynchings. Incidents of lynching is notified and lamented for in the poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. It could be observed that a lynching tree was like a cross and the African American was glorified to be the Black Christ in Black Literature. The story reveals how 'racism' had instigated brutality in men and the Universal brotherhood had been forgotten. The terror of lynching and its excruciating pain is portrayed in the horrific death of Bobo, The undying impressions of the incident are eternally etched in Big Boy's memory.

The ideology of 'race' and 'race culture' haunts Big Boy to a different world in Chicago. The unfortunate Bobo gets caught and suffers an awful death. Bobo's body parts are cunningly appropriated during the lynchings which are obtained as a souvenir during the Jim Crow era lynching. Wright's objective was to project a period in African American lives when they were subjected to inhuman violence and untold misery during the dark Jim Crow era in American history. The horrific nature of racism is very much highlighted through the story demanding the reader's attention and claiming for justice. The dialogue of the boys in African American dialect throws light on their teenage apprehensions of racial tension in the Jim Crow era. The setting of the story initially emphasizes youth, vigour and the innocence of the boys. Wright, through the dialogues of the various categories of characters had recorded the differing opinions with regard to racial tensions. As Big Boy watches the lynch-mob with 'tar feather to burn his friend' it leaves depressing memories in Big Boy who leaves home. There is irony in Big Boy's flight to a new world because it does not promise him freedom. Chicago which is now Big Boy's refuge is known for its urban violence since the race riots of 1919. Big Boy may find no peace in Chicago if his conditions of servitude as a 'Black' remain unaltered. The excruciating, painful lives and the connected African American themes are highlighted in the story. The most ubiquitous theme which occurs in the story is 'racism' and the violence of 'lynching'.

'There can be no peace without justice' is the proclamation of Nelson Mandela.

CONCLUSION

This 1938 story of Wright is a realistic portrayal of the social condition in which young black lives are gripped by racial tensions and fear and are falsely identified. The flight of Big Boy for the safety of his life raises questions of belongingness and nativity. The black Big Boy craves for a place that would ensure his peace and allow him to prosper. The character of Big Boy represents the longings of a race for centuries together. Writers like Wright were trying to voice out the voiceless which propagated the waves of the New Negro Renaissance in Harlem. At the same time, the story shows how the Whites were socially conditioned to look down upon the Blacks and estimate them on the negative side. When life became hard and food was scarce, the cry of the Black multitude has been recorded in the realistic character of Big Boy and his teenage friends. The destinies of the young Black boys in the story are doomed to death, silence and departure owing to racism. It is a clarion call to the Blacks to muster their strength and fight back oppression. The persevering will to 'struggle and survive' to 'serve and sustain' which is the hall mark of an African American is also alluded to in the story. The boys had chosen between a do or die. While Lester, Buck and Bozo embrace an awful death, Big Boy does have the preparedness to survive as a Black challenging the White World. The story is ended up in a mystery and the question of Big Boy's freedom, happiness and safety remains unanswered.

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