



HARMONY, PEACE AND SPACE: SOCIOLOGY OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*

MILIND RAJ ANAND,

Research Scholar

Department of Humanities and Other Studies
Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia National Law University
Lucknow (UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Harmonious social atmosphere is a need of every human being and the necessity of it lies in the very basic nature of the human being, reason being that human being is a 'Social Animal'. It shapes the human, gives him birth, transforms him, guides him, promotes him and gives him direction to work and develop. The motive of the life fulfils only when the human being adds something to the betterment of the society. For an individual to completely harness his potential he needs to have a harmonious atmosphere in the society of which he is a part. This can happen only when he is acceptable to the society of which he demands a space. This research paper will explore the necessity of the peace, harmony and trust within the society and a continual maintenance of it as a matter of right of every individual for his human growth and development and realization of his full potential, and to the ultimate contribution to the society through the critical analyses of Richard Wright's autobiography, 'Black Boy'.

Key words: recognition-value and emulation, harmonious-cultural-cohesive

INTRODUCTION

Harmonious social atmosphere is a need of every human being and the necessity of it lies in the very basic nature of the human being, reason being that human being is a 'Social Animal'.

MILIND RAJ ANAND

1P a g e



Society is a necessity for a Human Being. It shapes the human, gives him birth, transforms him, guides him, promotes him and gives him direction to work and develop. The motive of the life fulfils only when the human being adds something to the betterment of the society. If he is not able to contribute then the limitedness of himself to himself, keeps him up to an animal existence. The human and animal existence run parallel to each other, each dominating and competing with the other, each reverberating within each other, even at times each guiding the other. This is controlled, manipulated and modeled by the Culture of the individual into which he takes birth- rebirth daily within his life span and by which he is guided continuously and too adds to the society of which he is a part. This means a co-operative cultural understanding and relation is a must for the human being. Albert Camus notes, "Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future."

A fine and sound understanding of the cultural environs not only help the individual to homogenize with the people around but also make him a respectable and inalienable individual of it. An existence is carved out of the social space, cultural space and ultimately the Identity formation happens. Identity does not work and exist in seclusion, and so does the human being. An individual's identity has no meaning and relevance within the herd of cattle. It has to be recognized, valued and emulated to make it relevant. Each characteristic has a distinct necessity in the making of the individual, the society and the nation at large. Unless the individual is identified within the socio-cultural space, he is not able to realize his full potential within the same space of the society to which he or she belongs to, even if dormant existence is known to the inhabitants of the same society or vice-versa. Recognition demands activity which may or may not be social friendly but activity is a must. Even if the individual involves himself in an unsocial activity still he will be recognized by the society on which he leaves an impact, though in a negative picture. Secondly he has to be valued by the same society of which he is a part, which means he has an additive value in the activity which he undertakes. He adds to the society in the positive direction. He is a contributor to the society but not a destructor but a constructor, although a destructor is even recognized within the same society but as a destructor, not a value-additor. And thirdly he has to stand out distinguished enough to mark his presence in the society worthy enough to be emulated by other active thoughtful members of the society which may lead them to a right way of life. Till such things do not happen Identity formation does not happen, rather an indistinct existence prevails which if observed philosophically has no more meaning more than the existence of a sheep within flock. Identity demands standing out of the common.

Culture adds to the mental, physical and psychological faculty of the human and he is in fact a product of the same culture which he himself influences or is influenced of. Culture acts as a control over the human being, a regulator, a modifier, a modulator. Culture runs parallel with the Human evolution. It is an automatic existence with the human. Culture is an inherent



part of the human space. Ravindra Kumar quotes Mahatma Gandhi who says, “No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive.” A human being is born in a culture, which may have or may not have another human at the time of gaining consciousness. It is but obvious that he will be born of a human being, with contribution from another human being. But unless the individual gains a conscience, it would be unwise for a human being to be considered to have taken birth in philosophical terms. This consciousness starts impacting the individual, making a mark on the plane slate of his mind, registering all the observation he makes through his senses and process within his mind. He may have a jungle culture or a culture of a civil society, an urban culture or rural, a family culture or secluded, and so on and so forth.

The cultural settings may vary depending upon all the contributors which make it, like the atmosphere, geography, landscape, resources, technology, etc. These contributors in turn define the physique, colour, features, all in all the genes of the individual. Kofi Annan remarks, “We may have different religions, different languages, different coloured skin, but we all belong to one human race.” A homogenous society develops its own language, livelihood practices and occupations, codes of conduct and norms from all such inputs. And thus gradually the culture takes shape with a reflection of all these. Chinua Achebe comments, “When a tradition gathers enough strength to go on for centuries, you don’t just turn it off one day.” Considering the prolonged continuity of tradition to evolve into culture it is conclusive that it is ever evolving and a co-relative process. The culture guarantees homogeneity among the masses of which it is a resemblance and thus largely it reflects the harmonious existence of the people of same culture.

For an individual to completely harness his potential he needs to have a harmonious atmosphere in the society of which he is a part. This can happen only when he is acceptable to the society of which he demands a space. Non-acceptance can result because of having a different cultural background from which one has originated and shaped himself. Abhijit Naskar remarks, “Harmony doesn’t come merely through tolerance. You don’t need to tolerate people from other cultural backgrounds. It is time you start loving them. Toleration may make you a decent person, but it is love that makes you a true human being.” The tolerance and acceptability has to be wide enough to accommodate other cultural differences. Till a society has a repulsive behavior about the individual, it will never allow him to share any space within itself, which the society itself claims, without any concern of the same space which the people themselves would have acquired though begging, labour or force. Thus non acceptance in the social setting will lead to disharmony. The person will be taken as a fly in the milk, an unwanted material, an intruder, an unworthy individual or same may happen with a complete race. Adding to this Dalai Lama says, “Logically, harmony must come from the heart... Harmony very much based on trust. As soon as use force, creates fear. Fear and trust cannot go together.” Trust among each other is necessary for co-existence.



In a social competitive social atmosphere the opportunity to share space and opportunity is always decided by the powerful, the mighty who holds a dominant position in the space which is claimed of. Even if the dominant shares the space out of his necessity or greed, fear or favour, he may remain un-accommodative, repulsive and hostile to the people whom he considers unworthy. This will ultimately lead to disharmony within the society within which a space has been shared. Albert Camus warns, "The only way to deal with an un-free world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion." The disharmony will ultimately lead to revolution, rebellion which can be individual or collective.

A similar disharmony resulted in the American continent with the Blacks, where the Blacks were given a shared space out of the unavoidable necessity of the Whites so as to contribute as laborers, but the Whites never accepted them as worthy of Rights, Respect and Revenue. They were considered as savages under the whites, born to serve them under their command and perish as dust. They were enslaved because of their humane and humble approach towards the intruders, the Whites themselves, in their lands from where they were enslaved because of their having a lesser or must say a differently developed science and technology and they maintained a primitive lifestyle which could not compete with the deadly and vulturous sight of the whites who preyed on them. Before their uprising, struggle and ultimate gaining of freedom they were considered beasts and savages and the question of disharmonious environment never mattered because it was the survival that mattered for the Blacks. But after their independence when the Black consciousness gained its roots, the questions of rights and dignity came up. Disharmony within the same society propped up where there was virtual harmony because of silent servitude of the blacks through generations. A slave cannot be expected to claim dignity and harmony, but a rebel can or must say that the claim itself gives birth to a rebel. The space that was shared out of necessity to the Blacks had now to be shared out of claim by the Blacks. This led to a disharmonious situation among the Blacks and the Whites. This disharmony ultimately resulted into further conflicts and revolutions in the history of the making of American nation. The result of disharmony were the further atrocities on the Blacks by the Whites because of the powerful and defining position they held in the country and the violation of their Human Rights which were necessary to justify their full potential.

Richard Wright in his torturous childhood has detailed about the various incidents which affected his life, shaped it and made him as what he ended with. His mother who had been a strong support and pillar for him shaped his childhood because of his fatherless life. Even though America gained freedom long back, the Blacks were yet to gain freedom from hunger, poverty and disease. They yet had to dream and struggle for a life full of dignity, opportunity and freedom. Survival was the biggest challenge for the Black families and daily food was the monstrous question in their childhood. Daily fight with hunger lasted for many childhood years and the biggest obstacle to materialize was the unavailability of fair opportunity to



realize that. The struggle for survival is the struggle for the basic and unavoidable necessities of life. Such situations pose a situation of daily life and death. A daily risk has to be endured to step in the next date, to see the next rising sun. Many a times there results a struggle even among the strugglers themselves due to lack of opportunities and survival options. The mightier among the weak harasses the weaker, the poorer for his survival-security. Such a situation results in a literal fight too against those who encroach upon the rights of the others. The situation worsens even more in the cases where there exist absence of the males in the family, ultimately burden of struggle and life falling on the shoulders of the female head of the family. Female has always been considered a weak-link in the society, and Black society is no different in this regard. This is because of the average natural physical strength of the female which stands different than the male in certain respects. Thus attempts are made by the stronger and inhuman against such individuals and families and the struggler, the sufferer has to find his own ways to deal with such a situation and survive at any cost. The circumstance itself becomes the guide of the individual who learns as it goes and stands up to the situation.

After the parting of Wright with his father, he too had to learn new modes of survival at hand. His mother engaged herself in menial jobs around the neighborhood, and Wright even being a kid had to manage the family activities. At such a young age he had to pick up a fight against the unsocial elements of the society, the bully-boys and ensure his survival in the neighborhood. He was moved and motivated by his mother, who taught him the initial survival lessons of his life. Describing the challenging unsocial atmosphere he writes,

They came toward me and I broke into a wild run toward home. They overtook me and flung me to the pavement. I yelled, pleaded, kicked, but they wrenched the money out of my hand. They yanked me to my feet, gave me a few slaps, and sent me home sobbing. My mother met me at the door. ... "Don't you come in here," my mother warned me. ... "I 'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself." She went into the house and I waited, terrified, wondering what she was about. Presently she returned with more money and another note; she also had a long heavy stick" (Wright 17).

The White apathy and atrocity happened because of the racial difference the Blacks had against the White. Such an atmosphere over generations led to the development of segregated neighborhoods for Whites and Blacks. Any intrusions in the territory of the other led to severe fights among the two communities which even resulted in the loss of lives and lawsuits against the Blacks with an ultimate severe punishment. Struggle to survive led to a community feeling among each other but limited to the same racial brotherhood, standing dead against the other race. Thus an individual fight would result in a community clash. On one side it created a sense of security for one but on the other it created a sense of fear.



Having such a social atmosphere in the neighborhood poses not only challenge for the whole society to survive but it makes the lives of the most marginalized among the poor extremely unsafe and challenging. The right to live harmoniously gets compromised for all those who do not involve themselves in such a clash and the situation of whole lot becomes precarious. Ultimately the potential of the individual, the promising youth gets ruined and the hope best results get compromised for the life ahead because of unsocial and troubled atmosphere. Wright details,

We were not large enough for the White boys to fear us and both of us, the White boys and the Black boys, began to paly our traditional racial roles as thpough we had been born to them, as though it was in our blood, as though we were being guided by instinct. All the frightful descriptions we had heard about each other, all the violent expression of hate and hostility that had seeped into us from our surroundings, came now to the surface to guide our actions. (83)

Describing the seriousness and hostility of the surroundings in which he grew Wright narrates further,

Our battles were real and bloody; we threw rocks, scinders, coal, sticks, pieces of iron, and broken bottles, and while we threw them we longed for even deadlier weapons. If we were hurt, we took it quietly; there was no crying or whimpering. If our wounds were not truly serious, we hid them from our parents. We did not want to be beaten for fighting. (83)

The day to day struggle of human being changes his ways of behavior and thinking. He psyche is altered for life as a whole. Either he breaks under the circumstances and loses hope within himself and gives up or he takes the situations as a challenge and rebuilds himself, stands against the situations fighting all odds. The past impacts the future. A tough time helps evolve a tough man. The physical and psychological changes that take place within the individual transform the individual. The poor all over a world bear a tough rugged life and therefore they are less prone to breaking under various psychological and physical traumas that they pass through in life. They evolve of the most crucial phases of life which could be unimaginable to many who may give up even in normal circumstances. Challenges of food, clothing, shelter, medicine and education are the most crucial, pressing and basic to the survival of the human being. However a poor man even beats this distressing condition to make a way in life and survive. But the rich, who had never faced the odds in life may break under the situation, may fall into frustration and depression and may easily end his life.



The childhood of Richard Wright was full of the same challenges as most of the Black children of his age and he too overcame those tough times as many more did of his times. The undying fighting spirit kept him alive for long and ultimately made him what he finally became. The courageous battle against the society, the un-accommodative and fearful White environment placed him in a prominent position and a man to be referred as an icon of resilience, hard work and success later. At a tender age with positive attitude to survival in an unharmonious atmosphere, Wright adopted innumerable tactics, devised ways to reach the top of the ladder. Describing the resilience and sense of integrity he developed in the very childhood he says,

My street gang code was making it hard for me. I had never informed upon a boy in the public school, and I was waiting for the boy in front of me to come to my aid, lying, making up excuses, anything. In the past I had taken punishment that was not mine to protect the solidarity of the gang, and I had seen other boys do the same. ... I held out my hand... she stung my palm until it was red, then lashed me across my bare legs until welts rose. I clamped my teeth to keep from uttering a single whimper (Wright 106).

In the formative years of life it is the duty of the parents, the family and the neighborhood to provide and maintain a holistic and supportive cooperative environment for the children who may gradually grow into a better human being. All the personality gets shaped within such initial years of the child, which may be fruitful for his future life or may be harmful. A healthy and progressive atmosphere certainly adds up to the mental, physical and spiritual development of the individual. It becomes not only the duty of the society but of the State too to maintain a harmonious atmosphere by maintaining law and order among the people. Wright picked up many habits in his childhood which were bad, and cannot be called manners of a civilized society. But because of the impact of the neighborhood, the apathy of the government, such a life flourished around the neighborhood in which Wright lived and he picked up those which became a part of him at a very early age. This was a natural transformation of the Wright from the stage of child to adolescence. The day and night survival within such community altered his language and the filthy abusive language became a part of his tongue which landed him in troublesome situations many a times. Commenting on the psychological impact which Wright suffered and the distortions in language he narrates,

One evening, in doing my chores, I took the water pail to the hydrant in the backyard to fill it. I was half asleep, tired, tense, all but swaying on my feet. ... the pail slipped and water drenched my pants and shoes and stockings. ...



“That goddamn lousy bastard sonofabitching bucket!” I spoke in a whisper of hate and despair. ... I had learned to curse before I had learned to read? ... I had been a drunkard at the age of six?” (Wright 98).

The childhood needs immense care and shaping. Any sort of exploitation needs to be ward off from the child. The exploitations lead to a stunted psyche of the child. In the formative years it is impossible for the child to understand the difference between right and wrong and when he is exposed to a certain type of habitual practices day and night, he picks them inadvertently and could not differentiate between right and wrong. It comes in his consciousness only when the child grows up, develops his own mental faculty, has a power to reason out things, gets exposed to a different environment and makes a comparative study between the right and wrong and chooses what is suitable for himself and the society. Many a times it becomes very late by then and any transformation becomes impossible or at least very tough task. Therefore the task of parents and the society are unavoidably necessary and significant in the making of a progressive individual. The unsocial elements of the society affect in the negative to anybody they come in contact with, because their bad and unsocial activities personify them to a larger extent. Wright too was exposed to such kind of people in the atmosphere where he habitated. As a child at the age of six years he was exposed to the bar, to the drunkards and abusive language. These people were conscious of what they were doing to a child of six years of age but they hardly bothered. Suspending their conscience they had fun with a growing poor child and left him on the streets to beg, completely drunk. Such children in the Black neighborhoods were neither cared by the people nor the governments because they were Blacks who had no future and destiny. In the vile atmosphere the cultural impact was severely degrading for the development of Black children. Detailing on the helplessness of an innocent child Wright describes the impact the corrupt vile atmosphere made on him. He writes,

One summer afternoon – in my sixth year- while peering under the swinging doors of the neighborhood saloon, a black man caught hold of my arm and dragged me into its smoky and noisy depths. ... He lifted me and sat me upon the counter, put his hat upon my head and ordered a drink for me. ... Somebody tried to jam a cigar into my mouth, but I twisted out of my way. ... Whisky was set before me. ... I took a sip and coughed. ... Then another. My head spun and I laughed. ... I ran giggling and shouting among the yelling crowd” (Wright 20-21)

A man called me to him and whispered some words into my ear and told me that he would give me a nickel if I went to a woman and repeated them to her. I told him that I would say them; he gave me the nickel and I ran to the woman and shouted the words. A gale of laughter went up in the saloon.



... From then on , for a penny or a nickel, I would repeat to anyone whatever was whispered to me To beg drinks in the saloon became an obsession. Many evenings my mother would find me wandering in a daze and take me home and beat me; but the next morning, no sooner had she gone to her job than I would run to the saloon and wait for someone to take me in and buy me a drink. My mother protested tearfully to the proprietor of the saloon, who ordered me to keep out of his place. But the men- reluctant to surrender their sport- would buy me drinks anyway, letting me drink out of their flasks on the streets, urging me to repeat obscenities” (Wright 21).

This was misuse of liberty. The men in the saloon had the liberty to enjoy and relax but they extended their liberty to the nuisance and destruction of the other. This narrates the selfishness of the masses which added to the inharmonious atmosphere for the acceptance of a Black Boy. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in one of his famous speeches said, “So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you.” But he warned the limitations of the social liberty which shall never be misused at the expense of other’s freedom.

Thus we see that it is the society which shapes the individual; it makes him or destroys him. The peace and tranquility among the inhabitants of any society is a must for harnessing the full potential of the human being. A harmoniously-culturally-cohesive and respectfully amiable society will never let its human capital pass in vain and will tap all the resources in its realization. The socio-culturally and psychologically sound human being will add further to the development of the human capital of the society of which he has been a part. For the complete attainment and realization, the harmony of the social environment is a must which can only result by mutually respecting the Human Rights of fellow beings. Marcus Aurelius, the famous philosopher remarked, “He who lives in harmony with himself lives in harmony with the universe.” Therefore self observation and self regulation is necessary to evolve and maintain a harmonious atmosphere. For the generation of harmony a mutual trust needs to be generated which will lead to the prosperity and peace of the human race. Emphasizing on the necessity of trust among the fellow humans Dalai Lama remarked, “We need cooperation based on trust and self-confidence to create an open, passionate, harmonious society.” Therefore the emphasis of “harmony within society’ needs to be highlighted, which will ultimately compliment the realization of complete human self.

“With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things.”

- William Wordsworth



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