



Ain Shams University

Faculty of Education

English Department

**The Theme of Violence in Richard Wright's Fiction:  
Uncle Tom's Children ,Native Son,  
and The Outsider.**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Degree of**

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**Submitted by:**

**Marwa Mohamed AbdelRaouf AbdelMageed**

**Under the Supervision of**

**Prof. Ahmed Mohamed Aboud**

**Professor of English literature**

**Department of English**

**Ain Shams University**

**D. Amal Rashad AboHeiba**

**Lecturer in English literature**

**Department of English**

**Ain Shams University**

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**Abstract**

The objective of this thesis is twofold; first, it seeks to present some different types of violence and theories that deal with these types in different communities. Second, the thesis offers readings of some of Richard Wright's literary works that discuss the theme of violence.

Hence, Chapter one introduces some definitions of the term "violence". Mainly the thesis presents violence against blacks and collective violence. It is referred to Nietzsche's theory about masters and slaves to discuss how racial discrimination works to bring more violence against black people. It is also referred to Marx's and Sartre's economic and existential theories to demonstrate some of the causes of economic collective violence, and finally to the Huntington's political theory that predicts future wars and political collective violence.

Chapter two "Uncle Tom's Children: The White Man's Violence and the Black's Victimization" traces different shapes of violence practised by the white man against black people in the segregating American South during the last century. The chapter compares and contrasts the passive uncle toms and their positive children. After an introduction that summarizes some of the unjust compelling ethics that used to prevail in that racial society, Wright presents five novellas along which the idea of resisting the white's violence develops.

In chapter three "Native Son: the Black's Reaction to the White's violence" Wright moves a step further in describing the changes in the racial white/black relationship in his country. Bigger Thomas, the main black character is never satisfied by only resisting the white folks'

violence. He suffers from a long heritage of segregation in his native country and, thus, decides to take vengeance on white folks who cause his and his people's suffering. In fact, Bigger is America's native son. He is the product of racial America. His violence is surprising and unexpected however not unusual in his racial community. However aggressive are Bigger's actions, they are a mere reaction to the whites' previous vehement actions.

Chapter Four: "The Outsider: An Image of Extreme Violence" presents Wright's vision of violence that crosses the boundaries of his local racial society. After presenting violence as a reciprocal relation between the black and the white in racial America, Wright sheds light on violence as a universal phenomenon that modern man suffers from in the twentieth century. Damon Cross, *The Outsider's* protagonist, resorts to violence to solve all his problems however he fails. After killing four people whom he thought may hinder his way to freedom, Damon discovered that violence is never a solution for his problems.

The thesis ends with a summing up of the conclusions that the thesis arrives at.

**Key Words:**

1. Violence.
2. The White's actions.
3. The Black's reaction.
4. A universal phenomenon.

## *Preface*

This thesis proposes to achieve a dual purpose. First, it seeks to present a survey of different theories that deal with the concept of violence. Second, it aims mainly at tackling the theme of violence in Richard Wright's fiction, its causes and results. Such aim is discussed through the following premises. First, how much violence, according to Wright, forms the necessary prelude to self-realization for those oppressed black people in the South. Second, using violence by the Black is just a reaction to the previous violent actions of the White man in the racial discriminating American society. Third, the Black's violent actions are America's heritage of racism; and Wright warns America that its policy of racial exclusion has created monsters that would destroy it. Finally, Wright passes the limits of his native community to a universal context where violence controls the behavior of modern man.

Hence, the thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents various definitions of violence. Different forms of violence are presented as well. A reference to different theories helps to explain why different shapes of violence may take place. Finally, a critical reading of Wright's selected works will be presented to argue about Wright's view of racial violence in America.

Chapter two deals with Uncle Tom's Children the first collection of Long stories written by Wright. In this collection, Wright fictionalized the incidents of racial violence in the South. The five novellas are arranged to depict the struggle of Southern black peasants against a caste system dependent upon lynch violence.

In Chapter three Wright presents the Black's reaction to the White's violence. It deals with Wright's masterpiece Native Son in which he presents his protagonist, Thomas Bigger, who acts his role in the American racial violence drama by his murder of a white woman. Wright has given his white readers one of their own concepts about the black man as a murderous, depraved beast; however, he insists that they are more monstrous than Bigger because they share the ultimate responsibility for his being able to create and possess himself only through animal violence, only through cunning and ferocity.

Chapter Four presents an image of extreme violence. It deals with The Outsider, which deals with much more violence than any of Wright's novels. As Wright's other protagonists, Cross Damon tries to define himself and the world around him. However, the self Damon has created is a nightmare. By adopting violence, the protagonist creates for himself a brutal world without redemption even in the act of self-realization.

The thesis is concluded by Wright's affirmation that violence is not a solution for man's problems. Violence could not oppress black people or make them yield to white people's tyranny. On the other hand, it does not help black people either to beat white folks or to better their miserable conditions. Violence does not help them to get their rights or to achieve equality. On a broader level, in spite of predominating more and more in the modern age, violence could never resolve man's troubles in the twentieth century.

# **Chapter One:**

## **An Introduction to the concept of Violence.**



The main objective of this chapter is to investigate the phenomenon of violence. In spite of being publicly refused and rejected, violence still characterizes most people's behaviour. Along history man presented different sorts and shapes of behaviour that could only be described as violent. Throughout different ages, violence has its great impact on man to the extent that he was described as a violent being. In his book Culture and its Discontents, Freud describes man as having an instinct for violence. He states:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering their disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self destruction (82).

According to Freud, violence is innate in man. In fact, man is used to justifying his violence. He insists on giving logical reasons for his stern deeds. A colonizer, for instance, justifies his aggression against the colonized as a legal right for self-defence; on the other hand, he describes the colonized's attempts to return their land as aggressive and them as violent. In many countries, black people and other minor races still suffer from tribal violence. Such tribal violence is ascribed by their oppressors to those minorities' bad manners and evil nature. Man, hence, never attributes his violence towards his brothers in humanity to his selfishness, conceit, or greediness; on the contrary, he always gives himself the right to fight and to use force against anybody. Actually, those who adopt violence to be their style in dealing with others claim that using violence is their legal right and the others have no such right even to defend themselves.

The Encyclopedia of Civil Rights in America defines violence as "acts of intimidation, harassment, physical force, or threat of physical

force directed against any person, or person, or family, or their property or advocate, motivated at least in part by hostility to their real or perceived race, ethnic background, national origin, religious belief, sex, age, disability, or sexual orientation"(874). According to this definition some people suffer from violence because of no fault but being born in a specific country, belonging to a specific race or religion with a certain colour or gender. It is a matter of inequality or discrimination. Realizing that violence is directed against them just because of their colour, race, gender or national origin, the violated people suffer a great deal of oppression that is overwhelmed by their failure to save their rights or to protect their freedom. Opportunities for those oppressed minorities to achieve any sort of equality are limited by a kind of continuing systemized violence.

It is argued that a feeling of superiority leads some races or nations to mistreat those who seem to be inferior to them in certain aspects. Whether verbal or actual, this mistreatment is always aggressive and severe. However, the supposed superior group is not to be asked or even blamed for its aggression. They are superior and free to be violent against less superior groups. On the other hand, these supposed less superior groups are never satisfied by their inferior position; they fight vigorously those assaulter superiors. Racial violence against the blacks, for instance, is a direct result of the whites' fake feeling of superiority.

In fact, racial segregation takes several forms in any racial society. During the last century, for instance, black folks were severely treated by their supposed white masters. They were humiliated all the time as if they were subhuman beings. They were never on a bar with white folks. A black man, for instance, should address an equal white man with lots of 'sirs' and 'misters'; he was never to call him with his name only without

titles. A black boy was never to play with white boys as a peer and if they fought him, he was never to defend himself. A black person should have always been coward if he hoped to be safe. Further, a white woman was a sacred creature that was prohibited for a black man to establish a relation with. Dealing with a white woman sexually was a sin that may have cost a black man his life to atone for it; however, a white man could have a sexual intercourse with a black woman even if she was married or unwilling.

Moreover, schools, hospitals, restaurants, clubs for white folks were not allowed for black people to join. Even dwellings for white folks were in specific neighbourhoods where black folks were to work only as servants but never to live. Black people were employed only in specific low standard jobs. However clever or honest a black employee was, he was not allowed to exceed a certain limit of promotion. High rank jobs, such as doctors, officers, political diplomats, were confined only to white folks. High education schools, cultural institutions were opened only for white people; there was no need for black folks who would be servants to be highly educated or cultured. Concerning the American context, negro-white antagonism was a matter of racial conflict. In his article “The abolition of blacks in abolitionist fiction, 1830-1860”, Alfred R. Ferguson shows how the blacks in the American context have deeply suffered from racial segregation:

In America, blacks have experienced in varied degrees various modes of purgation by oppression in slavery *de jure*; purgation by repression in *de facto* slavery; purgation by attempted deportation. All those modes of purgation have been wrought by defining black people as beings less than human. But the most insidious, mode of purgation of the white land has been the historic(generally unconscious) unwillingness to cast black people in any realistic role in the fictive dramas of American life save the character and personality of nature’s special creation(135-136).

Actually, racism and violence are strongly related to each other. Racial communities witness lots of aggressive crimes and terrorist offences. Considering a class, a race or a specific ethnic group as superior to the other classes, races or ethnic groups in the same society indicates injustice, partiality and prejudice in this society. The superior race or class claims it has the right to control the other supposed inferior race or class. Controlling the others is not, of course, a peaceful process at all; on the contrary, it needs too much force and violence to be achieved. The supposed superior group fights for maintaining their high position in the society and for gaining as much profits as possible from the supposed inferior group and from being in a dominant position in the society. Consequently, fighting this severity or surrendering to it does not better the situation or decrease those inferiors' pains.

The "Negroes" were considered as the low, suppressed group. The white people in the racist American society, for instance, practiced all forms of violence against those "Negroes". The blacks had to follow their white masters' instructions in order to save themselves from their masters' anger. On the other side, the whites worked aggressively to preserve their triumphant position in their conflict with the black and to gain as much profits as they can. For example, throughout most of the history of the United States of America, especially in the South, white men have realized a "sexual gain" because they have had access to black women, while sexual relations between black men and white women have been a taboo.

To discuss how this idea of racial discrimination may bring violence for black people or any other ethnic group, it is referred to Nietzsche's famous classification for people into Masters and Slaves. He claims that this classification is a principle aspect in life. Every person has a certain

position in one of these two classes. In his book, Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche affirms that rank is an instinct: "there is an instinct for rank that more than anything else, is itself the sign of a high rank" (160). Rank is an instinctive aspect in man that cannot be denied or refused. Every soul belongs to an unalterable, inborn order of rank. So, people are never the same, there are two main categories: a noble, mastering, dominating category and an enslaved, following one.

Nietzsche begins to describe the noble class and show their merits. First, he confirms the consistency between what is noble and what is good. Later, Nietzsche gives an example that shows how bias he is. He comes to a conclusion that the noble is white and the black is bad while presenting the meaning of the word 'black' in different languages and according to different cultures. Nietzsche argues that:

The Latin *malus* (beside which I set *melas*) may designate the common man as the dark-colored, above all black-haired man...The distinguishing word for nobility, finally for the good, pure, originally meant the blond-headed, in contradistinction to the dark-haired aboriginal in-habitants (*Genealogy of Morals* 30).

According to the previously mentioned etymological and lingual levels, the noble consider themselves as great, good and superior. They are masters in contrast to the others who are accordingly slaves. They even call themselves the truthful who are distinct from the lying common man. Education or culture may never help develop a slave or make him better. Education and culture are tools of deception they help men deceive about the inherited vulgarity in body and soul. Consequently, nothing in the world can create any chance for communication between them. According to Nietzsche, even the same language is not enough to make different people understand each other as they do not have the same experience base.

After this long introduction, Nietzsche arrives to an important conclusion, that is, subordination to the masters or noble people is a must. Noble people dominate the society and control the other group (the slaves) totally. In fact, this noble class should be granted special rights or privileges. They can never be equal to the slaves who are inferior to them in every aspect. The most important right, Nietzsche decides they have, is to determine values i.e., what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. The noble person is the only one who has the right to decide values and his characteristics are the only characteristics to be honoured. What is honourable is honourable because it relates to him in a way or another and what is harmful to him is the only harmful thing. In his book Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche claims this right:

It is obvious that moral expressions everywhere first appear to people than, only later and derivatively, to actions. The noble type of person feels that he determines value he does not need anyone's approval, he judges that he is the one who gives honor to things in the first place, creates values. He honors everything he sees in himself; this sort of morality is self-glorifying (145).

An old instinct of submissiveness makes base people submissive to both good and bad opinions. It is the slave in their blood that makes them submit to their masters' opinions. However, the nobles are noble by nature; they do not need to have good opinions of the others. Being good and noble is an absolute fact. In his book Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche illustrates this point as follows: "This is because they submit- they feel submissive- to both good and bad opinions out of that old instinct of submissiveness which erupts within them. This is the slave in the blood of the vein, a remnant of the mischief of the slave" (157).

The second aspect of the relation between masters and slaves is 'exploitation'. The masters are free to use their slaves fairly or unfairly

for their own profit. Masters everywhere, at any time should enjoy their lives regardless what happens to their slaves, it is Nature's laws. The nobles should be always the leaders of the society, and consequently, it does not matter to scarify lots of slaves for the sake of their masters' joy and happiness. In his book Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche confirms that abusing slaves is a basic law in life:

But the essential feature of a good, healthy aristocracy is that it does not feel that it is a function (whether of the kingdom or of the community) but instead feels itself to be the meaning and the highest justification (of the kingdom or community), and consequently, it accepts in a good conscience the sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools, all for the sake of the aristocracy (152).

Later, Nietzsche frankly states that "exploitation does not belong to a corrupted or imperfect, primitive society:" it belongs to the essence of being alive as a fundamental organic function; it is a result of a genuine will to power, which is just the will of life" (BGY.53). For Nietzsche, exploitation is the essence of life; it is the primal fact of history. Life is a will to power. As long as you are alive, you will seek dominance over others, and once you achieve dominance you will abuse and exploit those you are dominating. Actually, masters are free to treat their slaves in whatever way they like as long as they gain profits. There are no rules or regulations that organize the relation between masters and slaves or nobles and base people. In fact, masters deal well only with their equals (their kind); they have no duties towards creatures of a lower kind (their slaves).

Violence, as an expected result of exploitation, presents the last feature of the relation between masters and slaves. Masters, for their good interest, are free to treat their slaves violently; while they have to be