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SOCIAL REALISM AND IDEOLOGY
IN THE NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT
AND SEMBENE OUSMANE

BY

ADUKE GRACE ADEBAYO
B.A. Hons (Ife)
M.Phil. (Ife)

A thesis in the Department of MODERN LANGUAGES
Submitted to the Faculty of Arts in partial fulfilment
of the requirements
for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

This study is an attempt at ideological criticism of black literature. It is divided into five chapters. Chapter one describes briefly the realist tradition in relationship to Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane. A detailed study is made of the evolution of the concept of realism in literature from the nineteenth century in France to modern times. It is thus possible to locate where our novelists stand on this extensive scale of literary value. While it is possible to document Richard Wright's indebtedness to realist writer of the American mainstream, Theodore Dreiser as well as the philosophy of existentialism, it is also possible to relate Sembene Ousmane's aesthetics to that of the socialist realism as well as African oral tradition.

The second chapter firmly places the two writers within black literary and social traditions. It examines the black condition which was born out of slavery, racism and colonialism and examines the reactions of Wright and Ousmane to the black condition.

While the first two chapters derive from extraliterary sources, chapters three to five are strictly

based on a stylistic analysis of some of the novels written by Wright and Ousmane. Chapter three concludes that existentialist thought is the main-spring of the Wrightean oeuvre after tracing a vital existentialist link between the major novels of the same author. On the other hand, the following chapter examines the ways in which the formal structures of Sembene Ousmane's novels point to the marxist ideology which permeates the texts, thus making them out as socialist realist novels.

The comparative perspective is introduced to the study in chapter five where, through a comparison and contrasting of the formal aspects in the works of the two writers, one arrives at the conclusion that despite noticeable divergencies, what unite them is their strict commitment to the black condition, as well as their social realism.

In the same chapter, it becomes clear that the ideology of the author is also transparent through the formal aspects of the novels for while the inner texture of Wright's novels show him as a critical or "bourgeois" realist that of Sembene Ousmane's novels prove that the writer is a socialist realist writer.

Finally the study illuminates the basis of the works of these two novelists not only as individual writers but as authors who create within a wider tradition of black literature. What have been postulated in the previous chapters for their novels become even more relevant for black literatures in general.

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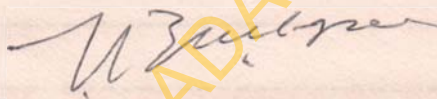
I thank Professor Wilfred Feuser and Professor David Oke, both of whom encouraged me to return to full time academics as a graduate assistant at the University of Ife. Even though Professor Feuser is far away in Port Harcourt, he has been very much interested in

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INTRODUCTION

The first two chapters of the book deal with the history of the Yoruba people and the Yoruba language. The third chapter deals with the Yoruba religion and the Yoruba art. The fourth chapter deals with the Yoruba literature and the Yoruba music. The fifth chapter deals with the Yoruba dance and the Yoruba drama. The sixth chapter deals with the Yoruba puppetry and the Yoruba shadow play. The seventh chapter deals with the Yoruba puppetry and the Yoruba shadow play. The eighth chapter deals with the Yoruba puppetry and the Yoruba shadow play.

DEDICATION

To Lere, Tunde, Ladi, Jumoke and Ronke
whose aspirations for mummy are as high
as the highest mountain.

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1. See, for example, W. I. Abubakar, "Literature and the Yoruba People", in *The Yoruba People*, London, 1964, pp. 102-103.
2. See, for example, W. I. Abubakar, "Literature and the Yoruba People", in *The Yoruba People*, London, 1964, pp. 102-103.

INTRODUCTION

All fiction dramatises the relationship between the individual and society. The social novels of Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane are not exempt from this general rule. These novels are so related to some specific historical phenomena that a detailed knowledge of the historical situations is essential to a full understanding of their novels for as Kohn Bramstedt puts it:

only a person who has a knowledge of the structure of a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behaviour are reproduced in the novel.... What is pure fancy, what realistic observation and what only an expression of the desires of the author must be separated in each case in a subtle manner. 1

Art is never created in a vacuum. It is the work not simply of "a person but of an author who is fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important, because articulate, part".² The critic is therefore interested in understanding the

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1. Quoted by Wellek and Warren, "Literature and Society", In their Theory of Literature. London, Penguin, 1949/73, p. 104.
 2. Scott, W. Five Approaches of Literary Criticism, London, Macmillan, 1962, p. 200.

social milieu and the extent to and the manner in which he responds to it.

When the novels are read in conjunction with histories of the period that they portray, the two kinds of work shed reciprocal light on each other and deepen our awareness that truth cannot be glimpsed from a single perspective only. By describing the historical conditions which cradle the novels and double their meanings, the critic is able to relate the literary works to a particular social perspective so that the relationship of the author to contemporary reality can be clearly defined.

A significant part of the task of the literary critic is to elucidate the various ways in which literature assimilates and transmits experience; in other words he must discover how writings express implicitly or explicitly selected experiences from a specific ideological point of view. It is this specificity which is referred to as the ideology of the literary text in contradistinction to authorial and general ideology. ¹

1. Eagleton, Terry. In his Criticism and Ideology London, N.B.L. 1978 distinguishes between general, authorial and aesthetic ideology within a novel.

Ideology is related to particular social circumstances and contains an explanatory theory of a more or less comprehensive kind about human experience and the external world. Ideology sets out a programme, in generalised and abstract terms, of social and political organisation thus aiding the interpretation of reality. Moreover it seeks not merely to persuade but to recruit loyal adherents demanding what is sometimes called commitment or "engagement".

Literature is the most convenient and revealing access to ideology. In the words of Terry Eagleton;

History enters the text as ideology; this is not to say that real history is present in the text but in disguised form, so that the task of the critic is to wrench the mask from the face... The imaginary situations in the text is... the pseudo-real... But this pseudo-real is not to be directly correlated with the historically real, it is, rather an effect or aspect of the text's whole process of signification. What that whole process signifies is ideology, which is itself a signification of history. 1

One of the two methods we have favoured in interpreting the works of Ousmane is the analysis of the social meanings of

1. Eagleton, Terry. Criticism and Ideology London, N.B.L. 1978, pp.70/80.

literature as it has been developed by marxist-oriented critics especially George Lukacs in his Studies in European Realism (1950). Marxist aesthetics which is best exemplified by George Lukacs is today credited as the *by who?* most intelligible account of the relationship of literature to the social order. Lukacs in this later work offers a critical method which respects the social and ideological while not neglecting the formalistic aspects of a work, because marxist criticism has for its aim "the full explanation of a literary work, a sensitive attention to its forms, styles, and meanings." ¹

The second method, existentialist criticism is applied to the works of Richard Wright and borrows the critical method of Edith Kern in her Existentialist Thought and Fictional Technique. ² Both methods are primarily the aesthetic exegesis of the *social - so as to cover both Wright - Eric and Grouman - ideological* ideological themes of the literary works rather than the isolation and therefore the distortion of such themes. Bearing in mind that the bearers of ideology in art are "the very forms, rather

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1. Eagleton, Terry. Criticism and Ideology. p. 82
 2. Ref. Kern, Edith. Existentialist Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1970.

than abstractable content", ideological themes are discussed in this thesis and interpreted in relation to the structural elements like theme, plot, characterisation, language and tone.

Our aim is to widen the scope of these kinds of ideological criticism by applying them to black literatures in general and to the novels of the black American Richard Wright and the francophone African, Sembene Ousmane. The choice of these two writers is not fortuitous. The most obvious link between them is that of race. Apart from this, both occupy a central position in the literature of their continents as black social realists and writers of ideologically committed literature. Wright and Sembene have both been described as the first proletarian ^{by who} writers of the national literatures to which they belong. How they have accomplished this task and whether this claim is right is one of the aims of this study.

Both Wright and Sembene are prolific writers and eloquent speakers who have made their thoughts known not only through their novels but also through interviews. This extra-literary source is very crucial to an understanding of their aims as artists. Both have been subjects of wide-ranging and exhaustive research. However a comparative

study of their works should not only be interesting but also of artistic and intellectual value to the student of comparative black literatures.

Marxism and Existentialism are the two ideologies examined in relationship to the two writers. Both ideologies lay emphasis on the place, the role and the destiny of Man in Society. It is therefore pertinent to discuss the age and society to which the writers not only belong but which they reflect and for which they produce; hence the emphasis on the black condition in relationship to the lives and letters of the writers. Although literature is not sociology, it is equally true that a writer's own experiences affect his desire to represent human affairs in a work of fiction. In the words of James Baldwin, "one writes out of one thing only - one's own experience."

The sociological background of the writers will be seen to have formed a constant pressure on both the form and content of their literary works for as Raymond Williams puts it, their is a:

radical and inevitable connection between a writer's real social relations (considered not only individually but in terms of the general social relations of "writing" in a

specific society and period, and within these the social relations embodied in particular kinds of writing) and the "style" or "forms" or "content" of his work, now considered not abstractly but as expressions of these relations. 1

This analysis is not another exegesis of "protest literature". Rather it is an effort to demonstrate ideological criticism as a valid method in the critical analysis of black literature.

1. Williams, Raymond. Marxism and Literature. London, O.U.P. 1977, p.203.

CHAPTER ONE

RICHARD WRIGHT AND SEMBENE OUSMANE IN THE
REALIST TRADITION

When a writer is said to be a realist, the statement says something about his writing and at the same time the writing is brought into a certain relationship with the author's world, society and life. The discussion on Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane as realists presupposes their close relationship and that of their fictional works with the Black world, the black literary tradition as well as literary history in general. Consequently, it is pertinent to view the writer in the context of the realist tradition as well as that of black literatures.

Although the controversy over the term realism and what constitutes reality dates back to Aristotle's discussion on mimesis, realism as a literary term did not become a serious subject of literary discussion until the nineteenth century. The French romantic poets of the last half of the eighteenth century as well as the first half of the nineteenth century laid the basis for modern literary realism. These poets fled imaginatively

from the contemporary reality of the post French Revolution as well as the Napoleonic era. They found themselves ill-at-ease in the new society which destroyed their hopes and ignored their talents. In short, they suffered from what has been generally termed "le mal du siècle".

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great precursor of the French Romantic Movement in his Confessions written between 1665 and 1770 and published in 1789, by contrasting the natural state of man with the unsatisfactory contemporary reality of the time, drew attention to the latter as well as to his personal life in its relationship with the same contemporary reality. In the view of Auerbach, the Rousseauist movement to which Rousseau's example gave birth as well as the great disillusionment it underwent was a prerequisite for the rise of the modern conception of reality:

Rousseau, by passionately contrasting the natural condition of man with the existing reality of life determined by history, made the latter a practical problem; now for the first time the eighteenth century style of historically unproblematic and unmoved presentation of life became valueless. 1

1. Auerbach, Eric. Mimesis Trans. by Willard R. Trask, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974, p.467.

French romanticism prepared the intellectual atmosphere for the Realist Movement. Romantic expansiveness also led to an interest in local colour, one of the interests of literary realism. However Romanticism and Realism are widely divergent in their philosophical bases. While the basis of Romanticism is the idealist metaphysics, that of Realism came into being in the ferment of scientific and positivist thinking of the mid-nineteenth century.

However, it was in Stendhal (Henry Beyle 1783-18) that the modern consciousness of reality found its first expression especially in his Le Rouge et Le Noir (1830). In this novel, the characters, the attitudes, the relationships of the dramatis personae are very closely connected with contemporary historical circumstances. Stendhal's novels are more or less incomprehensible without a detailed knowledge of the social stratification, the political situation and the economic circumstances of the period known as the Empire and Restoration in French history. Thus laying a contemporary foundation, rather than referring to a mysterious and distant past, became entrenched in the novel form as an aspect of modern realism.

Stendhal's novels are however plagued by a preponderance of current history and politics which are not **very** often wholly integrated into the course of the action. Although the intrigues which constitute his plots are artfully contrived, the historical forces which underly such intrigues are often neglected. Stendhal was much more interested in a detailed analysis of the workings of the human heart than in sociological details.

Balzac's novels went a step further in laying the foundations of modern literary realism. In his diverse novels which he collectively called La Comedie Humaine: Chronique du dix-neuvieme siecle, he made a representation of all facets of life in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. History for Balzac does not mean the scientific investigations of the remote past. Rather, it is a concern with the present or at most with a very recent past. Balzac set out to make a comprehensive study of the "moeurs" of the French society. In his own words:

Les Etudes de Moeurs représenteront tous les effets sociaux sans que ni une situation de la vie, ni une physionomie, ni un caractère d'homme ou de femme, ni une manière de vivre, ni une profession, ni

une zone sociale, ni un pays français, ni quoi que ce soit de l'enfance, de la vieillesse, de l'âge mûr, de la politique, de la justice, de la guerre ait été oublié.

Cela posé, l'histoire du coeur humain trace fil à fil l'histoire sociale faite dans toutes ses parties, voilà la base. Ce ne seront pas des faits imaginaires, ce sera ce que se passe partout. 1

With Balzac, the subject area of the novel becomes limitless. Characters and atmosphere are shown to spring from historical events and forces. The introduction of this dimension of Historicism which characterises modern realism can therefore be credited to Balzac. Like Stendhal's, Balzac's novels also have their flaws. Balzac's realism was characterised by excessive descriptions, portraits whose details are exaggerated, lack of a critical attitude which often leads to melodrama, all of which can be attributed to the romantic strain in this writer.

Nevertheless, Stendhal and Balzac remain the veritable precursor: of modern literary realism. With them the representation of life in all its everyday triviality, ugliness and practical pre-occupations became serious subjects of literature. In French classical literature, everyday subjects belonged to the comic, sati-

1. Quoted by Auerbach, Mimesis. op cit, p.479

rical, didactic and moralistic modes. With Stendhal and Balzac, characters of any situation could be the subject of serious and tragic literary representation. In Balzac's works, man is shown as a product of a historic situation and as part of it. Environment becomes a culture-medium with which man is organically connected.

1856, the year of Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary, constitutes a watershed in the history of modern realism. In this novel, realism is invested with an impartial, objective and impersonal dimension. Flaubert had wanted language alone to reveal the truth about characters and situations. The writer's role should, in his view, be limited to selecting basic events and describing them with such accuracy that their import would be apparent to the reader without having to contend with the narrator's running commentary. The subjectivism and authorial intrusion which characterise the novels of Stendhal and Balzac are therefore to be eliminated. In Madame Bovary:

language lays bare the silliness, immaturity, and disorder of (Emma's) life, the very wretchedness of that life, in which she remains immersed. 1

1. Auerbach, Eric. Mimesis. op cit. p.496.

By the 1857, the basis of literary realism had been solidly laid in France where the battle for this literary movement was first fought and won. In fact realism can be said to be at its apogee in the 1850^s for its decline came rapidly after. The subject matter of realism was:

the serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic, existential representation on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history. 1

Objectivity, by which facts speak for themselves through linguistic usage became the watchword of the realistic mode of writing. The authorial self-effacement favoured by Flaubert necessitated the reliance on observation and documentation. However, this tendency often led to a physical density which was overwhelming for the reader.

In general the period when realism flourished in the three decades from 1840^s to 60^s coincided on the political scene with a vogue of humanitarianism and the advent of socialist thought in France. On the scientific scene, it was the era of positivism. Furthermore, the bourgeoisie was playing a dominant role in socio-economic and

1. Becker, G.J. (ed) Documents on Modern Literary Realism. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1967/73, p.181.

political life but at the same time, the masses were already beginning to agitate for their rights. The novels of George Sand and the works of Eugene Sue were already portraying the lowly people before the advent of the Goncourts brothers. Ian Watt in his The Rise of the Novel describes critical realism which he refers to as "formal realism" as being closely connected with industrial capitalism, thereby being grounded in the basic structure of bourgeois society. Realism therefore embraced the whole reality of contemporary civilisation made up of society, politics and science.

When in 1865, the Goncourt brothers published their Germinie Lacerteux, realism had begun its transformation into Naturalism. In the "Preface", the novelists explained the basic principles of their writing, the choice of the common people as major characters as well as scientific documentation. They wrote:

Vivant au dix-neuvième siècle dans un temps de suffrage universel, de démocratie, de libéralisme, nous nous sommes demandé si ce qu'on appelle "les basses peuples" n'avait pas droit au Roman, si ce monde sous un monde, le peuple, devait rester sous le coup de l'interdit littéraire et des dédains d'auteurs, qui ont fait jusqu'ici le silence sur l'âme et le cœur qu'il peut avoir. Nous nous sommes demandé s'il y avait encore pour l'écrivain et pour le lecteur, en ces années

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d'égalité où nous sommes, des classes indignes, des malheurs trop bas, des drames trop mal embouchés, des catastrophes d'un terreur trop peu noble...

Aujourd'hui que le Roman s'élargit et grandit, qu'il devient... l'Histoire morale contemporaine... qu'il montre des misères bonnes à ne pas laisser oublier les heureux de Paris, qu'il fasse voir aux gens du monde... la souffrance humaine, présente et toute vive, qui apprend la charité; que le Roman ait cette religion que le siècle passé appelait de ce large et vaste nom: Humanité. 1

The Goncourts brothers wanted the novel to adopt the spirit of scientific historical research. They wanted to become "les raconteurs du présent." Their characters were almost all borrowed from their contemporary reality. Soeur Philomène (1861) is the story of a nurse who worked in the hospital in Rouen. Germinie Lacerteux (1865) is the story of one of their maids. Their aunt inspired the heroine of Madame Gervaisais (1869) while Renée Mauperin is the story of their childhood friend.

However, the interest of the Goncourts brothers in the lowly people proved to be more aesthetic than humanitarian. They gave their subjects a pathological treatment and they had a certain sensory fascination for the

1. Les Goncourts, "Préface", Germinie Lacerteux. Paris, Société des Beaux-Arts, 1905/65.

morbid, for "creatures passionnées, nerveuses, malade-
ment impressionnables." ¹ For example, Madame Gervaise
is a medical study of a religious crisis while Germinie
Lacerteux examines the case of an hysteric:

Les Goncourts recherchent avidement les
sensations nouvelles, "le poignant des
choses qui nous touchent, nous font vib-
rer les nerfs et saigner le coeur." Ils
etudient les cas anormaux, les détraque-
ments nerveux, avec une rigueur qu'ils
veulent scientifique. ²

By their methodical documentation and interest in patho-
logical case studies, the Goncourts brothers were pre-
cursors of naturalism in literature. However they were
not interested in the dynamics of the social structure.
In the words of Auerbach;

the subject treated is not one which con-
cerns the centre of social structure; it
is a strange and individual marginal phe-
nomenon. For the Goncourts, it is a
matter of the aesthetic attraction of the
ugly and pathological. ³

Emile Zola was however inspired by Geminie Lacer-
teux. In his twenty-volume novel on the Rougon Macquarts

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1. Lagarde et Michard. Les Grands Auteurs Français, XIXe Siècle. Paris, Bordas, p.477.
 2. Lagarde et Michard. op cit, p.477.
 3. Auerbach. op cit, p.505.

(1871-93), he shared the Goncourts' fascination with the ugly, repulsive and filthy world of workers and peasants, their passion for extensive scientific research, as well as the matter-of-factness of their presentation. Although Zola did not understand the essence of socialism which was gaining ground in his time, he depicted working class life with sympathy in his Germinal (1885) which deals with the struggle between labour and capital during the early socialist era of the Second Empire. Zola had been inspired by the biologist, Claude Bernard's Etudes des Sciences Experimentales. Also, a fervent disciple of the great philosopher and critic of literary realism, Hippolyte Taine, Zola believed in the subordination of psychology to physiology. One is reminded of his famous formula that:

Tous les sentiments, tous les états de l'ame humaine sont des produits, ayant leurs causes et leurs lois, et tout l'avenir de l'histoire consiste dans la recherche de ces causes et de ces lois. L'assimilation des recherches historiques et psychologiques et chimiques, voilà mon objet et mon idée maîtresse... Le vice et la vertu ne sont que des produits comme le vitriol et le sucre. 1

In the same vein, Zola describes the hero of the naturalist novel as a physiological being determined

1. Lagarde et Michard. XIX^e siècle. op cit, p.399.

by his environment and his innate disposition:

Notre héros n'est plus le pur esprit, l'homme abstrait du XVIII^e siècle, il est le sujet physiologique de notre science actuelle, un être qui est composé d'organes et qui trempe dans un milieu dont il est pénétré à chaque heure... Tous les sens vont agir sur l'âme. Dans chacun des ses mouvements l'âme sera précipitée ou ralentie par la vue, l'odorat, l'ouïe, le goût, le toucher. La conception d'une âme isolée fonctionnant toute seule dans le vide, devient fausse. C'est de la mécanique psychologique, ce n'est plus de la vie. 1

In other words, Zola, the naturalist writer lays emphasis on the physiological conditions, the influence of the milieu and the circumstances which determine human personality. This was an important dimension in the modern novel. The author of the experimental novel believed that the novelist is a kind of biologist performing an experiment. Describing this method which he used in his Les Rougon - Macquart: histoire d'une famille sous le Second Empire, he explained:

Le roman sera basé sur deux idées:

1. Etudier dans une famille les questions de sang et de milieux. Suivre pas à pas le travail secret qui donne aux en-

fants d'un même père des passions et des caractères différents à la suite des croisements et des façons particulières de vivre. Fouiller, en un mot, au vif même du drame humain dans ces profondeurs de la vie où s'élaborent les grandes vertus et les grands crimes, et y fouiller d'une façon méthodique, conduit par le fil des nouvelles découvertes physiologiques.

2. Etudier tout le Second Empire depuis le coup d'état jusqu'à nos jours. Incarner dans des types la société contemporaine, les scélérats et les héros. Peindre ainsi tout un âge social, dans les faits et dans les sentiments, et peindre cet âge dans mille détails, des mœurs et des événements. 1

The aesthetic consequence of Zola's method is that the more general and commonplace the story or the character is, the more typical it will be. This is the contrast to the Balzacian type who concretised the most salient aspects of his time.

Here we have the new realism, the concentrated essence and in sharp opposition to the old realism; a mechanical average takes the place of the dialectic unity of type and individual; description and analysis are substituted for epic situations and epic plots. 2

Zola's physiological and social study of man was not however impartial for according to him, art is "un

1. Quoted by J.H. Bornecque et P. Cogny. Realisme et Naturalisme. Paris, Classique Hechette, p.83.

2. Auerbach. op cit. p.91.

coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament." Zola pushed literary realism to its furtherest point, that is naturalism with its characteristic pessimistic and materialist determinism.

Generally, realism has surfaced as the dominant literary mode in the literature of every country at some point in its literary history. In Russia the second half of the nineteenth century also saw the rise of a long line of important novels of the realist tradition. Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekov, and Gorky drew attention to the marginal and the rootless of the Russian community.

In America, the battle for literary realism was being waged when the movement had died out in Europe and when Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, James Joyce and Franz Kafka were experimenting with new forms. The harsh conditions of pioneer life, the violence of the Civil War, the cruel and impersonal processes of industrialisation were new experiences which demanded new ways of depiction other than romantic escapism.

Through his literary column in Harper's magazine, William Dean Howells, the pioneer of American realism, preached the merits of European realists. Realism in American Literature reached its apogee in the first two

decades of this century with Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900). Others who wrote in the same tradition were Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and John Dos Passos.

Richard Wright was very much influenced by Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" but most especially by Theodore Dreiser's novels. In the 1920^s the most vital native tradition was the "New Realism" (or Naturalism) as both terms were interchangeable in American literature. So far as the new post war generation was concerned, Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900) and Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg Ohio (1919) were the most influential American novel since Huckleberry Finn (1885). Protest writers like Steinbeck, Dos Passos and Wright, who emerged between the two wars, either adopted or refined this tradition.

Wright felt more affinity with Dreiser and Steinbeck especially the former in his American Tragedy (1925).

An autodidact like Wright, Dreiser also had a poor childhood. He understood the plight of the poor who in a sense were outsiders to the mainstream of American society in his novels. Dreiser represented for the younger writers the triumph of that native tradition of

social protest and criticism that derived from the French realists Balzac, Stenhal and Flaubert as well as in the methodology of the new quantitative social sciences of economics and sociology.

When his American Tragedy appeared in 1925, Dreiser was acclaimed as the father of American naturalism. By the laborious, powerful accumulation of detail, Dreiser's novel revealed the tragic conditions lying beneath the prosperous surface of American life.

Nineteenth century and early twentieth century "naturalism" as practiced by Dreiser emerged as a necessary corrective to the fatuous optimism of the previous literary romance which celebrated a simple-minded philosophy of material success as in the novels of Hawthorne, Cooper and Melville. What endeared young writers like Wright to Dreiser was not so much his tiresome style but his honesty and sense of responsibility as a practicing writer. He it was who introduced the idea that to be an American was a tragic destiny. In his Sister Carrie, he showed that there was a disjunction between the American dream and what actually obtained as a social fact. An American Balzac, he took it upon himself to demonstrate how this dream had been corrupted.

In his American Tragedy, a whole book of six hundred pages assumes the difficult task of persuading the reader that the hero Clyde Griffiths, through his very lack of distinction and opportunity was an American possibility. Dreiser accumulates a great deal of substantiating details - Clyde growing up in a family that is both materially and spiritually impoverished; Clyde tasting the small pleasures of life; Clyde making his debut in the bourgeois world sanctioned by America in Lycurgus; Clyde being refused legal entry into this world; Clyde's desire to force his way into the world through murder and finally Clyde's death in the electric chair. From the first page to the last there is this desire to show Clyde as an image and a prisoner of America, "hungering with its hunger, empty with its emptiness." ¹

Dreiser's perspective of life is relentlessly economic. His heroes who in the Flaubertian tradition are really anti-heroes crystallise the banality of middle class life. They are vain, poor and ambitious. There is a fierce struggle by these heroes to transcend the harsh limits of reality. Dreiser proves however that they ulti-

1. Theodore Dreiser. An American Tragedy. New York, Signet Classic, 1925/64, p.201.

mately fail like all those who depart from the norms of society and this is a tribute to his realism.

Dreiser's habit of portraying contemporary American society as well as people who start at a disadvantage in the universal competition for social mobility as well as the innocence of vision which made him report what he saw and not what he was expected to see impressed Richard Wright.

In 1920, in a critique of Mary White Ovington's The Shadow, H.L. Mencken advised the black writer to get a true picture of his people on paper. He said that:

The thing we need is a realistic picture of this inner life of the Negro by one who sees the race from within - a self-portrait as vivid as Dostoevsky's portrait of Russia or Thackeray's of the Englishman. The action should be kept within the normal range of Negro experience... It should be presented against a background made vivid by innumerable small details. 1

Mencken further enjoined that the place to learn to write such novels is in the "harsh but distinguished seminary kept by Professor Dreiser". It was Wright who would fulfil this injunction.

1. Ray David and Farnworth. Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1973 edition, p. 35.

Wright's Native Son accomplished for the black Americans what Dreiser did for the larger American society in his American Tragedy. The conception and execution of the latter very much influenced Native Son. Like Dreiser, Wright painstakingly collected data and based his novel on a real story. Margaret Walker Alexander, Wright's close associate during his period with the WPA describes how she and Wright collected stories, interviews and newspaper clippings on the case of a boy named Nixon who committed a similar crime as Bigger's in Chicago. Wright is reported to have visited various police stations and jails as well as the rooftops all of which served as settings in Native Son.

Like Clyde Griffith, Bigger Thomas is both a product and victim of the American society. Bigger believes also in the American dream but his social position and race, he is already doomed to failure. This specificity of Bigger's background as well as the existential vision of the author is however responsible for the different ways in which the heroes' destinies are resolved. While Clyde Griffith is completely destroyed by society, Bigger Thomas is portrayed as triumphing over this society and dominating it by inflicting his own form of violence on the same society.

Wright claims that only by dramatically bursting out

of his immobility and by rejecting feelings of defeat and inferiority can the black assert himself, show that he is a human being with his own autonomy. Like Frantz Fanon, Wright proves that violence can indeed be a "cleansing force" which frees the oppressed from his inferiority complex and from his despair. In other words, violence is a potent psychological weapon.

However, by the 1930^s realism was on its decline in the literature of the American mainstream with the emergence of writers like Eliot, Hemingway and O'Neill. Conversely, it was the period when realism had just become the literary mode in black American literature with the novels of Richard Wright. This conflict of literary modes is in part responsible for the adverse criticism Native Son received from white writers in the 1940^s.

In the case of Sembene Ousmane as well as other francophone African writers, the influence of French realist writers on their works cannot be overemphasised. Besides, African literature in general is characterised by the qualities and indeed the shortcomings of social realism which we have highlighted. The novel, though an alien form in Africa, has been a very convenient form for the African writer to

make his research into contemporary situation and to put across his opinions to a wider audience.

As a literary form, the novel has always been adaptable to all socio-economic and historical situations since:

more directly than other arts, (it) confronts us openly with the issue of the meaning and value of our ineluctable historical and social condition. Implicit in the text of the novel are propositions that man never lives by himself, and above all, that he has a past, a present and a future... The novel is the first art to represent man explicitly as defined historically and socially... With the novel, society enters history and history enters society. 1

Sembene Ousmane, like all other African writers, desired a literary form which would be a means of historical and social investigation and he found this in the European realist novel. Like their European mentors, African novelists were:

pre-eminently concerned with the present, the contemporary as history; man (as being) firmly structured within a totality of political, economic and social forces... the individual and his fate as indissolubly bound to a cons-

1. Zeraffa, Michel. "The Novel as a Literary Form and as Social Institution", In Burn (ed) Sociology of Literature and Drama. Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1973.

tantly evolving society. 1

The Second Congress of Negro writers and Artists in Rome in 1959 laid a firmly realist and committed basis for African literature. The Committee on Literature, after examining the responsibilities of the black artist towards his people, advocated:

the true expression of the reality of his people long obscured, deformed or denied during the period of colonisation. This expression is so necessary under present conditions that it imposes on the Negro artist or writer a singularly specific concept of commitment. The Negro writer cannot avoid taking part in the general movement outlined above. 2

Taking the injunction of this committee very much to heart, most writers criticised in varying degrees the colonial enterprise in Africa and later the post independent situation in Africa. In the same vein, Sembene Ousmane's novels constitute a mimesis of African contemporary situation. His works are a reflection of what obtains in society and like Zola, he believes that "l'histoire doit guider nos mains."

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1. Swingewood, Alan. Politics and the Novel, London, Macmillan, 1975, p.29.
 2. Presence Africaine. Special Edition. Feb/May, 1959.

Realism is the singular literary canon the African critic has employed in his evaluation of African literature. The fortunes of Laye's L'Enfant Noir which appeared in 1954, in the hands of various critics illuminate the importance attached to realism in African literature. Mongo Beti accused the novel of its "negre bon enfant" mentality and for closing its eyes to the realities of the colonial situation. He declared:

Laye se complait dans l'anodin et surtout le pittoresque le plus facile, donc le plus payant... Malgré l'apparence, c'est une image stéréotypée, donc fautive de l'Afrique et des écrivains qu'il s'acharne à montrer: univers idyllique, optimisme des grands enfants, fêtes stupidement interminables, initiation de carnaval, circoncisions, excisions, superstitions, oncles Mamadou dont l'inconscience n'a d'égale que leur irréalité.

Est-il possible que pas une seule fois, Laye n'ait été témoin d'une seule petite exaction de l'administration coloniale. 1

However, it is interesting to note that this controversial L'Enfant Noir was acclaimed in the West and was even awarded the Charles Veillon Prize for 1954. Emile

1. Biyidi Alexandre. "L'Enfant Noir". In Trois Écrivains Noirs, Presence Africaine, 1954.

Henriot of the French Academy admired what put Mongo Beti off, that is the novel's exoticism and its classical French. According to him,

Camara Laye, si bon ecrivain du premier coup, nous vient de loin, attache de racines profondes encore au pays natal, à ses traditions, au souvenir de ses ancetres. Dans un tour limpide et uni, ce livre est un petit chef-d'oeuvre. 1

The same criterion of realistic portrayal of events and characters has been employed by anglophone critics of African literature. Chinua Achebe in his various essays which were later published in his Morning Yet on Creation Day (1977) advocated social relevance as a vital yardstick in African literary criticism. Employing this same criterion, he condemns Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born (1969)

The novel failed to convince me. His Ghana is unrecognisable. This aura of cosmic sorrow and despair is as foreign and unusable as those monstrous machines Nkrumah was said to have imported from Eastern countries; 2 he said.

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1. Quoted by Melone, Thomas. Dela Négritude dans la Litterature Negro-Africaine. Paris, Presence Africaine, 1962, p.94.
 2. Achebe, Chinua. Morning Yet On Creation Day: Essays. London, Heinmann, 1977 p.25.

Sembene Ousmane has affirmed that the basis of his art is realism. "La conception de son travail decoule de cet enseignement; rester au plus pres du reel et du peuple."¹ In this, he invests his works with the necessary "sociological imagination" which constitutes the specificity of African literature for as Abiola Irele rightly affirms:

Our writers are recognisably African only in the sense in which they give an African character to their works. 2

The seventies have witnessed a more inward looking realist literature. Most novels are reflections of the realities of post-independent Africa, with its inherent cultural contradictions, political and economic instability, corruption and nepotism. Sembene Ousmane's post-independent novels, Le Mandat (1966) Xala (1973) and Le Dernier de L'Empire (1980) are firmly entrenched in this new realist tradition which Abiola Irele terms the "New Realism", whereby:

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1. Sembene Ousmane. "Preface". L'Harmattan. Paris, Presence Africaine, 1964.
 2. Irele Abiola. "The Criticism of African Literature". In Heywood, Perspectives on African Literature. London, Heinemann, 1971, p.15.

The African writer has begun to modify his stance and to adjust his angle of perception to take account of those political and social realities that began in the wake of African independence to impress themselves more closely upon the general attention through the entire continent. 1

In the twentieth century, the outlook of literary realism has been modified by the marxist ideology and our two writers have both profited from its application to literature. Realism shares some innate characteristics with marxism. While both are revolutionary in nature, they also celebrate man's potential freedom from an arbitrary world and attack the alienating and dehumanising aspects of the modern world.

The type of literary realism which characterised the social novelists we have discussed from Balzac to Zola to Tolstoy and Dreiser has been formally distinguished from the socialist realism which characterise the writings of marxist oriented writers. Critical or formal realism is according to Swingewood:

a full and authentic report of human experience, a continuous questioning of

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1. Irele, Abiola. "Parables of the African condition: A Comparative study of three post-colonial Novels". In *Journal of African and Comparative Literature* (Ibadan) No. 1, March 1981, p.70.

reality, the response of specific characters within specific social groups, the response to the dominating socio-economic and political problems of their time. 1

Critical realism has depicted the workings of the bourgeois society and showed its ugly and repressive aspects. However, the socialist realist tradition sees the pre-occupation of critical realists as inadequate and only a partial revelation of contemporary reality. It has therefore sought to "elevate life" and thus recharge nineteenth century realism.

The advent of socialist realism cannot be dissociated from the doctrine and philosophy of marxism as a critique of the capitalist society itself. In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx had pointed out that the basic social problem the world must solve was the unfair economic advantage that permitted capitalism to exploit labour. In marxist terms capitalism is:

a system of production, which, through its extended division of work, including that between mental and manual labour, had the effect of creating a society in which man's sense of wholeness, his potential many-sidedness, becomes reduced to a mere fragment - his sensual, emotional, creative potential turned into one specialised

1. Swingewood, Allan. "Introduction" Literature and Revolution. London, Macmillan, 1975.

activity, a limiting function. ¹

Apart from objectifying man and limiting human potentials, marxists believe that capitalism also dehumanises man and emphasises the division of society into classes of haves and have nots as well as the domination of the latter by the former:

Capitalism, with its system of private property and the domination of one class over another, creates the social conditions in which man's labour, his creative potential becomes an external, oppressive activity, something which rather than fulfilling him denied him. ²

However, marxism optimistically posits that change is a normal feature of society. As Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history. The Capitalist society, like the slave and feudalistic societies, contains within it, inner contradictions which will eventually bring about its fall. As workers' lives become more and more precarious due to machines, they will begin to form trade unions against the bourgeoisie. The concentration of workers and the improved

1. Swingewood, Allan. Literature and Revolution op cit. p.73.

2. *ibid*,

means of communication will eventually lead to one "national struggle between classes." In time, the proletarian movement becomes a self-conscious and independent movement of the immense majority. In other words, the bourgeoisie produces its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the subsequent victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Hippolyte Taine pronounced that literature is the consequence of race, moment and milieu. Marx and Engels added a fourth dimension by the end of the nineteenth century by affirming that literature is also a product of the system of production, thus making possible by 1930^s the specific sociological approach to literature known as Marxist aesthetics as it has been represented by George Lukacs, Jean-Paul Sartre, T.W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Block, and Lucien Goldmann in their various ways.

Creative writers who have been influenced in their writings by the Marxist ideology like Sembene Ousmane can be described as socialist realists. Socialist realism desires the "truthful historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary develop"

ment.¹ In other words, it is not enough for the writer to represent life as it is; he must show that life is going towards the inevitable future of the Communist Society. Marx and Engels themselves wrote at length on literature and literary creation. However, it was Engels who posited some critical theories which have become the cornerstones of socialist realism. According to him:

the bias should flow by itself from the situation and action... A socialist based novel fully achieves its purpose... if by consciously describing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, instils doubt as to the eternal character of the existing order, although the author does not offer any definite solution or does not even line up openly on any particular side. 2

On the basis of this definition of socialist writing, Engels acclaimed Balzac as the greatest socialist writer ever known; for despite his aristocratic background and bias, Balzac was able to represent a society in the

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1. Quoted by Fokkema D.W. (ed). Theories of Literature in the Twentieth century. London, Hurst and Company, 1977.
 2. Engels, Friedrich. "Letter to Margaret Harkness, April 1888" in Literature and Art by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. N.Y. International Publishers, 1947, p 41-43.

process of witnessing a crucial historical change that spelt the death of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie to economic and therefore political power in the France of nineteenth century.

However, Engel's statement on socialist realism was modified by Maxim Gorky (1868 - 1936), the most influential literary figure of Soviet Russia in the period between the Russian Revolution and the Second World War. His major statements on literature in the 1930^s laid the basis of a conception of the writer as committed and with purposive social activity. He wrote that to him personally:

realism would best cope with its task if, in analysing an individual in the process of finding his true place on the road from petty bourgeois, animal individualism to socialism, it would describe man not as he is today, but also as he must be - and will be tomorrow.¹

The socialist novel can only achieve its purpose by depicting the bourgeois world realistically that is by breaking down conventional illusions and inducing doubt on "the eternal character of the existing order". The realism advocated by Gorky is termed by him as "revolu-

1. Gorky, Maxim. On Literature. Moscow, Progress Publishers, p. 138.

tionary romanticism" or "active romanticism". It is romantic in the sense that it dwells in part on what should be and not what is. In the words of Gorky himself:

revolutionary romanticism - this essentially is a pseudonym for socialist realism, the purpose of which is not only to depict the past critically, but chiefly to promote the consolidation of revolutionary achievement in the present and a clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future. 1

A mixture of romanticism and realism is deemed necessary since both are like the two facets of a single being. The mixture is also inevitable if actuality must be depicted in its revolutionary development. This Gorky achieved in his novel Mother (1906) a novel which has influenced Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star" and Sembene Ousmane's O Pays.

The doctrine of socialist realism was however not officially promulgated until the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, although the term had been discussed during the founding of the Writers Union in Soviet Russia in 1932. The Congress claimed descent from Gorky and resolved that:

1. ibid p.246.

socialist realism, being the basic method of soviet literature and literary criticism, requires from the artist a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. In addition, truthfulness and historical concreteness must be combined with the task of ideological transformation and education of the workers in the spirit of socialism. 1

Socialist realism has come to be identified as a kind of art that is acceptable to the socialist state.

Chairman Mao in his "Yenan Forum on Literature and Art" further expounded on the political role of literature. Literature in his view should be created for the masses and the workers. According to him:

Revolutionary literature and art are the products of the reflection of the life of the people in the brains of revolutionary writers and artists. The life of the people is always a mine for the raw materials of literature and art, materials in their natural form, materials that are crude, but most vital, rich and fundamental... Writers and artists concentrate such everyday phenomena, typify the contradictions and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them

1. Ovcharenko, A. Socialist Realism and the Modern Literary Process. Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 124.

to unite and struggle to transform their environment. 1

Since socialist realism has come to be identified as political literature, some writers refuse to be designated socialist realists even when their works manifest some characteristics of typical socialist realist writings. They argue that they do not write Party literature or that they do not create within a socialist state as Sembene Ousmane often states. Others object to the ideological background of socialist realism itself. Harry Levin argues, though one sidedly, that:

socialist realism in attempting to gain control of the realistic movement tended to suppress the realistic impetus, which presupposes full artistic freedom. True realism, like objective criticism, is empirical; socialist realism, like marxist ideology, is dogmatic. 2

Whatever the position adopted in the debate on socialist realism, it is undeniable that its basis is literary realism since realism itself is never a question of pointless imitation of reality but the revelation of

1. Mao Tse Tung, "Yenan Forum On Literature and Art" in Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Volume III, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1967 p. 81-82.
2. Levin, Harry. Ground for Comparison. Massachussets, Harvard University Press, 1972, p. 260.

a belief in an outer reality and the possibility of describing this reality. The perspective from which the description is done is entirely the choice of the author.

Realism has always been adapted to new social realities and new philosophies. In the 1940^s in Europe, the unsatisfactory political situation forced writers to represent the world in a new way in the light of existentialism which became a frame of reference for the exploration of contemporary reality and in that capacity was not incompatible with realism. Originally, existentialism had strong roots in the French experience of the forties. Nevertheless it was not confined to the French experience alone. In the words of F. Temple Kingston:

All of the existentialists admit that human beings in this century are threatened to an unusual degree in their very existence by abstract philosophies, by all powerful totalitarian states, and by the misuse of scientific inventions. This awareness has been made especially vivid to the French philosophers by France's defeat in the war and the present tension between communism and American democracy. 1

1. Kingston, F. Temple. French Existentialism: A Christian Critique, Toronto, 1961, p. 26-27.

Thus Richard Wright's realism could easily adopt an existentialist strain and like existentialist writers, analyse moral issues, the relationship of the individual to the society, the paradox of existence, freedom, ennui, responsibility, guilt, alienation, despair, death, anxiety and other tragic elements which are specific to black existence, such as racial discrimination, the feeling of rootlessness, perpetual impoverishment both at the individual and group levels as well as what Robert Bone has termed the black man's "unguaranteed existence".¹

In general, great social awareness has been aroused through realist depictions, since the malfunctioning of institutions is inescapably a subject of observation and since realism has usually tended to pursue socially useful aims. It seems in this respect that there is no end to literary realism and discussions about it especially in the literatures of developing countries and the black world in general where social norms are in perpetual flux and therefore need to be portrayed as they are portrayed by Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane.

1. Bone, Robert. Richard Wright. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1969, p.46.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE AND SOCIETY.

Richard Wright: the parable of the black condition in America.

The major theme of the novels of Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane is the black condition. These novels are preoccupied with elucidating this same condition by highlighting its positive and negative aspects.

The black condition has both psychological and socio-economic dimensions. Resulting from the peculiar historical circumstances of slavery and colonialism, the black condition is first a feeling of inferiority and insecurity in the presence of white people. It is also the underdeveloped socio-economic condition which put the black man whatever his social and economic status on the lowest rungs of the social and economic ladder of the world.

Slavery which began in the sixteenth century and was abolished in the nineteenth witnessed the transportation of millions of Africans across the oceans to the plantations of the New World. It is estimated that by the end of the Civil War in 1863, about four

million black people had been transported to America.

Central to all slave legislations was the fact that a slave was a piece of property. No matter his grievances, the slave could neither sue for redress nor act as a witness against any white man. He could be sold irrespective of family ties. In short, the slave was an object devoid of human and civil rights.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century slavery had become a social institution in America. The syllogism propagated thereafter was that all slaves were black; slaves were degraded and contemptible and should always be slaves, hence the social stigma that was attached to the black skin ever since.

Slavery was practiced most ruthlessly in the South. In the Southern colonies, slavery had become the corner stone of the economic system. The plantation system had become the basic unit of capitalist agriculture. More and more hands were needed in cotton plantations so that hand in hand with unmitigated capitalism went more ruthless slavery as well as the most implacable race

consciousness in history.

When Emancipation was finally proclaimed in 1863, it gave no guarantee that blacks would not remain as chattels. The freedom which Emancipation promised was rather ambiguous. Most ex-slaves like Wright's grand-father had no homes and no lands of their own. They had to remain wage earners or share-croppers who were glued to the same plantations which their forefathers worked as chattels. Richard Wright's father was all his life a share-cropper glued to the arid lands of the Mississippi. The last and indelible image he had of his father was that of a man;

standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a share-cropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands... he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent... 1

Richard Wright's mind ached as he thought of the simple nakedness of his father's life;

how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how

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1. Wright, Richard. Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth. New-York, Harper, 1945, p.43.

chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body.... 1

The social status of the emancipated slaves and their children did not improve. Hard core slavery was replaced by Jim Crow system especially in the South where Richard Wright was born. The caste line between the free and the bonded was replaced by the racial line between black and white. Total segregation and disfranchisement by Jim Crow system went further than slavery in its rigid enforcement and total inclusion of all coloured people whether they were born free or bonded. Throughout his youth Wright was baffled by the fact that his grandmother who could conveniently pass for white and who had never been a slave could be subjected to this system like all other former slaves.

Jim Crow system was based on the same premise as slavery, that is the belief of the whites in the innate inferiority of blacks. Thus began in full force the reign of racism in America. Having shed the mantle of a slave, the black man donned that of a person who

1. Wright, Richard. Black Boy. p. 43 .

was everywhere in chains. Richard Wright had bitter experiences of the Jim Crow system which he narrates in his autobiography, Black Boy. From these formative years, he cultivated a morbid dread of whites who became nightmare devils to him, and their habitations became "a symbol of fear". A psychological barrier had been erected between him and the white race because of his childhood experiences.

At the age of twelve, Wright had become conscious that a group of people existed against whom he was impotent, a group which could destroy him at will:

These fantasies were no longer a reflection of my reaction to the white people, they were a part of my living, of my emotional life, they were a culture, creed, a religion. The hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that it had lost direct connection with the daily environment in which I lived.... 1

Thus by the beginning of this century the problem of the black man in America was in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois that of the "color line". The caste system of slavery had given way to the injustices of class and racial oppressions and the

central blight of poverty among the majority of black people. Enfranchisement, education and housing were areas where racial discrimination bit hard into the black American, all of which are documented in naturalist terms in Black Boy.

By the age of seventeen when he finally left all formal education, Wright was equipped with enough knowledge for the average black boy, a deep hatred for whites, as well as a suspicious and blighted personality. His life symbolised the poverty which characterised the life of the black American. Looking back on those years of hunger, of deprivation, of humiliation, he was to feel that it had been a period which bred distrust and dread of others as well as emotional instability in him. Home life for Wright symbolised not only poverty but a cog in the wheel of his self-realisation. All his education amounted to was two years of American history, civics, botany, English; one year of Latin, one year of algebra, general science, civil government and a little physiology and anatomy.¹

1. Webb, Constance. Richard Wright: A Biography. New York, Putnam and Sons, 1968, p.67.

The major events of Wright's childhood were those of beating, hunger, lynching, injustices, illness and poverty. Because they happened at an impressionable age, they left an indelible mark upon him and although he later related well to whites and married a white woman, it was not known that he ever outlived his distrust of white society. This distrust of white society is clearly manifested in his preoccupation with the subject of racism.

The subject of racism has always been central to black American literature from the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley (1750-1784) to the present day literary works of black nationalist writers like Eldridge Cleaver in his Soul on Ice and Imamu Amiri Baraka in his Dutchman. The isolation and uncertainty of growing up as a **black** in the American society is also the central theme of the works of Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. The black American cannot answer satisfactorily the question "who am I?" because his socio-economic status has been pre-determined as a lowly one by the white group. In Baldwin's fictional

works, the black man is compelled to acknowledge his inferior status and respond with hopelessness and self-destruction as does Rufus in Another Country. Baldwin's heroes never find any sense of belonging. They retreat from society and form an intimate relationship especially the homosexual kind with another individual. Wright also treats the subject of race but from a psychological and sociological point of view. Thus he stands out as a more virulent social critic of racism in America.

However there is an inherent danger in assuming an exclusively psychological or sociological approach to the question of race as Wright does in his Native Son. The writer tends to over emphasise the psychological vulnerability of the black man. The combination of social and economic deprivation, the conflict between the desire for social acceptance and the rejection by the majority group definitely puts a great stress on the oppressed people. However a large majority succeed in creating an alternative life as Richard Wright did during his life. The overriding message is that **black** life is a meaningless psychological journey through Fear and Flight

into a tragic Fate as the subtitles of the novel suggest.

Such conclusions is untenable to most members of black American elite, who argue that many other boys who lived at the same period of which Wright wrote were not permanently bitter as Wright's heroes. This group's rejection of the Bigger syndrome is exemplified by James Baldwin's complaint that¹

Bigger and all his furious kin, serve to whet the notorious national taste for the sensational and to reinforce all that we now find necessary to believe. 1

This anti-Bigger attitude of the younger generation was explicable. The black elite of the fifties was becoming part of the American social revolution. After the Second World War, the polarisation between the Communist East and the Democratic West forced America to put her democratic house in order. The Truman era, which began in 1945, dealt with injustices and inequality in social, economic and political life.

1. Baldwin, James. "Many Thousands Gone". In Notes of a Native Son. New York, Bentam, 1955, page 33.

Novelists of the fifties therefore had wider pre-occupations and universal appeal because they could easily move into the main-stream of American life, society, and literature - Baldwin and Ellison endeavoured to convince America that the black American citizen was a complex human being and a loving individual who should be allowed into the mainstream of American life. Their novels eschewed violence and overt social commitment. Ellison felt, at ease to practice art for art's sake for as he said, "I can only ask that my fiction be judged as art; if it fails, it fails aesthetically"¹ and Baldwin opined in the same vein that the only concern of the artist was "to re-create **out of the dis-order** of life that order which is art"²

The white elite also joined their black counterpart in denouncing Native Son. The whites who had believed the black American to be docile, happy and

1. Quoted by Chapman, Abraham. Introduction to Black Voices. New York, New American Library, 1968

2. Baldwin, James. "Many Thousands Gone." In his Notes of a Native Son. Boston, Beacon, 1955.

indifferent to his social situation were startled by the stark naked, angry and uncomfortable revelations of the novel. They denied the probability of such a person as Bigger in an American context and called Bigger a figment of Negro imagination. David Littlejohn's caustic statement regarding Wright's novels summarises the white elite's standpoint. Novels like Native Son, according to him;

can tell the reader about their author, show him something of the shape the war myth can take in Negro imagination. (Wright's) Negro world exists only in his books and in his angry unconscious mind. It is unlike the "real" Negro world, entirely devoid of tenderness, love, communality, music, religious faith and hope, all of the solace and all of the joy. 1

While these arguments have some measure of justification, it is pertinent to signify their subjectivity and one-sidedness. They do not take into consideration the fact that Wright had a dislocated childhood and domestic life and was more intelligent and more sensitive than many of his mates. Besides, it is also pertinent to suggest that there might have

1. Littlejohn, David. Black On White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes. New York, Boni and Live right, 1925/65.

been others who were permanently scarred by their American experiences but who did not have Wright's fighting spirit which made him triumph over his surroundings and refuse the subservient role the society wanted him to play.

Literary activity was not Wright's only escape from Southern racism. His family, like many other Southern families moved from one city to another in his youth. He described his father as a man who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city; a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city, and who had at last fled the city.¹ The theme of flight from the intruman racial situation became a leitmotiv in Wright's works.

The same city which frustrated Wright's father lifted young Wright "in its burning arms and bore (him) toward alien and undreamed of shores of knowing".² When he left the South in search of liberty, his first stop was in Memphis, Tennessee in 1925 where he worked as an assistant in the American Optical Company and experienced less violent acts of racism than in Missi-

1. Wright. Black Boy. p.43.

2. *ibid*, p. 43.

ssippi. His visits to the library gave him the opportunity to read H.L. Mencken's entire works. Thus began his initiation into "the strange and exciting world of books." He was fascinated by Mencken, Balzac, Sinclair Lewis, Conrad, Edgar Allan Poe and Dreiser and in fact Mencken was his gateway to these social novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

These books made him see society in a new perspective. He understood the people around him better as well as relationships between people since what interested him most in the works he read were the characters' point of view. Because the authors views coincided with his, he felt a new assurance. This literature of rebellion gave him the assurance that he was not alone, that he was not queer to rebel.

In Chicago, Wright started experimental writing of disconnected sentences and paragraphs. He would fill pages with stream of consciousness black dialect, trying to depict dwellers of the black belt as he felt them. This practice would prove useful in his literary works which manifest a strong bias for dialects of the working class people especially in

his short stories in Uncle Tom's Children (1938) as well as in Native Son (1940).

It was also in Chicago that he began to read Dostoevski and Gertrude Stein. He was both shocked and delighted at the winding snake-like sentences of Stein's "Melanctha" which very much resembled the speeches of his mother, grandmother and friends in the South. On the other hand, Dostoevski taught him much about the psychological state of the modern man, a lesson he was later to put to profitable use in The Outsider (1953). These sociological and literary influences combined to determine the nature of Wright's writings and led to an ambiguity which has plagued critics of his literary works who see him as both a social realist and an existentialist writer. This Janus-like face of Wright's writing is due to the two ideologies to which Richard Wright was exposed in his life time - those of marxism and existentialism.

Like millions of Americans during the Great Depression of the 30^s Wright had his due share of unemployment, hunger and suffering. This depression shook the whole of America and Europe, but descended more heavily on the Negroes than on the white prole-

tariat. This was compounded for Wright by the fact that his family had joined him in Chicago and he was the sole-breadwinner. A stint as an insurance agent for a Negro burial society brought him in contact with the poverty-stricken people of Chicago. His visits to the welfare office brought him in close contact with the stark reality of widespread hunger, poverty and unemployment which characterised the lives of the black people. He listened to conversations as he waited on the queue to collect his rations and he felt at one with the poor people. He slowly began to comprehend his environment and to get out of his egotism. He now knew he was not alone in feeling injustice and rage. He grew open and questioning.

The American Communist Party saw in the momentary weakening of the capitalist system, an opportunity to unite the proletariat of America, regardless of race, against one common enemy which was capitalism. The Party's call for full racial equality and its attempts to devise methods of achieving it were rare in the history of American radicalism. For once, the black became the centre of serious political concern and activity. The era saw for the first time large

scale inter-racial and industrial unionism. Picketing, rent-strikes and economic boycotts often led to racial violence in most cities.

Wright met several Communist speakers in Chicago who invited him to attend a John Reed meeting. The John Reed Club was founded and organised in several major American cities during the Depression by the American Communist Party to help unknown writers and artists and to provide a stimulating milieu for artists.

In January 1932, the cautious Wright, convinced of the seriousness of purpose and the honesty of the Club towards the cause of the blacks finally became a member and in March he joined the Communist Party officially.

To Wright in 1932, the Communist Party was the only political organisation which expressed the country's need for a drastic change. As far as he was concerned, the Republicans and the Democrats were identical in their treatment of the black. The scope of the activity of the John Reed Club impressed him. It appealed to government to create jobs for the unemployed artists, planned and organised exhibitions,

raised funds for the publication of the Left Front, organised trade unions and sent speakers to union meetings. A few weeks later, he became the Executive Secretary of the Club. In his view at that time, his life ambition was about to be realised at last.

However, the series of clashes between Wright and the Communist Party began very early. The first quarrel arose over his writing activities. He had published a collection of short stories entitled Uncle Tom's Children. Party leaders thought that most of his energy should be spent in bringing new members in, instead of concentrating on individual development of the Club members. Party members tagged him an intellectual and a petty bourgeois who preferred writing to action.

The Party leaders were also putting a lot of demand on the Club for speakers, sign painters and funds so that little was left for literary activities and the publication of Left Front. As the problem aggravated, a conference was summoned to discuss and outline the role of the writer in relationship to the Communist Party. Richard Wright believed that the role of the writer was to prepare the revolution implicitly.

When the party leaders won the day, Wright began to doubt whether his goals were entirely identical with those of the Communist Party. He recalled later that at that point;

An invisible wall was building slowly between me and the people with whom I had cast my lot. Well, I would show them that all men who wrote books were not their enemies. I would communicate the meaning of their lives to people whom they could reach; then surely my intentions, would merit their confidence.¹

Richard Wright, like many others of the black elite who embraced Communism realised the achievement of the Communist Party in awakening black militancy over their prevailing condition which was similar to that of the oppressed peoples all over the world. The American Communist Party had high aims for the black workers who were expected to lead the black liberation movements within the context of a much larger struggle of the American proletariat against capitalism.

As Ralph Ellison was to discover later, Wright realised that the black man's

1. Wright, Richard, "Why I left the Communists". In Richard Crossman (ed.) The God That Failed. N.Y., Harper and Brothers, 1950.

major preoccupation was different from that of the Party. There were limitations in the Party's handling of the black situation. The black man, by his history and experiences constituted a special class in the American society and his major concern was how to solve the immediate and concrete problems of inadequate housing, disenfranchisement and segregated educational facilities. Richard Wright was thus not an orthodox Communist, and his position has been described as nearer the Popular Front brand of socialism than that of official Communism.

Wright's disagreement with the Communist Party came to a head soon after the publication of Native Son in 1940. One critic regretted "the absence of characters who would balance the picture by showing Negroes whose rebellion against oppression is expressed in constructive mass action rather than in individual violence".¹

Furthermore, Wright was accused of making out the communists in the novel, that is Jan, Mary and

1. Quoted by Ray, David and Farnsworth F.M. Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives. p. 44

Boris Max, as insensitive fools. Yet more serious reservations were held on ideological grounds. Party critics saw Bigger as:

a frustrated, anti-social individual who commits anarchic acts of violence in his blind rebellion against capitalist society. It is politically slanderous to contend that Bigger Thomas is the symbol of the Negro people. Consequently it is an aesthetic falsity to select a character who is atypical and to make him the protagonist of a novel that deals with the bitter persecution and exploitation of a minority people in bourgeois society. 1

The Party's quarrel with Native Son was understandable since the novel did not advance the Party's cause. Bigger Thomas's ethic is not that of communalism but that of individual freedom, a strictly existential ethic. However and interestingly enough, Native Son and indeed Uncle Tom's Children mirrored the ambiguity which was present within the Communist Party itself. The Party encouraged unionism yet it was undecided about the nature of the Negro's dilemma. Hence it presented the blacks as fighting for freedom within the Black Belt and as victims of the class war like white

1. Ray and Farnworth. op cit. p.45.

workers. In the same vein there is a conflict between the overt Marxist propaganda of the lawyer in Native Son and the hero's black nationalism and existentialist traits which is eventually resolved in the favour of the latter two.

However the influence of Wright's adherence to the Communist Party is so strongly felt in the works he wrote before 1946 that this period is often referred to as his Marxist Phase as opposed to his existentialist phase. Marxism had been for Wright a means of discovering the external world, his people and himself. Wright's Marxist phase is characterised by his social realism which is not due simply to his objective description of the social background of the novels but mostly in the way he shows how it feels to be imprisoned by the social facts of being a Negro. In short he is both a social and psychological realist.

Richard Wright's Communist experience had also marked the conception of some of his short stories in Uncle Tom's Children especially "Bright and Morning Star". "Bright and Morning Star" treats the race question in America from the perspective of a black mother, Sue, whose two sons are deeply involved in

the Communist movement which the white police officers are trying desperately to annihilate. The first son, Snug, has already been arrested and probably imprisoned. The second, Johnny Boy, is out in the countryside getting together white and black comrades for their next meeting.

Like most black mothers, Sue has led a hard life of subordination which she has come to accept as her fate. However, her sons progressively open up her mind to the world of Communism until she feels a strange power of self-will in herself. When the white sheriff demands information about her only remaining son, she resists with a feeling of intense pride and dignity despite the beatings and insults the sheriff's men mete out to her. By the end, she is courageous enough to shoot down Booker, the stool-pigeon in her son's group thereby barring Booker from giving out the names of the other comrades in the group.

When Sue herself is shot in retaliation, she is made to die like a martyr,

Focused and pointed, she was buried in
the depths of her star, swallowed in its
peace and strength and not feeling her
flesh growing cold, cold as the rain

that fell from the invisible sky upon
the doomed that never die. 1

Wright's Communist years also inspired proletarian poems like "Rest for the Weary", "A Red Love Note" and "I have seen Black Hands." In short, while the experience lasted, marxism was a means of discovering the external world, his people and himself.

The novels of Wright which belong to his so-called marxist phase also demonstrate a strong sense of commitment and protest, two elements which are basic to black American literary tradition from the slave era. The slave songs, work songs, gospel songs and preachers' sermons were all forms of protest. They opposed reality, talked about being uprooted and being dislocated and demonstrate the idea that the black man has been denied a place, hence such songs as:

"I'm rollin through an unfriendly worl". There were also dim memories of the remote African past of the slaves as in "sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home" or in the well known

1. Richard Wright. "Bright and Morning Star". In his Uncle Tom's Children. Harper and Row, 1938/76, p.188.

"Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home".

The spirituals were not exclusively religious; they were documents on the black people's lives. These people found biblical parallels to their lives, their experiences, the lack of liberty and saw their lives as identical to that of the Israelites in Egypt, hence they sang songs like;

"Deep river, my home is over Jordan."

I'm a poor pilgrim of sorrow.
I'm trying to make heaven my home."

The negro slave was not docile. He protested in these various forms against cruelty and the hypocrisy of the American pseudo-christian world. Even the slave narratives were accounts of injustices and as such they were agents of freedom in that:

the man who narrates his own experience thereby possesses it, reclaims it from those who had asserted rights over all aspects of his experience. 1

Phyllis Wheatley carried on this spirit of protest into her poetry. Her Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral (1773) was the first to be

1. Bradbury and Temperley. Introduction to American Studies. London, Longman, 1981, p.153.

published in black American literary tradition. Although she wrote in strictly American mainstream tradition since she wrote for the aristocratic society of London and Boston yet one can safely trace in her poems a subtle protest against the condition of blacks in her times in her poem: "On being brought from Africa to America." She pleads thus:

Tw'as mercy brought me from pagan land
Taught my blighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye;
"Their color is a diabolic dye".
Remember christians; Negroes black as Cain,
May be refined and join the angelic train.¹

In another poem, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth", she tells the Lord an account of her life thus:

I young in life, by seeming cruel fate was
Snatch'd from Africa's fancied happy seat.
Such, such my case.
And can I then but pray,
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? 2

1. Quoted by Robinson, W.H. Phyllis Wheatley in the Black American Beginnings. Detroit, Broadside Press, 1975 p.60.

2. *ibid*, p.41.

In the first poem although Phyllis Wheatley was concerned more with her peoples religious identification more than anything else yet she pleads against racial discrimination. The second poem is even more bitter as it is a recollection of her African past as well as a fervent prayer that her other kinsmen in Africa may not experience the inhuman condition of slavery. Phyllis Wheatley's protest is that of a christian whose indignation is tempered by Christian charity.

The first quarter of the nineteenth century produced a new climate of tension in American race relations which affected the course of black writing in the next century. The social intensity which gave rise to various uprisings such as those of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner was also responsible for the spirited protest in the works of the most important writers of the period, among whom were George Moses Horton, James Whitfield and Frances E.W. Harper. The same period also witnessed the maturity of black

autobiography whose militancy was undeniable. Notable among such autobiographies were Frederick Douglass' Narrative (1845) as well as William Wells Brown's Clotel and The Narrative of William Wells Brown (1847).

Black protest took a new turn the beginning of the twentieth century. Although Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery turned back the hands of the clock in its call for mutual cooperation between the whites and the blacks, yet the protest tradition gained more impetus from the writings of Paul Lawrence Dunbar (The Sport of the Gods, 1902) as well as Charles Waddell Chesnut's The Conjure Woman and The Marrow of Tradition (1901). However, "the cultural and psychological dualism" which these writers encountered prevented them from being as overtly committed as the next generation of writers were. In the words of Dunbar, the poet sang of love when earth was young.

But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jungle in a broken tongue.
We smile, but O great Christ our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but on the day is vile:
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask. 1

C.W. Chesnutt, in his The Marrow of Tradition (1901), describes a black doctor who is abused and ill-treated, but who eventually wins support of the better elements of the white community. The doctor is portrayed as a black rebel who is willing to die rather than accept subservient role. Yet the ambiguity of Chesnutt's writing is very glaring. Dunbar and Chesnutt were forced to write contrary to their feelings and experiences because they had to mediate their experiences through white publishers to a white audience and so were compelled to please the whites. There is a transparent feeling of shame rage and self-hate at this dissimulation in Dunbar's poems and Chesnutts novels.

While with Dunbar and Chesnutt the tradition of protest in black literature was stifled, there was a

1. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "The Poet" In Chapman (ed).
Black Voices. p.355.

lone but courageous voice of dissent, that of W.E.B. Du Bois. A Northern negro from a family of ante-bellum freedmen, he grew up in Massachusetts experiencing only mild racial prejudice. It was when he visited the South on vacation that he discovered the force of the color-line. In 1903, he published his classical collection of historical, socio-economic, political, mystical and literary essays, The Souls of Black Folk.

In a famous passage where he describes the Negro's double consciousness, he affirms that black Americans were both black and American and that this status confers on them a privileged insight into America's moral weakness. It also encumbered the black with an ambiguous identity which leaves him alienated both from society and from himself. Du Bois concludes that the "History of the Negro is the story of that strife" and it is this strife and the sense of double consciousness which is at the heart of much black art in general and literature in particular. Du Bois left an example of serious protest both in action and writing. His "A litaney at Atlanta" is a caustic poem, a modern psalm 44 addressed to God for sleeping while blacks were being killed.

Doth not this justice of hell stink in thy nostrils, O God? How long shall the mounting flood of innocent blood roar in Thine ears and pound in our hearts for vengeance? 1 he asked.

Du Bois poetry was characterised by its exaltation and militant tone, its racial pride, the violence of its hatred and protest and in all this he announced the advent of the Harlem Renaissance.

One other great name in the protest tradition of the period was Marcus Garvey whose "Back to Africa" slogan and his Black Star Line enterprise which was supposed to transport black Americans back to Africa went far in rehabilitating the black man. His relevance was to have conceived the first great mass movement ever known by blacks as a protest against their condition. Although he failed to realise his aims, his theory, Garveyism, emphasised black racism and brought back the pride of colour and became the living symbol of the black peoples deepest aspirations.

The militant awareness of Du Bois and Garvey reached a ferment in the 1920^s in the movement known

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, "A Litany in Atlanta", In Chapman (ed). Black Voices. p.360

variously as the "Harlem Renaissance", The "New Negro Movement" or the "Awakening of the Twenties."

Although the Harlem Renaissance was a complex political, social and literary phenomenon, yet its salient factors can be summarised. These consist of a concern for the history of the race, race-pride, destruction of the myth of the old Negro as a complacent, lazy underdog or the Uncle Tom which was propagated by the whites as well as militancy over the condition of black people. The Renaissance rehabilitated black history, blackness and everything it stood for. It exhumed folkhore, art, black spirituals, African rhythm in blues and especially in jazz music. Jazz was not simply a musical revolution, it also summarised a whole way of life, a revolt against conventions of the past and a nostalgia for African roots. It was a rehabilitation of the black American's past itself in that the black man became convinced that his art, rather than being inferior, had human values and universal appeal.

Not only were themes of the Harlem Renaissance literature radically different from what had gone before, but also all the wearing of the mask, all stereo-

types, all conformism were considered anathema. Langston Hughes described succinctly this new spirit when he declared that:

We younger Negro artists who create a new intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

.....

The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, the great bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of fact. 1

The chief writers of the period were Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes while Alain Locke made several comprehensive statements about the aims of the Harlem Renaissance as well as detailed social and aesthetic analysis in his The New Negro (1925).

However the two most important concerns of this group of writers were with the past as well as the urban black American. Many of the writers had studied

1. Hughes, Langston "The Negro Writer and the Racial Mountain", The Nation, 1946 No. 122, p.694.

in predominantly white Universities and were determined that a new image of the black American as a man of culture, cleanliness, intellect and overall respectability was primordial. Thus, the short stories of Hughes dealt with the experiences and view points of the urban black American from the mind and mouth of the memorable J.B. Simple.

Only Claude Mackay the "enfant terrible" of the Harlem Renaissance, to whom rebellion was more of a way of life, moved nearer the masses and their social problems. In each of his sonnets like "Lynching", "Tiger" and the well-known and often cited "If We Must Die", we have dramatic presentations of the pains and bitterness of centuries as well as the extension of W.E.B. Du Bois' militant protest in literature.

On the whole the mood of the black writers was that of celebration. With the exception of Jean Toomer who suffered from racial ambiguity as well as Langston Hughes, Renaissance poems were the opposite of the modernist concerns of Hemingway, Pound and Eliot who tended to dwell on images of sterility and unrealised dreams. Rather it was a poetry of shared experience and the creation of new values.

Nevertheless this celebration tended towards romanticism and was rather self-congratulatory. It provided a distorted image of the folk who was absorbed with the exigencies of physical survival in the post-war period of Ku Klux Klan and lynching. In the words of David Littlejohn, these poets were detailing not "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow but the Anxieties of Living-High-Brown".¹

Moreover, there was still a radical disagreement as to the objective of black writing. While Jean Toomer wanted to be "a writer" and not a "Negro writer", Langston Hughes advocated a new breed of writers who would write "as Negroes". With Toomer, the problem of identity was still unresolved while with Hughes this problem was an assumed fact.

The depression years of 1929 and 1930 dealt a death blow to the Harlem Renaissance in America but not until it had spread its influence across the ocean. The twenties was a most propitious time because Negro art was just being discovered by the West. In literature the **black** was the vogue on both sides of the Atlantic especially in France. In 1920, Blaise Cendr-

1. Littlejohn, David. Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes, p.6.

rars published his Anthologie Negre. 1921 was the year of the famous Batouala written by Rene Maran. The controversial novel drew the attention of the Western world to the evils of colonialism in Equatorial Africa. In 1927, and 1929, Andre Gide published his Voyage au Congo and Retour au Tchad respectively. All these brought the black man to the limelight and confirmed in the black American that France had made a return to the real and authentic culture, that is the black culture. It explains as well the vogue of black expatriation to France from this period onwards.

While the Depression proved fatal to poetry, it however had beneficial effects on the novel and on black protest literature. The period saw the influence of Works Progress Administration (WPA) created by Franklin Roosevelt to aid writers. The forum provided old hands like Arna Bontemps and Sterling Brown the opportunity to continue their career while it provided a solid beginning for younger writers like Richard Wright. The tradition of protest and indictment of the white society resurfaced in Arna Bontemps and Sterling Brown's works especially the latter's Southern Mansion but one notices that they only presented

the facade of black American life.

The apogee of the protest tradition in literature was attained with the publication of Richard Wright's Native Son in 1940. Two years earlier he had portrayed the violence, the oppression and the warping of the black man's spirit in his dramatic short stories Uncle Tom's Children. Native Son went further and became a milestone in the history of black American letters for clear reasons. Evidently, the novel is a protest about the race problem and violence. This as we have seen is not new in literature but Native Son was unique and was criticised by both white and black critics on the grounds of social relevance topicality, and commitment.

For the first time, a black writer had the courage to tell the "whole truth" from the common black's perspective. For the first time, the shame, the terror, the rage and the self-hatred a black American experiences in America as well as the power structure in the society were dissected by Wright without inhibitions. This ruthless social realism marked a symbolic turning point in black literature for as Irving Howe rightly remarked:

Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our (American) culture... A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognise himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognise the cost of his submission. 1

In the same vein, David Littlejohn would want a firm symbolic line to be drawn in black American literature at the publication of Native Son for, according to him, this novel introduced the "war element" into that literature and "it is this war element, this attack and with it a new kind of truth to suit a new situation" 2 which so distinguishes Native Son.

Native Son is patently propagandistic and moralistic. The marxist lawyer's speeches demand a more just society where crimes such as Biggers would be inconceivable. This is very much in line with the moral commitment of all social realist novels. For Wright, literature was a moral force for change as well as an aesthetic creation for as he wrote in his "Blueprint

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1. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons", Dissent (New York) autumn 1965, X, 4.
 2. Littlejohn, David, Black on White. p.6.

for Negro Writing" in 1938:

Every short story, novel, poem and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilisation and too, the faith and necessity to build a new world.¹

Wright enjoined a collective commitment on the part of the black American writer of the forties because the living conditions of the black American then did not warrant any artist practising an art for art's sake. Thus he followed the trail blazed by all the previous black writers we have mentioned most especially Du Bois and Claude McKay.

Wright also created a precedent in the use of the black man as an uninhibited and assertive central character in the novel. Since Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1952), the black man's portrayal in fiction has varied between dissimulation, pathos and humour. The black heroes were either "folksy, not too bright souls", Uncle Toms, forgiving Christians, or mask-wearing heroes.

Wright created a cogent hero within a literary frame, who is a real native son of America. As he himself wrote in his explanatory notes on Native Son he

1. Wright Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing". In Chapman (ed.) Black Voices.

felt that;

Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried with him the potentialities of either Communism or Fascism.... he is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out. 1

Bigger Thomas has nothing in common with the Suffering Hebrew children of the spirituals. The grand-son of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom is no longer docile, long suffering and stupidly loyal to the status quo. Rather he is well armed to meet violence with violence.

Wright took his novel very seriously. He was aware of the importance of its message to the black people hence his attempt to put Native Son both on stage and in the movies. Unfortunately, lack of experience and of capital led to the failure of this venture.

Following Wright's literary success, a Wright school made up of Chester Himes, Ann Petry, William Attaway developed. For this school,

1. Wright Richard "How Bigger was Born", Introduction to his Native Son. New York, Perennial Classics, 1965 edition.

literature is an emotional catharsis, - a means of dispelling the inner tensions of race; their novels often amounted to a prolonged cry of anguish and despair. Their principal theme, reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson is how the American caste system breeds "grotesques". The white audience on perceiving its responsibility for the plight of the protagonist is expected to alter its attitude towards race. 1

These writers were committed to highlighting the social ills of their time because they felt they had social and moral obligation to do so. Inequality, injustice, segregation, racism, dehumanisation of the industrial process, destruction of family life, American mercantile spirit were some of the themes in the novels of Himes, Attaway and Petry. Because they adopted the realist mode, their observations about society became social protests like Wright's Native Son.

Despite the reservations of critics about Native Son, the black American spirit can still be identified in Bigger Thomas's ambitions and frustrations if not in his methods of achieving visibility in a society which treats him as an invisible man. Even Baldwin, despite his scathing remarks about the novel as well as

1. Robert Bone, "Black Boys and Native Sons". op cit.

LeRoi Jones (Dutchman) and Angela Davis (Angela Davis: An Autobiography, 1974) have set a new tone for racial revolt as they tended to emphasise racial separation rather than the radical revolt of Richard Wright. They have kept alive the virile black American literary tradition of protest and commitment which blossomed with Wright for as Imamu Amiri Baraka says:

a Negro literature, to be a legitimate product of the Negro experience in America, must get at that experience in exactly the terms America has proposed for it in its most ruthless identity. 1

If Richard Wright has become accepted as the writer of realist literature, there is however another vital dimension to his career which is often overlooked. Samuel Omo Asein in his aptly titled article "Richard Wright's Existentialism: The Neglected Phase", remarked that an interesting example of Wright's literary influences "is to be found in the development of his existential outlook, the origin's of which have remained an unresolved issue in three or so decades of Wright criticism". 2

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1. Le Roi Jones. "The Myth of a Negro Literature", In Black Expression. op cit.
 2. Asein, S.O. "Richard Wright's Existentialism. The Neglected Phase", Modern Language Association of Nigeria Annual Conference, University of Ife, 22-24 February, 1979.

The issue of Wright's existentialism has been controversial. Critics like Robert Bone affirm that he owed the existentialist strain in his novels to his association with French existentialists during his self imposed exile in France. In 1946, Wright visited Paris for the first time at the invitation of the French Government. He walked freely in the streets without "any nervousness or strictures"¹ as he said.

Wright definitely had no intention of exiling himself when he visited Paris in 1946 but his growing fear for the security of his family finally decided him to leave. In July 1947, he finally chose exile, even though he maintained his American citizenship and performed his civic duties. The literary atmosphere provided by his existentialist-writer friends, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir contributed immensely to the crystallisation of his novel The Outsider (1953) which Nathan A. Scott Jr. has described as "the one emphatically existentialist novel in contemporary American literature."²

1. Wright, Black Boy. op cit, p. 245.

2. Scott, Nathan A. "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright", In Gibson (ed). Five Black Writers New York, New York University Press, 1970, p. 21

Wright identified closely with the aims of the French existentialist writer. He remarked that

one of the most remarkably gifted men I've met in Paris is J.P. Sartre..... Sartre feels that it is his right rather than his duty to defend, on purely humanistic grounds, the interest of workers, to castigate antisemites, racism, imperialism. 1

Wright's existential consciousness however antedates his exile years. As Michel Fabre adequately portrays in his magistral book on Wright, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (1980) that the reader should seek the roots of Wright's existentialism in E.E. Cummings The Enormous Room whose, "absurd, almost existential overtones attracted Wright in the thirties", in Nietzsche and in Dostoevski whom Wright himself claimed had moulded his philosophy - concerning modern man.

In addition Wright's exile years saw the publication of Savage Holiday (1954) Black Power (1954) Pagan Spain (1957) as well as the writing of Lawd Today and Eight Men both of which were published posthumously. Wright shifted his focus to the Third World. He had met many Africans from the French speaking areas of

1. Wright, R. "I choose Exile", MSS

West Africa in Paris. He had helped his friend Alioune Diop in launching the Negritude journal Presence Africaine. At first he had been very enthusiastic about Negritude which he considered a regrouping of forces among intellectual Africans. He believed fervently that to rediscover the old culture which was shredded and torn by the colonialists who had paralysed the black man for centuries was a worthy ideal. To search for what was uniquely African meant that the black man was at last ready for self-evaluation and was ready to re-organise his life in accordance with his basic feelings.

Nevertheless, Wright soon disagreed with the Negritude poets on fundamental points. He disliked the Negritudist apologists for blackness. He felt that "racial" qualities were myths spurned by prejudiced minds. He preferred Negritude to take a more political and militant stand because he did not believe in pacificism as a means of achieving political independence. Wright continued to be friendly but never intimate with his African friends. Black Power completed his estrangement with the Africans in Paris.

Unlike most black Americans, Wright was never ro-

mantic about Africa. He went out of curiosity to see how a new African nation was coping with self-government in a modern world and he reported what he saw - the wretchedness of life, filth, the arrogant elite, Wright saw in Gold Coast, the human misery which made him run away from America and he could not but denounce it as he had denounced human misery in his own country. Because he wrote as a naturalist would, his African friends did not forgive him for being fascinated by the seamy side of things in the former Gold Coast.

On November, 28th, 1960, Wright died mysteriously at the clinique chirurgicale Eugenie Gibez in Paris. His quarrel with America was never resolved in his lifetime. His restless life had been a long picaresque journey, a parable of the black condition, just at a time when the black protest in the United States against which he had so consistently warned the nation was breaking out.

Sembene Ousmane: the griot of the black condition
in Africa.

In Africa, the black condition donned a new apparel, that of colonialism which metamorphosed into neo-colonialism. Sembene Ousmane's life and career like that of Richard Wright has followed closely the social and historical conditions of Africa in general and Senegal his country in particular.

In 1848, France finally abolished the slave trade and turned her attention fully to Africa for economic gains. She explored and claimed for herself the coasts of present day Guinea, Ivory Coast, Benin and Malagasy and between 1854 and 1865, her troops moved into the interior of West Africa under the command of the legendary colonial conqueror, Louis Faidherbe, who extended French rule up to the Senegal River. For a long time after that, Senegal was to be an exemplar of French colonialism even though the French presence would not be strongly felt until after the 1884 Berlin conference which shared out Africa

among the various European powers. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the need for markets became acute for all European powers after slave trade had been abolished. Africa thus became the scene where the drama of European economic imperialism was played out.

Despite the humanitarian motives often advanced for colonialism in Africa, it is clear that each European nation ventured into Africa in order to solidify her economic interest and impose her national stamp on Africans. The French employed the term "civilising mission" to describe their venture in their territories in West and East Africa known respectively as *Afrique Occidentale Francaise* and *Afrique Equatoriale Francaise*. This term as well as the policy of assimilation which the French practiced in Africa had the same ideological basis as slavery and racism. It was based on the same prejudiced notion of the innate inferiority of blacks. It was therefore not surprising that Africans reacted sharply and sometimes violently like their black American counterparts against all forms of prejudice against them.

France practised the economic theory of "la mise

en valeur", an expression which clearly meant the exploitation of the colonies. Albert Sarraut, twice French colonial minister from 1920-24 and from 1932-33 summarised colonial economic venture as a relationship between the exploiter and the exploited. According to him;

Economically, a colonial possession means to the home country simply a privileged market whence it will draw the raw materials it needs, dumping her own manufactures in return. Economic policy is reduced to the rudimentary procedures of gathering crops and bartering them. This is literally a policy of exploitation, 1 he concluded.

By the time the First World War broke out, colonialism with all its attendant evils had been firmly established and Senegal where Sembene Ousmane was born in 1923 had become the model colonial territory and the headquarters of French colonial administration in West Africa. Since he was born in the Casamance a remote Southern part of Senegal, and not in the four privileged communes, Sembene Ousmane did not qualify as a French citizen.

1. Hargreaves, J.D. (ed) France and West Africa. London, Macmillan, 1969 p. 206.

The Casamance region, famous for its fishermen and the problem of monoculture is the social context of Sembene Ousmane's short stories and Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple. Sembene Ousmane insists in all his literary writings that the economic basis of colonialism must be emphasised and that it is the European economic exploitation of Africa which is responsible for her total ineptitude at all levels.

Like Richard Wright, Sembene Ousmane was an autodidact and like Wright he was a non-conformist. As a boy, he manifested a very rebellious and independent spirit, a spirit which was not tolerated in an African context where age was equated with wisdom. He was sent out of school before he could finish his primary education for what his headmaster referred to as his insubordination. Next he moved to Dakar where he tried his hands on a variety of jobs like plumbing, bricklaying and motor-vehicle repairing among others. The implications of his lack of formal education were double. First he could not become a citizen by reason of his western education as Leopold Sedar Senghor did. Secondly, as a self-taught man, he was open, like Wright, to a variety of literary influences.

The subject as opposed to the "citoyen", was open to many of the abuses of the colonial system. He was disenfranchised, excluded from participating actively in the administrative process, and was subject to exorbitant taxes as well as to the obnoxious and notorious native law called the "indigenat". The peasants who constituted the vast majority of the population and were subjects, suffered from the breach of the indigenat which curiously resembled Jim Crow laws. Among the possible infractions were songs, false rumour, disrespectful act, speech or remarks made to weaken respect for French authority and culture. The hero of Sembene Ousmane's Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple (1957) suffers series of humiliation because he dares to marry a French woman. His wife is victimised for allegedly degrading the white race. One white man derides her by asking:

Cela ne vous fait donc rien de coucher
avec un Nègre? Moi, à votre place, j'
aurais honte. 1

On a more positive note however, Sembene Ousmane's lack of formal education prevented him from being alie-

1. Ousmane, Sembene. Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple. Paris, Le Livre Contemporain, 1957, p.43.

nated from his culture and from the African masses. Colonial francophone education, like the Christian religion, was an agent of deculturisation which produced a new class of elite who considered themselves as superior to the masses and whose loyalty to the colonial government was more deep-rooted than their loyalty to their people. Sembene Ousmane, on the other hand has closely identified with the masses and their aspirations.

By the eve of the Second World War itself, Africa had become "a dying land", and was economically and politically stagnant. Peasants did not have the means of improving their rudimentary agricultural techniques. The French government was neither interested in investing on agriculture. When the war eventually broke out, the peasant was at the end of his patience. His purchasing power diminished, aggravated as it was by war subscriptions, black market, poor prices as well as conscription for "national defence".

The post Second World War saw the beginnings of nationalism in Africa in general and witnessed the resounding impact in Africa of Pan-Africanism which had gathered momentum in Europe in the previous decade through the efforts of W.E.B. Du Bois and George and

Dorothy Podmore.

After the war, educated Africans began to agitate for reforms in the pre-war system of autocratic French rule as a recompense for Africa's large contribution to the victory of the Allied Forces during the war. In 1938, an estimated 30,000 Africans served in France, Syria and North Africa while another 15,000 served in tropical Africa. In 1939, 12,000 men, of whom Sembene Ousmane were added to this number through a special draft. Sembene Ousmane saw service in Italy and Germany and in 1943, he returned home to Senegal armed with a new vision of Africa and Europe like all other ex-combatants. These ex-servicemen joined the educated Africans in demanding reforms and their agitations marked the beginnings of nationalist movements and political parties in francophone Africa.

Politically, the Second World War signalled the end of the colonial era. In the words of Ruth Morgenthau:

The Second World War marked a new stage in international politics, indicating that the colonial era was over. Then Africa became involved in the universal attempts of the poorer nations to reduce the gap separating them from the richer. The birth of the parties can

be seen as a step in this direction. Africans first sought to become politically independent because they believed that only thus could they take active part in their own development.¹

The most broadly based political party within this geographical area was the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (R.D.A) which grouped African elites who were almost all graduates of the famous elitist William Ponty School in Dakar. Rather than press for political independence as it was being done by Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, these elites called for reforms which was granted by the terms of the Brazaville Conference of 1944, which eradicated the indigénat, recommended freedom of assembly, the expansion of educational facilities as well as the organisation of trade unions.

However, rather than calming the Africans, these reforms raised expectations and stimulated fervent political activity in the form of trade unionism and violent demonstrations especially in Ivory Coast, Guinea and Cameroun. More radical Africans wanted their

1. Schachter Morgenthau Ruth. "Introduction", Political Parties in French Speaking West Africa. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964.

representatives in the French assemblies to demand political independence but were disappointed by the attitude of the intellectual politicians like Leopold Senghor and Houphouet Boigny who in fact were some of the most Frenchified Africans and who favoured a gradualist approach.

Sembene Ousmane had hoped that France would grant democratic self-rule to African colonies after the former had fought the war against fascism. He was even more disappointed that the Senegalese elite was settling for half-measures. Between 1943 and 1948, he travelled widely in West Africa to see the colonial situation for himself and to gauge the feelings of the masses. In 1946, he participated in the great Dakar-Niger railway strike which he was to commemorate in his Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu (1960). Disillusion at the political turn of events made him return to France in 1948.

Sembene Ousmane's years in France provided him with the opportunity to educate himself in the evenings after his works in the port and be in contact with Negritude writers as well as black American writers like Claude Mackay, Richard Wright and Chester Himes. He

was fascinated by the uncomproming and almost savage realism as well as the commitment to the cause of the common people in their novels.

When in 1948 Sembene Ousmane returned to France, Wright had been in Paris for almost two years and had already made a significant mark on the French literary scene. Translations of his major works were available in French. Native Son which was translated as Un Enfant du Pays was particularly successful in that it opened the eyes of the public to the racial problems in America. Sembene Ousmane must have read Wright's Un Enfant du Pays for his Le Docker Noir has striking resemblances with the former both in conception and execution.

Diaw's story is not exactly identical in setting, scope of narrative and temporal span with that of Bigger Thomas, yet the personalities of the two heroes reveal certain similarities. Both are black adolescents, second class citizens in predominantly white societies. Both are stunted and devoid of political social and economic rights. By their race and social class, they belong to "the wretched of the earth".

In Native Son and Le Docker Noir racism is a by-

product of economic and cultural oppression. Therefore race and social class are portrayed as being inseparable in the two novels. Both lawyers for the defence in the novel are marxists who highlight the heroes' crimes from a marxist point of view. They argue that Bigger and Diaw Falla are victims of the capitalist society both by their race and social class. Since racial prejudice is the bane of the black man, Sembene Ousmane like Richard Wright, returns to it ceaselessly in his novels which describe the colonial situation.

As a dockworker in Marseilles, Sembene Ousmane, like Wright, joined the Communist Party and was a member until Senegal gained her political independence in 1960. He was also an active leader of dock-workers within the context of the Confederation Generale du Travail, playing leading roles in workers' demonstrations which were rampant in the late forties and early fifties. His adherence to Marxism has also modified his conception of contemporary African reality. His successive novels have reiterated that writing is a form of social action. Rather than highlighting social and political problems in isolation as do many African writers, he dwells on historical landmarks

and emphasises a view of history in the perspective of conflict and class struggle. This is why history in his novel is treated from an economic rather than political point of view. Here it is pertinent to mention that this is in part due to the influence of Maxim Gorky on Sembene Ousmane, an influence which is apparent in the conception and execution of his Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu.

Sembene Ousmane has an implicit faith in technological progress and believes that the African must dominate nature for his own needs. This is the message in his Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple. Oumar Faye, the hero of this novel, is a practical marxist who would want to efface the negative elements in the African culture even if it is by the means of a revolution. For this die-hard marxist, suffering, even death, is the prize which he must pay in order to ensure the progress of his people. The enlightened Faye battles almost single-handedly against reactionary forces in order to liberate his people from the colonial economic yoke and introduce them to modern methods of co-operative farming which will break the monopoly of the white merchants. He is projected as

the ideal African, progressive, lucid, active and committed. Even when he is murdered by his white adversaries, the reader is made to believe that his spirit continues to inspire his people.

In many ways, Ô Pays resembles Jacques Roumain's Gouverneur de la Rosée (1946). Like Oumar Faye, the protagonist, Manuel has travelled wide, to Cuba precisely, where he has acquired socialist ideas. When Manuel arrives, he discovers that his people are suffering from drought as well as an internecine cold war with the neighbouring community over the question of land. This quarrel makes any co-operation in order to combat the drought quite impossible. After a monumental search, he discovers a water source which can be canalised for the use of both tribes. However this is impossible without the formation of a "coubite" which necessitates a joint-effort. With the help of his lover, Annaise, he secures a promise from the enemy clan but the project does not materialise before he is brutally murdered. However, although Manuel dies, we are made to believe that his spirit marches on, "il est mort Manuel, mais c'est toujours lui qui

guide."¹ Oumar Faye dies also before the materialisation of his "Cooperative agricole" which necessitates the co-operation of his and a neighbouring clan. In his article, "Affinités électives ou imitation", V.O. Aire proves conclusively that the similarities between Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple and Gouverneurs de la Rosée are not only thematic but also structural and even lexical. Rather than plagiarism however, Aire puts these similarities down to elective affinity:

Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple n'est pas dans l'ensemble un calque pur et simple des Gouverneurs de la Rosée. Loin de là. Il suffirait de lire les deux œuvres de très près pour s'en convaincre. Tout en faisant des emprunts à l'écrivain haïtien, Sembene anime son récit d'un souffle tout sénégalais et soulève avec passion quelques questions brûlantes de l'actualité africaine du moment où il écrivait. Le roman s'inscrit donc dans le contexte de la lutte anticolonialiste qui battait son plein à cette époque.²

Roumain and Sembene share the same marxist conception of art and both belong to the social realist tradition as well. In that wise, it is pertinent to agree with

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1. Roumain, Jacques. Gouverneurs de la Rosée. Paris, Les Editeurs Africains Reunis, 1946 p. 216
 2. Aire, V.O. "Affinités électives ou imitation: Gouverneurs de la Rosée et Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple. Presence Francophone. Automne 1977, No. 15.

Aire's conclusion that Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple is "une réplique africaine des Gouverneurs de la Rosée".

In 1960, Ousmane finally returned to Africa, convinced that his duty was first and foremost to independent Senegal and that exile amounted to cowardice. In this he differed from Richard Wright who never returned to America after his exile to France. In the words of one of his characters;

Si tu ne peux pas dire la vérité là où tu es né, là où sont tes amis, tes parents, là où tu fais un avec l'entourage, où la dirastu cette vérité - Ailleurs? Ailleurs, tu seras un étranger. 1

Sembene Ousmane was right for even in France, Richard Wright remained an outsider.

Since Independence, Sembene Ousmane has remained in his own words "un témoin patent" of the socio-economic process of Africa in general and Senegal in particular. He has watched with a sense of concern the consequences of adopting a cumbersome administrative system which is a replica of the French Civil Service even after Independence. Thus his illiterate hero in the short story Le Mandat becomes a victim of this same

1. Ousmane, Sembene. Le Docker Noir. Paris, Debresse, 1956, p. 108.

system. He has also cried out in Xala (1973) against the new national bourgeoisie to whom nationalisation quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period. Again in the same novel, he has become the advocate of the down-trodden people for whom:

le fait dominant, c'est la pénurie, la pauvreté et, plus encore, la précarité générale de l'existence dans le cadre du sous-développement. 1

Again in his latest novel in two volumes, Le Dernier de l'Empire, Tome I et II (1980), he has described the peculiar style of democracy in Senegal. In the face of the general misery, leaders, whose identity has been thinly disguised by the author have increasingly become authoritarian and adopted a curious kind of Socialism which nullifies opposition, thus confirming the view of Yves Bénot of Leopold Senghor's brand of socialism that:

La théorie senghorienne n'est que l'expression mystifiée du sous-développement persistant. 2

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1. Fougeyrollas Pierre. Où Va le Sénégal: Analyse Spéciale d'Une Nation Africaine. Paris, Anthropos, 1970, p.46.
 2. Bénot, Yves. Ideologie des Indépendances Africaines. Paris, Maspero, p.1^o2.

Thus Sembene Ousmane's life and literary works, like Richard Wright's also have closely followed the historical developments in Africa since the beginnings of this century. Sembene Ousmane's preoccupation is with Africa of which he never ceases to speak. Although he has not coherently formulated his thoughts about African literature, he can be conveniently referred to as one of the very few existing theoreticians of African literature. Like his American counterpart, Richard Wright, he believes that literature must be committed and like Wright also the basis of his protest and commitment must be traced not only to the marxist ideology but also to African literary tradition.

African traditional art is functional and didactic. Leopold Sedar Senghor has remarked that:

le mérite de l'art nègre est de n'être
ni jeu, ni pure jouissance esthétique.
Parce que fonctionnels et collectifs,
la littérature et l'art négro-africain
sont engagés. Ils engagent la per-
sonne et non seulement l'individu, par
et dans la communauté, en ce sens qu'ils
sont des techniques d'essentialisation.¹

These values of collective social commitment and didacticism have been inherited by African writers. The sub-

1. Senghor, L.S. Liberté I, Négritude et Humanisme.
Paris Seuil, 1964

ject of the role of the African writer preoccupied African artists in the thirties at the inception of the Negritude movement. The poets who made up that school had a conscious goal for their literary activity. Finding themselves in a Western world which looked down upon their race and thereby feeling a sense of frustration and alienation, these writers accepted the responsibility to assert their human dignity as well as the uniqueness of their African personality.

In their poems as well as their ideological writings, this search became their major objective as it was indeed that of the Harlem Renaissance.

Viewed within the context of Pan-Africanism, there has been striking similarities between the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude Movement. Both were preoccupied with the African past, race-pride, as well as the refusal to sanction old images. While the Harlem Renaissance propagated the ideal of the New Negro, that of Negritude propagated the African personality, that is the black man who refuses to accept an inferior status and is characterised by his search for liberty as well as his cultural nationalism.

The Harlem Renaissance preceded Negritude and by

its themes and "radicalism" announced the latter. With the hindsight at our disposal today, it is pertinent to view Pan-Africanism as a continuous movement of self-awareness of the black people wherever they are oppressed. Harlem Renaissance was its first cultural phase while Negritude was the second. The salient factors of the Harlem Renaissance were reproduced in the Negritude Movement. Both were essentially poetic and elitist movements on both continents.

Alioune Diop like Langston Hughes in his description of the spirit of the New Negro, defined the Negritude spirit succinctly when he wrote thus:

La Négritude - née en nous du sentiment d'avoir été frustrés, au cours de l'histoire, de la joie de créer et d'être considérés à notre juste valeur - la négritude n'est autre que notre humble et tenace ambition de réhabiliter des victimes et de montrer au monde ce que précisément l'on avait spécifiquement nié; la dignité de la race noire. 1

The African past which was known to the whites was one of slavery, denigration and colonialism. Negritude at

1. Diop, Alioune. "Le Sens de ce Congrès, discours d'ouverture de Deuxième Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs". Présence Africaine (Paris) XXIV-XXV, 42-43.

its inception thus had as its goal a process of self-authentication and revaluation of African civilisation. The essence of this civilisation became the subject of not a few Negritude poems and propositions as exemplified by the works of Léopold Sedar Senghor, chef de file of the movement. Describing African culture, he wrote thus:

Culture une et unitaire... Civilisation je précise, culture qui naquit de l'action réciproque de la race, de la tradition et du milieu; qui, émigrée en Amérique, est restée intacte dans son style, sinon dans ses éléments ergologiques. 1

On what characterise the black man, Senghor lays emphasis on emotion and rhythm. He argues that:

L'émotion est nègre comme la raison hellène... Cette force ordinatrice qui fait le style nègre est le rythme. C'est la chose la plus sensible et la moins matérielle. C'est l'élément vital par excellence... Le rythme agit sur ce qu'il y a de moins intellectuel en nous, despotiquement, pour nous faire pénétrer dans la spiritualité de l'objet; et cette attitude d'abandon qui est elle-même rythmique. 2

Today, this aspect of Negritude, referred to as "Negritude de source" is sharply criticised by Sembene Ous-

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1. Senghor, L.S. Liberté I, Négritude et Humanisme. Paris, Seuil, 1964.
 2. Senghor L.S. Liberté I. op cit. pp. 309-310.

mane as Richard Wright did before him for its lack of dynamism and its debilitating nature. According to him Negritude is;

racist, deviationist, fake retrogressive, a kind of intellectual intoxication being used by the rising bourgeoisie in Africa..an ideology to fool the masses and the progressive intelligentsia. 1

While Sembene Ousmane's criticism may be true in some respect, his statement overlooks a vital aspect of the Negritude movement, that is its committed and protest, spirit. It became the negritude writer's role to denounce the evils of colonialism, especially its half-hearted attempt at assimilation. This protest stance or "cri negre" came first from Rene Maran. The West Indian administrator, though, as he himself claimed he was, "plus blanc que les blancs", sent angry ripples through the French body politic in 1921 when he bitterly attacked the colonial system in his Preface to *Batouala*. Inveighing against the system, he declared:

Civilisation, civilisation, orgueil
des Européens, et leur charnier d'

1. "Interview with Sembene Ousmane" West Africa, 22nd September, 1962: No. 2364.

innocents, Rabin-dranath Tagore, le poète, un jour à Tokio, a dit ce que tu étais. Tu bâtis fon royaume sur des cadavres. Quoi que tu veuilles, quoi que tu fasses, tu te meus dans le mensonge. A ta vue, les larmes de sourdre, et la douleur de crier. Tu n'es pas un flambeau, mais un incendie, Tout ce à quoi tu touches, tu le consumes. 1

Some Negritude poets took over from where Batouala left off for if Maran bitterly attacked the inadequacies of colonialism, he did not advocate its end. The militant spirit of Negritude is more apparent in the Carribean writers. Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas as well as in David Diop in Coup de Pilon (1956).

This protest and committed aspects of Negritude (i.e. Negritude de combat) are often subsumed in the criticism of Negritude's conventional aspect. It is often overlooked that Negritude, in its militant form gave confidence and nourishment to the next generation of writers, of whom Sembene Ousmane, who were mostly novelists. The underlying idea in every literature of combat is to show the other side of the coin of the colonial situation from the point of view of the Africans so that the whole world would be shocked at the

1. Maran, René. "Préface", Batouala. Paris, Albin Michel, 1975 edition.

reality of the colonial situation. Themes like the passion of the black race and poverty in the Caribbean in Césaire's Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal (1939) or the inferiority complex from which the black man suffers in Léon Damas's Pigments (1937) or the revolt of David Diop and Rabemananjara are all elements of the contemporary reality of the colonial world. In the opinion of Marcien Towa this realist and committed stance is the most commendable aspect of Negritude, although, like Sembene Ousmane he condemns "Négritude de source." In his words,

Le rôle de la Négritude révolutionnaire fut double; d'une part, révéler chez les colonisés le goût de la liberté, abolir chez eux le sentiment de la fatalité, de l'asservissement, par le rappel de ce qu'ils furent jadis, des cultures qu'ils créèrent, de les convaincre ainsi qu'ils n'étaient pas de trop, qu'ils ne parasitaient pas le monde, que leur contribution à la grande oeuvre de l'humanité était essentielle et irremplaçable; d'autre part, la Négritude s'efforçait de montrer aux Européens de bonne volonté que les revendications des colonisés étaient fondées et que l'intérêt bien compris de l'Occident exigeait l'abolition du système colonial. 1

From its inception therefore, African literature found it natural to be committed to the social cause, be-

1. Towa, Marcien. Négritude ou Servitude p. 128

cause the socio-political situation in Africa called for it. Sembene Ousmane could not have been insensitive to this committed dimension of Negritude for he himself was in France during the ferment years of Negritude although he is not known to have participated actively in it. His preoccupation however is similar to theirs in more than one way.

Ousmane's preoccupation is primarily with Africa with its socio-economic and political problems and its hopes of a brighter future for the masses. Unlike the Negritude writers, however, Sembene is not a poet. His mode of communication is mainly the novel and more recently like Wright at a point in his career, the film.

Sembene Ousmane sees his role as a writer in the traditional context and compares himself to the traditional "griot". In his Preface to L'Harmattan (1964) he declares that the African writer's role derives from that of the traditional bard. He declares:

Jeme souviens pourtant que jadis dans cette Afrique qui passé pour classique, le griot était, non seulement l'élément dynamique de sa tribu, clan, village, mais aussi le témoin patent de chaque événement.

C'est lui qui enregistrerait, déposait avant tous, sous l'arbre du palabre les faits et les gestes de chacun. La conception de mon travail découle de cet enseignement. 1

Sembene Ousmane's stand is that of the social realist par excellence for he charges the writer to be a teacher as well as a prophet, to be;

l'homme qui pourrait apprendre à l'homme à travers sa charpente, son état d'âme, sa grandeur, sa faiblesse. 2

Yet Sembene Ousmane goes further than his African contemporaries as well as Richard Wright in his practice of social realism. As one of his characters says, it is impossible to be a good writer without defending a cause: In other words, there is need for a precise ideological and political commitment. He asks:

Tu aspirés à devenir un écrivain?
Tu n'en seras jamais un bon tant
que tu ne défendras pas une cause.
Vois-tu, un écrivain doit aller de
l'avant, voir les choses dans la
realite, ne point avoir peur de ses
idées. 3

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1. Ousmane, Sembene. "Préface", L'Harmattan. Paris, Presence Africaine, 1964.
 2. Ousmane, Sembene. "Préface" a L'Harmattan.
 3. Ousmane, Sembene. Le Docker Noir. Paris, Debresse, 1956, p. 108.

Sembene Ousmane's ultimate goal is to operate a form of disalienation in the consciousness of his readers by representing contemporary reality in the light of marxist ideology, as well as his African experience all of which gives his works a personal stamp in the same way existentialism does to the novels of Richard Wright.

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CHAPTER 3

EXISTENTIALISM IN THE
NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT.

Existentialism is regarded generally as a philosophy devoted to an interpretation of human existence in the world that stresses its concreteness and its problematic character. According to this body of thought, existence is always particular and individual, an avenue to the meaning of Being. Existence is regarded as being made up of diverse possibilities (choices) from which the Existent (Man) must make his choice and then commit himself to that choice. Since Existence is always a Being - in - the - world, man lives in a historically determined situation which limits and conditions his choice. Man is therefore a "Dasein" for the fact that he is in the world, and he inhabits it.

Existentialist ideology was particularly relevant during the Second World War when Europe was threatened by material as well as spiritual destruction. Under those conditions of uncertainty, the

optimism of Romantic inspiration by which the destiny of Man is guaranteed and propelled towards an ineluctable progress by such infinite forces as God and Reason appeared no longer tenable. Existentialism asserted that human reality is unstable and risky and that man is "thrown into the world". Man's freedom is conditioned by limitations which could at any time render such freedom void. The negative aspects of existence, made even more prominent by the War (aspects like suffering, pain, sickness, frustration and Death) became for the Existentialists, the salient features of human existence, the very features which Romantic optimists tended to deny.

Existentialism has drawn from various sources. First is the fifth century theologian, Saint Augustine, who taught that Man must not go outside himself in the search for truth, for truth abounds in Man himself. Secondly, existentialists have borrowed from Nietzsche's Dionysian Romanticism, the exultation of life in its most irrational and cruel features. According to Nietzsche, this exultation is the task of the "higher man" who exists beyond good and evil. A third source is the nihilism of Dostoevski who presents man as

being continuously defeated in his choices and continuously placed by those choices before the enigma of himself.

Because of the diversity of sources, existentialism has assumed different and even contrasting forms, from the theistic to the atheistic and to the humanistic. The names of Existentialists like the German Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, the French Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well as the Spanish Jose Ortega Gasset evoke different aspects of existentialism in one's mind. Some have focused on the problematic nature of the human situation in which man is confronted by diverse alternatives from which he can choose and thus project his life. Others have focused on certain baffling aspects of existence like man's contingency, the dread of death, the failure of choice, man's responsibility which derives from the choices he has made, boredom, and the absurdity of man's dangling between the infinity of his aspirations and the finitude of his possibilities. All these are favourite subjects of existentialists.

✧ However the common interest which unites the

existentialists is that of human freedom as well as an interest in a world considered as the environment of man. It is in this respect that they are all opposed to any positivist view of Man.

Existentialism in the final analysis should not lead to nihilism. The humanistic existentialism of Merleau-Ponty as well as Jean-Paul Sartre (his later phase in Critique de la Raison Dialectique) insists on Man's duty to transform the society and the world he inhabits. It is along this line of engagement, of assuming responsibility that Existentialism has moved nearer to Marxism. It is also along this line and in their interest in human freedom as well as the contemporary society that both are related to literary realism.

Although it is often affirmed that Richard Wright imbibed the philosophy of existentialism during his years in Paris, it is clear in his autobiography Black Boy that he had in him all the elements of the existential man.

First, Wright's racial origin set him apart as an "outsider". While the European suffers from artistic alienation, the black boy suffers in addition from a

cultural, social and racial alienation. Black Boy relates lasting events which marked Wright indelibly and contributed to this alienation. Personal freedom is the key to Black Boy. The book opens with the author constrained not to play because his grandmother was ill. He became listless and inadvertently set the house on fire. The author deliberately dwells on the details of the suffering he experienced while being punished in order to prove that the near tragedy occurred because his freedom was encroached upon and that he was punished unjustifiably. "What was it that made me conscious of possibilities? From where in this Southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom"¹ he soliloquised. Black Boy tries to answer these questions and in doing so Wright extracts the existential meaning of the black mans life.

The hero of Black Boy was endowed with a powerful will, stubborn tenacity and an independent spirit!

He could steal, fight, if it meant escaping a hateful racial system. He felt he had been emotionally cast out of the world, had been made to live outside the normal processes of life, had become accustomed to living on the side of

1. Wright. Black Boy New York, Harper and Row, 1945, p.11

those who watched and waited. ¹

In a Christian society which did not recognise his personality, he felt he did not have to adhere to the morality of Christian ethics. Later in life he was able to diagnose the reasons why he refused Christianity:

I knew about the meaning of religion, the hunger of the human heart for that which is not and can never be, the thirst of the human spirit to conquer and transcend the implacable limitations of human life ²

wherever I found religion in my life, I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn. ³

Society did not offer Wright any succour. The scenes of poverty, illness and injustice continuously made him withdraw into himself very early. He knew he would have to face things alone. Explaining further the existential basis of his life, he wrote:

... I had an attitude toward life that was to endure, that was to make me sceptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant

1. *ibid*, p223 .

2. *ibid*, p.132 .

3. *ibid*, p.150 ' .

of all and yet critical. The spirit I had caught gave me insight into the sufferings of others like my own, made me sit for hours while others told me of their lives, made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful. It directed my loyalties to the side of men in rebellion. It made me love talk that sought answers to questions that could help nobody, that could only keep alive in me that enthralling sense of wonder and in the face of the drama of human feeling which is hidden by the external drama of life. 1

All forms of domination and naked show of power were horrible to Wright because they assaulted his ego. He knew, however that this sense of freedom entailed responsibility and courage. At times, there came to him moments of doubt:

It was inconceivable to me that one should surrender to what seemed wrong and most of the people I had met seemed wrong. Ought one to surrender to authority even if one believed that authority was wrong? If the answer was yes, then I knew I would always be wrong, because I could never do it. Then how could one live in a world in which one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything? There were no answers. 2

It was generally accepted in Wright's days that blackness was ^a limitation but the hero did not. His

1. *ibid*, pp 111 - 113 .
2. *ibid*, p. 182 ,

major problem was contained in the one nagging question: "How can I change my relationship with my environment?" This environment which denied blacks the worth of their humanity. Richard Wright equated humanity with the full development of his potentialities. Many choices were possible in this tension between the self and the environment. Resignation, role playing, indulging in simple pleasures of life, self assertion and open rebellion were some of them. Wright chose self - assertion through literary creativity because he knew all other avenues were futile, though they existed in reality.

American Hunger continues the autobiographical strain well into the hero's Communist years. It deals also with more examples of his various experiences of racism. He had felt caged and mentally imprisoned during those years!

The heritage of free thought - which no man could escape if he read at all - the spirit of the protestant ethic which one suckled, figuratively with one's mother's milk, that self regenerating energy that made a man feel, whether he realised it or not, that he had to work and redeem himself through his own acts, all this was forbidden, taboo. 1

1. *ibid*, p. 120

Wright tried successfully to overcome the irrational forces of religion, racism and Communism but never completely mastered his environment hence his exile in France. Black Boy and American Hunger therefore explain the Nietzschean as well as the Dostoevskian bases of his novels. Fear, dread, discomfort and anxiety in the face of the world in Black Boy and American Hunger are all reiterated in Native Son and The Outsider. Wright personally never transcended his own existentialism which in fact underlies all his major novels. Existentialists have a way of putting themselves in their works since the basic question which Existentialism asks is the very meaning of one's existence. The social backgrounds of the heroes of Native Son and The Outsider as well as their relationships with their mothers which bred an ineradicable feeling of dread and guilt in them are very much those of Wright.

Native Son:-

The hero of Native Son, Bigger Thomas, is a black American existentialist hero. Bigger is doubly an outsider to the mainstream of American life. First he is an outsider by reasons of the blackness of his skin.

The theme of the black man as an outsider was not new in Black American literature. At the beginning of the century, W.E.B. Du Bois aptly described the ambiguous and therefore psychologically traumatic position of the black within the American society in his The Souls of Black Folk. He said:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness; two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. 1

Bigger is also set apart by reason of his social class. Since a large number of blacks in America occupy the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder by reasons of history and skin colour, they belong to

1. Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and sketches. Chicago Crest Paperback, 1961 Chapter 1.

the vast majority of the under-privileged peoples of the world to whom Richard Wright addresses himself in The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference, (1956).

The same theme of the black outsider is also symbolically treated by Ralph Ellison in his Invisible Man (1952). This novel, an epic of modern American Negro life, is a profound and uncompromising interpretation of the black's anomalous position in the American society. It is the story of a young man's search for identity. The hero encounters various situations which attempt to blind him to his image as a black man. In the end, he is convinced that he exists although the white society pretends he doesn't. Addressing the reader, he declares:

I am an invisible man... I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearying on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again you often doubt if you really exist. 1

The symbolic nature and the all-inclusiveness of its experience for the black race is poignantly expressed in the last sentence of the novel: "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you."

Much later John A Williams in his The Man Who Cried I am (1968) was to put the question of negro invisibility into a more frightening yet original and convincing perspective. The hero Max does ^{not} belong to the working class as Ellison's hero. Neither is he trapped in the ghetto like Wright's Bigger Thomas. Rather he belongs to the black elite, who, so to say,

1. Ellison, Ralph. The Invisible Man. New York, Vintage Books Edition, 1972, p. 3.

"has made it" as a successful novelist, a Presidential speech writer and an editor for a major-American magazine, the Pace.

Williams's novel relates how Max flies to Holland to meet his estranged Dutch wife Margrit, learns of the death of his friend Harry Ames (who curiously resembles Richard Wright) and accidentally discovers a C.I.A. plan, nicknamed King Alfred which aims at exterminating leading blacks. Needless to say the knowledge of this plan leads to his own extermination by black agents. The Man Who Cried I am is a work of pride, anger and passion of a man who accepts the responsibility to tell "those people (Communists, American Presidents and whites in general) to stop lying not only to us, but to themselves".¹ The novel relates with terrifying poignancy what it is to be a black American in America, to be denied of one's rights, of job opportunities, of family union and to be hounded to death for knowing too much. The merit of John Williams' novel lies in the proud affirmation of Max Reddick despite the odds that "I am - a writer, a man, something".²

1. Williams, John A. The Man Who Cried I am. New York, New American Library, 1968, p. 46

2. *ibid*, p.47.

birth to him:

Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you.... We wouldn't live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you.... All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life.... You'll regret how you living someday. 1

This continuous assault upon his ego finally makes him surrender:

As he ate he felt that they were thinking of the job he was to get that evening and it made him angry; he felt that they had tricked him into a cheap surrender. 2

Bigger sees the poverty in which he was born as the cause of this lack of freedom he experiences and the ghetto to which he is confined since this poverty makes the whole family dependent on him. He rages at that social situation which makes any choice impossible in his life:

Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering. But what could he do? Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a

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1. Wright: Native Son pp 11 and 13.
 2. Wright, Native Son p. 15.

blank wall and he stopped thinking....
Yes he could take the job at Dalton's
and be miserable, or he could refuse
it and starve. It maddened him to
think that he did not have a wider
choice of action. 1

The relationship with members of his family who constitute the first group of "Others" in his life is saturated with fear, lack of understanding and finally hate!

He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone-else. 2

The mother-son conflict is the first indication of Bigger as an outsider, as an alienated being or at worse an outlaw.

The second group of "Others" in Bigger's life is the whites. In order to escape his feeling of

1. *ibid*, p. 17.

2. *ibid*, p. 14.

self-hate and hate for his family, he "acts tough", by joining a gang and fighting, stealing, in short breaking the white man's law. There is a crucial monologue which exemplifies his attitude to whites. One of his gang's dreams is to rob Blum's shop. On his way to the Dalton's he reflects on this plan:

They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to. Yes; if they could rob Blum's, it would be a real hold-up, in more senses than one. 1

Robbing Blum is for Bigger a form of catharsis. It is a revolt against all forms of constraints to his ego. He has a basic distrust for the white people. Before leaving for the Dalton's he makes sure he has his knife and gun, which invest him with a sense of manhood:

He was going among white people, so he would take his knife and his gun; it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness. 2

1. *ibid*, p.18 .

2. *ibid*, p.44 °

Standing before the iron fence of the Dalton's however his "acting tough" disappears. Only his basic feeling of fear and emptiness resurface especially at the sharp contrast between this world and his:

This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could not feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses....

He grew angry. Why had he come to take this goddam job? He could have stayed among his own people and escaped feeling this fear and hate. This was not his world; he had been foolish in thinking that he would have liked it....

He had not expected anything like this, he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him. 1

If Bigger feels this way towards the white Daltons whom he has not even met, it is because he already possesses some negative stereotyped ideas about whites. For him, the whites are responsible for his poverty and lack of opportunity in life. Bigger Thomas is perpetually disgruntled about his frustration. "Goddammit, I'm always broke!" he mumbles. I could fly a plane if I had a chance, he complains

1. *ibid*, pp 45-47

at another time but his friend Gil is quick to remind him of the barrier to his aspirations.¹

If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane. 1

While play-acting at "whites" with his friends, Bigger unconsciously reveals his dreams. He would like to be a General, directing the attack on the enemy with tanks, gas, planes and infantry. He would also like to be the President of the United States directing cabinet meetings. However, each time he has to return firmly to earth from his day-dream world. He exclaims:

Goddammit! They don't let us do nothing, They don't let us do nothing.... The white folks.... Naw. But I just can't get used to it . I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there.... Everytime I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me.... Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships.... I reckon we the only

1. *ibid*, p.20

things in this city that can't go
where we want to go and do what we
want to do.... 1

Unlike his friends, Bigger cannot forget his status as an underdog and as a socially and economically deprived person. He cannot "get drunk and sleep it off". When asked where the white people live, he replies symbolically, "Right down here in my stomach. Every time I think of 'em, I feel em.... It's like fire." 2

Bigger's brief association with the Daltons brings fully into his consciousness the meaning of his life. Full to the brim with hatred of the whites, he decides to accept the driver's job for want of any better. He walks through the quiet and spacious white neighbourhood, registering enviously its poignant contrast with the one-room apartment in which his family squats in the South Side.

He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605. When he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black, iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside. All he had felt in the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filled him now. 3

1. *ibid*, pp. 20-24 .

2. *ibid*, p. 24 .

3. *ibid*, p. 45 .

The gaze is one of the tools with which the Other overpowers Bigger. He is particularly sensitive to the white man's gaze which in his view reduces him to nothingness, to the status of an object. In Sartrean terms, he is objectified and reduced to the existence of an "etre-pour-autrui." His first meeting with Mr. Dalton is a trying, tense and uneasy encounter.¹

Grabbing the arms of the chair, he pulled himself upright and found a tall, lean, white-haired man holding a piece of paper in his hand. The man was gazing at him with an amused smile that made him conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body....

He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way? He wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel like this. If not that, he wanted to blot himself out. 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 shoulder's stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way the white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him feel that they did. 1

1. *ibid*, pp. 49-50.

This scene between Mr. Dalton and Bigger exemplifies the psychological stereotyping inherent in racial societies. Bigger is constrained to assume this hypocritical attitude of the dumb, unintelligent boy before Mr. Dalton because this is what the society expects from a black boy. Mr. Dalton's interview further explicates the white man's views of the black as hardly competent, as a liar and a thief. By constantly hinting at his humanitarianism in employing Bigger, he surreptitiously puts Bigger squarely in his place in the social set-up: that of the underdog. He announces with self-justification that:

The pay calls for twenty dollars a week, but I'm going to give you twenty-five dollars. The extra five dollars is for yourself for you to spend as you like. You will get the clothes you need and your meals. You're to sleep in the back room, above the kitchen. You can give the twenty dollars to your mother to keep your brother and sister in school. How does that sound? 1

Though this paternalistic attitude infuriates Bigger, he is forced to hide his feelings under a string of "Yessirs!" There is another scene which demonstrates even more poignantly the tenseness (which is due to his forcefully repressing his

1. *ibid*, p.52 •

emotion of hatred) Bigger experiences when he comes closely to whites. This time the sensé at play is not that of sight but of touch. Bigger has to take his boss's daughter, Mary, out on his first night at work. Mary introduces Bigger to Jan, her boyfriend:

-Oh, Bigger, this is Jan. And Jan, this is Bigger Thomas. Jan smiled broadly, then extended an open palm toward him, Bigger's entire body tightened with suspense and dread. He felt Jan's fingers tighten about his own. He tried to pull his hand away, ever so gently, but Jan held on, firmly, smiling.... Jan still gripped his hand and Bigger held his head at an oblique angle, so that he could, by merely shifting his eyes, look at Jan and then out into the street whenever he did not wish to meet Jan's gaze. He heard Mary laughing softly. "Its all right, Bigger," she said. "Jan means it." 1

However Bigger who believes in the hypocrisy of whites who treat blacks well sees nothing to smile about in this short but meaningful drama of racial encounter:

He flushed with anger. Goddam her soul to hell! Was he laughing at him? Were they making fun of him.... Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking

1. Richard Wright, Native Son, p.67 .

at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent. 1

As in the case of his Mother, Bigger's feelings for Mary and Jan evolves from fear into implacable hatred. However, these are only two members of the white group he confronts in the novel. Mrs. Dalton for her own part wants to order Bigger's life by suggesting he continues his education in a night school to which he objects. Conclusively he sees all the members of this family as "a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do".² Now Bigger resents anyone who encroaches on his sense of freedom. He believes he is basically free and can determine his own life.

He felt that same way toward everyone. As long as he could remember, he had never been responsible to anyone. The moment a situation became so that it exacted something of him, he rebelled. That was the way he lived; he passed his days trying to defeat or gratify

1. *ibid*, p. 69 .

2. *ibid*, p. 60 .

powerful impulses in a world he
feared. 1

His major problem, that of affirming his existence
recurs this time within the context of a white domi-
nated world from which he is alienated.

His first day lived closely with whites has
been an unpleasant association with the "Other." The
taunting, the probing questions, Mary's putting her
arms around his shoulder, his being forced to sit so
closely between Jan and Mary in the front seat, his
eating and drinking with them against his wishes are
unsettling experiences for him. He feels the pre-
ssure, the "crowding" is unbearable for one night,
especially his first night with whites whom he does
not understand!;

he distrusted them, really hated them....
How on earth could he learn not to say
"yessuh" and "yessum" to white people
in one night when he had been saying it
all his life long?.... When he tried to
chew he found his mouth dry. It seemed
that the very organic functions of his
body had altered; and when he realised
why, when he understood the cause, he
could not chew the food. 2

1. *ibid*, p. 44 .

2. *ibid*, p. 73.

Bigger's alienation provides the motivation for his reactions to the whites. Blindness is the metaphor which the author uses most frequently to describe the relationship between Bigger and his bosses. In Bigger's morbid hatred and fear of whites, he is blind to the white humanity the Daltons offer as well as the Communist comradeship which Jan and Mary offer him. Bigger like Cross Damon in The Outsider believes he ought to be supremely free and that he is not responsible to anyone. However the author shows concretely how social realities destroy Utopias. Bigger's Utopian dream evaporates in the first instance at the touch of economic reality. He must accept a job in order to live and make others live. He is therefore a subject of economic determinism.

In the second place his choice is determined by the racial set up in the society, the narrator thereby adding a socio-cultural dimension to the existential form. When Bigger, out of fear smothers young Mary, his spontaneous reaction is to think of what the "Others" will think and how to absolve himself from their judgement. He is instantly aware that he is not just any murderer but a "NEGRO" murderer of a

white woman?

She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman. He had to get away from here...

In the darkness his fear made him live in him an element which he reckoned with as "them". He had to construct a case for "them".... But he would tell "them" that that was not true... They can't say I did it. If they do, they can't prove it. 1

When Bigger refers to "they" and "them", he means the Others, the Hegelian "das man", the faceless anonymous power that governs us all, that dominates our lives and determines standards of taste and morality. Bigger's flight (described in elaborate and dramatic details in Book II) is the second major act of "mauvaise foi" he commits. The first act is his accepting the stereotyping and the consequent dehumanisation that are part of the racial confrontation, thus robbing himself of his unique humanity and reducing himself to the state of an "etre - pour - autrui."

However, the murder revolutionises his consciousness as an individual. He acquires a sense of

1. *ibid*, pp. 90-91.

freedom and for the first time in his life he lives as a whole human being who is energetic, and active. The author describes in detail the calculating presence of mind with which Bigger puts Mary's body in a trunk, carries it downstairs, severs off the head, pushes the corpse into the blasting furnace and turns on the exhaust fan which will suck the air out of the basement so that there will be no odour. Bigger even comes to feel a sense of pride for having killed a white girl. The next morning, pondering over his actions of the previous night,

the thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had anything that others could not take from him. His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not. He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of even thinking that he had done such a deed. And he had done something which even he had not thought possible. 1

1. *ibid*, p. 101 .

Murder becomes a revolutionary act as far as Bigger is concerned because it is after committing it that he realises his humanity?

Like a man reborn, he wanted to test and taste each thing now to see how it went; like a man risen up well from a long illness he felt deep and wayward whims. 1

In his hide-out, he coldly and lucidly examines his act without feeling any remorse. "He had committed murder and had created a new world for himself." He resists arrest courageously, shooting at as many of his assailants as he can and when he finally gives up, it is with the satisfaction that he has done his best.

He is not afraid any more though he has not been able to create a world which would obey his own orders. However, he is shod of all his hate. He simply waits for the imminent end, the inevitable judgement of the "Others" whom he has so consistently evaded all his life!

Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral

1. *ibid*, p. 106.

guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life; having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people and having demanded ransom money to enable him to do it - having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle any more. 1

With death staring him in the face as the consequence of his action however, his old fear surges back, "the fear of death before which he was naked and without defense." Doubts about his identity resurface:

Maybe the confused promptings, the excitement, the tingling, the elation - maybe they were false lights that led nowhere. Maybe they (the whites) were right when they said that a black skin was bad, the covering of an apelike animal. Maybe he was just unlucky, a man born for dark doom, an obscene joke happening amid a colossal din of siren screams and white faces and circling lanes of light under a cold and silken sky. 2

Even now he is still preoccupied with how "they" (the whites) would watch him go to his death:

How could he go to his death with white faces looking on and saying that only death would cure him for having flung into their faces his feeling of being black? How could

1. *ibid*, p. 255.

2. *ibid*, p. 256 .

death be victory now....? He felt he wanted to live now - not escape paying for his crime - but live in order to find out, to see if it were true, and to feel it more deeply (i.e. his feeling of excitement and elation) - and, if he had to die, to die within it.... 1

Bigger is defended by the Communist lawyer Max who tries to put the criminal's murder in the perspective of a class as well as a racist struggle because within the social context defined in the novel, race and class are strictly intertwined. Mr. Dalton, Bigger's employer is a white man. He also owns the South Side Real Estate Company which owns Bigger's mother's apartment. In other words, whatever Bigger may earn from his job as a chauffeur goes back eventually to Mr. Dalton as rent.

Max pleads that Bigger is the natural product of the American racist and capitalist system, a victim of oppression, poverty, injustice and inequality. As the narrator explains:

He had been so conditioned in a cramped environment that hard words or kicks alone knocked him upright and made him capable of action - action that was futile because the world was too much for him. It was

then that he closed his eyes and struck out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back. 1

Addressing the jury, Max pleads the guilt of the state and emphasises the symbolic nature of Bigger's revolt against the law. He describes Bigger's life as;

a mode of life in our midst, a mode of life stunted and distorted, but possessing its own laws and claims, an existence of men growing out of the soil prepared by the collective but blind will of a hundred million people.... a human life draped in a form and guise alien to ours, but springing from a soil plowed and sown by all our hands. The all-important thing for this Court to remember in deciding this boy's fate is that, though his crime was accidental, the emotions that broke loose were already there; the thing to remember is that this boy's way of life was a way of guilt; that his crime existed long before the murder of Mary Dalton; that the accidental nature of his crime took the guise of a sudden and violent rent in the veil behind which he lived, a rent which allowed his feelings of resentment and estrangement to leap forth and find objective and concrete form. 2

Max's argument is that Bigger's crime is a symbolic gesture of the black race at war with the

1. *ibid*, p. 225 .

2. *ibid*, pp 359-361,

white race. The whole novel has tended in parts towards this major conclusion that Bigger's bizarre murders are the logical outcome of his absurd position in American social and economic system. Max would want the whole nation to feel a sense of shared guilt and social responsibility for this crime.

Max's attempt to incorporate Bigger's revolt into the conceptual framework of the class struggle remains incomprehensible to the latter. He has no feeling of brotherhood for anyone, whether black or white. Nevertheless, Max is the only one he opens his mind to because for the first time, a person has treated him like a man and an equal. Bigger confronts his real self by lucidly analysing his solitary personality to the only person who will listen to him even though he may not understand him:

Sounds funny, Mr. Max, but when I think about what you say, I kind of feel what I wanted. It makes me feel I was kind of right.... I ain't trying to forgive nobody and I ain't asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain't going to cry. They wouldn't let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain't fair to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I be-

gin to feel what I wanted, what I
am.... 1

In the final scenes, Bigger discards his "mauvaise foi" and lives out the consequences of his action. He rejects Max's sociological alibi for his crime, accepts responsibility for it in the full belief that only through violence could he have realised his full potential. To accept Max's defence would amount to cowardice not only in relation to the "Others" but also to himself. He will thus have lived in "mauvaise foi" all his life. Man must accept the consequences of his action. Bigger's last words are an affirmation of this belief in himself:

I didn't want to kill But what I
killed for, I am! It must've been
pretty deep in me to make me kill!
I must have felt it awful hard to
murder.... 2

By this assertion Bigger proves himself a lucid individual who is convinced that human decisions are not dictated by the inexorable logic of events or the "immanent dialectic of history". The author gives an interesting and lucid account of the exis-

1. *ibid*, p. 391 ,

2. *ibid*, p. 392 ,

tential man just before the hero's death. Bigger realises that every man's fate is death and no-one can flee from it. The composition and division of the novel into sections on Fear, Flight and Fate demonstrate even further this existential dimension of Native Son. Fear or dread at the meaninglessness of life makes Bigger commit two apparently "senseless" murders. He tries to flee from his actions and his lawyer tries to absolve him from the responsibility of such acts. Both attempts, flight and refusal of responsibility, amount to "mauvaise foi". However Bigger transcends this cowardice, realises his Nothingness and thus achieves authenticity which consists in the realisation of one's isolation and one's inevitable orientation towards death.

There was no day for him now, and there was no night; there was but a long stretch of time, a long stretch of time that was very short; and then - the end... there was no fear of death before which he was naked and without defense; he had to go forward to meet his end like any other living thing upon the earth... Passively, he hungered for another orbit between two poles that would let him live again; for a new mode of life that would catch him up with the tension of hate and love. There would have to hover above him, like the stars in a full sky, a vast configuration of images and symbols

whose magic power could lift him up and make him live so intensely that the dread of being black and unequal would be forgotten; that even death would not matter, that it would be a victory. This would have to happen before he could look them in the face again: a new pride and a new humility would have to be born in him, a humility springing from a new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity. 1

The most enduring and convincing picture of Bigger is that of an individualist. Bigger cannot relate to anyone in the novel. He has lived all his life outside the mainstream of the lives of Others. The Sartrean proposition: "L'Enfer, c'est les Autres" perfectly accords with his relationship to Others. He has therefore created his own ethos, owing no allegiance either to his family, his fellow men or the State. Their mode of communication, their symbols and images have all been denied him. Not only this, he has always felt stifled by Other's presence. Explaining this feeling to Max just before his death, he says:

I hurt folks cause I felt I had to;
that's all. They was crowding me too
close; they wouldn't give me no room.

1. *ibid*, p. 256.

Lots of times I tried to forget 'em but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me. 1

The Outsider.

When Richard Wright moved to France, he gathered more insight into existentialism as a movement and as a mode of writing.² He became aware that the existential man which he had portrayed in Native Son could be to some extent a universal phenomenon. In fact his Bigger had been an existential hero. He was therefore an existentialist "avant la lettre". According to Wright,

the break from the United States was more than a geographical change. It was a break with my former attitudes as a Negro and as a Communist.³

Thus his hero Cross Damon, like Bigger Thomas, feels no affinity either with blacks or whites. He is the "modern man" par excellence, existing all by himself. Wright himself had said that he wanted to examine the psychological state of the modern man and its consequences for society's survival

1. *ibid*, p. 388

2. See Aaron Ford, "The Ordeal of Richard Wright", The Black American Writer, ed: Gibson, New York 1970; A. Scott, Jr., "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright", ed Hill, Anger and Beyond, New York, 1966.

3. Gardner Smith, Williams. "Black Boy in Paris, Interview with Richard Wright", Ebony VIII July 1953, p. 40

using the Negro of the United States as the metaphor of the dilemma of the twentieth century man. Cross Damon himself at various points in the novel describes the state of alienation of the modern man:

In modern industrial society we try to steer our hearts by improvised, pragmatic rules which are in the end no rules at all.¹

He further explains that the world of science is unacceptable to modern man who continues to live by his own "totems and taboos".²

The conscience of twentieth century man is split and he continues to live in bad faith, "daily stifling his sense of terror in the face of life... pretending that life was tending toward a goal of redemption".³

When the novel opens, Damon is as tightly trapped and entrenched in bad faith as any modern man. As the title reveals, like Bigger Thomas he is an Outsider at many levels, the most superficial of which is that of his race. Ely Houston, his district Attorney friend understands the marginal place of the Negro in American society. He says:

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1. Wright, Richard. The Outsider, p. 358,
 2. Wright, Richard. The Outsider, p. 357,
 3. *ibid*, p. 187.

I know what it is to be an object outside of the normal lives of men. In America the Negro is outside. Our laws and practices see to it that he stays outside. 1

However the problem of race is not the ^{only} major issue here. Cross Damon lives on a plane different from that of anyone around him. His friends are often alarmed at his queer ways. One of his friends exclaims thus after Cross has successfully tricked all of his friends:

Cross, how in God's name did you dream up such stuff? Any man who can do things like that is a man standing outside of the world! Know what I mean? Like somebody out of your window is looking into your house and poking out his tongue at you. 2

Like Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon cannot relate with others, whether they are his friends or members of his family:

He knew that they liked him, but he felt that they were outside of his life, that there was nothing that they could do that would make any difference. Now more than ever he knew that he was alone and that his problem was one of the relationship of himself to himself. 3

1. *ibid*, pp 133-134 .

2. *ibid* p. 6 .

3. *ibid* p. 8 .

At first he finds a profound tide of identity between himself and his wife Gladys who herself has an ingrained sense of not belonging, of an outcast. But with marriage, children and the mediocrity which often accompanies married life, he gets tired of his marital life. He longs for an association with outcasts like himself who will understand him:

Weren't there somewhere in this world, rebels with whom he could feel at home, men who were outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusion? But where were they? How could one find them? 1

Damon lives this early part of his life in bad faith as a son, a husband, a father, a worker and a lover, doing things not because he wants to but because the society demands it. The drudgery, routine and unthinking humdrum of domestic life made up of day to day pedestrian responsibility eventually becomes unbearable for him.

Today was like yesterday and he knew that tomorrow would be the same....
His life was a delicate bridge span-

ning a gaping chasm and hostile hands were heaping heavy loads upon that bridge and it was about to crack and crash downward. 1

He therefore decides to end the "farce".

And if the pressure from within or without become too great he would use it (his gun); his gun would be his final protection against the world as well as against himself. 2

A fortuitous train accident in which a body is mistakenly identified as his provides him the means of changing his monotonous life. He decides to break entirely from his past, assume a new identity as Lionel Lane and leave Chicago to begin a new existence. He will give up the life his mother and Gladys ordered for him for "a restricted but more intense future". He now believes himself freer from the strangle-hold of the past, from all promises and responsibility to others. Now, he could act according to the philosophy of his mentors Dostoevski and Nietzsche whose books he had read as a student of philosophy.

Others took their lives for granted;
he would have to mould his with a

1. *ibid*, p. 15.

2. *ibid* pp.12-13.

conscious aim. Why not? Was he not free to do so? That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And his acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom. 1

He is now going to demonstrate that man has no essence, that he is the sum - total of his actions!

He had to discover good and evil through his own actions which were more exacting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have. For there was no grace of mercy if he failed. 2

Cross Damon departs for New York where he settles in Harlem. Despite his sense of freedom from the external world, he is still plagued by a sense of dread, a fear of himself and the fear of sudden surprises. He is even more plagued by his burden of non-identity. This sense of dread ?

was from within himself, within the vast and mysterious world that was his and his alone, and yet not

1. *ibid*, p. 75 .

2. *ibid*, p. 123 .

really known to him, a world that was his own and yet unknown. And it was into this strange but familiar world that he was now plunging. 1

Damon always muses gropingly about the meaning of human existence especially his own existence without finding a concrete answer:

Maybe that's the terror of it. Man may be just anything at all. 2

In New York, Damon comes in contact with the Communist couples Eva and Gil, Bob and Sarah who introduce him to the Communist circle. He at first feels a psychological relationship with their revolutionary spirit. "They, like him were outsiders. They were psychologically akin", but he finds out very soon that somehow he is outside them."

Cross had had the illusion of feeling at home with these outsiders, but now he felt himself being pushed more than ever into that position where he looked at others as though they weren't human. 3

Damon believes in his freedom from authority, the impersonal "Others", which he guards jealously.

His character had been so shaped that his struggle was a personal fight for

1. *ibid*, p. 117 .

2. *ibid*, p. 136 .

3. *ibid*, p. 171 .

the realisation of himself. 1

He cannot therefore allow his freedom to be undermined by Party discipline. Gil's definition of Communism is frightening enough. He says:

We're Communists. And being a Communist is not easy. It means negating yourself, blotting out your personal life and listening only to the voice of the Party. The Party wants you to obey! The Party hopes that you can understand why you must obey; but even if you don't then the Party will toss you aside, like a broken hammer, and seek another instrument that will obey. 2

Although Damon realises that Communism's totalitarian nature constitutes an insult to human life and intelligence, he decides to live with the Communists, a decision which is an act of bad faith in itself. With time, he realises that Communists are little gods trying to wrest power from each other.

What these men wanted was something much harder to get and the mere getting of it was in itself a way of keeping it. It was power, not just the existence of bureaucratic control, but personal power to be wielded

1. *ibid*, p. 142.

2. *ibid*, p. 183.

directly upon the lives and bodies of others. 1

Although he is at first offended by the Communists' struggle for power, he himself is compelled to kill several times for the same motive. He also tries to impose his own judgement on others thereby becoming "a little god who trafficked in human life". Granted that he had to kill his first victim, Joe, in order to conceal his identity or as he himself puts it because he was "confronted by the unexpected", he has no cogent reason to kill Blount and Hendon. Blount represents for him fascism while Hendon represents communism. When he stumbles on them fighting, he promptly puts the two in the perspective of the struggle of two totalitarian systems at war with each other. He decides to wipe out both of them from existence. The mechanism of his killing resembles all totalitarian murders. He kills out of a supreme conviction that he alone is right and others wrong; he engages in "killings whose logic led on and on into the gray, deadening reaches of inhuman meaning".

1. *ibid*, p. 199.

Ely Houston, whose personal situation in life as a hunchback has given him a vantage point from which he has gained insight into the problems of other excluded people explains the nature of the man who can kill wantonly as Damon does. Such a man is a metaphysical rebel who kills for no motives defined or known in the realm of law. He is a man with demonic feelings who plays god. He belongs to the clan of the rebellious and he kills because others have outraged his existence. This is the man Albert Camus calls;

l'homme révolté, un homme qui se dresse contre sa condition et la création toute entière. 1

The metaphysical rebel is a man of lawless impulses living in a society which seeks to restrain instincts for the common good. He is an inverted idealist who wants to impose his own meaning on life. He is a man plagued by "a spiritual malady", suffering from

the dilemma of the ethical criminal, the millions of men who lived in the tiny crevices of industrial society completely cut off from humanity,

1. Camus, Albert. "L'Homme Révolté", Essais. Paris, ed. Gallimard, 1965, p. 433.

the multitudes of little gods who ruled their own private worlds and acknowledged no outside authority.¹

Cross Damon is such a man. He has run away from everything but himself. He realises late that it is not easy to break with one's life, that it is more difficult to see that "one is always much more than what one thought one was". He had not believed he could be a murderer but on four occasions, he has killed because, as he says, the situations necessitated the act. There cannot then be the question of free will in human act as he earlier believed. Human freedom is conditioned by facticity.

In his final moment of explanation to Eva, the only person he seems to ever really care for, he says :

You see, Eva, I don't believe in anything. When you're just here on this earth and there's nothing, nothing else.... You know what it means to live senselessly? When everyday is a foolish day? 2

Damon is the individual man, the man who has gone beyond "the pale of little feelings, who can do anything, who has been through all ideologies, frauds

1. Wright, R. The Outsider. p. 346 .

2. *ibid*, pp. 398-399.

and pretenses but cannot see through himself and there lies his limitation. Although he is an existentialist man par excellence, he pushes things too far. The disciple of Nietzsche, Hegel, Jaspers, Heidegger, Husserl, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, the man who has wallowed in guilty thoughts all his life, ends as a nihilist.

Lawd Today

Lawd Today is based on the model of Albert Camu's alienated man and on the notion of the absurdity of human existence as expounded in his Le Mythe de Sisyphe (1942).

The first paragraphs of Lawd Today form the core of the novel, all that follows constituting a development or explication of these paragraphs. It describes a vivid and dramatic dream whose texture is very revealing. The protagonist, Jake Jackson is running up an endless flight of steps while someone whose voice resembles that of his boss in the Post Office keeps calling him!

He was flying up steps now, mounting whole blocks of steps, but even at that the end was not in sight...
He stopped, sighed, wiped sweat from his forehead, and looked to see how

many steps he had covered. He was right where he had started! He shook his head, mumbling to himself, Jesus, all that running for nothing.... 1

Upon waking up, Jake tries to reassemble the substantive content of this dream and impose a significance on it:

He had been going somewhere in a great hurry, he had been thirsting, longing for something. But each time he had almost got it, each time it was almost his, somebody had called. 2

Jake has recently left the rural South (Mississippi) for Chicago and he is working in the Chicago Post Office as a postal clerk, like most black workers. The novel seeks to portray a typical day in the life of this uprooted man. The reader follows every step of his dressing, all of which are described in minute details. Every gesture, from "fingering" his suit, to stepping out ⁱⁿ his outfit like a "Maltese Kitten" are spelt out carefully.

Jake subsequently takes his breakfast, reads the dailies, goes through his mail and finally goes

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1. Wright, Richard. Lawd Today. New York Walker Publications, 1963, p. 9
 2. *ibid*, p. 10 .

out into the streets. As he loiters around movie houses, he reads and comments on lurid posters:

Jake stood on the corner of 47th Street and Forestville Avenue. Sunshine was spread everywhere and the intense light hurt his eyes.... He had full three hours before worktime. He wanted to go somewhere, but he could not think of a suitable place. Above all, he did not want to go home. 1

Jake's dream is construed by Wright to be a literal transposition of Jake's daily life of drudgery made up of rising reluctantly from bed, cursing and yelling at his wife, washing, having breakfast, reading newspapers, opening the mail, loitering in the streets, resuming work at the Post Office and going back home only to repeat the same actions the following day.

The working place itself, the Chicago Post Office, is an "ocean of gloom":

It was a huge, dark grey building, almost the color of the sky, occupying a square block. Just to look at it depressed Jake. 2

These workers complain about the monotony and unremunerative nature of their job. The hand-stamping

1. Wright, Lawd Today, p. 47.

2. Lawd Today, p. 117.

exercise poignantly portrays the process of automation in the workers.'

In the faces and attitudes of the clerks the strain of the workday had begun to tell. Limbs moved with increasing listlessness. Slight puffs appeared beneath eyes that looked out with beaten, hang-dog expressions.... Lips grew stiff and dry from thirst. Nervously exhausted from years of racking labour, some worked with spasmodic jerkings of arms and shoulders. 1

Work in the post Office symbolises Jake's frustrated ambition as well as the absurdity of his existence. Most blacks were fortunate to get a job in the Post Office when they had a job at all.'

As he mounted the steps he wondered, if he would have to go on this way year after year 'til he died. Was this "all"? Deep in him was a numb yearning for something else; somewhere or other was something or other for him. But where? How? All he could see right now was an endless stretch of black postal days; and all he could feel was the agony of standing on his feet till they ached and sweated, of jerking his body when a voice yelled. 2

Jake's negative revolt against society is manifested in his ceaseless beating of his wife, in his

1. *ibid*, p. 149.

2. *ibid*, p. 117.

indulgence in drink, sex and gambling and in his desire for a total breakdown of law and order. On reading in the newspapers that the police are after some gangsters, he comments thus:

Now what's wrong with them Government? What they want to bother them poor guys for? They aint doing nothing but robbing a few banks.... Jeesus, it takes nerve to be a gangster! But they have plenty of fun. Always got a flock of gals hanging on their arms. Dress in sporty clothes. Drive them long sleek automobiles. And got money to throw away.... They don't live long, but I bet they sure have a hell of sweet time while they do live. Better time than a lot of us who work hard every day for a measly living. 1

Wright endeavours to make language lay bare the monotony and banality of Jake's existence. By jotting down events as they happen, an authentic picture of life in all its formlessness is undoubtedly suggested. Moreover, this presentation suggests an openness, the idea of the daily routine of life. There is quite apparent in the novel a ruthless aim at creating banality through form. Itemisation - the hero at home, in the bedroom, in

1. *ibid*, p. 34 .

the bath, in the streets and so on does not substantiate reality. Rather itemisation debunks reality's banality. Endless pages are filled in order to describe inconsequential activities.

The expression "Lawd Today!" a swear word and an expression of fatigue as well as the novel's title recurs several times in the novel especially where fatigue and boredom are evident. The subtitles of the three books into which the novel is subdivided are "Commonplace", "Squirrel's Cage" and "Rat's Alley". They suggest the inescapable banality of the life of black workers as well as the fact that they are like blind people who are mentally, physically and spiritually imprisoned.

The overall pattern of Lawd Today thus calls attention to banality and to flatness. It is an Afro-American expression of the tragic awareness of life's absurdity. Jake's ideology of revolt is that of an alienated man. His typical day has portrayed the frustration, tedium, meaninglessness and utter senselessness of an alienated man. Like Sisyphus, Jake is condemned to an absurd existence and in the words of Camus, "il n'est pas de punition

plus terrible que le travail inutile et sans espoir",¹ which is that of the black American.

However, Lawd Today suffers from serious structural lapses. Here and there in the novel, it is suggested that Jake's alienation is the result of the inequalities and injustices inherent in a racist and capitalist society. This is done mainly through sterile complaints made by Jake and his friends on several occasions in the novel:

- Aint it funny how some few folks is rich and just millions is poor?
- And them few rich folks owns the whole world...
- ... and runs it like they please.
- ... and the rest ain't got nothing...
- I wonder is there anything a white man won't do?
- They make us live in one corner of the city...
- ... like we was some kind of wild animals.... 2

Jake wants us to believe that no matter how hard he tries, he will always be dragged back into the quagmire of poverty. Yet this is not adequately portrayed in the novel. The sociological background which lends credence to the racist and capitalist

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1. Camus, Albert. Le Mythe de Sisyphe. Paris, Gallimard, 1942, p. 161
 2. Wright, R. Lawd Today. pp.172 - 173.

thesis and provides concrete and dramatic support to the theory of the absurdity of existence is thinly painted, though present.

Jake Jackson, the black model of the alienated man's character is very hollow. Wright makes copious use of animal imagery to describe Jake. His "fat black feet spread like cobra heads upon the carpet".¹ He "slouched heavily on the chair"² while his voice dropped to a low growl.³ These negative animal images evidently reduce the character. Right from the first paragraphs it is clear that Jake is all body and no soul. Everything about him is physical - fatigue, hunger, pleasure and sexual relations. Obviously this fickle-minded protagonist lacks the psychological dimension which characterises Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon.

The Long Dream

Wright's next novel, The Long Dream seems to redress the structural flaws which are noticeable in Lawd Today.

1. Richard Wright, Lawd Today p.12.

2. *ibid*, p. 14.

3. *ibid*, p. 20.

In The Long Dream which reminds the reader of Dreiser's American Dream the experiences of the protagonist, Fishbelly Tucker lends credence to a critique of a racist and capitalist society. Fish leaves school to become apprenticed to his father Tyree who is an undertaker. His gradual initiation into the world of affairs opens his eyes to the fact that blacks who "make it" are in reality castrated human beings, the modern version of Uncle Tom, like Doc, the barber in Lawd Today!

The money he had, had been made by a black buzzard of a Tyree, a crawling scavenger battenning upon only the black side of human life, burying only the black dead, selling only the living black female bodies to the white or black world, buying justice, protection, comfort from those sordid dealings and calling it business. 1

In his daily rounds of rent-collection, Fish gets an insight into the wretchedness of black life. He learns that:

the real reality of the lives of his people was negated; the real world lay over there somewhere - in a place where white people lived, people who had the power to say who could or could not live. 2

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1. Wright, Richard. The Long Dream. New York Doubleday, 1958, p. 27.
 2. *ibid*, p.67.

As he says again elsewhere:

Papa, this rent collecting's showing me something.... Our folks is "sick", Papa. All the black folks I meet's worried to death about white folks - talking about 'em all day and all night. They laugh, sing, and dance, but they "worried - " 1

Fish gradually realises from concretely dramatised events like rent-collecting, the fire incident, his trial and incarceration, that behind the black man's laughter is the self-abrogation of his manhood.

Tyree, on the other hand, instils the lesson of the American dream in his son. Like Jake, he believes in the omnipotence of the dollar to wipe out any type of shame. He therefore counsels his son to forget about equality and instead to accumulate money, for this is the black man's version of the American dream.

Fish, forgit that stuff. Your job's collecting rent. Git enough dollars, and you'll never have to worry none. There ain't no problem a dollar can't solve. Just git you a million dollars, and then tell me what you worried about. Till then, stop talking race. 2

1. *ibid*, p. 198.

2. Wright, Richard. The Long Dream. p. 178.

Tyree's assertion is however disproved in the novel. Fish watches helplessly as Tyree is hounded to death by the forces of the law in order to prevent the exposition of their corrupt practices:

Fishbelly now realised that had it not been for that fire he would never have known the real attitude of the Chief (Police Chief). White people lived with niggers, shared with them, worked with them, but owed them no human recognition. 1

He learns in a bitter way that no black man can win against whites. "They have the law, the guns, the juries".² The same fact is demonstrated by Bigger's trial in Native Son that the odds are against the black man in America.

Finally, as Fishbelly flees America to go to Paris, the meaning of his life dawns fully on him, "he had been born in America and found a nightmare".³ His American dream has not materialised. Despite Fishbelly's yearning for a better fate, "A black man's a dream, a dream that can't come true".⁴ Herein lies the absurdity of his existence.

1. *ibid*, p. 253.

2. Wright, Richard. The Long Dream. p.253 ,

3. *ibid*, p. 380 "

4. *ibid*, p. 199 "

Through the depiction of dramatic situations fraught with tension, Wright is able to present a convincing picture of an alienated black man in an American society. The structure of exploitation which frustrates the black man's version of the American dream is realistically portrayed through concrete situations and actions. Tyree and Fishbelly are versions of the mythical Sisyphus in the same way as Jake Jackson is but they are more realised than Jake, The Long Dream thus proving the most structurally balanced of Wright's novels.

Native Son, The Outsider, Lawd Today and The Long Dream, constitute an organic existential oeuvre both in their themes, structure and overall message. The protagonists of these novels are alienated black heroes who revolt against their continuous dehumanisation by the American social structure. Bigger's and Cross Damon's murders, Jake Jackson's defiance of social norms as well as Fishbelly's flight from America are all forms of revolt and their own ways of breaking out of their stereotyped existence. They create their own value systems and live or die by them. It is

in this respect that Margolies's description of Bigger applies to the four protagonists. They

Challenge the very condition of (their) being, the needless suffering, the absurd contrast between (their) inborn sense of justice and the morality and injustice of the external world. (They) try to bring the world into accord with (their) sense of justice, but if this fails, (they) will attempt to match in (themselves) its injustice and chaos. In either case, the principle is the same. (They) attack a shattered world in order to demand unity from it. 1

Wright's heroes are symbolic of a specific social reality; they constitute a metaphor of a specific historical situation, that of the black man's tragic human existence in the twentieth century. The overall significance of these novels lie in their realism, in their representation of everyday occurrences in a definite period of contemporary history, in making language to lay bare the very wretchedness, and the senselessness, of the black man's existence.

1. Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors. New York, Lippincott, 1968, p. 161 .

The four novels are united by the same existentialist strain and by the same portrayal of the growing extent of alienation in the contemporary world especially among the black underprivileged. They are linked by the same portrayal of the domination of life by the mechanism of capitalism and finally by the implicit protest against the dehumanisation of man.

The rejection of contemporary reality is characteristic of existentialists in as much as modern man in general and the black man in particular is alienated within the society. However no major existentialist writer has taught that everything is permitted. In Sartre's case, a control is exercised by the notion of responsibility which in fact redeems Bigger before he dies.

Wright analyses thoroughly the social, economic and psychological dimensions of the phenomenon of alienation among the black people, the outsiders of the American society. However, the author realises that man is not totally free, that there are moral and social determinants which limit human freedom. Wright's social realism resides in this fundamental realisation.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIALIST REALISM IN

SEMBENE OUSMANE'S NOVELS

Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu

In many of his works Sembene Ousmane describes the class struggle between the working and the bourgeois classes. In the short story entitled "La Noire de...." a young Senegalese maid, Diouana serves a French couple in the Antibes. All the housework, gardening and child-care devolve on her for the paltry wage of three thousand francs C.F.A. per month. As time goes on, her illusions and euphoria about a comfortable life in France is dampened as she realises that she is no more than a beast of burden in the hands of her egocentric bourgeois bosses.

Diouana abattait encore plus de travail qu'en Afrique ici. Elle n'était qu'un objet utilitaire. 1

1. Ousmane, Sembene. "La Noire de...." Votaique. Paris, Présence Africaine, p.5

Unable to bear the persistent humiliation to which she is subjected, she commits suicide. Apart from depicting the humiliating condition under which Diouana works, this story emphasises the dignified long-suffering and self-respectability of the working class to which Diouana belongs.

In Le Docker Noir (1956) the hard, miserable lives of the African working class who live in Marseille's ghetto is depicted in the adventure of the hero, Diaw Falla. Workers are shown as stunted and devoid of political, social and economic rights. They belong to that class of people whom Frantz Fanon rightly describes as "the wretched of the earth", the down-trodden masses who are exploited by the capitalist class.

Diaw Falla, in an attempt to improve his condition of living writes a novel on which he bases all his hopes for a better future. Unable to afford the sum of 150,000 Francs for publication, he entrusts his manuscript to a wealthy and influential French lady Ginette Tontisane, who expropriates it, publishes it in her name and receives a prize for the novel. When Diaw Falla

learns of the deceit, he takes a train to Paris, confronts Ginette with her theft and accidentally smothers her in the scuffle which ensues. Sembene Ousmane paints a relentless pursuit of the hero who represents the under-privileged working class by the combination of all the forces of bourgeois justice - the police, the courts, the press and the general public. He is literally hounded to the gallows.

In "La Noire de...." and Le Docker Noir the class struggle is characterised by the exploitation of the worker whose destiny the novelist sympathetically describes. However, the treatment of this subject suffers from an overwhelming sense of tragic loss and futility of the life of the working class. Besides, Le Docker Noir suffers from serious aesthetic flaws which undermine the overall significance of the novel.

Ousmane also implies that his hero is justified in killing because he has been provoked. Diaw Falla sees the French society as racist. He sees the same society as being an obstacle to his natural development and human progress. His

life in Paris is made up of a series of humiliations and choking hate.

Ousmane asserts that racism and racial prejudice are the end products of economic exploitation which is a direct result of the capitalist system. The murder of a white woman brings all the forces of the capitalist society - the Press, the Law, the Crowd and Religion - against Diaw Falla, the black murderer. The chapter entitled "Le Proces" in the novel is directly influenced by Bigger's trial in Native Son. All witnesses for the prosecution are agreed on premeditation. There are leading questions to prove that the murderer is a racial bigot and a savage liar. The lawyer for the defence is marxist and he highlights the hero's crime from the marxist point of view.

The hero, Diaw Falla sees himself as the victim of racial discrimination. If Ginette Tontisane robs him of his manuscript, it is because she takes him as a "nigger":

Tu m'as pris pour un Noir... Il avait fini par le dire. Le "Noir" pour lui signifiait l'ignorant, la brute, le niais. C'était plus qu'une lutte entre voleur et volé. Les deux races

s'affrontaient, des siècles de haine se mesuraient. 1

Throughout the novel, the white characters make highly prejudiced speeches or testimonies about Diaw. The doctor-witness affirms that blacks are sexually obsessed. He cites pseudo-scientific evidence to support his claim. He declares:

Chez les Noirs, c'est une chose naturelle, et surtout quand il s'agit d'une femme blanche. Ils sont fascinés par la blancheur de la peau qui est plus attirante que celles des Nègresses.... La Science a déterminé que les hommes de couleur ont des psychoses devant une femme blanche. 2

The Press also whips up the age-long prejudices against the black man as a rogue, an ape, and an indolent rapist in order to prove Diaw's culpability:

L'accusation repose sur la haine qu'ont provoquée les journaux, qui ont déformé les faits pour mieux toucher le coeur des honnêtes gens. 3

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1. Ousmane, Sembene. Le Docker Noir. Paris, Debresse, 1956, p. 193.
 2. *ibid*, pp. 54 - 55.
 3. *ibid*, p. 72.

What Sembene Ousmane depicts in Le Docker Noir is the black workers' experience in the French society, thereby trying but in vain to unite the subjects of race and social class within the framework of this novel.

Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu (1965) on the other hand rectifies the flaws in Sembene Ousmane's maiden novel. It is ethically and aesthetically the keystone to Ousmane's vision of the class struggle, the struggle between workers and the employers, between the exploiters and the exploited. Here, the author goes beyond mere descriptions and illusions and takes the reader directly to the theatre of war itself, to the "economic battlefield" on which the struggle is fought out to its bitter end.

The novel opens with an apparently objective description of the landscape as one enters Bamako. Against the background of a chain of hills stands out the resplendent residence of the European governor, "dresse comme un pain de sucre blanc au sommet de koulouba". Further to the centre of the city are the miserable lodgings, the "concessions

de torchis" where the Africans live. Borrowing the "travelling" technique of the camera, Sembene Ousmane's lens further focusses on a particular household, that of Bakayoko and finally closes in on the oldest member of the household, the aged Niakoro. She is apparently in a contemplative mood, worried by the actions of the tempestuous young men who take decisions without consulting the elders:

Et voilà qu'aujourd'hui, ils allaient seuls décider d'une grève. Savent-ils seulement ce que c'est? Elle, Niakoro le sait.... elle en a vu une. Et voilà qu'elle, elle à qui cette grève a pris un époux et un fils, personne n'est venu la consulter. 1

The subject of the novel - the railway workers' strike is introduced through Niakoro's interior monologue. The crucial word is pronounced at last - "grève". This first-hand evidence made available by the direct transposition of Niakoro's thoughts not only authenticates the present strike but lends the latter the perspective of continuity.

1. Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu p. 21

This struggle is not simply momentary or spontaneous but a continuous affair. Little Adjibidji's errand to Fa Keita in the meeting house serves as a link between the earlier mention of the strike and the actual preparation for it; thus concretising the strike theme!

Des ouvriers de toutes les corporations entraient et sortaient sans cesse. Mais ce jour-là, l'affluence avait, dès l'aube, battu tous les records. De toute la contrée on venait aux nouvelles; les cheminots allaient voler une grève et chacun savait que cette décision allait engager son sort. 1

This crucial, engaging and determining plenary meeting embraces all the railworkers described vividly and colourfully as "le flot humain, la masse compacte des têtes, des crânes rasés ou crépus, des haillons noircis de cambouis. The narrator continues:

Les visages avaient perdu toute personnalité; comme si quelque gomme géante était venue effacer leurs traits particuliers, ils avaient pris un masque commun, le masque anonyme de la foule. 2

1. *ibid*, p. 22 .

2. *ibid*, p. 23 .

This description gives a further precision as to the collective basis of the strike action to be depicted. This is important for the composition of the novel especially in its characterisation since characters will be expected to incarnate the collective destiny as well as the consciousness of the railway workers.

On the wall behind the rostrum hangs a large poster bearing an ominous inscription:

Traite en ami qui te traite en ami,
traite ton patron en ennemi. 1

These words underline the dominant feelings and moods of the novel. Comradeship and intense hatred are the two opposing sentiments displayed henceforth in the text.

In his opening speech, old Mamadou Keita summarises the history of his people, the quality of their lives, their grievances, what stop them from realising their potentials and happiness as well as what is responsible for their near sub-human condition. This is a long story dating from early colonial times.

1. *ibid*, p. 23 .

Mamadou Keita ou le Vieux, comme on l'appelait avec respect, avait la parole lente mais précise. D'abord il évoqua la pose des premiers rails. Il n'était pas encore de ce monde à l'époque, mais plus tard, il avait vu l'achèvement de la voie ferrée à Koulikoro. Puis il parla des épidémies, des famines, de l'annexion des terres tribales par l'administration du chemin de fer.

Mamadou Keita fit une pause et de ses yeux marrons cerclés de rouge --- fouilla le public.... Nous avons notre métier, mais il ne nous rapporte pas ce qu'il devrait; on nous vole. Il n'ya plus de différence entre les bêtes et nous, tant nos salaires sont bas. Voilà des années, ceux de Thiès ont de-brayé. Ça s'est soldé par des morts, des morts de notre côté. Et voici que cela recommence. 1

This summary constitutes the backdrop of the present action. By reminding the audience of its past history of subordination, exploitation and suffering, Keita rouses the inert crowd to a consciousness of its socio-economic and human condition. When he declares "Êtes - vous prêts à déclencher la grève, oui ou non?", the entire room choruses "Qui, la grève, la grève". Thus Keita's speech serves the all-important and essential role

1. *ibid*, p. 21 .

of rousing and motivating the crowd. Ascribing such a role to an old man in the Community also has authenticating effect since old age is traditionally revered and accepted as a sign of wisdom.

Further, Keita introduces the triangular spatial dimension of the strike mentioned earlier by Niakoro when he affirms:

Des hommes sont venus avant moi sur
cette tribune, d'autres vont suivre. 1

The horizon of this strike is thus enlarged to embrace not only the past and the present but also the future in a perspective of continuous class struggle.

The scene of action shifts from Bamako to Thiès, the headquarters of the railway company and the rail-workers' union and consequently a potentially more volatile scene of this struggle. In balzacian fashion, the ugly and dilapidated environment explains the wretched inhabitants and vice-versa:

Thiès: un immense terrain vague où
s'amoncellent tous les résidus de
la ville, des pieux, des traverses,
des roues de locomotives, des fûts

1. *ibid*, p. 24.

rouillés, des bidons défoncés,....
desmonceaux de vieilles boîtes de
conserves, des amas d'ordure, des
monticules de poteries cassées,
d'ustensiles de ménage, des châssis
de wagon demantibulés, des blocs -
moteurs ensevelis sous la poussière,
des carcasses de chats, de rats,
de poulets dont les charognards se
disputent les rares lambeaux. Thiès:
au milieu de cette pourriture, quelques
maigres arbustes, bantamarés, tomates
sauvages, gombos, bisabes, dont les
femmes récoltaient les fruits pour
boucler le budget familial.¹

It is in the midst of this environment of decay and physical denudation that the narrator inserts the inhabitants who are the actors of the subsequent all embracing drama, actors whose physical appearance explain the surroundings just as the surroundings explicate their appearance. There are:

Des gosses nus, perpétuellement affamés, promenant leurs omoplates et leurs ventres gonflés; ils disputaient aux vautours ce qui restait des charognes. Thiès, la zone où tous, hommes, femmes, enfants avaient des visages couleur de terre.... De Randoulène à la caserne des gardes - cercle, du grand Thiès à Diala, les habitations, les arbres et le sol dis-

1. *ibid*, p. 35

paraissaient sous une épaisse couche de poussière noire vomie par des locomotives. 1

It is implied in these physical details that if the lives of these people are so empty of gaiety and colour, it is because of the all pervading corrupting influence of the railway; the railway line being used as an obvious symbol of alienation:

Tous les habitants, quels qu'ils fussent, vivaient de la ligne, du trafic entre Koulikoro et Dakar. 2

The inhabitants of this "tête de ligne" are slaves and victims of industrial progress and exploitation. By means of the realism inherent in these paintings of the décor a valid motivation is provided for the strike. Furthermore, the décor creates the wide and varied space required for the unfolding of the action.

As the day dawns, each miner realises the difficulty in carrying out the decisions of the previous day. Samba Ndoulou-gou urges on the strikers with near threats:

- Je ne vois pas pourquoi vous hésitez,
vous avez eu hier soir l'occasion de

1. *ibid*, pp 35-36 .

2. *ibid*, p. 36 .

donner votre opinion. Plus question maintenant de se retracer. 1

This speech apart from serving as an encouragement also serves as a link to the previous scene at Bamako where an over-whelming "aye" spontaneously decided for a strike. This allows for a thematic progression in the story of the strike. As at Bamako, the impression of a solid mass of people is created!

D'habitude les ouvriers gagnaient rapidement leurs ateliers respectifs, mais ce jour-là, ils demeurèrent devant le grand portail d'entrée. Ils étaient tous là, les cheminots, les "roulants", ceux qui étaient de service et ceux qui ne l'étaient pas. 2

Like Fa Keita in Bamako, old Bakary puts the present strike in its historical perspective and highlights the demands of the miners!

J'ai assisté à leurs palabres, je croyais qu'ils parlaient seulement de la question des auxiliaires, mais ils parlent aussi de la retraite, une retraite qui ne commencerait pas seulement avec eux, mais qui serait bonne aussi pour les vieux.... Où sont les Fousseynou, les David de Gorée, les Aliou Samba et Abdoulaye et Coulibaly, ils n'ont pas de retraite eux et ils sont morts. Ce

1. *ibid*, p. 37.

2. *ibid*, p. 42.

sera bientôt notre tour; et où sont nos économies? Quant aux aînées des toubabs, ceux qui nous ont appris le métier, les Henri, les Delacolline, les Ede-uard, où sont ils? Ils sont chez eux avec leur retraite. Pourquoi ne pouvons nous pas l'avoir, cette retraite? Voilà ce que disent les jeunes. 1

The unjust disparity between the working conditions of African and the European is highlighted here as one of the reasons for the strike.

Despite the initial preparations for and discussions on the strike it explodes unexpectedly and takes on an unimaginable dimension of violence as the soldiers attack railworkers and the latter respond with a counter-attack. The attack ends fatally with eight dead and many more wounded. This second scene installs the strike physically in the plot. The exposition, made up of forty pages contains many extensive circumstantial descriptions with details about place and atmosphere. All these present a complete picture of the physical aspects of the world in which the course of action will take place as well as the physical

1. *ibid*, p. 43.

and at times psychological details of the characters who play out the ensuing struggle.

The planning strategy of the strike, the ensuing battle between the two opposing forces are given extensive descriptions. So also is the counter-offensive of the railway bosses. Dejean the regional director of the rail company has just refused to see any of the miners' representatives when he receives a phone call from Dakar the regional capital. His hard uncompromising stand is manifested in his decision not to hold any talks and also to invite in more troops. After serious deliberation with his men, Isnard, Victor and Leblanc, it is decided that the answer is to buy the leaders and create an opposing union:

On pourrait, soit acheter les principaux dirigeants, en ymettant le prix, soit en travailler quelques-uns et essayer de créer un syndicat concurrent. 1

By the end of the exposition, the lines of battle are drawn. While the bosses will adopt divide and rule tactics and occasional use of force, the miners adopt that of active resistance. The doubts,

1. *ibid*, p. 49.

hesitations and fears over the decision to embark on the strike are all convincingly portrayed. The old people who have wider experience like Niakoro, Keita and Bakary are torn by this problem more than the youths. Their reminiscing in the form of flashbacks to the abortive strikes of 1938 serve a coherence function. The remembrance of past strikes, the references to heredity and tradition, the summary of events, references to other cities and reports of crucial meetings are all constituents of the coherence structure which Sembene Ousmane gives the story.

Events are also motivated in terms of one another so that there is a sense of causality. Injustice in social and economic conditions lead to a strike which turns out to be violent and the violence in turn leads to the resolution of the conflict. This in simple terms provides the thematic progression in the novel.

The desire to achieve a realistically objective description makes Sembene Ousmane adopt the panoramic technique of "unanimism" in the description of events. Describing events which take place

simultaneously in three cities not only authenticates but underlines the unity of purpose and action over one thousand and five hundred kilometres of geographical space.

Ainsi la grève s'installa à Thiès. Une grève illimitée qui, pour beaucoup, tout au long de la ligne, fut une occasion de souffrir, mais, pour beaucoup aussi, une occasion de réfléchir. Lorsque la fumée s'arrêta de flotter sur la savane, ils comprirent qu'un temps était révolu, le temps dont leur parlaient les anciens, le temps où l'Afrique était un potager. C'était la machine qui maintenant régnait sur leur pays. En arrêtant sa marche sur plus de quinze cents kilomètres, ils prirent conscience de leur dépendance. En vérité, la machine, était en train de faire d'eux des hommes nouveaux. Elle ne leur appartenait pas, c'était eux qui lui appartenaient. En s'arrêtant, elle leur donna cette leçon.¹

The plot is developed further to describe the strike in all its ramifications. The strike itself reaches epic dimensions both in its narration and in its consequences.

The first quality of the epic imagination is expansiveness, the impulse to extend its own

1. *ibid*, p. 63.

luminosity in ever - widening circles. This is a unique quality of Les Bouts de Bois. The importance as well as the symbolic quality of the strike is exemplified in the epic aura which surrounds it. The initial note of optimism contained in the "Dedicace" and the "Avertisement", this rejoicing at the advent of the working class determines the epic composition of the novel which starts with a quest and ends with victory. The author has drawn up a triangle of action which is the basis of the composition.

The action which swings between Bamako, Thies and Dakar are at times complementary, at others simultaneous. This totality of approach is the hallmark of epic narration. "Ethical" episodes in which the reader is given a sense of the passage of time and is moved backwards and forwards in history alternates with "pathetic" episodes, which lay stress on activity and movement. Domestic scenes are made to alternate with vivid events such as the decision-taking process, the bloody but decisive clashes, the women's march from Thies to Dakar as well as Diara's trial. The overwhelming effect of such a presentation is that a formal and contextual

harmony is provided by the creation of an effect of totality as well as the eradication of monotony. Life is presented in its multifariousness.

Each scene in each city corresponds to epic episode which is indispensable to the unfolding of the narrative. In the words of George Lukacs:

The epic presentation of the totality of life - unlike the dramatic - must inevitably include the presentation of every important object, event and sphere of life belonging to the theme.¹

The impression of "a totality of life" is created as the author gives the strike an omnipotent and omnipresent quality. The strike plays a decisive part in the plot, in the characterisation as well as in the destiny of the actors.

Sembene Ousmane paints broadly and in such detail that each episode stands out as a separate picture within the framework of an organic whole. Each section contains some decisive points which make it a necessary factor in the evolution of one or more characters in the novel.

The battles fought by the fighters demonstrate their heroic energy and their superabundant

1. Lukacs, George. Studies in European Realism. p. 154.

vitality. At Thiès, the first day of the strike, violence erupts abruptly between the forces of order and the strikers who are aided by their wives. The description of the clash reaches epic heights and its language communicates energy and excitement:

Alors les soldats chargèrent. La mêlée fut immédiate: coup de crosses, coups de pointes, coup de godasses dans les tibias, bombes lacrymogènes. Les cris de rage, de colère, de douleur, faisaient une seule clameur qui montait dans le ciel du matin. La foule reculait, se scindait en tronçons terrifiés, se regroupait, oscillait, vacillait, reculait encore. Diyanaba, la marchande avait ameuté les femmes. Telles des amazones, elles arrivèrent à la rescousse, armées de batons, de barres de fer, de bouteilles.... la mêlée était partout à la fois. 1

Despite the human and material destruction which ensues, the description of the battle is replete with a sense of euphoria on the part of the strikers. Even the repressions in which many lives are lost are construed as inevitable sacrifices in the course of this epic struggle.

1. Ousmane, Sembene. Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu. p. 49.

The narration goes on to describe the effects of the strike on the inhabitant especially the women and the children. The dilemma of Houdia M' Baye, a widow who has eight children, the last of which is symbolically named Grève, is depicted with great conviction. All the tragedy of the strike is crystallised in the woman's destiny. Widowed as a result of the strike, her children become the victims of the same strike. The picture of Grève clutching in vain at a dry breast is not only made realistic but also pathetic by the graphic details of the description:

Paupières closes, il tétait féroce-
ment par brusques secousses, et
cela faisait mal: le sein était
parcouru de picotements, de brû-
lures, comme si on y enfonçait
des épingles. Houndia-Mbaye
changea de mamelle, sans plus de
résultat. Son lait était tari,
elle le savait bien. La pensée
de la grève la rongait comme un
mal. 1

The famished and weak children are concrete representations of the strike in Mbaye's consciousness. The mere sight of their malnourished bodies sends her mind back to the past.

1. *ibid*, p. 94.

Cette faim qui faisait grossir le ventre des enfants, maigrir leurs membres et voutait leurs épaules, faisait revenir, dans son esprit des images d'autre-fois, des images des temps heureux. 1

The remembrance of things past plays the role of emphasising the hardships of the present. It brings into prominence the nothingness and aridity of the present times. Recollection of her sumptuous marriage feast of yesteryears emphasises the fact that,

le quelquechose qui manquait, c' était tout simplement le pain quotidien. 2

For Houdia Mbaye, the strike is not an ideological abstraction. It presents itself in concrete, human and domestic terms that is lack of food, hungry and disease-ridden children, and sore-nipples.

The workers are shown as acting and suffering humanity. It is a credit to Sembene Ousmane's realist depiction that he does not portray the strike as a long period of euphoria. The hesitations which accompanied the decision-taking process and the planning of the strategy as well as the fact

1. *ibid*, p. 92 .

2. *ibid*, p. 92 .

that the strike unleashes itself in a violent outburst unprepared for by the strikers themselves have been noted already. There is the perplexity of the masses at first, the apathy of the weak ones like Sounkare, those like Daouda Beaugosse who expend their energy on useless quarrels all of which sharpen the edge of the despair and anger which lead eventually to bloody revolt.

Trying moments and obstacles are lived concretely by individuals in the text. The woman activist, Ramatoulaye, despite her strength of character is spiritually broken by the death of her sister-in-law, Houndia-Mbaye during one of the clashes with the police. She complains, though secretly that the women's strength of forbearance is being overstretched. Addressing Alioune, she sobs;

- Alioune, il faut arrêter. Si vous ne le faites pas pour vous, faites - le pour nous. Nous n'en pouvons plus, il y a trop de morts. 1

Dieynaba, also a frontline woman activist wants a stop put to the strike:

Je ne sais plus ce qui est juste ou ce qui ne l'est pas. Ça devient ...

1. *ibid*, p. 199 .

aussi difficile que de séparer l'eau froide de l'eau chaude dans le même récipient... Pour la dernière distribution, c'est Bakayoko qui a envoyé les fonds de Kaolack. Si nous ne recevons rien, les hommes devront reprendre, voilà tout ce que je sais. 1

It is not only the women-folk who show that their courage is overstretched. Among the menfolk, Doudou, the Secretary-general experiences the same spiritual depression. Forty days after the beginning of the strike action, it is obvious that responsibility weights him down. However, Isnard's offer to him of three million francs to betray the cause of the strikers and his courageous refusal of such blood money serves as a leaven to his spirit.

Deserters or "rénégats" as Tiemoko calls them also begin to manifest themselves. Diara's trial, apart from serving as a lesson to others, also depicts the difficulties engendered by the strike. In the words of Tiemoko;

Pourquoi devons-nous juger Diara qui, comme vous le savez, est mon oncle? Ce pourquoi appelle le pourquoi de la grève et le pourquoi des toubans nous et celui des machines. 2

1. *ibid*, p. 209 .

2. *ibid*, p. 134 .

This brings us to the depiction of women and their roles in the text. It is pertinent to refer to the sympathetic manner with which Ousmane portrays the women. Since the breadwinners no longer bring home any pay-packets, the duty now devolves on the women to fend for the family. This is against the traditional norm in this society where the woman's place is the home and where her duty is subservience to the husband. Assitan, the prototype of these women, is Bakayoko's inherited wife:

Elevée selon les anciennes coutumes, Assitan était toute réserve et vivait en marge de la vie de son mari, une vie de labeur, de silence et de résignation. 1

Although they have not been consulted as to the decision of the strike action, they nonetheless manifest a strikingly active participation in all the cities. The first day of the strike at Thiès, they spontaneously join the men in repulsing the police attack, under the leadership of Dieynaba, the foodseller.

Dieynaba, la marchande avait amené les femmes du marché. Telles des amazones, elles arrivaient à

1. *ibid*, p.365.

la rescousse armées de batons, de bornes de fer, de bouteilles. 1

When the clash subsides, the same Dieynaba turns her house into an emergency nursing home where the wounded are treated. As the strike begins to tell on the miners and the women's duty becomes increasingly onerous, they begin to gain consciousness of the possible functions they can assume for the benefit of their families. They realise that they must go out of their traditional docility, dependence and resignation in order to be active.

Des jours passèrent et des nuits passèrent. Dans ce pays, les hommes ont plusieurs épouses et c'est sans doute pour cela qu'au début il ne songèrent guère à l'aide qu'elles apportaient. Mais bientôt, là encore, ils découvrirent un aspect nouveau des temps à venir. Lorsqu'un homme rentrait d'un meeting, la tête basse, les poches vides, ce qu'il voyait d'abord c'était la cuisine éteinte, les mortiers culbutés, les bols et les calabasses empilés, vides. Alors il allait dans les bras d'une épouse, que ce fut la première ou la troisième. Et les épouses, devant ces épaules cassées, ces pas traînants prenaient conscience que quelque-chose était en train de changer aussi pour elles....

1. *ibid*, p.49 .

Un matin, une femme se leva, elle serra fortement son pagne autour de la taille et dit:

- Aujourd'hui, je vous apporterai à manger. Et les hommes comprirent que ce temps, s'il enfantait d'autres hommes, enfantait aussi d'autres femmes. 1

Under the influence of necessity, tradition is forced to change its norms about the place of women, without the need for overt feminine revolution. In Dakar, the same is also true. The women's support for the strike is even greater than that of their husbands despite the sufferings and inconveniences they undergo. Deune reports that his wife has threatened to castrate him if he defects. Like the women in Thies, they have come to assume the responsibility of fending for the family. They are even more conscious of their newly acquired status as responsible members of the society. Mame Sofi, addressing Ndeye Touti remarks with a touch of pride:

Tu verras qu'à la prochaine grève, les hommes nous consulteront. Avant ils étaient tout **fiers** de nous nourrir, maintenant c'est nous, les femmes, qui les nourissons. 2

1. *ibid*, pp.64-65.

2. *ibid*, p. 88 .

The person of Bakayoko serves as an effective link between the three cities of Dakar, Thies and Bamako. He is presented as the epic hero of the class struggle. He is "superior in degree to other men" in the novel.

In each city, the impression is given that Bakayoko is the soul of the strike as well as its theoretician. Members of the vanguard lament or await impatiently his arrival since he has the answer to the problems arising from the strike. Old Keita in Bamako regrets his absence at the all-important meeting where the decision to embark on a strike action is taken.

Ce qu'il nous faudrait aujourd'
hui c'est qu'Ibrahima Bakayoko
soit parmi nous. Il sait nous
parler et nous l'écoutons tous. 1

Tiemoko expresses the same sentiment during Diara's trial. What could they not have achieved through Bakayoko's eloquence. Explaining the "raison d'être" of the trial, he says:

Ce que j'ai à dire est très difficile
pour moi. Si Bakayoko était là, il
m'aurait compris et m'aurait aidé à

1. *ibid.*, p.27.

vous faire comprendre. 1

When the first conflict eventually explodes, it is his absence which is greatly lamented.

Dieu seul sait quand nous reverrons

Ibrahima Bakayoko,² says one of the organisers.

At Dakar also, his name is on the lips of the strikers! Beaugosse is forced to exclaim!

Bakayoko, Bakayoko, je n'entends plus que ce nom à longueur de la journée, comme si c'était un prophète! 3

Evidently Bakayoko is portrayed as a prophet and messiah of the masses of railway workers. His words are quoted quite often as a source of encouragement in time of crisis and as "parole de l'évangile!"

Bakayoko a dit: Ce ne sont pas ceux qui sont pris par force, enchaînés et vendus comme esclaves qui sont les vrais esclaves, ce sont ceux qui acceptent moralement et physiquement de l'être, 4

says Samba N'Doulougou during the stormy debate preceding the strike decision in Thies. Furthermore, Bakayoko's library furnishes relevant reading

1. *ibid*, p. 134.

2. *ibid* p. 54.

3. *ibid* p. 74.

4. *ibid*, p. 45.

materials. In fact the conception and execution of Diara's process was found by Tiemoko in a marxist book he borrowed from Bakayoko's library. There is thus a myth which surrounds Bakayoko.

This overwhelming strike can only be stopped by Bakayoko as the rumour goes. Arame asks Ndeye Touti, one of the female characters in the novel:

Dis cette greve, quand finira-t-elle?
On ne parle pas de la reprise? Tu
connais ce type - là ce Bambara?
J'ai son nom au bout de la langue.
On dit que s'il voulait, il pourrait
mettre fin à la greve c'est vrai, ça? ¹

In the imagination of the masses, Bakayoko is the purveyor of answers to all problems.

However what is crucial for the structure of the novel is Bakayoko's shuttling between the three centres of action - Thiès, Bamako, Dakar thus linking together the geographical space over which the actions are spread. One of the final episodes is entitled "Le Retour de Bakayoko", a timely return to Thiès which begins the untying of the knotty problems which the strike has caused. Doudou, the secretary-general would have given in to the railway

1. *ibid*, p. 104.

bosses, had Bakayoko not arrived. His words rekindle the dwindling hopes and energy for resistance, revamps the flagging interest in the strike and thus propels the plot on to its desired logical end. He asks:

Sommes-nous, oui ou non, responsables de ce que nous avons entrepris? Nous avons pu commettre des erreurs et sans doute en ferons-nous encore, mais est-ce une raison pour abandonner ceux qui nous ont suivis, ceux qui subissent la famine, ceux que l'on emprisonne, ceux que l'on tue?.... Nous sommes sur la voie et devant nous nous croyons voir un obstacle qui nous fait peur. Allons-nous arrêter et dire aux voyageurs. "Je ne veux plus avancer, j'ai peur de quelque chose, là-bas?" Non, nous avons la responsabilité du convoi, nous devons foncer jusqu'à voir s'il y a vraiment un obstacle. 1

Bakayo plays the role of the leaven required to stimulate the miners to action in their struggle against the bosses. He becomes almost a mythical figure by his omnipresence. In the words of M.T. Bestman:

Sa forte personnalité stimule à l'action et exerce une influence déterminante sur les autres personnages.... Ce qui frappe chez lui,

1. *ibid*, p. 271 .

c'est son omnipresence; il se trouve à la fois, partout et nulle part si l'on peut dire....

A travers les espaces des deux pays où se déroule simultanément l'action romanesque, le souvenir des réflexions de Bakayoko ne cesse de ranimer les autres; ces derniers se comparent à lui, c'est grâce à lui qu'ils prennent conscience d'eux-mêmes, de leur faiblesse, de leur progrès. En effet, tout est en fonction d'Ibrahima. Il est comme le centre d'attraction, le champ magnétique vers lequel tout converge, se polarise, réfléchit. 1

The climax of the strike action is the decisive march of the women from Thiès to Dakar. Like some other vital scenes in the novel, (for example Ramatoulaye's ritualistic slaughtering of Vendredi), the march to Thiès is painted with the richness of true epics. The women's anthem, apart from encouraging the male folk also describes the epic dimension of this struggle. For them, this is a historic battle and its victory is significant as the hope of their families and that of the working class in general. It is the dawn of a historical era, a ray of hope from the dark hori-

1. Bestman, M.T. Sembene Ousmane et l'Esthétique du Roman Négro-Africain. Sherbrooke, ed. Naaman, 1981, pp.179, 183.

zon of History!

Il fait jour et c'est un jour pour
l'Histoire.
Une lueur vient de l'horizon,
Il n'y a plus de Fumée de la Savane,
De Dakar à Koulikoro.
C'est le Dix Octobre, journée
décisive,
Nous l'avons juré sur le "Grouille
Yaram"
Nous vos femmes, vous soutiendrons
jusqu'au bout.
Pour surmonter les duretés de la lutte.
Nous vendrons boubous et bijoux.
Vous avez allumé le flambeau de l'
espoir,
Elle n'est plus loin, la victoire.
Il fait jour et c'est un jour pour
l'Histoire,
Une lueur vient de l'horizon. 1

The march itself is presented as a monumental sacrifice on the part of the women who have to leave their family to embark on such an arduous journey. Despite its overwhelming success, it is not without its difficult moments. Its effects tell on the women not only in terms of fatigue but also in terms of short tempers and silly quarrel

The picture of a human mass, moving like sea-waves and breaking against the soldiers in order to pour into Dakar is a highly impressive "pathetic" scene. The forces of light break through the

1. *ibid*, p. 267.

forces of darkness!

Et déjà, la poussée de la masse humaine faisait reculer les soldats. De partout maintenant des renforts arrivaient mais ce n'était pas des uniformes. Des crosses se levèrent auxquelles répondirent des batons et des pierres. Les tirailleurs s'affolèrent, des coups de feu claquèrent, deux corps tombèrent: Samba N'Doulougou et Penda.

Mais que pouvaient quelques chéchias devant ce grand fleuve qui roulait vers la mer? 1

The deaths of Penda and Samba N'Doulougou are construed as inevitable sacrifices to the cause of the class struggle. The euphoric march also leads the women to a deep consciousness of their importance and role in the society. As Lahbib reports in his letter to Bakayoko on the subject of the march:

Le retour des marcheuses a été bien accueilli, mais les hommes ont du mal à les dompter. Moi-même au début, elles venaient m'assaillir comme des lionnes, elles voulaient tout commander. Enfin tout est entré dans l'ordre, les enfants ne sont pas encore revenus et tous les jours elles vont au lac. Mais à l'avenir, il faudra compter avec elles. 2

1. *ibid*, p. 313 .

2. *ibid* p. 348 ,

The women's march leads to the expected "denuouement", that is the capitulation of the bosses and the granting of the workers' demands. The last achievement of the women is their forcing the odious colonial exploiter, Isnard, out of Thiès by besieging his house and singing abusive songs at him. Evidently the women have evolved far from their usual domestic roles in the opening pages.

Meanwhile, the structure of the novel itself, its progression from the exposition to the development, on to the climax and finally to the resolution points to the ideology of the text. This ideology is clearly revealed in the novel's material description, characterisation and point of view of narration.

Certain realistic elements observable in the depiction of the primary narrative world in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu are pointers to the ideology of the text since realism is a singularly direct way of taking issues with historical reality. The first indications of the particular textual ideology are the social context of this novel as

well as the choice of subject.

Ousmane makes use of a concrete historical event in a datable and locatable frame. The "Avertissement" constitutes the magahistory which doubles and predetermines the text as well as providing a clear pattern of expectation in the reader's mind. Sembene Ousmane says;

Les hommes et les femmes qui, du 10 Octobre 1947 au 19 mars 1948, engagèrent cette lutte pour une vie meilleure ne doivent rien à personne; ni à aucune mission civilisatrice ni à un notable, ni à un parlementaire. Leur exemple ne fut pas vain: depuis l'Afrique progresse. 1

The "Avertissement" is a prediction device which sounds a note of happy ending to the text right from the onset in the words "depuis l'Afrique progresse". It is also a guarantee of truth in its reference to contemporary event as its point of departure. Furthermore, it explains the "Dedicace";

A mes frères de syndicat et à tous les syndicalistes, et à leurs compagnes dans ce vaste monde, je dédie ce livre. 2

1. *ibid*, "Avertissement"

2. *ibid*, "Dédicace".

Both the "Avertissement" and the "Dedicace" have an authenticating function as guarantors of truth in this story. They are pointers also to the angle of vision from which the author reconstitutes history. The question: "Whose story is the author writing" is answered. The basis of the ideological relationship of the text to contemporary reality is also laid.

Sembene Ousmane also employs this same method of composition in L'Harmattan. Its "Avertissement" lays down the material basis of his writings which is also pertinent to any discussion on Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu. Sembene Ousmane wants to be like the griot who is "non seulement l'élément dynamique de sa tribu, clan, village, mais aussi le témoin patent de chaque événement".¹ He would also like to remain faithful to the truth of the collective life of the people; as he says: "rester au plus pres du réel et du peuple". His aims and literary methods are very clear - as a poetic historian of his people, he will engage in realistic representation of contemporary his-

1. Ousmane, Sembene. L'Harmattan, "Avertissement de l'Auteur.

tory from the point of view of the people, that is the peasants and the working class. The aesthetic consequence of this stand is that Sembene Ousmane's novel serves as a poetic means of reflecting reality from a marxist ideological perspective.

Quite early in the novel, Bakayoko, the mythical, epic hero, puts the struggle into its proper historical perspective when he declares on behalf of his co-railwaymen that:

Nous savons ce qu'est la France et nous la respectons, nous ne sommes pas antifrançais, mais encore une fois, il ne s'agit ni de la France, ni de son peuple, il s'agit d'employés qui discutent avec leurs employeurs. 1

What Bakayoko is proving is that theirs is not a racial but a class struggle. The central questions which are posed and answered fully in the novel are these: In what ways are the lives of the strikers based on exploitation and what problems do these social and economic basis produce in their lives? The novelist demonstrates the thorny road along which the railway-workers, who are portrayed as victims of alienated labour, have to tread in order to eli-

1. *ibid* pp. 281-282.

minate the misery which has hitherto governed their lives in order to build a brighter future for themselves. The class struggle is therefore central to Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu just as it is central to the marxist ideology.

According to the marxist critique of society, the capitalist society, like the slave and feudal societies, contain within it inner contradictions which will eventually lead to its fall. As workers become more and more alive to their rights and as their lives become more and more uncomfortable, they begin to form unions against the bourgeoisie. The concentration of workers and better means of communication facilitate the massing together of workers which eventually leads to one "national struggle between classes". In other words, the bourgeoisie produces its own "grave-diggers".

Evidently, the social vision contained in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu is that of the working class. This choice of subject matter is not fortuitous. Neither is it an accident that the major conflict is pitched between the exploiters and the exploited; the victory belonging eventually to the latter.

With its emphasis on group awareness and solidarity, Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu is the epic of comradeship, of courage, of the union of the exploited workers and of human dignity.

Since the novel demonstrates how the rail-workers are no longer willing to live in the old way, the building components of the novel obey the same principle. Consciousness replaces dramatically the previous apathy which was manifested at all levels of the society. The strike opens up the eyes of the workers to the fact that they are alienated, that they have no real hold on their lives and that their lives depend on the whims and caprices of the capitalist class which is represented by the railway bosses and Hadramé, the usurer. However, the strike reveals to them their innate strength and courage. Through the strike, most of the workers divest themselves of their egotism and achieve dignity and fulfilment within the context of collective commitment. Penda, Doudou, Ramatoulaye, Ndeye Touti, Maimouna, Samba N'Doulougou all outgrow their personal foibles. They merit not only the group's admiration but that of the reader

also.

Characterisation is also an index to the ideology of Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu. The characters who are given the greatest latitude of development are the workers. They are the characters who attract the reader's attention and admiration. The writer's own position is very clearly expressed in the way in which he presents the primary starting point of these characters and subsequent changes in their personality and behaviour. While the workers evolve, the representatives of the exploiting class do not. While the positive heroes adopt a problematic attitude to life and they struggle to achieve human dignity, negative heroes receive a strait-jacket portrayal. Sounkare, the old railguard is one of those negative characters. He adopts a fatalistic attitude to life and refuses to join in the strike action. His isolation in the rail-yard and his eventual disgraceful death from starvation is portrayed as a just punishment for his cowardice.

The white bosses are also negatively portrayed. Only two chapters are devoted to them and even then

in those few pages they are prejudiced bigots. Beatrice, Isnard's wife demonstrates an incredible heartlessness towards the murder of two black boys by her husband. For her, native lives are worthless, "ce sont des enfants, c'est tout".¹ In the eyes of the bosses the blacks are mere beasts of burden and it is worthless trying to understand them. Because of this lack of communication between the two groups it has been impossible for the groups to understand each other. Each group therefore lives by the stereotyped image of the other. If the bosses are portrayed as stereotypes it is because the major angle of vision in this novel is that of the railmen and it is their view of the bosses which is strictly emphasised. While this depiction is realistic, it is at the same time obviously partial. This partiality must be put at the door of Ousmane's adherence to the marxist point of view in the novel.

Sembene Ousmane's sympathetic portrayal of women's role is not gratuitous either. Never has the subject of the feminine role in African lite-

1. *ibid*, p. 257,

rature been treated with so much respect and understanding. Although in reality, African women may not have reached the high level of consciousness portrayed in Les Bouts de Bois and in lesser proportion in Ô Pays and L'Harmattan, yet the typicality of it rests in the possibility of the attainment of such a level.

What matters is not the falseness or otherwise of the women's position. Rather it is the social movement of which the picture is an ideological expression. In this portrayal of the latent strength of the women-folk, Sembene Ousmane, like Maxim Gorky in his Mother has created not only important types of the present but he has prophetically created types which are only just in their embryonic forms. It is a credit to his deep ideological vision of social reality that he has been able to achieve this. Like all true socialist realists he links up all human qualities with:

the great social process of man's struggle for freedom, with the process in the course of which men by their own efforts grow to be more human. 1

1. Lukacs, op cit. 217

As to Sembene Ousmane's portrayal of positive characters he makes them grow out of definite circumstances which they encounter. He also shows how the turning points in their lives are intertwined with the conditions prevailing in their time. The characters' conflict with the external world afford a latitude of development whose impact depends on the importance of the role which the character is supposed to play in the text. It is the movement of these characters which gives them very well defined outlines.

This method of characterisation has for its basis a progressive and marxist conception of human beings. The development of Ramatoulaye's character is a case in point. Her changing role and mood is typical of that of the women-folk at this time. As the strike becomes increasingly unbearable and her responsibility becomes onerous, her mood changes. She no longer indulges in idle women's talks. It is now her role to fend not only for her immediate family but also for that of her dead brother. Her visit to Hadramè, the shopkeeper is described in pathetically succinct terms. It

involves a debate between her sense of pride and necessity for survival. Her request for a credit of few kilos of rice is made in a few, dry, terse words which portray the battle between anger and pride that rages within her:

Hadramé, je veux cinq kilos de riz.
Pas d'huile, ni de sucre, du riz
seulement. 1

When the shopkeeper refuses, she plants her imposing figure rigidly in his shop, hoping to make him capitulate:

Si je reste, se dit-elle, je le
flechirai. Il faut que je tienne. 2

Her silent but eloquent presence is even weightier on Hardame's conscience than lengthy pleadings.

When all else fails, she explodes with a threat:

Ramatoulaye était à bout, sans qu'elle s'en rendit compte, sa voix seleva:
- Pour nous il n'ya rien, pour nous il n'y a rien, mais pour Mabigüe, oui!....
Lui et toi, vous etes avec les toubabs, mais la grève finira, Hadramé, il n'ya rien d'eternel!
Je reviendrai, Hadramé, je reviendrai si on n'a rien apporté de la ville, et alors ferme bien ton Ngounou, sinon j'aurai du riz! 3

1. *ibid*, p. 79.

2. *ibid*, p. 79.

3. *ibid*, p. 81.

This is a surprising gesture from an otherwise peace-loving woman. She suddenly realises that Hadramé has a vicious hold on her life. She has to pawn her things to him in order to feed herself. Moreover, most of the pay-packets go back to this usurer. She reiterates:

- Hadramé, tu sais que je t'ai toujours payé mon dû. Et puis, c'est toi qui nous as achetés nos bijoux. Tu peux me donner deux kilos au moins. 1

This realisation that she is exploited through and through infuriates her sense of justice and she revolts not only against Hadramé but also against her opulent brother, El Hadji Mabigué. Both of them have become in her consciousness the symbols of exploitation, of corruption, of the causes of other peoples' misery. As she justly remarks:

Nous sommes bien misérables, car le malheur, ce n'est pas seulement d'avoir faim et soif, le malheur, c'est de savoir qu'il ya des gens qui veulent que tu meures de faim. 2

After an enervating but unsuccessful round in search of food, Ramatoulaye directs her steps back

1. *ibid* p. 80 .

2. *ibid*, p. 94 .

to her house. As she walks her weary way, she turns over the events of the day in her mind. She as well as the reader, can hardly recognise her old self:

Ah, je ne sais plus où j'en suis. Comment ai - je pu dire à Hadrame que je reviendrai? Et si je revenais, que pourrais - je faire? Je ne suis pas capable d'incendier son n'gounou, j'ai du dire ça dans un moment de colère. Pourquoi ai-je proféré ces menaces? Tout ça, c'est à cause de cette grève....ou alors, c'est peut-être que je suis méchante? Mon, je ne suis pas méchante, c'est parce que nous avons faim.... Ah, c'est à devenir folle, une situation pareille: plus d'eau, plus de malo! Je ne peux pourtant pas rentrer les mains vides, avec toute une famille sur les bras? Autrefois j'aurais pu me débrouiller, vendre des bougies ou n'importe quoi, mais maintenant.... cette grève est trop dure, et elle nous donne trop à penser.¹

The strike has acquired a new and total dimension in the lives of the inhabitants and no one can ignore it. It is also the visible and logical cause of the radical change in Ramatoulaye's behaviour. She subsequently becomes the leader of the female group not by imposing herself on others but, by force of circumstance, her innate

1. *ibid*, p. 84.

leadership qualities are exteriorised. If she cannot burn down Hadramé's shop as a form of protest, she vents her anger on Vendredi, her nephews over-fed ram. The epic struggle with Vendredi is doubly symbolic. First, her new role as a leader dictates that she must be fearless. As the ram lies dead on the ground:

Ramatoulaye essuya son arme en la passant sur l'épaisse toison, puis elle se redressa. Il n'y avait dans son regard ni fierté, ni orgueil, simplement une sorte de satisfaction comme si son acte n'avait été qu'un devoir dicté par la fatalité. A ce moment, elle s'aperçut qu'elle saignait et rentra dans la maison principale.¹

Ramatoulaye's mates are surprised at her apparent but newly acquired audacity and courage.

Les autres femmes étaient proches de la panique. Elles ne reconnaissaient plus leur compagne, habituées, qu'elles étaient à la voir simple, sociable, douce avec les enfants. Jamais, à la borne-fontaine elle ne prenait part aux discussions, jamais elle ne médissait comme les autres. D'où lui était donc venue cette force neuve, où était la source de cette force qui se déchainait soudain? ce n'était pas à la guerre, Ramatoulaye n'était pas un homme, n'avait pas été

1. *ibid*, p. 115.

soldat, elle n'avait pas connu les longues marches sac en dos aucours desquelles on amasse les rancœurs. Ce n'était pas à l'usine, Ramatoulaye n'avait jamais été soumise aux inhumaines cadences du travail ouvrier. Ce n'était pas dans de multiples étreintes d'hommes. Ramatoulaye n'était pas de celles qui dilapident leur tendresse. Où donc alors? La réponse était simple comme elle l'était elle-même: dans les cuisines aux foyers éteints. 1

Ramatoulaye's violent gesture has a cathartic effect on her since she has been weighed down by the burden of responsibility. The strike has given her a newly-acquired courage and sense of responsibility. In her own words:

Quand on sait que la vie et le courage des autres dependent de votre vie et de votre courage, on n'a plus le droit d'avoir peur.... Même si on a tres peur! Ah! nous vivons des instants cruels, nous sommes obligés de nous forger une dureté, de nous raidir. Plus ça va, plus les temps deviennent durs. 2

The slaughtering of Vendredi should also be seen as having a ritualistic import. The slaughtering of the ram not only provides meat for the homes, it also provides a "scape-goat" which appeases the women who feel they have adequately revenged aga-

1. *ibid*, p. 124.
2. *ibid*, p. 117.

inst the feudalistic El Hadji Mabigué, the owner of the ram.

The positive heroes in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu are products of an evolutionary process and of concrete historical circumstances. Realism of depiction is achieved for these characters never say, feel or do anything which does not arise from their actions and social being. Tiemoko sums it all up when he says "Cette grève est une école". It has been a learning forum not only for the women but also for the men.

The romantic - idealist strain which runs through the novel is yet another aspect of the marxist dimension of the novel. An air of optimism pervades the novel. This optimism is at the basis of the epic aura which envelopes the strike despite the great sufferings it engenders. The author himself had experienced the emergence and maturing of the industrial problems of the forties and he has tried to immortalise the period in the pages of Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu. It is significant that no other francophone writer has thought of this strike as a worthy subject of

serious literature as well as the harbinger of the class struggle.

This optimism is also noticeable in Sembene Ousmane's two other novels namely Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple and L'Harmattan. Despite the fact that Oumar Faye and the members of the Front are portrayed as being larger than life, they identify closely with the masses and share in their hopes and aspirations. Because they are profoundly optimistic, even when they are seen to have failed temporarily, they do not lose hope. Addressing white merchants who are his commercial rivals, Oumar Faye declares:

Je vivrais cent ans, rien que pour voir une seule fois les cultivateurs fixer eux-mêmes le prix de leur labeur... 1

Je veux simplement lutter. Si je perds d'avance, cela ne fait rien. Ceux qui viendront après moi vous tiendront tête jusqu'à ce que vous soyez assis à la même table. 2

Léye, the poet-painter in L'Harmattan describes the harmattan as the symbol of hope and optimism. Commenting on a painting he has just prepared and depicting the black condition, he says:

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1. Sembene Ousmane, Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple, p. 150-
 2. *ibid*, p. 125.

Ce tableau, c'est l'harmattan, Il y a dans ce sujet, le passé et l'avenir. L'Afrique est une tombe pour les Africains. Et au-dessus des têtes, ce roux-violet, comme un nuage, c'est l'harmattan. Ce n'est un sanglot! Un sanglot de quatre siècles, soufflé par des millions de voix ensevelies. Un cri intarrissable à nos oreilles, venu des nuits anciennes, pour des jours radieux. Voilà ce que dit l'Harmattan.... L'Harmattan est le coeur de l'âme. Il git en nous, comme le fœtus dans la mère. Et nous, nous ne nous sevrans jamais d'elle. 1

The myth which surrounds Bakayoko lends a romantic - idealist dimension to the story of the strike for Bakayoko is the prototype of the male positive hero and visionary leader. Bakayoko is necessary in the class struggle to bring out the latent qualities in the people, in order that they may be transformed into truly positive human beings.

The ritualistic import of the death of Penda and Samba N'Doulougou as well as the slaughtering of Vendredi as a "sacrificial lamb" further expatiates on the romantic - idealism of the novel. Their deaths are construed as necessary sacrifices

1. Ousmane, Sembene. L'Harmattan, pp. 202-204.

towards the success of the strike.

Thus it is the marxist or better still the socialist - realist posture which determines the overall conception and execution of Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu. Serious realism and proletarian humanism are aesthetically blended. Through the realistic method of presentation, ideology loses its abstractness and becomes a relevant part of the life process. The ideological struggle is played out in the streets of Dakar, Thiès and Bamako by the two antagonistic forces. The reader is aware that the proletarian revolution is not only a hope for the future as in Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple and L'Harmattan but a possible present reality which transforms men into positive beings. Thus it is demonstrated that the working class movement:

in plucking men from the unconscious dullness of their lives and turning them into conscious fighters for the emancipation of mankind, transforms them into harmonious, contented, happy beings in spite of the hard fate which they have to bear as individuals. 1

1. Lukacs, op cit. 237.

In this wise, Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu must be regarded as a product of the social struggle, as playing a very important part in that struggle. Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu is a novel of universal significance in that it describes in marxist terms the preconditions as well as the carrying out of a revolutionary struggle of the masses.

The same has been done in Russian literature by the great realists Tolstoy, Gogol and Maxim Gorky and will continue to be done in any literature of the oppressed peoples of the world. Secondly and most important also, the novel is an artistic success. The referential power of the novel operates simultaneously both on the sociological and artistic levels, in its ability to grasp and define social realities through a gifted manipulation of literary techniques. It thereby demonstrates that literature, in order to awaken consciousness need not be propaganda. It performs the task best by digging down to the deepest roots of human suffering, feelings, thoughts and actions. In the words of Friedrich Engels,

a socialist based novel fully achieves its purpose.... if by consciously des-

cribing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, instils doubt as to the eternal character of the existing order, although the author does not offer any definite solution or does not even line up openly on any particular side. 1

Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu is a classic of socialist realism, remaining topical, understandable and aesthetically satisfying at all times.

LE MANDAT and XALA

In two of his works Le Mandat (1966) and Xala (1973), Sembene Ousmane employs the symbolic mode in order to lay bare the dynamics of contemporary society. It is important to understand why Ousmane adopts this mode and why he does so particularly in his post-independent novels instead of limiting himself to straight-forward realist depiction of society as in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu, L'Harmattan and Ô Pays.

Plekhanov in his description of Ibsen's works said

The history of literature shows that man has always used one or the other of these means (symbolism or realism) to transcend a particular reality.

1. op cit.

He employs the first (i.e. symbols) when he is unable to grasp the meaning of that particular reality, or when he cannot accept the conclusion to which the development of that reality leads. 1

It is the duty of the critic to find out if Le Mandat and Xala explicate Plekhanov's assumptions. Symbolism itself, with its concentration of meaning and richness of reference is not incompatible with realism. Symbols add a supplementary and combinatory potentiality to the realist text, the function of the symbol is to represent a reality or a truth either instantaneously or gradually. Symbol, like image and metaphor designates standing for something else and suggests the idea of analogy between the sign and the signified. The relationship of a symbol to reality has either a denotative or a representative value.

Le Mandat probes the nascent capitalist world with much the same artistic methods as in Xala. However since Le Mandat is a short story, its realism is much more concentrated than that of Xala. Le Mandat presents a single stressed in-

1. Quoted by James Frederic. Marxism and Form. p. 337.

dividual fate, a method most appropriate for showing particular aspects of social trends. The author concentrates on the protagonist Dieng. Polygamy which will be portrayed in Xala as a divisive factor is favourably portrayed here. This is not however due to any ambivalence in the attitude of the author to the subject of polygamy. Rather it is a technical device which does not allow the reader's attention to be caught by any other side issues.

Sembene Ousmane uses the Money-order as a symbol of "arrivisme". The protagonist, Ibrahima Dieng has just become a proud recipient of a Money-order worth 25,000 Francs CFA. In order to cash the money-order, Dieng needs an identify card. In order to obtain an identity card, he must produce a birth-certificate. Lost and confused by the eternal queue he confronts everywhere, he asks one of the characters who is also waiting for his certificate to explain things to him. The carpenter's answer is not encouraging:

Cela dépend si tu es connu ou si tu as des relations. Sinon, il n'y a qu'à ne pas se décourager.

Mais si tu as de l'argent, alors,
ça va vite....
Quand même, il est bon d'avoir
des relations par les temps qui
courent, finit par répéter le
maçon. 1

It is not only the carpenter who is disillusioned about the corrupt and cumbersome administrative process. Others join in the discussion

Des confidences en critiques, les connaissances s'élargissent. Les deux derniers arrivants s'y associèrent. L'un d'eux, le plus trapu, venu chercher l'acte de naissance de son fils, démontrait par ses propos l'incurie des bureaucrates, le manque de conscience civique. Tous, pourtant, se taisaient lorsque s'approchait quelqu'un. Le maçon distribua à la ronde des morceaux de kola.

Il obtint satisfaction. En partant, il serra les mains. 2

However, Dieng fails to obtain his certificate. Tired of the whole process, he plays into the hand of a relation who promises to help him cash the money-order. The latter eventually dupes him of the Money-order pretending it has been stolen.

What confers an overall importance on the

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1. Ousmane, Sembene. Le Mandat, p. 138.
 2. *ibid*, p. 138.

Money-order is the general poverty of the majority of the people in the story. Everyone builds his hope on a money-order which does not even belong to Dieng. Some invoke religious injunctions while others invoke the ethics of traditional communalism to buttress their demand for loans. When Dieng honestly refuses their demands, they become vicious. As Mety says;

Ici, dans le quartier, tout le monde croit que nous sommes des individualistes. Que nous faisons fi de la solidarité du voisinage. 1

Another woman however explains the root-cause of their viciousness. It is the rampant poverty from which the people are suffering. She pleads with Mety:

- Mety, ne nous accable pas! Tu nous blesses. Vrai, nous avons entendu parler de ce mandat. Que veux-tu, quand on a une famille et qu'on a faim, on croit à ce qu'on raconte. Tu sais que nos esprits sont plus agiles à condamner qu'à être indulgents....

- Parce que nous avons faim, ajouta une autre femme. 2

Money is shown to have become the ruling ethos in

1. *ibid*, p. 168 ,

2. *ibid*, p. 169.

the society described in Le Mandat. Mety revolts against this trait in her neighbours. She indicts them in strong terms:

Des vers, des qu'ils entendent que
quelqu'un a de l'argent, les voilà
comme des vautours. 1

One of the characters observes that this reign of money coincides with the advent of independence:

En fait dans notre pays depuis l'
indépendance, l'argent tient lieu
de la morale. 2

Another person adds bitterly:

c'est fou ce que les gens se baga-
rrent pour les sous depuis notre
indépendance. 3

And yet another laments the negative changes in Dakar:

Je ne compte plus mes années et jamais
je n'ai quitté Ndakaru, pourtant je
confesse que je ne reconnais plus ce
pays. Dans quel pays sommes-nous? 4

The apparently simple tragi-comic story of Le Mandat has wider dimensions. Sembene Ousmane's dissatisfaction with the present provides the foundation for his portrayal of the present with a profound and sharply satirical realism. The

1. *ibid*, p. 138.

2. *ibid*, p. 176.

3. *ibid*, p. 116.

4. *ibid*, p. 169.

presentation of everyday life is only a means of throwing the contradictions of such life into bolder relief and giving a total picture of a society in motion complete with all its determinants. In faithfully depicting the everyday destinies of men, Le Mandat demonstrates the great problems agitating the society. As Ousmane himself explains:

Dans Le Mandat, je ne traite ni du milieu rural, ni du milieu urbain. J'étudie l'évolution d'un individu dans un contexte social donné. L'histoire d'Ibrahima Dieng est celle d'un cas particulier qui, en abordant beaucoup de petites questions, soulève évidemment des problèmes plus généraux.... Ibrahima Dieng représente bien sur un habitant de Dakar avec ses caractéristiques propres mais il représente aussi un phénomène beaucoup plus général, celui de l'individu plongé dans une société dont il ne comprend pas les rouages. Les malheurs d'Ibrahima Dieng sont dus à la mal-honnêteté de ceux qui profitent de son ignorance et de sa naïveté. De là son impuissance. 1

Dieng believes at first that he is suffering from a personal fate; that everything is the work of Yallah.

Il faut comprendre Ibrahima Dieng.
Conditionné par des années de

1. Quoted by Vieira, Paulin. Sembene Ousmane, Cinéaste. pp 182/186.

sourde soumission in-consciente, il fuyait tout acte pouvant lui porter préjudice, tant physique que moral. Le coup de poing reçu au nez était un "atte Yallah" volonté de Dieu. L'argent perdu aussi.... Au plus profond de son désespoir, de l'affront subi, la forte conviction qu'il avait de sa foi le soutenait, dégelait un ruisseau souterrain d'espoir. 1

However his experiences have since the arrival of this money-order also taught him lessons. Like an "éclair de lucidité", it has put some doubts in his eternal optimism. He realises that there is a general suffering among the masses which is responsible for their viciousness.

A un homme, il faut de quoi faire vivre sa famille, Lorsque tout le monde aura à manger, de partout s'élèvera la paix des coeurs. Personne n'a de quoi faire vivre décemment sa famille. Cette nouvelle conduite (menterie) n'est pas le fruit de notre méchanceté, c'est plutôt que la vie n'est plus comme du temps de notre jeunesse à nous, les parents d'aujourd'hui. Combien sont ils ceux qui font rentrer leur sac de riz la nuit venue? Et pourquoi? Pour ne pas partager. 2

In his simple way, Dieng gives a recipe which is tantamount to the marxist credo, "To each accord-

1. ibid, p. 166.

2. ibid, p. 171.

ing to his needs". For a moment Dieng revolts against his condition declaring angrily:

C'est fini, moi aussi, je vais me vêtir de la peau de l'hyène. Parce qu'il n'ya que fourberie, menterie de vrai. L'honnè-teté est un délit de nos jours. 1

Dieng is disillusioned by the capitalist reality exposed in the story which to him is a distortion of the proper humane reality. As he remarks significantly in his letter to Abdou, the nephew who sent him the money-order from France,

De nos jours, l'étoffe de la confiance s'effrite. Je te demande de ne pas considérer l'argent comme l'essence de la vie. L'argent comme essence de la vie ne te conduit que sur une fausse route où tôt ou tard, tu seras seul. L'argent ne solidifie rien. Au contraire, il détruit tout ce qui nous reste d'humanité.... 2

However another character raises Dieng's morale by suggesting to him that he can still change things for the better. The following conversation ensues between him and the postman.

- Tu crois que tout est pourri?
- Non - cela changera. Demain nous changerons tout cela.

1. *ibid*, p. 189

2. *ibid*, p. 182,

- Qui, nous?
- Toi.
- Moi?
- Qui, toi Ibrahima Dieng, toi. 1

The symbols Sembene Ousmane employs is "Xala", in the novel of the same title. The mere fact of recurrence pushes "Xala" in the direction of a symbol. The word is used several times in the novel and in each reference it is written in italics, which denotes that particular attention must be paid to the lexical item, "xala". Some of these references are:

- Ce n'est rien le xala 2
- J'ai le xala. 3
- El Hadji a le xala. 4
- Le xala.... était devenu sujet de conversation générale. 5
- Pas de doute, il voyait l'auteur du xala. 6
- El Hadji souffrait atrocement de son xala. 7
- Il était tout absorbé par son xala. 8
- Il décrivait les méfaits du xala. 9
- Pourquoi ce xala? etc. 10

The world "xala" becomes a recurrent visual and graphic perception. In the words of Wellek and

1. *ibid*, p. 189.
2. Ousmane, Sembene. Xala, p. 45 .
3. *ibid*, p. 51.
4. *ibid*, p. 55.
5. *ibid*, p. 66.
6. *ibid*, p. 67.
7. *ibid*, p. 67.
8. *ibid*, p. 88.
9. *ibid*, p.115.
10. *ibid*, p.164.

Warren;

an image may be evoked once but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol, may even become part of a symbolic system. 1

Sembene Ousmane himself has explained both the cultural meaning and intended signification of "xala":

Etymologiquement, "xala veut dire en langue oulof, "impuissance sexuelle temporaire". Nous sommes ici dans une "zone culturelle" différente, même si nous sommes continuellement solidaires. "Xala, ça peut arriver à tous les hommes, qu'ils soient riches ou pauvres; ça peut être la conséquence d'un sentiment agressif de jalousie et de rivalité, ça peut provenir d'un vice, ou d'autre chose. Le "xala", en oulof usuel veut dire aussi - arc, cette arme qui tire des flèches. Or le sexe de l'homme en repos est toujours courbe, comme un arc. Comme l'arc il se tend, a moment donné, pour un acte, puis il reprend sa forme défendue, qui est alors courbe. D'où le sens du mot, sur le plan culturel: impuissance sexuelle temporaire. Avoir le "xala", c'est avoir "l'arc au repos". Et si c'est à un moment où il ne le faudrait pas, cela peut être très regrettable, évidemment; Ça c'est une première donnée, d'ordre culturel, une donnée linguistique. 2

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1. Wellek and Warren. Theory of Literature. London, Penguin p. 194
 2. Cheriaa, Tahaar. "L'Artiste et la Révolution", op cit.

The cultural-semantic significance to be attached to the word "xala" is therefore "temporary impotence". The symbolism of sex and of the life cycle is well known. It performs a function similar to those of time and eternity since it indicates the permanence of the cycle of sexual functions and the return and renewal of individual and collective physical life which those functions bring about. This endless renewal of life is often represented by the phallus.

Loss of virility is always viewed with seriousness in African culture. Chief Toje Onovwakpo a character in Isidore Ope~~wo~~'s The Last Duty (1976) laments bitterly the loss of his virility:

How shall it be told, how reported
that I cannot lie with a woman?.....
What use is this flab of flesh, if
it cannot perform the function without
which a man is not worth the
classification. 1

Thus the imagery of the "arc en repos" is evidently that of the inability to procreate. This poses a great problem to the protagonist and explains why he is obsessed by his "xala".

1. Ope~~wo~~, Isidore. The Last Duty. London, Longman, 1976, p. 27.

The "xala" is a structural device which serves as the focal point around which the whole story revolves. Four periods can be clearly delineated in the novel; periods which correspond to the evolution of the xala. The first period lasts one day and the one night. It is the apogee of Beye's wealth which he wastes in sensuousness and merry-making. He is about to acquire a third wife therefore, like all the invitees, he is in high spirits and in the words of the omniscient narrator:

Le Jerk et le Pachanga alternaient. Les danseurs-rien que des jeunes gens-ne quittaient pas la piste de danse. La noce avait perdu sa solennité pour retrouver une atmosphère de bombance.

Le "Groupe des Hommes d' Affaires" faisait bande à part. Là, une vive discussion s'animait, bondissait d'un sujet à l'autre, de la politique à la limitation des naissances, du communisme au capitalisme. Sur leur table d'honneur trônait toutes les marques d'alcool, des bouteilles de formes variées, le reste du gâteau de mariage, les reliefs du méchoui. 1

The euphoric party works El Hadji to a crescendo and leads to the climactic moment when, in the

1. *ibid*, p. 41 .

evening, the hero contemplates his newest acquisition, greedily impatient to consummate his third marriage. He is unable to do so because he suddenly discovers that he has become impotent. He has xala. From then on, Beye becomes physically, mentally and spiritually disorientated. He spends the rest of his money in an effort to cure his xala.

The second episode though unspecified extends over some months. It is a period of cruel disillusion which begins on the night of his marriage and ends on the night he regains his virility. From the moment the hero realises his impotence the tempo of the novel changes to reflect his gloomy mood. The quick tempo of the first episode, translated by short sentences and copious conversations gives way to long descriptions instead of dramatic presentations and to interior monologues. This change translates the hero's long effort to get himself cured as well as his psychological and physical depreciation. The hero's first reaction is that of unbelievable shock. The next morning, the hero is mentally

confused:

"El Hadji était affreusement déprimé".¹ Days later, the hero is still very worried and in a very poignant manner, the narrator describes the wounded rapacious male:

Le regret et la colère emplissait son coeur. Du fiel traversait son corps. Sentant et mesurant le poids de sa situation présente de mâle blessé, il était désorienté. Dans les bras de l'une ou l'autre de ses épouses il avait rêvé de cet instant: être seul avec N'Goné. Il avait désiré N'Goné au plus profond de lui. Vainque ; tel un oiseau rapace, il avait emporté sa proie jusqu'au nid.... Mais la consommation lui semblait impossible, sinon interdite. 2

Then begins his series of nocturnal visits to medicine men and with each fruitless trial, his bitterness increases towards everybody and towards life itself.

Cette amertume s'était muée en un complexe d'infériorité devant ses pairs.... Il ne supportait plus les rires après son passage, les apartés, les regards insistants. Cette infirmité - peut-être passagère, le rendait incapable de toute communication avec ses employés, ses femmes, enfants et

1. *ibid*, p. 47.

2. *ibid*, p. 65'

homologues. Lorsqu'il s'accordait des lui, il se voyait enfantin, léger. Les remords l'envahissaient comme une marrée de boue recouvre une rizière. 1

El Hadj becomes absent-minded, ridiculously touchy and reserved. Tell-tale signs begin to show on him:

La lassitude engourdissait ses épaules d'un poids supplémentaire. 2

Modu, le chauffeur, avait bien remarqué le déperissement de son patron: la voix, les regards fuyants, la démarche lourde, hésitante. 3

The third episode begins with the restoration of El Hadji's virility by the Serigne Maida. It is a parallel to the first episode, lasting one night and one full day and is characterised by a euphoria that equals that of the first episode. The hero is revitalised. He is beside himself with joy and he can hardly wait to prove his mettle with his wives just as he has been impatient on the night of his marriage.

Il était au faite de la joie. Il découvrait qu'il avait des oreilles.

1. *ibid*, p. 67.

2. *ibid* p. 86.

3. *ibid*, p. 91.

Tout son corps était traversé par des ondes vivantes. El Hadj était pressé de retourner à Dakar. Revigore, il pensait à la troisième épouse.... Sur le chemin de retour, nageant dans l'euphorie, il causait avec le conducteur. Son sang était chaud. 1

However this cure constitutes a "faux-dénouement", a break in the reader's perception as well as an aesthetic device to retard the moment of truth. For once, the reader nearly believes that the problem is over, that the hero has now re-entered vigorously into the process of procreation. But then, there is a fore-boding. El Hadji issues a cheque to cover the Serigne's fees. The latter warns him of the consequences of a dud cheque. "J'ai ton cheque! Ce que j'ai enlevé, je peux le remettre aussi rapidement".²

The following day at Dakar, Beye's euphoria is quickly brought to an end by his realisation that he has become totally bankrupt. The reader watches him make fruitless attempts to redress his economic situation and by the evening, he has been expelled from the "Group". This is the logical

1. *ibid*, p. 114.

2. *ibid*, p. 114.

dénouement the novel has been working towards. By the end of the day, as if in a classical tragedy, his race has been run, a chasm opens around him, "le vide se fait autour de lui".

The fourth episode re-echoes the second. The xala is restored but the protagonist is economically and physically ruined. The vestiges of his ephemeral wealth are removed one after the other until, in the last scene, there is in Beckettian manner a complete reversal of situation. The hero stands naked before the scum of Dakar who spit at him:

En un fil discontinu se dévidait dans sa mémoire son ascension. Il avait lutté fiévreusement pour avoir pignon sur rue, être quelqu'un. Et voilà que tout sébranlait, s'écroulait. 1

Both thematic, temporal and spatial organisation is all woven around the symbol of xala. All the characters respond in their various ways to this xala. As the narrator says:

Le xala, hier objet de confidence que l'on se passait de bouche à oreille, était devenu, au fil des jours, puis des semaines, sujet de conversation générale.

1. *ibid*, p.147.

2. *ibid*, p. 66

Rama the eldest daughter, Adja Awa Astou, Oumi Ndoye and Ngone, the three wives of the protagonist all suffer psychologically and materially from Beye's xala.

N'Goné, the latest bride on whose nuptial night, Beye discovers his impotence, is disappointed:-

N'Goné était l'incarnation de la persécution morale et physique. Elle se collait à lui, prenait des initiatives, maladroitement telle une leçon mal assimilée. Elle haletait, le renversa sur le lit, s'allongea sur lui....

Desappointée, N'Goné se pliait en deux sur le lit, la tête prise entre ses bras. Puis, d'un coup de rein, elle s'allongea sur le dos, le compas de ses jambes s'ouvrit. Elle fixait l'homme d'un regard de défi et de provocation. 1

While the presence of N'Goné emphasises the cruel inadequacy of Beye, that of Oumi N'doye emphasises the hero's chastisement. It gradually becomes a phobia to accomplish her "moome" because of her harrassment, threat and incomprehension of the hero's illness.

- Dis-moi ce que tu as?
- Je ne suis pas en forme.

1. *ibid*, p. 101.

- Et hier? dit-elle véhémente. Je ne suis pas de bois, comme disent les Français. Je te préviens que, moi aussi, je peux aller ailleurs. 1

Finally, the hero boycotts her villa:

Réduit à une figuration, El Hadji ne rendait plus visite à sa deuxième épouse.... 2

As to Adja Awa Astou, her husband's xala becomes her major preoccupation. She withdraws entirely into herself, suffering from an inexplicable sense of guilt, even though she is not the author of the "xala". She is worried about what people say, for according to her, "Dans des cas semblables, on accuse la première femme". 3

Directly or otherwise, the "xala" is primordial in determining the action of everyone in the story and in this sense, it plays the same organisational role as the "strike" in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu and the Referendum in L'Harmattan. Although it does not reach the epic dimension of the last two, it is however a source of obsession.

As we have said earlier, the symbol, as a "sign" or "picture" has either a denotative or a

1. *ibid*, p. 103.

2. *ibid*, p. 155.

3. *ibid*, p. 80.

truly representative meaning. The question arises what in fact the intentional function of the "xala" is in this story and what attitude is expected of the reader towards it. In determining this, it is pertinent to discuss the writer's use of verbal irony in the text and determine its intention and communicability. As has been noted earlier "xala" is a cultural and psychological anomaly and is therefore undesirable both to the protagonist and reader. The shared cultural context with Xala determines our negative attitude in the first place.

Next the reader must consider the presence of irony markers in the text. The writer makes copious use of under-dissimulations, over-dissimulations, arbitrary markers, mock hesitations and parodies in order to describe the hero, the group to which he belongs as well as his milieu. The first page of Xala is full of such examples:

Les "Hommes d'affaires" s'étaient réunis pour festoyer, et marquer ce jour-là d'une pierre blanche, car l'événement était de taille. Jamais, dans le passé de ce pays, le Sénégal, la Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie n'avait été dirigée par un Africain .

Venus individuellement d'horizons différents, ils avaient formé un "Groupement des Hommes d'affaires" faisant front à l'afflux des entreprises dirigées par des étrangers. Leur ambition était de prendre en main l'économie du pays. Cette velléité de constituer une couche sociale les avait rendus très combatifs, avec même un relent de xénophobie. Au fil des années, ils étaient parvenus - la politique aidant -, à grignoter le commerce de détail, de demi-gros, un peu d'import et d'export. Les dents longues, ils visaient l'administration, des banques, ou au moins d'y être associés.... L'acte de ce jour aurait toute sa portée dans les jours à venir. Son importance méritait cette libation.... 1

El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye is a prominent member of the country's Chamber of Commerce whose inaugural meeting is described here. "Hommes d'affaires", "Groupement des Hommes d'affaires", are put in inverted commas here in order to mark an ironic reluctance to use the expressions as well as an ironic distance not only between the narrator and the protagonist but also between the former and the group to which Beye belongs. The expressions are obviously taken from the vocabulary of the business group with which the narrator does not wish to be associated. Sembene Ousmane frequently uses this self-

marking irony everywhere these expressions figure in the novel. The reader is even informed that:

par mégalomanie, peut-être, ces gens ne prononçaient jamais "Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie" mais ils disaient "la Chambre". 1

Much later it becomes clear that there is an ironic intention when the narrator says:

En fait, il est bon de savoir que tous ces gens qui s'étaient arrogés le droit à l'appellation pompeuse d'hommes d'affaires n'étaient que des intermédiaires, des commis d'une espèce nouvelle. 2

The sarcastic intentions of the narrator towards the group is also noticeable in his choice of destructive words. "Grignoter", "xénophobie", "les dents longues" are suggestive of rapacious and destructive rodents who make tiny but frequent and destructive bites into whatever they eat. These expressions are not appropriate to describe people whom the narrator describes in the opening pages as "nationalistes". There is also an obvious contradiction in the first paragraph and the second. The first suggests an economic victory in the

1. Ousmane Sembene. Xala. p.8

2. ibid, p. 94.

struggle against colonialism which is itself is a positive and desirable event. The reader therefore agrees that "l'événement était de taille". However in the second and third paragraphs, it is clear that these men are pseudo-bourgeois egoists and their advent cannot be of any benefit to their country. It is therefore unjustified to describe them as having any nationalist sentiment. The sentence :

"L'acte de ce jour aurait toute sa portée dans les jours à venir". is pregnant with double meaning.

The points of suspension after the next sentence is obviously an irony marker which is a typographical equivalent of winks and nudges. It is obviously a mock hesitation. In these three paragraphs, the narrator by the use of expressions that are obviously inappropriate to the context and his choice of connotative vocabulary hints at the presence of irony. The two parts of the quotation are opposed obviously so as to alert the readers to the ironic intention of the writer towards the group of businessmen.

The foundation of their function in the so-

ciety is solidly laid right from the opening pages. Apart from the negative descriptions hinted at in the opening scenes, the narrator characterises them by external markers. Their social class is transparently obvious by their manner of dress:

une dizaine de personnes, richement habillées. La coupe des complets, en drap anglais, sur mesure, les chemises impeccables exprimaient assez leurs ambitions. Dehors, une rangée de voitures de marque les attendaient. 1

The so-called businessmen nevertheless do not play the same beneficial role and do not have the same characteristics as the European bourgeoisie with which the reader can compare it. When it is reported that "La réunion était finie", it is obvious that nothing positive and concrete has been achieved. The discussions have centred round celebrations and women, all of which are most unlikely of serious business discussions. During Beye's marriage ceremony, the Group's discussion is not any more disciplined.

"Le Groupe des Hommes d'affaires" faisait bande à part. Là, une vive discussion s'animait, bondissait d'un sujet à l'autre, de la

politique à la limitation des naissances, du communisme au capitalisme. Sur leur trône d'honneur trônaient toutes les marques d'alcool, des bouteilles les de formes variées, le reste du gâteau de mariage, les reliefs du méchoui....

La conversation s'étendit sur les aphrodisiaques. Chacun se montrait savant en la matière, chacun avait sa recette particulière. 1

However, Sembene Ousmane does not limit his descriptions to generalities. He chooses to demonstrate the salient aspects of this group by a realistic description of Abdou Kader Beye's background and evolution from schoolmaster to a member of this group. First the narrator puts him in his historical context. He is one of the few people who benefited from monopoly of trade headed by the Lebanese and the Syrians during the colonial era and when independence came, he was used as a front by foreign investors!

El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye était un ancien instituteur, rayé du corps enseignant à cause de son action syndicale à l'époque coloniale. Après son renvoi des cadres, il s'était initié à la revente de certains produits alimentaires, puis

1. Ousmane, Sembene. Xala. p.42.

il s'était fait intermédiaire dans les transactions immobilières. Etendant ses relations dans le milieu libano-syrien, il trouva un associé. Des mois, voire un an durant, ils monopolisèrent la commercialisation du riz, denrée de première nécessité. Cette aubaine le hissa au sommet des sous-traitants à la petite semaine. Vint l'indépendance du pays. Avec son petit capital amassé, ses relations, il fit cavalier seul.... Faute de crédits bancaires et de soutien, il revenait à son point de départ. Mais, très connu, ayant une "surface", le milieu industriel l'utilisa comme prête-nom moyennant quelques redevances. Il joua le jeu. Il était aussi membre du conseil d'administration de trois ou quatre sociétés de la place. A chaque fin d'exercice, il signait des procès-verbaux. La Loi n'y voyait goutte. Mais tous savaient la vérité....¹²

Beye is here presented as an arriviste whose fortune is built on the misfortunes of the poor and acquired by dubious means.

El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye était si on peut dire, la synthèse de deux cultures. Formation bourgeoise européenne, éducation féodale africaine. Il savait, comme ses pairs, se servir adroitement de ses deux pôles. La fusion n'était pas complète. 2

1. *ibid*, pp. 10-11.

The ironic reluctance to use the otherwise positive expression "synthèse de deux cultures" is conveyed lexically by the metalingual tag "si on peut dire" and reinforced by the terse final sentence, "La fusion n'était pas complète". The point is further driven home that he shares these aspects with his groups by the use of the expression of similitude "comme ses pairs".

Beye is a man devoid of intellectual and cultural depth like any member of the "Groupement des Hommes d'Affaires":

Lui non plus n'avait pas de riches conversations, fines, délicates, spirituelles. Ce type d'êtres, dans notre pays, cette "gentry" imbue de son rôle de maître - ce rôle de maître commençant et se limitant à équiper la femelle et à la monter - ne connaît nulle élévation, nulle finesse dans la correspondance verbale avec leur partenaire. Ce manque d'échanges faisait d'eux des étalons pour haras. El Hadji, limité, borné, n'était pas plus intelligent que les autres. Seule sa situation actuelle l'empêchait d'échanger avec N'Gone de nombreuses phrases creuses, insipides. 1

In the same way as the expression "Groupement des hommes d'affaires" the word "bureau" is identi-

fied first by the use of inverted commas as an object of derision, a mockery of an office. The following morning after his transitory recovery Beye dresses immaculately and eats a rich breakfast:

Le lendemain matin, rasé, vêtu d'un complet "Prince de Galles", chaussures noires bien cirées, El Hadji se régalaît avec appétit de deux oranges pressées, oeufs au jambon, café au lait, pain beurre. La bonne s'éloigna après avoir posé la bouteille d'Evian. 1

After eating he announces proudly to his second wife:

Je vais au "bureau". 2

However it is ironic that this well-dressed and well-fed man, who rides a Mercedes Benz car, has three wives and eleven children and keeps three villas works in a ram-shackle office. Our first view of the office is shocking. Madame Diouf his Secretary cum selling aide is busy chasing out the flies and the cockroaches in this "bureau". Later, as it is his practice, the narrator describes the "bureau" in realistic details.

1. *ibid*, p. 118 .

2. *ibid*, p. 119.

Le magasin d'import - export - qu'il nommait son "bureau" - se situait au centre de la cité commerciale. Un vaste hangar qu'il avait loué à un libano-syrien. Aux heures de son apogée, il regorgeait de sacs de riz, (en provenance du Siam, du Cambodge, de la Caroline du Sud, du Brésil), de produits de ménages, de denrées alimentaires (importées de France, de Hollande, de Belgique, d'Italie, du Luxem-bourg, d'Angleterre, du Maroc). Jusqu'au plafond s'entassaient des ustensiles en matière plastique, en étain, en fer blanc. Les friandises, les tomates en conserves, le poivre le lait, les sacs d'oignons, mêlant leurs senteurs à la moisissure des murs, contraignaient la secrétaire-vendeuse à utiliser deux bombes désodorisantes par semaine.

Dans un coin il s'était aménagé un réduit, - son bureau -, meuble d'armoires métalliques avec casiers où se lisaient les mois et les années. 1

Here it is the dashes within which the word "bureau" is encircled which express the ironic reluctance to use this word in order to describe a "réduit".

In the opening scenes, the Group was described as having bourgeois tastes without the necessary economic backing which usually goes with such tastes.

1. Ousmane, Sembene. Xala. pp.94-95.

Leur manque d'avoir bancaire avivait, aiguïsait un sentiment nationaliste auquel ne manquait pas quelque rêve d'embourgeoisement. 1

In what ways does Beye portray this same characteristic? Beye wastes his supposed wealth on acquiring titles, wives, villas, domestic servants, cars. His final catastrophe is caused by his excessive spending during his third marriage and his search for a cure to his xala. The whole affair with N'Gone is clearly exploitative. The girl's aunt, Yay Bineta is deliberately arranging this marriage in order to extort money from Beye who unwittingly plays into her hands. As the narrator puts it,

El Hadji était mur. La Badiene allait le cueillir. 2

His various visits to medicine-men and marabouts also lead to his penury:

A la vue de sa Mercedes, stationnant devant les pailloles et les baraques branlantes et de sa tenue européenne, chaque facc-katt comprenait que son patient possédait un standing élevé. On lui demandait des honoraires bien forts, bien rondelets. Il payait comptant. 3

1. *ibid*, p. 8.

2. Ousmane, Sembene. Xala. p.19.

3. *ibid*, p. 66.

Obsessed by this xala, Beye virtually neglects his business. Since it is a whole-sale business its success depends on frequent stocking and reselling. Since Beye no longer stocks his shop, the whole business gradually collapses while his bank debts rise.

His visit to his bank manager in order to raise more loans opens the reader's eyes to the protagonist's true economic position. The manager does not mince words about it:

J'ai ici un volumineux dossier te concernant. Tu as déjà bénéficié de deux découverts d'un demi-million. Tu as dépassé le seuil admis pour les découverts. Qu'as-tu fait des trente tonnes de riz de la Société Vivrière Nationale? Vendus. Où est passé l'argent? Ton train de vie dépasse tes possibilités: trois villas, des autos à crédit. Depuis ton troisième mariage, c'est la valse des chèques sans provision.... Tu sais qu'une banque n'est pas un bureau de bienfaisance. 1

When in the final scenes, Beye is totally bankrupt, his group decides to cast him out since in their own words he is "une tache noire", an abcess sur un organisme sain qu'il fallait vider".

1. *ibid*, p. 133.

Beye nevertheless refuses to be treated as an ulcer. He insists that in all he has done, he is not in anyway different from any member of the group. According to him:

Tous tant que nous sommes ici présents, nous avons émis des chèques sans provisions, fait le trafic de bons de marchandise, de denrées alimentaires. 1

His lengthy reply to his accusers is full of rhetorical questions, the non interrogative nature of which is very transparent:

- Qui sommes-nous? De minables commissionnaires, moins que des sous-traitants. Nous ne faisons que de la redistribution. Réistribuer les restes que les gros veulent bien nous céder. Sommes-nous des Hommes d'affaires? Je réponds, pour ma part: non. Des culsterreux....
- Les banques appartiennent à qui? Les assurances? Les usines? Les entreprises? Le commerce en gros? Les hôtels? etc, etc, etc. De tout cela et autres choses, nous ne contrôlons rien. Nous voulons la place de l'ex-occupant. Nous y sommes. Cette Chambre en est la preuve. Quoi de changé en général comme en particulier? Rien. Le colon est devenu plus fort, plus puissant, caché en nous, en nousici présents. Et nous?.... Culs-terreux, commissionnaires, sous-traitants, par fatuite nous nous disons "Hommes d'affaires". Des

1. ibid, p. 140.

affairistes sans fonds. 1

This long tirade made by the protagonist himself is a valuable eye-opener to the role of this new class of businessmen. Not only this, it authenticates the ironic intentions of the author towards the group. It also provides a clue to the function of the xala in the novel. The symbolic status of xala having been confirmed by its recurrence and graphic representation, what then does it symbolise?

Since Beye is unable to pay the medicine man's fees, the latter puts back his xala. However, a beggar whom he has always harassed offers to cure him free. The only condition is that he must neither protest nor ask questions. On the appointed day, the beggar brings along a host of disabled, ragged and dirty beggars who engage in a literal pillage of the villa. When Beye protests, a beggar replies: "Je me paie".² Another further expatiates.

-.... Pourquoi? Simplement parce que
tu nous as volés! Volé à'une façon

1. *ibid*, p. 139.

2. Ousmane, Sembene. Xala. p.164.

légale en apparence.... Des gens
comme toi ne vivent que de vols.... 1

While another adds:

- Toute ta fortune passée - car tu n'
en as plus - était bâtie sur la
floutrie. Toi et tes collègues ne
construisent que sur l'infortune
des humbles et honnêtes gens. Pour
vous donner une bonne conscience,
vous créez des oeuvres de bienfai-
sance, où vous faites l'aumône aux
coins des rues à des gens réduits
à l'état de disgrâce. Et quand
notre nombre est quantitativement
gênant, vous appelez votre police
pour....
- Pour nous éjecter comme des matières
fécales, 2

The beggar's indictment summarises what the reader
knows already of Beye and of his group. However
his cure is even more revealing. The beggar anno-
unces to him:

- Pour te guérir, tu vas te mettre nu,
tout nu, El Hadji. Nu devant nous
tous. Chacun de nous te crachera
dessus trois fois. Tu as la clef de
ta guérison. Décide toi. Je peux te
le dire maintenant, je suis, celui
qui t'a "noué l'aiguillette". 3

With this surprising revelation of who the author
of the xala is and in whom rests the power of its

1. *ibid*, p. 166.

2. *ibid*, p. 166.

3. *ibid*, p. 167.

removal, the denotative role of xala becomes clear. In present day Africa, Beye and his cohorts pretend to be powerful because of their economic superiority over others. In like manner a man who has lost his virility is to outward appearances still a man. It is only after knowing him intimately as N'Gone does El Hadji Beye that the truth comes out. Beye is conscious of the powerlessness of his class just as he is aware of his lack of virility. The economic life of the nation is solidly in the hands of foreigners. The Senegalese entrepreneur is only an intermediary. He has no power and he controls nothing.

On the superficial level therefore, xala represents a critique of the national bourgeoisie who instead of helping to consolidate the national economy dilapidates the same through conspicuous living. Like Frantz Fanon, Beye realises the parasitic nature of his "Group", the economic bourgeoisie.

La bourgeoisie nationale est une bourgeoisie sous-développée. Sa puissance économique est presque nulle et en tout cas sans commune mesure avec celle de la bourgeoisie métropolitaine à laquelle

elle entend se substituer. 1

Ousmane's criticism of the new bourgeoisie, with its aping of the white man, its socio-economic and political inertia, as well as the fact that it constitutes a sore in the body of the nation all come out from the reactions of the hero to his xala, who represents the group and passes judgement on it.

The xala, sign of lack of procreation, is at once the impotence of Beye, of his group and that of the economy of the nation. The 'embourgeoisement' of the elite as well as its depraved taste for materialistic acquisition has led to serious economic instability of the nation.

On a moral level, xala is a chastisement of the new bourgeoisie. The reification of money leads to moral depravity and spiritual degeneration. At the end of the novel, the poor people are disillusioned. The gap yawns between the rich and the poor as seen in the contrast between Beye's opulence and the beggars' destitution. However,

1. Frantz, Fanon. Les Damnés de la Terre. Paris, Maspero, 1966, p.96.

the poor have reached a crucial stage of awareness where they can identify the group responsible for their poverty. They bitterly indict Beye as a representative of an exploiter class.

The xala as a symbol not only brings about an interpretative knowledge of the senegalese society but it is also a means of access to economic reality. The use of irony further aids the interpretation of this reality, determining the reader's attitude to it.

However as all linguistic irony is a matter of guess-work what finally determine the validity of our interpretation are both our previous knowledge of the author's stand as well as the shared context; that is the background knowledge the reader possesses from extra-literary sources for as Kebrat Orecioni rightly says:

le décodage de l'ironie met en oeuvre, outre leur compétence linguistique, les compétences culturelle et idéologique des partenaires de l'allocution. C'est à dire l'ensemble de leurs connaissances et systèmes d'interprétation du référent. 1

1. Quoted by Muecke, D.C. "Irony Markers", Poetics, 7 (1978) p. 376.

The reader needs the shared context and the author's intention as the final authenticating factor in his interpretation since:

no linguistic or paralinguistic trait can be listed as an irony marker per se however familiar it is in this role; in any particular case of irony, the irony marker.... Can be confirmed as such only retrospectively, that is when one has understood irony. 1

In the same vein, our interpretation of the symbolism of "xala" must also be conclusively guaranteed by the author's intention and the shared context. Sembene Ousmane goes to a great length to authenticate our interpretation of the functions of symbols and irony in the novel. He explains on the subject of the film which he made from the novel:

Mon film (ou roman) n'est pas un film (roman) pornographique ou érotique. Cet aspect sexuel n'est qu'un prétexte à une réflexion sur la société sénégalaise d'aujourd'hui et sur la problématique de sa libération....

Nous avons au Sénégal, comme partout en Afrique, une certaine classe socio-économique, ou plutôt une couche favorisée de la société qui valonne, émerge en surface et cherche à être à l'image de la bourgeoisie européenne. Cette fonction de notre peuple-cette bourgeoisie africaine pour simplifier - malgré ses trésors d'énergie dépensée

1. *ibid*, p. 374.

depuis quelques décades déjà, est atteinte de "xala".

(Elle est frappée) d'impuissance culturelle, politique, économique; d'impuissance au niveau des origines même de la vie pour une société, ce qui t'explique mon recours à la notion, à l'expression et à la réalité sexuelle du "xala" dans la culture ouolof. Parce qu'il s'agit bien "d'une impuissance temporaire", de l'impuissance spécifique et passagère de cette bourgeoisie africaine, de "cette écume des surfaces" qui ne se confond qu'en apparence avec l'élément dont elle est issue, lequel, dans son mouvement naturel, la rejette et l'achemine inéluctablement vers les rivages des "épreuves inattendues" et de la mort, lente et effilochée plus souvent que brutale et déchiquetée.... 1

Sembene Ousmane further explains that this temporary impotence has a cure and this cure resides in the masses:

Sa solution se trouve dans "ces profondeurs océaniques" masquées aux regards distraits, par leur propre écume: elle est dans le peuple, il n'est jamais question, historiquement parlant, que d'un simple "xala" plus ou moins grave, plus ou moins dérisoire ou tragique mais toujours "passager". Voilà les références mythologiques que j'ai prises dans la culture ouolof de tous les jours pour faire ce film (roman) qui n'est

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1. Cheriaá, Tahar. "L'Artiste et la Révolution" - Interview with Sembene Ousmane, Cinéma-Quebec, op cit.

pas destiné uniquement au Sénégal,
ni même seulement à l'Afrique, mais
qui s'adresse à l'ensemble du tiers
monde.... 1

The influence of marxist ideology transpires in this unique role which Ousmane assigns to the masses - that of economically liberating the country. Although this imminent revolt is not as well developed as in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu, yet it is hinted at as a desired possibility in the future.

If Sembene Ousmane uses the symbolic mode, it is not because he is unable to grasp the meaning of reality but because he cannot "accept the conclusions to which the development of contemporary reality leads". Sembene Ousmane's realism consists in its merciless exposure of the socio-economic realities and in its faithful mirroring of the contradictions of life through the many tiered approach to reality.

Xala gives a profoundly conceived picture of the bourgeois society through the character of Beye, who is evidently a type and by giving detailed descriptions of Beye's way of life. His

1. *ibid.*

extreme attitude, passion and extreme fate show him as a type who depicts the life lived by parasitic businessmen in developing nations. Sembene presents the life of this group convincingly as that of exploiters and parasites. He exposes the wastefulness, and senselessness of such a life both for the individual, for the community and for the nation. This exposure of capitalist reality stems from a sense of indignation and from a desire for change. As he himself says:

l'Afrique doit lutter, aujourd'hui,
contre cette couche favorisée,
parasitaire de son propre corps
social, contre sa propre bourgeo-
isie. 1

The artistic success of xala resides in the fact that the author is able both to depict realistically the dynamics of his society as well as to invest his portrayal with a profound irony.

As at the end of Le Mandat, Sembene Ousmane gives poetic expression to the imminent revolt of the masses and herein lies the ideological implications of these two novels. The author boldly creates a fictional world in which the contradic-

1. Cheriaa, Tahaar. "L'Artiste et la Révolution",
op cit.

tions of a nascent capitalist society are quite apparent. All in all, we deal here with a literature of exposure which brings to light the deepest, most hidden problems of social evolution.

It is true that in these novels capitalism is shown to distort human personality, but as a proletarian humanist, the writer is aware that this trend is only a transitory historical phase, a period in the process of human evolution.

As an artist, Sembene Ousmane has successfully extracted meaningful symbols from everyday life. These symbols, as means of knowledge, aid in the revelation of truths. They fulfil an interpretative function in the process of effectively "apprehending and comprehending" contemporary experience. From the overwhelming influence of these two events, these symbols are made to arouse the consciousness of the reader to socio-economic, cultural and political problems. As Ousmane rightly explains:

Il va sans dire que, soulevant ces problèmes de contradiction; qui sont des problèmes de ma société actuelle,

c'est bien moi qui les enregistre, les analyse, les réduit à leurs données principales qui me paraissent propres à en faire l'exposition la plus claire, la plus accessible à tous ceux-là auxquels je veux les faire saisir nettement et aussi nettement que possible.... Autant dire que ce faisant, je m'engage. 1

In Le Mandat and xala, textual ideology manifests itself in the form of a realist depiction of a capitalist society, a critique and denunciation of the same reality as well as a belief in the redeeming function of the masses. Although this romantic-idealist strain is not as extensively portrayed as in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu, yet it stems from the same socialist-realist inspiration which is at the basis of the latter novel. This optimism is not an illusory one. Neither is it a romantic evasion from an uncomfortable contemporary reality. Rather, it stems from what George Lukacs has described as "optimism without illusion", that

passionate acceptance of the world as it is with all its inexhaustible multiplicity and incessant change, a passionate desire to learn from the world; love of reality, even though

1. Cheriaa, Tahar. op cit.

there are many abominations in it against which one has to struggle and which one hates - a love which is not hopeless because in the same reality one can see a road leading to human goodness - faith in life, in its movement, through human endeavour towards something better. 1

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1. Lukacs, George. op. cit. p. 224.

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CHAPTER FIVE

RICHARD WRIGHT AND SEMBENE OUSMANE:

THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The novels of Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane mark turning points in black literature. In their search for a new identity for the black man, both writers reject earlier models, that is the conventional Harlem Renaissance in contrast to the radicalism of McKay in the case of Richard Wright and "Negritude de source" in the case of Sembene Ousmane. Their basic difference with their predecessors is that their disaffection with contemporary reality does not manifest itself in lyrical forms or in some romantic, reactionary yearning for some lost, idyllic past. Rather it provides the foundation for their portrayal of the present with a profound and sharply critical realism within the novel form.

Only realism, the objective and factual representation of real life could have helped these novelists put into historical perspective

the experience of the most degraded and the most inarticulate sectors of the black world. The novels of Wright and Ousmane deal with contemporary reality, attaching great importance to setting as well as the use of realistic details for the purpose of building up the world in which their character move. Even when the details seem exaggerated as in The Outsider or when a recourse is made to the use of symbols as in Xala, the purpose to which these devices are subordinated is something realistic, that of the exploration of contemporary reality.

Realism comes out in these novels as transcending the average and the trivial. Rather it is a search for the deeper essence of reality which is hidden under the surface, a search which has been aided as we have demonstrated by the ideologies of Marxism and existentialism. Where the divergence exists is in how this essence is concretised in types who are the central category and criterion of realist literature.

As realist literature, these novels emphasise the mimetic and the didactic, and are therefore socially oriented. Racism, injustice, inequality,

dehumanisation by the industrial and capitalist system on the one hand and colonialism, neo-colonialism, poverty, and corruption on the other form the subject matters of these novels.

The novels of Wright and Ousmane are not exempt from the characteristic pitfalls of realism. The reader must contend with a physical density that is often overwhelming as is the case in Native Son and L'Harmattan. In a bid to make his point, the author accumulates details and the same point is made repeatedly even when the message is already clear. Furthermore, this missionary zeal often leads to authorial intrusion which undermines the tenet of objectivity that is characteristic of literary realism.

These novels, by the very nature of their literary mode, belong to the protest tradition. Inherent in realism itself are the burdens of social criticism and humanitarian sympathy. The status quo is always outraged by the depiction of the seamy side of social life as well as the revelation of uncomfortable facts. Because of this protest stance, the novels have come in for serious criti-

cism as being pessimistic and of not seeing any good in contemporary society. While it is admitted that these novels have been highly critical of society, it is also pertinent to note that they are written in an age when the grotesque is more in evidence than the sublime. Moreover, the contemporary world needs their criticism to complement its own one-sidedness and to alert it to its complacent optimism which is engendered by its over-confidence in materialistic values.

Wright and Ousmane are not so much pessimists as realists and herein lies in the first place the fundamental comparability of their novels.

Wright is considered as one of the originators of the concept of the "Third World" that is a collection of oppressed peoples generally the underprivileged nations of the world and mainly the black peoples of the world. The themes of all his novels justify this assertion and it is in this thematic concern that one should examine further his relationship with Sembene Ousmane.

The black condition and everything it implies constitute the major preoccupation of the novels

of Wright and Ousmane and it is this preoccupation which firmly establishes them within the black literary tradition. The theme of racism is central to the novels of both writers particularly Ousmane's maiden novel, Le Docker Noir (1956). However the variables of racism are different in the novels even though it is generally agreed in Native Son and Le Docker Noir that the basis of racism is essentially economic. Native Son focuses on the psychology of the black man who is born and bred in a racist society. It also highlights the sociological factors of racism. This novel is a milestone in the depiction of the race problem in black American literature because, for the first time, the Negro's impulse to submit or go under-ground when confronted with white hate is canalised into a form of violence which in the words of Frantz Fanon can be "a cleansing force". Thus through the concrete experiences of Wright's heroes (for the theme of race runs through all his novels) and through the social conditions described, racism becomes an over-riding factor as well as a live issue in his fictional world.

On the other hand, the theme of racism is unconvincingly painted in Le Docker Noir. Manifestations of racial prejudice are confined to highly prejudicial statements made by whites as in the case of the doctor-witness.

The racism exhibited by the newspapers in Le Docker Noir seems too crude and blatant. Although newspapers manifest serious racial prejudice in Native Son yet this aspect is borrowed from real articles published by the Chicago Tribune concerning a similar case to that of Bigger Thomas. Thus an element of authenticity is lent to the racist theme in Native Son. All in all the theme of racism is concretised and is therefore more convincing in Native Son than in Le Docker Noir.

The reason for the thematic flaw in Le Docker Noir is not simply due to the fact that this is a maiden novel. It must lie in the fact that racism is not as immediate to Sembene Ousmane's consciousness as it is to Richard Wright's. Racism is not as aggravated in the French society which is the social context of Le Docker Noir as it is in America. The psychological setting which is

characteristic of the American society is not evident in France although the French bourgeois society harbours certain prejudices against the black man. The basic division in Le Docker Noir is that of class.

The theme of racism as it is presented in the novel seems super-imposed and at variance with that of class. Moreover, there is a further division within the working class itself so that there are two mutually hostile working-class communities made up of Europeans on the one hand and Africans and West Indians on the other. Thus the union between race and class which is achieved in Native Son does not materialise in Le Docker Noir because there is lack of thematic focus in the novel. Thus, it is clear that Sembene Ousmane's attempt to transplant an American problem into a French society without the necessary modifications lead to inauthenticity and exaggeration.

In the colonial novels, Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple, Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu and L'Harmattan, the theme of racism is more realistically treated. Racism is incorporated into the background of the novels, thus

constituting the backdrop of the actions. The relationship between the white colonisers and the colonised is that of master and servant or that of the powerful and the weak. This division is transparently observable in the geographical space in these novels which is divided into the "quartier résidentiel" for the white masters and the "quartier indigène" for the black subjects.

The external physical segregation is symbolic of the social distance between the white and the black races. The lasting impression left by the separation at the geographical level and consequently at that of the level of interpersonal relationship between the blacks and the whites is that of two different races who are alienated one from the other. In the words of the narrator of

Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple;

Ainsi se cotoyaient deux mondes qui
ne se comprenaient pas, qui vivaient
sur la même terre, au rythme des
mêmes saisons et qui ne pouvaient
rien mettre en commun.... 1

Racism engenders alienation. On this point
the novels of Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane

1. Ousmane, Sembene. Ô Pay Mon Beau Peuple.
p. 210.

agree. However, while racism is a central concern of Wright's novels, it is not a major issue in those of Sembene Ousmane apart from Le Docker Noir.

The reason of differences in social context can also be adduced for the difference in the degree of importance given to the subject. While Wright's novels depict racism in an urban culture, Sembene Ousmane's colonial novels treat a fundamentally agrarian and traditional or feudal African society where the division is along caste line rather than on class or colour line. This is clearly evident in Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple. The element of racial prejudice is confined to a tiny minority of white racial bigots in the colonial administration.

Injustice and inequality are also common themes in the novels of Wright and Ousmane. Wright's heroes revolt against an unjust and alienating social system where there is inequality of opportunity between whites and blacks. Ousmane's heroes revolt against injustice of the whole economic structure which the ruling class

(be it white or black) expropriate the labour of the under-privileged or where the masses are alienated by the administrative structure as in Le Mandat.

Thus while it is true that the novels of Wright and Ousmane explore the same basic subject, that of the black condition, an in depth assessment of these novels show that their works are based on variations of this theme. While Wright's novels describe the alienation of the black man in an American society as well as his struggle against the very conditions which alienate him, the novels of Sembene Ousmane are pre-occupied with the same issues but in a different social context. Thus, their novels emerge in the words of Allan Swingewood as:

an interrogation of reality, the complex response of specific men who live out their lives within specific social groups, to the dominant social and political problems of their times. 1

In faithfully depicting the everyday destinies of black men, the novels of Richard Wright

1. Swingewood, Allan. The Novel and Revolution. London, Macmillan, 1975, .

and Sembene Ousmane have portrayed the great problems agitating the black world. As social realists, they see man as "zoon politikon", a social animal whose ontological being cannot be divorced from his social and historical environment. Besides, they portray heroes who struggle against reactionary forces and thus they are both radical writers. This is why all the themes in their novels, be it Native Son, Lawd Today, Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu or Le Mandat centre around inequality and injustice done to the black man who is invariably the underprivileged. Even in Xala, where the protagonist belongs to the commercial bourgeoisie, we have seen that he is thoroughly ridiculed to the delight of the down-trodden masses. This feeling of partisanship with the underprivileged or humanism is at the core of the aesthetics of the novels of Wright and Ousmane.

However, these novels arrive at their humanism through different though not divergent ideologies. This choice of differing ideologies has some significant consequences in the novels'

characterisation, plot structure and language all of which are the chief sources of realism and all of which are used to dissect precise elements of the black condition, each writer emphasising one item or the other. Wright's early works have been shown to be influenced by the marxist ideology. Moreover, he subscribes to the idea that economic relations are the real determinants of social life. Marxism is relevant to Wright's novels in as much as this ideology creates myths and symbols which inspire faith in life as it does in "Bright and Morning Star" and in this aspect it is pertinent to conclude that the inspiration of Wright's earlier works is in part similar to Sembene Ousmane's literary inspiration in that they are nurtured by the same marxist ideology.

After Native Son, the marxist bias in Wright's representation of contemporary reality disappeared completely in his subsequent literary works. This period as has been noted corresponds to his official exit from the American Communist Party. In Native Son, Bigger Thomas cannot fully

comprehend the theory of socio-economic determinism which the Marxist lawyer proposes in explanation of his life. When Bigger faces death, the only comprehensible explanation he finds for his life is an existential one. There is thus a tension between socio-economic determinism and free will at the core of the novel, which is resolved on the side of free will even though Max, the lawyer is present to represent the marxist point of view. Robert Bone sees this dichotomy of interest as a major flaw in Native Son. According to him, Wright is unable to integrate the marxist theory into the aesthetic fabric of his novel because the writer depends on an external influence that is the lawyer, to explain the marxist implications of the novel.¹

However, the ideological tension in the novels as well as the way it is resolved in favour of existentialism confirms that the dominant factor in the Wrightean oeuvre is existentialism rather than marxism. In The Outsider Cross Damon

1. Bone, Robert. The Negro Novel in America. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1958.

sees the whole structure of the Communist Party as being based on a struggle for power. Musing on the rivalry between the comrades;

he is startled by the revelation which dawns on him: Power! This was power he saw in action... it was a life strategy using political methods as its tools... Its essence was voluptuousness; a deep going sensuality that took cognizance of fundamental human needs. It related man to man in a fearfully organic way. To hold absolute power over others, to define what they should love or fear, to decide if they were to live or die and thereby revage the whole of their beings - that was a sensuality that made sexual passion pale by comparison. 1

Such negative criticisms of communism could only mean that this phase was a passing one in the career of Richard Wright and that he cannot be termed a proletarian writer despite his sympathy for the dispossessed.

Sembene Ousmane's novels on the other hand are more consistently marxist both in conception and execution than those of Wright. They are animated with an intense empathy with the exploi-

1. Wright, Richard. The Outsider. p. 198

ted class. These novels are very much concerned with achieving a sense of immediacy and therefore tend to dwell on historical circumstance. This is not to underplay the historical vision in Wright's novels also. As John Williams has rightly put it, "few American writers applied history to their work as Richard did".¹ However the differences in their use of history is evident in their plots. For both writers the plot constitutes the poetic form of reflecting reality. The novel is seen as the concrete historical understanding of reality and each writer's aim is to penetrate that reality.

However while Wright's novels deal with moments of crises in the lives of individuals, moments which are expected to represent the collective destiny of the black people, those of Ousmane deal with high points in the history of the community. In other words, Ousmane's plot can easily be interpreted as dealing with the totality of life since "the marxist philosophy of history analyses man as a whole, together

1. Williams, John A. The most native of sons.
p. 134.

with the partial achievement or non-achievement of completeness in periods of development.¹ A historical evolution can be traced from Le Docker Noir which deals with class antagonism to Vehi-Ciosane which deals with semi-feudal Africa, through Ô Pays Mon Beau Peuple and Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu which explore the colonial period and the beginnings of collective and class consciousness.

The colonial period is given a marxist interpretation for in the view of Ousmane, as in that of Wright, the basic issue of the black condition is first and foremost economic. This economic interpretation of history is also at the basis of Ousmane's post-colonial novels all of which constitute a critique of neo-colonialism. The entire economic infrastructure is not only reflected in Ousmane's novels as Wright does but corrected in them since the heroes embark on overturning the class structure of the society. There is thus the feeling for historicity and for historical

1. Lukacs, George. Studies in European Realism. "Introduction". p. 5.

change which is manifested in the depiction of the plot as a conflict of forces and the total moment of history is itself considered as process. The plot is therefore not meant to reflect the fortunes of either an individual or a given class alone. Rather;

it becomes a product of the men thrown into struggle by the specific contradictions of the given social formation... It expresses the content of the fundamental struggle with nature and with that society at its particular stage of development. 1

The theory of perception of these writers have aesthetic consequences on the level of characterisation. Wright's heroes are fundamentally outsiders who know the anguish involved in being outside the mainstream of society, because they are eternally trapped by their blackness. They reject marxist and religious options and seem to waver between Black Nationalism and an ethic of personal freedom both of which overlap in the consciousness of Bigger Thomas. The

1. Slaughter, Cliff. Marxism, Ideology and Literature. London, Macmillan, 1980, p.23,

hero is the intrinsic interest in Wright's novels and since his focus is on the individual, the author emphasises the psychology of the hero. Wright traces the evolution of his heroes who are singular, concrete individual black men who after living as caricatures of white notion of blacks, break out of their stereotyped and inauthentic existence in order to find an identity. In Native Son, The Outsider, Lawd Today, The Long Dream as well as in his short stories, Wright tests his heroes' reactions in different racial or social contexts; he examines the content of their thoughts, the psychological motives as well as the underlining emotions and mental processes of their actions.

Sembene Ousmane's characters are datable and locatable even though they are devoid of the psychological dimension of Wright's works. His characters are people who evolve in a human and material world. Besides, Ousmane's novels have a tendency for collective heroism as in Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu and L'Harmattan. What we hear is no longer the musing of a solitary hero but

that of the collective voice of the masses. Since Ousmane paints a society which is based on collective norms, his characters are social types who combine individuality and representativeness of the principal historical forces at work in a society. Since he does not focus so steadily on the individual as Wright does, there is much less ambiguity as to the representativeness of his heroes. Thus what Ousmane's novels lack in depth of characterisation, they gain in the broad vision of the black condition which they present.

The angle of vision in the novels of Wright and Ousmane as we have seen is obviously that of the underprivileged. In other words there is a moral concern which is basic to their work. However the element of struggle which is missing in Wright's novels is central to Ousmane's aesthetics. This disparity can also be attributed to the ideologies of these novels and of their writers. While the "bourgeois" writer, appreciates the expression of individual and typified sentiments, the 'ar'an writer

enjoys the picture of the struggle for a better condition by the masses. Wright posits a condition of alienation while Ousmane goes further to posit that this very condition of alienation is the same that must lead to the winning of human freedom and dignity.

Reflecting the humdrum reality of life as do the existentialist novels of Richard Wright does not fully account for the contradictory structure of the society as Ousmane's novels do. Wright's authorial and aesthetic ideology leads in effect to a tone of pessimistic despair which is transparent in all his novels. Except for the short story "Bright and Morning Star" Wright's fictional world is devoid of hope. This extreme vision is that of the existential man for it is in the nature of the existential imagination to speak of extreme situations,

the situation in which man's essential dignity is radically challenged by an unconscionable subversion of justice and an intolerable distance between master and slave. 1

1. Scott, A. Nathan, Jr. "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright", In Gibson, D. (ed). Five Black Writers. op.cit. p. 12.

cal stance into consideration.¹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi has argued that the latter Richard Wright is irrelevant both to the black American and the African. She asserts that Wright's novels are "psychologically distant compared to Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man or Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain for example. Wright may have lost physical contact with America but definitely he did not lose his psychological and spiritual contact with America; neither was his existentialism irrelevant to the black condition.

Statements such as C.O. Ogunyemi's do not take into consideration how a writer's personal ideology affects the way he represents human affairs in his works. Neither do they begin to cope with the difficult issue of the relationship between social experience, ideology and literature. Literature is both a product of the conscious and the unconscious. While the writer mirrors the contemporary society, he puts much of himself into his literary

1. See Widmer, Kingsley, "The Existential Darkness: Richard Wright's The Outsider and Redding, Saunders, "The Alien La. Richard Wright", In Gibson D. Id. Five Black Writers.

work at the same time and it is this mixture of both the unconscious and the conscious which determines the specificity of the literary work. Wright's conscious existentialist strain in his latter novels helps us to solve the ambiguity which plagued his earlier novels, thus revealing the real Richard Wright, who is nonetheless relevant to the assessment of the black condition.

Wright however viewed the black problem from within and his struggle democratic liberalism must not be confused with the impotent moralising of a James Baldwin. Wright's concern for the oppressed and the political mechanisms which made oppression possible over the world was real and he dissected both as someone who is at the centre of this dialectical relationship between the powers that be, the literary man and the oppressed masses. Wright pursued an ideal and he did so in pragmatic terms.

Wright's position in this respect is very much akin to that of a writer like Wole Soyinka whose scathing criticisms of the African contem-

porary society are made in the name of democratic humanism from the point of view of a writer who creates from within and not on the periphery of the black condition.

Yet one point must be made clear. Wright was writing on behalf of the black people mainly for a white audience because he was positive that blacks knew what he was writing about. This question of audience is basic to the works of these two novelists for it determines the characterisation, the tone, the language and overall message of their novels. Wrights heroes are expected to represent a whole people as Wright suggests in his "How Bigger Was Born". It is this representativeness which the American elite, both black and white found unbearable since ;

they did not want to believe what other negro writers - Du Bois for instance and Rayford Logan and Charles S. Johnson - had been for years telling them in academic terms, and by implication, and also by imaginative inversion. They did not want to believe that they were as helpless, as outraged, as despairing, as violent, and as hate-ridden as Wright depicted them.

But they were. 1

The problem in Wright's novels is not that of inauthenticity or irrelevance to the black condition. Rather it is the problem of typicality which besets all great realist writers. The realist writer desires his hero to represent, in its highest form, all the salient factors of the contemporary reality and he constantly runs the risk of his novel turning into a melodrama. The other flaw is the inadequate social actuality most especially in The Outsider and Lawd Today which tends to stretch the readers imagination. In other words, the faults in Wright's novels are artistic rather than perceptual.

Wright gives a black dimension to the existentialist ideology. All his heroes search for freedom. Bigger, Cross Damon, Jake Jackson and Fishbelly are against the submergence of their personal freedom in any impersonal kind of collectivism like family life or Communism. They abhor the lack of choice in their lives and the fact

1. Redding, Saunders, "The Alien Land of Richard Wright", In Gibson, D. Five Black Writers.
op. cit. p. 5.

that they may suffer from this lack forever, because they are black. Cross Damon's fate is even more acute because he is also an intellectual, modern man. However, the solitariness of Richard Wright's hero is not the basic solitariness of man as preached by the founding fathers of existentialism. It is that individual solitariness which is due to the hero's circumstances in life. It is neither the Heideggerean "thrownness - into - being ", the "Geworfenheit ins Dasein", whereby man is not only unable to establish relationship with things or persons outside himself but it is also impossible to determine theoretically the origin and goal of existence. The Heideggerean hero is ahistorical. Wright's hero is not. Conversely, Wright's concept of freedom is contingent on material, social, historical and psychological preconditions.

On the other hand to argue that the existential strain is foreign and badly adapted to the Negro theme as Irving Howe argues is clearly to

miss the point.¹ Anxiety, ennui, alienation and loneliness are all valid themes for the black American. Wright himself, who could not accept the way of life carved out for him by his black condition, lived in anxiety and forged his own personality in a world which did not offer him security and identity.

Wright was describing his vision of the black man as an outsider and in The Outsider, he makes the black man a parable of the modern man. However he was quite aware of the limitations of this vision for as Damon confirms as he is about to die, the existential option, when carried to its logical end is terrible and leads to the nihilistic form of revolt which Wright clearly rejects at the end of The Outsider. Thus existentialism, when applied to the black American condition loses the abstractness with which it is usually associated and dons a concrete and unique form.

Like Wright, Ousmane has also given a specifically black interpretation to marxism. Although he does not write party literature, the spirit of

1. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons", op.cit.

his novels is definitely that which is advocated by the founding fathers of socialist realism - Gorky and Mao. Ousmane's desired audience is the African masses although illiteracy hampers the complete realisation of this dream. Thus when he states that he writes for "le peuple", Ousmane is deeply aware of the limitations of his ideal. This is why he has moved nearer the people by adopting the film as a complementary medium to the novel, since the masses gain more access to his message through "l'ecole du soir".

Despite the differences in the novels it is clear that marxism and Existentialism are not as radically heterogeneous or incompatible as our study of these writers may have shown. Like Marxism, Existentialism believes in human freedom and is designed to reveal how things really are if we think about them deeply and open our eyes to our true position in the world. There is in all existentialist writings that desire to shock the reader out of his complacency. At the centre of marxism is this extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation.

The philosophy of existentialism seems to emerge whenever man finds his security threatened, when social structures are turned upside down, when human dignity is eroded by any type of encroachment, be it fascism, racism, capitalism or religion. In this wise it can be said that writers who adhere to these two ideologies do so out of a similar frustration which they experience in their environments. This conclusion is particularly valid in the cases of our two writers who in their works are virulent critics of their societies and advocates of social change.

Thus the basic complementarity of Marxism and existentialism is reflected in the thematic and stylistic concerns as well as the moral vision of Wright and Ousmane. As writers of the black condition and champions of the oppressed peoples of the Third World, their message is basically the same. As Ousmane puts it very simply, "j'escaie de detraumatiser mes freres"¹

1. In Cheriaa Tahaar, "Interview avec Sembene Ousmane", op cit.

Richard Wright had put it almost the same terms in 1938. He enjoined black writers to:

do no less than create values by which their race is to struggle, live and die.... to furnish moral sanctions for action to give meaning to blighted lives and to supply motives for mass movements of people. 1

Those messages have always been relevant in black literature and will always be. Thus implicit in the novels of these two writers is the aim of liberating the black people from their mental and physical alienation by revealing the meaning of black existence and in this wise reinvesting the black man with dignity. Thus the humanism and commitment of these novels which are manifested in the spirited mood of protest is a defence of black integrity.

1. Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing", op. cit.

CONCLUSION

Rene Wellek in his article "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship" has observed that "the discussion of the concept of realism is today again topical".¹ He attributes this revival to George Lukacs whose marxist literary aesthetics he judges to be "the most coherent theory of realism".² Wellek's assertion is not only relevant for Western literature, it is also for the Third World Literature and most especially black literatures.

The novels of Richard Wright and Sembene Ousmane are thoroughly ingrained in the social realist tradition. Since didacticism is implied or concealed in the realist theory, there is always a lesson of human pity, of social reformism and criticism. Thus our writers have not been able to close their eyes to the prob-

1. Wellek, Rene, "The concept of realism in literary scholarship", In Concepts of Criticism. (10th edition) New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978, pp.238-239.

2. *ibid* :

lems of their societies. Their novels demonstrate a mastery of social criticism and respond intensively to the varying problems of the black condition. The novelists maintain emotional contact with the ordinary exploited peoples of their societies and thus are able to reflect on their problems, hopes, achievements and failures. They are therefore black poetic historians who are able to reveal the complexities of the lives of the down-trodden with clarity and sincerity.

Realism presupposes commitment whether social, political or moral and in this respect it shares the most basic aspiration of all black literatures, since protest and commitment are today accepted as a matter of fact in these literatures. The novels we have analysed contain implicit or overt messages to the reader. One can thus posit that realism, that is the representation of contemporary social reality, is the basic literary mode in black literatures since the major preoccupation of these literatures is to focus on how literature deals with the

black man's specific experience.

Today, the thematic criticism of black literatures which is often referred to as the sociological criticism of that literature has proved inadequate in accounting for the specific subjects of realism and commitment. This criticism often accepts the author's explicit statements as proof of commitment and the exact reproduction of reality as proof of their realism. In this study, realism and commitment do not simply depend on verifiable subject matters alone. Rather, they are derived primarily from the structure of the texts themselves, the explicit statements of the authors as well as all other external sources thus providing authenticating evidences to our deductions.

By dwelling on aspects of plot, characterisation and material description in the novels, this study further enhances the realist assumption that a work of art is mimetic when not only its subject but also its structures are derived from human and contemporary experiences. The basis of this critical approach lies in the

acceptance of the fact that serious criticism is essentially a metalanguage or what Roland Barthes has called "a primary semantic system".

Realistic elements observable in the depiction of primary narrative worlds of the novels point in the first instance to the ideologies of the text. Thus by their plots, their social contexts which throw the contradictions of contemporary life into bolder relief as well as their actions which are presented as ideological expression of social movements and changes, the texts manifest their innate ideology.

The close attention to the formal aspects of the novels has led to illuminating discoveries. The point of view, symbols, irony as well as narrative strategies all make an ideological sense out of the fictional world the author has created. First it is this close attention to fictional techniques which opens the critics eyes to the textual ideology of the novels and thus to the essence and fundamental differences in the novels of the two writers. While humanism and didacticism, both of which are essential to realism, are

common denominators in their novels, Wright's humanism is a democratic humanism while that of Ousmane is a proletarian humanism.

The synthetic fusion of two critical methods, the "sociological" and the stylistic which is apparent in this study is dictated by the ideologies of the text, as well as the ideals of the black aesthetics. Marxist aesthetics is concerned with meaning as much as with form although it believes that the latter is a jumping board into the former. So also is existentialist aesthetics which, though it highlights existential themes, is concerned also with how these themes are worked out artistically. All black art can be judged on two levels, the social and the artistic. The latter, although a necessary part is not sufficient. According to Senghor, traditional art has at least three characteristics which are functionality, collective commitment and artistic perfection all of which have been taken into consideration in this study.

Besides, it is clear from this study that fictional technique relates back to the author's

metaphysics. Part of the critic's duty here is to analyse the former before arriving at the latter. The author's manner of drawing attention to contemporary reality of his time illuminates his own ideology as well, since he writes from a certain angle of vision. His relationship to that reality is apparent also in what he chooses to present out of contemporary reality. It is our believe that no comprehensive statement can be made about a black writer's works without the examination of his ideology and that of his text. This criterion is not only valid but inspiring and capable of being applied in our times.

Just as marxism and existentialism provide new ways of seeing the relationship between man and society, they also provide new ways of organising and expressing human experience in the novels of Wright and Ousmane. Ideology thus becomes the framework within which the writer as well as the critic can explore; interpret and evaluate perplexing events of the contemporary world. Thus, rather than determine the aesthetic

quality of the novels, as formalist critics often claim, ideology, in the final analysis becomes in this study an additional semantic potential of the text, directing the critic's ways of realising the potentiality of the texts.

Yet the richness of ideological interpretation of literary texts could not have been adequately savoured without borrowing the perspective and spirit of comparative literature. One of the domains of comparative literature is what John Fletcher has called "the promiscuous commerce between literature and ideas".¹ Furthermore, the study of realism beyond the boundaries of a national culture has led to illuminating ideas about black literature. From comparative evidences, it has been deduced that black literatures are not only characterised by their realism, but that their relationship to contemporary reality is ideologically determined. Consequently

1. Fletcher, John. "The Criticism of Comparison: The Approach through Comparative Literature and Intellectual History", In Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer. Contemporary Criticism. London, Edward Arnold Ltd., 1975, p. 128.

ideology is indispensable to a valid analysis of black literatures.

However, from our analysis of these novels it is clear that existentialism does not give as comprehensive an account of the black condition as marxist aesthetics both at the formal and thematic levels. There is evidently the need to complement the sociological vision of Richard Wright in his earlier novels with the latter ones in order to get the broad vision of the black problem which he wants to paint for his reader. Sembene Ousmane's mimesis of the African world is more organic, optimistic and comprehensive and therefore a more valid method of accounting for the black condition.

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