

On Domestic Violence in Richard Wright's Works

Yuan Fang

School of International Studies

Zhejiang University

Hangzhou, China

nancy0ann@126.com

Abstract—The research on Richard Wright pays more attention to the political and social values in his works, while the ethical values are ignored. The family ethical relationship is an important part of African American experiences in Richard Wright's works. And domestic violence has become an important aspect of ethical crisis in African American families. The frequent occurrence of African American domestic violence is due to the influence of the mainstream culture and the dual discrimination against black women. Wright's examination of the interpersonal ethics and psychological issues within the African American groups shows that he doesn't attribute the African American domestic violence all to white racism; within the black community, equality between men and women, the enhancement of black husband's responsibility and the correct understanding of the mainstream cultural ethics of the whites are all ways to solve domestic violence.

Keywords—Richard Wright, domestic violence, family ethical relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

Richard Wright (1908-1960) is an important representative writer of African American literature. As a writer with strong social responsibility and ethnical consciousness, Wright insists on recording the tears and inner entanglements of black people. He puts the real black living situation in front of the reader in a shocking form, causing people to pay attention to the survival of black people and the relationship between blacks and whites. As an important part of black life, family ethics is the focus of Wright's record of black people. In the past, Wright research paid more attention to the political and social values in his works, but the ethical values were neglected.

Family is a form of social organization based on marital and blood relationship. It is especially significant for black Americans. "Given the historical and sociological challenges African Americans have faced in keeping the family unit whole, the domestic space is a communal institution that has been coded culturally and literally as a collective buffer that combats the daily hidden injuries of racism. Although this buffer may yield and even bend to the pressures of outside forces, the family unit (and its attending sub-units) should still be viewed as an emancipatory representation of the multi-vocal and contradictory impulses of self-preservation and self-possession."^[1] Because of the enslaved and oppressed identities of African Americans, they are eager to find a sense of belonging and identity in the family, and resist the harm of racial injustice with the cohesion and healing power of the family. Family also plays the role of asylum in Wright's work, and at the same time Wright is clearly aware of the flaws and shortcomings of African American families. Domestic violence becomes an important

aspect of Wright's representation of ethical crisis in black families. Black males, with distorted family ethical views, use the threat of violence as a means of communication in the family. On the other hand, black women, suffering from aphasia under the dual oppression of racial and gender discrimination, choose to endure silently when they are subjected to domestic violence, and unconsciously become accomplices of the deformed social ethical mechanism.

II. DEFINITION AND ROOTS OF BLACK DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is a violation or abuse of one person by another person. It generally includes physical violence, mental violence and sexual violence, and is often carried out by intimate partners for the purpose of controlling. Women are the main victims of domestic violence. "Research shows that women are more seriously injured than men, and women are twice as likely to be killed by spouses as men. In general, women are more vulnerable than men to violent attacks by people who are intimately related to them (family members, former spouse, current and former marriage partner)."^[2] In African American society, domestic violence is particularly serious. "Two surveys conducted in 1975 and 1985 showed that black husbands' domestic violence against their wives was higher in frequency and extent than that of white husbands."^[3]

The frequent occurrence of black domestic violence is due to the influence of American masculinity and the double discrimination against black women. Black males have always been indoctrinated with the view that masculinity is equal to dominance and control, but in the mainstream social and political system with white supremacy, black males are unable to gain access to the dominant discourse system, and they can only gain the power and dominance from the family space. Black males equate masculinity with using violence to gain power. On the other hand, gender and racial discrimination against black women become catalysts for black domestic violence. White society take black men's domestic violence against black women as granted. "Black male violence against black females is the most acceptable form of acting out. Since the racist sexist white world sees black women as angry bitches who must be kept in check, it turns away from relational violence in black life."^[4] Under such distorted marriage ethics, many black men view violence against their wives as a means of controlling them and a legitimate channel for maintaining patriarchal masculinity. "The husbands who beat their wives think they are exercising power, safeguarding the normal order of the family, and punishing the wife's bad behavior."^[5] Many black women choose to silently endure domestic violence under the brainwashing of mainstream ideology, which becomes one of the causes of domestic violence. "It is men, not women, who

control the sociosexual and professional relationships in the black community.....This general climate fosters a situation where some Black women feel that they must subordinate their needs to those of Black men in order to help Black men regain and retain their manhood.”[6]

African-American writers Morrison and Walker have painted violent scenes of African-American families in their works, examining the painful living conditions of African Americans hurting each other. They trace the causes of such injuries, and call for black people’s complete survival. As a male writer, Wright doesn’t actively campaign for the vulnerable group of black women, but many scenes of domestic violence in his works reveal nakedly that black men have caused irreparable physical and mental damages to black women.

III. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ITS RESISTANCE STRATEGIES IN LAWD TODAY!

Lawd Today! tells of a day in the life of a black post office worker Jack. In the early morning, Jack is awakened from his sleep by the breeze outside the door, and he begins to shout at his wife. He wants to find a cup but cannot find it, so he is full of resentment towards his wife, “That bitch! How come she can’t never do nothing right? You can never find a thing you want when she’s around!” [7] He hears his wife Lil talking with the milkman outside the door, and he is dissatisfied, “What in hell can she find to talk about all the time? I certainly would like to know. And bawling her out don’t seem to do a bit of good neither. Yeah, she’s going to keep on with her foolishness till I teach her a damn good lesson one of these days. And furthermore, it ain’t right for a decent woman to stand talking commonlike that way to strangers. And she knows that!” [7] The short description of Jack’s psychological activities exposes his recognition of the provisions on female ethical behaviors in patriarchal society, i.e., a woman should try to reduce verbal communication with men other than her husband.

Because his wife chats with the milkman, Jack loses his temper and insults his wife. After the ineffective mental violence, Jack begins to commit physical violence against Lil. He gives her a heavy slap, “sounding like a pistol shot” [7]. When Lil makes a verbal rebellion, he gives her a slap again and twists her arm to the back, forcing her to yield with pain. The quarrel in the morning ends in silence. “He was quiet because he had won; she was quiet because she had lost.” [7] This sentence implies that males are dominated in patriarchal families. Under such ethical norm, Jack never allows his authority to be questioned, and regards his wife as his personal belongings. For example, Jack couldn’t find his own razor, and yells at Lil. When Lil helps him to find it and reminds him that it is he who puts it there, he is angry. Jack also often suspects that his wife is unfaithful. He takes his own razor and carefully checks whether there are other men’s hair. He even secretly sneaks home to see if his wife has a tryst with other men. Jack and Lil’s marriage lacks benign communication and trust. Jack violently deprives Lil of her right to speak, which foreshadows their marriage tragedy.

Jack maintains this male-dominated ethical status with mental and physical violence. However, he refuses to bear the ethical responsibility of being a breadwinner and protecting his wife which the social ethical norm prescribes. When his wife asks him for money to buy food, he ruthlessly refuses to accept

the husband’s role to support the daily expenses of the family. Jack also doesn’t fulfill the ethical responsibility of protecting his wife and children. Jack once deceives Lil, who is pregnant, to see a doctor for abortion. Lil loses her child without knowing it beforehand and could no longer have babies. The uterus is a female body organ, but under this social ethical mechanism, woman is a subordinate and she loses control of her body, and naturally she cannot have the right to choose to retain or give up the fetus in the womb. After the abortion, Lil needs to see a doctor all the year round and needs surgery because of a tumour. But Jack refuses to pay for her medical expenses, and doesn’t realize that curing his wife’s illness is his responsibility.

What is even more frightening is that domestic violence is not a hidden act in the family, but a public discussion in African American society. “Violence against Black women and children often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured. But these woman-hating acts are rarely discussed as crimes against Black women.” [6] When Jack’s friend Bob talks about his conflict with his ex-wife, Jack says, “the trouble with you is, you was too easy on your wife, you ought to see me beating down on old Lil this morning”. [7] In the conception of black men in the United States, beating one’s wife becomes a natural and even showable act. The social ethical mechanism guided by the white masculinity myth has seriously distorted the marriage ethics of black family.

In the face of Jack’s physical and mental violence, Lil’s attitude towards Jack develops from the initial fear to the later resistance. Lil’s rebellious strategy includes seeking asylum from religion, self-expression, seeking outside help, and physical violence. At the beginning, Lil’s fear of Jack is fully revealed by her physical movements. The tone of her conversation with Jack is very “tight”, and she “bit her lip and kept her shoulders stiff, as though expecting a blow” [7]. It shows that Jack’s domestic violence against Lil is commonplace. Lil’s earliest rebellious strategy is to seek religious asylum and escape. Lil devoutly believes in Christianity and hopes to heal her scarred heart with the power of religion. But religion obviously doesn’t protect her from domestic violence. Jack dismisses his wife’s religious beliefs and ridicules her, scorning the Christian brochures that his wife takes home, but he doesn’t realize that Christianity is a placebo for physically and emotionally abused wife. In the face of Jack’s provocation and insult, Lil chooses to escape, but in the end it intensifies domestic violence. Lil no longer keeps silent against Jack’s insults and her second resistance strategy is self-expression. Lil condemns Jack for his deception and escaping responsibility, asking Jack to pay for medical expenses for her surgery. She competes with Jack and fights for her own rights. The quarrel between Lil and Jack in the novel shows the verbal wisdom of African American women. They are not stupid and slow as black men think, instead they have mastered superb rebuttal art and debate skills.

Lil’s third resistance strategy is to seek outside help, which is an important part of fight against domestic violence. Women, as vulnerable groups, should seek outside help, and they are more likely to get out of the abyss of domestic violence by restricting their husbands’ behaviors through external social and judicial systems. However, Lil’s way of seeking outside help is not appropriate. She goes to Jack’s post office and complains about Jack’s domestic violence. Without restriction of judicial

system, Jack's domestic violence becomes aggravated. It also reflects that the concept that black women should be violently controlled inculcated by mainstream ideology has been deeply rooted in people. Even the black women themselves cannot trust the American judicial system with racism and gender discrimination to protect them, so they turn to other channels for outside help.

Lil's last resistance strategy is physical violence. At the end of the novel, Jack wants to squander the money he borrows from the post office for Lil's surgery in the brothel. He is deceived by a prostitute and beaten by her associates. Jack nearly breaks down with the humiliation of being deceived. After returning home, Jack wants to regain the trampled dignity by carrying out a domestic violence against Lil. This time, Lil chooses to use violence against violence. After being beaten and threatened to be killed by Jack, Lil raises a piece of broken glass and breaks Jack's head. The scene of domestic violence in the house becomes quiet after Jack bleeds and falls to the ground. The ending of the story doesn't explain whether Jack dies or not, but it is not important. What is important is that black men's attempts to show their masculinity in violence at home have failed. The end Wright arranges for Jack is meant to warn the black males who are guilty of domestic violence that black women would burst out of power they could not imagine under uninterrupted violence. "The violent black male has no real sense of agency, no real will to live." [4] Jack has always demonstrated his strength and masculinity with violent behavior. In fact, he has neither strength nor masculinity. He is supervised by whites when he is working. He is deceived and beaten in social space after work, and his groggy state of mind in most situations shows his lack of motivation and strength. Only when black males have healthy marriage ethics, reasonably understand masculinity and ethical norms under white ideology, and realize that having family responsibility and caring for their wives are also manifestations of masculinity, can they have true strength.

IV. SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL VENTING IN "LONG BLACK SONG"

American cultural critic Bell Hooks believes that black men are easily addicted to sex because it is the main source of satisfaction for them. "Despite continued racial exploitation and oppression, when it came to sexual performance, black men in the segregated world of black sexuality could control everything and be the star of the show. In that world black males from any class, whether individually or in groups, could find affirmation of their power in sexual conquests." [4] Sex is supposed to be a process in which both men and women voluntarily express intimacy and enjoy physical pleasure. However, in black male and female sexual relations, black males equate sexual discourse with conquest and obedience, and black females lose their willingness to express themselves. The body of black female becomes a tool for men to vent their sexual desires and continue their blood. Women cannot have their own passions, but passively accept men's control over their bodies and desires. Black women are to be marginalized, and black men control and discipline women's passions by developing various ethical norms.

Most of the black women in Wright's works are victims deprived of sexual choices and willingness. Sarah in "Long Black Song" is one of them. Sarah is a black housewife. Her husband has a certain amount of financial resources, so Sarah does not need to go out to work like other black women. Since her husband often goes out to do business, Sarah is very lonely when she is alone at home with her kid. A white salesman appears at the door of Sarah's house and takes the opportunity to rape Sarah with the excuse of asking for a drink of water. In order to conceal the historical fact that the slave owners turn the female slaves into sexual slaves and machines for giving birth to children during the slavery period, the whites rationalize the rape of the black women by the whites, and shape the black women into the image of vamps in the mainstream culture. So white men's rape of black women is not a crime. The black woman who is supposed to be the victim of rape is distorted into a lascivious woman who actively seduces a white male. In this ethical context, Sarah has no control over her body and can only be slaughtered by white males like animals.

After suffering from sexual violence by white males, Sarah suffers from another violent injury. The black husband who is supposed to give support and comfort become a new injury maker. Sarah's husband, Silas, is a leader among black men. He emulates the whites to do business and has a certain amount of wealth from scratch. "Silas was as good to her as any black man could be to a black woman. Most of the black women worked in the fields as croppers. But Silas had given her her own home, and that was more than many others had done for their women. Yes, she knew how Silas felt. Always he had said he was as good as any white man." [7] Silas not only emulates whites in his career, but he also follows the whites in ethical norms. The fact that he is "good" to Sarah shows, on the one hand, his recognition of the patriarchal ethical order, and on the other hand the external manifestation of his desire to compete with whites. The control of socio-economic resources gives Silas a certain power, and Silas, like whites, uses this power to achieve gender oppression of women. "In the traditional marriage model, the division of labor between men and women provides men with greater power.... some men may use this power to influence their wives' choices. For example, a man with strong financial ability may insist that his wife not go to work to maintain his authority in the relationship." [2] As a family member with more social resources, Silas let his wife not go to work in the field like other black women. It shows that he cares for his wife, but at the same time he uses his power to control his wife. After returning home, Silas discovers the phonograph left by the white male. He doesn't find out the truth through normal communication, but directly obtains information from his wife through emotional violence such as insults and intimidation. After discovering the handcuff of the white male in the bed, Silas is furious and the emotional violence against his wife evolves into physical violence. He takes out the whip and whips Sarah just as the slave owner whips slaves. Silas' physical violence against his wife is a recurrence of slave owner controlling slaves. Just as the slave owner denies the humanity of slaves, Silas also ignores his wife's subjectivity and materializes his wife into his personal property. At the end of the story, Silas bravely shoots a few whites and ends up with the whites. Silas's move is not only a rebellion against racial persecution, but also a rebellion against white males who infringe on his personal possessions, and a

maintenance of male dignity defined by patriarchy. “Rape is a man's violation of another man, and a harm to ‘his woman’.”[8] Silas is defined as a positive role with his spirit of resisting racial persecution, but behind his rebellious spirit, Silas' desire for power and materialization of his wife cannot be ignored, which is the key point to understand the development of the story.

On the other hand, Sarah's performance in the process of rape shows that she releases her suppressed sexual desire to some extent. Sarah responds little by little to the white man's caresses. “A wave of warm blood swept into her stomach and loins. She felt his lips touching her throat and where he kissed it burned.....Her lips felt his and she held her breath and dreaded ever to breathe again for fear of the feeling that would sweep down over her limbs.” [7] These descriptions indicates that Sarah's long-suppressed sexual needs have been awakened to some extent. She has been saying “no”, which is an insincere reaction under patriarchy, but her body is step by step, catering to the white salesman and enjoying the pleasure of intercourse. More than a rape, it is a subversion of existing ethics and power mechanism. When most black women doesn't realize that their blind observance of patriarchy is suppressing their own nature, Sarah listens to her inner desire and breaks through the social ethics. Sarah's sexual catharsis is a manifestation of women's freedom and equal personality in marriage and family. In a sense, she has gained true freedom.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Because of the radical protest theme in his work, Wright becomes the ancestor of “protest novel”, but he is not just a protest writer, he is also a constructive writer. He records the ethical crisis of African American families, and reveals the distortion of family ethics under the control of white ideology. At the same time, however, Wright's examination and revealing of the interpersonal ethical relationships and psychological problems within the black ethnic group show that he doesn't blame all the domestic problems faced by the blacks on white racism; within the African American group, equality between men and women, the enhancement of black husband's responsibility and the correct understanding of the mainstream cultural ethics of the whites are all ways to solve domestic violence in African American families. Reducing domestic violence in African American marriages requires the joint efforts of the entire American society. Black men need to change the misconception that masculinity equals to violence and domination. Black women should also raise their sense of self-protection and resistance. Both husband and wife should learn to deal with their conflicts in a peaceful way. At the same time, American mainstream society also needs to change the misconceptions about black domestic violence and truly protect the legitimate rights and interests of black women. In Wright's some works, black women are no longer simply victims of domestic violence, but become female warriors who actively resist and subvert patriarchal family ethics. Wright arranges tragic endings for most of the perpetrators of domestic violence. Through these immoral examples, Wright realizes the ethical teaching function of literary creation to punish evil and promote goodness, and provides moral warnings and teachings for modern people.

REFERENCES

- [1] Henderson, Carol E, “Notes from a Native Daughter: The Nature of Black Womanhood in Native Son,” Ana Maria Fraile ed., Richard Wright's Native Son. New York: Amsterdam, p. 62, 2007.
- [2] Brehm, S. Sharon, Intimate Relationships, Guohui and Xiaobin trans., Beijing: Posts&Telecom Press, pp. 298, 255, 2005.
- [3] Jackson, Nicky Ali ed. Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence, New York: Routledge, p.1, 2007.
- [4] Hooks, Bell, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity, New York: Routledge, pp.53,58,67,2004.
- [5] Cornell,R.W.,Masculinities, Liu Li trans., Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, p.297, 2003.
- [6] Collins, Patricia Hill, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, New York: Routledge, pp.157,159,2000.
- [7] Wright, Richard, Early Works: Lawd Today!, Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son. Arnold Rampersad ed. New York: Library of America, pp.9,17,14,22,73,10,347,338,1991.
- [8] Millett, Kate, Sexual Politics, Song Wenwei trans., Nanjing:Jiangsu People's Publishing Ltd., pp.52-53,2000.