



Social Conflict in Richard Wright's *A Father's Law*

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Abstract

Social conflict is the struggle for power in society. It occurs when two or more people oppose each other. Social conflict in America is a complex and enduring issue that encompasses a wide range of challenges, tensions and divisions within the nation. This article provides an overview of the multifaceted nature of social conflict in America, highlighting the issues of race, class and generational conflict. Through Ruddy Turner's experience, the author Richard Wright provides an insight into the broader societal and personal clashes. This article attempts to analyse Richard Wright's novel, *A Father's Law* to portray the conflicts experienced by the African Americans, due to race and class issues in American society.

Keywords: Struggle, oppression, discrimination, conflict.

Social Conflict in Richard Wright's *A Father's Law*

Richard Wright is an African American writer born on 1908 in Mississippi. He has authored number of novels, short stories, poems and non-fiction. He was one among the first African American writers to protest against the racial discrimination in America. Richard Wright uses a style called naturalism to connect cultures with literature and society. His important works are *Native Son*, *The Outsider* and *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Generally, the conflict arises due to disagreement between two people or groups that remains challenging to be resolved. These disputes not confined to a specific society but rather persist in universal level of human existence. Several key factors, currently contribute to the emergence of conflicts within the society, which are misunderstanding, lack of opportunities and miscommunication, differences and discrimination. Indeed, Richard Wright was known for incorporating the effects of social conflict into his novels.

Among the novels of Richard Wright, *A Father's Law* is a fascinating work and final literary gift from him. This novel delves deep into the complex conflicts faced by its protagonist, Ruddy Turner, who is not only a black man but also an elderly person in his family and American society. Within the novel, the social conflicts are analysed through three primary spheres. They are race, class and generational conflicts. This novel vividly portrays the racial conflict, using Ruddy Turner's role to explore the ongoing racial tensions and challenges that persist in American society. His position offers insight into the struggles and discrimination faced by the Blacks in position of authority.

Racial issue persists as a common and deep rooted problem in American society. The African Americans have a long history of facing racial discrimination, from slavery and segregation to ongoing systemic issues. The Blacks frequently face insults and violence due to their skin colour and ethnicity. Philomena Essed, in her work *Understanding Everyday Racism*, makes a thought-provoking statement about the nature of racial oppression and the pervasive issue of racism in society. She also states:

Once we recognize that racial oppression is inherent in the nature of the social order, it becomes clear that the real racial drama is not racism but the fact that racism is an everyday problem. When, as we shall see, racism is transmitted in routine practices that seem "normal," at least for the dominant group, this can only mean that racism is often not recognized, not acknowledged-let alone problematized-by the dominant group.(10)

In the novel *A Father's Law* someone, like Ruddy, who holds the position of a police officer, experiences hesitation when living in Chicago along with white neighbours. Extreme fear, hatred and anger forbid the black people to mingle with the Whites. All such characteristics resist Ruddy to perform his duties and take any action against the white people in Chicago. Thus, the racial inequality affects the mental health of a person and induces the feeling of insecurity around them. This scenario highlights the enduring racial tensions and inequalities that continue to haunt in the life of Black Americans.

Not only the black people face discrimination, but various other minority groups also endure racial bias in American society. One such community is the Jewish community that has faced historical discrimination and persecution, including the Holocaust. In the contemporary America, they still encounter anti-Semitic stereotypes and occasional acts of violence which serve as painful reminders of the past. Even Ruddy, being a black man, is annoyed sitting along with

Ed Seigel. Because Ed Seigel is a Jew and Ruddy is a black Catholic, therefore, he always keep a distance from the Jews. According to Ruddy, "He liked him, yet he feared that if he had too much to do with him, people would think that he was too intimate with an unpopular minority. And Ruddy loved being with the majority; he respected the wishes of the community; indeed, he loved the laws and rules of the community with an abiding and intense passion" (A Father's Law 26). In order to establish a change, building bridges among communities can help reduce stereotypes and biases and promote unity and cooperation among all minority groups in America.

Furthermore, class conflict represents another persistent social injustice in America. Class conflict in America is an ongoing problem where different groups of people do not get along. It is a longstanding issue that continues to divide society. Income inequality is a central facet of class conflict that remains as a prominent concern in the contemporary America which means some people have a lot of money while others struggle to make both ends meet. This conflict arises from disparities in wealth, income and access to opportunities among different classes within the country.

About class conflicts in the book Manifesto of the Communist Party, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx both emphasize the pervasive nature of class conflict in historical development. They argue that throughout history, people have been facing continuous conflict between race, class and various groups within a society: "Historical development is a continuous conflict, a conflict of interests, a conflict of races, a conflict of classes. And if friendship does not count even in ordinary business, how much less so in such a conflict. Good naturedness and sentimentality have no place in politics. They have never won a victory, but have bought unnumbered defeats" (48).

Within the realm of class conflict, Brentwood Park stands as a striking example. Those people residing in Brentwood Park are wealthy individuals with prestigious professions like bankers, presidents, plant managers, newspaper owners and politicians. They live in big houses surrounded by their servants along with their children. They live their life in an extravagant way. According to them: "They don't want their daughter's misdeeds written down in black and white to be used against them later. And when a rich son out there gets in trouble, there's a million dollars to help him get out of it" (FL 43). Consequently, when innocent people are wrongly accused of crimes they did not commit, they may remain imprisoned for the rest of their lives due to the influence and resources of the wealthy residents.

Ruddy could see at Brentwood Park tall apartments and the streets filled with cafes, restaurants, bars, laundries, amusement arcades etc. It looks like an artificial town to Ruddy. He could also see dark dense forest which has enough space for them to let their cars in. The driver tells Ruddy that most of the crimes tend to occur within the hotels and the private homes but not in the forest. When Ruddy asks for the reason the driver says: "Millionaires don't want to get their feet muddy" (63).

Ruddy feels as if he is in an alien ground. This is different from that of Black Belt. Thus the people of Brentwood Park live such an aristocratic life. Ruddy also admits and says: "This town was built to give people an excuse to spend money" (64). This land is mainly for the people who is a native American, rich, proud and free. Whereas, the Blacks live their life in a Black Belt area with no basic facilities. Comparing the life of both Brentwood Park and Black Belt area, Tommy says to Ruddy that: "It'll not be like enforcing the law in a Black Belt area. There, the folks believe in the law even when they violate it. They do it sneakily, in the dark, sweating and trembling. They know they are doing 'wrong' when they do 'wrong'. But in Brentwood Park the law is violated in the light of day, in the sunshine, with hundreds looking on." (74)

The rich people do not hesitate to ruin the life of the poor people. Those poor people who work for the rich people, such as the maids, cooks and butlers in Brentwood Park feel danger every time. Thus, the servants do not lead a safety life. Bill, the commissioner, tells Ruddy that in the last six months there were eighteen reported cases of housemaid pregnancy. Many such crimes go unnoticed, not being reported. Bill trains Ruddy about his work very clearly and appoints him to punish the criminals who all belong to the high class in the society. Bill tells Ruddy: ". . . when a rich man does something, its done in a manner different from what a poor man would do. . ." (FL 45). Even the crimes done by the rich people are not pointed out as crimes. Thus, Bill instills courage into Ruddy to punish the corrupted rich youth and send him among the people of Brentwood Park. Consequently, Ruddy is sent to enforce law among the lawless people. While there has been notable progress made in the persistent problems related to race and class in America, it requires ongoing dedication and action to achieve lasting change.

Generational conflict refers to the clash or tension that arises among individuals from different age groups or generations. This type of conflict is commonly observed in various settings, including workplaces and families. The underlying psychology behind generational conflict often revolves around the belief held by each generation that their approach and values are correct, while viewing the other generation's perspective as wrong or outdated.

The novel, A Father's Law vividly portrays the generational conflict between Ruddy and his son, Tommy. Generational conflict between a father and son is a common and complex issue that arises due to differences in values, experiences and perspectives shaped by the distinct eras in which each generation grew up. Ruddy's perception is that his son is not a straightforward person. He believes that Tommy is keeping more secret away from him: "Ruddy was intelligent enough to realize that there was something in him that was clouding his vision of his son, and that no matter how hard he had tried, he had never been able to erect the kind of father and son relationship he had always dreamed of and wanted." (6) Ruddy feels that father and son relationship is not good enough between them. He does not understand the reason behind it. Ruddy could understand that there is resentment in the heart of Tommy about him. But he could not figure out the purpose behind it because Ruddy has given everything Tommy would ask for. Tommy accepts every gift which is given to him with a slight attitude of mockery. Ruddy could feel that there is some sort of secret behind that ironical smile of his son. Ruddy feels that Tommy is not sharing anything with him. Ruddy thinks it is the generation

gap that separates the bond between them. Thus, generational conflict is a natural part of family dynamics and acknowledging and addressing these differences can lead to stronger relationships between both the father and the son. To conclude, solving social conflicts in American society is a complex and ongoing process that requires collaboration of the individuals, the communities and the organizations. Additionally, conflict resolution mechanisms, such as negotiation will be playing a vital role in managing disputes and promoting harmony within the communities and the families.

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