

Stereotypes and African Asian Solidarity in Richard Wright's *The Color Curtain*

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In *The Color Curtain* (1956), Wright provides a report of the Bandung Conference that was held in Kuala Lumpur between April 18th and 25th 1955. Wright represents the meeting in paradoxical ways that reveal both his disdain of traditions and religions and his respect for Asian African solidarity at the same time. *The Color Curtain* has condescending and patronizing statements about the Asian informants with whom Wright talked prior to the Bandung Conference and the African and Asian delegates whose speeches he heard at the summit. Wright's irreverent remarks about Asians and Africans reveal prejudices that contradict the criticisms that he makes in the book about the impact of European colonialism on people of color.

Yet *The Color Curtain* also contains occasional statements in which Wright openly declares his support for the independence of Asians and Africans from Western colonialism. Like most of the Asian and African delegates at the Bandung Conference, Wright predicted the clashes that could occur between the West and the Third World when the former's colonial experience has lingering effects that sustain the wall of socio-economic, cultural, and political oppression on the previously-colonized nations of Asia and Africa that the concept of "The Color Curtain" identifies. He uses the concept of the "color curtain" to describe "mighty," "turbulent," and "stormy" currents of racially defined oppositions that Westerners set in "human intercourse" (194). This meaning of the term "The Color Curtain" is suggested in a Jeffrey J. Folk's argument that "in *The Color Curtain* Wright recognizes that the social environment under colonialism had created structures of dependence that were not easily removed in newly independent countries" (79).

In an attempt to understand *The Color Curtain's* representation of the prolonged effect of colonialism on newly independent countries, this essay examines the book's representation of Asians and Africans and the positions that Wright took in the resistance of these people against their former colonizers during troubling times when he was personally also involved in the liberation struggle of African Americans. A crucial question is: How does Wright anticipate in *The Color Curtain* the current crisis in the relationships between the West and the formerly colonized countries hereafter called "the Third World"? In asking these questions, this essay hopes to uncover the blend of radicalism and self-righteousness in Wright's attitudes towards Asians and Africans.

Literature Review

Most studies of Wright's relationships with people of color outside of the United States tend to focus on Africans. While such scholarships which include Chimalum Nwankwo's "Richard Wright: A Dubious Legacy" (1996), John Cullen Gruesser's *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa* (2000), and Femi Ojo-Ade's "Africa and America: A Question of Continuities, Cleavage, and Dreams Deferred" (1996) overlook Wright's exploration of the relationships between Africans and Asian, they successfully represent the author's ambivalence towards Africa.¹ For instance, Ojo-Ade contends that Wright "cast Africa out of his psyche" (16) and that "his [Wright's] self-hate, resulting from White racism and Black rootlessness, pushes him to become the *Outsider*" (15).

Moreover, scholars of Wright's attitudes towards Blacks have represented them mainly in terms of discontinuities and ruptures from the Third World. For instance, S. Shankar describes Wright's representation of Africa as primitivism. Using Wright's *Black Power* (1953) as an example, Shankar argues that the book depicts the Gold Coast "as [being] ontologically of a primitive status in relation to the West to which he [Wright] belongs" (14). Establishing connections between *Black Power* and *The Color Curtain*, Shankar states:

In *The Color Curtain*, for example, Wright declares after surveying the behavior of Asian delegates traveling to the Bandung Conference in the same aircraft as his, "It was rapidly dawning on me that if the men of the West were political [i.e. scientific and rational] animals, then the men of the East were religious animals." (14)

Although they are grounded on actual evidence from Wright's writings and life, Shankar's statement weakens *The Color Curtain's* significance as a narrative of resistance against Western colonialism. Despite its arrogance towards Africa and Asia, *The Color Curtain* is a nationalist text since it explores the consequences of colonialism on Africans and Asians and suggests alternatives to the effects of colonial violence in the Third World.

In addition, Wright's book reveals connections between the racial situation in the United States and colonialism in the Third World. As M. Lynn Weiss suggests, in spite of his resistance to the worldview of Africans, Wright "saw a parallel to the American experience of a colonial people's struggle to become an independent nation" (24).

While he continued to develop condescending and Eurocentric remarks about Africans and Asians, Wright remained committed to their freedom from the West, even when his individualism and elitism contradicted his association with African political leaders such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and Kwame Nkrumah. Wright shared with these leaders a respite for Western expropriation of Africa's resources and the belief that the struggle for Third World independence would endure as long as racial

and ethnic prejudices and poverty continued to affect the lives of colonized peoples.

In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy decries the ways in which critics have avoided to examine the anti-essentialist concept of race in Wright's writings and "the fortifications which critics have placed between the work [Wright] produced in America and the supposedly inferior products of his European exile" (155). One way to fill these gaps is to discuss Wright's anti-essentialist concept of race in the framework of his participation in Asian and African anti-colonial resistance against exploitation. This method shows the assiduous ways in which Wright invested his life and talent in Third World struggle. This approach will reveal what Carla Cappetti praised as Wright's desire to grapple "with the important philosophical and aesthetic questions of modernity, racism, and alienation" and his bold excavation of "the buried archeological layers of American modernity, specifically 'Black modernity'" (43). Wright conceived of this modernity as the capacity to transcend the narrow concept of Black racial identity on which slavery was founded and move towards a broad understanding of humanity. Gilroy writes:

Wright saw the Negro as "America's metaphor," a historical and social construction which was intimately related to the institution of racial slavery and which corresponded to no fixed cultural or biological attributes common to blacks: : "Truly, you must know that the word Negro in America means something not racial or biological, but something *purely social*, something made in the United States . . . This simple insight, expressed repeatedly in what we might today recognise as an anti-essentialist conception of racial identity, is something that has confounded and perplexed many of Wright's American critics. (149)

Gilroy's statement shows that Wright's theory of race was based on the perception of identities as fluid and social, rather than rigid and inherent. Yet, even though it is anti-essentialist, Wright's theory of race is radical because it springs from an unflinching confrontation of White supremacy. In *White Man, Listen* (1957), Wright portrays this supremacy as one of the factors that have prevented the full integration of Blacks in American society. Describing the state of Black America in the early twentieth century, Wright asserts:

The gains they [Blacks] won fastened ever tighter around their necks the shackles of Jim Crowism. For example, every new hospital, clinic, and school that was built was a *Negro* hospital, a *Negro* clinic, a *Negro* school!, So, though Negroes

were slowly rising out of their debased physical conditions, the black ghettos were growing ever larger; instead of racial segregation lessening, it grew, deepened, spread. (85)

This quotation shows that Wright considered African American identity as a constant struggle for freedom from socio-economic and racial oppression. His attendance of the Bandung Conference was an attempt to understand this identity and struggle on a global scale. His defense of Third World interest is undoubtedly foiled by his biases towards Africans and Asians traditions and his over-exaggerated Western concepts of modernization and rationality that he unnecessarily pits against the hypothetical superstitions of the Third World. Yet, while he praises Western modernization and rationality, Wright firmly criticizes it for hampering African and Asian development. In this sense, his relationships with Africa, Asia, and the West transcend either/or binaries.

Any study of Wright's relations to Asians and Africans must begin with an acknowledgement of his split identity. On the one hand, Wright was both Black and American. On the other hand, he was both a spokesperson of African American resistance against racism and a defender of Western concepts of democracy, freedom, and individuality against the Third World. In so doing, he blended Western universalism with Third Worldist anti-colonialism. As Ralph Dumain suggests, Wright also integrated cosmopolitanism, militant individualism, secularism, and iconoclasm (135). Yet, this mixture of ideologies did not weaken Wright's racial consciousness or his status as a Third World intellectual, since he perceived all these discrete backgrounds as complimentary in his universalistic humanism. In Wright's worldview, the struggle for racial and individual liberation coexisted in the same way the resistance for national sovereignty and cultural freedom cohabited. Wimal Dissanayake writes:

On the one hand, Richard Wright was a nationalist who was genuinely interested in the national identity and sovereignty of newly independent countries, particularly in Africa. On the other hand, he did not subscribe to the rather simplistic notion entertained by many Third World leaders and opinion makers that modernization was inimical to the growth of Third World societies and that they had to resist this process if they were to retain their cultural identity. (485-486)

The above quotation stresses the blend of nationalism and modernism in Wright's analysis of Third World's struggle for independence that one can clearly notice in his interpretation of African Asian solidarity in *The Color Curtain*.

Wright's Views on African Asian Solidarity

Wright's image of African Asian unity is apparent in the interviews he had with Asian individuals before the Bandung Conference and in his interpretation of the speeches that were delivered at the convention. In both contexts, Wright suggests a blend of condescension and admiration for Third World nationalism. On the one hand, he represents the Africans and Asians delegates with contempt as political figures that he saw as reinforcing colonialism through cultural and religious essentialism. Yet, on the other hand, he occasionally depicts these leaders with esteem by rallying with their solidarity and struggle against racialism and colonialism.

Wright's positive representation of Third World nationalism is visible in the spirit of solidarity that he felt with the Asians and Africans at Bandung. The conference was one of the first and largest meetings of the twentieth century between leaders from Africa and Asia. Merze Tate explains: "Here in the young Republic of Indonesia assembled representatives of twenty-nine nations and a billion and a half people, or fifty-three percent of the world's population, from 12,606,938 square miles of the earth's surface" (263). The participants included Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, Kwame Nkrumah, Prime Minister of the Gold Coast [current Ghana], Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, Chou En Lai, Premier of China, Ho Chi Minh, Prime Minister of Vietnam, and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of the United States. The Asian countries that were represented included Afghanistan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, North Vietnam, and Yemen (Kahin 1). The leaders from Africa came from independent and nearly independent nations such as Ethiopia, the Gold Coast, Liberia, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and the Sudan (1). Wright describes these participants as

the despised, the insulted, the hurt, the dispossessed—in short, the underdogs of the human race [who] were meeting. Here were class and racial and religious consciousness on a global scale. Who had thought of organizing such a meeting? And what had these nations in common? Nothing, it seemed to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel. This meeting of the rejected was

in itself a kind of judgment upon that Western world! (*The Color Curtain* 12)

The quotation shows Wright's identification with Third World liberation struggle for independence from colonialism. Wright's identification with this resistance is apparent in his perception of the Asian and African delegates at the Bandung Conference as victims of a long Western subjugation that alienated, divided, and weakened them just as African Americans had been debilitated in America for generations. Listing the goals of the conference, he states:

- a. to promote good will and co-operation among the nations of Asia and Africa, to explore and advance their mutual as well as common interests and to establish and further friendliness and neighborly relations;
- b. to consider social, economic, and cultural problems and relations of the countries represented;
- c. to consider problems of special interest to Asian and African peoples, for example, problems affecting national sovereignty and of racialism and colonialism;
- d. to view the position of Asia and Africa and their people in the world today and the contribution they can make to the promotion of world peace and co-operation. (13)

By listing the objectives of the conference, Wright suggests their practical and urgent nature and his desire to see them achieved. In this sense, Wright recognized that the Bandung meeting was important in its own right as an opportunity for Asians and Africans to develop common strategies that could allow them to free and modernize their countries and play vital roles in international relations and world security.

Yet Wright's identification with Third World resistance of Western oppression in *The Color Curtain* is problematic because he develops acerbic and paternalistic opinions about the solidarity among the Asian and African personalities whose dilemma he seems to understand. Though he acknowledges the nationalist nature of the Bandung Conference, he expresses prejudices towards it by representing the nations who organized it as religion countries. He writes: "The nations sponsoring the conference—Burma, India, Indonesia, Ceylon, and Pakistan—were all religious. . . . This smacked of something new, something beyond Left and Right. Looked at in terms of history, these nations represented *races* and religions, vague but potent forces (13). This statement suggests the negative impact of Wright's elitism and contempt for religion on his nationalism, anticipating the Western

prejudices towards the traditions of nations with large Moslem or Arab populations since the mid-twentieth century.

Wright's Early Stereotypes of Bandung

In *The Color Curtain*, Wright's Western stereotypes about Asians are apparent in a questionnaire that he had compiled with the help of the sociologist Otto Klineberg weeks before he arrived in Indonesia. Using this survey, he collected the responses of educated Asians of different nations and occupations about the role of nationalism, traditions, Western culture, and religion in their postcolonial states. John M. Reilly writes:

Wright first administered the questionnaire to an Indonesian-born Dutch journalist; then he presented his questions to an Eurasian woman, a Westernized Asian educator of middle age, a full-blooded Indonesian student of political science, and a journalist from Pakistan. With the same evident empirical bent, Wright also records later conversations about relations between the West and Asia with an Indonesian student of sociology whom he encountered on an airplane and a Japanese newspaperman met on another flight; and, one in Jakarta. (512)

According to Reilly, Wright treats the people he meets "solely as informants, vessels without character . . . [and] as spokespeople without unique voice" (512). The evidence in *The Color Curtain* strongly supports Reilly's thesis. In the book, Wright describes an Indonesian-born Dutch journalist as being "more European in attitude than most Europeans; having been born in Indonesia but educated in Holland, he had felt a high degree of consciousness about his European values and possessed a detachment that made for straight answers" (26). Wright perceives this Indonesian-born Dutch man as an interviewee with some nationalist leanings. He writes: "Though Indonesian born, he believes in Asia for Asians, Europe for Europeans, America for Americans, and Africa for Africans" (27). Yet he relishes the fact that the Indonesian-born European's lack of interest in national Indonesian identity weakens his near-nationalist motto. Wright says: "He'd never send his children to Indonesian schools" (29).

Moreover, Wright seems to admire the ways in which the Indonesian-born European attaches no importance to the fact that Indonesians renamed their towns, cities, and streets when the Dutch were forced out (29). Later, Wright seems to appreciate how the Indonesian-born European pays more importance to unity between Europeans than that between Asians or Africans though he believes that "Africans and Asians should act as a political bloc" and "feels that Asian and African nations have had their fair share of say-so, authority, and influence in the

deliberations of the United Nations” (29). Wright’s representation of the Indonesian-born European’s views on Indonesia shows his ambiguous attitudes towards Third World nationalism. Wright’s appreciation of this Indonesian-born European’s perception of the nationalist renaming of the towns, cities, and cities of his birthplace as insignificant acts suggests his perception of sovereignty as a condition that is not antithetical to an acceptance and appropriation of the symbols of the former colonial power. In this sense, Wright has an elitist view of nationalism since he attached less importance to ethnic and populist cohesion against their former colonizers than he did the states’ organization against the new superpowers that dominated them. Defining Wright’s nationalism, Anthony Dawahare argues that it is “avant-garde” since

Wright viewed nationalism as an historical phenomenon that constructs what Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined communities” for people who in fact are anonymous to each other but wish for social communion. Wright also perceived nationalism as a divisive political ideology that must be supplanted with a Communist ideology he believed necessary for the emancipation of the working class. (451)

Wright’s Marxist-based perception of nationalism attests to his occasional disdain of ethnic and communal expression of solidarity and his preference of state-based resistance against global capitalism over “clan”-based struggle against former colonies. Yet Wright’s preference of a Communist ideology of resistance over its nationalist counterpart is less consistent than it seems, because he had abandoned Communism by the time he wrote *The Color Curtain* in 1956 and now preferred social democracy over social unity as a more powerful goal for national liberation. This transformation in Wright’s political leanings clarifies his admiration of the power that Africans and Asians had in using their status as a Non-Aligned coalition in order to switch allegiance between the Western powers represented in the U.N. In “The Awakening of the Afro-Asian Nations” (1960), Vernon Bartlett says:

The Fate of civilization will depend much less upon the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, or upon what happens in Europe, than upon whether these new nations in Asia and Africa turn towards Communism for their guide or towards Western Democracy. After all the Afro-Asian Group is already the largest group in the United Nations and there is growing evidence of their power to enforce fairly effective boycotts of countries whose policy they do not like. (105-106)

Unlike Bartlett, the Indonesian-born Dutch man perceives the power of Asians and Africans to swing power in the U.N. during the 1950s as a solidarity that should be political only, revealing his de-racialization and de-ethnicization of African Asian unity. In return, the Indonesian-born Dutch man wanted the union between European nations, which he calls that of “White Western nations,” to be “a political and racial bloc in order to defeat communism,” reflecting an equation of communism with non-Whiteness. From this logic, China, Indonesia, and the other countries he perceives as “colored” would be communist nations because “nonwhites” inhabit them (29).

By suggesting how this Indonesian-born Dutch analyzes the relations between the West and the “colored” countries, Wright shows how lack of racial-consciousness leads to stigmatization of those who are viewed as “colored.” De-racialization and prejudice feed the European sense of racism, cultural supremacy, and isolationism that disappointed Wright when he heard some of his Asian informants express them. For example, a Malayan woman who considers herself as a Eurasian told Wright that “she does not want to see Asian and African nations act as a racial or political bloc. ‘I feel for both sides. I love Asia and I love Europe and I don’t want to see a clash’ ” (38). Here, Wright reveals how Asians’ ignorance about Blacks can lead them to view Africa as the antithesis of a pure and pristine European “civilization” that they perceive as White only. Although she is physiologically “dark,” this Malayan woman regards herself as a European. She denies that Malaya is a multiracial nation because “‘Colored’ countries, she feels, are countries like the West Indies, African countries, etc. ‘Colored’ *races* include Asians, she feels. Expressly, she does not regard Malaya as being a ‘colored’ country. She was uncertain about Indonesia” (40). By rendering these sentiments, Wright exposes the impact of racialism on post-World War II Asians that the British passed on to the Japanese who later used it against Malaysians and other Asians. As a result, the British created in Asia a cycle of inter-ethnic stereotypes similar to those they fomented in Africa. European racialism then had damaging consequences on the colonized people since it has created a chain of reaction by which Africans are persistently seen as the ultimate “other” in the consciousness of the formerly or continually colonized people of color.

Later, Wright suggests the reaction of a French woman to whom he told his plan to attend the Bandung Conference. Wright writes: “‘What on earth have African Negroes and Burmese Buddhist in common?’ a young, ardent Frenchwoman asked me, with her eyes wide with images of global racial revenge” (17). The French woman’s attitude reflects the Western imagination of the Orient as a place “either to be feared . . . or to be controlled” that Edward Said called Orientalism (301). This Orientalism is similar to that which a Dutch woman expressed towards Wright’s plan to go to Indonesia. She said: “Oh, God! Then maybe you can bring me some

spices?” (18). Here, Wright reveals the demeaning power of the Western conception of Eastern nations as places where the islands and the millions of people who live there “still meant spices...” (18). Wright overcomes his occasional prejudices against Asians by satirizing Columbus’s search for spices in 1492 as if to represent the Dutch woman’s fancy for condiments as a restoration of imperialism in Asia. In so doing, Wright supports Asian nationalism by opposing Europeans who try to re-colonize Asia.

Ironically, Wright develops towards Asians and Africans the same kind of prejudices that he criticizes in the views of his interviewees. Wright’s orientalism is evident in Bill Mullen analysis in *Afro-Orientalism* of “His [Wright’s] characterization of the Asian and African populations at Bandung as a ‘gummy mass’ [which] dissolved images of class solidarity or collective militancy into the nondescript figure of a helpless horde discursively invisible behind the color curtain” (66). This orientalism is also apparent in the problematic views on the religiosity of the Bandung participants that Wright demonizes at the same time when he tries to identify with their critique of colonialism.

Though he initially believed that the conference was going to deal mainly about Red China and the U.S. policy in Asia and the Pacific and not on slavery and the French’s forced cultural assimilation of Africans, Wright was surprised to see that the conference addressed the impact of imperialism on Africans and Asians. In the first speech, the President Ahmed Sukarno, of Indonesia, paid homage to “Sacrifices made by our forefathers and by the people of our own and younger generations” (137). Sukarno’s tribute to African Asian solidarity was founded on the shared history of imperialism of the two people. He said: “For many generations our peoples have been the voiceless ones in the world. We have been the unregarded, the peoples for whom decisions were made by others whose interests were paramount, the peoples who lived in poverty and humiliation” (139). These are the oppressed people that Wright identifies as the “Asian and African populations [who] had been subjugated on the assumption that they were in some way biologically inferior and unfit to govern themselves, and the white Western world that had shackled them had either given them a Christian religion or else had made them agonizingly conscious of their old, traditional religions to which they had had to cling under conditions of imperialist rule” (140). Wright’s statement reflects his perception of religion as an irrational force which, like racial consciousness, allowed the colonized subjects of Africa and Asia to organize a “*system of identification manifesting itself in an emotional nationalism which was now leaping state boundaries and melting and merging, one into the other*” (140). This passage illustrates the frequent disdain of traditions and religions that weakened the support that Wright provided to the nationalist movement for freedom and Asian African solidarity that emerged from the Bandung Conference of 1955.

Conclusion

In this sense, Wright developed ambivalence towards Africans and Asians whose status as rightful opponents of an oppressive Western racialism and imperialism he strongly supported. Yet the book also shows Wright's support for the ideologies of Third World anti-racialism, national sovereignty, peace, development, and resistance against Western colonialism. His support for these ideologies is visible in his examination of his relationships with Africans and Asians who were involved in independence struggles during the 1950s. Therefore, Wright developed a subtle form of nationalism that is apparent in the connections between Asians and Africans that he makes in his interpretation of the speeches that were delivered at the meeting.

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¹ See Chimalum Nwankwo. "Richard Wright: A Dubious Legacy." In *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead of Alive: African Perspectives on African-American Writers*. Ed. Ojo-Ade, Femi. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1996. 53-64; Gruesser, John Cullen. *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2000. 47; 67; 77; 93; 138-44; 137; 144; 146; 150; 151; 157.
