

# الاغتراب الوجودي في رواية ريتشارد رايت الرجل الذي عاش تحت الأرض

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## الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مفهوم الاغتراب الوجودي في رواية ريتشارد رايت: "الرجل الذي عاش تحت الأرض"، حيث يناقش البحث تجربة الاغتراب والانفصال عن العالم والواقع والنفس، في ظلّ العنف والاضطهاد واللاإنسانية التي يواجهها السود في أمريكا، كما تتجلى في رواية ريتشارد رايت. ويركز البحث على إظهار كيف أن هذه التجارب تؤثر على عقل الرجل الأسود ونفسه، وتؤدي به إلى إعادة تقييم، ثم رفض العالم وقيمته ككل؛ بناء على نظريته الوجودية له. وتعتمد منهجية البحث على مصطلح الاغتراب، كما قدمه فرانز فانون في كتابه: (Black Skin, White Masks)؛ لدراسة العلاقة بين الاضطهاد العرقي، وتبني الاغتراب الوجودي كاستجابة للامعقولية العالم المضادّ للسود، الذي يقوم على اضطهاد ذوي الأصل الإفريقي ورفضهم.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاغتراب الوجودي، الاضطهاد، نظرة وجودية، ريتشارد رايت، فرانز فانون.

# Existential Alienation in Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*

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## Abstract:

This research focuses on examining the concept of existential alienation in Richard Wright's recently published novel, *The Man Who Lived Underground* (2021). It traces the protagonist, Fred Daniels' experience of estrangement and separation from the world, reality, and the self. It sheds light on the causes of these experiences mainly the racial violence, oppression and dehumanization. It shows how these affect the psyche of the black man leading to his reevaluation then rejection of the world and its values from an existential perspective. This study is theoretically framed using Frantz Fanon's framework on the concept of alienation particularly in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* to scrutinize the relationship between racial oppression against blacks and the adaptation of existential alienation as a response to the absurdity of the anti-black world that, abuses, rejects and equally dehumanizes the African American man. The protagonist in Wright's novel exhibits some typical features of an alienated man including loss of sense of reality, memory fragmentation, dehumanization, and deformation of character.

**Keywords:** existential alienation, estrangement, oppression, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Wright, Fanon, African American.

## Introduction:

This research examines the concept of existential alienation in Richard Wright's novel *The Man Who Lived Underground* (2021). It focuses on discussing the elements of estrangement from the self and from the world as a consequence of experiencing a process of arbitrary arrest, false accusation and torture. The research focuses on how Wright depicts the absurd situation in which a black man finds himself once he is faced with the oppressive side of the white world in which he exists. This situation is in the form of regression towards literal and metaphorical darkness, physical and psychological alienation, subversion of reason, loss of the sense of being in terms of human form and finally the reevaluation and then rejection of the values of society that interiorize the black man as per se. The analysis is theoretically framed using Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) to highlight how oppression and violence against a black man who exists in an anti-black world leads to the deformation of his character, indulgence in criminality and the change of perception of the world.

## Research Methodology

The concept of alienation has developed throughout time in literature particularly in the modern period. It originally referred to the feeling of separation, not belonging or understanding oneself in relation to the environment. It is a complex idea that

explains how people understand themselves in relation to their societies. Seeman identifies powerlessness, powerlessness, isolation and self-estrangement as pathologies of alienation (Seeman, 1959). They present conditions in which the individual loses control and understanding over the physical world. Over time, the concept of alienation has developed in relation to identity from denoting separation of man from society, to loss and derangement of mental faculties, separation of mind from its essence, estrangement from nature and from self. Sinari Ramakant argues that alienation is a situation where the alienated is no longer in harmony with his milieu and this disharmony results in anguish and suffering because of not being in accordance with the universe (1970). It takes two forms: social alienation and self-alienation. The former refers to the fact that the individual finds the social system to be oppressive, the latter is related to the individual self's loss of inclinations that conform to social patterns where the human subject is denied the feeling of integrity. Erich Fromm sustains that "Alienation as we find it in modern society is almost total" (1955). He regards that in the context of modern idolatry world man can no longer experience himself as a free agent but as dependent on powers outside of himself.

The concept of alienation is central in the thought of man existentialist thinkers and writers. Hegel accounts for human self-development through "a process of

alienation, self-estrangement, and self-recognition” (Sayers, 2011). He refers to the process by which the human self externalizes itself and confronts that other separate being as something distinct. The conception of alienation was further popularized with Karl Marx according to which alienation is separation or estrangement of the labors in a capitalist society. Søren Kierkegaard on the other hand considers how individuals are estranged not only from themselves but from the world through experiencing its hostility towards their subjectivity and individuality.

Fanon’s conception of alienation is based on the ideas of separation, estrangement and exploitation of the colonized and racially oppressed black subjects. Race is a focal point in his discussion of alienation. He argues that the exploitation of the black man, under either colonialism or racism, results in his separation and estrangement from the potential of being fully human being. His analysis focuses on the economic, cultural and psychological aspects of alienation of the black subject under oppression. The existentialist conception of alienation in Fanon’s thought involves his understanding of how the marginalization of the oppressed results in his psychological dilemmas and leads to the despair of being structured outside of humanity. He employs existential phenomenological concepts to address the fact of being black in the white man’s world. Existential alienation is related to Fanon’s discussion of the psychological dimension of alienation inflicted by oppressive colonial powers. It is related to how the black man negotiates life and identity when faced with racial alienation. However, the concept of alienation as approached by Fanon is not limited to the colonial subject, but extends that to any form of oppression against black subjects including racism and racial prejudices. He uses a graphic metaphor of amputation to suggest how the experience of racism can shatter the bodily schema of the black man creating deficiency and loss.

This research examines the existential dimension of alienation depicted by Richard Wright focusing on the experiences of racial oppression and racism that affects the black man leading to his separation and estrangement from the self and rejection of reality, reason, and society. This form of alienation is not only focused on one’s separation from others and from the environment, but also on self-alienation, fragmentation, dehumanization and failure to function as an intact psyche in isolation from the world.

## Discussion

*The Man Who Lived Underground* is the full-length novel published in 2021 after it was previously rejected for publication and reduced to a short story in Wright’s collection, *Eight Men* (1962). The short story did not include the part that portrays the grotesque scenes of police violence against a black young man. Various studies focused on the short story but not on

the novel. Robinson Whitted (2004) examined Wright’s use of religious commitment as a model focusing on the role of religion in the life of Wright’s grandmother and on her survival in a strange and hostile world. She stressed that Wright was interested in his grandmother’s sense of psychological distance of replacing reality by the dark passageways of the mind. *Evripidis* (1944) discussed the crisis of identity of the black protagonist and his endeavor to find a place in color divided society. He focused on how the setting of the story plays a role in depriving the protagonist the freedom to achieve individual identity in society.

This Research, however, focuses on how oppressive violence in the context of racism and segregation results in the alienation of the protagonist transforming him into a dehumanized and deranged man immersed in criminality and existential quest for truth. The research foregrounds an understanding of the dehumanizing effects of oppression and violence against the African American man. It aims at highlighting how alienation is in fact a marker of the inferiority and phony freedom of the black subject in the post-bellum era. This paper also explains also how alienation offers the black man the chance to see the reality of his plight, in a society prejudiced against blacks, while equally leading to the fragmentation of his identity and destruction.

*The Man Who Lived Underground* opens with the image of a young black man named Fred Daniels returning home from his work to his pregnant wife. He is approached by three policemen and arrested for a double murder he did not commit. Under torture and abuse, he is forced to sign a confession. He escapes but the events that follow are surreal. The novel is set in the context of racial discrimination and factual segregation in the United States. It presents the transformation of a man from cultural and economic alienation to psychological and existential alienation. It also highlights his dehumanization, examination and rejection of the values of the world as a consequence. The story also shows the effect of racism, violence and criminalization against blacks and its irrevocable effect.

Wright seeks to expose the reality of the plight of the black man through depicting his protagonist’s experience of existential alienation. The descent into the underground and the indulgence in crime mark the beginning of fragmentation, estrangement, and separation from the world. The title of the novel itself is revealing because it suggests a detachment from the human world and a retreat into a life of isolation where the protagonists reflects on questions of truth, guilt, reality and rationality. His escapes and returns to the aboveground world end as dismal failure. He is no longer suited for life aboveground and is viewed as a mad man.

Fred Daniels’ alienation emerges after he is arbitrarily arrested, falsely accused of the murder of a white

couple, and exposed to brutal torture. Daniels is a poor, young black man, living on the margin of society; he represents man at the most vulnerable, physically weak and socially powerless. However, he is content with the little he earns from his honest work pay: "He walked again, chuckling...during seven sweltering days he had given his bodily strength in exchange for dollars with which to buy bread and pay rent for the coming week" (Wright, 2021). But he is also recoiled and subdued by the forces of exclusion and discrimination. His social circles are restricted to the Church which provides him with a menial job for a white family.

However, Daniels does not start as completely blind to his inferior status in society. In his encounter with policemen, "he waited for them to question him so that he could give a satisfactory account of himself" (Wright, 2021). He believes that as soon as he identifies himself sufficiently, they would let him go. This incident recalls the words of Fanon: "The white man had the anguished feeling that I was escaping from him and that I was taking something with me. He went through my pockets. He thrusts probes into the least circumvolution of my brain" (1952). Being a suspect and facing investigation is a common thing for black men in the United States. This oppressive practice generates the problem of alienation. Being always a suspect and a criminal in the eyes of the white world turns the black man into an inferior outcast. Wright's protagonist is weak in body and will and the abuse turns him into a humbled man endowed with feelings of fear and confusion. He cries and his raw emotions do not allow him to articulate anything beyond pleading innocence (Wright, 2021). All his life he has been careful avoiding such a confrontation but he is never safe.

Existential alienation occurs with Daniels' encounter with the white world. It is accompanied by terror and incoherence because he feels that these men know what he will be doing at any future moment of his life. According to Fanon, "the White man's eyes break up the Black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed" (1952). The violence inculcates the feeling that "though he was not guilty of a crime; they made him feel somehow guilty". (Wright, 2021)

According to Fanon, the abnormality of the black man occurs when he contacts the violent side of the white world and "the disproportion that ensues causes psychic traumas" (1952). Wright highlights how the black man is alienated from the world as well as from reality due to the forces of racism and oppressive violence. It is a transformation from passivity and subjection to active immersion in crime and rejection of society. The state of physical and psychological alienation ushers the existential questioning of reality, religion, morals, guilt, and reason.

## 1-Psychological Rupture

The separation and estrangement from the world and the self in Wright's novel is a psychological rupture in the form of alienation, retreat, meditation and revelation. The lawless, corrupt, and prejudiced nature of the world causes the protagonist's psychic fragmentation as he becomes a terrorized, disillusioned and hysterical man. He is an adult married man but the policemen constantly address him as "boy". According to Fanon, "A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child" (1952). These men act in accordance with an inhuman psychology with the protagonist which marks the beginning of his psychological rupture. The protagonist's response to the police is separation from the world through escape into the underground sewer system.

The anonymity of the protagonist after the incident with the police reinforces his psychic rupture. The last time he is referred to by his name is by his wife calling for him amid her fear and pain. In the underground, he is referred to as "he". This articulates the invisibility of the black man to the white world and to himself (Ridenour, 1970). Even though he is aware of his humanity, his life will eventually lead him to the darkness of subterranean sewers and of his own mind. Society pushes the black man to live in the dark, and then marks him guilty for it.

Physical and psychic alienation in the underground deprives Daniels of identity. He fails to remember his own name and is repeatedly mistaken for someone else. He makes no mention of family or friends as the novel advances. The accusation of rape also deepens the protagonist's psychic rupture. The black man is historically associated with rape within the white man's discourse: "Whoever says rape says Negro" (Fanon, 1952). Daniels is dispossessed as he descends into his cave in isolation from the larger community (McNallie, 1977). He turns demoralized, feeble and baffled to see the dissolution of the truths he has worked out for himself and "at some time during the recent past they had become alien to him...He was claimed by some strange, powerful reality which the policemen represented" (Wright, 2021). He projects his psyche into the world only to feel hostility and collapse of meaningful relationships with that world.

Violence is central to Daniels' psychological rupture and leads to his existential alienation. According to Freudian psychology, one is unaware of the trauma of separation because it is suppressed in the unconscious. In contrast, the oppressed does not have the privilege to suppress his traumas into the subconscious (Fanon, 1952). Daniels regresses out of the instinct of survival and the world of violent racism leads him to self-annihilation. The images of the dead brown baby floating upon the sewer's waters and the dead brown bodies reflect a sense of despair and nothingness. The series of discoveries of places that a black man as is

usually denied access to are upsetting adventures that frustrate him into bewilderment and cynicism.

Moreover, the escape from the world of racism and oppression into that of nature fragments the protagonist's memory and awareness of reality. This is evident through his phantasmagoric visits to different places through their basement and his dreams of a woman and a new born baby sinking into a sea. He fails to relate his dream to his wife and child or to his family and life aboveground. His memory dissolves in accordance with his disconnectedness from the world and "life aboveground was now something less than reality, less than sight or sound, less even than memory" (Wright, 2021). He is condemned to live a perpetual present with which moments of his life have no connection. He develops "a behavior akin to an obsessive neurotic type or, if one prefers, he puts himself into a complete situational neurosis" (Fanon, 1952). His attempt to reconnect with the aboveground world turns him into a neurotic. He is once again rejected and "put back into his place" (Wright, 2021). Although violence and separation from the world frees him, it also issues his neurosis. In his isolated existence, he fails to make coherent his past.

## 2-Moral and Religious Regression

In *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Wright addresses the rejection of both religious and moral values of society as a response to the world's alienating force. It is a subversion of the social ideals alleged as right and desirable including Christianity and morality. Wright scrutinizes these elements through the existential perspective of a man who has forgone the desire to possess things in a world rid of values. His petit stature becomes an advantage and his timid personality is replaced by an active one. In the underground, "solitude allows one to do what one wants in a life which, in the beginning, consisted of merely ensuring one's survival" (Fabre, 2019). The protagonist finds himself in a world divested of light where he feels alien and strange: "in the silence and darkness that followed he really did not exist as a personality...before he could live again, hope or plan again, a regrouping of his faculties into a new personality structure would be necessary" (Wright, 2021). But his new personality is tainted with criminality and rejection of religion. He tunnels into different basements and steals money, food, jewellery, and a gun. Yet he does not steal things to use but just to keep "as one takes a memento from a country fair" (Wright, 2021). These objects stand for power in the aboveground; the power that because he did not have, he could not defend himself against oppression. As he becomes estranged from the world and stripped of everything except his body, he strips these objects of their value and meaning. He uses them as embellishments on the walls of his asylum and to

role-play as a mockery of the world. Alone as an individual, he superimposes different masks and defines himself according to an aptitude in leading a volatile type of life.

The indulgence in crime marks the loss of radical innocence of the protagonist. Daniels is transformed from a culturally and economically inferior and passive man, into an underground criminal immersed in an existential quest for truth. When he is separate from the world and its values, "he would not know how to define the criteria necessary to differentiate reality from roles and appearances" (Fabre, 2019). His invisibility allows him to experiment through stealing valuable objects that were previously out of his reach. As an act of freedom, he sees himself able to do anything now and considers the possibility that "if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself-theft or murder or torture- was right" (Wright, 2021). According to his new-found logic, man's actions are determined solely by circumstances.

Wright's protagonist lived in a world ruled by God and the Church. But in the underground, he rejects and is alienated from the concept of God because he believes God symbolizes the white man. As a black man, he believes that "the good and merciful God cannot be black: He is a white man with bright pink cheeks. From black to white is the course of mutation" (Fanon, 1952). The values within which he had lived as a good servant, citizen, Christian and law abider become meaningless. He reasons that since man is not satisfied with his fate, he finds consolation in religion. He eavesdrops on a Black Church Choir practice and realizes that religion, which was once a comfort for him, is contemptible servility:

When he has sung, prayed with his brothers and sisters in church, he had always felt what they felt; but here in the underground, distantly sundered from them, he saw a defenceless nakedness in their lives that made him disown them. A physical distance had come between them and had conferred upon him a terrifying knowledge. He felt that these people should stand silent, unrepentant, with simple manly pride, and yield no quarter in whimpering (Wright, 2021)

There emerges a conflict within him, "He does not understand his own race" (Fanon, 1952). They are merely responding to a fragmented and senseless world of centuries of oppression through a helpless and meaningless invention of gods "to feel what they could not feel" and to find "comfort in the pity of their gods." (Wright, 2021)

Daniels represents rejection and critique of the values of the world above, of its secular and religious laws. They impose that to be human is to be guilty and also to be black and poor is to be guilty. He gives up his Christian dogma in contempt for the blindness of his fellow black people and of man in general to its hypocrisy. Although not yet aware of the idea of the

death of God, he develops a nihilistic attitude that would later characterize the world. Because he suddenly finds himself in a world of darkness, “a world in which it is always a question of annihilation or triumph” (Fanon, 1952), he begins to regard himself as a god, capable of creating and desolate meaning.

### 3- Subversion of Reason and Rationality

Physical and psychological removal from the reality and self-initiates Daniels’ attitude against reason and rationality of the world aboveground. His traumatizing contact with the violence of the white world makes him advocate the idea that the rationality of the aboveground world is synonymous with racism and oppression (Cappetti, 2001). Fanon stresses that “for a man whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason” (Fanon, 1952) Daniel’s encounter with the corrupt, abusive power of the law alienates him and irrevocably disrupts his character and alters his perception. The estrangement of the protagonist into another world with other values and laws widens his perception to the “reasonlessness of the human life” (Wright, 2021). However, the discovery of the absurdity of the aboveground world drives him into a sort of madness manifested through his smiling, laughing and singing when he is back to the policemen to confess his crimes and to tell what he have seen in his refuge underground (Wright, 2021).

Wright’s protagonist cannot fathom the rational of his arrest, torture and humiliation. “Though blameless, he was accused; though living, he must die; though possessing faculties of dignity, he must live a life of shame; though existing in a seemingly reasonable world, he must die a certainly reasonless death” (Wright, 2021). Daniels becomes convinced that he is guilty and that all men guilty. His escapist experiences in the underground highlight the futility of his search for meaning and the meaninglessness of the world (Guidom et al., 2021). The world that oppressed him now signifies that of irrationality while the world of darkness in the underground is that of rationality and truth.

The subversion of the notion of reason is manifested through the protagonist’s mocking and silently criticizing people and their immersion in religion, art and entertainment to evade the reality of their misery. Once this truth becomes visible to him, he tries to enforce his insight on others as well, to “rationalize the world” (Fanon, 1952). His grotesque travelogue brings him to face the nothingness of the world: “The images of terror that thronged his brain would not let him sleep...Faintly quivering above him was the dim sound of yelling voices. He cocked his head. Crazy people, he muttered, smiling” (Wright, 2021). Absurdity in Wright’s allegory arises from the questioning and derision of the world. Wright’s hero decides to return aboveground to “convince those who

lived aboveground of the death-like quality of their lives” (Wright, 2021) and of the deception of reason.

### 4-Existential Alienation

Wright depicts the experience of a black man who becomes existentially alienated and who develops his consciousness as a result of separation and estrangement from the world and through observation and scrutiny of life and people. His retreat and psychological regression represent the loneliness and anonymity of the black man in a materialistic world. In contrast to the traditional slave narrative that presents a heroic figure escaping slavery in the South, Wright recounts an escape from oppression in the free North to the darkness of an underground. However, he also portrays transformation of a black man from passivity and subjection, to critique of the corrupt, absurd and exploitative world from a perspective of an exiled man.

Wright examines the status of the modern “free” black man from the existential perspective of an oppressed man. He explores the racism that characterizes the world of his protagonist through the status as an invisible man. The literal journey into the underground provides a view of the experience of the African American man in a society that does not tolerate his existence. He attempts to “utter angry words against the whole configuration of the senseless world. This was his enemy; it condemned him as effectively as had those policemen” (Wright, 2021). Daniels believes that his fall is a triumph and freedom from the irrational and unjust world (Wright, 2021). In the underground, he is faced with the primitive ages of humanity: “He waits, investigates his surroundings, and interprets everything in terms of what he discovers; he becomes hypersensitive” (Fanon, 1952). His invisibility offers him the freedom to stand outside the law to see the world through a new perspective. Hence, he chooses the uncertainty of life in the underground, over the certainty of death in the aboveground.

When he decides to return aboveground for a brief time, he encounters different people who misidentify him. The fear and terror he previously faced have turned into laughter and contempt. “He burst out laughing...The look of the world was beautiful, yet, under the surface of this beguiling drapery he felt the lurking threat. The kinder the aspects of things were, the more he recoiled” (Wright, 2021). Only remote from them that he could see the inhabitants of world aboveground as “children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying” (Wright, 2021). He can now make his own understanding of existential truth beyond social and moral values, in an existential enlightenment through his alienation. However, the rejection by the world creates fear and shock within him. He attempts to mitigate these feelings by contacting the above world through a radio:

As he heard the cultivated tone, he looked down upon land and sea as men fought, as cities were razed, as planes scattered death upon open towns, as long lines of trenches wavered and broke. He heard the names of generals and the names of mountains and the names of countries and the names and numbers of divisions that were in action on different battle fronts. He saw black smoke billowing from the stacks of warship as they neared each other over wastes of water and he heard their huge guns thunder as red-hot shells screamed across the surface of night seas. (Wright, 2021)

The journey into the blackness of the underground allows Daniels "to see what is "real" more clearly and accurately". (Gines, 2011) He figures that the world is that of horror where technology is a tool of destruction and where savagery is not restricted to racism but extends to wars and conflicts. Now he can see the world's savagery and darkness where chaos, injustice and fear belong. In contrast, the underground is lightened with truth and freedom. His isolation and loneliness offer the opportunity to reflect on what he sees:

He remembered the singing in the church, the people yelling in the theatre, the dead baby, and the nude man stretched out cold upon the white table. . . He saw these things hovering before his eyes and he felt that some dim meaning tied them together, that some magical relationship made them kin. He stared with vacant eyes, convinced that all of these images, with their tongueless reality, were striving to tell him something. (Wright, 2021)

These sights are interpreted in relation to the racial situation. The black congregation represents religious segregation, the dead baby as the black man rejected by American culture, and the dead body on the white table as the black man deprived of substance and infused with stereotypes. They also convey the injustice, materialism and hypocrisy of the world. He is enraged by these scenes but his anger is futile because he is a weak prey to these evil forces. But what he sees from his exile constitutes a view of Western civilization more than merely of the black segregated world.

However, his removed observations will eventually change his attitude from contempt to understanding and sympathy. A night watchman is accused and tortured for a theft Daniels committed. He laughs with contempt then feels sorry for the man "who was being accused as he had once been accused of a crime he had not committed" but "The man was guilty; he had been stealing money. Although the man was not guilty of the crime of which he was now being accused, he was guilty; he had always been guilty" (Wright, 2021). According to his logic, what made him guilty is what makes the watchman guilty, the guilt of being weak and poor. The suicide of the night watchman fuels his urge to return to the world: "He had to act, yet he was afraid" (Wright, 2021). The freedom the underground

offers him is more terrifying than the oppression of the world aboveground. His alienation offers him a new consciousness on the brutality and danger of that world.

### 5-The Guilt Complex

In the novel, the protagonist's alienation from the world offers him the opportunity him to observe the human world through an existential perspective. In almost every episode of the story he wrestles with the idea of guilt and innocence. He begins to believe that all men are guilty because they possess an inherently evil nature:

Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? It seemed that when one felt this guilt one was but retracing in one's living a faint pattern designed long before; it seemed that one was trying to remember a gigantic shock that had left an impression upon one's body which one could not forget, but which had been almost forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one a state of external anxiety. (Wright, 2021)

Daniels figures a new human perspective according to which man lives in a meaningless world for which he holds guilt and responsibility. More importantly, being black, poor and weak necessarily indicates being inevitably guilty. The violent alienating experience "had the power of projecting him into a strange orbit where, though he was not guilty of a crime, they made him feel somehow guilty". (Wright, 2021)

The novel advocates a shared sense of guilt by both the oppressed and the oppressor. Wright's protagonist comes to terms with the irrational world through accepting guilt as a character of his human nature. Similar to Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Daniels becomes "chattel-man, without means of subsistence, without reason to live shattered at the very heart of his being. "It is at this stage that the famous guilt complex appears" (Fanon, 1952). His return to the above world stems from a realization of guilt as a human trait. It is also a realization that his attempt at escaping the evil of the world is futile because he cannot evade his innate darkness. In the underground, Daniels perceives of a universal sense of guilt and innocence. Within the framework of the narrative, guilt becomes an essential psychological fact that represents a form of the human mind and condition.

### 6- Failure of the Quest for Meaning and for Dis-alienation

Daniels is obliged to stay underground at the start and with that comes his search for truth. But as he becomes enlightened to the reality that the world aboveground is a world of world of money, power and evil, inhabited by the deadly sleeping people, who lie, steal and betray each other, he decides to start what Fanon

calls a “dis-alienation” through returning to the world. He eventually realizes that the freedom that the darkness and separation from the world offered him is more dangerous than the oppression he suffered aboveground. Evidently, freedom is accompanied with a sense of guilt and responsibility for the evilness of the world that he believes he shares with the rest of humanity. After he defies society and asserts his autonomy through his alienating existence, Wright’s protagonist is endowed with an urge to return to the world. It originates from his need to communicate the truth and meaning he has discovered. But once he is out of the sewer, “nobody seemed to pay attention to him” (Wright, 2021). Fanon explains that the rejection of the black man by the white world makes him overwhelmed by “the sense of nausea associated with the fact of having to be made ‘invisible’” (1952). Daniels has imagined his emergence to be a desperate hassle with men who are waiting to haunt and kill him. People who see him think of him as a mere black sewer worker. And yet none of the people who watched him coming out of the manhole could think of him as a fugitive or a criminal. They saw him but could not see his character or understand his plight and grotesque journey. His return enhances the idea is that men are invisible to themselves and to each other; they fail to communicate and remain blind and indifferent to the truth.

Daniels struggles to communicate the truth and meaning he has discovered to the world because. He cannot remain in the underground with the knowledge he now owns and the identity he has created for himself and that is founded on interdependence in the form of shared guilt. Yet when he returns to the above world, he is again reluctant, hesitant, weak and incoherent. He is unable to state his identity or recount his journey. He stops mocking the world as he did in the underground. He sings the songs he heard black people singing in church while he previously disowned them for their passivity. The estrangement from society has turned him into an outsider, a lone and invisible man with a fragmented memory and identity: “he could not remember the names of the three policemen. He saw the cave, the money, the watches, and the rings ... How could he say it? There was a vast distance between what he felt and these men” (Wright, 2021). He has become blank inside and no longer fit for life.

The truth and knowledge Daniels believes he has to communicate to the world is that he is guilty and all men are guilty by nature of their humanity. He thinks that his return and surrender should establish peace (Wright, 2021). But he fails to coherently express himself and people in the aboveground refuse to listen to him believing him to be mad. The policemen think he is crazy because “colored boys go nuts easily since they live in a white man’s world” (Wright, 2021). He claps his hands with wild joy like a child; he cries,

sings and laughs for no reason. Hence, instead of disalienation and reuniting with the human world under one common truth, Daniels is rejected by society leaving him “sprawled out, distorted, recolored”. (Fanon, 1952)

The world refuses to see and hear Daniels and the violence and absurdity of the white world turns him into a psychologically deranged and estranged man. He struggles to articulate the truth and meanings he has discovered and the world silences him: “They didn’t believe him? They couldn’t see!” (Wright, 2021). Daniels gives the impression of a mad man, but his madness is that of a man who has been traumatized and alienated. He cannot recollect his memories and past when he turns himself to the policemen who kill and return his body into the underground through the manhole. His attempt at reconnecting with those who oppressed him only makes him forever a dead body floating within the blackness of his skin and of the underground. Daniels is an outsider man who cannot seem to belong to any of the two worlds he lives in. His stay in the underground although freed him from oppression, it downed on him the burden of truth. He sought to liberate himself from this burden through conveying it to others. However, Daniels is exterminated before he is given the opportunity to transmit his insights to the world. His fears of the horror of these truths restricts his sense of freedom and belonging in the underground while his mad-like character in the above world makes people refuse to hear him.

## Conclusion

*The Man Who Lived Underground* is a text that helps in examining African American perspective on blackness and being black in a white world. Fred Daniels’ experience draws attention to the issue of alienation and meaning making from Wright’s existential point of view that stems from life difficulties including oppression, racism, injustices, and marginalization of blacks. These elements push the black man into a kind of isolated and meaningless existence. He then opts for alienation as a method of existence beyond the evil of others. But within his presence away from the world and its reality and from his former self, he struggles to make sense of the world for the first time in his life. He becomes enlightened to new meanings and truths related philosophical questions of reason, morals, religion, death, race, and guilt that were beyond his grasp before his encounter with oppression and violence.

Wright’s protagonist could reach answers to his existential questions within the darkness of the underground but he is denied to fulfil his desire of identifying with the others through sharing guilt and responsibility. The existential vacuum he is thrown into faces him with death, fear and suffering, but also



with new meaning, logic, values and new purpose to his life.

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