CHAPTER THREE
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RACE AND CASTE CONFLICTS

As social beings, the members of a society interact with one another by establishing relationships and contacts. In the process, they are forced to adhere to the social order, which is made up of power, interdependence, cooperation, strength, conflict and weaknesses of the people and groups. The life of an individual is thus shaped by the social environment in which he is placed.

When the social environment oppresses an individual - politically, racially, economically or religiously -- the individual tries to rebel against/overcome the oppression and as a result there ensues a conflict. The social environment is invariably created by the irreconcilable interests of different groups/classes of society. As a sociologist observes,

the resources of power are unevenly distributed, which is one of the bases of our social-class system. Group and class conflict is the result of uneven distribution of wealth and power; people with the greatest power (the most productive power resources) are able to realize their interests at the expense of the people with less power (Stebbins 14).
In the societies of America and India, the social order is such that one group/race/ caste cannot establish a meaningful relation or contact with other group/race/ caste easily, since the societies are divided into groups with certain groups becoming dominant and others being weak and submissive. Blacks in America and low class, poor people in India are submissive and weak, while the whites of America and high caste, rich people of India are powerful and dominant.

In America as well as in India, there are conventions and codes on the basis of race and colour, caste and religion. The practice of such restrictions prevent a smooth relationship among the people of different groups. This in turn becomes a sort of social rejection which leads to lack of space for living and few opportunities for earning and finally drives them to hunger and poverty. Most of the time they are kept at their place by racist and casteist oppression, religious hatred and colour prejudice. These cruelties force them into submission to individuals, families and in short to the community itself. Thus in America not only the uneven distribution of socio-economic, political power, but the inhuman treatment the blacks are subjected to due to their skin colour is the root cause of the conflict in its social relations. In India, the
conflicts mainly spring from caste differences, class inequality and religious confrontations. Richard Wright and Jayakānta in their fictions highlight the conflicts in which their protagonists are involved, because they are after freedom and equality. When their protagonists try to establish their humanness and achieve equality and freedom, they encounter social conventions and customs as the stumbling blocks. This attempt on the part of the protagonists is considered to be a transgression of convention, violation of social code and breach of custom. The society stubbornly refuses to accept them as humans and reinforces its oppressive hold on them. But most of the protagonists struggle against the oppression resulting in conflicts leading to the disorientation in racial relationship, disruption in family life and disjunction in social order.

Though race and caste are different factors, the divisive role they play in the two societies are more or less the same. Hence it is appropriate to discuss in the same breath the racial conflict in Richard Wright and the caste conflict in Jayakānta. In America, unable to bear the white oppression, some of Wright's protagonists fight back and some flee. Since the protagonists are rootless, they yearn for a sense of belonging in the American society.
But the dominant society denies him such a place and hunts him down at the earliest opportunity. Wright portrays it in his fiction and there is "the growing resistance by blacks to white oppression. and everywhere there is blood and lynching and death" (Sylvia 136).

Richard Wright further reveals in his writings how the atrocities of racial oppression and segregation make the blacks suffer and struggle in their lives. Critics point out about Wright's theme thus: "Wright insisted again and again that because of the lack of space that mattered, black life was hopelessly stunted". (Macksey and Moorer 5). Spatial segregation means denial of any meaningful social interaction and freedom. Wright's writings broadly catalogue the white brutalities in terms of racial, sexual and spatial rejections. These cruelties themselves create an environment for his characters.

More importantly the inadequacy of space marks the environment in which blacks are put to live. Even in the face of natural calamities, he must obey the convention and be at his place. In "Down by the Riverside" Wright portrays how nature (the flood) and the whites harass and torture the blacks. The story vividly exposes the inhuman, unkind behaviour of the whites and the black protagonist Thomas
Mann's struggle against the oppressive racial environment and the violent flood. Mann's story is "of a black man trapped with his family in a flood, trapped as well in the infinitely more terrible trap of the white supremacy world" (Stephens 452).

As the flood rises alarmingly and threatens to wash away the house, Mann gets a stolen boat from a white neighbourhood to escape. The context of the stealing of a white boat almost decides the fate of Brother Mann.

If he does not take the 'stolen' boat and reach for safety, his entire family would perish in the flood. On the other hand, if he risks taking the boat and is caught red-handed, it also means death. But he decides to take his pregnant wife and the family in the 'White' boat. On his way to the hospital, he encounters the owner of the boat, a white man and in the ensuing conflict kills him. "What would they do to a black man who had killed a white man in a flood? He did not know. But whatever it was must be something far more terrible than at other times" (Uncle Tom's Children 76). So he has committed two terrible crimes against the white society which can "shoot a nigger down jus like a dog n think nothin of it" (Uncle Tom's Children 56). The merciless and oppressive white environment drives him to commit the crimes and he tries to escape from them.
He is terribly upset when he learns about the death of his wife and cries. A white soldier asks him about his crying and says, "Shucks, nigger! You ought to be glad you're not dead in a flood like this" (Uncle Tom's Children 80).

Later he is asked to help rescue the marooned people. Leaving his wife's dead body, mother and child, he works hard and helps people to reach for safety. He rescues the family of the white man whom he killed. He has a temptation to wipe out the family and erase the evidence of his killing. But he changes his mind and rescues the family. But after reaching safety, the boy of the family identifies him as the killer of his father. Mann tries to flee but he is shot dead. The crimes Mann committed are not only stealing and killing, but also alleged raping; the white society tries to fix him on a charge of rape. When the officer examines the family members of the white man, he asks the white lady thus:

"Did he bother you, Mrs. Heartfield?"

"No; not that way"

"That little girl?" (Uncle Tom's Children 100).

Thus the white-oppressive, racial environment always makes the blacks victims of circumstances and destroys them. If the blacks try to come closer to the
white society, they are hunted and destroyed, at any given time. And a critic sums it up thus:

it is just this sense of terrifying disorientation (the sense that at any moment the unexpected may happen, that one's life is at the mercy of some awesome unpredictable force) that has been the daily lot of the black man throughout his history under white rule (Stephen 456).

As the unpredictableness is the rule not the exception in the black life, a black boy is caught between his nagging parents and an exacting white master. A teenage black boy's adolescent aspirations are throttled and he is driven to such an extreme situation of running away from home.

The context of "The Man who was Almos A Man" is thus about the misunderstanding of the people around the protagonist. The protagonist, David Glover, thinks that he is almost a man but others, his white master and parents alike, think that he is a boy. He has ideas about buying a gun: "One of these days he was going to get a gun and practice shooting, then they couldn't talk to him as though he were a little boy" (Eight Men 9). He pesters his mother and persuades her by saying that "we need a gun. Pa ain got no gun. We need a gun in the house. Yuh kin never tell
whut might happen" (Eight Men 13). This fear of encountering unexpected possibilities in black life makes him cautious in life. When he buys a gun and tries to practice shooting in the field, he inadvertently kills his master's mule. His parents and the white master demand the truth about the death of the mule but he feigns ignorance, and only after persistent queries does he reveal the truth about the killing. However, he does not disclose the whereabouts of the gun. In a show of racial and social superiority, the white master demands fifty dollars as compensation for the killing of the mule from those poor blacks.

During that night the boy is not able to sleep and recalls the happenings of the day with bitterness. Because "Nobody ever gave him anything. All he did was work. They treat me like a mule, n then they beat me" (Eight Men 20). Unable to decide on the next course of action he goes to the field and takes the gun and rather spontaneously clings on to a passing train to go some where else and be a man. By now he realizes that neither the white society nor the black community will allow him to be what he wants to be. If the boy in this story flees from the Southern oppressive environment to the North in order to find freedom, the urban black hides himself from the racially violent society in

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"The Man who lived underground". In this story, Wright depicts the black, in the oppressive situation, as an outsider, invisible, with an underground status. The protagonist, Freddaniels, is arrested and falsely accused of a murder not only because he has happened to be present at the scene but, more pitiably, also because he is black. He runs away from the police and voluntarily withdraws from the society into an underground sewer. He has got to hide because he is "tired of running and dodging' the white man's law. Faced with the choice of 'hide or surrender', the black man in America goes underground. The sewer is Wright's metaphor for the black ghetto, a dank place crawling with rats" (Dan M call 167). In a remarkable foreshadowing, Wright anticipates the metaphor that Ralph Ellison was to make a more symbolic and solid use of in the Invisible Man. Thus the underground explicitly signifies the marginal aspect of the black man's existence and his ambiguous rapport with American civilization.

After going down into the sewer, Daniels is cut off from the outer world and from his past. He becomes a victim, an innocent black man who is charged with murder by the white police and its law. Inside the sewer, he gains confidence, feels powerful and omnipotent and his invisibility drives him to acts of irresponsibility:
stealing. He feels guilty because he could not become a superman and behaves only like any other man. When he returns to the ground he becomes "the terrified fugitive in flight from his pursuers" (Margolies 78).

The skin colour attracts the white hunters to hound him. Since the white man imagines that the Negro is a dirty, evil-smelling character, he is excluded from the American society. When Daniels approaches the police and tries to establish his identity, they dismiss it scornfully and shoot Daniels to death. Wright's message seems to be that

both social conventions and human values in the modern age are without meaning. Men must start anew must create values again by recognizing that they share a common guilt for the dilemma of racism: White men perpetrate the injustice, black men yield to its terror (Cauley 339).

Wright exposes the blind racial hatred of the whites in "Big Black Good Man". In the very opening of the story Wright describes the character of the white porter: Olaf Johnson. He treats all customers equally, irrespective of race and colour and thus he says: "my tenants are my children" (Eight Men 76). As a former sailor, he knows better about sailors and their needs. Besides, they are
simple, direct and childlike. They are always after women and whisky. After making such an exposition, Wright now introduces the protagonist, a black sailor. The black man is very big and Olaf "was staring at the biggest, strangest and blackest man he'd ever seen in all his life (Eight Men 77).

In an instinctive reaction, common to many whites, Olaf hates this black man intensely. His very size frightens him and he feels insulted. And he is determined not to rent him a room mainly on the basis of the black man's size and colour. But he could not deny him a room because something makes him accommodate him. Then the black man makes a request: "I want a bottle of whiskey and woman" he said. "Can you fix me up?" "Yes", Olaf whispered, wild with anger and insult (Eight Men 79). Even though he hates this black man and his very presence, he simply obliges his demands and arranges a white woman. He indirectly hints to her about the colour and size of the man. She retorts that "He's just a man" (Eight Men 80). The intensity of hatred towards the black man is such that "he could not shake off a primitive hate for that black mountain of energy, of muscle ..." (Eight Men 81). After a six day stay the black man vacates the room and takes his leave from the white porter, Olaf is very much relieved and feels happy about the black man's departure.
After a year the black man returns to the hotel and on seeing him, Olaf thinks that this time he will not allow this black man to stay here. But instead of demanding a room, the visitor presents Olaf some shirts and takes his leave. Olaf feels happy and says "You're a big black good man" (Eight Men 88). It is an ironical and paradoxical presentation of the basic instinct that resides in every white man. Olaf is a nice man, proper and sincere. The black visitor is an ordinary guest, who has not committed any crime. Yet Olaf's initial response is fear and hatred. The racial conflict thus lies dormant in almost every member of the white race and what is required is just the smallest spark to set off a big confrontation. Luckily, in this situation, the black's behaviour does not cause any friction. The individual Olaf had been so much influenced by the societal attitude that initially he is quite blind. It takes a second visit by the black guest to convince Olaf of his ordinariness. In pointed contrast to Olaf's prejudiced view is the indifferent and professional attitude of the white prostitute who shrugs her shoulders and says, "He's just a man".

In this story Wright portrays Olaf's character as one which is not as bad as any of his other white male characters in his fiction. Though he feels nothing wrong in
the sailor's debauchery, he is cold when the big black man
demands the same. Even though the story ends on a happy
note, the racial issue is at its heart and Wright exposes it
neatly.

The whites' blindness to see the human aspirations
of the blacks results in conflict of interests and leads to
murder. In "Man, God Ain't Like That!" John, a white
artist, visits Africa with his family. While travelling in a
car, he knocks down a black boy, Babu, and takes him to
Paris. On reaching Paris, Babu is stranded and is not to be
found by John. When John is busy arranging for an
exhibition of his painting, Babu comes there at last, and
confronts John, and says that Christ has come back even
after he was crucified and he gave everything to the white
man. Now Babu believes that God hides in white man's land
and only God has brought him to Paris to test him. Saying
this, he kills John because he believes that like Christ,
John would rise from his death. Babu is of the opinion that
the white is powerful and God is a white. God provides the
white everything but "Black man live in mud hut in Jungle.
White man live in stone building in city" (Eight Men 151).

Wright focuses on the failure of the white artist
in identifying the black man's humanity. He simply treats
him as an animal devoid of any rational thinking. Thus the
white man fails to recognize the black man's problems and his feelings. John, the white artist, sees Babu as a stupid, idiotic black boy. But the boy has his own ideas about the world and God. When he says that God is "really White" and "White like massa" and "White God powerful" he compares and contrasts the black people being without God, even if there is one, it is less powerful. At the same time white God provides everything to the whites and it ignores the blacks.

This division of human beings on the colour line-black and white and the consequent discriminations meted out to the blacks result in an intense racial conflict. In Native Son, Wright's celebrated novel, the black protagonist is pitted against the white racial hatred. The protagonist, Bigger, is different from his family and friends. While they are humble and submissive to the white gods, he is not a bit submissive to them. He is aware of the discriminations the whites have heaped upon the blacks. In the very first section of the book, Bigger expresses his resentment over the exclusion of the blacks from the mainstream of the American Society. His discussion/conversation with his friend Gus clearly exposes his mind and intentions. Thus he says: "They don't let us do nothing" and further elaborates: "They got things and we
nothing" and further elaborates: "They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't". And about the living place: "Why they make us live in one corner of the city?" (Native Son 58). "I reckon We the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do" (Native Son 59). Hence he wants to do something. He cannot bear this immobility because he feels that living in the restricted place is just like living in jail. So he says that "it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's .... It's like I was going to do something I can't help" (Native Son 60).

Though the American civilization professes the American idealism, the blacks are prevented from realising them. Wright here focuses on how the racial environment stunts the growth of the black's personality and how it cripples the life of the black community. Wright in this novel's first section 'Fear' portrays elaborately the racially oppressive environment in which his protagonist is placed. As far as the title of the first section of the book 'Fear' is concerned, it signifies the environmental forces that create fear in the minds of the black characters, particularly in Bigger Thomas.

Bigger lives in a one-room tenement apartment in Chicago's south side Black Belt with his mother, sister and
brother. The room in which Bigger's family put in is so small that, whenever they change dresses, they have to close their eyes.

Bigger, the protagonist, resents the way he is made to live. He is neither happy with his family nor with his friends because all of them in one way or another opt for submission to white oppression. Besides this subservient behaviour, his mother is a pious and devout Christian, who finds solace in religion. His brother Buddy accepts the white supremacy without any murmur. And his sister Vera is involved with the YWCA virtues. Quite like his family members, his girl Bessie tries to drown her worries in alcohol and sex. His friends Gus, G.H. and Jack are submissive to the white oppression. So Bigger is caught between the white oppression and black servitude. He knows his limitations in this environment. And

He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain (Native Son 48).
To escape from this sickness of life he either seeks the company of his friends or the comforts of his girl friend Bessie. Since he is a product of lower class environment, all entrances and exits to the upper class are closed for him. To put it simply, he is a trapped man in an unfriendly environment.

But when he is offered a chauffeur's job, he is quite reluctant to accept it, as he feels that these fringe benefits cannot alter his relationship with the white society. Finally he decides to take up the job because of the tremendous need of his family for physical comfort and survival. This job in a white man's house brings him to face the blind, white society. At the first meeting of the whites in their house, he is awestruck. Bigger had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him. On the smooth walls were several paintings whose nature he tried to make out, but failed. He would have liked to examine them, but dared not. Then he listened; a faint sound of piano music floated to him from somewhere. He was sitting in a white home; dim lights burned round him; strange objects challenged him, and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable (Native Son 84).
Here he meets the blind snob Mrs. Dalton, the petit, flirtatious, pretentious, communist oriented young lady, Mary Dalton; the liberal young communist, Jan Erlone and above all the 'noble' white landlord Mr. Dalton.

This is a totally strange world. In this totally strange world, he is in a new environment. He is like a rat leaving its hole, which does not know how to cope with the different atmosphere. Mr. Dalton is the owner of the tenement in which he and his family live. Mr. Dalton collects higher rents from the blacks than from the whites. He sends tennis balls to the boy's club and hires such "wayward boys" as Bigger. His wife sees Bigger as another case history in a charitable hand who may be saved through Christian goodness. Their daughter Mary looks upon him as a social experiment, one of the downtrodden masses, everywhere her equal. Thus their 'treating' the Bigger differently is a sort of racial exploitation. As a critic observes,

the Daltons' complicity in exploitation is a greater evil than the Klan-like behavior of Britten and Buckley, for their controlling role in the economic and social system of Chicago creates the conditions that frustrate and oppress not only the Thomases but all blacks in the city, conditions that in turn require the active reinforcement of the overt racism that the
Daltons are too respectable to indulge, too self-deluded to acknowledge as necessary to the maintenance of their social position (Reilly 43, 1990).

While her father controls people like Bigger, Mary Dalton is insensitive to their feelings. On his first outing in his new job, she insists that he drive her and her boyfriend Jan to the South side. Both Mary and Jan act on this very first meeting with Bigger as if he were not black. Their very special treatment makes him feel more black and untouchable. Thus their action seems to him very strange and he feels his isolation and loneliness more acutely than ever. Bigger's reaction is analogous to the reaction of a handicapped: When a crippled man was offered a seat in a crowded bus, he not only refused the offer but also was very angry because by offering him a seat, the co-passenger focused on the crippled man's handicap. Bigger's feelings are similar to the crippled man's. About Mary's behaviour he feels that "She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog. I was so mad I wanted to cry". But when Max, his lawyer points him about her kind behaviour towards him Bigger says bitterly, "All I know was that they kill us for women like her. We live apart and then she comes and acts like that to me" (Native Son 387-388).
When they return home, Bigger helps the drunken Mary into her bedroom, at the same time the blind Mrs. Dalton enters. Now Bigger is a black man trapped in the bedroom of a white woman. Here Bigger's condition is fear; because being trapped in a white woman's bedroom is tantamount to murder. For, in the white world, "the bedroom (the woman's room) is a sanctuary defiled by Bigger's intrusion" comments Fabre and elaborates further, "it signifies the risk of being accused of rape and being lynched" (Fabre 128). So his fears of lynching and murder drive him to protect himself and he acts instinctively by killing Mary Dalton inadvertently. Only when Mrs. Dalton leaves the room does he realise the magnitude of his act. But he feels that

in a certain sense he knew that the girl's death had not been accidental. He had killed many times before, only on those other times there had been no handy victim of circumstance to make visible or dramatic his Will to kill. His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this (Native Son 144).

Being driven by the circumstances to commit the murder he wants to say that he has done it consciously. It is the oppressive environment that has made him choose so. But his
mother, his sister and his girl friend have made some sort of adjustment with the conditions of black life. He feels that he is alone because "he is a man without essence, his condition is fear, his situation confinement, his reaction violence" (Bradbury 103.)

Thus the denial of freedom and equality makes him rebel. As a result, his relationship with others is devoid of devotion, loyalty or trust. Relationship is simply and nakedly exploitative. From the beginning whatever attempts he makes in order to achieve freedom, he encounters one convention after another as the stumbling block. He is a man caught in a racially hostile environment and in perpetual conflict with the majority community.

In American Society not only the poor Negro is struggling against white supremacy and unable to lead a peaceful social life, but the middle class blacks also taste the oppressive treatment of the whites. In The Long Dream, Wright depicts how a middle class Negro family is pitted against the white racial mountain. And how it undermines Tyree Tucker's black family by depriving him of his self-respect. So far Wright has portrayed as his protagonists only the "Pariahs, peasants, proletarians, or dispossessed intellectuals" (Margolies 154).
But in this novel it is about the bourgeois and his interactions with the American white society. Caught between the oppressive, violent white society and subservient, submissive black values is a black boy:

From the age of six, to eighteen, when he flees Mississippi, Fish slowly discovers that it is impossible to be both a successful and sensitive Southern Negro; White women can tease but they may never be touched; the police may be used but they can never be treated as equals; flight is often the best answer to injustice; and above all, a black man's dreams can never come true, ... (Shapiro 334).

Fishbelly is made to witness the black humiliation and white brutality; exploitative white power and condescending black community. Fishbelly's father, a well known undertaker, Tyree Tucker, runs a brothel with the connivance of the police Chief of Clintonville Cantley. It is this relationship between a black bourgeois and white police officer that decides the fate of the protagonist. Fishbelly and his friends know pretty well that "a nigger's a black man who doesn't know who he is" (The Long Dream 30).

Among their friends, the teenage black Sam, Fishbelly's friend, is succinct in explaining the plight of the black in America. He says to his friends;
you ain't no American! you live Jim crow. Don't you ride Jim Crow trains? Jim Crow houses? Don't you go to Jim Crow restaurants? Jim Crow schools? Jim Crow churches? Ain't your undertaking parlors and graveyards Jim Crow? Try and git a room in that West End Hotel Where Chris is working and them white folks 'll lynch your black ass to hell and gone: You can't live like no American, 'cause you ain't no American! And you ain't African neither! So what is you? Nothing! Just nothing! (The Long Dream 32).

"Jim Crow" is an expression that means the practice of discrimination against blacks, as segregation of places.

Fishbelly learns about the white terror, and racial discrimination only slowly and gradually because he lives under a very protective and wealthy parents. Only when he comes of age, Tyree Tucker takes him out and exposes him to the white world. And though he vaguely knows something about it before, he fully realizes it only when there is a race riot which leads to violence, terror and lynching. When Tyree takes his son in his car and flees from the place of the riot, Fishbelly asks him about his fleeing. He says about the race riot and the whitefolks. "The white folks.... The phrase rang in his mind like a black bell sounding. He had long heard of the terror that
white people meted out to black people, but this was the first time in his life that he was fleeing before that terror" (The Long Dream 58).

Tyree anxiously and cautiously relates about his business and relationship with the white society to his son. When Fishbelly learns about Tucker's ignoble, shameful and illegal, underground activities, he feels ashamed of him. And when he is to witness his father's cowardice, loathsome, self-degrading behaviour in the presence of whites he pities him and hates him. At times he asks questions about his parent's running away from the white folks instead of fighting them. He is more afraid of his parents than he is of the white people. Inspite of these feelings, since he is in the process of learning of the white world, Tyree involves him in all his business activities. As an adolescent he is quickly attracted to sex and women, especially white women. But Tyree cautions Fishbelly about white women.

Keep away from 'em, son. When you in the presence of a white woman, remember she means death! The white folks hate us, fight us, kill us, make laws against us; but they use this damned business about white woman to make what they do sound right. So don't give 'em no excuse, son. They hate you the moment you's born and all your
life they going to be looking for something, to kill you for. But don't let 'em kill you for that. There ain't no bigger shame for a black man than to die fooling with a no-good white gal (The Long Dream 60).

Precisely for this charge Fishbelly will be framed and put behind the bars later in his life. Thus Tyree's cautions are prophetic. Half of the novel is about 'educating' Fishbelly of the intricacies of living adeptly in an unjust and cruel white society. Tyree makes his son aware of the going on between him and Cantley, the police chief. He operates illegally a dance hall, 'Grove' by name, where fire prevention ordinances are openly violated and prostitutes are frequented for their trade. Cantley shares the profit from this business activities and wants him to learn about dealing with whites "properly". Thus he advises Fishbelly; "Obey 'em!" Tyree shouted in a thunderous whisper, Clapping his hands to emphasize each word. "Don't dispute 'em! Don't talk back to 'em! Don't give 'em no excuse for nothing! Hear?" (The Long Dream 115).

When a fire accident occurs at Grove, burning alive some forty lives, including Fish's sweetheart Gladys, Tyree is booked for the mishap and fearing that he would reveal the secret dealings and partnership, the chief of
police Cantley shoots him to death. This shows that "White people lived with niggers, shared with them, worked with them, but owed them no human recognition" (The Long Dream 231).

All these happenings are a kind of awakening in Fishbelly. Hitherto he has been a spectator, watching the goings on as though it were in a drama, but he understands the dimensions of black-white relationship when he realizes that "there was no right or wrong in their lives. Life was a fight to keep from being killed, to keep out of jail, to avoid situations that induced too much shame" (The Long Dream 245).

After shooting Tyree to death, Cantley suspects that Fishbelly would have some incriminating evidence against him. So he frames Fishbelly on charges of raping a white girl and imprisons him for two years. After his release from jail, Fish flees to France. Thus Wright "tells a story of brutality, white and black venality created by the system of segregation, lynching, frustration and -- rather oddly for Wright -- physical escape and personal hope for his hero" (Poston 328).

While Wright presents in his fiction the racial conflict Jayakānta depicts how in Indian Society the
conflicts are as varied as the very social situations are. There is intense caste conflict and this is inevitable because it seems to be the oldest and longstanding.

As far as caste conflict is concerned, he presents it as a conflict between brahmin and non-brahmin castes, or between upper castes and lower castes. Unlike in Wright's fiction, many conflicts are given a solution in Jayakāntan's fiction. For, he always presents this social tension in the form of love and marriage between the brahmin and the rest of the castes. Invariably the woman belongs to the Orthodox brahmin family and the man hails from backward communities. Jayakāntan attacks the supremacy of the casteism not by employing outside forces but by creating and representing radicals and rationalists of the brahmin caste itself. In his story "Putiya Vārpukal" ("New Moulds") he boldly effects a change in the attitude of the women folk of the brahmin family. For, the woman is supposed to be the fulcrum of social values and a symbol of purity. When Intu, a brahmin girl loves and elopes with a non-brahmin boy, hell breaks out in her house. Her father with the connivance of the police puts the lover behind the bars, charging him with the stealing of jewels. The worst part of it is the girl is made to give witness to the prosecution. But when he returns after spending a four year jail term, Intu realizes
her mistake and to condone it she prepares to leave with him for ever. She requests him saying "Vēṇu ... I will come with you. You take me with you. Enough; this hell is enough" (Putiya Vārpukal 21). Vēṇu replies that he will take her publicly. There is no need to run away stealthily.

The resolution of the conflict must come from within and not from without. Intu is not a girl ignorant of the world. Life has given her sufficient lessons. Community has crucified her and she has come through those testing times; living in dark, she has resolved to lead a new life. Now the mother also has resolved not to torment her daughter anymore. Her father has caused her terrible hardships by ill-treating her. Nobody has respected her and treated her with dignity. She has become an untouchable in her own house, amidst her kith and kin.

Jayakāntaṇ makes Intu's mother realize the hopelessness and meaninglessness of keeping Intu in their house. So she comes to the conclusion that only this boy, Vēṇu could give a meaningful life to her daughter. Intu's grandmother also approves this not because she is flexible and broadminded but in order to escape from the stigma attached to the family. As long as Intu remains in the house, the young ones of the family cannot be married off.
It is a tradition that has turned into a prison. The characters react in a predictable way. Though the father is angry and tries to do the same old tricks, he realizes that his mother and wife have already accepted Intu's decision. Jayakantha deliberately shows how the conventions are violated by a brahmin girl and how she faces the consequences. By creating a situation like this in the orthodox brahmin family, he not only questions the supremacy of the brahmin caste but also tries to equate other castes with it.

In "Oru Pakal Nerappancar Vanthiyile" (In a Day Passenger Train) Jayakantha adds a new dimension to the caste conflict by bringing a brahmin widow at the mercy of an untouchable - low caste man. The untouchable man, Ammaci is keenly aware of the caste restrictions in his society but he is made to compare his life in the army and his life as a civilian in the society. In the army there is no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, or creed. But the indignities of untouchability during his childhood and even at present make him feel bitter about it. Even after his retirement he has to face the treacherous society. Unable to find any relative at his native village he makes a journey to Madras in a passenger train.
When he takes a seat opposite to a young brahmin woman, he realizes that she is in a pathetic condition. Her suffering from tuberculosis makes her difficult to take care of her child. Pitying her, he wants to feed the baby and help the young woman. But the caste conventions make him wary of buying milk and feeding the baby. In that context, touching a brahmin by a non-brahmin is tantamount to crime. That's why he hesitates and seeks her permission before violating the convention.

The young brahmin widow is at her life's end. She makes a scathing attack on the evil practice of dowry, when she recounts her tragic life, about her poor parents' inability to pay for dowry and give her a prosperous life; and her becoming a third wife to an old man suffering from tuberculosis. She asserts that the woman is the most tormented soul on earth. That too, for a poor brahmin, life means nothing but hell. Through her Jayakāntan declares that caste is not seriously taken by one and all. They use caste as a means to achieve something in their life. They practice it pretentiously and move with others hypocritically.

If everybody has taken it seriously it would have disappeared by now. When she dies in the train, the untouchable man is left with the responsibility of disposing
of her body and he has to take the child under his custody. This gesture of an untouchable towards a brahmin woman is nothing but revolutionary given the particular social context.

The caste factor has run so deep in the Hindu psyche that uprooting its evil hold on society is no casual affair. Political, religious and national forces and people imbued with high ideals should be prepared to wage a war against this prejudice. Marxism is the latest weapon in the armoury of Jayakāntan to fight casteism.

In his story "Piramāṇopatēcam" (Divine Initiation) Jayakāntan makes two things clear: Marxism is the new Veda like brahminism itself and by converting a non-brahmin into brahminism he indirectly declares that brahmin is not born but created. By creating two diametrically opposite characters in the brahmin community itself and bringing the conflict to a flash point, Jayakāntan makes a bold attempt to give a new thrust to both Marxism and brahminism. The orthodox brahmin Caṅkara Caramā's skepticism about the present day brahmins' indifferent, callous attitude towards brahminical codes and conventions and their superficial faith in them is quite shocking, because Caramā's attacks are tantamount to abuse/blasphemy. The radical young Cēsātri's
love for Marxism is as deep as Carmā’s love for brahminism, and he confronts Carmā by saying that though he is a brahmin he does not practice it; moreover, he is an atheist and considers that Marxism is the new Veda which aims to serve the people and society and hence he is a new brahmin. He refuses to accept a particular section of the society as pure and supreme. Thus Jayakāntaṇ places these two in direct opposition to each other and this confrontation echoes in Carmā’s family also because, Carmā’s daughter is in love with and intends to marry Čēsātri. But Carmā makes his intention clear that only to a true brahmin, who adheres to the brahminical codes and conventions that he could give his daughter in marriage. But in a rebellious move, his daughter elopes with Čēsātri. However, Carmā’s initiating a non-brahmin into brahminism is the most revolutionary act of all. Thus the story indirectly makes it clear that one who is sincere in following and practicising the principles of brahminism can become a brahmin, whether he is born of brahmin parents or not. Only the second birth, the initiation, and the following of brahminical codes do matter. Čēsātri’s marrying Carmā’s daughter is a move that strengthens the revolutionary path Čēsātri wants to take up in order to achieve a scientific socialism. Thus both Carmā and Čēsātri move in the same direction where there will be an ideal society.
In another story, "Iraṇṭukulantaikal" (Two Children) involving a brahmin and a poor woman Jayakantha brings out the arrogance of the brahmin and highlights the high-caste man ill-treating people like her as animals. The age old practices and beliefs have made some men quite inhuman and blind to human feelings. An instance of it can be had from this short story.

If not the pompous style of living, the comfortable life of a brahmin family is contrasted with a non-brahmin woman with a child, living in the cattle shed. And she is left alone by her husband because he is working in a faraway place. Her struggles in meeting the daily needs are brought out vividly and the occasional support she receives from the brahmin household is also indicated. But the most horrible aspect of the caste superiority is projected when the child of the poor woman is made to eat the left-overs of the household, at the instigation of the brahmin master. This shocking spectacle makes the mother scream in anger and frustration and reply fittingly to the brahmin that though they are poor, they have self-respect; she admonishes the brahmin not to indulge in such things again; if they are superior in caste they must keep that to themselves. This story brings out not only the brahmin versus non-brahmin conflict but also the plight of a poor, rootless woman.
Jayakānta in his novel *Oru Manitan Oru Viitu Oru Ulakam* (A Man, A House, A World) brings out the devastating, destructive effect of the caste in a man's life and his eschewal of it in the later part of his life. The elopement of the protagonist Capāpati Pillai's wife with a low caste/barber and that too in the very presence of Capāpati Pillai, makes it horrible for him to withstand the shame and unable to face the degradation and humiliation, he too runs away from the village. His running away coincides with the elopement of his wife thus making it appear to the community that both husband and wife have left the village together. But Capāpati Pillai's running away is mainly to protect the pride and honour of his community, because a high caste woman like Capāpati Pillai's wife eloping with a low caste barber is nothing but betrayal and hurting the pride and honour of his succeeding generations.

Ironically, the same Capāpti Pillai, who runs away from the village, has to run away with his friend's wife by force of circumstances, of course with a difference. Here his friend in the army, Michael, virtually hands his wife over to Capāpati Pillai at the time of his death. After the death of his friend, when Capāpati Pillai and his friend's wife take a journey they find an orphan child and adopt it.
Now Jayakāntaḥ almost reverses the first part of the story/problem where the caste destroys the family.

So, in a consciously allegorical rendering of the caste factor and its destructive impact on the Tamil society, Jayakāntaḥ has presented the character of Henry in this novel as a symbolic figure who transcends caste, religion and community.

In his complex novel Jaya Jaya Caṅkarā (Salutations to Cankara) he creates ideal characters in politics and religion who ceaselessly strive for the welfare of the society. As in other novels he takes two characters whom he makes them as brothers and assigns them two different roles: Opposing each other, the elder brother Makāliṅka Iyer represents the orthodox brahmin who is all out to protect and preserve the Hindu religion and brahminism at any cost. In his zeal, he sends his son to live and serve as the head of a religious institution. On the other hand his younger brother Catāciva Iyer propagates the Gandhian ideals of untouchability and temple entry by Harijans (the untouchables). He seriously partakes in the social reformation and this is resented by his brother and fellow brahmin folks. But unmindful of their objections he tries to set up an ashram for the welfare of the
untouchables. During the freedom struggle movement he is arrested and the ashram is left to be run by his daughter Cutantara Tēvi and her husband Āti, an untouchable. Thus in the first and second generations of this novel the main issue is caste conflict and struggle for the removal of untouchability.

Politics and religion are inseparable in the Indian sub-continent. The very partition of India as a political agenda was taken up, as every student of recent history knows, due to religious sentiments and considerations. Jayakānta portrays the ill effects of the practice of untouchability which spills over in politics, too.

Though Caṅkaraṇ and Āti are in different camps, they espouse the cause of the untouchables. They try to bring out some change in the outlook of others about untouchability and the eradication of that evil. Thus Āti makes a request to Caṅkaraṇ: "You create new brahmins for us. In such an effort you destroy the social evil, untouchability" (Jaya Jaya Cankara 97). Āti even proposes how to achieve this ambition: "combine temple and ashram: That is, an ashram should be established with every temple and it should become the workshop for creating/training new brahmins" (Jaya Jaya Cankara 99). In practice, though it
may be difficult, Āti tries to establish an ashram and teach people against casteism and spreading Gandhian values.

But the third generation of this novel turns to radical political ideology and violent means to carry out social changes. While Caṅkaraṇ and Āti represent the post-Gandhian era of reconstruction, Āti's son, Makāliṅkam and his teacher Catyamūrti represent the post-Independent critics of the self-rule; their action plan is to overthrow the selfish, vested-interest establishment through violent means and establish an egalitarian society. Caṅkarāyar's son Catyamūrti spearheads this movement by writing and propagating the extreme left wing communist ideology. Āti's son Makāliṅkam and a brahmin, Sanskrit Pandit's daughter, Umā, join in this struggle and there ensues a conflict between the political ideologies of different hues. During this struggle, Catyamūrti is put behind the bars and Makāliṅkam and Umā go underground. The emergency regulations are at its worst in that, they are used against the opposition parties.

This novel is based on the happenings reported in the newspapers during the emergency period. Though the time span is from pre-Independence era to the present, the freedom struggle is not focused much and instead, the caste
conflict is highlighted. But in the second part it is the recollection of Çinkarâyâr, the freedom fighter, that runs parallel to the on-going political struggle. But it focuses on how religion still maintains the caste system and the most heinous practice is untouchability. This untouchability leads to segregation, hunger and poverty. Since the religions like Christianity and Islam treat these untouchables as equals and offer them some social status, people from the lower strata of Hindu society switch over their allegiance to Islam. This conversion leads to conflicts and this is the main issue in the novel Ėsvâra Allâh Têrê nâm (Easwara and Allah are one). The harijans are persecuted for centuries and kept at a distance from the superior community. Even after achieving self-rule, no improvement has been seen and felt by them. Instead, they are derided for their practice of eating beef and mutton and running stalls of the same; the dominant, superior castes always treat the untouchables as animals. When Ātî the founder of an ashram visits the muslim-converted people, one of the converts reasons thus: In Hindu religion, they offer animals to God but it is not sin... They preach protection of all creatures. But their sacrificing/butchering animals for God will not make their conscience guilty. But why should I be a sinner when I do the same for my livelihood, and become a barbarian and an
untouchable? Why should I be guilty of it? If there is a way, a faith, to remove that guilt, my mind naturally leans on it" (Esvara Allāh Tērē Nām 25).

He further strengthens his argument by saying that "the immediate gain of this conversion of a harijan into Islam is Self-respect" (Esvara Allāh Tērē Nām 27).

Though many harijans embrace Islam in order to escape the social stigma attached to their caste in the Hindu religion, from daily harassment in the hands of upper caste people, the brahmins and other high caste people do not take it lightly. They very much feel betrayed and insulted. They wait for an appropriate opportunity to take revenge on them.

The fictional situation presented by Jayakāntan is rather improbable, but bristles with dramatic possibilities. Āti visits the converted muslims and he wants to establish an ashram. Most of the converted people are his relatives. Āti's ambition of establishing of Gandhi ashram is shared by one and all. Jayakāntan highlights the brahmin male's arrogance, his ill-treating the untouchable, and he is also very critical of the male treatment of the brahmin woman. He equates the status of the poor brahmin woman with that of slaves. And one such poor girl Apirāmi is living with a
relative because of unending poverty and misery in her family. She falls in love with one Mustapā, a rich, young but a muslim boy.

The religious feelings run rather high in the Hindu society. In this context, Apirāmi-Mustapā affair cannot but become a very controversial matter. Āti is offered land for his ashram by Mustapā. When his love for Apirāmi is known to their respective families, they become severely critical of it. While Mustapā's father offers him a solution saying that "let her become a Muslim first and then you marry her," Apirāmi's parents almost make her a prisoner. Mustapā is a non-believer and his opposition is very much against his own religion's tenets keeping women as slaves. He reasons that "hereafter there must be a law preventing people marrying girls in the same religion" (*Eswara Allāh Tērē Nām* 131).

Explosive scenes develop when people with ulterior motives and vested interests enter the fray which results in caste conflict because the converted muslim houses are destroyed by vandals setting fire to them. The culprits are the high caste Hindus. They are against the conversions which they express by setting fire, almost destroying, their houses; the incident is volatile enough to disturb communal amity and peace.
Only Āṭi leads a peace committee and establishes Gandhi ashram as he had planned. Apirāmi and Mustapā too join in the ashram, thus paving way for communal harmony. It is an ideal situation that Jayakāntan envisages in the final moments of the novel.

In a country like India with complex elements constituting its contemporary society, religious conflicts have taken more disastrous turns in the recent times. Jayakāntan was quite keenly aware of the dangerously explosive nature of the religious conflicts, which impelled him to approach the issue with sensitivity and offer idealistic solutions to it. These conflicts invariably lead to social tensions, and consequent disjunction in communal life and social set up.

Thus Wright and Jayakāntan in their fiction highlight the social environment which is made up of race and caste factors, that play a predominant role in shaping the life of a segment of the society, invariably the racially inferior and the low caste of the societies of America and India respectively. The shaping forces of the social environment are the powerful segment of each society and it imposes inhuman conventions and codes-racial and caste - upon the weak. It maintains mercilessly its status quo fearing its downfall if it slackens its hold. Thus the
racial/caste environment almost becomes the fate of the inhabitants of these two societies: American and Indian. But at the same time there is a marked difference between these two writers' treating the conflicts in their writings.

While Wright makes it clear in his writings that the black is hunted and persecuted in the white dominated American society, Jayakāntaṇaṇ tries to present ideal situations without caste differences by giving importance to intercaste relationships in different situations. Wright's protagonists also encounter different white racial conflicts and they react differently. In some stories they are made to confront the white racial tyranny which leads to violence and destruction. In some other fiction, the protagonists are driven to the extremes of life and they murder their white oppressors. Yet in a few stories, the protagonists seek escape as the only means for survival and they flee from the hostile situations.

Jayakāntaṇaṇ always opts for social reconciliation at the end of the caste conflicts. He too presents different types of caste encounters as we have seen earlier but they are not as intense and violent as the race conflicts of Wright. The caste conflict invariably centres around the brahmin caste. Either a brahmin girl elopes with a non-brahmin boy or she is seduced by a non-brahmin young
man. In some stories the interaction between brahmin and the untouchable is discussed and in a story the conflict is between a brahmin non-believer and an orthodox brahmin over the status of brahminism. In another instant he focuses on the high caste versus low caste conflict. In some stories the brahmin arrogance against the non-brahmin and the caste war between the high caste Hindus and the converted muslims are all focused. In short, Jayakantaz has not dealt with caste conflicts adequately because he had not undergone the experience of the shame and degradation of being treated as an untouchable or low caste member or the psychological humiliations of the outcast in a casteist society. And also he at times defends the hierarchical caste system based on inherited profession of an individual. It seems that he is not against caste system as such but only against the ill-treatment of the low caste and the discriminatory attitude of the brahmin caste towards other castes and also the pretentious behaviour of the brahmins in practising brahminism. Though Jayakantaz has not exploited the caste conflicts to the full extent, he is the only writer in Tamil fiction who has explored it at least to this extent. Though the identification and selection of their materials and the focus and emphasis of the conflicts differ in range and depth, their intention in highlighting these conflicts is the same: For the betterment of society.