

# A Critical Interpretation of Black Humor in Charles Wright's the Messenger and the Wig



Prasanta Kumar Padhi

**Abstract**— Charles Wright is one of the experimental American novelists of the mid-sixties and is concerned with depicting the absurdity of life in a world that threatens to destroy man's sovereign self. As a black humourist, he not only highlights the black man's despair in the white dominated America, but also the general condition of man in a hostile universe. He has placed his characters in the most bizarre setting to bring out man's utter helplessness in the world. He tries to show how man becomes an easy victim of both the cosmic and social forces in the present day world. But despite his treatment of the bleak universe of human beings, Wright's vision of life is not dominated by cynicism and despair. In this paper an attempt has been made to show how by incorporating into his fiction the vision of black humour Wright presents a constructive vision of life by not choosing an alternative to the meaningless and purposeless life, but by complementing it with a spirit of laughter which should help man in confronting life with courage and fortitude. His treatment of black man as a paradigm of the precarious human condition divorces him from other black novelists of the protest tradition. Whereas the writers of the protest tradition are occupied with the specific nature of black man's problems, Wright is concerned with the idea that the black man, by his special burden in history, becomes the ultimate metaphor of the general human condition.

**Keywords:** Alienation, black humour, cosmic labyrinth, endurance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Broom Weber has recognised the ambiguity and apparent contradictions inherent in the term 'black humour' and has tried to differentiate the original 'black humour' from the 'humour' of the blacks. He is of the opinion that "black humour should retain its specific significance without being confused with 'Afro American humour'(Weber 389). In other words, black humour is an aesthetic comprehension of the hard realities of life, the realities which not only demonstrate the lack of resilience in the human condition, but also present a site of struggle between man and his deterministic situations of life. Afro American humour, on the contrary, draws on the minstrelsy tradition and is opposed to everything the Judeo-Christian society stands for. It is mostly making a burlesque out of the American culture. What

is common to both is their critical attitude towards the prevailing social order. Otherwise they are entirely different from each other. In the case of Afro American humour, there is always a sense of victory or the conclusiveness of its resolutions, whereas in the case of black humour, there is a note of stoic indifference towards the world. The other difference lies in the context of racism. The Afro American humour novels are Surcharged with racial overtones, whereas the black humour novels are quite neutral in their stance. The speciality of Charles Wright lies in his fusion if Afro American humour 'which is essentially racial'(Jackson 159) with black humour which, as Brom Weber says, 'transcends race and Nation'(Weber 390).

## II. METHODS

The present investigation of black humour in the major works of Charles Wright primarily focuses to figure out and closely examine the satiric mode and its key components in African novels. In this paper a sincere attempt has been made to investigate the striking connections between satiric forms of expression and the African American experience through analysing two of Wright's novel, The Messenger and The Wig. In this connection various primary and secondary materials are referred to find out how Charles Right used black humour more as a weapon of self-protection, than one of offense.

## III. RESULTS

Like any other Black Humourist, Charles Wright is isolated from the American Literary mainstream by his constant concern with a realization of new perspectives on all aspects of reality: search for new artistic means of representing contemporary experience as well as questioning of the established ideas concerning the reality of this experience. However, like any other black author Wright, being a Black Humourist represents a deviation from what is considered the usual course of the Black writer. He shares the same slightly raised attitude about the humanistic concerns through his Black humour novels.

## IV. DISCUSSION & RESULTS

'Black humour' is coined by Andre Breton in his book Anthologie de l'humor noir (1939), a collection of miscellaneous writings by forty-five authors, in the preface to the anthology, Breton defines 'black humour' as: To participate in black tournament of humour, one must indeed have passed through several stages of elimination.

Manuscript published on November 30, 2019.

\* Correspondence Author

**Dr. Prasanta Kumar Padhi\***, Department of Humanities, Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology, Burla, Orissa, India. (Email: [zyitu100@gmail.com](mailto:zyitu100@gmail.com))

© The Authors. Published by Blue Eyes Intelligence Engineering and Sciences Publication (BEIESP). This is an [open access](#) article under the CC-BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Retrieval Number: D5294118419/2019©BEIESP

DOI:10.35940/ijrte.D5294.118419

Journal Website: [www.ijrte.org](http://www.ijrte.org)

Black humour is circumscribed by too many things, such as stupidity, sceptical irony, jokes without seriousness... but it is especially the mortal enemy of sentimentality on a sky blue background, and of a certain short term fantasy which too often tries to pass for poetry, which persists vainly in wanting to subject the mind of its collapsing artifices, and which for this reason probably has little time left to raise against the sun, among the other poppy seeds, its head of a crowned crane (p. 21-22).

The black humour, as Breton suggests, challenges the traditional notions of life. It envisions life not as an ordered system, but as chaotic and systematic. Breton, of course, suggests that whatever be the nature of life, it is not without its grace. The self-gains victory over the odds and oddities and achieves its final 'triumph'. Jean Paul Richter and Luigi Pirandello, the other exponents of humour noir has rightly suggested that humour noir posits encounter between the infinite and the finite ego leading to the victory of the latter.

The black humour novel contains, as Richard Kostelanetz (1965) says, '... a series of absurd- that is, nonsensical or ridiculous- events that suggest ultimate absurdity, the ultimate meaninglessness of human existence'(p. 3). Charles Wright, as a black humourist, manifest in his novels this chaotic and disorderly universe. The disruption which marks Wright's fictional world takes place on two levels: the cosmic and the social. On the cosmic level, the black humourist concerns himself with the problems which are very basic to human nature. He is interested in assessing man's perverted desire to comprehend the limitless world. Max F. Schulz realizes the significance of the cosmic issues:

Where I allude to the cosmic I have in mind the black humour concept of the cosmic labyrinth, which is more ironic than rib-tickling in its inferences about man's pitifully inadequate efforts to comprehend... the 'divine disorder' of the cosmos (p. 156).

The phrase 'cosmic labyrinth' refers to the life's sinuous ways. The protagonist of the black humour novel realizes at the end how futile it is to seek a logical meaning from life. His ultimate comprehension of life lies in his realization that life is a labyrinth from which it is impossible to derive any coherent system of order.

Charles Wright, in his novels made an attempt to comprehend this 'cosmic labyrinth' through his protagonist's struggles and discoveries. Stevenson, the protagonist in *The Messenger* suffers from the dual illusions of life emphasized by Charles B Harris in his remarks about Kurt Vonnegut's novels. The first kind of illusion, Harris (1971) suggests is the illusion of a 'purposeful universe'. The second kind of illusion, he says, 'arises out of the belief that one can confront reality in a meaningful way by a few limited theories' (p. 54). The theories may include consciousness of one's own nationality, or the puritan ethics. Stevenson expects that by identifying himself with America, he has a better right to the different advantages of life, and can solve all the personal problems. Wright shows how this very assumption that the world is purposeful land will yield to his pious theories about life is quite absurd. The other aspect of cosmic which the black humour protagonist believes in is the awareness of death. To the black humourist, death is central to the experience of the protagonist. On this aspect of black humour novel, Thomas Le Clair (1965) remarks:

That the 'blackness' of the Black Humour is primarily funereal, that the fact and awareness of death are the basic sources of pessimism or nihilism in such fiction, that the presence of death in such fiction does much to explain the kinds of heroes presented, the strategies of selfhood they adopt, and the kind of endings and forms the writers employ, and that the Black Humourists' concern with death gives their fiction both a philosophical ultimacy and an artistic rationale (p. 5-6).

In black humour novels, LeClair is of the opinion that death, instead of playing the traditional role of bringing resolution to the action, heralds the central action of the novel from very beginning. The other strands in the novel are connected to the main action and are dominated by the image of death. Charles Wright emphasizes both the aspect of 'cosmic labyrinth' in his novel. Charles Stevenson, the lead character in *The Messenger* is quite conscious of death through his life. Wright devoted a full chapter dealing with the poetic exercises of the protagonist about death. The protagonist is quite lyrical about death when he says "Death was a crowded cottage with paint peeling from the exterior (Wright, 1972, p. 37). Stevenson not only encounters death in its varied form in the middle of the novel, but also confronts it in its symbolic form when he is ultimately deprived of the love of Shirley, his beloved and is obliged in the end to make a trip to nowhere. In view of the indeterminacy of his position, such a trip is worse than death. In the middle of the novel, he once pays homage to the statue of Captain Zimmerman. He is found asking from time to time 'why does America let me die quietly'.

The black humour novel not only presents absurdity in the cosmic level, but depicts it in the social level as well. Society, in the black humour novel, becomes the arch enemy of individual. The black humour protagonist tries his best to find out some logical clue from inside the society's framework, but he is unable to comprehend that it is Lenny Bruce's world where everything is rotten. The fictive world of *The Messenger*, *The Wig* and *Absolutely Nothing to Get Alarmed about* is peopled with such characters as transvestites, homosexuals, sadists and other abnormal beings. In such a world a nightmarish atmosphere dominates, an atmosphere created by bureaucracy, racism and parental supremacy. However, both Charles and Lester tried but failed to get a decent job anywhere in white America. They are not even granted interviews. The white man at the 'backdoor' says to Charlie 'Boy, can't you get it through your thick skull, we don't hire niggers' (Wright, 1972, p. 86). As there is hardly any chance to keep up one's self in a broken world, the hero reduces himself to an anti-hero. Unlike his existential counterpart, the anti-hero hardly enjoys free will and choice. He leads a life devoid of direction and purpose. Charles in *The Messenger* says: 'My life seems like that of a tomcat who had slunk down too many alleys and had gotten nothing but a whore's bag of experience' (Wright, 1972, p. 184). His life becomes uneventful, as the events are not of his own making. Instead of becoming the master of situation, the situation becomes his master.

With the disappearance of the romantic harmony between the individual and the society, there occurs a gap in his sensibility, a gap that surfaces when he fails to appreciate the beauty of the external world. Charles, who had once cherished the dream of being ' lulled to sleep by the whispers of leaves, the sprinkler jetting on the lawn,' comes back to New York after being exasperated by the habits and the manners of the village folk. The world loses its dappled variety for him.

In a world turned upside down, the values crumble like a house of cards. Charles is forced to seduce Elvira under the very nose of her husband Alfonso, who like Tiresias 'rested head against the steering wheel' and 'towards the end, when his wife screamed joyfully... put his hands over his ears' (Wright, 1972, p. 57). In another situation, the emaciated impotent Jim asks Charles to 'make it' with his wife, Laura. Peter, a spurious white man asks Charles to 'sleep after a good breakfast' after a while Charles 'discovered something was happening to the lower part of his body' (Wright, 1972, p. 19). Love, instead of remaining in an exclusive private world, comes down to the marketplace. The dark corner between Pizza House and Tip Top Parking becomes the meeting place of the lovers.

As James E Miller says, 'The nightmare world, alienation, nausea, the quest for identity and, the coming doomsday vision- these are the four elements that characterize American fiction'(p. 16). The world of the black humourist is such a nightmarish world. The element of grotesque characterizes such a ghastly world. Out of the two kind of grotesque- 'the supportive grotesque' and the 'terrible grotesque' (Winston,1972, p. 227)- it is the terrible grotesque that makes the world frightening and nightmarish. It is manifested in the distortion, separation or the mutilation of the body, which suggests the presence of death in the fictional world. As Mathew Winston says, 'the treat to the body is part of the omnipresent threat of death in grotesque black humour' (Winston,1972, p. 283). The 'terrible grotesque' brings a sense of insecurity and uncertainty to the fictional world. It changes the whole fabric of fictional world creating horror in the enlisting sympathy from the reader. Winston says 'it emphasises the blackness, diminishes the humour, treats the protagonist more harshly and involves the reader's emotional response to a greater extent' (Winston,1972, p. 282). In *The Messenger* Wright displays grotesquery through the sexual perversions of the characters. There is one ghastly incident in the novel resulting in the death of an innocent child. The husband hurls the child headlong onto the stony floor of the house and the child instantly dies. *The Messenger* is full of such ghastly incidents involving numerous deaths. Besides physical mutilation and the real deaths which abound in the novel, there is an all pervasive atmosphere of darkness which makes the black humour novels extremely dark. In *The Messenger* 'The empire building looms a giant obelisk; the rest is a misty El Greco painting. In the midst of the low buildings are angular, surrealistic' (Winston,1972, p. 4).

In the absurd world of black humour novel where everything is out of joint, there is bound to be 'alienation and nausea'. The protagonists of Wright's novels suffer from alienation and nausea after being disenchanted with their society. The protagonist in the black humour novel feels lonely, not because of lack of any ethical values, but because

of lack of any opportunities in life. Charles says: 'I began to be aware of something at the time, something perhaps I had been born with and which was never to leave me. Loneliness' (Wright, 1972, p. 43). The black humour protagonists take refuge in memories as an escape from nausea and alienation. These memories do not have the freshness of personal memories. They are often public memories about some national figures or cultural figures dealing with the problem of equality and self-definition. These memories do not take the characters anywhere; they rather make them more conscious of the world outside. Schulz's (1973) remarks about black humour protagonist's relationship with the outside world are pertinent here:

Like Shakespeare's dark comedies, black humour condemns man to a dying world; it never envisions, as do Shakespeare's early and late comedies, the possibilities of human escape from an aberrant environment into the forest milieu, as a ritual of the green world over the waste land (p. 8).

The protagonist of Charles Wright made a temporary escape to the sylvan surroundings of their native places only to return to the cities soon.

Alienation prompts the black humour protagonists to go in quest of their identity. The black humour protagonist is essentially a rogue having his own code of conduct and character. He is usually a trickster, an imposter telling lies in almost all circumstances. This kind of character necessitates the picaresque form with its episodic structure, a form Robert Scholes (1979) suggests, which encourages: 'a natural tendency... towards a grotesque exaggeration of misfortunes: an intensification of everyday troubles with an ironic vision of a distorted cosmos, where a poetic injustice reigns, which destroys all who do not learn to accommodate themselves to it' (p. 164). The picaresque form by its emphasis on a journey motif is helpful to a character who is in search of his identity, the use of picaresque in the black humour novels is different from the treatment of the same in the eighteenth century novel. In eighteenth novel there exists a normative world to which the characters return again and again for guidance, but in the black humour novel such a world is absent, and hence the journey of characters in search for their identity ends invariably in fiasco. There exist a kind of poetic justice in the traditional picaresque novel, but in the black humour novel the picaresque form administers more injustice than poetic justice.in such a world, the quest of black humour hero never becomes a meaningful one. It leads the protagonist into humble troubles through his labyrinthine journey. James E Miller (1967) points out the absurdity of any quest of the black humour protagonist:

Not just at times and not just on occasion, but rather steadily and without relief, our recent writers portray the universe as a "vast practical joke"- and the joke is on everybody, novelist, characters and readers alike. In such universe, any quest at all is the quest absurd (p. 26).

The speciality of the black humour protagonist lies in the way he confronts the crude reality of the world by his capacity to endure and suffer.



The fortitude he displays is the ‘black humour’ which Andre Breton has suggested, manifests in a ‘mood’. James Miller calls this mood a thin, frail line of hope. The black humour protagonist exhibits enough grit and energy to fight the forces of absurdity. His conscience equips him to encounter the harsh realities of the broken world. As Robert Scholes (1979) points out ‘the black humourist is not concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it’ (p. 43). The peculiar mood of the black humour protagonist’s mood is neither too pessimistic nor too optimistic. He is ‘at once observer of, and participant in the drama of dissidence, detached from and yet affected by what happens around him’ (p. 12). Towards the end of the novel two unpleasant things happens to Charles, the protagonist of *The Messenger*. One is Super’s notice to evacuate his house and the other, Shirley’s decision to marry her doctor-lover. His pat reply to Shirley’s decision is ‘suddenly I did not care’ seems quite courageous in the context. Similarly, in the same spirit he replies to Super. When Super asks him ‘what’s wrong?’ he replies, ‘nothing absolutely nothing’ (Wright, 1972, p. 217). James E Miller (1967) describes this aspect of the black humour novel in the following words:

There is laughter in all these novelists, but it is a laughter slightly off key, a laughter shot through with needing pain, a laughter that shades off on one side into the hysterical on the other into the moronic (p. 24).

Wright’s *The Wig* contains these basic contradictory qualities of the black humour novel. It oscillates between the cosmic and the pathetic by making use of the usual devices of the absurd black humour and the grotesque black humour. In its interest in the cosmic issues of death and meaninglessness if the world and its emphasis on contemporary world and its emphasis on contemporary reality, it fulfils the qualities of the black humour novel.

*The wig* depicts the story of a black man named Lester Jefferson who makes an attempt to transmute his self by means of a wig which promises that ‘with this, you may become whatever you desire’ (Wright, 1966, p. 4). The purpose behind his being incognito is to have connections with the great society. His dreams of achievement include ‘pretty girls, credit cards, charge account, Hart Schaffner and Marx suits, fine shoes, dobbs hats, XK-E Jaguars and more pretty girls...’ (Wright, 1966, p. 3). In his quest of dream, he does not accomplish anything. Instead, he frustrates his lady love The Deb, and ultimately loses her. His story ultimately ends with castration. Wright not only brings out into the limelight the grave qualities lying in the fabric of the black diaspora, but also lend them a universal significance by pitting them against the cosmic absurdity of the American reality.

*The Wig* examines the cosmic problem in two ways, first, it deals with what is called the “cosmic labyrinth.” Secondly, it focuses on the theme of death. Wright strikes at the core of the cosmic problem through an imposter like Lester. Later, like any black humour protagonist, has his own share of illusion. He believes in the American dream and also in the principle of equality which explains a part of his name, Jefferson. He believes in progress, and wants to work it out through his illusion about puritanism. He says ‘I am an American. That’s an established fact. America’s the land of elbow grease and hard work... I’m gonna work like a son of a

bitch” (Wright, 1966, p. 33).

He strongly believes that he can drive maximum advantage by embracing such a code of belief. Initially, he is filled with a promise which, he thinks, we pave the way for his future. He thinks of being elected as the president of the United States in the year 2000. If that is not possible, he hopes to become the chairman of the Handyman’s union. But the cosmic reality operates in a different way. Its ways are inscrutable. Lester hopes to occupy a very significant place in the orbit of his cosmic reality. Ultimately to his utter dismay, he becomes a chicken man only to break the heart of The Deb with whom he is in love. He finally gets castrated and accepts his fate on its own terms. The course of life Lester has gone through is at variance with the dreams he has held from the beginning. He does not understand how ill-equipped he is to examine the cosmic reality which knows no limits. The ending of the novel suggests that the labyrinth of the cosmic reality is quite sinuous and resists ant of its oversimplified solutions.

The second aspect of the cosmic problem involves the subject of death. Soon after Lester is anointed with the wig, he becomes conscious of death in the form of castration. His death consciousness is implicit in his dream:

Sweet dreams zipped through my mind, a politician had prophesied that it was extremely likely a Negro would be elected president of the United states in the year 2000. Being realist I could just picture myself as Chairman of Handyman’s union, addressing the committee of foreign relations and then being castrated. At least I’d no longer have to phone Mr. Fishback, the necrophilic funeral director each time I went downtown. What a relief that would be. (Wright, 1966, p. 8).

Fishback as the funeral director personifies death. He supervises the deaths of the citizens of the city. He looms large in the horizon of the city. He looms large in the horizon of the city. Lester is conscious of both castration and death. However hard he may try to keep them off, he is caught by both. Fishback functions as his mentor. It is Fishback’s credit which answer Lester’s health and happiness. Fishback at every turn controls Lester. Madam X accepts Lester as Fishback’s ‘bill’. Fishback keeps a watch on Lester’s movement. He seems to be aware of Lester’s denial of love to the nameless young girl. Death like, Fishback stands mysteriously in the middle of the road in a yellow cab waiting for Lester’s arrival. After a few moments he castrates him. Thus, Lester manipulates and manoeuvrings did not do much. Death devises its own way to conquer man. Lester is a puny figure before death. Wright lays emphasis on death’s inevitability in this novel.

Apart from the cosmic problem involving the inevitability of death, *The wig* examines the absurdity of American reality. The novel suggests that there is a total disagreement between individual and society. Lester’s loss of job as an Arab waiter, his inability to get a new job, confiscation of Little Jimmie’s property- all these speak of the indifference of the establishment- the hostility of society to the individual results in the latter’s shrinking self.



The individual is further diminished by the perpetration of myths by both the blacks and the whites. The best example of myth circulating around exemplified by the presence of a Negro who appears in the promenade with a chastity belt around his waist with a placard which reads 'I paid good money for this sturdy black man. He belongs to me and not to God' (Wright, 1966, p. 101). Like Stevenson in *The Messenger*, Lester could not get a job because of his colour. He did not have unemployment

insurance as he 'he looked foreign and spoke almost perfect English' (Wright, 1966, p. 5). That the American black is a sambo is still upheld by the American whites. Little Jimmie is presented with 'a medal, gold plated, the size of silver dollar, carved with a figure of a naked black man swinging from a pecan tree' (Wright, 1966, p. 29). The medical report of the Little Jimmie shows that:

Negros did not have bleeding ulcers nor did they need sleeping pills. American Negros, they explained, were free as birds and animals in a rich green forest. Childlike creatures, their minds ran the gamut from Yes Sir to No Sir. There was simply no occasion for ulcers" (Wright, 1966, p. 30).

The black man, thus, is still an abominable creature for the whites. A mutual distrust exists between the blacks and the whites. Little Jimmie shudders at the sight of the policemen. Though Lester defends the policemen as 'our protectors' and tells Jimmie that 'the cops are our friends,' Jimmie chooses to run across the English avenue to avoid a policeman. Wright not only exposes the white man's hypocrisy in dealing with the blacks, but also raises a finger against the blacks who, for their own self-aggrandisement, turn their backs on their own fellow brothers in the community. A black politician who resents the ban on black music in the 125<sup>th</sup> street only a week later makes a sea voyage with all pomp and grandeur. The Duke speaks high of the blues and promises his kindred that '...we are moving into a brotherly racial era...' (Wright, 1966, p. 67). But he hardly feels sorry when his 'learning tower in Italy' falls on the three small rickety children.

The American reality as presented in *The Wig* is not only inimical, but also equally incomprehensible to the individual. It often borders on fantasy and the surreal. Wright makes use of both the 'supportive grotesque' and the 'terrible grotesque' to present the nightmarish quality of that reality. The supportive and the terrible grotesque are but the two facets of the grotesque humour representing its ludicrous and fearsome qualities respectively. The killing of the truant boy, the death of the husband in the middle of the street and the killing of the rats in The Deb's are examples of the supportive grotesque humour. The cruel mother kills her truant boy because he does not want to go to a segregated school. She takes the night stick from the policeman and hits the boy's head. 'The boy's mouth and he fell to the sidewalk. Blood flowed from his nostrils and lips' (Wright, 1966, p. 163). The mother remains calm and composed and maintains a clear voice and tells placidly 'he's dead...I could never talk to him'. The mother's responsibility is exonerated by the policeman who consoles with the words 'it's not your fault. Kids are getting out of hand these days' (Wright, 1966, p. 163). The death of the man on the road is another example of the supportive grotesque. The woman wails rhythmically not so much losing her husband but for remembering that her husband could not see Florida before his death. The awesome

killing of the rats, the 'Rasputins' which is at the heart of the novel is another example of the supportive grotesque. The conversion of a man into either an animal or a bird points to the irrationality of reality. Lester, after all his trials to become a respectable citizen of society, has to accept his misery of becoming a chicken man. As a chicken man he 'was crawling through the streets of Harlemon (his)... hands and knees, wearing snow white, full feathered chicken costume' (Wright, 1966, p. 140). In this description of the 'supportive' is fused with the 'terrible' grotesque. Though the whole situation of the chicken man seems to be ludicrous, it exudes a lot of sympathy because of its inherent pathos. The terrible grotesque lies in the societal murder in Harlem International zone. The negro maid 'who had walked from Grape tree, Mississippi, to Cold Spring Harbour, long Island ... was flogged for being too maidenly fair'(Wright, 1966, p. 51). The murder of the negro by the host and hostess who were famous for their collection of Contemporary Collection Stone Art is an unhappy incident in the fictional world of *The Wig*. The cause of the negro's murder is that 'the gleaming, white-toothed young Negro with the rough but carefully combed kinky hair...displayed a rosebud instead of a penis!'(Wright, 1966, p. 52). Lester Jefferson's gruesome castration is another example of the terrible grotesque of the kind which Wright uses abundantly in the novel.

The nightmarish quality of the fictional world of *The Wig* owes a great deal of sexual aberrations depicted in it. There is nothing in the human relationship, the novel tries to suggest, which can be called as sacred. The human relationship has been dishevelled in a world of least connections. The degradation of sex is accompanied by a debasement of the code of love. Lester is in love with The Deb who feels like 'the queen of Sheba' 'every time a Swedish ship comes to town' and who follows the code 'No finance, no romance' (Wright, 1966, p. 46). She has at least rejected Lester's love twice because Lester has not given her gifts. Lester's love for the Deb is based on profanity. Lester dreams of Deb 'sweet brown girl. Bulldozing between your thighs, you with your roses in your hair' (Wright, 1966, p. 53). Lester takes a great deal of pleasure in associating his sexual acts with the Debs with a sense of victor: 'She squirmed under my power and I understood the lust of the conquistador'. Love is submerged by power. While preparing the pelts for The Deb, he imagines 'we would talk and laugh and later make love. My penis, which I have never measured, flipped snakewise to an honest Negro's estimate of seven-and-a half inches'(Wright, 1966, p. 125).

The American reality as depicted in *The Wig* takes a nightmarish quality from the kind of people who inhabit it. 'The homosexuals, transvestites and masochists from the world of *The Wig*. Miss Sandra Hanover ex-Miss Rosie Lamont, Ex-Mrs. Roger Wilson, Nee Alvin Brown is a transvestite' (Wright, 1966, p. 18). With a 'pair of shocks' in his bosom, he feigns as 'white woman from Georgia' (Wright, 1966, p. 22). She expresses her passion for Lester in the most trenchant words 'Iain't gonna bite you. My, my, those beautiful curls. Naked, you'd look like a Greek statue' (Wright, 1966, p. 77).



The yellow taxi driver who drives Lester and Jimmie to the Paradise Records located on the eighty-eight floor of the league of Nations pill building wishes to be beaten by them. As masochist he wishes, 'I gonna take my leather straps and chain and beat me up. I know you gonna make black-and-blue marks over me and take my money' (Wright, 1966, p. 72).

The characters who inhabits the world of *The Wig* suffer from a strong sense of nausea and loneliness. There is no true friendship between the characters like Jimmie, Nonnie Swift and Mrs. Tucker. The mandarin tree under whose shades the in-dwellers gather sometimes is a poor representative of tender values of nature and humanity. Jimmie Wishbone, after being thrown from Hollywood, has no place to live in. after his unsuccessful expedition to the Paradise Records, Little Jimmie aimlessly walks up 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. As Lester asks him 'Where you going?' Little Jimmie replies 'I don't know. Just going' (Wright, 1966, p. 87). This shows how Lester had nowhere to go after his banishment from Hollywood. He lands twice in the 'nutward' which becomes his second home. Each person is an island in the nightmarish world of *The Wig*. Nonnie Swift is left all to herself. The duke's building is a separate entity altogether. It is the 'leaning tower of Italy.' Mr. Fishback is at the farthest end of the town, and like Madam X, lives secluded from others. Mrs. Tucker keeps her iron gates closed on Nonnie Swift. On the first of April, Lester felt so much lonely and hungry for human association that he started rehearsing an interior monologue:

Suddenly I wanted to talk to someone; hope someone would say "Good morning. What lovely weather we are having." Yes, isn't it?" I'd reply, "I think we'll have an early spring." "I hope so, the other party would say, "Of course, you never can tell." "That's right," I'd say Corny human stuff like that (Wright, 1966, p. 167).

Sometimes, Wright's characters communicate with non-human objects. After being baffled with his love with The Deb and being totally disappointed with life, Lester begins his journey afresh in consultation with cockroaches. Nonnie Swift "questioned the plastic violets for conformation" of her belief that the wig will see Lester through the troubled times (Wright, 1966, p. 13).

The bewildering external world, however, does not drive Lester to total despair. He quietly accepts life without any qualification. As a black American he has an advantage over the whites in his understanding of the world, because he has experienced life from the lower depths. Ruby, Stevenson's beloved in *The Messenger* points out the advantage of a Black American in understanding life:

Never be bitter, Sonny. Only people who can't face life and hate themselves are bitter. May be I was born black and lost my voice to teach me a lesson. Well, kid, I learned. I know damn well I learned something being born black that I could never have learned being born white (Wright, 1972, p. 89).

Exposed to the bleak life in the black diaspora, Lester too knows that to take advantage of his disadvantages. The placard which he comes across during his journey crystallises his estimation of life. The placard reads 'Life is worthwhile, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar' (Wright, 1966, p. 101).

The exposure to ambivalence in life has prepared Lester to take life easily on its own terms. When faced with a macabre situation, he knows how to handle it. The protagonists of both *The Messenger* and *The Wig* exhibit endurance while accepting life. Both are marked by qualities that counter the feeling of loneliness and despair. They shed their high illusions and life as a 'diminished thing.' Lester is so much absorbed with the shocks he has received that he almost quietly obeys the commands of Mr. Fishback. Mr. Fishback jabbed the red hot slender steel rod into the head of Lester's penis and asked about his feelings. Smiling, Lester said, 'I'm beginning to feel better already' (Wright, 1966, p. 179). This is the comic the black humourist comes to terms with the extremity of his situation.

### V. CONCLUSION

Charles Wright like any other Black humourist, is isolated from the American literary mainstream by his constant concern with a realization of new perspectives on all aspects of reality: one which includes a search for new artistic means of presenting contemporary experience as well as a question of the established ideas concerning the reality of his experience. However, like any other Black author, he is because of his race generally isolated from even the black humour tributary of American literature. Yet, being a Black humourist, he represents a deviation from what is considered the usual course of Black writer. Both of his novels has successfully appropriated the genre of black humour novel not only to depict the racial discrimination of the blacks by the whites, but also to make a meaningful statement about the riddles of life itself.

### REFERENCES

1. Breton, Andre. *Anthologies de l'humour Noir*. Paris, JJ Pauvert, 1966.
2. Foster, Frances S. *Charles Wright: Black Black Humorist*. CLA Journal, 15.1, 1971,pp 44.
3. Gehring, Wes. G. *American Dark Comedy – Beyond Satire*. Westport, Greenwood, 1996.
4. Harris, Charle B. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd*. New Haven, College and University Press.
5. Harris, Robert. "The Purpose and Method of Satire". *Virtual Salt*. Version Date: 14 May 2001.https://www.virtuallsalt.com/satire.htm. Accessed: 10 June. 2018.
6. Hunger, Jeffrey W. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 127, Gale Grap Publications, 2000.
7. Jackson, Blyden. "The Minstrel Mode". *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, Edited by Louis D Robin, Jr Voice of America Forum Series, United States Information Series, 1974.
8. Le Clair, Thomas. Death and Black Humor. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 17, 1 (1965): 5-40.
9. Kostelanetz, Richard. The Point is that Life Doesn't Have Any Point. *The New York Times Book Review*, 6 June, 1965.
10. Miller, James E. *Quests Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1967.
11. Scholes, Robert. *Fabulation and Metafiction*. Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1979
12. Schulz, Max F. *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and his World*. Athens, Ohio University Press, 1973.
13. Weber, Brom. The Mode of "Black Humor. *The Comic Imagination in American literature*, Edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. Forum Series, U.S. Information Agency, 1974



14. Winston, Mathew. *Humor Noir and Black Humour*. *Veins of Humor*. Edited by Harry Levin, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1972.
15. Wright, Charles. *The Messenger*. New York, Mentor Books Inc, 1972.
16. Wright, Charles. *The Wig*. New York, Manor Books Inc, 1966.

### AUTHORS PROFILE



**Dr. Prasanta Kumar Padhi**, is working as an Assistant Professor of English in department of Humanities, Veer Surendra Sai university of Technology, Burla, Orissa. Prior to joining VSSUT he was working as the Head, department of Humanities, Orissa Engineering College. He has published more than 15 peer reviewed research journals and presented papers in several National and international seminars and conferences. He has extensive experience in soft skills training for aspiring professionals. His current areas of research interest include business communication, cross cultural communication, soft skills training, Black American women writings and contemporary Indian fiction. You can reach him at [zyitu100@gmail.com](mailto:zyitu100@gmail.com).