

Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* as a Novel of Education, Beyond the Genre

Harish Chander

Independent Scholar

Rudolph Fisher--a radiologist by training and profession--is also one of the outstanding fiction writers of the Harlem Renaissance. This period of a decade and a half, occurring during the nineteen-twenties and early thirties, witnessed the flourishing of creative activity among African American artists who began to assert their own individual and racial selves without fear or inhibition. As S. P. Fullinwider points out, Black literature had hitherto taken the direction of either "reform" or "special pleading" for Black people's humanity and rights (125). With race pride bolstered by Marcus Garvey's "Black is beautiful" message and by the Pan-Africanist movement, Black writers of the Renaissance began to create unique Black characters instead of stereotypes of the contented Negro, the militant Negro, and the comic Negro, offered by whites. In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), included in *The Black Aesthetic*, Langston Hughes unravels the dilemma faced by African American artists of his time who were encouraged by Blacks to "show how good we are" and by whites not to "shatter our illusions about you" (170). Hughes resists either stance, declaring, "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose" (172). Confident of their creative talents, these writers immersed themselves "in search of new ways of understanding and expressing the Negro experience" (Fullinwider 133). Rejecting the racial myths and shibboleths, they sought individual identity, definition, and expression. In Alain Locke's famous words from his essay "Negro Youth Speaks," included in *The New Negro*, "Race to them [the Harlem Renaissance artists] is but an idiom of experience, a sort of added enriching adventure and discipline, giving subtler tones to life, making it more beautiful and

interesting, even if more poignantly so" (48). Locke adds that these artists "take their material objectively with detached artistic vision" (50). Fisher's works are prime examples of this new approach, conveying an unsentimental, scientific picture of reality, seeking to educate by showing the flaws of Blacks and whites.

Fisher, who had earlier shown his talent in depicting the Black urban life in his short stories, gives in *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), a different kind of a novel of education, addressing both whites and Blacks, and, by extension, the entire human race. Erstwhile, Fisher critics have focused on aspects other than its genre as a novel of education. To demonstrate the truth of this viewpoint, we briefly examine four most important critical studies of *The Walls of Jericho*. The authors are Eleanor Q. Tignor, Emad Mirmotahari, Sidney H. Bremer, and Jonathan Munby. Tignor in her 1982 article titled "Rudolph Fisher: Harlem Novelist," published in *The Langston Hughes Review*, explores social relations between Black-white as well as Black-Black (upper class Blacks and lower -class Blacks). He finds that not only is there lack of trust and mutual suspicion between Black and white Harlemites, but it permeates to upper class and lower -class Blacks, as well. Sidney H. Bremer's 1990 *PMLA* article titled "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers" shows how Harlem in 1920s became the cultural capital of Black America, with writers and artists making it their home. Even while they were away, they, like Claude McKay, felt nostalgic about Harlem. They celebrated through their art "the organic place and community of Harlem" (52). There was, however, a downside to it in so far as it limited Black artists to Harlem community, separating them from the rest of New York City. Bremer thus provides valuable lessons in the Black history of Harlem. Mirmotahari in his 2012 article titled "Mapping Race: The Discourse of Blackness in Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho*" rejects the biology/culture connection because he finds immense variety of physical

features among Harlem's Black population. His important finding is that "racial strife is printed all over the novel" (581). Nor does Fisher, according to Mirmotahari, entertain the idea of return of American Blacks to Africa in large numbers in their quest to live happily without discrimination. As to Munby's assessment titled "Rudolph Fisher: Renaissance Man and Harlem's Interpreter," which forms chapter 14 of *A History of the Harlem Renaissance*, published in 2022, Fisher, the man of science and son of a clergyman, is unraveling the tensions between deductive logic and faith, and between superstition and science among African Americans, particularly of Harlem.

Fisher's earlier short stories depicted the charms of Harlem life, such as the Sunday Seventh Avenue promenade, the barbershop, lounge, and the dance casino, but also the problems of the Harlemites, including their interracial and intra-racial conflicts. In the short story "The City of Refuge," Fisher points out that good Samaritans are rare, and that cheats do not spare even members of their own race. This story dramatizes the initial euphoria and subsequent disillusionment of a Southern Black migrant to Harlem. King Solomon Gillis is ecstatic to come to Harlem where he finds Black people in charge—where, unlike his native South, "black was white," and where Black people "had privileges, protected by law" (36). However, Gillis is in for a rude shock as his so-called friend Mouse Uggam betrays him, turning the city of refuge into the city of doom when Gillis has to face the charge of peddling drugs. In the short story "Cynthia," the seventy-year-old Miss Cynthia, who is initially upset that her grandson Dave Tappan has not chosen to become a medical practitioner, a preacher, or an undertaker, comes around to take pride in the latter's success as a singer-entertainer, learning that honor lies in following one's talent and going about it honestly. Dave sings a secular love song which he as a child had learned from Miss Cynthia. As she "watches its effect on members of the audience," she is thrilled that

they are “transformed from a loud and sinful [sic] crowd to a gathering of children who share Dave’s memory” (14-15). Fisher here seems to be warning parents to allow children to seek their own professions based on their aptitudes and excel in those fields.

In *The Walls of Jericho*, Fisher attacks race and class prejudice as well as egomania and self-illusion, and brings out the need for the pursuit of common goals and seriousness of purpose by interested Blacks and whites to improve the condition of the Black people. *The Walls of Jericho* is a singular *bildungsroman*. The term “Bildungsroman” is of German origin, as it is made up of two German words, “bildung,” which means education or formation and “roman,” which means novel. It is worthy of note that according to Nordic Lexicon, “Bildung is a German word for education, cultivation, personal formation and character, emotional and moral development, and maturation combined.” Bildungsroman is a novel of education that pertains to the mental, moral, psychological, and spiritual growth of the protagonist. The term was coined by the German philologist Johan Simon Karl Morganstern in his lecture called “On the Nature of the Bildungsroman” in 1819 at the University of Dorpat (present-day Taru in Estonia). In Morganstern’s own words, “We may call a novel *Bildungsroman* first and foremost on account of its content, because it represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion, but also, second, because this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel” (Morganstern 654-55). *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, Goethe’s second novel, is considered the earliest and perhaps the finest Bildungsroman. It is a story of the growth and maturation of the protagonist. Dissatisfied with the bourgeois, business life and disappointed in love, Wilhelm sets out on his travels to achieve self-realization. In the beginning, the idealist Wilhelm thinks that “all that good and noble and great embodied” can be shown forth by the theatric art, but experience shows that this

was not true because of frequent disputes between the patron and actors, rivalry among the actors themselves, and use of theatre as a money-making-venture. While at the end, after many struggles and sufferings, the protagonist is reconciled to the social order. Wilhelm, his mind no longer at unrest, becomes, to use Thomas Carlyle's telling phrase, from his essay on Goethe, "the calmest man" (48). The novel closes with Wilhelm's averment: "... I have attained a happiness which ...I would not change with anything in life" (598).

Written in response to a challenge that a short novel could not blend the extremes of Harlem society into a single coherent whole, Fisher meets the challenge by skillfully bringing together Blacks from different socio-economic strata. Unlike a typical novel of education such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915) which traces the journey of the protagonist through his formative years, childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, *The Walls of Jericho* deals with the story of an adult in the process of becoming a man. (Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* falls into the same category of the growth of an adult protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet). As Emerson puts it in "The American Scholar," "The main enterprise of the world for splendour, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man [and by extension of a human being]" (59).

And a bildungsroman performs this aforementioned function admirably. However, just as Joyce in *A Portrait* strives to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience (collective soul of my [Irish] race" to shape it new (281), Fisher in *The Walls of Jericho* offers a unique portraiture of the Black people of his time, giving them a new vision of themselves and the white folks. In contradistinction to the protest and propaganda novel, Fisher here gives an unsentimental representation of a cross section of the Harlem society, as he shows Black prejudice toward whites and class prejudice among Blacks, in addition to a panoply of white

attitudes toward Blacks. It serves as an initiation story for the readers—Black and white, urging them to get rid of their racial prejudices and judge each individual human being on their own merits rather than on their skin pigmentation. The novel has two plots. One is concerned with the love story of Joshua “Shine” Jones, a furniture mover, and Linda Young, a housemaid, in which Jones considers himself too hard to be conquered by a woman. And the other involves the Black attorney Fred Merrit’s move into a house on Court Avenue, an exclusively white neighborhood. The two plots merge, as the men hired to move Fred Merrit are Joshua Jones and the comic duo of Bubber Brown and Jinx Jenkins. Intertwined with the two plots is the story of the pool parlor owner Henry Patmore who has romantic designs on Linda Young, and considers Fred Merrit his enemy after the latter wins a ten-thousand-dollar court judgment for his client against Patmore. To achieve his goal of bringing out race and class prejudice and attacking egomania and self-illusion, Fisher employs the literary devices of humor, irony, parody, as well as the title metaphor of the novel.

### Race and Class Prejudice

First and foremost, Fisher as a novelist exposes race prejudice among both Blacks and whites. Fisher deplores Black prejudice against whites. The authorial narrator seems to denounce Fred Merrit when the latter unashamedly exclaims: “I hate fays [white people]. Always has. Always will. Chief joy in life is making them uncomfortable” (21). Fred Merrit’s bitter prejudice toward whites is apparent from his belief that the white men who came “oftener than once” to Harlem “had but one motive, the pursuit of Harlem women,” and that “their cultivation of Harlem men was a blind and an instrument in achieving this end” (61). When Tod Bruce, the Rector of the St. Augustine Church, mentions that there is a white point of view, and that “the fays have a side, too,” Merrit responds, “[W]e aren’t supposed to see that” (23). The

author roundly condemns Henry Patmore for burning Merrit's Court Avenue home, as the white lad leading blind beggar comments: "Can you imagine it? A Negro—using white prejudice to cover he wanted to do, putting the blame in the most likely spot—almost getting away with it, too" (161).

Fisher's masterstroke in irony is the putting side-by-side of Fred Merrit and Miss Agatha Cramp at the General Improvement Association's Annual Costume Ball. By not revealing his race and parodying the usual white prejudices toward Blacks, the fair-skinned Merrit tricks the philanthropist Cramp into revealing her true feelings about Black people and her deep-seated racial prejudices. Cramp tells Merrit that Blacks are "primitive" people, "primeval" and "unspoiled by civilization" (62). Discussing with Nora Byle how to uplift the Black race, she says that the Negro problem can be solved by increasing the number of Black servants and blue-collar workers--but not by elevating Black people to the status of governesses and secretaries (78). When Miss Cramp declares that she will move out of Court Avenue if Merrit moves in her neighborhood, her Baltimorean friend Irene Pamalee says that she thought that Cramp was interested in uplifting Black people. Thereupon, Cramp blurts, revealing her innermost feelings: "... it's one thing to help them and quite another to live beside them as equals' (99). The tone of irony is again evident in the narrator's comments that despite having devoted fifteen years of her life to the "service of mankind," Miss Cramp has only recently thought about the possibility of Negroes [sic] also being members of the human race (36). Miss Cramp changes her charity, as she changes her maid. It is worthy of note that Miss Cramp has so far directed her social service toward specific racial groups--French, Polish, and Russian--primarily dictated by the race of her maid at a given time. Having directed her philanthropy toward remote disasters, she had not considered the deprivations of Black people before she hired a black maid, Linda Young (32-33).

While there is deliberate use of irony by Merrit in his encounter with Cramp, there is a streak of unintentional irony in Linda Young's responses to Miss Cramp's questions and Miss Cramp's accidental encounter with Mrs. Nora Byle. In response to Miss Cramp's question what the General Improvement Association does, Linda Young says that they collect a dollar each from members and use that money to send some body down South whenever there is a lynching to report that it actually happened. When Miss Cramp asks Miss Young why the G.I.A. does not pay attention to the problems here in this great metropolis, the latter responds innocuously that "nobody gets lynched here" (35). Later, Linda Young confides in Miss Arabella Fuller, Merrit's housekeeper, that Miss Cramp once asked her "a lot of dumb questions about shines," and she gave her "a lot of dumb answers," which has made Miss Cramp to join the G.I.A. to "find out [the truth about Blacks] for herself" (97). Whether or not Miss Cramp learns like Betty that "Caucasian superiority stuff is a lot of bunk" (64) is a question that cannot be definitely answered, but it does provide her food for serious thought. While the novel uses the word "educate" only twice, it is remarkable that it is both times used by Miss Cramp in reference to Black dancing that "we must educate these people [Blacks] out of such unrestraint" (62-63). It is ironic that while Miss Cramp is critical of Black dancing, Nordic Tony Nale is taking lessons in Black dancing from Nora Byle. Fisher also repudiates class prejudice among Blacks. As the movers unload the truck carrying Merrit's household stuff, they discuss what they would do if whites should try to evict Merrit. They agree that they should not risk their lives for Merrit because he is a "dickty (upper -class Black)." Shine says aloud to himself: "If this bird wasn't a dickty, he'd be OK. But there never was a dickty worth a damn" (28). This class enmity is one of the reasons that the middleclass Henry Patmore burns down Merrit's home in the exclusively white neighborhood.



Fisher employs the title metaphor of the walls of Jericho to focus attention on the self-illusion with which people wrap themselves so that they do not really know themselves. Just as the biblical Joshua had to shatter the walls of Jericho to get to the promised land, Fisher's Joshua Jones has to shatter "the wall of self-illusion" (106) to know his real self. As Father Bruce, the author's spokesperson, remarks: "A man may ... boast that he is evil and merciless and hard when all this is a crust, shielding and hiding a spirit that is kindly, compassionate and gentle" (105). He explains to the congregation, with particular reference to Joshua Jones, that they may find themselves "face to face with a solid blank wall, " "beyond which lies ...the land of promise" (105). Interestingly enough, Reverend Bruce further postulates that "The Walls of Jericho" does not need to be taken literally, but it should be considered a metaphor for the wall of self-illusion that an individual must shatter to see their true self. Linda adds that Joshua Jones has so far mistakenly believed that he is hard and it's soft to fall for a girl," and that mistaken belief prevented him from declaring his love to Linda. (147). He declares, "No mamma in this man's world was tight enough to put it on *him*" (123). The omniscient narrator observes, "...to him [Joshua Jones] through Linda and after considerable meditation, had come a new outlook on old things," (151), not as a sudden flash of light or epiphany. The walls of Jericho come tumbling down when it finally dawns upon Joshua that "[t]he guy that's really hard is the guy that's hard enough to be soft" (151).

The metaphor of Jericho walls is also indicative of the racially divided America, "the fays" (white people), "dickties" (people of mixed races, white and black) and "boogys" (ordinary black people)—practicing segregation to all intents and purposes. And on rare occasions, such as the G.I.A. Costume Ball, when some of them meet, they do not interact socially: "Out on the dance

floor, everyone, dickty and rat, rubbed joyous elbows, laughing, mingling, forgetting differences. But whenever the music stopped everyone immediately sought his own level" (39).

Lastly, *The Walls of Jericho* emphasizes the need for Black racial unity and interracial cooperation to fight racism. Fisher believes that Blacks should not shun working for other Blacks if it means greater job satisfaction and better pay. To create a Black "business class"(163), Merrit proposes to buy a one-truck moving business to be run by Joshua Jones, with both dividing up the profits equally and with an option to buy for Jones in due course. Jones gladly accepts the offer. While the General Improvement Association's Costume Ball brings together Blacks from all classes as well as interested whites to raise funds for the advancement of Black people, the motivations of the participants vary. Some whites come, observes the author –narrator, just to "enjoy themselves," some to "raise up their darker brother," and others to observe the behavior of Black people (39). As for Dicktie women, they come extravagantly dressed primarily to show off their costumes and jewelry (38).

In a 1971 interview, John A. Williams describes the role of the African American writer in the following words:

I think the black writer has two functions of equal importance. One is that given this time and its processes, he really has to deal with and for his people.

He has to become an educator, a teacher, a storyteller, a satirist, and any vehicle that will help make his people aware of their positions.

At the same time, he's also bound to become an expert in his craft; writing a novel, writing poetry, what have you. (Cited by Richard Yarborough in his "Foreword" to *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, XVI)

Convergences  
Chander: Rudolph Fisher's

Rudolph Fisher in *The Walls of Jericho* perfectly performs the role of an educator, his novel having lessons for not only the black protagonist but also for other Blacks and whites, for he dexterously uses his double-edged irony as a both defensive and offensive weapon in his fight for demolishing racial and class prejudices. Once the walls of illusion and ignorance between the races come down, racial harmony will result.

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