

## Research Paper

**'Black Boy': A Post-Colonial Approach**

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**ABSTRACT**

*From the very origin of the mankind, human beings are divided into two main classes - the haves and the have-nots. As the haves invented various socio-political institutions for their own well-being, these institutions have invariably turned into the centers of oppression of the have-nots. It means the haves and the have-nots became the oppressor and the oppressed respectively.*

**KEY TERMS:** African American literature, exploitation, protest, socio-political institutions and their influence.

The colonizer and the colonized are the terms which later came to be used to refer respectively to the oppressor and the oppressed. But in reality, ruler, oppressor and colonizer are just the different nomenclatures which refer to the same human tendency that leads one to exploit the others. Literature being the mirror of the society in which it is created, throws ample light on the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. In American society, African Americans have been the constant source of exploitation for the Whites. Consequently, African American literature overflows with incidents of oppression and the reactions of their writers against such oppression. That is why this paper aims to analyze Richard Wright's 'Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth' and bring out the complexities in the relationship between the Whites and the Blacks and its effects on the victim.

Richard Wright's 'Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth' (1945) is one of the best-seller autobiographies ever written by African American writer. It narrates the life experiences of Richard, a Black boy, whose 'self' is engulfed by detrimental socio-political institutions of his time. These institutions were so menacing that it was almost impossible for his 'self' to have any positive growth. However, Richard was a child with 'difference' who was ever prepared to face any of the challenges of life in order to survive in the hostile circumstances. In fact, it is observed that it is this sense of fighting out the battle up to its end enabled him to develop his personality in the right direction and reach to the pre-planned destination of his life-journey.

A close analysis of 'Black Boy' shows that the conflict for survival of the 'self' of the narrator begins from his family itself. It's very early in his life-story that the readers come to know that Richard's father had deserted his family and was living with another woman. In fact, his father "... was a shiftless farmhand, a slave in mind if not in body, with no vestige of loyalty towards his wife or family." (Weeks, 1945: 131) Consequently, Richard was forced to suffer the pangs of a broken family. In normal circumstances, it is expected that the parents should take proper care of their children and help them to grow as a normal human being. However, Richard could not get this normal treatment at the hands of his family members. Of course, his mother tried to perform her duties towards her son as sincerely as possible, yet her ill-health compelled her to surrender in front of the adverse circumstances. It is seen that her ill-health, particularly the days when she was bed-ridden due to a stroke of paralysis, had very adverse effect on the tender and receptive mind of little Richard. In this connection he writes: "(her) sufferings grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness, ... a somberness that was to make me stand apart and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me self conscious, that was to make me keep forever on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me." (Wright, 1945: 87)

However, it has to be taken into consideration that it was because of his mother that Richard could learn many skills which were indispensable to keep his self intact in the racial circumstances of his life. It was his mother who made him fit to survive in his antagonistic surrounding by forcing him fight with other Black boys in the street and at the same time keeping him away from the Whites as any confrontation with this powerful enemy was dangerous for his own survival. Though she was deserted by her husband, she taught Richard to read and write which changed the entire course of his future life. But it is also true that his mother was responsible for many of the fears which bore in his mind and heart. Once, accidentally, he put the house on fire that resulted in his severe beating at the hands of his mother. The fear of this beating was so intense that:

"Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. ...I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid..."

Exhaustion would make me drift toward sleep and then I would scream until I was wide awake again; I was afraid to sleep.” (Wright, 1945: 6)

Such kind of deep fear in the tender mind of a small boy certainly plays an important role in shaping his personality. In a similar incident, Richard Wright tells the readers how he was made to sleep without taking his dinner because of his indecent behaviour in the presence of a guest. As his father had deserted the family and his mother was busy with earning food for the family, there was nobody to look after him and his younger brother who learnt the language of the street and unhesitatingly used it at home for which they were punished.

It is observed that his other relatives too tried to create as many hindrances as possible in the smooth development of little Richard. As his mother was suffering from paralysis, Richard, along with his mother and younger brother, moved to his grandmother's place. During this stay, Richard was exploited by his aunts and uncles as he was an unwanted burden for the family. Foremost amongst his oppressors at Granny's was Aunt Addie who worked as a teacher in a religious school and treated Richard cruelly. The readers along with Richard fail to understand the reason for such inimical attitude of Aunt Addie towards her nephew.

Richard narrates another incident when he used to live with Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody. Uncle Clark was of the opinion that being an orphan, Richard has to work if he wanted to stay with him. Richard tried to satisfy his 'patrons' by working as hard as possible. But when he came to know about the dead boy of the landlord, he was terribly frightened to sleep in his room. When he requested his Uncle to allow him to sleep elsewhere, he was not allowed to do so. The readers are perturbed to read that Richard was forced by his Aunt and Uncle to sleep in the same room in which the landlord's son had died. In fact, it creates a suspicion in the minds of the readers that the announcement of the death of the landlord's son might be a deliberate plan made by his Uncle to get rid of an unwanted responsibility. And his plan really succeeded as frightened Richard left the place after this incident. Such kind of ill-treatment at the hands of all his relatives made a critic to observe that:

“Wright never knew love – not even for of from his mother.  
He was never loved by anyone.  
He never knew what it meant to love someone.” (Burns, 1945: 11)

Naturally all this had a very negative impact on the growth of Richard's personality.

Along with his family and relatives, Richard is also seen being exploited by the members of Black community. For instance, in one incident, Richard tells his readers that when he was six years old, he used to roam the streets and peep into the saloons. One day a Black man took him into a saloon and made him drink wine and utter obscenities, thereby spoiling the innocent child. Richard writes:

“I was a drunkard in my sixth year, before I had begun school.  
With a gang of children, I roamed the streets, begging pennies from passers-by,  
haunting the doors of saloons, wandering further and further away from home each day.  
I saw more than I could understand and heard more than I could remember. (Wright, 1945: 19)

It is astonishing to read about the people who, instead of curbing the bad manners, encourage a small child to drink and use bad language. In another incident Richard Wright throws light on the selfishness of the Blacks and how they used to exploit their fellows. After losing his job in the post office, Richard worked as an agent, selling insurance policies to ignorant Blacks. During the course of this job, he came to know that those illiterate Blacks were being cheated by the burial and insurance societies by exchanging their policies for the new ones with stricter clauses. Though these companies were exploiting the poor Blacks, their owners “were leaders in Negro communities and were respected by whites.” (Wright, 1945: 36)

Richard Wright has also written about his visit to a Black publisher to get his story published in 'Southern Register.' The conversation between Richard and the publisher shows how the Blacks used to exploit their fellow Blacks. When Richard asked for the royalty for his story, the editor replied that he was giving Richard a chance to write, which was more valuable than the royalty. Though Richard was pleased by the editor's answer, he “still thought he was taking advantage of me.” (Wright, 1945: 145)

All the above incidents clearly illustrate that Richard's life was more than a dungeon because the inmates of a dungeon are governed by certain well-defined rules and regulations. As per the law, the prisoners are entitled to the basic needs of human life like food and shelter. The confinement of the prisoners is the result of some crime they had committed. But in Richard's case, this was not the reality. He had not committed any crime, yet he was forced to lead a life of prisoner. There was no any law that governed his life; and what's more, he was denied even the basic requirements of his life. To earn his livelihood, he was forced to take various jobs. His life was full of sufferings, though he was not responsible for it. Then the question arises why his life had become unbearable to live? What kind of sin he had committed in his life? Why did his family members fail to take proper care of Richard? Why were his Uncles and Aunts so cruel in their behavior with Richard? Why did the members of his own community try to take disadvantage of a small fatherless child? Was it because there was some problem with Richard himself? Or can it be said that Richard did not deserve to be treated properly because of the sins of his parents?

All these questions ultimately lead the readers to the socio-historical facts of Richard's life which, in fact, were the real culprits behind all the sufferings in the life not only of Richard but also of his community. 'Black Boy' successfully exposes these instigators and brings forth the answers to all the above questions. After reading his autobiography, the readers come to know that Richard belonged to African American community, a community which had its roots in Africa. These Africans were brought in chains to the shores of America by the European settlers and forced to work on the vast plantations

as bonded labourers. These Negroes were bought and sold in open market on the auction block. They were given secondary treatment in American society. Segregation was shamelessly practiced at public places like the parks, restaurants, playgrounds, libraries and temples. There were separate seats and compartments for Blacks on buses and trains. Even in the hospitals they had different treatment. It means the Whites regarded the Blacks:

“...scarcely more than chattel or animals, to be taunted, manipulated, humiliated at will, and kept in their place at the bottom of society.

Crossing the colorline was an offence seldom tolerated and often severely punished...” (Leibowitz, 1993: 340)

It was because of such a partial attitude of the oppressive Whites towards the poor Blacks that had made their lives worse than the lives of animals. The atrocities of the Whites were so severe that even the Blacks, it seems, had accepted their lot. In these vitiating circumstances, it seems to be pretentious on the part of the 'civilized' world to expect any 'good and gentlemanly' behavior from the common Blacks. For instance, the readers come across an incident in 'Black Boy' which speaks about how Richard was the victim of carelessness of his parents. His father, particularly, is presented in a dark shade, who seems to be irresponsible enough to desert his family. Though Richard's mother tries her level best to take good care of her son, ultimately fails to give a proper shape to Richard's life. There are many incidents in which she is found to be engaged in giving lessons in good behavior to her son. To achieve the desired goal, she even punishes Richard.

After reading about such incidents, even some readers, it seems, feel that Richard should have faithfully followed all the instructions of his mother and tried to be a good and responsible son. And in general circumstances, there is nothing wrong in such an expectation. But the readers tend to forget the fact that the circumstances in which Richard lived were not the general one; they were very specific – specific in the sense that to understand them it is absolutely required to take birth in a Black family and live in the racist social structure of America and it should be such a family whose caretaker had deserted it; a family who had nothing to rely upon except the physical labour of a physically weak mother with two small sons to take care of; a family with two little children who were left alone to take care of themselves while the mother was out to earn the livelihood; a family which had relatives like Aunt Addie, Aunt Jody and Uncle Clark.

This was the stark reality in which Richard was being brought up. And this reality was not the consequence of any inborn weakness in the personalities either of Richard or other concerned people. On the contrary, it was the outcome of socio-historical circumstances of their lives - the circumstances which had direct relation with the cruel attitudes of the racist Whites who considered themselves to be superior to the Blacks. This belief of racial superiority of the Whites had no any scientific base. Yet, they treated Blacks as inferiors and exploited them socially, economically, physically and also mentally. This colonial attitude of the Whites was the real culprit that made the lives of Blacks utterly miserable. And to safeguard their colonial interests, the White masters misused all the social institutions including language, religion, law, police, literature, education and politics. The Blacks were forced to believe that whatever 'white' was good. And if anybody, even the White, tried to question the truth of this belief, was ruthlessly punished. In such socio-political circumstances, it seems to be futile to expect the Blacks to behave in any other way than Richard Wright has shown them behaving in his autobiography. Therefore, the incidents which speak about the oppression of Richard at the hands of his family and community should be read and understood keeping in mind the vicious circumstances which forced them to behave in that way. In other words they alone should not be blamed for their behaviour as their circumstances were more responsible for it.

To conclude, therefore, it can be said that it is essential to study the autobiographies of African Americans with a new approach which considers them not only the works of literature alone but the genuine accounts of the realistic incidents taken directly from the lives of their authors. This new attitude will certainly lead the readers to many secret and dark avenues of American society and enable them to look at the lives of the Blacks sympathetically and help them to break away from the colonial attitude and appreciate these autobiographies in better manner and pass on the correct judgments on their merits.

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