



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 3; No. 9; September 2022 (pp. 38-42)
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi:10.48150/jlah.v3no8.2022.a4

Wright's *Black Boy*: A Narrative of Black Experience

Dr. Rajendra Prasad Bhatt
Associate Professor
Far Western University
Mahendranagar, Kanchanpur
Nepal

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the depiction of black life in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. It examines how socio-cultural circumstances create obstacles for Negroes and make black community suffer. *Black Boy*, which depicts extreme poverty and the writer's accounts of racial violence against the blacks, primarily is an attack on [racist](#) Southern white society. Utilizing the narrative inquiry approach, it concentrates on black American life and highlights the issues of racism and gender oppression. The conflict between the black and the white communities, the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites, and the violence and bloodshed within the black communities have been the dominant themes in Wright's works. This paper claims that black American literature opposes racism and oppression in all ramifications to overcome the self-pride and self-identity of black race. The pursuit of identity is a continuous process where the potential aspects of the present and the past, of the individual and society, play a vital role.

Key Word: Racism, Oppression, Humiliation, Hunger, Violence

Introduction

Richard Wright, a pioneering African American writer, is well-known for his 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*. Wright's *Black Boy* narrates about the hardships and obstacles faced by a poverty-stricken black family. The novel focuses on Richard's struggle for identity. Richard's mother Ella Wright supports him at every step to overcome the challenges. Richard suffers from hunger all over his life. His hunger is not only for food but also for acceptance, love, and an insatiable hunger for knowledge. He challenges parental authority by defying to his aunts and uncles even challenging them to physical violence. He opposes the strict religion followed by his grandmother. Richard also refuses to read the script required by his school principal and stands up to the whites at his work place and even against communist party. Throughout his life, he faces the need for a loving family to help and encourage him, but his family in a way, unknowingly helps to form his independence. Richard's father abandons the family after he has an affair with another woman. His mother Ella supports the family at every stage and makes her children understand the world. The novel captures the experiences that black people face in a racist and sexist social order by exploring Richard's personal experiences.

Discussion/Analysis

Richard's mother Ella plays a crucial role in his life. Mother-love is at the heart of the novel. A much better role model and strict mother, Ella often disciplines him harshly and punishes Richard by lashing him with a switch. When he accidentally lights his house on fire, Ella beats him until he nearly dies as the narrative reveals:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. A doctor was called - I was afterwards told - and he ordered that I be kept abed, that I be kept quiet, that my very life depended upon it. My body seemed on fire and I could not sleep. Packs of ice were put on my forehead to keep down the fever. (6).

When Richard burns down the house, the mother Ella beats him. Richard falls ill. His parents try to hold him but he shouts too much in pain. They call a doctor. The doctor examines him and suggests them to put ice packs on his forehead to keep the fever down. Due to intense pain and high temperature of his body he begins to hallucinate. Finally after some days, he gets better and feels ashamed of that incident.

The plot captures most of the moments when Ella is sick. However, she shows parental authority when she disciplines Richard. She is compassionate and independent due to her ability to take care of the family when her husband abandons them. The meaningless pain and endless suffering that she faces in her life create negative impacts in her children's minds. Reflecting the harmful effects of the unfavorable circumstances in his mind, Richard narrates:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, and conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face. (87)

The mother's pathetic condition hunts Richard all the time. Due to poverty and other factors the family faces a lot of problems. The night when Richard's mother tells him that she wishes to die, he feels helpless. The only eye witness of her pain, Richard realizes that the world is an unfair place filled with poverty and suffering.

Ella is the single breadwinner of her family. She trains Richard to be strong and attentive. She is the single biggest factor that has shaped his life. Regarding Ella's role in Richard's life, Horace A. Porter in his work "Richard Wright's Portrait of the Artist in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*" writes, "Wright's mother not only instructs him in the high moral values of civilized society, but she also teaches him how to survive in a hostile and impoverished environment" (73). Porter believes that Ella plays a significant role in Richard's life. She teaches him to oppose when he feels people are being unjust towards him. When the boys in the street beat him and take the grocery shopping money forcefully from him, Ella simply reacts by giving him a stick. As he narrates, "If those boys bother you, then fight for yourself" (15). Ella's response shows that the aim of his mother's actions is to instruct Richard on the manner to protect and to live in those difficult periods. Concerning Richard's conflict with the boys in the street and his mother's response to the situation, Darbaz Azeez Sadeq in his work "The Projection of Racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*" explains that, "his (Richard's) own mother would be the one who instill a sense of self-defense in the child by giving him a thick stick to be used as powerful weapon against the neighboring white kids" (70). Sadeq's words reflect mother's encouragement to fight against unjust and domineering forces. She tries to make him bold and independent because she feels that this is the only weapon that can help him to survive in a racist society.

As an assertive mother figure, she makes Richard fight back even though he is deadly afraid of street gang. Richard obeys his mother because he understands that she is strict. He remembers, "She slammed the door and I heard the key turn in the lock. I shook with fright. I was alone upon the dark, hostile streets and gangs were after me. I had the choice of being beaten at home or away from home" (16). The energetic, independent spirit Richard develops at home leads him to refuse to accept the codes of behavior the white world has set for Southern blacks. Richard encounters various difficult problems between the ages of four and seventeen. Due to his self-reliance and ability to fight back against oppressive forces, he overcomes every obstacle. To make her children self-reliant and confident, Ella encourages them to lead a better path. She tries her best to make them understand the real situation.

Richard has no father-figure at home. Ella, the sole parental authority, is the guide and guardian of the family. She teaches Richard the basics of reading and writing. As he says, "She taught me to read, told me stories. On Sundays I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out the words" (20).

Ella knows that her primary responsibility is to feed her children, even than she manages time to teach her young ones. She even rewards Richard with bliss when he successfully revolts against his grandmother's will. As he says, "... my mother smiled when I told her that I had defied them. She rose and hobbled to me on her paralytic legs and kissed me" (126). Her suffering, her paralysis, and private sorrows do not hinder her from influencing her son.

The narrative concentrates on Richard's understanding of whiteness and blackness. From an early age it becomes difficult for him to understand about two categories of people that are the black and the white. Describing his childhood experience, Richard narrates, "At last we were at the railroad station with our bags, waiting for the train that would take us to Arkansas; and for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a "white" line and a "black" line" (41). Remembering the event of his childhood, Richard describes about the two lines of people at the ticket counter. It reflects Richard's inability to understand the racial gap between the blacks and the whites. Even at the age of six, Richard's hunger for understanding this aspect of his life is prevalent. He explains by saying: "I wanted to understand these two sets of people who lived side by side and never touched, except in violence"(41). He questions the adults around him, asking them about the racial inequalities he sees and why they have come to be. He asks questions to his mother regarding race and its social construction. But he never receives any satisfactory answer. In fact, he is typically punished for asking such questions.

Richard does not understand that how the whites are associated with good and the blacks are associated with being bad. He is not sure whether his light-skinned Granny falls in the category of white race or black race. To him, her skin is neither white nor black, but is rather somewhere in between. Any of the social characteristics attributed to the white or to the black people are not obvious to Richard. Richard's mother, Ella makes clear for him that in the world of the South there are no gradations of the blacks, anyone who appears even slightly black is treated as inferior. He never receives any valid answer about race issues.

Richard does not see the difference between the blacks and the whites so he does not treat them differently. This creates problems for him when he grows up, particularly at school and work places. At school he finds the principal to be a pawn of the white power structure. Regarding white teachers attitude to black students, Warren J. Carson in his work "Realities of the South in Wright's *Black Boy* and Selected Short Fiction" points out, "Wright perceives that the principal's role is more to retard the development of black students by teaching them to conform to what white folks want rather than encouraging the students to think, speak, and act freely" (148). Carson reflects the situation of black students at school, where the teachers are biased. The principal does not support the black students. At graduation when Richard does not deliver an address to appease the whites in the audience, he has to face principal's hostility.

Richard suffers many frightening and violent encounters with racism in Jackson. Two white Southerners, Pease and Reynolds create problems for him at his optical shop job. They claim that such skilled work is not meant for the blacks. Richard tries his best to act more appropriately but he soon realizes that it is very difficult to carry it on. He gets upset and finally moves from the job. As he narrates, "It was simply utterly impossible for him (Richard) to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time" (161-162). Richard faces difficult situations when he works with the whites of the South because they generally discourage him. Due to discriminatory attitude of the whites to black race, he desires a world where he would be accepted regardless of his skin color. Regarding Richard's racial harassment, Dan McCall in his works "An American Life" writes, "Malcolm X was to say explicitly what Wright's portrait presents implicitly, that black Americans dealing with the white man are "dealing with a man whose bias and prejudice are making him lose his mind, his intelligence, every day" (40). McCall's words clarify white people's attitude towards black race in America. Richard understands that living in the South does not mean living as a human being, but means eating, sleeping, and working as a black man in a predominantly white world. He knows that the only way to survive as a black man is to move to the North, where there is less prejudice. He says, "The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me" (147). This hope follows him everywhere and it makes him believe that at some point he will be able to live in an environment that is comprehensible to him.

When Richard gets a job in a brick yard for bringing pails of water to the thirsty black laborers, one day a white boss's dog bites him on the thigh. Afraid of infection, Richard reports this event to the supervisor with a view to receiving adequate medicines, but instead of getting medicine Richard gets a very bitter remark. The supervisor says, "A dog bite cannot hurt a nigger" (143). It shows the pathetic lives of black folks in the South. Grandpa's inability to receive pension and Uncle Hoskins's murder by white men are other scenes that represent racial hostility and oppression. Grandpa has been wounded in the civil-war, but never receives his disability pension. This fact upsets him. For decades Grandpa writes letter after letters to the war department to claim his pension. Due to his black skin, nobody takes the matter seriously and he does not receive his pension at all. Uncle Hoskins runs a successful saloon business. White people feel jealous about Hoskins's business success. When their jealousy reaches a peak, they kill Hoskins and threaten the rest of the family.

Exposing black life in the South, McCall expresses, "When Uncle Hoskins is killed, 'fear drowned out grief'. . . Hoskins was dead, but 'there was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers'. None of those tokens with which a culture makes peace with its dead are allowed—there is too much danger that the white man will 'kill all his kinfolks!'" (34). McCall exposes the fact how black people are threatened and humiliated by white community in American south. When the family members get frequent threats, they flee to West Helena, Arkansas, even cannot mourn and express their grief after the demise of their close ones.

One afternoon Richard meets his classmate Ned Green Lay and knows about Ned's brother Bob's murder by some white men. Bob, a hotel porter, was charged of an affair with a white prostitute. Hearing this all Richard knows about white people's brutality against the blacks. Describing the white supremacist policy to dominate the blacks, bell hooks in her work *Ain't I A Woman* states, "They (Whites) used lynching, castration, and other brutal punishments to prevent black men from initiating relationships with white women" (61). hooks talks about the injustice and brutality the blacks face in a racist society when they have an affair with a white woman. Ned's brother Bob also encounters the same fate. It suggests a general tendency of the Negroes' life in American south.

Ella's abandonment by her husband exposes the women's vulnerability and oppression in male dominated society. Richard's father, Nathan Wright deserts the family when Richard was six years old. He abandons his wife Ella and her children, which creates difficult problems for them. His mother, Ella, burdened with responsibilities, begins to work in a white household to fulfill the basic needs of her children. Narrating the mother's situation Richard says:

My mother finally went to work as a cook and left me and my brother alone in the flat each day with a loaf of bread and a pot of tea. When she returned in the evening she would be tired and dispirited and would cry a lot. Sometimes, when she was in despair, she would call us to her and talk to us for hours, telling us that we now had no father. (14).

After Richard's father leaves the family, the overall responsibility falls on the shoulders of his mother. To fulfill the basic needs of her family, she works as a house maid. In the evening when she returns home, she is tired. Even then, she calls her children and talks to them.

When Richard's parents face each other in court over financial issues, Richard expects his father to be kind and humble. But he feels ashamed of his father's acts. His father acts confidently and pretends that he is doing whatever he can for his family. As he says, "I am doing all I can, Your Honor, he mumbled grinning" (24). Finally, he wins the approval of the court. This all makes Richard very upset. Richard expresses his feelings saying, "It had been painful to watch my mother crying and my father laughing" (24). His mother is in a state of emotional turmoil. It becomes very difficult for her to accept the court decision. When she arrives home she again weeps bitterly. As he reveals, "Back at home my mother wept again and talked complainingly about the unfairness of the judge who had accepted my father's words" (24). Richard's father represents black male's irresponsible attitude to his family. Being a father figure, he responds to the situation by drinking and womanizing. Reflecting Richard's father's activities, Robert Felgar in his work *Understanding Richard Wright's Black boy: A Student casebook to issues, sources and historical documents* writes that "(Nathan) is a selfish man who abandons his family and later on as a sharecropper who represents slavery" (39). Felgar exposes the domineering attitude of black males, who oppress black women for no sufficient reason. Richard's father abandons the family for no reason.

Richard's mother has to pass through physical pain and suffering throughout her life. She gets oppressed by white authority as well as by her own husband. Regarding Ella's predicaments, McCall describes, "His mother's agony touched everything, "gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering" (38). McCall believes that due to poverty, ignorance, helplessness, hunger and other reasons, Ella suffers all over her life. In spite of difficulties and poverty stricken situations, she proceeds boldly and tries to fulfill the demand of her children until her last breathe. Richard feels that the only way out of the cycle of gender subjugation is female autonomy which can be achieved through moving to North where African Americans can make their own lives, and attempt to heal their problems.

Richard's hunger for knowledge is also apparent in the novel. His hunger can never be satisfied. Reflecting on Richard's hunger, Daniel Rees in his work *Hunger and Modern Writing* opines, "Hunger is intimately bound up with the pivotal moments in Wright's life, such as his broken relationship with his father, his awakening consciousness of his own individuality while living in an orphanage, his friendships at school, his growing love of reading and books, and his obsessive desire to escape life in the South" (122). Rees words are significant to understand Richard's insatiable hunger. Richard tries his best to satisfy his thirst for knowledge, but his efforts make him more ravenous. As narrated, "The plots and stories in the novels did not interest me so much as the point of view revealed. I gave myself over to each novel without reserve, without trying to criticize it; it was enough for me to see and feel something different. . . . Reading was like a drug, a dope" (219). Each piece of reading enlightens him to a world, where he never travelled. He experiences different world at every step. Charles Davis perceives that the knowledge he acquires from books is bound up with the development of Wright's artistic talents. In his work "From Experience to Eloquence: Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Art" he explains that "those qualities supporting and sustaining the growing boy's imagination are just those preventing a successful adjustment to life in the South" (63). Davis argues that the knowledge Richard acquires from reading helps him to understand the world better. He has acquired a lot of knowledge about the many possibilities of life. Though his intense appetite for knowledge often alienates him from others, he does not feel any type of hesitation. He believes that his appetite for knowledge is his greatest asset because it motivates him and leads his life to success.

Conclusion

In *Black Boy* the writer depicts the influence of race and class on black community and family life by exploring Richard's personal experiences. The family suffers from the problems that race and class factors bring about. In spite of poverty stricken situation and unfavorable circumstances, the mother Ella fulfills the demands of her children. In a society where circumstances are harsh for the blacks as well as for women, it is harsher for a single mother for whom survival is prioritized. Though the blacks and women face various challenges, they cope with all those challenges boldly for their survival.

Works Cited

- Carson, Warren J. "Realities of the South in Wright's *Black Boy* and Selected Short Fiction." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Richard Wright's Black Boy*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 2006, pp.143-150.
- Davis, Charles T. "From Experience to Eloquence: Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Art." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Richard Wright's Black Boy*, edited by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House, 2006, pp. 53-68.
- Felgar, Robert. *Understanding Richard Wright's Black boy: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents*. Greenwood Publishers, 1998.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Pluto Press, 1990.
- McCall, Dan. "An American Life." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Richard Wright's Black Boy*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 2006, pp. 21-44.
- Porter, Horace A. "Richard Wright's Portrait of the Artist in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Richard Wright's Black Boy*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 2006, pp. 69-82.
- Rees, Daniel. *Hunger and Modern Writing*. Modern Academic Publisher, 2016.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1976.
- Sadeq, Darbaz Azeez. "The Projection of Racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*." *International Journal of Media Culture and Literature*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2016. pp. 65-80.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. The World Publishing, 1947