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BLACK IDENTITY THROUGH REBELLION IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S "BLACK BOY"

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ABSTRACT

The major concern of the American Writers since the early 1920s was the phenomenon of illusion and reality, the search for a lost ideal and the search for identity. They have endeavoured to express the American conception of business, progress, self-reliance, success, suffering and love but with a few peculiarities. These peculiarities represent the unique American predicaments, delusions, hopes and promises of a nation in search of its own identity.

Key words: racial discrimination, rootlessness, alienation, resentment, search for identity

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Richard Wright's novels mark the beginning of a new era. He was largely responsible for the emergence of a new attitude, which considered art for art's sake instead of art for race's sake.

Richard Wright was an avid reader with extremely strong talents and intelligence. He was superior to most of the ignorant whites to whom he was forced to abase himself in the few menial black jobs he was able to find. Always lonely and isolated he dreamed violent day dreams of retribution against the people who represented the forces that created the conditions of his life.

Wright had enough courage to speak out what he felt. He reflected what he felt in the dark places of his soul – disgust and anger, shame and fear, and this combined with innate honesty to form the main elements of Richard Wright's extraordinary literary power and reflects in his autobiography Black boy.

In Black Boy, Richard Wright narrates how his childhood was tinged with the element of violence, setting fire to their wooden house and hanging a kitten to death. He becomes conscious of his black identity only in the course of his boy hood.

From then on the awareness that he is a black supposedly inferior to the white man faded. He presents a few episodes in which the black consciousness gets entrenched into his mind.

Richard Wright does not behave like a normal Black boy. A conventional Afro-American takes things lying down, resigns himself to the cruel fate that has perpetuated such a predicament. But, Richard Wright transgresses this convention. He resents being ill-treated and hits back. On one particular occasion, when he decides to sell his dog, he refuses to part with it to a white woman for ninety-seven cents, three cents less than what he has demanded. His refusal stems from his reluctance to give in to a white. This is an important

episode in his life which underlines the stance taken by him regarding the problem of racial discrimination.

Richard Wright was the break through man who came all the way up from all the way down. He was suckled on resentment, nurtured on anger, grew up on rootlessness, and tasted every violent flavour of alienation and hostility. But his bitter rootlessness resentment, alienation, and hostility are the creation of poverty and humiliations attendant upon racism led him, through the grim determination of his personality to blaze a trail that opened new worlds to countless young blacks.

Having learnt that literature could be a powerful social weapon, Wright ruthlessly forced his America to look at how the 'Monster Nigger' was the inevitable pathological result of fear, shame, guilt and anger. His unrelentingly honest creation of Bigger Thomas, in his most powerful book, *Native Son* revealed the connection of a National culture between the rural black south of Mississippi and the urban black North of Chicago.

The Anger that Bigger Thomas felt was the anger that Richard Wright knew from his own experience. No more than most American Negroes was Wright of pure African ancestry. As he says in his Autobiography *Black Boy*,

It might have been that my tardiness in learning to sense white people as 'White' people came from the fact that many of my relatives were 'white' looking people (Wright, *Black Boy* 31.)

The harshly religious grandmother who dominated the household, in which he was brought up, looks like a White woman. She is of Irish, Scotch and French stock in which Black blood had somewhere and somehow been infused. His father had Indian white and black ancestry. Then what am I? Richard asked his mother and she mockingly replied: "They'll call you a colored man when you grow up.....Do you mind, Mr. Wright?" (Wright, *Black Boy* 57).

Actually, the percentage of red, white and black blood in Richard Wright's veins mattered not at all. What counted was that he was born into the Black world of Mississippi and experienced all its cruelty and poverty, before he escaped to Chicago,

only to learn the bitter truth about that City's ghetto horrors.

Wright's earliest memories were of living in a humble shack overlooking the Mississippi river near Natchez. From this rural environment, his parents moved to the city of Memphis, Tennessee where they lived with their two children in a small tenement. Before Richard was six his father deserted the family to go off with another woman. Until his mother could get a job Richard had very little to eat.

As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness (Wright, *Black Boy* 22).

While their mother worked for meager wages as a cook in white families, Richard and his brother ran the street of Memphis, engaging in pastimes far from innocent.

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 farther and farther away from home each day. I'll and desperate, the mother placed the children in a Negro Orphanage, a cheerless institution, where the boys were still hungry (Wright, *Black Boy* 29).

Redeemed from the orphanage, Richard and his brother accompanied their mother to Arkansas, where they lived for a time with relatives. While waiting for the train that would take the Wright family to Arkansas, Richard Wright became aware of the racial discrimination. As he says... 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 (Wright, *Black Boy* 64). In small Arkansas towns Richard became more aware of the frightening contacts between Whites and Blacks. The morning after white ruffians murdered his uncle, to rob him of his profitable saloon, the rest of the family fled town without even trying to claim the body. Richard sensed the rising racial tensions of World War-I days. "A dread of White people now

came to live permanently in my feelings and imagination" (Wright *Black Boy* 64).

He participated eagerly in the stone-throwing wars between the White and Negro boys.

All the frightful descriptions we had heard about each other, all the violent expressions of hate and hostility that had seemed into us from our surroundings, came now to the surface to guide our actions (Wright, *Black boy* 93).

Richard is piqued when he is advised not to middle with the white people. As he writes,

"Can I go and peep at the white folks?" I asked my mother.

"You keep quiet" she said.

"But that wouldn't be wrong, would it?"

"Will you keep still?"

"But why can't I?"

"Quit talking foolishness!" (Wright, *Black Boy* 99).

When Richard was twelve, he lost even the precarious security that his mother had tried to provide. She became a helpless paralytic, dependent upon relatives to care for her and the boys. After some unhappy attempts at other solutions to the problem the maternal grandmother took Richard and his mother into her home in Jackson, Mississippi.

Richard was already a rebel, but it was not for lack of discipline. One of his earliest memories was of being almost whipped to death by his terrified mother, after he had set the house on fire at the age of four. From that time on, his mother, father, uncles, aunts and school teachers all thrashed him whenever he violated their code of behaviour. Nor did he lack for religious admonitions. His grandmother was a zealous seventh Day Adventist, who would not let him take jobs on Saturdays and imposed stern puritanical regime upon the family. Richard was repelled by this harsh faith. Wright's position in his Granny's household, was a delicate one. Granny based all her logic on God's justice. She believed that one sinful person in a household would bring disaster to all the members of that household. Regarding this, Wright wrote, "I became skilled in ignoring these cosmic threats and

developed callousness toward all metaphysical preachments" (Wright, *Black Boy* 115).

Wright's relatives were respectable, hard-working people. Scarcely able to support themselves, they accepted with resignation the obligation to care for Richard's mother, his brother and himself. Yet there was grimness in the family environment that left its scars upon the boy.

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me....I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man and how shallow was even one despair (Wright, *Black Boy* 45).

Rather than being uninhibited children of nature, as Whites liked to believe, the Negroes were actually confused, fearful and uncertain.

Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it (Wright, *Black Boy* 45).

Wright had problems in the school with Aunt Addie as the only teacher. As he had come from another plane of living, he could not mingle with his classmates. As he says, "I had to curb my habit of cursing, but not before I had shocked more than half of them and had embarrassed Aunt Addie to helplessness" (Wright, *Black Boy* 116).

He had a serious conflict with Aunt Addie which flared up openly. He was accused of eating walnuts in the classroom. When Aunt Addie asked him to stand up, he did not move. He was given a severe lashing as a result. When she tried to teach him manners in the house that day, the rebel in Wright erupted. Wright says,

I stood fighting, fighting as I had never fought in my life, fighting with myself....In her veins my own blood flowed, in many of her actions I could see some elusive part of

my own self; and in her speech. I could catch some echoes of my own self (Wright, *Black Boy* 119).

Though he did not want to be violent with her, he was not prepared to be punished for a wrong he had never committed.

By some miracle, the harsh environment neither crushed the boy's spirit nor made him a criminal. Under existing conditions in the south, where poorly-trained Black teachers transmitted their pittance of knowledge poorly motivated Black children, Wright's formal education was pathetically inadequate. He stayed in school through the ninth grade and graduated as valedictorian of his class. But his real education was in his own hands. A voracious reader of all kinds of books, he had already started writing stories while he was still a school boy.

Wright's keen intelligence and touchy independence made it difficult for him to hold a job. Most white employers demanded of their Black employees a grinning deference that Wright found it difficult to simulate. On one job, white fellow-employees hazed him until he quit. On another carousing whites brained him with an empty whiskey bottle because he forgot to say "Sir"; on a third a white watchman threatened him with a revolver because Wright showed his distance for the watchman's fanny-slapping ways with the Negro maids, "I had begun caping with the white world too late," Wright wrote "I could not make subservience an automatic part of my behavior". (Wright, *Black Boy* 215). He could see how other Negroes adapted, how they acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them. These Negroes found an outlet for their frustrations in gambling, drinking, and wrenching but Wright could not settle for these shabby substitutes for real achievements.

Escape from the south became imperative, and eventually Wright was able to move northward. In order to get the necessary cash he stole from a white employer. For many Blacks such thefts were taken for granted; since the days of slavery Blacks had registered their silent protest against white exploitation by petty thievery. But Wright had prided himself on his honesty. Aboard a train speeding north he discovered tears on his cheeks.

In that moment I understood the pain that accompanied crime and I hoped that I would never have to feel it again. I never did feel it again, for I never stole again; and what kept me from it was the knowledge that for me crime carried its own punishment. (Wright, *Black Boy* 227).

Then came the turning point. He stumbled upon *A Book of Prefaces* by H.L Mencken. Of this experience he says

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences...this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for there they were. Then, may be, perhaps, I could use them as weapons? (Gibson 26).

The next year Richard left the south for Chicago and a new life. The past was dead, only its roots would persist as a memory of the days that had done. But the memory was bitter. And out of it has flowed the bitter experiences of *Black Boy*.

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