

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE PROBLEMS OF BLACK IDENTITY IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*

MUTAZ TARIK SHAKIR¹, Dr.CHENNA REDDY²

¹Research Scholar (PhD), Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, AP, India

²Assistant Professor and Research Director, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, AP, India



ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to analyse the important themes like Identity crisis in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in the concept of racial segregation of Black in America. It claims that Black American literature was written to oppose racism and oppression in all ramifications and also to gain self-pride and identity. The pursuit of a coherent identity is a continuous process where the potential aspects of the present and the past, of the individual and society, play a vital role. This essay concentrates on the theme of the identity of black people in Black American literature with special. Our intention is to show that racism and oppression indeed is a prominent theme in *Black Boy*, especially because the book was written during the Jim Crow era at a point where racism was very prominent in the American society.

Key Word: Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Identity crisis, Racism, oppression

"But the color of a Negro's skin makes him easily recognizable, makes him suspect, converts him into a defenseless target" — Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945)

American literature has traveled long and widely from its colonial days to the modern times. It has displayed its various dimensions in each circle. It has gotten another period the field of world literature. It is a way breaking accomplishment for a young country in the literary world. It has conveyed the traditionalist past to the modern times with a telling effect on culture, custom, society, humanity and modern innovation. African American literature narrates the horrors, pain and the debasement the Blacks experienced for the duration of their lives. The literature revolves around racism, convention, culture, slavery and freedom. Modern American literature has a different channel called Black Literature. Writing books has turned into the pattern of the black Americans to show their agonies of racism to the entire world. The portrayal of the vexed personality, horrendous psyche and hazardous life appear to be the significant worry of the American Literature. Autobiographies of the black Americans assumed a crucial part in tossing light on the dark pages of the blacks. Writers like Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Henry James, Mark Twain, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison created various literary works in a similar wave lengths. Literature illuminates and upgrades the entire significance of human binds of life. It encourages the readers to find out about humanity, the past culture and the lifestyle. Many black prominent writers uncovered the despondent black's yearnings and their dreams.

Mission for identity as a changing issue of life connected with the psyches of awesome African American savvy people. With their innovative creative energy and American resourcefulness, they nearly began examining the topic of search for identity. Among the African Richard Wright was one of the most prominent African-American authors of the twentieth century, capable of addressing delicate racial issues during a difficult period. American writers Richard Wright came into prominence, with his creative expression concerned with the social complexities of the United States and the reality of African Americans as oppressed minority. Wright wrote his reactions against the inadequacies of blacks in the American society. It paved the way for new theories with the significant support of Harlem Renaissance, where the interest of many black intellectuals were patronized for the up-liftment of artists and for the effective social reforms.

Wright's novels represented blacks' rejections of the whites' norms through their alienation from the established order. Wright's literature is an Avant-garde literature and art as well as challenges norms of the society. His novels forced whites to recognize their selves as oppressors. His works also were tried to liberate American society from such traditions that destroyed its culture. This essay analyzes the Black American writers' problems of identity with reference to *Black Boy*, i.e., their search for an "Ego," a self-definition as members of a society. I seize the word identity. It is a key word. You hear it over and over again. On this word will focus, around this word will coagulate, ... Alienated from the world to which he is born and from the country of which he is a citizen, yet surrounded by the successful values of that world, and country, how can the Negro define himself? (Robert Penn Warren, 1965)

The main objective of this study is to study the Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), on alienation, identity, suppression, oppression and exploitation, insecurity, the major predicaments of blacks in the matrix of inter and intra continental and racial setup. The title *Black Boy* introduces this negation-turned affirmation by flipping the common degrading "boy" reference to black men into a reclaiming of his own identity and narrative.

Black Boy (1945) is an autobiography of Richard Wright. It is his portrayal of life in the South and North of America. It is a life of a black in the white dominated, "Jim Crow" South. He unfolds the novel with his father's presence in the family and what he thinks of him. He speaks of his mother as God-fearing and a timid black woman. The protagonist's father abandons the family and leaves them at the mercy of poverty. The main character explains his traumatic life running between the families for his living as well as his love towards reading. The story nicely projects what education means for the blacks and what sort of education for the blacks was determined by the Whites. Unable to cope with events in the South, Richard moves to the North hoping to find prosperity and better living condition. He realizes the harshness of truth after reaching North where he finds racial segregation, job discrimination and white dominance that prevails in the so-called liberal North. His contemporaries, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Zora Neale Hurston have depicted their life experiences through their autobiographies on the various scenarios of life and expressions of what the life gave them.

Discussion

Richard Wright depicts the numerous parts of social acknowledgment and the utilization of language as a key to identity all through the novel. He brings life into the pages by utilizing adequate components to upgrade his written work. Through these displays of explanatory methods, the interest to the reader is drastically expanded which brings about a more individual and general critical importance to the Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy* (1945). In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright describes how his childhood was tinged with the element of violence, setting fire to their wooden house and hanging a little cat to death. He ends up plainly aware of his black identity just over the span of his childhood. From that point on the awareness that he is a black apparently substandard compared to the white man faded. He shows a couple of scenes in which the black awareness gets dug in into his brain. Richard Wright does not carry on like a typical Black boy. An ordinary Afro-American brings things resting, leaves himself to the cruel destiny that has sustained such a dilemma. In any case, Richard Wright transgresses this tradition. He despises being abused and hits back. Racism as an issue among people is a well-known point in writing. *Black Boy*, in any case, investigates Racism not just as a detestable conviction held by evil individuals yet in addition as a tricky issue weaved into the very

structure holding the system together in general. Wright depicts characters, such as, Olin and Pease as evil individuals, yet additionally and all the more chillingly as bit players in a vast drama of hatred, fear, and oppression. He gives an analysis of industrial capitalism. That is the sort of work he uses to get the reader to comprehend what it would intend to be a Negro in the South, how separated he was the extent that the way of life is concerned, that it is so difficult to see something like a symbol America of freedom and justice from that standpoint.

Concept of Identity

Before analyzing the problem of identity in the Black American literature like *Black Boy*, we must have a more precise notion of the term identity. The term identity seems not only to have pervaded the literature on the Negro revolution in the U.S.A., but also to have come to represent in India (and in other countries) something in the revolutionary psychological field of the colored races and nations who seek (try to find) inner as well as outer emancipation from colonial rule and colonial power. Social scientists sometimes attempt to make it more concrete, using such terms as "identity crisis," "self-identity" or "sexual identity." For the sake of logical or experimental maneuverability, they try to treat these terms as matters of social roles, personal traits or conscious self-images. Its use has, in fact, become so indiscriminate that recently a German reviewer called' the concept the pet subject of the Amerikanische Popular psychologie (Peter Rose, 1970)

In race relations, the term is nowadays mainly referred to as a revolution of awareness— political, economic, cultural and spiritual awareness (Robert Penn Warren, 1965). According to Erik Erikson (1966), the alternatives and controversies, the ambiguities and ambivalences concerning the various aspects of the identity issue are; (i) Individual and Communal, (ii) Conscious and Unconscious, (iii) Positive and Negative, (iv) Past and Future (v) Total and whole identities.

Black Boy, then, is Richard Wright's very shrewdly and carefully crafted fictionalized autobiography. Its main purpose is to attack and refute the white South's view of him as a "boy," as an inferior version of whites. He is resolutely insisting, through the structure and themes of *Black Boy*, that he be granted the same dignity and autonomy his readers want for themselves. He is also looking for the understanding and sympathy that he felt lacking from his family, community, and the white South (Felgar, Robert, 1998).

In chapter one of a "Black Boy", awareness comes to young Wright at the age of four. This awareness for a black child carries with it mixed and contradictory emotions: love, fear, guilt, distrust, longing and feeling of hopelessness, all within the early stage of growing up. So, Wright opens his eyes as a child and find his psyche' entrenched with an image reflecting the social and racial realities of his time. Wright's novels reflect not only his vision of African descent, hut his sense of powerlessness vis-a-vis the whites. He concluded "that those powerful, invisible white faces ruled the lives of black people to a degree that hut few black people could allow themselves to acknowledge." This idea has a curious effect on Wright's characters such as Fish belly, Bigger or "Black Boy." They hate the whites so much and they are so ashamed of being black that they feel in crisis, a crisis of alienation from their own group and from the world of the whites from which they had been excluded. Fish was aware "how black people looked to white people; he was beginning to look at his people through alien eyes and what he saw evoked in him a sense of distance between him and his people that baffled and worried him (Wright, Long Dream, p. 326.) In *Black boy*, an auto biography by Richard Wright, we see the struggles of being black in a world dominated by white people. *Black boy* is a story about how a young black man fights the societal norms that are continuously pushed upon him. In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright narrates how his childhood was tinged with the component of violence, setting vet their wooden house and hanging a little cat to death. He ends up noticeably aware of his black identity just throughout his boy hood. An extremely solid theme in this novel is brutality. Regularly it happens that Richard is chidden, reviled, he gets a beating, he is slapped over his face. It is shocking this occurs inside the family, he was never beaten by a "white" man. Many clashes which he has are clashes with his grandma who is an extremely religious individual. Whenever "whites" have an issue with Richard, when they imagine that his conduct is unbearable, they just scold him or crush a glass of some alcohol in his face in one case. One way or another, violence which could be seen as abusing whether physical or mental, plays an important role in this autobiography. The reader meets violence in every chapter of this book. Sometimes Richard deserves to be punished, as he set the house on fire,

but the degree of violence used against him is surprising. At the beginning of *Black Boy*, Wright had set his home a fire, he stated:

'I yearned to become invisible, to stop living'. This frequency of consuming his home at that age demonstrates that, in the wake of encountering a treacherous reality of presence, young Wright felt that things must change promptly and revolutionarily too henceforth the utilization of flame. In making the genuine picture of racism, Wright, portrayed his mistake when he saw the vessel they were to board when setting out with his mom to Memphis. In the above portrayal, inside Wright's autobiographical awareness, we locate a concise disclosure of an existence described by shocking background from youth. This made young Wright to consider life to be a brutal excursion through which he should pass. What's more, his barrier techniques for survival inside those conditions incorporate a ruthless approach. What he goes for is a sentiment fulfillment in the vast majority of those ruthless activities, in the wake of setting the house a fire, the following severe activity was killing the cat. Knowing fully that his father never meant what he said when he was asked to kill it:

How could I hit back at him? (His Father) oh, yes....he had said to kill the kitten and I would kill it! I know that he had not really meant for me to kill the kitten, but my deep hate of him urged me towards a literal acceptance of his word. (*Black Boy*, p.8)

Wright suffers serious hunger and deprivation and to artistically present to his readers that racism is always felt in everything a Blackman does the children of the blacks:

Mama, I'm hungry' I complained one afternoon.

'Jump and catch a hungry, she said trying to make me laugh and forget.

'What's a hungry?

It's what little boy eat when they get hungry

She said. 'What does it taste like?'

I don't know

'then why do you tell me to catch one? '

I sensed that she was teasing me and it made me angry

But I am hungry, I want to eat'

'You will have to wait ' But I want to eat now '

But there's nothing to eat' eat' she told me 'why'

' just because there is none, she 'explained'

but I want to eat' I said beginning to cry.

..... But I 'm hungry.

She was ironing and she paused and looked at me with tears in her eyes (p.12)

The social Baseness of black life was similarly exhibited after Wright went through childhood and found that:

After I had outlived shocks of childhood, after habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absences of real kindness in Negroes, how in genuine passion we were how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our tradition how hollow our memories? How lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man and how shallow was even our despair? After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who that Negroes led so passionate an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was negative confusion, our flights, our fears our frenzy under pressure (p.31)

Early in his life Wright himself had encountered a desire for brotherhood, a search his own identity which was lost in him. This drove him gradually however definitely to end up noticeably distanced from his own kin, commenting later in his autobiography, to the stun of many blacks, that he used to ponder,

. . . 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 our despair.

(*Black Boy*, 103)

Richard is a victim of extraordinary physical manhandle from his family members and society. At the point when as a four year old little child, he incidentally burns his family abode. His mom ignores the way that he is a little child and it was a mishap as she beats him oblivious. Soon a while later, Richard falls gravely sick. This level of brutality is extraordinary towards a grown-up individual not to mention a four year old. All through the content Richard is beaten and slapped routinely.

Richard surpasses desires and finishes undertakings that black individuals are not expected to do. Richard changes his identity from a subservient black boy into a kind of insubordinate young man by starting his writing profession. All through the work, Richard presents an endless number of occupations from working in homes of whites, to endeavoring to take in the exchange of optometry.

While working for this family, Richard is having a discussion with the mother. She asks him, "What grade are you in school?" • (Wright,173). Richard reacts, "Seventh, ma'am" (Wright, 173). She at that point asks him, "Then why are you going to school?" (Wright, 173). This discussion demonstrates that whites think it is superfluous for blacks to go to class past the 6th grade since they ought to be working. Whites feel that they will never add up to anything, and in this way ought not to be squandering their chance in school. Be that as it may, Richard needs to break this foreordained shape of his identity expected to be.

He answers to his employer, "well, I want to be a writer" • (Wright 173). While working for this white family, Richard's foreordained identity and his intends to part from this shape are both appeared. In the long run, Richard would like to have the capacity to compose as a profession, and keeps on going to class to concentrate to wind up plainly as well as can be expected be. The two his boss and his family disclose to him that he has no way of turning into an author, however he keeps on demonstrating everybody wrong by not stressing over his race. He rejects the way that there are no popular black scholars, and keeps on accomplishing his objectives and keeps on framing his actual identity. Richard keeps on going ahead and buckles down every last day with a specific end goal to think outside the box of his doled out identity because of his race. The principal summons Richard to his office and says to him, " well, Richard Wright, here is your speech " • (Wright 206). After Richard claims that he has officially composed his own discourse, the key lets him know "Tune in, boy, you will address both white and minorities individuals that night. What would you be able to alone consider saying to them? "You have no experience. . ." (Wright 206). Richard keeps on fighting this suspicion made by his principal that he can't convey a discourse which will be satisfactory for white individuals to tune in to. Notwithstanding when his Uncle Tom asserts, "the principal's speech is the better speech" (Wright 209) Richard agrees. Be that as it may, Richard needs to give the discourse he composed in light of the fact that it says what he needs to state (Wright 209-10). Richard did not give it a second thought if the principal's discourse was superior to his; he needed to convey his discourse how he would have preferred to convey it. Here, Richard keeps on building up his actual identity as a fighter who won't remain for this doled out identity. He needs to have any kind of effect on the planet, and he is tired of everybody recently taking the mishandle they get. He starts to develop a fantasy in himself which the instructive framework in the Jim Crow South had been fixed and intended to smother (Wright 199). He was just fifteen years of age, and right now started acknowledging how the Jim Crow South functioned. The vast majority of African Americans depicted in *Black boy* do not have the opportunity to become economically prosperous. This is because the system is biased against them. There is poverty in the house Richard grows up in. This is reflected by his constant hunger as a young boy. When he begins to stay with Uncle Hoskins and Aunt Maggie he cannot come to terms with the fact that there is enough to eat in this new home. Wright has a harsh criticism against the White South and the way they treated him: The white South said that it knew "niggers," and I was what the white South called A "nigger." Well, the white South had never known me— never known what I thought, what I felt. The white South said that I had a "place" in life. Well, I had never felt my "place"; or, rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject the "place" to which the white South had assigned me(227).

Richard Wright acknowledged that he was a product of the West, albeit a person of African descent. He explained:

Since I'm detached from, because of racial conditions, the West, why do I bother to call myself Western at all? What is it that prompts me to make identification with the West despite the

contradiction involved? The fact is I really have no choice in the matter. Historical forces more powerful have shaped me as a Westerner. I have not consciously elected to be a Westerner...(Kunnie,7)

REFERENCES

- Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York, 1965), p. 17.
- Peter Rose, *Americans From Africa: Old Memories, New Moods* (New York. Atherton Press, 1970).
- Felgar, Robert. Understanding Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, edited by Robert Felgar, Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 1998. Pro Quest Ebook Central
- Wright Richard., 1958, *Long Dream*, p. 326.
- Erikson, Erik H. 1966, The Concept of Identity in Race Relations: Notes and Queries. *Daedalus* 95:145-171.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1945. Print
- Wright, Richard. *Black Power: Three Books From Exile: Black Power, the Color Curtain and White Man, Listen!* New York: Harper & Brothers, 2008. Print
- Kunnie, Julian. "Richard Wright"s Interrogation of Negritude: Revolutionary Implications for Pan Africanism and Liberation". *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol.4, No.9, 2012.
- Distant Thunder: Voice of the Silenced", (Proceedings of the UGC Sponsored National Seminar during 11th , 12th December 2014) Ed. By Brinda BalaSreenivasan, Jose Printers, South Kalamassery Kochi, Kerala.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Richard Wright's Black Boy*. Infobase Publishing, 2006,P.103.
-