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Quest for Individual Voice and Racial Transcendence in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*: A Study

Dr Sudhir P Mathpati

Assistant Professor & Research Guide

Department of English

Adarsh Mahavidyalaya, Omerga,

Dist. Osmanabad-413606, MS, India

Abstract:

The present research paper focuses on the threads like quest for Individual, racism, gender discrimination, oppression, suppression, colour discourse, etc. Have been greatly discussed, explored and criticized in the stream of literatures. From one perspective, every country has something to be presented through literature and analysed the same. When one deals with the American literature or African American literature, one prominent element or facet of their writings come in force and that is the crucial threads so far and deeply explored the roots of these anti social streams and they have tried their level best to put the same before the world and Richard Wright is one of them who presented the agony, exploitation and harassment of the natives in his select novel Black Boy (1945).

Keywords: Quest for Individuality, Racism, Gender Discrimination, Oppression, Suppression, Colour Discourse, etc.

African American novel primarily concerns itself with what it means to be a 'Negro' in America. It records the responses of the creative writers to Negro's social experience in a society tragically obsessed with colour race. It also describes how through sheer power of 'endurance' the Negro has borne the indignities and overcome the insurmountable social barriers that have impeded his march to a life of esteem and dignity.

The African American novel, therefore, is a quest for identity; search for fulfillment of individual potential by merging a divided, alienated self into truer and better unified literate self. The African American critics find two existential visions of the black creative writers which illuminate the basic themes of African American literature. Viewing from this angle Richard Wright, therefore, finds two distinct features of the African American literature, one, what he calls the narcissistic level which is characterized by formal self-conscious and imitative writings indicating racist attitude; any two, 'the forms of things unknown' i.e. the spontaneous expressive writings deriving from black folk forms. Thus, in his opinion, the private and public for the Negro in America merge into one another and form a synthetic whole without any line of demarcation. Robert Bone witnesses more or less the same dialectical unity, stylistic pattern and theme in the African American novels.

A reading of African American fiction reveals the efforts of the 'Negroes' to liberate themselves from the oppressive social system imposed upon them by the white Americans. This is mainly because of the fact that the American black life, black reality and black fiction. The black novelists have 'individual perspective, distinct from one another. The common cultural condition shadows their consciousness so much that a protagonist like Richard Wright urges them not to express themselves in purely racial terms.

The struggle between individual and society forms the backbone of Wright's fictionalized autobiography, *Black Boy*. It controls the two main types used in the book, the concept of personality and the concept of environment. Environment is an all inclusive term. It indicates the group, Community, Culture, Tradition and authority. Against these tough establishment and the fears which they generate, the individual personality has to strive for self-realization. These institutions become powerful living bodies; they are more real than the single individual who forms them. Against these formidable challenges, Richard Wright the individual, who opposes the racist south, must fight.

The theme of this autobiography is the bitter frustration forced upon the blacks by the rigid racial taboos of the south. Wright knows what his place is supposed to be in the prevailing social pattern. Though some times, he has to go through the required forms, he never accepts them. So he feels the injustice and discrimination keenly and the outcome is a powerful protest against them.

The secondary theme of *Black Boy* is Wright's emphatic rejection of southern 'Negro values'. A stubborn individualism is the basis of this conflict. Instinctively the black community tries to suppress individuality, discourage competition and restrain aggressiveness. In so far as the black south opposes his efforts at self-realization, Wright never hesitates to attack its value system. He was forced to number his own kin among his enemies. Wright's response to self-limiting tendencies in Negro life is profound disgust, so near to self-hatred.

Black Boy tells Wright's early initiation, his struggles with himself, his black neighbors, his frightened, highly religious family and his struggle with the white world. According to Robert Bone Wright's major literary theme is: "That the entire society is mobilized to keep the Negro in his place; to restrict his freedom of moments, discourage his ambition and banish him forever to nether regions of subordination and inferiority. This attempt to mark in advance the boundaries of human life is Wright's essential theme" (Bone, 14).

Black Boy is also a self-portrait. He unsparingly relates the torments and the conflicts he feels. There are fierce family clashes, rebellion against his parents, violent quarrels with relatives, revolt against teachers, brutal fights with others boys in the early years when the child knows nothing about racial distinction.

Black Boy is far from being a simple catalog of beatings and punishments. It illustrates the child's growing ability to rebel against his environment and its institution and describes the process through which his personality is shaped. Each time he successfully emerges from a confrontation with a family member, Richard Wright is able to keep his personality intact through a progressive denial of kinship and through a growing sense of isolation. In his first encounter with his father, he describes the old man as "Stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote. A quarter of a century was to elapse .When I was to see him again. I realized that, tough ties of blood made as kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking in a different language, living on vastly distant places of reality" (Wright, *BB*,142).

Young Wright's relationship with the family covers the first half of *Black Boy*. It develops through progression from passive to resentful submission, to successful rebellion against the authority of this institution and of the entire family environment. Attempts at self expression provide the ground for most of the confrontations. His confrontations with his relatives continue with Aunt Addie whose personality has been influenced by school, family and religion. He considers whether or not to defend himself from her lashings and also to protect his self-esteem. "I was trying to stifle the impulse to go to the drawer of the kitchen table and get a knife and defend myself. But this women who stood before me was my aunt, my mother's sister,

Granny's daughter, in her veins my own blood flowed, in many of her actions. I could catch echoes of my own speech" (Wright, *BB*, 119).

The values of blood ties make him to hesitate. When the aunt lashes him across the face, as a last resort he goes to kitchen drawer and takes a knife. Even after that, the aunt, mad with anger, is not going to leave him alone.

Wright is not only alienated from the dominant white society but also from his own race since he abhors the concept of accommodation which they accept though unwillingly. Blacks are afraid to disturb the delicate equilibrium between the two races and they complicate each other's socialization and individualization process by pressuring their own to maintain status quo, to play the role demanded by the whites.

Early in his life, Wright himself has experienced a desire for brotherhood, a yearning for identity. But because of constant hunger and loneliness, Wright grows to distrust everything and everybody. His father has deserted the family and his mother is forced to leave Richard temporarily with a woman whose ugly face and foul breath repel the young boy. Wright is sent from one relative to the other because the family is so poor. Thus he slowly and inevitably becomes alienated from his own people.

In *Black Boy* he is pondering, "The strange absence of real kindness in negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking is genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid of a joy, how bore our tradition, how hallow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair" (Wright, *BB*, 45).

Religion comes uninvited to Richard Wright as it is part of the family affair. Seventh Day Adventist Church is introduced by his fanatical grandmother and later black Methodist church by his more moderate mother and others. Wright seems to resist it with the budding strength of his personality. He strongly resists their attempts to save his soul. "The hymns and sermons of god came into my heart only long after my personality has been shaped and formed by uncharted conditions of life. I felt I had in me a sense of living as deep as that which the church was trying to give me, and in the end I remain basically unaffected" (Wright, *BB*, 124).

Much like the family, the church embodies and sanctions a group which confronts the individual by asking him either to be a part of it or to remain alone. Besieged by the preacher, the congregation and his mother, "Richard, in the company of few other boys, finds himself trapped into the allegiance with the church. He explains: "It was no longer a question of my believing in god, it was no longer a matter of whether I would steal or lie or murder; it was a simple, urgent matter of public pride, matter of how much I had in common with other people. If I refused it meant I did not love my mother and no man in that tight little community had ever been crazy enough to let himself be placed in such a position" (Wright, *BB*, 170).

It is true that *Black Boy* presents an almost unrelieved picture of a personality corrupted by brutal environment. It also presents those fresh, human responses brought to its world by the sensitive child. There were also those white men who allowed Wright to use his library privileges and the other who advised him to leave the South, and still others whose offers of friendship he was too frightened to accept. Wright assumed that the nucleus of plastic sensibility is a human heritage-the right and the opportunity to dilate, deepen, and enrich sensibility-democracy. Thus, the drama of *Black Boy* lies in its depiction of what occurs when Negro sensibility attempts to fulfill itself in the undemocratic south. Here it is not the individual that is the immediate focus, but that upon which his sensibility was nourished.

Wright saw his destiny-the combination of forces before which man feels powerless-in terms of a quick and casual violence inflicted on him by both family and community. His response was likewise violent, and it has been his need to give that violence significance which has shaped his writings. *Black Boy* is not a sociological case history but an autobiography, and therefore a work of art shaped by a writer bent upon making an ideological point. Doubtless this was the beginning of Wright's exile, the making of a decision which was to shape his life and writing. Wright as a writer was less interesting than the enigma he personified,

that he could so dissociate himself from the complexity of his background while trying so hard to improve the condition of black men everywhere; that he could be so wonderful an example of human possibility but could not for ideological reasons depict blacks as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself.

The *Black Boy* is a story of a highly sensitive individual subjected to a series of cruel and almost unbearable shocks. Many individuals have been crushed under such circumstances which could not crush Richard Wright. For those who had happier childhood, it is difficult to face up to the truth of this childhood of Richard Wright.

Black Boy has tremendous power. Its intensity of feeling, sustained drama, and eloquence make reading it an unforgettable experience. This is because it is the product of a remarkable combination: an author of superb talent a life story of pathos and tragedy, and a human theme of monumental significance.

Thus, the characteristics of Wright's childhood in the *Black Boy* - loneliness, distrust of all people, impatient with family's poverty-were to govern his entire life. Wright often boldly asserted, his purpose in writing was to lend his tongue to voiceless black children, never to disown them. To explain him, Wright had to relate to the millions allegedly like him. It was crime, especially in his own mind to be different. One suspects Wright did not disown his people because he could not obliterate his past. The experiences of Wrights character are brutally real; but in some way the insulated, self-protected, suppressed aspects of his makeup made it hard for him truly to connect with black people, with anyone, except in the abstract, as a central spring of his political opinion.

One may list the number of motives *Black Boy* shares with the slave narratives. The violence and gnawing hunger, the skeptical view of Christianity the portrait of a black family valiantly attempting to maintain a degree of unity, the impregnable isolation, the longing scheming to follow the North star resolved by boarding the Freedom Train but the most enduring link is the motive of narrators' quest for literacy. It was reading, as well writing of stories and even commencement addresses, which promoted young Richard to follow the North star and in a supreme act of self-assertion, free himself.

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