

## **Afro–American Autobiography as Ideological Documentation: A study of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy***

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### **Abstract**

*A preoccupation with political and social problems is evident in the works of a number of early black writers. The Afro – Americans and indeed, the black race had undergone several stages of human and material exploitation, from the triangular slave trade period of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the colonization period of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This paper examines the theory of Afro –American autobiography and places Richard Wright’s Black Boy within the continuum of Black autobiography. The paper discusses issues relating to the formation of an ideology in Afro- American Autobiography. The paper further seeks to prove that, autobiography a part of a study of the Creative Process, a humanistic study of the ways of men and the forms taken by human consciousness can also be viewed as an ideological document.*

**Keywords: Black boy, autobiography, Ideology, race.**

## Introduction

*Black Boy* (1945) is Wright's first autobiographical work, in it, he reveals in bitter personal terms the devastating impact of racial prejudice on young black males in the United States. The narrative points out the many psychological and cultural similarities between 20<sup>th</sup> century racism and its predecessor, slavery.

Wright's other non-fiction works include *Black power* (1954), a commentary on the emerging nations of Africa; *The color curtain* (1956), which focuses on the so-called third world; *Pagan Spain* (1957), which addresses the fascist rule in that country; and *American Hunger* (1977), a second autobiographical work. In 1941, Wright collaborated with photographer Edwin Ruska on 12 million black voices, a folk History of blacks in America (Olney, 1980). Wright's first book, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938; revised), consisted of four novellas that dramatize racial prejudice. The book won first prize in a writing competition sponsored by the writer's project.

According to David Marc, (2009: 20), "Wright's most acclaimed works are the novel *Native Son* (1940) and the autobiographical memoir *Black Boy* (1945). *Native Son* explores the violent psychological pressures that drives bigger Thomas, a young black man, to murder. Through a special artistic ability, Wright presents a careful psychological and social examination of the story's events and of American race relation. *Native Son* was an immediate sensation with white and black readers and this wide appeal, helped make Wright the first American writer to have a book – of the month club selection. (Marc 2009).

Wright moved to France in the late 1940s. He published several more novels during his life time, including *The Outsider* (1953), which describes an African American character's involvement with the communist party in Chicago; and the *Long Dream* (1958), about a boy's childhood in Mississippi. The short-story collection, *Eight men* and novel *Lewd Today* (1963) were published after Wright's death.

What is important to note in all Wright's literary sojourn as documented in both his fictional and non-fictional works is his concern with commitment and protest. Hazel (2001; 20) observes that "a part from the political sophistication and deep social involvement, Wright's books are notable for their passionate sincerity. He was perceptive about the universal problems that had the ability to destroy mankind."

This perceptive ability to situate racism within a universal framework also proves the affinity of "Black Boy" with Peter Abrahams' "Tell freedom" irrespective of their spatio-temporal locations. Because within the deep structure of racism, minority or majority is not a factor in the equation, but the existence of a super structure that ensures the perpetuation of and the continuity in the series of dehumanizing activities of destroying mankind deemed 'inferior' race by a supposedly 'superior' one.

If *Native Son* (1940) as Hazel (2001) pointed out ‘a brutally honest depiction of black urban, ghetto life’ is most successful of all his non-fiction works, then *Black boy* owing to his commitment to truth becomes his most successful non-fiction work. The book immediately after publication, (January 1945), its sales reached four hundred thousand copies by March of that same year.

John Herrick (1999:16), when commenting on Wright’s literary accomplishments pointed to the fact that, ‘here at last was a black writer who undeniably wrote considerably better than many of his white contemporaries’.

In Afro- American literary cycle, the period of the late 1940’s was the period of Richard Wright. And that period, marked the end of indulgence for Negro writers.

The closing of this era in the opinion of Herrick (1999:19) ‘in the final analysis is the greatest contribution Richard Wright made to the status of Negro writers and to literature’.

### ***Black Boy As a Unique Story of the Reality of the African – American life***

The reality of the African – American life in general is that of oppression; the task and the mission of the black writers therefore are with creating a work of art in a segregated society. In expressing this reality, the black writer, has to first; explain the society to him and create his art while opposing that society. And secondly, he cannot be honest with himself or his people without lending his support, at least verbally .It is within this intellectual milieu that black autobiography, a minority within a minority takes its power – the power of consciously representing the ideals of black people; the ideals of reasons and consistency.

Undoubtedly, Wright has been consistent in presenting his ideology in relation to the reality of the African – American life in “Black boy”. This is even so, since as observed by Rosenblatt (1976:176), ‘in autobiography, one is not merely getting at the self, but at reality as well, the one not existing outside its relation to the other’.

Born on a plantation near Natchez in Mississippi in 1908 Wright in his *Black boy* went to some pain to make clear that;

His cultural alienation had begun in his black home and in black community where as a small child he was scarcely aware of the existence of a white race .... That his family had tried to beat fear and submission into his mature years before interracial contacts made evident the rationale for a’ Nigger’ identity ....and saw black and whites as inseparably fused in their acceptance of a grotesque racial myth

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.

According to Rosenblatt (1976), the 'argument' of black autobiography is:

Against the existing Universe which the narrator was and is an essential if uncomfortable part, the 'argument' of the work is extended against the Self. Black autobiography annihilates the self because by so doing it takes the world with it. (p.80)

At the beginning of *Black Boy*, Wright had set his house a fire, he said: 'I yearned to become invisible, to stop living'. This incidence of burning his house at that age shows that, after coming face to face with an unjust reality of existence, young Wright felt that things must change immediately and revolutionarily too hence the use of fire. In creating the true picture of racism, Wright, narrated his disappointment when he saw the boat they were to board when travelling with his mother to Memphis.

'For days I had dreamed about a huge white boat floating on a vast body of water, but when my mother took me down to the levee on the day of leaving, I saw a tiny, dirty boat that was not at all like the boat I had imagined'. And to further paint the picture of the ghetto in which the blacks live, he described their home in Memphis and its environment:

In Memphis we live in a one -story brick tenement. The stone buildings and the concrete pavements looked bleak and hostile to me. The absence of green growing things made the city seem dead. Living space for the four of us - my mother, my brother, my father, and me - was a kitchen and a bedroom. In the front and rear were paved areas in which my brother and I could play, but for days I was afraid to go into the strange city street alone.

In the above description, within Wright's autobiographical consciousness, we find a succinct revelation of a life characterized by horrible experience from childhood. This made young Wright to see life as a harsh journey through which he must pass. And his defense strategies for survival within those conditions include a brutal approach. What he aims for is a feeling of satisfaction in most of those brutal actions, after setting the house a fire, the next brutal action was killing the kitten. 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. (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 kungry, she said trying to make me laugh and forget.  
' What's a kungry?  
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.  
'You just have to wait again but why?  
For god to send food'  
When is he going to send it?  
I don't know'  
But I 'm hungry  
She was ironing and she paused and looked at me with tears in her eyes (p.12)

To further present the hollowness and hopelessness of existence, he narrated how adults made him drunk and says obscenities in a saloon at the age of six. This further demonstrates the bleakness of black life in America. The cultural Baseness of black life was equally presented after Wright passed through childhood and discovered 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 hallow 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)

Wright in *Black Boy*, more than in all his other non-fiction works succeeds in dramatizing by fictional techniques the truth of his recreated life that culminates in the triumph of his will and ideology. He does this successfully by deliberately reversing the usual connotation western tradition has assigned to black and white that black is always bad and white good. The imagery of light and dark, black and white, is similarly mutable and resist simple formation. The south is dark, so dark that he wonders over the fact that the sun is still shining (Mandel, 1980). Another imagery used by Wright for his yearning is hunger. The entire book is strung between hunger and satisfaction; light and darkness; black and white; and many more opposing irreconcilable forces. Wright therefore set his biography within some ideological needs which locate the self as part of a social program aimed at change in a certain direction. The wind of change always blows from the north. To get the change Wright had to follow that direction and laments that:

Yet deep down that I could never really leave the south, for my feeling had always been formed by the south, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and

consciousness, black though I was the culture of the south. So in leaving, I was taking a part of the south to transplant In alien soil, to see if it could grow differently if it could of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of the other son and perhaps to bloom... And if that miracle ever happens and, then I would know that there was yet hope in that southern swamp of despair and violence, that light could emerge even out of the blackest of the southern night. I would know that the south too could overcome its fear. Its hate, its cowardice, its heritage of guilt and blood, its burden of anxiety and compulsive cruelty.(p.228)

In the above submission, Wright evokes the feeling of despair and the necessity to move north. Because that movement is in the main, the beginning of realization of the ultimate yearning for freedom. The voyage is a necessary evil. He has seen the light through literature; in literature the hope resides which has to be expressed in literary form.

Wright has clearly indicated that the religion (symbolized by the church) is only good in theory, but for obvious racial reasons, not practicable. For practicing it will equalize all God's children on earth. And racism is always there to say no. Wright also made a blasphemous statement and is always quarrelling with Granny over her religious beliefs, he queried the machinery of Granny's maneuvering when she sent a boy from the neighborhood to preach to Wright and bring him to God. Wright frankly expressed his understanding of the world in relation to the existence of God a propos the realities of racism:

Embedded in me was a motion of the suffering in life, but none of it seemed like the consequences of original sin to me; I simply could not feel weak and cost in a cosmic manner. I had been made to go church, I had given God's existence a sort of tacit assent, but after having seen His creatures serve Him at first hand, I had my doubts. My faith, such as it was, was welded to the common realities of life anchored in the sensation of my body nothing could ever shake this faith and surely not my fear of an invisible power.(p.100)

On that same page, still on religion, Wright made a hypothetical statement that summed up his attitude towards God and the suffering in the world. In other words, he expressed his ideology about religion, that if after suffering from dread, fear, hunger, terror and loneliness, another fear of an invisible power is added to his miserable life then that invisible power, if it actually exists, and could not do anything to alleviate those visible calamities he had experienced firsthand, then it does not deserve either his acknowledgement of its existence or further additional subjugation of his already over troubled soul in the hope of reaping anything in the hereafter. To further prove that he is not afraid of the consequences of death, he puts the hypothetical statement thus:

“if laying down my life could stop the suffering in the world, I'd do it but I don't believe anything can stop it”.(p.100)

Wright in his desperate attempt to remind his readers that the Negro is not in himself inferior to the Whiteman, and that his apparent inferiority is essentially the result of poverty, neglect, lack of education and discrimination, he saved money for his education and sometimes going without food.



The fifteenth year in the life of our hero was a turning point in a more challenging manner. For young Lee, he lost all his savings and became homeless. The beginning of struggle against the forces of racism without home and a family to return to. And for young Richard:

I was in my fifteenth year; in term of schooling I was far behind the average youth of the nation, but I did not know that. In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, mode of being that was the way of life about me had said could not be, must be, and upon which the penalty of the death had been placed. Somewhere in the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing forwards a dangerous steep slope heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red light that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screens that filled the air.(p.148)

So also Wright in his own ideological manner, resented and breaks out of the limits of knowledge and awareness that were laid down for him both by tradition and by the 'JIM CROW LAWS'; that is the laws designed to prevent the Negro from enjoying any political power. Over the effect of these loaf sided Jim Crow Laws, Wright was:

Building up a dream in which I saw the entire educational system of the South to have rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow Laws had been drafted to pass and keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that Southern senators in the nation had striven to keep out of Negro life; I was beginning to dream the dreams of what the state had said were wrong, that the school had said were taboo.(p.148)

A part from the intensity of the Jim Crows Laws, Wright seems to tell the world that the whites were conscious only of what has happening at a given moment; this enables him to describe a certain kind of insensitivity, a failure to understand the significance of an event in light of whole story of that event – here, of slavery, of the civil war, of poverty, of discrimination. And in a systematic way, Wright always brings his burden of memory, knowledge and awareness (the essential tool that formed his ideology), hence his inability to accept the expected of him. The role of subservience, the role of the submission to aggression; the role of representing the cultural barrenness of black life, all these are to be played within 'the aura of limitless freedom.'

Within this 'aura of limitless freedom', a sense of rebellion was born in the psyche' of young Wright just as is the case of his counterpart Peter Abrahams in *Tell Freedom* when he blatantly refused to conform to the norms of white supremacy in South Africa. Such rebellious stances by autobiographers, always serve as a harbinger for trouble. Wright was sacked more than once from different places of work. This is because of the burning ideology that, he too is not less than human. (Dignity of man)

In this rebellious stance, Wright is a degree above Abrahams. This he demonstrates by his expression of feelings not merely of hatred of the white and all they represent, but by deliberate design

to act. This action is in form of attack. Therefore, he was sacked from job, in narrating and analyzing his ordeals. He clearly points out that:

As time separated me from the experience, I could feel no hate for the men who had driven me from the job. They did not seem to be individual men, but part of huge implacable elemental design towards which hate is futile. What I did feel was a longing to attack. But how? And because I knew of no way to grapple with this thing, I felt doubly cast out. (p.170)

When he was sacked again from the drug store, he sat down to reassess what was wrong with him or the system that perpetually pushes him to the periphery of existence:

I knew what was wrong with me, but I could not correct it. The words and action of white people were baffling signs to me. I was living in a culture and not a civilization I could learn how that culture worked only by living with it. Misreading the reaction of whites around me made me say and do the wrong things. In my dealing with white I was conscious entirely of my relation with them and where conscious only of what was happening at a given moment. I had to keep remembering what others took for granted; I had to think out what others felt. (p.171)

In the fulfillment of black autobiographical formula, after Wright became saturated with ideas that stem from the reading of books on literary criticism, he resolved that moving north in form of self exile, becomes inevitable; because that idea is what give him a glimpse of hope in the future:

In the main my hope was merely a kind of self defense, a conviction that if I did not leave I will perish, either because of possible violence of others against me, or because of my possible violence against them. The substance of my hope was formless. Book didn't add something to an already adequate life, but help to fill some of the holes in an inadequate life, in a swamp of despair and violence. (P.226)

With a feeling of hope and desire to actualize his dream Wright headed north on to the unknown:

I was leaving the South to fling myself into the unknown, to meet other situations that will perhaps elicit from me other responses and if I could meet enough of a different life then perhaps gradually and slowly I might learn who I was, what I might be. I was not leaving the South to forget the South but so that someday I might understand it, might come to know what its rigors has done to me to its children. I fled so that the numbness of my defensive leaving might thaw out and let me feel the pain years later and far away of what living in the south had meant. (p.228)



## Conclusion

Wright establishes the fact that, through autobiography, experiences are presented to the reader. These experiences develop over time and culminate into an ideology. African Americans because of their long tradition as oppressed peoples have found an outlet in the autobiographical form. Within this fold of autobiography, Wright rightly points the consequent exploitation, discrimination, and repression which further hardened him and were accompanied by ideological explanations or inscriptions and policies at the bottom of which was deliberate subordination and exclusion of the blacks in the then South America. Within this terrain, it becomes evident that Wright was primarily influenced by Literature and through this he developed a yearning for a better future. All these put together gave him hope. And later, developed an ideology which he presented in an autobiographical form in his book, *Black Boy*.

From the foregoing analysis, Wright demonstrates what Barrett J. Mandel (1980-55) established about autobiographies: 'Autobiographies are not essentially tabular; they are experimental: an autobiography shares experience as its way of revealing reality'. In this paper, we have shared Wrights' bitter experiences and have seen the picture of reality he tries to depict in his autobiography. We have equally seen a unique reflection of the dominant racial prejudices that made Wright not only rebellious but ideologically different from other blacks in the same trauma and under the same condition in the South America of their time. These differences find expression in his dual dealings with whites sometimes with grave consequences and in his dealings with the members of his family and his immediate community, who equally suffer his predicament.

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