



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2020; 6(10): 617-621
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 18-08-2020
Accepted: 27-09-2020

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Richard Wright's 'Jim Crow' and 'Black Boy': A critical analysis

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Abstract

Richard Wright^[5, 11] is a writer of rebellious protest. He never showed any laxity in his fight against racism. Words were for him the ultimate weapon in his fight. In his 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch', he recounts his experiences of White racism. He describes powerfully as well as vividly situations in which Jim Crow laws humiliated the black man and made him suffer just for being black. The segregationist policy and prejudices of Southern Whites had made the life of blacks utterly miserable. As about Wright's 'Black Boy: A Record of Childhood of Youth', the effects of the same anecdotes is diluted by the narrative style Richard Wright. 'Black Boy' is really a story of a man set apart from the white race by intellect and sensitivity. At the same time, this man barred forever from the white race by the colour of his skin. Wright here is representative of all blacks.

Keywords: Protest, Racism, Jim Crow, Black man, Segregationist, White race, Colour-prejudices.

Introduction

The rigid segregationist laws of the South always stood in the way of Blacks. These mischievous laws prevented governmental aid from reaching the black man in his poverty. Richard Wright calls these laws 'Jim Crow' laws. These laws harm the black man in many other ways as well. Wright dwells in detail upon these laws and their effects on the blacks in his 'Jim Crow'.

'Black Boy' is the story of the American black who is barred from the white race by the colour of his skin. Wright relates many anecdotes to prove his point in this regard.

Main thrust

In his autobiographical essay, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch" Wright relates some of his adventures in the south during his childhood and adolescence. The 'Jim Crow' were laws that designated the way blacks were supposed to live and conduct themselves in the South. An innocent infraction of these laws was sufficient enough to provoke the anger of whites and result in the violent death of the black man. Even though he was very young, Wright had learned what to say and do in order not to anger the white man. What was true of Wright was also true of every black of the South. It was the duty of black parents to see to it that their children behaved according to the norms established by the Southern whites. As Wright sees it, racial struggle is constant. In this atmosphere, the white world tries to control his life by all imaginable means, so the black man must learn to protect himself. Wright himself learned his first Jim Crow lesson at the age of ten. At that time he was living in west Helena, Arkansas. The line of demarcation between the white and the black community was the railroad track. Wright and his little friends liked to go near the rail road where they could play their games.

One day it so happened that the white children who lived on the other side of the railway tracks, provoked the black children. As the black boys were very much assured by their experience, they were certain of their victory. They took the provocation and attacked the white boys with sooty trash. But they were defeated. The little whites responded to them by throwing pieces of broken bottles. Richard Wright suffered a head injury in this fight. He had to get three stitches immediately. He was surprised to see that white boys had cheated the black ones by throwing broken bottles. This was against the rules of the juvenile skirmish. That early in life, he had not realised that he belonged to a race that whites scorned. When

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his mother came in the evening and learned about the quarrel, she gave Wright a very sound thrashing. He fell sick from it. It was strange show of affection shown by his mother. Black mothers behaved in this very manner to teach their children to respect Jim Crow laws. This behaviour can be seen even today to some extent. These mothers know very well the psychology of whites. They know that whites will suppress every kind of defiance from the black community. Richard Wright was just a boy at that time. But he learned his lesson not to forget it later. Not provoking whites, he concluded, was the only way of living in peace and security. Wright grew up within his community with this experience. About six years after this railroad incident, he went to look for work in a white town. Having been away from whites for so many years, he had been very confident in his conduct. But this conduct of his did not please his white employers. He began to work for an optical good business. His boss had recommended him to the other two white workers. Now he was sure of having a good future for himself. After a month, he asked his two colleagues to teach him the trade. He told them that he had learned nothing in a month. The reaction of the whites was unexpectedly negative. It was so violent that Wright felt he might be killed. He left his job immediately. The two whites after having beaten him violently told him clearly to content himself with what he had. According to these white fellows, Wright had taken himself for white and hence he had to suffer. He had offended Southern whites unknowingly. The latter never considered a black man to be human and ambitious. South segregation did not allow blacks to learn trades reserved for whites. Whites wanted to obtain what they desired. Blacks should have learned to be satisfied with whatever is left for them by these people. Blacks not respecting these rules were often thrown out of jobs. They were also watched closely by whites because they considered them as dangerous. Had Wright defied these whites, his future would have been sealed. Hence he left his job quite unprotestingly. Affirming his manhood by fighting with whites was the only way on the part of the black man to protect his people. But Wright himself found it impossible to do.

While working in a clothing store in Jackson, Mississippi, one day Wright heard the wails of a woman. He saw that his boss and his son were beating a black woman who had not paid her bills. When the poor woman emerged from the store, covered with blood, a policeman stopped her. The cop locked her up immediately for drunkenness and for public disturbance. This happened before Wright's eyes. But he was unable to say or do anything. Had he intervened, he would have lost his job. As about the white cop, he knew what had happened inside the store. He had locked up the black woman to protect the white shopkeeper's reputation. The work that Wright did at the store was that of a messenger. He had to go often to deliver packages in the white suburbs of Jackson. On a very hot summer day, one of the tyres of Wright's bicycle burst. Wright had to walk the rest of his way pushing it along. Some whites were passing by in a car. They offered him a ride on the running board of their car and he accepted their offer. But he said "no" to one of these whites who offered him some alcohol to drink. At this, the white man hit him in the face with a bottle of whiskey. Wright lost his balance and fell from his perch right in the middle of the road. Before the whites left him, they taught him to learn always to say "Mister" to a white

man if he wished to live long. The white men behaved with him so angrily because he had not behaved according to the norms of the South. Perhaps he was treating them as their equals. In this condition no other treatment was expected. The black man must have to pay attention to what the white man says. He must force himself to be polite. The white man always distrusts the black man. On one Saturday evening, Wright had just finished delivering the packages in a white neighbourhood. At that very time, he was stopped by some white policemen. He was searched under the revolvers of the white cops. He offered not the slightest resistance to them. That would have cost him his life. The policemen were disappointed at not having found any weapon on his person. They then advised him not to enter white neighbourhood's in future after sunset. Wright was suspect and guilty in the eyes of the defenders of white laws only because the colour of his skin was not white. The American police, both in the South and in the North wishes to assure itself that blacks remain where they belong. Behind the occasional quarrels of a brutal and bloody nature, there has always been a lack of trust and understanding between whites and blacks. Whites are eternally in the fear that blacks will suddenly attack their neighbourhoods to spread terror and to bring destruction there. This fear is the product of a guilt feeling in the white man. He sees poverty and destruction of blacks, and knows that he is responsible for these. He considers them as savages and nothing more. According to Richard Wright, sexuality plays a very important role here. The white man believes he is sexually inferior to the black man. Hence he does everything to protect the purity of the white woman. When Wright worked in a white hotel in Jackson as a bellboy, white prostitutes often had him to do errands for them. They were scarcely concerned about their nudity when Wright entered their rooms. For these white prostitutes, he did not belong to the race of the humans. One day, he was called into the room of a white prostitute. When he entered her room, he found her in bed with a white man. No sooner had he arrived there than the white young woman got out of her bed, stark naked, to get some money from the dressing table. In such a situation, the woman naturally caught the attention of Wright. But the white man became mad with anger at this. He ordered Wright to turn his head away. The reaction of the white man in this regard was nothing but natural. For whites, the sexual desires of blacks are not supposed to be human. The reaction in this case of the white man was to show that the white woman belonged to him. As is with other whites, this white man, too, lacked confidence in him as a result of the prejudices and misconceptions rooted in him with regard to the black man's sexual capabilities. Had Wright been white, the white man would have reacted differently. In that case, he would have, at the most, hurled an abuse at the prostitute and said nothing to Wright. Whites do not allow blacks to go to bed with white women. If such a thing is ever discovered, white women accuse the blacks of having raped them. Thus, they save themselves from being punished. The black does not have a like fate. He is at least beaten savagely. Or he is lynched. In Richard Wright's time, only the second type of punishment was reserved for blacks in such cases.

Thus, whites protect the virtue of their white women by doing whatever they like to do in this regard. On the other hand, black men can do nothing to defend their own women from the sexual assaults of white men. To white men, black

women are lustful women without virtue. A black bellhop was forced by police to marry a black girl under the pretext that he was the father of the child she was expecting. As it happened later, the child that was born had a skin much lighter than that of his mother or the black bellhop. The whites were not surprised at this, for they knew that the father of the child was a white man. Consequently, the black woman makes her black companion suffer the consequences of her own situation.

The black man thus suffers doubly-both at the hands of the white man, and also of the black woman. White men consider black women only as sex objects. They show an attitude of total lack of respect for black women. One evening, Wright was coming out of the hotel with a black lady friend. The white night watchman gave this young lady a resounding slap on the posterior. Wright became quite amazed at this. Seeing his amazement, the white man forced him, under threat, to declare that he had nothing to say about what he had just seen. Wright knew that the same watchman had already killed two black men in so called self-defence. He therefore complied immediately with the order of the white man. He knew that the latter would not have hesitated to kill him in so-called self-defence once again.

The numerous anecdotes recounted in 'The Ethics' give an idea of the hazardous life the Southern black man had to live every day. The incidents are isolated ones, but they give a clear picture of the precise situations in which the black man finds himself in the segregationist South. The anecdotes of 'The Ethics' have a much more striking effect than those recounted another autobiographical work in 'Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth'. Talking about the theme of 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch', Kenneth Kinnamon ^[1] says that "the theme of initiation into violence and escape from it is one Wright was obsessed with." In 'Black Boy', the effects of these same anecdotes is diluted by the narrative style of Richard Wright. It is not that 'Black Boy' is less convincing than 'The Ethics'. In the former, Wright describes powerfully and colourfully situations in which Jim Crow laws humiliate the black man and make him suffer. In his seething criticism in this regard, Dan McCall ^[2] deplores the consciousness of the white community in these burning words: "The Villain in Black Boy is the depraved itself into a snarling thing."

As soon as Wright arrived in Memphis, he was duped by a white and a black. They used him easily to get what they wanted. Walking along the Mississippi, Wright had met a black man of his age. They had discovered together in the grass, as if by chance, a big flask containing alcohol. They found a white buyer, and put the flask in his car in exchange for five dollars. Feigning to go for change, the new friend of Wright entered a store and disappeared. The latter then realised that he had been fooled by both those men. But the thing that upset him was that a white man could use a black man to deceive another black man. In fact, whites never hesitate to divide blacks to achieve their ends.

As the black man is not regarded as human, the means used maybe quite varied. 'Black Boy' is really a story of a man set apart from his own race by intellect and sensitivity. At the same time, this man is barred forever from the white race by the colour of his skin. It is evident that the black man can be easily humiliated by his own people. Whites may or may not be directly responsible for it. Wright here is a representative of all blacks. What he says about himself is true of every African-American black. About Wright, W.M.

Jones comments "His family and his friends do not treat him wisely because they do not know any better and they do not know any better because they are forever cut off from graciousness, from culture from universalism." This remark of Jones is applicable to all Southern blacks. This utterly ungracious parochialism is quite universal in the American South.

The bitter experience with the black man with the flask of alcohol taught Richard Wright to fear his own race. At that time he was in Memphis working for an optical goods company. Employed in this small industrial establishment were a dozen whites. The majority of these hated blacks. They did everything to humiliate them. There was a black elevator operator in the building. He gave these whites every reason to believe in the stupidity of the black race. This black operator let the whites kick him in the posterior just for a few cents. Because his silly tricks brought him some money, it mattered little for him what other blacks, including Wright, thought about it. In fact, his behaviour hurt the blacks around him quite deeply. It contributed to reinforcing the image of the comical and simple-minded black in the eyes of whites. The name of this black elevator was Shorty. Wright had asked him a number of times to stop his degrading buffoonery because he knew that he was intelligent. Shorty never heeded his advice. As soon as Shorty was in the presence of whites, he adopted an attitude that assured him both protection and money from them. The man was fully aware that he was living a dual personality. But he also knew that this duality permitted him to live in a world that was anything but friendly. Whites do not satisfy themselves only by making fun, constantly, of blacks. Whites do not recognize any human value in blacks. So when blacks destroy one another, they are quite happy. The white foreman of Richard Wright at the optical goods store in Memphis tried to provoke a knife fight between him and another black man, Harrison. Not having succeeded in this, he tried to provoke a boxing match between Wright and Harrison, promising them five dollars apiece. The fight took place in the presence of whites. Their bodies had been bruised by blows and covered with blood. The whites were rather mad with joy to see it. In fact, before the fight, Wright and Harrison had promised each other to pretend to fight. Unfortunately, however, they had been unable to keep their promise because they knew nothing of boxing. They had been in such a state, forced to defend themselves fiercely against the untutored, awkward, and painful blows of each other. In this fight, Wright had lost his self-esteem and so had Harrison.

The aim of the whites was to achieve precisely this. Talking about Wright in this connection, Duffus ^[4] says, "He did not feel himself inferior, yet in order to survive he had to act the part of an inferior." Whites impose the life of an inferior being on the Southern black. It gives the latter an insight into the world to which he does not really belong. He only observes it from outside. This society has rejected him, and hence he hates it. Still he wants to understand it in entirety, in its minutest details.

Wright says that the white man at the optical goods establishment who had lent his library card was hated by other white workers. The reason for the hatred was that the card-lending white was a Catholic. Wright explains the sympathy of this white man for himself and for other blacks. He says that he understood blacks and felt pity for them because of his own unique situation. The white world was as

hostile to this white man, Mr. Falk, as it was to Richard Wright. Thus a silent friendship linked this white with a black, Wright, in a world that was equally hostile to both of them, Mr. Falk suffered on account of his religion whereas Wright suffered on account of his race. Revealing his true feelings and true attitudes to the white world is, on the part of the black man, as good as committing suicide. To obtain the books that he wanted to read, Wright had to pay the white man's game. He passed for a simple-minded black man. He would write a note to the librarian on behalf of Mr. Falk, like this "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L. Mencken?" In this manner, the librarian would not suspect his intention. Wright thus took refuge in reading. In this way, he wanted to escape the world that oppressed him.

Most blacks are unable to find such escape. They seek their solace in other ways. They practice religion or indulge in sexual debauchery, alcohol, or drugs. Whites sanction this because these things do not pose any danger to their world directly. Rather they feel assured that blacks are with their own kind. Whites loved blacks talking about sex and religion. Wright knew it well. Hence when he was at the optical goods company in Memphis, he did not talk with whites on any other subject. Had he done that, he would have invited trouble for himself. Among the topics that Southern white men did not like to discuss with Negroes were the following: American white women; The Ku Klux Klan; France and how Negro soldiers fared while there, French women; Jack Johnson; the entire northern part of the United States; the Civil War; Abraham Lincoln; U.S. Grant; General Sherman; Catholics; the Pope Jews; The Republican party; Slavery; Social Equality; Communism Socialism; the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution; or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-esteem on the part of the Negro". In such an adverse situation, the Southern black looks for a way out. Only then can he live the semblance of a normal life.

This is the reason why, during the twenties, thousands of blacks left south for the North. Before leaving the South, the black man had to prepare himself mentally that he was going to live in another white world. For him, all whites were equally dangerous. If the black man had met a Northern white world in the South, he knew that the atmosphere in the North must have been different from that of South. He knew how to behave with a Southern white, but he did not know how to behave with a white from the North. This is precisely what happened to Wright when he suddenly left the optical goods firm in Jackson. He left the firm to avert a racial confrontation with two white colleagues. His boss, Mr. Crane, was a Northern white. He had wished to know the whole truth about the incident, Mr. Crane was ready to punish the two white workers and Wright knew this. He found it wiser, however, to say nothing. Mr. Crane was, thinks Wright, quite an exception to the Southern rule. Any other Southern white in his position would not have behaved in the manner he did. But the trouble here for Wright was that if Mr. Crane had said anything to the two whites, they would probably have killed him. Wright knew it perfectly well.

Such experiences make the Southern blacks realize that Northern whites are different from those of the South. The only requirement of Southern laws is that blacks should always please whites. As about the Northern white, a kind of mystery surrounded him. He was regarded as a new kind of

white by Southern blacks. And that is why a great number of them left for the North.

In *Black Boy*, Wright speaks of his different adventures. These are all his personal experiences. The actions of whites in the South have always disorganized his family life. These actions have always deprived him of a good education and made him live in poverty. The dominant emotion of Richard Wright throughout *Black Boy* is anger. Lionel Trilling^[7] says, "Black Boy" is an angry book. But the amount of anger that Mr. Wright feels is in proportion not only to the social situation he is dealing with; it is also in proportion to the author's desire to live a reasonable and effective life."

Richard Wright possessed special intellectual qualities from the time he was very young. He was, moreover, a very keen observer. That is why *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* is laden with emotion and bitterness. The white world always refused to recognize Wright's qualities. It forced him to trust no one except himself. It compelled him to develop an unrelenting aggressiveness against everything that was white. Behind his writing in the manner Wright did was the memory of the fear he had experienced in the South. Almost all his critics are in agreement on this point. The critic Ralph K. White says that "his hostility is rooted in anxiety, his rage is rooted in fear." As, Wright says, both the black world as well as the white distrusted him because neither was capable of understanding him. He chose consequently to live in an isolated world entirely his own. Critics are of the opinion, and justifiably, that Wright had never understood blacks and whites well. But they do not explain the reason he was in such situation. *Black Boy* reveals that Wright's childhood consisted of constant moving. As a young boy, he never had a fixed address. This created a psychological instability in him. On account of this, he was never able to know people of his own race and whites.

Despite the critical remarks that Wright could never understand blacks or whites, the fact remains that *Black Boy* has human value as well as a great literary importance. It reveals the kind of life the Southern black had to lead. America always ignored this problem. But the whole world came to know of it inspite of the U.S. doing everything not to let the world know. Ralph Ellison^[9] gives us an insight into Wright's intention in these words: "He has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going underground' into a will to confront the world, evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unabashedly into the guilty conscience of America."

A very hasty reading of *Black Boy* may beget a notion that black Americans belong to a mysterious world that is not a part of American society. The fact is that, whether they like it or not, black and white Americans constitute the same American family. Understanding and expressing the matter well, Ellison says: "Wright knows perfectly well that Negro life is by-product of Western civilization, and that in it, if only one possesses the humanity and humility to see, are to be discovered all those impulse, tendencies, life and culture forms to be found elsewhere in Western society." The black man is a part of American society, and an integral one. But he is completely without any means of defence against constant threats. These threats come from the majority of his white fellow countrymen to silence him and to make him continue in slavery. It can be understood properly in the context of Richard Wright's poignant exclamation at the end of his book: "But in what other ways had the South allowed

me to be natural, to be real, and to be myself, except in rejection, rebellion and aggression?"

Rejection, rebellion and aggression are the only cathartic tools whereby the pent-up anger and frustration of the black man can be expressed. A sensitive and tortured soul must try to find some release for his suppressed emotions. The black man of the South found that release by going to the North. There was no other way out for him and his repressed feelings. Blacks choosing to stay back in the South will have to accept their condition if they want whites to spare them.

Conclusion

Richard Wright is white America's most powerful anti-racist black writer. In his two books under study here, he cites anecdote after anecdote to drive home his point. These two works are his 'Jim Crow' and 'Black Boy.'

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