



Representation of Racial Segregation and Identity Crisis in Richard Wright's Novel *Black Boy*

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Abstract

Racial segregation and identity crisis play an essential role in Black American literature as well as in American society. The objective of the study is to analyze the significant themes of identity crisis and racial segregation in Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy*. The study focuses on the concepts of racial segregation and identity crisis because these issues were and are still controversial and argumentative in Afro-American Literature. There is also an analysis of the features of post-colonialism. Post-colonialism is a major writing style used in this novel. It claims that Black American literature was written to fight against racial segregation, oppression, aggression in order to obtain self-pride and identity. It also concentrates on the theme of the problems of Blacks' identity and racial discrimination in American society to prove that racism and oppression are indeed prominent themes in Wright's novel because the book was written during the Jim Crow era at a point where racism was very important in American society.

Key words: Richard Wright's *Black Boy*; Identity crisis; Racism; oppression

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INTRODUCTION

The novel *Black Boy* is an autobiography of Richard Wright that is based on critical social issues which include

defiance racial segregation, problems of black's identity and physical and emotional violence in American society. In *Black Boy*, Wright examines the influence of racial segregation and identity crisis on Blacks in American society.

Among African American novelists, Richard Wright was one of the most famous African-American authors of the twentieth century, capable of addressing delicate racial issues and identity problems. Wright wrote his reactions against the inadequacies of Blacks in the American society. Wright's literature is an Innovative literature and art as well as challenges norms of the society. His novel, *Black Boy*, forced whites to identify their personalities as oppressors.

Another level of this novel speaks about racial segregation as about a crucial problem which sunk in society as a whole. *Black Boy* does not only narrate about segregation and identity, but it also narrates about relationships among African-American people themselves in American society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial segregation and identity crisis are the major themes of African-American literature. From the seventeenth century up to the twentieth century, African-American people were exposed to various forms of oppression, aggression, exploitation, suppression, and discrimination that devastated their lives and forced them to live in segregated community. Therefore, Richard Wright (1908-1960) is a leading figure, have always been shed light on the African-American dilemma within the socio-political context in his novel *Black Boy*. As Alice Mikal Craven and his friend state that:

Black Boy deserves to be read as a text that transcends its ostensible boundaries, for even though Wright situates it in the Mississippi that he knew all too well, its relentless exploration of the shaping of black identity in a Western society spoke

and continues to speak to people of color throughout the black diaspora (Dow & Craven, 2011, p.250).

Black Boy is Richard Wright's very shrewdly and carefully crafted fictionalized autobiography. Its main purpose is to counter the white South's view of him as an inferior boy to the white society. Richard Wright reflects not only the situation of himself but all difficult conditions of blacks in the White South through the structure and themes of *Black Boy*. "Black Boy is filled with blues-tempered echoes of railroad trains, the names of southern towns and cities, estrangements, fights and flights, deaths and disappointments, charged with physical and spiritual hungers and pain" (Bloom, 2010, p.72).

It is one of the most famous novels of African American literature that faces all forms of slavery and racial segregation of blacks in America as Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that: " (in *Black Boy*) Wright's humanity is achieved only at the expense of his fellow blacks, pitiful victims of the pathology of slavery and racial segregation who surround and suffocate him" (1988, p.182).

Black Boy was and remains one of the best novels in Afro- American literature for exposing the real situations of the blacks not only in the South America but also all over the world. As Harold describes that: " *Black Boy* was on the New York Times bestseller list for three months and had such an influence on other black writers that a small circle became known as "the Wright School" of African-American writing" (Bloom, 2010, p.19).

Through his novel *Black Boy* (1945), Richard Wright concentrates on racial segregation, alienation, identity crisis, suppression, oppression and exploitation of blacks in America. *Black Boy* is his picture of life in the South and North of America. " *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" (p.74). Famous writers describe Wright's novel as the real story for depicting the critical situations of blacks in South America.

RACIAL SEGREGATION

Richard Wright is one the most well-known African-American novelists to achieve reputation and wealth from his works. More importantly, Wright should be known as the first African-American to stand against violent deeds and racist segregation of the White Americans. He is considered as the savior to his generation of Afro-Americans who can't show their case to the world. *Black Boy* is one of the best literary works, written by an African American writer Richard Wright." *Black Boy*, Wright's terrifying 1945 memoir of growing up in the segregated South, became a literary landmark of the U.S. color line despite his publisher's amputation of part of the manuscript " (Dow & Craven, 2011, p.40).

He portrays the hard circumstances of Blacks under suppression. In the novel *Black Boy* he depicts not only the situation of himself, but also the situations of the Blacks as they face many obstacles like poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, exploitation of blacks, depression and segregation.

The significant power of Wright's novel *Black Boy* considered Wright as an influential writer in Afro-American literature. His novel *Black Boy* describes Wright's growth and suffering in the ferocious Jim Crow laws especially in South America. The Jim Crow Laws were applied in South America to exploit and oppress African-American people by Euro-American people. The consequences of these laws is the racial segregation against the Blacks. That racial segregation was connected to several places such as public swimming pools, cafeterias, public stations, hospitals, theatres, marriage, schools, colleges, and the court of law, where any African-American could not witness against any White American. As Wright states in his novel:

I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation's capital had striven to keep out of Negro life; I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo (2009, p.110).

In his novel *Black Boy* he speaks in the first person, Wright doesn't only confirm on his own childhood, but also on childhood of many African-American children who were raised during the emergence of the American segregation time. The African Americans who were living during the time of apartheid and racial segregation had suffered from maltreatment of Whites and describing the black people as " the barbarians" " ghosts " and these strange people were forced to serve their masters (Hooks, 1992, p.165). Those people don't have the right to do, participate, learn, or even to take their seats in the train or bus. They were exploited and found for serving the white power.

Then, Richard and his family face many problems and the main problem is the shortage of food because his father Nathan refuses to help them . As a result of this, his mother Ella takes her children to the orphan home to stay there. But the difficult conditions of her children, Ella brings back her children from the orphan home and goes to aunt Maggie in Arkansas. Arkansas is the essential source of struggle against racial segregation of Blacks. "When he left Mississippi for Memphis in November 1925, he was motivated by a desire not only to free himself of the Deep South's harshest forms of racial discrimination and violence" (Dow & Craven, 2011, p.58).

Right notices that there is separate place for whites and blacks. When he tries to tell something about his uncle to stand against Whites, his mother Ella stops and

slaps him, this example shows that a black should not ask or pose any question regarding their segregation. “When my mother had slapped me when I had asked her—in the far-off days of Arkansas—why my “uncle” had run away from the white people, why he had not fought back; my mother had given me a ringing slap” (Wright, 2009, p.231).

Moreover, *Black Boy* exposes this serious problem as a famous issue which is held by some people. It also states about racial segregation as about a dangerous problem which spread in American society. Some characters in the novel are portrayed as exploited, oppressed, depressed characters that are full of dreadful violence and oppression. As Lincoln thought that the entire African American people could be excluded from America, he still considered the racial segregation and colonization as a means of increasing “white support for emancipation” (Gates, 2009, p.235).

White Americans are not very kind to Richard in this novel because he is a black and different one. When his mother Ella tells him about the fable story of *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*. Richard Wright stays miserable and he claims that this was the first time when he has felt some very strong feelings. Wright and readers of this book want to know the secret of Wright’s feelings whether positive or negative.

“Ella,” I begged, “please tell me what you are reading.”
“It’s just a book,” she said evasively, looking about with apprehension.....
I sat at her feet and lifted my face to hers.
“Once upon a time there was an old, old man named Bluebeard,” she began in a low voice. She whispered to me the story of Bluebeard and His Seven Wives and I ceased to see the porch, the sunshine, her face, everything. As her words fell upon my new ears, I endowed them with a reality that welled up from somewhere within me (Right, 2009, p.30).

Secondly, after the retirement of his grandfather from the Union Army, he couldn’t get the deserved disability pension from the government due to some segregated and bureaucratic reasons. Perhaps he had been injured in the civil war, he was not respected and honored by the White government. The white officer intentionally has written his name mistakenly for making him without disability pension. As Warnes describes the life of Blacks in America: “Yet, in our most recent war, his blood was segregated as was, for the most part, his person. Up to today we are set at a division, so that he may not marry our daughters or our sisters, nor may he – for the most part – eat at our tables or live in our house” (2007, p.78). He states the situation of racial segregation that was resulting from the bad behavior of the white Americans.

Even after the death of his grandfather, the government hasn’t given any compensation and official apologies for his family. In this regard Richard thinks that black soldiers were exploited to serve the white society. Even Blacks are

risking their life to defend the country on other side they are brutally treated. It reflects the feeling of segregation of blacks in white society. As Richard Wright states:

Another rumor had it that the white officer had been a Southerner and had deliberately falsified Grandpa’s papers. Anyway, Grandpa did not discover that he had been discharged in the name of Richard Vinson until years later; and when he applied to the War Department for a pension, no trace could be found of his ever having served in the Union Army under the name of Richard Wilson (2009, p.91).

This is the highest point of racial segregation against Richard when he arrives at a white neighborhood for selling his dog. This makes him so anxious and uneasy. This reflects the sense of Wright’s anxiety in *Black Boy* when he goes to a white neighborhood to sell his dog to a white woman for a dollar so that he may buy something to eat. During a long waiting, Right was marveling at the quietness and the cleanliness of the white place. He thought that these houses are being made for white people not for black people. He told himself that the woman may tell someone something wrong about him. His tensions and anxieties disturbed him. As a result of this, he has decided to leave the place to his safety of the Black faces without taking his dog. As Richard Wright narrates in his novel:

“Do you want to buy a pretty dog?” I asked.
“Let me see it.”
She took the dog into her arms and fondled and kissed it.
“What’s its name?”
“Betsy.”
“She is cute,” she said. “What do you want for her?”
“A dollar,” I said.
“Wait a moment,” she said. “Let me see if I have a dollar.”
She took Betsy into the house with her and I waited on the porch, marveling at the cleanliness, the quietness of the white world. How orderly everything was! Yet I felt out of place. I had no desire to live here (p.49).

This exposes the critical social issues of Blacks such as racial segregation, degradation, starvation, and bad treatments of the blacks by the white society. In the course of time, he starts to see differences between the white and black societies that he doesn’t not understand at first. It is the time in which segregation and racism are prevailing in America. Due to the serious situations of Right’s living, he decides to search for a job to enlarge the awareness of the world. He gets a job as a delivering newspapers to homes. He sells a certain newspaper so that he can read the stories in them. It seems impossible to escape it. Even reading that awakens him is enclosed in racial segregation. As Wright explains: “Well, I never read the newspaper. It isn’t much. But boy, the magazine supplement! What stories...I’m reading the serial of Zane Grey’s Riders of the Purple Sage” (p.84).

However, his path to the world is closed when he finds out that the newspaper comprises racist and segregated deeds against Blacks. Richard is confined in a racist

world. Richard is looking up hopefully to be kind to white characters. One of them help him like the optician Mr. Crane who employs Richard and attempts successfully to “defend him against the white shop employees” who fear him and finally drive him from the job, but some of white people are shyful, Blacks were fearing of “violent reprisals” still waiting for Whites who helped Blacks in the segregated South (Dow & Craven, 2011, p.41).

IDENTITY CRISIS

Richard Wright and most of the African American writers struggle for emancipation from a dominant white society that are used to exploit and oppress black Americans. Therefore, Richard Wright used literature as a weapon to demonstrate the black realities and rights to achieve genuine black identity in American society. As Hogue states that:

... the African American seeks freedom by embracing the values of the dominant white society and so has to crush and destroy that which is specifically African American, his respite from this double consciousness is to focus on the sensibility of the black writer. But what exactly does this mean? Does simply acknowledging that someone is a black writer remove him or her from white mythology? (2003, p.263).

Richard Wright explains the different aspects of black identity as depicted in his novel. The novel analyses the role and identity of Blacks in American society through the role of a few characters in Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy*. It also focuses on the social conditions of America which have determined the black's identity. Right portrays black man as an innocent hero victimized by a guilty society. His novel explores black man's search for identity in a world controlled by white power and laws. Right's loss of identity results from culture, traditions, norms, folks, and he stands as victims of social setting. The texts of the black writers protest against low status and degraded representation of African American writers in American norm and standard. They also were looking for “social equality” in American society. They generally painted “a portrait of African American as a “victim” (p.43).

He also concentrates on the subject of the black identity in American literature. This novel was written during the Jim Crow era at a point where racism and identity crisis were very prominent in the American society. Through laws and localized conventions, whites controlled both the geographical and representational mobility in the South of African Americans, who were clearly defined as inferior because they occupied “inferior spaces like Jim Crow cars, often literally marked as colored, and across the nation because they appeared at fairs, in advertisements, and in movies as visibly inferior characters (p.27). *Black Boy* is considered the first autobiography of Wright that he describes the Jim Crow

South as a place of violence, ignorance, and maltreated of Blacks in America.

Wright writes about inequality of blacks and whites, alienation, identity, suppression, oppression and exploitation, insecurity, and the major predicaments in the American society. He wants to free white American society from such bad traditions that destroy black's culture and identity. In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright depicts how his childhood was combined with violent deeds such as setting fire to their wooden house and hanging a little cat to death. During his childhood, he wants to build his black identity to improve the life standards of his family. As an Afro-American writer, he discusses the problems of black identity not only in America, but also all over the world. King and his friend state that the struggles of being black in a world dominated by white people. According to Wright, the liberation of black feudal farmers lies not in maintaining or developing a black “national” culture in the South, but in overcoming the “black” historical and cultural national identity. In other words, Wright temporarily accepts the unified cultural identity of the “New Negro” after the war, because “he favors a “multicultural” identity in the process of further socialization through modernity” (Warnes, 2007, p.102).

There are many scenes in the novel that reflect the psychological and physical abusing of Right since his childhood as an identity crisis of Blacks in America. First of all, Right is slapped over his face inside his family and he was never hit a white man. Many clashes which he has are clashes with his grandmother who is an extremely religious individual. When Richard Wright left Mississippi for Memphis in November 1925, he was motivated not only to free himself from the harshest forms of racial discrimination and violence in the deep South, but also to free himself from his grandmother and her faith (Dow & Craven, 2011, p.58). This is the bad manners and behaviors of Whites as well as Blacks against Right. The main problem of Right with whites is his behavior, when they think that his behavior is bad, they just blame him or breaking a glass of some alcohol in his face. Wright had to overcome the evil attributed to his expression because he was African American and avoided collusion with Western ideas of “good literature.” He needs to turn “bad” and “good” into “bad” in the African-American sense (Bloom, 2010, p.101).

It is surprising way when Richard sets fire to his grandmother's house, so that the small child is beaten mercilessly by his mother. The elements of violence and maltreatment are in every chapter of this book. Sometimes Richard deserves to be punished, as he set the house on fire, but the degree of violence, abusing, and oppression used against him is amazing. One day, Richard is ordered by his father to kill the cat and says: *to* “Kill that damn thing!” my father exploded. “Do anything, but get it away

from here!” (Wright, 2009, p.14). As a result of this, he kills the kitten violently and he is scolded by his mother for this cruel act. Richard portrays violence and oppression as a way to tyrannize and a tool of control. This violence and oppression are possible in the house against Richard. It reflects the act of violence and oppression through the white people against the Blacks in America. When he asks his mother:

“why did the ‘white’ man whip the ‘black’ boy?” I asked my mother. “The ‘white’ man did not whip the ‘black’ boy,” my mother told me. “He beat the ‘black’ boy.”
“But why?”
“You’re too young to understand.”
“I’m not going to let anybody beat me,” I said stoutly.
“Then stop running wild in the streets,” my mother said” (p.22).

Richard Wright achieves this compromise in the *Black Boy* by associating literal “bad” language - dirty words, obscenity, curses - with inappropriate speech ideas as defined by a racist society. He plays these concepts from each other to redefine the concepts of “good” and “bad” language (Bloom, 2010, p.101).

The social life of the Blacks has been oppressed and exploited by the whites not only in America, but all over the world. Since his childhood, Wright himself looks for his own identity that was lost in him. As he explains that the basic gloom of black life in America, and that Negroes were never allowed to capture the whole spirit of Western civilization. Therefore, they lived there in some way but not with it (p.29). In this part, he focuses on the problem of starvation. It indicates to the critical conditions of the blacks who have never got enough food while serving in the houses of Whites, and the great example is Richard’s mother.

I sensed that she was teasing me and it made me angry.
“But I’m hungry. I want to eat.”
“You’ll have to wait.”
“But I want to eat now.”
“But there’s nothing to eat,” she told me
(Wright, 2009, p.17).

The most important factor that helps Richard Wright to build his own identity is his eager for education. He wants to learn about the words and to know the ways of the modern world. Richard doesn’t only want to change his identity from an obedient black boy into a kind of free young man, but also he wants to push the Blacks to be like Whites in America.

During his dialogue with his mother when he is working for a white family. She asks him, “What grade are you in school?” (p.96). Richard reacts, “Seventh, ma’am” (p.96). She at that point asks him, “Then why are you going to school?” (p.96). This discussion proves that Whites think that education is superfluous for Blacks to go to class past the 6th grade since they ought to be working. Bercovitch explains the situation of the black Americans in the South as “the black could only ever be portrayed as

the illiterate, the lower class, or the folk black: realities as far from him as from any of his white readers” (2011, p.60).

The Whites feel that the instruction for blacks as a matter of wasting time in school. Therefore, Richard needs to break the views of the Whites towards the Blacks and to construct his sole identity. As he answers to his employer, “well, I want to be a writer” (Wright 96). Richard does not expect that the principal’s speech was superior to his; he wants his discourse to be unique and superior to all white educators. Here, Richard goes on building up his genuine identity as a fighter who struggles for black schoolers. As King and his friend state that: “...(Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*) educated black characters were doomed to similar tragic fates. Wright’s autobiographical self, however, represents somewhat of a historical outpost, since the tragic dimensions of black intellectuals recede from the horizon, replaced, especially during the 1960s,” (King & Moody, 2013, p.224).

The changing stages of American community have created severe identity crisis in the blacks. The Blacks still live in America with the memory of bondage and fight for establishing a stability between being a black on the one hand and an American on the other. They struggle for freedom and a peace of mind from a white dominant identity.

CONCLUSION

It has been concluded that the novel *Black Boy* reflects the racial segregation, identity crisis, discrimination, ill-treatment and oppression of the black people not only in America, but all over the world. Even women suffered from these issues. The novel is about the struggle of a black man to survive in the atmosphere of dictators and to cope up with the white community. Richard Wright could build his identity by acquiring knowledge not only to solve his problems but also to support the blacks to overcome their difficulties. He wants the Blacks to be equal with the Whites. Wright wants the readers to feel about the critical problems of blacks living in the South America during the Jim Crow Laws.

He is successful in conveying his message to all readers to understand the crucial situation of living standards of blacks in the South America. He could also break away the racial segregation and identity crisis of Blacks in the white society. The black American’s racial segregation and identity crisis problems have resulted from racial issues such as ill-treatment, starvation, illiteracy, exploitation, degradation and oppressions. He also emphasizes on the social conditions of America which have determined the black’s identity in America.

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