

The Projection of Racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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Abstract

This study lays emphasis on an issue of violence which occurs abundantly in *Black Boy*. Violence is a prominent theme in the novel *Black Boy*. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate violence in the novel *Black Boy* by Richard Wright through examining ways of violence against black community during the times when *the Jim Crow Laws* were implemented. According to the Constitution of the United States of America, everyone is born with equal rights. However, the term 'equality' was non-existent or irrelevant in the states of Southern America. In the southern states, *the Jim Crow Laws* were unanimously being amended and forced upon the inhabitants of those states. The black community was very harshly treated during those times. Even innocuous incidents, like looking at a white person in the eye were punishable by law. The punishments were very brutal and included forceful arrest, severe beating and mob-lynching. The story in the novel *Black Boy* mainly recollects the life of Wright and more importantly his interactions with the whites, his neighbors and his own family who were scared and very pious during Jim Crow Era. The life that Richard Wright faced in his childhood and early adulthood was very hurtful. But due to his endless efforts, intelligence and desire to fight against injustice, he was able to achieve considerable success as a black despite living under *the Jim Crow Laws*.

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Living under Jim Crow Laws: Violence in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

1. Jim Crow Era and *Black Boy*

It is obvious that violence was deeply rooted in American history. Although, Americans were excited about the establishing of the American Colonies, and then about the United States, since the country promoted the search for liberty including political and economic freedom, and freedom of religion. However, from the beginning, the American society was simultaneously founded on atrocious forms, of oppression and injustice that implied the complete rejection of freedom for slaves. And this consequence can be regarded as a fundamental paradox of American history. In order to be more specific concerning the issue of violence in America, it is necessary to explore the living conditions of the black community during the implementation and reinforcing of those laws in Southern America, more specifically in Mississippi where Richard Wright's *Black Boy* was set. The Constitution of America plainly states that "All men and women are created equal", however, black people were constantly oppressed during the beginning of twentieth century in the South according to *the Jim Crow Laws* (Zinn 688). The whites had implemented plenty of strategies to restrain blacks from receiving citizenship in America. Furthermore, they created murdering groups for eliminating the African-Americans. The blacks were considered as inferior and were dealt with in a degrading manner.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Wright in his novel *Black Boy* depicts the uneasiness between the Euro-Americans and African-Americans. In the book this is what makes a consequence from this attitude develop. It appears completely believable that Richard had troubles with whites, at the same time, the awkward of Jim Crow Era was the main reasons that even the relationships were not good among African-American people. By the way, in this study the circumstances in Richard's family were truly great that I would like to explain that situation further.

Punishments were very brutal through "Jim Crow" laws by a majority of American states from the 1880s into the 1960s. Many states and cities from North to South and from West to East could enforce their terrible

retributions on blacks for consorting with members of another race. Most of the laws prohibited marriage between blacks and whites and commanded employers and public organizations to treat the black and white people differently. Economically, the blacks provide were capable of earning their livelihood, despite that, the white people, that were not racist, were obliged to reject the black job-seekers and customers.

Historians believed that the expression Jim Crow had emerged in 1830 when a white, minstrelsy entertainer named Thomas Daddy Rice decorated his face with black and capered happily whilst singing a text entitled *Jump Jim Crow*. As he was journeying through the south of America, he bumped into an old black man or a teenager capering and singing cheerfully some words that ended with “I jump Jim Crow”. Other Chroniclers argued that a young man known as Mr. Crow had a slave that motivated Thomas Rice to behave that way, therefore, the Jim Crow was mentioned throughout the text (Williams 53).

The expression was originated during 1904 even though it is said that it has been used previously. Historically, The Jim Crow Period symbolizes the violation of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 issued by Abraham Lincoln, wherein he emancipated the southern slaves. (Epps 238). Throughout the southern states of America, discrimination began to be the basic rules and regulations of the state, a state of affairs which was allowed in 1896 once the Supreme Court of America declared that “separate but equal” opportunities for whites and blacks were legal. Therefore, the Jim Crow legislations secured its gravity due to that statement of the Supreme Court of America during 1880s and 1890s (Muldoon 19).

By the end of the Civil War, many slaves were freed and they began to settle in America. However, they were not very familiar with the regime and the society still considered them differently. It was not easy for them to adapt to their new-found freedom. In the first half of the 20th century, a Civil Right Movement surfaced and it was welcome by the black community as well as all the other minor communities residing in the United States at that time. But it should also be noted that while the minorities were flourishing, a dark organization was being put in place to counter the efforts of the minorities. That organization was called the Ku Klux Klan or simply the

“KKK”. The Ku Klux Klan is a right-wing extremist organization in the United States which aimed at the “purification” of the American society. They advocated extremist reactionary beliefs such as white supremacy, white nationalism, anti-immigration, anti-Catholicism, anticommunism, anti-Semitism and nativism. The first Klan was formed in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee right after the end of the Civil War by six former Confederate army members. Its goal was to deny the freedmen and their allies the freedom to achieve social, economic and political rights (Lewis 142). The Klan had General Nathan Bedford Forrest as the leader and he was named the First Imperial Wizard. Due to the Enforcement Acts in 1870, the original Klan was disbanded.

In the 1920s, a second Klan was founded in Atlanta, Georgia and it had strong relations to religion especially Protestantism, businesses and political factions all over the United States. Its aim was clearly to restrict the arrivals of new immigrants more specifically the blacks, the Jews, the Catholics from Southern Europe like Italy and to protect the assets of the Americans. The operations of KKK had both political and brutal dimensions. That is to say, the organization had participated in political ground. Following the Reconstruction era, the republican party took control over the southern part of America, this dominance of the party entirely drove the whites into involving in the violent acts, changing political atmosphere “in the legislative and judicial branches” that resulted in the expulsion of blacks from the Democratic Party by 1890 and the entire political process by 1900 (Brown xxii). The second Klan had the largest number of members but it too faded out in the 1940s due to internal conflicts.

The third Klan is still active nowadays and was formed in 1945 in Birmingham, Alabama. The members of the group mostly targeted civil rights activists in America, sometimes killing them or sabotaging their workplaces and homes. In the late 1990s it was officially regarded as a terrorist organization. The KKK was fighting for a conservative cause. The members of the organizations employed a number of means such as wearing masks and hanging by the neck in order to terrorize the blacks and the non-racist whites (Atkins 3).

The goal was to estrange all blacks from the entire arenas of life not merely political arena. The racial acts of did not come to an end by excluding the blacks from political circle, but they similarly caused losing all close touches with the blacks. This situation can be perfectly exemplified by the nature of certain laws issued in Louisiana during 1890 because the laws obliged the blacks to get into different railcars. After six years, the blacks attempted to repeal the racial segregation law by possessing semi-white skins, Homere Plessey entered a railway train, therein he was apprehended immediately because of taking a seat dedicated white people. Plessey was taken to court and lost the case there, this incident recorded as a remarkable historical event of America known as Plessy v. Ferguson. Tribunal decided that equal rights had been granted to Plessey because different but equal places had been secured for both African-Americans and white individuals by the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that announced that all people must be given the right to enjoy equally and completely “the accommodations, advantages, facilities... and other places of public discrimination on a railroad and in public sites” (Wilson 6).

The white judicial system made the situation worse by issuing rules that caused problems for the black people during elections and dramatically took away the opportunities of voting from numerous African-American people. The white segregationists of the south resorted to a number of other ways to suppress the blacks. Actually, during the final two decades of nineteenth century, brutality was rising towards its peak in America because of the racial practices by the whites. In addition, the white segregationists promoted the White Supremacy, which is another form of racism. The formation of White Supremacy during 1865 to 1890 and the 1890 disenfranchisement Act by Mississippi State are regarded as the start of decriminalizing Jim Crow rules. However, blacks strived for exercising self-formed rights, and due to their efforts, they were subjected to violent attacks. In other words, in the southern part of America, the White Supremacy had been challenged, therefore the whites who still believed in the superiority of their own race decided to protect their principles by intimidating the newly freed black people who followed the rules of the Constitution of the United States of America (Epps 246).

2. Violence in Black Boy

Being a black writer and novelist, Richard Wright could gather many white readers around his great works. Richard achieved popularity by just publishing his successful novel *Black Boy*. One more thing is that Richard was considered as the most significant Negro novelist before Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. In 1945, *Black Boy* was published and it was widely regarded as a masterpiece in the Black Literature point of view. The manner in which Richard Wright depicted the violence that was rampant at the time he was growing up was commendable. He was among the first writers who plainly described the atrocities associated with Jim Crow Laws and racism in Southern America and even forced in advertently the outbreak of the Civil War. He made a name for himself and was a pioneer in fighting for eliminating violence committed against the black community in America. One of the theme of the novel *Black Boy* is violence. It so occurred that when Richard Wright was scolded he was beaten and he was even slapped at his cheek, that is to say other people used violence against him due to living under the Jim Crow Laws. He had numerous bad encounters with his pious grandmother. He was scolded by the “whites” when they found his attitude to be intolerable and they would either scold him with words or pour down a glass of whiskey or any alcoholic drinks they were having at the time on his head and face. Both physical and mental violence as shown in every corner his autobiography was essential to its success. At times young Richard was very curious about his surroundings and he would experiment with things around him. For instance he set the curtains of his house ablaze only to see for himself how they looked (Wright 6). Richard’s environment could be termed a violent one due to largely the Jim Crow Laws. When Richard himself was not being scolded for his misbehavior, he would be the one who would use actual violence. He even narrated that when and his fellows would throw rocks and other small objects they would imagine that they were using more lethal and sophisticated means as weapon for they believed that their actions were justified as they being persecuted (Wright 84).

Furthermore, living under the Jim Crow Laws his own mother would be the one who instill a sense of self-defense in the child by giving him a thick stick to be used as powerful weapon against the neighboring white kids. In another situation, while going on errands with his mother, he again

used his reliable stick to beat some older boys who wanted to beat him and his mother. However, young Richard was also known to be quite cruel when he had a cat hanged only to gain the approval of his father having taken his words as literally as possible and he knew that his father would never punish if ever he did so. In the environment he lived, Richard was compelled to use violence to either make him more heard or he acted out of revenge as in the case of Addie where he threatened her with a knife and set his dwelling on fire.

Richard Wright started his novel by narrating an episode which happened in his young life. He had burnt the curtains and was scared of the repercussions of his acts, he ran away to a hidden place. But he was found by his mother hours later and was severely beaten:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. A doctor was called - I was afterwards told - and he ordered that I be kept abed, that I be kept quiet, that my very life depended upon it. My body seemed on fire and I could not sleep. Packs of ice were put on my forehead to keep down the fever. Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, when I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid. Day and night I begged my mother and father to take the bags away, pointing to them, shaking with terror because no one saw them but me. Exhaustion would make me drift toward sleep and then I would scream until I was awake again; I was afraid to sleep. Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well. But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me (Wright 8).

Following this situation, Richard got ill and fainted. His parents tried to hold him but he was shouting too much in pain. The doctor came and examined him. He ordered Richard to lie on the bed and not move as if he would die should he get off the bed. To keep the fever down, ice packs were placed on his forehead. But the pain and his body temperature were so intense that he started to hallucinate. He kept seeing strange things like the full udders of cows hanging from the ceiling. He was very much afraid that the contents of those bags would fall upon him and harm him. He supplicated with his parents to remove the bags that only he could see. He had those nightmares for a few days where he would wake up screaming his heads off every now and then. Finally with time he got better, but he still remembered the time when his mother almost killed him and he felt ashamed of that incident. The preceding quotation shows that young Richard was afraid of his mother and her punishments. He even felt shame when recalling that incident.

There is no law or any rule as to how to begin a chapter or a novel. Richard Wright started the chapter in a violent and brutal fashion and by choosing to do so, he made his introduction more dramatizing and therefore the readers were thrilled. The above-mentioned passage indicated that life itself was ever changing. His mother proved that by being kind and supportive at times and admonishing at others. He feared her very much for she could easily chastise him as well as be compassionate to him “huge, wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows” (Wright 8).

But this assumption is not fully depicted in a mortal way as racism was still prevailing in the society. As always, it was the abominable settings from the whites degrading the blacks. However, Wright reconstructed his narrative using metaphors like the “huge wobbly bags” as his mother’s breasts which oozed the life-giving white liquid that was milk and the “full udders of cows” as a deadly weapon. He especially feared that the white liquid would asphyxiate him and also helped on his way to establish himself as a dignified person. The novel *Black Boy*, which narrated the life and the perils of Richard Wright began with the time he was born, with the time he took his first breath, with the time he came into being. Moreover, the child Richard only believed his own mother was actually punishing him was when he felt very near to losing his life, the very life given to

him by his mother. As a young boy, he said “I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me” (Wright 8). He would later compile those excruciating experiences into his book.

Those compiled verses of the various experiences of Wright could easily be interpreted in many ways. The way he described the waters of the river Mississippi can be attributed to the fact that young Richard was imagining those different sources. It put his tremendous amount of imagination to the test as it showed his embodiment of the senses of real living and surfing on the bed of dreams and fantasy and journey and of different schemes of possibility. The power of his imaginative mind was so strong that the feelings he had were almost impossible to set in words. Here he described the scenery he saw and the feelings that washed over him. For instance, when he first saw horses galloping on the slopes of a mountain, the colorful vegetables on the sides of the road, the elation he felt when he ran in the green meadows and feeling the dew on his skin, the amazement when he watched a tiny ant carrying something much bigger than its size and moving on its own path or the feeling of derision when he tortured a crawfish which found its way in a tin can. He also recalled the colors emanating from the clouds from an unseen sun (Wright 8-9).

Richard Wright was of the belief that a concrete balance between the moments of uncertainty when he was under the impression that he was about to lose his life and the great senses of travelling through a range of dreams and imagination. It is fascinating to note that most scenes described in the novel are interconnected with one another. Another scene which is deemed worthy of interest involves Richard’s mother telling him that they are leaving for Memphis on the boat named *Kate Adams*.

One day my mother told me that we were going to Memphis on a boat, the *Kate Adams*, and my eagerness thereafter made the days seem endless. Each night I went to bed hoping that the next morning would be the day of departure.

‘How big is the boat? I asked my mother.

As big as a mountain, she said.

Has it got a whistle?

Yes.

Does the whistle blow?

Yes.

When?

When the captain wants it to blow.

Why do they call it the Kate Adams?

Because that's the boat's name.

What color is the boat?

White.

How long will we be on the boat?

All day and all night.

Will we sleep on the boat?

Yes, when we get sleepy, we'll sleep. Now, hush (Wright 10).

The unlimited amount of imagination that young Richard possessed would serve as a means to enlighten his day to day activities which were by no means entertaining and full of grandeur. It served the purpose of adding a bit of saga in his life, one which each and everybody needs. However, this was all pure fantasy for he was unable to distract himself from the realities of the world in which he and his family lived. He was a pauper and on top of that, black, which meant that he was very much unwelcome and was deprived of certain joys. The avid readers at once noticed that this poor fellow was doomed from the start and that he would be incapable of fulfilling his various dreams and ambitions.

There is a thing connected to powerlessness that arises from the repeated variation which one starts to see even plotted in the initial three chapters, and the trouble with powerlessness is first located not centrally in that social world. The reader is not meant to understand that the young Richard Wright when he discovers that the *Kate Adams* is a dirty, little boat and that it is not the romantic vision of a ship he had dreamt of, thoughts became to form in Richard's mind. It is simply an experience of disappointment. It was a moment felt by someone being let down. The most intense feeling of inability seen in the first chapter in a scene involving his mother almost beating the life out of him is embedded in the family. And the reader gets such a dramatic vision of that in another scene which follows, the scene talking about the kitten.

The job of Richard's father takes place at night and during the day he rest. So the children had to remain quiet at all times and not disturb him during his naps. The meowing of a neighboring cat deeply affected the peace that his father enjoyed during the day and he became very irascible by the sounds of the cat. He even told the boys to silence the cat for good if need be "Make that cat shut up" he would tell them but they cannot, Richard already despised his father for many reasons "Make it shut up. I don't care. Kill it if you have to. Kill that cat" (Wright 12). He was aware that his father would soon leave the family to fend for themselves as he was enchanted by another dazzling beauty. For Richard, it is most that particular kind of person: a rude, upset, abusive person that he loathed above all. His resentment over his powerlessness within the family bursts out during this moment and Richard thinks of a way to play a revenge on his father. He immediately acted upon the direct orders of his father and killed the animal by hanging it, "I will take his words literally; I will kill the cat," (Wright 13). Richard's mother finds out when his brother prodded it out of him, and the father cannot punish Richard. Richard has taken the father's words literally even though they were not meant that way, however, in doing so, in relying on his father's words in a sense, to protect him, even as he subverts them, he escapes the punishment that would surely follow. Richard Wright's own vocabulary came into existence when he started using the very same words uttered by his much despised father and also certain words which he either invented himself or distorted other words to create new ones. He would then later use those same words in his essays to cause a vilifying effect. Thus, words became Wright's preferred weapons. To enhance his own intellectual power and development, he copied Mencken's idea of words as weapons in the view to achieve a political meaning. For Wright thought that he was now able to assert his own independence and have his dreams and ideas come to fruition. He was no longer under the dominance of his own father. But his mother was not to be fooled or even scared by this new found development. Richard's mother was more resourceful than his father and attacked her son in such a way that he it made him ashamed of what he had done earlier, that is the killing of an innocent kitten. Throughout the afternoon she kept on admonishing him with carefully chosen words that according to Richard started to create fears that the kitten would want revenge on him. He became so worried that he was afraid to go into an empty room alone.

Even apologizing to his mother was not enough to assuage her stance. Here, we can see that by taking his father's words literally, young Richard was able to demonstrate that he was not to be intimidated by his father. He stood up to him and knew he had the upper hand. His father could not beat him up for killing the kitten because he knew Richard would never listen to him again. However, his mother knew how to punish him and make him feel guilty without violence (Wright 13).

His mother had her personal manner in which she could employ the words properly to achieve the desired effects on her son. She would use words in a much more powerful way, but with a different intent so as to make that kitten killed by Richard be reborn in his mind. In that episode, Richard Wright's mother became the main character where she absorbed the soul of the dead kitten in order to make his life like hell. In Richard's mind there was now a conflict he could not fully understand. While he had power over his father by using words, those same words would then be used against Richard by his no-nonsense mother.

Suspense upon suspense kept on piling up as the plot thickened. The highlight is the language used in the book. While that novel *Black Boy* was about the life, trials, problems, tribulations, oppressions suffered by the author when being brought up in Southern America and at same time being black and poor, it also narrated the way in the author managed to educate himself enough to enable himself to use different wordings to convey his messages. Acquiring of power was the focus of the initial scenes and language later became the focal point. However, the power exerted by words in any given language is such that it cannot be fashioned to any specific meaning or significance. Words can be interpreted by anyone wishing them to have an alternate meaning. Richard learned that particular lesson when realized that his words did not have the similar effects on his mother as they did on his father.

It is obvious that the novel was written when the Jim Crow Laws were implemented. Due to the implementation of the *Jim Crow Laws* under which the black community suffered a lot. Also in a completely different setting where violence would again occur in the life of young Richard was he went on errands for his mother. It was a very ordinary scene. Richard

recalled in the beginning of his book of an incident that occurred when he was six:

Go on and don't pay any attention to them, she said.
I went out of the door and walked briskly down the sidewalk, praying that the gang would not molest me. But when I came abreast of them someone shouted.
There he is!
They came toward me and I broke into a wild run toward home. They overtook me and flung me to the pavement. I yelled, pleaded, kicked, but they wrenched the money out of my hand. They yanked me to my feet, gave me a few slaps, and sent me home sobbing. My mother met me at the door.
They b-beat m-me, I gasped. They t-t-took the m-money.
I started up the steps, seeking the shelter of the house.
Don't you come in here, 'my mother warned me.
I froze in my tracks and stared at her.
But they're coming after me, I said.
You just stay right where you are, she said in a deadly tone. I'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself (Wright 18).

In the above quote, Richard was told to go to the market and get a few things. His mother gave him the money and told him not to pay any attention to the gang of older boys on the streets. However, he ran into the gang of older boys who dashed towards him, hit him, took off with his money despite his many pleas and sent him to his home. Young Richard was very shaken and started weeping. He came back to his home to stay away from the streets, but his strict mother refused to allow him inside unless he brought home the groceries. He pleaded with his mother with no success. The mother then gave him some money again and told him that she was going to teach him how to stand up to others. This scene shows that Richard is armed with a stick and advice from his mother in order to teach him how to protect himself through his difficult times. His mother handed him some money again, but this time she also gave him a pole to be used in case he was mugged for second time. Richard was scared. He did not want to face those goons again. But his mother was adamant. Richard

reluctantly pocketed the money and ran to the market. With tears flowing freely from his eyes Richard left. Upon finding that little Richard was back again, the older lads went straight for him with intent to thrash the living out of him. Richard had two choices. Either stand up against those boys or return home where he would face the music from his mother. He made a decision to stand his grounds and confronts the guys. Sometimes black people reacted violently to the racism and oppression they faced on a regular basis. The stick given to him by his mother was the right tool to be used when encountering such dangers and young Richard did just that. He beat up those same guys who took his money earlier with the stick. He used the stick expertly on the older boys. He felt the weapon crack the skull of one of them and continued to strike hitting another on the face breaking his nose. He squared up to them even taunting them to come near him and beat him. He wanted to hurt them so much as to kill them so that they did not hurt him again. The gang ran away injured. When their parents came out to threaten him, he hurled abuse at them too which was the first time in his young life that he did so. He felt he could beat up and hurt the elders as well if they upset him. He collected the money and grocery list he dropped and made his way to the market once more. He did not throw the stick away for it was a useful weapon in case he was attacked again. That day he felt brave enough to walk on the streets on Memphis all alone (Wright 19). In this scene, Richard used the stick and the advice given to him by his formidable mother to gain the independence he wanted and also to stand up to abuses from others.

Moreover, the story in the novel *Black Boy* mainly recollects the life of Wright and more importantly his interactions with the whites, his neighbors and his own family who were scared and very pious during Jim Crow Era. There had also been several incidents where the black boy reacted to abuse by similarly calling their abusers names not fit for a civilized society. Such names were very hurtful and included the likes of “white bastard”, “sons of bitches”, and so on. This means that, when one reads this part of the book for the first time, one must ponder how Wright’s mother could be so strict, inflexible and uncaring. It seemed that she was not troubled for her son. Many readers were asking the same question. They were asking whether or not she would have been upset that her son came back home injured (Wright 81). His mother sends him to buy groceries outside home

but the money that she has given him is taken by some teenagers on the street. Then, he is given more money again and a big stick by his mother for defending himself against the teenagers on the street. In addition, his mother says to him that “I’m going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself”. At that time, he is about six years. He goes out arrogantly and returned to the home with the groceries (Wright 18). Suppose the same incidents happen nowadays, most people will barely comprehend that such woman being on top of that a mother to a growing child would actually react in that kind of way. It is important to point out that the aim of his mother’s actions was to instruct Richard on the manner to protect himself and to live in those difficult periods. She was absolutely right to help her child and her fight did not go to waste that evening. Richard Wright was able to walk on the roads of Memphis by standing up to the gang. He became more daring and the mother ascertains herself that her son was able to look after himself. Needless to say that many of the inhabitants were taking necessary measures during those precarious times in the same way Richard Wright’s mother who was trying to teach her son that it was crucial to struggle for life.

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