

## Self-Discovery Journey of Women: Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

P.Nelson Raj<sup>a</sup>, S.Azariah Kirubhakaran<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, Bishop Heber College, Trichy, Tamilnadu, India

<sup>b</sup>Research Supervisor, Bishop Heber College, Trichy, India

### Abstract

“For there is a fundamental truism regarding human behavior: when men and women to think, they can always think of a better way...” claims Rodgers (1992, 79). This argument can be considered the best way to a common sense. But especially the way of female thinking is the focus to Wright to find oneself. The central character of *Black Boy* is young Richard Wright. He wrote his autobiography in such a way to emphasize the gradual progress of Richard's journey toward self-awareness and knowledge of the world around him. The main focus of the story is on his development into an artist and intellectual. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* has made a strong impact on American literature with its strong commentary on the cultural, political, racial, religious, and social issues of 20<sup>th</sup> century American society. Critics often describe the novel as a superb example of subtly-crafted narrative describing Wright's journey into adulthood. Many critics question as to whether the book should be considered pure autobiography, particularly because they doubt the accuracy of Wright's recollection as well as because of its novelistic style. But it is agreed that the book monumentalizes an important piece of American, as well as African-American, history. *Black Boy* celebrates Wright's talent for narrative in its description of the brutal South from the black perspective between 1900 and 1945. Perhaps not meant to be a social commentary, *Black Boy* has nevertheless become an integral piece of African-American literature, dealing with the prejudices of Jim Crow laws and the unity of the black community. Wright criticizes black culture for not providing a strong foundation for its race, but place hope in the idea that African-Americans will overcome and defeat racism. Wright is able to depict being a black male in an oppressive society by selecting symbolic moment from his own life, drawing insights from his own personal experience. More true, however, is that *Black Boy* is able to transcend what appears at first glance to be a novel from a limited perspective that of the black male in American society. Rather, Wright discusses a universal existence by discussing religion, intellectual hunger, and basic human emotion. Many have even described Wright's analytic style as metaphysical, with his discussion of ghosts and dreams.

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Perhaps the most intriguing lesson learned in *Black Boy* is how Richard discovers the power of his own words, his own writing. Whether or not Wright predicted the profound effect the novel would have on the world of American literature and history is betrayed in his closing:

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo? I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.( Wright, 1991, p.384 )

During this self-discovery journey the effects of Richard's female characters are obvious. Richard's female relatives are more significant in his life than the males. For Richard, home is a place of intense emotional conflict. Although he had friends, went to school, had a family and learnt to read, write and count in his childhood, we can sense that Richard feels alienated from his family. This theme of alienation is one that continues, both in relation to Richard's family, the black community and as well as white community. This sense of isolation comes out in rebellion and not accepting the roles, behaviours which were determined by his female relatives. Richard is fiercely individual and constantly expresses a desire to join society on his own terms rather than be forced into one of the categories that society wishes him to fill. In this regard, Richard struggles against a dominant female culture-both in the South and in the North-and even against his own black culture. Neither white nor black women know how to handle a brilliant, strong-willed, self-respecting black man. Richard perceives that his options are either to conform or to wilt. Needless to say, neither option -satisfies him, so he forges his own middle path.

We can see that he is discouraged and hindered by women who are not able to share his dreams at the very beginning. These women are his mother, his Granny, his Aunt Addie, Mrs. Moss, Bess, his neighbors and all white women in his life. They may be very strong, determined, defensive and in general good-hearted but they are indifferent to his dreams and he always sees them as obstacles to reach his intellectual point in his life. Some of them are heartless and not aware of the limitations which are hostile to their self interest. These limitations are traditional values of family, tribe, religion and accept rules of white community.

With the analysis of his each woman character we can see how they can achieve to affect Richard's life negatively. We must start with his mother, Ella Wright. It can be said that she may be the single biggest factor that shaped his life. She is left by her husband for another woman. She is left with herself alone and then Ella suffers from strokes that leave her paralyzed. She is dependent on her family for survival. Ella is a strict mother and tries her hardest to discipline Richard. She tries her best to raise Richard after his father leaves the family but she could not. Her illness prevents her from caring for herself and her children. In some ways, she is not able to give Richard the emotional support he wants. As a former school teacher, she encouraged Richard in his efforts to learn to read; but she is too beaten down by her husband's abandonment, her lack of money, the responsibility of looking after the boys. It is not also easy to get a clear impression of Richard's mother. Richard's mother is a solid presence throughout the book, throughout his life. The author expresses this situation as follows: "All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient" (Wright, 1991, p. 1).

She often disciplines him harshly, when he makes a mistake, it ends with her punishing him. She often punishes him by lashing him with a switch. Ella beats him until he nearly

dies. The story also begins with one of that beating. For instance, when Richard was four years old he accidentally lit his house on fire. Ella punished him severely with a switch even knocking him unconscious, and slowly he withdrew from her emotionally.

Richard's contentious relationship with his mother may be traced back to his early childhood when Ella administers a beating that nearly kills him. This conflict continues throughout Richard's early years, as he commits and less punishable offenses in a setting where his mother is often the only authority figure around to deliver punishment. Ella is the one that order all the moves when Richard is young. Once gangs stole his money Ella wanted her son to fight and got back the Money:

She slammed the door and I heard the key turn in the lock. I shook with fright. I was alone upon the dark, hostile streets and gangs were after me. I had the choice of being beaten at home or away from home. (19)

A major concern in *Black Boy* is Richard's view of religion. Her mother's endless oppression about his lack of faith always becomes an obstacle in his turning into a true intellectual. He thought that there was one world, and we were in it, so any notion of some 'other' world was offensive to his intellectual sensibility. In Renaissance and Gothic literature, a deformity or some other physical impairment often serves as an outward sign of an unhealthy or evil soul. This kind of symbolism implies that the universe is a sensible place, as an evil soul is rewarded with a mangled body. In *Black Boy*, however, the opposite is true. Richard's mother, Ella, is one of the few people in the novel-and the only person in the entire family-who seems genuinely concerned for Richard's welfare. If anyone in the novel has a truly good, saint like soul, it is Ella. However, she is beset with incurable ailments and paralytic legs. Other family members, meanwhile, have abundant strength, which they frequently use to beat Richard for trivial offenses. In this context, Ella's infirmity symbolizes for Richard the unfair and random nature of the universe.

In his early childhood one day when a kitten meowed plaintively his father disturbed with meowing and wanted Richard to do anything probably not to kill but get it away from him. Richard knew that he had not really meant for him to kill the kitten, but his deep hate of his father urged him toward a literal acceptance of his father's word. After he killed the kitten his mother made him repeat after her a prayer in which Richard asks God to spare his life even though he did not spare the kitten's:

'Shut your eyes and repeat after me,' she said.

I closed my eyes tightly, my hand clinging to hers.

'Dear God, our father, for give me, for I knew not what I was doing...' (15)

Richard views the incident as an example of how religion uses terror to enforce norms that the community finds acceptable his mother's view of religion translates as a form of violence and threat by other means so strongly does Richard feel about the unethicalness of his mother's kind of religion that he devotes almost all of chapter 4 to this theme. Richard believed that there was very little that religious institutions would stop at in order to gain converts. Nevertheless, he also understood the function of religion

– namely, to make up for what reality lacks- but he was implacably realistic: “ My growing hate of the preacher finally became more important than God or religion and I could no longer contain myself” ( 27 ).

He also understood religion to be another form of power: when his mother encouraged him to join a Methodist church, she put her request in a form that was hard to resist: She said that if he loved her, he would join church. And his mother’s long illness was sometimes blamed on his faithlessness. It can be said that because of her illness, her mother, Ella, stands for the meaningless sufferings Richard experienced during his life. The meaning of Ella’s character lies in her illness, as symbolizes for Richard those elements of life that are at once unpredictable, over whelming and unfair. In chapter 3, Ella’s suffering effectively becomes a symbol of everything wrong with the world for Richard. In unjust universe, he concludes, the unfriendly and harmful people would be sick and Ella would enjoy vigorous health. However, the reality is, of course, that Ella is constantly sick and suffering. The injustice he sees afflicting his mother mirrors the injustices he himself faced: poverty, hunger, a severely abridged education, and the fact of being black in the Jim Crow South. Taken together, these accidents of life constitute a major obstacle that Richard must overcome in order to live the life that he wants. His mother becomes a symbol of the suffering Richard has encountered and will encounter throughout the rest of his life. And this part of the book can show the obvious effect of his mother’s illness:

My mother’s suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face. (19)

She is not happy living in the religious household they are forced so often to inhabit, and she even rewards Richard with a kiss when he successfully revolts against his grandmother’s will. Her suffering, her paralysis, and private sorrows do not hinder her from influencing her son. One feels that Mrs. Wright is a tremendous force in Richard’s life, probably the most important influence on his character. She is strong in the face of overwhelming adversity. She strikes out at him because there is no else around to strike. We see her always in terms of Richard, by the way he reacts to her. She shows a special tolerance and affection for Richards that we do not see in any of the other major characters. When Richard publishes ‘ The voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre’ for example, the rest of the family attacks him, but Ella shows compassion through her concern that Richard’s writing might make it hard for him to get a job. She is also one of the few people that motivated Richard. But it can clearly be understood that. His mother’s protection does not come from her comprehension of Richard’s intellectual hunger but it comes only from bare instinct of motherless. For a curious child like Richard, her mother is a stifling presence for refusing to answer any questions about their past or current

environment. The best thing that Richard's mother did for Richard was letting him to come world and this may sum up her complete effect in the whole life of Richard.

The other most important female character of Richard is his Granny. Ella's mother was strict and religiously moralistic. She looked after Richard and his brother during periods when Ella was too ill to take care of the boys herself. Granny had no faith in Richard's abilities and instead tried to discipline him through physical punishment. Under his grandmother's religious supervision, Richard felt hunger both physically and intellectually. For Richard religion was more of a hindrance than a path to salvation. It was his grandmother's religious belief that not only prevent him from being adequately fed, but stunt his intellectual growth. She thought Richard was sinful and she had little tolerance for his behaviours. Like her husband Granny was also the child of slaves. Due to her partially white ancestry. She looked white and Richard opened his novel with Granny's white and ill face. That face disturbed Richard as a little boy because he couldn't understand how such a white-skinned person could be 'black'. The most important tension between Richard and Granny is neatly summed up at the beginning of the fourth chapter: "Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshipping her God, which was her exaction form my keep" (98),

Granny did not let him get a job on Saturdays (their Sabbath, religious day) and thus Richard could not buy food, clothes and other things necessary amongst children his age. Granny also prevented him from reading as he would like to or hearing stories, like Bluebeard, because they were not Bible. Indirectly, this taught Richard all about the hypocrisy of religion. More directly, due to a deal he made with Granny to pray everyday, he wrote his first short story when he should be quietly praying in his room and the idea of being a writer started. With her white face and black hair, her religiosity and hot temper, Granny came to represent everything that Richard had to struggle to escape from. He and his Granny were locked in warfare. It seemed to be an irrational conflict at first, but soon it could be seen that a clash of temperaments was not the only problem between them. Granny's face was the first white face he knew but it was the face he hated most. She was absorbed those qualities of white society that are intolerant, puritanical, oppressive and fanatical:

My first indications that something was wrong was that Granny became terribly still, then she pushed me violently from her. I turned around and saw that her white face was frozen, that her black, deep-set eyes were blazing at me unblinkingly. Taking my cue from her queer expression, I knew that I had said something awful, but I had no notion at that moment just how awful it was. (41)

She used her religiosity as the weapon for all her venom, just as the white Protestants done. She made church into the center of respectability. She stood in the way of Richard's natural curiosity and impulses. Her white skin effectively prepared Richard for the culturally white society around him. It was ironic that what he received from her religion -the beautiful language and the mystery of sound and meaning- was the opposite of what Granny wanted him to receive.

From the very beginning to end Granny was a ridiculous and frustrating figure and it can be said that after the protagonist himself, she was the most formidable character in the novel. There is also a big contrast between his black women and white women. He narrates them in a different way:

His work emphasizes a contrast between black women and white women. Although both are "givers" to black boys, the nature of what they give is different. The black woman gives physical life, feeds it, and protects it at the expense of spiritual or creative vitality. Her goal is to survive bodily, to breathe, to have enough strength to endure the physical deprivations of being black. The black woman mothers a people dead of spirit but alive with physical capability; she does this through counsel, religion, example, and, if these fail, physical torture. Young black girls learn this pattern from older black girls and the conditioning becomes a "mothering" of humans lacking in personal initiative and creative drive. In contrast to the black women in Wright's works, the white women are unconcerned with the physical survival of black boys. Instead, white women coax black boys out of the mothering syndrome and into the "mommism" syndrome, enticing Wright's black boy characters toward a life of the spirit at the expense of physical death. With this contrast between the physical and the spiritual, Wright points out the evils of racist, classist societies that fragment the self and force black men into unfair, unnecessary choices between physical life and spiritual meaning. (from a paper Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English 68th, Kansas City, Missouri, November 23–25, 1978)

The other female character was Aunt Addie, Ella Wright's sister. She is Richard's aunt and teacher in a religious school. Addie lives with Granny. She wanted him to obey the religious rule on her guidance. Aunt Addie tried not to miss any opportunity to beat or humiliate him. She seemed him as a threat to her authority. She was uncertain how she act toward her nephew. When he refused to tell her who had been eating walnuts in her classroom she punished him. The hostility between them grew until finally Wright threatened her with a knife in his grandmother's house, where she had tried to beat him again: "I bit her hand and we rolled, kicking, scratching, hitting, fighting as though we were strangers, deadly enemies, fighting for our lives" (129).

As a conclusion it would be possible to argue that all his female characters, no matter if they are major or minor, white or black, young or old, have great effect on his journey toward self awareness.

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