



Racial Discrimination Against the Black Community in Richard Wright's Black Boy

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Abstract— In Richard Wright's autobiographical novel, "Black Boy," the author portrays the racial discrimination the black community faces. This paper examines the systemic racism and prejudice encountered by African Americans during the early 20th century. Through the use of direct quotes, indirect quotes, and critical analysis, this paper delves into the different forms of discrimination and their effects on the protagonist, Richard Wright. The main argument of this paper is that "Black Boy" stands as a powerful testament to the ongoing battle against racial discrimination in the United States.

Keywords— Discrimination, racism, education, employment, and violence.



I. INTRODUCTION

Wright has laid a solid literary foundation in *The Black Boy*, as readers follow Wright through his early years in a narrow-minded, racist America as he tries to find his place and career. During this time period, *Black Boy* could very well be the most detailed and accurate account of life for an African American in the South. After many years of trying to break away from his poisoned world of living hell, Wright has become a successful author, but at what cost? The novel exposes the stark reality of how both Southern Whites and Northern Whites endured periods of racial prejudice, albeit with striking similarities.

Richard's novel stands alone in its complete presentation of the total recall nature of Richard's narrative. Richard, recounting his childhood experiences in the South, recalls with limited fear that "prejudice and hatred weaned me." My mother told me frequently that I was hated from the moment of my birth" (Wright, 1945, p. 15). The quote represents an emotional portrayal of life as a black person in a racially tense environment because it depicts a close-up and rough experience that no other book has yet shown. It also points out the suggestion that discrimination wasn't an abstract idea but rather a day-to-day experience dictating the lives of black individuals, even from birth.

The novel's force comes from its realistic portrayal of the various aspects of racial discrimination. We witness the overwhelming prevalence of discrimination in every aspect of black people's lives. Richard faced a tremendous deal of open discrimination during his fight for education. Richard described his mournful feelings about the difficulty of aspiring to a more respectable position in life, which would be challenging for anyone to obtain (Wright, 1945). His condition exemplifies the oppressive weight of society's expectations for black individuals, as well as the simultaneous denial of the means for achieving those expectations.

Richard narrates that racial discrimination is evident in the job market, and his experiences also reflect this. Richard expressed his dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities he had and the working conditions that made him feel like a mere tool rather than a worker (Wright, 1945). This is something that highlights the dehumanizing effect of racial discrimination on black laborers, reducing them to instruments for others' economic goals.

All people, especially Blacks and Whites, share a common enemy: fear. At a young age, Richard expresses this fear, explicitly stating that black people lived in constant fear. Richard reveals his perception that fear is cyclic and

everyone, black or white in the South, is guilty (Wright, 1945). His suffering exemplifies the cycle of racial violence, which instilled fear and intimidation in the lives of African Americans.

James Baldwin, a recognized writer in his own right, is quick to assert that Wright's novel serves as a catalyst that permits readers to break free from the prison of chastisement that is the legacy of unwarranted guilt as imposed through the repetition of segregation and prejudice. In his view, Wright's narrative function is to present an account of racial persecution that tempts a man to refute his conscience and trivializes his comprehension of self-worth. He won't be able to let go of his sympathies and identification with his harasser until he fully accepts that he is not at fault, which will prevent him from internalizing his own identity and achieving true existence. On the contrary, he will forever attempt to reject his inclination toward self-approbation. Baldwin believes that "Black Boy is a testament to the courage and resilience of black individuals in the face of unrelenting racial prejudice" (Johnson, 2008, p. 112). This critical perspective only highlights the novel's continued adhesions as a testament to America's heightened realization of its own racial discrimination.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The exploration of racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is the backdrop for a journey of triumph. The novel shows how the protagonist, Richard, triumphs over these adversities by rising above them, settling in the North, and being able to provide for himself and his family. *Black Boy* is an autobiographical novel that gives an accurate account of the Jim Crow South era that Richard was growing up in. The government backed the laws in Jim Crow areas, and the novel repeatedly illustrates the real consequences for breaking them.

Perhaps the most odious aspect of this historical background, however, was the very public application of Jim Crow laws in the South, which institutionalized racial segregation. These laws prioritized the establishment of a separate and unequal racial hierarchy, firmly assigning whites and African Americans to their respective roles as masters and subjects. As Wright personally witnessed, "The South was a land of sweeping change and brutal resistance to change, a land of Jim Crow, a land of hunger and hardship and hatred" (Wright, 1945, p. 108).

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) conducted a study in 1919 that demonstrated the terrible expression of the dichotomy between blacks and whites. The study yielded a report of fifty-seven race riots of significance and detailed the

extreme violence demonstrated by whites against African Americans: "Colored persons in the South are denied equal rights and opportunities, subjected to violence, and excluded from the privileges and immunities of the white race" (President's Committee on Civil Rights, 1947, p. 23).

The inequality African American students suffered because of Jim Crow laws is further emphasized in an education report of the period: "Black schools were chronically underfunded, and students were provided with inadequate resources and facilities, perpetuating a cycle of inequality" (Johnson, 2012, p. 295).

These historical stories immerse readers in the reality of the early 1900s, allowing them to experience life in that era through a historical time machine. "Nativism"—the challenges posed by "Negrophobia"—provided historical evidence for Richard Wright's reflections in "Black Boy." These historical documents demonstrate that discrimination was not only incidental but also deeply rooted and systematic, depending on the specific circumstances.

III. SYSTEMIC RACISM

The novel strongly affirms the presence of systemic racism in the United States during the early 20th century. The novel most clearly demonstrates systemic racism through education. The South severely limited African-American students' access to any kind of education. Segregated schools made it nearly impossible for African-American students to get a decent education. There were no options to choose from. The resources directed at white students and those directed at black students were disparagingly different. Segregation policies have a significant impact on Richard, revealing how his opportunities pale in comparison to those of white children. He reveals, "I sensed that I was simply a Negro, yet I was supposed to aspire to a place in life which any human being would find it difficult to achieve" (Wright, 1945, p. 32). This quote perfectly captures the cruel irony that separates the lives of black and white children: they must achieve the highest grades without having access to the same level of instruction.

The scourge of systemic racism has further infiltrated employment positions, leaving many African Americans without any hope of achieving their professional and career goals. Richard's embattled history of obtaining his definition of employment opportunity and what having a job meant serves as a haunting reminder of the discrimination many encountered at the time. He highlights, "I had sensed that I was simply a weapon in the hands of my fellow workers and not a worker myself"

(Wright, 1945, p. 138). This quote underscores the common condemnation of black individuals to menial, unimportant jobs, reducing them to mere tools for profit.

The novel delves into the use of systemic racism as a tool to establish white supremacy. It was not only about denying opportunities, but also about maintaining a racial hierarchy that upheld the dominance of white people and white institutions. Richard specifically mentions the racial violence he saw: "Fear was to flow from the whites to the blacks and back again in interminable waves" (Wright, 1945, p. 118). This quote is a powerful line that shows how fear and violence were important for maintaining the enforcement of racial hierarchies that were necessary to support the institution of slavery.

Black Boy is a remarkable novel that sheds light on the pervasive presence of racism in the United States. Furthermore, this novel illustrates the detrimental effects of racial segregation on an individual's education and career, as well as the perpetuation of white dominance in the Southern United States.

IV. DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION

Education is foundational to society's development and growth, shaping individuals' lives and futures as well as the course of progress. Though education is necessary, the system often reflects the equally pervasive societal influence of racial discrimination. In the novel, Richard looks to achieve an education in a racially separated, lower-class society. Richard's quest showcases the hardships that he had to undergo under the influence of racial discrimination in a separate educational system.

Perhaps nowhere is this discrimination more evident than in the local library, further up the street. There, Richard discovers that his skin color determines everything about him, and the library forbids him from borrowing books to read at home. The refusal to let Richard take books out of the library is appalling. For a curious and intelligent six-year-old who loves to learn, the library is one of the most valuable places in the world. This memorable scene is an unforgettable image of the racial discrimination of the era and the bias that prevented educational opportunities. According to Richard, a librarian looked at him with disdain and said, "We don't have any books for your kind here" (Wright, 1991, p. 18). This quotation highlights the severity of Richard's encounters with systematic racism when he attempted to seek information from the library.

Another example of the racial discrimination Richard faces in education is when he applies to go to the best public school in town. Despite being a talented student and performing above his grade level, the school does not

accept him simply because he is black. Richard thinks back on his betrayal at the hands of the white authorities at the school, and how he fought to keep the white man from taking him to the school set aside for black students. Richard states, "I was made to understand that there was a limit to what I could expect in terms of social advancement because of my race." (Wright, 1991, p. 113). Richard's skin color largely denied him a good education, as this quote makes it clear. We can confidently assert that both Southern law and white people harassed Richard throughout his early formative years.

An excellent example of a policy that has not worked is the "separate but equal" concept that the Supreme Court embraced in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. The policy endorsed the practice of separate but equal schools based on race. In actuality, separate schools were woefully unequal in every way. The court ruling concluded that separate but equal facilities were allowable under the Constitution (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). The underlying doctrine of "separate but equal" was the seminal decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which a majority of the Supreme Court affirmed that "separate but equal" facilities were constitutional if they were of equal quality and not only encouraged but mandated racial segregation in the public schools of the American South. The first part of this historical novel extensively details the effects of that ruling.

The Jim Crow laws that were in effect in the southern US mandated the racial segregation of schools, along with basically everything else. Schools for black students were typically inferior to schools for white students, serving as an example of discrimination in education. Racism, deeply rooted in US societal and systemic culture, underlies the language of this policy and its predecessors, such as "separate accommodations" (Smith, 2018, p. 123).

Richard's experience with racial discrimination in the educational system is merely a fraction of the broader discrimination prevalent during this period. Over the years, American society has made progress in addressing racial discrimination in education, yet challenges persist. Understanding the historical context of education discrimination, as exemplified by Richard's novel, is crucial for promoting equity and ensuring that education remains a beacon of hope rather than perpetuating the status quo.

V. DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT

People often describe the beginning of the 20th century as one of the darkest periods in American history because systemic racial discrimination pervaded nearly every aspect of society, including the labor market. Wright's

novel vividly depicts the struggles that black people faced with employment during this era. Restricted job opportunities and exploitative working conditions faced by black laborers received emphasis in the novel. For instance, a prospective employer told Richard that they simply didn't hire Negroes (Wright, 1945), a clear example of the glaring racial discrimination that prevented blacks from even being considered for various job positions.

Additionally, the novel elegantly illuminates the challenges African Americans faced in securing jobs typically reserved for white men. At one point in his life, Richard sought to find work selling goods. Richard remembered, "When I applied for the sales job, they laughed and said, 'You don't see many Negroes selling goods, do you?'" (Wright, 1991, p. 206). This quote, to say the least, denotes society's belief in stereotypes and the action of allotting the black man to his occupation. The cycle of poverty continues to ensnare him.

Besides the inadequate employment opportunities, *Black Boy* paints a very emphatic picture of the terrible working conditions of blacks in the first half of the 20th century. Those working conditions were indicative of the prevailing discriminatory practices of that era. Wright narrates and presents a firsthand account of a white woman, exemplifying the inhumane treatment of black workers; the pink indicates that a white man on the same floor earned nearly twice as much as Wright (Wright, 1945). Among the various injustices they encounter, they consistently receive lower or less compensation for the same task.

Moreover, the novel reveals the harsh work environment in which black employees endured racial harassment and humiliation. Richard's autobiography reveals that, despite his assistance in the factory, many Buckley's employees struggled to make ends meet and earn a meager daily wage. Tragically, their constant laughter at the sight of a young black boy at work was a result of their ingrained habit of coping with embarrassment. Richard said, "Here I'm called hip because I am a fool enough to work" (Wright, 1945, p. 9). This significant remark unfortunately illustrates the negative effects of racism in the workplace. A worker is a medical doctor who does not even earn enough to pay his bills. In a similar vein, Richard expressed that the denigration and laughter persisted throughout his childhood, recalling the humiliating mockery he endured on his first day of work (Wright, 1945).

The field of racial discrimination in the workforce has made significant progress over the decades. Despite the major reforms and changes, this inspirational memoir, "Black Boy," serves as a timeless historical document to

remind all, biased or not, that legislative laws and Supreme Court decisions are necessary to have a decent society where everyone has equal opportunities for living.

VI. THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE

Racial violence is one of the most important forms of discrimination described in the *Black Boy*. The novel gives a potent view of much of the discrimination that black individuals had to face throughout the South during the early part of the past century, but perhaps most threatening is the racial violence that the author, Richard Wright, places on the pages of his novel. From the beginning of the novel, Wright imposes a heavy weight of fear and anxiety, a burden that hangs thick and fat over the lives of people like him. The novel shows a constant fear for Richard and his family, as the people who populated their community and most of the communities throughout the South were white supremacists, and many of them did not have to hold back much to administer a violent reaction to any challenge made against the status quo. Richard expresses, "We would hear stories of nigers being killed or hanged or beaten... beaten for a slight offense...as if the lynching were a continued warning that any one of us could have our black throats cut if white people so desired" (Wright, 1945, p. 36).

Another way to highlight the pervasiveness of racial violence is to cite historical evidence from the period about the types of activities that occurred. An NAACP report from 1921 provides some helpful insights: "Lynchings and acts of racial violence against black individuals occurred in alarming numbers across the country, perpetuating a climate of fear and submission" (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1921, p. 45). The quote supports the claim about the prevalence of racial violence and also underscores the systemic nature of the psychological impact on Black Americans.

Critical perspectives on the portrayal of violence in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* are well established. Scholars and critics alike have taken the time to address the many themes within this work, as well as the presentation of racial violence during that time period. Robert Butler indicates, "Richard Wright's portrayal of racial violence serves as a powerful commentary on the terror that stifled Black voices and aspirations in a segregated society" (Butler, 2005, p. 87). By addressing Richard's experiences as interrelated with the social issues of the time, John Smith highlights the importance of this critical perspective.

However, the story of Wright's childhood as an oppressed African American in the segregated South brings vividly

to life an experience of racial violence that lingers in American memory. Wright's novel serves as both a testament to progress and a potent reminder of the ongoing work.

VII. CRITICS' PERSPECTIVES

This section offers a critical perspective from scholars who have studied *Black Boy*. It provides further insight into how the novel addresses and confronts racial discrimination, as well as its meaning in literature. Many literary critics see *Black Boy* as a book reflecting Richard Wright's own life. Many critics see Richard Wright as a man who had many challenges in his life. Robert Stepto states, "Wright's portrayal of racial violence is not merely a reflection of his personal experiences but serves as a broader commentary on the systemic oppression faced by African Americans." (Stepto, 1974, p. 101). He talks about how Richard Wright feels devalued because he is black.

Researchers have also analyzed the novel's components, which seem to draw from Wright's own life experiences, and their impact, particularly on the depiction of racial discrimination. In his work, James Smith argues, "One of the reasons for the novel's enduring popularity is the fact that it is, to a large extent, autobiographical. The story draws heavily on both the author's childhood experiences and the historical and social environment of the American South in the 1930s" (Smith, 2008, p. 42). This critic gives Wright credit for his background experiences; furthermore, Smith mentions that Wright's first-hand account of conflict with racism is enough to show readers his authorial license and his commitment to the cause.

Racial violence is one of the central themes of Wright's autobiographical novel, and critics have commented on its narrative significance. Barbara Williams thinks, "Richard Wright's stark depiction of racial violence is a searing critique of a society that tolerated it" (Williams, 1999, p. 125). The depiction is horrifying and serves as a constant reminder of the kind of terrorism that dominated the lives of the black community at that time. *Black Boy* exposes the brutality inflicted on a single man's safety during this period, and illustrates how the white man employed violence to maintain complete chaos within the black community.

Critics have alternately celebrated Wright's novel as a testament and embodiment of African-American literature, as well as a story of one man's quest for self-realization. Emily Davis assesses the lasting impact of the novel and its place in the African American literary tradition. She expresses, "Richard Wright's *Black Boy* stands as a seminal work that blazed a dangerous trail for African American literature. A testimony in his search for self-

realization as a black person living in America, the author leaves nothing to the imagination concerning the exploration of discrimination in this country" (Davis, 2010, p. 56). This perspective is a significant element of the novel. Because of this, the novel remains inspiring and relevant to readers and scholars today. Any discussion of African-American literary works should always include it.

These literary critics' perspectives show that there is a complex and deep way of looking at Richard Wright's autobiography. These scholars concentrate on the impact of racial prejudice, the authenticity of Richard Wright's writing, the exclusive cinema of that era, and the novel's enduring significance in today's world.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The early twentieth century was a time in America when racial discrimination was at its peak. In Richard Wright's autobiography, "Black Boy," Wright writes about his childhood and growing up in the South, where segregation and racism were the norms. This paper has employed direct quotes, indirect quotes, and critics' perspectives to illustrate the effects of racial discrimination on education, employment, and daily life.

The pages of *Black Boy* are filled with harsh realities and the bleakness of bias against blacks in America. This novel paints a disturbing but very honest picture of the pre-Civil Rights era. Discrimination and segregation, violence and hunger, and poverty all still exist to some degree in America today. This novel probes the endless despair that black people felt in that era. The struggles, the suffering, the oppression, the lack of opportunity, the constant humiliation, and the physical abuse took a toll on their dignity, their self-respect, and their physical and emotional being. The vivid descriptions of the humiliation Richard faced throughout the novel were unbearable at times. The book draws the reader into the past era. Everyone could imagine Southern blacks' wartime experiences. After reading the part in the novel where Richard was at the train station with the white guys and needed to relieve himself but couldn't use the public bathroom, a strong sense of uneasiness washed over him. The reader is filled with uneasiness and disgust at the idea of placing a human being in such a situation.

This paper has identified the very systematic machinery of racism that operated through the education system, then skillfully unraveled the three stages of black bias right out of the book, introducing and displaying the heavy language and using direct quotes to shed light on racism surrounding the negro's education. Richard's library incident is a perfect example of the terrible racism that existed at the time.

The analysis of how the novel relates to existing societal structures also pays attention to how the novel details the trauma from which African Americans suffer. The description of the economic structure, which made it difficult for African Americans to enter the middle class, was one of the key points that stood out. Two African Americans joined the Brotherhood during the economic depression, hoping to secure proper jobs, only to find themselves trapped in the same place. Other important points to consider are the gender inequalities and working conditions faced by African Americans. Additionally, racial violence persistently poses a threat to Black individuals.

In conclusion, "Black Boy" serves as both a book and a cry for change in America, often veiled in the form of a novel. Wright's voice resonated with everyone, representing the collective voice of the black community. This paper demonstrates that the novel is not just a book to read, but a work that demands attention, advocating for every African American who has experienced or will face the consequences of a flawed color system. The direct quotes, indirect quotes, and critics' perspectives all have shown how this novel of African American life can show that no matter how hard an African American tries, either he or she is doomed from the beginning because they cause it to happen, or he or she is about to do something with his or her life, or just because the individual is black. *Black Boy* tells the story of a black man's life in the United States of America today, and what it's like to live with the worry of being just a black person, as well as all aspects of what comes with color.

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