



## Bildungsroman Autobiography: *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*

Dr. Nandkumar Suresh Shinde

Symbiosis Skills and Open University, Kiwale

### Abstract

Bildungsroman is a type of autobiography that copulates the coming of an age of the narrator. It is common phenomenon of the auto biographer's narrating a series of events of his formative years which is a sensitive phase of everybody's life. *Black Boy* (1943) is counted today as a master piece written by Richard Wright. The autobiography written as a slave narrative makes a mark as milestone in the literary discourse of USA. The autobiography from its onset creates a theme of protest and challenges. The narrator becomes aggressive and decides to take up the book as setting the fire. As a child, the writer and narrator speaks in an authorial voice. The new urban order with humiliations and racism becomes intolerable for the poor black father and head of the suffering family. He seems to be an out-dated material for both family and society. His villainous temper and irritation results into personal frustrations and Richard becomes his vent of negativity. A new turning point comes in his life when he shifts to Arkansas to live with his aunt Elaine and it has been a learning lesson for him about the Black racism and the evils of racism. Racism was prevalent everywhere and it was the norm of social behaviour. Living in the midst of discrimination and racism, life of a black boy was not easy and comfortable at all. There were undeclared rules of behaviour for the blacks and no tolerance was acceptable. Slaves need to live like a slave without any self-esteem, pride or sense of belonging. in spite of all these hardships, Wright emerged as a successful writer but that does not mean that racism ended and the Blacks lived peacefully with the Whites. Richard feels uneasy with the subservience of his community to the white. He emancipates by taking some concrete steps. It's an autobiography of a black boy who fights against all odds and finally achieves a social status and respect in the same society.

**Keywords:-** Bildungsroman, black race, autobiography, Richard Wright, racism, American society.

### Introduction:-

*Black Boy* (1943) is counted today as a master piece written by Richard Wright. The autobiography was written as a slave narrative and made a mark as milestone in the literary discourse of USA. The full title of it is *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* which is based upon Wright's experience growing up in the South, the symbolic place of racism and segregation; it is an illustration of coming of an age memoir. It covers the span from his childhood to youth, his physical and mental growing up in a society where the basic right of humanity were denied. As Addison

Gayle puts it, "They (blacks) waged not against the society but against the societal laws and mores that barred them from equal membership." (Addison-xviii)

### **The Theme of Aggression**

The autobiography from its onset creates a theme of protest and challenges. The narrator becomes aggressive and decides to take up the book as setting the fire. As a child, the writer and narrator speaks in an authorial voice. Richard is living with his younger brother, his parents and his bed ridden grandmother. The first incident sets the tone of resilience and fight back. Richard a small kid of four years sets the fire to the house of the white curtains in his grandmother's home in Jackson, Mississippi. He gets a punishment of beating firstly by his mother and followed by his father. He gets bed ridden due to this severe punishment. It was an act of childishness to put fire but the wildness and the hurling behavior of the little boy is reflected through this act. His mother and father mercilessly beat the child to express their rage and anger which is the product of their own poverty and helplessness. The family then is seen to move to Mississippi, Tennessee where they live in a tenement, job migrations is common in blacks as his father works as a night porter.

The hostility of Wright's mother and father are surfaced through another violent incident when Richard is asked by his father to kill the cat who was disturbing his sleep and the boy listens to his father and kills the cat. Later on, he realized that his father doesn't mean it literally. His mother realizes him this with saying, "The moral horror involved in taking a life". (P- 14)

Richard's violent actions is the outcome of his bitterness towards the unwillingness to obey the authority. His relatives also spread the negativity and closeness towards life. The social members appear as dominating figures showing severe moral order. This theme of alienation is further developed, in the book, when he is introduced into the vast 'white world'. He witness violence in the family and outside in the society. The violence creates a home in his psyche and he sees blacks beaten by whites at each step so he questions himself, "Why did the white man whip the black boy?" (P-24)

### **Hunger and humiliations:**

The new urban order with humiliations and racism becomes intolerable for the poor black father and head of the suffering family. He seems to be an out-dated material for both family and society. His villainous temper and irritation resulted into personal frustrations and Richard becomes his vent of negativity. On the other hand, Richard being only child cannot understand his father's reality. Richard originates only disagreeable qualities from the negative image of his father: "My father was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city". (P-23)

The hunger has become a metaphor in poor people's life and it is a significant issue addressed in the book. The pitiful remark sums up the tragedies of children in those days, as Wright says, "Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played.... I became less active in my play, and for the first time in my life I had to pause and think of what was happening to me" (Wright 14-15). Hunger is an important issue relates to the blacks and their lives. Poverty is an ultimate reason for the scarcity of food. Hunger and anger were the constant companions of blacks that

resulted from their severe poverty and pennilessness. Missing father is another feature common in slave narratives which highlights the miserable conditions of women in black community. As a small kid, Wright used to feel hungry all the time and asked for food, his mother would be angry and taunt him to ask food for his father who had left the family long ago. Wright explains the helplessness of his mother as, "Mother to fight for earning three meals a day. But she failed in her attempt. Though she was a cook in the White man's house and prepared delicious dishes for the Whites, she was not able to fill her children's stomach". (P-12)

Luckily, she would sometimes take her children to her white master's kitchen and if the White hosts had left their home for outing, then Wright and his brother would get some food to eat; otherwise, they were left with only bread and tea. As a cook whenever he and his brother accompanied their mother, they were made to wait till the Whites finished eating. This was intolerable to Wright and angered by this kind of discrimination Wright innocently asked the questions which were unanswerable: "Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to eat until others were through? I could not understand why some people had enough food and others did not?" (Wright, 19). The racial discrimination between the Whites and the Blacks ruined the childhood of the entire generations and the oppression of the Whites led the Blacks to lead a very miserable life without any identity and dignity of their own. The Whites utilized the Blacks to do all sorts of things and thereby marred their life for their own benefit. Whites deprived them any economic or social gain. When the conditions created by slavery was so negative that it used to lead black kids towards all sorts of ill habits and additions. The love, support or belonging of both parents were missing and the children were left with empty space of time and meaninglessness of living. This absence of father and working mother weakened their family bonding and led to absence of any moral values or emotional supports in life. The surroundings made the Black children miserable at a very early age.

### **Growing Age and challenges**

Wright's mother after finding her son's behaviour felt worried, but she, being a strong lady who wanted her son to walk on the right path, beats him mercilessly so that her son could refrain from those bad habits and company. She prayed to God for his good behaviour. Eventually, Wright followed the path that his mother wanted him to tread; he stopped drinking when his mother hired an old black woman to keep him and his brother under the control. Like any black irresponsible black father Wright's case was not different. His father deserted the family completely as he was unable to pay the house rent leaving the two kids and helpless wife behind. But the black woman was strong enough to take care of their children and to face the worst situation. Wright's mother placed both her sons in an orphan home under the control of Miss Simon. She was not happy to be away from her children, but for their betterment, she decided it against their wish. Wright, not happy with the orphan house, tried to escape from it, but later on after learning about this his mother's visit and having asked him not to escape again, he decided to try and adjust in the orphan home. He understood his mother's concern and her support made him to be a good boy and to please her.

"Negro life may be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom. Negro writers spring from a family, a clan, a class, and a nation; and

the social units in which they are bound have a story, a record. Sense of theme will emerge in Negro writing when Negro writers try to fix this story about some pole of meaning, remembering as they do so that in the creative process meaning proceeds *equally* as much from the contemplation of the subject matter as from the hopes and apprehensions that rage in the heart of the writer” (Wright, 342-343).

### **Relocation to Arkansas**

A new turning point came in his life when he was shifted to Arkansas to live with his aunt Elaine and it was a learning lesson for him about the Black racism and the evils of racism.

Racism was prevalent everywhere and it was the norm of social behaviour. Laws were there to mark the official and legal segregation in day to day life. When Wright was at a railway station, he noticed two lines at the ticket window, one for Whites and the other line for Blacks. He writes:

“During my visit at Granny’s, a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died. When I boarded the train I was aware that we Negroes were in one part of the train and that the whites were in another” (Wright 46).

As a growing boy in the racist society, he came across the bitter truth of life in America. Blacks had no privileges and whites were supreme by all means. Blacks were hated and treated like animals and there was no respect or considerations for blacks. Blacks were tortured or even murdered for trivial issues. He himself had gone through many humiliations and physical beatings by whites and he says, “Whenever I thought of the essential blackness of life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full of Western civilization that they lived somehow in it but not of it”. (P-37)

Ned Green Lay, Richard’s classmate, narrated a story of how Ned’s brother Bob, has been murdered by the gang of white men. Poor Bob was working as a hotel porter and he was murdered because the whites couldn’t tolerate to see him with white prostitute. Such trivial issues could cause the life of any black and there was no fear of law in whites.

One of the devastating experience he witnessed was the ‘chain gang’, the chaining black labourers with iron chains so that they move together and cannot run from the work. This made him to think the severe conditions of slaves who are treated like animals. He comments, “A gang of men chained together and made to work” (Wright 58) and they were chained to hold them from running away. He saw white masters whipping and scolding heavily to those chained labours. He saw handful of white guards controlling hundreds of slaves together. Created a question in his mind which he asks to his mother, “...why don’t all the black men fight all the white men out there? There are more black men than white men...” (Wright 58).

The lessons of life made him matured and strong. But, later he gained spirit and started to think in a matured way and writes: “Though I was a child, I could no longer feel as a child, could no longer react as a child. The desire for play was gone and I brooded, wondering if Granny would come and help us. I tried not to think of a tomorrow that was neither real nor wanted, for all tomorrows held questions that I could not answer” (Wright, 86). He developed a resilient bond with his mother. Her

illness cured his faith in love and bonding. He says: “The spirit I had caught gave me insight into the sufferings of others, made me gravitate towards those whose feelings were like my own, made me sit for hours while others told me of their lives, made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful” (Wright, 100-101).

Living in the midst of discrimination and racism, life of a black boy was not easy and comfortable at all. There were undeclared rules of behaviour for blacks and no tolerance was acceptable. Slaves need to live like a slave without any self-esteem, pride or sense of belonging. Wright’s friend Griggs explains in detail how to deal with the Whites in order to live in harmony with them. He says: “When you are in front of white people, *think* before you act, *think* before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among *our* people, but not for *white* people. They won’t stand for it” (Wright, 184). Wright took up many jobs and tried to carve a better life for himself by fighting against the Whites’ oppression and exploitation. With regard to the variety of jobs he took up, he writes: “I had grown up in complete ignorance of what created jobs. Having been thrust out of the world because of my race, I had accepted my destiny by not being curious about what shaped it” (Wright, 288).

### **Conclusion**

However in spite of all these hardships Wright emerged as a successful writer but that does not mean that racism ended and the Blacks lived peacefully with the Whites. Richard feels uneasy with the subservience of his community to the white. He emancipate by taking some concrete steps. He writes, “I had begun coping with the white world too late. I could not make subservience an automatic part of my behavior. I had to feel and think out each tiny item of racial experience in the light of the whole race problem”. (P-283)

Going through all the good and bad experiences of life , lot of upheavals, setbacks, ups and downs, Richard, the black boy finally climbs ladder of success and reaches pinnacle of his glorious career as a high profile writer and thinker. Finally the autobiographical book is concluded with a literary, enlightening ending, seeking the desired object by unlearn of finishing the work. “I would hurt words into this darkness and wait for an echo and if an echo sounded no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that grows in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.” (P-384)

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