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**A STUDY OF THE PROTAGONIST IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*
AS AN OUTSIDER.**

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Abstract:

Richard Wright's novel Black Boy can be categorized as a kunstlerroman. The life journey from the age of four to becoming an adult is depicted in this novel. The Kunstlerroman genre requires that the central figure be an artist. Richard Wright pays a high price to be a writer and displays an independent genius. A rebel by nature, Richard is isolated from family and society from the beginning. Although he has a sense of family values, he does not find much emotional closeness to anyone other than his mother. He also has to struggle with his society while facing massive discrimination from the white people. For a black person to read and write is considered feminine because he is growing up in a society where he has to do whatever drudgery he can and not think but just obey white people. He misses the chance to change his life by following the Principal's advice without compromising his ideas. He rejects the opportunity to become a teacher in a black school and live a very good life and takes the path of struggle. This is one of the most important qualities that make Richard an outsider.

Keywords: Blacks, Whites, Jim Crow, Outsider, Isolation, Socialization, Detachment, Poverty, Crime, etc.

Black Boy is a novel by Richard Wright that falls under the American Slave Narrative genre. Autobiographical novels that depict the struggles and hardships of freedmen from slavery fall into this genre. The original title of the novel was *Hunger* which was later changed to *Black Boy*. The word *Hunger* is also used many times in the novel. In the first few chapters the word *Hunger* is used only for literal hunger but after the middle of the novel the word *Hunger* is used more for Psychological Hunger.

The novel *Black Boy* begins with Richard Wright at the age of four and describes the terrible torture of life in the American south and ends when the author arrives in Chicago at the age of nineteen. The novel presents the impact of slavery on a person on physical, psychological and spiritual levels. The impact of slavery on individuals is so strange that a



man cannot survive the tortures of slavery and even after being freed from it, his past haunts him and he has to struggle to adapt to the free environment. *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory Defines Outsider as*

An outsider may be seen as a person (especially a creative artist) who is, in some respects, above and outside the society on which he or she lives and perhaps even superior to it. There have always been the unconventional, the eccentric and the egregious; the outsider is all these; perhaps even a kind of superman (Cuddon, DLTLT, 626).

A four-year-old child gradually realizes that he is black and that there are different rules for black and white people in this society. Richard Wright's family has a big role to play in making him realize this. White society has laid out a path for black people, made certain rules, and made breaking those rules punishable. White people also have the right to inflict physical harm on black people for no reason. Little Richard's understanding of all these matters grew, and the most piercing question of why this was so began to pain him.

There are several instances in the novel that clearly show that Richard has a lot of difficulty adjusting to the situation. His reaction to a situation is not like that of a normal person. Richard's understanding of the situation is different and he cannot assert himself. After a rift in a relationship, Richard falls short of reestablishing it. The fact that Richard can't even ask for forgiveness is highlighted from the very first chapter.

Richard gradually realized that the work of blacks and whites was also divided and that all menial jobs were shared by blacks. All manual labor jobs are for black people while intellectual jobs are for white people. This distinction is so internalized by black people that when Richard writes a short story for the newspaper, the whole family gets upset because it is not black to write something like that. Richard's inclination is more towards reading. His dream is to become a writer, but Richard's passion for reading and writing is strongly opposed by his family. On the one hand, despite being black he does intellectual work, so he is not accepted by white people, and his family also does not like him. The result of all this is that Richard begins to feel that he is different and not like everyone else. Richard is estranged from society and family.

In the South, Jim Crow laws are so harsh and black people go through such bitter experiences that no matter how hard they try, this bitterness is reflected in their behavior. This bitterness is created in them by that system. This is hard for little Richard to understand, so his mother tells him that he will understand all this when he is a little older.

Richard's childhood is not a pleasant one as his father abandons his family in the very first chapter of the novel for no apparent reason. After his father's departure, Richard becomes familiar with hunger because he can no longer get enough food. His mother can no longer support the children without working, so they are placed in an orphanage where Richard's pranks continue to increase. Richard experiences the underworld at a very young age and is exposed to alcoholism at the age of just five.

All the events that happen in Richard's life gradually make him mature but at same time isolate him from family. Changing two or three places of residence does not give him stability. The happy days of his life do not last long. Uncle Hopkins murder by white men is



the first death he experiences. He realizes for the first time how deadly the conflict between blacks and whites is. After this incident he has another shocking experience which is his mother's illness. When Richard's mother falls seriously ill, his relatives come forward to help, but due to the lack of good hospitals for black people, his mother's illness is never fully cured and everyone realizes that she will never fully recover. He is placed with Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody in Greenwood Mississippi while his mother is ill. This Uncle Clark provides him little material comforts but does not get the love and affection he craves. The effect of all this is to increase his isolation, and his mother's illness and pain continue to symbolically symbolize the pain suffered by black people.

Richard Wright has been detached from his family since childhood. In the first chapter he uses the words my mother for his mother, my father for his father, and my brother for his brother, but does not use the terms Mommy, Papa, or Daddy to indicate intimacy, which shows that even though Richard thinks of everyone, he still lacks the kind of intimacy and affection that his relationships require.

There are two instances in the novel that show Richard Wright's lack of socialization. Richard does not know how to face the situation and how to handle the situation without violence. In chapter four, Addie, his aunt and the school teacher, is about to punish Richard, but Richard stands with a knife and threatens to attack if Aunt Addie hurts him. Aunt Addie does not punish him but she never speaks to Richard after this incident. Despite living under the same roof, they never communicate with each other. Richard is a rebellious and naughty boy for the family.

A similar incident occurs in Chapter Six. Uncle Tom and his wife come to stay at Richard's house and during the discussion they ask Richard some questions. Richard answers the questions but Uncle Tom finds his tone disrespectful which angers him and announces that he will kill Richard, after which Richard again threatens to attack with two razor blades in hand. Uncle Tom relents but prophesies to Richard that his behavior will one day get him hanged.

Richard is fourteen years old and usually children of this age are rebellious but in this novel Uncle Tom wants to suggest that such rebellious attitude does not work under Jim Crow laws. Where white people have been given so much power, black rebellion cannot be tolerated. If Richard wants to live in such a society, he has to reduce this rebellion. He has to learn to lean in and say it's my fault even if it's not his fault. Richard can only survive in this society if he makes such a change or the white people will not hang him.

The event that brought about a fundamental transformation in Richard and made him an adult was the murder of a boy named Bob Greenley by white people. Bob was not Richard's friend, but his friend's brother, but the murder pushed him out of the loop. Sometimes a person can bear the violence that has happened to him, but when the person experiences the violent incident heard through imagination, it feels more intense. Richard has a good imagination as he likes to read novels and write articles.

Bob is murdered for having an affair with a white prostitute. Richard is horrified by the incident and realizes that even a small lapse in Jim Crow laws could cost him his life. For the first time he begins to look at life from a mature perspective. He begins to understand the meaning of everyday events in a new way. He has never realized till now that despite living



under the same roof, many members of the household do not say a word to him because they consider him violent.

Another thing that Richard realizes is that all his friends in his class are employed somewhere but none of them are helping Richard with the job. Such events force Richard to introspect. But the basic nature of a person can be curbed a little but it cannot be changed completely. Because of his passion for studies, Richard ranks first in his class and gets the chance to give a public speech at the graduation ceremony. Richard's principal, knowing his nature, asks him to write a speech and test it. The principal is worried that many white people will be attending the event and that they will be offended by Richard's speech. After graduation, Richard will have a great opportunity to become a teacher, only for this, Richard needs to change his behavior and accept the principal's advice. Richard delivers his own speech at the annual event and misses a life-changing opportunity.

Richard, who has just completed his graduation, now decides to work full-time. Now while working full time in the society, he will have more contact with white people than before. Richard still doesn't know how to deal with white people, so he could be in big trouble. He starts working in a textile shop where he openly observes how a black woman is humiliated through no fault of her own and even arrested by the police. Once after going to deliver goods, he was severely beaten by white people. Richard is lucky he doesn't die so the white people call him lucky bastard. Soon he is fired because his behavior and speech are not like other Negroes. Richard's friend Griggs convinces him that if he wants to survive Jim Crow laws, he has to be a fool in front of white people. White people have to deal with making fun of African Americans and constantly belittling them.

One has to constantly consider oneself and his society as inferior. Griggs explains to Richard that this is a strategy for survival. Only if this behavior is maintained, white people consider it normal and do not bother. Richard can't do everything, his pride prevents him from doing this and he is the most dangerous in society because his rebellious nature never knows when he will get into trouble. While working in a Northerner owner's optical cable factory, his white colleagues do not teach him work despite the owner's request. When Richard quits the job, the owner repeatedly asks him why he is quitting but he leaves without saying anything because accusing white people is like inviting death.

Richard realizes that this is a big conspiracy and his opinion doesn't count. He cannot fight against this great system, and it will be of no use to hate him. Richard's greatest pain is that he cannot tolerate the system and cannot accept it by changing himself like so many black people. His socialites work as they can, gambling, drinking or chasing girls in their free time. Richard cannot act like this, and his greatest fault is that he thinks.

Richard decides to leave his village and move to the big city, but it will take two years for him to get the money he needs if he only continues to earn money in good ways. On the one hand, Richard knows that black people steal some of the white people's money and goods where they work, and unless he joins in, he will not be able to save money and get out of this vicious cycle quickly. On the other hand, if he is found earning money by wrong means, then there is no other option than jail or death, so he is scared out of his mind. Even white people know that this kind of corruption happens because the system is designed that way. The only thing dangerous to them is black people making eye contact with them and talking to them in a



loud voice. Richard takes a calculated risk and earns money illegally but immediately quits the job and takes another job to raise the money.

The incident where he leaves his native village is a very touching scene in the entire novel. Richard does not have enough money to take his mother and brother with him, so he feels guilty. His mother's feelings are also mixed, on the one hand she is very happy that her son is coming out of this swamp and starting a new life, on the other hand she is afraid that he will be separated from her forever. Richard apologizes to everyone as he should have left his grandmother's house long ago but it took him a long time to get back on his feet. Even in this case he does not inform anyone other than his mother that he is leaving home as he is not very close to other members of the family. This episode once again makes it clear that Richard is an outsider.

Richard has left the village and come to the big city to live with dignity but this is only half the journey, while he is still in the South, his next step is to go to the North where the laws are liberal compared to the South and blacks are treated with some respect.

The first turning point in Richard's life was after the murder of Bob Greenely, followed by reading the works of H. L. Mencken. Richard indulged his love of reading by reading newspapers. After heavy criticism of Mencken from newspapers in the South, Richard realized that he might like Mencken in the sense that white people hated Mencken, but that under the strict Jim Crow laws, it was very difficult for a Negro to have access to his material. Only on the card of a white person can he get a book from the library. Fortunately for him, a white man named Mr. Falk takes the risk for him and supplies Richard with books. Mencken has harshly criticized the treatment of blacks by whites as if he was lashing out at whites with the word whip.

I opened A Book of Prefaces and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that?..... I stood up, trying to realize that what reality lay behind the meaning of the words.... Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it (Wright, *BB*, 79).

For the first time in his life, Richard understands the power of words. He realizes that words can also act as a whip and give direction to society. In Richard, the hidden writer begins to revive and wants to express through words.

On a family level, he manages to bring his mother and brother to the city. As there are many job opportunities in the city, his brother also gets a job and they both start saving money as he now wants to leave the South with his family and move to the North. He doesn't know what will change in his life after moving to North but he wants to get away from this situation.

The first episode of the novel *Black Boy* ends with Richard boarding a train to the North. This dream has not come true easily, so Richard's mind is very disturbed. Aunt Maggie moves in with Richard after her husband leaves her. Richard, his brother, mother, and Aunt



Maggie all constantly dream of what their lives will be like in the North but must make bold decisions to not change their reality just by imagining. They don't have enough money for everyone to go North at once, so Richard and Aunt Maggie decide to go first, leaving their mother and brother behind, and then plan to have their mother and his brother come and meet them.

The biggest question facing Richard is what to tell his current boss and colleagues. Although Richard leaves for the North in search of a better life, he feels that he is committing a great crime because no white person would like it and no black person would be jealous. His co-worker Shorty is jealous of him and admits that he doesn't have the courage to make such a decision. The uncertainty of a new place is scary to them, but they have become accustomed to the pain of a familiar place. Richard also thinks that he is dreaming and that he might be in the same city when he wakes up. When he finally gets on the train freed from all this confusion, he thinks about the culture he grew up in and from which he is liberating himself today. Richard expresses his joy and mixed feelings as,

I stepped from the elevator into the street, half expecting someone to call me back and tell me that it was all a dream, that I was not leaving. This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled (Wright, *BB*, 79).

Richard, the protagonist of the novel, arrives in Chicago in 1927. One of his dreams has come true. After reaching Chicago, new confusion starts in his mind. Until now he did not know enough how to behave in slavery, now he does not understand how to behave in freedom. The atmosphere in Chicago was much more open, there were no For Whites and For Blacks signs. Buses do not have separate arrangements for blacks. Black people can also sit next to white people. In the workplace, white female employees talk to black people, make jokes, and no one cares if they are accidentally touched. Since this entire environment is new to Richard, it becomes his situation that even freedom confuses a person.

He doesn't like the city of Chicago because of its consistence but there are many job opportunities open to him. He gets a job at a delicatessen and the problem of hunger ends. Richard gets serious again and decides to take the postal clerk exam. He decides to take a short break from work for this exam but doesn't know what reason to give to his boss. Because he is still under the influence of the laws of the South. He tells the owner that his mother has died but the owner immediately realizes that this is a false pretext and scolds Richard.

Basically he didn't need to lie because the master wouldn't have objected to him being tested but he didn't quite know how to act. Due to a strained relationship with the owners, he changes jobs and takes a job as a dishwasher in a cafe. He is also surprised by the open atmosphere in the Cafe. Being brilliant in studies, he clears the preliminary exam of postal clerk and gets a temporary job. In order to become permanent in the post office, he has to give a physical test and there is also a requirement of 125 pounds. Since Richard is underweight, he overeats but does not gain weight and as a result he fails the physical test.

Everyone in his family blames him a lot. There are two major contradictions hidden here. The first of which is that he has to save a lot of money to leave the South and bring his family to the North, for which he starves himself, half-fed himself to save money and is



seriously malnourished. Despite his best efforts, he does not gain weight and fails. Richard's family plays a big role in this failure and they are again blaming him for his failure.

The second major paradox is that the system is basically hiring only those who are starving because they have set a certain weight requirement. This means that the one who comes from a good family, who is strong will get a job and someone like Richard will not get that job because they are malnourished. He fails the exam because the family that could not feed him well, the family for which he starves and saves money blames him thus increasing his isolation. At that time his dream of becoming a writer is rekindled and he takes refuge in books.

Richard is now twenty years old. He is going to take the post office exam again as he has gained the required weight to qualify. Richard succeeds in the exam and gets selected. Till date he has worked hard day and night and he is getting this result. Post jobs include blacks, whites, and people of all backgrounds, so Richard begins to gain a wide range of experiences. Because of Richard's reading and thinking ability, he also chats with colleagues on many topics. He experiences the financial and social stability of such a system for the first time. These two or three years of his life pass happily and in 1929, news of the stock market crash is printed in a newspaper. America finds itself in the Great Depression. The impact of this recessionary wave is so widespread that no one is spared. As the turnover of the people at the post decreases, the working hours of the employees are reduced and after a period of time everyone becomes unemployed again. Happy days are over. Richard gets a job in an insurance company with the help of his cousin but the job does not satisfy him as he realizes that he is defrauding poor people.

One of the advantages of working in an insurance company is that it gives him the opportunity to observe many people. This experience will be useful to him as a writer. During this period, Richard also wanders a lot and listens to the speeches of people who are communist activists. He is suspicious of Communist ideology because he does not believe that uneducated, poverty-stricken workers will unite and create a revolution.

Although Richard does not have much emotional entanglement with the members of the house, he has taken responsibility for them. During this recession, after running out of food in the house, he has no other option but to go and register his name in the welfare. Enrolling in Welfare is like a public display of poverty but no other option is available. Even in this welfare office, black people tell their problems to others, so it helps Richard to understand their life. Pain is very important to Richard and he believes that the meaning of life is hidden in suffering.

Richard quits his job in an insurance company and starts working as a janitor in a hospital. Here again he has to face great discrimination. His colleagues in the hospital are also eccentric. The White doctors there do not answer Richard's questions. White doctors say that medical research is not something black people think about. Richard's co-workers fight among themselves and knock down the items placed in the racks causing great damage. If the doctors there get to know about this incident, all of their jobs will be lost, so they all will keep things as they were. Richard knows that to do so is to mislead medical research but he has no other option to keep his job and the doctors do not treat him humanely.



Richard is invited to a meeting of the John Reed Club by his old post office colleagues. It is a communist club and almost all the members are white. Richard is treated equally by the white people. He also enjoys joining a good organization for the first time. Richard realizes that the topics discussed here are complicated and beyond the understanding of the general public. At home, he cannot explain to his mother what communism is, so it is difficult for poor black people to understand the subject. Richard takes it upon himself to simplify such a difficult subject and write the papers in a simple, understandable manner. Everyone at the club is delighted and soon elects Richard as president. In that club, a young boy named Comrade Young becomes suspicious of some people. Later Richard realizes that he is being treated by a psychiatrist. Richard is shocked how a deranged person can become a member of the club and how his thoughts can be so aligned. After this, Richard begins to look at everything with suspicion.

Richard's experience in the Communist club is not very pleasant. It is the members of the group who start looking at him suspiciously. It was a situation where everyone looked at each other with suspicion as the Great Depression filled the atmosphere with negativity. Richard's loyalty is suspected and he is expelled from the group. Richard tries his best to prove his honesty and loyalty but people in the party don't understand it. The opposition to him grows to such an extent that eventually people in the party begin to consider him as an enemy.

Richard attends the May Day Parade in 1936 but Richard is deeply distressed by the experience as some people attack him. In his life, he made an honest attempt to create deep relations in the communist club, but he failed, so he is in a lot of pain. Disappointed, Richard reaches home with no one else to accompany him. Richard decides to write once again but now not for anyone but only to explore deeply the suffering and what it means to be human.

I would hurl 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 gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human (Wright, *BB*, 242).

After a deep scrutiny of the events in Richard's life, the people he meets and the relationships he has with them, it proves that he does not form any sustained relationships. He always had a lofty goal of becoming a writer. Whenever he fails, thoughts of writing come to his mind and he takes refuge in stories and novels. No one in the family or society understands or accepts him. Every workplace is perceived to be different from others. Although it is difficult for black people to live with self-respect under Jim Crow laws, he decides to live with dignity and does not compromise. He pays a heavy price for not compromising but he does not give up. All these things make Richard different from others and hence he is an outsider.

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Literary Cognizance

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)

An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism

Vol.- V, Issue- 1, June 2024



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To Cite the Article: Handibag, Trupti, Mathpati, Sudhir. “A Study of the Protagonist in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy as an Outsider*”. *Literary Cognizance*, V - 1 (June, 2024): 120-128. Web.

