



ISSN: 3107-5088 (ONLINE)

ISSN: 3107-4898 (PRINT)

www.cognitivethinking.in

Cognitive Thinking: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

(An International, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed & ISO Certified Journal)

Vol. 1 & Issue 4 (October - December 2025)

Editor-in-Chief

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Catastrophic Reverberation: A Study of Richard Wright' *Black Boy*

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Article: Received: 01/11/2025, Accepted: 19/12/2025, Published:30/12/2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18092946>



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Abstract: *Black Boy* is about the catastrophic destruction of the frustration and humiliation experienced by a sensitive black boy not only in the South but also in the North; it deals with the depression of the blacks. Despite of all the apocalypses, yet there is a glimpse of hope for equality, freedom and happiness. Wright uses himself as the protagonist to portray a society where inequality and man's inhumanity to man in the order of the day. With the insight we have about the blacks, we are made to see that the life of Richard Wright symbolizes the emergence from slavery and struggle towards freedom and equality in the New World through self-appraisal and self-identity.

Keywords: Slavery, Catastrophic, Self-identity, South, Labour, minor, suicide.

Introduction: The purposes of slavery moved from personal experience narratives to the works of fiction in the twentieth century. Slavery is not only a way of economic production, but it is also a system of perpetual exchange and socialization. As a social institution, slavery changes over time and evolves. In sum, slavery is temporally and spatially diverse.

According to Orlando Patterson, slavery is "a complex interactional process." "Even at this most elementary level of personal relations it should be clear that we are dealing not with a static entity but with a complex interactional process, one laden with tension and contradiction" (13). Slavery is an economic institution of oppression and its major purpose is the elimination of maximum labor from captured persons. More important, slavery is a social institution; it is dynamic, it changes, and it is a process. It is a constant site of socialization, attempted socialization, and exchange. The structure of this dynamic social institution is as complex as the institution itself.

Richard Wright, the grandson of slaves was born in Natchez Mississippi. When Richard was ten years old, his mother had a paralytic shock. The family was very poor. After a brief education, he was forced to look for employment in order to support his mother. He had a difficult childhood which was characterized by hopelessness, insecurity, deprivation and hunger as a great catastrophic element portrayed in his autobiography Novel, *Black Boy* (1945). Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, represents his boyhood in the cruel Jim Crow South and his fight back with the Communist Party in North (Chicago). As such, insightful reading of this work depends on an understanding of its social as well as historical framework.

One of the primary contexts is the body of laws referred to as the “Jim Crow laws” after a crudely stereotypical character in white theater designed to degrade blacks for white entertainment.

This fictional slave-narrative highlights on how the apocalypses and physical violence are strongly shown in the selected text. The various forms of racism and oppression having various catastrophic expressions are identified and demonstrated in the narrative to prove the readers how Richard Wright has handled them in *Black Boy*. It is an autobiography of Richard Wright’s childhood and young adulthood. It is divided into two sections, “Southern Night” (concerning his childhood in the South) and “The Horror and the Glory” (concerning his early adult years in North).

Black Boy was written to expose and describe the experience of the blacks. It also exposes the distress and bewilderment of the slaves. Black American responded to their humanity in a number of ways. The emergence of Afro-American literature reflects the centrality of writing to the project of seeking freedom and equality in the U. S. Literature presented a way for the blacks to display their artistic creation and imagination though in the twentieth century, Afro-American literature has continued to be a means through which the historical record and African culture are greatly represented. In his narrative, he by resolving to use his writing to search for a way to start a revolution, he thinks that everyone has a strong desire for freedom and happiness that needs to be filled.

In *Black Boy*, Wright’s handling of the pastoral opens the trope to attack. In his work pastoral element is also found:

There was the delight I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon. There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning. There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez. There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky. (7-8)

Wright unsettles and upends the pastoral. He rejects its simplistic appreciation for nature un-reflected on in favor of one in which danger and disorder are imminent and prevalent, one in which terror and fear are always but a few steps away. Wright is a country boy, adjusted to rural, instinctual ways of knowing as well as experiencing nature, yet he seems to enjoy a sense of retreat, a freedom from the work that puts the “red and green vegetables” in the ground and allows him to contemplate on a view of the mighty Mississippi. There is likewise a sort of studied sense to these reflections, a certain literary quality of record in that these observations are in chorus instantaneous and insightful. But the text does not allow these images to stand unconcealed and straightforward:

There was the experience of feeling death without dying that came from watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been snapped by a quick twist of my father’s wrist. There was the great joke that I felt God played on cats and dogs by making them lap their milk and water with their tongues. . . . There was the speechless astonishment of seeing a hog stabbed through the heart, dipped into boiling water, scraped, split open, gutted and strung up gaping and bloody. . . . And there was the quiet terror that suffused my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights (8-9)

Wright’s treatment of the pastoral reiterates its inseparability from agricultural concerns. Wright’s description of the exhausted figure of his father underlines the plight of Afro-American farmers:

I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body ... (34)

Writing from the angle of a man who has lived in both the country and the city, Wright's visit to his father reveals what Leo Marx later terms a "complex" pastoral-ism: at once "simple," "season[al]," and "animalistic," yet also "aching," "imprisoned," "chained," "crude," "raw," and "withering" (362-363).

The use of the term 'environment' throughout Wright's corpus, in *Black Boy*, permits a re-envisioning of pastoral modes of imagining space and place, particularly in building bridges between evidently 'natural' spaces and visibly constructed urban environments. *Black Boy* opposes conventional ecologist thinking of nature and wilderness by conflating them with images of built space:

To starve in order to learn about my environment was irrational, but so were my hungers. With my books slung over my shoulder, I would tramp with a gang into the woods, to rivers, to creeks, into the business district, to the doors of poolrooms, into the movies when we could slip in without paying, to neighborhood ball games, to brick kilns, to lumberyards, to cottonseed mills to watch men work. (*Black Boy* 127)

It is Richard's experience that makes him a writer. Since he is alienated and isolated from both South and North, he takes to reading everything he could lay hands on, from magazines, newspapers, novels etc. *Black Boy* shows Richard's loneliness, he claims that "I learned to become invisible, to stop living; I felt lonely, cast forever out of life" (11-12). After Richard tries for some tedious jobs, he came to realize that the society is quite simple one which holds no future for the uneducated blacks. Richard's dream to become a writer is to be able to convey the dictating spirit of the whites, the idea of white supremacy and to tell of the various ways through which the blacks are oppressed and subjugated. To achieve this dream, Wright migrates from the South to the North with a hope that things will get better. It was there he begins to write to provoke slavery and the encompassed racial discrimination.

These autobiographical novel highlights various catastrophic elements in a form of apocalypse like-poverty, hunger, dehumanisation, violence, social insecurity, disharmony, rejection and ejection and moreover physical and sexual assault of the black characters in the North who are economically not sound and almost disempowered by the deprivation resulting from racial discrimination. The blacks are deprived of the right to get equal job opportunity. Since they have no good jobs, they cannot afford good accommodation, food and other basic necessities of life. The impact if racism is revealed to Wright in the form of Hunger. Initially as a child, Richard does not understand racism. But very soon, he gets the reasons to why he and his brother had to feed on the leftover of the white, "Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to wait until others were through? I could not understand why some people had enough food and others did not" (26)?

Hence, it is through hunger, poverty and general lack that he first becomes familiar with the harsh realities of racism in the North. Most of the times, Richard and his family had nothing to eat because of the great extent of poverty. Hunger made Richard and his mother move to Aunty Maggie's house in Arkansas. Here, Richard gets to eat more because his uncle Hoskins owns a saloon that caters to the need for hundreds of blacks who work in his environment. At meals time, there is much to eat that Richard himself finds it hard to believe, "Can I eat all I want? "Eat as much as you like" uncle Hoskins said, "I did not believe him then I ate until my stomach hurt, but even then, I did not want to get up from the table" (*Black Boy* 59).

Wright and other black characters in the novel are treated by the whites even worse than the mules. Wright gives an account how he lost his job on the basis that he called a white man by name without adding Mr. to his name. The whites deny the blacks what is considered -a white man's job, thereby niggardly them a means of livelihood.

Richard's Granny was named by her slave master, "What was Granny's name before she married Grandpa?" "Bolden" "Who gave her that name?" "The white man who owned her" (44). This dialogue exchange between Richard and his mother makes him know that he is actually an offspring of slaves. Another incident of this dehumanization is the one Wright witnesses in his Granny's place. Black slaves

are held together by iron chains. Wright on seeing them by mistake refers to them as elephants because of the way they are held and rolled together. “As the strange animals came abreast of me, I saw that the legs of the black animals were held together by irons and that arms were linked with heavy chains that clanked softly and musically as they moved” (49). Richard’s mother explains to him that the elephants are slaves made to work. “It’s just what you see”, she said, “A gang of men chained together and made to work” (49). The blacks, even in Richard’s days are still used as slaves. They are seen not just as slaves but also for enjoyment. Wright asserts that “I suppose it’s fun for white man to see niggers fight” (260). He narrates an incident where Mr. Olin, one of the foremen in his office initiated a fight between him and Harrison, another black boy. Mr. Olin guarantees the winner five dollars just for the two boys to fight themselves while for the whites it was not more than a mere entertainment.

The concern of social insecurity also badly affects the life of Richard that he turns into a drunkard at the age of six. The black is so timid in the white society as a result of violence, lynching, murders etc. As a child, Richard is mocked by the white kids also who frighten him. This insecurity makes his mother to give confidence to him to fight by providing him with a big stick to retaliate. Uncle Hoskins is also killed by the white mob for no just cause. Richard is also bitten by a white man’s dog in the plantation and given no cure. These examples shows that the blacks are not safe in the community, still they do not offend the white folks.

Wright shows that there are conflicts not only in the black families but also in between the blacks and the whites. It is simple to recognize the reason of this. As the problems of racial attacks on the blacks, they become psychologically disturbed by injustices, hunger, rejection etc., which causes embarrassment of each individual life. For example, Wright’s father cannot hold his frustration. Thus, he always takes out his anger on his wife and kids. Richard’s Aunt Addie who is also his school teacher punishes him at school out of her psychological frustration. She beats him at the slightest irritation and Richard, also frustrated and rejected by his society attacks her too.

“For a moment she hesitated, then she struck at me with the switch and I dodge and stumbled into a corner. She was upon me, lashing me across the face. I leaped, screaming and ran past her and jerked open the kitchen drawer; it spilled to the floor with thunderous sound. I grabbed a knife and held it ready for her”. “Now, I told you to stop! I screamed. “You put down that knife” “Leave me alone or it cut you! “She stood debating. Then she made up her mind and come at me. I lunged at her with the knife...we crashed to the floor... I but her hand and we rolled, kicking, scratching, hutting, fighting for our lives as though we were strangers, enemies, fighting for our lives (94).

Both of them, and so many others too, at that time caught in the web of racial discrimination. Therefore, the result is disaffection and disharmony among family members and within the society. Another instance of disharmony is seen in Uncle Tom’s case. Uncle Tom is really frustrated because although he is educated enough to be a teacher yet he ends up making chairs for the whites and he transfers his aggression to Richard who is opportune to go to school.

What are you angry about? I asked “I never heard a sassier black imp than you in all my life”, he spluttered. I swung my feet to the floor so that I could watch him. “What are you talking about?” I asked “you asked me the time and I told you...shut up”, he shouted “or I’ll take my fist and ram it down your throat...” I could hear his breath whistling in his throat; and I knew he was furious. (100)

All the black characters in *Black Boy* are all the time discarded by the society. Richard’s Grandfather waits for many years for his pension which he is rightfully entitled to, but all he keeps getting are the refusal letters through which they deny him all his benefits. “And I would read him the letter -reading slowly and pronouncing each word with extreme care telling him that his claims for a pension had not been validated and that his application had been rejected. Grandpa would not blink an eye, then he would curse softly under his breath” (122).

Also, Richard's mother is rejected in the hospital because the government makes no ample health provisions for the coloured people. The hospitals provide good health care for whites, leaving the blacks who live poverty to take care of themselves. Wright is also rejected by his white employers most of the times. He goes from one job to another as a result of racial discrimination. The blacks have problems with the issue of accommodation. Richard's family has to be expelled from their several homes because they couldn't pay the house rent. This creates Richard's experience to early street life concluding in child crime and psychological trauma and suffering of the worst kind:

Inability to pay rent forced us to move into a house perched atop high logs in a section of the town where flood waters came. My brother and I had great fun running up and down the tall shaky steps. Again, rent paying became a problem and we moved nearer the centre of town where I found a job in a pressing shop... yet again we moved, this time to the outskirts of town, near a wide stretch of railroad tracks to which each morning before school, I would take a sack and gather coal to heat your frame house". (72)

Richard and his family move from one place like 'South' to a worse place like 'North', because they were being constantly ejected. This also affects Richard's education; he has to do menial jobs to keep his family together. In Richard's society, there exist no health facilities for blacks, no legal coverage, no justice, no freedom, no decent jobs all as a result of the society which rejects the black race.

The white never give up taking advantages of the black characters either physically or sexually. Richard is often terrorized by white boys. He says, "they came towards me... they overtook me and flinch me to the pavement. I yelled, pleaded, kicked... they yanked me to my feet, gave me a few slaps and sent me home" (12). The incident happens when Richard's mother sends him to get groceries; he is badly beaten for nothing. Richard faces physical attacks so many times in his family, the white man's office where he works and so much more. A number of Negro girls are employed as maids for the whites. The white man takes advantages of them. He slaps a black maid mischievously on the buttocks and when Richard asks why she allows it, she says, "they never get any further with us than that, if we don't want 'em to" (174). This is sarcastic because the black men are not even allowed to get near a white prostitute. There are various ways through which the characters in *Black Boy* react to racism and oppression.

Richard narrates the pain of growing in the south where survival is for the fittest. Like every other black child, this pushes him farther from home into the street; he develops the spirit of alienation. Wright struggles to react to their poverty which is caused by oppression. He is always firm to improve the condition of the blacks, "I could fight the southern whites by organizing with other negroes, as my grandfather had done. But I know that I could never win that way; there were many whites and there were but a few blacks... outright black rebellion could never win" (138).

Violence is used by all the characters in the black and white world as a means of either oppression or protection. The society is mainly of violence which is instinctively imprinted in the system of the blacks. In the opening chapter of *Black Boy*, Richard reflexively sits the house on fire, "I had not really intended to set the house on fire, I just wanted to see how the curtains would look like when they burned" (2). Richard's environment could be expressional a violent one. As he states "our battles are real and bloody. We threw rocks, coal, sticks, iron and while we threw them, we longed for deadlier weapons" (39). This clearly denotes that they recognize their strengths and find solace within their 'own' environment. The black boys had to use aggressive methods to react to racism and oppression they ever faced. The black boy responds to the racial segregation and oppression also by verbal means, they call the white men undignified names i.e. white bastard, son of a bitch, etc.

Conclusion: *Black Boy* of Richard Wright not only exposes the experiences of the blacks, but also the agony and confusion of the slaves like *Beloved*. The narrative highlights various catastrophic elements like- poverty, hunger, dehumanisation, violence, social insecurity, disharmony, rejection and ejection and moreover physical and sexual assault of the black characters in the North who are economically disempowered by the deprivation resulting from racial discrimination. The impact if racism is revealed

to Wright in the form of Hunger. All the black characters in *Black Boy* are constantly rejected by the society. In the narrative, violence is used by all the characters in the black and white world as a means of either oppression or protection. *Black Boy* is about the catastrophic destruction of the frustration and humiliation experienced by a sensitive black boy not only in the South but also in the North; it deals with the depression of the blacks. Despite of all the apocalypses, yet there is a glimpse of hope for equality, freedom and happiness. Afro-American narratives predominantly capture the apocalypses in its varied shades.

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