

A Hungry Man is a Negro Man: Racializing Poverty in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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Abstract

Poverty is basically raceless. Both Whites and Blacks do suffer from it. Still, in the U.S. Southern context as presented in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, one realizes that Blacks have been impoverished by the raging brutality of racial segregation. Informed by both Postcolonial and Marxist criticism, this paper intended, first, to show that the American South is an environment that impoverishes African Americans and, then, to use it to understand their reaction vis-à-vis their impoverishment. The findings revealed that the more an individual is denied his basic rights, the more dangerous he becomes. The implications of the findings intended for practice are discussed.

Keywords: Poverty, impoverishment, black boy, hunger.

Introduction

Richard Wright's *Black Boy* was hailed by many critics (Howland, Leibowitz, Gaylesome) as an important sociological document. I equally share the same perspective because the book has acutely chronicled the Southern black life. This autobiography has impressively depicted the ordeal of Blacks in the Jim Crow South that has denied Blacks opportunities to make a living. More surprisingly, the book tells us that when it comes to Blacks, there is no favor given to any of them, not even children. The proof is that when Richard started growing, he experienced hunger and stricken poverty as though he were mature (26, 37, 78, 113, 114). The trauma generated by this starvation might be the source of his violence, non-conformist attitudes, and philosophical questionings. In this respect, although critics and reviewers have heavily explored critical ideas within the book, none of them has clearly focused attention on the racialization of poverty. I am well apprised that the book has received harsh criticism from both Whites and Blacks. No wonder, since the objective of Richard Wright is neither to please the Whites nor to do justice to his fellow Blacks, one may argue that Wright's aim is to present the Negro life as both realistic and accurate as it is, without idealizing or badmouthing anything unreasonable. Definitely, *Black Boy*, Gibson avers, is "a strong protest against the plight of all the black boys and girls, men and women subjected, in his words, to

‘the ethics of living Jim Crow’” (1986: 494). Therefore, informed by Marxist critical theory and postcolonial theory, this paper argues the racialization of poverty. More specifically, my interest here is to show that African Americans have been impoverished by the Southern segregation system. Equally, this essay shows the consequences this racialization of poverty has created to African Americans. I am aware that poverty has been heavily ferreted. For instance, the sociologist Diana Pearce has coined the phrase ‘feminization of poverty’ in 1978 which has been fully discussed by Emily Northrop in her article: “A Contrast of Blacks and White Feminization of Poverty”. However, no one has clearly delved into the idea of the way race can be a cause of poverty to Blacks in the American South.

Aims and Scope

The main purpose of this article was to argue that poverty could, unfortunately, be imposed on a group of people, based on their race, which implies largely that they are impoverished rather than poor. The study approached the literature as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which addressed both theoretical and applied research. The study considered as the first, and leading of its kind, revealed that the more an individual is denied his basic rights, the more dangerous he becomes.

Methodology and Design

This is a qualitative research study using content analysis and is appropriate to the exploratory nature of the research.

The South: A Metaphor for Blacks’ Impoverishment

Before we come to the ensuing discussion, it is appropriate to speculate a little on the concept of poverty. Poverty, according to Francis Adeola, “is a depressing condition in which an individual or a family is unable to afford an adequate level of living in keeping with the society’s standards” (2005: 3). Absolute poverty describes a life-threatening condition of deprivation of access to basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, clothing, and health care (Burton, 1992). The question one needs to put into consideration is, how come that in a nation so endowed with abundant resources unparalleled by any international standards could we have poor people? Are the poor solely responsible for being poor or are they, as Adeola has put it, “passive victims of structural forces beyond their control?”

It is true that social scientists, such as Cotter (2002), Brady (2003), Lichter (2002) to name only a few, have established that the intersection of class, gender, and nativity in social inequality and resource deprivation are some of the causes of opportunities inequalities. More than this, they have noticed the role race/ethnicity hugely play when it comes to African Americans in the South.

The South recalls the period of slavery and who says slavery speaks volumes of the ordeal of people of African descent? In a real sense, the enslaved Blacks were owned and could in no way feed themselves. They were fed by their owners with meager foods. In fact, the South is a metaphor of slavery, racial discrimination, and the dehumanization of Blacks. The opening page of *Black Boy* already informs the reader that Blacks are confined and caged in a system that rejects their humanity. As Howland rightly puts it, “*Black Boy*... begins with the metaphorical suggestion that the black individual is commonly reduced to a function of the forces which shape Southern society in general” (1986: 122).

Similarly, from the era of slavery up to this present day, to be Black in American South signals to be born with the wrong color and as a result, one is born into sufferings and stricken poverty. It is a fact that the majority of poor people in America are Blacks. Therefore, my premise is that blackness in the South symbolizes poverty.

From the onset of slavery, education was a potent weapon for slaves, because as Poulos underscores, “the ability to express oneself as an educated person can alter fundamentally the identity of a slave; the struggle for self-expression is the struggle for freedom” (1997: 54). Therefore, the importance of education and of learning how to read and write has become a pronounced theme in African American literature. Further, education, as highlighted here, is one of the basic rights a child needs. Racial discrimination in the US makes it that even the education offered to Blacks suffers. A black person could not receive the same education that a white person has because they are Black and so are not entitled to the same opportunities. In *Black Boy*, one realizes that African Americans receive poor education. Although one agrees with the point that poverty is always evil and degrading and both the white man and black man suffer equally, I concur with Albert Vogel that “there is a sense in which the poverty of the black man results as much from his race and from the social role assigned to him by the whites, as from the incongruities from the modern society” (1966: 195). Therefore, the formal education the black person receives is racially discriminated against.

Understandably, a poor person cannot acquire the same education as a rich person. Richard was born on a poor farm in Mississippi and later moved to Memphis. In both places, he lived in poverty. And in such a situation, he is obliged to receive no better education. This poverty of Richard has a very special connotation when one “considers that the conditions of the ghetto life, the limited occupational choices a young Negro has, and the special kind of education offered him meant that he had little, if any, hope of ever escaping his plight” (Vogel, 1966: 195).

Interestingly, this racially impoverished education African Americans acquire has changed their way of articulating words. For the African American community, language is not a simple communication tool. Language can be used badly and for these non-conformists, the Richard type, one has to use it regardless of the consequences. Throughout *Black Boy*, the reader realizes that the language that young Richard often uses is full of profanity. Profanity because when one is denied the basic right due to racial biases, one is ready to do and say anything. After all, White Americans themselves use foul languages towards Blacks. When Richard narrates his early work experiences, he reprints in detail the bad language of his white employers. These Whites swear gratuitously with the intent of degrading others. An illustration of this can be read: “What the hell...every morning it’s these damn eggs for breakfast.... you sonofabitch ...you might try serving some dirt...That’s right, you bitch...knock the food right out of my goddamn mouth” (175). This experience encourages Richard to do alike. Actually, Richard is chronically “underfed because of the poverty generated by segregation;” consequently, he is obliged to curse and badmouth the people that put him in this situation (Poulos, 1997: 56).

Wright elaborates on this concept of bad use of language in Richard’s experiences at the optician’s shop in Jackson, Mississippi. Reynolds and Pease, white lens grinders, called Richard a lazy black sonofabitch, a “granny dodger,” and wanted to hit him with a “f—k—g bar” (224-225). The implied message here is that racism generates profanity.

A family that lacks the daily bread is likely to give in to divorce. A father who cannot cater for his family and whose earnest effort succumbs due to racial tensions seem to desert the house. This situation is so glaring in the Southern society where Blacks are deprived of their basic needs. In *Black Boy*, the reader realizes that Richard’s father deserts the house due to constant frustrations and joblessness. At the age of six, as the book recalls, Richard’s father left the house for no clear reasons leaving the child and his mother.

“A Hungry man is an angry man,” it is often said. In the context of this book, one can see that hunger actually brings about anger, despair, and suffering. Physical hunger, as the young Richard experiences it, is so intense that one would have wished to die. In *Black Boy*’s context, it is clearly understood that poverty is conditioned by race.

In the South, African Americans often live in corrugated houses. This results from racial discrimination. In the South, a black person is not supposed to be rich nor live in a good house. Hospital facilities and the health care system do not work for Blacks. In the very first page of *Black Boy*, the reader discovers the sad reality in which Blacks are living. In Memphis, we are equally presented with the housing problems Blacks face all along their presence in America. The text reads, “In Memphis, we lived in a one-story brick tenement. The stone buildings and the concrete pavements looked bleak and hostile to me. The absence of green, growing things made the city seem dead. Living space for the four of us—my mother, my brother, my father, and me—was a kitchen and a bedroom”. What can be surmised from this foregoing is that, in a real sense, Blacks are living in no good conditions at all. How can four people live in a one-story brick tenement? What this suggests is that Blacks are treated like animals that can be piled up and dropped anywhere.

African Americans’ Response to Impoverishment

Hunger is evil and we have to fight it in our society. A hungry person can do anything. In the African American context, hunger has created in them hatred toward the white race. Someone who lacks the daily bread and his basic needs can get into any criminal activity. For Makombe, “poverty and desperation may force one to engage in criminal activities (2013: 303). In *Black Boy*, Richard comes to realize that Whites eat well and are never hungry, while Blacks are constantly hungry and envious of white people. Therefore, he is obliged to do with “something unclean”.

Richard’s father does a mean job. As a result, he is not paid well and could not afford the needs of the family. He worked as a night porter in a Beale Street drugstore. Understandably, there are many Blacks like the type of Richard’s father who do mean jobs and could not meet their basic needs. All this stems from the racially oppressive system established in the South to manipulate Blacks. A few pages later, this horrible and disappointing condition forced the family to leave Mississippi for Memphis. While this apparently suggests that the family is leaving poverty behind and is heading to peace, joy, and stability, one is quickly met with an

unwelcoming event. For instance, the picture of the father speaks aloud. Richard suggests that his father's life is ensnared and drawn by the "corrupting and enslaving rhythms of urban life: "solace came when I wandered about the boat and gazed at Negroes throwing dice, drinking whiskey, playing cards, lolling on boxes, eating, talking, and singing. My father took me down into the engine room and the throbbing machines enthralled me four hours". In a real sense, the father's inability to satisfy the needs of the family since he earns no reasonable salary, his despair, and also his affair with another black woman forced him to run away.

Though one was expecting the mother who has now become the matriarch of the family to be granted a good job so as to fend for the family, hers is worse than that of her husband. As the story unfolds, the reader is informed that she later got a job. The job she got, no wonder, was to work as a cook. This job gives her no solace at all. Instead, we are told that anytime she comes back from work, she is exhausted and disappointed. The story reads: "When she returned at evening she would be tired and dispirited and would cry a lot. Sometimes, when she was in despair, she would call us to her and talk to us for hours, telling us that we now had no father, that our lives would be different from those of other children, that we must learn as soon as possible to take care of ourselves, to dress ourselves, to prepare our own food; that we must take upon ourselves the responsibility...".

Moreover, the other mischief the family faces is that when the mother brings her children to work, and though there is enough food, the children cannot eat. The reason is that the food does not belong to them and, however delicious it might be, it is only the good smell that the children will benefit from. Shockingly, the children could see their mother prepare food since she is a cook, and yet they cannot taste nor have a part of it. For Richard, this is worse than not even seeing the food at all: "Standing hungrily and silently in a corner of the kitchen, we would watch her go from stove to the sink, from cabinet to the table... I always loved to stand in the white folk's kitchen when my mother cooked, for it meant that I got occasional scraps of bread and meat; but many times I regretted having come, for my nostrils would be assailed with the scent of food that did not belong to me and which I was forbidden to eat". The Jim Crow system established in the South pauperizes Blacks and enriches the Whites. No matter how hard a black person works in the South, he cannot equate his white counterpart. As a result, Blacks are frustrated and fall ill so quick. In *Black Boy*, we can see that after the departure of Richard's father, the mother has to take over. Despite her unceasing efforts, she is doomed to remain poor. Sadly, though, she falls sick: "My mother became too ill to work

and I began to do chores in the neighborhood... Inability to pay the rent forced us to move into a house perched atop logs in a section of the town where flood waters came". Oddly enough, the sickness she was suffering from was "a stroke of paralysis". This sickness in part resulted from the racial discrimination of the South that denies equal chances to Blacks.

There is evident awareness that some critics especially will state that Blacks are given equal chances as their white counterparts, and if they fail it is not the system but they themselves. A myopic reading of Blacks' situation in the South may attest to that. However, a glaring example in *Black Boy* suggests that no matter how hard a Negro will work in the South, they will never make it. This is also a well-established strategy put in place by Whites so as to keep their so-called superiority over Blacks. If one doubts, let one explain this incident in the book whereby we are told the story of a thriving Black businessman by the name of Uncle Hoskins. What happened to him is that he was been hunted down and shot dead by racist Whites. The logic, as Makombe puts it, is that "if a Black man is less human, then he should not venture into business and do better than Whites, otherwise he threatens the white man's perceived and actual sense of security" (2013: 308). Richard tells us that he "learned afterwards that Uncle Hoskins had been killed by Whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business". Even if Richard's first encounter with hunger derives from his misbehaving attitude, one can also deduce that it is an expression of the life of many Southern Blacks who could not eat well. Hunger, as Richard describes it for the first time, is a metaphor of a person who sits beside him and seems to be torturing him day and night: "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, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly... This new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent". Suggestively, hunger has become a ghost haunting and hunting Richard all the time. Though it may be argued that the child has committed an evil and is denied food, or that his parents are lazy and could not feed the young Richard, one needs not to go far to underscore that the situation presented here in *Black Boy* surpasses that. In the South, whether a black person is workaholic or not, he deserves the same treatment. Regardless of their struggle, Blacks are being impoverished by the Southern system of racial discrimination.

As key as it may appear, Richard Wright's chief word in the book is "hunger." The word and the fact of hunger recur like what Thaddeus refers to as "drumbeats throughout the book, an

insistent refrain” (1985: 201). Childhood implies innocence and who says innocence entails happiness, peace, security, love, and carelessness? A child should not think of what to do before they eat. All the burden is on the parents’ shoulder. Parents’ sole responsibility is to bring in food, money, and meet the children’s needs. However, if parents fail to or are forced by circumstances to do otherwise, it permeates automatically the well-being of the children.

In this respect, one can see that because Richard’s parents could not feed him accordingly, he feels hunger in so dire way that joy is taken away from his life. He becomes “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”. More striking, the reader is abashed to see in the following scene whereby Richard complained to his mother that he was hungry and was given such an unwelcome answer: “‘Mama, I’m hungry,’ I complained one afternoon. ‘Jump up and catch a kungry,’ she said, trying to make me laugh and forget”. Further, the mother gives a quite realistic answer though bitter to her hungry son: “you’ll have to wait until I get a job and buy food”. Childhood implies innocence and who says innocence refers to joy, peace, carelessness, and security? A child never worries about what they should eat, put on, or even where to live. Parents represent all that a child needs. However, when these basic needs of children are not met due to life situations, children are the most victims. They become victims because there is no happiness, no fun, and safety. What follows is that these children become street ones, wandering because there is no one to discipline them. In *Black Boy*, the very scenario is presented. As the story unfolds, we are told that when Richard’s mother “had gone to work, I would follow a crowd of black children—abandoned for the day by their working parents—to the bottom of a sloping hill”. The racialization of poverty in the African American community impoverishes the education black children receive. In effect, a black child often comes from a poor family and so could not dream of having the same educational facilities a white child does have. A black child in the South attends a segregated school under poor conditions. Richard is a case in point. He does not start school at the regular age and equally receives a poor education. The text reads: “I began school...at a later age than was usual; my mother had not been able to buy me the necessary clothes to make me presentable”. A poor child can do anything possible to survive. If today we are having millions of street children who are either delinquent, robbers, or prostitute, the majority of them comes from poor homes. A child cannot on his/her own give in to immoralities. It necessarily results from a broken home or from a poor living condition.

Richard experiences such a situation. He often starves for food, although he can see people, especially Whites, eat food he is denied access to. For instance, the ensuing quotation describes a very sad situation where Richard gets angry because he can see people eating and yet he himself could not: “Watching the white people eat would make my empty stomach churn and I would grow angry. 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’. A child that is denied food can steal and do anything at his reach to be satisfied. In the Jim Crowed South, African American children often rob and become sex maniac for Whites in order to eat. Richard is obliged by the starving situation, for example, to beg for food and be roaming about in restaurants where he is either given drinks or cigarette. The reader comes to know that Richard “would beg for pennies, then peer under the swinging doors to watch the men and women drink. When some neighbors would chase me away from the door, I would follow the drunks about the streets... Somebody tried to jam a cigar into my mouth...”. Or, he becomes a womanizing envoy: “A man called me to him and whispered some words into my ear and told me that he would give me a nickel if I went to a woman and repeated them to her. I told him that I would say them; he gave me the nickel and I ran to the woman and shouted the words. A gale of laughter went up in the saloon... From then on, for a penny or a nickel, I would repeat to anyone whatever was whispered to me. In my foggy, tipsy state, the reaction of the men and women to my mysterious words enthralled me.” As the story continues, it becomes clear that begging for food turns to be an obsession for Richard: “To beg drinks in the saloon became an obsession. Many evenings my mother would find me wandering in a daze and take me home and beat me; but the next morning... I would run to the saloon and wait for someone to take me in and buy me a drink”. However unacceptable it can be, one should remember that the scene is occurring in the segregated South, where Blacks are not allowed to enjoy the fruit of their labors and their children turn to be the first victims.

Similarly, we are presented anew with another intriguing incident in the life of Richard when he had to violate his ethics or commit an unacceptable act. As the story is getting to its end, it appears clear that Richard was unwelcomed anywhere he works. Either he is paid a meager salary or he is treated indecently. Here is a situation whereby Richard expressed a quite philosophical judgment when he had to steal in order to head to the North: “if I stole, I would have a chance to head northward quickly; if I remained barely honest, piddling with pints of bootleg liquor, I merely prolonged my stay, increased my chances of being caught... The

temptation to venture into crime was too strong, and I decided to work quickly, taking whatever was in sight, amass a wad of money, and flee”. Although stealing should not be condoned nor connived, the fact is presented anyways. Suggestively, one can argue that if Richard has now decided to steal, which is a crime, it is his impoverished state that forced him to think so. Understandably, the rampant criminalities and immoralities often committed by Blacks can be partly attributed to their impoverished and disillusioned condition.

To Wright, the effect of White oppression in the South was most visible in the black communities of the Mississippi Delta. He realizes that starvation, sicknesses, and their corollaries replenish Blacks’ homes when he was appalled by the pervasiveness of segregated life: “I saw a bare, bleak pool of black life and I hated it; the people were alike, their homes were alike, and their farms were alike”. For Hakutani, “the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings” (1985: 71). This equally refers to the problem of homelessness often faced by African Americans in the US. They live sometimes in small and dilapidated, inadequate and uncomfortable homes. Surprisingly, however, this problem of “homeless African Americans is often absent from the usual textbook study of homeless people” (Johnson, 2010: 583). In addition, what Richard has understood over his experiences in the South is that because the system has impoverished his people, they tend to lose all sense of life. This is aptly true because an individual who is denied his basic rights seems to likely hate the world and the very essence that makes life enjoyable. For instance, when Richard has this say: “After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man and how shallow was our despair.” Further, to express the actual reason why Blacks become so, he adds that “whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it”. Interestingly, however, hunger in this book may serve as a symbolic motif for raising conscious awareness. Though it has been clear that African Americans are made poor by the raging system established in the South, it is important to highlight that this pauperization has enabled Richard to be aware of the salient realities of Blacks living in the South. Richard himself has this to say: “I had an attitude toward life that was to endure, that was to make me seek those areas of living that would

keep it alive, that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical". In the words of Tate, it serves for "depicting Richard's compelling need to nurture his growing consciousness. Insatiable hunger defines the breadth of his childhood longings for imaginative adventure and his unfulfilled need to expand his awareness of himself and his environment" (1976: 118).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this paper has been to argue that poverty can, unfortunately, be imposed on a group of people, based on their race, which implies to a large extent that they are impoverished rather than poor. In *Black Boy*, one notices that African Americans are impoverished by the Southern dehumanizing system. This system, which is important to bring to the shore, enriches fellow Whites at the expense of Blacks. It denies Blacks the fundamental rights while privileging Whites. And no matter how hard a black person works in the South, s/he can never be rich nor enjoy the fruits of his labor. What this generates, however, is a shocking response from Blacks. As a result, this paper has found out that the more an individual is denied his basic rights, the more dangerous he becomes. Further, one needs to bear in mind that hunger is a serious threat to the world. Therefore, rather than to share the world's resources unequally on the basis of race, we need to come together as one and enjoy them in peace. For, terrorism, stealing, criminality, and any other moral vices will never give way in our society unless we feed people and meet their basic needs.

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