

The Dehumanizing Effect Of Jim Crow Laws On Richard Wright In Black Boy**Prof. V.M.Deshmukh**

Associate Prof. and Head

Dept. of English

G.S. Science, Arts and Commerce College,

Khamgaon 444 303

Dist. Buldhana (Maharashtra)

“Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. All were enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by white Democratic- dominated State Legislature after the Reconstruction Period. The laws were enforced until 1965. In practice, Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the states of the former Confederate States of America [https://en.m.wikipedia.org]

This paper attempt to throw light upon the dehumanizing effect of Jim Crow laws on delicate psyche of Richard Wright in particular and the blacks in general in Black Boy: A Record of childhood and youth. Richard Wright’s childhood in the South was marked by the abject poverty of his family, racial discrimination and the Jim Crow laws prevalent in the South. Wright recounts a childhood that is full of hunger, fear, physical beating as discipline and racism. He was extremely aggressive towards everything white. When he was barely four year old, he set fire to his grandmother’s white curtains. The fire rages out control, and terrified Richard runs out of the room. Ella, then lashes him until he loses consciousness. In Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth he says;

“Tension would set in at the mere mention of white and vast complex emotions, involving the whole of my personality, would be aroused. It was as though I was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be tolerated” [Wright 84]

He had already understood that the white world was ‘ Invisible Power’ which controlled and mistreated blacks- The dehumanizing Jim Crow South pronounced Wright and all black men unfit for anything but the lowliest work. As he ventures into the white world to find job, he encounters extreme racism and brutal violence, experience

which stays with him the rest of his life. His status as dispossessed black made his situation worse adding poverty to the race factor. Because Wright is black, he faces many challenges and abuse at the hands of a racist society. He is frequently the victim of Jim Crow laws and of his a family who does not seek to learn or move up in the society, but merely to survive: the fate of many black people at the time. All these elements left ineradicable marks on his psyche and creative genius. They also provided a raw material for his writing. Social reality helped Wright to mould his literary personality. During the entire period of life in the United States he was victim of racial prejudice and racial discrimination.

In vacation, Richard and his mother went to visit his Aunt Maggie and his rich Uncle Hoskins, who were living near Elaine, Arkansas. Uncle Hoskins, owner of a very profitable bar, had always refused to be submissive to whites, who were jealous of him. Only a few after Richard and his mother arrival, Uncle Hoskins was killed by a white in his bar. Unable to claim Hoskin’s body or his asset – and in danger of being murdered themselves- Ella, her two boys and Maggie flee back to Granny’s house. This behavior was then common among Southern blacks, who knew they could do nothing about inhumane acts of whites. Indeed, in those days whites could kill a black under any pretext. They knew that justice would always be on their side. The Negro boy had learned at firsthand what the whites will and can do to black men they feel threatened by. Either through experience or through sad tragic tales told to him by other Negroes Wright as he grew up, collected information and formed impressions about the ways in which contacts between the two races contained hidden and real dangers.

The effects of such seemingly senseless social structure were profound for Wright. His entire being challenged by the hate and threat stemming from what, by now had become a group of almost

unreal people. He dreamed of his own vindictive heroics against whites. Wright's imagination helped to create an environment both terrible and strongly remote as he explains,

“Something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment”. [White 151]

As White says,

“Wright vision of hostile southern white culture was come from his observations during various job experiences in Jackson, Mississippi. and Memphis during the early and mid 1920's.

He began to see the manner in which Negro labor was exploited.

Wright saw Southern Negro acting out a role assigned to him by the white in time even repressing the realization that his life was stunted. The Negro thus had to develop,

“A delicate sensitive controlling mechanism” that shut off his mind and emotions

“From all that the white race said was taboo”.

[White 172]

A normal life in the society was replaced by devious and subversive activities ways and means were found to cheat white men behind their, to gain triumphs great in black men's eyes but hardly noticed as victories by the white. At the Memphis bank young Richard got to know a round, yellow fat elevator operator named Shorty. One day Shorty needed a quarter for lunch, he told Richard he would get it from the first white man, who comes by. He gave them every reason to believe in the stupidity of the black race for he let them kick him in the behind for a few cents. It mattered little what Blacks thought, including Richard Wright, since his silly tricks brought him some money. Now his behavior deeply hurt the blacks around him and contributed to reinforcing the image of the comical and simple minded black in the eyes of whites. Though such actions the Negro ironically reinforced the white man's preconception that he was immoral and prone to crime. His deed were, in fact, subdued reactions to, and meager consolations for the repression forced upon him by the whites

The life of Negro, especially in the South, is generally an obscure one; and much current sociological research has be devoted to locating that line and to determining in fact, whether there is a division or, instead . The life of inferior is imposed

on the Southern. If one considers the long road of racial suffering in America down which Richard Wright fled from place to place, and if one consider also his extreme sensivity and self consciousness, his emotional vulnerability, one can summarize treatment be meted in his own land. He explains Carl Van Vechten in an interview:

“I never left my house to walk two blocks without being made to feel a Negro”

[Kinnamon 17]

As a result of living in constant fear and tension, the black themselves enforce obedience to the code of behavior drawn up by the whites i.e. “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow”. Wright had quickly realized that it was impossible for him to talk about anything, whatsoever with whites, except sex and religion. Otherwise he would have caused trouble for himself:

“Among the topics that Southern white men did not like to discuss with Negroes were the following:

American white women. The Ku Klux Klan, France and how Negro soldier fared while there; French-women Jack Johnson; the entire Northern part of the United States; the civil war;

Abraham Lincoln; the Pope; Jews, the Republican Party;

Slavery; Social equality; Communism; Socialism; the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the constitution; or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-esteem on the part of the Negro”

[Wright 252-253]

Socially and economically, black in Mississippi during this period were subjected to total discrimination. Most blacks during this period of Wright's boyhood worked as sharecropper, always desperately poor. In the towns and the few small cities, blacks worked as laborers, servants and in other menial capacities- One can understand that, in such a situation, the Southern black looks for a way out that will permit him to live the semblance of normal life.

In other words, Richard begins to have sympathy for blacks who lower their standards in order to get by. He shows that he is beginning to understand the psychic pain of the black community which was indirectly result of cruel Jim Crow Laws

Conclusion:

Conceivably all these personality traits in Richard Wright might have originated in isolated experiences in Southern American culture. Their origins are also related to a general state of the Negro mind bound up in the daily degradations forcefully proffered by a white controlled Southern culture dominated by Jim Crow laws. The book reveals the kind of degraded life the Southern black has to encounter. The author's aim was simply to confront America with the problem that it has always avoided.

4. Ibid; P.P 252-253
5. White Ralf K: "Black Boy: A Value Analysis",
6. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, XLI (Oct 1947) P.151
7. Ibid; P. 172
8. Kinnamon Kenneth : The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society Urbana : UP of Illinois Press, 1973, P.17

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1. [<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>]
2. Wikipedia p. np
3. Wright Richard : Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth New York; Harper and Row, 1945 P-84

