

# Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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## Abstract

Richard Wright (1908- 1960), an African American author, has grown up in the American South at a time when the American society has witnessed deep division, for together with the Whites vs. Blacks conflict there has been The Blacks vs. Blacks tension likewise, and violence has formed the dominant behavior between the conflicting groups. Wright's autobiographical novel, *Black Boy*, shows how he has been reared by a mother who believes that violence is the only effective strategy to protect her son from their violent environment. The misery and hardships the mother, Ella Wright, has undergone in her larger society as well as with her family and separated husband, have led her to adopt this strategy. She uses violence to teach her son the priority of family, religion, and beyond everything else she teaches him violence itself as a means of self-protection. Albeit this strategy affects the mother-son relationship negatively on the part of the son at the beginning, the son's intellectual maturity minimizes its significance, and he gradually starts to generate sympathy and show deep understanding towards his mother. The article discusses Wright's mother use of violence as a method for bringing up her son, Richard Wright in his autobiography, *Black Boy*. It also examines the impact of this method upon Richard's relationship with his mother and how he perceives her maternal role. Finally, the conclusion sums up the main findings of the article.

**Keywords {violence; Black Boy; Richard Wright; mother; son}**

## **Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ..... Inst. Iman Mahdy**

In a community where the color of the skin has been the criterion by which its members are assessed, Black people have suffered a constant pressure due to their lack of educational, economic, and social opportunities. Basically, this racial discrimination has led to an escalating Black and White conflict, but what is more escalating is Black on Black violence. This violence is perhaps attributed to various factors, among them is venting the anger and frustration they feel towards their unjust society. However, in this community Black mothers have suffered the most; besides the fact that they have to face being nonentities due to their undesirable color. They also have to bear a grave responsibility of raising a generation that is capable of facing such a difficult life as well. Moreover, black mothers have to protect their kids from this hostile environment. Each and every mother has had her own strategy to fulfill this responsibility. One of these mothers is Richard Wright's mother, Ella.

The mother-son relationship between Wright and his mother, as portrayed in his autobiography *Black Boy*, is one example of the African American mother relationship with her son, and violence, extraordinarily, forms the strategy which she believes is for his own advantage. The article focuses on Richard Wright's mother tendency towards the use of violence, physical or emotional, as a viable strategy to raise her son in Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*. It also explores the influence of this strategy on her son and the relationship between them.

Born in (1908) at Pucker's Plantation in Roxie, Mississippi, Richard Wright, the son of Ella and Nathan Wright, a school teacher and a sharecropper, had spent most of his difficult childhood in the American South; the place where Wright, like all other Black people, has suffered semi-legalized discrimination, pauperization and deprivation of education.<sup>1</sup> This anti-Black South has provided the bleak setting of Wright's *Black Boy* which is published in (1945). *Black Boy* or *American Hunger: A Record of Childhood and Youth* is regarded as the finest biography written by a Black author and one of the greatest autobiographies ever written in America.<sup>2</sup> It includes twenty chapters distributed among two parts, Part I; 'Southern Nights', and Part II; 'The

Horror and the Glory'. Part I covers Richard's childhood, while Part II covers his adulthood.

## **Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ..... Inst. Iman Mahdy**

The autobiography opens with a dramatic scene of the four-year-old Richard setting his grandmother's house on fire out of a child's curiosity. Unnaturally he starts to run not to seek a mother's haven from fire, but to seek a refuge from his mother's punishment hiding under fire itself which he has believed the perfect place that would protect him from his furious mother:

The fire soared to the ceiling and I trembled with fright

....

Soon my mother would smell that smoke and see the fire and come and beat me .... Yes I would run away and never come back. I ran out of the kitchen and into the backyard. Where could I go? Yes, under the house .... My mother must not find me and whip me for what I had done .... And neither did it occur to me that I was hiding under a burning house. (pp.4-5)<sup>3</sup>

The abject horror of being beaten up by his mother tells us that Richard has been experiencing this before, that now, being four years old, the cumulative impact of violence on Richard's psychological state is apparent. The violent reaction of Ella against her son's misbehavior has been so hard that the child loses his consciousness:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. A doctor was called- I was afterwards told- and he ordered that I be kept a bed, that I be kept quiet, that my very life depended upon it.(p.7)

Encountering this life-threatening violence has made this situation a critical moment in Richard's life to the degree that he had made of it a start for his autobiographical novel.

Whenever Richard is beaten up, Ella justifies it with words like: 'you've learned your lesson.' (p.14) and 'I'm going to teach you ....' (p.17) which gives the reader the impression that she is trying to perform the role of the teacher inside her own home, but what kind of teacher is she to Richard in this situation? She is probably a teacher who prefers apathy over empathy in order to achieve her aims. It appears that she's been concerned about her son explicitly posing a threat to the family, she says in a cogent manner: 'you almost scared us to death' (p. 7), also implicitly posing a threat to the community and this would mean posing a threat to himself, hence, she tries to teach him, via violence, compliance with the family along with the community norms. She does not acknowledge Richard's active mind, but

**Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ..... Inst. Iman Mahdy**

instead she believes it to be a deadly threat to the family and him, and therefore she beats him to death.<sup>4</sup>

W. E. Du Bois believes that *Black Boy* is a fictionalized autobiography even if its subtitle; *A Record of Childhood and Youth*, gives the reader the impression that the story is an accurate record of Richard's life.<sup>5</sup> The early drafts of *Black Boy* prove Du Bois's view point, since Wright has made revisions to them such as the one made to the image he sees in a horrible dream that comes to him as a consequence to the physical and psychological pain he suffers after being beaten up mercilessly. In the dream, Richard sees 'huge wobbly White bags, like the full udders of cow, suspended from the ceiling', (p.7) and later on when his condition grows worse, he starts to see the bags during the day, and starts to have a feeling that they are going to fall on him and drench him with 'some horrible liquid'(Ibid.) In the early drafts of the autobiography the 'white bags' appear as white faces, which means that Wright has revised them into 'white bags'. This revision definitely hasn't been made arbitrarily; the white faces symbolize oppression of the Whites in the Black mind, while 'bags' might symbolize the breast; the maternal symbol, and the liquid represents milk. By making this revision, Wright is turning from a general symbol to a more personal one<sup>6</sup> and the purpose is to concentrate on the serious jeopardy the mother-son relationship is confronting when the fear of being beaten up develops into the terror of being killed. The color white symbolizes terror for Wright,<sup>7</sup> for this reason he hasn't revised the color as he has done with 'faces', but he deliberately keeps it in order to associate it to his Black mother's breast and thereupon associate terror to his mother. The vision Richard sees can be described as the moment when Richard realizes that his mother; 'the person who gave him life, can revoke it'<sup>8</sup>.

Extraordinarily, Richard's first attempt to overpower the excessive violence he suffers at his own home has been directed against his father rather than his mother. It is worth mentioning that Richard has been beaten up by most if not all of his family members; his father, grandfather, grandmother, and aunt. All this violence has led Richard to feel weak and defenseless; therefore, he tries to put up a defense mechanism against violence. It is the mechanism of what he refers to as 'using words as a weapon' (p.248). Working as a night porter, Richard's father sleeps during the day which means that Richard and his younger brother have to keep quiet all day long. One morning, Richard and his brother find a kitten and start playing with it noisily and they wake the father. Frustrated, the father shouts 'kill that damn thing' (p.11). Richard knows that his father does not intend the literal meaning of what he says, but out of indignation, Richard

**Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ..... Inst. Iman Mahdy**

decides to take his father's words literally and so he hangs the kitten. When the father wants to punish him, Richard reminds him of his words and that he cannot punish him for carrying out his orders. Richard escapes his father's punishment and he triumphs over him by using his father's words against him. He makes his father feel that it is his fault using these particular words with a child.

This situation might not only signify the troubled relationship between the father and his son, but it also signifies the first stage of Richard's intellectual cognitive development. Moreover, it highlights Richard's passion for words, which he employs later in his life, as a weapon against his unjust society. The question that raises itself here is: Why does Richard use his mechanism against his father rather than his mother who has at some point represented a threat to his life? There are perhaps two reasons why Richard chooses his father rather than his mother; firstly, his father's absence from home has made him a complete stranger to Richard which is obvious in the way Wright describes him in the following passage:

He became important and forbidding to me only when I learned that I could not make noise when he was asleep in the daytime. He was the law giver in our family and I never laughed in his presence. I used to lurk timidly in the kitchen door way and watch his huge body sitting slumped at the table. I stared at him with awe as he gulped his beer from a tin bucket, as he ate long and heavily, sighed, belched, closed his eyes to nod on a stuffed belly. He was quite fat and his bloated stomach always lapped over his belt. He was always a stranger to me, always, somehow alien and remote. (p.10)

This passage reveals the awkwardness Richard feels towards his father which eventually leads to bitterness and anger and ends with him holding a grudge against his father and this has manifested itself in his words; 'my deep hate of him urged me toward a literal acceptance of his word' (p.11). On the other hand, Richard's intellectual development has somehow made him realize the fact that his mother's presence and concern even if they are not free from rough treatment, but at least they boost his confidence that he is not going to be abandoned and so feels cared for, especially after his father deserts his mother for the sake of another woman a short time after this incident. This incident can be regarded as the first step towards Richard's full awareness that his mother is a victim rather than oppressor and the violence she inflicts on him is meant to discipline more than to harm. Secondly, Richard knows that he and his mother speak the same language; he believes that his mother is 'imaginative' and brilliant enough to understand that he is lying and this is what actually happens next:

**Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ..... Inst. Iman Mahdy**

"But papa said to kill it," I said, trying to shift the moral blame upon my father.

my mother whacked me across my mouth with the flat palm of her hand.

"you stop that lying! You know what he meant!" (p.13)

Physical violence shifts to emotional violence; Ella uses Richard's active imagination against him when she fabricates a horrifying story of the dead kitten, coming back alive, to avenge itself against him. She then forces him to bury the kitten and pray on its grave to atone for his sin or else he would face the same awful fate as the kitten:

But my mother, being more imaginative, retaliated with an assault upon my sensibilities that crushed me with the moral horror involved in taking a life. All that afternoon she directed toward me calculated words that spawned in my mind a horde of invisible demons bent upon exacting vengeance for what I had done. As evening drew near, anxiety filled me and I was afraid to go into an empty room alone....

She ordered me to go out into the dark, dig a grave, and bury the kitten

....

Then, obeying my mother's floating voice; I hunted for a spot of earth, dug a shallow hole, and buried the stiff kitten; as I handled its cold body my skin prickled. When I had completed the burial, I sighed and started back to the flat, but my mother caught hold of my hand and led me again to the kitten's grave. "Shut your eyes and repeat after me," she said ....

"Dear God, our father, forgive me, for I know not what I was doing..."

"And while I sleep tonight, do not snatch the breath of life from me..."

I opened my mouth but no words came. My mind was frozen with horror. I pictured myself gasping for breath and dying in my sleep. (pp.13-

Ella realizes that her son is working on a self-defense technique; however, she 'knows that certain small gestures of self-pride and assertion would lead readily to brutality or death'<sup>9</sup> in a society like theirs which has made excuse enough for her to use her regular technique to manage her son's behavior. This is also Ella's first attempt to introduce Richard to religion. She chooses to teach him the wrath of God first, taking advantage of his already fevered imagination to force it on him.

Ella rejects Richard's innovative defense technique because she believes violence to be the only powerful self-defense technique that can ensure their safety in their hostile society, therefore, she does not only adopt it to bring her son up, but she also teaches it to her son in the form of self-defense.<sup>10</sup> In another dramatic incident, Ella teaches Richard to stand up and fight for himself for the first time. A gang of Black boys attack Richard and rob him on his way to buy grocery. He returns home terrified, Ella offers him two choices, either to take a stick and fight for himself or be

## **Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ..... Inst. Iman Mahdy**

whipped by her. Richard chooses the stick and engages in excessive level of violence against the boys:

They closed in. In blind fear I let the stick fly, feeling it crack against a boy's skull. I swung again, lamming another skull, then another. Realizing that they would retaliate if I let up for but a second, I fought to lay them low, to knock them cold to kill them so that they could not strike back at me. I flayed with tears in my eyes, teeth clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow. I hit again and again, dropping the money and the grocery list. The boys scattered, yelling, nursing their heads, staring at me in utter disbelief. They had never seen such frenzy. I stood panting, egging them on, taunting them to come on and fight. When they refused, I ran after them and they tore out for their homes, screaming.(p.18)

The heavy stick is clearly the symbol of protection for the mother, and a symbol of power for Richard which has won him 'the rights to the streets of Memphis' (Ibid.). When Ella gives Richard the heavy stick; It is as if she was giving him the authority over the family. It is a woman's avowal of frailty in the face of desertion. After the father abandon's the family, she takes his role as the provider more than the protector; she works as a cook to support the family financially. Later on she falls seriously ill, and ends up paralyzed.

Wright obliquely describes the violence he has suffered with his family and peers as the draining off of their restlessness 'by transferring their hatred of themselves to others with black skin and fighting them'(p.253). However, he realizes that it is different with his mother; he hesitates 'to accuse her of the betrayal of maternal care he cannot forget or quite forgive'.<sup>11</sup> He is aware that his mother, the intelligent and bookish woman, has been victimized by her disastrous choice of an unschooled peasant as well as by her racist society until she has grown into a symbol of suffering in his mind<sup>12</sup> whose influence lives on with him for the rest of his life, he contemplates:

my mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helpless; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relations to events that I had yet to face. (p.100)

Thus, Ella has found in violence the powerful force that would spare her son from suffering the same tragic fate she had suffered.

### **Conclusion**

The word 'mother' has always been, and always will be, associated with protection from hostility. Nevertheless, it has also been associated with hostility as is the case with Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*; Wright's mother, Ella, has found in hostility the proper procedure to protect her son from their hostile environment. Ella's pain and suffering hasn't been caused by only the White persecutor, but also by her equals, the persecuted Blacks. She has spent her life in a deeply divided society with an emotionally and mentally estranged husband. Being deserted, she has had to be the sole income provider as well as the sole caregiver, thereupon; she has got to turn to violence which she believes the only rational approach to provide the parental care. She beats her son to death to instill in him concern for his family, and not to cause danger to any of its members. She lashes his brain with horror stories to teach him spirituality. She beats him to force him understand that he should not employ any innovative self-defense technique save for violence which she considers the standard self-defense technique that he ought to employ to protect himself.

The Blacks have used violence against each other inside and outside their homes, which Wright regards as a way of taking the pent-up frustration they feel against their persecutors on their own people. Wright's mother might possibly be the most violent member of a family whose members have all used violence against him; yet she believes the violence she uses against her son is justifiable. However, this justifiable violence has had its impact on her son; it starts with his deep fear which later changes into deep understanding and sympathy with age and intellectual development. Being a member of the same society his mother is a member of, and confronting the same challenges she has confronted, have made Wright realize that his mother's use of violence is not against him, but rather for his own good. Furthermore, her lack of sympathy and outbursts of anger have been nothing but acts of care in disguise.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Jerry W. Ward, Jr. and Robert J. Butler, eds. *John Clare: The Richard Wright Encyclopedia* (USA : Greenwood Press, 2008), p.1.

<sup>2</sup>Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p.114.

<sup>3</sup>Edward P. Jones, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth. 60<sup>th</sup> ed.* (NY: Harper Perennial Modern Class, 2006) All Quotations from Wright's *Black Boy* are taken from this book.

<sup>4</sup>Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell, *Black Mothers to Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature with Social Practice, Vol. 20*, (NY: Peter Lang, 1995), p.9.

<sup>5</sup>Cited in Hakutani, p.114.



## **Violence as a Safeguard against Hostility: Black Mother-to-Son Parenting in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ..... Inst. Iman Mahdy**

- <sup>6</sup> Amy Hungerford. "The American Novel since 1945". You Tube. Yale University, Connecticut. Retrieved on 5 Aug. 2015. Lecture.
- <sup>7</sup> Amy Hungerford. From an E-Mail to Amy Hungerford, Professor of English and Divisional Director of Humanities at Yale University. 18 Aug. 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> Amy Hungerford. 'The American Novel since 1945'
- <sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom, ed. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Richard Wright's Black Boy* (NY: InfoBase Publishing, 2006), p.73.
- <sup>10</sup> King and Mitchell, p.11.
- <sup>11</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* ( NY: Amistad Press, 1993), p. 336.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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## **العنف كوسيلة للحماية ضد العداء: علاقة الام والابن السود**

### **في رواية ريتشارد رايت "الولد الاسود"**

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#### **الخلاصة**

ولد الكاتب الامريكي من اصل افريقي ريتشارد رايت (1908-1960) وترى في الجنوب الامريكي في وقت شهد فيه المجتمع الامريكي انقسام كبير، فبالاضافة الى صراع البيض مع السود كان هناك ايضا التوتر بين السود انفسهم، وشكل العنف السلوك السائد بين الاطراف المتصارعة. تبين السيرة الذاتية الروائية لريتشارد رايت (الولد الاسود) كيف انه تربي على يد ام تؤمن ان العنف هو الاستراتيجية الفاعلة لحماية ابنها من بيئتهما القاسية. ان الصعوبات والبؤس الذي واجهته الام، ايلا رايت، في مجتمعها الكبير ومع عائلتها وزوجها المنفصل قادها الى تبني هذه الاستراتيجية. تستعمل الام العنف لتعلم ابنها اهمية العائلة والدين وفوق كل شئ تعلمه العنف نفسه كوسيلة لحماية نفسه. بالرغم من ان هذه الاستراتيجية اثرت على العلاقة بين الام والابن بصورة سلبية من جهة الابن في البداية، الا ان البلوغ الفكري للأبن قلل من اهميته وجعله يبدأ تدريجياً بالتعاطف مع امه وتفهمها. تناقش المقالة استعمال ام رايت للعنف كوسيلة لتربية ابنها، ريتشارد رايت، في سيرته الذاتية (الولد الاسود). وتبحث المقالة تأثير هذه الوسيلة على علاقة ريتشارد بأمه وكيف ينظر الى دورها كأم. وأخيراً يلخص الاستنتاج النتائج الاساسية للبحث.

**الكلمات المفتاحية : (العنف, الولد الاسود , ريتشارد رايت , الام, الابن )**