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Representation of Revolutionary Spirit in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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Abstract

The revolutionary spirit is a natural state with which one revolts. It struggles to come up with its existence. It is not apparent in adverse conditions, but it reveals itself when a human being becomes aware of its very existence. In the autobiographical novel *Black Boy*, the protagonist serves as a representative of African Americans who possess a revolutionary spirit. As a child, the protagonist wonders about the discriminatory ways of racism. He prefers freedom with challenges to submissiveness with no challenges.

Objective: To trace the revolutionary spirit in the character of Richard.

Hypothesis: Richard's thoughts, speech, and actions are revolutionary.

Methodology: The researcher has studied Richard Wright's biographical novel *Black Boy*. He has also studied Wright's biography, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, written by Hazel Rowley.

Keywords: Freedom instinct, childhood impulse, and revolutionary spirit

Introduction

Revolutionary spirit means a state or action that is against an established social system. Spirit is one's mental state. The research paper studies the character of the protagonist, Richard, in *Black Boy* (1945), written by Richard Nathaniel Wright, an African American writer. It traces the revolutionary spirit in the thoughts, speech, and actions of Richard. It explores the desire for freedom in Richard, who feels it as a child and wants it despite the adverse social system. The paper points out how Richard, as a child, wonders about the racial discrimination between the Whites and the African Americans.

Freedom Instinct

In the first chapter of *Black Boy*, Richard shows his childhood impulses. It shows how a child desires naturally. At the beginning of the novel, Richard says that he dreamt of running and shouting freely, but he is restricted by his Granny, whom he is afraid of. In the company of natural objects, he experiences excitement and pleasure. He can feel it as a child, when he has no idea of the future full of troubles of racism. Being untouched by the torture of the Whites, his feelings are natural. He feels the sensuality in the touch of dew and the sense of the infinite in the Mississippi River. He feels nostalgia in the crying of the geese that fly towards the South despite the autumn (this is symbolic of southern migrants). His aunt's way of life creates disdain in him. He finds aching glory in the burning clouds when the sun disappears behind them. Seeing a hog stabbed in the heart astonishes him speechless. Another childhood experience with his father shows here Richard's love for freedom. When his father does not come home for a long time, he enjoys the days. He says, "I had been glad that he was not there to shout his restrictions at me" (*Black Boy*, 13). But, at that time, Richard didn't know that the absence of his father meant no more food. Richard's mother goes to the judge for justice against her husband. She wants the judge to make her husband support her and her children. Later, Richard understands that the support of his father means food to him, but he does not want his father to feed him, despite his hunger. This shows that Richard's hunger for freedom and self-esteem is stronger than his hunger for food. Richard's father says that Richard can get plenty of food, but when his mother asks for his willingness, Richard replies to his father, "I am hungry, but I won't stay with you" (*Black Boy*, 31).

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Richard is also offered a nickel by his father, but, though he wants the nickel, he does not want it from his father. It makes clear that Richard does not want to acquire food and livelihood at the cost of freedom.

Resistance to the Oppression

Richard wants to live by his principles. His grandmother denies him permission to work on Saturday (according to her religious principles). He does not follow her instructions and does not believe in such ideas. The grandmother warns him that the family member who rejects the religious beliefs cannot live in her house. At this, Richard chooses to leave the house; he prefers a hard life with freedom. At the workplace, Richard experiences racial discrimination and oppressive treatment by the White employees. So, he desires to go to North America, where he thinks he can live freely without racial discrimination.

In his school, Richard is selected to deliver a speech in a program. Richard prepares it on the basis of his experience as a black boy. The principal of the school persuades him to modify it in such a manner that it should please the White people. He also lures him, saying that Richard will pass the graduation and get a job, too. Richard refuses to do so. Here, Richard's nature seems obstinate to the African Americans as well as the Whites, but it is his hatred of the oppression.

Questioning the Social System

The experience creates a quest for justice, and even a sparkle of revolution is found in him as he becomes angry towards the unequal and unjust scene. Richard has to wait for the leftovers of the Whites. He stands near them when they enjoy their food, talk, and laugh. At the same time, looking at them, Richard's empty stomach churns with deep hunger. It naturally creates a quest in his mind, "Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to wait until others were through? I cannot understand why some people had enough food and some did not?" (Black Boy, 17).

Being an eager child, Richard asks many questions about the relationship between the Whites and the African Americans. Earlier, he finds no difference between them. He does not recognize that the words 'African Americans' and 'whites' are used intentionally. As Richard comes to know that a black boy has been severely beaten by a white man, his naive perception is that the White man must be the father of the boy. Knowing that the white man has no relation with the black boy, Richard wonders, "Then why did the white man whip the black boy?" (Black Boy, 22). Though his mother says that he is 'too young to understand' the matter, Richard stoutly declares that he will not let anybody beat him.

Childhood Impulse

Granny does not allow Richard the kinds of novels Ella reads. When she comes to know that Ella is narrating the story from one of the novels she read, she becomes angry with Ella and Richard as well. According to the religious principles of Granny, reading and listening to such stories is an immoral thing. But even after knowing the view of Granny, Richard urges reading those stories. This shows that Richard never pays regard to any religious principle. He is fascinated by the thirst for violence given in the imaginative stories of the novels. This is also a revolutionary behavior against an established code of conduct.

One day, Richard sees a large group of Black men. They look like elephants to him. He asks his mother about them. She tells him the truth. She says that they are not the elephants but the African Americans who are put in the chains by the Whites. Richard wonders, with the impulse of fighting back, why the African Americans do not fight against the Whites, as there are more African Americans than the Whites.

When the African American children come together, they eagerly talk about the life and nature of the Whites. They wonder what kind of people the Whites are exactly. They wonder if the Whites are less or more ugly than the African Americans. There is no specific aim or direction in their talk, but there is an emotional rejection of the Whites.

Revolutionary Spirit

The revolutionary instinct in the child (Richard) is inflamed in him by his mother. When his mother sends him to buy groceries, a gang of boys robs him. Richard runs back home in a panic. His mother neither says anything against the gang nor does she support Richard, but she sends him again for the groceries with another note. The gang again beats Richard and snatches money from him. Richard comes home threatened. His mother does not let him come into the house. She warns him not to come in till he gets the groceries. No way is left to Richard but to go to the shop anyhow and bring the groceries. It means inevitable fighting against the gang. There is just a way to 'do or die'. Again, there is the same situation, but Richard has neither the way to run back nor does he want to die; so, he fights back bitterly and defeats the gang. The problem is solved neither by pleading for others' feelings of pity nor by running away from them, but by staying there and enforcing one's position.

Richard's mother says to him to be humble (especially before the White boys) and not to fight against them. This teaching is also a part of religious preaching. Richard does not follow as per his mother's will, but for her satisfaction, he finally promises to follow her. Richard cannot afford to follow what his mother says. However, he promises that he will not fight against the White boys, but he knows well that if he keeps his word, he will lose his position in the gang of Black boys. He does not want it, for he feels that gang life is his life.

Revolution never comes free of cost. Richard has to suffer much for his ways. His revolutionary ideas are not pre-planned, but they are the products of a natural instinct for freedom that is cultivated in a particular atmosphere.

Hazel Rowley has given details about Richard Wright's family background in *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, how Richard's grandfather fought in the war on the side of America. He also had struggled to protect the African Americans' right to vote during the times of elections. This fighting back nature is found in Richard's mother. It makes her insist on her son to fight back (though, only against the African Americans).

Fear is set in Richard's mind due to listening to the stories of injustice and violence by the Whites against the African Americans. He feels that someday the same kind of violence can happen to him. One day, he hears about a black woman exploited by the Whites. Bearing the fighting spirit, he resolves that he will emulate the black woman from the clutch of the White mob. He thinks that he can fight against the Whites not straight but strategically. He thinks he will

conceal his weapon and pretend that he has accepted the maltreatment given by the Whites, and will kill the Whites with his gun before they kill him. The confused defensive feeling that has been in sleeping mode in him for a long time starts to take form and meaning in this manner.

From the gossip with his Black friends, Richard comes to know that they are aware of the suppression and conspiracy of the Whites. They know that the Whites conspire because they are fearful of the African Americans. In such a gossip, one of the black boys says, half complaining and half boastfully, that the African Americans are trained and used in war for America, but the Whites are scared of them when they return from the war to their homes.

Richard also reacts against his relatives and other African American boys who torture him. He never lets her aunt beat him, even when she wants to teach him manners and discipline. Richard's character is shown as aggressive in *Black Boy*. He is sent to be under the care of his uncle when his mother is no longer capable of taking care of him and his brother. Richard does not like to be asked many questions about his personal life, even by his uncle. When he goes to a new school on the first day, a black boy tries to torture and insult him, calling him an ugly boy. Richard calls the boy 'no less ugly than him'. Further, he defeats the boy in a fight and proves that he is not one to be bullied. This spirit is instilled in him by his mother. Richard Wright gives in *Black Boy* how his mother made him bitterly fight back. However, Richard's mother wants him to fight back against the African Americans, but she never allows him to fight back against the Whites, for she knows that it will punish him with death.

Being around twelve years old is not generally considered the age of maturity. But, even at such a young age, he feels that no threat can erase what he feels. He has his sense and notion, which cannot be changed by any kind of mis-education in his whole life. He believes that the meaning of life comes through struggling to find meaning in meaningless suffering. He has an attitude that makes him tolerant but critical and skeptical of everything. He has an attitude that makes him listen to those who have feelings and sufferings like him. That attitude makes him 'strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful'. He has a mind that broods over the unjust matters that happen to African Americans.

Conclusion

Richard loves freedom at such an age (in his early childhood) when nobody had taught him about freedom and slavery. Desiring freedom is a characteristic which is found in every child. Secondly, as Richard grows up, the family conditions build in him a revolutionary spirit. Though Richard has to suffer for having such a nature, he chooses to fight back. He does not fail to succumb to the bribe and oppression but resists them.

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