

The Horror and the Glory: A Black Artist's Emotional Experiment to Break the Ice

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Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to understand the unique nature of the African American authorship with special reference to the autobiography of the African American literary stalwart Richard Wright. The two volumes of his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945) and *American Hunger* (1977), compiled under the title *The Horror and the Glory* is a wonderful expression of the experiential aesthetics of a black man who tries to break his shell. It evinces how the voice of a social and emotional outcast traverses the set literary paradigms in search of a dignified identity. It not only breaks free his literary articulation from the western aesthetics but also assimilates it with the other marginalized voices of the world.

Keywords: Black aesthetics, marginalized group, sensibilities, experiential aesthetics, comparative paradigm, marginalized voices

African American writing is generally treated as a sub stream of a vast entity of Euro-American literature. In spite of many differences, the general characteristics of American writing have always been considered essential to understand wider implications of black writing. As the eminent black critic Roger Rosenblatt states, "Themes which have been ascribed as characteristically American... are the themes of black fiction as well. Stock American literary figures such as the confidence man and Yankee peddler show up in black fiction too, as do celebrations of the outlaw, the outcaste, and the versions of the standard American success story." ("Introduction", *Black Fiction*, 4) But, in the course of time the dictum is revised by the African American authors to search the uniqueness of their cultural experience. The Black Arts Movement of 1960s was a sharp deviation from the earlier integrationist approach. Its major expression was an aggressive advertisement of the 'Black Aesthetics' that celebrated the blackness. Larry Neal, one of its expounders, interpreting its fundamental proposition stated, "The Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology." (*The Black Aesthetic*, 257) It gives novel directions to reconsider the whole range of African American authorship in the light of their different socio cultural experience.

In this context the black authorship and its critique become the matter of discussion. Being a minority discourse the black autobiographies are

mainly treated as the voice of a marginalized group that is to be interpreted with regard to their protest element against the central oppressive force. The chief criterion to assess their success has been how far the author accomplishes in his projection of black plight within the aesthetic dimensions of mainstream literature. It specially holds true to the representative black writers who strove to set the new models for their group. The works of the African American literary stalwart Richard Wright have also been subjected to such critique. The two volumes of his well known autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945) and *American Hunger* (1977), which he initially composed as one book entitled *The Horror and the Glory* is widely appreciated in terms of a black man's portrayal of his helplessness on the American land. But, this one dimensional assessment arouses many questions that need a renewed analysis of literary classics such as Wright's *The Horror and the Glory*.

Does an autobiography of a black man always exist in relation to the silent presence of a white man? Or it has its own aesthetic dimensions. Does the western polemics, consciously or unconsciously, always govern the textual formation of the experiences of a maginalised group or their literary articulation is strong enough to enjoy autonomous status? How does the uniqueness of a socio-cultural experience generate experiential aesthetics in a literary discourse? To find out the answers of these queries one need to delve deep into the factors working beneath the textual surface. The first and foremost thing required for such exploration is to liberate the minority discourse from mainstream paradigms. The shifting paradigms of comparative literature are a healthy development in this direction. It opens immense scope to discover novelties of the artist who sets out to give voice to the experiences of a marginalized group. Traditional approaches need to be rectified for a broader and deeper view of black writing which advocates the rereading of their texts in the light of other than centre staged models.

Wright's autobiography is a wonderful specimen of the experiential aesthetics of a black artist. It begins with the incident of burning the white curtains by Wright as a four-year-old boy and it is really amazing to explore all the aesthetic dimensions of what makes a young black boy of four years to do so. The opening paragraph of Wright's autobiography announces:

ONE winter morning in the long-ago four-year-old days of my life I found myself standing before a fire-place, warming my hands over a mound of glowing coals, listening to the wind whistle past the house outside. All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient. In the next room Granny lay ill and under the day and night care of a doctor and I knew that I would be punished if I did not obey. I crossed restlessly to the window and pushed back the long fluffy white curtains- which I had been forbidden to touch- and looked yearningly out into the empty street. I was dreaming of running and playing and shouting,

but the vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow, made me afraid. (*Black Boy*, 9)

Here, Wright delineates his feelings as a four-year-old boy. But the author is no more the same boy. He is a grown up man who reconstitutes his past for artistic purpose. Wright says, as a boy he is instructed to "make no noise". Does it imply a black artist's consciousness of restrictions over his attempt to speak that others degenerate into propaganda? The statement becomes very significant with regard to a black artist whose work is primarily interpreted in terms of the protest element. He is also apprehensive of being punished if he doesn't obey the instructions. Perhaps, Wright intentionally develops the conflict of 'utterance' and 'silence' to emphasize an artist's rejection of the idea of loss of voice. In fact, there is a denial of the whole conception of circumscription as he continues to further develop it in the opening chapter:

"You better hush," my brother said.

"You shut up," I said.

My mother stepped briskly into the room and closed the door behind her. She came to me and shook her finger in my face.

"You stop that yelling, you hear?" she whispered.

... "I told you so," my brother gloated.

"You shut up," I told him again. (*Black Boy*, 9-10)

Wright is coerced to keep silence because his "old, white, wrinkled, grim" faced Granny is not to be disturbed. He is also "forbidden" to touch the white curtains as it may spoil their white beauty. The black boy is very much aware of the restrictions imposed upon him. Reiteration of white images reinforces a black man's colour consciousness. He is provided with a code of conduct regarding the 'white' even at the age of four. Although the young sensibilities of a child do not fully understand its meaning yet it starts taking shape in his mind. What alternative is left with a young boy to do when he is left with no choice of his own and is placed amidst so many predefined etiquettes? The boy ached with boredom.

I wandered listlessly about the room, trying to think of something to do, dreading the return of my mother, resentful of being neglected. The room held nothing of interest except the fire and finally I stood before the shimmering embers, fascinated by the quivering coals. An idea of a new kind of game grew and took root in my mind..... My idea was growing, blooming. Now I was wondering just how the long fluffy white curtains would look if I lit a bunch of straws and held it under them. Would I try it? Sure. (*Black Boy*, 10)

The only thing that fascinates the boy is 'fire' that has immense power of destruction. After a short rumination he decides to experiment with it to break the monotony of his life's boredom. It results in setting the entire house on fire. What makes the whole episode remarkable is its deviation from the standard signification. Here, the act of arson does not symbolize

Wright's protest but it is a curious experiment of a young boy in spite of his awareness of its dire consequences. Wright terms it as an accident. He expounds:

Anyway, it was all an accident; I had not really intended to set the house afire. I had just wanted to see how the curtains would look when they burned. And neither did occur to me that I was hiding under a burning house. (*Black Boy*, 11)

Wright's reconstitution of his past as an artist in *Black Boy* begins with the decimation of an establishment symbolized in the image of house and he, the exterminator terrified of the consequences of his own experiment, hiding himself beneath it. But he does it to initiate his creative process; the process which begins with destroying the objects that enclose him. The whole book is full of many such examples of experiential aesthetics where a black artist gives his own interpretation to the usual and unusual happenings of his life. An eminent critic Horace A. Porter reads Wright's autobiography as a narrative of an artist in formation. In his article he discusses, "how *Black Boy* (and to a lesser degree *American Hunger*) can be read primarily as a portrait of the artist as a young man." (316) It reminds one of the famous novel by James Joyce entitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which he describes his own development through the fictional personality of Stephen Dedalus. There may be some similarities between the two as Wright also passes through a succession of influences like family, academic learning, sex, and the puritanical religiosity of his near white Granny, which exert claims upon his conscience like Stephen Dedalus's. But Stephen's life does not reflect Wright's life, nor can Joyce's aesthetic experience define and represent Wright's emotional and intellectual experiment with words in the form of his autobiography.

Joyce's Stephen appears as a highly unified character. He chronicled with patience what he saw. His diary entries at the close of the book refer to various matters on different dates. But Wright's black boy believes in giving the words novel interpretations, the aesthetics of which does no more remained confined to existing western literary models. For example, Wright quotes one incident when he lived in a one-story brick tenement with his family in Memphis. One day his father was awakened by the meowing of a stray cat. He shouted at Wright and his brother to "Kill that damn thing!" (17), as it disturbed his sleep. He exploded, "Do anything, but get it away from here!" (17) His father was never literally meant so. But, despite the repetitive warning of his brother, Wright did exactly what his father suggested. Wright explains his act of such cruelty through retelling in his autobiography.

I resented his shouting and it irked me that I could never make him feel my resentment. How could I hit back at him? Oh, yes I knew that he had not really meant for me to kill the kitten, but my deep hate of him urged me to ward a literal acceptance of his word. (17)

Wright turns his literal act of killing a cat into symbolic parricide. Porter calls it "a willful misinterpretation" on the part of a son "to neutralize his

father's psychological authority" (318) In one sense it may be interpreted as an expression of protest but experiential aesthetics of a writer lying beneath the whole description is unparallel. It arouses decadent beauty of the incident. The query which is raised by Wright through narrating such incident is who is to blame for the emotional bleakness of man? Wright analyses this sensitive issue very delicately. He broods over in the Chapter Two of the *Black Boy*:

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 even our despair. (45)

The oppressed black boy of Wright seems to come close to the oppressor Shylock of *Merchant of Venice* in his sentiment. In spite of being a far fetched comparison, this single dimensional incidental similarity between an oppressed in one context and an oppressor in another context arouses because Shakespearean monstrous villain is a religious outcaste in relation to the mainstream Christianity. Both in terms of being marginalized represent the 'other voice', telling the story of the 'other side', expressing the 'other point of view' in response to the attitudinal approach of the central authority that imposes its own definition on them. It presents a new comparative paradigm in which African American fictional characters find identification with the rebels and victims of Jewish American literature like of Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth and Saul Bellow that inspires to discover new dimensions in multi-ethnic literature.

Wright left South (Mississippi) at the age of 19 for North. The second volume of his autobiography *American Hunger* opens with his arrival in Chicago which seemed to him, in his first glimpse, an "unreal" city. The first half of the book gives a socio psychological portrayal of his life whereas the second half deals with his fascination and, at the same time, reservations about the communists and their ideology. Wright joined Chicago's John Reed Club and was immediately given a writing assignment for *Left Front*. But an artist inside him sensed the constraints of tacit official protocol. What he realized was that an organizational setup with collective goals leaves no space for independent thinking. His individualism clashed with collective norms. He could not allow the power of his words to suffocate in an ideological design. As for a black writer, words seem only available means to let the world know the uniqueness of his experience, he declares: My writing was my way of seeing, my way of living, my way of feeling, and who could change his sight, his notion of direction, his senses? (*American Hunger*, 93) Hence, *American Hunger* concludes with the final proclamation of a black artist regarding his intellectual endeavour to break his shell. Wright ends his autobiography with the exposition:

...I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human. (*American Hunger*, 135)

Wright's autobiography is a good example of a black artist's experiential aesthetics. It evinces how the voice of a social and emotional outcast traverses the set literary paradigms in search of a dignified identity. An artist's search for 'I' puts him in contradiction with his own people. Such dissociation of sensibilities leads him to further isolation within the group. The author who seems to have refused to be destroyed as a man, as a human and of course as an artist experiments with the words to attain his identity. The barbaric impulses created in him by the imposition of inhuman status come into clash with the high morality of civilized society. It not only breaks free his literary articulation from the western aesthetics but also assimilates it with the other marginalized voices of the world.

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