

A Study of Richard's Racial Trauma and Recovery in Black Boy's "Southern Night"

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Abstract: *Black Boy* is one of the masterpieces of African American writer Richard Wright. The book was divided into two chapters, the first of which detailed Richard's experiences as a child living in the South, and the description of racial trauma was an important feature. This paper will analyse the indescribable racial trauma young Richard has suffered, and how racial trauma had affected his outlook and life direction. Fortunately, young Richard took the next step toward the recovery of racial trauma with the help of his mother, friend and his favourite writer. And by writing about his trauma healing process, Wright intended to inspire the people who were struggling with racial trauma and provided them with ideas for overcoming racial trauma.

1. Introduction

The African American writer Richard Wright, known worldwide for his fiction, poetry, and political prose, contributed greatly to the development of African American literature as well as the Black Movements. Born into a poor family in Mississippi in 1908, Wright spent much of his childhood struggling with hunger and discrimination. Growing up in a segregated environment, Wright not only empathized with African Americans, but also had a keen insight into the conflicts between races. His works embodied a wide range of concerns about the living environment and conditions of African Americans. Based on what he saw, heard and experienced, Wright wrote the book *Black Boy*. In the form of autobiography, the book showed readers the way of survival and the spiritual world of the African Americans at the bottom of the society from a first-person perspective, portraying a vivid social "marginalized person". With the recordation of twists and turns of the lives and joys and sorrows of underprivileged African Americans, "*Black Boy* rang cash registers" and became "the fourth largest selling non-fiction title of 1945. Wright was the first African American writer to reach such a wide audience"^[1]. The spirit conveyed by *Black Boy* could be said the core of all Wright's works. Wright wrote about the mental trauma of African Americans under the torture of racism, recorded how he came out of the spiritual wasteland and redeemed himself, and bravely showed the voices of African Americans themselves, which changed the prospect of the creation of African American writers and set off a revolutionary trend of black literature. *Black Boy* was composed of two parts, "Southern Night" and "The Horror and The Glory". Wright intended to publish both parts in one entire volume, but some obstacles prevented the second part from being

published until 1977 under the title *American Hunger*. In 1991, the Library of America published the two parts together under the title *Black Boy(American Hunger)*. This article will focus on the first part, “Southern Night”, and analyze the symptoms of racial trauma that Wright suffered as a child and the recovery from that trauma.

2. Richard’s Racial Trauma Symptoms in “Southern Night”

The persistent psychological reactions caused by racism and colonialism are known as racial trauma, which mainly refers to the psychological damage caused by racism and colonialism to both perpetrators and victims. Born into the underclass of the American South, Richard suffered direct or indirect persecution by racial discrimination in his growth, which caused excruciatingly painful and traumatic injuries to Richard’s body and mind.

Firstly, the most common and pervasive symptom of psychological trauma is “intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation”^[2]. Indeed, Richard’s fear of the white was evident in every line of “Southern Night”. Growing up with bloody stories of violence against colored people, young Richard developed, as he wrote, “a vague uneasiness about it all”^[3]. Even encountered with police officer who was supposed to symbolize safety, Richard still felt that “his ‘white’ face created a new fear in me”^[3]. It was the murder of Uncle Hoskins by white men that really made Richard fall into concrete fear. The death of his relative transformed the threat of white violent from hearing to fact, giving Richard a first up-close experience of white terror. According to Herman’s trauma theory, “The worst fear of any traumatized person is that the moment of horror will recur... the repetition of trauma amplifies all the hyperarousal symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Chronically traumatized people are continually hypervigilant, anxious, and agitated”^[2]. When the second mysterious uncle was traced, Richard mother warned him not to speak any information for the sake of life safety. In a crisis reminiscent of Uncle Hoskins’ death, Richard was once again plunged into the fear of the white men’s bloody menace. To add insult to injury, the death of friend’s brother Bob completely shattered Richard’s mental security: “The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move...as long as it remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment”^[3].

Secondly, As Herman wrote, “...repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality”^[2], Richard developed uncontrolled fear even hatred for white people under the subtle influence of the racist environment, and these constant negative feelings greatly affected Richard’s personality development. As a young child, Richard originally had no concept of race and regarded the whites as “merely people like other people”^[3]. Gradually, as a result of hearsay stories of violence and personal experiences of racism, “a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died”^[3]. Moreover, racial trauma would perpetuate in a way of intergenerational transmission within the victim group and create collective trauma within the race. Richard could be able to fit in with the black boys only “by subscribing to certain racial sentiments”, that is, “the touchstone of fraternity was my feeling toward white people, how much hostility I held toward them, what degrees of value and honor I assigned to race”^[3]. Under the racial conflict environment and the implication of the black community, a racial concept was buried in Richard’s heart. This concept, a mixture of hatred and fear, gradually became a huge shadow as Richard grew up, encroaching on Richard’s entire life. Richard wailed that “nothing challenged the totality of my personality so much as this pressure of hate and threat that stemmed from the invisible whites”^[3].

In the end, Richard fell into depression. “Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless”^[2]. Sometimes, when some “kind” white men made absurd suggestions, Richard does not explain or expect understanding and sympathy from them. Richard had learned in each of his

setbacks that there was an invisible wall between black and white people that could never be broken through. And to those whites who arbitrarily oppressed blacks, Richard had discovered that it was futile to fight back and hate this or that white person who was “part of a huge, implacable, elemental design”^[3]. In addition to his isolation from the whites’ world, the isolation from his black people pushed Richard into a deep depression. Frantz Fanon’s^[4] theory of racial trauma argued that under the “Cultural Imposition” of European colonialism, blacks fell into a situation of double servitude, that is, from enslavement by whites to self-enslavement. Indeed, Richard had witnessed many cases that African Americans trampled on their pride and disciplined their children to please the white people. However, Richard “could not make subservience an automatic part of my behavior”^[3], and this attitude led him to run into obstacles at every turn in his work. For living, Richard had to give up his dignity and compromise with racism, but the result was that he was insulted and oppressed by white people. Richard painfully confided his suffering to his friend Griggs, but Griggs had long been numb and thought that there was nothing strange about being bullied and beaten. Not accepted by the whites and not understood by blacks, Richard fell into depression. He described his painful feeling: “I felt that I had been slapped out of the human race”^[3]. The constant negative emotion even caused Richard to develop somatization symptoms: “My personality was numb, reduced to a lumpish, loose, dissolved state. I was a non-man, something that knew vaguely that it was human but felt that it was not”^[3].

3. Recovery Process of Richard’s Racial Trauma in “Southern Night”

Struggling in the racial trauma, Richard was guided by his mother, friend and his favorite writer, which not only largely alleviated the pain of racial trauma, but also made several key changes in his personality and world view. This initial recovery of Richard’s racial trauma laid a solid spiritual foundation for the second part of Richard to leave the South resolutely and to go to the North in search of further redemption.

“The guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor”^[2]. When young Richard tried to escape the threat of violence from his peers, his mother Ella made a choice that affected Richard’s whole life. Ella cruelly refused Richard’s crying pleas to come into the house and forced him to “stand up and fight for yourself”^[3]. Taking up arms, Richard unexpectedly “won the right to the streets of Memphis”^[3]. Makombe commented the violence and crime in *Black Boy*: “...where race, society, and legislation are stumbling blocks to self-realization... Crime and violence are not only abhorrent social vices but also strategies used by some individuals to undermine and/or evade authority and ensure survival”^[5]. When the law of white supremacy failed to secure the rights of blacks, violence was not a kind of nature but a desperate means of survival. Therefore, such a kind mother who loved children deeply unexpectedly implemented a tough and extreme parenting style in the defense of individual rights, forcing Richard to use violence to solve problems. This unusual experience played a crucial and leading role in Richard’s life. In the face of white oppression, humiliation, violence, and the perverted racial concepts of inferiority, hatred, and compromise, Richard still insisted on defending his dignity as a “MAN”, that is, in the words of Joseph Skerrett, “Wright rejected the anesthesia of the emotions which made these survival methods practicable, and chose instead the role and route of the rebel”^[6].

“Many abused children cling to the hope that growing up will bring escape and freedom. But the personality formed in an environment of coercive control is not well adapted to adult life”^[2]. Richard was enlightened to defend equal rights under the education of Ella, but his strong character also made himself suffer from racial issues. So the second step of trauma recovery was that Richard learned to hide his character in order to survive safely in the white world. Griggs revealed to Richard how African Americans made a living in a white supremacist world. The first thing was to

remember the humble status: “you’re black, black, black, see? Can’t you understand that?”^[3]; Second was that “When you’re in front of white people, think before you act, think before you speak”^[3]; Finally, Griggs introduced Richard to a job that was right for him and Richard felt “My hopes soared”^[3]. In order to find a job for living, and to avoid another confrontation with whites, Richard finally decided to follow Griggs’ advice: “I’ve got to watch myself, break myself...”^[3]. Richard worked hard to get closer to his fellow blacks: to be polite to white people, to show inferiority, to speak in a low volume. Over time, Richard had learnt “to contain the tension I felt in my relations with whites”^[3], and could easily adapt to the rules of the white world, laying a financial foundation for his plan to escape the South.

While secretly fighting against racism and pretending to pander to the whites in order to survive, Richard found no outlet and became lost in the two conflicting lifestyles. Until H. L. Mencken’s shocking article, like a thunderbolt, awakened Richard, who was wandering in this racist society. Mencken has been described by Walter Lippmann as “the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people”^[7]. His radical writings opened Richard’s eyes to radically different blacks’ ideas, and led the curious Richard to develop a new interest of reading. Richard felt the novelty and joy that the cruel reality did not have, and reading subtly changed Richard’s perception of everything he saw and heard. For example, with the help of books, Richard came to understand the underlying logic of the white supremacy world and “no longer felt that the world about me was hostile, killing”^[3]. On the other hand, Richard was inspired by Mencken’s articles: “This man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club”^[3]. As a result, Richard resumed his dream of writing, using the pen as a weapon of equality, and “at first reading, and later writing, became for him a strategy for dealing with the hostile environments that surrounded him and the hostile but unutterable feelings he carried within”^[6]. Driven by a desire to write, Richard began to introspect and tried to find out the life him really wanted: “I could fight the southern whites by organizing with other Negroes... But I knew that I could never win that way... I could submit and live the life of a genial slave, but that was impossible”^[3]. After much consideration, Richard finally decided to follow his heart and emotions, and got on the train to Chicago to start a new chapter of his life in the North. It also means that Richard moved from an infinite passive wallow in racial trauma to an active fight, as he wrote firmly at the end of the book: “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 the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human”^[3].

4. Literary Significance in the Trauma and Recovery Perspective

Black Boy was an autobiographical novel in which “the attitudes and sentiments expressed by the young Wright are not totally his own but represent the responses of those he called ‘the voiceless Negro boys’ of the South”^[8]. As a spokesman for black boys, Wright did not portray all the blacks in a positive light. The black people in his works were not always the obedient, honest and pathetic victims in traditional black literature, and the process of young Richard’s recovery from racial trauma was also full of violence and submission elements. As Dan McCall put it, “He(Wright) refuses to dress up his Negroes in an imported Sunday best because he has a far larger task before him”^[9]. By writing about the real and terrible mental state of the blacks at the bottom and the seemingly extreme guidance of the blacks to their compatriots, Wright showed the serious mental trauma of African Americans to the world, so as to guide the people around world to think deeply about the causes of this situation. Wright showed the crisis of the blacks and the pervasiveness of racial trauma in the black community, exposing the morbid decay that lies beneath the glitters of

modern civilization: the racism that ate away at the flesh and soul of its victims.

In the image of many blacks who were suffering from racial trauma, Wright bravely broke through the wall set by racism for blacks. Wright tried to guide black boys in oppression through “young Richard” and to show them the direction to get rid of racial trauma. In Wright’s writing, young Richard, who had valuable resistance consciousness, did not become an invincible “hero”, but it was the countless twists and turns and undignified suffering that made Richard remove the “protagonist halo” and become an ordinary, flesh-and-blood member of the blacks. By writing the story that such an ordinary black boy could jump out of the cycle of blacks’ racial trauma, Wright not only brought hope to African Americans who were suffering from racial trauma, but also recorded the mental journey of young Richard in detail, so as to inspire the black community. From thinking about how an individual could resist the differential treatment in daily life, Richard slowly transitioned to reflecting on why blacks had been unable to successfully regain their own dignity and power. Richard found that the agglomeration of black community was the result of the exclusion of white society and the group trauma caused by racism. Not only this kind of negative gathering was difficult to sprout a firm resistance force, but also the vulnerable group had to force their members to obey in order to avoid the revenge of the abuser. Every black person was forced to silence under external and internal pressure, and this vicious circle led to tragic fate. Such reflection also made young Richard understand that it was necessary to let the black community spontaneously unite and resist in unison, and let the black people have their own voice. From this, young Richard finally found a direction out of his trauma. As Li Yi commented, “Most of the male protagonists in Richard Wright’s works could not get rid of the brand of historical trauma and the confusion of the real society in transformation process... but their reflection on their tragic fate was what Wright urgently needed to convey to the world”^[10].

Richard aroused the reflection and resistance of the black community through his shocking literary works, and its essence was also trying to promote the development of human racial equality through literature. As Richard wrote in his book, Mencken made him realize the infinite power of language. Wright “twists the white authors’ words to find an understanding and expression of his own culture, taking the traditions of realism and naturalism for himself ... what Wright has stolen is the ability to use language powerfully, the ability to make his bad language heard through the manipulation of white text”^[11]. Inspired by Mencken, Wright realized that language was no longer the tool used by racists to suppress and rule the blacks. On the contrary, language could be a powerful weapon of equality for blacks, even for all mankind who were suffered by racial trauma. *Black Boy* was one of Wright’s practices. He opened up his racial trauma with brutal prose, and showed how a black boy climbed out of the mire of pain, in an attempt to demonstrate the values that he believed the oppressed should follow. The great success of *Black Boy* was of extraordinary significance. It encouraged African Americans in the same racial trauma to seek redemption, it made the blood and tears under racism come to light, and realized the goal of promoting the development of human racial equality through literature.

5. Conclusion

Wright drew on his own experience to create a heartbreaking story about a black boy growing up. As a victim of racism, Wright “had a lot of material, and his black identity gave him a sensitivity beyond that of the average white writer, which gave his work an extraordinary power”^[12]. Once struggling with racial trauma, Richard found the hope to escape predicament, and he couldn’t wait to pick up a pen to share his healing experience with his fellows. Wright tried to rely on the powerful language to disperse the shadow spread by racism, calling on the victims of racial trauma like him to keep a sense of resistance, develop strong character, and reflect on the tragic fate at all

times. Like “a battering ram”, Wright “exposed with such emotional power the oppression faced by Negroes in America. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Richard Wright’s books helped to lay the ground for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s”^[1]. Wright’s work was a protest of social change, but also a guide to equality. The spirit he wanted to convey was not only applicable to the African American, but also pointed out the direction of pursuing freedom for all mankind who were suffer by racial trauma. In this way, Richard Wright was not only an excellent writer, but also a well-deserved spiritual mentor for all mankind.

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