

**Impact of Racism and Oppression of the Afro-American Psyche -  
A Study of Richard Wright's Select Works**

**Prof. C. N Annadurai, M.A., M.Phil. (Ph.D.)**



**Richard Wright (1908-1960)**

**Courtesy: [https://aalbc.com/authors/author.php?author\\_name=Richard+Wright](https://aalbc.com/authors/author.php?author_name=Richard+Wright)**

**Abstract**

The fiction of Richard Wright revolves around the suffering of the African-American people in the hands of the racist whites. It is essentially a reliving of the anguish of the Afro-American community, which had to endure an environment of brutal racism and endless hunger and poverty. It not only serves as a faithful account of the socio-political conditions of Wright's times but also brings out the impact of such a life on the Afro-American population living in America. The present paper highlights the novelist's attempts to portray the impact of racism and oppression on the Afro-American psyche as seen in *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945).

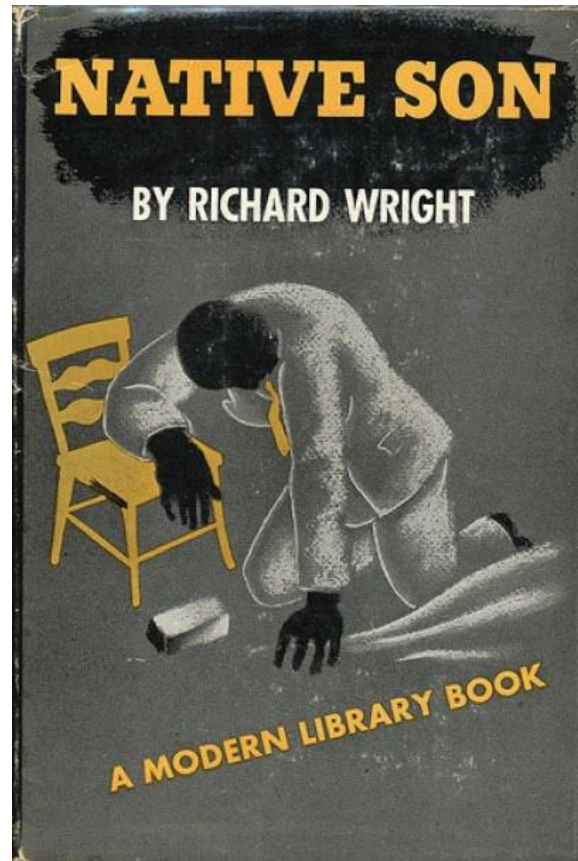
**Keywords:** Richard Wright, Afro-American, racism, Afro-American literature, *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, *American Hunger*

## **Introduction**

Richard Nathaniel Wright, the renowned Afro-American Writer was born in Mississippi in 1908. His father was an illiterate farmer and his mother was a schoolteacher. Wright's family moved to Tennessee when he was six years old. When his father abandoned the family, Wright's education suffered terribly. He moved from one school to another and struggled a lot to adjust with the new atmosphere and classmates. Even as young boy, Wright had seen and experienced the painful pangs of hatred, racism and oppression in his house and in the society. This scarred his young impressionable mind permanently and later emerged powerfully through his pen. He decided to become a writer to express himself as a black man. He moved to Chicago and improved his writing by reading Dostoyevsky, Theodore Dreiser, Henry James and Sinclair Lewis in public libraries. He worked as a postal clerk and then got a job in a relief agency and supported his mother and uncle's family with the meagre income. Then, he associated himself with the communist party. He wrote for the communist paper regularly and in 1937 became an editor in *Daily Worker*. As a black writer, Richard Wright did much to help his people to free themselves from the bonds of slavery and racial oppression. Alan Wald puts it as, "Much of his literature concerns racial themes, especially those involving the plight of African Americans during the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Literary critics believe his work helped change race relations in the United States in the mid-20th century." (Alan Wald)

In the following pages, an earnest attempt is made to bring out the impact of the racism and the oppressive environment on the Afro-American psyche as seen in the select works of Richard Wright.

*Native Son* (1940)



Courtesy: <https://www.pinterest.com/explore/native-son/>

Richard's Wright's debut novel *Native Son* presents the fate of the central character Bigger Thomas, an illiterate and poverty-stricken black man in his twenties. The novel is set in Chicago, America during the 1930s, a period of the great American depression. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist wakes up to a grim reality in his cramped, rat-crawling apartment located in the southern side of the city. His oppressed life was hard and filled with acts of violence. He had completely lost his identity and control over his life. He feels he is destined for menial and low-wage labour under the rich white people. He had been living a lowly life of a thug thus far. Following the continuous pestering of his mother, he unwillingly takes a job as a chauffeur with Mr. Dalton, a rich white man. Mr. Dalton sees himself and acts like a philanthropist only to suppress his guilty conscience arising out of endless exploitation and swindling of the helpless and poor black people.

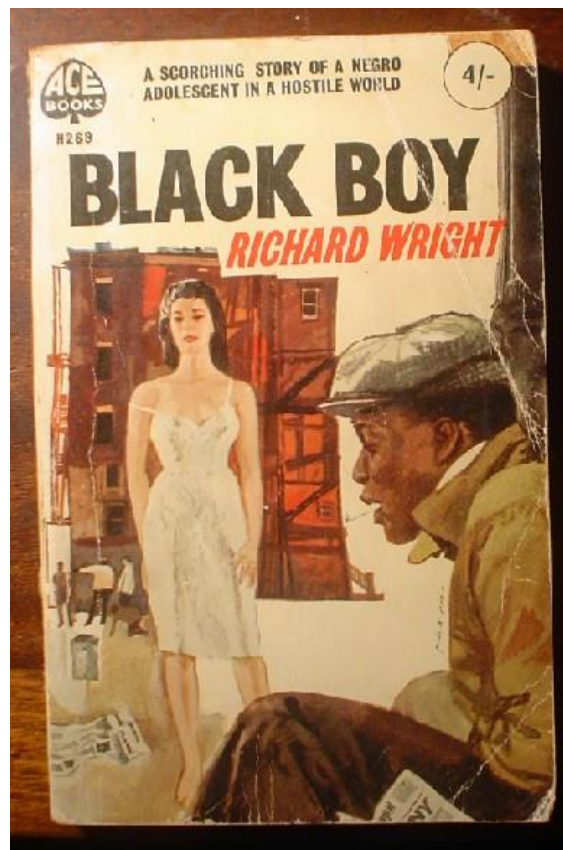
Even on the first day of his work, Mary, Mr. Dalton's daughter violates the black-white restrictions and forces Bigger to take her to meet Jan, her boyfriend. Bigger is embarrassed even more when Mary and Jan take him to a restaurant in the south side and ask him to drink with them. He drives the car while Jan and Mary make love in the back seat. He helps the drunken Mary to her room upstairs. Under the influence of liquor and being very close to a white woman for the first time, Bigger loses self-control and kisses Mary. When he lays her on her bed, the blind Mrs. Dalton comes there. Bigger is stupefied, he fears Mary would reveal him. He tries to silence her by pressing a pillow on her face but by doing so, he inadvertently kills her. When Mrs. Dalton leaves the place, Bigger takes Mary's body to the furnace and burns her to erase the evidence. Mary's death is seen by the Daltons as a case of possible kidnapping by her boyfriend Jan, belonging to the communist party. Bigger uses the bias of the Daltons for the communists as a cover and continues to work in the house as an innocent black worker.

The act of murdering Mary, the white woman intoxicates Bigger with a strange power and courage. Encouraged by his girlfriend, Bessie, he writes a ransom letter to the Daltons in the name of Red to extract money. Soon Mary's bones are located in the furnace and her murder is confirmed. Bigger flees the place with Bessie and takes refuge in a vacant building. There, he quarrels with Bessie and in a fit of madness, rapes her. Out of fear that she might reveal him, he beats her to death. After a period of lucky escape, Bigger is finally caught and brought to justice and is sentenced to death. Meanwhile, a white mob ravages the southern side, where the black people live in the name of seeking justice for Mary's brutal murder at the hands of a black man.

Mary's boyfriend, Jan calls on Bigger in jail and regrets for violating the social codes that governed the black-white relations. He empathises with Bigger and arranges his friend Boris A. Max to vindicate Bigger's case. For the first time, two white men—Jan and Max appear as human beings to Bigger. In spite of Max's best efforts to save Bigger, the latter is sentenced to death by the jury. However, Max points out rightly that Bigger is a product of the racist and oppressive American culture and violence, hatred and revenge only creates more Biggers in the society.

Thus, Wright brings out the impact of the racist and oppressive social milieu on the Afro-American psyche. Bigger, the protagonist is a son of the soil and he was not a born criminal. However, he is dehumanised and rendered indifferent and violent by the racist culture around him. Conditions of hunger, poverty and humiliation make matters worse. It is through violence that Bigger is able to realise self-worth and identity as a black man. Anne Gee observes, “In Native Son, Richard Wright examines how the correlation of race and violence produces devastation through the novel’s main character Bigger Thomas, whose “rhythms of life” have become “indifference and violence.” In another instance, she points out “In treating blacks as objects, whites create an environment that precludes black identification as human.” (Anna Gee)

### *Black Boy (1945)*



Courtesy: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/521995413035630585/>

*Black Boy* is a fictionalised autobiographical work that is based on Richard Wright’s early life. It examines the author’s hard times as a boy in the south covering the period of 1912-

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27. It shows the painful self-realisation and eventual emergence of the author as a protest writer. It tells about his efforts to suppress violence or extreme behaviour aroused by the racist and hateful white southerners. Wright's family failed to provide the love and kindness to him as a boy. Often the author felt as a stranger in his own house and longed for understanding and acceptance. He is punished by his mother even for his mistakes and the adults in his house never treated him kindly. All this affected him emotionally and made him seek a better life outside in the unfriendly world dominated by the whites. Sarah J Turner, a Wright scholar says, "...Wright suffers from hunger his entire life, not only for food but also for acceptance, love, and an understanding of the world around him." ([www.studentpulse.com](http://www.studentpulse.com))

*Black Boy* begins when the author as a young boy sets fire to his grandma's house accidentally. He is beaten severely by his mother and left to wriggle in pain. The violent incident creates an indelible impression in Wright's young mind and makes him grow stronger. Soon they move to Tennessee and the father abandons the family. It is in Memphis, Tennessee that Richard Wright encounters the monster of racism. It affects the core of his being and moulds him in certain ways that clearly lasts throughout his life. It gives him the fiery passion and determination to escape the clutches of poverty, hunger and overcome the oppressive circumstances.

When Richard grows older, he begins to realise it would be easier for him to live the submissive and slavish life that is laid down for a black man by the white. He decides to break the old ways and develop into a new being with an identity for him. For some time, he feels religion has the power to bring people of different races and colours together and give them peace and progress.

When Richard was twelve, he feels estranged from his family and friends. He could not connect with anybody and feels like an outsider all through his life. As he grows older, he decides to become a writer. He moves to Chicago to realise his dreams. He works part-time and throws himself to reading the works of famous American and African writers. He carries the worlds and the painful experiences within him and yet he is determined to come out of himself

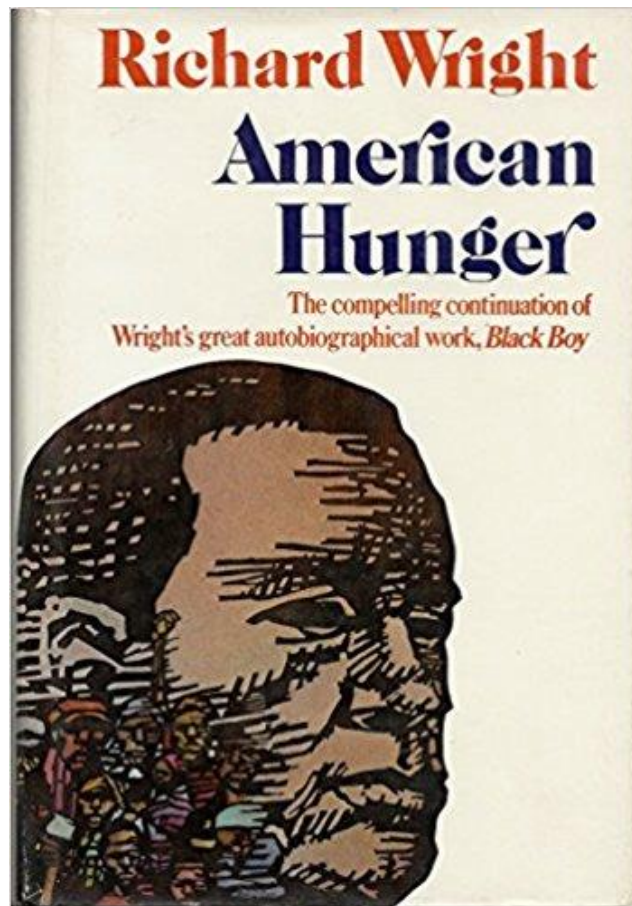
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and walk as a new man. He says, "... I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within. Because my environment was bare and bleak, I endowed it with unlimited potentialities, redeemed it for the sake of my own hungry and cloudy yearning." (*Black Boy*, p.70)

### *American Hunger*



Richard Wright's *American Hunger* is a continuation of *Black Boy*, in which the author's life in Chicago, Illinois from 1927-37 is covered. It was published posthumously in 1960. It begins in the year 1927 when Richard Wright comes to live in Chicago with Maggie, his aunt. He finds that the condition of the Afro-Americans has not improved or changed for good. Barriers of race and colour still separate black men from the white and confine the latter to a life of poverty and suffering. Richard himself is no better than his black counterparts are. He still

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tries to find a foothold and works low-paying jobs and lives in continuous hunger and isolation. He could barely manage to make both ends meet.

When he joins the John Reed Club and other groups of writers, the communist members see him as a threat for being the objectionable 'black intellectual'. They label him a traitor and attack him. He dissociates himself from the communist party and moves to New York the following year. His quest now is to free himself socially and psychologically and become a successful writer. He expresses himself through writing as he feels, "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." (*Black Boy*, p.148)

## **Conclusion**

Richard Wright heralded a new literary tradition of black writers, who following their master raised their voice in protest against racism and oppression. Almost all the works of Wright contain themes of racism in one form or the other. His works *Native Son* and *Black Boy* bring about the impact of racism on the black psyche. The black man who is seen as an object by the whites suffers unspeakable anguish, loss of identity, social blindness and feels emotionally disconnected with himself, with his family and with the world. He lives the life of misery, poverty, hunger, humiliation and suffering. He has no self-image and he feels he is born only to suffer and die.

Although slavery was done away in America in 1863, Richard Wright's *Native Son* documents it in the America of the 1940s. Even in the present day, African- Americans still face the racial tensions with their white counterparts and their life has not improved much in the socio-economic fronts. Richard Wright's powerful works of protest brought to limelight the issue of racism against the black people and helped to change it for the good of both the white and the black people. Wright's following words still carry relevance and significance: "What was it that made the hate of whites for blacks so steady, seemingly so woven into the texture of things? What kind of life was possible under that hate? ..." To this profound question, he himself



provides an answer of hope, "I told myself that there were good white people, people with money and sensitive feelings." (*American Hunger*, p.71)

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