



ALKEBULAN

A Journal of West and
East African Studies

Volume 5, Issue 2

Alkebulan: A Journal of West and East African Studies

<https://gnosipress.com.ng/index.php/alkebulan>

ISSN (Online): 2971-6187

Dimensions of Child Abuse and Traumatic Memories in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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ABSTRACT

Racism is a form of discrimination that conditions the existence of African Americans physically and psychologically. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* illustrates the effect of racism on the lives of African Americans in the American society. Through literary depictions, he accounts for the psychological effect of racism on African Americans. This study, through the application of critical race theory and trauma theory examines Wright's *Black Boy* as a traumatic memory of the fictional autobiographical narrator within the world of the novel. This study adopts a qualitative research approach and observes that the concept of whiteness from when Richard was four has been a source of trauma for him, and he did all he could to survive the American society. This study submits that Wright's father is traumatised by his experiences of slavery and an attempt to survive the racial system, and as such, he looks for an easy means out of his fatherly responsibility. This study concludes that Richard is a traumatic patient who was first traumatised by the actions of his family and the censorship he faced. Richard's experiences of subjugation at the hands of fellow blacks and whites in the American society all lead to various levels of abuse, resulting in trauma.

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Received: 20 July 2024

Accepted: 2 July 2025

Published: 12 July 2025

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Keywords: Organisational Communication; Perceived Organisational Support; Employee Engagement; Remote Work; Organisational Support Theory (OST)

INTRODUCTION

Memory plays a functional roles in Wright's *Black Boy*. Onuoha (2018) writes that; "There is a nexus between self, literature and history and it is commonplace to submit that the writer expropriates from history in the creation of a literary text" (p.17). Wright's *Black Boy* highlights the destructive effect of racism on the psychic of African Americans. Ramadhani and Rosyidi (2019) focused on "*Black Boy*...subjects such as racism, discrimination, and power..." (p. 40). This concept of power is premised on the ability of one to regulate the life of another, even when it is detrimental to the growth of others. This concept of power is clearly highlighted in the abuse of children and African American people, as vividly captured in Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*. Udaganj (2021), acknowledging this oppressive power, submits that "Wright portrays the black under oppression" (p. 7). This oppression is in the form of whites oppressing blacks and blacks oppressing their children. In view of the foregoing, Tiwari (2017) observes that "Wright is one of those literary voices who wages a war against the evil of racial discrimination" (p. 977). In this war against racial discrimination, parental oppression and abuse are highlighted. Chaitanya (2020) refers to Wright's *Black Boy* as Richard's recount of his experiences of white racism (p. 617).

As such, it presents it for literary and social criticism of the actions of racism. Tarik and Reddy (2017), in writing about *Black Boy*, note that "Wright's novels represented blacks' rejections of the white norms through alienation from the established order" (p. 460). Wright's *Black Boy* uses art to hold a mirror onto the consciousness of society by portraying the effect of racism and segregation on the psychic of the African American. Deshmukh (2019) corroborates the foregoing in affirming that Jim Crow laws have a negative effect on the delicate psyche of Richard Wright in particular and the blacks in general in *Black Boy* (p. 59). Richard in *Black Boy* was at his formative age, and the construct of society made a negative impression on his psyche, which had a traumatic effect on him. In view of the foregoing, Al-Subari (2020) refers to Wright's *Black Boy* as a "fictionalized autobiography" (p. 22), which indicates that the work is a blend of personal stories that highlights his abusive childhood and his subjugation by racism.

Child abuse is the subjugation and exploitation of children without providing necessary care for the minors. Onuoha (2022) affirms the foregoing thus; "Neglect is a form of child it is the failure of parents to redeem their obligation towards their children" (p. 153). It also includes resisting the inquisitive nature of the child's habit and suppressing the child's self-expression. Sheikh and Pathan (2018) are of the opinion that African American children are exploited in the South of the United States, and they experience family fragmentation and alienation, which is illustrative of *Black Boy* (p. 258). Richard's parents are traumatic patients of slavery and racism in their society; they constantly restrain and constrain Richard to live within the premise of the defining laws of racial American society. These various kinds of restraints were sources of trauma for Richard. The White in Wright's *Black Boy* constitute the major contributors to Richard's trauma within the world of the novel. Bhalt (2022), in writing about *Black Boy*, observes that "Richard Wright, a pioneering African American writer, is well known for his 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*" (p. 38). *Black Boy* is a creative memory of traumatic realities in African American society.

African American men and women have experienced various forms of traumatic exploitation, ranging from slavery to racism, etc. These experiences are the traumatic burden that African Americans carry right from birth and throughout their existence in

the American society. Hakutain (1985) is of the opinion that “Wright’s intention is to use the young self as a mask” (p. 71). The masking of the young self refers to the traumatic experience of the collective in the African American society. It is an attempt to find a route into the stifling effect of slavery and racism on African American memory. Caruth (1996, p. 4) is of the opinion that the wound of the mind is unknown and finds expression in repeated imposition on the survivor. Slavery and racism are the constant repetitive focus of Wright’s creative works, and this lays claim to the wound of his psychic that finds expression in his works generally and specifically in his *Black Boy*, which highlights the effect of racism on the mind of the African American boy. Symbolically, by using “I” Wright personalises his traumatic memories and attempts to heal from them through the reenactment of such experiences. The thesis of this paper is to examine dimensions of Wright's traumatic neurosis because of abuse that finds expressions in *Black Boy*.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the qualitative methodological framework, which has to do with the analysis of data from a discursive perspective. The data for this study was elicited from Wright’s *Black Boy* and subjected to textual analysis. This approach enables the researchers to critically examine the data by subjecting them to literary interpretations through the application of race critical and trauma theories. This enables the researchers to critically analyse the text, accounting for dimensions of trauma in Wright’s autobiographical narrative and highlighting the psychological effects of racism.

Child Abuse and Traumatic Memories in Wright’s *Black Boy*

Wright’s *Black Boy* is a traumatic autobiographical but fictionalised narrative that chronicles the experiences of African Americans in America. Owan and Onuoha (2022) are of the view that; “(Auto) biographical storytelling in all its taxonomic forms is used to erect memorials on the psyche of the society” (p.401). *Black Boy*, as the name indicates, is a narrative that is symbolic of the traumatic experiences of the black boys in America and how systemic racism and segregation deprive them and subjugate them by virtue of the actions of the whites in America. From the Critical Race Theory and Trauma Theory, we could see that *Black Boy* is used by Wright to challenge the dominant narrative of white superiority in America. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) affirm that “critical storytellers believe that stories also have a valid destructive function” (p. 44). Wright’s *Black Boy* is a deconstructive narrative that highlights the effect of racism in the American society and the traumatic effects of this form of oppression. This is so in the sense that, as Delgado and Stefancic (2017) inform us, “Society constructs the social world through a series of tacit agreements mediated by images, pictures, and tales.” (p. 44). *Black Boy* is an attempt to hold up functionality and reality in the consciousness of American society and to re-examine its treatment of African Americans in the American society. *Black Boy* opens with a narrative foreground of the source of African American boys' trauma in the American society. Wright (1945) unknowingly acknowledges his trauma when he submits that:

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. (...) 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... (p.7).

Richard is raised in a rigidly structured household, which becomes a source of his trauma in the sense that physical pain was constantly inflicted on him in the name of discipline to enable him to extract obedience from him as a child. Onuoha and Clinton (2021) observe that; "...non-fictional presentation of personal memories relating to specific events and experiences in the life of the narrator" (p. 360) Richard's mother constantly scolded him without any means instance of petting him as a child, which became a source of his annoyance. However, his subjugation is symbolised by the existence of a white curtain, which he was warned never to touch. This white curtain is symbolically used to represent the white racial society that keeps scolding Richard at every turn, like his mother.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) affirm the foregoing when they note that "stories can give them a voice and reveal that other people have similar experiences" (p. 44). Richard seems to suggest that other African American boys shared his own experiences. At the "morning" of any African American child, the American society keeps scolding the African American "boy" to the extent that they become fretful and impatient to conform to a certain norm in a racialized society. This concept of scolding an African American "child" without any petting or praise becomes a source of the trauma that the African American boy experiences, as illustrated in the case of Richard in *Black Boy*. Caruth (1996), in defining trauma and its manifestation, writes, "Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). Richard's memory is an overwhelming experience of his childhood memory that propels his creative autobiographical memory as reflected in his narrative. The white curtain, which is symbolic of the American White, comes with the seclusion of racialized society, and this led to Richard burning down their house as an attempt to escape his trauma which is triggered by the curtain. Richard setting the whole house ablaze indicates a certain impossibility of destroying racialized American society, which benefited greatly from slavery, racism, and inequality. Richard acknowledges the impossibility of disrupting racism when he comments on setting the curtain ablaze, thus: I crawled under the house and crept into a dark hollow of a brick chimney and balled myself into a tight knot. My mother must not find me and whip me for what I had done. 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 it occur to me that I was hiding under a burning house (Wright 1945, p. 9).

The disruption of racism, even by accident, would lead to the collapse of many American institutions that are built on systemic racism and the subjugation of African Americans for the benefit of whites in America. A white American like Richard would be traumatised to disrupt racism because of the generations that had benefited from it. Caruth (1997) notes that "it is through encounter with trauma – both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it – that we can begin to recognise the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (no longer based on simple models of experience and reference)" (p. 11). The possibility of Richard's trauma is referential to his lived experiences in American society as a person of colour. Through his autobiography, he tells a national story depicting the subjugation of African American people in America. Mathpati (2021) corroborates the foregoing, thus: "The struggle between individual and society forms the backbone of Wright's fictionalised autobiography. It controls two main types used in the book: the concept of personality

and the concept of environment” (p. 672). *Black Boy* illustrates the impressions made on the body and the mind because of the racial environment.

The body is a site for impressions and to account for racial effects in African American personality. Shakir and Reddy (2017) affirm that racism affected the identity and social life of the blacks in Wright's *Black Boy*, and this effect is indicated in the ability of the traumatic patients to traumatise another, as seen in the actions of Richard's parents. Hovad (2010) highlights the foregoing thus, “Racism negatively affects relationships among African American people themselves” (p. 5). The brutalization of Richard by his parents is indicative of the brutalization of his parents through the racist system of America. Onuoha (2020) notes that the body has assumed newer thematic representation (p.25). Richard's body becomes a site for the infliction of several pains by his parents because of Richard's attempt to disrupt the symbols of his trauma. He affirms this thus:

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... I was lost in a fog of fear. (...). My body seemed on fire and I could not sleep. Packs of ice were put on my forehead to keep down the fever. Whenever I tried to sleep, I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me (Wright 1945, p. 2).

As a result of Richard's action, he was inflicted with physical pains to the extent that he lost consciousness. Richard case indicates that an attempt to disrupt racism completely has a negative effect on whoever attempts to carry out the project. Richard's experience in trying to burn the curtain, which is the source of trauma in his life, complicated his existence, indicating that it was not possible to completely eradicate racism from the American society without the one trying to, not doing complete damage to the system. Richard's brutalization after burning down the curtain, which is referential to his trauma, is indicative of the effect of racism and any attempt to disrupt it. Richard's family is symbolic of the American society that attempts to silence the black, and the Richard family silenced him at all points in his life and did not allow him to grow as an inquisitive child. First, Richard is silenced by his mother and the don'ts at home, and later, he is also silenced by his father, indicating that the African American child experiences various forms of abuse before even coming into contact consciously with a racialized society. However, the parents who are products of racial trauma by their actions transfer this trauma to their children because of the way society defines their place in society. They indirectly define the place of their children within their own environment, leading to generational trauma transferred from one generation to another through inherited trauma and first-hand experiences of trauma later, as depicted in Wright's *Black Boy*. Richard's father is a source of fear for Richard, and he is traumatised whenever his father is at home. Sadeq (2016), commenting on *Black Boy*, submits that “violence occurs abundantly in *Black Boy*” (p. 65). This violence is perpetrated by human agents such as traumatised blacks and racist whites in the American society. Richard is writing about his father and the effect of his father's actions had on him, and he submits that:

It was in this tenement that the personality of my father first came fully into the orbit of my concern. (...) 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 lawgiver in our family, and I never laughed in his

presence. I used to lurk timidly in the kitchen (...). He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote (Wright 1945, p. 16).

Richard's father censored him in such a way that it drove fear into him, and Richard is always conscious when his father is around. Richard's traumatic consciousness is a product of his fear of his father. As a patriarch, Richard's father constitutes another level of power within the structure of power and subjugates his son for his personal comfort. Richard's father is a source of fear that traumatised his son, as depicted in the excerpt above. Richard could not laugh in the presence of his father, and Richard's father's presence made him timid, which is occasioned by fear, and this is a gradual development and manifestation of trauma within the narrative. Richard is not only traumatised by his father's attitude toward them, but he is also irritated by it, and he observes, "He went inside, grumbling. I resented his shouting. Oh, yes.... He had said to kill the kitten, and I would kill it! "I knew that he had not really meant for me to kill the kitten, but my deep hatred of him urged me toward a literal acceptance of his word" (Wright 1945, p. 17). Richard went as far as killing the kitten just to get back at his father and to register his dissatisfaction with his father as a child, but his action became a source of fear. Richard killing the kitten was symbolic of him standing up against his fear and the subjugation of his father, and he repeatedly observed that he understood what the father said but needed to get back at his father. Richard notes that "I waited, resolving to defend myself with my father's rash words, anticipating my enjoyment in repeating them to him even though I knew that he had spoken them in anger" (Wright 1945, p. 18).

Richard, through the killing of the kitten, attempts to find redemption from the oppression of his father. Richard is a character that fights against his subjugation, even though that is represented by his father. Richard observes that "I had had my first triumph over my father" (Wright 1945, p. 19). Richard, right from childhood, battles with subjugation and attempts to present such a form of subjugation by virtue of his actions. Richard's victory was temporary because of his mother's action, which retraumatized him. He observes that "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" (Wright 1945, p. 19). Richard is traumatised by his mother's use of words, and since she is more experienced, she played on the child's psychic abilities to the extent that the child's actions haunted him. This is also highlighted in Richard's fear of going outside to bury the kitten as directed by his mother. Richard affirms the effect of his mother's words on him, saying, "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" (Wright 1945, p. 21). Richard is a constant witness to the site of trauma, and he experienced it through his physical and psychic reactions to it.

As well as his psychological pain, Richard also faces physical pain, which is occasioned by hunger. Richard is constantly tormented by hunger. Richard observes that "Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first, I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been... at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly" (Wright 1937, p. 22). Richard is affected by hunger in such a way that he grows numb. Richard's absentee father became a source of trauma and hunger for Richard. Richard submits that "as the days slid

past, the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger, I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness" (Wright 1937, p. 23). Richard had to suffer because his father absconded from his responsibility as a father. Even Richard's mother's attempt to get Richard's father to take up his responsibility as a man was a futile attempt. As a result, Richard was continuously traumatised by his father's action in court, and when his mother had gone to meet him to ask for assistance for the upkeep of his children, Richard's father failed on both occasions to oblige to their demands. As a result of the absence of his father, Richard had to battle hunger and do all sorts of menial jobs to be able to provide for himself, and this was a source of pain and trauma with regard to his existence as a child. Richard's father's actions become a traumatic memory that returns to Richard in his dreams and imagination.

Richard's father's face and that of the strange woman were a source of flame that almost suffocated him in his childhood. Richard's father's actions traumatised him and made Richard reject his father. Although it was painful to him, his father had rejected him first for a strange woman. Richard subsequently accounted for his father's actions as a project of slavery trauma, which did not allow African American men to see value in family because of the brutality of slavery and racism in America. Richard submits that "my living the knowledge that my father was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life but who had failed in the city; a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city and who had at last fled the city." (Wright 1937, p. 47). Richard's father is traumatised because of the reality of the environment in which he found himself, an environment that is designed to subjugate African Americans to the extent that the placement of individual survival becomes more important than that of the family and the community. Richard's father's life is twisted and frustrated by the peasant plantation and the city he escaped to for solace, which conspired against him to the extent that he is frustrated and absconding from his responsibility as a father, eloping with another woman who provided him with a temporary escape from his failure as a father. Morrison (1977) in *Song of Solomon* affirms the foregoing, thus: "People do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us, and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive, and stay in the game makes us do funny things. Things that make us hurt one another; we don't even know why" (p. 84). The same case is made for Richard's father; to survive his own trauma of American society, he had to abandon his family.

In the house of Uncle Clark, Richard is traumatised by the narrative of a dead boy who had slept in the room. This changed Richard's view of the house, and he decided to go home. In his narrative of his trauma, Richard observes that "I spent another sleepless, shivering night in the dead boy's room—it was not my room any longer—and I was so frightened that I sweated. Each creak of the house made my heart stand still. (...). "A week of sleeplessness brought me near the edge of nervous collapse" (Wright 1937, p. 123). Richard heard that a boy had died in his room; his knowledge became a source of tension in his life, and he demanded to return home to his mother. At home, he was abused and subjugated by his overly religious grandmother, who wanted to make him a Christian at all costs. Granny's attempt to make Richard a Christian within her fold becomes a source of trauma and the infliction of pain on Richard, and when he refused to join Granny's fold, he was deprived of other basic needs of survival as a means of forcing him to join the fold. Aunt Addie also inflicted pain on Richard as a means of asserting herself, and until Richard stood up for himself, that was the only time she left him alone. All these forms of discipline from Richard's extended family were a source of trauma for his young physicist.

Richard is also abused by the African American Black in society because his child action at six made him play with the wrong because of his absentee father. Richard observes that:

One summer afternoon—in my sixth year—while peering under the swinging doors of the neighbourhood saloon, a black man caught hold of my arm and dragged me into its smoky and noisy depths. (...). I yelled and struggled, trying to break free of him, afraid of the staring crowd of men and women, but he would not let me go. He ...ordered a drink for me. (...). Somebody tried to jam a cigar into my mouth... (Wright 1937, p. 29).

The African American men did not understand that Richard was a child at six and that children mimic adults, and they got him drunk. The African American men did not understand the nature of children, and as such, they abused Richard by virtue of their actions. As a result, Richard became addicted to alcohol, and this exposed him to unwholesome aspects of African American life. It took Richard's mother time and effort for her to be able to control her son's alcohol addiction. Bhalt (2022), analysing Wright's *Black Boy*, observes that "the narrative concentrates on Richard's understanding of whiteness and blackness" (p. 40). Wright's understanding of blackness indicates that they are not saints, and many of them can do wrong, but they are also traumatised by the environment in which they found themselves.

Richard, at an early age, is traumatised by the concept of whiteness, as symbolised by the curtain he attempted to burn down, which led to the burning of his parents' house. Sreenirasan (2014) submits that "he explores racism not only as an odious belief held by odious people but also as an insidious problem knit into the very fabric of society as a whole" (p. 16). Racism is a discriminatory power structure that traumatises blacks and complicates their existence in American society. Richard observes that:

"white" people, it had never meant anything to me emotionally. (...). And when word circulated among the black people of the neighbourhood that a "black" boy had been severely beaten by a "white" man, I felt that the "white" man had had a right to beat the "black" boy, for I naïvely assumed that the "white" man must have been the "black" boy's father. And did not all fathers, like my father, have the right to beat their children? A paternal right was the only right, to my understanding, that a man had to beat a child. But when my mother told me that the "white" man was not the father of the "black" boy, was no kin to him at all, I was puzzled (Wright 1945, p. 33).

The above indicates Richard's gradually taking note of what constitutes whiteness in the African American society. To describe his relationship with the white community, Richard acknowledges the existence of racism in America. Like the African American men, the Whiteman also inflicted pain on the boys in society, which also made Richard refer to the site of his trauma, his father, who always beat him. This beating of a black boy by a white man becomes self-referential and makes Richard afraid of the whites since the whites who beat a black boy did not fulfil the requirement for administering discipline to a child. Whiteness becomes a reference to trauma in the life of Richard and his attempt to stay away from all whiteness, as represented by the curtain he set fire to and his running away from the orphanage that his mother took him to. The memory of the boy beaten by the white man becomes a source of influence that guides his actions in running away from the orphanage. After years of staying in the orphanage, Miss Simon's face, the owner of the orphanage, becomes a source of trauma for Richard, making him immobile whenever he

is in her presence. Since his childhood of four, Richard has been a traumatic patient because of how he was raised and how African American society was fashioned. He observes that:

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. (...). Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization... (Wright 1945, p. 50).

From the foregoing, Richard acknowledged that he was traumatised growing up in Memphis. In acknowledging his trauma, he also highlights dimensions of his trauma, which include the family he was born into. The subjugation of the negroes was a source of trauma for Richard because he was also implicated in the collective plight of the African Americans. Richard suggests that the negroes have been constantly traumatised to the extent that their inner strength has been cowered by their fears, frenzy of confusion, and pressure in American society. Richard thought he had outlived the shock of childhood because he was changing an environment, but the new environment still has much racism and subjugation. It was unknown to him that he would have a family that would attempt to force their ways on him. Richard's thought of outliving the shocks of childhood implicates Caruth's (1996) submission: "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (p. 17). Granny, like Richard's parents, continues to inflict pain on him. Granny is allergic to Richard reading novels. Richard was thoroughly beaten for his slips when Granny was bathing him, and she did not stop there; she recruited her husband and daughter to further inflict pain on Richard as a measure of discipline.

Richard never healed from the traumatic memories of his childhood. Through the benevolence of Aunt Maggie's husband, Uncle Hoskins, Richard, and his family had enough to eat, but he was not sure that he would have such an amount of food on the dining table that he asked several times before he could get some to eat. There were indications that trauma influenced his actions, as illustrated below:

Though the biscuits were right before my eyes, and though there was more flour in the kitchen, I was apprehensive lest there be no bread for breakfast in the morning. I was afraid that somehow the biscuits might disappear during the night, while I was sleeping. I did not want to wake up in the morning, as I had so often in the past, feeling hungry and knowing that there was no food in the house. So, surreptitiously, I took some of the biscuits from the platter and slipped them into my pocket, not to eat, but to keep as a bulwark against any possible attack of hunger. Even after I had got used to seeing the table loaded with food at each meal, I still stole bread and put it into my pockets. In washing my clothes my mother found the gummy wads and scolded me to break me of the habit; I stopped hiding the bread in my pockets and hid it about the house, in corners, behind dressers (Wright 1945, p. 67).

From the foregoing, it is indicative that hunger is a source of trauma for Richard in that, although he had a lot to eat, his traumatic memories of hunger were still with him. Richard constantly lives with the fear of not having enough to eat, which refers to his childhood memories of lack because of the actions of his absentee father. It was Richard's traumatic memory of childhood that made him continuously hide biscuits in anticipation of hunger the next morning, as he had been used to. Richard's trauma never went away, even when he would see enough food repeatedly on the dining table. He did not stop hiding some of the food in his pocket, even when his mother had scolded him several times. What he did was change where he hid his food against his traumatic memory of hunger, which he anticipated might come back anytime soon. Richard's victory over hunger was cut short as soon as Aunt Maggie's husband, Uncle Hoskins, was killed by the racist white men because he was doing better than the whites, and this also forced Richard and his family to move. With the death of Uncle Hoskins, which was occasioned by racism, Richard came firsthand to racism and its destructive effect on assertive blacks. Richard could see firsthand the dimensions of racism and its effect on African Americans. Richard observes that:

Suddenly I noticed that the white men were holding the long, heavy black sticks—rifles! —on their shoulders. After they had passed, I ran breathlessly into the house. “Mama!” I yelled. “What?” she answered from the kitchen. “There are elephants in the street!” She came to the kitchen door and stared at me. “Elephants?” she asked. “Yes. Come and see them. They're digging in the street.” My mother.... She looked out of the door and shook her head. “Those are not elephants,” she said. “What are they?” “That's a chain gang.” “What's a chain gang?” “It's just what you see,” she said. “A gang of men chained together and made to work.” “Why?” “Because they've done something wrong and they're being punished” (Wright 1937, p. 76).

Richard, through his observation, accounts for the trauma of African Americans who are subjugated and treated as chain gangs by a racist system to work on their plantation. The sight of this, although viewed by Richard in his innocence, was a source of trauma because he did not expect humans to be treated as animals, and he unknowingly referred to them as elephants. This is a subtle means of how racism and segregation gradually reveal themselves to Richard. The inequality in American society is a source of trauma for Richard, even during the war in the South. Richard observes that “a dread of white people now came to live permanently in my feelings and imagination” (Wright 1945, p. 96). Racism and race relations become a source of trauma for Richard, and these stories of racial conflicts have a psychological effect on him. Through listening to adults' narratives, Richard became familiar with the racial issues in his society, and this became a source of tension for him. Other people's plight becomes Richard's own traumatic memory. Richard accounts for the story of a woman who avenged the death of her husband because the whites killed the woman's husband. Richard went further to acknowledge that:

...tension would set in at the mere mention of whites, and a vast complex of emotions, involving the whole of my personality, would be aroused. It was as though I was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behaviour could not be predicted. I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings” (Wright 1945, p. 98).

Richard has a secondary trauma from listening to the stories of the white lynching of blacks by thousands. These memories become a source of trauma and tension in the life of Richard, and they influence his navigation of the world of American society. This trauma was manifested when Richard started a new school and was asked to write on a blackboard using white chalk. Trauma, which is occasioned by "whiteness," took effect on him to the extent that he became blank and empty and could not remember his name. However, when the teacher asked him to say his name and spell it, he could, but when he got to the use of the white chalk, he became blank, which indicates his compulsive reaction whenever he meets whiteness. Richard refers to this trauma when he writes, "Again, I turned to the blackboard and lifted my hand to write, then I was blank and void within." "I tried frantically to collect my senses, but I could remember nothing" (Wright 1945, p. 99). This is a paralyzing effect of trauma when a traumatic patient is exposed to the primary source of his trauma. Richard remembers the paralyzing effect of the chalk he held in his hands.

Richard experienced a different world in a racist society, which traumatised him because of his attempt to survive and provide for himself. In his attempt to step out and seek survival, he is burdened by his experiences with racial society to the extent that he asks himself some critical questions before he can decide on taking up jobs. He self-observes thus:

What would happen now that I would be among white people for hours at a stretch? Would they hit me? Curse me? If they did, I would leave at once. In all my wishing for a job I had not thought of how I would be treated, and now it loomed important, decisive, sweeping down beneath every other consideration. I would be polite, humble, saying yes sir and no sir, yes ma'am and no ma'am, but I would draw a line over which they must not step. Oh, maybe I'm just thinking up trouble, I told myself. They might like me.... (Wright 1945, p. 189).

Richard re-examines himself before attempting to take up jobs with the whites; the reason for his self-examination is not unconnected with the boundaries that exist between the white and black. Richard's self-examination is a product of traumatic memory, his relation to whites in the American society, and the constant representation of this class of people as a source for his intentions and immobility in life. In Richard's work life, he is traumatised by the attempt of a white woman to define his place in society. Richard affirms this conflict as the source of his traumatic memory, thus:

"What grade are you in school?"

"Seventh, ma'am."

"Then why are you going to school?" she asked in surprise.

"Well, I want to be a writer," I mumbled, unsure of myself; I had not planned to tell her that, but she had made me feel so utterly wrong and of no account that I needed to bolster myself.

"A what?" she demanded.

"A writer," I mumbled. "For what?" "To write stories," I mumbled defensively.

"You'll never be a writer," she said.

"Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?"

"Nobody," I said.

"I didn't think anybody ever would," she declared indignantly. (Wright 1945, p. 191).

The forcing of Richard by the white lady into racialized spaces becomes a source of trauma in the sense that Richard had a place he wanted to be in life, but the white lady kept restraining him and defining his place in society. The white relationship to fellow whites and the black relationship become a source of strain for Richard as he attempts to work with different American white ladies. Bonukara and Tanritaur (2010) are of the opinion that Richard is alienated from his family, the black community, and the white community” (p. 117). This is true of how he is treated by his family, which wanted him to conform to racial standards, and by the whites, who saw him as less human. For instance, the white woman he works for insults him at will, and he tries to avoid others from the house so that he is not insulted. Richard describes the effect of such work on him when he says, “The morning was physically tiring, but the nervous strain, the fear that my actions would call down upon my head a storm of curses, was even more damaging” (Wright 1945, p. 197). Richard’s sensitive nature and inquisitiveness, the reaction of the whites and how he was treated had a negative effect on his physical strength. Being in close quarters with the whites and how he is treated affected his studies in class, and he could not leave the site of his trauma because it provided him with temporary relief from hunger.

Wright’s *Black Boy* affirms the Critical Race Theory, which highlights counter stories from a nationalist perspective as a means of balancing the lopsidedness of American history about African American experiences in the American society. Wright, through his autobiography, highlights the effects of oppression, evoking the history of slavery and the continuous practice of racism. Setiyawan (2019), defining oppression, submits that it “...is the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual group institution” (p. 2). This is clearly highlighted by Wright’s nationalist autobiography, which tells a personal story of the oppressive nature of American society. Avono (2018), affirming the close link between Wright’s autobiography and the lived experiences of African Americans, submits that “Wright’s *Black Boy* is an important sociological document” (p. 52). This is indicative of the function of personal trauma in telling the narrative of the collective trauma of the people from a personalised premise. Avono (2018) continues; thus, “The book has actively chronicled black life. This autobiography has impressively depicted the ordeals of blacks in the Jim Crow South that have denied blacks opportunities to make a living” (p. 52). This denial, as depicted in Wright’s *Black Boy*, has led to Richard’s traumatic experiences that are chronicled within the framework of his narrative. Caruth (1996), affirming the functionality of trauma narrative, submits that “trauma... is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (p. 4).

Wright’s *Black Boy* is a narrative of childhood trauma that tells us various dimensions of the subjugation of Richard and other African Americans affected by racism in America. Caruth (1996), in accounting for traumatic narrative, notes that “At the heart of these stories is thus an enigmatic testimony not only to the nature of violent events but to what, in trauma, resists simple comprehension” (p. 6). Wright’s *Black Boy* presents unknowable testimony of the effect of trauma on the psychic of the African American boy. This “enigmatic testimony” is seen in the case where Richard said he had healed from childhood trauma when he left Memphis, only for his decisions and actions to be influenced by his traumatic memory. Wright’s *Black Boy* accounts for various dimensions of racism and its effect on the physic of the black boy. Richard is excluded from the rights and privileges of humans in the American society, and this has had a traumatic effect on

him. Richard and other African Americans are excluded from all privileges in the racial American society, and as such, they are given a subhuman status, which limits them from everything in the society.

CONCLUSION

Wright's *Black Boy* is a creative autobiographical recall of traumatic memories of childhood and the effect of racism on the African American psyche. The story highlights the double yoke of racism on the African American boy growing up as a symbolic representation of the African American people. Wright indicates that trauma is very functional in the lives of the African American family, and they experience it in different spheres of their lives because of racism and its brutality toward blacks. The study has accounted for dimensions of the traumatic experiences of Wright's *Black Boy*. It indicates that Richard in *Black Boy* is traumatised by various experiences from his childhood. First, his mother's constant scolding, which is symbolic of racial society's constant scolding to limit the African American people and to put them constantly in their racialized class. The study concludes that Richard is a traumatised character, and his work is referential to racism and his perception of whiteness in American society. The study affirms that Richard's father's action in abandoning his family was a product of trauma. Wright's *Black Boy* illustrates the possibilities of African Americans traumatising their fellow victims because of the powers of patriarchy, as indicative of the case of Richard's parents and the African American men who got him drunk.

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