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Children exploitation in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

African American children have been exploited in South of the United States, especially, in Mississippi and Georgia. Hence of intensive exploitation, they were influenced profoundly. It has been depicted in their autobiography or in their written novels. This paper focuses on the main reasons for African American exploitation, and types of exploitation in the work of Richard Wright (*Black Boy*) and Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), such as racism, sexism, classism, family fragmentation and patriarchy. Then, it suggests some ideas for protection of African American children.

Keywords- *Exploitation, Racism, Reservation, Sexism*

1- Introduction

America is known as the land of peace, justice and equality. It was regarded as the dream of freedom, and many of the immigrants from different parts of the world came to it. This perspective has been destroyed, and thousands of black children had suffered of oppression and dehumanization from 1619 up to the recent time. Many of black novelists and story tellers, such as, Richard Wright and Alice Walker manifested the real reasons behind the black children suffering of both, intra-exploitation and inter-exploitation from their landing in America, or from their birth there. African American children had suffered of exploitation from the White community, and the Blacks themselves. So, the major themes of African American fiction are racism, sexism and classism. Children had been profoundly affected of these three themes. Thus, child exploitation was defined as:

Child exploitation is the act of using a minor child for profit, labor, sexual gratification, or some other personal or financial advantage. Child exploitation often results in cruel or harmful physical and emotional treatment of the child, as the activities he or she may be forced to take part in can cause emotional, physical, and social problems” dictionary definition. (1)

Children exploitation is a prominent phenomenon in African American literature. It represents the effects of imperialism, racial and gender discrimination, as well as social and psychological situation of the black children. They are suffering of the family fragmentation and alienation of their parents, as absence or single parenthood. It also, deals with patriarchy and its implications on devastation of black children. All these issues have been manifested in the works of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1946) and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982).

Richard Wright was born on Rucker's Plantation near Natchez, Mississippi in 1908. His father is an illiterate sharecropper, and his mother is a schoolteacher. The grandson of slaves and the son of a sharecropper, Wright was largely raised by his mother, a caring woman, who became a single parent after her husband left the family, when Wright was five years old. His mother was forced to take domestic jobs away from the house. Wright and his brother spent a period at an orphanage.

In his autobiography *Black Boy*, Wright narrated his life from his childhood to his death. It represents his agony and his horrible life in fragmented family. His father left them, and later, his mother became a paralytic. So, his early life was moving from one place to another, searching for job and food. It represented the unstable period in his life, because of the materialism and imperialism world. (2)

It was very difficult for him to enjoy his childhood in the imperialism world, because he could not get something to eat. In fact, in the imperialism world, parents do not show any care or responsibility for their children, as what Wright’s father had done, when he abandoned his wife and two children. Imperialism gave more concern on individuals’ role and did not care about the family members as a whole. Wright started to struggle and strive against the poverty and hunger, so his autobiography was written first as *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. Wright depicted the horrible impact of the absent of one, or both parents. He skilfully succeeded to manifest the child exploitation physically, emotionally and psychologically, under the Whites’ domination, racism and sexism.

Though I was a child, I could no longer feel as a child, could no longer react as a child...When the neighbor's offered me food, I refused, already ashamed that so often in my life I had to be fed by strangers. (3)

1.1 Physical exploitation

Richard Wright was working from his childhood, with whites and deprived of education since his father's abandon. Hunger forced him to work with very little wages in restaurants, distributing newspapers and working in factories. Wright used to work with his uncle Clark, while he was sitting with him. Clark whipped and beat for nothing. This is what meant by inter-exploitation., "I'm going to whip you. Pull off your shirt." Wordlessly I bared my back and he lashed me with a strap. I gritted my teeth and did not cry." (4)

Furthermore, hunger forced him to search for another work. Once, he heard that, there was a job for a boy to do chores. He went and met the white woman and she accepted him to work for two dollars wages a week. He will work evening and morning and all the day Saturdays, washing dishes, chopping wood, scrubbing floor and cleaning the yard. "The next morning I chopped wood for the cook stove, lugged in scuttles of coal for the grates, washed the front porch and swept the back porch, swept the kitchen, helped wait on the table, and washed the dishes. I was sweating. I swept the front walk and ran to the store to shop". (5)

Then, Richard Wright worked as a porter in a clothing store, which is regarded as a hazardous work. He was being a responsible of himself, and his family. They just depend on his salary to purchase food and drug to his sick mother.

1.2. Racism:

Racism is being one of the main problems, the black children had suffered, because of their color and inferiority, so that Wright had been suffered. One day, Wright was beaten by the White men, while he was returning back home. His bicycle was broken, so those white men had taken him in their car. In the car, they offered him to drink, but he refused, so they hit and bled his legs. This is regarded, as intra-exploitation which comes from the other race.

"Nigger, ain't you learned no better sense'n that yet?" asked the man who hit me.

"Ain't you learned to say sir to a white man yet?" Dazed, I pulled to my feet. My elbows and legs were bleeding. Fists doubled, the white man advanced, kicking the bicycle out of the way. "Aw, leave the bastard alone. (6)

In Memphis, he was exploited in Optical Company with Mr, Crane. His master informed him that one black boy 'Harrison' was always attempting to kill him. He warned him, that Harrison has got a knife to kill him, and he is waiting for him outside the company. When his temptation failed to make the black children kill each other, he made an offer five Dollars, if they wrestle each other.

One of the forms of child oppression and exploitation, Richard encountered is called societal oppression. For instance, after Richard saw a black child was being whipping by a white man, he was shocked. So, he started to raise many questions to his mother, who replied him, "The "white" man did not whip the "black" boy...He beat the "black" (7)

1.3. Emotional exploitation:

Emotional exploitation can be described as the willful destruction of significant impairment of a child's competence. Emotional abuse can include, name calling, degradation, torture or destruction of a pet and routine labeling or humiliation. Emotional abuse, often results in abnormal or disrupted attachment development and a tendency, for the victim to blame him or her for the abuse, leading to a learned helplessness, emotional numbing and overly passive behavior. Psychological abuse, is often combined with other forms of abuse which is, a result of emotional exploitation. African American children used to be called as, "Niger, blacks and son of bitches". Alienation is one of the traumas Wright had suffered which affected his emotional and psychological upbringing. According to Marx's theory of alienation, it is a separation of things, that are naturally meant to be together, and therefore a person actually becomes an "alien" in the world they live in. First, Wright was deprived of his father's kindness and care. Then he suffered from alienation of his society, because of his color and poverty. (8)

Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton. She was the daughter of a sharecropper, and the youngest of eight children. At age eight, she lost one of her eyes. Her partial blindness, caused her to withdraw from normal childhood activities and began writing poetry, to ease her loneliness. As an African American writer, she represented child exploitation in her novels and manifested all kinds of oppression. In *The Color Purple*, the black children suffered not only from the Whites, but also the black themselves, which is known as inter-exploitation. The protagonist Celie was molested by her step-father, and she got a physical exploitation through it. She succeeded in the process of survival, both at the level of self and community meaningfully in the context of the racist, sexist and classist society of America. She wrote to God to help her to survive. Walker depicted the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse, the protagonist encountered at the hands of her father (step-father). 9

2. Physical Exploitation:

Celie is a poor, uneducated, fourteen-year-old black girl living in rural Georgia. In the other hand *Color Purple*, Celie was deprived of education, because of the pregnancy by her step-father. She started writing letters to God. Alphonso used to beat, molest and rape her. Alphonso has already impregnated Celie once. Celie gave birth to a girl, whom her father sold and fathered her, for the second child a boy and sold him for Samuel, who adapted them. Celie's mother became seriously ill and died. Alphonso brought home a new wife, but he continued to abuse Celie. The female had been determined as periphery and subordinate, and had no authority, even to say no or express her suffering and agony. "He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't.... He starts to choke me saying you better shut up and get used to it." (10)

Celie could not even speak to her sick mother about her stepfather's abuse. The only way she had done and permitted, was just to write to the God in her letters and complain her suffering. In the *Color Purple* (1982), her husband used to beat and deals with her as she is a slave or a beast. He beats her, as if he beats his children, except he doesn't hardly beat them. He says, "Celie, get the belt. The children be outside the room pecking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry" (11).

2.1. Patriarchy:

Celie's suffering in the patriarchal and sexist society, continues before and after her marriage, in the age of sixteen years old. African American children forced to be silent, because of the man domination and patriarchy. She did not disclose her crisis to God, and her stepfather did never allow her to speak to anybody except God. Then, he forced her to marry an old man, and carry the responsibility of his children. She is overworked in her husband's house, by doing things for her husband's children. But her work is not acknowledged, neither do anyone care about her as a human being, rather she is subjected to sexual oppression. She deprived of her children, who were sold by their father to Samuel. Celie, also, as a child, was deprived of education under the threat of her father. The same vicious circle is repeated in, with her husband. She is sexually harassed and subjected to repetitive beatings, "He never ask me nothing and about myself. He clamon top of me and fuck, even when my head bandaged" (12)

2.2. Rape and Incest

Molestation is defined as the crime of sexual acts, with children up to the age of 18, including, touching of private parts, exposure of genitalia, taking of pornographic pictures, rape, and inducement of sexual acts with the molester, or with other children, and variations of these acts by pedophiles. (13) Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* began with the scene of rape. When the protagonist of the novel, "Celie is 14...stepfather, whom she believes to be her father, begins to rape her". (14) She cannot tell this trauma to anybody. Alphonso started to molest her, when her mother was not at home, because she used to go to the Doctor. She was sick. Afterwards, he forced her to do what her mother used to do "...you better shut up and get used to it" (15). Celie's expressions had shown how difficult position she stayed. The rape scene in the novel, actually, was committed by Walker's grandmother earlier. Walker proved that, the child molestation was an inherited aspect in the African American community, "...is based on Walker's great-great-grandmother, who was raped and impregnated at age 11 by her master Walker's great-great-grandfather" (16)

Alice walker suggests that, child-rape or incest is, an undeniable fact of most blacks' lives in South. The significance of Celie's rape case is, that there is not a race issue, but it is an inter-exploitation.

3- Conclusion:

African American children had been racially exploited, emotionally violated and sexually abused, by the White and Blacks Americans. Wright and Walker depicted the children exploitation in racist and patriarchal communities in South of the United States. They were exploited physically, emotionally and sexually. Most of them forced to work in hazardous works as in Wright's autobiography, and leave their schools in the South. The main theme of their works was alienation among the family members, which affected their social, economic and psychological life. It caused the destruction of children's lives physically and socially.

The two novels obviously, proved that the absent of the father is being one of the main reasons for the child exploitation. So, in *Black Boy*, we have seen how the children had been exposed as vulnerable for racism, and classism oppression. In the other novel, *The Color Purple*, Walker had shown how the children, who lost their biological father, were being vulnerable for the sexual exploitation and molestation.

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