

## Critical Consciousness: Challenging Social Norms in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son*

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**Abstract** : This article explores moves from class relations to social consciousness in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. The transcendence draws from the texts' poised exploitative structures of interclass dynamics — a racial capitalist frame that conditions identity and behaviour in an oppositional manner. The objectives of the essay include highlighting the texts' poised social structures that dehumanize blacks', denouncing them, x-raying how fear, violence and alienation enable critical explorations, and elucidating how critical thinking is the criterion for the complex phenomenon of social change. The study reveals how the protagonists of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* navigate worlds shaped by systemic exploitation and radicalised class oppression and become directors of social change. The article for one captures Bigger's reactive rage, young Richard's intellectual awakening and the nonconformist acts of some whites as distinct trajectories of political awareness under the Jim Crow law. The analyses is guided by the literary theories of class consciousness, a central pillar of Marxist theory, with a twist to Cooley (1909) hypothesized concept of social consciousness but with focus on the tenets of radicalized capitalism, critical reflection and critical action. The article underlines literature as a vehicle for revolutionary thought and argues that Wright's narratives are not mere realist portrayals of black suffering but equally radical calls to consciousnesses that challenge both racial subjugation and false consciousness.

**Key words:** hierarchy, racism, consciousness, transformation

**Résumé** : Cet article explore le passage des rapports de classe à la conscience sociale dans *Native Son* and *Black Boy* de Richard Wright. La transcendance s'appuie sur les structures d'exploitation inhérentes aux dynamiques interclasses présentes dans les textes – un cadre capitaliste racial qui conditionne l'identité et le comportement de manière contestataire. L'essai vise notamment à mettre en lumière et à dénoncer les structures sociales qui déshumanisent les Noirs, à analyser comment la peur, la violence et l'aliénation permettent des explorations critiques, et à démontrer que la pensée critique est le critère du phénomène complexe du changement social. L'étude révèle comment les protagonistes de *Native Son* and *Black Boy* évoluent dans des mondes façonnés par l'exploitation systémique et l'oppression de classe radicalisée, et deviennent des acteurs du changement social. L'article saisit notamment la rage réactive de Bigger, l'éveil intellectuel du jeune Richard et les actes non conformistes de certains Blancs comme autant de trajectoires distinctes de prise de conscience politique sous le régime de la ségrégation raciale. Les analyses s'appuient sur les théories littéraires de la conscience de classe, pilier central de la théorie marxiste, en revisitant le concept de conscience sociale proposé par Cooley (1909) et en mettant l'accent sur les principes du capitalisme radicalisé, la réflexion critique et l'action critique. L'article souligne le rôle de la littérature comme vecteur de pensée révolutionnaire et soutient que les récits de Wright ne sont pas de simples représentations réalistes de la souffrance des Noirs, mais aussi des appels radicaux à une prise de conscience qui remet en question à la fois l'assujettissement racial et la fausse conscience.

**Mots-clés** : hiérarchie, racisme, conscience, transformation

### Introduction

Though healthy intergroup relations would constitute the network for inclusive and relevant national identities and world cultures (Gordon 1954), Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* first published in 1940 and 1945 respectively, underline ethnic rivalries as defining characteristics of the America of their time. The both narratives x-ray the absence of interracial closeness at individual, romantic and intergroup levels and become penetrating critiques of systemic injustices —a racial divide characterized principally by

the black's lack of opportunities. This unhealthy condition left the 20th century American black at the margins of the society, rendered them poor and brought to the fore the capitalist mind frame of the American white. The literary landscape as exemplified by the works of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison profoundly examined the racial and class struggles definitive of America by exposing the lived realities of African Americans within the capitalist, white-dominated American society. It is obviously from this fictional perspective that much of the existing critical material on Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* address but racial subtleties. Many critical voices underline relevance in this angle of research. Graham for one contends that Wright's novels compel readers to "confront the moral paralysis of white liberalism" and to reassess the political power of radical black writing (Graham 1996, p.132). This discourse stresses on the racial divide and the feeling of powerlessness that it causes individuals— how it renders them unfit of recognizing the filth in it. This is an obvious base for Elam's projection of an understanding of Wright's race discourses as the bases for studying current racial injustices and of Graham's hailing Wright's efforts at unveiling the heinous white malpractices in his literary works. The ongoing research endeavor though exposes the racial atmosphere of America principally interrogates the critical forces working against its chauvinist practices associated with racism.

Racism, as Wellam (1977) explicates, is a combination of prejudice and power that allows the dominate race to institutionalize its supremacy over the weaker one(s) — a practice validated in the texts under study as the whites lord over the blacks at all levels of the society. It is an institutional ideology that functions on a system in which the white race elevates its social position by "exploiting, controlling and keeping down others who are categorized in racial or ethnic terms" (Blauner 1972, p.22). A race then is built up of a cultural spirit that fuels racism. As exposed in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, it generates race pride or racism that emphasizes its superiority in the social, the systematic and the structural categories. This race spirit consequently generates class conflict and fuels class consciousness which though, unfortunately can be false, eventually initiates a social tentacle for the good of the society. Racism, then, is a manifestation of moral inadequacy that would always attract criticism and result to moral uprightness. This study argues that in both *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Wright's protagonists wrestle with class oppressions and active consciences right from childhood and become fashioned by them.

The historical context of this paper is a racist society in which the Black Americans trace their first arrivals to, and settlements in America to slavery. This was in 1619— a moment that marked the beginning of a racialised system of forced labour that would evolve into chattel slavery. By the late eighteenth century, slavery had become the economic cornerstone of the southern society with it, sustaining vast plantation economies and entrenching white supremacy (Baptist 5; Berlin 200). Later, emancipation and radical reconstructions would allow for limited black political representation and land ownership and consequently open some political space for the formerly enslaved (Foner 1988). But the Compromise of 1877 and the subsequent withdrawal of federal troops from the South marked the end of reconstruction and the rise of the Jim Crow Law — a racial caste system enforced through segregation laws and racial-terror lynching (Alexander 2012). These fierce laws and acts of violence systematically denied Black Americans access to

political power, education, and economic mobility. American racism became the outcome of historical materiality and class relation for it fostered the economic exploitation inherent in capitalism as could be deduced from the manipulative practices implicit in slavery. This was visible in the spirit of existence definitive of black life in the American South, as vividly stressed in Wright's narratives under study.

*Black Boy* and *Native Son* are set at the peak of Jim Crow's horrifying grip on the southern American slavery prone society. The texts underline racism as the background of the society's individual and group consciousness. *Black Boy* portrays the south as a harsh entity, as a rigid hold of Jim Crow's segregation laws. The location is projected as a physical, social and psychological prison for the blacks. This same frustrating atmosphere defines *Native Son's* blacks as the urban slums that house them speak of their alterity, poverty and consequent psychological distress. These unbearable living conditions either helped blacks internalized the social prescription of their inferior existence as seen in Bigger and his folks in *Native Son*, or guide them to learn about the difference in social class and struggle to accept it like young Richard in *Black Boy*. Both textual trajectories intelligently highlight the potential and risk of developing a revolutionary awareness in a deeply stratified society under the background that group consciousness often becomes false consciousness when members attach selves to dominant ideologies or remain unconscious of reality. The texts' deeper engagement with the economic materiality of American drives the essay's resolve to interrogating class and social behaviours; perspectives that foreground the article's resolve on class consciousness and social consciousness as analytical tools. Marxist thought, in its class consciousness like socialist views influenced 20th century intellectuals, prominent among them being Richard Wright, into articulating distinctly black popular identities and into linking racial struggles with class and social revolutions (Kelly 2002).

Marxist theory locates social conflict at the heart of historical development and roots it in the material conditions of class struggle. Marx and Engels explicate that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx and Engels 1970, p. 64). This saying reflects the ideological workings of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* as the whites, the privileged class, lord over the blacks in all sections of the society. Class consciousness as Marx and Engels again theorize awakens the working class/masses/exploited to the realities of their exploitation and, to the need for collective resistance. This is a tenet of *Native Son's* and *Black Boy's* revolutionary manifestations. Complexly, as has been put by Lukács (1971), class consciousness is not merely individual awareness but a collective social process, a course that captures the sufferings, grievances and consequent call for evolution by a social group. To some critics it is synonymous to cultural hegemony. Explicably here, it is that dominance of a class's worldview that functions like intelligence but forgets that dominant ideologies mask exploitation and consequently become false consciousnesses (Gerald 2025). Evidently, individual consciousness — the self-awareness of one's group members, often initiates class consciousness, a premise positively validated in the transformative heroes of Wright's works. In line with Marxist thought, class consciousness analyze how literature either reinforces or challenges dominant ideologies and how they can contribute to or problematize readers' understanding of class consciousness.

Social consciousness on its part, as Marx posits, captures the appreciation of collective struggle that is sprouting from personal struggle and education— a revolution that stems from the groups recognition and fight against their shared marginalization and manipulation by a dominant system. It is the product of a social mind— the result of being mindful of that entire society to which one belongs (Cooley (1907). Cooley positions social consciousness as the parameter for navigating varied cultures, for emphasizing respect and, for understanding and avoiding racialism. Within this frame class consciousness often becomes false consciousness because class consciousness often interprets injustices only from what the other does to them without a thought of their own mal practices against that opposite element. The task of every revolutionary criticism as Eagleton (2002) explicates, is to show how “the forces of oppression and liberation work themselves out in the texture of lived experience” (Eagleton 28) — an ideological frame positively validating engagements on both class consciousness and social conscientisation.

Both socialist and humanitarian criticisms advocate the need for the social transformation of America in their portrayals of the country as a place where poor whites and blacks are both “enslaved by a brutal and cynical oligarchy” that benefits from their mutual hostility (Baldwin 1964, p. 25). Baldwin further stresses the trauma of the Black American thus, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time” (Baldwin, “The Negro in American Culture”). Ellison highlights the above thesis in the explanation that liberal institutions commodify Black bodies as overtly racist ones; an argument he defends with *Invisible Man’s* protagonist being lashed to the rhetoric of capitalism (Ellison 1952, 239-42). Baldwin and Ellison link the Afro-American’s self-awareness to permanent class/race agitations. Acting within the above context, Afro-American literature mirror social reality and foster class and social consciousnesses. Wrights narratives capture both Black Americans and the American whites in collective struggles and resistance against systematic racism. Analytically, while class consciousness would examine how individuals study and respond to their class, social consciousness would alter focus from individual and class experiences to an extensive social context— interrogating social relations, social structures, and the possibilities for deliberate collective actions. The section below though projects the blacks constrained by the assumptions and narratives of capitalism, highlights the coming of age of the protagonist of the both texts, in their inquisitiveness and struggles to break free of exploitation and marginalization.

### **Class Consciousness in *Black Boy* and *Native son***

Class-consciousness theories position a social class as a primary force shaping identity and behavior within a social grouping. It finds voice in group members crying foul to theories of universalism like those of individualism but stressing on the importance of individual consciousness for class consciousness (Diva 2019). Class consciousness thus is not a societal background but that awareness of shared interest with class members that primarily charts the road map for systematic change by means of conflict and self-assertion .Wright’s protagonists initially lacked this awareness as they were intellectually, economically and communicatively restrained by the racist American society. *Black Boy’s* young Richard reveals his earlier handicap state by saying that he “stumbled

upon the relations between whites and blacks” (Wright 2007, p.19) and discovered terrifying things. Obviously the trauma he experienced during the process of stumbling ignited his consciousness. Positioning Richard’s sudden consciousness in literacy Rampersad notes that literacy in Wright’s text functions as “the ignition of political self-recognition” (Rampersad 2002, p. 70). Richards’s ability to identify, understand, interpret and write took him beyond the borders set against the blacks’ existence and vested on him the ability to achieve goals and participate for his society. Literacy as Rampersad continues that the economic gap in the American society is an intended gulf for the whites to get richer while the blacks become eliminated as exemplified by the white’s murder of Richard’s prosperous Uncle, Hoskins. In contrast, *Native Son* on its part, opens with Bigger alertness to class hierarchy as he bitterly notes that “whites get to be army generals, rich bankers, presidents and secretary of states” (Wright 2005, 26–27). His resentment surfaces in a concise speech—“we black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t”. This atmosphere as Bigger concludes, is synonymous to “living in jail”(Wright 2005, p. 28). Bigger’s repeated “we” versus “they” above signals a developed sense of collective class interest, highlights the difference in race and how inferior “we” are from “they”. To Foley (1993) this resentment of Bigger articulates an emerging but authentic class solidarity signaled by his “we” versus “they” repetition echoed above. His earlier lament that segregation is as bad as being imprisoned exemplifies the “cerebral imagination” of the Black inner-city masses (Gilroy 1993, p.162) — a phrase that highlights how class consciousness accrues from the feeling of inferiority that racism provokes in the blacks.

The transformation journeys of the two protagonists are crisis-ridden as *Native Son*’s hero is seemingly stuck with the past and *Black Boy*’s superman is undergoing a very slow and conflicted change process. Even as Richard becomes conscious of “pushing against the current of [his] environment” (Wright 2007, p.147), he realizes he is awakening to ideas Jim Crow laws had drafted and passed to keep out of[Negro] life”, dreams that state legislators and teachers alike had declared “taboo” (Wright 2007, p. 148). His new insight therefore puts him not only against the dominant white class but also against the internalized restraints of his own community. Bigger, meanwhile, confronts his class position head-on, experiencing it as an intolerable constraint; Richard recognizes the same structure but must first overcome a lifetime of ideological suppression before he can name it. Together the two protagonists illustrate how early-twentieth-century African-American literature dramatizes both the immediacy and the gradual evolution of class consciousness under racial capitalism.

Both texts align with Marx’s and Eagleton’s (1970) view that racial hierarchy is a produce of class consciousness. Its profit logic, beneficial only to the whites, functions in encouraging capitalism; an economic system that enhances job inequalities between blacks and whites for white advantages. In *Native Son*, this structure is unadulterated in the relationship between black tenants and their landlords. Bigger’s family like a host of other black families are being exploited by their white landlords —the likes of the Daltons who accumulate capital by extracting inflated rents. During cross-examination, Bigger’s attorney Max would reveal that Mr Dalton “charges more to Negroes than to whites for the same rat-infested flats, but ironically boasts of ‘philanthropy’ toward Negro education”

(Wright 2005, p.157). This captures what Robinson calls “racial capitalism” (Robinson 2000, p. 91); a process by which the growth of wealth is mutually connected with radicalized corruption and confiscation. With this practice segregation synchronously becomes a revenue model, an income model in which segregation underlines profitable real-estate policy. This revenue stream prompts Bigger to sense, however dimly, that his poverty is a designed feature of the system; a realization that provokes his anger and illogical behaviours till almost the close of the narrative.

Baldwin analyses in Bigger’s too much rage a reduction of his person and the flaw of *Native Son*. He asserts that Wright’s a *Native Son* is “the most devastating portrait of a Negro in American fiction,” (Baldwin 1984, p. 23) —someone with only violence as means of protest. If all Negro sons are like Bigger then there is no salvation for the blacks. The text projects Bigger as an estranged, fierce and inactive stranger with no meaningful existence. Because of his internalized racist mind and consequent fear of insecurity he moves about with both “knife and gun” (Wright 2005, p. 66); defensive tools he especially takes with him to white residential quarters. While Baldwin exposes the limits of Wright’s psychological rendering, Rowley counters that Bigger’s violence is not gratuitous but “a result of accumulated terror and social paralysis”(Rowley 103) — a fierceness caused by systemic racism and material deprivation. In *Black Boy* Wright charts a coming-of-age across repressive Southern and Northern landscapes in his tracing the intellectual and political awakening of young Richard. Richard taught himself to write and write with the resources he came across and became a new individual—one with an understanding of the barriers the black community and the racist whites constructed against his freedom and one with the determination and ability to overthrow his foes. Perhaps it is from this perspective that Rampersad describes *Black Boy* as “less an autobiography than a bildungsroman of resistance” (Rampersad 2002, p. 66). He explains that Wright’s emergent class consciousness shatters the Southern code of submission, Richard’s decision to read his valediction speech and not the one conditioned by his principal together with his working at optimal shops speak of his consciousness of the plight of the blacks, his non-conformity to white imposed suppression, and his hatred for the hostile environment defining blacks in South America. His search for intellectual and existentialist freedom takes him to the north, a place defined by justice and equity, a location definitive of ideational blends; a feature typical of the Northern communist party in which he sought refuge on arrival. The party protected the less privileged and educated the working class into declining exploitation. Wright’s 1930s’ affiliation with this party shaped his literary ideology as both *Native Son* and *Black Boy* lay bare capitalist ideologies and find solace in communist functioning. Foley interprets *Native Son* as a Marxist novel that “foregrounds the structural links between race and class oppression in capitalist America” (Foley 2001, p.19). The author’s assertion finds meaning in his stress on how the social mechanisms of urban ghetto, economic marginalization, and the legal system criminalize black existence and conversely buttress white capitalist interests.

*Black Boy’s* capitalist violence though is less institutional thought, it is not less instructive for class consciousness. Richard recalls how white business competitors murdered his Uncle Hoskins after their failed schemes to make him abandon the liquor market for them His success threatened the racial class order and consequently signaled

whites to eliminate him. Rowley analyses this maltreatment and eventual killing of this black business magnet from the perspective that “Black prosperity beyond prescribed limits provokes lethal backlash” (Rowley 2001, p.117). Life in Uncle Hoskins’ house as Richard explains was hunger free. To Richard’s surprise, there was sufficient food and therefore class mobility for sufficiency in America was coded white. Southern realities like the forgone incident fueled Richard with the thought that migrating to the north was both a geographical escape and a refusal to remain a surplus labourer in the Jim-Crow South. His hustling and even petty thefts — his ticket reselling scheme, his stealing of a gun and pawning it, and his selling of the fruits that he stole from a college were but means to save money for the train ticket that would ferry him to Memphis for Chicago. His acts register an emergent class consciousness, what to Kelley is “a spatial strategy of class refusal” (Kelley 2002, p, 44). Richard had discovered in capitalism’s colour line a force fencing him into poverty and consequently went beyond odds to challenge it.

Characters’ inability to perceive their true class interests (due to internalized ideologies that sustain existing power structures) is a feature of the two narratives. The author dramatizes this false consciousness in *Native Son* through Bigger, who, at the novel’s outset, operates under the burden of dominant social narrative of white superiority without a clear understanding of its structural nature. His actions especially the killing of Mary Dalton fall short of political commitments but find expression under a fearful submission to racism’s unwritten codes. Bigger does not intend to murder Mary; rather, he reacts in terror to the consequences of being found in a white woman’s bedroom. This instinctual fear is a product of his conditions, and reveals a misrecognition of the true sources of his oppression. Again, Bigger’s lawyer, Max’s successful defense of Bigger in court with narratives of his socially induced criminal and miserable backgrounds further clarifies his psychological warping. It is only in prison, through prolonged conversations with Max, that Bigger begins to glimpse the systemic nature of his suffering. As Max urges him to reflect, Bigger starts to see his actions in the broader context of racialized capitalism and social injustice. This gradual awakening marks the beginning of class consciousness, a shift from instinctual survival to critical understanding. Wright thereby presents false consciousness not simply as an abstract theoretical construct, but as a lived and tragic consequence of America’s racial and economic hierarchies. *Native Son* critiques not only the conditions that produce Bigger’s rage but also the ideological distortions that prevent him from initially naming or resisting those conditions.

*Black Boy* exposes multiple manifestations of false consciousness, particularly among the Black working class and within the narrator’s own immediate family. False consciousness from the perspective of Marxist thinking captures a misperception of one’s material and social reality due to the internalization of dominant ideologies that mask class oppression. Richard’s grandmother, for example, espouses a religious worldview that emphasizes spiritual salvation over material liberation in her constant warnings that Richard “will burn in hell” (Wright 2007, p.111) for trying to understand the world through reason and evidence rather than through religious dogma. Du Bois labels this sort of mental outburst under “cultural priming” (Du Bois 1998, p. 705) — that which diverts class anger into ritual submission. Grandmother’s fervent religiosity reinforces passivity and suffering within the consideration of virtuousness, while deflecting attention from the

socio-economic systems that perpetuate racial subjugation. Similarly, we find Richard's peers and co-workers referring to his intellectual ambitions with suspicion/contempt, believing that either "asking questions" or "reading books" is dangerous or inappropriate for a black boy (Wright 2007, pp.136–137). These reactions reveal an internalized racial order, that context where resistance is discouraged and passivity encouraged. Blacks' resignations to low wages, social invisibility, and racial humiliation however reflect a shared false consciousness, molded by a society designed to stifle mindfulness as its people cooperate with a system that promotes injustice.

### **Black Consciousness in *Native Son* and *Black Boy***

Black consciousness has been vastly delineated as a type of class consciousness that stems from the black man's refusal of the marginalization marketed by the inferiority the white man attaches to the black skin (Biko 1978). As Biko explicates, its superiority to Marxist's class consciousness theory is visibly in the importance it accords the black psychic— black peoples' psychological awareness that they have been stripped of their humanity by the racist ideology. It is a form of conscientisation to the back American; pushing each towards individual liberation and mobilizing the blacks against the source of their exploitation. The term thus captures a feeling of identification together with an awareness of the history and culture of people of African descent. It echoes the revolutionary consciousness which for long has occupied most Afro-American authors. Douglass echoed this course in 1846 to a friend, Garrison in the words "I cannot remain insensible to the wrongs and sufferings of any part of the greatest family of man" (Gilroy 1993, p.26). This concept highlights the fostering of the blacks' self-esteem in a hostile American environment; what according to the Modish Project "Black Consciousness and Racism") includes the search for a language with which to affirm a black dignity and express the richness of the black oral culture.

From Du Bois's thoughts, African Americans consciousness emerged when Black workers who formed the "real proletariat" of America (the industrial underclass) discovered that their exploitation was colour and job related (Du Bois 1998, p.708). Explicitly, the end of slavery did not neutralize the exploitation of blacks. Instead, Jim Crow's leasing systems would surface to reinforce the exploitation of people of colour — ensuring continuous access to cheap black labour and the excluding of blacks from "land ownership, union participation, and industrial capital" (Baptist 379; Blackmon 53–76). These exploitative conditions catalyzed a collective awareness of the intersecting forces of race and class oppressions and made the black man conscious of "the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression" in order to "infuse the Black community with a new-found pride in themselves" (Biko 2004, p.91). Literary figures from Addison Gayle Jr. to Houston A. Baker extend the concept to African-American letters, arguing that the Black writer's task is to reject white aesthetic norms and articulate a "black selfhood" (Gayle xx; Baker 152); that black pride rooted in their history, oral culture, and collective struggle. In Wright's oeuvre, black consciousness manifests as the blacks' fraught pursuit of self-definition under racial capitalism.

In *Native Son* Bigger's murder of Mary gains for him from Max the status of a soldier who kills at war as he rhetorically states; "Do men regret when they kill in war? ...

You kill to keep from being killed! And after a victorious war you return to a free country, just as this boy, with his hands stained with the blood of Mary Dalton, felt that he was free for the first time in his life” (Wright, *Native Son*, p.306). Mary is thus an enemy who would have killed Bigger had Bigger not murdered her. According to Carby, Bigger’s claimed freedom is a revelation that “Black masculine rage is scripted by white supremacy’s rules of fear” (Carby 1989, p. 82). Really not only did the fear of being termed Mary’s sex partner scare him into killing her but the fear of him being discovered as the killer empowered him both psychologically and physically into concealing the corps. Though this liberation is not genuine emancipation, it seems to be the only for legible form he could have in the brutal American society. His belief that he is now free is emblematic of false consciousness; he confuses personal agency with political liberation, failing to understand that true class interest lies not in racial violence, but in dismantling the conditions that made such violence inevitable.

Wright positions revolutionary engagements as both springboards of intuitions and observations and the outputs of determination. Richard’s drive to read and write far from being only a mere individual ambition is also a result of hard work, constitutive of empirical studies, inquisitiveness and practical efforts. Rampersad (2002) too explicates Richard’s growth in terms of “an act of racial self-assertion that reclaims Black interior life from the white gaze” (Rampersad 2002, p. 72). Richard on his part accepts becoming conscious of what Jim Crow South was stopping him from knowing—that which the State of Mississippi “had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel” (Wright 2007, 148). He had become conscious of that desire for freedom the southern leaders never wanted a Negro to feel. Against all odds he forges his way towards the north; rejecting the “burn in hell” (Wright 2007, p.111) theology of his grandmother and the economic fatalism of his peers. His mind instead beheld a future “beyond the restrictive orbit of the South” (Wright 2007, p.226).

Bigger’s experiences represent a darker portrayal of black consciousness, what Fanon (2008) describes as a “pathological response” produced when colonial violence forecloses rational avenues of self-affirmation (Fanon 2008, p.232). The offensive atmosphere in which Bigger lives propels his sense of who a black person is: “We black and they white... They do things and we can’t” (Wright 2005, p.28). Bigger regrets the black man’s inability to do what white’s do because the black wishes he had the chance to do them—live the liberties and systematic favours enjoyed by the whites. But his inability to react is conditioned by his environment, what Foley (ibid) explicates as a deformity arising from “the ghetto’s constant surveillance and threat” (Foley 28). Only in prison does Bigger begin to articulate a more politicised identity. This new Bigger is prompted by Max’s exposes on the negative impact of the American structural system on blacks. Bigger clearly sees himself living a life built and policed by others and, a world in which he saw himself unfortunately entrapped. Robinson reads this moment as “proto-Black radicalism aborted by racial capitalism” (Robinson 2000 p. 104).

Both texts in their focus on words that reflect the hardships, fear and rage of black people become a marketing of the black people’s quest for a vocabulary that can affirm dignity against dehumanisation. Literacy to Wright stands out as a weapon for personal exposition and social reckoning. This appropriation of literacy aligns with Gilroy’s notion

of the Black Atlantic subject as one who “turns to modernity’s communicative networks to craft diasporic solidarity” (Gilroy 1993, p. 77). In *Native Son* Bigger crudely but potently accepted to having killed Mary, a declaration which Carby argues is “a desperate act of self-naming, forcing white America to acknowledge the terror it has produced” (Carby 1987, p. 90). Wright’s engagement with oral rhythms finds place in Richard’s acts of storytelling, and Bigger’s street talk —repositories of communal memory. These ethnic speech manifestations conjecture Gayle’s claim that Black consciousness “is initiated through the cadences of the people” (Gayle 1971, p.xvii).

### **Social Consciousness in Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son***

Social consciousness is here interpreted from the perspective of Paulo’s (1970) notion of a critical consciousness with socio/political and educative potentials and applied from Jamal’s (2017) viewpoint of it being the highest transformative potentials of critical consciousness. According to Paulo it guides learners/the oppressed into questioning historical and social situations and into imagining ways of undoing injustices. Jamal celebrates it from the angle of its transformative abilities— varied consciousness with the highest amongst being that ability to critically reflect on the conditions that shape individual existence, the entire social set up, and critically align with others into achieving positive change. Acting within this frame in 1846 Douglass defined himself as an American slave and a human being who though was then free had to fight for the freedom of others explanation that you can only be psychologically stable if those around you are liberated (Douglass 1846). This is the transformative potential experimented in Wright’s oeuvre as individuals (irrespective of the race brackets) and an organization (the communist party) question the conceptual and theoretical bases of racism and function beyond its prescriptive limits.

From *Native Son*’s description of its protagonist as a poor black who, if was allowed to go to the flight academy would have been a pilot, the reader imagines an inconsequential Black American with status determined by forces beyond his control. The reader envisions one with the ability to question the statuesque; one with the desire to change things but one constrained by the system in power. The image of an individual with half-baked ideas about self and society; one who cannot affect positive change is projected. *Native Son* logically portrays Bigger misunderstanding communism— considering communists as a people with no social point of views, unimportant people and as a group with nothing he can illegally possess (since illegality is the only language Bigger can articulate well). He fails to imagine that these communists have the ideas that can save him, his black folk and institute a better America. His association with the communists Jan and Mary however eventually altered his faulted reasoning facility, though confusedly as he had never imagined that a good white person existed. Jan’s consciousness beyond Bigger’s expectation to the evil associated with the whites’ alienation from blacks and in he himself never having never entered the home of a Negro changed Bigger’s poor conception of communists. Jan especially analyse the ills in this alienation altitude from the reasoning that so many blacks live “in the same cities with us” (Wright 2005, p. 70) — the ‘us’ here being a reference to the American white community.

Bigger's greater confusion later stems from Jan's revolutionary plan— his strategy towards a united America,. Jan previews an America “free of the colour bias; a country with no rich and no more” (Wright 2005, p. 69); that America anti-racist Americans long for. With Jan and Mary Bigger experienced love and respect; a life of equal status with the whites as Jan refused Bigger shouldn't call him “sir”(Wright 1966, p.70). This is communist sympathy; an anti-racist ideology; a fight against ethnicity and consequently a move towards social equality. But Mary's attempts at genuine friendship with Bigger will instead facilitate her death due Bigger's mistrust of, and preconceived revenge plan against the Whites.

Max's anti-racist behavior projected in defense of Bigger in court will open his eyes, though late, to the existence of both whites' and communist sympathies towards blacks. This is that empathy that kills false consciousness. In socialist robes Max's defense scene charts Bigger as a product of racist America; a poor insecure Black living in envy and fear of the White— an atmosphere that causes him to make mistakes for the sake of surviving. His plea on Bigger's behalf speaks of the Whites awareness of and rejection of the racial bias in America and their hunger for the unity of the American people. Their consciousness of the destructive effects of racism on the American black is the recognition of a shared identity with the blacks and an endeavor for a clour free America. This story speaks of a nation of suppressed people who are each ready to aid the other and, Bigger's closeness to Jan, Max and Mary grace him with this knowledge. Social consciousness here typifies the moral mind frame of a group. This is visible in the communist party's single and a supportive mind.

*Black Boy's* autobiographical protagonist's social consciousness crops from his determination to flee hunger. He is strong-minded on outwearing that racist fight that had limited his race and himself, and handicapped socio/economic and political justice in America. Richard analyses in this marginalized context surrounding him a strangeness and perpetual subjugating line that he must cross though he visualizes a rough road ahead. And his eventual success set puzzles for the racist whites who sought to unveil the mystery with regards to “how had he come to tread it” (Wright 2007, p. 126). Richard's level of education opened for him doors for job opportunism closed to blacks and fueled him with the sense of not mistreating a fellow black for white men's pleasures. *Black Boy* thus progresses with an intercultural frame; with people interacting on the bases of shared experience and togetherness. The protagonist's engagement at an optimal shop — an all-white business section of the economy would not have been possible if not for the socially conscious white owner, Mr. Crane who saw in Richard, many potentials — the abilities to do what the whites are doing and to train other blacks in the same line of business. Mr Crane's compassion for blacks is registered in the sadness that he expresses when racists cause Richard to leave the shop. *Black Boy* as well registers Mr Falk (an Irish white) as a great force in Richard's intellectual journey as he usually allowed Richard use his library card to borrow books from the library. His desire for a collective American society is interpreted in the smile that defined his face on knowing that Richard had left the south for the north, the supposed place for the black's freedom.

Richard will instead encounter in the north a complex environment that fuels despair and disillusionment in blacks; a space in which the happiness of Negros is only

ensured by the choices they make. The socialist principles of the communism consequently invite Richard into the communist party; a political setup he visualized could “make men feel the earth and the people upon it” (Wright 2007, p. 372). an ideological frame that could guide men to progress and consequently one that would enable the blacks to unbound the chains that had bound them to servitude. Richard however finds a job with the Communist Magazine but when the party would dismiss another black for reasons discrimination against the Negro and the lie behind the communist egalitarian principle; frailties that caused him to leave the party.

Thus Richard was out to liberate humanity and not just himself a fact especially noted in his engaging in neo slave narratives—novels depicting slavery’s dehumanizing legacy in America and consequently provoking the working of consciences. By examining the brutal realities of racialized capitalism, *Black Boy* equips readers with a language of critique. *Native Son* on its part surprises the reader with its criminalizing of black existence. In doing so, both texts convert narrative into political intervention in their struggles to overturn negative dogmatic and social structures. The power of the both narratives thus lie in them revealing systemic class oppression and challenging readers into confronting and resisting social inequalities. As Eagleton’s and Marx posit literary engagements focus more on the meaning social of existence and not on simply representing the society (goodreads.com). Really, Wright’s protagonists far from merely existing as well puncture complacency. In *Black Boy*, the memoir of intellectual awakening equips readers with the language of critique. In *Native Son*, the tragedy of Bigger shocks readers to the awareness of the social forces that produce disposability. Through literature then, Wright reflects oppression in the process of gesturing towards collective resistance

The both texts depict false consciousness and equally chronicle conscious struggles against it. Through reading, questioning, and ultimately writing, *Black Boy*’s protagonist, Richard for one, gradually and steadily distances self from the oppressive narratives that structure black life under Jim Crow’s Laws. His growing awareness that racism and class exploitation are entwined brings about a politicized sense of himself. Richard becomes conscious of his environment as we hear him reflect: “I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel... I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong” (Wright 2007, p.148). This quote reveals two significant ideas. While it captures systematic injustices as the center of social malfunctioning, it as well underlines individual awareness towards it as the emergence of class/social consciousness. Richard could now decode a host of capitalism’s and racism’s forces in the forms of religion, education, and ethnicity. Thus, the narrative arcs of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* (especially that of *Black Boy*) though dramatize the effects of false consciousness as well chart the protagonist transformative journeys towards revolutionary self-awareness through class and social conscientizations.

## Conclusion

Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and *Native Son* saved as background from where the article x-rayed how consciences effectively redirected critical thinking towards social awareness in in the America of the nineteen forties. Consciences moved beyond

individual and colour differences into challenging the structural intersections of race and class traditionally definitive of America. The article traced the evolution of varied consciousnesses — class consciousness, black consciousness and social consciousness from Wright's dramatizing the operation of oppressions through economic and political structures, the race ideology, fear, and silence. The work depicted highly sensitive black heroes namely Bigger in *Native Son* and Richard in *Black Boy*, guided to eventual states of responsibilities by their past conditions of alienation, suffering and pain and, intolerance to filthy family and group conditions. Bigger's gravest violence was the accidental killing of Mary; an incident which saw him demonstrating manliness and taking responsibility by logically justifying his actions from the position of him being the exploited. With black consciousness black suffering and pain was theorized as the result of white; racist capitalist motives; a psychological move that paved the way for blacks fight for liberation from philosophies that limits black consciousness to an American in-group consciousness. This violence then, though tragic, was a distorted form of resistance born from false consciousness. Richard's rebellion on the other hand was intellectual—conscious efforts to redefine himself through reading and writing. and embodied a clearer trajectory towards revolutionary awareness. Through the Class consciousness critique, the article then underlined Wright's characters not just as victims of a racist society but as active (though at times misguided) participants in the struggle for meaning and liberation. In exposing the systemic roots of inequality (religion, education and housing) and the ideological tools (the racial mythology) as conditioners of the class related America, The article correspondingly consequently positioned active consciousness as the principal weapon in the battle for emancipation.

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