

Claude McKay and Black Diaspora

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to project the outcome of ‘Black diaspora’ and picturization of dehumanized ‘blacks’ in the fictional world of Claude McKay, who contributed his deepest involvement in the Negro Literary Renaissance. Most of his works are expressing the dilemma and frustration of the blacks in their American diaspora. McKay writings is known, which portraying the harsh reality of contemporary black existence in America.

Keywords: Claude McKay, Black Diaspora, Dehumanization, deprivation, racism, oppression, frustration, rootlessness

It is generally held that Black literature is marked by an undercurrent of misery, privation and oppression suffered by the blacks in an alien soil. As a race, they have been exploited for centuries. As Sartre puts it, “it has had the horrible privilege of touching the depths of unhappiness.” (P 30) In the words of Richard Wright, The Black was held in bondage stripped of his own culture, denied family life for centuries and made to labour for others” (Bajaj 7). Truly speaking, the Blacks have expressed denial, deprivation, dehumanization, agony and angst at the hands of the Whites. As a result, to use the words of Shelley, the black writers “tell of the saddest tales” of the coloured people. Their literature is replete with instances of the excesses committed by the white oppressor and the segregation suffered by the ethnic minority. In this sense, the Afro-American literature may even be considered racial and ethnic. Claude McKay echoes the same sentiment:

“only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white
Can penetrate into the Negro’s ken
or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
which hides and buries him from other men
So, what I write is urged out of my blood...” (P 50)

However, it should be made clear that the Black American literature has exerted a wider appeal and come to assume a larger literature significance. Phillis Wheatly was considered to be the first poetess to voice the love of liberty and protest against tyranny in 1770. Then George Moses

Horton (1797-1883) and George B. Vashon (1820-1878) estimated them as representatives voicing the concerns of the aggrieved people. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) and Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) were regarded as the first prominent writers that the Black race produced. Immediately after World War I (1912), there was an unprecedented literary and artistic flowering among the Blacks in the United States. The Black American literature is greatly indebted to such makers of the Black literature as W.E.B. Dubois, Fenton Johnson, Jean Tomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, Frank Marshall Davis, Richard Wright and a few others who obviously brought out their artistic creations. “That sudden flowering in literature” (Cooper 297) during the post-war period snowballed into a movement. Alain Locke coined a term and called it ‘the Negro Renaissance.’

Claude McKay is one such writer who did significantly contribute to this literary flowering, paving the way for deepest involvement in the Negro Literary Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson observes:

“Claude McKay was one of the great forces
in bringing about what is now called
the Negro Literary Renaissance” (P 33)

McKay was called “the day star of the bright dawn” (Locke 405). Claude McKay “remains,” according to Jean Wagner, “beyond a doubt the immediate forerunner and one of the leading forces of the Renaissance, the man without whom it could never have achieved what it did” (P 197).

Claude McKay was born in the parish of Clarendon in Sunny Ville, Jamaica which was then a British Colony on the West Indies on 15 Sep 1889. He had his early education at a denominational school in Jamaica on the British pattern. This nurtured in him a sense of being a young Briton. His father, Thomas Francis McKay and mother, Ann Elizabeth Edwards McKay, were peasant farmers, who developed in young McKay an appreciation for the purity of black blood and a pride in racial heritage. He is said to have inherited the universal spirit of love from his mother and the spirit of individuality from his father. Claude had access to the works of Dante, Milton, Pope, Keats and Shelley through his brother Uriah Theophilus and an English man Walter Jekyll, a folklorist. Having gone to America in 1912, he enrolled at Tuskegee Institute to Study agriculture and then at the University of Kansas. He never took his study of agriculture seriously but devoted most of his time and energy to English composition and writing essays McKay strongly believed: “If I would not graduate as a bachelor of arts or science, I would graduate as a poet” (A Long Way From Home 4).

McKay wrote poetry first and he took to prose fiction later. He published two volumes of dialect poetry. *Songs of Jamaica* contained poem on the lives of the *Jamaica* contained poems on the lives of the Jamaican people and the picturesque surroundings of the countryside and *Constab Ballads* was mostly a personal account of his experience as an island constable. The sheer beauty and vitality of his dialect poetry earned him the name of the “Bobby Burns of Jamaica” (Hart 623). McKay entered the American scene in 1917 under the pseudonym of Eli Edwards. His two poems

“Harlem Dancer” and “Invocation” appeared in *The Seven Arts* magazine and his best-known poem was a powerful, terse and dramatic sonnet, “I we must die” written in response to the bloody race riots of 1919 it runs thus:

“If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot
O Kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (SP 36).

Almost all the black magazines and newspapers immediately carried the sonnet and brought him instant popularity. He began to be looked upon as a militant and defiant poet. *Harlem Shadows* a collection of poems published in 1922 was McKay’s first American publication. Then he published his three novels *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), *Banana Bottom* (1933) and then a collection of short stories namely *Gingertown* in 1932. His *Home to Harlem* was seen as a bold venture of a black to expose the social malaise which was only an outcome of white exploitation.

A.L. McLeod comments:

“Actually, all that McKay had done was to take a wide canvas and paint in bright rather than in pastoral colours the often heroic struggle for survival in a celebrated setting of deprivation and distress *Home to Harlem* is, then, a reliable depiction of life in the largest black belt in America in the 1920’s” (P 68).

Almost all his works aim at examining the depiction of the dilemma and frustration of the blacks in their American diaspora. The black race has suffered the most inhuman persecution, oppression and dehumanisation in the whole history of the world, perhaps with the only possible exception of the Jews. The intensity of their suffering was so much that Sartre was prompted to observe:

“During the centuries of slavery, the black man
Drank the cup of bitterness to the last drop” (P 32)

The disgrace heaped upon the blacks has been so very complete and universal that Aime Cesaire concludes that his race is “the fallen race” (P 32). The blacks got uprooted from their native African homeland in tens of thousands during the slave trade. Their ignorance coupled with their

poverty made them fall easy victims to the allurements of their captors. Regular shipments of this human cargo left the coasts of Africa to destinations in Europe and America. It was a one-way passage and those who trod the way never set their foot on their native soil again. Thus, the Africans unwittingly sealed their fate with their diaspora and get scattered throughout Europe and America. They were snatched from their idyllic but primitive homes and were cast among the civilized savages of a hostile world. The black diaspora culminated in their exploitation and bondage down the generations. It left behind an indelible scar and stigma on the black psyche which neither time nor bravado could erase from their memory.

The black diaspora was characterised by excessive movement and overwhelming rootlessness. While they longed to cling on to their cultural past, the western civilization made inroads into their very being. As a result, they felt more and more alienated. Driven by this inner sense of alienation and threatened by the everyday reality of social segregation, the blacks were an accursed lot. And Claude McKay is said to have attempted to capture and project their dilemmas and frustrations with astounding clarity and vividness. McKay's writings in general, and his three novels in particular reveal "his passionate gesture of identification with the people" (Nathan 300). To be precise, McKay's novels are a faithful record of contemporary life. He reproduces in print "the indignities and humiliations that make up the common experience of the black multitudes in America" (P 301). Like the majority of American black populace, McKay's characters in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* have no permanent living place of their own. They make up the floating population of the industrialized "jungles of civilization" (McKay's *Banjo* 136). They are always on the move. Jake's vagrancy takes him from Petersburg to Harlem through Brest, France, London and New York and again to Pittsburg, Chicago and Marseilles. Similarly, Ray has travelled from Haiti to Philadelphia, Harlem, Pittsburg, Washington, Australia and then to Marseilles. While Jake is portrayed as "one Black Moor that nourished a perfect contempt for place" (*Home to Harlem* 42). Ray is described as having "lived like a vagabond Poet ... quitting jobs when he wanted to go on a dream wish or love drunk, without being beholden to anybody" (*Banjo* 65). Almost all the other characters also show a tendency for shifting places. It is indeed a reflection of a facet of the author's own character. As Martha Gruening puts it,

"Claude McKay is another vagabond Poet
who has brought a somewhat similar experience
to rich friction in his novels" (P 510).

That the characters drift from place to place underscores their lack of deep attachment to society. They are excessively rootless. Being uprooted from their native land, they are cast upon an alien soil. Thus, they are unable to forge any meaningful and lasting relationship with the men and women around them. Ray is a typical case of a rootless exile. Born in Haiti, he goes to the United States to study. Haiti is invaded by the American Troops. His father is jailed, and his brother is killed by the occupation forces. He is able neither to go home nor to contribute his education. Ray finds himself working as a waiter. He sees himself as a denigrated outsider and scorns the idea of becoming "one of the contented hogs in the pigpen of Harlem, getting ready to litter little black

piggies” (Home to Harlem 263). His rootlessness is complete to the point that “he enjoyed his role of a wandering black without patriotic or family ties” (Banjo 136). The beach-combers on the waterfront of Marseilles are all homeless vagabonds leading a hand to month life panhandling. And their leader Banjo was a great vagabond of lowly life With his unquenchable desire to be always going” (Banjo 11). Thus, McKay makes it clear that rootlessness and the state of not-belonging are a way of life with the blacks not only in America but throughout Europe.

The title of the novel *Home to Harlem* is ironic because neither Jake nor his creator McKay finds a real home in Harlem. Jake is in high spirits when he is about to return to Harlem after two years of wandering in France and England. He shouts “Oh, boy! Harlem for mine! Take me home to Harlem /Mistership/ (Home to Harlem 9). But soon he is fed up with Harlem and moves out. Richard K. Barksdale makes a pointed reference saying:

“As the novel ends, Jake is on his way
To Chicago to find another home ...
They will keep moving on in a fruitless
Quest and never truly find a ‘home’
- not even in Harlem” (P 344).

McKay is seen portraying the harsh reality of contemporary black existence in America. His plot, incidents, characters and narrative reveal the disoriented and truncated lives of the millions of blacks living there. Helen Pyne-Tinothy does evidently observe:

“All of McKay’s work reiterates the thesis that
The black man stands in a peculiarly unhappy
position in the Western world cut off from his
roots, socially, economically and spiritually
deprived.....” (P 152)

Home to Harlem lays bare the restlessness, impermanence and disorientation among the “transient outcasts of American society” (Bremer 48). And Banjo on the other hand carries the message that not only in America but also in Europe their lot is the same. In the words of Robert Smith, “Banjo is a novel which vigorously brings to light the problem of blacks in general in a world dominated by hostile, in sensitive, and profligate white” (P 48).

Thus, McKay’s design in his novels is to emphatically illustrate the aftermath of black diaspora and raise the question of the non-white outsider’s existence in an alien culture thereby focusing on their problems and privations. Shari Mali Ali observes:

“He (McKay) epitomized the struggles
And contradictions inherent in any
oppressed group searching for self-reliance

and respect” (P 212).

To conclude, it may be said that McKay is preoccupied with racial discrimination and the resultant alienation.

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