

**FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE  
A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF  
CHESTER B. HIMES**

**W.S. KOTTISWARI**

**THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
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**DEDICATED TO  
THE FOND MEMORY OF  
MY FATHER AND FATHER-IN-LAW**

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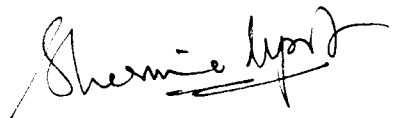
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### CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE — A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF CHESTER. B. HIMES" submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is a record of bonafide research carried out by the candidate under my supervision and that no part of the thesis has been submitted for any degree before.

Calicut,

Date: 10/11/1999

  
Upot Sherine

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### DECLARATION

I, W.S. Kottiswari, hereby declare that the thesis entitled "FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE — A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF CHESTER. B. HIMES", has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar title, or recognition.

Palakkad,

Date: 10/11/99



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## PREFACE

Chester Himes was a real discovery to me. I had not come across him earlier, either as a student or as a teacher. It was at the ASRC, Hyderabad, that I came across *The Quality of Hurt*, Chester Himes's first volume of autobiography. The title impressed me to such an extent that I was forced to finish the book at a single sitting. This book together with the second volume of Himes's autobiography, also significantly titled *My Life of Absurdity*, recount Himes's recollection of the hurts he suffered in racist America. Metaphorically speaking, Himes's autobiographies are records of the desperate attempts of a self struggling to achieve liberation in a culture that denies authentic freedom.

In Himes's fictional works, one comes across a direct thrust of story, an expert handling of plot, a mastery of narrative technique and above all, a great insight into the African - American psyche. A perusal of his novels created in me a keen desire to do research on them. Once I made up my mind I was on the look-out for a topic that would reveal the extent and scope of Himes's art. Thus the title *Fictionalising the Black Psyche* struck me as appropriate in

bringing out the quintessential Himes. Personally, I felt attracted towards the consummate artistry of Himes's writing, especially his confident and credible treatment of the theme of black - white encounters. What appeals here is the imaginative fictionalisation of the black American situation vis - a - vis the mighty white Americans and Himes's works, in the final analysis, become a window on the black - white encounter.

It is the modest aim of the present thesis to study the major themes of Himes's novels with a view to highlighting the dilemmas of the black protagonists. Within the framework of such a study, therefore, the technical and stylistic aspects, important though they are, had to be omitted. The discussion is largely illustrative and the aim has been to try to understand the relevance of Himes's thematic concerns as part of his artistic vision and design.

This dissertation seeks to analyse the four novels written by Himes during the period from 1945 to 1955 which closely document the turmoils and tribulations of the black psyche in a cannibalistic culture. It tries to show how these four novels *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), *Lonely Crusade* (1947), *The Third Generation* (1954), *The Primitive* (1955) form a saga. These novels share the same thematic drift and also record the progression in the writer's artistic

perspective as it broadens out from novel to novel detailing the various patterns of victimisation. In order to understand the remarkable achievement of Chester Himes as a novelist, one must go back and appreciate the African - American tradition and the conflict of images with which other writers preceding Himes's period had to contend. Thus the first part of Chapter I places Himes in the literary tradition highlighting the characteristics of the Wrightian School to which he belonged and shows how Himes differs from the other writers of the period. A number of factors contributed to Himes's social, political and aesthetic consciousness — environment, familial background, the middle - class black community in which he grew up, his early educational background and the literary works by great writers like Richard Wright. These factors helped him become more and more conscious of the nature of the black American's dilemma and the cause and effects of such a dilemma on the black American psyche. Himes's awareness of the black American's dilemma led to his increasing commitment to help solve it in terms of fictional art thereby allying his political consciousness with an aesthetic sensibility. Himes's familial background is also traced in the first chapter with a view to understanding the various factors which moulded Himes's fictional art. The second part of Chapter I introduces the socio - psychological theories on which the thesis is founded. The four novels are analysed chronologically in

the attempt to underscore Himes's philosophical stance. Chapter II considers the paranoid tendencies of the black worker in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Chapter III highlights the familial and political influences which lead to neurotic conflicts of the protagonist in *Lonely Crusade*. Chapter IV examines the delinquent tendencies of the middle class black youth of *The Third Generation* who falls a prey to familial conflicts, while Chapter V focuses on the sensitive black writer of *The Primitive* who becomes a fragmented self as a result of harassing experiences in the American prison house. The four protest novels project a vision of the black man's life as a progressive journey to self knowledge and self definition. Himes envisages his intellectual fictional heroes as undergoing a transition from a state of "double - consciousness" to a state of positive affirmation of identity. Himes has succeeded in the depiction of the African - American reality through his educated heroes who have the anguished revolutionary thrust in them. Taken together, the four novels show the emerging pattern of the stages in Himes's evolving artistic vision. It may be seen that Himes's in-depth exploration into the black psyche shows how the black self shapes itself under pressure and defines the limits of rebellion, defiance and perversity.

I am thankful to Dr. Upot Sherine, my supervising teacher, for her valuable and able guidance. I am grateful to her for

accepting me as her student and instilling hope and confidence into me without which this work would have been impossible. I also thank the Library staff and Office staff of the Department of English, University of Calicut, for extending all possible help.

I am indebted to the authorities of ASRC, Hyderabad, for their grants which enabled me to make several trips to the library and make optimum use of it and also for the academic help extended by them throughout the period of my research.

I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to the former Principals of Mercy College, Palakkad, Sr. Ezechiel and Sr. Finbar and the present Principal Sr. Leena Jose who have always been encouraging.

I owe a lot to my husband, Mr. N. Sukumaran, for his utmost patience, encouragement and moral support. My mother, Mrs. W.S. Jayalakshmi, has been a pillar of strength. During my long periods of absence from home she has looked after my family with utmost care and concern making it possible for me to continue my work in an uninterrupted manner. I thank my children, S. Mahalakshmy and S. Senthilkumar for they had to make the maximum amount of adjustment to enable me to pursue my studies.

I wish to record my deep sense of gratitude to my brother, Dr. W.S. Sampath, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, Colorado State University, USA for getting me Himes's novels, reviews, articles, critical works and even secondary materials from America throughout the period of my research. Without these materials this thesis would not have been possible.

I am grateful to my in-laws, especially my mother-in-law Mrs. N. Sundarambal, elder brother-in-law, Mr.N. Venugopal and my sister-in-law Mrs. Rani Venugopal for their consistent support. My family was well-cared for by them in my mother's absence.

I owe my sincere thanks to Sr. Lisbeth Mary, Mother, Carmel Convent, Kohinoor for being very hospitable whenever I visited the University. She also provided me accommodation whenever the need arose.

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## ABBREVIATIONS OF TITLES IN THE THESIS

<i>Son</i>	-	<i>Native Son</i>
<i>Man</i>	-	<i>Invisible Man</i>
<i>Hurt</i>	-	<i>The Quality of Hurt</i>
<i>Hollers</i>	-	<i>If He Hollers Let Him Go</i>
<i>Crusade</i>	-	<i>Lonely Crusade</i>
<i>Generation</i>	-	<i>The Third Generation</i>
<i>Primitive</i>	-	<i>The Primitive</i>

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## CHAPTER - I

### THE BLACK PSYCHE - A PERSPECTIVE

The black American writer has forged and moulded his sensibility out of the fire of his experience and environment. It is mainly through his sensibility that the black writer interprets his existence and gives form to his personality. Thus "blackness" becomes the material out of which develops the writer's quest for identity. To the black writer writing is functional as it serves a social purpose. The obtaining of aesthetic pleasure has not been the main objective of the American black writer. The literature of the blacks is on the whole impelled by a deep sense of commitment with the writer giving expression to the collective voice of the people. It is this quality about black literature that prompted Saunders Redding to describe it as the "literature of necessity" ( 3).

During the period of slavery, black American literature was predominantly oral. Black Americans were too preoccupied with the demands of survival to find much time for the pursuit of writing. Their customs and traditions were transmitted orally in the form of tales, proverbs and songs. The oral tradition gradually gave way to the written tradition with the emergence of a privileged class of

house niggers. This class, often represented by the racially mixed relatives of the white master, soon constituted a small, elite caste within the slave community, whose opportunities for literacy far outstripped those of the "field niggers". It was from within this minority community of privileged black slaves that the first writings of black American literature emerged. It was a writing that leaned heavily upon the folk-tale tradition. Throughout this initial period black authors were perforce dependent upon a white audience with the consequence that their work often reflected the stereotypes engendered by white presumption.

The folk-tale tradition gave way in due course to slave memoirs and this remained the dominant literary form published prior to the Civil War by black Americans during the nineteenth century. Slave tales recounted tales of the horrors of slavery, separation and break-up of black families by their white masters and of sexual abuse heaped upon black women by their masters. Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and David Walker emerged as effective spokesmen for the cause of emancipation. Douglass through his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* sought equality with the whites in education and employment. William Wells Brown was the first black American novelist to be single-minded in his commitment to the abolition of slavery. Deeply influenced by Harriet

Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Brown baptized his novel in the protest spirit. His novel *Clotel or The President's Daughter* dealt with miscegenation, a theme made all the more sensational for its times because it concerned the occupant of the White House, the symbol of white power. The black American novel thus evolved in protest and it bequeathed protest to the black novelists of the succeeding generations.

The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 brought about great changes in the social and literary climate of black Americans. By this time enough education and stability had developed within the middle class to stimulate literary expression. The social conditions prevalent during this period were not congenial to literary art. During the period of the Reconstruction there arose the Ku Klux Klan which was the southern white reaction to blacks. In spite of these disastrous social conditions a number of writers committed to the perfection of literary art forms emerged during this period. Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906) was a gifted poet and his dialect poetry made him one of the best known black poet of the time. His works reinforced the stereotype of the black as a satisfied peasant, docile servitor, a creature who had a place and knew it, and would keep it in order to lead a decent life. While Dunbar supported the "accommodationist policy" of Booker T.

Washington, Charles Chesnutt proved through his novels that black characters could be created independent of the traditional stereotypes endorsed by Booker T. Washington. That Chesnutt was also caught up in a kind of cultural dualism may be evidenced from his major novels like *The House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream*. W.E.B. DuBois, eminent sociologist and accomplished scholar on race relations, provided a radical alternative to Booker T. Washington's accommodationist approach to racial upliftment. His *Souls of Black Folk* was a major attempt by a black writer to analyse the dilemma of black life. He was convinced that racial injustice could be dealt with only through international socialist politics and not through patronizing national civil rights organisations. The brilliance of DuBois's thought influenced the black intelligentsia so much that it led to a glorious era in the history of black literature. The publication of *The New Negro*, an anthology of black essays, fiction, poetry and drama by Alain Locke, heralded the coming of the Harlem Renaissance. In *The New Negro* Locke asserted that black writers had "stopped speaking for the negro" because now "they speak as negroes" (1968, 48).

The Harlem Renaissance was the outcome of several forces and pressures acting upon the blacks. The Great Migration during the early twentieth century (1916 - 19) was responsible for making the

urban black more conscious of his social deprivation. Together with this and Alain Locke's influential book there were other factors that gave momentum to the Harlem Renaissance. Some of the most salient among them were DuBois's challenge to the accommodationist policy of Washington, the keen interest taken in black writers by white writers like Carl Van Vechten and Du Bose Hayward and Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement. While some black writers of the period employed fiction as a medium of protest and wrote purposeful novels, others showed a particular propensity for the depiction of primitivism and exoticism especially as it manifested in interracial marriages and the practice of blacks masquerading as whites.

Robert Bone categorises the Harlem novelists into two schools namely the Harlem school and the Rear Guard (97). While the Harlem school writers turned to folk art for their major characters and made use of the low life milieu and negro speech — jive, the writers of the Rear Guard presented an alternative to the primitive image presented by the Harlem school by depicting middle-class characters. Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer were some of the prominent writers of the Harlem school while Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen were some of those who belonged to the Rear Guard. That Claude McKay, the first

important writer of the Renaissance, identified completely with the black masses is clear from his three novels *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929) and *Banana Bottom* (1933). In *Home to Harlem* McKay conveys the superiority of instinct over reason through his memorable character Jake who represents pure happiness in contrast to Ray, another character in the novel, who represents the dilemma of the overcivilised intellectual. Claude McKay also excelled as a poet. The publication of *Cane* by Jean Toomer in 1923 revealed Toomer's artistic potential. *Cane* was a highly successful collection of prose sketches and poems that presented contrasting pictures of southern peasant life and northern urban life. It was also about the search for roots and about the sufferings people undergo on being uprooted. The publication of the article *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* (1926) brought to notice the remarkable genius of Langston Hughes. In this Hughes urged the black artist to make full use of the colourful, distinctive material at his disposal and to interpret the beauty of his own people.

We younger negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter... If coloured people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter

either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves (694).

Langston Hughes popularised an imaginary character Jesse B. Simple, the black Everyman. Simple's conversations with his friend Boyd served as a springboard for Hughes's opinions and flights of imagination. Simple, an anti-authoritarian-optimist, pokes fun at his own foibles and mocks at the hypocrisy and shams of his compatriots both black and white and makes his readers feel angry and ashamed simultaneously. While Claude McKay and Langston Hughes glorified low negro life, the writers of the Rear Guard, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, glorified the black middle-class as paragons of virtue. Their focal theme was "passing" i.e., the practice of blacks masquerading as whites.

The black writers who emerged in the forties moved away from these stereotypes. Their aim was to present reality with honesty. These young writers probed deeper and deeper into the reality of the black experience and the best of them evoked a universality which escaped most of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. C.W.E. Bigsby considers these writers as initiators of a distinct trend in black writing. Bigsby acclaims Richard Wright as the pioneer of this development which began in the 1940's with the publication

of Wright's seminal novel *Native Son* (1940) but came into its own only in the sixties and the seventies. Terming this trend the Second Black Renaissance, Bigsby says

The Second Black Renaissance did, indeed, have its roots in the work of Richard Wright who, in a sense, contained within himself the conflicting passions which, for the next few decades, defined the nature of the black American's debate with himself and with his culture (1980, 3).

While the Harlem Renaissance was born out of a distrust of rationalism, a celebration of sensuality and a faith in a self sundered from social imperatives, the Second Black Renaissance was born out of a spirit of protest and writers of this period presented black characters in a deterministic world severely circumscribed by societal forces. The writers of the forties did not think they had to escape their blackness in order to dramatise themes of genuinely universal significance. They were serious artists. They neither tried to entertain nor tried to make a favourable impression but gave more thought to depicting the violent and sometimes ugly social scene. The brooding and violent Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* replaced the exotic and carefree Jake of *Home to Harlem* as the most notable figure in black literature. *Native Son* is the story of a black underclass youth who resorts to violence as a means of retaliation

against the oppression, hatred and incomprehension of the white world. Indeed, Bigger is the first black character created by a black writer to be considered among the most memorable figures in all of American fiction. This is so because though Bigger's experience is apparently racially constricted, many of his deepest problems are those which confront all men in modern society. *Native Son* presents a new approach to the treatment of urban black living. It shows how dismal conditions twist the social and spiritual development of the blacks. Crime is the inevitable product of a warped society. Wright makes it abundantly clear that individuals such as Bigger Thomas live by a strange and perverted code. Such individuals are not likely to succeed by merely following the conventional norms of society. They therefore seek release from the frustration and anger engendered by the shams and hoaxes practised on them by white America by carrying through their tendency to destroy others and in the end, themselves. Wright wanted to prove that it is only when a black man has sufficient control over his environment that he can feel strong enough to realise his innate potential. Wright's novels and autobiography reveal the fact that he, more powerfully than any of his predecessors, realised and recognised the rage lodged in the hearts of the blacks to whom denial of recognition and justice made life itself seem futile. In an article "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937) Wright asserts that it

is the duty of the black writer to furnish moral sanctions for action and create better values so that his race can be better equipped to meet the world on its terms. Wright vehemently opposed writers who pandered to a white audience rather than directing their energies to serve the needs of their black people. Wright believed that writers who ignored black folklore and disowned their responsibility towards their black brethren in favour of literary posturing, produced works which however clever and ornamental, were culturally sterile and aesthetically barren. In his own writing Wright mixed judiciously the personal, the documentary, the factual and the fictional in his attempt to generate in the black masses a new power of self-affirmation and a fresh resoluteness of purpose in their quest for justice.

Robert Bone while speaking of writers like Willard Savoy, Alden Bland, Carl Offord, Ann Petry and Chester Himes who followed Wright, proposes that they may be thought of as forming "the Wright School" (157). Chester Himes truly belongs to the Wright school in that his novels are couched in the protest vein initiated by Wright. However, he differs from Wright in that he presents alienated, black middle-class characters. He himself was a member of the black middle-class and his protagonists too belong to that class. Himes depicts his characters as being caught in the sweep of

social and psychological forces. The ever-present feeling of isolation and hopelessness in Himes's protagonists is similar to what Bigger feels in *Native Son*. In Bigger's words "It's like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I am on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence" (*Son* 23). Himes's protagonists spend their entire lives in the struggle for survival against forces over which they have no control. Yet what makes them distinctive is their continual attempt to retain their integrity without succumbing to fascist pressures.

The publication of Himes's autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt* in 1972 fuelled an increasing interest in the works of this, until then, relatively unappreciated, unexamined black writer. Edward Margolies in his book *Native Sons* (1968) speaks highly of Himes and asserts that he deserves more critical attention. In fact, Margolies devotes a whole chapter "Race and Sex in the Novels of Chester Himes" in *Native Sons* to Himes and critically examines five of Himes's major works. Critics like Stephen Milliken and James Lundquist perceptively assess the overall position of Chester Himes in the broad spectrum of African - American literature. John A. Williams in a long interview titled "My Man Himes" (1970) observes that Himes has been treated unfairly by critics and publishers.

The kind of hurt and racial injustice that is repeatedly highlighted by Himes in his novels is drawn mostly from the writer's own experience. This is made clear in an interview with Hoyt Fuller where Himes declares

so much of it [his life] I've used in various stories of mine, such as *The Primitive* which was autobiographical; *The Third Generation* was autobiographical... so I thought it pointless of me to go back over and rehash these stories in my autobiography because I already did it in detail (12).

This admission of the writer's would perhaps provide the justification for taking a quick look at certain details of Himes's personal life as they are relevant to a proper understanding of his novels. Chester Himes was born on July 29, 1909, in Jefferson City, Missouri. During the first fourteen years of his life, Himes's family lived variously in Mississippi, Georgia and Arkansas, depending upon where Himes's father, who taught wheel-wrighting at black colleges, found a job. The events of these formative years are depicted in the novel *The Third Generation* (1954). His mother who looked like a white and believed she should have been white was temperamentally quite different from his father who was a short black man with bow legs. His mother felt superior to her husband because of her white ancestry. This led to frequent quarrels with

her husband. In *The Third Generation* Himes recounts the constant friction between his parents and the effect this had on him. Himes says in his autobiography "Our parents quarrelled bitterly... our house was gloomy and unbearable" (*Hurt* 28). In 1923, Himes's brother Joseph was almost totally blinded in an accident during a chemistry demonstration. Of this event Himes writes, "that one moment in my life hurt me as much as all the others put together" (*Hurt* 11). After Joe's accident, the family moved to St. Louis and Cleveland in search of the best medical treatment. During the period from 1926-28, Chester Himes graduated from high school, attended Ohio State University briefly and then became involved in criminal activities. In particular, he associated himself with Bunch Boy, a well-known gambler in Cleveland. In 1928, Himes was arrested for armed robbery and sentenced to twenty to twenty five years of hard labour in the Ohio State Penitentiary. Of his reactions upon being apprehended Himes writes "I refused to think of the hurt I had inflicted on my parents, on my relatives, on myself" (*Hurt* 59). The next seven and a half years were spent in prison and Himes recounts his prison experience in the novel *Cast the First Stone* (1952). In his autobiography too he says of this time, "I didn't have time to think of my hurt. I didn't realise at the time that I was being hurt. It's just costing the state and isn't

hurting me a bit, I used to think of my imprisonment" (*Hurt* 65). He left prison, married and started looking for work to support himself and his wife. It was during this time that he experienced the racial dimensions of his hurt. Himes's preoccupation with "hurt" that is with sources of pain, not only in his own life but also in the lives of others is seen very clearly in his autobiography *The Quality of Hurt*. Here Himes states "I can never again be hurt as much as I have already been hurt, eventhough I should live a hundred thousand years" (1). Himes also critiques the passive attitude of American blacks towards injustice. After working briefly for Ohio Writer's Project in Cleveland Himes tried to find work in a private industry but was rebuffed. He states "it was then I learned what racial prejudice is like. My hurt became violent. Each day, a thousand times, I had to exert the greatest self-control to keep from smashing the face of some white personnel director" (*Hurt* 72).

In 1940, Himes and his wife moved to Los Angeles where he held twenty three jobs during the next three years. He came to know many members of the Communist Party and the labour unions for most of his work was in the war industries of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Out of these experiences, working in various shipyards along the coast, came the material for Himes's first two novels. The years in Los Angeles were full of pain. His experiences

there enabled him to understand the precarious condition of the black man in America and provoked him to remark that "the American black man is the most neurotic, complicated, schizophrenic, unanalysed, anthropologically advanced specimen of mankind of the history of the world" (*Hurt* 285).

In 1945, he came to New York when he received a Rosenwald Fellowship. He met many middle-class blacks and whites, friends of his cousins Molly and Henry Moon. This association formed the basis of his book *Pink Toes* (1961). He returned to California, came again to New York where he completed work on *Lonely Crusade* (1947). When he published this novel he experienced the greatest pain. The novel was poorly received and this disaster crippled him so much that he was unable to write for five years. During these years he drifted from job to job and relationship to relationship. His violent relationship with a white woman, Vandi Haygood, during this period, formed the basis of his next novel *The Primitive* (1955). In 1953, he published *The Third Generation*. Later he went to Europe and was in France for some time in order to escape some of the hurt inflicted on him in America. In 1956, Himes wrote a novel *Une Affaire de Viol* based on his experiences in France. This was later published in America as *A Case of Rape* (1963). While in Europe he wrote nine detective novels, two of which were been made into Hollywood films. In 1963, he suffered a stroke but after recuperation resumed writing.

His essay "Dilemma of the Negro novelist in the United States" (1966) is as significant as his autobiography because it states Himes's views regarding the duties of a black writer. He begins his essay on a high note stating that the noblest quest of all is the search for identity. According to Himes, a writer is burdened by a search for meaning and it is in this search that the writer makes his own experiences meaningful. Himes goes on to outline the dilemma in which the black writer finds himself. As the writer himself undergoes experiences that are brutalised, restricted, degraded he is tempted to portray life as bereft of all meaning. The black writer not only experiences pain while recounting the effects of racial oppression on the blacks but also comes into conflict with his readers. Whites do not relish the truth revealed so openly, while blacks dislike the exposure of the subtle class differences operating within their own community. In spite of such hostility, the black writer fulfils his predominant duty as an artist by laying stress on the indomitable quality of the human spirit. As Himes puts it

There is an indomitable quality within the human spirit that cannot be destroyed; a face deep within the human personality that is impregnable to all assaults. This quality, this force, exists deep within the Negro also; he is human. They rest so deeply that prejudice, oppression,

lynchings, riots, time or weariness can never corrode or destroy them. During the three hundred years Negroes have lived in America as slaves and near subhumans, the whole moral fibre and personality of those Negroes now living would be a total waste; we would be drooling idiots, dangerous maniacs, raving beasts — if it were not for that quality and force within all humans that cries; "I will live" (Himes 1966, 57-58).

Racial oppression as perpetrated by the whites follows a certain pattern. White America is guilty of perpetuating a society which denies all that is human in non-white beings. This results in a thoroughly dehumanised society. So deeply and severely has the black race been maimed by prolonged racial oppression that it has resulted in the production of a warped black psyche. As Himes explains

plumbing for the truth reveals within the Negro personality, homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority, paradoxical anti-semitism, arrogance, uncle-tomism, hate and fear and self-hate. This then is the effect of oppression on the human personality... the honest American Negro writer is trying to

convince his audience that the whole Negro race in America, as a result of centuries of oppression, is sick at soul... it could not conceivably be otherwise (Himes 1966, 57).

Speaking of the dynamics of the hate-fear-self-hate syndrome, Himes observes that though hate is the normal reaction of the American black it is inevitably linked to the fear that his hatred may be discovered. This becomes a chain reaction wherein the black ends up hating himself for his own fear and cowardice. However, in spite of these overwhelming odds against him there is in the black a strong will to survive.

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The American black is weighed down by a double burden as he is buffeted by two cultures, the Western culture and his black heritage. His adjustment to the dominant culture is, therefore, marked by a conflicting pattern of identification and rejection. Nationalism, assimilation, accommodation and outright protest become the various forms resorted to in black literature as reactions to the dominant culture. While some black writers turn to their rich folk heritage for literary material and emphasize racial differences, others suppress such differences thereby allowing only a diluted version of black nationalism to influence their work. Black

writers differ on whether they should focus on the pathological consequences of discrimination on the black self or the strength of the black self to withstand such immense pressure on it. The writers of the Wrightian school, by depicting "grotesques" in their fiction, emphasize the fact that the American caste system breeds such ravaged characters. These writers consider the plight of the urban black masses from the naturalistic, psychological and Marxian perspectives. How black Americans deal with their minority status has been viewed by black writers as a critical determinant of their psychic health and functioning. Dissociating oneself from one's blackness implies rejection of the self, feeling pride about black people implies pride in the self and blaming blacks for their life conditions implies blaming of the self. The black self is seen emerging and developing through the manifold influences exerted on it by society. An in-depth knowledge of the black self is crucial to an understanding of the black psyche.

The self is nothing more than a construct or an idea. It is composed of the picture an individual has of his body and appearance, the image he has of how others see him, the feelings he has about himself and his family, his feelings of worth, acceptance or rejection. Biological and sociological conditions blend in a unique way to form the self-concept. The self, in other words, is generated

through a social process. In the course of the search for identity the self interacts with society since, as a social being, man is dependent on others for his survival. Society imposes its fictions and stereotypes on the individual with the result that his attitudes are shaped and guided by those of society.

The term "self" has been popularised by social psychologists like Charles Horton Cooley, G.H. Mead, Gordon Allport and Abraham Maslow who are primarily concerned with the effect of "social variables" on the psyche of the individual. According to Mead, the concept of the self arises in the process of social experience and activity and develops in the given individual as a result of the social process as a whole. The individual experiences himself indirectly from the particular standpoint of other individual members of the same social group. By doing so, he becomes an object to himself through "taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself" (Mead 215). Other individuals, the environment and the community as a whole play a significant part in the formation of the self. The concept of the self as Mead defines it is similar to C.H. Cooley's notion of a "looking-glass" self (151). According to Cooley, an individual even takes the role of the other and views himself as an object. This enables him to form a concept of himself and even evaluate that concept. Thus the

self is revised as new evidence comes in or as one actively tests reality to find out how others feel. Both these theorists lay stress on social interaction as the determining factor in the shaping of one's self.

It is a well-known fact that the self-image of the blacks is fundamentally related to a colour-caste system. Black writers have time and again dealt with the crucial question of the interaction of the black self with society. The black self, it is generally seen, suffers from conflicting pulls in its desire to conform to mainstream codes and at the same time to reject them. The black American lives a precarious existence forced as he is to confront images, both positive and negative, which sift through his mind; some images are retained and make a lasting impression while others are discarded. In either case, for an evaluation of himself, the black American peers into mirrors constructed by those who represent power and influence. W.E.B. DuBois's remark that the black man has been forced to see himself through the eyes of the dominant society expresses this dilemma. According to DuBois the black man is gifted with "second sight" and this double-consciousness results in his having "two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one black body" (1961, 16-17). Such opposing concepts wreak irreparable havoc

on the black psyche. DuBois describes the poignancy of the resulting frustration

It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy and help to them but aid to all the world... It gradually permeates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear, that some thick sheet of invisible glass is between them and the world. They get excited, they talk louder, they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity... They still either do not hear at all, or hear but, dimly and even what they hear they do not understand. Then the people within may become hysterical (1968, 130).

This theme assumes shape and form in the works of prominent black writers like Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Their works project black characters who are called upon to play a variety of roles according to the dictates of the

white society. The roles may be as divergent as that of the wily slave, the darky entertainer, the dissimulator or the saviour of the black race. Ralph Ellison's nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man* takes on such divergent roles. Each role, though constraining his individuality, is necessary for survival. These roles highlight the helplessness of the black in shaking off the strait-jacket of racial stereotyping that consigns him to a lifetime of invisibility. Torn between actuality and illusion, the protagonist goes through, what Thomas Kreilkamp terms, a kind of "crisis of the self" (206). Ultimately the protagonist of *Invisible Man* decides to write his own story relinquishing the meaning generated by other ideologies in favour of the one that is primarily self-generated. He creates a persona for himself different from the images that others have projected on to him. When he realises that all other-imposed identities are false he arrives at the desired state of the enlightened self. After passing through many disillusioning experiences, the invisible man says "I'm nobody but myself" (*Man* 17). The example of *Invisible Man* proves that black literature does indeed give lyrical and allegorical form to the sociological studies of DuBois and G.H. Mead.

This thesis aims to examine, through a study of Himes's novels, the contingencies under which the black self shapes itself. Interpersonal and intrapsychic factors come together to give shape and

substance to the psychic life of the black individual. An individual's relationship to his own group members, be they his family or peers and to the members of the dominant group assume importance when viewed in this light. Positive relationships inculcate a strong sense of self while negative relationships mar the self-worth of an individual. Karen Horney's psychological theories are based on the principle that every psychic disorder is the offshoot of disturbances in human relationships. She uses the term "neurosis" to refer to all the possible variations of conflicts in a person who falls prey to psychic disorder. While acknowledging the role that early childhood experiences have in giving rise to the neurotic personality, Horney also recognises the role of conflicts in later life suggesting that anxiety is the basis of neurosis. She terms this as "Basic Anxiety" and makes a distinction between the ordinary anxiety experienced by a normal individual and that experienced by a neurotic. The former is a reasonable expectation of danger while the latter is an irrational fear totally unwarranted by the situation in which one is placed. She, however, asserts that in every culture there may exist life conditions which give rise to fears. A neurotic shares the fears common to all individuals in a culture but differs from a normal individual in experiencing "fears which in quantity or quality deviate from those of the cultural pattern". To sum up, "a neurosis is a

psychic disturbance brought about by fears and defences against these fears and by attempts to find compromise solutions for conflicting tendencies" (Horney 1937, 28-29). The defences which a neurotic builds up against basic anxiety may be as varied as need for affection, submission, striving for power and withdrawal. Depending on the overt manifestations of the conflicts, Horney broadly classifies personality types as compliant, aggressive and detached. While Sigmund Freud considered compulsive drives to be instinctual, Horney, though not ignoring childhood experiences, traces the root cause of such drives to feelings of isolation, helplessness, fear and anxiety. Inconsistency thus becomes an indication of an unstable psyche. "Inconsistencies are as definite an indication of the presence of conflicts as a rise in body temperature is of physical disturbance" (Horney 1945, 35).

American blacks are more prone to such inconsistencies and contradictory attitudes destined as they are to live a marginal existence. The foremost threat to the black self is manifest in social relationships, be they with other blacks or with whites. Disturbed relationships in turn give rise to fears in the black individual who desperately builds up adequate defences to ward off such fears. Generally speaking, black men and women fall a prey to stereotypes and are unable to appreciate themselves or others. Above all, they

have to cope with the anger that results from intimidation, psychological castration, neglect and frustration. It is against this background that a study of Chester Himes's fiction assumes relevance. As Himes's fiction moves between the polarities of self and society the study examines the pressure of environmental reality on the protagonists. The focus of this study is on the relationship between the black individual and his total environment as projected in Himes's fiction. Defects or imbalances in the relationship between the protagonists and society leads to erratic behaviour patterns. The victim heroes who figure in Himes's novels are unable to resist inner disorder for they cannot view the external reality objectively and positively. What runs as a chord throughout the Himesian corpus is the dominating metaphor of conflict. Desperately trying to stem the conflict from within and without, the characters search for patterns of living that are compatible with themselves as maturing individuals. They remain preoccupied with the self, with their individual status as victims of the American society. Each one's search becomes essentially a reaching out to find his separate and particular identity in proper relatedness to other people. While unravelling the familial and social conflicts of his black characters, Himes takes up his position in their consciousness and presents the psychological netherworld of the

American black as a seething cauldron of uncertainty, hostility and guilt. However, in spite of all these odds Himes's victim-heroes are endowed with a tremendous potential to survive and strike out against the stinging barbs of oppression. Himes frequently emphasises growth. Though the characters are psychologically crippled they transcend their victim state by their remarkable capacity to realise, endure and overcome the racial hurts to which they are brutally subjected.

**FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE  
A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF  
CHESTER B. HIMES**

**W.S. KOTTISWARI**

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## CHAPTER - II

### THE SELF IN CRISIS - *IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO*

Himes's first novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) conveys Himes's sense of outrage and bitter condemnation of the American mores and laws that have continued to shackle the black man. Bob Jones, the protagonist of the novel, is a sensitive man who refuses to knuckle under social pressures shunted though he is from one miserable situation to another. Jones stubbornly challenges the system that seeks to keep him subordinated. All he desires is to be accepted as a human being, to be able to shed his cloak of racial invisibility and to be respected as a man among men. As he journeys in the search for an identity he becomes an alien in his own land. The quest becomes bereft of meaning when his real world turns irrational, unreal and eventually nightmarish while his dreams and visions take on the contours of reality. It is this absurd vision of black existence that the novel projects. Gilbert Muller in his analysis of the novel describes Bob Jones as an "absurd anti-hero" whose "anger and fear are objectified by his sense of the absurd" (28). Muller's views are shared by critics like Milliken and Lundquist who appreciate the novel's tight plot,

exciting backdrop and individual characterisation. Edward Margolies though criticising the novel's seeming lack of progression is all praise for the novel's exploration of the effect of racism on the black psyche. He states

Specifically, systematic racism has awakened in him (Bob Jones) deep castration fears — has indeed psychologically emasculated him, robbing him of his self-esteem since he is constantly being reminded of his "place" in the scheme of things. In compensation, Bob drives his car furiously, drinks hard, fights hard and makes love to the wife of one of his friends. But his principal torment is that he is intellectually aware of what is happening to him, but cannot muster sufficient strength to save himself as he watches his fate overtake him (1968, 90).

White critics like Robert Bone, David LittleJohn and Carl Milton Hughes are, however, critical in their response to the novel. They find fault with Himes for presenting maladjusted characters who are "race-mad almost to the point of hysteria" (LittleJohn 142-43). These critics fail to recognise and acknowledge the underlying forces that cause such maladjustments. What makes Himes's work unique is that it is informed by a thorough knowledge of the American social reality which is responsible for the creation of such conflict - ridden characters.

Through his fiction Himes presents the condition of the black man as victim. The tragic disjunction of meaning between the self and the world outside creates in the black a state of perpetual anxiety and anguish which alienates him from his inner reality. Himes's characters combine in themselves two diametrically opposite human possibilities — the capacity to suffer and the capacity to affirm the human sense of life despite the nihilistic void into which they are drawn because of racism. They are endowed with an invincible human spirit and constantly fight against destructive social reality.

*If He Hollers Let Him Go* achieves poignancy through its projection of Himes's own experiences in Los Angeles where he was buffeted by feelings of anger, frustration and experienced a sense of rejection. Like Himes's private self, his fictive protagonists make desperate attempts to achieve liberation and authentic freedom. Writing his own story seems to Himes to provide a way of discovering or creating the essential unity of his life. Through the imposition of a narrative form on his lived experience, Himes converts the randomness of real events into the coherence of art. Himes has the ability to counterpoise his perceptions as a black male with his analysis as a seasoned writer and it is this which lends credence to his fiction. As Valerie Smith states "by fictionalising one's life one bestows a quality of authenticity on it" (2).

California, the dream factory, forms the backdrop of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. It is here that Himes's protagonist, like his creator, tries to fulfill his dreams and in the process meets with the same disillusionment. The focus in the novel is on Bob Jones, an intelligent and educated black who suffers from psychological maladjustment. Bob Jones, like the other Himesian protagonists, believes in the primacy of the individual over the race. He aspires for the American dream — a home, a car and a good social position — but its fulfilment eludes him as he faces the harsh realities of existence that confront a black in urban America. The novel shows the ambiguous nature of Jones's status. California in the 1940's was teeming with a great influx of immigrants especially Mexicans and Japanese. Japanese-Americans at the time were looked upon with suspicion and quite a few were interned in concentration camps because of Japan's involvement in the second world war. During the same period Mexican-Americans too were rioting against the whites for their rights. Immigrants and blacks were as a consequence ill-treated by the Americans for daring to rebel against them. Japanese immigrants were forced to settle in Little Tokyo, a Japanese slum in California. Despite the job opportunities it offered, the California of the time was seething with racial tension, bigotry and discrimination. These unhealthy social conditions inevitably

fuelled frustration in blacks and other minorities. It is into this bubbling cauldron of virulent racism and social inequality that Bob Jones steps when he comes from Cleveland.

Bob Jones has left Cleveland and has come to Los Angeles hoping to find social security and live in peace. However, his experiences in southern California prove him wrong. In the course of the novel, Jones experiences deep-seated feelings of guilt, self-hate, insecurity and anguish. He hopes that he can put his racial self-consciousness out of his mind in Los Angeles. Shockingly, he discovers that racism is more subtle in Los Angeles than in Cleveland. The twin forces of racism and sexism combine to smother Jones. He confronts a world devoid of options, where his words and actions are constantly under scrutiny and where he feels that his future is being scripted for him by some other. Jones is forced to see himself as others define him. His real conflict stems out of his inability to find self-validation in a world in which all choices are equally reprehensible. In *Black Skin White Masks* Frantz Fanon observes

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme

of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being that his own human worth and reality depend (216-217).

Bob Jones moves to Los Angeles not just for better employment opportunities but for something very elusive — a secure sense of his own self-worth. The war-time recession and the racially discriminatory practices that he encounters there make it very difficult for Jones to secure a job. What he sees in the face of the white Americans in Los Angeles is

...that crazy, wild-eyed unleashed hatred that the first Jap bomb on Pearl Harbour let loose in a flood. All that tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the street as gas fumes. Everytime I stepped outside, I saw a challenge I had to accept or ignore (*Hollers* 4).

The look of disapproval on the faces of others induces in Jones a sense of powerlessness and a lowered self-concept. The curious and indignant looks that he gets from passers-by gnaw at Jones's self-confidence. The eyes into which he looks reflect a dirtied, unacceptable blackness back to him. He finds it impossible to be objective about the implied condemnation. Society, it seems, is determined to keep him a "nigger" and put him in his place.

The novel encompasses a time span of five days and is narrated in the first person. The first person narrative is very effective in its projection of the mental state of the protagonist. Milliken comments on the novel's neatly balanced plot and the skilful use of first person narration. To him, Himes's technique is

almost flawless ... reminiscent of the marvelous torture machine in Franz Kafka's "Penal Colony" that was designed to inflict maximum pain upon its victims with minimum waste motion. Himes had undertaken to demonstrate how a particular set of social circumstances can break a man, and he assembled the assorted disasters that demolish Bob Jones with the skill of a Grand Inquisitor. The device of the first - person narrator, Bob Jones himself, is applied quite literally, without tricks or gimmicks, and the book's other characters, flattened to recognizable social types in Bob Jones's distorted view, function in much the same way as the row of needles set in a conveyor belt do in Kafka's ghastly machine (77).

Jones's position as leaderman in the Atlas Shipyard Corporation gives him a sense of importance, of pride and is a boost to his ego initially. He possesses the external trappings of success in the

form of a 1942 Buick Roadmaster. The car is not merely the symbol of middle-class status to a black man but is also a morale booster. His attachment to this material symbol of his success is so great that he would rather lose his job than lose his car. In course of time, however, Jones's self-worth suffers a setback when on the way to work, he is forced to battle on the road with white drivers for position and advantage. Whenever the white drivers cast a look of cold hatred on seeing Jones and his co-workers, Jones boils with rage. He even feels like dashing his car against them. When a driver in a Nash coupe cuts out in front of him without signalling, Jones feels that the other has done it purposely to slight him because he is a coloured man. Jones says "I kept on his tail until I could pull up beside him, then I leaned out of the window and shouted 'this ain't Alabama, you peckerwood son of a bitch. When you want to pull out of line, stick out your hand'" (*Hollers* 15-16). Muller considers Jones's rides to and from his work place to be of unique significance.

The Los Angeles roads and highways that Jones travels each morning and afternoon to and from work, more than forty miles in all, give a unique rhythm of immersion and invisibility to the novel's protagonist. The fine June weather means nothing to Bob Jones, who must engage in

actual and figurative combat simply to get himself and his black coworkers to Atlas. These symbolic rides are primal episodes in racial consciousness. The highways become spatial expressions not only of Los Angeles life but also of a social structure rooted in racism... the very Los Angeles roads that swallow and spit out Bob Jones are the expression of a particular urban pathology (23 - 24).

Jones has occasion to confront many such situations. The racially hostile environment sickens Jones's mental state and greatly lowers his self-esteem. Himes provides enough evidence of such hostility — verbal abuse from whites, segregated public facilities, overt instances of job discrimination. Other subtle but more malignant ways of expressing this hostility exist too. For instance, in one scene Jones wanders around the downtown streets of Los Angeles feeling like a stranger in an alien land. Wherever he turns, he feels either debased or ignored. White faces stare at him from magazine covers, white pedestrians look with hostility as they push past him on the street. When he takes his place in a theatre to watch a movie a white woman shifts her seat to avoid sitting next to him; finally, sickened by the debasing image of a fawning black woman on the screen he leaves the theatre in disgust.

As an extremely sensitive individual, Jones's sense of self-worth is constantly defined by the other. This attitude makes his work, social and love relationships tend to move in disastrous directions. It also creates a pathetic sense of inferiority in Jones. Jones's interactions with the "significant others" who according to the psychologist Mead, have an important role in shaping the self-worth of an individual bear this out. Jones's "significant others" are Kelly, his white supervisor, Madge, his white subordinate and Alice, his light-skinned fiancée and his relationships with them turn out to be disastrous. The situation at Jones's workplace is not in any way better than the hurdles he encounters on his way to work. The major conflict in the novel involves Jones and his white supervisor, Kelly. This conflict is, as in many black novels, the unifying structure of the plot. Jones is aware of the fact that his position vis-a-vis that of the supervisor is an inferior one. His inferiority is not due to any defects in his intelligence or in his worth as a human being but is rather thrust upon him by the manipulative mechanics of a white society. White society does not allow for equal competition between blacks and whites. Kelly, even earlier, had tried his best to prevent Jones from becoming a leaderman. Now he sees to it that Jones is kept subservient. Kelly's attitude towards Jones is conditioned by a psychopathic preoccupation with the preservation of his autonomy

which, he feels, is threatened by Jones. As Robert Bone observes "by projecting the 'blackness' of his own being upon the dark skin of his negro victim, the white man hopes to exorcise the chaotic forces that threaten to destroy him from within" (229). On the one hand, we have Kelly who refuses to recognise the dark drives of his own soul and thereby suffers a loss of identity, while on the other we have Bob Jones who reels under the impact of forces of rejection and dreams only of vengeance. This hatred renders him incapable of love and aborts all his attempts to achieve a valid identity. He finds his identity both as a black man and as a leaderman challenged by Kelly who becomes the white villain in the novel.

Kelly's determination to humiliate Bob Jones is revealed in a series of incidents. Right from Jones's first meeting with Kelly it becomes obvious that their relationship is going to be fraught with tension. Whenever Kelly sees Jones his face reddens in irritation and he taunts Jones by throwing his blackness at his face with questions like "How's that coloured gang of yours coming along, Bob?" (*Hollers* 20). Through the use of "antilocution" (Allport 50) or verbal abuse, Kelly is able to cause Jones greater hurt. According to the social psychologist Allport, antilocution is more effective than open discrimination as a weapon in causing injury to another's self-esteem. On hearing the epithet "coloured" Jones simmers with

rage but with remarkable self-control suppresses it. His blackness as well as his position as leaderman is slighted by Kelly. He comes to feel that the pride which he has initially felt as a leaderman is thoroughly unwarranted. The subordinate nature of his position is brought home to him when he has to fight even for basic rights let alone enjoy any privilege. Jones understands that he has to fight and assert his self in a world geared to downgrade him. The working conditions in the Atlas Shipyard aggravate his frustration. The place literally resembles a mad house. It is significant that the setting also contributes to a sense of powerlessness. Jones is not only psychologically cramped but also physically restricted. The working area is claustrophobic: "it was cramped quarters aft, a labyrinth of narrow, hard-angled companion ways, jammed with staging, and workers who had to be contortionists first of all" (*Hollers* 24).

If his confrontations with Kelly are a blow to his identity as a leaderman, those with Madge are a blow to his manhood. Madge, a Texas-bred white woman is "the novel's most prominent white monster" (Milliken 78). She is very much aware of the complex emotions she arouses in Bob Jones. This makes her use her whiteness as a means of asserting her superiority over him. The myth of white womanhood, Doris Y. Wilkinson asserts, "has soaked into the negro's skin. In matters of beauty, manners, social graces

and womanly virtues, the white woman is elevated by the American society to the status of a near goddess" (247). This results in the idealisation of the white woman but what makes the black man predisposed towards the white woman is "the equal absurdity of the taboo surrounding her" (Wilkinson 249). Paradoxically, this leads to hatred. Continues Wilkinson

In the mind and life of the negro man the white woman symbolises at once his freedom and bondage. She is made into an object of temptation and repulsion, love and hate. It appears to me that the black man's existence in the south is predicted upon the existence of the white woman who is inaccessible. A kind of reverse racism sets in. The Negro, like everyone else, hates what he cannot love; he wants what he cannot have; he degrades and mutilates that which humiliates and deranges him (251).

Madge, a white southerner who is only a fitter and his subordinate, challenges and circumscribes Jones's manhood in many ways. During the daily performance of their duties they see each other. While Jones experiences ambivalent feelings towards her, Madge uses her whiteness as a threat, a challenge and a lure. Her facial expressions convey the common white belief that blacks are

potential rapists. While Jones hates and fears her, Madge is attracted to him but is afraid to demonstrate her affection in a normal manner. She pretends to be afraid of him. As Jones says, "she deliberately put on a frightened, wide-eyed look and backed away from me as if she were scared stiff, as if she were a naked virgin and I was KingKong" (*Hollers* 22). Though only an ordinary worker in the Atlas Shipyard she wields more power than Jones. The power-play in which she indulges takes on the significance of a ritual with its recurrence throughout the novel. This ritual robs Jones of his virility and leaves him psychologically impotent. The general sense of foreboding that Jones experiences on his arrival at the shipyard gets intensified during his encounters with Madge. Commenting on the theme of fear in the novel, Milliken says "fear is the dominant theme of the novel. It is a concentrated study of the genesis of panic, the progressive deterioration of a personality under the deadly pressure of a huge and inescapable fear" (75). However, Jones's fear is different in kind from that experienced by Himes's other protagonists. The sight of Madge brings to Jones's mind the mythic figure of the black rapist who is often a murderer, like Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. Joe is castrated and killed by vigilantes after he has had sexual relations with and then killed a white woman. This figure of the

murderer-rapist embedded in his unconscious intimidates Jones. Somewhere in the reaches of his mind, the image of himself as a superstud combines with the white-female taboo and makes him evoke the image of the lynch mob. This feeling is a prelude to his loss of confidence, for it has as its center the notion that he is trespassing upon territory forbidden to him even as he tries to convince himself that he can conquer that territory and use it for his own purposes. Madge, on the other hand, exploits Jones's attraction for her. She refuses to work with Jones, calls him nigger, has him demoted but still continues to flirt with him. It is to be noted that just as white society has conditioned him to desire her whiteness, it has also conditioned him to fear it. Jones becomes fully aware of it when, after a ritualistic tussle, she challenges him to rape her. "All right, Rape me then, Nigger" (*Hollers* 179) and the word itself confounds him. "Rape... just the sound of the word scared me, took everything out of me, my desire, my determination, my whole build up" (*Hollers* 179). To be raped by Jones becomes a necessity for Madge as it would establish her superiority as a white. The very fact that she wields immense power over Jones both with regard to instilling fear in him and in being able to provoke his dormant lust gives her immense satisfaction. Madge's power assumes dangerous proportions when she becomes instrumental in depriving

Jones of his job. Jones's first official act soon after joining Atlas Shipyard Corporation is to recruit Madge as a helper but she bluntly refuses to work for a "nigger". In response, Jones retorts by calling her "cracker bitch" (*Hollers* 33). The white world immediately sees to it that negative sanctions are enforced against him for he has challenged the white world. He is hauled before the superintendent MacDougal who informs him that he will be demoted to the status of a mechanic the following week. Thus the dualities and dislocations caused by race make his situation precarious. The next day Jones returns to his job earnestly hoping to secure the support of his black co-workers but his hopes are in vain. His friends extend verbal support but lack the courage to defend him in more concrete ways. Jones vainly hopes to get the support of the union to revoke his demotion but the union is just as unsupportive. The luke-warm response of the union representative proves, Himes seems to suggest, that the refuge offered by communism is only illusory. Jones's experience with the party proves beyond doubt that it is not genuinely interested in proletarian revolution or in the lives of American blacks. The shipyard's bigots who hate him for being a black man who has overstepped his place are jubilant at his humiliation. For the first time, the whites in the plant are openly vindictive towards him. Kelly deliberately tells a "darky" joke in his presence. These events put Jones's emotions into a turmoil,

"They couldn't have done it any better if they've rehearsed it... I never wanted to get out of a place so bad in all my life. But Kelly knew he had me. He wanted me away. 'Go on, go on, Get out of here'" (*Hollers* 148).

Psychologically boxed in, Jones's only salvation lies in his chic middle-class, near-white girl Alice Harrison and it is to her that he goes when his ideal of manhood is threatened. Rosenblatt comments that Alice is parodied as an Alice - in - Wonderland type of black woman.

Alice is no accidental name; it evokes the image of a blonde heroine, pink and white, curtsying and speaking perfect English. In a way, the Harrisons created Alice so that she might open wonderland to them, not realising that they were already living in a wonderland merely by needing such a wish (170).

Jones feels proud of his lady-love who, as Ella Mae, his black landlady, says "is the whitest coloured girl you could find" (*Hollers* 56). The Harrisons live on the West Side of the Beverly Hills which is removed from the black ghetto on the South side. They represent the black elite. Alice is a case-work supervisor but harbours only superficial social concerns. Jones derives a sense of personal pride in having

her as his girl. To go around with her is a boost to his ego. "I could knock myself out just walking along the street with her and whenever we ran into any of the white shipyard workers downtown somewhere, I really felt like something" (*Hollers* 8). Paradoxically, Alice too lets him down for she is embarrassed by Jones's powerful, assertive blackness and is ashamed to be seen in a segregated high society downtown restaurant with him. Jones faces open discrimination when they go to a restaurant. They are served grudgingly and with the bill there are two typed lines "We served you this time but we do not want your patronage in the future" (*Hollers* 73). Mrs. Harrison, Alice's mother, preaches accommodationism to Jones. When Jones is frustrated over the manner in which he is treated in his job she says that there is some inherent weakness in blacks which prevents them from achieving what they desire. Mrs. Harrison takes her gospel on the "negro problem" from Booker T. Washington and Eleanor Roosevelt. As she tells Jones

You know yourself, Bob, a lot of our people are just not worthy, they just don't deserve any more than they're getting. And they make it so hard for the rest of us... Southern Negroes are coming in here and making it hard for us... We must hope and pray. We cannot get everything we want overnight and we can't expect the white people to give us what we

don't deserve. We must be patient, we must make progress... (*Hollers* 62-63).

As a result of his harassing experience Jones unknowingly falls a victim to systematic delusions of persecution. His fantasies give shape to the perception that white people persecute blacks and sometimes blacks too come to be considered as persecutors. Such a feeling is seen in his association with Alice. Jones sometimes feels that Alice, like the white society, is a traitor who takes pleasure in challenging his manhood. Once she takes him to her friend's house where she makes a pass at a girl. There is a subtle suggestion of homosexuality which is as much a challenge to Jones's manhood as is Madge's whiteness. The fact that Alice prefers a lesbian to him shocks him greatly. It is then that he realises his helplessness — the sorry situation of his life being reduced to a pawn controlled by external agents. His suspicions are again aroused when he sees Alice with a white man, Tom Leighton. Jones's attitude towards Leighton is one of jealousy. Even a minor incident like Alice's association with Leighton gives rise to an interpretive system that causes him to react with unusual intensity whenever he meets Leighton. Though Leighton tries to be friendly, Jones suspects him of laughing at him. Leighton has not helped to deform or oppress Jones but is only ignorant of Jones's fear, pain and suspicion.

It is sheer destiny that Jones, the sensitive intellectual, is caught in the game played by Madge on the one hand and Alice on the other. Alice wants to intellectualise and remould him in her image of a black professional. When he encounters Alice and her three female friends discussing the problems which confront the social worker in Little Tokyo, Bob Jones is repelled by the "cut-rate jive in social worker's phraseology that proved a certain intellectualism" (*Hollers* 101). He tells them that the only solution to the black problem is revolution. Alice chides Jones for being anti-social and reprimands him for his rude manners. Against such destructive forces, Jones feels totally defenceless. Moreover, he imbibes a deep sense of inferiority from the negative view of himself that he receives from others. As a result Jones's "looking-glass" self (Cooley 151) is distorted. This social situation renders him powerless.

Another very significant factor to note in Jones's self-other interaction is the power of role-playing which affects Jones's self-esteem as much as his distorted "looking-glass" self does. Thomas Pettigrew effectively demonstrates the effect of role-playing in black-white encounters in his work *A Profile of the Negro American* (1964). To Pettigrew, the white must act out the role of the "superior" thereby conveying the expectation that "he will be treated with deference"(4)

and similarly the black must act out the role of the "inferior". If the black refuses to play the role he would be judged by the whites as one not aware of his place and harsh sanctions would be imposed on him. Such role adoptions hamper forthright, uninhibited social interaction. The formality and constraints of role relationships act as barriers making communication impossible. Madge, Kelly and even Alice enact roles. Alice, although a black woman, takes on the role of Jones's social superior for she believes herself to be a part of the white world. She takes pride in her material affluence and light skin. However, in Jones, such role-adoptions by the people he comes across leads to a "confusion of self-identity" and "lowering of self-esteem" (Pettigrew 6) which are two of the most serious "marks of oppression" upon the black American psyche. Having lost his identity as a worker, a black man and a lover, Jones can only think of aggression as a way of compensating for his inferior feeling. It is only through violence that he can restore his lost manhood. He gets an opportunity to let out his aggressive feelings when he wanders out of the shipyard and joins a group of white workers playing dice. He finds himself once again an outsider in their midst. Though he wins money in the game, the white workers accuse him of cheating and a tall, blond man named Johnny Stoddart hits him from behind. This makes Jones decide to kill the white man. In Jones's desire to kill Johnny is manifest the link between

sex, violence and racism, a theme that is extensively explored in Himes's writings. Both Madge and Johnny are seen as components of the white world and by challenging both, that is, by murdering Johnny and raping Madge, Jones desires to reverse the historic roles of power and submission and thereby assume freedom. Jones's decision to kill Johnny fills him with an exultation never experienced before. The very thought of revenge gives him an inner strength. Jones remarks "it unchained me, made me free. I felt like running and jumping, shouting and laughing" (*Hollers* 44). This feeling even makes him sideline his earlier impulse to use his car as a weapon to seek vantage position against the white drivers on the road. Jones describes his sense of release — "all the tightness that had been in my body making my motions jerky, keeping my muscles taut left me and I felt relaxed, confident, strong" (*Hollers* 45). Jones's sudden feeling of superiority even goes to include a compelling feeling of friendship towards the whites. "I felt like waving to them and saying, 'It's all right now. It's fine, solid. It's a great deal'" (*Hollers* 45).

Perpetration of violence becomes for Jones an expression of his manhood and possession of that manhood is very important to him.

As long as I knew I was going to kill him, nothing could bother me. They could beat my head to a bloody pulp and kick my guts through my spine. But they couldn't hurt

me, no matter what they did. I had a peckerwood's life in the palm of my hand and that made all the difference (*Hollers* 54).

The moment Jones approaches Johnny with the intention of killing him, however, there is a sudden shift in his attitude. The look of fear in Johnny's face makes Jones postpone his action. Jones comes to understand that Johnny also fears him and thus his deflated ego is lifted. Jones, therefore, is unable to arrive at a decision whether to kill Johnny or not and this ambivalence accounts for the sudden change in Jones's decision.

A similar ambivalence seen in his attitude towards Alice brings out the central conflict in his mind. Jones cannot experience genuine love hampered as he always is through an awareness of his 'self'. Alice is more "symbol" than person in Jones's life. Jones's description of her reveals his detached almost clinical attitude towards her. It has, as Milliken states, the pattern of a "gossip columnist describing the season's outstanding socialite" (89).

Alice... fell into the living room like Bette Davis, big eyed and callisthenical and strictly sharp. She was togged in a flowing royal purple chiffon evening gown with silver trimmings and a low square-cut neck that showed the tops of her creamy white breasts with the darker disturbing seam down between and her hair was swept up on top of her head

in a turbulent billow and held by two silver combs that matched the silver trimmings of her gown... (*Hollers* 63).

Jones's attitude towards Alice proves that it is only a craving for affection which draws him to Alice. Horney points out the difference between love and the neurotic's need for affection. While the feeling of affection is primary in love, in neurosis the primary feeling is the need for reassurance.

In fact, if one feels fundamentally helpless towards a world which is invariably menacing and hostile, then the search for affection would appear to be the most logical and direct way of reaching out for any kind of benevolence, help and appreciation (Horney 1937, 105-106).

Acceptance by Alice is as important to him as his desperate need to kill Johnny and rape Madge. If Alice accepts him, it seems to Jones, it will compensate for his own inadequacies. The association with Alice, Jones says, "...really built me up, made me feel wanted again, important too. A guy had to feel important to somebody, even if only to himself" (*Hollers* 196). Thus loving, for Jones, is basically a matter of desperate need. This need indicates his basic inferiority and insecurity. The moment his ego is bruised by whites Jones turns to Alice for moral support. In fact, he is

excessively dependent on her for endless affirmation in the form of approval, admiration, flattery. He needs her for self-validation. This need for reassurance exacts a very heavy price.

The most common ways in which the price is paid are an attitude of compliance and an emotional dependence. The complying attitude may take the form of not daring to disagree with or criticise the other person, of showing nothing but devotion, admiration and docility (Horney 1937, 119-20).

This price in the case of Jones manifests in the suppression of both his aggressive impulses and the tendencies toward self-assertion. He is ready to make any sacrifice. He agrees to comply with Alice's wishes and is ready to apologise to Madge. His dependence on Alice is the reason why he vacillates between extremes of behaviour, deciding one minute to follow one course of action then rejecting it and choosing the opposite course. This emotional dependency is mixed with a great deal of resentment. Jones resents being enslaved but continues to do so out of fear of losing Alice. His demand for unconditional love remains unfulfilled when Alice puts forward certain ultimatums. As a social worker, Alice has her own view concerning Jones's behaviour. She accuses him of being "insanely belligerent... You think you can solve your problems with your brawn. You have a really staggering inferiority complex,

amounting to a fixation. You're disrespectful, quite ignorant, simply impossible" (*Hollers* 111). Alice labels him as a maladjusted character and her acceptance of him depends upon whether he can make his truce with the white world or not. Entirely dependent on her for endless affirmation, Jones decides to give in and make a temporary compromise by moulding himself to suit the image she has in mind. She states her position thus "I 'm ambitious and demanding... I want a husband who is important and respected and wealthy enough so that I can avoid a major part of the discriminatory practices which I am sensible enough to know I cannot change" (*Hollers* 117). She is very clear about how she would like Jones to be. She lacks the largeness of spirit and the willingness to understand or even to listen to Jones. When he comes to her seeking assurance, sympathy and a patient hearing she can only offer the trite phrases of the social worker. Jones is superior to Alice in mental strength even though he decides to make his truce with the white world. Blacks who are like Alice consider class to be mainly at the root of all their troubles. They believe firmly that once blacks ascend steadily up the social ladder their troubles will come to an end but Jones knows otherwise. To him, no amount of economic security will end racism. He has come to understand that Race hatred is ingrained in the minds of whites. Racism is a "state of mind. As long as the white folks hate me and I hate them we can

earn the same amount of money, live side by side in the same kind of house, and fight every day" (*Hollers* 107).

His lowered self-concept alienates Jones not only from the white world but also from his own black community. This is clear in his attitude towards the group of black workers who work under him. He is accompanied by his black co-workers in his car when he goes to work daily, he boards with a black couple but he feels superior to them and, therefore, remains aloof. Whenever he refers to the other black men it is with a mixture of affection and contempt, with the contempt often predominant. He becomes totally immersed in his own conflicts and on all occasions becomes an alienated being. In Milliken's words "he is totally encapsulated in his private realm of pain, a man who does not reach out to other men and who cannot be reached by them. His absorption in his own dilemma is complete, perfect and impregnated with inescapably neurotic overtones" (86). The conflicts which Jones experiences in his relationships with Madge, Kelly and Alice bring to light the fact that he wants very much to act, to give expression to his seething anger while at the same time fearing the consequences of his actions. The only option left for him, he understands, is to fulfil his promise to Alice that he would humble himself before the boss who demoted him. However, he is caught in a precarious situation which virtually seals his fate. He accidentally

enters Madge's room where she again rehearses her ritual power play. She shouts "I'm being raped" (*Hollers* 219) and Jones, like Bigger Thomas, is unjustly accused of rape. He attempts to escape and phones Alice but she offers him only some more advice on the proper conduct of his life. He is captured and is taken for trial and learns that the rape charge has been dropped. The judge gives Jones the choice of jail or conscription and he ultimately joins the army. His final words "I'm still here" is not to be taken as a sign of defeatism. Rather, it is a positive affirmation of his continuing battle with his oppressors. As Roger Rosenblatt affirms

No character in all of black fiction is more vital or spirited than this one. Born into a form of anonymity, he has challenged that designation by trying to become an individually identifiable man. His entire story, in fact, is about someone desperate to avoid anonymity, anonymity threatened on all sides by blacks and whites alike (172 - 73).

So far the focus has been on the effect that self-other interactions have on Jones. It is these interactions which have been responsible for the deep sense of inferiority he has acquired. But the effective use of dream symbolism in the novel has also to be given due importance for it is this which provides an insight into Jones's inner reality. Through their scientific studies of dreams,

both Freud and Jung stimulated great scholarly interest in the significance of dreams in human life. While Freud considered dreams essentially as the fulfilment of a wish for Carl Jung dreams are spontaneous self-portrayal of the actual situation in symbolic form in the unconscious. Dreams, according to Jung, have both "compensatory" and "prospective" functions (1969, 254). Dreams serve to compensate for the feeling of loss which one may experience in conscious moments and also to anticipate future conscious achievements in the unconscious. To Jung, a thorough knowledge of the conscious situation is necessary because dreams contain "its unconscious complement, that is, the material which the conscious situation has constellated in the unconscious" (1969, 249). He calls it "compensatory" dreams. The drawback of such a view would be that it might lead one to assume that anyone with <sup>an</sup> too pessimistic attitude to life would have cheerful optimistic dreams and vice-versa. Jung observes that this may not be applicable in all cases, for the character of dreams is "closely bound up with the whole nature of the individual" (1969, 254). In other words, if a person is basically one who does not have a cheerful attitude to life his dreams will assume a much blacker character than his conscious attitude.

Jones's dreams assume significance when viewed in the light of Jung's ideas on dream psychology. Jones's confidence is undermined at every step and as he becomes vulnerable to the forces within and outside him his dreams also project his abject state. Every day is a fight and is filled with some tension - ridden encounter with whites. Each morning Jones awakens with fear spreading to his groin "with an almost sexual torture" and settling in his stomach "like butterfly wings" (*Hollers* 2). Jones's dreams instead of stimulating his warped ego contribute toward making his situation all the more depressing. In Jung's words, Jones's dreams assume a blacker character. They make him aware of his marginal position. Edward Margolies comments that his dreams of tethered dogs, crippled men and rejection underscore Jones's main torment. They also make Jones intellectually aware not only of what is happening to him immediately, but also of his inability to save himself (90).

Each day in Jones's life is preceded by a dream. The book opens with a dream about a black dog whose neck is tied with wire and which is liked by no one but Jones. The dog tries to escape but is caught. This reflects Jones's own feeling of being trapped, unloved, rejected. In his sleep he turns over to the other side and dreams about being interrogated for the killing of a white man in a war

plant. The killer is black and crippled. The police cleverly try to trap the murderer by making all suspects run upstairs. The guilty person is the one who limps. This dream sequence, it becomes obvious, is the offshoot of the attitudes Jones has internalised about the whites. The whites consider the blacks guilty of murder and the dream, it seems, also confirms Jones's belief that blacks are maimed and crippled psychologically. The dream also anticipates Jones's desire to avenge himself through the killing of Johnny. However, his fear of white power, as evinced in the dream, makes him postpone his decision.

Another of Jones's dreams is based upon the difficulties he has encountered in finding work in Los Angeles. In the dream, he approaches two white men for work. They, however, laugh at him because he lacks the tools for the job. The dream he has the following night appears to be a sequel to this and reflects his deeply ingrained sense of inadequacy. Here he dreams of being beaten by two white southerners at the command of the shipyard President, Houghton, who appears dressed up as an army general. A coloured couple, in the dream, comes walking past and seeing the situation, stop to agree with the general that the problems faced by the black community are caused mainly by people like Jones who are consistent trouble-makers. Implicit in the couple's remarks is the

suggestion that 'good' black people like themselves are not to be judged by the behaviour of disreputable people like Jones. The interchangeable nature of the dream-reality situation in which Jones finds himself is described by Lundquist.

This dream, like all of the dreams in the novel, underscores the resemblance between the nightmares Bob suffers through each night and the nightmare world he wakes up to each day. He sleeps like a shell-shocked soldier and wakes up each morning not quite certain about where he is and which is real — the dream or the morning light (34).

Jung also brings out the "prospective" function of dreams which is described as "an anticipation in the unconscious of future conscious achievements, something like a preliminary exercise or sketch, or a plan roughed out in advance". It cannot be called prophetic as they are "merely an anticipatory combination of probabilities which may coincide with the actual behaviour of things" (1969, 255). The above mentioned dream also has a "prospective" function as it foreshadows the conclusion of the novel where Jones is ordered to join the army by the President of the shipyard company.

The third dream occurs the night after Jones's meeting with Alice in the company of her social worker friends. During the meeting Alice and her friends discuss in their clipped middle-class accents the ways to improve the living conditions of Little Tokyo. One of the social workers is Tom Leighton, Alice's white friend, with whom Jones suspects Alice <sup>of having</sup> ~~has~~ an affair. They ask Jones for his opinion in the matter and Jones responds with a gesture which insults Alice's co-workers. Alice calls him "filthy Negro" in retaliation. The anger which Jones suppresses at that moment surfaces in his dream that night. He wants Alice to feel as insignificant and inferior as he feels. Consequently, in the dream, Alice shrinks before his eyes into a tiny form, almost a rag doll.

The fourth dream is connected with an anecdote one of Jones's friends, Smitty had narrated the previous day and also foreshadows Jones's ultimate defeat. The anecdote is that a coloured man watched an alligator and discovered, much to his surprise, that it could talk. He could not contain his emotions and started running when he met a white man ploughing and asked him to come with him to see the strange alligator. The white man agreed to go but on condition that if the alligator did not talk he would beat the coloured man. The white man's suspicion was confirmed for the alligator did not talk and the coloured man was beaten black and blue by the

white man. The fourth dream reflects such a situation. The dream is of a fight with knives between a young white and a young black. The black has a long knife and the white youth seems to have nothing. But suddenly the white is chasing the black and hitting him again and again. Jones sees the white man grasping a penknife with a quarter-inch blade and inflicting dozens of tiny stab wounds on the black man. The superior power possessed by whites to trap the blacks and render them powerless is outlined in this dream. The dream makes Jones conscious of the futility of his fight against the whites especially of his inability to defend either himself or anyone else. The racial opponent, the message is loud and clear, is always more powerful and more cunning.

What Jones is unable to do in his waking life is realised in his final dream which he has in prison. It is unlike the other dreams. It compensates for the anxiety and anguish which Jones experiences in his encounters with whites and it raises Jones's deflated ego. When Jones is condemned for rape and is locked in a cell he dreams of shooting Johnny, the white man. Paradoxically, while Jones is free he dreams of being crippled and caught but now in jail on the charge of rape he dreams of being in a jubilant mood for having killed Johnny Stoddart, the white man. The joy is so great that "all inside of me felt swollen and bursting with joy as if I'd just hit a

hundred thousand dollar jackpot. I wanted to run and leap and shout and roll in the goddamned street" (*Hollers* 242). His happiness is cut short in the dream when he is caught by a laughing marine sergeant who asks Jones what he is doing. Jones tells him that he has killed a white man. The sergeant displays his medals saying that he has been rewarded for the crimes he has committed. While Jones is punished for something which he has not committed, the sergeant is awarded medals for crimes. Himes brings out the irony and absurdity of racism in this culminating dream. The dreams replicate Jones's conscious reality and also foreshadow what is to befall him later in the novel. "These dreams begin and end his [Jones's] work days and as bizzare as some of them are, they merge increasingly with his conscious experience, and by the end of the novel, the reader recalls Bob's story as one extended nightmare" (Lundquist 43).

The novel highlights the shortfall between what Jones desires and what he actually receives. Milliken states "Bob's supreme aspiration, his thwarted ideal, is to live out the American myth of maleness, with all its folklorish components, heroic fighter, dauntless leader of men and tender lover" (95). It does not take him long to discover that the role of the leader is the one role which the white society denies to the black male. Though given the choice of marrying

Alice, finishing college, going to law school and becoming a successful coloured man, Jones decides against it. He understands that this superficial success will not be enough because there will always remain certain streets down which he will not be permitted to walk and certain houses in which he will not be permitted to live. What he desires most is to be an ordinary man distinguished neither by colour nor ambition.

The tragedy of Jones is that he is aware of his inferiority and loss of self. He knows what is happening and tries to retaliate but fear hampers his will to assert himself. Throughout, his masculinity is at stake. Jones insists on being given a full set of options and his refusal to compromise makes him the protagonist of tragedy. Roger Rosenblatt considers Jones a "contemplative hero" (167). James Baldwin succinctly summarises the heroic struggle of black victims

... the Negro's past of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape, death, and humiliation, fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone, doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinsfolk, for his children, who need his protection and whom he could not protect, rage, hatred and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made

all love, all trust, all joy impossible... this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains for all its horror, something very beautiful ... people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth — and, indeed no church can teach — he achieves his own authority and that is unshakeable (1963, 112-113).

Jones's last words "I'm still here" reveal his determination to exist in spite of everything. People like the Harrisons lack sufficient strength to face reality and so take recourse to accommodationist principles. Jones, on the other hand, understands his situation. Although he is not offered any chance to be heroic, he has not actually turned from the fight. He is still there, as he so significantly attests.

**FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE  
A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF  
CHESTER B. HIMES**

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## CHAPTER - III

### THE REDEEMED SELF - *LONELY CRUSADE*

Himes's second novel is a mature exploration of the themes of self-identity and responsibility in the attempt to create one's own meanings. Here, Himes's defense of individual dignity emerges with more force and clarity than it does in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. In *Lonely Crusade* he presents a politically conscious protagonist, Lee Gordon, who is caught in a matrix of conflicting forces — capitalism versus communism, totalitarianism versus democracy and the proletariat versus the ruling elite. It is while crusading against such predatory forces that Lee Gordon comes to understand that he must rely on his personal creativity in order to forge his identity. Gordon also realises how ineffective collectivism is as a means of apprehending the deeper reality and value of human dignity. Stephen Milliken describes him as a crusader "more nearly a martyr, a man with a carefully thought out philosophy and faith who consciously and deliberately chooses both the manner and moment of his own destruction" (97). However, Milliken finds the protagonist's sudden shift to action at the end of the novel unconvincing especially because Gordon has been all along portrayed

as a passive character. Perhaps this could be due to the fact that Milliken does not accord sufficient importance to the psychological impact that the self-other interactions have on Gordon's disturbed psyche. What Himes actually does in the novel is to project the powerful dynamics of interpersonal relationships and show how these segmented relationships propel the protagonist towards a reconstituted identity. This chapter explores how this reconstituted identity comes into being through an analysis of Gordon's childhood experiences, marital life and his relationship with members of institutions like communism and unionism. The novel portrays Gordon as being victimised by several forces ranging from individuals to institutions. This victimisation by capitalists, communists, labour unions as well as the police denies the formation of a positive self-concept in Gordon. However, there are also certain fruitful and positive interactions that help Gordon free himself from the image imposed upon him by others. James Lundquist makes this point while describing *Lonely Crusade* as a

philosophical novel that takes the readers through a series of dialogues involving Lee and various characters, who contribute to Lee's growing awareness not of the problems between management and labour but to his awareness of the problem of himself and the definition of his own reality (51).

This makes Gordon more fortunate than Jones of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* for while Jones exhibits only a semblance of resistance, Gordon's redemption is wrought through his conscious and deliberate taking of action against the forces that seek to engulf him. Like a Sartrean existential hero, Gordon understands that man has the potential to realise himself through existential choice. Gordon also gains a deeper insight into the responsibilities of the intellectual as well as new insights into the pathology of racism and the role cut out for him as a black man. Through this he comes to understand that his destiny is immersion in the class struggle, the struggle of all humanity for social justice. This leads Gordon to a complete awareness of the need to defend humanistic values and promote solidarity among the blacks. Gordon's metamorphosis from a state of helplessness to one of active commitment is a step-by-step progression, a progression that is fraught with neurotic conflicts, guilt and aggression. However, the novel should not be read as a neurotic's case history. It reveals, rather, a black man's personal crusade against victimisation. Only when it is viewed in this light can the underlying depth of the novel be gauged. When considered so the novel becomes the representation of a struggle that gains in coherence and meaning as it advances.

Gordon's initiation into American culture as a young boy made him aware of the unpleasant racial facts of life. Born of domestic servants Gordon attended grade school in Pasadena and was the only black in his class. In school he was either maligned or ignored as a result of which he became ashamed of his colour. This feeling of shame was further intensified by his teachers who believed that most black people in the world were cannibals and heathens. These adolescent experiences cripple Gordon's healthy character development. Erik Erikson highlights the devastating effect that negative experiences have on children. In cases where the child discovers, says Erikson, that

the color of his skin or the background of his parents rather than his wish and will to learn are the factors that decide his worth as a pupil or apprentice, the human propensity for feeling unworthy may be fatefully aggravated as a determinant of character development (124).

Gordon is baffled by the whites' strong sanctions against him when, as a fourteen year old boy desiring to know whether white girls are different from black girls, he is caught hiding in the girls' locker room. The white society considers his action as a violation of existing racial codes. He is expelled from school and his parents are forced to leave for Los Angeles where his father had been employed as a

janitor. The circumstance of his father's death only serve to aggravate Gordon's feelings of insecurity. One night while returning home late, his father is shot dead as he is suspected of being a burglar. The family receives a donation of one thousand five hundred dollars from sympathetic people, and Gordon realises with a shock what little worth white society attaches to his father's life. This incident confirms Gordon's suspicion that blacks are powerless to control their fate. While Jones's fears in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* are imaginary, those of Gordon in *Lonely Crusade* primarily stem from his childhood experiences. The trauma of childhood is intensified by the persecution he suffers during his college years. The dilemma of racial identity so obsesses Gordon while he is in college that he turns to the study of sociology in an attempt to understand the blacks' ingrained sense of inferiority. No amount of book learning he discovers, can provide him with a basis for the whites' deep-seated prejudice against the blacks. Another white racist prejudice that Gordon finds unsettling is the widespread belief that besides being inferior blacks are abnormal too. Thus initially Gordon's individuality and sense of autonomy suffer continual checks through the racial categorisation and stigma thrust on him by white society. Gordon at this stage believes that the white world is the real one and he views blacks through the filter of white eyes. Soon after graduation, Gordon discovers much

to his shock and despair, that the only jobs open to blacks are in the domestic service. Gordon refuses to take up menial jobs and stays at home surviving on his mother's earnings until her death throws him into abject penury. Hunger and the constant refusal of employment bring on the fear which adversely affects his already shattered self.

Gordon's early experiences make him embittered. He comes to understand that blacks are powerless to control their destiny in a world where whites reign supreme. Another painful truth that he discovers is that seeing the world through the 'white' filter does not guarantee social acceptance. Instead it only leads to further rejection and isolation. White society rejects him and he, in turn, blindly accepts his inferiority thereby isolating himself from the rest of the world. Ihab Hassan while commenting on the positive and negative encounters between the self and the world explains that this is one of the stances that a victimized self may take. According to Hassan

... initiation may be understood as a process leading through right action and consecrated knowledge to a viable mode of life in the world. Its end is confirmation. The result of victimisation, however, is renunciation. Its characteristic mode is estrangement from the world, and its values are chiefly inward and transcendental (47).

Gordon's marriage with Ruth Roberts does not, in any way, instil a positive self-image in him. Instead matrimony only serves to compound his frustration. Initially Gordon feels that Ruth will end his loneliness and instil meaning into his otherwise meaningless life. For the first two years of marriage he and his wife experience great happiness; they exist in a world of their own, a world rich with promise. His immense love for her forces him to accept even the menial jobs that he had refused before. He works as a bus boy, porter, waiter, labourer and in the course of his work is, on many occasions, forced to pocket insults. The Gordon - Ruth relationship comes to bear the brunt of several types of oppression. Though both are victims of racism, Gordon is forced to accept demeaning work as a labourer while she becomes a personnel counsellor in a large industrial plant. It is then that Gordon's psychological fear which has remained dormant surfaces. This fear gets aggravated when he quits one job after another. His earlier fear of the white world is now replaced by the fear of being unable to support and protect his wife in a world where white men can do both. Milliken remarks that it is Gordon's real and imagined fears which poison his relationship with his wife (109). Both Gordon and Ruth fall prey to the sexual stereotyping fostered by a racist society. As a result, their role-reversal becomes a site of confrontation with Gordon becoming a liability and Ruth the breadwinner. Gordon's inability

to support Ruth gnaws at his being to such an extent that their marriage comes to lack the two qualities necessary for a successful union — co-operation and equality. The glow and warmth of their marriage dies down very fast and is replaced by a lack of communion. Both drift into separate worlds walled off from one another. His need for dominance and his inability to achieve it gives rise to frustration

Ruth? ... She could not even understand his necessity for dominance or anything at all about his ego — his warping ego, his sickly, dwarfed, cowardly, cringing ego that his fear had given him ... so what if Lee did need such a wife to know that he was not the lowest person in the world? And what if he did make her the lowest instead of himself. It would just be her unfortunate predicament of being married to a negro man ... But Lord God, a man had to stand on somebody, because this was the way it was (*Crusade* 143).

Ruth is unable to gauge Gordon's inner nature. Lucy Potts Pearson of Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and Ruth serve as points of comparison. Lucy is prepared to compensate for her husband's inadequacies and is more than able to supply what her husband lacks in ambition and initiative. She is full of compassion at her husband's struggle to conquer the "brute beast" within. Ruth,

though she contemplates resigning her job does not actually do so for she fears that she will not be able to survive without a job. She knows that Gordon has been totally conditioned by white values and his moral potential totally destroyed. She does not want to give up her independence and be dependent on him. Gordon interprets her decision as an acknowledgement of his impotence. This realisation gives rise to frustration and anger within him which manifests in his sexual relations with her. Horney calls such tendencies "sadistic trends" adding that

The mutual dependence that accrues from such a situation arouses resentment not only in the enslaved but in the enslaver as well ... Not realising that he himself has created these cramping ties, he may reproach the partner for being grasping or clinging. His wanting to break away on such occasions is as much an expression of fear and resentment as a means of intimidation (1945, 195).

This kind of situation is seen in the Gordon - Ruth relationship. For Gordon, oppressing his wife is his only outlet from the feelings of inadequacy he experiences. Gordon's and Ruth's turbulent feelings veer towards the abnormal and as a result there is strife, cruelty and unhappiness. Their physical relationship degenerates into rape. There is no joy at all in their lovemaking, only a dull anguish, a

deadly compulsion. Upon coming to understand Gordon's need to assert his manhood in a queer perverted way Ruth initially tries to absorb his hurt hoping to relieve him of his misery. After a while, however, Gordon does not derive pleasure out of forcing her flesh into submission. He comes to hate Ruth all the more because he can feel no desire for her and she hates him for his sexual brutality. He wants in a wife a "sycophant and a slave ... A wife who, if she could not think of him as great, could at least tell him he was right ..." (*Crusade* 143). Gordon's enslaving of Ruth results in the total debasement of their marriage.

The agonising turmoil which Gordon suffers because of his speedily collapsing marriage worsens through his association with a white communist woman, Jackie Forks and with Louis Foster, the executive vice president of the plant where Gordon works. Both are negative influences on Gordon's self. Gordon's interactions with others both at the personal level and at the institutional level reflect this negativity. In addition to manipulating Gordon's troubled psyche, they succeed in complicating his personal crisis. However, Abe Rosenberg, a committed communist and Smitty, a white union organiser try to nullify the impact of such negative influences on Gordon. They try to understand the source of Gordon's conflicts and then force him to redefine himself in terms of the conflict in which he is inextricably enmeshed.

In the Gordon - Jackie relationship Himes explores another vital aspect of the black man's psyche — the black man's desire to transcend racial barriers by developing a genuine, validating reciprocal relationship with a white woman. This theme is further elaborated in Himes's novel *A Case of Rape*. Gordon is different in this respect from Himes's other protagonists. While detailing the development of the Gordon - Jackie relationship Himes predicts the impossibility of breaking through the deadly myths and stereotypes propagated by the whites. In his attempt to gain Jackie's love, Gordon adopts a different posture in her company. While he is his arrogant, vindictive self with his wife he tends to become self-effacing with Jackie. Horney refers to this posturing as "compartmentalizing" (1950, 190) which means experiencing two selves at different times. This is one of the ways to overcome neurosis. With Jackie, Gordon is compliant and appeasing. It is with great effort that Gordon keeps himself in control in her company. On one occasion, when she tells him that she has never loved a black before Gordon experiences the impulse to hurt and dominate her but the fear of losing her love makes him submissive. On another occasion, when Gordon tries to be intimate with her she forestalls his advances by saying that she wouldn't cry even if Gordon were to rape her. The word "rape" has the same effect on Gordon as it has on Jones. In an introspective and disillusioned state Gordon

knows for sure that "in his mind he actually was not trying to rape her. There was no desire in him for sex — just a deep sterile hurt he had sought to release. But he did not know himself how he had sought to release it or what he had intended to do" (*Crusade* 109).

Jackie never understands Gordon's sincere desire to get past her whiteness to her essential humanity. Racial superiority is so strong in her that she can only use Gordon to confirm her sense of superiority. Unfortunately, Gordon does not perceive her real self. His attempt to transcend his race by sustaining a meaningful relationship with Jackie is thwarted when he expresses his desire to marry and support her. In the Ruth - Jackie relationship Himes explores another facet of racial prejudice by highlighting the strained relationship between a black woman and a white woman. On coming to know of Gordon's intention to marry her Jackie dreads the idea of a direct confrontation with a black woman more than the prospect of marrying a black man. In a fantasy she even imagines Ruth as a huge, dark Negress of tremendous strength and vicious temperament against whom she can hardly compete. Her fear of violence from a black woman is equalled by her fear of public condemnation. She has proved herself to be a daring woman in challenging the racial restrictions of white society by carrying on an affair with a black man, but to be caught in a "Negro emotional mess" (*Crusade* 301) by

marrying him is totally different. It is below her dignity to fight with a black woman over a black man. To her

Lee Gordon became not a man, but once more a Negro. For over and above whatever passionate attachment she might have had for him was the simple fact of race. She would take him and have him and hold him and love him. And if she wanted him badly enough, she would fight for him with any white woman in the world. But she would not fight for him with a Negro woman (*Crusade* 301).

Jackie totally emasculates him by agreeing to be his whore rather than be his wife. On hearing this, Gordon feels degraded and his personal crisis reaches a point from which, he feels, there will be no redemption. Caught between Jackie who, as he thought until then would provide him the much needed assurance by loving him, and his wife Ruth who is determined to stubbornly resist Jackie by holding on to her husband, Gordon critically rates the importance of these two women in his life. Earlier he had considered Jackie's pretended sympathy towards him to be more important than the lack of understanding in his wife. Now he understands Jackie's inability to break through the walls of the racist prison. It is at such a critical point that Abe Rosenberg sensing Gordon's dilemma, instils hope in him and makes him realise the importance of his

wife. Rosenberg is a redemptive force in Gordon's personal life. When Gordon confesses that he has destroyed his home Rosenberg retorts saying that no man has the power to destroy what he has. Rosenberg goes to the root cause of Gordon's personal crisis and makes Gordon understand the need to develop a smooth relationship with Ruth. He takes the liberty of analysing Gordon's dilemma and traces it to factors like obsession with racial identity and shame caused by his inability to support his wife. These factors have handicapped Gordon to such an extent, says Rosenberg, that Gordon is forever imprisoned in the prison - house of fear, jealousy and self-centredness. As long as Gordon wallows in this state, Rosenberg tells Gordon, he can never understand the role he has to fulfil as a black man. Understanding can come about only if Gordon comes to terms with reality and gets reconciled with his wonderful wife who has all along lent succour to his life. Ruth, once she realises the trust which Gordon has in her, will sustain Gordon's self in the process of his crusade against the forces that seek to stifle it. After his interaction with Rosenberg Gordon realises how much he depends upon Ruth. Gordon even feels

... that underneath all of his resentment, all of the things he had thought of her [Ruth] he had been proud of her achievement and proud of her femininity, of her fidelity and

how much it had always given him, even though he had always known that he was never worth it (*Crusade* 313).

The hazards Gordon faces in his occupation as union organiser only serve to complicate his personal crisis. Louis Foster is largely responsible for this . Foster considers Gordon a threat to his authority and is apprehensive that he will mobilise the black workers in the plant to rally against him. Louis Foster is a capitalist force and, according to Muller, is a symbol of craven opportunism and elitism in a reactionary world (35). Gordon finds in Foster the dialectics of power in a capitalist society. Foster is very much concerned about his self-image and is prepared to pay any price to enhance it. He is different from Kelly, the white villain in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. While Kelly exhibits his hatred for blacks openly, Foster subtly conceals it in order to earn the reputation of a lovable American. At the same time he never allows blacks to get out of hand. Lee Gordon, Luther McGregor and Lester Mckinley all come into contact with Foster and with all the three he adopts different tactics to subjugate them. With Lester he is downright rude and refuses to promote him. Foster entices Luther with money. Sensing that Luther is capable of double-crossing both the union and the communists he buys him with five hundred dollars and succeeds in forestalling union activities. He waits for an

opportunity to trap Gordon for he senses that Gordon could pose a threat to him if Gordon succeeds in unifying the workers against him. Foster manages to get Luther to wheedle Gordon into working with him. He makes use of Paul Dixon, the state policeman too to put his plan to work. Paul is to tell both Gordon and Luther what Foster expects of them and pay them for doing it. Paul offers them only hundred dollars each. When Paul refuses to give them more Luther kills him. Foster makes use of this opportunity to frame Gordon as the murderer and with the help of the police kills Luther.

Foster also knows that economic insecurity is the root cause of Gordon's marital unhappiness and with remarkable shrewdness he invites both Gordon and Ruth to his house and offers Gordon a job in the plant at an incredible salary of five thousand dollars a year if he will leave his union organiser's position. The offer is tempting to Gordon as the job will enable him to retrieve his self-worth in the eyes of his wife but he refuses to be bought by the capitalist. His commitment to the union is total. He expects Ruth to appreciate his decision and take it as proof of his integrity. Ruth, on the other hand, is disappointed and construes Gordon's refusal of Foster's offer an indication of his selfishness. If Gordon had any concern for her she feels, he would not have refused Foster's offer. Such a response from Ruth has a devastating effect on Gordon. He loses

confidence in himself and comes to re-assess his thoughts in a totally different way. It is foolish, Gordon argues with himself, to hold on to dignity and honour in a materialistic world. As Ruth values security and stability more than anything else, Gordon decides to provide her both by accepting Foster's offer. He decides to give up his integrity for the sake of material benefits. He realises that accepting Foster's offer will mean a step closer towards the completion of his degradation. Setting aside his scruples for the sake of Ruth's happiness he approaches Foster and says that he will take the job in the personnel office.

He had put himself here of his own free choice, out of his own conclusion that to live in fair comfort, relieved of the necessity to protest, his sexual urges satisfied by those who made a business of it, was worth more than all the freedom and virtue he had attained or hoped to attained. Now in the end he recognised the simple fact of his inadequacy to cope with both life and race. No doubt there were many negroes who could do both with honour and integrity — and did so. He did not know. He only knew that he was not among them (*Crusade* 307-08).

Foster deals a crushing blow to Gordon's ego by saying that the job no longer exists.

In Gordon's initial rejection of Foster's offer and later submission is seen the basic conflict in Gordon's psyche. At first Gordon espouses the virtues of integrity, honour and justice. He strongly desires others, be they his wife, colleagues or superiors, to value him for what he is. When this is not forthcoming he decides that it is better to go along with the power play at work in a capitalist society. This results in his abdication of his positive values for the sake of material comfort. Gordon struggles between commitment and opportunism oscillating from one to the other. This is the pattern seen throughout the novel till he achieves a measure of autonomy over his self. In the course of his development he is helped by some who enable him to gain a positive outlook while others deny him the much-needed assurance.

At the social level, Gordon's prospects are not very encouraging. Gordon rejects blackness because his internalisation of white values and attitudes makes him feel there is nothing to be proud about being a black. This attitude prevents him from feeling a sense of kinship with the three thousand black workers in the Comstock plant so much so that it seems absurd and farcical that he is their union organiser. Coexisting with Gordon's deep sense of alienation from black workers is his fear that he may be forced to face rebuffs and humiliations from white workers. Gordon exhibits this fear on

many occasions and Rosenberg comes to his rescue and helps him to resolve his conflicts at the social level too. When the two of them visit restaurants, Rosenberg senses the unease experienced by Gordon in the company of whites. He is surprised and even shocked at Gordon nurturing prejudice against the whites and he mildly reprimands Gordon for behaving like an uneducated, crude southern black. Gradually Gordon comes to terms with his prejudice and from then on he makes an effort to understand the individuality of each worker so that he can instil confidence into them and make them accept the idea of an interracial union. His interaction with the black labourers makes him realise how similar they are to him for they too are content to implicitly accept their inferiority.

Smitty is the white union council secretary whom Gordon meets when he is hired as a union organiser in the Comstock plant. This happens at a time when Gordon is totally defeated in his personal life and is unable to sustain a strong sense of self. He hopes through holding down this job to gain the respect of his wife whom he has never been able to support financially. Like Bob Jones, Gordon takes pride in his job as union organiser. It is not only his first chance at important work but also the first that matches up to his qualifications. It is a "Negro First Job" — Gordon is the first black to be hired as a full-time organiser by the union in the Comstock

Aircraft Corporation. However, on the very first day he realises what he is up against. His initial elation at being hired diminishes when he realises the harassment he will have to face in the white world of unionism, marxism and capitalism. Smitty and Gordon differ on ideological issues. Paradoxically, such differences of opinion between them regarding the concept of unionism are of benefit to both of them for they come to understand each other better after an exchange of views. These exchanges are of great importance for they constitute Gordon's education, propelling him to immerse himself into the cause of the black workers. Joe Ptak, a strong white ex-steel mill worker and Smitty chart out Gordon's job at the plant. Gordon has to make the workers aware of unionism by organising them. At the same time he must not irritate the white workers who constitute the majority of the plant's employees and must also be careful of the communists for Smitty desires to keep the union free from communist influence. When Gordon meets Smitty on the very first day that he joins the job his feeling towards Smitty are rather ambivalent. Earlier, Gordon had felt an unconscious liking for Smitty which gradually gives place to suspicion. Unlike Jones, Gordon cannot sustain a belligerent attitude towards the whites. His hatred is mixed with "a strange, involuntary urge to please, to dissemble, to impress ..." (*Crusade* 14 - 15). This is how he feels towards Smitty. Smitty lays stress upon the importance of organising

every worker, for the working class of the Comstock Corporation will ultimately decide the future of the nation. At the very outset, Smitty speaks of his allegiance to the cause of the union but Gordon is unable to take Smitty at his word. He comes to understand that Smitty can be honest and sincere in his regard for blacks but can never understand the basic factors concerning black victimization. Gordon argues that the very idea of uniting black and white workers in the plant will be an impossibility. Smitty attributes the black problem to class differences but to Gordon it is not class but race that is the crucial factor. In his naivety Smitty never understands that it is impossible to have equality in the plant and inequality in the street. To rectify the black problem, Gordon states categorically, what is needed is more than equality ie. granting of "special consideration" to blacks. Though Gordon knows the futility of making Smitty understand this, he attempts to explain it to him. While Smitty asserts that unity is more important than equality, Gordon believes otherwise. It disheartens Gordon to hear Smitty speak of his personal regard for blacks while having no understanding whatsoever of the issues that torment them. Gordon sees Smitty as a well-meaning, honest, sincere, white man who can fight ceaselessly to bring about a solution to the blacks' oppression. At the same time Smitty cannot accept the proposition of equality because deep inside him he believes in the inequality between the

racess. Both Smitty and Gordon stand on different grounds though both work for the same cause. The very fact that Smitty is unable to understand the true reality of blacks makes Gordon suspect him. In his characterisation of Smitty, Himes shows the extent to which even men of good intentions are victimised by their own narrow imaginations and rigid thought processes. Smitty's attitude to blacks in general is typified by his attitude to Gordon. Smitty has a patronising attitude towards Gordon with the result that he too, like Foster and Ruth, is unable to understand Gordon's strong belief in integrity. For example, when Gordon knows that Jackie has been unjustly accused for accepting bribes from Foster, Gordon is angered. He knows that it is Luther, a communist and a union member, who has double-crossed the union by accepting bribes from Foster. At the union meeting, Gordon wishes to expose Luther and defend Jackie. Smitty however, does not wish to enter into a battle with the communists by denouncing their member Luther. Gordon, on this occasion, wishes Smitty to support him and defend Jackie. When Smitty does not do so, Gordon is disturbed. Himes says that Smitty "did not have the imagination to put himself into a Negro's place" (*Crusade* 345). Just as Gordon outgrows his former state of ignorance and becomes cognizant of his identity, Smitty too gains insight into what Gordon expects of him. Smitty

understands Gordon's desire for a black man to be granted 'special privileges' in order to be considered equal to the whites. Having understood this, Smitty even grants 'special privileges' to Gordon in his effort to lend every possible support to him at moments of crisis. One such occasion is when Gordon is arrested on the charge of killing a white man Paul Dixon, the sheriff's deputy. Smitty with the help of some union members and a lawyer gets Gordon released on bail. He also listens patiently to Gordon when the latter narrates the events which led to Dixon's murder by Luther with whom Gordon went to accept Foster's money. Gordon also explains the reason for his mean action of going to Foster in the hope of getting a job. When Smitty notices guilt and genuine remorse in Gordon's face for having succumbed to Foster's temptation, he responds with sympathy and genuine concern.

A troubled expression touched Smitty's flaccid face as he searched his thoughts for understanding - because no one man could be as contradictory as Lee Gordon seemed. Sometimes on the surface he seemed just another rat, yet always deep from inside of him came the sense of something else, disturbing every judgement he might pass. Was this what being a Negro did to a normal man ? he wondered. And what was there to do about it that he had not already done ? (*Crusade* 354 - 355).

From his initial patronising attitude towards blacks Smitty's attitude changes to one fully cognizant of the inner reality of the wounded black psyche. As Gordon opens his soul to Smitty the latter visualises the conflicting forces at odds in Gordon's psyche: those which sap his energy to act and make him give up his principles and those which instil in him the yearning to experience fullness and integration by committing himself to a course of action. Gordon is undecided as to whether he should sustain hope or give way to despair. Gordon's faith in himself is still uncertain and Smitty almost becomes a godfather to Gordon in his desperation to protect Gordon from being hurt by the communists and the capitalists. His concern for Gordon becomes evident when he berates the latter for his mistakes. Smitty makes Gordon understand his responsibility when once, at an organizational meeting Gordon, unintentionally, effects a segregation between the black and white workers by sitting with Lester, a black man, instead of occupying his place on the platform with the leaders of the meeting. Smitty, painstakingly, reprimands Gordon for forgetting his responsibility as an official in the organisation and for arousing suspicion in the minds of white workers assembled there that the meeting is 'Jim - Crowed'. Smitty also convinces the members that they are mistaken in their opinion of Gordon. Smitty realises that much depends on his success in

instilling a strong sense of self in Gordon. Smitty's strong faith in Gordon becomes clear when he puts forth the proposition to Gordon that he should involve himself totally in his job, he should convince the black workers in the plant so that they support the union representative in the elections due to be held the coming week. If the union wins in the election, Smitty and others in the union will lend support to Gordon and get him released because they are convinced that Foster will arrest Gordon on a false charge of murder. If Gordon does not succeed he will be dropped. This proposition, Smitty hopes, will orient Gordon towards the right path apart from strengthening his weak ego. Lundquist commenting on the powerful influence Smitty and the concept of 'union' have on Gordon's psyche says that Gordon initially is

torn within by self-hatred and feelings of inadequacy. As his story progresses and he is drawn into union activities of the sort Smitty stands for, Lee moves toward unity on all levels. He and Ruth become closer in their understanding of one another, he begins to believe in the possibility of friendship and trust between white and blacks, and he becomes more unified in personality (53).

The novel *Lonely Crusade* is, without question, a proletarian novel, a novel which analyses the abject condition of workers,

especially black workers, seeking ways to remedy their situation. Gordon's experience of American culture forces him to see through the subtle power politics of both the communists and the capitalists. To appreciate the thematic thrust of the novel and the growth of Gordon it is necessary, therefore, to establish the relationships in it between marxism and capitalism, two opposing ideologies.

While Himes was working on *Lonely Crusade* the communists were rallying around the black cause. American communists, impressed by the growth of race and national feeling among blacks, strongly believed that such sentiments might be turned to good account by the launching of a black nationalist movement under the communist party control. Himes, like Richard Wright, was also influenced by marxist ideology. Himes has, on many occasions, spoken of his association with communists and how this has enabled him to understand the game that the communists were playing with him by trying to use him as a tool to break the colour-line. This insight into the power politics indulged in by communists has helped Himes portray two types of communists in the novel — those who are eager to help Gordon not out of genuine concern but for their own selfish ends and those who are loyal, determined fighters of injustice. While going about his job of organising the black and white workers, Gordon comes across both types of communists in Bart, Maud Himmelstein, Jackie, Luther and Abe Rosenberg.

Gordon's early encounters with the communists had not been very encouraging. When he had worked in Los Angeles post office for a short while he was dismissed from service for referring to his employer as "Hitler." At that time when Gordon had appealed to the communist party to get him reinstated in his job they did not come to his aid but later in the Comstock Aircraft Corporation the communists try to enlist his support. On his very first day at Comstock, Gordon comes across two of them. Luther McGregor, the crude black man who volunteers to help him in his job of organising the workers, works both for the union and for the communist party. Jackie is a white communist woman who also works for the union but, unknown to Gordon, she has been assigned by the party to convince Gordon of the importance of communism and the necessity of making every worker a communist. However, union leaders like Smitty and Joe Ptak wish to keep the workers free from the communist influence. Bart, the regional communist leader manipulates Gordon, Luther and Jackie. It is through Bart that Himes criticises the methodology of the communists. Bart, a black man, becomes an instrument of fascist power and not of Marxist humanitarianism through his disregard for the human element. Like the inimitable Bledsoe in *Invisible Man*, Bart has overcome his sense of racial inferiority by effectively dissembling his way into the upper echelons of the party leadership. Like Brother

Jack, another character in *Invisible Man*, he too is against wasting emotions on individuals who do not count. Bart has rejected the humanistic values taught by his mother and has instead, become an opportunist. While Gordon struggles to maintain his integrity Bart has come to the conclusion that "there was no such thing as integrity" (*Crusade* 255) for the party sees integrity as a superfluous virtue imposed by the bourgeoisie upon the proletariat to stabilize oppression. Bart's belief in such views and the way in which he manipulates and even sacrifices individuals to serve his purpose are seen at a very critical moment in the novel. There is a rumour in the plant that a union member has sold out to Foster by accepting five hundred dollars from him. Bart handles the situation with remarkable dexterity. First of all, he gets Gordon's support so that he will, if presented with evidence, denounce the traitor at the union meeting. Bart thereby, wishes to make the union members aware of the sincerity of the party in exposing the traitor and saving the union. Bart also wishes to impress on Gordon the importance of Marxian ideology. However, when Gordon asks him to name the traitor he doesn't do so for reasons of his own. Though he and many others, both in the union and in the party, know that Luther is the traitor he doesn't reveal it. Bart, being a "good Marxist" quells his conscience about right and wrong, vice and virtue. The moment

Bart receives a directive from his party's national committee to kill the rumours about Luther's betrayal and issue a memorandum proclaiming Luther's innocence he does so and also chooses a scapegoat, Jackie, to give validity to his action. Since Jackie's services to the party are not indispensable she can be condemned as a traitor. Even if Gordon supports her it will not be believed for everyone knows of the liaison between Gordon and Jackie. Bart does not want to expose Luther for people like him are necessary and valuable to a revolutionary movement. To accuse Luther would be equivalent to accusing black people and to expel him from the party would sever a vital link between the party and the blacks. As Bart asserts in the state committee meeting of the party

we must consider the effect of any act in our relation with the union. Our objective now is control of the union, and all things must work toward this end. 'Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class', Marx wrote in his Communist Manifesto, and we must keep it so (*Crusade* 257).

With this intention he selects one of the women workers in the plant to denounce Jackie at the next union meeting. By doing so, he indirectly makes Gordon suspect in the eyes of the workers and

complicates his job as union organiser. Bart, by distorting the basic principles of Marx and by demanding complete suffocation of the self, misinterprets Marxian ethics and fails to carry out the humanitarian side of the Marxian program in a consistent way.

Jackie's allegiance to the party is sincere. She is neither an opportunist as Bart is nor a devout humanitarian communist like Abe Rosenberg. She is to a certain extent, naive for she is unable to see through the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of other time-serving communists. She implicitly believes in Bart and carries out the orders given to her by him. She is asked to radicalise Gordon by the party high command. In this effort she uses her whiteness as a lure. Though she knows that Luther is the traitor she waits for Bart's orders and later when Gordon accuses her of not revealing the truth to Bart she excuses Luther by saying that Marxian ethics are not the same as those of bourgeoisie society. She little realises then that she will in turn be made a scapegoat to these distorted "Marxian ethics" herself. When she is denounced as a traitor her racial superiority comes to the fore. She feels slighted for having been sacrificed for the sake of a black man, Luther. She believes herself to be different from other communists "... who sought to escape racial and religious persecution ... she was the kind of

American whom even Hitler would have welcomed — fair, Aryan, and a pure - blooded gentile — and certainly she had nothing to fear in America" (*Crusade* 268).

Gordon's self is demoralised not only by Jackie's racial identity but also by her communist identity. When she is totally exploited by the party she turns against Gordon though earlier when Gordon had spoken against her expulsion at the union meeting she had been temporarily consoled. Then she had even felt a sense of affinity with the blacks whom she had shunned before for they, too, are hurt. Gordon does not realise this facet of her character. After Luther's murder of Paul Dixon, Gordon approaches her to give him an alibi. Then Gordon appeals to her to save him from such a critical situation. This appeal does not bring about any response from Jackie because now her attitude to Gordon is one of enfeinity. Her mind is full of anger against the blacks as she has been expelled from the party to save the honour of Luther, a black man. Out of sheer desperation she strikes a sympathetic pose in front of Gordon and immediately afterwards saps his physical and psychological energy by telling him that she cannot support him against the police. With harsh determination she turns him over to the police telling

them the story he had told her of Dixon's murder. Watching her thin-lipped, tight face, Gordon

... realised that she would no more have given him an alibi than she would have appeared at a divorce trial against his negro wife; that no matter what she might do in private, publicly she would always support the legend of her superiority because in the end she would always find race her strongest emotion (*Crusade* 334).

Luther McGregor, though considered very valuable by the communists, is different from both Bart and Jackie for he uses his communist identity as a protective shield to achieve his selfish ends. Luther expresses his view about communism to Gordon.

Do you think I love the Party? or even believe in it? what the hell does I know about Marx? or give a damn 'bout him? But I knows how to be a nigger and make it pay. If I can't make it pay one way I makes it pay the other. 'Cause if the white folks wants some niggers, let'em pay for us (*Crusade* 328).

Maud Himmelstein, a Jewish communist, is a direct contrast to Luther McGregor for she feels ashamed and oppressed by her Jewishness and she resorts to communism as an escape from her racial identity. Abe Rosenberg, a staunch Jewish communist, is an

elder member of the party and the keenest intellectual in the group of communists. Gilbert Muller remarks that Gordon's relationship with Abe Rosenberg is the "most positive humanistic relationship elaborated in the novel" (35). Rosenberg is inspired by the Marxian ideal that places faith in the fundamental value and dignity of human beings. He represents Marxist humanitarianism in contrast to Bart and Maud who represent the fascist element of Marxism. Sensing Gordon's unwillingness to be drawn into the Marxian ideology, Rosenberg patiently educates Gordon on many issues. It is Rosenberg who dispels Gordon's or, more precisely, the blacks' ingrained anti-semitism. The Jews have done more to help blacks than any other group for they are genuinely interested in minority group problems Rosenberg tells Gordon. Rosenberg forces Gordon to face reality by saying that the Jews, like the blacks, bear the stamp of oppression. By presenting his views in a very convincing manner Rosenberg engages Gordon's attention and makes him participate in intellectual arguments. Gordon's experience with other communists has made him apprehensive and though he does not take Rosenberg into his confidence immediately his attitude to Rosenberg softens after every session he has with him.

When Gordon meets Rosenberg at a party in Luther's house Gordon assumes a racial stance by criticising the communists for

collecting funds to help Russia instead of trying to solve the black problem. Rosenberg speaks eloquently on dialectical materialism realising that Gordon has only the average black man's knowledge of Marxian ideology. Rosenberg implores Gordon not to judge all communists by Luther's and Bart's standards. Convinced that Luther is guilty of accepting bribes from Foster, Rosenberg stands by Gordon in his hour of need. He openly denounces Bart for covering up Luther's guilt. Luther should be expelled from the party, Rosenberg argues. Rosenberg even goes to the extent of filing a case against the party high command for its callousness in covering up Luther's crime. As a result, Rosenberg is subsequently expelled from the party. It is then that he rises in Gordon's estimation for his refusal to sacrifice individuals for the cause of furthering communism. Rosenberg's words to Gordon greatly rejuvenate Gordon's self. He shows his concern for Gordon by saying "You are important. And what's happened to you is important. And how you feel about it is important" (*Crusade* 243). To Rosenberg, individuals even if they are opportunists like Bart and Maud are important. Since Gordon is a black with revolutionary potential he is important as an instrument of social change. Rosenberg understands Gordon's dilemma and senses that Gordon is unable to extricate himself from the surrounding myths, images and stereotypes regarding racism.

Rosenburg enables Gordon to find his moorings in such a society by making him aware of his misconceptions, by identifying the basic sources of his confusion and thus directing Gordon towards the path of self-understanding. Rosenburg says that only by suffering can a black learn the importance of being a black. Gordon after his interaction with Rosenburg feels as if he has gone through a religious conversion. Rosenburg labours as ardently as a minister working to save a condemned man's soul. Gordon undergoes an epiphany on hearing these words by Rosenburg.

I mean to you because you are a Negro, just as I am a Jew, and being what you are is as important to you as being what I am is important to me. If it were not so then we would be something else. The importance is not of your making, only of your learning ... People are important not because of what they do but because of what they are. Therefore it holds that being Negroes who are people is indivisibly important. People may be divided and races may be divided and nations may be divided, but the fact of their existence and the importance of the fact, are indivisible (*Crusade* 376).

After such an illuminating session with Rosenburg, Gordon learns to take correct decisions later in life. He shows the ability to make

intuitive choices between alternative actions and values. His interaction with Rosenberg deepens his awareness of racial identity. He perceptively analyses his dilemma and even outgrows it. Gordon sheds his fear and insecurity, adopts no psychological props to safeguard his sanity and learns the truth that he cannot excuse his predicament on grounds of race and that he has the choice to be "either normal or subnormal. And if he was normal he would have to rise above the connotation America has given to his race. He would have to stand or fall as one other human being in the world" (*Crusade* 362).

To underscore the conflicting forces in Gordon's psyche and to project the various psychological props adopted by black men to counter American racist culture, Himes presents two male black characters who serve as 'Doubles' to Gordon. The conventional Double, according to the critic Robert Roger, is some sort of antithetical self, usually a guardian angel or tempting devil which "might also symbolise possible alliances and divisions among the Id, Ego and Super Ego" (62). Such multiple characters might exist independently in a work but they are generally "fragments of some other characterological whole" (6). Though such Doubles may exist in an artistic work as an independent entity it may be difficult to identify them as Doubles.

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Luther McGregor and Lester Mckinley function as Doubles in the novel to the protagonist Lee Gordon even though they exist independently. They represent the psychological forces at odds in Gordon's psyche. The similarity in their names strike the reader as more than coincidental. All three are black and face the rebuffs of Foster and the communists at their workplace in the Comstock Aircraft Corporation. All are fated to suffer discrimination and are buffeted by psychological compulsions. However, there are certain apparent differences between them too. When the novel opens Gordon is almost on the verge of breakdown as a result of his traumatic experiences in childhood and his inability to find a decent job. Mckinley too, like his other self Gordon, has experienced such miseries. He grew up in Georgia and at the age of twelve witnessed the lynching of a black man. From that day onwards Mckinley has an overwhelming compulsion to kill whites. When he meets Foster he nourishes the wish to kill him. A brilliant scholar in Latin, Mckinley is unable to get over his psychopathic inclinations and on the advice of a psychiatrist, marries a white woman Sylvia hoping to rid himself of his compulsion to kill white men. While Gordon's wish to marry Jackie is out of genuine love, Lester wishes to marry Sylvia out of racial need. Racial identity has so obsessed Mckinley's psyche that he needs his wife to strengthen his self. His wife becomes

aware of her husband's troubled psyche and even believes that he is capable of killing her and their three children and himself in one of his fits of fury. However, Mckinley does not let his insanity bother him greatly for he knows it to be one of the norms of existence for black men. Gordon is different from Mckinley in that he is able to free himself ultimately from such debilitating images which whites have thrust on him.

What links Gordon and Mckinley is their belief in integrity. The moment Gordon sees Mckinley he recognises the latter to be an honest, upright individual surrounded by unprincipled communists. As both Gordon and Mckinley share a passion for integrity both are disillusioned when they come to be suspected of selling out to Foster. Mckinley disappears from the novel mysteriously before he can enact his fantasies and kill Foster. Mckinley is considered a minor character by Milliken and his characterisation is, to him, "something of a gratuitous irregularity" (122) in the smooth texture of the novel. However, the very presentation of such a character is, Milliken adds "... one of the major triumphs of the book. With it Himes probes as deep as any writer ever has into the tight coil of unbearably intense pain that is at the center of the black experience in America" (123). Luther McGregor is different from Lester Mckinley and Gordon. He is uncouth, uneducated and primitive in his bestial urges but, in

spite of all these, he accepts his racial identity willingly. Never once does he experience a sense of alienation while working with the black workers at Comstock. Mckinley, being a scholar, thinks he is superior to the masses while Gordon, until the end, never identifies with the workers. McGregor, on the other hand, is able to impress and unify the black workers efficiently. On one occasion, while Gordon finds himself unable to handle the workers, McGregor recites from memory the classic ghetto ballad "The Signifying Monkey" finally identifying himself with the trouble-making monkey, the master-manipulator of the jungle. This, precisely, is McGregor's function throughout the novel. He manipulates the communists, the capitalists and the union to suit his purpose but never allows himself to be manipulated. He expounds his pragmatic philosophy many times enabling Gordon to understand him thoroughly.

... In this goddamn world they's all kind of wars going on and people is getting kilt in all of them. They's the races fighting 'gainst each other. And they's the classes cutting each other's throats. And they's every mother's son fighting for hisself, just to keep on living. And they's the nigger at the bottom of it, being fit for everybody and kilt by everybody. And they's me down there at the bottom of the bottom. I

gotta fight everybody — the white folks and the black folks, the capitalists and the communists, too (*Crusade* 327).

McGregor's blackness attracts white women and he is chosen as paramour by two white women in succession. Mollie, with whom he lives, calls him "Caliban" accepting only his bestial qualities. Unaffected by America's sexual mystique, he has no overwhelming fascination for white women. He uses Mollie for money and she uses him for sex. Neither bothers to explore the individuality of the other nor treat each other as racial representatives. McGregor, on knowing that Gordon has left his wife for Jackie, comments "only a weak-minded nigger would do (that) for any white woman" (*Crusade* 328). While Mckinley never kills a white man McGregor does. He kills Paul Dixon not to assert his selfhood but out of anger and defiance. This action, according to Luther, is justified for the killing of a white man is not really murder. Though Luther could have framed Gordon for Dixon's murder he doesn't do so since he has a great deal of sympathy for Gordon. This finally leads to his own death in the hands of the police while resisting arrest.

McGregor is different from Mckinley and Gordon in his attitude to the values of uprightness and integrity. He doesn't believe in

such virtues. The only aim he has is to face the whites squarely and double-cross them cleverly. Milliken praises Himes's characterisation of McGregor.

As a literary character Luther suffers from gigantism; everything about him is oversized like a figure out of folklore; from his affections to his hatreds. That he is nevertheless entirely believable, even terrifyingly believable, is a measure of Himes's skill and the extent of his knowledge of men like Luther (127).

Thus all the three black men grapple with the surface fact of black inferiority and come to terms with it in their own unique ways. Gordon, however, gets over his mainstream cultural hang-ups by sublimating his conflicts and diverting his energies in the way desired by Smitty and Rosenberg. In the course of highlighting this underlying theme of the novel — the growth of Gordon from neurosis to self-realisation — Himes establishes the intricate link between naturalism, existentialism and Marxism. Both naturalism and existentialism revolve around a concept of determinism. According to Charles Walcutt, the major theme in naturalism is "the idea that natural law and socio-economic influences are more powerful than the human will" (20). Gordon initially is so

constrained by racism that he feels restrained from realising his individuality. As he struggles to emerge from such dehumanising forces his situation becomes almost similar to that of Tod Clifton in *Invisible Man* who signifies his helpless state by peddling string-operated paper sambo dolls. By refusing to sacrifice his humanity to the capitalist and to the Marxian opportunists Gordon retains his identity. With consummate skill Himes moves his character out of a deterministic situation and into an existential one by enabling Gordon to transcend the conflicting pressures on his psyche in an effort to create himself anew. Himes seems to say that it is possible for any human being to re-create himself.

The crucial moment for Gordon is the day of the union rally. He has succeeded in getting the support of the workers, both black and white, and he has to get their votes. Someone has to lead the workers braving the police who, under Foster's orders, block the street with the intention of preventing the rally. Joe Ptak asks Gordon to remain out of sight for he is sure to be hunted by Foster's men in connection with Dixon's murder. As he watches Joe Ptak being knocked down when he attempts to lead the rally, Gordon decides instantly to take up the banner thereby proving to Rosenberg, Smitty and Ruth that he is worthy of the trust they have reposed in him. He has to identify himself with the unkempt, unshaven dirty black men and his only salvation lies in accepting

his blackness as a part of his being. Such a realisation prompts Gordon to fight his way to Joe, pick up the banner and lead the masses. Gordon's very act of committing himself to the cause of the workers and his act of daring the police signifies Gordon's awareness of his own potential for growth and self determination.

As an existential hero it is imperative to contrast Gordon with Cross Damon in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*. While Cross Damon, in his search to create himself anew, pitilessly tramples and exploits other men thus breaking the bond of humanity, Gordon, in his search, embraces humanity. Gordon stands firmly as a champion of basic human issues. In other words, his existential commitment which is strongly positive is analogous to what Abraham Maslow calls the "peak experience" in self-actualised people. Maslow defines this experience as an episode

in which the powers of the person come together in a particularly efficient and intensely enjoyable way, and in which he is more integrated and less split, more open for experience, more idiosyncratic, more perfectly expressive or spontaneous, or fully functioning ... more ego - transcending, more independent of his lower needs etc. He becomes in these episodes more truly himself, more

perfectly actualising his potentialities, closer to the core of his being, more fully human (97).

The major thrust of the novel lies in the dramatic rendering of the destructive forces that assault the protagonist's self and the stubborn persistence of the latter to create his own values. By accepting himself as a man, by losing his fear at the moment of insight, by feeling a unity within himself and by transcending his conflicts, Gordon emerges as a truly heroic figure.

**FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE  
A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF  
CHESTER B. HIMES**

**W.S. KOTTISWARI**

**THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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## CHAPTER - IV

### THE DEVIANT SELF - *THE THIRD GENERATION*

*The Third Generation* is an intimate, sympathetic and graphic account of the detrimental effects of racism on a black middle-class family. Racism culminates in anguish and violence as the family members substitute illusion for reality and cruelty for love. Through refusing to recognise each other's individual needs, Lillian Taylor, the mother, Will Taylor, the father and Charles, their son are caught in a frustrating bondage. The power politics in which the three get enmeshed engineers psychological compulsions that propel them toward their separate destinies. Himes is careful to give equal importance to Charles's innate potential even while depicting his psychological conflicts. Though Charles momentarily succumbs to the massive forces that threaten his psyche, he transcends his victimized state and strives to acquire a strong self.

The novel is, in fact, a self-purgation that attempts to set down, with as much detail and detachment as a semi-biographical piece of fictive writing will permit, a major experience in Himes's own life. It is a well-known fact that childhood is one of the most impressionable periods of a person's life. The humiliating, degrading

and emasculating effect that Himes's mother had on her family sowed deep - seated resentment in Himes's consciousness. Charles becomes Himes's fictional mouthpiece as his experiences parallel those of his author and reveal the yearnings of his tortured mind. The novel makes meaningful statements both in the psychological as well as in the sociological sense with Himes dwelling on the shame, fear and hate that are a part of the life of a black middle-class family. In *The Third Generation* both Lillian, the mother and Charles, the son are creatures of strong impulses and primitive emotions and they are portrayed with a remarkable depth of understanding and keenness of insight. Identifying Charles with the artist Himes, Milliken states that the novel

reduces the traumas generated within the Black American community itself by the pressures of racism to the story of a single black family, rent by the conflict between a black-hating mother and a black-accepting father, and the sons caught in between — Himes's own story (139).

Personal relationships constitute the main subject of the novel and it is the development of personal relationships which dictates the structure of the novel. The story line is firm and clear and in the plot there are no tangled skeins which need unravelling. The novel progresses through the chronological depiction of its protagonist's

development. The depiction of family life is exact and vivid. The ruling idea of the book is the pitiful wastage of the best in men and women. The story starts with the marriage of the parents and the birth of the children. The daily life of the family as the children grow up is portrayed — the work, the small joys, the parental strife. As the story progresses one senses certain well-defined emotional pressures; the children are alienated from their father whose personality degenerates gradually as he senses his exclusion from the family. The mother increasingly dominates her sons' affections, aspirations, mental habits. There is an organic disturbance in the relations between the husband and wife mainly because of defective interpersonal relations. This creates an internal schism in the husband as well as in the sons. Charles, especially, suffers for he is strongly influenced by his mother even though he does not ultimately end up as an emotional derelict. Himes also traces the inward growth of Charles — his desperate effort to come to terms with his inner problems. Lillian Taylor is the all-absorbing force in the earlier sections of the novel and it is only towards the middle that Charles comes to dominate the scene. An examination of the self-other relationships of the three major characters lays bare the psychic conflicts they experience.

Lillian Taylor becomes a tragic figure in her ineffectual battle against her environment. She is representative of the many underprivileged women who dare to maintain dignity and character in the face of vicissitudes and yet experience in life nothing but frustrations, fears and ultimate unhappiness as the only reward for such courage. Her life is one of disappointment and bitterness. Her marriage is a failure, her children are a source of disappointment to her and her beauty is not an asset. In short, happiness eludes her. Lillian's parents had been slaves in the South. Her father Charles Manning was the son of his slave master, Dr. Jessie Manning. Her mother Lin was the daughter of an Irish overseer and an Indian slave. Her parents were both fair and would easily have passed for white in a northern state. Lillian is their sixth child. Even as a child Lillian was highly imaginative and fond of daydreaming. She would fantasize about her white lineage which, in course of time, became a romantic myth. She was forced to suppress the myth when her parents punished her for telling the story of her white lineage to her friends and schoolmates. At home where she felt a sense of superiority she could do without this comforting fiction but after disillusionment with her marriage and the bitter conflicts about colour with her husband, this myth resurfaces in her mind and becomes a tool to boost her sagging self-esteem. This romantic

fiction about her white ancestry becomes for her an "idealised image" (Horney 1945, 96) or wishful thinking. Lillian keeps adding to the original story enlarging and changing the parts she doesn't like. She finally comes to believe that her mother was the grand daughter of a United States President and this belief adds a touch of grandeur to her story. Though much fantasy is woven into this "idealised image" it has the value of reality to Lillian. She continuously tries to reinforce this image and resists all attempts to demolish it. The importance of the "idealised image" to people ridden with conflicts is highlighted by Horney.

As long as his image remains real to him and is intact, he can feel significant, superior and harmonious, in spite of the illusory nature of those feelings. But if he allows it to be undermined he is immediately threatened with the prospect of facing all his weaknesses, with no title to special claims, a comparatively insignificant figure or even — in his own eyes — a contemptible one. More terrifying still, he is faced with his conflicts and the hideous fear of being torn to pieces (1945, 109).

Lillian's psychological compulsions are mainly due to her desperation to sustain this image at all costs. In other words, her obsession with race is the key to the several quirks in her personality — her indomitable will, monumental pride, sexual

fears, artistic temperament, implicit faith in god, overwhelming love and extreme combativeness. Her marriage to William Taylor was an accident. As a young graduate she managed to resist the advances of young men with her cold exterior. Will Taylor who had initially come to her house to court her younger sister was attracted to the distant, aloof Lillian. Lillian too was dazzled by his fine talk and his manhood. More than this, he gave her the impression that he thought of her as a deity to be worshipped. This made her presume that he would always be content<sup>t</sup> to be her inferior contributing to her feeling of importance. In return, she felt, "she could give a little of herself... only in the manner of one bestowing a grace" (*Generation 18*). It is with this misconception that she enters marital life. Her sexual fears compound the frustration of their married life. An unpleasant experience early in life is responsible for the distorted view she has of sex. As a young girl, while walking through Atlanta, a black town, she had overheard an obscene reference to sex. From then on "the feeling of shame had lingered in her thoughts like a drop of pus, poisoning her conception of sex" (*Generation 22*). She had then decided that all men are driven by a brutal, humiliating lust which seeks to dissipate itself in sexual gratification. Her husband thus comes to symbolise the degrading, animal passion of the flesh. The consummation of their marriage is a frightening memory to Lillian.

She lay rigid in the posture of crucifixion, her stiff white face as still as if in death, looking at him through pools of horror. The sight of his black body was incalculably repulsive. Finally, she closed her eyes. She felt as if she had been raped, victimised, debased by an animal. "You beast", she said (*Generation 24*).

Somehow she connects her husband's black body with sexual brutality. His blackness becomes an embodiment of evil and assumes a sinister aspect. She never gets over her initial revulsion. Even when she needs him she does not go to him as it would be equivalent to admitting his superiority. As a consequence, both suffer from sexual frustration. Lillian's attitude to sex is thus closely related to her attitude towards race.

While Ruth in *Lonely Crusade* is unaware of her husband's innate potentialities, Lillian deliberately refuses to recognise the creative abilities of her husband as an artisan skilled in blacksmithing. Lillian assumes the role of a castrating wife who, in order to strengthen her self-image, erodes her husband's strong sense of self. Milliken draws attention to this tendency in her by asserting that "... she functions as the negative principle, the primary destructive impulse ... as awesome as Medea, and as chilling, both

superhuman and inhuman<sup>11</sup> (141). Apart from lashing at her husband with racist epithets like "black devil", "shanty nigger", "cabin brood" and so on she makes him dysfunctional by her destructive behaviour. Sometimes she treats him with unwavering contempt and at other times insults him in front of his colleagues. This forces him to resign his post as head of the mechanical department of the Georgia State College. With great skill she creates a scandal in Missouri and gets an arrest warrant for her husband following an argument in which she goads him to slap her. The scandal grows to such proportions that Will Taylor is forced to resign his teaching post in Missouri too. She had married him with the hope of attaining the material comforts which she so desperately desired. He would, she had hoped, buy her a home and take her away from the inferior blacks who lived nearby. This materialistic obsession had been the object of her life but she unconsciously endangers her husband's position by her hateful behaviour. In Missouri, surrounded by black people, Lillian has the feeling of being trapped. This spoils her happiness while her husband and children enjoy the contentment there. By cutting her family off from the black community, she destabilises her family. It would seem that by temperament she is totally unfit to bring to the marriage the love, compassion and understanding that her husband needs. Thus their relationship disintegrates.

Lillian refuses to identify her husband as a member of the black community among whom they reside. Will Taylor, on the other hand, cherishes a kinship with his neighbours and would be content to live among them but Lillian forces him to move from one place to another. Will again does not share in his wife's materialistic ways. The family thus gets divided into two warring camps with the father on the one side and the mother and sons on the other.

When Lillian's attempts to force her husband into relinquishing his racial identity and mould his personality fail, she turns her attention to her children. She desperately hopes to revive her aspiration of seeking access into the white world through her three sons. She constantly reminds the children of their white heritage, she refuses to let them attend churches meant for blacks or play with black children for she wants them to grow up believing that they are white. She earnestly hopes that her eldest son Tom would come up to her expectations. She tries to brainwash him with her white lineage. So sure is she of him that he appears to her like a knight in a shining armor who will one day rescue her from her fate. Her hopes are shattered when, soon after graduation, he refuses to stay with the family. Tom's physical appearance revolts Lillian because he resembles his father. His complexion is a flat, muddy

brown and he has inherited his father's kinky hair. She hates to think that even one of her sons could resemble their father. Her youngest son Charles, however, is happy and spontaneous with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. His skin is of a lighter complexion almost "olive coloured" similar to the complexion of southern Europeans. In spite of Charles's light complexion, Lillian regrets that he has not inherited her own soft, straight hair, straight nose and fair complexion. She is strongly convinced that light-complexioned skin and straight hair give blacks a certain prestige within the race. Charles becomes her last hope in the matter of fulfilling her aspirations.

From his birth she had taken great pain with his hair, nursing it along as if his life depended on it being straight. Every night she massaged his scalp with warm olive oil and gave his hair a hundred strokes with an imported brush; and several times each day she gently pinched the bridge of his nose to keep it from flattening out (*Generation 11*).

Her anxiety becomes an obsession almost, so much so that she even suspects her husband of plotting against her to possess her children. Once when the children smear their heads with paint she becomes

extremely agitated fearing that the texture of Charles's hair would be spoilt. Once, Will Taylor cuts Charles's hair and thenceforth

she firmly believed that it had been the shaving of his skull that had changed its texture. It hurt her deeply to know he wouldn't have straight hair. She felt he had been deprived of his birthright. Until her death she considered it one of the tragedies of his life (*Generation* 36).

While her sons resist, in their own ways, her consistent efforts to indoctrinate them into the myth of white ancestry, Lillian desperately turns to the white world to seek confirmation of the superiority she thinks is conferred on her due to her light skin. As is only to be expected her efforts prove futile. Knowing that she can "pass" for white she journeys on both sides of the colour line. The white world restrains her free movement by forcing her to abide by the laws of segregation while the black world scorns her for her patronising ways. Once in Natchez, she patronises a white dentist but is arrested and put in a police cell. Though her husband gets her released she threatens the chief of police saying that she will take the case to the Supreme Court. The humiliation of having a fruit vendor's refusal to sell her fruits and the ignominy of having to travel in a Jim-Crow Car are just two among the innumerable

racial insults encountered by her everyday. The anger which she has bottled up is given vent to in her act of refusing to budge from the railroad car and her threat that she would sue the railroad. Urged on by her sense of racial superiority she goes to Vicksburg and seeks accommodation in a hotel meant only for whites in order to get her family out of Mississippi. The governor phones Will Taylor ordering him to get his wife out of Mississippi for trying to transgress the rules pertaining to blacks in the south. On another occasion, she threatens an enraged Mississippi farmer with a rifle whose mules have been frightened by the Taylors' automobile.

When Lillian's self-esteem gets slighted she is faced with the dilemma of giving up the pretence of the protective shield of racial superiority. The painful choice for Lillian is between accepting her black heritage or rejecting it through continuing to sustain her fiction. Instead of accepting the inadequacy of her "idealised image" she becomes hard, vindictive, defiant and her aggression makes her almost, according to Muller, "a militant terrorist" and a "demonic figure" (53). Her life thereafter becomes a callous pursuit of self-interest and she lashes out at her husband and sons unaware of the effect it has on their psyche. Lillian adopts various methods to bring them under her control. Sometimes she exercises outright power and at other times manipulates

her sons through an over - solicitousness thereby trying to put them under obligation. At the same time she is bound by the self-hatred that is commonly seen in people of her character. Analysing the self-hatred common among the black bourgeoisie, Frazier remarks

The repressed hostilities of middle-class Negroes to whites are not only directed towards other minority groups but inward toward themselves. This results in self-hatred, which may appear from their behaviour to be directed towards the Negro masses but which in reality is directed against themselves (226).

Lillian's self-hatred is evident when she becomes unreasonably cruel to Charles. By punishing him she, in some perverse way, gets satisfaction because she thinks she is hurting herself — "there was a fury and jealousy and strange frustrations in her punishment of him. It resembled some horrible, silent ritual. At moments in her passion she felt she would kill him. She received a vicarious pleasure, hurting herself" (*Generation* 84). The delusion of power provides her an escape from the world of reality and her own frustrations. She even projects her own feelings of low self-esteem onto her husband's relatives, accusing them of feeling inadequate because they are black. Her husband's attempt to bring his sister

Beatrice to live with them to help with the housework is of no use. It only makes Lillian resort to taking out her anger on her black sister-in-law. Throughout, she fights with her sisters-in-law and even alienates her children from them. When Charles loses control of his aunt's car and runs it into a crowd, Lillian refuses to pay her the cost of damages and even accuses her of allowing a minor to drive. Charles's aunt and uncle end up losing their home and savings through Lillian's highhandedness.

Thus to Lillian, victimising others be they her husband, children or in-laws is a defence mechanism that allows her to protect or insulate herself from hurts suffered in her attempt to merge with the white world. As this pattern of action continues unchanged, Lillian gradually destroys herself becoming almost insane and paranoid. Delusions haunt her constantly and her pathetic state can be compared to that of Bob Jones in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. While Jones feels that the white world is conspiring against him, Lillian imagines that her own family is plotting to hurt her. In her hysteria she even suspects her husband of destroying her by making monsters of her children:

It was as if she'd returned to the scene of a long and bitter defeat. The old scars and humiliations of battle opened sharply with new hurt. Before she'd been determined to

depart. Now she was obsessed with escape. At times her frustration was so heightened she felt she'd go crazy. Her eyes were often red from crying, and deep lines of discontent began settling in her face (*Generation 112*).

She hates her sons for their lack of appreciation of the sacrifices made by her for the family. She imagines that they are conspiring to drive her insane by repeatedly performing actions that irritate her or hurt her physically.

Charles — she was certain it was him — sprinkled water in her bedroom slippers so that she would catch a cold. But she was afraid to accuse him of it; he looked at her so strangely now. And she was positive her husband sprinkled red pepper in her bed, although she couldn't catch him at it. But she knew she'd wake up in the morning with her skin all red and blistered. They have been sleeping in twin beds in the same room. Now she moved into the room that Tom had occupied and locked the door at night (*Generation 153*).

Even after her divorce from her husband she constantly shifts her house because she imagines that her landlady puts mice in her room at night or that the landlord's children put stink bombs in her room.

Lillian's real self is glimpsed, in isolated moments, when she lets go of her image and brings to her family memorable moments of great beauty. Milliken emphasises her importance to the family by considering her "... the family's soul, providing its only direction and coherence, lifting it above the ordinary by her determination and the ardor of her aspirations, however naive and conventional they might in fact be" (143). Her elegant manners, culture, ability as a pianist and her sharp intelligence sustain the family in moments of crisis. Such moments are treasured by her husband when he feels pride in his lovely, talented wife. She plays on the piano, sings for her children and reads them stories on Christmas eve. When William and Charles are affected by small-pox she nurses them with great care and tenderness. When Charles is psychologically affected through witnessing the gruesome death of a girl student, she works hard to bring him back to normalcy by helping him put his mind to work. She even teaches her children herself for five long years in order to inculcate in them a desire for classical literature. She takes her two younger sons to the Crayne Institute in order to separate them from her husband's influence. She even becomes very friendly with them attending to their needs meticulously. However, when her husband takes charge of the children the following year, Lillian becomes her former vindictive self.

Whenever she discovers that she is needed she gets over her frustration and takes charge of the family. When her husband loses one job after another and William gets hospitalised after the lab accident which blinds him, she becomes concerned and is determined to see her family through such a critical phase. Sensing the apathy and lethargy in her husband she tries to fire him with ambition. Lillian strongly believes that her husband never strives hard enough to achieve middle class status, wealth and position. The fact that they don't even own the house they live in embitters her and, with immense will power, she tries to remake him with her love and devotion. She desires her sons too to be poised in bearing and to aspire for status and position. She tries her best to infuse more ambition into Charles.

In addition to her paranoia, sexual fears and overriding concern for her children Lillian is also beset by religious fears. To Lillian who feels herself buffeted by forces in a menacing world even God is a revenging deity. On many occasions, her nagging takes on a strident tone as she scolds both her husband and sons for doing something to enrage the sullen, lurking deity. Every mishap suffered by the family is interpreted by Lillian as the effect of a kind of divine malevolence. Always apprehensive of God's punishment Lillian's psyche becomes overburdened with feelings

of guilt. Whenever her children are upto mischief she reprimands them by saying "God doesn't like ugly" (*Generation* 86) thereby infusing the fear of God's wrath in them. Whenever she feels guilty she analyses herself and senses the pain caused to her husband and sons because of her obsession with white skin. She fears that God will deprive her of the people she loves. She apologises to her husband for her domineering attitude and promises to be a good wife. She becomes kinder and more concerned towards him and urges her sons to express their gratitude to God. When her sons are affected by small -pox she pleads desperately to God to take her life and spare her children. She insists that they attend Church regularly but the sight of black men and women shouting and jumping wildly in the Church at Mississippi nauseates her. Her racial attitude conditions even her choice of churches and she attends only the Presbyterian Churches where all fair-skinned blacks worship. She senses the loss to her soon after Charles's accident in the elevator. She realises her fatal mistake in trying to make Charles do whatever she wished merely in order to feed her own ambition.

It seemed a sacrilege against nature. Her baby, she thought, the last of all her sons, the one — She didn't dare think it. And yet, the loss to her, then, as she first

suffered it, him lying there in such total disability, was everything, the final, bitter end of all her high and eager dreams (*Generation 212*).

However, such moments of insight into her psyche never lead to an improvement in the intrinsic nature of Lillian's character. In fact, after a brief spell of being a concerned, affectionate mother and wife she again turns out to be demanding and aggressive, revelling in the pleasure derived from wielding power and exacting subjugation. As she wavers between her idealised image and her real self she goes through a period that sees her alternating between extremes of behaviour. Horney asserts that such variant attitudes are part of the mental make-up of people who sustain an "idealised image" of themselves. All these attempts can only be regarded "... as desperate efforts to get out of an intolerable situation; that as in any other intolerable situation the most dissimilar means are tried — if one fails, another is resorted to" (1945, 113). In the course of Lillian's struggle to sustain her idealised image her real self gets suppressed and she imprisons herself within her own narrow prejudices and remains static hardly developing in the course of the novel. Ironically, it is her real self that would have helped her to become a better person. If her latent virtues had been developed she would have been better able to nurture her family's emotional needs. As it is, her character

hardly shows any progression in the course of the novel and she remains something of a shrew throughout. Her relationship with her husband brings out only the unpleasant aspects of her character.

Himes makes effective use of nature imagery to draw attention to the chaotic thoughts in the minds of both Lillian and Charles. Nature becomes an objective equivalent of Lillian's chaotic feelings. For example, the lush growth in Mississippi exasperates Lillian. The profusion outside in nature symbolises the chaotic thoughts in her mind. Lillian, unsuccessfully, tries to change all this and bring order to the chaos. The chaos outside and inside her are beyond her control. She plants packages of flower seeds in neat rows in an attempt to create order but is startled to see the sudden growth around her. Himes seems to indicate that it becomes almost impossible for Lillian to come to terms with her conflicts.

Will Taylor is unlike the other black men portrayed by Himes. Crude, simple and open, he is free from psychological compulsions. Himes illustrates through Taylor's character the fact that a black man can still retain his humanity in spite of being emasculated by his wife. He never, in spite of his wife's blatant racism, executes power over her in order to regain some semblance of manhood. He is rather, as Muller says, " ... an increasingly harried and bewildered participant in marital discord" (53).

Will Taylor's father was a rebel who had killed his former master and fled, leaving behind his wife and children. His mother was also an ex-slave. While the other four children in Taylor's family never got to college, Will Taylor was fortunate enough to get an education. He attended a small church college in Georgia, paying for his room and board by working at menial chores. He later studied in Boston. Despite his poverty, he did not feel inferior. He did not let his colour hold him back. Unlike his father, though, Will Taylor adopts a pose of ingratiating servility in front of whites, but unlike his wife, he is not ashamed of being black.

In part his popularity came from being a magnificent actor. None knew this so well as his wife, who had learned it to her regret. He could dissemble and pose with such validity that his innermost thoughts and emotions were seldom revealed (*Generation 32*).

He is liked by both blacks and whites. His colleagues admire his skill and his wit. Lillian despises this characteristic almost as much as she does his colour. She even thinks of it as a slave inheritance and on seeing him scratch his head and assume an attitude of subservience she likens him to the fictional Uncle Tom. As he seems incapable of refinement and sophistication, he is looked down upon

by her. He does not share her intellectual subtleties and she is not content with the little he might be. Actually he is much superior to his wife in many respects. First and foremost, he is content with his sort of life and sees nothing enviable in an intellectually oriented life. In this he is representative of the common people who with little intellectual brilliance but brimming over with physical life are closely in touch with the earth and rejoice in the life of nature. A simple and humble acceptor of life, he ranks spiritually with Hardy's rustics. His field is blacksmithing more than academics and he is talented at his job. He has a remarkable ability to make the most elaborate coal tongs, gates and lamp-posts. He makes wonderful replicas of metal works for his children. Before the damaging effect of his wife's attitude becomes pronounced, Taylor is seen as a man who has a sustained interest in his work. At Mississippi he is totally immersed in his work. Even in winter he likes to rise early and walk the long distance to work. He feels at one with the other blacks and considers himself only more fortunate than the others. Never does he, like Jones and Gordon, feel alienated from them. He earnestly hopes that his sons grow up with the same attitude. As long as he is in the south he is blissful. The southerners respond to his natural, genial humour whole-heartedly. They shower Taylor with small favours and respect him for his sincerity and

commitment. It appears that the south makes up for the lack of warmth at home.

Though his talents are not recognised by his wife, his children love to watch him at the forge shaping metals with remarkable skill. Tom even believes that his father can make anything. Taylor buys bicycles on Christmas eve and, in appreciation of his wife's musical talent, gets her a phonograph and a box of records. It is Taylor who provides absolute freedom to his sons for he strongly believes that they can develop their personalities only in such an atmosphere. He makes them a swing which, unfortunately, results in Charles's accident. Even when his wife accuses him of attempting to murder the children he voices his concern for them by saying that

The boys have to have some outlet. You keep them cooped up like laying hens. You won't let them go to school like other children. You think they are too good to play with the country boys their age. They never go anywhere unless they slip off. They have to have something to do (*Generation 75*).

It is only Taylor who senses the effect that the psychologically destructive racial attitudes of his wife have on Charles and attempts to free his son from it. Taylor pleads with his wife to let Charles alone and not to hamper Charles's development into a normal adult.

When Charles becomes disinterested in his studies Taylor, with the help of his friend who is headwaiter in a hotel, gets his son a job as waiter. Later Taylor comes to Charles's defence in court when Lillian gets Charles arrested on a false charge of forgery. In the court Taylor justifies Charles's deviant behaviour by drawing attention to the mental trauma experienced by his son due to the elevator accident. Taylor even tries to assert his role as father by saying that he will not give up his sons even if his wife divorces him. He manages to establish himself as master of the household by providing his children with good clothes, lavish food and a certain standing in the community in spite of Lillian's demoralising effect on him. Unfortunately, in the battle of wills between Taylor and Lillian she scores a victory over him by making the chief decisions, by cleverly excluding him in matters pertaining to her sons and thereby alienating him totally from them.

In Taylor, Himes creates an enigmatic character with contradictory character traits:

Most persons thought him lovable. He had the guile and intuition of the born comedian and could be extremely entertaining, yet he was never quite a clown. Along with an innate servility, which he had almost completely

submerged beneath an aggressive demeanour, he had a strong and bitter pride ... Deep in his heart he wanted to be a rebel. Had he ever become a hero in the eyes of his wife he might have been a leader (*Generation 10*).

In keeping with his ambivalent character his responses to his wife ~~is~~ are varied. It is only when he finds himself trapped in a frustrating situation that he gives expression to the fire in his nature by speaking against Lillian. Taylor, being a man proud of his race, cannot tolerate his wife speaking ill of his black heritage. Soon after the paint episode when she accuses him of making the children look black he says

"Just a Negro, that's all; just a Negro. Did you think he'd be white?"

"Must he have kinky hair to be a Negro?"

"I want my children to look like me" he muttered.

"So they can grow up handicapped and despised?"

"Despised!" His face took on a lowering look. "What do you mean, despised? I suppose you think I'm handicapped and despised?"

"Aren't you?" The question startled him. "Can't you see", she went on, "I want the children to have it better, not just be common pickaninnies".

"Pickaninnies -" Her thoughtless remark cut him to the quick. "That's better than being white man's leavings" (*Generation* 36-37).

Verbal violence offers Taylor a dramatic acting out of the long-smouldering hostility against his wife. The more she oppresses him with racial epithets the more positive becomes Taylor's identification with his group. He always sides with his sisters when Lillian openly fights with them. The frequent quarrels between them make him more boorish and he meets his wife's reproaches with offensive sordidness. On such occasions, Taylor reacts by "moving against" (Horney 1945, 63) his oppressor i.e., by stiffly resisting his wife's domineering attitudes almost attempting to make her subservient and docile. It becomes practically impossible for him to sustain such an attitude towards his wife mainly because he recognises the impossibility of defeating his wife with a maliciousness equivalent to that of hers. Since Lillian married him for money and status he could have maintained control over her by becoming more ambitious and bettering his status. Success and prestige lend power to people for it provides a feeling of strength. Despite his wife's nagging Taylor, being basically a contented man, never for a moment entertains thoughts of enhancing his prestige and wealth merely to prove himself superior to his wife. Lillian's

constant reminders that he is a misfit both in society and at home psychologically incapacitate Taylor.

As long as he works in schools in the south he is able to retain a strong sense of self as the black people there appreciate his talent as a skilled craftsman. Continual shifts from the south and his children's alienation from him lead to his decline. The accident that blinds William gives Lillian the chance to force her husband to leave the south as she wants her son to be closer to the best doctors. Taylor also fails to establish closeness with his children which brings about a general feeling of helplessness in him. When the family moves to St. Louis and Cleveland, Taylor's life becomes one long, catastrophic decline. In St. Louis, he becomes totally lost. He doesn't have the capacity to adjust himself to city life having lived in southern black colleges for long. In the south he was respected but in the city he is a nobody. He cuts a sorry figure as he comes home from work.

a small black man hunched over and frowning, shambling in a tired-footed walk, crushed old cap pulled down over his tired, glazed eyes, a cigarette dangling from loose lips ... once, going to the bathroom, Charles saw his father slowly trudging up the stairs. He looked so old and stooped and beaten. It frightened him (*Generation* 143-44).

Taylor the craftsman, is reduced to being a handyman and eventually, to the position of a janitor in the northern cities. For the sake of keeping his family together he works at any job he gets. Taylor's reaction to his wife also undergoes a change here. There is no indication of verbal aggression now. He does not wish to aggravate their already damaged relationship and resorts to sublimating alternatives which take the form of "moving away" (Horney 1945, 73) from the oppressor i.e., becoming detached and submissive. When his wife decides to divorce him, he pleads with her to consider the length of time they have been together. His words to his wife "Don't break up our home, honey, we've been married twenty six years" (*Generation* 268) bring out the submissive trait in Taylor. Lillian, on her part, puts forth an ultimatum that Charles be sent to a school in the city maintained for recalcitrant youth in which case she would agree for reconciliation. However, knowing that putting Charles in such a school would destroy his son Taylor refuses to agree to the condition put forth by his wife. During the divorce proceedings Lillian creates the impression that Taylor is a debased and spineless scoundrel who has tried to kill her. Taylor then loses all hope in life.

And although Prof. Taylor had been without a teaching post for four long years, he had still felt he belonged. Deep down he had still considered himself a teacher. Now he

didn't. It broke him inside where it counted. He gave up. He lost his will to try. In many ways, the effect on this little black man born in a Georgia cabin who'd tried so hard to be someone of consequence in this world, to live a respectable life, rear his children to be good, and teach his backward people, was the greatest tragedy of all (*Generation 221*).

After the divorce he develops what Ulf Hannerz calls, "a ghetto-specific trait" (36-37). He becomes irresponsible, lives in a squalid tenement house, drinks heavily and satisfies his sexual desires by reading lurid stories. He talks to himself and becomes forgetful. Right till the end he remains a devoted father. He meets his death at the hands of a pimp in a gambling joint where he goes in search of Charles. Lillian's influence on her husband is complete. Will Taylor has been defeated in his home and, as a result, he becomes psychologically and spiritually dead even before his death. Milliken highlights Himes's success in delineating Taylor's character.

The characters of *The Third Generation* have a largeness of size that is without parallel in the rest of Chester Himes's fiction. They are creatures of epic, of romance, of allegory — and of life itself, remembered with love and anguish ... even the father, Professor William Taylor, called

"Fess" Taylor, and Charles's two brothers, Will Jr., and Tom, are clearer in outline and purer in substance than ordinary mortals (140-141).

Of the three sons, Thomas, the eldest is practical and diplomatic. Unlike his brothers, he escapes his mother's influence for he is sent to a boarding school. He understands, to a certain extent, the rift between his parents. He is often touched to the quick when his mother accuses his father unreasonably. He also has the maturity to sense the prejudiced attitude of his mother. His mother's injunctions not to be influenced by his father's black relatives is distasteful to him. Unlike Charles, he adjusts well with his paternal aunts when he is sent to Cleveland and this shows that his mother's racial prejudices have not affected him. Every time he comes home there is a significant change in his attitude. He looks strange, foreign and aloof. His brothers sense the difference in him for he refuses to play with them. As before he is embarrassed by his mother's strange intensity and comes home very rarely in order to avoid his mother's nagging. When he enters the University in Atlanta he and his family are totally alienated. Whenever he comes home his brothers hardly feel any kinship with him. He becomes a dandy with pretentious manners and affected laughter. Lillian hates him when she comes to know of his familiarity with the girls in the

neighbourhood but Tom stubbornly resists his mother's influence on him. When he senses the frustration entombing all of them, Tom decides to leave the house and does so in spite of his mother's insistence that he stay back.

William, the second son, is different from both Thomas and Charles. He lacks the pretentiousness of Thomas and the primitivism of Charles. He, like his father, is simple and open. Though he loves his mother more than his father he escapes his mother's influence by keeping away from her. William, in spite of his blindness, does not succumb to his mother's indoctrination. He is, unlike Charles, more receptive to good influences. He maintains his poise in social contacts and does not suffer from frustrating compulsions. He is gay and witty, dances excellently and is liked by girls. He adjusts himself perfectly to the outside world and develops a healthy attitude to people and life. He becomes a success in society and is even popular with teachers and students.

Charles, the youngest, is most seriously affected by the destructive force which envelops his parents as he is dragged into the centre of their feud. Ralph Reckley commenting on the intimate relationship between of Charles and Lillian, stresses that the intraracial conflict within the novel has its matrix in the Oedipus Complex (1977, 275). In psychoanalytic terms, the Oedipus dilemma,

as posited by Sigmund Freud, supports the theory that the child desires sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex. At the same time the child experiences a sense of rivalry with the parent of the same sex. Failure to overcome the Oedipal stage results in the child's inability to develop psychosexually into a normal adult. This phenomenon is viewed in a different light by Karen Horney and Eric Fromm. To Horney, the Oedipus Complex, instead of being a "primary process" is the "outcome of several processes". Particular family situations make the child cling "to one parent for the sake of reassurance" (Horney 1937, 160-61). In other words, the conflicts which the child experiences are not due to an unnatural love for the parent of the opposite sex but due to lack of harmony between the parents, unlimited authoritative power of one parent on the child, taboos on the child's movements in order to restrict its freedom etc. Such debilitating influences on the child may create in the child diverse emotions as "helplessness, fear, love or feelings of guilt" (Horney 1937, 85). Charles's problems in the novel are engendered, therefore, not because of his Oedipus complex but of the difficulties of adjustment arising out of distortions in his intrafamilial relationships.

When the novel opens Charles is little more than an infant barely three years old, an extraordinarily lovely child "... with perfect rose-

tan features and deep dimples when he smiled. His dark brown eyes were deep-set like her own, but large and very clear. They were fringed by long black shiny lashes that curled upward" (*Generation 73*). While Lillian, on her part, lavishes affection and attention on Charles and wears her prettiest things for him, Charles combs his mother's hair and does her nails. Charles's love for his mother is the perfectly natural love of a sensitive child who is drawn by the studied charm and beauty of his mother's dignified physique. Charles is equally drawn to his father's rich voice, indulgent laugh and artistic abilities. He would often tag along behind his father as he roamed through the lush green Mississippi landscape to show his children beautiful things which would capture their attention. Charles, then, would indulge in adventures totally negligent of danger. Fearing his uncontrolled emotions Lillian decides to curb his daring spirit by lashing him severely. While William, sixteen months older than Charles, fears his mother's wrath, Charles braves his mother by gritting his teeth thereby daring her to whip him all the harder. Never put off by the grim, unconquerable look in his mother's face, Charles even welcomes the silent ritual between them. Later he seeks an outlet for his defiant attitude by completely disregarding physical injury. He chops off his foot, challenges danger, rolls down rocky cliffs, breaks his limbs and loves walking with crutches. Charles's harsh

defiance, it is evident, is as strong as his deep affection for his mother. Both Charles and Lillian perfectly match each other in their intense feelings, whether they be love, fear, hate or anger.

Charles, even as a young boy, is drawn irresistably into his parents' quarrels. When they quarrel over their racial differences their screaming voices make all the three children shudder and pray to God for them to stop. Later, as an eight-year old boy, Charles's feelings are torn between his father and mother whenever they start bickering.

Their parents fought a great deal during that time. Hearing their screaming voices, followed by the sounds of scuffling, Charles would crawl to the head of the stairs and crouch, trembling in rage and fear. He didn't hate his father. But when his parents quarelled he wanted to cut off his father's head with the chopping axe. He felt violently protective toward his mother (*Generation 74*).

Charles's allegiance to his mother gets strengthened subsequently as he gradually gets indoctrinated by his mother's belief that her husband is indifferent and unconcerned about their well-being. Soon after the swing accident in which Charles is injured Lillian accuses Taylor as a murderer for making the rope swing in

order to kill her children. She exaggerates Taylor's innocent actions making it appear diabolical. As a result, Charles comes to believe whatever his mother says feeling pity for her as a wronged woman suffering untold miseries in the hands of his father. One morning as Charles awakens to hear his parents struggling in the bedroom he gets infuriated. On seeing his mother being hit by his father, Charles becomes temporarily insane. In an effort to protect his mother from physical injury he even attacks his father which is an indication of his violent temperament. Though Lillian succeeds in concentrating her son's affections on her she is hardly aware of the emotional disturbance in her son. Horney's view that a "spirit of competitiveness" in the family is mainly responsible for character malformation in the child is particularly relevant here.

... neurotic parents who create the kind of atmosphere we have discussed are usually discontented with their lives, have no satisfactory emotional or sexual relations and hence are inclined to make children the objects of their love. They loose their need for affection on the children. Their expression of affection has not always a sexual coloring, but at any rate it is highly charged emotionally (1937, 83-84).

Hemmed in by too much love and too much hate Charles's childish heart is torn between anguish for his abused mother and a scarcely repressed hatred for his father. He becomes her confidante and consoler as she continues to be an overwhelming presence throughout childhood. However, she also comes to represent, to Charles as he becomes an adolescent, the most powerful woman with whom none can compete not even his father. Charles's problems get aggravated as there is no attractive standard of masculinity for him to imitate. Taylor's gradual degradation into a nonentity in the family instils fear into Charles's mind that he too may suffer a similar fate. The mother, in such cases, becomes transformed

into a dangerous cannibal, or an all-destroying monster ... The only course which in such cases can cure the fears that may drive a person to the border of insanity is the capacity to cut the tie with mother ... In as much as a person remains caught in this dependency, his own independence, freedom and responsibility are weakened (Fromm 1964, 100).

Charles's fear is different from that of Gordon and Jones. While Jones suffers from castration fears and Gordon from economic insecurity, Charles fears that his very dependency on his mother may weaken his own strength and independence. In his desire to

assert his superiority Charles develops, what Fromm terms, a "seductive male-narcissistic attitude" (1964, 102). As he hates his father, he develops a strong narcissism which makes him feel that he is better than his father. Thus he comes to strongly desire an identity of his own. The desire to be an individual in his own right poses difficulties for Charles has unconsciously come to depend too much on his mother's goading that he be better than his father. As long as he is under her tutelage he performs brilliantly well in studies. When he graduates from high school Lillian tells her son that he must keep his ambition burning and not let her down. Charles feels exhilarated on seeing his mother's contented look. "He had reached that delicate stage of first maturity where every son feels honor-bound to make his parents proud of him. It was a new emotion, affecting him strangely" (*Generation* 197). Once he is away from her Charles is unable to sustain his interest in studies. He is later suspended from the University for his deviant ways and falling grades. He even comes to hate his mother for goading him all his life which has made him always seek her support. Charles comes to realise with pain that the paralysing patterns of his mother's conflicts have invaded his consciousness too.

Charles has to grapple with his mother's religious fears also. Here again, Lillian's instinctive fear of God's wrath gets infused

into Charles's psyche. Charles's explosive temper, defiance and the near-fatal accidents that befall him regularly trouble Lillian very much and hence she lives in constant dread of his killing some other boy or getting himself maimed permanently. She is sure that God would punish her by inflicting injury on Charles. Once when Charles throws a torpedo at their house she remarks to him that God is sure to punish Charles's deviant actions and he retorts by saying that he doesn't care. Charles is shocked by such a reaction from him.

He, too, was frightened by his own remark as if he'd gone beyond the realm of safety. He'd always considered God as omnipresent, able to reach out and touch him at his will. It would not have surprised him had God struck him dead, or burnt him to a cinder (*Generation* 127).

As a punishment for his remark his mother prevents him from partaking in the chemistry experiment demonstration in school for which both he and William are selected. William, in the process of the experiment, gets blinded in an explosion. This becomes a traumatic incident in Charles's life making him feel guilty and responsible for his brother's blindness.

Earlier, Charles had deflected his adoration for his mother to adoration for his brother William. He considers William as his ideal

and this attitude can be seen as an enforced quest of a love object other than his mother who is as much feared as she is loved. Charles, by doing so, makes a feeble attempt to step out of the frustrating family bondage in which he has been held from infancy. Now, after the explosion incident, Charles gets alienated from his brother as a result of the guilt which troubles him constantly. God's judgement startles him. It is he who is ugly and not William but it seems that God doesn't know the difference. Hurt cascades down his heart and he is unable to bear it as his mother's eyes seem to follow him accusingly. Whenever he guides his blind brother down the lane he feels a strange sense of shame and embarrassment. William had always taken the lead before. He was the acknowledged leader. Now it is just the opposite. The incident severs the link between the two. Charles knows that his brother can never regain his sight. His mother's advice to be a good boy reminds him constantly of his ugliness. Charles's feeling of guilt after William's accident gets compounded by jealousy on seeing William's successful adjustment to his blindness. William never succumbs to his handicap which is proof of his positive growth while Charles, in spite of his intelligence and health, remains maladjusted. Apart from Charles's alienation from his brother is Lillian's constant reminder of God's punishment which suggests to Charles the fact that he, however much he tries,

can never be successful like his brothers. Charles accepts this image of himself as a misfit as it is reflected in his familial mirror. By then, the deadening, numbing poison of racism also begins to take its effect on him as he witnesses his mother's efforts to 'pass' for white and her inability to cross the colour-line. Though Lillian reassures him by saying that Charles must not think of himself as coloured, Charles becomes conscious of his racial identity when he attends a high school where the majority are white. He develops hatred for his black aunts and considers them to be inferior to his white mother. His hatred surfaces when he and his brother William are forced to stay with them in Cleveland. While his aunt Beatrice constantly picks on him, venting on him her hatred for his mother, Charles, on his part, finds it difficult to treat his black aunts politely. The situation gets out of hand many times as Lillian supports her son's mean actions against them. On such occasions, Charles comes to realise the superior role played by his mother in all interpersonal relationships. Charles develops a fascination for power and dominance. His desire to impose his superiority on others prevents him from developing healthy, normal relationship with others, whether they be his father's relatives, his peer group or women. He becomes therefore, psychologically stagnant and emotionally sterile. While outlining the characteristics of one who is caught in a

destructive tie with one's mother, Fromm asserts "the difficulty of such a person to relate to others or to love others" (1964, 108) which is true in Charles's case.

As the Taylors lead a migratory life Charles, like his father, finds it difficult to adjust to city life. While William is not troubled by the change, Charles is seriously affected. Charles's pleasant reveries are associated with the south while the north to him symbolises despair, alienation and loss. Charles collapses under the strain as the ghetto life saps his energy forcing him to forge a new style of life and exhibit his dashing beauty to advantage among his peer group. Charles's peer group interaction also turns out to be disastrous. His first association is with Gregory, Robinsons' son, with whom he houses. Gregory makes Charles feel inferior by his studied condescension. While observing the sophistication of Gregory's friends Charles realises that he lacks the qualities which his mother has — poise, grace and confidence. Gregory also succeeds in making Charles self conscious about his drawbacks. Charles's attempts to cut a striking figure in society like using cosmetics to straighten his kinky hair end up in failure. Whenever his friends tease him, life drains out of Charles as he comes to realise increasingly of a lack of something in him which exasperates all the pretty girls in his peer group. Charles is fated to being hurt always

and many times he tries to avoid the hurt simply by not thinking about it. At this point Charles begins to indulge in a pattern of criminal activity which, according to Bassis, is a "mode of self-victimization" (134). By courting danger in order to be arrested Charles exults in the feeling of punishment for it relieves him from guilt. He steals candy from a drugstore where he works and is arrested and fired. Shortly after this, he obtains another job and steals again. This time his employer asks him to confess but Charles refuses to do so as he may feel defeated. Bassis considers the conflict in Charles's psyche as a "complex mechanism of guilt which cannot be overtly admitted or apologised for but which can only be expiated by committing further sins, increasing the guilt and finally making punishment inevitable" (135). Charles's guilt feelings find an outlet in athletics too. He plays games out of a deep subconscious compulsion to kill himself. The vicious brutal game of football grips his fancy and he loves to slam his face into the rocky ground. Indulging in criminal activities and participating in athletics provide Charles with the means of victimising himself while the act of driving cars restores his power and manhood and at the same time enables him to salvage a sense of importance and glory in his peer group.

The sense of power Charles experiences while driving is something which he cannot assert either with his mother or with other women. He gets involved in three major automobile accidents with great damage to the cars and injury to a few pedestrians. Desperate to get over his inferiority he makes use of the opportunity when his Aunt Beatrice asks him to drive her car. He feels happy and in the limelight. He drives fast and loses control over the brake. As his car dashes against a pedestrian, Charles feels immense excitement at the outcome of the accident. Even when he is taken to the police station for enquiry he is hardly disturbed. He speaks of the accident with startling clarity. This only points to the fact that Charles has totally alienated himself from the world in his search for freedom and self-definition. As an outsider forced to create a self, Charles becomes insensitive to the pain and suffering caused to others by his deviant actions. He recounts the details of the accident and is totally unaffected by the tragedy. He is as detached and uncommitted as Mathieu in Sartre's novel *The Age of Reason*.

The actual tragedy hadn't gotten him. His mind contained the photographic pictures of the accumulated grotesquerie, but no connection had been made with the resulting pain and awful hurt and terrible consequences. The victims were recalled as adagio dancers executing comic

pantomime. Much of it still affected him as funny. The sheer ludicrousness of the poor guy getting knocked down twice. Little shifts of laughter kept blowing through his nose. There was something monstrous, inhuman in his mental rejection of the horror. It was as if the dream was known to be a dream, the horror but the artificiality of the dream (*Generation* 180).

Even at the hearing he sits between his parents totally unaffected and detached. The incident has the desired effect for he gets the respect of his peer group who look at him with awe and admiration. His friends organise themselves into a fraternity and he is given an important position in it. Thereafter Charles acts as a gallant when, on one occasion, he hits a ruffian Dick for misbehaving with a girl. Such acts of violence provide Charles with a sense of release. The younger men look at him with respect and the girls make a great fuss over him. This incident enables him to overcome the diffidence experienced earlier and even infuses in him tremendous power.

Soon all semblance of his terror left and he expanded with emotion. The driving excitement returned. He felt as if his head would burst. For a time he felt himself vested with supernatural power, dipped in the river of invincibility. He danced and talked as he never had before.

All of his dances were taken with the most popular girls. He soared in delirious ecstasy and found himself saying the most extravagant things (*Generation* 188).

Charles's pleasure is short-lived. He is affected by fears of physical pain, infirmity, sexual impotency and debility when he falls down an empty elevator at the hotel where he works as a waiter. He is reduced to the state of a semi-invalid with the shattering prospect of years of pain ahead of him. The elevator accident seriously maims his psyche as the explosion accident alienates him from his dear brother. Panic shatters him as he imagines himself a cripple confined to a wheel chair with a wizened useless arm. He is disturbed by the thought that women may not love him because of his handicap. In short, he becomes a prey to morbid self-obsession. Though outwardly cheerful, inwardly he is full of anger and resentment.

Throughout the novel Charles's moods are conditioned by those of his parents. Charles's early flirtation with crime ceases when his parents are happy and when their marital difficulties are at its peak he once again plunges into criminal activity. As he lies in hospital after the elevator accident, he dreads their visits more than anything else. Where before Charles shared his parents' suffering

hoping to see them happy, he now feels only rejection and is devoid of any tenderness or concern for them. He just wants to get away from them so that he need not suffer the defeat which they experience. Hurt affects him very deeply so much so that his perception becomes strangely distorted.

When he enrolls for the pre-medical course in college, while still in the early stages of recovery, he realises with startling suddenness that his parents's endless battling has left him with psychological injuries far more serious than the fractured spine he suffered in the elevator accident. As a failure in college, Charles gets drawn into the most sordid aspects of ghetto life when he takes refuge in the squalid house of an underworld friend Dave, a gambler and pimp. Lillian's questioning leaves Charles frustrated all the more and she resorts to extreme steps to curb his deviance. She succeeds in getting his disability pension stopped and even gets him arrested on a false charge of forgery. Lillian's extreme steps to make Charles dependent on her financially only results in making him all the more desperate to assert himself. He steals a car and even cashes false cheques ending up in jail. When caught by the police he does not run and the very idea of being chased is relished by him. This is evident in the chaotic feelings Charles experiences then.

To be chased had always impressed him as an intolerable dignity. It was an impression from his childhood indelibly implanted in his mind when he first read of Achilles chasing Hector around the walls of Troy while all the city looked down, weeping in anguish at the sad spectacle of this once brave and mighty warrior fleeing for his life (*Generation* 280).

Charles likes jail for the total freedom it affords him. He is free from the need to testify at his parents' divorce trial. He is also free from responsibility, obligation and from his mother's nagging. In other words, he experiences the freedom which he has yearned for throughout his life. When his mother tells him of her separation from his father he feels only a numbness — "she sounded like a stranger" (*Generation* 285). The same detachment is experienced when he goes to his mother after his release on bail. The emotions which both feel now are totally different from the intense love which they felt for each other earlier.

They were both embarrassed and constrained, as if they were strangers. Both found themselves unable at the moment to discuss what was uppermost in their thoughts. She wanted to know about his trial, why she hadn't been

notified, and all about his future plans. She wondered if he'd heard from his father, what his father was doing. He wanted to tell her he was sorry they had to sell the house, that he was sorry now about everything, about all the hurt and headache he had caused her all his life. But there was a wall between them which neither could break through (*Generation 290*).

When Charles is still in his teens, sexuality becomes a dominant impulse. He seeks women desperately only to exert his power over them. Sex becomes a way of asserting his manhood. Once, when a young girl in school refuses to date him Charles feels hurt but he gets over the disappointment when another girl his age permits him to bully her. This experience, though short lived, greatly reassures his self. Charles strives to repeat the same pattern of behaviour with Della whom he meets at a dance programme. He fails in his attempt when Della stubbornly refuses to be dominated by him. His next affair is with Peggy. Peggy offers her love unselfishly as a means of extricating Charles from the prison of his hatred but he cannot reciprocate that love. Hatred, fear, anguish and frustration have been etched indelibly upon his brain and he can only use Peggy as he has been ill used by his mother. Unable to recognise Peggy's worth Charles can only view her motive for

remaining his mistress from a purely physical point of view, that of her need for sexual gratification. He cannot accept Peggy's love for him and return that love. To keep his real self inviolate and free from subjugation he erects barriers against her influence and overawes her with his domineering attitude. Something about her puts him on edge as he loses his temper at her very easily and experiences the need to be cruel to her. Nevertheless, Peggy is persistent in her futile even pathetic efforts to overcome the barrier between them. She tries to regard Charles with compassion and understanding. He also experiences, in course of time, a love that is genuine and almost complete but abruptly stifles such emotions within him.

When Peggy discloses her pregnancy, Charles decides to leave her. He never wishes to possess anyone who may curtail his freedom. He is sure that his marriage will hurt his mother. He terminates his relationship with Peggy though he knows that he still loves her. When he breaks his affair with Peggy he becomes nervous and fantasies haunt him. He picks women at random taking them to liquor joints, waking up in strange rooms with half-remembered details of drunken orgies. It is at this point that he begins to turn to another woman, Veeny, a thirty-five year old woman whose lustful look revolts and entrances him. With her he hopes to have an

impersonal relationship. After his affair with Peggy Charles associates sex with dirt, sordidness and guilt. Veeny frightens him as she seems to smell of death and yet she incites in him an almost, uncontrollable desire. His experience with her is totally different from that with Peggy. He feels so repulsed that he almost vomits. Even her arms have a dead look as if just beginning to decay. He gets caught in her vicious hold.

He felt defiled, as if he had debased himself, as if he had wallowed in pollution. But the lust surged back into him until his blood pounded. The conflict of lust and revulsion held him, he shivered with a sudden chill. The splitting headache of his hangover blinded him. He let her force him and gave in (*Generation* 298).

Veeny becomes a death-like figure luring him to destruction. His attempts to escape her are futile and every time he is drawn back to her. There is a paralysing evil in her consuming desire. He never has the strength to leave her. His thoughts become vague and he finds himself floating in a nightmare of sensuality. While his relationship with Peggy has a touch of affection and love, that with Veeny is abnormal. He feels himself sinking into an abyss of hell and torture when he is with her. Every time he wishes to leave

she orders him back in a triumphant voice which makes him feel nauseated with shame. His pent-up sexual desire is alternately provoked and repressed by Veeny and for a time Charles lives in sheer physical ecstasy with her. With Veeny, Charles hopes, there would be less difficulty than with Peggy for he can discard her whenever he wishes. Charles's affair with these two women brings to the fore the division in his personality. Sex becomes for him a way of self-torture and, tragically, happiness in love is not to be Charles's destiny.

Charles suffers from an ambivalent self-concept as he finds himself unable to choose between a traumatic reality and the need to search for self-realisation in a positive way. Significantly, the nature imagery in the novel also underscores the two contrasting impulses in him — the destructive, deviant aspect and the idealistic, imaginative one. When Charles is blissful as a young boy experiencing perfect amity both with his mother and the lush landscape at Mississippi he is transported to an imaginary world of his own. Hilarious and excited he would then be drawn into a state of enchantment at the very sight of the strange quiet beauty of the long green fields. "He loved each new sight passionately, the smell of the mud and the mules, the pine spires in the purple sky, the softly sighing corn. It was as tangible and friendly and as wonderful to him as his mother's breast" (*Generation* 41). Twilight and Spring

would heighten his rapture. At twilight he would sit entranced as a phantom fairyland took shape in his mind. Those were moments of intense delight as he and William would dash about the yard, catch the fireflies and rub them on their faces so that spots of light would appear at places where they smeared it. Spring, on the other hand, would give rise to fantasy. In spring "... he was a flower, a deep red flower, or a green whispering tree. He could change himself into a bird, or he could become a yellow-winged butterfly. It was almost all a dream; he could turn everything into a dream" (*Generation 77*). This fantasy signifies Charles's inordinate love for freedom. In his dream he would be a butterfly and a bird, both strong symbols of freedom. This dream-fantasy world evoked by nature is also nurtured by Charles's extensive reading of the Greek classics, the horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe, the histories of legendary heroes. He imagines himself to be powerful mythological figures like Horatio, Hannibal, and Jason in search of the Golden Fleece. He also conjures up in his mind a world of phantoms and murderers. On one occasion, as Charles speeds through a village he derives sadistic pleasure by imagining a man's head being knocked off by a telegraph pole and the headless man running along beside the train dodging in and out of the telegraph poles. The sight of the dark buildings looming in the shadows of the village is likened to Dante's *Inferno*. These images of darkness bring out Charles's inner deviance.

Charles associates winter with pain and suffering. As his mother whips him to restrain the wildness in him, Charles becomes primitive and defiant even hoping to die in the lap of nature.

Winter was like that, like the ecstasy of pain. His mother whipping him out of her love him and his love for her aching inside of him with the pain, their love unable to come through the hard bleakness of their hate was like death. Winter was like death. He loved to play dead, falling in a pretended faint and lying immobile on the ground, feeling the embrace of the earth, its closeness and its chill. Several times he frightened his mother out of her wits (*Generation 76*).

However, when he sympathises with her and considers her to be a pathetic woman subjugated by his father he yearns intensely to be her saviour and protector. Whenever his parents war against each other he escapes to the attic and, in his fantasies, becomes a victorious saviour. He fights a thousand duels and saves many damsels in distress.

He was Ivanhoe, Richard the Lion hearted, Alexander the Great and the Count of Monte Cristo, Genghis Khan and the Scarlet Pimpernel. It was often his face in the iron mask, and his strong back, instead of Jean Valjean's, lifting the

carriage from the mud. Most often he was Achilles chasing Hector around the walls of Troy (*Generation* 116-117).

Later, when Charles plunges deeper and deeper into crime and associates himself with prostitutes, repulsive, destructive fantasies trouble him. Demons take the place of fairies in his fantasy. He finds himself constantly pursued by them closing in on him. At the slightest sound he would wheel about, his face gripped in the horror of death. Veeny seems to be a "carnivorous animal" drawing all that was good from him and "poisoning his blood with something that was repulsive and weird and abnormal" (*Generation* 301).

Such weird images towards the climax of the novel would naturally incline the readers to expect a tragic ending. However, these contrasting images highlight the intricate link between victimization and growth which is expressed by Himes in his essay "Dilemma of the Negro novelist in the United States" (1966). Charles's growth is possible only because of his psychological victimization. Of particular significance is Charles's self realisation in Veeny's sordid ghetto room where he has been physically victimised. As he watches his parents fighting for him against his comrade Dave and Veeny, he is dumbfounded and understands the need to cut himself off from such companions. The sight of his

seriously wounded father brings him back to reality. He feels drained of all emotions as he watches his mother nursing his father. When he sees them together he suddenly realises that he has to fend for himself. By cutting his tie with his mother Charles experiences the pain of growth — "he felt as if he had been cut in two; as if a part of himself had been severed from himself forever. But at that moment it did not hurt; the hurt had not come" (*Generation* 315). The emotions which he experiences now are totally different. Charles realises the need to stand on his own and decides not to give in to despair and deviance.

The novel ends with Charles's enlightened awareness. There is an optimistic note towards the end when he feels totally free of the strong bond of love-hate which so far had kept him tied to his mother. He visualises a new beginning even as he wonders what will become of himself. He thinks of Peggy's deep attachment to him and hopes to find her. After the tiring events of his life, Charles thinks of his past and the varied experiences he has had so far. He experiences a crisis in the search for his identity. His past experiences bring him the knowledge which helps him to correct his image of himself. The bright and positive aspects of life fill him with renewed vigour as he drifts away into a peaceful slumber. There

is an indication that Charles is on his way to explore his self and define it not according to truth and reality but according to what he wants to make it out to be. He breaks out of the prison wall of selfishness that had once confined him in darkness and comes out into the open bright sunlight thereby amending his way of life. Self-correction, it is to be presumed, will follow self-knowledge.

**FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE  
A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF  
CHESTER B. HIMES**

**W.S. KOTTISWARI**

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## CHAPTER - V

### THE SPLIT SELF - *THE PRIMITIVE*

In his novel *The Primitive* Himes attempts to provide new definitions of sanity and insanity by presenting a fragmented hero. Here Himes's protagonist, Jesse Robinson, a writer, is so profoundly alienated from society and self, so utterly overwhelmed by feelings of futility and shame that he lapses into complete helplessness. Immobilised by guilt and fear, he turns into a split personality with a disintegrating mind like some of Kurt Vonnegut's characters who give in to extreme emotions in order to combat the sterilizing effect of modern technology. John Alridge declares that the typical narrative today sets the scene for such characters and that the writer is constrained to depict schizophrenic characters in order to bring out the self - alienation experienced by modern man. According to Alridge

The young writer is faced, from the moment he begins his first novel, with the unavoidable fact that the only hope for a successful dramatic effect lies today in the depiction of the grotesque and abnormal, for it is there and there only that the tragic situation of modern life exists (91).

The lunatic hero is a man who ignores complex social realities in favour of a radical, hedonistic nihilism. In *The Primitive* Robinson, as a result of his experiences, is driven so deeply within himself that he becomes an automated shadow. All his previous experiences lead him to believe that involvement in intimate relationships can lead only to misery and betrayal. As he tries to avoid contact with other people he loses hold on his own sense of self and regresses into a perverted state of mind becoming in the process, "a violent man, almost powerless to control an ever more pressing urge toward overt, lethal expression of his destructive impulses" (Milliken 195).

The structure of the novel deserves attention as it reveals Himes's technical finesse. Milliken considers *The Primitive* to be as "richly packed and complex a book as the sprawling *Lonely Crusade*" especially because it is an "intricately patterned piece of fiction" (184). Lundquist also praises Himes's effective style.

*The Primitive*, while tragic in outline, is filled with incidents and conversations that are handled with ironic Rabelaisian gusto. Gargantuan drinking and eating scenes are described in a style that effectively blends the high and the low, and the literary allusion and street language are combined in a manner that makes *The Primitive*,

despite its gruesomeness, more engaging than any of Himes's earlier novels (93).

Margolies even goes to the extent of saying that the novel is so well-written that it is difficult to do justice to it. He says that the

parts are extremely well-written and Himes's cast of characters is authentically conceived. Jesse is especially interesting. His self pity — of which he has plenty — is seldom irritating, and this is a remarkable feat for any author. Himes laces Jesse's gloom with a kind of dry wit, a sad intellectual humor that saves him from sentimentality (98).

The chapters are arranged meticulously with the focus alternating from Jesse Robinson to Kriss. The first and third chapters of the novel provide background information about Kristina Cummings, the white, highly successful middle class woman executive while the second chapter presents the unsuccessful black writer Jesse Robinson. The two main characters of the novel differ not only in terms of race but also with regard to their position in society. Also Robinson's smooth relationship with his wife Becky contrasts with his strained affair with Kriss. The calm atmosphere of the opening chapters is totally different from the emotional

outburst of the final murder scene. The subsequent chapters bring out the pathological parallelism in the lives of Robinson and Kriss as both are lured into homosexual relationships. The absurd life which both Robinson and Kriss are destined to lead is effectively portrayed by Himes who

uses the grotesque to turn away from the confessional mode to underscore the cultural absurdities that prompt absurd private lives. Jesse and Kriss, in their extreme behaviour, are not so much atypical as they are representative of cultural types unable to escape their sexual and racial pasts (Muller 71).

Muller also hails the classical structure as most effectively underscoring the thematic thrust of the novel adding that "...within the symmetrical structural units of *The Primitive* Himes orchestrates a primitive asymmetry or unbalance in the tortured lives of two souls caught in a distinctly contemporary urban hell" (67).

Robinson's anguish stems from being not only a black man but also a sensitive writer in an insensitive environment. His sense of self is very much related to his profession. As he says "a writer writes, a fighter fights" (*Primitive* 100). However, Robinson is not a successful writer. Two of his novels dealing with the racial problem

and communism have been severely criticised by the reading public. His second novel had been rejected on the grounds that the public is fed up of protest novels. The editor who rejects his novels compares the book to "dung" and "filth" as its appeal is not to the intellect. Such a strong reaction dampens Robinson's spirit and he becomes disillusioned on not finding his books in bookshops among books by other black writers. The editor's remarks make him feel sometimes bitter and sometimes amused. The editor criticises Robinson's narrative style insisting that the style ought to have been in the manner of the Old Testament. In that case, Robinson reflects with wry humour, he should have started the novel very much in this manner.

The nigger woke up, sat up, scratched at the lice, stood up, made a wind, natured, gargled, harked, spat, sat down, ate a dishpan of stewed chitterlings, drank a gallon of lightning, hated the white folks for an hour, went out and stole some chickens, raped a white woman, got lynched by a mob, scratched his kinky head and said, Boss Ah's tahd uh gittn' lynched. Ah's so weary kain keep mah eyes open. And the Boss said Go on home an' sleep , nigger, that's all you niggers is good for. So he went back to his shanty, stealing a watermelon on the way, ate the watermelon,

rind and all, lay down on his pallet, blinked, yawned, and went to sleep hating the white folks (*Primitive* 44-45).

Soon after this disheartening experience, Robinson becomes dispirited but manages to write another novel *I was looking for a Street* during his stay with his wife Becky on a small island in upstate New York where he enjoys perfect peace of mind. He is hopeful of being acknowledged as a good writer this time as he is given \$500 advance for this novel. His hopes are belied when he meets James Pope, the editor at Hobson's publishing house who had given him the advance. Pope utters what seems to Robinson to be an adequate prologue to a rejection. Robinson wants Pope to convey whatever bad news he has in store for him but the latter makes a remark which is disparaging to a man of Robinson's sensibility. Pope says that he likes the book but feels that it will be better if some parts of the novel are omitted. With a change of title the book is sure to be a success. The heated argument that ensues between Pope and Robinson leads to the latter criticising the editors for the way they rate individual works. The term "Protest", Robinson opines, is something which editors have not clearly understood. Pope argues that the novel is vivid, bitter but humorless without "animal fun" (*Primitive* 94). Since all the characters in Robinson's novel are killed Pope qualifies it as a

protest novel. If this is the criteria applied for dubbing novels as protest novels, Robinson retorts, then Shakespeare's *Hamlet* aptly deserves the tag for everyone is killed in the play. Pope subtly evades the point and gives him a bit of advice which is contradictory to what he had said in the earlier part of the interview. He asks Robinson to write an inspirational story, a Negro success novel, in fact, Robinson can even write a success story about himself. Pope totally forgets the fact that only a moment or so earlier he had termed the rejected novel as autobiographical. Through such shattering episodes Robinson understands the fact that the whites find it difficult to accept the painful truth of racism from blacks and a writer who attempts to expose the basic psychological insecurities experienced by the whites is sure to be vilified and scorned. Herein lies the dilemma of the artist - protagonist Robinson. He aspires to be a writer but is powerless to establish himself as one in spite of his fertile creative mind.

At the domestic level, Robinson experiences perfect amity and happiness. Unlike Gordon, Robinson does not feel the need to oppress his wife in order to emphasize his manhood. The Robinson - Becky relationship is based on love and not on compulsive needs. He is protective and has great love for his wife. Her devotion to her husband is seen soon after the car accident when Robinson is jailed on a

false charge by a white woman. Robinson's bail is set at twenty-five dollars and she becomes frantic on knowing of his arrest. She, with great difficulty, arranges for the bail money and after bailing him out she agrees to look for a job so that he can complete his novel *I was looking for a Street*. Such an arrangement is disliked by Robinson for he does not want his wife to be burdened with an unsuccessful husband. It is then that Robinson decides to leave her. He even justifies his decision to leave her as an act of nobility. Though he wants to put an end to the farce of playing husband, he passionately wants her to be safe and free from hurt. After nine month's separation from her, he thinks of his wife with gentleness. Robinson, at this point of time, wonders as to why Becky suffered the agony of being his wife for nearly twelve years. Robinson is convinced, beyond all doubt, that he can never fulfil his role as a husband to his wife. Himes delineates a potentially healthy relationship between a black man and his wife in the Robinson - Becky relationship. White America prevents Robinson from establishing himself as a writer with the result that he is forced to survive on his wife's earnings which Robinson finds demeaning. It is white America's victimisation of Robinson as a writer which leads to the failure of his marriage and not lack of responsibility or love on Robinson's part.

Milliken considers Robinson a tragic character mainly because he is consistently tormented by

the memory of the failure of his marriage and the great love he had for his wife Becky, his desperate need to shelter and protect her, to give her pride in himself and his work, and the memory of the mire of humiliation and despair he had dragged her into (200-201).

The only way, Robinson feels, by which he can restore his shattered ego is to somehow seek out a white woman and it is this obsession which drives him to enter into a tempestuous affair with Kristina Cummings. They seek each other out not because of mutual love but hate. Margolies effectively analyses the reason for Robinson seeking her. To him, Robinson

is motivated by certain primitive and dangerous elements in his nature. When he first sees Kriss he feels himself utterly defeated; in a way he is already spiritually dead. Prior to their meeting he says he needs a white woman. Without acknowledging it to himself, Jesse is seeking out his physical destruction, but just as significantly he is seeking out the cause of his destruction. For him Kriss represents the white world that has crushed him (98).

While Jesse Robinson is seen in the grip of turbulent emotions, Kriss his paramour, in spite of imbalances within radiates calmness and keeps her cool. Milliken comments on her character in the following lines.

Kriss's remarkably sturdy physical constitution permits her to plunge deep into vice and dissipation with relative impunity, triumphantly healthy to the end, and, similarly, her common sense and bubbly humor, her bouncy sense of fun, permit her, for a long time, to play fast and loose with the demons of her own psyche. She is monumentally unhappy but suffers from no obvious debilitating mental illness. Yet, she has acquired the vocation of murderess, a half - mischievous urge to provoke men to violence against her, to incite them beyond the limits of their control, and she represents an enormous danger to any man with difficult - to - control murderous impulses (194 - 95).

She resides in a posh Gramercy Park Apartment unlike Robinson who resides in the Harlem squalor. The apartment appears unearthly the moment she wakes up to reality. It symbolises the fear and loneliness which she experiences every day. Such an opulently furnished apartment is in direct contrast to her pathetic mental state. The reason for her present state is due largely to her

German heritage. Born of a German father, Kriss grew up as a lonely child and was even ostracised because of her mixed heritage during the years following the first world war. The sight of her father sitting drunk and embittered by the German defeat made her situation worse. To her he was the epitome of defeat

his defeat had filled their home with a dark despair in which she had grown up always on the verge of terror, sometimes within the terror, never far away, and the feeling of complete aloneness somehow coming from her father too in a way she couldn't understand (*Primitive 6*).

When she chooses Ronny, a homosexual, as her husband she ruins all chances for happiness. Ronny always feels guilty when he sleeps with her and when his guilt intensifies he confesses his infidelities to her. This aggravates Kriss's frustration until she becomes promiscuous. With malice, she picks lovers at random. She deliberately seeks out both black and white men to assuage her hurt. Once when she almost decides to marry Ted, a black man, she is ostracised by the white community. She experiences depressing emotions upon waking up each morning and even the sight of her modern room with its opulent furniture fails to rejuvenate her sinking spirit. Daily she has to swallow pills to get over her mental and emotional distress and fortify herself

emotionally by watching the queer antics of a chimpanzee on television. Regaining her composure she walks out of her apartment and once outside she assumes a different air. As she walks on Madison Avenue the old ladies smile at her and she even stops to rub the arched back of a sleek, fat, Persian cat with genuine admiration. The old ladies remark that "she is the only real gentle lady of the lot" (*Primitive* 36). This is a ritual undergone everyday. At work she is an epitome of perfection. She started working at the Godwin Institute four and a half years ago at a salary of fifty dollars weekly. Now she holds a formidable position as Assistant Director with a salary of six thousand dollars a year. Her work is to write the summaries of the Institute projects which are sent as prospectuses to all of the subsidizing foundations and the US State Department. She is, unlike Robinson, well-liked, important and permanently situated. At the age of thirty-seven she retains her former alertness and confidence. She sorts her work and instructs her secretary to type the summaries. As an expert proof reader and excellent writer of clear prose she is very much in demand. One of the reasons for her popularity is her efficiency at work. Her striking blonde figure and her creative mind make her vulnerable to the subtle advances of not only men but women. She remains unruffled when Dorothy Stone, her secretary, takes the liberty of tenderly fingering her curls and complimenting on her poise.

The psycho-sexual dynamics between Robinson and Kriss is very complex. Kriss's relationship with both black and white men is fraught with frustration and anxiety. Though Kriss frequently remarks that she does not have any racial prejudice and that "most of the people whom she had ever deeply admired had been Jews and a few Negroes" (*Primitive* 16) her actions prove that she hates both blacks and whites. She has been victimised by white society for going around with black men. The white men even remark that she solves the Negro problem in bed. They feel that she is not good enough for them and treat her like dirt. Calvin Hernton explains that the white male, in order to prevent his woman from associating with the black man, has created the myth of the black's sexuality to dehumanize him. Through continual repetition of the myth, the white female believes it and wants proof. The white man thus fears the black man "and the white woman who associates with a Negro knows in advance that many of her friends will desert her, white men will sneer at her, and society in general will look down on her" (Hernton 44).

Kriss desperately seeks out both white and black men in order to victimise them. Fromm describes the character traits of such people and says that such behaviour becomes one of the means of

escaping from an unbearable situation. Fromm adds that there are three kinds of sadistic tendencies that may be seen in such people:

One is to make others dependent on oneself and to have absolute and unrestricted power over them, so as to make them nothing but instruments, "clay in the potter's hand". Another consists of the impulse not only to rule over others in this absolute fashion, but to exploit them, to use them, to steal from them... A third kind of sadistic tendency is the wish to make others suffer or to see them suffer. This suffering can be physical, but more often it is mental suffering. Its aim is to hurt actively, to humiliate, embarrass others, or to see them in <sup>an</sup> embarrassing and humiliating situation (1942, 123-124).

Kriss often places both her black and white lovers in very humiliating situations. She becomes a sadist of the kind Fromm describes. She derives satisfaction by narrating her affairs with black men to her former white lover Dave. She feels superior to him by doing so and also derives a sense of evil. With black men she achieves a sense of identity and security by intimidating them. For her "this was the best part of it; all her past hurts were dissolved, watching the symptomatic self-destructiveness of a frustrated Negro male in a

white woman's room" (*Primitive* 137). Apart from Robinson, Harold and Walter are two other black perverts who seek out Kriss in order to share their hurts. Harold is a black sociologist. He had earlier impressed Kriss with his insightful scholarship into the "Negro problem". When he meets Kriss he too is a slave to alcoholism and is on the verge of a mental break down. He drops his veneer of refinement in front of her and appeals to her to take pity on him. He narrates his miserable experience with his black wife who has deserted him for white men. When Kriss screams at him hysterically "... niggers! niggers! niggers! You're just as bad as she is! All niggers! I'm sick to death of niggers! Ever since I've known you you've talked of nothing but niggers" (*Primitive* 117), Harold goes down on his knees before her saying that both he and Kriss are alike for both are hurt. "You married homosexual ... I married whore ... You can't do without black men ... no more'n I can do without white women" (*Primitive* 117). Walter, a successful white bourgeois, dislikes Robinson for the anger expressed in his novels. He is a conservative integrationist and, like Bart in *Lonely Crusade*, has succeeded in the white world by sacrificing his integrity. He too, like Harold, seeks affirmation of his self-worth from Kriss. Kriss consistently flirts with him knowing his constant need for ego- gratification.

By victimising black men she can feel superior, can take out the frustrations she feels and even fantasize about her vanity. On the other hand, by narrating her affairs with black men to white men she can extract the greatest revenge against white men. This brings to light Kriss' total dependency on both black men and white men — a point emphasised by Fromm when he speaks of the relationship between a sadist and the object of his sadism (1942, 124).

When Robinson decides to renew his amorous relationship with Kriss he experiences strange emotions. He knows, for sure, that he does not feel anything for her. It is only an attempt to get over the "sudden blind panic of being lost in a world he longer understood "(*Primitive* 49). In other words, Robinson experiences feelings of inferiority, powerlessness and individual insignificance as a result of which life as a whole, is felt by him as something overwhelmingly powerful which he cannot master or control. Such feelings of defeatism make Robinson resort to a kind of defence mechanism termed by Fromm as "masochistic strivings" (1942, 122). This lies in trying to "fuse one's self with somebody or something outside oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking"<sup>1</sup>(Fromm 1942, 122). Robinson's relationship with Kriss serves this purpose. He surrenders himself

totally to her, a trait commonly seen in people who take refuge in such a defence mechanism. Such people

show a tendency to belittle themselves, to make themselves weak, and not to master things. Quite regularly these people show a marked dependence on powers outside themselves, on other people, or institutions, or nature. They tend not to assert themselves, not to do what they want, but to submit to the factual or alleged orders of these outside forces. Often they are quite incapable of experiencing the feeling "I want" or "I am"(Fromm 1942, 122).

It is only with reluctance that Kriss agrees to meet him. Robinson is also particular not to arouse Kriss's suspicion. His former association with Kriss makes him know that she cannot abide a tense silent escort and if he plunges in a mood of black despair she will not hesitate to terminate her association with him. Thus, to please her, Robinson even dons a new Oxford blue flannel suit. When both Robinson and Kriss come face to face they stare at one another in slight shock. Robinson discovers Kriss to be different from what she was before. There is no sign of the daredevil girl whom he had once liked. Instead she appears as a slightly dull woman wrapped

up in an impregnable respectability. When Robinson questions her about her former lover Ted, Kriss gives a very bitter reply saying that she wishes him dead. Immediately, Robinson senses that her attitude towards him will also be the same. At that moment both realise their hatred towards for each other.

In the silence that followed, realising their need of each other, both now ostracised from the only exciting life they had ever known, both starved for sexual fulfilment, lost and lonely, outcasts drifting together long after the passion had passed, faced with a night of sleeping together which at that moment neither desired, they hated each other (*Primitive* 55).

Robinson is careful not to divulge his real feelings for her and asserts that he loves her whole-heartedly. At the same time he is quick enough to sense the seething discontent in her mind and tries to please her in his own way. Kriss questions him about his wife and then refers to the book he had written last adding that she is sick of listening to negroes whining. Robinson's youthful appearance makes Kriss jealous and she contrasts it with her own sagging physique. She attributes " ... his youthful appearance to the fact that white people, like herself, supported him so that he could write

a book every four or five years about what mean bullies the white people, like herself, were" (*Primitive* 65). She is often condescending towards him. This attitude of hers makes Robinson angry but he laughs deprecatingly and assures her of pleasant company. As Kriss continues to oppress him in many subtle ways, Robinson allows her to order him around. He cleans her house, prepares her breakfast, lets her call him 'nigger' and abuse his novels, all of which indicate his paralysis and his masochistic need to continue as victim. She incites him to be aggressive towards her by making him an observer when she flirts with other men. Biting, cynical remarks are directed at him and she grins delightedly on knowing that his novel has been rejected. The ritual between them reaches its peak when both indulge in extreme behaviour alternating between ecstasy, sensual delight, outright hatred and rejection. She melts with sensuous ecstasy and this mood is followed by one of repressed fury. On one occasion, Robinson finds himself in the company of Kriss and another black man Harold. Kriss, as usual, taunts both black men with the intention of making them fight over her. Robinson, instead of becoming angry, relapses into a lethargic state quickly taking in the absurdity of the situation. The situation strikes him as funny and he thinks of the magazine cartoons of a man cast away on a land with a beautiful woman. "Bitch cast away with two men...

Island not tropical... no palm trees, but shade of skyscrapers just as good... only pleasure television... "(*Primitive* 114). On another occasion, Walter and Kriss discuss Robinson's novels in his presence. While Lucille, Walter's wife, speaks highly of his works Walter and Kriss are very critical. Though hurt deep within, Robinson pipes in his cheerful drunken voice"... And now I'm going to write the biography of the great white ape who rules all the black apes in the jungle. Mister A as he is known to the black apes. Of course the title will be *Gone with the Apes*" (*Primitive* 140). He sees the face of Lucille as she watches her husband stroke Kriss. The look of infinite despair on Lucille's face reminds him of Becky and he instantly defends Lucille. In an angry voice he tries to dissuade Kriss from playing the game in front of the black woman but Kriss refuses to listen to him. Kriss justifies her behaviour by saying that she wishes to see what arouses a man. When he slaps Kriss with savage violence, Lucille, surprisingly, intervenes and tells Robinson that the action is totally unwarranted for she is not at all unhappy. All through the ritual

Jesse sat silent and unmoving, watching the performance with a completely detached curiosity; with no reaction to the danger whatsoever, scarcely realizing his own participation. It was as if he were watching with

impersonal interest some vaguely valid but not very novel exhibition of idiocy like a Hollywood treatment of a Negro theme (*Primitive* 146).

In spite of such humiliating experiences, Robinson never wants to leave the safety of Kriss' apartment for

... the thought of leaving the small bright cell of debauchery and invading the outside darkness invoked an incomprehensible fear. It was as if, during his twenty-six hours inside her apartment, the outside had become the unknown, and was infested with dangers and evils and what was more to be feared, imponderables of what was termed normality too terrifying to be ventured. Inside he felt secure when sufficiently drunk to pleasantly subside into a dementia praecox befitting the circumstances and complementing the bitch (*Primitive* 137 - 138).

Though Robinson remains tied in a kind of masochistic bond with Kriss, he also desires to be free. Fromm brings out this complex dynamics of a masochist by saying that such a person basically

remains a powerless atom who suffers under the submergence of his self. He and the power to which he clings

never become one, a basic antagonism remains and with it an impulse, even if it is not conscious at all, to overcome the masochistic dependence and to become free (1942, 135).

This desire for freedom makes Robinson violent but, at the same time he has to repress his anger especially with Kriss in order to continue staying in her apartment. Unlike Himes's other protagonists, Robinson finds himself in a very precarious situation. He is constantly afraid of losing his self in Kriss's presence. He discovers that she is false, her love mechanical and compassion unknown to her. Robinson is an extreme example of a character who, in Laing's terminology, experiences "ontological insecurity" (41). Robinson's threshold of a basic sense of security is so low that practically any relationship with another person threatens to overwhelm him. As circumstances continually threaten his sense of self, Robinson adopts a peculiar strategy in the effort to preserve his identity. When Kriss's attempts to humiliate him become so overwhelming that it obliterates his self completely, Robinson decides to guard himself against losing his subjectivity. He cultivates a false - self system or he dons a mask, 'front' or 'persona' in front of her and even others. Robinson's withdrawal from the real world becomes a deliberately cultivated strategy to maintain personal freedom by retreating behind some sort of protective shield. Robinson's psyche gets affected

when he dons such a mask. His psyche splits into two selves — the inner self and the outer self or false self system. Laing explains that in such a state

[T]he body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's own being. Instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a false self, which a detached, disembodied, 'inner', 'true' self looks on at with tenderness, amusement or hatred as the case may be (71).

His bodily experiences and actions are a part of the false-self system. In this sense, Robinson is unlike the usual characters in a protest novel. Time loses its significance and there seems to be no pattern in events. His thoughts and emotions lack consistency. The identity question looms large in his mind when he begins to doubt his very existence. The lines from Maxim Gorky's novel *The Bystander* recur often in Robinson's consciousness. As he continues reading the story over and over again he relapses into a world of imagination. A particular passage from the novel recurs with frightening immediacy. The drowning of Boris, a character in the novel, and the insistent questioning by someone in a crowd merges in Robinson's consciousness with his own plight. The identity crisis which Robinson faces is brought to the fore at this juncture. Only two

lines from the novel flash through his inward eye "But was there really a boy? Perhaps there was no boy at all" (*Primitive* 23). These lines may very well apply to Robinson himself.

Throughout the novel, perhaps more often in the latter part, there recurs an on-going dialogue between Robinson and his false self. His inner self addresses the outer as "son". Muller opines that "the son is Jesse's comic alter ego with whom he converses throughout the novel — the element that forces him to confront the absurdity of his primitive condition" (70). It is interesting to note that the inner self assumes different moods at different times. It is critical, humorous, patronising and, more often, ironical. In the earlier part of the novel the inner self remains submerged while in the latter it becomes very prominent very much like a refrain in a song. On many occasions, Robinson's inner self perceptively views his actions and accuses him of possessing undesirable qualities. For example, at one time soon after his editor's refusal to accept his novel he thinks of Maud, the powerful black socialite who is a cheat, liar, and thief without conscience or scruples. Still she is thought of as respectable by others.

Son, that's the trick. Here's a whore who's friend of the mighty, lunches with the mayor's wife, entertains the rich, the very rich, on all kinds of interracial committees, a great

Negro social leader. While you, with your so-called integrity are just a pest and a nuisance (*Primitive* 46).

Sometimes he tells himself not to think too much because thinking is un-American. At other times his comic counterpart speaks about primitivism and civilisation. "Can't eat bitter, son. No more than natural, anyway. Christian nation. Don't forget that. Pagans castrated all black slaves. Christians let them have families. Christian way. Profit in it too. Don't forget the profit" (*Primitive* 99). The ominous, affirmative voice within takes on a sardonic edge when Robinson discovers himself by Kriss's side and feels like leaping up and running away from the place. There is self-disparagement when it questions "Ready to light out and run, eh, son" (*Primitive* 65). Often the voice critically evaluates Robinson's physique stating that he doesn't look a damn bit different from what he was before. The accusative and the slightly pessimistic voice brings Robinson's plight to conscious awareness.

Jesse Robinson. How do these people do it, son? The white man is fouling on them too, and the days don't know them either. How is it they keep their wives, bring up children, get along? Why can't you believe too. They say after the first bite it tastes like sugar. How come you have to be

the only one to act a fool? And think you're being noble, too... (*Primitive* 72).

His divided soul is possessed by the opposing forces of optimism and pessimism. As soon as his positive voice asserts, the pessimistic voice nullifies it, creating a kind of spiritual stalemate. The pessimistic voice becomes all the more prominent after his meeting with James Pope, editor at Hobson's publishing house. Robinson's thoughts turn inward more often after this incident. The interview with Pope has a lasting impact on Robinson's subconscious as he crawls gradually into a schizophrenic shell forced to listen to the promptings of an alien and dangerously fatalistic inner voice. Robinson also becomes unaware of what happens around him as he becomes more and more divided within himself. He hardly notices people whenever he ventures out into the streets of Harlem. He has to call out his own name repeatedly to assert his identity. Robinson draws the attention of everyone to himself by his strange behaviour. His mind becomes totally unresponsive as he walks down the street. He hardly recognises or notices the people who confront him:

Students were coming in a stream up toward the 145th street entrance to the subway. He went down the other way, walking against the crowd. He staggered a little but

he didn't feel drunk. Although he didn't know when he'd left the house nor where he'd intended going, it didn't worry him. He was accustomed to these blanks of memory and as far as he knew nothing dreadful had ever happened to him during one of them. At the moment he didn't remember the rejection, but felt strangely depressed for some unattributable reason, and in the back of his mind began silently singing his private dirge, da-da-dee (*Primitive* 96).

Robinson's senses become so befuddled that even slopes appear quite level. He tries his best to keep up with his head which seems to be at some distance in front of him. In this mood, Robinson wanders in and out of restaurants and theatres vaguely remembering a gangster picture on the screen. On the screen, weird faces appear dimly and he remembers seeing two thieves quarelling over a pile of loot and one suddenly drawing his gun and shooting the other. It appears to be the best solution to the problem. His walk through the dark alleys of Harlem symbolises his plunge into the mysterious ways of the unconscious. To Himes, the city becomes a means of portraying Robinson's shattered personality. The anonymity its crowded streets provide gives Himes a suitable objective correlative for the depiction of that hidden, 'personal' side

of his protagonist. Robinson is seen drifting in and out of his consciousness very effectively. The sight of his rejected novel creates a welter of emotions in Robinson's already troubled mind. The inner voice continues to warn him not to be bitter and even suggests various ways to deal with the humiliation suffered at the hands of the whites. His intellectual mind keeps churning out bitter thoughts and he is unable to decide what course to take regarding his rejected novel. If he desires to give up his self-respect he can revise the manuscript and cut off some portions as the editor suggests. He can also try to find another publisher and get a contract. At the back of his mind the desire to fight is very strong. Even without being conscious of his reason for doing so he picks up a big knife and uttering an animal sound stabs the manuscript with all his force. The sight of the manuscript with the strong forged blade sunk in it amuses him to a great extent while the voice within is whole-hearted in its appreciation. "You're some boy, son... Pope (the editor) should see this now" (*Primitive* 102).

Another serious threat to Robinson's self is the vulgar, but equally dangerous advances of Leroy, a homosexual, who is his neighbour. His apartment in Harlem is literally a household of perverts. Robinson's and Leroy's bedrooms are situated close together, both opening into short hallways leading to a large square

backhall. The very thought of meeting Leroy on the way inspires mixed feelings of awe, laughter and hatred in Robinson's mind. So much is Robinson disturbed that crossing the hall becomes almost a perilous journey not to be ventured when one is not in full command of one's senses. The junk accumulated against the back wall of the hall becomes symbolic of the degraded condition in which Robinson finds himself in. The huge Leroy who affects the mannerisms of a Victorian gentlewoman is accompanied by two effeminate male Pomeranians that continuously yap and nip at Robinson's heels. Robinson tries his best to avoid Leroy but it becomes practically impossible. Leroy looks at Robinson with his lids lowered lecherously and a hungry smile on his lips. Frequently, he casts admiring, indulgent looks at Robinson and it is with much effort that Robinson forestalls his advances. Driven to the edge of despair Robinson even decides to cut Leroy's throat if he makes a pass at him. Leroy's dogs also take in some of his ire as he flicks the curs with a strap. When he makes a desperate jump on them, a white marble statue falls and Robinson immediately thinks of the racial connotation "Good thing you're not in Georgia, son... Open and shut case of rape" (Primitive 103). Wry humour gives place to serious introspection as a significant question crops up in his troubled mind. "You were looking for a street, eh, son? he said. But all you found was a blind alley" (Primitive 95). Perhaps, as a reply to this question,

Robinson's sensitive mind composes a series of rhymes and a combination of words. Such combinations seem to provide a solution to the problem and indicate the "street" which Robinson desperately tries to find. It also underscores the striking contrast between Robinson's aims and his present paralysis. If he cannot produce a novel he can, at least, compose rhymes. The words - white - woman, problem - Negro, end-problem, end-white seem to be meaningful and in a frenzied manner he unravels the riddle stating that "something's got to end. Goddamn it" (*Primitive* 101). In a drunken stupor, having lost all his rational faculties Robinson decides to kill Kriss for it is she whose life has to end.

Ominously enough, the two main characters in the novel come to experience a state of death-in-life existence at precisely the same point of time. Though Kriss does not suffer from mental illness like Robinson, she experiences a more universal state of dread and feels cut off from time, the seasons and life itself. She represents a grave danger to men especially of Robinson's temperament. While Robinson suffers from lapses of memory, Kriss suffers from the aftermath of a failed suicide attempt. When Dave, her last fiance drops her, she frantically reacts by trying to swallow the contents of an entire bottle of sleeping pills. She is unable to know, in a drunken mood, that her attempt has failed. It is but natural that in

such a state both seek out each other to enact their grim tragedies. Muller very effectively sums up the effect they have on each other.

Himes has thrown a black man and white woman-two intelligent people-together on a grotesque modern stage, uniting them through alcohol and destructive sexuality in a macabre dance of death. There is both a pathetic and a ludicrous rhythm of emptiness to their marginal lives and relationship (67).

Robinson kills Kriss not out of racial but human urges. His action is different from the blundering murders of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.

For Jesse, murdering Kriss is an act not directed against white society, but against himself. She has become a part of himself that he does not like. And Himes depicts, for perhaps the first time in a novel by a black American writer, a crime committed by a black man against a white woman that is, once Jesse realises what he has become, more human than racial in its implications (Lundquist 105).

As a sensitive man given to introspection, Robinson is vividly aware of the burden of freedom and his escape from it by taking refuge in

a white woman's apartment even allowing himself to be kicked and beaten like an unwanted animal. He is tormented by the vast distances between his dreams and the world's reality and Kriss's dead body appears to be the natural result of the search which has impelled him in a particular direction so far. With a sardonic self-lacerating humour the critical voice congratulates him and analyses his behaviour perceptively:

End product of the impact of Americanism on one Jesse Robinson-black man. Your answer, son. You've been searching for it. Black man kills white woman. All the proof you need now. Absolutely incontrovertible behaviourism of a male human being. Most human of all behaviour (*Primitive* 158).

An ironic twist is given to the title of the novel. White society sees Robinson as a primitive because being black he is stereotypically portrayed as uncivilised, savage and crude. Robinson, however, knows that he is not a primitive because he believes in principles like integrity, honour, conscience, faith etc. — qualities which civilized individuals possess. The white man has created a dehumanised society by exalting violence. Though in reality such a

society represents the real savagery of primitivism people who act in ways compatible with such a society (by indulging in violent behaviour like Robinson) are considered "civilised". Thus it is society which is primitive because it has induced negative behaviorism in Robinson and thus his murder of Kriss has made Robinson "civilized". Ralph Reckley emphatically points out that

it is these supposedly civilized individuals who impose their values on the so-called primitive. They demand of the primitives, as initiatory rites, that he declares his humanity — really his inhumanity — by committing murder. Having committed the act the humane primitive becomes a primitive human being (1976, 218).

As in the novel *If he Hollers Let Him Go*, Himes effectively makes use of dreams which are described with psycho - analytic detail. To Lundquist, these dreams are "a metaphor of his present condition" (94). Robinson's dreams are as disturbing as Jones's. Robinson dreams of skating somewhere in a crowd and falling through the ice. As the icy current tugs at him he calls out desperately for help. The other skaters, all of whom are couples, neither look in his direction nor give any indication of having heard his cries. The deep sense of isolation and helplessness that he experiences in his waking hours are brought out in this dream

when he realises the total neglect of the skaters. The gin he has, on waking up, does not help him in any way for he dreams again as he goes back to sleep. This time he dreams of sitting at the end of a banquet table where two pretty blonde women are seated. As there is an empty space between his seat and theirs he is unable to speak to them. Even the man at his right moves away as he does not like his neighbour. A well dressed editor appears at that moment to take his place at the head of the table. The editor may be one of the many who were callous enough to reject his novels. The editor, too, ignores him. He also dreams of watching a short man beat a big man. A well dressed black woman, nevertheless, offers some words of reassurance but not companionship. Himes seems to suggest the fact that his protagonist can neither be a participator nor a spectator. In spite of being neglected his protagonist will, as far as it can be surmised, continue to exist in a lethargic state whether he contemplates a street - brawl or sits languishing in a banquet hall. Lundquist sums up Robinson's state of mind thus

his being all alone at a banquet, and his watching a beating both suggest Jesse's view of his life in America —the inside world of plenty, where he is not exactly rejected but not exactly welcomed either, and the outside world of violence where he is too often an unwilling spectator (95).

The thematic thrust of the novel, the absurd instability of western civilisation, is highlighted in the next dream. Soon after the rejection of his novel, Robinson has a distorted dream. He dreams of being in a house with a thousand rooms of different sizes made entirely of distorted mirrors. The room houses many members and their reflections are grotesque. Some appear to be dwarfs, others giants. The very sight of such distorted shapes makes Robinson panic-stricken. In a frenzy he runs from room to room trying to find a familiar human shape. As he leaves the room, tired of the sinister, treacherous grins and scowls, the sight of the city meets his eye. The people in the streets and building appear to be distorted and senseless. From Robinson's point of view

this normal struggle for existence appeared so greatly distorted by emotional idiocy, senseless loves and hatred, lunatic ambitions, grotesque reasoning, fantastic behaviour, that he turned in horror and fled back into the house of distorted mirrors where by comparison everything seemed normal (*Primitive* 101 - 102).

Lundquist goes on to explain this distorted vision. "His drunkard's vision fuelled by his racial frustrations, distorted though it may be, is far less distorted than the outlook of those who go about their business assuming that love and harmony can be a social

reality" (100). It is precisely this conclusion which he arrives at later when he realises the absurdity of life in the total reversal of values.

The next dream is when his mind is totally absorbed with thoughts of killing Kriss. It is in Kriss's room soon after Harold-Kriss episode. The dream is a jumble of horrible scenes of murder, savage fights and heated arguments. The last of the dreams is that of millions of blacks being driven into a bottomless gorge by white horsemen. Robinson, on the other hand, stands on the top of the cliff watching his friends disappear. There is a note of desperation in his voice when he asserts his importance as a writer. Similar to the editors who rejected his novels, the white horsemen, spurring their mounts towards him ask him "Who said you could write?". They push Robinson over the edge and he discovers himself being engulfed and swallowed in the endless void. The falling imagery is, as Laing asserts, a manifestation of the dread of dissolution which split personalities experience in their dreams. Robinson's fear of being disembodied and even emptied out of an inner self is revealed through this dream.

Reminded of the lack of "animal fun" in his novels, the reason given by the editor Pope for rejecting his novel, Robinson dreams of writing a lyrical book narrating his experiences as a cook in an estate. The title of the novel is "Paradise for Pigs". It describes a farm where hogs make sausages without being slaughtered. One day,

one of the hogs refuses to give its share of sausage. When spoken to, the hog confesses that it has crossed over to the other side while at the same time it feels sorry for not giving its master his due quota of sausages. To Lundquist "the rebel pig is, of course, like the heroes of Jesse's novels and like Jesse himself — refusing to give of himself more than he wants to, refusing to write the uplift novel, refusing to leave the house of distorted mirrors to live in the fools' paradise outside" (102).

Apart from dreams, Robinson also sees visions and fantasies. One of his visions is that of dismembered square fishes bobbing on the surface of a sea of dark congealing blood. Significantly, he sees such a vision when he is driven to the limit by Kriss's indulgent attitude towards another man, Don. The fear he experiences inside her apartment and the danger involved in staying there is brought to his conscious awareness through this vision. Frequently, Robinson grinds his teeth, mutters in his sleep and giggles. When Kriss sees him in such a state she compares his antics to that of monkeys in the zoo or eels in a net.

It is in this novel that Himes's technical perfection is evident in the several devices he employs to portray the dehumanization of white American society and hold it responsible for producing strange victims like Kriss and Robinson. For example, he uses the television, the

"new electronic serpent in the garden" which enables both Robinson and Kriss to "discover that this new powerful medium transports them to the realm of grotesque revelation" (Muller 68). At the end of the novel, Himes describes the television watching Robinson thus — "he lay on his side watching the zigzag streaks of white and black chase one another furiously across the television screen, as if it were the intention of the studio to depict continual distortion" (*Primitive* 138). In Himes's view, continual distortion on many levels has become the norm in America and has produced a host of victims. Himes also satirizes the mechanisation of American life. At one point in the novel, Robinson has a fantasy about a tooth-shining machine and imagines the danger of a man being ground to death by it. He even imagines a gadget which resembles a "disembodied finger ... disembodied teeth" (*Primitive* 155). Such images

symbolize the ultimate extinction of the human personality. The gadget controls every function in the kitchen and the house, even the air. It represents the ultimate in a mechanized environment where the human element, having been found unnecessary, has been eliminated (Bassis 177).

Himes makes skillful use of surrealistic techniques in order to bring out the absurdity of Robinson's condition. Himes judiciously uses distortion, disjointed narration, dreams, visions and illogical reasoning in order to project his protagonist's tragic state. One of the powerful techniques used is the device of a chimpanzee, the "primitive" of man who appears on a morning television show commenting on the news events of the day. In fact, the chimp has more insight and capacity than civilized humans for it can predict the political events of the future. This reinforces Himes's ironic point concerning primitivism. The irony is that the events the chimp describes point up to the logical inconsistency and absurdity of human behaviour. Significantly, both Robinson and Kriss, who lead absurd lives, are attracted by the human, prophetic voice of the chimp. So much is Robinson impressed by the chimp that he playfully suggests to Kriss that he will write a book about chimpanzees but becomes apprehensive that there might be a "chimpanzee problem". He even tells Harold that he has the title of his next book ready and it is to be *Gone with the Apes*. It is the chimp again which predicts the events which has happened in Kriss's room. While Robinson languishes in a world of fantasy, the chimpanzee narrates that Robinson, in a state of insanity, has killed his lady-love Kriss and the defence attorney will enter a plea of

insanity which will be dismissed. With a leer, the chimpanzee adds that the case is very strange for, unlike other cases, involving a black man and a white woman, there is no evidence of rape. Lundquist points to the effective use of the chimpanzee by Himes.

The chimpanzee returns again and again in the novel, most significantly in the last chapter, and symbolizes part of what Himes means by the word primitive — that there is an ape, a beast, in all of us, and that human behavior can be predicted on that basis. What better Cassandra, then, but a chimpanzee ? (94).

When the implication of his deed dawns on him, Robinson is discovered kneeling behind Kriss's bed sobbing into her sheet. The voice within assumes a prophetic tone when it says "you don't really know you did it" but in the next flash, "who're you lyin' to, son? You knew before it happened. Perhaps from the first time they ever hurt you for being born black" (*Primitive* 157).

Milliken applauds both Himes and his protagonist Jesse Robinson. To Milliken, Robinson is

a purely novelistic creation, an effective vehicle for the expression of his own deepest insights into the human

condition in general. *The Primitive* is ... a product of the creative imagination, rather than that of an autobiography, a chronicle of facts, a simple act of self-revelation. Every reader is left free to find some aspect of the incredibly complex, multilayered Jesse Robinson, a compound of rage, despair, love and hope, that he can personally identify with (206).

By presenting a lunatic hero as the protagonist of this novel, Himes projects insanity as the most graphic and compelling metaphor for a society hell-bent on self-destruction. Himes examines the paradoxical relationship of the schizoid artist to society. White America's effect on Robinson's self is so negative that it results in a fragmented self. Such a division ultimately leads to a natural recalcitrance, loneliness and despair forcing Robinson to resist conformist patterns and maintain his own free logic. While putting his free logic to action, Jesse Robinson, the protagonist gains fresh insight into the predicament of man.

**FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE  
A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF  
CHESTER B. HIMES**

**W.S. KOTTISWARI**

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## CONCLUSION

The analyses of Himes's protest novels reveal the writer's in-depth knowledge of the black psyche. Himes's major contribution to African - American literature is his intensely accurate psychological portraiture of black men as victims of American racism. Himes throws new light on the relationship between American blacks and whites through his exploration of violence and interracial sex, that are the frequently recurring themes of his novels. The novels rise above narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature. The novels acquire an existential dimension with Himes's consistent stress on the importance of responsibility and choice on the part of each of his protagonists. The black protagonists represent the essence of "being" since they contain within themselves both productive and destructive impulses. They are all, in some way, 'beaten and dwarfed' through living in a racist society but Himes endows them with the capacity for growth. The protagonists strive continually to make the affirmation "I will live" which is necessary for survival and growth. They illustrate the basic Himesian paradox or inversion: of the rebellious victim becoming in some ways a hero because of his very struggle to survive.

Himes's novels are largely autobiographical. His black men dramatise Himes's own personal conflicts and emotional reactions. In his fiction, Himes consistently attempts to come to terms with the truth of his oppressed existence by interpreting the sum of his experiences. In his autobiographies Himes draws attention to the absurd, existential contours of life through his statements that the life of a black man is an absurdity. Even as a black boy, Himes had always meditated on man's terrible freedom and compulsions. As early as that time, his autobiographies reveal, he had experienced the compelling need to lay bare the truth about the uncertain and enigmatic nature of life. Himes's novels are not naturalistic. There are no types or general categories in his works. To Himes, man retains his unpredictability in spite of being conditioned by his environment. It is this quality that, according to Himes, prompts man to break with what he has been and to elect a new path. This is a quality that one comes across in Himes's characters too. Himes's protagonists meet the test on the white man's ground, aware of the inevitability of defeat but succeed in living as best as they can, thereby achieving for themselves a measure of human dignity. This awareness makes Himes's characters evolve and grow. Each of his characters contains within himself / herself the possibility of accomplishing a new action. They are initially seen caught in

the conflict between existential freedom and psychological compulsions. This leads the characters to indulge in acts of violence, self-destructive actions and even flights — all of which point to the basic dilemma inherent in their beings. Nevertheless, they outgrow such compulsions, fears and neuroses. Himes seems to be making the point that existential enlightenment can dawn only after a plunge into the darkness of defiance, destruction, hidden desires and nihilism. The novels prove to be valid statements of Himes's belief.

Himes draws attention to the erratic behaviour patterns of his protagonists and traces the root cause of their aberrant behaviour to the influence of the other on their selves. The influence of the other manifests in the ways in which these black men are constantly censored, reified and even reduced to insignificance by the surrounding society. 'Self-concept' plays a vital role in determining how the protagonist shapes up under these pressures. The theories of Herbert Mead and Horton Cooley are used to examine the 'self-concept' of Himes's protagonists and bring into clearer focus their inner reality. Both these theorists lay stress on the formation of the self in a social setting by pointing to the notion of a 'looking-glass' self. Precisely the same point is stressed by Jean Paul Sartre who highlights the importance of 'the Look' as a determinant of

human relations. The very fact of being 'seen' by another both confirms one's reality and threatens one's sense of freedom. Sartre puts it thus

To the other person who looks at me from the outside, I seem an object, a thing, my subjectivity with its inner freedom escapes his gaze. Hence his tendency is always to convert me into the object he sees. The gaze of the Other penetrates to the depths of my existence, freezes and congeals it (Barett 229).

The adoption of such parameters by black men to define themselves sets in motion a cycle of conflicting and shifting subject - object relationships in which both sides try simultaneously to remain in control of the relationship and to use the other's look to confirm identity. What this means is exemplified by Himes's characters who try to define themselves through the eyes of others. Such rigid role adoption in turn, hampers growth by giving rise to complex psychological conflicts that initially prevent these men from making spontaneous choices. The theories of neo-Freudian psychologists like Karen Horney and Eric Fromm have been relied upon to analyse the neurotic conflicts engendered in the individual as a result of the clash of cultural forces. Both these approaches, that of Mead and Cooley and of the neo-Freudians are helpful in arriving at a holistic

picture of the individual black self that is dehumanised not only by a racist, mechanized society, but also by its own fears, weaknesses and self-hatred. The analyses of the novels trace the root cause of the protagonists' psychological malady to cultural factors.

*If He Hollers Let Him Go* explores in detail the psychological conflicts suffered by blacks in white America. Bob Jones, the protagonist of the novel, suffers from the "double-consciousness" of which DuBois speaks. Jones is an educated black who is alienated both from the white world and the black one. Albert Camus defines absurdity as the disproportion between man's intention and the reality he encounters. Bob Jones is keenly aware of how divorced man is from his life. He is perceptive enough to recognise the absurdity of his situation. It is this realisation that constitutes Jones's major problem in the prison-house of American culture. After having faced much racial oppression in Cleveland, Bob Jones comes to Los Angeles hoping to strengthen his demoralised ego. Here also he is forced to accept the roles and images which are prescribed and sanctioned by the white world. He has to journey through American stereotypes and images which consign him to a life of invisibility — a common theme in African - American literature. The most glaring facet of black racial reality i.e, helplessness, is brought home to him as a result of this journey. He

constantly uses others to evaluate himself and hence these others acquire more than the usual importance. His odyssey through the multiple social strata of American society therefore assumes great significance. Neither his work-a-day world nor his private life offer any solace to Jones. While Kelly, his white supervisor, uses words as skillfully as a surgeon's scalpel to degrade him in all possible ways, Madge, his white female helper, by just uttering a single word "Rape" psychologically castrates him. Fear forms such an integral part of Jones's mental make-up that it impedes him at every step. His conflicts intensify when he resorts to defences in order to ward off his fears. Finding the white female tantalising and at the same time threatening, he turns to the white male hoping to let out his aggressive feelings on this other. Unable to come to terms with his stark fear, he resorts to a kind of defensive thinking by projecting his hatred onto the white man. Here too Jones fails miserably. Jones's drive towards selfhood is always counter-balanced by a moral paralysis brought on by institutional conditioning. The corporate will is stronger than his own. The racial oppression he suffers leads to neurotic conflicts. In his attempt to resolve his conflicts, Jones constantly seeks props to sustain his psychological balance, to maintain sanity in an insane world. In neo-Freudian terminology, he reacts with a 'power drive'. A man immersed in his own self,

Jones is unable to view anything objectively. His relationship with Alice, his fiancée, is a case in point. Since Alice is light-skinned and middle-class, she is very much needed by Jones to enhance his prestige. She becomes important to him just because of his abject need for reassurance, a predominant trait of neurotics. However, this need for reassurance is thwarted on many occasions mainly because Alice is repulsed by his blackness. Jones's emotional dependency remains suppressed. Jones feels superior when he is with other blacks and inferior when he is with his lady-love Alice. In his relationship with Alice, Jones remains undecided about whether he should continue to play the role of a submissive lover. Though he realises the importance of asserting himself he lacks the conviction and moral strength to do so. Therein arises the conflict between the two aspects of his troubled psyche — the proud, defiant self and the subdued self. Bob Jones undergoes an education as a result of his journey through American culture. He understands that the American dream can be had for the black only if one is willing to surrender one's manhood. This education takes place both on a personal and a social level. It is at the end of the novel that Jones realises the futility of depending on others. By accepting the reality of his situation Jones has attained manhood, has validated his self-worth. Even though the white world daily hunts

him down for daring to transgress its stereotype of a black man, Jones makes it clear that he will not allow himself to be robbed of his manhood without putting up at least a semblance of resistance. The novel derives its power from its delineation of Jones's progress in self-awareness — of his understanding of his marginal position in society and his attempts to withstand the conflict engendered by a racist society. The telling mark of his manhood lies not in his winning the battle against overwhelming odds but in his waging the struggle against the evil seeking to engulf him. This is what makes Jones the prototype of the resisting marginalised everywhere.

In *Lonely Crusade* Himes displays the same skill at creating and maintaining suspense and at manipulating the interactions of characters as was seen in his first novel. The protagonist Lee Gordon's life is meaningless in the beginning for he accepts as true the images dictated to him by white society. By falling a prey to such stereotypes Gordon becomes both a victim and a victimiser. Gordon experiences pulls from forces as diverse as the communists, capitalists and the workers. These different pulls have an unsettling influence on him and the frustration that is engendered as a result gets released in his sado-masochistic dealings with his wife. However, even in the face of such conflicting pulls Gordon is able to retain a sense of autonomy without becoming totally powerless.

What Jones has been unable to retain, Gordon does. It is in this sense that Gordon's life becomes "authentic" and, therefore, as the existentialists aver, worth examining. Gordon's 'self' consciousness is developed only after he embarks upon a critical self-analysis with the help of his two friends, Smitty and Rosenberg. While Smitty dispels Gordon's ingrained antipathy towards the whites and enables him to identify with the union for which Gordon works, Abe Rosenberg inculcates a sense of universal brotherhood in Gordon. Gordon's awareness of the power of the self, in turn, leads to his willingness to assume responsibility for and give meaning to his life. Paradoxically, it is only when Gordon undertakes an intensely private pursuit of self that a sense of community develops within him. Gordon is thus seen progressing from a concern with individual pursuits to an involvement with universal ones. Empathy with the suffering black and white workers leads him to realise the importance of brotherhood. Sartre insists that the individual must face the anguish of conscious decision at every instant of his life since he is burdened with terrible freedom — the responsibility to make or unmake himself. Gordon understands this universal human condition. He overcomes the fears that seek to engulf him by assuming responsibility for his choice and thereby comes to understand the value of existence. The voice of Gordon

towards the end of the novel is not the voice of either metaphysical or social rebellion but of acceptance of the human condition. It is an acceptance with a difference however, a declaration that as a black man he is trying to cope. The supreme test of Gordon lies in this: he is forced to choose from among individualism, racial unity and universal brotherhood. The struggle in which he gets immersed, both metaphorically and actually, is not a personal but a collective one. What is demanded of him is not only valour and courage but love and respect for the suffering lot of workers. To be a black man means to evaluate oneself using a different criteria. It means to be cognizant of one's past, to opt for the collective "we" over the individual "I" and to love each man, be he black or white, as one loves oneself. Only in this way can oppression and tyranny be ended. Only in this way can people move to create the new world. This seems to be the point that Himes is making as he guides his hero through the rites of passage of the modern existential novel that is the *Lonely Crusade*. The novel highlights the Sartrean view of the possibility of realising oneself through authentic choice.

*The Third Generation* is an in-depth exploration of the central duality between the forces of captivity and freedom, chaos and order, victimisation and growth. Here, unlike as in the other novels, the focus is on intrafamilial forces which both prevent and nurture the

development of Charles Taylor, the central protagonist of the novel. In this novel, as in the previous two, the application of neo-Freudian theories help in arriving at an understanding of the delinquent tendencies of the protagonist who is caught inextricably in the power game of his mother, Lillian Taylor. Karen Horney considers the Oedipus complex to be the outcome of several factors like excessive demands for unconditional love, jealousy, possessiveness and hatred. Charles suffers from this behavioral aberration in the novel. *The Third Generation* portrays Charles's efforts to extricate himself from these negative influences and forge a new identity for himself. It is through the exploration of the psyche of a light-skinned black woman Lillian, that Himes undertakes to reveal the self-hatred experienced by the two men intimately related to her — William Taylor, the husband and Charles Taylor, the son. Lillian is afflicted with the malady of self-love. She lives in a world of illusion. Since she passes for white she considers herself much superior to other blacks. She looks with disdain upon the 'uncouth', 'unclean' folks among whom she lives in the black neighbourhoods. She has developed a marked contempt for dark skin, black colleges and black people in general and dwells in the make-believe world of pretended ancestral pride. Both her husband and son feel insecure because they feel unwanted by her.

Antagonism and repressed hatred are generated in both of them as a result of this. When Charles's attempts to reach out for affection fail he strives for power by becoming a delinquent. William, on the other hand, has reached the pinnacle of black self-awareness. He identifies himself totally with his community and its traditions and is one with them. However, the emasculating influence of his wife robs him of his positive qualities and he reaches a point when he loses the will to live. Charles sees life as a welter of forces among which he must try to work out his individual salvation. The ways in which Charles copes with a denial of the basic needs of human existence like love and familial ties are dealt with in this novel. The novel presents life as a tense combination of the forces of lust, ambition, vanity, insecurity and hate; any alteration in the configuration of these elements will create an imbalance in the tension that will set life moving in a new direction. This is clearly seen from Charles's experiences. Charles's self-esteem depends mainly on being admired. His self-esteem dwindles considerably when he experiences constant rebuffs from his mother. Like Robinson in *The Primitive* Charles uses fantasy to escape from the unpleasant present and wilfully courts danger. The latter impulse is an indication of the lurking death-wish in his mind. Charles through recourse to escapist fantasies tries to free himself

from reality. In Freudian terms, as the conflict between Eros, the life-impulse, and Thanatos, the death-impulse intensifies, Charles brings repressed fear and guilt to consciousness. Gradually, Charles comes to terms with his repressed familial tensions and forges a creative and independent identity for himself. The novel charts the growth of Charles from a sense of guilt and self-destruction to one of self-affirmation. His self-knowledge leads Charles to the resolution that he will henceforth use his powers not for destruction but for creation. The novel suggests the possibility that Charles may embark upon the path of the artist and thereby uphold the positive values of life. He will no longer remain confined in his private world muffling the cry of conscience. Charles's crisis, no doubt, is a personal crisis but the very fact that he comes face to face with it strikes a note of affirmation in the end.

In terms of both form and content *The Primitive* may be said to mark the culmination of Himes's artistic powers. The novel has a tight, classical structure that displays Himes's innovative use of form in order to delineate the strange predicaments of the two main characters, Kriss Cummings and Jesse Robinson. Himes for the first time makes use of just two main characters in order to focus pointedly on the meaninglessness and absurdity of their lives in

particular and of humanity in general. He employs surrealistic techniques, disjointed narration and grotesque scenes and in this the novel anticipates the genre of postmodern fiction. The novel may be said to deal with an individual's isolation and subjectivity, his consequent feelings of despair and anxiety. The focus is on the emergence of a hero who acts according to an extremely personalised sense of values. The novel concentrates on the nightmare existence of the two characters, Kriss and Robinson, who are inextricably caught in a vicious matrix of inadequacy, deception and recrimination to which each has contributed and of which each is a victim. Robinson exhibits no affection or feeling towards Kriss, his white lady-love. Kriss and Robinson get involved in a kind of sado-masochistic relationship. Both are drawn to each other not because of mutual love but because of mutual hate. Robinson suffers from a kind of masochistic need and allows himself to be commanded and degraded by Kriss. He suffers verbal, physical and psychological humiliation at her hands. Himes brings out the paradox of their love-hate entanglement in the novel. The love - hate ritual between them continues till it reaches a point when Robinson, in an unconscious fit of rage, murders her. The only choice open to Robinson, it is implied in the novel, is to be either the victim or the executioner. He decides to be the executioner. This is a tragic choice,

one of crucial significance because of the emotional intensity that prompts the choice and the crisis situation which generates it. The act of killing Kriss thus becomes a ritual that proceeds from the consequence of being compelled to make an existential choice. Nevertheless, Robinson experiences the existentialist shock of authentic self-revelation when the chimpanzee in the television reveals to him that he had all along harboured a subconscious desire to kill Kriss. Robinson is able to recognise his killing of Kriss as an act of self-assertion. His response is comparable to that of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. However, Robinson is different from Bigger Thomas in that he is able to perceptively analyse and express what he feels. At one level, the novel may be even seen to transcend racial implications and reflect the universal human condition. Jesse Robinson, the protagonist, exemplifies the dilemma in which modern man finds himself. He becomes the unheroic exemplar of the sensibility of an era. Robinson's sense of alienation is portrayed very effectively by Himes. As he walks through the streets he feels alienated. His sense of alienation is so critical that he becomes alienated even from his own self. To Robinson, the world shows itself as bleak, hostile and unknowable. He becomes a rebel and, like the other absurd heroes of the twentieth century, he challenges the absurd condition. As Camus states "the theme of permanent

revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is thus keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive, is above all, contemplating it" (40). Though his choice of action and identity appear free and explicit, Robinson at the same time suffers from tortuous "dark compulsions". He seems to be unaware of these compulsions and lives out his absurd destiny. For him, the absurd is essentially the result of his awareness of his own mortality. He is the "everyday man" described in *The Myth of Sisyphus* who, before his consciousness of the absurd, had projects, hopes, ambitions and the belief that he was free to order his life. Robinson's quest, like that of Sisyphus's, is more specifically oriented towards the creation, if not the discovery, of individual norms. Himes does not claim that Robinson is an exemplary hero, a model of behaviour for others. On the other hand, Himes portrays Robinson as a man who refuses to play social games. The predominant trait of Robinson's character is his refusal to say more about his feelings than what is immediately apparent. His life is a series of random occurrences and often he accepts life as it is. Robinson's dignity resides in his consciousness of the "absurd". In its concern for the self as a victim of the human condition, Himes's novel becomes a working out of existentialist preoccupations in fictional terms.

Conflict is the energizing force behind the development of Himes's black characters. When gripped by fear these characters think they are unequal to the forces they have to oppose. In their desperation they seek out ways of escape, even if these ways be self-defeating. Caught between the existential fear of owning the responsibility for their own lives and an equally compelling drive for independence, these characters take refuge in masochistic and sadistic relationships trying to escape from their unbearable freedom through bondage with another. Himes, through his protest novels, projects the resoluteness on the part of the self to exist in the face of almost insurmountable destructive forces. This creates in the reader's mind some fragile hope for the disinherited man. If writing is an act of cleansing and renewal, its full meaning becomes clear in *The Primitive* which not only incorporates all the essential racial themes of Himes's previous works but also serves as the spiritual climax of Himes's own life and career. Himes may have saved his own sanity through the therapeutic process of art; by an act of symbolic amputation — the severing of the Robinson within himself. The novel is as much Himes's baptism by fire as it is the story of Robinson's madness.

To sum up, the analyses of these four major novels of the Himesian corpus reveal that Himes's black protagonists respond differently to

the varied social and cultural pressures on their psyche. Spread as these novels are over a period of ten years (1945 - 1955), the subtle change in the manner in which the protagonists — from Bob Jones to Robinson — are portrayed as reacting to racial conflicts seems to be indicative of Himes's changing perspective over the years. If in Bob Jones there is ultimately the realisation that he can re-create himself only after shaking free from an excessive reliance on others, in Lee Gordon and Charles Taylor such a realisation leads to an active commitment to a cause and a positive affirmation of self-reliance. In Robinson, affirmation is achieved through a realisation of the anarchic role a black man must play when confronted with the destructive force of white womanhood.

Himes may be said to have pioneered a distinct trend in African-American literature by presenting black men who though they initially grapple with the problem of internalisation of others' values, discover as they journey through white America that such an attitude is life-denying. This realisation leads them to reject their status as objects and perfect images of the other. By 'choosing' to be free selves they exhibit the Sartrean quality of "radical liberty" (Barett 227).

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**FICTIONALISING THE BLACK PSYCHE  
A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION OF  
CHESTER B. HIMES**

**W.S. KOTTISWARI**

**THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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