

**SOCIOLOGY OF BLACK EXPERIENCE AND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS- A
STUDY WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO
THE NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT,
RALPH ELLISON AND ISHMAEL REED**

**THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT
FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

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2001

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is a bonafide record of research work done by me and that no part of the thesis has been presented earlier for any degree, diploma or similar title of any other University.

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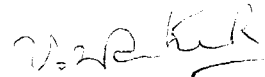

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled **Sociology of Black Experience and the Development of Black Consciousness-- A Study with Particular Reference to the Novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed** is a record of studies and research carried out by U. Hemanth Kumar under my supervision and guidance and that no part of this thesis has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, title or recognition.

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Preface

The predicament of the African – Americans is marked by their hyphenated existence and double consciousness. They are doubly marginalized because of their status as a discriminated and minority group in the American society. In the present work my endeavour is to examine the development of black consciousness reflected in the fictional works of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed, three significant African-American novelists of the twentieth century. My main proposition rests on the argument that despite the difference in the artistic concerns and ideological moorings of the novelists, each one of them articulates black consciousness as punctuated by historical and sociological factors. The term 'black consciousness' as used in the thesis is a flexible term indicating the intense awareness of being black in a hostile environment. This awareness is articulated by the novelists through the narrative discourse. Whether it is Richard Wright's naturalism or Ralph Ellison's modernism or Ishmael Reed's postmodernism, they all emerge out of a black matrix. I have critically examined Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *The Long Dream*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Ishmael Reed's *Free lance Pall Bearers* and *Mumbo Jumbo* in order to illustrate my main proposition and to trace the nature of the development of black consciousness. Further I have shown that the multiplicity of reactions and responses articulated by these novelists seem to correspond to the kind of reactions attributed to various discriminated / minority groups by prominent sociologists.

In the first part of chapter 1 a critical examination of the black American situation right from the days of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, against the back drop of the sociological theories on the attitudes and responses of minority / ethnic / racial

groups, has been attempted. The theories propounded by eminent sociologists such as Gunnar Myrdal, Oliver Cox, Franklin Frazier have been examined to put the responses of the black American writers in the right sociological perspective. The second part of chapter 1 is a critical survey of the history of the African- American fiction and the major trends and preoccupations of the African-American novelists. The comparatively recent attempts by critics such as Houston A. Baker and Henry Louis Gates Jr. to evolve a critical theory rooted in black American cultural matrix have been considered with a view to indicating the potency of indigenous critical practices of black criticism. Chapter 2 is a critical discussion of Richard Wright with a particular emphasis on his novels, *Native Son* and *The Long Dream*. Wright chronicles the injustice meted out to blacks in the American society in a naturalistic mode and thereby interrogates the mores of the values of the hegemonic class in the American society characterized by colour prejudice and racial discrimination. An exegetical reading of his novels, *Native Son* and *The Long Dream* amply bears this out. Chapter 3 discusses Ralph Ellison and his only published novel *Invisible Man*. The study reveals that he has a heightened awareness of literary craftsmanship as well as the racial problem. For him the black consciousness is inbuilt in the very structure of the novel. He has abundantly made use of the elements of black folklore in *Invisible Man* and it functions as the frame work of the novel. Further, I have shown that instead of chronicling the injustice rampant in the society in the Wrightean vein, he has expressed it through a symbolic rendering of episodes against the framework of the black folklore. Chapter 4 is devoted to a study of Ishmael Reed's novels. A brief critical discussion has been attempted to locate the theoretical underpinnings of the Neo Hoodoo aesthetic and its multicultural perspective. The study of his novels, *Free lance Pall Bearers* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, indicates that he is an African-American postmodernist writer who deploys metafictional techniques to articulate black consciousness. The imprint of blackness is

dominant in the fictional concerns of Ishmael Reed. Chapter 5 sums up the arguments put forth in the preceding chapters. A selected bibliography is given at the end of the work.

I take this opportunity to express my sense of gratitude to my guide Dr. R. Viswanathan, Professor, Department of English, Calicut University for his invaluable guidance. I sincerely thank him for his patient and thorough reading of my thesis. I am also thankful to Dr. N. Ramachandran Nair, Head, Department of English, Calicut University, for his help and encouragement. I gratefully acknowledge the immense help I have received from scholars at the Indo-American center for International Studies, Hyderabad with whom I have had several moments of fruitful discussion. I wish to record my gratitude to the staff of the library of the Department of English, Calicut University, Librarians of Indo-American Centre for International Studies, Hyderabad and American Information Resource Centre, Chennai for their sincere co-operation. I am also grateful to the Principal, Sree Narayana College, Nattika for recommending my name to the University Grants Commission for the award of Teacher Fellowship. Finally I acknowledge my gratitude to Mr. Murali and Mr. Lenin for the neat typing of my thesis.

U. Hemantha Kumar

Chapter 1

Black Experience, Black Consciousness and the African-American Novel

Africans, the forebears of the African-American community, were brought to America as indentured labourers in the seventeenth century. The development of tobacco and cotton plantations had created the need for a large-scale labour force, and Negro labour was inexpensive and cheap. The immediate intention behind the slave trade, later known as the Atlantic slave trade, was, no doubt, economic as it offered cheap labour force for the work in the plantations. The very idea of the captive labour force and its potential were effectively tapped earlier in Greek and Egyptian societies and following this line, the Atlantic Slave Trade too provided the most profitable labour force to the owners of the plantations in America. Between 1619, the year of first Negro transport, and 1860 some 400,000 blacks were transported from Africa and the bulk of them to the Sugar Plantations of Brazil and Carribean. The Atlantic slave trade carried around 9.5 million Negroes to the New World, most of them from the West coast of Africa, which could boast of a flourishing civilization, language, mores and folkways.¹

There are, however, differences of opinion among historians and sociologists regarding the actual year in which the forced transportation of Negroes began. But the year 1619 is generally taken as the year in which the slave trade commenced. Lorenzo Johnson Greene, who attempted a thorough and perceptive enquiry into the condition of the Negro in the colonial New England and its socio-political impact, drawing heavily on a variety of sources, arrived at the conclusion that 1638 was

the year of the introduction of slavery in New England.² For him, 1644 was a momentous year in the history of the New England Slave trade. In that year Boston traders attempted to import slaves directly from Africa when an association of businessmen sent three ships full of Negroes to America.³ Blyden Jackson who wrote a multi-volume history of African-American literature entitled *A History of Afro-American Literature* noted that the story of black Americans should be considered as extending at least as far as back into the West's historic past-- AD 1441. Commenting on the forced transportation of Africans to America, which finally culminated in what is known as Atlantic slave trade, he writes:

In that year (1441 AD) Autan Goucalvez, a young Portuguese Sea captain -- the Chronicler Zurara calls him "very young" -- who had managed to push his ships down to the southernmost latitude of Morocco's Atlantic Coast, captured some Africans, homeward bound, his vessel fell in with the ship of another young Portuguese, Nuino Tristao. Tristao joined with Goncalvez in capturing additional Africans. So Goucalvez and Tristao disembarked in Hisbon with 12 Africans on whom they had fastened the status of slaves. These Africans incidentally were not blacks, but probably olive complexioned moors. Unwillingly, however, the two young captains had initiated what was to become the greatest forced migration in the annals of the human race. They had started the Atlantic slave trade.⁴

The Negroes who were brought to America passed through several historical experiences such as slavery, torture, religious conversion, emancipation, reconstruction, post-reconstruction and urbanization, which helped in moulding their social consciousness. More than anything else, slavery blighted their lives and desiccated their individuality. Robbed off their past and authentic identity

rooted in the African soil, they were compelled to start their life from scratch. E. Franklin Frazier, a renowned black sociologist, has aptly commented on the unique experience of black Americans:

Probably never before in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped off its social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America. Other conquered races have continued to worship their household gods in the ultimate circle of their kinsmen. But American slavery destroyed household gods and dissolved the bonds of sympathy and affection between men of the same blood and household old men and women might have brooded over memories of their African homeland, but they could not change the world about them. Through force of circumstances, they had to acquire a new language, adopt new habits of labour and take over, however imperfectly, the folkways of the American environment.⁵

Though the argument advanced by Melville J. Herskovit, the anthropologist and Africanist, in his *The Myth of the Negro Past* that Africanism existed in American Negro subculture and some of these cultural traits had been transmitted to whites⁶ runs counter to the thesis advanced by Frazier, it goes to the credit of August Meir and Elliot Rudwick for combining the two views bringing out its common elements. Their illuminating words are worth-quoting:

It can be argued, of course, that the aspects of African culture which have survived in the United States are those which have had a functional value; that the African family institution was modified and adopted to meet the exigencies of life for the slaves and the freedman in America;

that the African forms of religious possession fulfilled important needs for the oppressed black people and indeed for lower class whites as well. Actually there is no contradiction between Herskovit's emphasis upon the persistence of African cultural traditions and the functional exploration offered by sociologists like Charles S. Johnson and Frazier.⁷

Though the question of the extent of the retention of African Culture in black American slaves may be a debatable point, there is no denying the fact that the culture of several tribes in Africa was equal to that of the culture of the slave captors.⁸ This potential of the native African culture was effectively used later by nationalist blacks and black writers to create pride in blackness. African-Americans has clung on to it as an escape mechanism and also to offset the pressure of their marginalized existence, alienated from the mainline American life.

Slave owners, in their attempt to provide a rationale for the inequitable and inhuman system of slavery, propagated several theories to substantiate what they thought to be the natural inferiority of blacks and the historic and religious mission of the whites to civilize them. Theology was a potent weapon in their hands and passages were culled out even from the Bible to rationalize the system of slavery, which helped them to perpetuate the system without much resistance in the early period. *The Bible Defense of Slavery*, tried to establish that the Negro was the natural born slave by referring to his peculiar features such as the great length and width of his foot, the extraordinary protrusion of the heel backward, placing the leg nearly in the middle of the foot in many instances; the skin where the "Divine Hand" has placed myriads of little cups of pellucid water mingled with the capillary vessels to throw off the sun's rays and avert sunstroke.⁹ The eighteenth

century Euro-centric thought relegated black people to a lower rung in the Great Chain of Being. Such stereotypes as the long-simmering Christ-like Uncle Tom, the childlike Sambo, the loyal Mammy, the emasculating matriarch and the wild seductress were invented to assuage the guilt of the whites and veil the brutal exploitative action of the dominant group. In fact, Africans were enslaved, not because they were biologically inferior but because their labour was cheap. Their dark complexion only contributed to their easy identification. Providing a rationale based on religion and pseudo-scientific theories regarding the inferiority of blacks, the dominant exploitative groups perpetuated the Black image as the "other". It succeeded in masking the exploitative motive that had actually prompted the Atlantic slave trade. Eric Williams' perceptive analysis is illuminating:

Here then, is the origin of slavery. The reason was economic, not racial, it had to do not with the colour of the labour, but the cheapness of the labour. As compared with Indian and white labour, Negro slavery was eminently superior. The features of the man, his hair, colour and dentitrice, his subhuman characteristic, so widely pleaded was only later rationalization to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labour and resorted to Negro labour because it was the cheapest and the best.¹⁰

It is significant that slave trade was not abolished by any country until the economic value of slavery declined. The emergence of Northern industrial class put up a stiff resistance to the system of slavery and it consequently brought forth new theories and ideas to challenge it. The Civil War was fought between Northern capitalists and Southern slave holders and it was very often portrayed as a struggle for the abolition of slavery out of altruistic and humanistic motives.

Richard Wright has aptly demystified the popular notion associated with the Civil War in America:

A civil war was fought in America and American school children are taught that it was to free the black slaves. It was not. It was to establish a republic, to create conditions of economic freedom, to clear the ground for the launching of an industrial society. Naturally, slavery had to go in such a situation.¹¹

The Northern Capitalists saw the abolition of slavery as an opportunity to make inroads into the Southern states using them as a source of raw materials and also as a market for their manufactured products. The Civil War, though it paved the way for ending slavery in America, was the consequence of many factors including the low productivity of forced labour, lack of markets, low industrialization and the like.¹² The emergence and the final legal abolition of slavery was necessitated by economic motives though it was often cloaked behind paternalistic and protective theories which even went to the extent of claiming that the Negroes needed the "humanizing influence of slavery."¹³ Social Darwinists, on the other hand, relying on the doctrine of the "survival of the fittest" reasoned that the blacks' failure to achieve equality in American life could be scientifically explained. Toeing the line of scientists and naturalists like Dr. Cartwright and Louis Agassiz who noted that Negroes were physically and genetically inferior,¹⁴ Professor William Graham Sumner of Yale University says that nothing was more certain than "the inequality of the law of life." The doctrine of evolution, instead of supporting the natural equality of man, would give a demonstration of their inequality.¹⁵ Richard Colfax in the 19th century, who is claimed to have conducted research into the skulls and facial angles of Negroes argued that "the acknowledged

meanness of the Negro's intellect only coincides with the shape of his head" and this can be seen in the Negro's facial angle "which was almost to a level with that of a brute."¹⁶ In America, white people have projected white images with the result that the blacks are left with a "zero image" of themselves. The Bible and the Christianity were misinterpreted to provide "divine sanction" to their alleged racial inferiority with the result that a feeling of inferiority was planted in the black's consciousness.¹⁷ For the blacks, religion acted as an opium¹⁸ and a tool in the hands of the exploiting class to perpetuate their exploitation.

Even now the old lies perpetuated by slave holders persist in a different form in the American society. Despite drastic changes in the condition of blacks and abolition of slavery and discrimination at the legal level notions of Negro inferiority still prevail. A survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Centre of the University of Chicago in 1990 showed that 53 percent of the non-blacks believe that African-Americans are less intelligent than whites, 51% believe that they are less patriotic; 56% believe that they are more violence-prone, 62 percent believe that they are more likely to prefer to live off welfare.¹⁹

The persistence of racist ideology in America, despite the legal abolition of slavery and racial discrimination is not hard to explain. The racist ideology is well entrenched in the American Civil and political society that it is ingrained in the psyche of the people. The people who internalize these majoritarian values accept it as if it is the general truth without realising its racist overtones and undertones. Manning Marable's perceptive analysis of the impact of pedagogy and media, which is not free from subtle racist ideas, is worth-quoting:

The black child attending public school is burdened with an educational

pedagogy which rests on the assumption of his/her cultural or intellectual inferiority. In their place of worship most blacks are confronted every Sunday with early Renaissance portrait of Christ, a white Deity, and a form of spirituality which theoretically and historically had little direct relevance to their unique heritage and original African belief systems. The media often carefully select and eliminate glaring contradictions which would evoke outrage and activity by black people. The aesthetic and popular culture of racist societies constantly reinforce the image of the Anglo-Saxon ideal in the minds of blacks, creating the tragic and destructive phenomenon of self-hatred and cultural genocide.²⁰

Marx's concept of ideology or false consciousness and its elaboration by Louis Althusser, a renowned Marxist ideologue, in his concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) explains the existence of subtle racist views prevalent in society despite its legal abolition. To Marx, the dominant ideas in any class society are those of the ruling class. They perpetuate their exploitative rule not only through coercion but by a subtle mechanism, the mechanism of ideology or false consciousness. Though the ideology of the class society is the ideology of the dominant class, the subordinate classes accept it as if it is neutral and class-free. This is achieved through what Althusser called the Ideological State Apparatus. To Althusser "No class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatus."²¹ The church, educational system, laws, media, culture and family are regarded as institutions of Ideological State Apparatus which reproduce the dominant ideology and for the masses it appears to be neutral and class-caste free. In America ruling class ideology perpetuated slavery and race prejudice,

not only through legal means but through ideology as well. The same ideology with modifications still works against them to keep them in "their place," though the power of what Althusser called the Repressive State Apparatus has declined in the contemporary American society.

African-Americans have, no doubt, registered significant advances during the past three hundred years. Though they still remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in the American society, various measures of legislation which came in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement have succeeded in checking and minimizing discrimination and prejudice. America, a society founded on the lofty ideals of equality and democracy has, no doubt, denied justice to the black population. The principles of equality of men and right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness enunciated in the *Declaration of Independence in 1776* which established the United States as a nation independent of the British colonial empire remained a dead letter for the blacks for centuries. It was paradoxical that slavery continued even after the Revolution and was abolished only in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation of Abraham Lincoln in the wake of the Civil War. Even then, equal opportunity before law was denied to them. The Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 set all slaves free and the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868 extended citizenship to blacks and the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870 gave blacks the political right and declared that race was no bar to voting rights. The landmark decision of the Supreme Court in *Brown Vs. Board of Education in 1954* declared the separate but equal doctrine illegal and paved the way for school desegregation. The Supreme Court decision invalidated the damage done by the Court order in *Plassey Vs Fergusson* case, which legally upheld the validity of separate but equal doctrine. It is a fact that the legal desegregation has failed to deliver the desired results

because the American mind still remains segregated. John Oliver Killen perceptively points to the root of the limitation of legal and constitutional remedies to do away with discrimination when he notes that "along with the fight to desegregate the school, we must desegregate the entire cultural statement of America; we must desegregate the minds of the American people. . . . Integration begins the day the minds of the American people are desegregated."²² The legal desegregation sans desegregation in the mind and attitude of the people in the North, in fact, led to mass exodus of whites from cities fearing integrated schools. So the immediate fallout of the judgement was an increase in the intensity of segregation in the North.²³

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s resulted in a plethora of Acts which, in turn, gave blacks a semblance of identity and equality. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 stated that race, colour, religion or national origin could not lead to disenfranchisement, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did away with any test or device as a prerequisite for registration or voting. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 outlawed discrimination in the sale or rental of all housing because of race, colour, religion or national origin. Affirmative action has been launched in America with a view to ameliorating the condition of the blacks as a marginalized and minority group. Jessie Jackson's vice-presidential candidature in the United States' presidential election is often cited as an index of the fact that a black man can come up in the social ladder. Statistics is employed to bring home the point that they have made rapid progress in America. But in 1970, only 4.5 percent of black families earned 50,000 dollar or more a year; by 1986, that percentage has doubled, to 9 percent. 44 percent of black families owned their own home in 1984. Whereas the figure for whites was 67 percent. Forty members of the 103rd Congress are

black and the Black Consumer Movement has grown from \$30,000 million in 1960 to more than \$1,25,000 million in 1980.²⁴

William Julius Wilson in his pioneering study on race in America has come to the conclusion that class has superseded race as the most important factor in American society determining life chances for black Americans. To him, the rigidity of racial stratification is on the decline. A powerful black bourgeoisie has emerged making use of the gains of development. Wilson believes that the present post-world war American society is going through progressive transition from racial inequities to class inequities.²⁵ It is to be noted that, Wilson is arguing that the significance of race is on the decline and it should not be construed as a statement indicating that it has disappeared in American society as a factor determining the life chances of the black Americans. There is a point in Wilson's argument as he does not negate the existence of institutional and respectable racism²⁶ still prevalent in the American society. But the sad fact is that the black/non black dichotomy is still a powerful factor in the American society. Blyden Jackson's pertinent comment that "the day of slavery is over, but color-caste is not,"²⁷ corroborates the assertion made by W.E.B. Dubois as early as 1901 that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line."²⁸ The fruits of progress and development of the nation are yet to percolate down to the black masses compared to that of the non-black population and facts and figures bear this out. Nearly 1/3 of all Black families in America live below the poverty line. Black men make up 47% of the prison population. Half of the black children are born in poverty.²⁹ The average of African-American family income in 1991 was only 57 percent of the family income of white population. The average life expectancy of an African-American is six years less than that of white Americans.³⁰ Black

males earn only 57% of what white males earn. Forty-five per cent black children live in poverty today as compared with fifteen percent of the whites. One out of every black male spends part of his life behind the bars.³¹ The spontaneous riots which broke out in Los Angeles in April 1992 in the wake of the Court exonerating four policemen charged with severely beating Rodney King, a 26 year old black construction worker, for violating traffic laws points to the sad plight of blacks at the hands of law enforcing authorities and the miscarriage of justice attributed to racial prejudice. The civil disturbances which broke out in the wake of the Court verdict flew in the face of the video tape of the incident shown on TV and it was attributable to the frustration and poverty of blacks and Latinos (who were mainly involved in it) in and around areas like South Central.³² This shows that race is still a barrier for blacks in the American society inhibiting their forward movement. Notwithstanding the changes that have taken place vis-a-vis black situation, America is employing double standards resulting in the emergence of two Americas. Social legislation have failed to realise its objective, with the result that "a drive through any city in the United States will show that cities are divided along racial line; White areas are cleaner, richer, greener and have good school. Black areas are run down poorer, frequented by gangs."³³

The contemporary American reality makes us think that race is still a determinant of psychological wellbeing and quality of life in spite of changes in the social and legal status of black Americans. Melvine E. Thomas and Michel Hughes, expatiating on Wilson's work *The Declining Significance of Race* have rightly warned against the danger of completely neglecting race factor in American social life.³⁴

The situation of the blacks is quite different from that of the other immigrant

groups in the United States. America, often referred to as “a nation of nations” and “the nation of immigrants” was formed by the migration of English, Scottish, French, Germans, Blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. America absorbed about 41 million immigrants from various sources that were superimposed on the white - protestant society. The Blacks, though they were among the earlier immigrants to America, are classified among the new ethnics because they, like the Spanish surnamed Americans have emerged into prominence in the urban North only after World War II.³⁵ In 1973, the Census Bureau published a report on the ethnic origins of the population which revealed that 49.9% of Americans classified themselves as of a specific European national origin and 41.6% of the population was listed as other which included persons of mixed national origins (Blacks, Asian Americans, American Indian etc.) constituting about 91.5% of the population of the United States.³⁶ The theory of the ‘melting pot’ coined by Israel Sangwill in his 1906 play, which bore it as its title, is adduced to explain the position of various immigrant groups vis-a-vis American society. The epithet indicates that in America all ‘nations’ are to be divested their original characteristic to emerge as a new and higher nation, combining the best of the ideas of the nations. It suggests that the *diverse cultures and identities of disparate ethnic groups* would be merged, blended and “melted” together in such a way that their individual ethnic character would forever be lost in the formation of a new homogenous American culture. Even if we accept the view that the Negroes in America are not distinguished by culture from the dominant group, as they lost their ancestral culture and language,³⁷ it is that “the melting pot did not melt for them”.³⁸ The experience of slavery, lynching, Jim Crow laws, racial discrimination and prejudice based on their colour contributed to their alienation from the mainstream American life. For the black, his colour is the peg on which his being and identity hangs.

He is locked into the infernal cycle because of his colour. As Franz Fanon has pointed out, "when people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my colour. When they do not like me, they point out that it is not because of my colour."³⁹ The black colour, which is a feature of African reality, sets him apart from other minority and immigrant groups in America. The predicament of the black owing to his colour is aptly brought out by Sartre when he wrote that "A Jew, a white man among white men can deny that he is a Jew, can declare himself a man among men. The Negro cannot deny that he is a Negro, nor can he claim that he is part of some abstract, colourless humanity. He is black."⁴⁰ The Negro, being a prisoner of his colour, could not escape the fact of his life. They were compelled to live in a society wherein existed a general feeling that their dark skin, their curly hair, their physiognomy were direct manifestations of their backwardness.⁴¹

Lyndon Johnson once noted that having denied of freedom, crippled by hatred and deprived of opportunity, American Negroes have become another nation,⁴² thereby indirectly accepting the notion that they constitute a separate nation within the United States as certain privileges have been denied to them. John Hope Franklin attributed the emergence of two worlds of race in America to the system of slavery,⁴³ and thus shares the view voiced by several scholars working on African-American history.⁴⁴ Going a step further, black scholars have characterized Blacks in America as victims of domestic colonialism. Instead of the United States establishing a colonial empire in Africa, it brought the colonial system home and installed it in the Southern states.⁴⁵ Albert Memmi has dedicated the American edition of the book *The Colonizer and the Colonized* to the "American Negro, also Colonized." Colonization is a political and economic subjugation as well as spiritual and cultural enslavement of countries. American Negro was forced to live in a situation similar

to that of a colonizer-colonized relationship in the colonies. Like the people of the colonial countries the Negro suffers varying degrees of hunger, illiteracy, disease and he is exploited economically, politically and culturally. Blacks, who were brought to the United States were robbed off their culture, were forced to worship white images and use English language. Frantz Fanon, the black ideologue called it cultural estrangement, which, to him, is part of colonial strategy: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the nation of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it."⁴⁶

The reductionist theories characterizing black Americans as a separate nation or victims of domestic colonialism are, no doubt, stretching the facts too far. But there is no denying the fact that they exhibit certain attributes of these categories owing to their peculiar disadvantaged and submerged position in the American society. Even the different views advanced regarding the sociological category that can be tagged on to the black American such as race, ethnic group or caste corroborates this notion. Traditionally, races are really categories of human beings based on differences in physical traits that are transmitted by the genes. On the other hand, an ethnic group is a group with a sense of cultural identity. Race, as a biological construct cannot be employed to refer to black Americans because it flies in the face of scientific facts. If at all it is employed, it is used as a social construct. Todorov in his celebrated essay "Race" Writing and Culture,' has justified his act of putting the word 'race' within quotation marks as he believes that races do not exist. But racism and racial discrimination exist, as they signify a type of behaviour which is manifested in the display of contempt or aggressiveness towards other people on account of physical differences (other

than those of sex), between them and oneself.⁴⁷

Bernard W. Bell, the famous chronicler of the African-American novel justifies the argument reducing black Americans to an ethnic minority. Beginning from the assumption that racial groups are distinguishable by socially selected physical traits and ethnic groups by socially selected cultural traits, William J. Wilson says:

Certain social minorities are also classified as ethnic groups, and some writers have subsumed the concept of racial groups under the general category of ethnic groups (racially defined ethnic group). If a given racial group is ethnically distinct, i.e. viewed as having a distinct subculture and as being bound by similar cultural ties, such a designation is valid. Because I have clearly demonstrated that black Americans have a distinct subculture, they are generally classified as an ethnic group in the ethnographic literary history of the African-American novel.⁴⁸

Dr. Myrdal, on the other hand, preferred the term 'caste' by employing the method of successive elimination. A Negroe's life consists of drastic restrictions to free competition in various spheres of life with the result that the individual in a lower caste cannot, by any means, change his station except by a secret and illegitimate 'passing' which is possible only to the few who have the physical appearance of the upper caste. The biological and genetic connotation of the word 'race' which is the product of the age of Social Darwinism do not suit the recent trends in sociobiology.⁴⁹ The confusion over the appropriate sociological category to which the black Americans belong, drives home the point that they are unlike other minority groups in America. They suffer the disadvantages not

only of a minority group but more that of a marginalized and oppressed group. So the black situation "is part of and apart from the wider community in which they live."⁵⁰

A study of the history of the African-Americans reveals that their attitude to the mainstream society vacillated primarily between integration and nationalism or separatism, even though other less significant behavioural patterns are discernible. Nationalism, aimed at the elimination of the 'double consciousness' found expression in the nineteenth century in the emigrationist movement led by Martin Delaney in the 1850s, Paul Cuffe early in the twentieth century and Bishop Henry M. Turner in the post Reconstruction years. Its most assertive and militant expression is found in Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" Movement of the 1920s and later in the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Harold Cruse rightly says that "American Negro history is basically a history of the conflict between integrationist and nationalist forces in politics, economics and culture, no matter what leaders are involved and what slogans are used."⁵¹ Myrdal, the Swedish Sociologist voiced the same view when he observed that it was through integration and separation that blacks had dealt with a hostile society.

To be an assimilated American and to be an unassimilated Negro have been two options before them. These behavioural patterns are characteristic of the minority groups such as the Negroes in America. Peter I. Rose, using the Negro minority in the United States as a case in point, has examined four types of reactions -- submission, withdrawal, avoidance and integration patterns. Rose further says that "within any single minority group all of their reaction patterns are possible, and a given individual may manifest two or more of these responses at various time and in different circumstances."⁵²

Even W.E.B. Dubois, the prominent black ideologue, vacillated between separatism and integration. Booker T. Washington's approach was accommodationistic as he refrained from challenging the system, but tried to gain as much as he could by adjusting with whites. It is to be borne in mind that these twin concepts are exclusive categories as far as the African-Americans are concerned and they appeared during specific historical periods which, somehow, necessitated it. Thomas L. Blair, has aptly summed up the ideological thrust of these two movements which underlies almost all black political movements:

From the colonial period to this day there are two identifiable modes of action which blacks have used to assault the barrier that violate their right as Americans and as human beings. One is to submerge their African heritage and traits of character, and by political and legal mechanisms and cultural initiation become integrated into the society as a whole. The other is to restructure black groups to resist white imposed social deformation and to adapt to new circumstances with a revived sense of pride in the black heritage.⁵³

The developing consciousness of their identity among the African-Americans is also reflected in their approach to the changing appellation employed to refer to the group. The word Negro, a term associated with slavery and subjugation gave way to 'black' which signified the colour of their skin.⁵⁴ Afro-American, a hyphenated expression used to describe them till recently has been replaced by the epithet African-American, which emphasizes their bicultural existence and best captures their peculiar position in America. It is the most accepted appellation in the African-American community and it reflects the growing consciousness of

blacks of having a separate identity predicated on African roots and drawing sustenance from America. The appellation itself implicitly abhors assimilation in the dominant society and reflects their desire to carve out a niche for themselves in the American society without mortgaging their cultural identity. The expression, by formalizing the African connection, would serve to add dignity and self respect to the people. This preoccupation with their bicultural identity found its expression in W.E.B. Dubois, way back in 1965, when he wrote that

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Romans, the Teuton and Mangolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with the second sight in this American world -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelations of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness-an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife•the longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.⁵⁵

This paradoxical situation of being both an American and a man of colour has almost become a psychological obsession with the black American writers and it is the major factor which regulates their response to their experience.

II

An examination of the history of the African-American novel and the major concerns which preoccupied the significant movements and major writers reveal that their works have been shaped in the crucible of black experience and they have given literary expression to black consciousness which resulted from their encounter with the black situation in America. Though their attitude and vision differ, they reflect the changing African-American situation in their own characteristic way. Saunders Redding's observation that "American Negro literature cannot be lopped off from the main body of American literary expression without doing harm to both"⁵⁶ cannot be cited to deny the characteristic feature of Negro literature which really marks them off from the mainstream American literature or other minority literatures as it invariably expressed the hopes, fears and their attempt to make adjustment with the mainstream culture and their search for identity which their disadvantaged position thrust on them. A closer examination of the history of the African-American novel would reveal the plurality of voices which stem from their different attitudes and approaches to their situations as a marginalized and minority group which had undergone the searing impact of slavery and still remains the butt of racial discrimination and prejudice in America. Bernard W. Bell has provided a working definition of African-American novel which is perceptive and illuminating:

The phrase African-American novel, for example, refers to any extended prose narrative written by an American of African ancestry that illuminates the experiences of black American in a formal, magnetically distinctive manner--thematically, structurally or stylistically--and whose intrinsic

linguistic properties do not wholly explain its interpretation, reception and reputation.⁵⁷

The 'blackness' of a literary text, or the black consciousness expressed in a work of art lies not only in its theme, but in its style, form, structure and its profuse borrowing from the elements of the African-American cultural tradition as well. Traditional African-American literary critics often elaborated on the blackness of the literary texts, concentrating on the theme, to the virtual exclusion of the formal aspects of the work of art. Their approach springs from an erroneous understanding that black experience is only the content which the black writer pours into the well-defined and concrete, ready-made containers -- that is the form of the literature. Having failed to note the dialectical relationship between content and form, they lose sight of the fact that thematic aspects of the literature contribute to the technique and form. In fact, Georg Lukács' perceptive observation that "form is the product of content, but reacts back upon it in a double edged relationship"⁵⁸ points to the impact of content in determining the evolution of literary form. Though the Lukácsian thesis cannot be applied with mathematical precision on a work of art, thematic element is, no doubt, a significant determinant in the evolution of literary form. The history of African-American novel, doubtlessly, attests to this fact. In modern times, several theories have been propounded by critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Robert Stepto, Houston Baker and John Callahan, which are rooted in African-American cultural matrix and patterns of black experience. They have tried to evolve critical theories rooted in African-American cultural matrix. Even the formal innovations and techniques employed by African-American novelists should be analysed against the backdrop of the ideational content of the novels in order to perceive the underlying African-American basis of the novels written by African-American novelists.

Despite the diversity of style and approaches to literature and the conflict of ideas, and varying attitude to life which characterize the black American writers, their works appear to emerge from the black experience and there is strikingly something "black" about their works. As Henry Louis Gates has rightly pointed out "for all sorts of complex historical reasons, the act of writing itself has been a political act for African-American writers."⁵⁹ For them, their politics emerges from the sociocultural matrix of the African-American situation and comes into conflict with the Euro-centric world view hegemonising the cultural life of America. Factors such as Africa, the experience of slavery, the South, lynching, Jim Crow laws, Emancipation, Reconstruction, Northern Migration and racial prejudice loom large in the consciousness of the black American novelists and the encounter of the blacks with the American society is producing a kind of bicultural identity and a hyphenated existence in them. The double-consciousness and socialized ambivalence reflected in their writings set them off from the mainstream American writers. Even when the black American writers minimize or abandon black element, they may be often responding to a specific situation as a black man as reflected in Wright's *Savage Holiday*, where he altogether dispensed with black characters. Nationalism and Integration, the twin antithetical attitudes which preoccupied the African-Americans in different social periods influenced their writings and often determined their major concerns. Black Americans attempted to deal with the culture shock, which they experienced in the American society because of their encounter with an alien setting as an unassimilated minority group, in their own ways. Bell has aptly summed up his illuminating arguments in his comprehensive socio-psychological and sociocultural interpretative history of the African-American novel:

In retrospect, the African-American novel, like the Euro-American novels, is a hybrid form that is not the culmination of an evolutionary process in the narrative tradition, but the product of social and cultural forces that shape the author's attitude towards life and that fuel the dialectical process between romantic and mimetic narrative impulses. In contrast to the Euro-American novel, however, the Afro-American novel has its roots in the combined oral and literary tradition of African-American culture. It is one of the symbolic literary form that black Americans have borrowed from Western Culture and adapted in the quest for status, power and identity in a racist, capitalist, patriarchal American social arena. The African-American novel, in other words, is not a solipsistic, self-referential signifying system but a symbolic cultural act.⁶⁰

Any survey of the history of the African-American novel should begin with the slave narratives, considered to be the first African-American literary form, which foreshadowed the patterns and general thematic concerns later expressed in black autobiographies and black novels. In fact, African-American literature began not with poets like Phyllis wheatly and Jupiter Hammon as is commonly assumed, but with the genre called slave narratives--both oral and written--usually told by a fugitive slave, giving vent to his crying need for human freedom. The slave narratives beginning with John Saffin's *Adam Negro's Tryall* (1703) and including famous slave narratives such as Josiah Henson's *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Written by Himself*, all protested against white slavocracy and indicted the inequitable system of slavery. They articulated in their autobiographical narratives not only the physical and psychological bondage but their longing for freedom as well.

Houston A. Baker has correctly pinpointed the significance of slave narrative when he called it the "locus classicus of African-American literary discourse".⁶¹ The slave narratives documented the personal history of the individual reeling under the impact of slavery. The importance of slave narratives as a distinct literary genre developed by African-American is aptly summed up by Amiri Baraka:

The slave narratives are ideological and emotional reflection of the great majority of the African-American people as well as a stunningly incisive portrait of slave America. They are also a genre, a distinctive body of work, that indicates a way of living and thinking in the society. They are anti-slavery: fierce indictment of American slave society, the exact opposite of Wheatly-Hammon.⁶²

At another level, it can be noted that major black American literary texts, in fact, bear structural resemblance to the slave narratives. It can be seen that Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) bears a signifying relation of intertextuality to Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (1845). Henson's *Stranger than Fiction* provided the framework for Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* and for both Henson and Reed Canada, symbolic of freedom, is a state of mind rather than a mere geographical space. Steve Cannon in an interview with Ralph Ellison in *Y' Bird Review* has dwelt on the structural similarities with slave narratives. Though Ellison has rejected any conscious, direct borrowing from slave narratives, he admitted that the movement from South to North is a basic pattern in Afro-American experience and it is reflected both in slave narratives and *Invisible Man*.⁶³

William Wells Brown's *Clotel: or the President's Daughter* (1853) is the first novel written by an African-American. Though a poorly written novel, it is

the first in a series of propagandist novels of the later half of the nineteenth century trying to bring home the point that Negroes are human. Brown, an ex-slave who fled to England with the help of a Quaker family wrote *Clotel* as a propagandist condemnation of slavery designed to advance the abolitionist cause. Brown, like the earlier African-American poets such as Phyllis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon, adopted the mannerism, language and world view of the white authors, while championing the cause of the emancipation.⁶⁴ Later, the growing antislavery movement provided political and literary thrust for the Negro. In fact, African-American literature, marked by the mastery of literary craftsmanship, formal innovation, exploration of literary and cultural problems of the Negro in American culture began in the closing years of the nineteenth century with the works of W.E.B. DuBois, Charles Chestnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar. The period from 1877 to 1915 is labelled as the nadir of black American novel.⁶⁵ Historical factors such as the sudden reversal suffered by the hope generated in the post-Reconstruction years and the rise of Jim Crowism coupled with a spurt in racial violence provided a fertile ground for a literature with protest as its dominant theme. But as assimilationists, they focused their protest mainly on their exclusion from the mainstream of American life.⁶⁶ James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is often considered to be the best novel written by a black American before Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), very often hailed as the first novel worthy of its name written by a black American by no less a person than Leroi Jones.⁶⁷

Harlem Renaissance or what is often referred to as the Negro Renaissance of the 1920s was a landmark in the history of African-American literature. It was a typical middle class reaction expressing pride in being black which elevated the position of the African-American community from the quagmire of neglect and subordination. The Renaissance captured critical attention with the publication

of Alain Locke's seminal work entitled *The New Negro*, a collection of poems, stories and plays along with an introduction written by Locke elucidating the major concerns of the movement. Locke's observation throws light on the significance of Harlem in black history:

Hitherto, it must be admitted that American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact or, to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is--more promises at least to be--a race capital.⁶⁸

The great migration of the blacks from the rural South to the industrial North, in search of freedom and opportunity, provided the cultural and intellectual thrust to the New Negro Movement. Claude Mckay, Langhston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Jean Toomer and Counte Cullen were the major figures of the Renaissance. Langston Hughes captured the essence of the Harlem Renaissance when he wrote that

We, younger Negro artists who create, now intend to express our own individual dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. We will build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountains, free within ourselves.⁶⁹

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance cut themselves off from the Western values and identified themselves with Africa where blacks can feel free from repression as in Toomer and Claude Mckay. They attempted a dissociation of sensibility from that enforced by American culture and its institutions. As Hayden has put it. "Its main thrust was "integrationist" rather than "separatist," trying to awaken black American to their own value in society."⁷⁰

The 'New Negro' with his acceptance of cultural pluralism and accommodation to American life came in conflict with the Garvey movement initiated by Marcus Garvey which had struck a chord in the lower class blacks with his separatist "Back to Africa" slogan. Harlem Renaissance's natural death was necessitated, among other things, by its middle-class orientation which alienated the lower classes from its ambit. This conflict between the nationalist and integrationist ideas, reflected in the tussle between Harlem ideology and Garvey movement, resurfaced in the 1960s in the emergence of works influenced by Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement.

African-American novel came of age with the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. *Native Son*, which Noel Schraufngal called the first modern Negro novel,⁷¹ radically departed from the portrayal of blacks in the black novels of yester years and broke new ground by portraying Bigger Thomas, the protagonist, who shocked the reading public with a violent murder. Wright with his autobiographical works like *Black Boy*, *American Hunger* and novels such as *The Outsider*, *Lawd Today*, and *The Long Dream* became the first African-American writer to have captured the attention of mainstream critics and readers in America. He still remains one of the major African-American novelists in the history of African-American

literature, even more than half a century after the publication of Wright's first novel. Wright fictionalized black experience in *Native Son* by portraying the psychological damage of racism and established the protest tradition in black literature. Baldwin, who launched a scathing attack on the protest motive fictionalized by Wright in *Native Son* on the ground that "it rejects life, the human being, denies his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his characterization alone is real,"⁷² veered round to the same concern in his novel *Another Country*, in which he attacked the white society, its racial politics and sexual mores. Baldwin, who was content with fictionalizing the internal problems of John Grimes, a black youth, intend on escaping the traumas of racial discrimination finds solace in the bosom of the church came out with an overtly propagandist novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* in 1968 with the obvious message that black man must answer a call to arms instead of taking recourse to theological solutions to solve the racial problem. Baldwin, with his own writing, showed the limitations of his earlier views on the flaws of *Native Son*. Black consciousness in Richard Wright is evident in his theme, characterization and exploration of Negro problem in the novels. Except in *Savage Holiday*, where he abandoned race problem altogether, all his novels treat the Negro problem in the South and North and its damaging impact on the human psyche. Wright makes use of the patterns of bad Nigger and religious preacher in *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children* and the blues element in *Lawd Today*. Though he had rejected black folklore as of no use,⁷³ his black consciousness comes forth in his conscious position vis-a-vis the predicament of the African-Americans.

In the post-war years, the spirit of integration reared its head again. The trauma of the second World War, which affected both whites and blacks alike had

a levelling impact as in the case of the Depression of the 1920s. Black writers began exploring the wider existential problems of human existence abandoning the protest tradition and relegating the race factor to the background. It is significant that thirteen of the thirty three Negro novels written between 1945 and 1952 have a predominantly or exclusively white cast of characters."⁷⁴ Bernard W. Bell has correctly pinpointed the impact of the social situation on the African-American novel between 1952 to 1962 which witnessed the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*:

From 1952 to 1962 two parallel movements in the tradition of the Afro-American novel can be observed: a movement toward the rediscovery and revitalization of myth, legend and ritual as appropriate sign systems for expressing the double consciousness, socialized ambivalence and double vision of the modern black experience.⁷⁵

Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison's only novel to date which came out in 1952, employed African-American myth, legend and ritual to fictionalize African-American history revolving around a nameless protagonist who is denied an identity. The various options which appeared before the African-Americans as solution to their problem such as Booker T. Washington's ideology, Marxism and Black nationalism are personified in the character of Bledsoe, Jack and Ras in the novel and are rejected as of no value to the black American. In the novel Ellison delves deep into the African-American history and each stage in the protagonist's personal history corresponds to an era in the social history of black Americans such as Reconstruction, Emancipation and Great Migration. Corroborating the observation made by Bell regarding the post-1952 novel, *Invisible Man* drew heavily on black folklore and it, in fact, functioned as a framework determining its content and

form.⁷⁶ Susan L. Blake's reference to the background of the slave experience of the *Battle Royal*, Prologue as an iconographic blues ritual, use of 'I' technique or point of view and its indebtedness to Blues prove beyond doubt that for Ellison's protagonist black folklore is the most potent weapon for dealing with racial injustice in America.⁷⁷ Unlike Wright, Ellison consciously acknowledged the value and function of folklore in his essays in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to Territory* and effectively incorporated its elements into his novel and short stories. Ellison, eschewing the protest motive in the naturalistic vein popularized by Richard Wright gave aesthetic expression to his black consciousness by chronicling African-American history within the framework of black folklore. It is significant that the landmark Supreme Court Judgement on school desegregation came out only two years after the publication of *Invisible Man*. The sociopolitical atmosphere of the period was suffused with the air of integration. Baker has gone to the extent of saying that even in the African-American critical sphere 1940s and 1950s were dominated by the poetics of integration."⁷⁸

In the period since 1950s the two major political movements which influenced black writing was the Civil Rights Movement dating from 1954 to 1964 and the Black Power Movement lasting from 1964 to 1973.⁷⁹ The Civil Rights Movement, in fact, provided plot and characterization to such seminal African-American works such as Alice Walker's *Meridian* and John Mc Clukky's *Look What They Done to My Song*. Black Power, on the other hand, exerted a tremendous influence on African-American letters by paving the way for the emergence of black Arts movements and New Black Aesthetic. The failure of the gradualist philosophy of Martin Luther King, which based political actions on the Civil Rights Movement, created a social condition which was conducive to the development of militant movements rooted in the philosophy of Nationalism. The Black Arts Movement

and New Black Aesthetic which were the natural corollaries of the Black Power movements at the creative and critical sphere dominated the 1960s and 1970s. A new Renaissance occurred in black art, and its impact is reflected in the anthology coedited by Larry Neal and Leroi Jones in 1968 entitled *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. Many of the themes of the 1920s resurfaced in the black art, such as the association of Africa with freedom from oppression, the harsh criticism of western civilization, the emphasis on racial pride and the celebration of the beautiful black.⁸⁰ Drawing theoretical inspiration from the ideology of the Black Power propounded by Stokely Carmichael, Clayton Powell Jr. and Malcolm X, the practitioners of the New Black Aesthetic such as Leroi Jones, Addison Gayle and Larry Neal sought to substitute Euro-centric notion of art criticism with Afro-centric aesthetic standards. For them, black art should be subordinated to the needs of black liberation, which is more akin to the ideological demands of socialist realism. They believed that the task of contemporary black art was to assault the mainstream white images and promote black images as the means of fostering autonomous black consciousness and for doing away with the burden of what Dubois called "double consciousness." Positing the view that art and beauty are culture specific, they held the opinion that the beauty of black writer's work must be judged according to his contribution to "change the life of a single American Negro into an African-American or a black man."⁸¹ For the Black Aesthetian, sociopolitical revolution is the essential prerequisite and, art is only a handmaid to the primary object of achieving the liberation of blacks. As Baraka, the most vociferous champion of the New Black Aesthetic, put it, "black art is a weapon against cultural aggression."⁸² Ron Karega refers to the political undercurrents and ideological underpinnings of Black Art and New Black Aesthetic when he wrote that

Black Art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution. It must be like Leroi Jones' poems that are assassin's poems, poems that kill and shoot guns and wrassle cops into alleys taking their weapons, leaving them dead with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland.⁸³

Though Black Arts movement and New Black Aesthetic exerted tremendous influence in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not the sole voice in African-American literature. African-American fiction of the 60s and 70s exhibits diversity and innovation in theme and technique. African-American literature has graduated from the charge of the deadly sameness of sensibility which had often been levelled against it as it very often rests content with fictionalizing black experience without much aesthetic experimentation. Richard Wright voiced the same idea and found an alibi for it in black situations. "The Negro writer had no choice in his subject matter, he could not select his experience. Hence the monotonous repetition of horror that rolls in verse from one generation to another".⁸⁴

In fact, the origin and emergence of various oral and literary forms of the Negro people in America have been the direct response to their immediate needs and aspirations. Even the original element in black American folklore, Negro Spirituals and Blues which are considered to be authentic forms of African-Americans had its roots in the economic institution of slavery. John Henrik Clark even went to the extent of saying that "in the United States the arts and literature of the Negro people has had an economic origin."⁸⁵ But contemporary African -American fiction has transcended the limitation of traditional African-American fiction and is far from monolithic. Charles Johnson has correctly cited Bradley's foray into

the philosophy of black history, Toni Morrison's mythic narrative, Clarence Major's explorations into European forms of experimentation, Alice Walker's efforts at formal innovation, McPherson's nearly brutal emotional honesty and Ishmael Reed's satirical post - modern fiction⁸⁶ to indicate the diversity of contemporary African-American fiction. It is natural that Roger Rosenblatt, who periodized black fiction till the protest period of the 1940s, saw modern scene in black fiction as "too diffuse and close to us to be categorized accurately."⁸⁷

Ishmael Reed is a solitary voice in contemporary African-American literature. Reed, a black post-modernist fictionist came out strongly against the ideological assumptions of the practitioners of the new Black Aesthetic by positing NeoHoodoo aesthetic, which he claimed to be the true African-American aesthetic. For him, the very idea of prescribing what black art should be goes against the spirit of the African-American tradition. In 1969 he formulated the New Literary Hoodooism, taking into account such African components as dance, drums, magic, religion and wood sculpture. Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic is a multicultural aesthetic, and the term derives from the vodoun religion of Haity, which is pluralistic, pantheistic or Polytheistic one.⁸⁸ Reed is, in fact, not against a black aesthetic or a black way of doing things, but he believes that censorship cannot be part of the black aesthetic. His criticism of the practitioners of the New Black Aesthetic is predicated on the argument that the mainstream aspiration of the African-American is for more freedom, not slavery, including freedom of artistic expression.⁸⁹ He came out strongly against the dogmatic pontifications of the practitioners of the New Black Aesthetic critics such as Addison Gayle, Larry Neal, Hoyt Fuller and Leroi Jones whose ideals, he thought, were steeped in the Euro-Christian tradition. He believes that his Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic is blacker and does more justice to

the culture of the African-Americans. For Reed, Neo-Hoodoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest. You can bring your own creative ideas to NeoHoodoo.⁹⁰

Reed's experimental, satirical novels such as *Free-lance Pall-bearers*, *Flight to Canada*, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* demolish the ideology of the Eurocentric Christian civilization which, to Reed, condones discrimination and prejudice. The critique and denunciation of Western civilization and rationalism reaches its zenith with the championing of an alternate counter culture rooted in African-American culture and tradition. Bell aptly summed up the major concerns of the Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic when he wrote that

At the heart of the Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic, which is largely constructed from residual elements of syncretic African religion (Vodun, Pecomania, Cendonuble, Macumba and Hoodoo) in the Carribean and the American, especially Haity, Brazil and the United States is a belief in the power of the unknown particularly as expressed in artistic freedom and originality. In the Prose-poem "Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto" he tells us that Neo-Hoodoo comes in all styles and moods, and that every man is an artist and every artist a priest.⁹¹

From the foregoing critical survey it can be seen that major black writers have given aesthetic expression to their black consciousness in different ways. They differ not only in their technique and reliance on the African-American folklore but in their understanding of the African-American history as well. The perception of Africa, their ancestral homeland, differ from writer to writer. Broadly speaking, nationalism and separatism, two ideological currents, gave shape and substance

to the African-American novelists at different stages in its history. Robert Bone, in his most influential monograph on the black novel, has introduced a dualistic frame of reference for the study of black novels:

Assimilationism and Negro Nationalism, concepts indispensable to an understanding of the cultural history of the American Negro provide a fixed point of reference from which to view the changing racial attitudes of the Negro novelists which are often fundamental to the content of the art.⁹²

In fact, the impact of assimilationist and the Negro nationalist tendencies which marked the political history of black Americans on the black American novel was underscored by Addison Gayle when he noted that black novels were to be analysed in terms of the struggle for the supremacy of the ideas of assimilation and nationalism.⁹³

Noel Schraufnagel, on the other hand, challenging the dualistic frame of reference delineated the evolution of black novel since the publication of *Native Son* in his critical work *From Apology to Protest: The Black American Novel*. He introduced multiple approach, using central terms such as "protest," "assimilationist," "accommodationist", "apologetic" and "militant protest" to characterize the dominant traits of novels of different periods. Notwithstanding his success in emphasizing the subtle changes in the portrayal of black characters and black themes, it in no way negates the wider basis of the dualistic frame of reference as a general interpretative method for the African-American novel. Noel Schraufnagel's analysis is more precise and specific as it takes into account minor changes reflected in the African-American novel in tune with the changes in the African-American's sociopolitical context.

African-American novelists employed elements of African-American folklore in their novels with varying degrees of success. Being a marginalized and disadvantaged group in America, blacks heavily drew on the elements of black folklore as they were in need of a liberating and unifying force for emotional sustenance. Black folklore is an umbrella term which includes under its rubric

Both the history of black masses and oral forms that have developed over that history which comprise blues, Jazz, spirituals, sermons, toasts, the dozens, cautionary tales, trickster tales; legends, rural and urban speech patterns; folk beliefs such as Voodoo, conjure and superstition; and folk characters such as Brer Rabbit, Stagolea, John Henry, the loup garoon flying Africans, the Conjure woman, the good time woman and the aunt.⁹⁴

The blues, Jazz, spirituals and other constituents of African-American folklore provided the black writer with a psychic ballast to offset the searing black situation. For the black American writer, they were part and parcel of their being. Berndt ostendorf's comment on the significance of Jazz and Blues is revealing:

Among blacks from the working class, for the south side people, for the Southern blacks who had come up North in search of freedom and money, Jazz and blues were an expression of their style. It was their reality. Jazz and blues formed the center of their culture. Still, they were consistently reminded that it was a subculture, a race culture, an inferior culture. These social stigmata notwithstanding they supported the music whole heartedly. One reason for the support of a music of Southern and preindustrial origin was that it provided an antidote to the injuries of race

and class, to the rigors of new urban work ethic and life style.⁹⁵

The blues are not mere songs which express the feeling of hopelessness and despair, but the repositories of the history and culture of the past of the black community. Houston Baker in his pioneering work *Blues, Ideology and African-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, theorized that individual African-American texts emerged out of a long standing vernacular matrix rooted in the collective historical realities of commercial deportation and economics of slavery--a paradigmatic discourse symbolized by the Blues. Baker posits a spatial metaphor, the Blues matrix and tries to identify and isolate an "authentic" Afro-American literary tradition rooted in the black vernacular. Many other African-American ideologues and writers have also spelt out the significance of Blues and Jazz for the African-American writers. Ralph Ellison in his seminal essay "Richard Wright's Blues" noted that the specific art forms which helped shape the writer's attitude towards his life and which embodied the impulse that contributes much to the quality and tone of the Richard Wright's *Black Boy* were the Negro Blues. Ellison, who exploited the potential of black folklore in his novels and short stories, perceived blues impulse in Wright's autobiography. Ellison has brilliantly summed up the curative potential of the blues:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.⁹⁶

Apart from the use of black folklore, many African-American writers have been obsessed with Africa, the ancestral home of the African-Americans. Wright's non-fictional works such as *Black Power*, *White Man, Listen!* and *Color Curtain* indicate his involvement in African independence and exemplify his growing African consciousness. Africa is a living presence in the fictional works of Ishmael Reed. The characters' concern with Africa springs from the realization that "black American is a kind of bastard of the West."⁹⁷ This understanding about the true homeland of Negroes was at the root of the Garvey movement and the Afro-centric orientation of the Black Power and Black Art Movements. The Black American writer's obsession with Africa and African elements are also expressions of their black consciousness.

Acute awareness of being black unites the African-American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed though their thematic concerns and aesthetic orientation differ. In the domain of criticism, Henry Louis Gates Jr. has evolved a black critical theory based on the theory of signification drawing on the elements of post-structuralist literary theories. By providing a critical theory rooted in the vernacular tradition of black culture, he demolished the notion that theory is the exclusive preserve of the canonical literary tradition. The concept of 'signifying' was first expressed in the article "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and Signifying Monkey" which appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 1983 and later included in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self*, brought out in 1987. The concept was later elaborated and illustrated with reference to black literary texts in his celebrated book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* in 1988. The peculiar connotation of the word "signifying" in black discourse has been aptly defined by Roger D. Abrahams:

Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean

any of a number of things; in the case of the tale about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbours by telling stories, it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, "My brother needs a piece of cake."⁹⁸

"Signifying" a concept literally derived from the tales of the Signifying Monkey, a distinctly African-American figure, is a technique of indirect argument or persuasion, a language of implication. In order to bring out the difference between the signifier-signifying concepts in white and black discourse Gates chose to write the black term with a bracketed `g' ("signifyin(g)") and the white term as signifying, thereby implying that the word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final `g' as "signifying."⁹⁹ Elaborating the concept of signification further, Gates argues that African-American literary history is characterized by tertiary formal revision, by which he meant "its authors seem to revise at least two antecedent texts often taken from different generation or periods within the tradition."¹⁰⁰ For example, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) revises Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) along with Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Toomer's *Cane*. Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* revises Zora Neale Hurston, Wright and Ellison. Gates elaborates how Ellison Signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference right from its title:

The play of language, the signifying, starts with the titles: Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, titles connoting race, self and presence, Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, invisibility an ironic response of absence, to the would be presence of "blacks" and "natives", while "man" suggests a more mature and stronger status than either "son" or "boy". Wright's distinctive version of naturalism Ellison signifies upon with a complex rendering of modernism; *Wright's reacting* protagonist, voiceless to the last, Ellison signifies upon with a nameless protagonist.¹⁰¹

Gates's theory of criticism grounded on the intertextual relationship between the works of African-American authors points to the existence of common concerns binding the works of African-American authors. His analysis is significant in a discussion of black consciousness as it is an attempt to place black texts in the black cultural matrix. Critical tools for an exegetical analysis of black American texts against the backdrop of African-American culture and its basic patterns have been provided by Robert B. Stepto in his *From Behind the Veil* and John F. Callahan in *In the African-American Grain* as well. Stepto's assumption is that African-American culture, like all cultures, has its stores of 'canonical stories' or 'pregeneric myth' and the primary pregeneric myth of African-American is the quest for freedom and literacy.¹⁰² Stepto's thesis is predicated on the understanding that black authors and texts collectively seek their own literary form and it is bound historically and linguistically to a shared pregeneric myth, as in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the myth of freedom and literacy assumed the properties of a genre. John F. Callahan, on the other hand, assumed that African-American novelists adopted 'call-and response' to fiction from the participatory forms of oral culture. These critical methods, rooted in the African-American tradition,

attempt to come to the conclusion that double consciousness of African-Americans writers operates both at the thematic and structural level. This peculiarity itself is due to the blackness of African-American texts or the black consciousness articulated by black authors in their own peculiar ways.

NOTES

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⁴ Blyden Jackson, *A History of Afro-American Literature, Vol. I. The Long Beginnings, 1746-1895* (Baton Rouge: U of Louisiana, 1989) 1.

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⁹ Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery* (Glasgow: W.S. Brown, 1851) 51.

¹⁰ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1944) 17.

¹¹ Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (1957; New York: Double day, 1964) 60.

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¹⁴ Quoted in Sarbani Sen, "How Red is Black? An Analysis of the African-American Movement with Marxism," *Politics and Culture in Twentieth Century America*, Ed. Joseph L. Plakkottam (Hyderabad: ASRC, 1993) 33.

¹⁵ Quoted in John Hope Franklin, *Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976) 63.

¹⁶ Quoted in H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 9.

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¹⁹ Bharath Bhushan, "Soul on Fire," *Sunday Magazine*, 11 April 1993: 1.

²⁰ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy and Society* (Boston: South Press, 1983) 9.

²¹ Louis Althusser, *Lenin, Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 145.

²² John Oliver Killens, *Black Man's Burden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965) 42.

²³ Alphine W. Jefferson, "Black American in the 1980s: Rhetoric Vs Reality," *Black Scholar*. 17.3 (1986): 3.

²⁴ "Race Relations in America," *SPAN*, Dec. 1992: 7.

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²⁶ For Carmichael and Hamilton, institutional racism rears its head when in the same city five hundred black babies die each year because of lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community. 'Respectable racism' is reflected in such slogans as 'reverse discrimination', 'meritocracy', and in the criticism of 'affirmative action'. They enunciated these categories in their seminal work *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*: (New York: Random House, 1967).

²⁷ Blyden Jackson 7.

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²⁹ Bharath Bhushan I.

³⁰ K. John Mammen, "African Americans lot," *Indian Express* 2 Dec. 1993: 8.

³¹ A. Balu, "Being Black and Poor", *Indian Express* 10 May 92: 8.

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³⁶ M. Glen Johnson 63.

³⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 680-81.

³⁸ Quoted in Michel Fabre, "Wright's Exile," *Wright: Impressions and Perspectives*, ed. David Ray and Robert Farmsworth (Ann Arbor: UP of Michigan Press, 1973) 136.

³⁹ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 116.

⁴⁰ Jean Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," *The Black American Writer Vol. II Poetry and Drama*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969) 9.

⁴¹ Marion Berghahn, *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Little Field, 1977) 4.

⁴² Quoted in Albert P. Blainstein and Robert L. Zangrandi, *Civil Rights and the American Negro: A Documentary History* (New York: Washington Square, 1968) 559.

⁴³ John Hope Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race," *The Use of the Present*, ed. Leonard Wolf (New York: Mchraw Hill Book Comp., 1970) 129.

⁴⁴ Joseph Stalin's thesis in *Marxism and the Nationality Question* was used by the American Communist Party to characterize black Americans as a separate nation and to raise the slogan of self determination. The idea was shelved in the post war years in tune with the interests of the Soviet State and the Communist Party and, consequently, Black Americans who had earlier enthusiastically gravitated towards Communism felt disillusioned.

⁴⁵ Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (New York: William Morrow, 1968) 75.

⁴⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Middle Sex: Penguin) 169.

⁴⁷ Todorov, "Race, Writing and Culture," "Race", *Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1985; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 377.

⁴⁸ William J. Wilson, *Power, Racism and Privilege: Race Relations in Theoretical and Socio-historical Perspective* (1973; New York: Free Press, 1976) 6.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Olivex Cox, *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970) 515.

⁵⁰ Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: U of Yale P, 1966) 3.

⁵¹ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Appollo, 1967) 564.

⁵² Peter I. Rose, "They and We: Racial and Ethnic relations in the United States,"

Minority Responses: Comparative Views of Reactions to Subordination, ed. Minoko Kurokawa (New York: Random House, 1970) 60.

⁵³ Thomas L. Blair, *Retreat to Ghetto: The End of a Dream* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 5.

⁵⁴ Marcus Garvey preferred the term Negro to black because, to him, it connoted more dignity and self-respect. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power* preferred the epithets black, Afro-American or African-American to the word Negro, which, to them, is the invention of their oppressor. To Leroi Jones 'Negro' signifies slave status and 'black' indicates a freed man. Though the preference for a particular appellation reflects their peculiar ideological position vis-a-vis the black problem, the term African - American is being currently employed in all writings and is the most accepted term among the black Americans.

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⁵⁶ Saunders Reddings, "Negro Writing in America," *New Leader* 16 May 1960: 8.

⁵⁷ Bernard W. Bell XVI.

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⁶⁰ Bernard W. Bell 329.

⁶¹ Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago, London: U of Chicago Press, 1984) 3.

⁶² Amiri Baraka, "Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle," *Black American Literature Forum* 14.1 (1980): 5.

⁶³ Ralph Ellison, "The Essential Ellison," "Interview," *Y'Bird Magazine, Vol. I No. 1: Before Columbus and Other Essays* (Berkeley: UP of Berkeley, 1977) 155.

⁶⁴ Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975) XII.

⁶⁵ Dickson D Bruce, Jr. *Black Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition* (Baton Rouge, London: Louisiana State UP, 1989) 15.

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⁶⁷ Quoted in Robert Hemenway, *The Black Novelist* (Columbia: Merrill Publ. Corp. 1970) 3.

⁶⁸ Alain Locke, "Introduction," *The New Negro* (1925; New York: Atheneum, 1969) 7.

⁶⁹ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, (16 June 1926): 694.

⁷⁰ Robert Hayden, "Preface," *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1969) IX.

⁷¹ Noel Schraufnagel, *From Apology to Protest: The Black American Novel* (Florida: Everett Edwards, Inc. 1973) 9.

⁷² James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972) 17.

⁷³ Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954) 342.

⁷⁴ Noel Schraufnagel 21.

⁷⁵ Bell 189.

⁷⁶ Susan L. Blake, "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison," *PMLA*, 94 (1979): 126.

⁷⁷ Thomas H. Nigel, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American novel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 82.

⁷⁸ Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American literature* 67.

⁷⁹ Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 332.

⁸⁰ Marion Berghahny, *Image of Africa in Black American Literature* 19.

⁸¹ Addison Gayle, "introduction," *Black Aesthetic*, (ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Anchor Books, 1971) XXIII.

⁸² Amiri Baraka, "Black Art," *The Black Scholar* 18 Jan-Feb 1987: 23.

⁸³ Roni Karega, "Black Cultural Nationalism," *The Black Aesthetic* ed. Addison Gayle 32.

⁸⁴ Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* 80.

⁸⁵ John Henrick Clarke, "The Origin and Growth of Afro-American Literature," *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New America Library, 1968) 634.

⁸⁶Charles Johnson, *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 121.

⁸⁷Roger Rosen Blatt, *Black Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974) 121.

⁸⁸ Nathaniel McKay, "Ishmael Reed and the Black Aesthetic," *CLA Journal*, . XXI.3 (1978) : 364-65.

⁸⁹ Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Double day, 1978) 298.

⁹⁰ Ishmael Reed, *Conjure: Selected Poems 1963-1970* (Amherst: U of Massachussetts, 1972) 21.

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⁹⁴ Keith E. Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction* (London: UP of Georgia, 1986) 2.

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⁹⁸ Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Critical Inquiry* 9.4 (1983): 689.

⁹⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 46.

¹⁰⁰ Gates, "Blackness of Blackness" 692.

¹⁰¹ Gates, "Blackness of Blackness" 696.

¹⁰² Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana, Chicago: UP of Illinois Press, 1979) ix.

Chapter 2

Richard Wright: Blacks as Victims and Rebels

Richard Wright was born as the son of an illiterate sharecropper and a one-time school teacher in Mississippi in 1908. His childhood in the South was marked by the abject poverty of his family, racial discrimination and the Jim Crow laws prevalent in the South. His father deserted his family and, his mother, who had been working as a cook in white people's kitchen, had once beaten him so severely when he was four that he was left senseless for a day. The pathos of his rudderless childhood, marked by lack of love and warmth in the family, is obvious in his fictionalized autobiography *Black Boy*, where expressing his antipathy towards his father he narrates the circumstance which made him a drunkard at the age of four.¹ His literary interest and imaginative nature alienated him from his black community. This further compounded and aggravated his feeling of alienation in a situation dominated and controlled by white racism. His plastic years, spent in the South where racism was well - entrenched made an indelible impact on his mind. His status as a dispossessed black made his situation worse adding poverty to the race factor. As Kenneth Kinnamon has observed "the four basic facts of his youth which contributed to the moulding of his personality are his racial status, poverty, the disruption of his family life and his faulty education."² Bell's account of Wright's formative experience provides an illuminating insight into the factors which moulded his sensibility:

In sheer drama his life reads like one of his short stories or novels. Before reaching his seventeenth birthday, Wright was deserted by his father, made a drunkard by Memphis bar flies, placed in an orphanage by his

poverty-stricken mother, forced to flee Arkansa after the lynching of his uncle, reared under the religious tyranny of his good mother and aunts, terrified by the suffering of his mother brought on by poverty and a paralytic stroke, and beaten by white bigots, and involved in petty thefts with his friends. It was not because of the American Dream that he achieved success as a writer, but in spite of it.³

It was in 1914 that he moved to Memphis, Tennessee and later on to Chicago in 1934 and then to New York. Finally, putting an end to his migratory experience, which is considered to be "his central formative experience"⁴ he left France as was done by Fishbelly Tucker in his novel *The Long Dream*. Though the migrations were prompted by his desire to "talk freely, to escape the pressures of fear"⁵ he even felt disillusioned in Paris. Chicago, "the great iron, impersonal, mechanical city to which other blacks like himself had fled"⁶ turned out to be another mirage in his existential journey. In Chicago, he got himself actively involved in the Communist Party activities through the John Read club, its cultural outfit. His affair with the Communist party was short-lived as he had to part company with them for personal and ideological reasons as lucidly set forth in his much anthologized essay "I Tried to be a Communist" which later formed part of his autobiographical work *American Hunger*. As Richard Kostelanetz has pointed out, "his life itself was marked by a series of rejections, first of the American South, then of the Northern cities, then of communism, then of America itself, then perhaps of expatriation."⁷ His self-imposed exile was also prompted by a desire to escape the racism implicit in American society, as he felt that Paris seemed to offer him freedom without alienation. In an article "I choose exile" which was written for *Ebony*, but rejected as too severe an indictment of the United States, he pointed

out that "something was basically wrong with a nation that its denial of rights to the Negro could so cynically violate its own constitution and democratic pretensions."⁸

His hope of experiencing freedom in Paris was belied as he found that he had got lost in an alien soil. He opted for Paris, because in his mind it was equated with Freedom, freedom from violence, blacklisting, and the pressures of hysterical democracy. Though he appears to have lost in an alien land in Paris as in the case of Fish belly Tucker in "the Island of Hallucination,"¹⁰ he found "more freedom in one square block of Paris than there in the entire United States."¹¹ It is significant that though the humanistic tradition of France seemed to offer him freedom, in Paris he engaged in writing his non-fictional works of cultural politics such as *Black Power*, *Pagan Spain* and *Color Curtain*, where he views the problem of racism from a Third World perspective counterposing it to the western culture.

Wright, often hailed as the first significant modern African-American novelist who wrote in the naturalistic vein, setting the trend of the protest tradition in the modern context, has fictional and non-fictional works to his credit. His fictional works such as *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, *Lawd Today*, *The Outsider* and *The Long Dream* are laced with autobiographical material whereas his *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* are often referred to as fictionalized autobiographies. *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* delineate the common experience of being black in American society while his fictional works generally provide a glimpse into his own individual experience as a marginalized black in a society dominated by whites. Both his fictional and non-fictional works, except his novel *Savage Holiday*, are rooted in black experience and express the intense black consciousness of the writer. Uncle Tom, the traditional subservient image of the Negro popularized

by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is supplanted in Wright's fictional world with the characters who are determined to challenge the system even by violent and aggressive means. Wright himself heralded the birth of Uncle Tom's children, rebels who people not only the stories of *Uncle Tom's Children* but all his fictional works when he wrote in his epigraph to *Uncle Tom's Children* that "the image of the Negro symbolizing the reluctant toleration for the cringing type who knew his place before white folk (Uncle Tom) has given way to a new word from another generation which says Uncle Tom is dead."¹² Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Jack Jackson in *Lawd Today*, Cross Damon in *The Outsider* are temperamentally rebels who try to assert their identity even through violence. They are victims as well as rebels and their rebellion springs out of their desire to survive. Evelyn Gross Avery's observation that "the black rebel, driven to assert himself, often, violently has replaced the acquiescent victim in recent black fiction and the image of Uncle Tom and Sambo has disappeared"¹³ holds true for the characters of Richard Wright who assume the archetypal role of the rebel in black American fiction.

Uncle Tom's Children, a collection of novellas, was published in 1938 and prefaced by an autobiographical sketch entitled "The Ethics of living Jim Crow," a record of his experience as a child and adult in a racist society. In the autobiographical sketch he delineates his own Jim Crow education in the course of various jobs as hall boy in a hotel, worker in an optical company in Memphis and porter in a clothing store. The experiences gathered from these places provide an excellent background for the thematic concerns in the stories which depict the debilitating effect of Jim Crow laws on the psyche of the blacks. The dehumanizing and deracinating effect of racism and its manifestation in the form of Jim Crow laws in the South is brilliantly explored in the stories included in *Uncle Tom's Children*. The stories in the collection have attained

such a unity of theme and tone that many have classified it as a novel.¹⁴ The story "Big Boy Leaves Home," the crowning achievement of Wright in *Uncle Tom's children* revolves round four self indulgent negro boys in Mississippi who are discovered by a white woman while they were swimming in the nude. The four boys led by the Big Boy are away from school, giving vent to their rebellious tendencies, trespassing on the pond of Harvey, a white old man. Jim, the companion of the white woman, an armed and uniformed soldier shoots immediately killing two of them before the remaining two charge him. In the ensuing struggle the white man is killed by Big Boy and, Bobo, fearing mob violence attempts to escape to the North with the garments of Buck and Lester, his companions. Bobo is caught and the whites burn and mutilate him. The Big Boy watches all this from his hiding place while white women and children watch the festive occasion sacrificing a Negro who trespassed the code prescribed by the white community. The story, by portraying racial confrontation in the South in sexual terms, fictionalises the black- white relationship in the South. It effectively makes use of the myth of Negro sexual superiority and the notion ingrained in the whites that every black male is a potential rapist as he always desires a white woman. Feeling of sexual inferiority generates in whites jealousy and it often ends up in violence directed against the blacks. In the story, the lynching of Bobo is, in fact, a symbolic rite of castration, the ultimate indignity that can be inflicted upon an individual.¹⁵ The Big boy by his resistance to the Jim Crow laws of the South foreshadowed Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and the wider significance and ramifications of sexualized racism first treated in "Big Boy leaves Home" became the central concern in *The Long Dream*.

Uncle Tom's Children includes stories which show a marked influence of Communist ideals which Wright held dear to his heart in those days. The story "Down By Riverside," centers upon the story of Mann, a black farmer who takes his ailing wife to the hospital in the midst of a flood, stealing the boat of a postman as no boats were

available then. This incident sparks off a series of violent incidents beginning with Mann's murder of the postman when he tries to recover his stolen property. He is shot on the banks of the river and later his wife dies in child birth. In "Bright and Morning Star" where the mother Booker adopts her son's communist vision to replace her own religious convictions, shows Wright's view that even the most ignorant and poor black woman can become a vital force in the cause of freedom. The stories in the collection were written when he was actively involved in Communist politics as in the case of his early poems which appeared between 1934 and 1936 in communist periodicals such as *New Front*, *New Masses* and *International Literature*. "Bright and Morning Star," along with "Fire and Cloud" reveals Wright's dream of the unity between the lower classes of both races, thus contributing to the communist cause of class unity transcending the barriers of race and caste. But James R. Giles has succinctly outlined the progression from individual effort to group rebellion characterizing the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* when he summed up the motives of the protagonists in the stories. The stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, while commenting on racism, foreshadow the major preoccupations and motives of Wright's protagonists in his later novels such as *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *The Long Dream* and *Lawd Today*. Giles' observations aptly pinpoint the characteristic traits of the protagonists of the stories:

There is Big Boy, the youth who runs, then Mann the adult who runs, then Silas who meets a heroic but lonely death, then Taylor, the Minister who will not openly endorse Marxism but acts out its implications, and finally there is Sue who dies a martyred convert to communism and thus triumphs over all the forces which have limited the characters in the first four stories.¹⁶

Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth, his fictionalized autobiography

is, in fact, a sociological study of how the black life in the South was determined by its environment, as it is a series of episodes strung together illustrating the enormity of racism in the South. *American Hunger*, its extension, often referred to as his portrait as an artist, which dwelt at length on his association with communists through the John Reed club in Chicago, was published only in 1977, though Wright initially composed both *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* as one book entitled *The Horror and the Glory*. Though *Black Boy* is replete with autobiographical episodes, the narrator of the book adopts an impersonal attitude in the course of the narration. The argument that *Black Boy* is an autobiography is often contested on the ground that there are several discrepancies in Wright's account in the book and the facts contained in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow." W.E.B. Dubois, by his illuminating comment has set at rest the controversy over the alleged fictionality/ autobiographical nature of *Black Boy*:

The [Sub] title 'A Record of Childhood and Youth' makes one at first think that the story is autobiographical. It probably is, at least in part. But mainly it is probably intended to be fiction or fictionalized biography. At any rate the reader must regard it as a creative work, rather simply a record of life.¹⁷

The protagonist who goes through the searing impact of poverty, discrimination and lack of love is a representative of the black youth in the South who often broke the Jim Crow laws of the South. Wright emerges as a rebel determined to go beyond the limits set by his environment after passing through the excruciating circumstances. The unique feature of *Black Boy* lies in the fact that Wright here considers "himself as symbolic of all the brutality and cruelty inflicted upon the black man in the Southern environment."¹⁸ He echoes Dubois' oft-quoted concept

of the double consciousness when he alludes to the situation of blacks in America:

Whenever I thought of the essential blackness of black life in America, I know that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clear, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty and the capacity to remember, was native to man.¹⁹

As in other black autobiographies he communicates to the white world what the white world has done to them.²⁰ *Black Boy* closes as we find the protagonist boarding a train to North thinking that there he could experience the pleasures of life which had been denied to him in the South.²¹ Despite his crying need to escape from the South in search of freedom he was conscious of the shaping influence of the South on his psyche and artistic sensibility. His perceptive observation towards the close of *Black Boy* partly explains the feeling of restlessness and alienation he felt wherever he went:

Yet, deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feeling had already been formed by the South, for they had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South. So, in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently.²²

The Outsider, Wright's expatriate novel, laced with intense philosophizing, is an extension of the ideas contained in his short story "The Man who Lived Underground" collected in *Eight Men*. The novel portrays Cross Damon, a Negro post office employee in Chicago, who kills four people and is finally killed by the

Communists with whom he had worked earlier. Damon, who has all the attributes of an existential hero, is a modified version of Fred Daniel, the protagonist in "The Man who Lived Underground" a God like superman who transcends the limits set on his actions. Damon is an outsider, who while rejecting the laws and conventions of the society like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov and Karamazov, assumes the role of a nihilistic superman challenging the facts of his existence. Dejected and disillusioned with his family and job, he takes advantage of a subway accident to assume the identity of another person. Escaping to New York, he gets involved in Communist party activities, but very soon sees through their nefarious game of using individuals as pawns for political games and ends up killing two of them and his racist landlord Ely Houston. Though the racist identity of Cross is not as pronounced as in *Native Son*, *Lawd Today* and *The Long Dream*, it must be noted that Cross's existential problem is a product of his status as a Negro in American society. Cross's obsession with his non-identity and search for an identity which culminate in the murders, his involvement with Communist party activities and later disillusionment are not unconnected with his position as a Negro and in many respects parallel the situation of many a Negro in American society. In *The Outsider*, Wright shows how a Negro is destroyed by an organized movement which denies freedom and opportunity to the individual, whereas in *Native Son* he puts the capitalist system on trial for the same reason. Darwin T. Turner has made a thematic comparison of *Native Son* and *The Outsider* which sheds light on Wright's treatment of existential problem plaguing the black psyche:

Despite the difference in the character of Bigger and Cross Damon they have parallel themes: Bigger is economically poor and uneducated; Damon is a middle class black and an intellectual. Both through murder

achieve manhood, but are destroyed by an organized institution -- Bigger by a capitalist society and Damon by Communists.²³

His positive portrayal of communists in *Native Son* and the indictment of the Communist Party in *The Outsider* can be attributed to the antithetical stance adopted by Wright regarding the efficacy of the communist position vis-a-vis black problem at the time of writing the two novels.

Wright's *The Outsider* is often referred to as an existential novel, and William V. Sparios in his *A Case Book On Existentialism* includes it as a novel exemplifying existentialist philosophy. Though the existential vision pervades *Native Son* and critics interpreted Bigger's action as that of a metaphysical rebel in the tradition of Albert Camus, *The Outsider* offers more easy existential reading. But the existentialism in *The Outsider* cannot be reduced to the codified theories of existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger or Sartre, rather, the existential vision of the novel grows out of the protagonist's situation in America, which generates an existential frame of mind. His existential concerns spring from the exigencies of the life situation of the Negro class to which he belongs rather than from a direct reading of the books of the European existentialist thinkers. There is no denying the fact that during his Paris years he came under the direct influence of existential thinkers and, in fact, he met some of them. After reading the works of German and French existentialists Wright had noted that they were writing things that he had been thinking, visiting and feeling all his life.²⁴ This situation arose out of the close interconnection between the existentialist vision and the situation of the Negro in the United States. As Christopher Sawyer has noted, for Wright "the impulse toward his embrace of existentialism was firmly rooted in his upbringing, in his personal observation of the absurd existence thrust on black man in America."²⁵

Modern European existentialists in the twentieth century emerged in the wake of the experience of Europe under Nazi occupation and the traumas of the World War. Alienation and dehumanization characteristic of the modern industrial and technocratic society are the staple theme of modern existentialist writers. For them, man is an outsider or refugee in his own homeland. This vision parallels the situation of blacks who have been marginalized in the society. Racial discrimination and prejudice generate identical feelings in blacks. So it is quite natural that blacks have a propensity for existentialism as it is a way of confronting their extreme situation. In this regard Nathan Scott Jr. has aptly pointed out that "there was nothing at all unnatural in the American Negro writer having responded affirmatively to the angst-ridden accents and idioms of Sartre and George Bataille and Maurice Blanchot"²⁶. Nina Kressner's argument that Cross Damon's philosophy of psychological determinism is the very negation of Jean Paul Sartre's precept 'existence precedes essence'²⁷ does not invalidate the view that *The Outsider* is a novel dealing with existential problems. For Richard Wright, existential problems emerge out of the predicament of blacks and it is not an ideological jacket handed over by Sartre or Kierkegaard. The socio-political existence of the American Negro on the margins of American society has made him an existentialist. More precisely, an existentialist response is often thrust upon him by the necessities of his life. It springs from his double consciousness or what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has termed the "two-toned heritage"²⁸ and is implicit in his response to life and reality. Michel Fabre's perceptive account of the African-American root of Wright's existential vision is illuminating:

But an irreducible element in his psychological and ethical kinship with French thought came from his own bitter experience, from

the constant "double vision" of being black in America, from the "bad faith" of living Jim Crow and from his radical posture of departure as a life long outsider.²⁹

Lawd Today, the first written and the last published of Wright's novels, came out posthumously in 1963. A dialect novel in the naturalistic vein, *Lawd Today* portrays twenty four hours in the life of Jake Jackson, a Chicago postal clerk who is disillusioned and embittered and gives vent to his fury on his wife Lil. An experimental novel, very much in the vein of Joyce's *Ulysses*, it fictionalizes the problems of environmental determinism in shaping the character of Jake, a negro antihero. To forget about his nagging wife who incurs heavy debts on account of her ailment and abortion, and his deadening job Jake takes recourse to playing bridge and drinking realising that "a nigger just stays a nigger."³⁰ The action of the novel takes place on Feb. 12, the day of Abraham Lincoln's birthday and the radio blares forth a series on the Civil War celebrating the emancipation of slaves. The choice of Feb. 12 is ironical, as Wright drives home the point that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation has not yet emancipated the blacks and despite legal freedom they are still as bad as slaves. In the very beginning of the novel, Jake dreams he is hurrying up a long flight of stairs, but the steps seem endless. He undertakes a Sisiphasean effort to reach the top, but in vain. Denied upward mobility, he remains in the same place and that is the predicament of the Negro in America. The stair-climbing dream is the central theme of the novel through which Wright indicates that a negro is made incapable of going up the social ladder in America because of the racist nature of the society.

Jackson challenges the facts of his existence, which, in fact, is predicated on his Negro status. He is reduced to an animal by the environment and it drives

him to brutality, alcohol and sex. He is another version of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, who are also products of their circumstances. Noel Schraufnagel who included *Lawd Today* in the lists of the novels written in the apologetic protest tradition of the sixties pointed to the deterministic motive of the novel when he noted that in *Lawd Today*, "Wright attempts to illustrate that white oppression is responsible for the depraved condition of the defeated creature."³¹ In this sense the novel is a strong indictment of the white power structure which perpetuates racial discrimination and colour prejudice. By portraying the dissipated life of a Mississippi migrant in Chicago, he may also be alluding to the fact that the Great Migration of blacks from South to North in search of freedom and opportunity in the beginning of this century did not better the situation of the Negroes. Jackson, who often identifies with mainstream values and is virulently anti-Red comments that "the only difference between the North and the South is, these guys down there 'll kill you, and there up he'll let you starve to death."³² The difference is only in degree and justice is denied to the Negro both in the South and the North. The protagonist in *Lawd Today* turns violent and aggressive like the protagonists of *Native Son* and *The Outsider* and very often the violence is directed against his own people. Frantz Fanon, who characterized the black man as similar to that of a colonized native, posited the theory of violence which helps explain Wright's characters' penchant for violence against people of their own Negro class. Fanon noted that "the black man first manifests aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people."³³ In *Lawd Today*, the butt of Jackson's fury, conditioned by his black consciousness, is his negro wife Lil.

In his non-fictional works Wright has lucidly analysed the sociology and politics of the black experience in America. Whereas his fictional works are replete

with utterances which shed light on his black consciousness moulded in the crucible of black experience, his comprehensive account of the black situation provided in his books of cultural politics and a few introductory essays in some seminal works on black sociology reinforce the exploration of the psychological damage done to the blacks in his fictional works. His moving account of his association with the Communist party in "I Tried to be a Communist" and passing references to communist ideology in other non-fictional works indicate that his political vision was conditioned by the black consciousness and he found it difficult to transcend the barrier wherever he was. His oft-quoted observation that "Negro is America's metaphor"³⁴ stemmed from his realization that the feeling of alienation and rootlessness characteristic of Americans are best exemplified in the predicament of the Negro on the margins of American society. Negroes are the very embodiment of an alienated group as they had been cut off from their African roots and not allowed to participate in the mainstream culture of America. He experiences an identity crisis on account of his double consciousness. Wright catches the full spirit of the psychological damage inflicted on blacks in America right from the days of Atlantic slave trade when he noted that

Captivity, under Christendom blasted our lives, disrupted our families, reached down into the personalities of each of us and destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings in the effort to live. Our folk ways and folk tales, which had once given meaning and sanction to our action faded from our consciousness. Our gods were dead and answered us no more. The trauma of leaving our African home, the suffering of the long Middle Passage, the thirst, the hunger, the horrors of the slave ships--all these hollowed us out, humbled us, stripped us, and left only psychological urges, the feelings of fear and fatigue.³⁵

Wright believed that in the days of slavery white masters, not content with physically enslaving the Negroes, deprived them of their tradition and past. Further, he voiced the idea that blacks in America were an internal colony as early as the 1940s. In a letter published in a French magazine *Les Nouvelles Epirtres*, in 1946 he characterized the plight of the African-Americans as that of an internal colony:

The Negro is intrinsically a colonial subject, but one who lives not in China, India or Africa but next door to his conquerors, fighting their wars, and labouring in the factories. The American Negro problem, therefore, is but a fact of the global problem that splits the world into two. Tradition Vs. Progress, Personality Vs Collectivity, the East (the colonial people) Vs. the West (the exploiters of the world).³⁶

Wright rightly believed that the Negro was neither a racial nor a biological construct, but someone made in the United States.³⁷ He has captured the caged situation of black Americans in a vivid and powerful image in *American Hunger* by drawing a parallel between his isolated job in the hospital cut off from the mainstream:

The hospital kept us, four Negroes, as though we were close kin to the animals we tended, huddled together down in the underworld corridors of the hospital, separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant process of the rest of the hospital -- just as America had kept in locked in the dark underworld of American life for 300 years -- and he had made our own code of ethics, values and loyalty.³⁸

The black American's status in America is bicultural. He is denied complete

participation in American life. The factors which direct and shape black lives are radically different from the factors which mould the life of non-blacks. He is the product of a subhuman and excruciating circumstance. In this regard, Wright's observation in his Introduction to George Lamming's work *In the Castle of My Skin* is illuminating:

Without adequate preparation, the Negro of the Western world lives, in one life, many life times. Most white lives are couched in norms more or less traditional: born of stable family groups, a white boy emerges from adolescence, enters high school, finishes college, studies a profession, marries, builds a home, raising children etc. The Negro, though born in the Western world, is not quite of it; due to policies of racial exclusion, his is the story of two cultures: the dying culture in which he happens to be born and the culture into which he is trying to enter--a culture, which has, for him, not quite yet come into being.³⁹

Though his vision broadened in the expatriate years as he came to believe in the necessity of uniting all the oppressed sections of the world against the oppressors, his focal point remained the problem of the African-Americans. As he had claimed "he had shed the corpse of the burden of race consciousness which every Negro in America carries, when he stepped off the train in Paris."⁴⁰ The alien atmosphere of the French soil must have provided him an opportunity to view the race problem from a wide Third World perspective and plead for the unity of the Third World countries against the imperialist oppressors. But his concern with the problem of the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy was, no doubt, prompted by his obsession with the predicament of the black Americans. His interest in the proceedings of the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in which he

participated reveals his belief in a united offensive against the West as expressed in *Colour Curtain*, whereas his fascination with the plight of the Protestants in Spain recorded in *Pagan Spain* (1957) is prompted by his understanding that their situation has affinities with African-Americans, Jews and other oppressed minorities. He glorified African culture in *12 Million Black Voices* and in *Black Power* he recounted his experience of his visit to the African Gold coast. Though viewed from a different angle, the ideas set forth in his works of cultural politics is the logical denouement of his understanding of the black situation expressed in his fictional works.

Wright who vehemently indicted racial discrimination and its devastating influence on black psyche in his non-fictional works peopled his novels with violent and aggressive characters. It is quite natural that a sensibility shaped in the ambience of post-depression years in America, when the sociological imagination was in the air, took on a note of violence and protest. The protagonists in *Native Son*, *The Outsider* and *Lawd Today* are not passive victims, on the contrary, they are rebels who revolted violently against the facts of their victimized existence. Fish Belly Tucker in *The Long Dream*, though not as violent as the protagonists in other novels, is aware that violence is the only course open to him, but as he detests it, he ultimately takes recourse to a self-imposed exile. His conscious rejection of the American society ridden with the evils of racism itself is a rebellious act, and the final denouement drives him to the company of Bigger, Damon and Jackson.

Wright was heavily influenced by the Chicago School of Sociology headed by Louis Wirth, Horace Cayton and Robert E. Park, and he draws on the sociological findings of eminent sociologists. He himself acknowledged his indebtedness to

the authors of *Black Metropolis*:

If in reading my novel, *Native Son*, you doubted the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in the books; if in reading my autobiography *Black Boy*, you doubted the picture of family life shown there, then read their study on family disorganization given there. *Black Boy* describes the processes that mould Negro life as we know it today, processes that make the majority of Negroes in Chicago's South side sixth graders, processes that make sixty five per cent of all Negroes in Chicago's South side earn their living by manual labour. After studying the social processes in the book, you cannot expect Negro life to be other than what it is.⁴¹

Wright is driving home the point that his account of black life portrayed in *Black Boy* and *Native Son* is corroborated in the sociological findings in *Black Metropolis*. In *Black Metropolis*, which is a blend of anthropology and sociology, Wright employed sociological concepts such as industrialization, secularization, urbanization and social stratification in the analysis of the black-white relationship in Chicago. In actuality, Wright identifies himself with all the black boys in the South in *Black Boy*, and the approach is very much in the tradition of the Chicago school of sociology which, by examining individuals as types showed him that the story of blacks and of himself were identical.⁴² Wright is also indebted to the scientific findings of Robert E. Park, Robert Redford and Louis Wirth for the writing of *12 Million Black Voices*, *Native Son*, *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*.⁴³ The sociological imagination of the post-Depression years which emphasized the grafting of sociology and literature provided Wright with a method to give literary expression to his black consciousness. For him, the selection of naturalism as a literary mode

was not an ideologically conscious choice as it was for Emile Zola, Dos Passos and John Steinbeck. As Baker has pointed out "probably he felt that his own life and the Negro life in the United States were closely mirrored in the naturalistic assumptions of determinism."⁴⁴

Naturalism, an offshoot and extension of realism and social documentation, borrowed the term from post-Darwinian biology and asserted the wholly determined character of man and society. Since man is simply a higher animal, his nature is controlled by the regular forces of heredity and environment. So a naturalist novelist becomes a taxonomic biologist displaying his scientific objectivity, tracing the motivation of characters. Man, in the naturalistic novel, is portrayed as a creature determined by heredity, milieu and the pressures of the moment. Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Jackson in *Lawd Today* and Cross Damon in *The Outsider* are all products of the American racist society, and they cannot be faulted for their crimes. The roots of their abnormal behaviour and crimes are to be located in the society which breeds violent and aggressive tendencies in blacks by forcing them to live in subhuman conditions, denying equal opportunities and perpetuating racial discrimination. For Wright, naturalism came handy to project black vision from his own angle. Max's defense of Bigger in *Native Son* is an excellent naturalistic explanation of the roots of black crime. Donald B. Gibson's perceptive observation sheds light on the significance of the naturalistic mode for Wright who fictionalized black experience: "Wright did not simply emerge from the naturalist school of Dreiser, Dos Passos and Farrel; he did not simply adopt the technique of and thought of the naturalist to the situation of the black man ... but grew out of his experience in America."⁴⁵

Wright's numerous observations on communists and his relationship with

the Communist Party drive home the point that despite his active involvement in the Communist politics for about a decade (1934-44) he could not transcend his black consciousness which imprisoned him and prevented him from making any lasting association with any non-black ideology. His earlier affiliation with the Communist Party was never prompted by a conscious understanding of the theoretical precepts of Marxist ideology but sprang out of an emotional and sentimental attachment to the communist brotherhood which offered a niche for Negroes, like any other oppressed group, in its system. There is no denying the fact that the post-Depression scenario in America had witnessed a renewed interest in communism that really began in the post-October Revolution years. But as he himself noted,

It was not the economics of communism, not the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole.⁴⁶

The Communist Party's approach to the Negro problem underwent a radical change in the post-Depression years in tune with Stalin's thesis in his *Marxism and National and Colonial Question*. Communists, who had underplayed the significance of race, caste and ethnicity in favour of class solidarity and class consciousness, adopted a policy at their Sixth World Congress in 1928 defining the status of black Americans as that of an oppressed nation and called for its right of self-determination. This ideological shift which continued only up to the Hitler-Stalin pact must have appealed to Wright. He was fascinated by the news that in post-revolutionary Russia the phonetic experts had given the tongueless people a language, newspaper, institutions and effectively solved the nationality problem.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Communist

Party offered him the warmth of interracial fellowship where he could forget his inferior status as a black. But Wright has unambiguously asserted that black people primarily regarded Russian Communists as whitemen just as they regard American, British and French anti-communist as white people.⁴⁸ He is not prepared to sacrifice his black identity and obsession with black problem at the altar of communism. For the Negro the various sociological systems are mere instruments for their own ends as he stands outside the ambit of those instruments and ideologies. Communist's sidelining of the Negro problem, following the Stalin-Hitler pact in tune with the Soviet policy, embarrassed Richard Wright and contributed to his alienation from the party orbit. His inability to transcend his black consciousness to make any lasting identification with the class consciousness theory of Marxism is evident in a letter he wrote to a friend, Edward Aswell, in 1955:

I was a Communist because I was a Negro. Indeed the Communist Party had been the only road out of the Black belt for me. Hence communism had not been for me simply a fad, a hobby; it had a deep functional meaning for my life; Therefore, when I left the communist party, I no longer had a protective barrier, no defense between me and a hostile environment that absorbed all of my time, emotions and attention. To me, the racial situation was far hardened matter than the communist one and it was one I could not solve alone.⁴⁹

Wright's black consciousness continued to assert itself though he was conscious of the problems of other oppressed groups in the Third World countries. His political vision and his approach sprang from his black consciousness and consequently he looked upon ideological systems with the eye of a black man obsessed with the problems of the blacks in America. He could no longer subscribe

to the Marxist view which tried to fit the Negro problem into a class war frame of reference as he believed that the roots of that problem lay in American culture.

II

Native Son, published in 1940 broke fresh ground in African-American novel with the portrayal of Bigger Thomas, the black protagonist, who violently rebelled against the racist society of America with his double murder. Irving Howe has rightly commented on its impact on American society when he said that "the day *Native Son* was published American society was changed for ever."⁵¹ *Native son*, radically departing from the black novels of yester years which very often contented with portraying Uncle Toms and passive Negroes, projected an alienated protagonist characterized in different ways by critics such as a metaphysical rebel,⁵² Bad Nigger,⁵³ Black Nationalist and anti-hero.⁵⁴ Though critics differ on the ideological moorings which prompted Bigger to put on a violent and aggressive disposition which finally culminated in the double murder, a threadbare analysis of the novel would reveal that there is not much for disputing the argument that Wright depicts him as a typical and natural product of a society which practised racial discrimination on the basis of colour. Bigger's trial in the novel is, in fact, a trial in which the inequitable American society is indicted. He is a victim-turned rebel and his rebellion is the product of his victimized body and mind. As Ihab Hassan has pointed out he belongs to the category of Negro protagonists who graduated from being innocent victims to the status of rebels.⁵⁵ His life embodies the traits of Prometheus, the eternal rebel and Sisiphus, the eternal victim.⁵⁶

The novel is a fine blending of objective and subjective experiences. As

Wright admits, the character of Bigger is a composite of at least five individual Negroes he knew in his life.⁵⁷ The sociological research of Wright's friend Horace R. Cayton provided enough material for the novel.⁵⁸ The slum conditions of Chicago depicted in *Native Son* had been the daily reality in Wright's life during 1927 and 1937. Robert Nixon, a Chicago negro who was executed in the electric chair in 1938 for having murdered a white girl also⁵⁹ must have given impetus for the composition of the novel.

Native Son, set in Chicago, tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a twenty year old Chicago Negro who kills his employer Dalton's daughter Mary, who is sympathetic to the Negro cause and later to conceal the facts ends up killing his own Negro beloved Bessie. The murder of Mary is purely accidental, accomplished by the pressure of a pillow over her mouth to keep her from calling her blind mother. Later, Jan, Mary's communist boyfriend procures the assistance of Max, a Jewish communist lawyer, who defends him in vain. Bigger is executed after a lengthy trial in which Wright presents various aspects of the black problem and white-black interrelationship which breed violence and aggression on the part of the Negroes. Bigger emerging from his poverty-stricken, excruciating circumstances is a typical product of his situation and a perceptive reader after reading the novel is left with the impression that he is what he is because of his tormenting circumstances over which he has no control.

Bigger was born in Mississippi, "racially the most repressive state in the union,"⁶⁰ and educated in the South where the colour line is pronounced. His father got killed in a race riot when he was a kid and "as far as he knows nothing was done about it".⁶¹ He lives with his sister and mother in a room where there is "no rug on the floor and pastery on the walls

and ceiling hung loose in many places" (NS 100). With his friends Gus, G.H. and Jack he indulges in petty thievery, though, they were scared of robbing whites because they felt that "it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white police men never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes (NS 17).

It is, therefore, not surprising that though Bigger is guilty of double murder--Mary, a white and Bessie, a black--it is for the former that he is indicted. This power of racism capable of subverting the hopes and aspirations of blacks is evident when Gus advises Bigger when he expresses his wish to fly planes: "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to the aviation school, you could fly a plane" (NS 20). All the 'ifs' point to the fact that as far as Negroes it is only a dream. The pathological environment in which Bigger is forced to live by the circumstance of his racial status is such that it is capable of inducing aggressive traits in his character. In this sense, Bigger is a 'native son', a true product of a society whose values are predicated on the shoddy ethics of racism and capitalism. He is an instrument in the hands of certain forces over which he has no control. It is significant in this context to study his behaviour in the light of Earl ofari Hutchinson's argument that "violence is not endemic to blacks. It is endemic to American society."⁶² Rebuilding Patric Moynihan's oft-quoted thesis in his famous 1965 report that the disorganisation of the black family breeds violence among the blacks, Hutchinson provides illuminating insight into the factors engendered by racism which cause disorganization of the black family. Wright himself has summed up his notion of the conditioning of the individual by external causes in a powerful image:

After studying the social process you cannot expect Negro life to be other than what it is. To expect the contrary would be like expecting to see Rolls-Royce coming off the assembly lines in Ford's River Rouge Plant. The imposed condition under which Negroes live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outlining the blue prints for the production of machine.⁶³

The conditioning of Bigger's psyche by the manifestations of race and class, the double burden which defined his identity as portrayed in *Native Son* is in tune with the deterministic philosophy of Wright expressed in his non-fictional works. In an essay entitled "Urban Misery and American City," published in the periodical *Twice a Year* in 1964, he used specific case studies to show how social conditions in New York's Harlem have affected black family life and produced juvenile delinquency.⁶⁴

The action of the novel begins with the members of the Thomas family engaged in the hunting of the rat that has been pestering them in their ill-equipped apartment on the south side of Chicago. Bigger leads the operation to corner and kill the rat and succeeds in trapping it and pounds the head of the rat with the shoe in a shocking manner much to the consternation of his sister Vera. Rat in this episode is often considered to be the central metaphor in the novel as it foreshadows what is in store for Bigger as he is later made to play the role of a rat among the whites. Ironically, the role is reversed, the white society hunting for Bigger who troubles the peaceful life of the whites. Margolies aptly summed up the implication of the image when he observed that "one may consider the entire book, from that harsh "Bung" to Bigger's, weak "Good-boy" as the lawyer, Max leaves him in the death cell is an extension, with the roles inverted of the

chilling metaphor.⁶⁵ Bigger, like the rat, is no match for the stronger foe, which is the white power structure. The subhuman existence of black community is also hinted at through powerful and appropriate metaphor of the rat "which is the key to the naturalistic elements that runs through the novel."⁶⁶ Towards the end of the novel Bigger assumes the role of a hunted animal and is crucified.

Bigger gets employed as a chauffeur under Mr. Dalton, a white philanthropist and a sympathizer of the NAACP. He contributes Ping Pong tables for the south side and tidy sums of money for Negro charity and is the owner of the south side real estate company in Chicago from which Bigger's family rents the room. But all the seemingly altruistic actions cover up the ruthless exploitation and racial hatred practised by him. He charges exorbitant rent from Negro tenants for uninhabitable accommodation because he thinks "it would be unethical to undersell his competitors" (NS 304). He admits that he charged high rents from Negroes because a housing shortage had existed in the Negro community. Though he owns homes in other sections of the city where no shortage exists, he will not rent them to Negroes because he thinks "Negroes are happier living together in one section" (NS 302). He further admits that, of all the Negroes his philanthropy has helped to educate he "gave over five million dollars to the colored schools" (NS 57). He had never employed one in the operation of his vast business enterprise (NS 207). Though he puts on a humanitarian mask in his dealings with the Negroes, basically he is shown to be no different from other whitemen who think that Negroes have to be shown their place. The liberal donation may salve his quilt-ridden conscience as he had made illegal money through slum rentals. The actions and activities of people like Daltons provided a congenial atmosphere for the emergence of people like Bigger. True to the naturalistic vein, Wright portrays Bigger as a pathological

figure conditioned and moulded by the mores and customs of the society which attaches a stigma to the colour of his skin. Mary's parents had brought her up avoiding the company of Negroes and it is through her Communist boy friend that she developed radical and progressive views on the Negro problem. Bigger had to carry Mary to her bed room as she had been too weak to walk. The immediate provocation for the murder is the fear of being caught in a white woman's bedroom which is a defiant violation of the racial taboo. In that case Bigger would be guilty of miscegenation, if he was caught. By hinting at the taboo attached to black male-white female relationship as a strong factor in the murder Wright is indicting the sexualized racism implicit in the American society which sees black man as a potential rapist. Calvin C. Hernton has maintained that

The American brand of sex and racism has distorted and vulgarized the perception of blackmen as sexual beings. The most blatant of the cultural stereotypes about the (black male) is the myth of (his) sexual virility Whites conceive of the (black) male predominantly in genital terms--that is, as a "bull" or as some kind of walking phallus.⁶⁷

In a society where the image of the black male as a sexual dynamo is deeply ingrained, the innocent intention behind Bigger helping Mary is difficult to be convinced. By bringing in the element of sexualized racism, Wright is implicitly putting on trial the attitudes of whites which contributed to the occurrence of the ghastly act which took away Mary's life.

The urge to kill has always been there in Bigger's psyche. He had an obscure but deep debt to fulfil to himself in accepting the deed (*NS* 101). Wright's portrayal of the psychological motive is revealing: "He had killed many times before,

only on those other times there had been no handy victim or circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill. His crime seemed natural; he felt that all his life had been leading to something like this" (NS 225). He suffered the inhumanity of the laws prescribed by the whites to keep the Negro in subjugation. In the beginning of the novel, in the Company of his pals he poses several pertinent questions which reveal his obsession with racial discrimination practised in the society. To his query, why the whites make the blacks live in one corner of the city and why they do not let them fly planes and run ships, Gus responds by advising him to stop thinking over such problems as he will go mad (NS 23). His personality is such that he knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else (NS 14). His antipathy towards white people is evident: To Bigger and his kind white people are not really people; They were a sort of natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark (NS 109). To avoid thinking too much Gus advises him to get drunk and sleep it off" (NS 24). So Mary was only an agent "to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Mary's" (NS 24). It was the culmination of his obsession with his black situation. After the murder he "felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried" (NS 109) as it was the first full free act of his life. Not satisfied with the murder of Mary, Bigger takes Bessie, his sweetheart to a vacant tenement on the southside, rapes her and beats her head with a brick before tossing her body down an airshaft. He gets rid of her because she will be a hindrance during his flight. It is the reason adduced by the protagonist. The real motivation for the murder of the Negro is to be located in the conditioned psyche of Bigger as it stands on a different plane. Addison Gayle's illuminating comment provides

brilliant insight into the psychology of the Negro protagonist:

The murder of Bessie Mears is the weakest incident in the novel. To murder the woman of his color and race mean that Bigger severs all ties with the universe, becomes a man completely alone. Further, for a black to murder another is to commit the most heinous of crimes, to substantiate the argument made by Attaway in *Blood on the Forge* that the black man who engages in violence becomes so obsessed with hatred and rage that he is incapable of distinguishing between friend and foe, not able to separate the oppressor from the victim. On this level Bigger fails as both rebel and revolutionary.⁶⁸

Bigger is no revolutionary in the conventional sense of the term. His murder, both that of the white and the black, grew out of the oppressive and dehumanizing situation in which he is forced to live. He does not have any genuine love for Bessie. He says: "I wasn't in love with Bessie. She was just my girl. I don't reckon I was even in love with nobody. I killed Bessie to save myself. You have to have a girl, so I had Bessie" (NS 326). As a Negro he is alienated and dehumanized. Consequently, he is incapable of establishing any meaningful relationship with others. Bigger himself says that "true love grows from stable relationships, shared experience, loyalty and devotion" (NS 368). Even he hated his family simply because "he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them" (NS 13).

Jan, though arrested and incarcerated for suspected murder, does not hold Bigger guilty. As a fervent Communist, he is conscious of the social roots of the criminal nature of Negroes like Bigger. Jan says: "Even since I got out

of jail I've been thinking this thing over and I felt that I'm the one who ought to be in jail for murder instead of you. But that can't be, Bigger. I can't take upon myself the blame for what one hundred million people have done" (NS 267). Jan's emotional attachment to Mary does not prevent him from arriving at the root cause of the crime which ends up in her death. Jan is a Communist.

In the beginning of the third part entitled "Fate" Bigger reads the copy of a newspaper entitled *Tribune*, given by the policeman which had carried a report about him captioned "Rapist faints at inquest." The report contains certain interesting observations made by white women which throw light on the racist notions ingrained in the psyche of the whites. The media propagate the myth of the Bad Nigger and tries to accentuate the racial barrier by spreading racist lies and myths by lending it an air of neutrality. A young white girl exclaimed that he looked exactly like an ape, thus alluding to the notion propagated by some Whites that blacks stand midway between ape and man in biological evolution.

During the historical trial, Max asks him a number of probing questions, and his response provides a glimpse into the working of Bigger's mind. Max's argument defending Bigger and his rebuttal of the charges made by Buckley, the attorney, conform to a Marxist analysis of the social phenomena that propelled Bigger to commit the murder. Bigger explains how his ambition to become an aviator and join the army was thwarted by the laws framed by the whites. "All they want a black man for is to dig ditches. ...all he can do is wash dishes and scrub floors" (NS 327).

Bigger pleaded not guilty at the arraignment and in the trial Max suggested

that they could change it to a plea of guilty and ask for mercy. When the trial was in progress, the newspapers were replete with reports with captions such as "sentiment against killer still rising" (NS 338). The media played up the crime to arouse public anger against Bigger. Two regiments were ordered during the trial of Bigger fearing outbreak of violence (NS 338). The media response indicates how the hegemonic press indirectly influences the Jury through creating a monstrous image of people like Bigger.

Wright seems to be hinting that the media controlled by the ruling class help in reproducing the dominant ideology which characterizes blacks as callous and monstrous men. This prejudiced view, which is biased and tendentious, is taken by the people as true and unprejudiced. Buckley, the State attorney, treats rape, sexual assault and murder as threats to the peaceful life of the American people and treats Bigger merely as a law and order problem. He refuses to see the social dimension of the crime, and his only plea is that if they do not kill him the mob will kill him. To whet the appetite of the mob, the Jury should pass death sentence. Max, on the other hand, drawing the attention of the Jury to the hordes of injustice heaped on the blacks argues that injustice lasting for three centuries is no longer injustice, it is a fact of life (NS 360). He further says:

He murdered Mary Dalton accidentally, without thinking, without plan, without conscious motive. But after he murdered, he accepted the crime. And that's the important thing. It was the first full act of his life; It was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it. It made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight (NS 364).

Bigger need not regret his act. "Do men regret when they kill in war?" (NS 364). Max asks. In the war we kill to keep from being killed. This is exactly what happened with Bigger. After a victorious war you return to a free country, just as the boy, with his hands stained with the blood of Mary Dalton, felt that he was free for the first time in his life (NS 364). Max, in a scathing attack on the circumstance that produced Bigger, treats him as a type representing the entire black population who, to him, constitute a separate nation within the United States. He says:

Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, allowing for environmental and temperamental variation, and for those Negroes who are completely under the influence of the church, and you have the psychology of the Negro people. But once you see them as a whole, once your eyes leave the individual and encompass the mass, a new quality comes into the picture. Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million people, in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped and held captive within the nation, devoid of political, social, economic and property rights (NS 364).

Although Max defends him to the hilt in the court, he really does not approve of the act of murder committed by Bigger. He tells him when he is awaiting execution: "Bigger, you killed: That was wrong. That was not the way to do it. It's too late now for you to ... work with ... others who are trying to ... believe and make the world live again" (NS 390). For him individual acts of sabotage are not a solution to the racial problem which is basically murderous and inhuman. Bigger's succinct assertion, "what I killed for, I am" (NS 392) towards the end of the novel provides the key to his personality. It is not a well-thought out and carefully planned action

consciously designed to shock the society. As Wright himself has put it, "Bigger was a rebel because he was the product of a dislocated society rather than of conscious design."⁶⁹ For him, murder is a creative act which gave him a sense of guilt and aloofness. Sartre, in line with Frantz Fanon's thesis on violence, has pointed out that killing can be a creative act for the colonized. Sartre has summed up Fanon's ideas succinctly:

In the period of their helplessness, the mad impulse to murder is the expression of the (colonial) native's collective unconscious. If the suppressed fury fails to find an outlet, it turns in a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves. In order to free themselves they even massacre each other.⁶⁹

Violence and propensity to commit murder are endemic to the psychological mechanism of the collective unconscious of the colonized. In the American situation the colonizer-colonized duality is quite different. What is being practised is a kind of domestic colonialism in which the Negroes play the role of the colonized. Bigger is seeking to assert his identity in a society which denies him his true identity and renders him invisible. It is significant that *Native Son* struck a deep chord of response among the intellectuals and writers of the Third World countries as it had sought to subvert the dominant cultural discourse. Srilankan poet and critic Wimal Dissanayaka's explanation is perceptive and revealing:

In order for Bigger to realize his identity and attain visibility, he has to subvert the cultural discourse into which he has been born. The need for subverting the dominant cultural discourse so as to create a more satisfying human one is acutely felt in most Third World countries which are struggling with

the forces of colonialism despite their liberation from foreign rule. It is largely for this reason that Richard Wright has struck a deep chord of response in many intellectuals and writers in the Third World.⁷¹

By challenging and undermining the dominant cultural discourse, which subordinated the Negro and rendered him invisible, through an act of violence, Bigger points to the need to establish a new power relation in society. This is also the meaning of metaphysical rebellion, where the rebel revolts against the conditions of his existence. To Albert Camus "Rebellion is born of the spectacle of the irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos... It protests, it demands, it insists that this outrage be brought to an end".⁷² Raskolnikov, the protagonist in *Crime and Punishment*, committed murder to prove himself a Superman, to assert his right to transgress moral conventions. Bigger's rebellion, on the other hand, grows out of the traumatic black situation. His concepts of rebellion and freedom do not emerge out of a vacuum, but comes directly out of his racial status which poses existential questions that are remediable.

Wright's choice of the title of the novel indicates that the protagonist is a product of the American society. The novel explores the psychological impact of racism on the psyche of Bigger and points out that his criminality has its roots in the system that prevails in America. Wright himself summed up the position of Bigger and also of himself when he wrote that "He was an American because he was a native son, but he was also a Negro nationalist in a vague sense because he was not allowed to live as an American. Such was his way of life and mine, neither Bigger nor I resided fully in the camp".⁷³ Bigger lives on the fringes of

the American society because of his disadvantaged and subordinate position in American society bedevilled by racial discrimination and colour prejudice. He is a native son not because of his identity as a Negro but being a negro he is among the first immigrants to settle in America.⁷⁴ But the recreation of his identity was made possible within the framework of the American society which placed a premium on colour. At the same time, Wright is blaming the country itself for inspiring so much hatred and violence in one of its citizens (*NS* 78). On the other hand, he is a bad nigger in the eyes of the white power structure which wants to perpetuate the status quo. Ralph Ellison's criticism of Bigger's portrayal stems from his understanding that the serious drawback of *Native Son* is its environmental determinism and Wright's adoption of the white myth of the Bad Nigger. Reacting to Howe's adverse comment on Ellison for being guilty of what he calls filial betrayal, Ellison says:

In *Native Son*, Wright began with the ideological proposition that what whites think of the Negro's reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be. Hence Bigger was presented as a near subhuman indictment of white oppression. It was designed to shock whites out of their apathy and end the circumstances out of which Wright insisted Bigger emerged. Here environment is all and interestingly enough, environment concerned solely in terms of the physical, the non-conscious.⁷⁵

In fact, what Ellison considers to be the limitation of Wright's vision is its strength. Through the lengthy speeches of Max, Wright has succeeded in providing illuminating insight into the social roots of his murderous nature. In a similar vein, Jean Paul Sartre in a celebrated book *Saint Genet: The Martyr and the Comedian* has argued

that bourgeoisie society had made Genet the thief and homosexual that he was. Genet, caught stealing at the age of ten and called a thief, comes to realize that "thief is his truth, his eternal essence. And if he is a thief, he must therefore always be one, every where."⁷⁶ To Sartre, this type of social conditioning is the common reaction among the untouchable. His brilliant observation is illuminating:

It is the typical reaction of all group of untouchables ... when they have achieved sufficient self awareness to oppose their oppressors without having the means of imposing a change in their status ... (to) think only of demanding that they be integrated into the society which reject them. But when they have realized that it rejects them forever, they themselves assume the ostracism of which they are victims they continue to view themselves according to the pattern furnished by their prosecutors. But instead of bearing the stigma shamefully, they display it proudly. "Dirty Nigger!" Says a Negro poet. "Very well, I am a dirty nigger, and I like my blackness, better than your whiteness."⁷⁷

Adopting the negative appellation thrust on the individual by society itself is an act of rebellion. Bigger, revolted against the mores of the society by adopting the image thrust upon the Negro by the white racists. As his name suggests he is a "nigger", with all its negative attributes. The action in the novel is, in fact, a warning in the sense that if we are not prepared to change the society to prevent the creation of more Bigger Thomases the condition will be disastrous. *Native Son*, not only provides a thread bare discussion of the social phenomena of racial problem from a Marxist angle but articulates the author's revolutionary black consciousness and his awareness of the black situation drenched in injustice and violence.

The Long Dream (1958) fictionalizes the initiation rituals of Fish Belly Tucker, a black boy in Clinton Villa, Mississippi in the American South. Revolving round upon the key image of the Dream and avoiding overt ideological discussions and arguments over the racial problems, the novel treats the psycho-sexual impact of racism and its ugly manifestations exhibited in the lives of both whites and blacks. Edward Margolies has captured the basic thematic orientation of the novel when he observed that, "the essential element of the novel is Wright's depiction of the psycho-sexual aspect of the racial problem."⁷⁹ The victimized Negroes in his earlier novels such as *Native Son*, *Lawd Today* and *The Outsider* rebelled against the circumstances and took recourse to violence to assert their identity. *The Long Dream*, while reproducing the elements of "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Man Who killed the Shadow", his earlier short stories, abandon violence as a possible solution to the black American problem and instead posits expatriation as the only way out before the persecuted blacks in America.

Fish Belly Tucker is the son of a black man who owns a home and about 40,000 dollars worth of property rented out, but avoids confrontation with whites because he thinks it will spell doom for him. He fervently believes that "I tend to my business and leave white folks alone. If I didn't I wouldn't be where I am."⁸⁰ Tyree tries to mould Fish by tutoring him with the success ideology he himself has adopted in his life, which, he thinks has brought him rich dividends. He knows that white people in the town hate him (*LD* 60) but he refrains from antagonizing them with his actions and responses. The novel later unfolds the illusion of Tyree by showing the enormity of racism and Tyree and Fish come to the bitter and shocking conclusion that it is difficult to enjoy the fruits of freedom and justice even for a Negro who has considerably gone up the social ladder.

Jim Crow laws practised in the American South render the realization of the American Dream a mirage for the blacks. Even Tyree, who had internalized the white myth of success and the ethics of capitalism is not spared. He conforms to the values of whites and closes his eyes to injustice because he thinks that by doing so he can be a full fledged participant in the American society. Tyree, like the middle class blacks, looks condescendingly towards the lower class blacks and even advises his son, who is seven years old, not to associate with "black railroad worker because, although they are his color, they are not his kind" (LD 20). But the very episode recounted as part of Fish's initiation ritual in *The Long Dream* makes them realize that a black man is a misfit in American society. The problem of the colour line crops up at the crucial moment depriving the black man of his legitimate share and justice. He could not save his own life, even though he believed in and practised the doctrine that "Negroes can live only if they give a little of their lives to the white folks" (LD 65).

Basically Tyree is anti-white and often pours out his antipathy towards whites to his son. He realizes that they are inimical to the interests of the blacks and make women instruments to destroy them. Realising that protest and violence would further drive him to the periphery of the society, he adopts the role of Uncle Tom, which he thinks, explains his financial success. Tyree is an accommodationist black and Myrdal's perceptive observation on the dominant attitude of blacks in the South provides an insight into the factors which motivate Tyree:

Accommodation is undoubtedly stronger than protest especially in the South, where the structure of the caste is more pervasive and unyielding... The white caste has obvious interests in trying to have accommodating leaders to help them control the Negro group. On the otherside of the

caste gulf, the Negroes need persons to establish contact with the influential people in the whole group. The Negro in the South are dependent upon the white not only for a share in the public services, but individually for small favours and personal protection in a social order determined almost exclusively by the whites.⁸¹

Tyree emerges as a black bourgeoisie by conforming to the white power structure in the South, though the novel later proves beyond doubt the pointlessness of his accommodationist ideology. The significance of *The Long Dream* lies not in the portrayal of Tyree's success, but in the fact that the various episodes portrayed in the novel deconstruct his illusion by baring the nightmare of racism haunting the lives of blacks in the South determining the entire course of their lives. An explication of the various episodes depicted in the novel reveals Wright's intense critique of Southern racism and his acute realization of being black in America.

In the very beginning of the novel, the conversation among Fish and his boyhood pals, Sam, Zeke and Tony brings out the enormity of Southern racism and the identity crisis faced by the black Americans which spring from their unique situation in America. Initially, Fish states his status by saying that "I am black and live in America and my folks come from America; that's all I know" (LD 31). Tony, on the other hand, tries to make black life in America seem normal: "We just like everybody else in the country" (LD 32). America, a nation of the immigrants is constituted by people from diverse geographical areas. But the situation of African-Americans is quite different from other European immigrants and Sam's perceptive comment sheds light on this basic difference: "Them Irish and them English is white folks. Fish is an African who's been taken out of Africa. Fish ain't no American" (LD 32). To Zeke's assertion that he is an American, Sam

reacts by citing numerous Jim Crow laws which deny equality of opportunity for blacks in America. The unique situation of blacks who had been forcefully brought from Africa and later made victims of slavery and racial discrimination is brought out in Sam's seemingly innocent comments. Blacks who were deprived of their past and cultural life feel alienated on the American soil. Sam's ominous words foreshadow what is to befall Fish and Tyree later: "Roosevelt can do what he wants to, and Fish Can't! Fish thinks he's American but he ain't. Now, my Papa says all black folks ought to build up Africa, 'cause that is our true home" (*LD* 32).

The mainstream American culture, which is predominantly white-Anglo-Saxon, treats blacks on a different footing unlike the other immigrant groups and the impact of the Jim Crow laws and racism are more entrenched in the South, the locale of the novel. Sam, who has internalized his father Mr. Davis' Afro-centric philosophy bordering on black nationalist ideology is conscious of his identity rooted in African ethos. Sam takes other blacks to task for displaying a 'Cinderella wish' to be white by straightening their hair, putting mashed potatoes on their hair to make it straight like white folk hair (*LD* 30). Later, when Fish calls at Sam's house for collecting rent Davis pours forth his vitriolic diatribe outlining the impact of racism being practised in America:

Look at the world and you see the black man's rising. He's rising everywhere but in America. It makes me sick to see black folks scraping and bowing to this no-good white trash when black folks was once kings of Ghana, the great black kingdom in Africa. Be proud of being black, son. Live black, die black, eat black, sleep black, buy black, sell black, love black ... The white man's conquered us cause' he's made us

ashamed of our hair, our skin, our noses, 'shamed of Africa (*LD* 178).

Fish, in fact, turns a deaf ear to Davis' utterances, as Africa no longer inspires him. He wants "to make some goodamn money" (*LD* 178), and that is all.

The major episodes in the novel such as Chris' death, Fish's arrest for swimming on private property, incidents leading to Grove fire in which Tyree was indicted and later killed, Fish's incarceration and later expatriation all pinpoint the enormity of the unjust nature of the societal laws which always work against the interests of the blacks. Tyree is trying to mould his son Fish belly in a manner that enables him to keep what property he had amassed and avoids trouble with whites. Fish, who often rebels against the approach of his father, often falls a prey to the same ideology. The failure of the Washingtonian ethics comes out in each and every episode in which whites are grilled. Booker T. Washington believed that to make themselves as appealing as possible to the society dominated by the whites, African-Americans had to be industrious in their work, respectful in their dealing with white superiors, responsible to their families and their communities.⁸² Tyree seems to have imbibed the Washingtonian advice that if an African-American is to succeed, he or she must not challenge the system of white supremacy. But despite his adoption of the acquiescent ideology Tyree is ambushed and killed.

The lynching of Chris, a twenty-four year old brown-skinned young man bellhopping at the West End Hotel and a hero of the black boys of the locality, on the charge that he kept a white mistress provides an opportunity for Tyree to advise Fish on the dangers inherent in blackman-white woman relationship. His death exemplifies Tyree's earlier warning to Fish that

When you are in the presence of the white woman, remember, she means death. The white folks hate us, fight us, kill us, make laws against us; but they use the damned business about white women to make what they do sound right. So don't give 'em no excuse, son. They hate you the moment you're born and all your life they going to be looking for something to kill you for. But don't let them kill you for that. There ain't no bigger shame for a black man than to die fooling with no-good white gal (*LD 60*).

Chris' death impels Tyree to make the comment that "Chris should've known better than to touch a white woman" (*LD 65*), thus pointing to Chris' transgression of racial taboo attached to black man-white woman relationship. Tyree had already given Fish the advice, "NEVER LOOK AT A WHITE WOMAN" (*LD 59*), and Chris' tragic end corroborates Tyree's warning to Fish. The tragedy that befalls Chris makes Tyree realize that "We can live only if we give a little of our lives to the white folks" (*LD 65*). Not satisfied with getting rid of Chris, the whites have robbed him of the semblance of the human. "The genitals were pulled out by a pair of pliers or some like instrument" (*LD 71*) as inferred by the doctor. His killing is portrayed in such a manner that it appears to have been motivated by far more deeper sexual reasons. Whites are said to be jealous of the sexual potency and power of the black man and they always look upon the blacks as potential rapists. This naturally creates a feeling of sexual jealousy towards the black man by the white man and is reflected in their approach to black men. Dr. Bruce points out: "To get a chance to mutilate him was part of why they killed him" (*LD 71*). Bruce refers to the larger dimension of Chris' murder when he observes that "You have to be terribly attracted toward a person, almost in love with him, to mangle,' im in this manner. They hate us, Tyree, but they love us too, in a perverted sort

of way, they love us" (*LD 72*).

The psycho-sexual aspect of racism earlier treated in his stories such as "Big boy Leaves Home" and "A Man who killed the Shadow" appears in Chris' episode and points to the fact that sex and caste are interlinked in the American context and it is the root cause of several conflicts between blacks and whites. In this respect, Margolies's comment on the significance of Chris's murder is illuminating:

The death of Chris supplies both Wright and Fishbelly with central insight into the connection between sex and caste. The Negro, they discover, who submits to white oppression is as much castrated psychologically as the bellhop physically. Thus, for them, the lynching becomes symbolic of the roles they are expected to play in life.⁸³

The white woman always gives sleepless nights to the black man. Later, when Fish is arrested for swimming on the private property, he is so scared as he thinks that the picture of the white girl that he keeps in his pocket will be discovered, and consequently he faints. When the police stops at a drive-in restaurant, Fish stares absently at a white waitress. Annoyed by this, the policeman threatens him with castration by holding a pen knife and Fish faints. The fear of castration is very much in the consciousness of the blackman owing to the sexualized racism prevalent in the American South. It is suggested that the white police officers seem to derive a sort of sadistic pleasure in adopting such a method.

Tyree, in collaboration with Dr. Bruce, runs a brothel and for that purpose greases the palm of the chief of Police Centley. Trying to amass wealth by stooping to the level of indulging in flesh trade he seems to have internalized the ethics

of the American capitalist society. The trade goes on well till a fire destroys his dance hall taking the life of forty two people, including Fish's light-skinned mistress. Tyree is implicated as the tragedy is attributed to certain lapses on his part like allowing fire hazards to go uncorrected, and he is charged with criminal negligence and man-slaughter. Centley, who received graft for permitting the heinous crime escapes scot-free. Tyree's claim that he has hidden cancelled checks of graft payment to Centley which will implicate him in the crime results in the murder of Tyree at the hands of Centley. Earlier the white policeman had tried to blackmail him to extort money, but he hits back by handing over the cheque to McWilliam, a white reformer who, in turn, gives it to the grand-jury. The episode brings to light the various manifestations of racism and helps Tyree to break his illusion of getting on well with white folks by adopting accommodationist ideology.

The chief of Police, though a friend of Tyree, is not trying to keep Tyree out of jail probably because he thinks "jails was built for folks like us" (LD 231). Tyree's bitter realization comes out at the end--the line of race was drawn even among the thieves. The differential treatment meted out to blacks and whites convinces him that "white folks give us what's left over and call it kindness" (LD 237). The episode makes him realize the hollowness and the impracticability of his philosophy of life which he tries to inject into his son. He says: "For twenty years I grinned and slaved and bowed and scraped and took every insult that a man can know to git something, and now they ask me to give it all up!" (LD 241). Tyree, who always grinned in his life as he believed that "whites want blacks to always cry or grin" (LD 130) now stands face to face with the inhuman manifestation of racism which has penetrated

even to the area of human relationship. Though he demands a jury comprising black judges as he does not want to be judged by white law, Centley responds to it by commenting that "the desire to have Negroes on the jury is only a pipe dream" (LD 227).

McWilliams, the Mississippi based white reformist lawyer who assists Tyree, and whom Fish towards the end of the novel, calls "the only honest white I have ever met" (LD 349) makes certain observations during his conversation with Tyree, which provides illuminating insights into the black problem in America and the social causation of their peculiar responses. To him, Tyree is legally guilty, because he runs the business and has paid graft. But he pinpoints the socio-historical background of the black American problem when he says that "Your people have been terribly provoked; there was slavery, and there was hate on the part of the white man for the freed slave. Then your people began to adjust to an unjust situation" (LD 250).

Though his legal mind refuses to condone Tyree, he is aware of the fact that the unjust and inequitable system has made Tyree a dealer in flesh trade and a corrupt man. Like Max in *Native Son* he makes sweeping observations, which seem to locate the roots of the aberrant behaviour among the black Americans in the social system itself. For Tyree, the only way to enjoy the comforts of life like the whites is only through such means. He confesses to McWilliams: "I want a wife, a car, a house to live in. The White man's got'em. Then how come I can't have 'em? And when I g't 'em the only way I can, you say I am corrupt" (LD 249).

After Tyree's death Fish steps into his shoes at the age of sixteen. But

the police haunts him as they apprehend that he is in possession of the cancelled checks implicating Centley in the deal. When the pressure tactic fails Fish is jailed for two years on a trumped up charge of rape, which they did by planting a white woman in his room. McWilliams exposes Centley and obtains his release but his term is extended on the charge of assaulting his black cell mate who was, in fact, a stool pigeon. Fish's incarceration on the trumped-up charge of having found in the company of white woman again corroborates Tyrees' perceptive advice to Fish regarding the dangerous potential of white woman. After his release Centley approaches him to resume the black whore house and the police pay-offs. Fish, having realized that it is virtually impossible for a black man to lead an honest and decent life in America, decides to flee to France. Meanwhile, he obtains a letter from Zeke, his childhood friend who had served in France during the war, in which he states that "France aint no heaven, but folks don't kill you for crazy thing" (LD 340). Zeke indicts American society by indicating how it makes criminals out of innocent blacks. He refers to an incident which occurred long back when they had gone to the fair. They saw a crazy white woman showing them tits and for Zeke "That's the way they do and they say we rape them" (LD 340). Now he is face to face with an analogous situation in the case of Fish. In the white-black relationship the whole course of justice is upside down. The victim turns out to be the culprit in the eyes of the lawmakers.

While leaving for France, Fish meets a young man heading for Italy and he narrates the story of his life. He left Italy when he was young and he is so fond of America that he calls it "my wonderful Romance" (LD 347). Despite his status of being an immigrant he achieved success in America. Fish's situation is diametrically opposite to that of the Italian. Though he was born and brought

up in America, his life ended up as a nightmare. His prophetic statement sums up the ironic predicament of the black Americans: "That man's father had come to America and had found a dream. He (Fish) had been born in America and had found a nightmare" (*LD* 348).

The shocking revelation dawns on him that the black minority group is the most disadvantaged group in the American Society. A comparative assessment of the fortunes of people against the backdrop of their racial/ethnic status leads Wright's characters to pose certain pertinent questions shedding light on the nature of the American society. It makes him aware of the shocking fact that the power of racism transcends the barriers of nationality and language. In a similar vein, Wright in his story "The Man who went to Chicago" has mused on the success of a Jewish shopkeeper and the failure of a blackman in America: "Though English was my native tongue and America my native land, she, an alien, could operate a store and earn a living, in a neighbourhood where I could not even live."⁸⁴ But in *The Long Dream* the realization dawns on Tyree and Fish only when they pass through adverse circumstances. Fish had understood the seamy side of black life during the rent collection. He had realised that, "our folk is sick, Papa. All the black folks I meet worried" (*LD* 181). Tyree, on the other hand, is conscious of all these and advises Fish to turn a blind eye to such things and asks him instead to "Git, enough dollars, you'll never have to worry none. There ain't no problem a dollar can't solve" (*LD* 181). He believes that white folks are aware of the fact that "if they give us half a chance we'd beat'em, come on top" (*LD* 130). Tyree, aware of the injustice and discrimination perpetuated on blacks by whites, condones it and refuses to challenge it by playing the role of a "good nigger," because he considers it is essential to live in America.

Dream, which is the central image of the novel, appears not only in the title and sectional headings but functions also as a leitmotif. Tyree's advice to Fish in the wake of Chris's murder summing up the black situation is also couched in the dream image:

A black man's dream, son, a dream that can't come true. Dream, Fish. But be careful what you dream. Dream only what can happen If you ever find yourself dreaming something that can't happen, then choke it back, 'cause there is too many dreams of a black man that can't come true. Don't force your dreams, son; if you die, you'll die; you'll be just one more black man gone, one more black dream dead ... Fish, the main thing for a blackman is to live and not end up like Chris.... For most folks to die like that'd be an accident. For us that accident comes too damned often to be called an accident. When it happen every day, it ain't no accident no more. It is a law, a law of life (*LD 73*).

Fish realizes that there is a limit beyond which he cannot even dream. His final solution of expatriation is prompted by the severe limitation and handicaps suffered by him as a Negro in America society. His initiation has resulted in alienation, and not in social acceptance. As Ihab Hassan has noted, for the Negro in America, initiation is a painful process resulting in alienation, and not in confirmation. Hassan's comment on the initiation theme is illuminating in this context:

Initiation can be understood for our purpose as the first existential ordeal, crisis, or encounter with the experience in the life of a youth. The ideal aim is knowledge, recognition and confirmation in the world, to which the actions of the initiate, however, painful, must tend. It is quite simply, the

viable mode of confronting adult realities.⁸⁵

The Negro, who is forced to play a subordinate role in American society finds the initiation process painful. Tyree, who realizes this hoped he could sustain the limited success achieved by him by conforming to the Washingtonian accommodationist ideology. That, too, finally collapses bringing death to Tyree and incarceration and estrangement to Fish.

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¹ Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945) 29.

² Kenneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society* (1972; Urbana: UP of Illinois Press, 1973) 3.

³ Bernard W. Bell 155.

⁴ John M. Reilly, "Richard Wright Preaches the Nation: 12 Million black Voices," *Black American Literature Forum* 16.3 (1982):116.

⁵ Richard Wright, *American Hunger* 92.

⁶ Richard Wright, "introduction, "*Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro life in a Northern city* XVII.

⁷ Richard Kostelanetz, *Politics in the African American Novel: James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Dubois, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991) 103.

⁸ Quoted in Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: Patnam, 1968) 290.

⁹ Quoted in Michel Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1985) 147.

¹⁰ "Island of Hallucination," the unpublished sequel to the *Long Dream* portrays Fish's experiences in Paris. Fish, in fact, feels lost in an alien soil,

¹¹ Quoted in Michel Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* 146.

¹² Richard Wright, *Early Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1991) 225.

¹³ Evelyn Gross Avery, *Rebels and Victims: The Fiction of Richard Wright and Bernard Malamud* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1979) 4.

¹⁴ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States* (Cambridge: UP of Massachusetts Press, 1950) 260.

¹⁵ Blyden Jackson, "Richard Wright in a Moment of Truth," *Black American Fiction: Form and Function*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young (London: Oxford UP, 1989) 41.

¹⁶ James R. Giles, "Richard Wright's Successful Failure: A New Look at *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Phylon* 34 (1972): 266.

¹⁷ Quoted in Yoshinobu Hikutani, "Creation of the Self in Wright's *Black Boy*," *Black American Literature Forum* 9.2 (1985):70.

¹⁸ Constance Webb 205.

¹⁹ *Black Boy* 45.

²⁰ Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America*, (Amherst: UP of

Massachusetts, 1974) 3.

²¹ James Baldwin, who emigrated to France once provided an interesting but thought-provoking explanation for it: "If I'd been born in Mississippi I might have come to New York. But being born in New York, there is no place that you can go. You have to go out" (Quoted in Fern Maria Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (Philadelphia: M. Evans/ Lippincott, 1966) 113. Baldwin's perceptive comment provides a glimpse into the racial situation in the South and the North.

²² *Black Boy* 284.

²³ Quoted in Yoshinobu Hakutani 14.

²⁴ Nina Kessner Cobb, "Richard Wright: Exile and Existentialism," *Phylon*, XXXVII.2 (1976): 362.

²⁵ Christopher Sawyer - Lancanno, *The Continual Pilgrimage: American Writers in Paris, 1944-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1992) 172.

²⁶ Nathan Scott. Jr. "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Wright," *The Black Novelist*, ed. Robert Hemenway (Columbus: Charles Merrill Company, 1970) 74.

²⁷ Nina Kessner Cobb 372.

²⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey* XIII

²⁹ Michel Fabre, "Wright and French Existentialists," *MELUS* V (1978): 35.

- ³⁰ Richard Wright, *Early Works* 103.
- ³¹ Noel Schraufnagel 169.
- ³² Wright, *Early Works* 181
- ³³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Middle Sex, Penguin, 1970) 40
- ³⁴ Wright, *Whiteman, Listen* 80
- ³⁵ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 15
- ³⁶ Quoted in Michel Fabre, "introduction," *Richard Wright Reader* 3.
- ³⁷ *White Man, Listen* 80
- ³⁸ *American Hunger* 59
- ³⁹ Richard Wright, "introduction," *In the Castle of My Skin* by George Lamming (New York: Hill Book Camp, 1953) X
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Charles T. Davis, "introduction", *Wright: Impressions and Perspectives*. ed. David Rang and Robert M. Fansnorth (Ann. Arbor. UP of Michigan 1971) 138.
- ⁴¹ Richard Wright, "introduction," *Black Metropolis! A Study of Negro life in a Northern City*, ed. Clair St. Drake and Horace R. Cayton (1945; New York:

Harper & Row, 1970) XX .

⁴² John M. Reilly 116 - 117

⁴³ *Black Metropolis* XVIII

⁴⁴ Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1972) 127.

⁴⁵ Donald B. Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son," *Twentieth Century Interpretation on Wright* 103.

⁴⁶ *American Hunger* 103.

⁴⁷ *American Hunger* 81-2

⁴⁸ Richard Wright, "foreword," *Pan-Africanism or Communism* by George Padamora (New York: Double day, Inc. 1972) XIII

⁴⁹ Quoted in Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. (New York: William Morrow, 1973) 230-31.

⁵⁰ Wright, "Introduction," *Black Metropolis* XXIX .

⁵¹ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent*, 16 Autumn, 1963: 354.

⁵² Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968) 82.

⁵³ Bernard W. Bell 165.

⁵⁴ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Trans. Isabel Barzun (New York: William Horrow & Co., 1973) 480.

⁵⁵ Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 6.

⁵⁶ Katherine Fishburn, *Richard Wright's Hero: The face of a Rebel victim* (Metucher, JJ: the Scarcrow Press, 1977) 87.

⁵⁷ Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," *Native Son*, VIII-XI.

⁵⁸ Richard Wright, *Black Metropolis* XVIII.

⁵⁹ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest* 172.

⁶⁰ George E. Kent, "Wright: Blackness and the Adventures of Western Culture," *CLA Journal* XII (1969): 323.

⁶¹ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940; New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 74. Hereafter abbreviated *NS* and incorporated in the text in parenthesis.

⁶² Earl Olfari Hutchinson, *The Mugging of Black America* (Chicago: Africa American Images, 1990) 15.

⁶³ Richard Wright, "introduction," *Black Metropolis* XX

⁶⁴ Quoted in David Bakish, *Richard Wright* (New York: Ungan, 1973) 52-53.

⁶⁵ Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors* (Philadelphia, Lippricott, 1963) 341.

⁶⁶ Louis Graham, "The White Self Image Conflict in *Native Son*," *Studies in Black Literature* 3.2(1972): 21

⁶⁷ Calvin C. Heruton, *Sex and Racism in America* (New York: Grove, 1966) 26.

⁶⁸ Addison Gayle, Jr. *The Way of the New World* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1965) 171.

⁶⁹ Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," *Native Son* XXIV.

⁷⁰ Jean Paul Sartre, "introduction," *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon 6 - 7.

⁷¹ Wimal Dissanayake, "Richard Wright: A View from the Third World", *Callalo*, 9.3 (1980): 483.

⁷² Albert Camus, *The Rebel* trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961) 10.

⁷³ Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," *Native Son* XXIV

⁷⁴ Edward Margolies, *Native Sons* 14

⁷⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 114

⁷⁶ Quoted in Jerry Wasserman, "Embracing the Negative : *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*." *Studies in American Fiction* 4.1 (1976): 96.

⁷⁷ Jean Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. tran. Bernard Frechtman (New York: R rajitten Hen, 1963) 49.

⁷⁸ Richard Kostelanetz, *Politics in the Afro-American novel* (New York: Green Wood, 1991) 85.

⁷⁹ Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U Press, 1969) 155.

⁸⁰ Richard Wright, *The Long Dream* (Garden City, New York: Double Day, 1958) 66. (Hereafter abbreviated *LD* and incorporated in the text in parenthesis)

⁸¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *American Dilemma* 722

⁸² Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz 110

⁸³ Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* 150 .

⁸⁴ Richard Wright, *Eight Men* (New York: Pyramid Communication Inc, 1961) 17.

⁸⁵ Ihab Hassan 41 .

Chapter 3

**Ralph Ellison: Fictionist of African-American
History and Folklore**

Ralph Ellison, the most significant African-American writer to emerge after Richard Wright, published his novel *Invisible Man* in 1952, the most comprehensive one-volume symbolic treatment of the history of the American Negro in the 20th century.¹ The work, the only published novel of the author to date, is still considered to be one of the classics of American literature. It is significant that even critics who were unsympathetic to black causes showered encomiums on Ellison's portrayal of a nameless protagonist's search for identity and his attempt to escape from the programming influences of the society in the novel. On the other hand, some black critics took him to task for what they perceived to be a negative portrayal of black characters and black life. The ambivalent reaction of critics and readers can be attributed to the fact that departing from the stock responses aired by black American writers schooled in Wrightean sociological, naturalistic fictional mode, Ellison was found to be displaying what they called 'Uncle Tomism'.² Despite the critics' attempt to attach a nonracial tag on the novel,³ a serious examination of the novel will indicate that it is rooted in African-American history and folklore both at the thematic and structural level. Far from betraying the black cause as alleged by his detractors, Ellison emerges as a novelist who articulates the trials and tribulations of the black life, doing justice to the aesthetic elements in his own characteristic manner. The milieu in which he lived, when the atmosphere was surcharged with the ideas of accommodationism had a decisive impact on

the moulding of his sensibility.

Ellison's formative years, coupled with the milieu in which he lived, have had a determining influence in the moulding of his artistic vision and, probably, contributed to the distrust of sociological documentation which marked his fictional works. Born in 1914, he grew up in Oklahoma city where the colour lines were not as rigidly drawn as in the other parts of the South. Moreover, Oklahoma was admitted to the Union only two years before his birth. His childhood was happier than that of most other black children of his age group, though, he too had to pass through excruciating circumstances during the years of the Depression. Edward Margolies's illuminating comment that "although he was aware of racism in the community, it never occurred to him that he was inferior because he was a Negro"⁴ sheds light on the socio-political context which shaped his vision. Ellison himself was pointing to his peculiar background, when he noted that both Wright and himself were united by their connection with a past condition of servitude and divided by geography and a difference of experience and background."⁵ As blackmen Wright and Ellison shared a common past, which was marked by poverty, discrimination and Jim Crow laws. But Ellison's individual experience, born out of his place of upbringing and familial situation was so markedly different from that of Wright that it must have contributed to the "less sombre and more optimistic atmosphere"⁶ pervading his novel.

His early training at Tuskegee and exposure to the works of Euro-American writers also played a vital role in the moulding of his aesthetic sensibility, which taught him to subordinate the social problems to the demands of art. In 1933 he enrolled at Tuskegee Institute to study Composition under William Dowson. His training in music stood him in good stead later and its impact is obvious in

Invisible Man. In Tuskegee he was moved by T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, especially by the "intensity, sensibility and the music of the language."⁷ His wide exposure to the works of European and American masters was such that, it partly contributed to the shaping of his philosophy of life and artistic sensibility. Barbara Christian's observation that "Ellison's background, with its illusion of personal freedom is a strong determinant in his philosophy of infinite possibilities"⁸ aptly sums up the impact of his formative years on the shaping of his aesthetic sensibility.

In New York, he met writers such as James Joyce, Andre Malraux, Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot whose influence shaped his aesthetic sensibility and their influence probably led him to disparage the overt propagandist works and sociological documentation resorted to by most black writers with a view to ameliorating the condition of the blacks. Bernard W. Bell's perceptive comment on the impact of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* on Ellison provides a glimpse into the factors that went into the making of his sensibility:

Its emphasis on life's all encompassing frustration, ironies and a hint at the developing thunder against such frustration that Negroes could relate to that turned him to writing and not a political understanding of the Negroe's terrible plight during the Depression.⁹

Ellison, who was exposed to the works of the Euro-American writers, naturally relied heavily on their literary techniques. He himself had taken note of "the pluralist literary tradition from which he sprang."¹⁰ Unlike Wright, whose vision was circumscribed to the areas of racial life marked by racial preoccupation and hypersensitivity, Ellison attempted to explore wider issues of trans-racial ramification.

His comments lying scattered in his critical writings such as *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, when analysed divorced from its context, give the impression that his works have little to do with black tradition. He even played down his indebtedness to Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground," though it bore a close resemblance to his *Invisible Man*. Further, he himself once acknowledged that "critics like Eliot and Joyce made him conscious of the literary value of his folk inheritance."¹¹ Those critics who club him with the assimilationist tradition ignore the fact that he was attracted to the moralist writers of the 19th century mainly because of their concern with the moral question in the wake of the conflict between the glorious ideals enshrined in the constitution and Bill of Rights and the denial of these rights best exemplified in the life of the Negroes. Ellison's vision bears the imprint of the milieu which was surcharged with the atmosphere of accommodationism in the wake of Truman's order integrating armed forces which later paved the way for the landmark Supreme Court judgement of 1956. Ellison, abandoning protest tradition and naturalistic technique, adopted modernist literary techniques drawn from Euro-American writers to probe the possibilities of literary craftsmanship and to give aesthetic shape to his black consciousness. As a creative writer he is less interested in an ideological interpretation of Negro experience,¹² and consequently, he began his literary endeavour from the premise that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself.¹³

Ellison's much-publicized feud with Irving Howe, a left-wing literary critic, amply demonstrates the fact that he is distrustful of the naturalistic and sociological orientation of Richard Wright who, to him, was "overcommitted to ideology."¹⁴ Howe, approaching literature from a leftist angle criticized Ellison for not adopting protest motive in the Wrightean vein, as he believed that "plight and protest are

inseparable from the black experience.”¹⁵ In fact, Howe’s view sprang from an erroneous notion that black experience is monolithic and, consequently, generates a uniform and common experience bordering on protest and indignation. It is natural that, Irving Howe, whose sensibility seemed to be attuned to the naturalistic novels of Richard Wright criticized *Invisible Man* for not being true to the black predicament. Howe’s failure really lies in his attempt to seek identical responses from African-American writers. Ellison’s reaction to Howe’s criticism is revealing, as it throws light on his emphasis on aesthetic concerns as a literary craftsman and his refusal to subordinate his aesthetic to the socio-political interests of the African-Americans. As he himself admitted, his endeavour in *Invisible Man* was “to transform the elements of the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in the country into art.”¹⁶ His refusal to document and portray the black problem in a naturalistic and sociological vein invited criticism from a section of African-American writers and readers who treated literature as a handmaid to the political struggle of the blacks.

Ellison’s denunciation of Wright, whom he considers as his “relative” in contradistinction to the Euro-American masters, whom he regarded as his “ancestors”, is revealing as it is an open indictment of the priorities of the Wright School:

Any attempt to define the Negro’s predicament in exclusively sociological terms would perforce, short circuit the exploration of the full range of American Negro humanity and obliterate those qualities in the race which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economic or previous condition of servitudes.¹⁷

The reductionist approach of some of the African - American writers who

failed to go beyond the confines of Negro life, refusing to explore the universal human values did not suit his sensibility. For him "novels are not weapons, but arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and, therefore, are ritualistic and ceremonial at the core."¹⁸ His novel is not peopled by aggressive and violent characters who pose a challenge to the system as in the works of Richard Wright. His illuminating observation on Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, throws light on his attitude to stereotyped and stock characters in black fiction who often serve as the mouthpiece of political programmes:

I felt that Wright was overcommitted to ideology, even though I too, wanted many of the same thing for our people. You might say that I was much less a social determinist. But I suppose that basically it comes down to a difference in our concepts of the individual. I, for instance, found it disturbing that Bigger had none of the fine qualities of Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sensibility for poetry, none of the gaiety. And I preferred Wright to Bigger Thomas.¹⁹

Ellison resisted all attempts to prescribe programmes for the black writers in the hope of eliciting stock reaction. Further, he believed that there was no dichotomy between art and protest and to perfect his aesthetic he made use of all that came his way, irrespective of its racial or regional orientation. To him, the artistic freedom, which he unsparingly used, is in itself a gift which he acquired by virtue of being a Negro. Ellison's avowed objective is to achieve racial harmony in a culturally pluralistic society. His accommodationist stance has been aptly pinpointed by Amrijith Singh:

Ellison is acutely conscious of the personality of the American Negro. Instead of developing a mystique of blackness based on the black

American's African roots, like the other Negro intellectuals of the time, chooses to emphasize race differences with the definite objective of achieving racial cooperation and harmony in a culturally pluralist American society.²⁰

Ellison detested the separatist doctrines of black ideologues as borne out by his portrayal of Ras in *Invisible Man*. He asserted: "I am not a separatist. The imagination is integrative. That is how you make the new by putting something else with what you've got. And I am unashamedly an American integrationist."²¹

Ellison's characteristic outlook and approach to the black problem coupled with his portrayal of black characters has given rise to the argument that *Invisible Man* is an assimilationist novel. Addison Gayle has rightly rejected the appellation, assimilationist, and has pointed out that if at all a sociological label can be thrust upon him, it is that of "an accommodationist writer"²² which itself is a product of his milieu and life. Ellison's novel rooted in African-American history, tradition, and culture does not negate or bury ethnic or racial identities as in the case of the novels written in the assimilationist tradition.

In this context, it is significant that critics often place '*Invisible Man*', along with the canonical texts of American literature totally underplaying its racial dimension. In their zeal to explore universal themes, they often upstage the racial and ethnic aspect. Having fallen a prey to what Antony Appiah called "Naipaul Fallacy",²³ the mainstream critics hailed it, because, for them, it conforms to the standards of highbrow art set by Euro-American masters of the dominant discourse. To Tony Tanner, *Invisible Man* fictionalizes the stock theme in American fiction -- "the rightman of being controlled by unseen agencies and powers which recurs

in contemporary American fiction.”²⁴ Relegating the racial element to the background, Tanner comes to the conclusion that *Invisible Man* “is quite simply the most profound novel about American identity written since the War.”²⁵ But the feeling of estrangement, alienation and consequent search for identity appear in Ellison's novel against the backdrop of African-American predicament and is indirectly intertwined with the black-white relationship in America. For the *Invisible Man*, there is no denying the fact that his situation springs from the nature of the white power structure and white values and the culprit is none other than the American society inimical to the freedom and wellbeing of the African-Americans. As a blackman, his alienation is remediable as it is directly linked to the problem of the colour line. He is the very embodiment of rootlessness and alienation of the American in its intense form, and his existential problem is inseparable from the sociological problems of racism, prejudice and discrimination rampant in the American society. So there is a point in saying that *Invisible Man* is about the hero's search for identity, but, in actuality, he is searching for identity as a blackman in America, and the problems he encounters could have been different had he been non-black.

It is germane to note that even a section of the black readers dismissed it for what they believed to be the negative portrayal of the black characters. James E. Walton was making a pertinent point shared by many critics when he noted that after teaching *Invisible Man* to minority students in the class room he came to the conclusion that “they invariably favour works by Wright, Hughes and MalcolmX and others while blithely dismissing Ellison as no longer startling to them.”²⁶ He is, in fact, recording the stock response of black students who found the unflattering portrayal of blacks in the novel objectionable. But they sadly missed the point that Ellison was primarily an artist grappling with African-American problems in

its social, political and existential ramifications in his own unique manner. Despite Ellison's dislike of ideological straitjacket and refusal to subordinate craftsmanship to the political programmes of blacks, *Invisible Man* emerges as a fictional work "immersed" in African-American culture and history. His critical credo expressed in his rejoinder to Irving Howe, his use of the modernist fictional technique of European and American main stream writers and his antipathy towards naturalistic method and sociological documentation do not in any way minimize the black consciousness pervading his only published novel, and it is aesthetically articulated and projected in his own unique and peculiar manner.

The novel begins with the realization on the part of the narrator-protagonist that he is invisible, though he is "a man of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids."²⁷ His expatiation on his invisibility is significant:

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either (*IM* 7).

His utterings as well as the episodes with which he comes into contact drive home the point that he is invisible not only because "people refuse to see him" (*IM* 7) but because he is ignorant of the racial world around him which inhibits his free development and progress. The various episodes in the novel in which the invisible narrator gets involved demystify the true nature of the people and shatters the illusion entertained by him regarding the curative potential of the

different systems and schools of thought offering blacks a way out of the black belt and finally breed in him a new realization. Bell refers to the need of the protagonist to resist the manifestations of American culture when he says that "To assert his humanity he must acknowledge his Afro-American folk heritage and reject the pervasive racism, boundless optimism, compulsive individualism and rampant commercialism of American culture."²⁸

In his pre-invisible days he visualized himself as "a potential Booker T. Washington" (*IM* 18) and consequently his activities suggest the extent to which he had internalized the acquiescent ideology of Booker T. Washington. It is significant to note that Washington's philosophy preaching responsibility, industrial education and coexistence with whites without initiating any attempt to challenge the racist system played a pivotal role in the life of the African - American in the early part of the century and it seemed to offer a solution to the black problem within the framework of the existing system. His oft-quoted words in the famous Atlanta Proclamation Address' -- "Cast down your buckets where you are,"²⁹ indicated the need for seeking solution for the problems of the African-American within the framework of the Southern system. In this connection, it is ironic that the invisible man's oration at the school is an ideational reproduction of the Atlanta address, and his words echo Washington's views and attitudes. It is quite natural that he earns the recognition and admiration of the white audience who later requested him to make the same speech again, just as Washington was projected and admired by the white power structure during his times. In fact, Booker's acquiescent ideology preaching the message of compromise, humility and patience placated the white power structure who saw in the mulatto leader's ideology a rationale of the statusquo. The essence of his call to Southern blacks to "Cast down in agriculture, machinery, in commerce, in domestic science and in the profession,"³⁰ radically deviated from

Duboisian doctrines, and provided a rationale for the hegemony of the accommodationist atmosphere. Washington believed that by being industrious in one's work and respectful in his dealing with his white superiors the Negro can earn the recognition of southern whites. The invisible Man, in the early part of his career earned the recognition of the white power structure by conforming to Washington's prescription regarding black-white relationship. The impact of Washington's ideology is very much evident in the early episodes in the novel.

The narrator is plagued by confusion and a feeling of guilt throughout his life, and he attributes it to his grandfather whose death bed advice to his father haunted him throughout his life. He had called himself a spy and traitor and had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity (*IM* 18). His advice is pregnant with meaning, and it points to the later encounters of the protagonist in the novel:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em Swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open (*IM* 17).

In the 'pre-invisible' days the advice of his grandfather to wear a mask of deception haunted him and he felt guilty "Whereever things went well" (*IM* 18). Going things well in a racist set up, invariably, means the exploited blacks are meek and humble, thereby, playing the role of traitors. As the episode unfolds, stripping the protagonist of the illusion he entertained, the narrator seems to realize the significance and ramifications of the words of this ex-slave. The invisible

man's grandfather, who had felt deceived at the hands of the whites, told them that the blacks were "free, united with others of our country in everything pertaining to the common good, and in everything social, separate like the fingers of the hand" (*IM* 17). Having believed in the lies perpetuated by the whites, the blacks worked hard only to learn that they have always been at the receiving end. This bitter realization prompted his grandfather to advise his son to "Keep up the fight," which, in turn, obsessed the whole endeavour and activities of the invisible Man. But he knows how to get on in the white dominated society. On his Graduation day, in his oration, he declared that humility was the secret of progress not because he believed it, but because he knew it worked and earned the approbation of the white guests. He knew very well that remembering his grandfather he could never believe that humility was the secret of progress.

In the 'Battle Royal,' staged in the ball room of the main hotel of a Southern town, the protagonist, along with the other Negro youths, is blindfolded with white clothes and the whole thing is being watched by the leading white citizens. Ten Negro boys are provided with boxing gloves, put in a makeshift ring, blindfolded and they are made to fight one another to the amusement of the white audience. Further, it is performed in the midst of the stark-naked blonde with "the round firm breasts, soft thigh and small American flag tattooed on her belly dancing sensuously" (*IM* 20). The Negro boys are forced to watch, but not to touch the sexual exhibitionism which tells upon their conditioned psyche inhibiting normal black male-white female sexual relationship. Finally, while picking the coins as remuneration for the "entertainment" enjoyed by whites, the Negro boys experience electric shock which leads them to jump and shriek in animal-like movements. Battle Royal, one of the major episodes in the novel, is invested with symbolic overtones and helps in deconstructing the efficacy of Washington's doctrine held

dear by the protagonist. It is interesting to note that the very concept of the Battle Royal itself is not the invention of the novelist for fictional purpose. The pattern was already there in the American society. As Ellison himself noted, the pattern was, for him, a vital part of the behaviour patterns in the South, which both Negroes and whites thoughtlessly accept."³¹ By portraying the Battle Royal in a broader context of meaning, Ellison has amplified an African-American pattern in tune with the contemporary situation of the African-Americans to drive home their tragic plight and the ramifications of the accommodationist ideology. Susan L. Blake's pertinent observation, in fact, traces the origin of the Battle Royal to the slave past of the African - Americans: "It goes back to the many versioned folk tale -- "The Fight" in which old master and his neighbour pit their two strongest slaves against each other and stake their plantations on the outcome." ³²

The two central attractions of the capitalist society are presented before blacks in introducing the naked blonde and money. The ritual introduces the black youths to the false gods of American culture: sex, violence and money. The sexualized racism, pervasive in the racist American society, rears its head in the life of the protagonist as he is expected only to look at and not to touch the woman. As for the black man, the Southern indoctrination inhibiting a meaningful interaction between black man and the white woman has functioned as a kind of super ego directing and controlling a meaningful relationship with white women throughout his life. Even in the case of the narrator, he could find a meaningful relationship only in Mary who was a "stable force, a source of refuge, the substance of hope, warmth and love" (*IM* 210).

It is all the more significant that the Battle Royal is fought over a belly dancer and the fake coins are symbolic of the two major temptations of the American

capitalist society, money and woman. Instead of directing their aggressive impulses against their oppressor, blacks are being cleverly manipulated in such a way that they fight among themselves, thereby pointing to a wider machination to perpetuate the unjust system of prejudice and discrimination. The whole fight among the black children controlled by whites for their amusement suggests that white power structure makes African - Americans channel their aggressive impulse inward upon their own race, instead of upon their true enemies, who remain on the sidelines, supervising the fray to make sure that the violence is directed away from themselves. Ellison, in actuality, is criticizing the values and mores of the American society which is inimical to the interests of the blacks, without adopting the mode of Protest writers. The domination and manipulation by whites are subtly suggested without chronicling the injustices in a direct manner. The plight of the black boys in the *Battle Royal* is reminiscent of Richard Wright's perceptive observation on the attitude of the Whites in *Black Boy*. "I suppose, it is fun for whitemen to see Biggers fight... To whiteman we're like dogs or cocks."³³ The symbolic dimension of the remuneration he gets is suggestive of the predicament of the blacks.

After the boxing the narrator is invited to deliver his graduation speech in which he extols the wisdom of Booker T. Washington. His speech is a replica of the famous Atlanta Proclamation address made by Booker T. Washington and shows the extent to which he is influenced by Washington's ideology. In an apparent re-rendering of Washington's remarks, he advises the blacks against their desire to move North: "to cast down your bucket where they are -- cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded...." (*IM* 29). He spoke till his mouth "filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled him." (*IM* 29). When asked to repeat louder his reference to social responsibility, he made a mistake and yelled a phrase social equality -- which he had often

seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private (*IM* 29). Though his utterance can be explained away as a slip of the tongue and was in fact made in a moment of mental exhaustion, it is, 'fraught' with symbolic and psychological overtones. His 'slip of the tongue' provides insight into the unconscious working of his psyche which is in conflict with his apparent attempt to conform to Washington's ideals which guarantee peaceful coexistence in a racist society. Moreover, it may suggest that the ideational content of his speech which impresses the white audience is a mere gimmick which does not reflect his innermost thought. John F. Callahan's comment on the episode is worth-quoting:

With these two unconsciously intentional words, Invisible Man says no to the audience's attempt to make him a mechanical orator and yes to the principle of equality affirmed by his grandfather, though seemingly denied, and seemingly affirmed by Thomas Jefferson and the other founders, though devised by certain specific provisions the framers built into the constitution and American legal code.³⁴

It is pertinent to note that the call for social equality goes contrary to Washington's philosophy of accommodationism. The implication is clear: in fact he does not believe in the efficacy of Washington's ideology because it is impracticable and utopian. At the psychological level, we may assume that, for him, when the censor relaxes his innermost thought is expressed without any inhibition. His imitation of Washington's ideas is only a ploy, to "overcome them with Yeses" as suggested by his grandfather. He adopts this technique, because he knows that it will enable him to corner some benefits.

At the end of the meeting the narrator is presented with a briefcase containing

an official-looking document--a Scholarship to the State College for Negroes. He managed to win the reward, by playing the game without earning the displeasure of the white dominated society. It also points to the situation prevailing in American society that only Uncle Toms who dance to the tunes of the whites are rewarded and accepted and not Bigger Thomases who challenge the system.

On the night after the Battle Royal the narrator dreams. In the dream, his grandfather tells him to open the briefcase, and he finds an engraved document which reads: "To Whom It May Concern: Keep this Nigger Boy Running" (*IM* 32). In fact, the wording in the document captures the real plight of the African - Americans and foreshadows the content of the letter Bledsoe later writes to Emerson, which the narrator obtains in order to get a job. Kerry MCSweeney sheds light on the socio-political roots of the symbolic dream when he comments on the significance of the note in the life of the African-Americans:

In the days of Slavery, illiterate blacks needed a note signed by the white master in order to travel from plantation to plantation. A Negro boy looking for work is told by a prospective white employer to try at another white business and is given a sealed letter to carry to the next employer.³⁵

Having won a Scholarship to pursue his studies, he joins the black college where he encounters Dr. Bledsoe, the black College President who symbolizes everything he is hankering after. Bledsoe, a trickster figure, achieved the heights of success indulging in clever manipulative tactics. He soon becomes the narrator's ideal, and the narrator appears to have internalized the majoritarian values which make him look upto Bledose

with awe and wonder:

But more than that, he was the example of everything I hoped to be: influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking creamy-complexioned wife. What was more, while black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern whitemen (*IM* 86)

His overemphasis on money, colour and women indicates that he has fallen a prey to the world view of the hegemonic class in America. His later rejection of the Washington ideology becomes all the more significant when viewed against the backdrop of the factors which had earlier made him a slave of the indirect workings of the societal ideology. For him, Bledsoe is more than just the President of the College. He is a "leader, a Statesman who carried our problems to those above us, even unto the white house" (*IM* 98), says the narrator. But despite his attempt to emulate the example of Dr. Bledsoe, who wields considerable power and status in the society, he remains invisible because he has failed to play the game in the right manner. He has been nursing a love for the success myth like a typical American, and Bledsoe seemed to symbolize those values mainly sought after by him. The indelible imprint made by Bledsoe's presence on the narrators mind is revealing as it provides an insight into the narrators attitude to all that Bledsoe represents:

To us he was more than just a president of a college. He was a leader, a

'statesman' who carried our problems to those above us, even unto the White House; and in days past he had conducted the President himself about the campus. He was our leader and our magic, who kept the endowment high, the funds for scholarships plentiful and publicity moving through the channels of the press. He was our coal-black daddy of whom we were afraid. (*IM* 98).

The narrator takes Norton, a white philanthropist, to the black slum down below the College on the hill at the request of Bledsoe. On his request, he stops his car before a log cabin of Trueblood, an uneducated African-American "who is the father of both his daughter and daughter's child." Their encounter with Trueblood later proves to be his ruin. Trueblood, as his name suggests, is being true to his blood; narrates the story of how he impregnated his daughter and its consequence. It is ironical that Norton, who himself is guilty of secretly harbouring erotic feelings for his daughter overstepping the boundary of filial love, is amused and feels elated and gives him a sum of money. Norton, notwithstanding his puritan sensibility, realistically describes his daughter who died while accompanying him on his globe-trotting, and this experience, makes him identify with Trueblood who gave vent to his natural instincts ignoring the reaction of the society. As Bell has pointed out "they are sharers in the common human condition despite their cultural and racial differences."³⁶

The Trueblood episode has multiple layers of meanings, from an African-American angle. At one level, such stories help the whites to propagate their view regarding the basic depravity of the blackman, whom they consider as uncivilized brutes having no qualms in expressing their animal desires. It is significant and ironic that Norton too is a victim of Electra complex but he manages to mask

it under the veneer of civilization. Norton, "the bearer of the Whiteman's burden" is no different from the uneducated Negro who, at least, confesses his actions and wrongs. Not only Nortons, but Trueblood's white boss and the local sheriff derive voyeuristic pleasure on listening to the story of the incest from the horse's mouth and they gave him food, drink and tobacco in return. The circumstances which led to the incestuous act bring out the stark poverty and lack of basic amenities in his household which is the common experience of the majority of the African-Americans. Trueblood's explanation provides insight into the predicament of blacks which is the result of discrimination and unbalanced development. Because of the limited amenities they are forced to share the room which finally led to the shocking act. In a sense, the White power structure which denied the blacks enough space and fair share is indirectly responsible for the generation of immoral feelings in the blacks. Their depravity is not innate, on the contrary, it is the product of an unjust system predicated on prejudice and discrimination. The fact that Kate attempts to punish him --he wears a festering axe wound on one side of his face --and his willingness to be punished indicates that folk values are more intolerant of incest than the whiteman's civilization.³⁷ So the episode becomes a thinly veiled criticism of the Whitemen's pretensions on the superiority of their civilization. In this connection the perceptive observation made by Barksdale is illuminating:

The net result of the incident is comic ridicule of a white man's civilization which places a greater emphasis on repression and suppression than on expression and fulfillment ... The Trueblood incident, then, in *Invisible man* is comic because it confronts a blackman who has nothing but his truth with a whiteman who has everything but his truth.³⁸

The incestuous act, instead of turning out to be a curse, has a positive effect on his life. His confession is revealing: "...I done the worse thing a man can do in his family and 'stead of things gittin bad, they got better." (IM 60) His experience contradicts Washington's belief that white society would reward only those African-Americans who lived by its official morality. On the other hand, Norton sees a reflection of his own innermost desires in Trueblood and is excited on hearing the story from Trueblood's mouth. Probably, he provides amusement and voyeuristic pleasure to the whites who entertain identical feeling beneath the mask of civilization.

After leaving Trueblood's cabin, he takes Norton to the roadside bar, "The Golden Day", visited by black, mentally ill, shell-shocked veterans of World War II. As Norton felt exhausted, he expressed his desire to have a stimulant. The inmates, mostly middle class blacks, bare their hearts in the presence of Norton. Their seemingly innocuous comments are thought-provoking and are severe indictments of white hypocrisy. One of them greets Norton by calling him his grandfather Thomas Jefferson, who is said to have fathered three or more children by his slave mistress Sally Hemings. Though there is taboo attached on blackman-White woman relationship as exemplified in the Battle Royal episode, there is no denying the fact that white men have been violating black women and fathering children throughout history. Golden Day is a microcosm of the middle class black world comprising mostly depressed ex surgeons, former chemists and supervised by the hospital attendant Super-cargo. Probably, Ellison seems to suggest that it is an insane world driven by racism. To the white world the inmates are aberrations. It indirectly points to the fact that society has made them mentally deranged as they find it difficult to adjust to the ethics of the white man's world. It is natural

that this maladjustment causes psychic problems, especially when the middle class blacks try to emulate the mainline American values which they think would help them come up in the world. During their journey North Vet gives the Invisible Man illuminating advice which provides a glimpse into the narrator's predicament and also indicates that there is a method in his madness: "Play the game, but don't believe in it - that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a straight jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way - part of the time atleast." (*IM* 127).

Back in the College, he is summoned by Bledsoe and taken to task for "showing a white trustee more of black life than black eyes intended her to see" (*IM* 148). To the narrator's explanation that he was trying to please Norton, Bledsoe's reply is revealing: "The dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!" (*IM* 124). Bledsoe who has internalized Washington's acquiescent ideology as a means of success in the society is shocked to learn that Norton, the White trustee of the College, has been made to see the seamy side of black life. Consequently, the narrator is expelled from the College and is given a letter of recommendation which he takes to a prospective employer-- Emerson in the North. His migration North in search of better opportunities corresponds to the journey undertaken by the Negroes from South to North in the early decades of the century in search of greener pastures. It also turns out to be a fruitless endeavour, as the North is not much different from the South in its treatment of blacks. At the symbolic level it is also a rejection of Washington's prescription to "cast down your bucket where you are" contained in the famous Atlanta Proclamation Address. Bledsoe's sealed letter is another instance of treachery and its contents echo the "Keep

the Nigger Boy running" prescription seen in the dream earlier. Bledsoe's letter, in fact, requests Emerson to "help him to continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveller" as he wants to "make his severance with the College be executed as painlessly as possible" (*IM* 156). Bledsoe's letter echoes the injunctions in his dream, which is in tune with the plight of the black Americans in the American society.

Having fired from the College he obtains a job in the Paint Factory in the North where he comes face to face with the ruthlessness of American capitalism and trade unionism. The accident that occurs in the factory and its fallout is an indictment of the American capitalist society which exploits the labour of blacks for their development and their attempt to rob them of their identity. Carrying Dr. Bledsoe's letter of recommendation, he manages to get an employment in Liberty Paints, though the letter contained derogatory references about the narrator. He has to work with Lucious Brockway, the Black Uncle Tom, who is the Chief Engineer of the firm. The Company, which is a microcosm of America, with Eagle as its insignia and "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints" as its motto is engaged in preparing the purest paint -- the optic white. The insignia eagle, its motto, and the fact that optic white paint is made by mixing ten drops of black with a can of white paint are all invested with symbolic meaning which, in turn, indicate the predicament of the blacks in American society. In America, blacks constitute about ten percent of the population and American power structure sees to it that their presence does not diminish the hold of the white Anglo-saxon values in the society. Black labour is pressed into service to put on a veneer of impartiality and to retain the hegemony of White-Anglo-Saxon Values. What is expected of blacks is to accommodate the white values and strive to retain the social fabric

of America intact. By hinting at the exploitation of black labour by American industry controlled by whites, Ellison is, in fact, illustrating Manning Marable's perceptive observation that "Capitalism has developed in America not in spite of blacks, but because of them."³⁹ Actually, his recruitment itself was motivated by the desire to offset the pressure of the striking white employees. Whites need blacks as workers only when their labour is cheap and economical. Moreover, in the Company he is looked upon by the pro-union employees as an informer to the boss. In the course of his employment he is deceived into overpressurizing one of the boilers until it explodes and he is taken to a hospital where he undergoes a pre-frontal lobotomy which results in complete personality change. The hospital machine seems to have been designed to destroy his racial identity and is symbolic of America's attempt to dehumanize the black minority. In this regard, we see that even blacks, who are typical uncle Toms, contribute their share in the perpetration of the great crime. His treatment on the electric machine, though it succeeded in healing his injury caused by the explosion, resulted in his partial loss of memory, and it points to American power structure's attempt to make the blackman impotent. Ellison seems to imply that a black man is always put on an electric machine manned by the white society, bent on setting a limit to their aspirations and dreams. Later, he is removed from the paint mixing job when he inadvertently takes his refill from the wrong tank producing a mixture with a grey tinge. As in the 'slip of the tongue' during the speech after the Battle Royal, here too, the message is obvious -- left to themselves, blacks will assert their identity rather than contribute to the development of the white culture. The whole episode in the Liberty Paints is an indictment of not only American capitalism and its exploitation of black labour but the blacks own complicity in their subjugation as well. As Robert Bone has observed, Brockway represents the skilled stratum of Negro labour which has

been entrenched in American industry from the beginning, the black base on which our industrial pyramid is reared."⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that the mixing of the paint is wholly monitored by none other than the black Uncle Tom Lucius and, his talent contributes to the perpetuation of the status quo. Somewhere beyond the narrative level, Ellison is saying that America has dependent, from the start, on the unacknowledged skills and sacrifice of Negro labour.⁴¹

Another major experience of the narrator takes place in Harlem where he gets involved in the activities of the Brotherhood, a thinly veiled portrait of the Communist Party. His involvement in the activities of the Brotherhood and later disillusionment closely correspond to the African-American's attraction to communism as a way of liberation and later disenchantment and bitter realization that it is an outfit controlled by whites. Ellison has depicted the Brotherhood in such a way that the readers become aware of the real motivation of the group and their perspective which are never in consonance with the interests of the African-Americans. On seeing old people being evicted from the house, the narrator delivers a militant speech thereby impressing Brother Jack by his oratorical skills. Later, he becomes a salaried organizer and functions as a theoretician. The eviction scene brings out the brutality of American capitalism and the problem is compounded because the victims are poor blacks. He gravitates towards the orbit of the Brotherhood as it seems to offer a way of escape from the racist society of America. He hopes he could "glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race" (*IM* 355). But even from the beginning, the novelist prepares us for the eventual disillusionment of the narrator with the Brotherhood. Brother Jack's language is unintelligible to the narrator, so also to the majority of blacks. Jack offers a Cheese cake, a white delicacy, wholly foreign to black taste. He begins suspecting

the aim of the Brotherhood when they criticize his speech. His alienation from the brotherhood is complete when he speaks at the funeral of Tod Clifton, a former functionary of the Brotherhood, defying party directive. He later moves away from its orbit as there was "a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope, and it was felt that for the moment the interests of Harlem were not of first importance" (*IM* 324).

The narrator's experience with the Brotherhood closely resembles the attitude of the American Communist Party which later took up international issues relegating the problem of the blacks to the background. He even felt that they were not free from racial chauvinism. When one 'Brother' asks the narrator to sing a spiritual he replies in the negative. The brother's retort that "all colored peoples sing" suggests the real face of the whites in the Brotherhood who themselves have internalized the dominant ideology. His bitter realization is aptly summed up when he muses that "outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they did not see us. It was a hell of a state of affairs, we were nowhere" (*IM* 402). By debunking the motives of the Brotherhood, Ellison is, in fact, trying to bring home the point that the radical alternative offered by the Communist Party failed to address the problem of the black Americans and the Brotherhood is in no way different from other less militant options he experimented in the past such as Booker's ideology, Bledsoe and Emerson. For him, Jack, despite his protestations to the contrary, belongs to the Company of Norton and Emerson and tries to force their view of reality on the blacks like other non-black ideological systems. His final finding demystifies the illusion he has nursed:

And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much

the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it came out the same -- except I now recognized my invisibility (*IM* 409).

His encounter with Ras, the exhorter, brings out the failure of the Black Nationalist movement to solve the problems of the African-Americans. Ras is portrayed as a Garveyite who is critical of the tenets of the Brotherhood and he sees it as another white organization. He detests everything associated with white people and advocates black pride, solidarity and autonomy and even "goes wild when he sees black people and white people together" (*IM* 315). Though the narrator realizes that there is an element of truth in what Ras says, he feels utterly disillusioned with him later when he sees that Ras engineers a race riot in Harlem which culminates in the death of more black people than the whites. Moreover, his solution to the black American's problem is impracticable and his call for resettlement in Abyssinia is patently utopian. Though he cannot approve of the destructionist rhetoric of Ras, he knows that it arises out of the emotional needs of the black Americans who have been on their journey to carve out a niche for themselves in the white dominated American society. Marion Berghahn's perceptive comment sums up Ellison's ambivalent attitude to Ras: "Ellison knows that his (Ras) hatred and violence as well as the absurdity of his battle dress are expression of a deep-seated feeling of frustration and stem from the hopelessness of the black predicament."⁴² His views embody the kernel of the Black Nationalist ideology which rejects any alliance with the whites. His advice to the narrator is significant as it indicates

how intolerant Black Nationalist ideology is:

You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same colour!; how the hell you call these white men brother? Shit, mahn. That's shit!. Brothers are the same colour. We sons of Mama Africa, You done forgot? you black, BLACK! You - Goddahm, mahn !.... you got bahd hair ! You got thick lips! They say you stink ! They hate you, mahn. You African, AFRICAN ! Why you with them? Leave that shit, mahn. They sell you out. That shit is old fashioned. They enslave us you forget that? How can they mean a black mahn. any good !. How they going to be your brother?. (*IM* 299).

Ras cannot approve of the collusion between blacks and whites who, for him, are antagonist forces in the American society. But it is ironical that in the riot he engineers, blacks fight against blacks and whites derive a sort of pleasure observing it as in the 'Battle Royal,' because the self-destructive violence is against the interests of the blacks. The contradiction in the Black Nationalist ideology comes out clearly in the violence and it further proves the inefficacy of Black Nationalism as an ideology offering hope to the African-Americans.

Finally, the Invisible Man meets Rhinehart, the ambiguous person who represents the possibilities of Harlem life. He sees that Harlemites accept Rhinehart as a preacher, a charlatan, a numbers runner, a police briber, a spiritual technologist and he is portrayed as a trickster figure common to the African- American tradition. Realizing the infinite possibilities of Rhinehart, he decides to do a Rhinehart and overcome the blind white people with "yeses" and undermine them with "grins" as advised by his grandfather. He is his last hope and only choice through whom he can translate his grandfather's advice into reality. He says: "so I'd accept

it, I'd explore it, mine and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet and they'd gag. Oh, but wouldn't they gag. I didn't know what my grandfather had meant, but I was ready to test his advice (*IM* 409).

He begins pinning his hope on Rhinehart as he "caught a glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rhinehart's multiple personalities." (*IM* 452) He is an urban Brer Rabbit who 'yesses everybody.' Disenchanted with everything he comes into contact, the Invisible Man is struck by the possibilities offered by Rhinehart's personality. Ellison's himself has aptly commented on the significance and role of Rhinehart in the novel:

Rhinehart's role in the formal structure of the narrative is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras and a means of applying in yet another form his grandfather's cryptic aims to his own situation: Rhinehart is my name for the personification of Chaos. He is also intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it.⁴³

Towards the end of the novel riot breaks out in Harlem at the instance of Ras who still sees the Invisible Man as a follower of the Brotherhood. While trying to escape from Ras, he is pursued by a gang of whitemen and in the course of the flight he falls through a manhole into a coal cellar. In the coal Cellar he falls asleep and dreams that his enemies have castrated him. The dream is symbolic as it points to the attempt of the American society to rob him of his identity. The Invisible Man tells the two whitemen who had been chasing him that he still has them in his briefcase. His ambiguous words have generated a lot of conflicting interpretations. Ellison's own observation is capable of setting at rest such differing

perceptions:

What I wanted him to be saying was that the whitemen were not aware that their fate was in the bag that he carried. The bag that he had hauled around with his various identification, his diploma, with Clifton's doll, with Tarp's slavery chain-link, and so on, that this contained a very important part of their history and of their lives.⁴⁴

His experiences lead him to a thorough self-introspection which, in turn, makes him realize the fact that even though he is an Invisible man, he has a socially responsible role to play. He revokes his earlier decision to stay on in the underground to escape the society's effort to programme and condition him.

The narrator's encounter with various figures and involvement in different situations corroborate Ellison's own observation that "the major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way of success."⁴⁵ It is only towards the end of the novel that realization dawns on him regarding the illusory nature of what he has been chasing in his life. The susceptibility of the protagonist to fall a prey to the societal images thrust upon him is emphasized in each and every episode, but he emerges out of it unscathed. Dispensing with the practice of voicing tailor-made ideological harangue resorted to by several African - American writers, Ellison has succeeded in transmuting African-American material into art, thereby earning the approbation of a wider readership across racial and ethnic barriers. A perceptive analysis of the episodes in the novel around which the action of the novel revolves suggests that they are invested with symbolic meaning indicating the plight and aspirations of the African-Americans. Stretching the symbol-hunting to its limits Noel Schraufnagel

has made thought-provoking comments on the symbolic meaning of even the apparently less important objects referred to in the novel:

His diploma is symbolic of the unsatisfactory educational system of the South, Bledsoe's letter indicates how blacks are used against each other in the system. The minstrel bank he steals from Mary Rambo represents economic exploitation. The leg shackles given to him by a member of the Brotherhood is a symbol of slavery, which, in a sense, still exists. Tod Clifton's Sambo doll represent's the servile role played by blacks in most phases of American life. Brother Jack's letter identifying the hero as a party member illustrates the willingness of the Communists to use the Negroes as a political pawn. Finally his dark Rhinehart glasses are indicative of the invisibility of blacks, in a society in which their humanity is denied.⁴⁶

Passing through a plethora of options which deceive him, he comes out with the realization that though invisible, he has a socially responsible role to play. It is significant to note that the successful figures in *Invisible Man* such as Bledsoe, Rhinehart, Trueblood etc. are trickster figures drawn from African-American folklore, perhaps because "blacks survive only by being tricksters."⁴⁷ He banks on his culture and its constituent elements and it appears that it alone offers him hope of salvation in the colour-ridden society. In moments of desperation black Americans can fall back only on their culture as "it is a necessary shield, in the cellars of white America."⁴⁸ This is borne out by Ellison's use of the elements of African-American folklore in the novel.

Ellison articulates his black consciousness not merely through his treatment

of African-American history and problems but through his reliance on the African-American folklore as well. As Ostendorf has put it, "he has captured the best spirit, the symbols and the function of black oral culture in a literate world."⁴⁹ Bernard W. Bell has rightly referred to the mood of the *Invisible Man* as "bluesy" because in *Invisible Man* Ellison takes recourse to the most relentless form of self-knowledge and the extreme form of realism exemplified in the blues.⁵⁰ In the Prologue, the narrator sits brooding as he listens to the reading of Armstrong playing "Black and Blue." Trueblood sings the blues which has a therapeutic effect on him. In the Prologue, he says that "sometimes how I listen to Louis while I have my favourite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin." (*IM* 11) Trueblood's account of his incest itself reads like the blues. Later, when he walks across the college campus after learning of his expulsion, the sounds of an "old guitar-blues plunked from an out of tune piano" drift towards him, reminding him of the echoed whistle of a lonely train. In New York he meets a Cartman belting out the Boogie Woogie blues. Even in the epilogue he recalls Louis Armstrong playing and singing "Buddy Boldan's blues." It appears that, blues is a survival mechanism for the narrator and also for the characters who take recourse to it as in the case of other black victims of racism. The psychological significance of the blues is materialized in the case of the narrator who is engaged in a journey towards self-realization. Bernard W. Bell has rightly referred to the blues-Jazz motive in the novel by referring to Ellison's adoption of blues technique in the novel:

The recurrence of the numbers three and seven (blue notes), fragments of the blue lyrics (She's got feet like a monkey, legs like a frog, Lawd, Lawd!) and allusion to the cathartic effect of the blues in the True blood and Junkiann episodes further reinforce the jazz-blue motive of the

novel.⁵¹

Ellison has abundantly made use of the elements of black folklore--blues, jazz and spirituals, "the most profound contribution of American Negroes to art"⁵² in his novel and it functions as the framework of the novel. Ellison's use of modernist and post-modernist techniques such as Image, symbol, polyphonic organization of the chapters with regard to the style and the use of defamiliarization techniques have made some critics compare it to James Joyce's *Ulysses* in regard to artistic elaboration and presentation of its subject.⁵³ The use of black folklore is significant for the black writer, as it offers a psychological way of coping with the harsh reality of black man's existence in America. Ellison, while acknowledging the universal significance and import of the Negro folklore, is fully conscious of its origin and background:

Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture, which regarded it as inferior, was especially a courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own expression, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality rather than allow his masters to define their crucial matter for him.⁵⁴

His perceptive observations on the curative potential of the black folklore provide a glimpse into the factors which made him choose it as an effective material for his fictional work:

In the folklore we tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves and depict the humor as well as the horror of living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical

perspective and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing.⁵⁵

The mood of the Jazz and blues suits the tragic circumstances of the African-American's situation and, for him, it is a means of liberation. It has the potential to make him come to terms with the tragic situation as it has got a therapeutic effect. Its potential as a therapeutic force came in handy for the African-Americans whose situation was excruciating and tragic. Ellison himself captures the potency of blues when he observes that "its attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit."⁵⁶ His characterization of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as "blues" hold true even in the case of *Invisible Man* because in it "each episode serves almost as an extended blues verse and the narrator becomes the singer."⁵⁷ The narrator reflects on the trials and tribulations of life which has a cathartic effect on him as in blues.

Susan L. Blake in her pioneering article "Ritual and Rationalization: Black folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison" has dwelt on the elements of folklore in *Invisible Man* and his short stories and has come to the conclusion that "he bridges the gap between the uniqueness and universality of black experience by the use of black folklore."⁵⁸ *Invisible Man* is replete with folktales, trinkets, toasts, sermon and the Jazz-blues motive is so obvious in the novel even for a casual reader. In Berndt Ostendorfs opinion "Jazz is one of the three forms of *Invisible Man*, the other being Anthropology and Modernism."⁵⁹

In fact, it is hard to find a black writer who has artistically assimilated the elements of black folklore in his literary work as Ellison. His conscious choice

of the folklore as the framework of the novel is predicated on his understanding of the value of tradition and, consequently, it emerges as the peg on which the theme of the novel revolves.

Unlike Wright, who openly indicted the manifestations of racism, Ellison transmuted protest elements into art. The portrayal of the episodes itself is an implicit indictment of the American society which by its racist nature made possible such heinous and unjust situations. The situations emerge as the product of society and not that of the idiosyncratic mind of a hero or anti-hero. The roots of the problem lie in the racism prevalent in the society and naturally it calls for measures to abolish it. Eschewing the approach of a sociologist or political commentator, he portrayed it with the aesthetic standards he had drawn from myriad traditions. But a careful and close examination of the episodes and folklorist framework of the novel indicate that *Invisible Man* is a novel "Immersed" in African-American history and experience and the episodes are formed in the crucible of African-American experience. The fact that he relied on his "ancestors" -- Euro-American masters of mainstream fiction -- for perfecting his craftsmanship does not in any way minimize the importance and significance of *Invisible Man* as an African-American text articulating black consciousness. As Keith B. Byerman has aptly put it "what makes *Invisible Man* a crucial text for contemporary black fiction is its combining of traditional Afro-American themes and desires with stylistic and structural method of modernist literature."⁶⁰

NOTES

¹ Richard Kostelanetz, "The Politics of Ralph Ellison's Booker: *Invisible Man* as symbolic History," *A case book on Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, ed. Joseph F. Trimmen (New York: Thomas Cromwell, 1972) 282.

² Once Ellison was called an Uncle Tom to his face by a black College Student. See Kerry McSweeney, *Invisible Man: Race and Identity*.

³ Tonny Tanner, *City of Words: A Study of American Fiction in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (1971; London: Jonathan Cape, 1976) 50-64.

⁴ Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co. 1969) 128.

⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Going to Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986) 199.

⁶ Wilfried F. Fensen, "The Men Who Lived Underground: Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison," *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*, ed. Brucking and Kolanrole Ogungbesan (1971; Oxford: OUP, 1975)99.

⁷ *Going to Territory* 39.

⁸ Barbara Christian, "Ralph Ellison: A Critical Study," *Black Expression*, ed. Addison Gayle 122.

⁹ Bernard W. Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* 53.

¹⁰ Ralph Ellison, "introduction," *Invisible Man* (New York: Viking, 1985) 4.

¹¹ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 70.

¹² *Shadow and Act* 35.

¹³ *Shadow and Act* 137.

¹⁴ *Shadow and Act* 34.

¹⁵ Irving Howe, *A World More Attractive* (New York: Horizon, 1963) 100.

¹⁶ *Shadow and Act* 137.

¹⁷ *Shadow and Act* 3.

¹⁸ *Shadow and Act* 121.

¹⁹ *Shadow and Act* 16.

²⁰ Amrijit Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* 16.

²¹ Ralph Ellison, "On initiation Rites and Power: Ralph Ellison Speaks at West point," ed. Robert H. Moore, *Contemporary Literature* 16.2 (1974): 169.

²² Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel*

in America (Garden City, New York: Double Day, Anchor Books, 1975) 71.

²³ Antony Appiah, "Strictures on Structures: The prospects for a structuralist prospects for a structuralist poetics of African fiction," *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Methuen, 1984) 146.

²⁴ Tonny Tanner, *City of Words* 16.

²⁵ Tonny Tanner 51-52.

²⁶ James E. Walton, "The Use of Culture and Artistic Freedom: the Rights of a Minority Writer," *Approaches to Teaching Ralph Ellison* 26.

²⁷ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Penguin, 1979) 7. Hereafter abbreviated IM and put in parenthesis.

²⁸ Bernard W. Bell 196.

²⁹ Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Exposition Address," *A Case book on Ellison's Invisible Man*, ed. Joseph F. Trimmen (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972) 4.

³⁰ Booker T. Washington 4.

³¹ *Shadow and Act* 173.

³² Susan L. Blake, "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison," *PMLA* 94 (1997):126.

³³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* 207-208.

³⁴ John F. Callahan, *In the African-American Grain: Call and Response in Twentieth Century Black Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1990) 159.

³⁵ Kerry McSweeney, *Race and Identity* (Boston: Twayne, 1988) 46 .

³⁶ Bernad W. Bell 202.

³⁷ Bernard W. Bell 202.

³⁸ Barksdale, "Black American and the Mark of Comedy," *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin Jr. (New Jersey: UP of Rutgers, 1973) 356.

³⁹ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Under Developed America* 9.

⁴⁰ Robert Bone, *Negro Novel in America* 20.

⁴¹ Edward Margolies, *Native Sons* 104.

⁴² Marion Berghahu, *Images of Africa* 170.

⁴³ *Shadow and Act* 56-57.

⁴⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Going to Territory* 60-61.

⁴⁵ *Shadow and Act* 48.

⁴⁶ Noel Schraufnagel, *From Apology to Protest: The Black American Novel* (Deland, Fla: Everett/Edwards, 1973) 86.

⁴⁷ Thomas H. Neigel, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 92.

⁴⁸ *From Folklore to Fiction* 93-94.

⁴⁹ Berndt Ostendorf, *Black literature in White America* (New York: Barnes & Noble books, 1982) 46.

⁵⁰ Bernard W. Bell 53.

⁵¹ Bell 204.

⁵² Leroi Jones, "The Myth of Negro literature," *Black Expression*, Ed. Addison Gayle 9.

⁵³ *Race and Identity* 21.

⁵⁴ *Shadow and Act* 173.

⁵⁵ *Shadow and Act* 78.

⁵⁶ *Shadow and Act* 94.

⁵⁷ Edward Margolies, *Native Sons* 133.

⁵⁸ Susan L. Blake, *PMLA* 127.

⁵⁹ Berndt Ostendorf, *Black Literature in White America* 88 .

⁶⁰ Keith B. Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain* 11.

Chapter 4

Ishmael Reed: Towards an African-American Aesthetics

Ishmael Reed is one of America's most distinguished experimental black fictionists who chartered a new path in African-American fiction in the modern times. As a post-modernist writer he emerged on the literary scene in the 1970s, in the midst of the second Renaissance in African-American literature, and his works represent a radical departure from the black fictionists of the yester years, although his works spring directly from the African-American history and culture. It is significant that Reed is more known as a master of technique, though, he never failed to project a black consciousness in a different plane through his fictional works. The innovative techniques he adopted from the mainstream fictionists such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth are not mere stylistic embellishments, but arise out of his belief that "experimentation and improvization are traits of the African culture."¹ But unlike the mainstream fictionists, he used the techniques to posit an alternative view of reality. In 1969 he evolved the 'Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic,' which he himself called a 'truly Afro-American aesthetic'² taking into account such African components as drums, nommo, magic religion, and wood sculpture. In his zeal to defend his "New Literary Neo-Hoodooism," he rebutted the ideological moorings of the chief figures of the New Black Aesthetic critics such as Amiri Baraka, Houston A. Baker and Addison Gayle. Deviating from the traditional novel, both at the thematic and stylistic level, Reed discarded conventional plot and employed the genre as a vehicle of satire and parody. His world view as well as his aesthetic premises are grounded on the conviction that Western rationalism, metaphysics,

Christianity, Western art and the hypocritical democratic ideals are inimical to the interests of the African-Americans. Debunking Western metaphysics and Christianity, he posited an alternative value system in his novels which took its sustenance from the culture of the African-Americans. To him, Christianity and Western art are the logical products of Western rationalism and Western metaphysics which have subverted early man's practice of magic.

Reed's novels are replete with vaudevillian humour, phantasmagorical colours, Voodoo rituals, surrealistic imagery, and the actions in the novels are very often set in alien landscapes. The novels parody popular narrative forms: *The Free Lance Pall Bearers* parodies confessional autobiography and Horatio Alger stories; *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* shatters the conventions of the Western; *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* follows the structure of the whodunit; *Flight to Canada* revises the fugitive Slave narratives, and parody becomes a medium for social and literary satire in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In tune with the demands of his tradition Reed draws heavily on the literary potential of signifying, which always entails "formal revision and an inter-textual relation,"³ to treat the problem of the African-Americans. For Reed, parody in its ironic transcontextualisation and inversion, is repetition with a difference.⁴ He seeks to demystify the cultural history as in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Working backwards to Egyptian myth, locating the source of the black-white conflict, he comes out with his view that it coincides with the Osiris-Set conflict. In his novels, he conjures up Presidents (Lincoln, Eisenhower, Warren G. Harding), religious figures (Moses, Pope Innocent) and cultural figures (Harriet Beecher Stowe, Marie Le Veau, Freud) and employs myths and legends of Antigony (*The Last Days of Louisiana Red*) and Santa Claus (*Terrible Twos*). He uses anachronism, cartoon-like characters, radical time shifts and

exhibits dystaxy,⁵ that is, the disruption of linear narrative techniques employed by post-modern metafictionists such as Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon, but projects an anti-Western, anti-Christian vision antithetical to that of the mainstream writers. The innovative and experimentalist nature of his fiction which marks him off from other black American writers is aptly pinpointed by John O'Brien when he noted that white readers have become the fans of Reed's fiction because of the experimentalist nature of his fiction.⁶ Reed himself is, in fact, critical of the undue emphasis given to argument and theme in the investigation and explication of black texts to the virtual exclusion of form, technique and imagery. But missing the ideational content and the theoretical basis of the technique will deprive a critic of the real import and significance of his fictional works. Norman Harris has succinctly summed up the fictional concerns of Reed which give him a unique place in African-American literature:

In much black fiction a great deal of time is taken in exposing and depicting various injustices. In Reed these things are given. Consequently Reed can concentrate on his Neo-Hoodoo informed necromancy. Therefore, Reed's characters move with his full knowledge; a practical knowledge of past injustice results in a self-reliant attitude which is united with an explanatory Neo-Hoodoo. In Reed, then, self-reliance and Neo-Hoodoo merge to create a kind of practical/ supernatural Horatio Alger Story.⁷

Reed formulated his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic in 1969 and it is rooted in African-American culture and history. In actuality, the theoretical underpinning of his aesthetic became popular through his polemic with the ideologues of the New Black Aesthetic movement which dominated the black literary scene in the 60s and 70s, for whom he has little sympathy. The New Black Aesthetic, advocating

the evolution of art and literature serving black cause came in for severe attack from Reed, who projected his Neo Hoodoo against it. Neo Hoodoo aesthetic was something that he became devoted to even before he became aware of Black Nationalism which paved the way for New Black Aestheticism. Reed's account of the circumstances which led to its formulation is revealing:

The "Neo-Hoodoo" aesthetic comes out of my personal experience and represents my need to find something that I could be at home with. It was something that I became devoted to even before I became aware of Black Nationalism. "Neo-Hoodoo" is international. So I don't know whether "Neo-Hoodooism" comes out of the Black movement or not. I don't think it does, because I was personally looking for material that no one had used or tried before... I was ultimately reaching for a different set of aesthetic values, in reaction to literary standards.⁸

Reed was attempting to evolve a multicultural aesthetics rooted in the African-American tradition in opposition to the ideological assumptions of Western metaphysics and Western rationalism. Rationalism is the basis of modern materialistic society. The Judaeo-Christian value system which emerged out of Western metaphysics is bent on imposing only one view of reality to the exclusion of the other. The African-American, on the other hand, is tied to pre-rationalistic history and are the carriers of an ancient sensibility. The very word 'Hoodoo' is a synonym for Voodoo, a derivative of Haitian Vodou, which was a syncretism of Catholic and African religious beliefs and practises. Through Neo-Hoodoo, Reed deconstructs and debunks the cultural hegemony of the Western civilization as the world view of Neo-Hoodoo is rooted in the ancient tradition and culture of the African-Americans. Robert Elliot Fox aptly says that "Neo-Hoodoo is not in the manner of Blake

or Yeats, a private symbology, but one employing folk roots: an aesthetic drawn, as it were, from the public domain though shaped and instigated by the individual artist houngan."⁹

Central to it is the belief in the power of the unknown, particularly as expressed in artistic freedom and originality. In the "Neo-Hoodoo manifesto" Reed says that "Neo Hoodoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest."¹⁰ In Reed, words have magical powers. Voodoo is basically antithetical to Christianity, and it conforms to Reed's philosophy of life. He once called Neo-Hoodoo a "Cop religion"¹¹ because it is monolithic, myopic and condemns those who do not agree with its principles. It sprang from a 'guilt culture' whereas Voodoo religion emerged from a shame culture. He ridicules Christianity in his novels, especially in *Freelance Pall Bearers* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, for its narcotic effects on the psyche of the people. Reed's denunciation of the proponents of the New Black Aesthetic critics such as Addison Gayle, Larry Neal, Hoyt Fuller, Houston A. Baker and Amiri Baraka which lie scattered in his interviews and articles, in fact, helps to illuminate his ideological stand and the proper orientation of his aesthetic creed. The basic point of disagreement between Reed and New Black Aesthetic critics is on the question of artistic freedom, which Reed feels is the essence of African-American Culture. He called New Black Aesthetic a "Northern urban academic movement"¹² and disapproved of its prescriptive nature which is contrary to the spirit of the African-American tradition. Reed is not against black aesthetic or a black way of doing things. It is simply that, the way he sees it, censorship cannot be part of the black aesthetic. It appears that the prescriptive nature of the New Black Aesthetic Critics coupled with their fascination for Marxist view of art repelled him.

He came down heavily on the social reformist, functional orientation of Black Aesthetic critics. His disagreement with them is apparent when he says that

For, if a clique or organization began to determine what people should read, what areas of life would they seek control over next? What would happen to the thousands of examples of non-western art which have no function. What does a piece of sculpture depicting a spirit have to do with anything? How do the Blues have anything to do with change? Social reform? In Afro-American and Native American or Indian tales in which the hero sometimes becomes worse than the scoundrel he unseats?¹³

Reed was critical of the proponents of Black art, and he ridiculed the social realist in *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, by humorously insisting that "Art must be for the end of liberating the masses. A landscape is only good when it shows the oppressor hanging from a tree."¹⁴

To Reed, the basic programmatic premise on which New Black Aesthetic is founded is antithetical to the African-American tradition which emphasized artistic freedom and diversity. The Zhadanovian orientation and utilitarian objective which marked their arguments irritated him. Reed's rejection of their stance springs from the fact that it is contrary to the basic spirit of the African-American tradition:

A literary Banana Republic approach to things by those who have forgotten that the mainstream aspiration of Afro-American is for more freedom and not slavery, including freedom of artistic expression. Perhaps the Civil

Rights Movement lost its steam because people noticed that blacks were not practising Civil rights among themselves.¹⁵

It is interesting to note that Reed and Gayle-Baker-Baraka combine have indulged in a lot of polemic on the relative merits and demerits of their aesthetic principles and Reed throughout the debate has been emphasising the "African-Americanness" of Neo Hoodoo in opposition to New Black Aesthetic which, to him, is basically antithetical to the black tradition despite their peripheral espousal of black causes.

Reed's aesthetics is "bicultural" whereas the Black Nationalists adopt a "mono cultural" approach, which is not in tune with the spirit of the African-American tradition.¹⁵ Houston A. Baker cannot condone Reed's use of negative Black characters in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and *Flight to Canada* and Amiri Baraka denounced him alleging that he "fits into the capitulationist mould" and for "being a conservative and house nigger."¹⁶ But they missed the point that Reed portrayed negative as well as positive black characters knowing very well that both had been part of the social reality. It has been observed that revolutionary, political orientation of Black Nationalists prompted them to cross swords with Reed who was vehement in his criticism of capitalist American society as in *The Free Lance Pall Bearers*, though he did not share their political ideology. Reed, on the other hand, made a diatribe against Baker and Gayle, "The black opportunists in the English Department who had been set up by liberal critics to keep Afro-American writers in check by imposing rigid guidelines for what would be considered acceptable writing by blacks."¹⁷

Though he has evolved a unique aesthetic rooted in African-American culture, as a fictionist he is not without models. In an interview, he himself admitted

that he derived inspiration from Nathaniel West's *A Cool Million* (a parody of Horatio Alger Story) and *The Dream Life of Balso Swell* and Charles Wright's *The Wig*. Reed's *The Freelance Pall bearers* has much in common with Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot and Mumbo Jumbo* resembles Pynchon's *V* as all these novels are metafictional works. His fictional concerns are aptly summed up by John H. Bryant: " His context is the American Pop culture, the political cartoon, the routine of a Stand-up comedian, the high Jinks of mad comics. His vocabulary and allusion comes from the cliches of TV, best selling works, newspaper and magazine commercials and movies."¹⁸

Reed adopts a mythopoeic approach to classical myth of Antigone (*The Last Day of Louisiana Red*) and to the Osiris-Isis conflict (*Mumbo-Jumbo*). Mythopoeic approach results from an interaction of the past and the present with a view to speculating the direction of the future.¹⁹ Reed's mythopoeic vision attempts to transpose various primeval myths into symbolic meaning. He is interested in what Harry Slochower calls "mythopoesis or the recreation of myths."²⁰ In *Conjure* and *Chattanooga*, Reed's collection of poems, he debunks the white mythology which is the product of Western anti-life culture. Reed, in fact, refrained from cataloguing the injustices heaped on the blacks by white power structure as portrayed in naturalistic or realistic works. But a close examination of his works indicates that his theme, technique and concept of art all bear the stamp of African-American tradition and emerges out of the matrix of African-American culture.

He uses the technique of necromancy through which he tries to rewrite history. Necromancy means using the events in the race's past to comment on the present and prophesy about the future. To Reed the African-American artist is similar to a necromancer. He is a conjurer who works juju upon his oppressors,

a witch doctor who frees his fellow visitors from the psychic attack launched by demons of the outer and inner world.²¹ It is through necromancy that Reed offers an alternative view of slavery in *Flight to Canada* and Harlem Renaissance in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Like Thomas Pynchon, Gunter Grass, Robert Grover and Donald Barthelme, Reed uses the medium of art to raise ontological issues. But unlike the non-black writers, Reed evolved an alternative view of reality which is basically anti-western and anti-rationalist. The foregrounding of ontological issues and themes has been one of the major concerns of post-modernist fictionists. As Briam Mo-Hale, in his authoritative study on post-modern fiction, has noted "in post-modern texts, epistemology is backgrounded as the price for foregrounding ontology."²² Reed's fictional works conform to the features of a post-modern text. Reed employs fantasy, parody, burlesque and irony as in the case of other post-modern works since they believed that the conventional elements of fiction were exhausted and ineffective in expressing the truth of contemporary life. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a typical metafiction which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality."²³ Reed combines fabulation and satire in his fictional works. His fictional works conform to the definition of fabulation put forth by Robert Scholes in his *Fabulators*: "Fabulation is a return to a more verbal kind of fiction, a less realistic and more artistic kind of narration; more sharply, more evocative, more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things."²⁴

For Reed, post-modern fictional technique is a means to articulate his double consciousness which is the direct product of his hyphenated existence as a black man in America and to establish the culture and tradition of his African-

American community. Even the heterophany of elements found in Reed's work can be traced back not only to modernist and post-modernist bricolage technique, but to Jazz as well.²⁵ Bernard W. Bell has aptly emphasized the point of divergence between black postmodernists like Reed and non-black metafictionists:

Unlike their white contemporaries, black American post-modernists are not merely rejecting the arrogance and anachronism of Western forms and convention, but also rediscovering and reaffirming the power and wisdom of their own folk tradition: Afro-American way of seeing, knowing, and expressing reality, especially black speech, music and religion.²⁶

Satire, parody and humour are the characteristic features of his novels. One of the criticisms levelled against him is that he treats serious racial issues in a mundane and silly way refraining from serious satire. But in Reed, satire is an effective weapon and it has an African-American origin:

Satire is a prominent part of it. If you look at our tradition all the way back to the plantation you see that satire and signifying are widely used. It is a way of subverting the wishes of the people in power. And that is one of the techniques I've used a lot in my work. One could call it magic populism.²⁷

Magic populism, a variation of social realism, takes the side of the poor against the rich and directs its grouse against church and racism. But the butt of his satire is directed not only against the whites, but against the blacks as well. Reed entertained the belief that there had been a collusion between black women and white men to rob the black man of his position. Probably the notion got strengthened at a time when the literary establishment and publishing houses

were bent on promoting black women writers. In *The Last Day of Louisiana* and *Flight to Canada* he fictionalized the castration of black male resorted to by white men and black women. To Reed, black male in America "is the object of fear and fascination."²⁸ He believed that the "scapegoat in this process has always been the black male."²⁹ Moreover, he himself confessed that he is "more and more beginning to express the black male point of view because it is being left out."³⁰ He consequently portrayed many black women in negative light in his novels. In an interview with Reginald Martin he succinctly summed up his opinion on the role of black men in society:

I think that the black male is a pariah all over the world. Well, maybe not all over the world, but it seems in my experience that in South America, that is, places like that, the black male is a pariah. That also gives you an advantage. Because there is a desperation, a certain creativeness, originality, that comes from being at the bottom, a lot of our great art comes from the Afro-American male experience.³¹

It is a historical fact that right from the days of slavery whites have been covertly and overtly violating black women, often with their consent which produced what is called mulattoes. Even Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington belonged to this category. Reed's approach to black men-women problem is illustrative of the fact that his black consciousness lies not in supporting or espousing everything pertaining to blacks. On the other hand, he adopts a concrete position based on an objective understanding of the African-American predicament and its myriad interrelated problems.

Ishmael Reed's novels are an exemplification of his aesthetic creed which

seeks to treat black problems and concerns in an unconventional manner. In *Freelance Pall bearers*, he ridicules Christianity as indicated in the portrayal of three Horsemen of the Apocalypse who appear as the Barber, Marshall and Doctor, all criminals and hypocrites."³² The parody of "his Passion", Loop's betrayal by other blacks and his eventual resurrection³³ and the appearance of the Pope in the Yellow Back Radio Town in the 1880's as a corrupt upholder of white ideology all point to Reed's denunciation of Christianity which is opposed to the religious-mystical method of Neo-Hoodooism.

Technically, he adopts the popular literary form of the Western and parodies it by deconstructing its form to its components and blends it with the semantic categories of the Western, Science fiction, the electronic and the print media. The dualistic frame of reference of the good verses evil, a feature of the Western is defined historically rather than absolutely. Reed's use of two adjacent circles--one filled in black and the other empty white--to separate episode and description, which Robert Elliot Fox called "Reed's ontological emblem,"³⁴ owes its origin to Voudon and it permits black to become the principal element in the design. The darkened circle comes first and it is to be figured as a presence and the white figure becomes the second element figured by absence. In both theme and technique the stamp of African and African-American culture and concerns are obvious. Michel Fabre has summed up the total impact of the novel when he notes that it is remarkable in two ways: "First it establishes Voodoo as a viable counter tradition to the officially recognised beliefs of the Judaeo-Christian faith; second, it defines the artist as a maker of spells."³⁵ *Flight to Canada* explores the experience of slavery and Civil War by portraying real, fictive and historical characters. Structurally, the novel lampoons slave narrative, texts dealing with

black problems, especially Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, combining the element of satire, allegory and farce. The novel, set during the Civil War, mixes contemporary characters and characters from 1860s to stress the similarity between the periods. The plot revolves around the relationship between the demonic and decadent slave-holder Arthur Swelle and his four slaves. Of these, Raven Quickskill, Leechfield and 40s run away with high hopes to Canada, the land of freedom. Raven writes a poem on Canada and it takes him to Canada. When Raven reaches Niagara, situated in Canada, he meets a beaten up Carpenter returning from Toronto who tells him that 'Canada belonged to the American, the Silla,' thereby demolishing the illusion entertained by Raven. He realizes that 'Canada like freedom is a state of mind'³⁶ and returns to Virginia. On the otherhand, Cato and Uncle Robin remain with Swelle. Robin doctors the will of his master and inherits his mansion. Eventually, Swelle is thrown into fire by his wife and dies as a punishment for being responsible for their son's death. Robin says that it is the power of the Hoodoo which has allowed him to triumph over Swelle.³⁷ He is, in fact, a subversion of Uncle Tom in both temperament and strategy. Swelle embodies slavocracy and multinational capitalism and his essential downfall is portrayed towards the close of the novel. Cato, the overseer in the Swelle's plantation, whom Quickskill calls "Yellow Judas"³⁸ preaches Christianity despite being black and is subservient to Swelle and all that he represents. He is a typical black possessed by the ideology of Western culture and religion. Reed trains his satire on Cato who embodies false consciousness. Quickskill's story indicates that home is the best place, thus endorsing the importance of one's roots. Robin, on the other hand, uses freedom and literacy to subvert the political structure built on master-slave relationship. In the novel Hoodoo gives the black protagonists the strength to maintain poise in a seemingly hopeless situation.³⁹

The Last Days of Louisiana Red consists of three major story lines concerned with the investigation of Labas, an astrodetective, into the murder of Ed Yelling, the black discoverer of a cancer cure and the creator of the Solid Gumbo Works, a business that uses Voodoo to fight against Louisiana Red. The novel structured along the line of Sophocles' *Antigone*, satirizes the political activism of the sixties and questions the matriarchal theory of black society in America. He attacks the black revolutionary organization that sprang up in places like Berkeley during the 60s and the conflict between and within the organization and black women-men conflicts. *Terrible Twos*, an experimental novel, resurrects the legends of Santoclaus and Black Peter. Set in 1989-90, it is an allegory of the beginning of Ronald Regan's first term of Presidency and a scathing attack on America. The novel gives the message that evil comes from selfishness fed by Capitalism. *Terrible Threes*, based on the narrative structure of Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, exposes the power politicians in America. *Reckless Eye Balling*, considered to be Reed's most straightforward narrative shows his hostility towards the ideology of Feminism. *Mumbo Jumbo*, his most significant work, is a mythic representation of black history.

It is obvious that a critical examination of his fictional world would indicate that they are drenched in black consciousness, though often the thematic concerns seem to get lost in the paraphernalia of his fictional techniques. His combination of Voodoo aesthetic and metafictional techniques has been rightly pinpointed by Keith B. Byerman when he noted that

As an artist, Reed has no problem in using contemporary, often metafictional techniques to make social and cultural criticism. He uses anomalous materials, anachronisms, Cartoon like characters, radical time

shifts quite self consciously and often self reflexively to undermine what he considers to be indefensible values. In this he shares the aesthetic principles of Barth, Barthelme and Pynchon. But unlike them, except perhaps Pynchon, his understanding is premised on an alternative value system, one that includes diversity, creativity, artistic freedom and cultural democracy and that he insists has its true basis in that black folk system. This combination of method and value can be called his Voodoo aesthetics.⁴⁰

II

The Freelance Pall Bearers, published in 1967, is Reed's first novel and is a strong indictment of the American society using scatological and bawdy metaphors and imagery. It is an expressionistic comic satire burlesque on the confessional style and mode that has characterized much black American fiction since the slave narratives of the 18th century. It is a satire on America, combining the elements of surrealism and parody, and thematically adopts the form of the identity crisis novel. It appears to parody Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, two canonical texts of African-American literature. As in the other novels he blends avant-garde techniques with the techniques of 'Jazz Age.' Moreover, as Michel Fabre has noted, "it denounces the prostituted state controlled communication and the unmaking of individual pretence under the citizen's fine words."⁴¹

Bukka Doopeyduk, a young accultured black, who believes in everything that SAM runs down, is a magical man owing to his status as a blackman. Harry Sam is both the name of the country and its autocratic ruler. He is Uncle Sam,

symbolic of America. In the beginning of the novel we see that Sam has “disappeared into the John with a ravaging illness” (*FPB* 1) and he likes sitting in the toilet and ruling the Kingdom. Bukka is a young Nazerine apprentice who lives in the oppressive society ruled by Uncle Sam. He quits his studies and marries the girl whom he loves and settles in Harry Sam Project House. He works as a psychiatric technician in a hospital but his wife Fane persuades him to work in Harry Sam Muggle Factory so that he can earn more. He is later demoted for a minor lapse and consequently his health disintegrates. His neighbours are under the illusion that someone had put Hoodoo in him. His College Dean U2 Polygot cures him of his malady and later on he vacates his apartment. Meanwhile, his wife obtains divorce from a court of law on alleged cruelty. Having been fired from the job, rejected by his wife and thrown out of the apartment, he is a totally shattered man. It is at this time that he is summoned by Harry Sam for his alleged statement calling for guerilla war against Hary Sam and is made a Bishop of Nazerene to placate him. Later, Bukka was shocked to find the skulls of children in Harry Sam’s dwelling and divulges the shocking fact before a gathering that Sam has been eating children. Finally Bukka is caught and crucified on meathooks.

The novel, in fact, delineates the shattering of Bukka’s illusion, and the readers witness his conversion from being an ardent supporter of Sam’s creed to a revolutionary bent on unseating him. Bukka was a victim of the American dream embodied in the Horatio Alger story and was guided by the principles of Christianity as well as by the advice of his mother “to be always at the top of the heap” (*FPB* 2). American Society worships work and its guiding principle is ‘nobody is killed by hard work.’ Having believed in this dictum he tries to “Start at the bottom and work his way up the ladder” (*FPB* 10). Bukka wants to become

the first bacteriological warfare expert of the race and later to occupy the position of Sam. From being a staunch votary of Sam's philosophy of life, Bukka later turns out to be his bitter critic and opponent. His first temptation comes when he begins to doubt "the validity of the Nazerene discipline" (*FPB* 36). The second temptation results in his undoing, when he is tempted to replace Sam. As he himself admits, since leaving College, he received several setbacks-- "The fights with Fannie Mae, my physical and spiritual deterioration; my increasing doubts as to the validity of the Nazerene discipline" (*FPB* 48). while he was under the spell of Nazarene Creed, he distrusted ordinary black working class people, "lowly ruttish lumpen" (*FPB* 42) and married a "Switen bitter merely because he had sex with her" (*FPB* 3). His emulation of white American values and white way of life coupled with his hatred of black working class indicate the attitude and perception of what Franklin Frazier called the 'black bourgeoisie.' Bukka's problem is that he has internalized the American ideology of success embodied in the figure of Sam.

Bukka is a Nazarene apprentice, and the Nazerene manual is symbolic of Christianity which Reed attacks mercilessly in his novel. The cannibalism of Sam is symbolic of the consumptive, acquisitive nature of the American society whose motto appears to be "EATS, EATS, EATS." But the natural end product is shit, which is wasteful and useless. The anti-humanist, business ethics of American capitalist society is ridiculed through the caricature of Sam's cannibalism and defecation. He runs his country from a glittering neon-lighted motel located on an island. Though greed and self-interest mark his activities he convinces the people that he is looking after their interests. He has a personal economist, Mille Pande and a personal cook (who makes recipe out of children's flesh) who manipulate

things for him.

Eric Fromm in his illuminating study of the psychology of autocracy and necrophilia in *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* has come out with brilliant conclusions which seem to corroborate Reed's use of faeces and waste matter in a novel exploring the problems of power and dictatorship. Sam is a necrophilous person if we go by the standard definition: Showing passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; and it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something in alive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical. It is the passion to tear apart living structures as exhibited by power maniacs like Hitler. Sam, who likes sitting in the toilet, eating children in plenty is, no doubt, a necrophilous person in the characterological sense of the term. Commenting on the relation between necrophilia and scatological language, Fromm makes certain enlightening remarks which provide a glimpse into the workings of Reed's creative mind:

The language of the necrophilous person is characterized by the predominant use of words referring to destruction and to faeces and toilets. While the use of the word 'shit' has become very widespread today, it is nevertheless not difficult to discover people whose favourite word it is, far beyond its current frequency.⁴²

The scatological imagination evokes the threats of the power of oppression which is the central experience of African-Americans in the American society. As Keith B. Byerman has aptly noted "money, power, sexuality and language are all metaphorically associated with faeces."⁴³ Reed has succeeded in exploring the power mania of Sam -- and thereby America -- through the symbol of diarrhea

and faeces. Terry H. Bryant's comment is perceptive and sums up the symbolic import of the diarrhoea metaphor:

Sam's diarrhoea is a symbol of America's obsession with power. This is the power to consume as well as to produce. Some call it America's greatness and point to our standard of living as proof. Reed makes us see it as a case of diarrhoea, emphasizing devouring, digesting, defecating. He suggests it is a disgusting sickness, reflecting a consumption and waste cycle unprecedented in history.⁴⁴

Reed's critique of the narcotic effects of Christianity embodied in Nazarene manual is also premised on his notion that, Christianity, associating evil rampant in the society with the post lapsarian nature of the world shies away from probing the root cause of the oppression. The desire to reject Christianity, stems from Reed's desire to debunk the religion of the oppressors. Reed, though not sympathetic to Marxism, is in fact, echoing Marx's oft-quoted observation on the impact of religion on the psyche of the oppressed people when he refers to the narcotic effects of Christianity. To Marx "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature. It is the heart of the heartless world. It is the spirit of the spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."⁴⁵

Many of the minor episodes in the novel are invested with symbolic meanings. In Sam's subterranean toilet homosexual inclinations predominate and it is suggestive of the perverted sexual preoccupation of the American society. Even the wedlock and divorce of Bukka indicate a utilitarian and pragmatic marital relationship devoid of true love which itself is a critique of the sexual and family mores of the American

society. U2 Polyglot, the Dean of Harry Sam College, who is working on a paper titled "The Egyptian dung Beetle in Kafka's Metamorphosis" is a weapon in the cultural front, who tries to provide a rationale for the injustice and discrimination rampant in the society. It is part of the Ideological State Apparatus, through which capitalist exploitation is being perpetuated without evoking much protest from its victims.

Though Reed criticizes whites for the moral degeneration of the society, he does not refrain from portraying negative black characters. He does not associate all evil with whites and all goodness with blacks. This is in tune with his view that some blacks cooperate with the white oppressors to keep them in subjugation. In the novel Elijah Raven is the Muslim/Black nationalist whose ideas of cultural and racial separation in America are exposed as lies. Eclair Porkchop is the Minister fronting as an advocate of the people's causes, but he is later discovered performing an unspeakable sex act. The black Cop who protects white people from the blacks in the projects, and who is so stupid that he allows a cow-bell to be put around his neck for 'meritorious service.' Reed trains his gun on the black leaders who cater to SAM in his palace: His diatribe directed at the black leaders who are really flunkey's of SAM is revealing:

They were second only to the leaders of the blacks who mounted the circuitous steps leading to SAM's, assuring the boss dat: 'Wasn't us, boss. 'Twas Stokely and Malcolm. Not us boss. No indeed. We put dat ad in da Times repudiating dem, boss? Member, boss? You saw da ad, didn't you, boss ? Look, boss we can prove it to you, dat we loves you. Would you like for us to cook up some strange recipes for ya, boss? Or tell some jokes? Did you hear the one about da nigger in da woodpile? Well.

Seems dere was this nigger, boss... (*FPB* 37-38).

Reed inserts contemporary references with a view to satirizing certain contemporary issues which have a direct bearing on the life of African-Americans. The 1960s were the times of housing projects being erected in response to the cry for better housing for the poor. The protagonist is a resident of HARRY SAM Project, visited by white scholars preparing papers on segregated housing projects. Stark poverty caused the disintegration of many black families in those days as in the case of Doopeyduk. This was a common problem which plagued black families who were reeling under poverty in the 1960s. Further, the antipathy shown by white scholars towards the use of black English is lampooned when Doopeyduk muses on the reason why he dismissed its use in his thesis:

We refuse to sit back on our RANDES and listen to the steady erosion of the English language. Not since Caxton has there been such a crisis in letters. For many years now we've been lecturing on how Dostoevsky ate cabbages and have tolerated (giving themselves away) the ADULTERATION of HER TONGUE. Now we feel it's time to speak out. There will be a twilight vigil at the grave site of RUTHERFORD BIRCHARD HAYES in Spiegel Grove State Park, Fremont, Ohio. All those who feel as we do please try to be present. Buses will leave at 6.00 A.M. A potluck lunch will be prepared by the Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences from the University of Buffalo. Then a community sing will be led by BENNETT CERF AND BERGAN EVANS (*FLP* 100).

The Freelance Pall Bearers, which criticizes the vulgarity of American society parodies the Horatio Alger myth of success which masks the ruthless exploitation

and cut-throat competition of American capitalist society. Horatio Alger myth has a peculiar fascination for Americans as it embodies the abiding desire of the Americans to reach the top to make money and position as embodied in American Dream. Reed uses language borrowed from comics, movies, advertising, newspaper, T.V. and Radio. Even the language employed reflects the transformation of the world into things. Massification or reification, which is the hallmark of man's predicament in the contemporary world has conditioned the language as well. The plot breaks chronology and the "narration proceeds by a cinematic editing cut"⁴⁶ and the language corresponds to the reality it depicts. It is a conglomeration of idiolect and conflicting types of speech that caricatures their speakers. He prefers phonetic spelling to standard spelling as it "gives emphasize to subjects otherwise mundane."⁴⁷ The novel emerges as a typical black American political text steeped in black problems and concerns portrayed through post-modern techniques.

Mumbo Jumbo, Reed's longest novel published in 1972, is a mythical representation of black history and its relation to Judaeo-Christian tradition. Set in 1920s, it examines a significant stage in the history of African-American writing -- Harlem Renaissance or the Jazz age -- and its relation to the rest of American culture. It is said that Reed had written the novel in partial response to the white literary critics remarks that black Americans lacked a literary tradition.⁴⁸ He himself believed that the novel traces the true African-American aesthetic. Reed himself sets forth his objective in writing the novel in his *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*:

I wanted to write about time like the present or to use the past to prophesy about the future -- a process our ancestors called necromancy. I choose the 20s because they were very similar to what is happening right now. This is a valid method and has been used by writers from time immemorial.

Nobody, ever accused James Joyce of making up things. Using a past event of one's country or culture to comment on the present.⁴⁹

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, the period of the Harlem Renaissance when the creative output of the African-American writers was at its zenith, is treated to prophesy the future. Reed as a necromancer -- he elsewhere called an artist a necromancer -- adopts the technique perfected by post-modern experimental metafictionists and literally came out with a novel about writing that "figures and glorifies, indeterminacy."⁵⁰ The techniques and formal aspects are drawn from African-American tradition and Euro-American masters. The novel, despite its metafictional mode of narration, emerges out of black history and black concerns and reflects the author's growing black consciousness in a predominantly white society. Reed's approach to Western rationalism, Christianity, American society, Marxist and Black nationalist ideologies, which mark his black perspective, find expression in the novel.

The novel begins with an outbreak of Jes Grew, a psychic condition which embodies the freedom and vitality of the Afro-American tradition in New Orleans. JesGrew, a metaphor for the creative energy of the Harlem Renaissance is seeking the text of black experience. As a result of Jes Grew "people were doing stupid sensual things, were in a state of uncontrollable frenzy" and the people irrespective of their race or class are its victims (*MJ* 4,5). The positive aspects of the Jes Grew are indicated in the novel:

Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host. Other plagues were accompanied by bad air (Malaria). Jes Grew victims said that the air was as clear as they had ever seen it and that there was the aroma of

roses and perfumes which had never before enticed their nostrils ...
Terrible plagues were due to the wrath of the God; but Jes Grew is the
delight of the gods (*MJ 6*).

The Wall Flower Order, a militant organization of Atonist was summoned to control Jes Grew by grooming a Talking Android who will work within the Negro, to drive it out, to blot Jes Grew. Meanwhile, compounding the threat posed by Jes Grew, Mutafikah, the art "nappers" are bent on plundering art museums and shipping the plunder back to where it came from. The impact of Jes Grew, which is heading towards Chicago, is aptly summed up by a Southern Congressman: "Jes Grew is the boll weevil eating away at the fabric of our forms of our technique, our aesthetic integrity" (*MJ 17*).

Hinkle Van Vampton, the Templar Librarian was hired by Wall flower Order to curb Jes Grew and make a Talking Anthroid. The Wall flower order launches a war against Haitians who promote Jes Grew. Hinkle goes to Abdul Hamid, the Editor of the NewYork Sun and demands the Text from him. He is killed by Hinkle when he refuses to part with the Text. Labas, the Hoodoo detective, who is in pursuit of Jes Grew and its text narrates a tale describing how Set tried to suppress the Osirian dance, and how the basic dances were recorded in the Book of Thoth which forms the text for Jes Grew and how the book passed hands and finally fell in the hands of Hickle, the Templar. Significantly, Abdul Hameed, a black Muslim who secured the book burns it and his portrayal in the novel is an implicit criticism of the attitude of Black Muslims. Labas, a houngan who searches out and reconstructs a black aesthetic from the remnants of literary and cultural history is a trickster figure from black tradition.

The novel portrays a socio-political struggle between the forces of Atonists, representative of the repressive rationalistic Judaeo-Christian tradition and Jes Grew, the anti-plague, a new racial consciousness in New Orleans represented by Papa Labas and aided by Mutafikah, the military wing of Jes Grew. Wall flower order is a secret medieval order of knighthood which once held the fate of Western civilization in its hands. Through the conflict, Reed indicts Christianity and Western civilization which perpetuate and condone slavery and racial discrimination. This is in tune with his antipathy towards Western civilization and Christianity which provide the rationale for discrimination and prejudice. Even at the structural level, Reed deconstructs the suppositions of Western rationalism by parodying the rational structure of the detective story.

The tussle between Atonists and Jes Grew is an extension of the age old conflict between the forces of light and the forces of darkness and the descendants of Set and Orisis. Atonism embodies the worst things associated with Christianity and Western imperialism. Neo-Hoodoo with its liberational potential is represented by Osiris. It is often believed that the formidable power of the Loas played a significant role in the Italian defeat of the French armies during the war of independence. In the novel, the Jes Grew threatens the base and power of the Atonist order and they are out to stamp it out. The suppression of non-western civilization by Western Christian culture began earlier is still going on under new garbs. Reed brings home the idea that the sensuality and irrationality of African-American culture is incompatible with the theoretical orientation of the Western Culture. Papa Labas and Black Hermen are trying to prevent the destruction of the elements of black aesthetic threatened by the champion of Western culture, the Knights Templar.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed sends up the Nation of Islam symbolized by Abdul

Hamid whose perspective is antithetical to the pluralistic orientation of Reed's world vision. Though, historically, Nation of Islam emerged as a reaction to the conformist ideology of Christianity, Reed does not spare them from his criticism. Hamid too is "cutting out" Jes Grew and he even goes to the extent of burning it. Labas' accusation is revealing: "You are no different from the Christians you imitate. Atonists, Christian and Muslims don't tolerate those who refuse to accept their modes" (MJ 34-5). Labas' illuminating comments suggest that Reed's criticism is not confined to the tenets of Judaism and Christianity but the Nation of Islam as well. Despite its professed objective of acting as the saviour of the coloured, they very often conform to the same ideological framework of Christians who, to Reed, are intolerant of other beliefs.

In the same vein, he takes to task the Black Marxists through the characterization of Woodrow Wilson, a young man sympathetic to the Marxist cause, who works against the Jes Grew and poses a threat to the artistic freedom of blacks. For Reed, Atonism is a wide umbrella term comprising Eurocentric philosophic systems such as Marxism, Freudian psychology and Protestantism. Reed denounces protestant philosophy which is responsible for the violent nature of America. Speaking of lynching LaBas says:

A Protestant country ignorant even of Western mysteries executes soldiers after a manner of punishment dealt to witches in the "Middle Ages." Europe and Catholic church are horrified but not surprised at this 'tough guy' across the waters whose horrendous murders in Salem led Europe to reform its 'witch laws' (MJ 33-34).

Labas himself later rejects the notion that Earline has suffered a nervous

breakdown arguing that “nervous breakdown sound so protestant,” which reflects his negative assessment of Protestant ideology. The motivation behind Reed’s indictment of Protestantism stems from the fact that America, predominantly a protestant country, is nourished by the ideology of Protestantism for the survival of its capitalist culture. Critique of Protestantism is a criticism of the protestant society of America, popularly known as WASP, which dispenses injustice to its black minority. Abdul Hamid, a Muslim character in the novel, directly puts on trial the American ethos of money, land and power:

This is the country where something is successful in direct proportion to how it’s put over; how it’s gamed. Look at the Mormons. Did they recruit 1000s of whites to their cause by conjuring the Druids? No, they used material the people were familiar with and added their own. The most fundamental book of the Mormon Church, the Book of Mormon, is a fraud. If we Blacks came up with something as corny as the Angel of Moroni, something as trite and phony as their story that the book is the record of ancient Americans who came here in 600 B.C. and perished by A.D. 400, they would deride us with pejorative adjectival phrases like ‘so-called’ and ‘would-be’. They would refuse to exempt our priests from the draft, a privilege extended to every white hayseed’s fruit stand which calls itself a Church. But regardless of the put-on the hype, the Mormons got Utah, didn’t they? (*MJ* 38).

Through the indictment of protestant ideology and the American culture Reed is indirectly castigating the values which purport to provide the rationale for the perpetuation of colour discrimination and prejudice rampant in the American society.

Theodore O. Mason has correctly pinpointed the two-fold ideological and aesthetic objective of Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* when he noted that

Reed wishes to loosen the stranglehold of the Judaeo-Christian tradition on the cultural patterns of black people everywhere (not simply Afro-Americans). Further, he wishes to establish the virtue of fiction as performance on the part of the artist, wresting from the domination of the West, which, to his mind, has emphasized contemplation and tranquillity over performance and activity.⁵²

Structurally, *Mumbo Jumbo* parodies the narrative form of detective fiction by following its conventions. The debunking of the form itself is part of his ideological strategy to deconstruct Western rationalism against which he projected his Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic. Detective fiction stresses the importance of rational search for knowledge whereas in *Mumbo Jumbo* Labas eschews rationality and takes recourse to Voodoo to combat the spell of the dominant white establishment. The method adopted by Labas is a projection of rationalistic outlook implicit in the detective fiction. Further, Reed has used thriller which deemphasizes the discovery of the identity of the criminal and instead focus on the unravelling of complex webs of conspiracy and murder. The novel is replete with photographs, dictionary definitions, anagrams, quotations, newspaper clippings which lend an air of authenticity to the narrative. It is a parody of the documentary conventions of black realism and naturalism which marked much of the black fiction of his contemporaries.⁵³ Hoodo time is obvious in the novel through the usage of present tense verbs at the beginning of the narrative of selected chapters. Technically, the plot of the novel is given as bits of a widely scattered concept as in Thomas Pynchon. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed has succeeded in transmuting his world view drenched

in African-American experience through the innovative techniques drawn from various sources, but doing justice to his concept of Neo-Hoodooism.

NOTES

¹ Ishmael Reed, "Interview," by Joseph Henry, *MELUS* 11.2 (1984): 89.

² Ishmael Reed, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* by Reginald Martin, 4.2(1984): 180.

³ Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 51.

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (1985, New York: Oxford UP, 1991) 32.

⁵ Reginald Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* (London: Macmillan, 1988) 74.

⁶ John O' Brien, Ed, *Interview with Black Writers* (New York: Livenight, 1973) 167.

⁷ Norman Harris, "Politics as Innovative aspect of literary folklore: A study of Ishmael Reed," *Obsidian* 5.1-2 (1979): 47.

⁸ Reed, "Interview," *MELUS* 86.

⁹ Robert Elliot Fox, "Blacking the Zero: Towards a Semiotic of Neo Hoodoo," *Black American Literature Forum* 18.3 (1988): 95.

¹⁰Ishmael Reed, *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970* (Amherst: UP of Massachusetts, 1972) 20.

¹¹Quoted in Reginald Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 82.

¹²Quoted in Reginald Martin 187.

¹³Ishmael Reed, Ed, *Y. Bird Magazine Vol. 1 No. 1 : Before Columbus and other Essays* (Berkeley: UP of Berkeley, 1977) 71.

¹⁴ Ishmael Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* (New York: Macmillan) 36.

¹⁵ Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Doubleday, 1978) 298. In *Japanese by Spring* (1993), Reed reaches beyond his native English and includes passages written in Japanese and Yoruba.

¹⁶ Quoted in Reginald Martin 60.

¹⁷ Cameron Northoise, *Conversation with Writers II*, Ed. Richard Layman et al. (New York: Gale Research Co., 1978) 219.

¹⁸ Jerry H. Bryant, "Old Gods and New Demons - Ishmael Reed and his fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 196.

¹⁹ Harry Slochower, *Mythopoesis, Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics* (Defront: U of Wayne State P, 1970) 40.

²⁰ Harry Slochower 40.

²¹ Ishmael Reed, "Introduction" *19 Necromancers from Now* (New York, Doubleday, 1970) XVIII.

²² Brian Mo Hale, *Post modernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987) 10.

²³ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. (London: Methuen, 1985) 8.

²⁴ Robert Scholes, *Fabulators* (New York: Oxford UP, 1967) 12.

²⁵ Robert Elliot Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and Samuel Delaney* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) 50.

²⁶ Bernard W. Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987) 284.

²⁷ Ishmael Reed, *Interview with Reed* by Mel Watkins, *Southern Review* 21.3, (1975): 610.

²⁸ Ishmael Reed, *Writing is Fighting: Thirty Seven years of Boxing on Paper* (New York: Atheneum, 1988) 6.

²⁹ Ishmael Reed, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," Reginald Martin, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 4.2,(1984): 179.

³⁰ Ishmael Reed, "Interview," *MELUS* 89.

- ³¹ Ishmael Reed, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," Reginald Martin, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 181.
- ³² Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* 21.
- ³³ Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* 203.
- ³⁴ Robert Elliot Fox, "Blacking the Zero: Towards a Semiotics of Neo-Hoodoo," *Black American Literature Forum* 18.3,(1984): 95.
- ³⁵ Michel Fabre, "Postmodernist Rhetoric in Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*," *The Afro-American Novel since 1960.*, ed. Bruck Peter & Wolfgangrerrer (Amsterdam: B.R. Gruner Press, 1982) 116.
- ³⁶ Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Random House, 1976) 178.
- ³⁷ *Flight to Canada* 187.
- ³⁸ *Flight to Canada* 4.
- ³⁹ Reginald Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 102.
- ⁴⁰ Keith E. Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction* (Athens: UP of Georgia P, 1986) 237.
- ⁴¹ Michel Fabre, "Ishmael Reed's Freelance Pale bearers or the Dialectics of Shit," *OBSIDIAN* 3.3 (1977): 5.
- ⁴² Eric Fromm, *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York,

Chicago: Holt, Rinehart & Weston, 1973) 344.

⁴³ Keith E. Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain* 219.

⁴⁴ Jerry H. Bryant, "Old Gods and New Demons - Ishmael Reed and His Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 4.2 (1984): 196-97.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, "Introduction," *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law 1844," On Religion*, K. Marx & F. Engels (Moscow: Progress, 1975) 39.

⁴⁶ Franco La Polla, *The Free Lance Pall Bearers*, OR: no more Prosceniurum Arch," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4.2 (1984): 191.

⁴⁷ Reginald Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New black Aesthetics Critics* 67.

⁴⁸ Reginald Martin 85.

⁴⁹ Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* 70.

⁵⁰ Henry Louis Gates, *Critical Inquiry* 709.

⁵¹ Robert Elliot Fox 55.

⁵² Theodore O. Mason, Jr., "Performance, History and Myth: The Problem of Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.1 (1988): 98.

⁵³ Lizabeth Paravisini, "Mumbo Jumbo and the Uses of Parody," *Obsidian* 1.1-2 (1986): 36

Chapter 5

Conclusion

An exegetical study of the selected novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed, attempted in the preceding chapters, indicates that their responses to the peculiar predicament of the African-Americans in the American society -- whether it be accommodationism, violent resistance towards the power structure and the mainstream values or a sort of cultural resistance at the ideological plane -- is the product of the black experience reflected and refracted through the prism of the individual consciousness of the writers. The African-American novelists have captured the intricacies of their collective and individual existence in their own unique and characteristic manner and have adopted various techniques to articulate the trials and tribulations of their hyphenated existence and marginalized position in the American society. In fact, Terry Mcmillan's perceptive comment that "their vision varies just like the color of the skin varies in shades of black" provides illuminating insight into the reason for the diversity of approaches with regard to theme, style and technique manifested in the fictional works of the writers under study. All the three novelists have been, in their own characteristic fashion, struggling to integrate their world view with the demands and compulsions of novel as a literary genre.

My present study also reveals that the ambience of the times coupled with the impact of the various sociopolitical movements of the African-Americans with divergent views has contributed much to the perception and attitude of the novelists. Very often, the writers have been forced to bank on what Saunders

Redding called "a literature of necessity." This, I think, is more pronounced in the case of Wright, whose world view is drenched in violence, aggression and resistance. He dissects the roots of the racial problem with the eye of a social scientist and adopts naturalism as a literary technique to achieve his goal. He emerges more as a historian and sociologist, and he succeeds in raising certain fundamental questions of morality and justice through his works. His reliance on African-American folklore is minimal, but his novels appeal more to the militant and race conscious sections of the African-Americans. For him, the violence and aggression of the characters are not the manifestation of criminality or aberration, on the contrary, political acts necessitated by the facts of their existence. Much of the significance and appeal of Wright's novels will decline when there is a drastic change in the situation of the African-Americans.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, on the other hand, appeals to a wider audience cutting across racial and cultural barriers because he successfully translates black experience into symbolic action by drawing on the elements of modernism and black folklore. His black consciousness is inbuilt in the very structure of the novel. It is significant that one of the dominant issues in Afro-American literary criticism was, what in Barthian terms would be called the "Writerliness" of *Invisible Man*. Ellison's novel has intertextual overtones and is replete with references and echoes of texts from systems that lie outside the parameters of black experience. In actuality, far from betraying the black cause as some maverick critics would have us believe, Ellison, through his novel, is corroborating black ideologue W.E.B. Dubois' pertinent observation in his article "Criteria of Negro Art" that "black folk will not be recognised as human until their art is equal to that of white folks." In my opinion he has earned the approbation of mainstream critics, more than

any other African-American novelist, not because of his ideological predilections but because of his approach to art. His adoption of modernist techniques in no way hampers his attempt to draw the elements of African-American myth and folklore. He successfully fused the specific sociological problems of the Afro-American with the existential and metaphysical problems experienced by men in society regulated by laws beyond their control. As a researcher looking upon the whole gamut of African-American fiction from an alien angle I feel that Ellison's understanding and literary treatment of the black problem make his novel more universal and lasting.

Ishmael Reed's approach, which accommodated non-black tradition in its fold on the ground that African-American tradition is syncretic and multicultural, is an attempt to reassert the potency and vigour of the African-American tradition. Reed uses postmodernist literary techniques and predicates his black consciousness on a critique of western epistemology, Christianity and rationalism which, Reed believed, had provided the rationale for racism. His multicultural aesthetic is a direct response to the cultural colonialism and an attempt to challenge the culture of the hegemonic class. In this respect, Reed's fiction and world view are agents of decolonization and disalienation at the cultural sphere. He elevates, through his novels, black consciousness to a newer plane with the blending of Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and post-modern literary techniques.

The present study reveals that the experience of the African-American in the American society has functioned as the creative source for the African-American novelists, be it Wright, Ellison or Reed. What distinguishes them is their individual grasp of the reality, and their understanding and approach to the challenges of literary craftsmanship.

NOTES

¹ Terry Mcmillan, "Introduction," *Breaking the Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* (London: Vintage, 1967) XXII.

² J. Saunders Redding: "The Fore runners," *Black Expression: Essays By and About Black American in the Creative Arts*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Waybright & Talley, 1969) 59.

³ Quoted in Sandra Adell, "The Big Ellison's Texts and Intertexts: Eliot, Burke and the Underground man," *CLA Journal* 37.4 (1994): 380.

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