CHAPTER - II

NEGRO NOVELIST - HIS LIGHT AND DARK SHADES
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The prevailing notion that "Negro literature is racial at heart, a "primitive" product. "Negroid" in substance and spirit, Negro literature and art gives expression to the soul of the black folk: their exuberance, their earthly sensuousness, their child-like mind and innocent eye, their African sense of rhythm. It is the art of a separate race within America,\textsuperscript{1} decides the fate of the Negro novelist, or Artist. It thus fixes the writer in a "Literary ghetto," a no man's land confining him to black cultural belt, barring him to enter the premises of the outside world, defining him and dictating him what to write about. He is never allowed to be an individual, and never allowed to forget his race and merge with the world outside. This psychological along with physical alienation is paradoxical. The alienation strangles any other emotion or observation or presentation apart from the race, yet gives a vantage point as he is bes-
towed with a rich deep emotional area that can be probed and depicted in the right sense only by him. Thus race is his fate. Jay Saunders Redding in his article "Negro writer and his relationship to his roots" says, "on the one hand, the jungle, on the other, the resourceful hunter to clean it. The jungle where lurk the beasts nourishes the hunter. It is here that he has that some of relationships that made him what he is. It is where he lives. It is precisely because the jungle is there and is terrible and dangerous that the Negro writer writes and lives at all."²

Negro writer thus is forced to be race conscious all the time. Thus turning to be militant crusader. "America has not yet changed to the extent that a Negro writer can deny, effectively supress, or truly escape what Wright himself defined as the "inevitable race consciousness which three hundred years of Jim Crow living has burned into the Negro's heart." "He cannot escape the supra consciousness of what living in America has made him. If the pathos of man is that
he yearns to be whole, hungers for fulfillment and strives for a sense of community with others, it is the particular tragedy for the Negro in America that no success gratifies the yearning. "The fact of separation from the culture of his native land," Wright wrote a few years back "has sunk into the Negro's heart. The Negro loves his land, but the land rejects him."

He is always apart. He is, God help him, always alone. "I know America." Glicksberg asserts that "Cultural alienation manifests itself as racialism the Negro writers betraying an almost pathological pride in their separateness, their "Difference," their achievement as a people. Racialism is fetish, a source of inspiration and strength, a philosophy of aesthetics in a creative religion." This enforced segregation makes the writer highly subjective. Being totally obsessed with colour, caste he becomes blind and cold to the outside world. He fails to understand the universe, the failures, frustrations, agonies of human race as such. Misreflexes are conditioned and anything
outside of his race, his group fails to rouse his interest. He may be quite aware of the general suffering but he is haunted by his own colour, his own race and anything or everything is interpreted in racial terms. He is forced to be in cultural black belt and finds it to rank universal. Other thing outside this domain slips away from his conscience.

This enforced segregation raises two questions, what to write about and for whom, the first being a more complicated to the Negro writers. The three famous writers Ralph Ellison, John Wright and James Baldwin have experienced the same difficulty. "My fight," writes John C. Killens, "is not to be a white man in a black skin, but to inject some black blood, some black intelligence into the pallid main stream of American life." and Ellison says that "the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, and linked to this was the difficulty... of depicting what really happened within our areas of
American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediences the attitudes and values which give Negro American life its sense of wholeness and which renders it bearable human and, finally James Baldwin in one of his early essays which by contrast make his subsequent novels look contrived trivial false - wrote that "the difficulty then...of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was in effect prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real danger of my social situation."  

The Negro writer is limited by his audience too. His audience are the middle class blacks who always frown at Negroness of American Negro in their urge to be merged in the American mainstream. Blacks do not believe if actual Negro experience is portrayed as they never think that they are so helpless and so humiliated. Neither the whites accept the truth as it will be shattering their faith in themselves and
in their democracy. The writer is kept in the dilemma of writing exclusively for a Negro audience and limiting himself to a glorified and race proud picture of Negro life or of writing exclusively for a white audience and being trapped in the old stereotypes and fixed opinions that are bulwarks against honest creation. Negro writers traditionally have been impaled upon one or the other horn of this dilemma sometimes in spite of their efforts to avoid it. The Negro writer is asked to wear a mask and to tear the mask is to end his career as it discloses truths that white audience does not want to face. "The audience that Negro writers feel duty bound to attract is fixed in its ideas of what Negroes are and it is engaged as Ralph Ellison points out, in a "feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are" and it demands that Negro writer functions within its structure of ideology myth." The white audience rejects any real sharing of experience of being black. Any serious black writer feels it as his duty to depict this black experience and thus he is committed once again to his
race, as a necessity, a forced responsibility.

The Negro is made invisible and he is constantly made to search and establish his identity. This probing for real self exhausts him, leaves him drained as he spends all his energies. "He is then constantly pre-occupied with the seeking of the self and this is where his time and energy are spent. Several Negro intellectuals have protested against this. Thus Saunders Redding has written: "The obligations imposed by race upon the average educated and talented Negro, are vast and become at large onerous. I am tired of giving up my creative initiative to these demands." The Negro writer's existence can be compared to that of a jazz musician. The writer must preserve his individuality within the group. He must always balance both without allowing one cancelling the other. The writer has to co-ordinate his unique Negro experience and the American quality of his experience which is a feat and most of the writers yield to the demanding pressure thus becoming onesided, partial and racial.
By insisting on his race he can never be universal. This racial segregation fills him with gall and without exception the writer is always bitter in his approach. The bitterness will be either anger glaring like that of Richard Wright or it will just be satirical like George Schuyler (Black No More.) And the bitter writer will be either contemptuous of his race, or full of hate for whole of America or will be militant. His novels will be often tracts as he just cannot help deviating to philosophy. He is compelled to attack racial prejudice wherever he finds and this kills the charm of his words. Neither his characters will be of interest as his characters invariably become propaganda materials and fail to be individuals. Unknowingly he idealises these Negro characters thus making them stereotypes. "The Negro author" Overstreet wrote in 1944 "...dare not take the position that all that is human is his novelist's province (and that) he has perfect right to describe scoundrel Negroes if he so prefers. He does so at the peril to his people for every scoundrel Negro he describes is meta-
And so is the case with the universe he presents. His presentation of the universe always reflects that of a ghetto. "All Negro fiction tends to conceive of its physical world as a sharp dichotomy, with the ghetto as its central figure and its symbolic truth and with all else comprising a nonghetto which throws into high relief the ghetto itself as the fundamental of life for Negroes as a group. This has been consistently the case with fiction by Negro authors since the earliest novel of Negro authorship William Wells Brown's *Clottelle.* Even the exceptions like Chesnutt's Baxter's Procrustes, and Ann Petry's *Country Place* confirms this rule, this will be good loving joyous niggers different from vicious, cunning clownish Negro characters of white writers, but both stereotypes. He fails to present variegated, multifaceted Negro and if the Negro writer has substituted a more grim and shocking character its because humour fails to serve his purpose of advancement. The Negro author writes predominantly
the novel of purpose, and the critics for the most part assign him this category.

Being always preoccupied with his race, and topical issue Negro writer fails to develop true historical sense. Negro stands without past as he is cut off culturally from American heritage. He is ashamed of his slavery in the past which he ignores, thus depriving himself of the past. So is the case with present. In spite of freedom the Negro is made to feel dirty because of his colour and he develops a sense of shame as a result of rejection. The Negro writers (Negroes for that matter) followed quite a few ways to kill this shame. Either it is through mass rejection of shame, "redefinition of the past by discovering more glorious past as it was imagined to have been in Africa." or they embraced communism like Wright believing that redemption is in revolution. Their novels become propaganda material for communism. The tales are full of horror, crime after crime without any humour. (ex: Wright and his followers). They may ring with truth
but of no interest. Artistic value will not be there and it fails its purpose. It does not interest the reader as "Its horror drawn to the breaking point, protests that swell to a frenzied almost vengeful climax." The twoness of the writer (Negro Past and the America) always puts the writer in a nightmarish dilemma. His uniqueness, creativity are lost if he owns America, he departs from America if he embraces his Negroself.

But the irony starts as the Negro writer could capitalize the same clamping situation. "Ironical though it may seem we had capitalized on oppression (in a literary sense of course.). Although one may deplore and condemn the cause there is great creative motivation in a movement which brings all members of its group together and cements them in a common bond. And that is just what segregation did for the Negro especially during 'twenties and 'thirties when full segregation was not only practiced in the South but
tacitly condoned by the whole nation. As long as there was this common enemy we had a common purpose and strong urge to transform into artistic terms our deep rooted feelings of bitterness and scorn."

The Negro novelist proves his mettle in spite of this crushing agonizing racial segregation. He rather flourishes in his situation. "Negro is a sort of seventh son born with a veil and gifted with second sight in the American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation of the double consciousness, this sense of always looking at himself through the eyes of others, measuring ones soul by the tapes of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged sense alone kept it from being torn asunder." This tormenting situation has led to identity crises which was a bonanza to the black writer. The phenomenon known as the Negro would supply source material for some Negro novelist.
In recreating a world which approximates closely reality they display penetrating insight into the structure of society. To present this material effectively is tantamount to translating actual human personal experience to the level of literature. The Negro novelist enables the reader to understand immediately the difference between living under limitations imposed from without and superimposed handicaps arising from within. The Negro cannot escape racial self-consciousness and remain within himself an ethnic. "Within society yet outside its full areas of participation this enigma of life affords the necessary emotional comfort for the dramatic content of the world. Indeed the nature of the medium with its flexibility permits the Negro to write of life with flourishes and embellishments."\textsuperscript{15}

He is the sufferer and not a detached observer and hence he can give that personal touch. His probing into the situation is always deep and his knowledge of the subject is first hand and his experience is fresh
and rich. His awareness of his anguished situation keeps his feet on earth and his presentation would be definitely true. He tries to put forth things with accuracy, with great perception of naked truth. (That's why Wright and his followers merge with naturalists)

His pathetic situation, the injustice he meets make him intensely emotional. His experiences, his reactions being genuine will lead to a genuine picture that ring with deep intense emotions. His happiness is not superficial either. Neither his suffering is romantic.

No doubt not artistic, but he can capture the hearts of the readers for being so genuine. It can be so if the writer asserts his greatness by extolling virtues of his class.

As he defends the race he asserts his greatness by extolling the virtues of his class, he turns as champion of oppressed whereever they are whoever they are. He upholds the human dignity, freedom and all other finer qualities. "He, as per Baldwin's opinion, is a Voltaire when he attacks religious fanaticism and mere
political injustice and Thomas Paine when he asserts the right to be free! "It would seem that the black writer himself a member of a group struggling to rise from the mass of degradation and apathy and despair would find such a role tailored to his peculiar specification."\textsuperscript{16}

Earlier the blackman was oppressed, was made to feel dirty, ashamed. One can see just the opposite from twenties onwards. There was curiosity aroused in black culture and every thing black was looked upon as great. Blacks for first time felt immensely proud of themselves, and their artistry. There was an open acknowledgement and honest treatment and free expression of black life. The writers like Ellison, Baldwin started proudly claiming their Negroeness and they could go beyond the colour line.

Wright extricated himself from this colour belt and Langston Hughes declared that "Negro writers cared nothing for the pleasure, or displeasure of either
a white or a coloured audience. He was sincere but mistaken." Chester Himes, in his *Lonely Crusader*, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Motley in *Knock On Any Door*, Frank Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow*, *The Vixens*, *The Golden Hawk* deal with racial topics. One may agree with JHughes M. Gloster when he says, "In spite of the limiting and crippling effects of racial hypersensitivity and Jim Crow aesthetics, the Negro writer has gradually loosened the shackles that have held him in mental bondage for the past two centuries." Richard Wright has shown in *Native Son* that "it is possible to attack racial oppression and at the same time provide truthful implication for all the mankind." Negro writer to be accepted by all, need not suppress the race or ethnic individuality but must treat the race from universal point of view and shun the cultural insularity that results from racial preoccupation. That's what we can see in writers like Ellison. The Negro writer is often judged to
be comic, primitive and even savage but he is ironic too. But his irony is in contrast to accepted traditional irony.

Their irony is bound up with colour caste. But the reader can enjoy the irony only when he becomes one with the writer as he is genuine. Fiction by Negroes, if not all at least by some, can as well be called as high art. As Leroi Jones puts, "High art first of all must reflect the experiences of the human being, the emotional predicament of the man as he exists in the defined world of his being. It must be produced from the legitimate emotional resources of the souls in the world. It can never be produced by evading these resources or pretending that they do not exist. It can never be produced by appropriating the withered emotional responses of some strictly social idea of humanity. It must issue from real categories of human activity, truthful accounts of human life and not fancied accounts of the attainment of cultural privilege by some willingly prepostorous
apologists for one social order or another. “Works of Ralph Ellison can stand on this pedestal of high art, whereas Jean Toomer, Richard Wright Baldwin can be called as serious writers though their words do not join Ralph Ellison in high art.
NOTES


11. Horace Cayton - "Ideological Forces in the Work of Negro Writers," from *Anger and Beyond.*


16. Hoyt W. Fuller, *The Role of Negro Writer in the era of struggle*. From Negro Digest (June 1964)


*Phylon* forth Quarter (1950)


from *Black Expression* by Gayle Addision.