CHAPTER V

RE-VISIONING THE ABSOLUTES

For the imaginative artist, his creation is not an appeal to the intellect alone, but it is a sensuous phenomenon which affects his emotions, imagination, and memory. The artist has to traverse a lonely path by breaking the existing mould of frozen conventions in the society. He should re-vision the absolutes set by the society by sacrificing some embedded and cherished areas of habit. The nameless artist says about absolute concept in the Ghost of Memory:

Absolutes, I feel, reinforce partialities until they conceal them from view. This has helped to promote genocides, holocausts. It promotes terrifying divides we cannot see between the conscious, the subconscious, the unconscious, between Brain and the Mind of love. (52)

Wilson Harris, descents into the inner self of man, which is steeped in these biases. He feels it is time to dismantle monolithic structures and reformulate it in new ways. Harris says in “Adversarial Contexts and Creativity”: “I speak of fiction that seeks through complex rehearsals to consume its own biases…Moral being cannot be divorced from a deepened cycle of creativity through which we may visualize a breakthrough from absolute violence” (127-128). What he envisions is not a destruction, but qualitative deconstruction of the sovereign ideas. His intent is not to make the last first and first last, but to show us the essential merit inherent in everybody and everything. Religion, race, nationality, ethnicity, language - all can
turn as absolute concepts when we see one as superior to that of other. The problems created by these absolutes plague most of the Post Colonial nations.

Explicit theorization of racism began in the late eighteenth century and was increasingly scientificized in the nineteenth century with the Western occupation of nine-tenths of the surface territory of the globe. Racial prejudice preceded racialism as a scientific knowledge and it became a cultural construction or ‘cultural racism’ as Fanon calls it. Disraeli, the erstwhile Prime Minister of Britain puts his attitude succinctly as: “All is race, there is no other truth.” (qtd. in Young, 93)

Negative manifestations of the black regions are brought in as a foil to reinforce Europe’s spiritual grace. In the introduction to the Heart of Darkness Conrad lets us know that Cecil Rhodes, the English empire builder in South Africa had dedicated his fortune: “To expediting God’s evident intention of making his chosen people, the Anglo-Saxon race crown the evolutionary process by adding the Americas, Africa and other promising places to the British empire”(xx). In all the discourses of the Colonizer, the aim became the ennoblement of inferior races. Harris on the contrary, feels that these conquests were aimed at “destroying invaluable differences” between races. Science colluded with these arguments by discovering race linked genes. As Fanon says in the Black Skin, White Masks:

After much reluctance, the scientists had conceded that the Negro was a human being; in vivo and in vitro the negro had been proved analogous to the white man; the same morphology, same histology…In the first chapter of the history that others have compiled for me, the foundation of
cannibalism has been made eminently plain in order that I may not lose
sight of it. My chromosomes were supposed to have a few thicker or
thinner genes representing cannibalism. In addition to the sex-linked, the
scholars now discovered the race-linked. What a shameful science! (85)

In the Caribbean, race and ancestry are of issues of supreme and inescapable
importance, crucial not just to philosophy but to the dynamics of day-to-day survival.
The descendents of some ten million African slaves in the Caribbean plantations,
along with the indentured labourers - the ‘legal successors’ of the slaves - make the
Caribbean Islands a melting pot of races. Race and religion has become the most
visible marker of the Caribbean identity. It is inevitable to revive the lost ancestral
link, before Caribbean present can be understood and the islands become ‘home’.

Denis Williams proposes a ‘catalysis’ model of Guyanese society, where cross-
culturality, language and landscape is woven together to a ‘langscape’. In the settler
colonies like Australia, a ‘filialistic’ tendency which stresses on a subservient -
subclass relation between the imperial power and aborigines exists. But in the
 racially and ethnically mixed societies like the Caribbean, a catalytic interaction
occurs in which ‘each racial group qualifies and diminishes the self-image of the
other’ (Williams, 19). There is no need to mourn for the lack of union with ancestral
Gods, as it leads to a ‘psychic unease’. William’s ‘catalysis’ stresses the creative
meaning of the individual in the present. To assess the self image of the present day
man in terms of the Old world values leads to his self annihilation. We have no
guarantee for anything, but only the present – realization of this fact should be
crucial in understanding the human in the infinite process of catalysis. For Williams, Wilson Harris is the perfect practitioner of this Caribbean ‘catalysis’. Harris like Williams believes that, the racially mixed population of the Caribbean offer unique possibilities for cross-cultural creativity, which is unavailable to mono-cultural societies. Harris utilizes the cultural aspects of all these cultures. As he says in “Tradition, the Writer and Society”, the promise of fulfilment of culture, “lies in a profound and difficult vision of essential unity within the most bitter forms of latent and active historical diversity” (*Selected Essays*, 45). Belief in mono-culturalism, purity of race and lineage leads to race-hatred and race oppression which releases violence. Harris’s work encompasses the influences from myths and epics all over the world and yet it preserves its high originality and uniqueness. This characteristic is described by A.J.M. Bundy who defines the work of Harris as addressing the vulnerability of the age and identifying new areas of imaginative resources in the culture:

Harris’s literary art is a highly individual fusion of hidden traditions of the imagination, native cosmogonies, alchemy, dreams, quantum physics; parables of man in the living landscapes; the aboriginal religions and cultures of Central and South America; the great Western tradition; fables of history and society; Jungian archetypes; hypotheses on time and space, and much else. (Bundy, 1)

The surveying expeditions that frequent Harris’s novels are psychical expeditions clothed as geographical expeditions. In the *Palace*, Harris gives us vivid
details as to which race each crew member belongs. Donne is a European conqueror, the Dasilvas belong to Portugal, Schomburg’s great grandfather is a German and great grandmother an Arawak American Indian, Vigilence is an Indian, Carroll is his cousin. Cameron’s and Jennings great grandfathers belong to Scotland and great grandmothers were African slaves. Wishrope, a mullato resembled Donne. Among them, only Donne has a ‘rich first name’ and all others had only ‘economic names’. There is no hierarchy in posts and intellect. The whole crew is bound not only by the sense of duty, but emotionally and spiritually too: “They were bound together in wishful substance and in the very enormity of a dreaming enmity and opposition and self destruction. Remove all this or weaken its appearance and its cruelty and they were finished” (96). So Donne has to die in the death of Wishrope. Jenning’s primitive abstraction and slackening of will is a reflection of the death of Cameron. Schomburg dies with Carroll. The murderer Dasilva and the murdered Cameron unite not only in spirit but in flesh too. The crew, the symbol of whole humanity which is born from some mysterious womb of nature, is created by a wooden carpenter. Life becomes an infinite rehearsal where each human being is born and reborn to suffer and thus purge oneself of all blemishes. There is an animal with an old wound in the carpenter’s chamber: “…millions of years had passed, he knew until now he felt bruised and wounded beyond words and his limbs had crawled and still flew” (92). Carpenter’s soothing hands bring in the memory of the spear which caused the wound. He calls it a “wooden memory of its life and its death” (104). The animal with the wound may be symbolic of the man with a wounded conscience. Gradually the profound truths of creation seep in, and the wound created by the
violence of the past is eventually healed. The Arawak woman forcibly taken as the guide is a symbol of the primitive race, land and womanfolk. She has an expression of “crumbled pointlessness”, and there is no show of malice, enmity and overt desire to overcome oppression and evil:

In reality the legend and consciousness of race had come to mean for her patience, the unfathomable patience of a god in whom all is changed into wisdom, all experience and all life a handkerchief of wisdom when the grandiloquence of history and civilization was past. (61)

Her race was a vanishing one, overpowered by the “fantasy of a Catholic as well as Protestant invasion” (62). The heart of the crew gets filled with guilt when they aspire to ravish her: “The murderous rape and fury filled our heart to an overburden” (63). Colonization is a machine of fantasy and desire with its unlimited appetite for territorial expansion which forced disparate territories, histories and peoples to thrust together into an unnatural union. Harris sees the thirst for geographical expansion, as the rape of the land. The insolence of soul deviates the attention of the crew from duty and they reach the precarious and forbidden passage called, “the war office rapids”. There they have to sacrifice Carroll, the youngest of the crew as a penance. The death of Carroll reminds them of the death of innocence and purity in themselves. Their quest for the invisible folk becomes, “…a child’s game of a besieged and a besieging race who felt driven to seek themselves” (114). In the course of the journey the pursuer becomes the pursued. Their guilty conscience pursues them relentlessly and leads to a full understanding which frees them from
the “chains of illusion” (116). Their eyes were opened to the unity underlying all beings and they realize that all divisions were merely rumour and superstitions: “The force that divided them from each other was the wind of rumour and superstition, and the truth was they had all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk” (110). Each one learns to:

…hug to himself his true invisible otherness and opposition, his true alien spiritual love without cruelty and confusion in the blindness and frustration of desire. It was the dance of all fulfilment I now held and knew deeply, cancelling my forgotten fear of strangeness and catastrophe in a destitute world. (111)

Finally the crew reaches the palace under the soothing coolness of white moon light which forms a symbolic expression of Harris’s syncretic vision. White light which makes everything visible comprises all the colours in right proportion. In the plume of the peacock there is a play of colours. Still it forms a harmonious whole, where nothing stands off as unassimilable. Harris does not negate the existence of race or colour, but shows us the beauty and harmony of this universe when all the races in this world coexist in peace and unity.

_The Secret Ladder_ is set exactly in the area that Harris surveyed in 1951-1952 with the same purpose as the character of Fenwick – assessing the possibilities of damming the area to provide a supply of constant irrigation for coastal rice farmers. Harris, through Fenwick, indicates that there is a real danger of succumbing to a facile, romantic pride in a racial heritage. He recognizes that the ‘legacy of the past’
raises a much deeper question than one simply of racial origin (Gilkes, 87). Fenwick, is described as a man whose father was African, his mother half French and half British, with some Amerindian blood. The narrator also shows the feelings that are connected to such a background when he says about Fenwick’s ancestry that “he was not ashamed of the unique vagaries and fictions of the ancestral past. Far from it, he was proud. Nevertheless it made him profoundly uneasy at times. There was something guilty and concrete he had to learn to face, after all” (383). He studied in Canada and Britain, but it was not only there he had to feel the ‘burden of his ancestry’. The racial details of crew members are given here as well. Perez is an indolent Portuguese who is deemed superior to others because of his fair skin. Weng and Chiung are Chinese. Bryant is a “thin- boned African”. The African community after the abolition of slavery in 1834 took to subsistence farming, recreating along the coast and river banks African-style villages. Stoll is a pale-skinned mulatto who is considered superior to Blacks but inferior to whites. He petitions Jordan, the shrewd cook to make him Fenwick’s camp attendant. Van Brock is a black with a Dutch name. The crew is there to survey the land, putting gauges, measuring temperature and measuring the amount of rainfall. Fenwick comes in confrontation with the descendants of runaway slaves of African origin, Poseidon and his men. The natives fear the dam, as it could be catastrophic to the interior settlers who have been living there for generations. It could submerge the home of Poseidon and his tribe. They hate the intrusion of technology to their pristine home land. For Fenwick and the tribe it becomes an extreme situation. Fenwick tries his best to pacify the tribe
but Fenwick’s survey is sabotaged by Poseidon and the settlers. Sensing his own racial affinity with them, Fenwick goes to meet them again.

Harris here records his own experiences as a surveyor while he narrates the perilous journey of Fenwick. The water in the jungle creek is jet black with sediment and Fenwick is submerged waist-deep, groping for a foothold on the slippery bark. The journey as in the *Palace* takes seven days to complete. Fenwick takes the young black, Bryant with him. Poseidon hopes the best thing for Fenwick and his crew is to leave the place with their measuring instruments. Fenwick feels indignant and blurts out at Bryant: “You seem sympathetic to him. You think that we are going to cut short his freedom. What is freedom? What kind of freedom does Poseidon have, he and his ex-slaves? ” Fenwick feels that by bringing science and surveying the place he is bringing them real freedom. Bryant replies that: “I think he is freer than you or me” (178). He adds that when Poseidon dies he will go back to Africa. They learnt in school that such an impression under which the slaves committed suicide was an illusion. Bryant is here choosing the truth of myths to that of objective knowledge imparted through educational system. He takes Poseidon to be his grandfather. Fenwick is deeply disturbed, as this conversation has subtle influence on him. When the news reaches him that the tribes have broken down the gauges to measure the water, he reacts in an unexpected way. The foremen are eager to punish them. But a change comes to Fenwick which makes him support the tribe. He feels that, they were seeking to establish some sort of freedom which was threatened by the outsiders. Once he understands that, he feels “better”. The Secret Ladder, like ‘Jacob’s dream-ladder’ becomes a ladder of consciousness for Fenwick. The
graduated gauges that measure the water level become a measure of his spiritual
growth and the surveyor’s conscience unites with the natives.

The second of the Guyana Quartet novels, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, deals with
the life of another major racial group - the East Indian community in Guyana. The
first novel, the *Palace of the Peacock* had no East Indian among its multi-racial
crew. The novel focuses on the issue of greed which creates a new form of slavery in
contemporary West Indian society. The old imperial plantation owners are replaced
by a new generation of peasants who amass wealth by exploiting others. The story is
about the spiritual decay of the community when it falls into the trap of materialism
due to “disfiguring and vulgar quest for new ways of making money”. The coherence
of the joint family is broken by greed. Mohammed and his two brothers - Hassan and
Kaiser and their cousin conspire to kill their illegitimate half brother who inherits
their father’s property. They justify it by telling that he is not their father’s son in
some ‘outside woman’ but the son of a ‘black-skin coolie man’. When the brothers
fear that the will under their dying father’s pillow might disinherit them, they break
the dying man’s spectacle and substitute a blank will in place of the original. After
the murder of the half brother, the brothers die one after another. Mohammed is
killed by a bull and Kaiser by fire, and the family disintegrates. Mohammed was
ruined by Ram, an unscrupulous moneylender, who represents the power of capital
in a materialistic world. He mortgages the land of tenants and their labour and builds
up his empire on the ruin of others. We find antiquated master–slave relation existing
among the descendants of indentured labourers living on the coastal Savannahs.
Oudin is the Anancy trickster figure who outwits Ram and Mohammed, the cunning
exploiters. Oudin is the accomplice in Ram’s actions or ‘the managerial clown’. Ram is the devil in the new economic order, and for him everything is possible, ‘save the magic of potency and fertility and life’. He uses his dirty tricks to get an heir for him, which is foiled by Oudin’s widow, Beti.

The greedy Ram is ultimately redeemed, as his material and spiritual possessions are at stake. Harris sympathetically portrays how the blind greed and insecurity of a community and the fear of turning poor, makes them resort to duplicity and deception which drains them of their spirituality. Hassan aspires to return to the land of his ancestors to attain salvation but Harris through the words of Kaiser exposes the futility of it:

Hassan has just got the obstinate idea in his burning head that he wanted to return to India to circulate his ashes on mother-soil. Kaiser protested. If he returned he would be looked upon as an outcast and an untouchable ghost. What language had he save the darkest and frailest outline of an ancient style and tongue? Not a blasted thing more. Remember too how much he had forgotten, Kaiser scolded him. The ceremonies and sacraments he fitfully observed were not a patch on the real thing. It was a dim hope, dimmer than their father’s childhood and adolescence. (72-73)

In the time of crisis Hassan dreams of his ancestors’s land but Kaiser does not want to return, as he cannot go back to “the mother’s shell and womb” (181). Back in India he would belong to the untouchable caste and he would be poor. Moreover, they no longer have the connection that would make it possible for them to return.
Here he can be rich, leave the rice plantation and go as “a Negro pork-knocker to look for diamonds and gold” (181). Through him, Harris tells us that spiritually and materially it is beneficial for the Caribbean to remain in the island of his birth. Hassan is portrayed as donning the white garments of a Hindu pundit which is always stained by curry. He declares that he is a devotee of Siva and Vishnu and longs to be like the ‘ascetic Gauthama’, since, “only the empty one, who no longer dreamt and sketched the vaguest desire, could kill the devil” (75).

In the *Genesis of the Clowns*, there is an Indian named, Marti M. Frederick. M in the name stands for money. This is the stereotypical image of the East Indians as they are considered stingy and enterprising and they hoard money for the future, suffering ‘holy poverty’. East Indian community in the West Indies is often blamed for their refusal to mix with other communities and for deliberately maintaining their distinctive cultural identity. Their bond to the ancestral home and its culture and religion is stronger than their affinity to their place of origin. Dennis Williams sees this attitude of West Indians against his concept of catalysis and hence dismisses the Indian cultural presence in the Guyana as irrelevant. In Naipaul’s novels on the community, the characters find no exit from the forced coherence of joint family system and imminent collapse. They try to be culturally exclusive and self sufficient. Harris takes a sympathetic attitude towards the community stating that, they are as much trapped as any other group in the Caribbean.

Harris’s last novel, the *Ghost of Memory* is a polemical discourse on absolutes, and on the question of history and existence. A writer who has twenty four novels to
his credit does a plain talk on issues he wants to tell freely. Plot, characterization and action are ignored, as usual. Unlike in other novels where Harris scrupulously mentions the specificities of race to which his characters belong, here we find a man out of nowhere. He has no race, religion, politics or nationality. He is deeply concerned about the fate of human beings and nature. He was mistaken for a terrorist and was shot and he fell from great height into a painting in the gallery, in a city. Nothing else about his antecedents is disclosed to the reader. He is caught by an artist “to a new beginning”. The wound, as the narrator confesses makes him identify with millions shot and bombed as enemies of established state. He confesses that he is: “…more sensitive than ever not only to my limbs, back, body but to millions who had perished instantly in volcanoes and earthquakes” (9). His mind longs to return to a promise of wholeness which only art can claim as: “There is a ladder between the shore of earth and the shore of heaven in the artist’s painting” (9) and the artist can reverse the “power of violence and greed and narrow interests,… dig deep into fear, to stir a seed within the womb of art” (11). Harris sees art and creativity as a fortress against the onslaught of absolutist views:

Madness is the opposite side of profound creativity. As materialism is the opposite side of secret villainy. In a tight-fisted age where everything has been worked out with apparent efficiency – asylums for the mad, prisons for the villain – where fixtures and absolutes do not confess to their madness, creativity is banished and materialism triumphs as the sane procedure in punishing those who are so inept, so cruel, so violent, they
have to be put away to protect us from the rage of inner darkness that we fear. (28-29)

Harris here criticizes religion, when it becomes another absolute. Columbus says that he considers the church as his parent and that man is created in the image of God. The narrator replies that:

One hundred million years ago …the Dinosaurs strolled like giants through places where now are great Cathedrals (with images of God as absolute human vessels maimed or crucified) and great cities... Primitive faith is a faint trace of the massive shock to rivers, to rocks, trees, to soil, to oceans, everything, to the Earth in itself. (34)

This is not blasphemy, but an attempt to make us see that primitive religions can also be true and trustworthy. Ghost wants to stage a play, the *Art of the City*, based on the painting on which the dead terrorist stepped. Columbus fears that the play may be ‘heretical’. The ghost tells him that no one can be absolutely right as: “All knowledge is tainted by the sensation that one knows absolutely what the other thinks; that they both see with an unchanging light” (38). Absolutes helped to promote genocides and holocausts. Absolutes and certainties are dangerous when they hope to provide solutions to all our myriad problems. True independence could be attained only through creativity and imagination. Wilson Harris gives primacy to the liberating power of subconscious in the novel, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*: “What is potential exists in the subconscious, in the unconscious. It is there, but
many are not aware of it. Its eruption into the consciousness of a few seems like madness. But may it not be a form of primordial sanity.”(9)

There is no linear flow of time in Harris. Time is not an absolute and is cyclic, when history is reconstructed. There is a juxtaposition of past with present, the objective and the subjective. The overlapping of time and space in his novels probably denotes the historic and philosophic discontinuity of his native place. In the Ascent to Omai, Victor, a Christ-like figure, disappeared from the scene of action to reappear after forty years. He writes a “new history” for his life. The time of the story follows no linear order. The character anticipates the time when the story would be written: “This is 1929. Forty years hence things may be different. But now we are a poor country in an obscure still untapped continent” (74). The Judge through whom Victor writes his novel wanted “to write a kind of novel or novel history in which the spectre of time was the main character, and the art of narrative the obsessed ground/lighthouse of security/insecurity” (83). The Judge further asks, “why, were all men so obsessed by the clock – whether black welder or white scrivener, clerk of court or registrar of births – prisoners of time, in time, sentenced, paroled?” (81)

In the Latin America, time is not an absolute. Carlos Fuentes says that in Mexico there is no single time like the multiple histories it possesses. There:

…all times are living, all pasts are present...All times must be maintained, all times must be kept alive. Why? Because no Mexican time has yet fulfilled itself. We are a horizon of latent, promising or frustrated,
never fully achieved potentialities. A country of suspended time.

(Fuentes, 16)

Pre-Columbian Mexicans stored time carefully to prevent its leakage. They had a mythical time cycle of fifty two years by the end of which they had to manufacture it afresh or it would slip from their grasp forever. In order to prevent that they seized on a victim and tore the living heart out, as a sacrifice to sun.

In Harris’s early novels, a sort of ‘dream time’ is employed whereas in later novels memory comes to the fore. In the *Dark Jester* the two times mix with the historical one. Space and time get mixed in as mere constructs inside the ‘womb of space’. By taking liberty with time and space, Harris questions deeprooted social and scientific convictions, which provide us a feeling of false comfort. In truth, they unconsciously leave us divided.

C.G.Jung says in “Psychology and Literature”: “A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is never unequivocal” (David Lodge, 87). What Jung says about art is true in the case of Harris. The works of Wilson Harris comprise the radical experiment in narrative techniques. Harris’s novels as well as his critical and theoretical writings can be seen as a cohesive body of work. The general insights of the work is preserved and advanced dialectically in all works but the paradox is that the authority of one text is eroded by its successor. Characters and plot defy fixity as they exist in a state of process. No text is completely finished as characters move between texts and between life and death. Nothing is absolute, as the text might build its superstructure
on its predecessor or deconstruct the earlier one by redistributing its elements. Dasilva appears first in the *Palace of the Peacock* and later as the painter in the novel, *Dasilva dasilva’s Cultivated Wilderness*. The *Tree of the Sun* later elaborates on his life and revisions it. The three shattered poems that are found in the half burnt down rest house of Stevenson in the *Heartland* are later recovered by Marsden in the *Black Marsden*.

Jacques Derrida’s investigations on the limitations of the Western philosophical tradition resulted in the development of his theory of language. Harris’s experiments with language and meaning start with the first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), which predates Derrida’s translation of Husserl by two years and the French publication of *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Writing and Difference* (1967) by seven years. Derrida finds deferring of meaning as an inescapable characteristic of language and textuality. For Harris, it becomes a mechanism to deimperialise the apparently monolithic European forms and epistemology. He questions the conventional logic of narration to which we are accustomed to. Harris advocates radical innovations in the form of the novel, to portray, “the discontinuities of Caribbean experience” and to avoid the conventional novel’s “consolidation of popular character”. We find in Harris, the traces of what later developed in the west in the 1980s as Post Structuralism - violation of narrative authority, unstable signification, questioning and destabilizing the monoliths of power structures. Harris says in ‘Profiles of Myth and the New World’, that we ought to “…to remap human experience, to renew a grasp of the human psyche at once phenomenal and cultural, we must dismantle the narrative convention and its tie-in with the fatal realisms of
society” (*Selected Essays*, 31). But he still believes in the bond between life and art, and that language has the power to lead us to ultimate truth, which detaches him partly from all –isms like Post Structuralism, Post Modernism and Post Colonialism.

Contradiction is a technique developed and perfected by Harris. It is manifested in quick and unexpected conjunction of disparate elements, masking and unmasking of characters, and the typical movement of sentences. In the *Palace*, Cameron is described as having “slow feet, faster than a snake in the forest with his hands” (22), which demonstrates the contradictory quality of prose coupled with a frequent recourse to antithesis. Antithetical images are yoked together into an unnatural union, which negates the conventional meaning. Images are used in strange combinations and the specific is replaced by a void, as in Harris’ repeatedly used phrases – all taken from the *Selected Essays* - like, “swimming on dry land” (174) and “absent presences”. Binary fusion of words, which are in opposition like “blessed fury” (234), “slow-motion lightning” (259), adds to the ambiguity. Like other Modern novelists, he employs devices like multiple narratives and shifting point of view. He tries to free the text from the trappings of a transcendental signified, contradicting the surface of the text. This is what happens when in *Palace*, the dream horse man enters as “gaoler and ruler”, and he says, paradoxically that, “fear is nothing but a dream”. Stylistic devices like Oxymorons, as “midnight morning”, frequent his works. Pairs of opposites are brought together to assimilate the adversarial contexts as Harris combines words and concepts in unexpected, jarring ways. He uses words that on the surface bear no similarity to one another. Let
us look at a sentence in the *Palace of the Peacock* - “They were plainly astonished at the immaculate bridal veil falling motionlessly from the river’s tall brink” (100). On the surface waterfall appears serene, whereas beneath that calm “bridal veil” there is rushing water. Harris develops an idiosyncratic vocabulary. Here is a passage from one of Harris’ Amerindian tales, “*Yurokon*”:

Break the land. Break the sea. Break the savannah. Break the forest.
Break the twig. Break the bough. The unwritten symphony of the wind, unwritten spark of the wind, made him bark—a sudden bark. (The Carib boy, Yurokon’s uncle) stared at the bristling dog of the fire, fire break, fire bark, delicacy, magic; he smacked his lips and the roast of Yurokon’s bark subsided into the silent bay of conscience like an invocation at the heart of the feast: man’s best enemy or friend. (69)

Harris explains the passage in “The Native Phenomenon” which makes it even more complex:

The ‘breaking of the land, sea, savannah etc’ is an inner perception or anticipation of cleavage in the persona of conquest—mimetic crash or crack or bone of a native/ universal symphony within which image and imagelessness are orchestrated into a metaphor which implies that the very ruined walls of time may provide an aperture or organ or flute through which the theme of community is restated as a capacity to sustain inner and outer overlapping perspectives. (Anna Rutherford, 150)
The passage shows how Harris breaks down language, conventional syntax and images to develop a new vision where the break in the land and psyche created by the conquest is reconciled through the melody created by the Carib bone flute. Harris reverses and overturns images to upset our tuned expectations. Novel with its “mixed futuristic order of memory and event” is a revolt against linear story telling. Harris mixes poetry and prose in his novels and some passages are read like extract from essay. Meaning here is a transcendent, immanent concept. Endings and beginnings alternate, evoking a twilight zone on the edge between certainties and voids rich with possibilities. The words of the writer should explode into new meanings in the minds of the reader. Conventional expectations regarding form, sequence of events, temporal and spatial relations are subverted. With the progress in development of the spirit of individuals, metaphors also shift in meaning. The metamorphosis of images presented, correspond to a similar transformation of formerly fixed attitudes in the psyche of the characters. Peacock is used conventionally as a symbol of pride. Harris uses it as the citadel of beauty where disparate colours coexist in harmony. Symbols of straw, swallow and sun shift in signification. Donne is initially represented by the destructive and absolute symbol of the sun which finally shatters into a constellation of stars which becomes the eyes of the peacock’s tail. Carib bone flute made of human bone is the sacred place where the self of enemy meets its other. The narrators are simply dreaming, and that justifies all the apparent contradictions in plot. For Harris, artist is like God; and is involved in the intuitive process of creation.

Harris started writing novel before Post Modern concepts like ‘metafiction’ got theoretical explication. But we find certain qualities which critics ascribed to that of
metafiction in Harris’ novels. There is an overlapping of ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ in the work. The work consciously discusses on the process of writing and how the text came into being. Sometimes the author’s participation and presence is overtly questioned. Diagrams of dots, tides and circles appear at random in novels like *Secret Ladder*, *Four Banks of the River of Space* and *Ascent to Omai*. The *Dark Jester* progresses as a dream. The narrator emphasizes it throughout the novel: “I was safe to continue Dreaming an impossible Dream” (35). In that dream, the “pursuer becomes the pursued, and “conquest” becomes a “fantasy”. The dream factor helps Harris to indulge in paradoxes which is inevitable for his mystical mode of writing. The self conscious fiction constantly reminds us of its fictionality. In the *Ascent to Omai*, the narrator directly addresses the reader and says:

Dear Reader, … my intention in part, is to repudiate the vicarious novel – vicarious sex- mark, death- mark – where the writer, following a certain canon of clarity, claims to enter the most obscure and difficult terrain of experience without incurring a necessary burden of authenticity, obscurity or difficulty at the same time. No matter his material stems from centuries of inequality, repression, oppression, etc… The truth is, I believe, the novel has been conditioned for so long by comedy of manners, it overlooks an immense poetry of original and precarious features which, in fact, we can only begin to expose again by immersing ourselves in actual difficulty of the task: by immersing ourselves in language as omen, as an equation of experience. (96)
The statement in *Ghost of Memory* directly involves the reader in the writing process: “the evolution of Art, it seems to me, is immense…Is evolution the best term?” (16). These ‘meta’ concepts are not empty play for Harris, but forms part of his attempt to bring us out of our fixation to static absolutes. There is no marked demarcation between dreaming and waking as everything is presented as real, but nothing is real. Harris challenges our static views of reality, space and time and reductive view of persons. Harris uses the conventions of the novel form to undermine it. Ghost of the devices of history, place, language and linear structure perform their functions, but the book pretends not to need them. The first person narrating convention appears and disappears, wilting the self-sufficient character. The authorial voice is unable to contain itself and it enters the I-narrator or dreamer as in *The Dark Jester*. Michael Gilkes comments that, in *The Waiting Room*, “Harris adopts a technical approach which could embody both form and formlessness in a single sustained act of memory” (118). In the Author’s note to *The Waiting Room*, Harris explains that his novel “is based on the disjointed diary” (9) of Susan Forrestal and her husband, a diary which supposedly came into Harris’s hands some years earlier. No character exists in the conventional sense as novel is a process of memory. The note explains the genesis of the text, signing it “W.H”. Harris writes another postscript where he says that his text is based upon an earlier half obliterated text, which survives the explosion that wrecked the main character’s home. Exploded text upon which Harris has based the novel is described as Forrestal’s diary. Novel seems to follow Susan’s consciousness but it is based on an interim text of multiple writings. The novel exposes the reader to a radical otherness of
perspective. Harris places scare quotes around the pronoun “he” which reveals that the lover of Susan may be a sheer phenomenon of sensibility. He advises that, where Harris has neglected to employ the quotes he trusts the “distinction is one which speaks for itself”. Robin Redbreast Glass writes a disclaimer in his prologue to *The Infinite Rehearsal* in which he accuses that ‘W.H’ steals his book. Issues are left unresolved and endings are inconclusive. The characters are liberated from the fixed sense of self, and a static psyche. The characters are flexible - moving between death and life, living closely resembling the dead, and doubles appear frequently challenging our sense of fixity.

Alan Riach in, “The Presence of Actual Angels” gives an interesting account of Harris’s address in the Smuts Memorial Fund Commonwealth Lectures conducted by the University of Cambridge:

In a quite, undemonstrative way, Harris began by confessing that he had been visited by one of the characters from his fiction, who had torn up the lecture he had written for this evening. There were sounds of uncertainty: was this an outrageous gambit? Or was this man an actual visionary? Harris carefully depicted a scene: himself in his study, the lecture typed and ready, and the visionary appearance of Aunt Alicia from *The Four Banks of the River of Space*. She tears the lecture to shreds and tells him: “That’s no good. No sort of formal essay for you. Speak out of your vulnerability. Speak from within the resources of your creative experience.” Harris proceeded to ask, “What is the source of such visits?”
And he answered to himself, “There is no total explanation, but one could venture upon a political analogy. We all know that the empires have created their subjects who, for periods, remain the passive recipients of the power exercised over them. We know in our own century that communism and fascism have created their slaves and that capitalism has created its consumers. We know also that from time to time these subjects spring out of the pages of history and confront their authors—authors of states, authors of the body politic, sometimes authors of tyranny. And we know that the consequences can be horrific and devastating. (36)

The lecture Harris delivered there was entitled, “The Fabric of the Imagination”—a title Aunt Alicia had left on a scrap of paper. It seems that Harris lives out his life in the midst of his own fictional characters. This is a demonstration of how a fictional character claims its position as an independent entity, coming out of the fictional world, to confront the author and dictate his ways.

When the ghost in the *Ghost of Memory* emerges from the painting Harris accomplishes in shaking us out of our “static habit”. In the *Mask of the Beggar*, the artist’s view is supported and sometimes contradicted by the sculpted Mother’s voice. There is an increasingly ineffective attempt to maintain the difference between the author and fictional character. The mother had died in 1952 and is resurrected by the son as a wooden sculpture. She asks: “Had he seized me, I wondered, as part-death, part-life, partial death, partial life? I died in 1952” (19). Even death is not an absolute for Harris as: “The artist or author does not have absolute control of his
creations but is subject to being created afresh by the characters (or character masks) he creates. In this way there is no final creation since finality is ceaselessly partial and is subject to profoundest alterations” (ix). In the *Ghost of Memory* Harris mentions Michael Angelo’s Rondanini Pieta, the last of the Pieta, or ‘pity’. In the painting, Christ seems to be faintly alive and he supports his mother who looks dead. Harris has been fascinated by this breaking of the absolute of death and life. He finds in this painting “the broken-ness in the living and the dying…” The sculpture breaks and reverses the western imagery, as: “Christ, the dying son – in the Byzantine icon – gives re-birth to his dying mother, who has become a Child” (71). In the novel, a man named after Columbus, pulls out a knife and cuts the painting into pieces. He sliced into it from wall to wall until it became a series of rags. Harris calls this act of vandalism, the “pathos of humanity” which happens when we fail to recognize that all religions are incomplete.

For the contemporary writer, world is not an eternal entity, but a matrix of constructs and impermanent structures. Harris proclaims the end of history by questioning its capacity to reveal absolute truths. That is what historiographic metafiction does when it proclaims: “History gets rewritten…History is a fiction. It is a dream in the mind of humanity, forever striving – towards what? Towards perfection.” (Mark Curie, 78)

Through fiction, Harris creates and explains his theory of fiction. The novel becomes a ground for playing with language, thus demystifying structures of power, decentering the subject in an implosion of meaning. The demarcation between image
or simulation and reality implodes as the real world disappears into a ‘dream’. But Harris does not lead us to the world of hyper reality which leaves only simulacra. The world of images Harris presents quests for explication and ‘deep structure’ gains as much importance as ‘surface structure’. The stories of the West had been haunted by the excess of its own history. Harris attempts to bring his readers out of received wisdom by including forgotten voices in his rewriting of canonical texts. Polyphony and disorder in form helps to utter the fluid condition of historical and cultural displacement and transcend the restrictions of race. Realism which is the main tradition in English fiction is found incapable to represent the reality of Caribbean society. Harris is keenly aware of oppression and the barrenness of the Caribbean past which has wrought great havoc on individual psyche. Instead of lamenting or satirising this state, Harris exhorts in “Unresolved Constitution” that one must, “creatively descend into the disorder of it, suffer creatively the disorder of it” (44). Events that had played a significant part in the genesis of Caribbean society were lost. For Harris, art alone has the power to heal the wounds inflicted by the past and serve as a source of rebirth for West Indian identity. In a world devoid of God and all the certainties including grammar, Post Modern writers celebrate the ideology of futility and barrenness. Harris in his works, pieces together the rupture in Caribbean history. Through his experimental novels, Harris explores the lost, hidden, unconscious and unacknowledged elements that shaped the West Indian psyche. He combines the “broken parts of an enormous heritage” as a remedy for the “terrifying cleavage in the psyche of man” (“Tradition, the Writer and Society”, 57). Hena Maes Jelinek says in Explorations, that Harris rejects realistic mode of writing because:
“He associates realism with ‘linear persuasion’ and ‘restrictive convention’ and regards it as part of the prevailing ideology of a given period, a fact which makes authoritarian and inadequate to render the ‘dismembered psychical world’ of the Caribbean.” (139)

The dream of European scholars was to unite all knowledge under a common force called reason which was expected to bring order to the world. Realism was meant to offer ultimate answers to the problems faced by the world. Harris shatters realism along with rigidly monolithic conception of culture and closure at all levels. Harris says in “A Note on the Genesis of The Guyana Quartet” (1985):

Technical brilliance is at the core of realism. Realism, I would say, has undoubtedly been the fruit of the eighteenth and nineteenth century European novel form which has influenced the twentieth-century theatre of the arts. But such realism, however sophisticated or satiric or comic, led the rulers of civilization unintentionally perhaps into an “obliviousness” of the many diverse peoples under the umbrella of Empire… the art of empire in the novel- form of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries displayed all-white families and ignored all other peoples, diverse and peculiar, under the imperial umbrella. (2)

Caribbean landscape is alive with the spirit of earlier generations, vanished Caribs, barely surviving Amerindians, runaway slaves and their oppressors. Silencing of these ‘otherness’ creates absences in the Colonial consciousness. The
‘fictious presence’ of absent tribe could only be presented as mere fiction in a realist novel. Memory of suppressed legends, silent folklore and forgotten images are revived and history is repopulated with invisible presences never quite completely destroyed. Authoritarian reason breeds absolute concepts. Realism is an authoritative mode that limits human imagination, while claiming an accurate portrayal of the world. Harris abandons the “demon of realism” as it is bound to confirm the linearity of events and thus fails to recognize the revolutionary potential of forgotten moments in history. Harris criticizes realist novels as ‘spectatorial novels’ with no sense of life. For Harris writing is a means to unearth the truth of so-called primitive societies. He says:

Some years ago I attempted to outline the possibility of validating or proving the truths that may occupy certain twentieth century works of fiction that diverge, in peculiar degrees from canons of realism. I sought such proof or validation by bringing the fictions I had in mind into parallel with profound myth that lies apparently eclipsed in largely forgotten so-called savage cultures. (“Genesis of the Guyana Quartet”, 7)

Through literature Harris leads the way for resurrecting a lost community or broken souls as Gabriel Marquez did with El Macondo. Critics find Harris belonging to the Latin American tradition, popular as ‘Magic Realism’. But the Latin American writers do not see it as a deliberate attempt to discard realism. Gabriel Garcia Marquez is quoted by Harris in “The Amerindian Legacy”:
I am a realist writer because I believe that in Latin America everything is possible, everything is real. There is technical problem in that the writer finds difficulty in transcribing real events in Latin America because no one would believe them in a book… I believe that we have to work, investigating language and the technical forms of narration so that the entire fantastic reality of Latin-America might form part of our books, and so that Latin-American literature might correspond to Latin-American life where the most extraordinary things happen everyday… I believe that what we should do is to promote it as a form of reality which can give something new to universal literature. (*Selected Essays*, 175)

Harris further adds that for him Magic Realism is another tool for breaking the absolutes. He sees it a vehicle in his endless quest towards the forgotten origins of mankind: “The concept ‘marvellous realism’ constitutes for me an alchemical pilgrimage… a ceaseless adventure within the self and without the self in nature and beings that are undervalued or that have been eclipsed or imprisoned by models of conquest”.

In the *Art and Criticism* (1951), he calls for a “new architecture” (8) in narrative strategy. The protest literature and historical documentaries see the West Indies as utterly deprived and destructed by exploitation and fail to see the genuine possibility for change available for them. Harris exhorts the need to bring about radical innovation in the form of the novel to depict the discontinuities of Caribbean experience and to avoid the ‘consolidation of popular character’. Realist and
symbolic writing alternates in Harris’s works, which carries the narrative forward. Disorder in the sequence of events is a deliberate attempt to jerk us out of the secure four dimensional world of sequentiality into a defamiliarised world.

In the polyglossic Caribbean writing the privileged centrality of ‘English’ is abrogated. Language is taken to bear the burden through abrogation, appropriation and reconstruction. The concept of Creole Continuum is now widely accepted as an explanation of the linguistic culture of the Caribbean. It undermines the static models of language formation, overturns ‘concentric’ notions of language which regard Standard English as its ‘core’. It shows that the language is constituted of several overlapping lects or distinguishable forms of language use and that the characteristics of language are located in actual practice rather than structural abstraction. Harris asserts that the binary structuration in European and many other languages lies at the root of ceaseless pattern of conquest and domination. Hence Harris takes direct issue with language in his writings. Gregory Shaw says that in Harris’s works, the word is:

Liberated, hollowed out, emptied through a dialectical process of paired contradictions… Images crumple, shift, dissolve and coalesce in strange combinations or to use Harris’ own term, ‘paradoxical juxtapositions’, reflecting a universe in the process of becoming. (*Literate Imagination*, 146)

Harris’s works are semantically difficult, though apparently simple. For the sake of his pursuit of experimentalism, Harris has forfeited a wide readership. In *The Far
Journey of Oudin, Mohammed feels that their father looks at them in an “unfathomable way”. It looks like, “he grieving for a language. Is ancient scorn and habit at the hard careless words we does use. But is who fault if the only language we got is a breaking-up or making-up language” (44). Mohammed asks the question West Indian writers have repeatedly asked. Language is willfully fractured to express the subjective experience that cannot be expressed normally. Sometimes language is found unable to express and transmit ideas when the conversation is between people with opposing views. In The Secret Ladder, Fenwick talks with Poseidon and he notices the way that Poseidon’s lips move is contrary to the things he is supposed to be saying. He seems to belong to a different age. Fenwick writes to his mother: “I didn’t understand him but I have a peculiar feeling that unless I understand what he is saying, this generation to which I belong is doomed” (197). Here language becomes unintelligible, but the invisible chord of soul works wonders. Language and reality are one for Harris. In “The Fabric Of The Imagination”, Harris tells that language is what “we are and what we have acquired, not only from our mother’s lips but also from the sound of the rain falling, from the sigh of the leaves, from the music of the earth as we pressed on it, what cracked under our feet”. (The Radical Imagination, 78)

Harris strives for cross-culturality, through employing polyphony in novels, as well-ordered syntax cannot express the multi-cultural reality. Harris confesses that creoleness made him aware of the “complex labyrinth of the family of humankind” to which he belongs. English ‘creolo’ was first used in the sixteenth century to refer to someone, usually of European origin born in the Americas and soon began to refer
to the mixture of peoples, languages, religion, music etc. that developed in the region. African oral culture received an additional layering from the languages brought to the region from Asia. Creole Continuum is the existence of a number of language varieties, ranging from the ‘acrolect’, a local version of the standard language (English or French) to the ‘basilect’ or variety far removed from the standard language (Justin Edwards, 3). Creole was a more viable strategy than negritude for the Caribbean. Edward Brathwaite’s model of ‘Creolisation’ as he wrote in *History of Voice*, is a cultural action based on this journey to origins. For him, the artist should travel back to the past and hinterland of his psyche to understand his true link with the African or Amerindian ancestor. Through this the artist becomes truly their own creators, discovering word for object and image for word. Caribbean became a ‘cultural disaster area’ where people educated in the system learned only about foreign kings and queens, who were the people who destroyed their own language. Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid asks in her essay “A Small Place” (1988) about the problem of adopted language:

> What I see is the millions of people, of whom I am just one, made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland, no god…and worst and most painful of all, no tongue … for is’nt it odd that the only language I’ve in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? (*Caliban’s Voice*, 14).

As Edward Kamau Brathwaite says ironically, the Caribbean children wrote about falling of snow than about the force of hurricanes which is the reality before
them as the ‘hurricane does not roar in pentameters’. He postulates a ‘nation language’, influenced by the African model. It is English in terms of lexical features, but in its rhythm, contours and sound explosion it is more close to the oral form. Nation language, as he argues, decentralizes the control of the imposed European language systems in the Post Colonial era. Dialect carries pejorative meanings as it is taken to be an inferior version of European language whereas nation language is a creative system that infuses the imposed language with the attributes of the suppressed system. It stems from the rich plurality of Caribbean culture. The resulting language includes English lexical features, but its contours, rhythms and explosions are not Anglophonic. It expresses a unique identity through rhythm, storytelling styles and subversive language systems. Creole resistance focuses on breaking down the Iambic rhythm and displacing it with the intonations and rhythms of the Calypso which employs Dactyls. Creolisation is a hybridising concept which seeps across the Manichaean division between black and white, native and the settler. Wilson Harris in his analysis of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* appreciates that, Rhys is intuitively rather than intentionally attempting to compensate a historical portrait of the West Indian creole (*Selected Essays*, 120). Harris offers a limbo perspective where creole experience becomes a “new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within the new architecture of culture”. Edouard Glissant called it ‘creolite’ or ‘creolity’. Harris’s notion of “cross- cultural imagination” is a similar concept. Harris, who is from a region that is a cultural confluence of four continents, is a believer in what he calls "cross-culturality". He suggests it as a threshold into wholeness. When one faction of
humanity discovers itself in another, a new universe is opened before them. The 
_Theatre of the Arts_ contains a rewritten account of a discussion of Gordon Rohlehr, 
Stuart Murray, Fred D’Augiar, Hena Maes Jelinek and Wilson Harris. Harris talks 
there about the need of cross-culturality in the following way:

… I don’t see this transfer happening, I must confess, in Europe, because 
you have groups that are totally against each other, totally polarized; I’m 
suggesting that there is a psychical possibility that those groups can 
inform and instruct and change each other by trials of the imagination. 
That is cross-culturality, that is profound cross-culturality. (236, 243)

In an interview with Fred D’Augiar in the issue of Bomb 82 of winter 2003, 
Harris makes a clear distinction between cross-culturality and multiculturality. Harris 
states the greatest deficiency of multicultural society as follows:

Cross-culturality differs radically from multiculturality. There is no 
creative and re-creative sharing of dimensions in multiculturality. The 
strongest culture in multiculturality holds an umbrella over the rest, which 
have no alternative but to abide by the values that the strongest believe to 
be universal. Cross-culturality is an opening to a true and variant 
universality of a blend of parts we can never wholly encompass, though 
when we become aware of them we may ceaselessly strive for an open 
unity that they offer. In this quantum way we may forestall the tyranny of 
one-sided being. (22)
It is well described by A.J.M. Bundy in his introduction to *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris* where he says that “Harris’s own blood-mix reflects that of the Guyanese nation: English, Hindu Indian, Afro-Caribbean and indigenous Amerindian ancestors all contribute to Harris’s antecedents, so that in his very genes Wilson Harris embodies cross-cultural community” (Bundy, 1). Haunted by the waste of past encounters based on arrogant conquest and forcible conversion, Harris senses that other world-views can challenge the ritual habit, ritual normality that seals our eyes and ears, and move out of the absolutes. For Harris, imagination has power to effect genuine change than traditional institutional and cultural avenues. Harris often talks about ‘Womb of Space’ which is a gyno-centred metaphor, with rich inner meanings. He believes that the ancestry of human beings can be traced to a single womb. He says in the *Mask of the Beggar*:

> Who are humanity’s ancestors? Lost ancestors in the dark ages… Or a single ancestor equally lost, forever lost, except within an organ of true creation that ceaselessly returns. Do you not see? Chinese, Europeans, Indians, Africans, Incas, Aztecs and others I find difficulty in naming, blunder into the arms of Mother of Space, the Bride of Space. (18)

It is also the site of radical imagination, an imagination that transcends the limited notion of fixed space and chronology and leads us to an unbroken historical chain where the living, dead and those yet to come are inevitably present. The concept can be viewed in conjunction with Harris’s faith in the ‘collective unconscious’ of mankind. Harris describes it as “universal unconscious”. He says in
an interview with Vera M. Kutzinki: “When I speak of the unconscious I’m not only speaking of the human unconscious but of the unconscious that resides in objects, in trees, in rivers. I’m suggesting that there is a psyche, a mysterious entity, that links us with the unconscious in nature…”(20). In the time-scale of the ‘womb of space’ all human beings are thus united with the grand scheme of the universe. Harris says in Ghost of Memory:

We live in dangerous and terrible times, and one faction fights the other. When you hear of 'multiculturality', it simply means cultures are grouped together, but they retain their absolute beliefs. Each culture promotes itself, whereas I've been working against those absolute values. (57)

In his fictional world, Harris envisions a new world where all cultures promote each other discarding their blind faith in their own creed which they have acquired due to the accident of birth. The writer gives visual reality to his ideas on the inner drama of man, and the world he inhabits, and sets up in the imagination of the reader, ever expanding echoes of thought waves. Revelation or illumination is within oneself and creation of man becomes an endless process fraught with ‘infinite rehearsals’. Dreaming for Harris is the source of creativity. It is the window to the unconscious, repository of all aspirations and hidden woes. In an age of interpretations, Harris shows us that the absolutes of material truth are partial and incomplete. Recognising this, he goes for the abstract truth of memory and dream where past, present and future coalesce. Harris is the narrator of human history,
taking his cues from the common memory that we possess, but seldom ventured to probe.