CHAPTER II

CLAUDE McKAY’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND HIS APPEAL FOR BLACK SOLIDARITY

If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

— Claude McKay

No less a leader than Winston Churchill, the wartime Prime Minister of Great Britain quoted the afore cited lines from the signature poem of the iconic poet of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Claude McKay. This would speak in volumes about the impregnable diction and its capacity to catapult the reader to any level of intensity. He is the first major poet of the Harlem Renaissance who inspired the African Americans with the power of race-conscious verses.

Festus Claudius Claude McKay was born on 15 September, 1889 and died on 22 May, 1948. He was a Jamaican-American writer and poet, who was a seminal figure in the Harlem Renaissance. He wrote four novels: *Home to Harlem* (1928), a best-seller that won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature, *Banjo* (1929), *Banana Bottom* (1933), and in 1941, a manuscript called *Amiable With Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem* that has not yet been published. McKay also authored collections of poetry, a collection of short stories *Ginger Town* (1932), two autobiographical books, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, published posthumously and a non-fiction, socio-historical treatise entitled *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). His 1922 poetry collection, *Harlem Shadows*, was among the first books published during the Harlem Renaissance.
Claude McKay was born in Nairne Castle near James Hill, Clarendon, Jamaica. He was the youngest child of Thomas Francis McKay and Hannah Ann Elizabeth Edwards, well-to-do farmers who had enough property to qualify to vote. Thomas McKay's father was of Ashanti descent, and Claude recounted that his father would share stories of Ashanti customs with him. Claude's mother was of Malagasy ancestry.

When he was four years old, McKay started basic school at the church that he attended. At the age of seven, he was sent to live with his oldest brother, Uriah Theodore, a teacher, to be given the best education available. While living with this brother, McKay became an avid reader of classical and British literature, as well as philosophy, science and theology. He started writing poetry at the age of ten.

In 1906, McKay became apprenticed to a carriage and cabinet maker known as Old Brenga, staying in his apprenticeship for about two years. During that time, in 1907, McKay met a man named Walter Jekyll, who became a mentor and an inspiration for him and encouraged him to concentrate on his writing. Jekyll convinced McKay to write in his native dialect and even later set some of McKay's verses to music. Jekyll helped McKay publish his first book of poems, Songs of Jamaica in 1912. These were the first poems published in Jamaican Patois which is a dialect of mainly English words and African structure. McKay's next volume, Constab Ballads (1912), was based on his experiences of joining the constabulary for a brief period in 1911.

McKay left for the United States in 1912 to attend Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. McKay was shocked by the intense racism he encountered when he arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, where many public facilities were segregated, which inspired him to write more poetry. At Tuskegee, he disliked the semi-military, machine-like existence and quickly left to study at Kansas State University. At Kansas State, he read W. E. B. Du Bois' the Souls of Black Folk, which had a major impact on him and stirred his political involvement. But despite
superior academic performance, in 1914 McKay decided he did not want to be an agronomist and moved to New York, where he married his childhood sweetheart, Eulalie Lewars.

McKay published two poems in 1917 in *The Seven Arts* under the pseudonym Eli Edwards while working as a waiter on the railways. In 1919, he met Crystal and Max Eastman, who produced *The Liberator* where McKay served as co-executive editor until 1922. It was here, as the co-editor of *The Liberator*, that he published one of his most famous poems, ‘If We Must Die’, during the Red Summer, a period of intense racial violence against black people in Anglo-American societies. The poem was reportedly later quoted by Winston Churchill during World War II. This single poem ‘If we must die’ earned him a worldwide acclaim.

McKay became involved with a group of black radicals who were unhappy both with Marcus Garvey's nationalism and the middle-class reformist wing NAACP. These included other Caribbean writers such as Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore and Wilfred Domingo. They fought for black self-determination within the context of socialist revolution. Together they founded the semi-secret revolutionary organization, the African Blood Brotherhood. Hubert Harrison had asked McKay to write for Garvey's *Negro World*, but only a few copies of the paper have survived from this period, none of which contain any articles by McKay. McKay soon left for London, England.

McKay arrived in London in Autumn 1919. He used to frequent a soldier's club in Drury Lane and the International Socialist Club in Shore ditch. A militant atheist, he also joined the Rationalist Press Association. It was during this period that McKay's commitment to socialism deepened and he read Marx assiduously. At the International Socialist Club, McKay met Shapurji Saklatvala, A. J. Cook, Guy Aldred, Jack Tanner, Arthur McManus, William Gallacher, Sylvia Pankhurst and George Lansbury. He was soon invited to write for *Workers' Dreadnought*. 
In 1920, the *Daily Herald*, a socialist paper published by George Lansbury, included a racist article written by E. D. Morel. Entitled *Black Scourge in Europe: Sexual Horror Let Loose by France on the Rhine*, it insinuated gross hyper-sexuality on black people in general, but Lansbury refused to print McKay's response. This response then appeared in *Workers' Dreadnought*. This started his regular involvement with *Workers' Dreadnought* and the Workers' Socialist Federation, a Council Communist group active in the East End and which had a majority of women involved in it at all levels of the organization. He became a paid journalist for the paper. Some people claim that he was the first black journalist in Britain. He attended the Communist Unity Conference that established the Communist Party of Great Britain. At this time, he also had some of his poetry published in the *Cambridge Magazine*, edited by C. K. Ogden.

When Sylvia Pankhurst was arrested under the Defense of the Realm Act for publishing articles calculated and likely to cause sedition amongst His Majesty's forces in the Navy, and among the civilian population, McKay had his rooms searched. He is likely to have been the author of *The Yellow Peril and the Dockers* attributed to Leon Lopez, which was one of the articles cited by the Government in its case against *Workers' Dreadnought*.

From November 1922 to June 1923, he visited the Soviet Union and attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. There, he met many leading Bolsheviks including Leon Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek. Claude McKay details his experience in Russia in the essay *Soviet Russia and the Negro* published in the December 1923 issue of *The Crisis* Magazine.

McKay wrote the manuscripts for a book of essays called *Negroes in America* and three stories published as *Lynching in America*, both of which appeared first in Russian and were re-translated into English. McKay's original English manuscripts have been lost. When Russia was under the rule of communists led by Lenin he was invited to Russia while being reconstruction of
the country, out of the experience of going from one end of the country to the other he wrote one of his most famous poems, ‘If We Must Die’. It was revolutionary and it appealed and gave courage to the minorities' fight against great odds.

In 1928, McKay published his most famous novel, *Home to Harlem*, which won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature. The novel, which depicted street life in Harlem, had a major impact on black intellectuals in the Caribbean, West Africa, and Europe.

McKay's novel gained a substantial readership, especially with people who wanted to know more about the intense, and sometimes shocking, details of Harlem nightlife. His novel was an attempt to capture the energetic and intense spirit of the uprooted black vagabonds. *Home to Harlem* was a work in which McKay looked among the common people for a distinctive black identity.

Despite this, the book drew fire from one of McKay's heroes, W. E. B. Du Bois. To Du Bois, the novel's frank depictions of sexuality and the nightlife in Harlem only appealed to the vulgar demands of white readers and publishers looking for portrayals of black licentiousness. As Du Bois said that *Home to Harlem* ... for the most part nauseates him, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath." Modern critics now dismiss this criticism from Du Bois, who was more concerned with using art as propaganda in the struggle for African American political liberation than in the value of art to showcase the truth about the lives of black people.

McKay's other novels were *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933). *Banjo* was noted in part for its portrayal of how the French treated people from its Sub-Saharan African colonies, as the novel centers on black seamen in Marseilles. Aimé Césaire stated that in *Banjo*, blacks were described truthfully and without inhibition or prejudice. *Banana Bottom* was McKay's third novel. The book is said to follow a principal theme of a black individual in search of establishing a
cultural identity in a white society. The book discusses underlying racial and cultural tensions.

McKay also authored a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932), two autobiographical books, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, published posthumously in 1979, and a non-fiction, socio-historical treatise entitled *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). His collection *Selected Poems* (1953) was published posthumously and included a Foreword by John Dewey. McKay became an American citizen in 1940. Becoming disillusioned with communism, McKay embraced the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, to which he converted in 1944. He died from a heart attack in Chicago at the age of 59.

In 1977, the Government of Jamaica named Claude McKay the national poet and posthumously awarded him the Order of Jamaica for his contribution to literature. In 2002, scholar Molefi Kete Asante listed Claude McKay on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans. He is regarded as the foremost left-wing black intellectual of his age and his work heavily influenced a generation of black authors including James Baldwin and Richard Wright.

McKay’s fiction has been variously interpreted as one born of radical poetics, as part of protest literature of the 1920s, as a manifesto of negritude and as a celebration of primitivism. The variant readings that constitute the central problematic of McKay’s work issue, it can be safely said, from a deep schism in the author’s make up. Wayne Cooper, in his celebrated biography of McKay, locates the source of a personality “characterized always by a deep seated ambivalence” that was caused mainly by dependence upon a succession of father figures.(47)

It can, however, be argued that McKay’s work seems paradoxical because it has been read in an inappropriate frame of reference. Beginnings with James Weldon Johnson’s Black Manhattan (1930) critics have concluded, certainly to
their satisfaction, that McKay was of the Harlem group. Indeed that was one of the movement’s ornaments. And in the latest study of the Harlem school, *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations* (1989), Geta Laseur affirms that Claude McKay remains today part of the acknowledged literary triumvirate of the Harlem Renaissance. He shares this prestigious position with Langston Hughes and Jean Toomey.

The general critical position on McKay has been that to be understood satisfactorily, he ought to be read as a pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance. The elements of his work that clearly militate against the work of what Max Eastman called a rather irresponsible and wayward character.

A close reading of McKay’s work, especially when it is aligned with other works from the colonies, forces us to the conclusion that
to anchor McKay’s awareness in Harlem is to dislocate his true emotional geography; it is indeed, to misread or dislocate the map of his political consciousness. If we would accommodate the whole of his work nor explain away any of it, we might have to take McKay for what he was, a colonial writer who happened to stop over in Harlem on his lifelong quest for a spiritual home, on a quest, incidentally, that no colonial writer has ever effectively escaped. His association with Harlem was no more than what Harlem itself has been to African American letters. (Baker, 112)

In any case, to identify his work exclusively with Harlem aesthetics or politics is to rob its uniqueness and to deny it the central place it deserves in colonial writing. Arbitrary points of reference can lead only to skewed inferences.

Once it might have been necessary for African American scholars like Johnson and Locke to enlist McKay in the service of black letters in America.
Once African American literature has been established definitively, no such political contingency exists for McKay’s continuing there. As they treated McKay as a home grown Harlem only and displaces Jamaica’s contribution to the African Diaspora of letters without adding any more luster to the African American. Replacing the Harlem perspective by the colonial, on the other hand, will lead to a better understanding of McKay’s creative energy and a more realistic evaluation of his place in the global discourse of black authors, emphasizing the global dimensions of black consciousness.

If we reread McKay as a writer from a British colony, then as one with a mindset entirely different from that of Carmelites, what currently looks problematic will seem natural and what has seemed wayward may appear predictable. James Weldon Johnson, called by McKay in the dedicatory note to *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* a friend and wise counselor, finds McKay’s nostalgia for Jamaica and singing. Such battlement obviously results from an ignorance of, a basic fact about the colonial sensibility; that it straddles between two worlds, the one of its origin, the other of its adoption. Politically, its values and attitudes derive from and swing between the two sets. It sides, at once with both the victim and the victimizer.

To stress McKay’s colonial heritage is certainly not to minimize his value to the movement or the overall worth of his work. On the contrary, his work did, indeed, carve out the path that black writers all over the world could, if they would follow. Some of them, like Alain Locke, who altered the title of McKay’s poem ‘The White House to White Houses’ and thus destroyed the symbolic statement that the poet had intended, dared not follow McKay’s lead. But a few did. Aime Césaire, according to the interview published as part of Discourse on Colonialism, was inspired by McKay’s novel *Banjo*, which for him was really “one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity.”(49). That McKay’s self assurance, like his passionate devotion to the cause of the black race, did a yeoman’s service to the advancement of African American literature is a fact widely accepted.
Claude McKay’s *Banana Bottom* has been called “the first West Indian prose classic” and its heroine “The First West Indian Heroine”(Rampersad, 273). But the emphasis has been on the novel’s aesthetic maturity. Robert Bone sees it as the culmination of McKay’s search for a form. In *Banjo* McKay comes closer to realizing this central theme and the finished form that he finally achieves in *Banana Bottom*. McLeod says that it is more than a regional romance and that it contains serious social criticism, but his emphasis is also on the continuous concern of McKay for presenting with rare verisimilitude accounts of the lives of the folk, whether urban or rural.

Both Bone and Ramachand propose that cultural dualism is the central theme of *Banana Bottom* and according to the latter, in this respect it shows continuity with the earlier novels, the difference being only the differences in art. But it is much more than a triumph of techniques or we must see technique as a way of exploring and discovering reality. Adam Lively sees this maturity in substance in *Banana Bottom*, which he calls both McKay’s finest work of art and the final refinement of his polemic, adding that the nature of the polemic has changed. The Cultural Dualism of the earlier novels is redefined in such a way that it no longer simply depicts an antithesis of emotion and intellect. Thus the cultural dualism is not bolstered by a structural dualism represented by Ray and Jake and by intellect and emotion in Ray’s psyche.

McKay’s expressions of political concern seem variable, perhaps even opportunistic. The outrage of black suffering during the American tumults of 1919 caused ‘If We Must Die’ to gush is a defiant lament from his pen. The ‘magical pilgrimage’ to Russia in 1922 elicited the more measured study on the Negroes in America. Disaffection with communism, into which he had been attracted as much by personal attentions left leaning litterateurs as by philosophical conviction, led to an interval of physical and mental drifting before he took up the Catholic faith and in this period a longing for an idealized Jamaica inspired *Banana Bottom* and its moving evocation of the non conformist way. Two terms can properly be applied
to McKay, expatriate and peripatetic and his politics reflects his actually stumbling upon rather than sustaining and elaborating connections.

In the years of the Harlem Renaissance generally regarded as 1920-1930, India too experienced the growth and spur of the movement of Swaraj or Home Rule. It was a period of heroic nationalist fervour following the return of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa. His message and his mission of eradication of untouchability acted as magic to India’s millions.

Claude McKay, who aroused the conscience of the Blacks against the injustice of the whites in his writings, was aware of the Mahatma and his political weapon, satyagraha which really means holding onto truth, so effectively used against apartheid in South Africa and used to arouse national fervor to recover India’s freedom. McKay’s writings about segregation in America have something of the sting of a Garibaldi or a Byron. He had the same goal as the Mahatma but lacked his gentleness and calm his universal appeal and fame.

When McKay migrated to the United States and moved to New York, he did not involve himself in the fight against racism but he was disgusted with the discriminatory practices against Blacks in a society that professed egalitarian democratic doctrines. In fact, it was in the Kingston (Jamaica) Daily Gleaner for 6 April 1912, three years before Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, that McKay published his poem ‘Passive Resistance’, with its confident note of certain victory for those opposing the ailments in our midst.

In Jamaica, McKay was moved to pity and hence to imaginative when he moved to America and lived amid the squalor and human suffering he made an attempt to project a positive niggerhood a voice that could celebrate or defy with apparent directness. It was like the magic voice of the Mahatma a defiance of white racial imperialism. Gradually McKay grew in stature to be a poet of all the Negroes, to be the poet who could clearly see the implications of racism as far reaching for those who were guilty of the evil, for mankind as a whole and not least for himself as a poet and a human being.
In the early poems McKay’s mood is quiet, sober, self reflective. He is sensitive to the plight of the coloured people and identifies with it, but he is not bitter as if he is resigned to the natural, immutable inequities of life. He voices his concern, his protest, firmly, but he is not intoxicated with hate.

Only with the 1919 race riots in the United States did McKay’s temper change and the celebrated sonnet ‘If We Must Die’, at once became the incarnation of the new spirit that permeated America. The poem’s realistic imagery is every bit as vivid as William Cowper’s and it makes the reader feel the agony of the black man’s soul in pain through the language of his exhortation. Blacks are entreated not to be complacent when subjected to all manner of indignities stated metaphorically as being hunted and penned like hogs attacked by mad dogs but, if necessary, to die with nobility though faced with monstrous and outnumbering foes. The contrast between the sentiments of this poem and those of Rupert Brooke’s ‘The Soldier, If I should die’ could not be more stark and McKay’s is notable for its greater intensity of feeling its greater claim for universal understanding. The better known poem by Brooke is really a personal statement of identification with white Britain. McKay’s is a racial demand for non discrimination against black people that threatens ultimate action to redress wrongs that have become institutionalized. Brooke is considering the change of applauded battle death. McKay is considering the necessity, perhaps, of death in quite different circumstances in civil strife in urban areas within his country itself.

Somewhere between the time of McKay’s departure from Jamaica in 1912 and the composition of ‘If We Must Die’ in 1919, he had a modification of his ideology of action. The earlier avowal of gaining full rights for black by a strong though bloodless war has been modified cruelty and brutality. In fact, the course of action is for just one deathblow in response to a thousand blows from a murderous pack. But it is action that results in noble death, in honour, in a display of bravery and in full recognition of manliness. Fighting back is the key not just fighting. The goal is self respect through assertion of equality and denial of inferiority.

Since 1918, when the large number of Blacks who had served in the war returned to America to seek jobs and to look for some amelioration in their social
conditions as a result of their having helped to defend the country’s interests overseas, to about 1930, when the Depression changed the whole social scene, the composition of the black community in the United States and especially in Harlem changed considerably. A new black intelligentsia had developed many of these were behind the demand for equal civil rights, for full citizenship for Blacks, others were responsive to the newer social movements such as feminism and socialism. There was a relative dearth of leaders and a plethora of directions. Marcus Garvey asserted his special brand of Black Nationalism for a while, only to be deported to his native Jamaica. Claude McKay remained in Europe, a self exile, so that his influence as a calming, Fabian advocate of change through non violent action was muted. And though he went to the Soviet Union where he wrote his first short stories, published in the 1920s but later translated into English as a ‘Trial by Lynching’, he never became an active advocate of violent revolution instead he almost immediately upon his departure repudiated the idea of violent action in the interest of social change and racial advancement, advocating instead a gradual ameliorant policy akin to the Gandhian one.

McKay subsequently wrote in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home* as

I was an older man and not regarded as member of the renaissance but more as a forerunner I was surprised when I discovered that many of the talented Negroes regarded their renaissance more as an uplift organization and a vehicle to accelerate the pace and progress of smart Negro society. (LWH, 43)

For McKay the important task was not so much the advancement of the talented youth that was the special concern of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois as the general improvement in the lot of the great masses of black folk whose lives were lighted by the stigma of colour. It is hell to belong to suppressed minority and outcast group, he wrote elsewhere in *A Long Way from Home*. “For to most members of the powerful majority you are not a person you are a problem. And it was on this
general topic, the Negro problem, that he had addressed the Comintern in 1922” (LWH, 47).

It was during his expatriation in France that Claude McKay first met an authentic African prince, a nephew of the last king of Dahomey, Behanzin, who had been defeated and deported by the French in the 1890s. He also met and made friends during this period in Paris, in Marseilles and in Morocco with Africans, many of them former West Indians, and Black Americans.

It was Senghor’s belief that had not McKay transcended that hatred and come to recognize, and embrace the fertile contributions of white civilization, but that the vigour of his assertion of the value of negritude was unique in African American poetry, and in his eyes, he was without any doubt the leading figure and initiator who would be eventually followed by other black American poets and writers.

In his search for reassurances and the evidence on which to base his trust and belief in the validity of their African cultural and historical roots, McKay represented an additional dimension for not only he himself was black but he also insisted in treating openly and repeatedly the themes and preoccupations which the younger French speaking black intellectuals were grappling with in the mid 1930s and in the 1940s and 1950s.

Another early black writer who made a great impression on the negritude generation was, without doubt, the Goncourt Prize winner of 1921, Rene Maran, author of *Batouala*. Maran born in Fort de France, Martinique, in 1887, was precise contemporary of McKay. The prize winning book and above all the preface written by the author condemned unequivocally the abusive and exploitative practices of the French colonials in central Africa the former Afrique equatorial Franchise and aroused a virulent polemic in France and in the French colonies service. He had served as a colonial officer in the territory of Oubangui Chari, now the Central African Republic, for thirteen years.
While it would be utterly erroneous to attempt to identify Claude McKay with most of the African, West Indian, or African American Docker or seaman types who evolve freely in Banjo or in the unpublished Romance in Marseilles, it is undeniable that characters like Banjo and Jake were created with genuine sympathy and admiration devoid of any condescension.

The impact and influence of McKay’s poetry on the poetry of Senghor, Cesaire, Damas and Birago Diop was equally undeniable, however, the principal themes of race consciousness and pride of race specificity that is the search for the quintessential authentic black personality, of racism and the sub themes of race and sex had a much greater and more direct impact on these poets of negritude as well as on subsequent Francophone African and Caribbean poets and novelists. Among these the most obviously influenced by McKay were Ousmane Soce Diop, author of Mirages de Paris (1937), and a contemporary and compatriot of Senghor, Joseph Zobel from Martinique (La rue Case Negores, 1950), and Ousmane Sembene (Le Docker Noir, 1956).

In the short piece ‘Boyhood in Jamaica’, Claude McKay expressed the belief that his island in the Caribbean, which had long been located at the periphery of American and European consciousness, would assume an international role. McKay opines that

The people of Jamaica were like an exotic garden planted by God. And today I see them as something more. I see them as a rising people and sometimes I think that the Negroes amongst them will give leadership to the Negroes of the world in the great struggle that lies ahead (LWH, 55).

This dual perception of black Jamaicans as part of a luscious landscape and as a potential cultural and political force in world developments lies at the heart of McKay’s writing. Through his reading and later his travels, McKay became aware of the crisis in Western civilization beginning toward the end of the nineteenth
century and reaching its climax during the aftermath of the First World War. In *A Long Way from Home*, McKay summed up his feelings about the new post war era as he had no reason to think that the world that he lived in was permanent, solid and unshakable. He further told that the World war had just come to a truce.

The sense of flux was at the root of a cultural crisis that was part of process of decent ring that upset the notion of Western cultural superiority and questioned the supposed universality of Western values and traditions. The increased number of European encounters with other cultures in Asia and Africa, resulting in the suppression of backward cultures by Western imperialist powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had the unintended effect of stimulating the rise of nationalism and the assertion of cultural identity by racial and ethnic groups that had hitherto been relegated to the status of second class citizens in the world community. The scramble for Africa, in the last years of the nineteenth century exacerbated political tensions in Europe and led to the outbreak of the First World War. Moreover, the loot imported from Africa in the form of cultural artifacts contributed to a modernist revolution in European art in the early twentieth century and the carnage of World War I and the breakup of imperialist power after the war contributed to loss of faith in the supposed innate superiority of western European civilization.

In the New World, the same period witnessed the emergence of the United States as a global power. The Spanish American War was a showcase for American military might, while the construction of the Panama Canal, using black labour imported from the Caribbean and South America, was a victory for American technology. The invasion of Haiti by American troops in 1915 constituted the suppression of the first black republic that had traditionally been a source of pride for African Americans. As C.L.R. James told that the West Indians first became aware of themselves as a people in the Haitian revolution.

McKay and Maran portray the natural community of Blacks pitted against the brutal oppression and inhumanity of white civilization. Both novels attempt to
define specific black values as alternatives to the crisis of Western civilization in the aftermath of World War I. It is therefore not surprising that these novels would inspire the negritude writers who were also searching for their cultural roots.

The concept of negritude has always been controversial. Some writers, like Wole Soyinka and Ezekiel Mphahlele, argue that negritude is a myth that ignores the realities of black culture. Others, like Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire, see in negritude the sum of what it means to be black in a white world. It was apparently, Cesaire who first coined the term in 1939 in his poem ‘Notebook of a Return to the Native Land’. Cesaire says,

My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day my negritude is not a laukoma of dead liquid over the earth’s dead eye my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral it takes root in the red flesh of the sky it breaks through the opaque prostration with its upright patience. (49)

Negritude was for Cesaire rooted in the struggle to transcend racism and arrive at self affirmation through the assertion of seemingly negative values. Negritude is thus not a mythic project but rather an acceptance of the reality of black history which transmutes degradation into affirmation. Cesaire’s negritude has therefore a historical dimension which he describes as “the awareness of being black the simple acknowledgement of a fact that implies the acceptance of it, a taking charge of one’s destiny as a black man, of one’s history and culture”.(110)

In assessing the outpouring of creativity that was the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke noted of its avant-garde artists that “The mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of limitation and implied inferiority something like a spiritual emancipation in Harlem Negro life seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self determination”. (67)
At a time in American literary history when the black artist was concerned with the creation of an African American ethos, fiction writers, in particular, appropriated the black idiom of folklore and its attendant rituals as an artistic device for privileging a subordinated and marginalized consciousness and experience of American life. These artists were inextricably bound up in the creation of a black American character and in this respect, their works often demonstrate a felt-need to adapt an essentially oral form to a literary one.

Among the innovators of African American folk expression and self determination were Claude McKay and Arna Bontemps, both of whom managed to weave an intricate pattern of black life and budding nationalism into their respective fictions, *Home to Harlem* and *Black Thunder*. Both construct their heroes along the lines of the black folk hero, the black Moses and the trickster the defiant black man who challenges Euro American socio political hegemony. And as these characters are located squarely among the people at the level of America’s subculture, the texts succeed in delineating the role that folk ritual plays in the psychic survival of African Americans. Thus the texts and the characters operate subversively to undermine the definitions and constructs of the dominant society by asserting the otherness of the black experience as a valid but rejected aspect of the American experience.

Wayne F. Cooper notes in the foreword to the 1987 edition of *Home to Harlem* that with the novel, Claude McKay began a fictional search for value, meaning and self direction in modern African American existence. Such a search was for him, as it had been for his literary forefathers, one fraught with tension and the conflict of duality a twoness/double consciousness of which W.E.B. Du Bois had written earlier in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

In the poem ‘Outcast’, posthumously printed in 1953, McKay foregrounds this struggle of the black artist in a personal complaint reminiscent of Countee Cullen’s *Yet Do I Marvel*, where Cullen wonders about wisdom of a god who
would make a poet black, then bid him sing. McKay’s poem underscores a similar uncertainly ambiguity. He says,

My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs,
I would go back to darkness and to peace
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my heart,
Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart (First stanza Outcast).

The concept of twoness is further expressed in ‘The white city’, where McKay asserts:

My being would be a skeleton, a shell
If this dark Passion that fills my ever mood,
And makes my heaven in the white world’s hell,
Did not forever feed me vital blood.

The vital blood, of which McKay speaks is the Africanicity (or souls) of black people in the diaspora of the Caribbean and the United States that he had others of the Harlem Renaissance sought to capture in imagery, colour and metaphor in their poetry and fiction.

Writing in The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance: Twelve Black writers 1923-1933, Professor Amritjit Singh notes,

Claude McKay hoped to define the black experience in the West in terms of the African American’ African roots. The
joy and abandon with which McKay’s black characters sing, dance, eat, love and sleep represent the uninterrupted stream of values and attitudes their ancestors brought from Africa and which have helped them cope with tortuous lives in the West. In spite of (or perhaps because of) his grueling menial jobs, McKay’s black man has Urge and capacity to give himself to music and dancing, drinking and gambling sex love with a passion starling to most white men. White healthy and human instincts, he struggles to remain unmechanized despite constant pressure from the evil civilization that surrounds him.(63)

The close relationship between the Gabriel Prosser of 1800 and the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly when considered in the context of the failure of Gabriel’s rebellion and the decline in the creative energy of the Renaissance at the time that Bontemps wrote Black Thunder, seems to suggest the importance of maintaining at any period in history a vitalizing and permanent contact with historical tradition while forging the future.

It is important to note that as Gabriel prepares to die amidst the turbulence of Virginia in 1800, still maintaining the assertiveness that has allowed him his freedom for nearly a month. He also comes to admit the importance of historical tradition as it is focused in Black Thunder on the African lore of signs. Gabriel explains the rebellion’s failure in words that directly echo the earlier statements of the women: “We all know it was one thing or the other. The star was against us, though” (40). The hero of Bontemps’s novel is killed but he dies not only vibrant with a new psychology but with a stronger relationship with his history. Most especially important in relation to Bontemps praise of the African American voices to be found in slave narratives before death, Gabriel finds his own distinct expression and his own voice, as the third person narrator momentarily disappears from the text: “Well, such, I done sung my song, I reckon, they know I’m a free man, me”(112).
One of the most forthright and candid writers of the century, Claude McKay displayed rare versatility in his writings, which covered the genres of poetry, prose, short story, novel and practical journalism. His contribution lies in his iconoclastic approach toward the old literary models and in starting new trends in black American literature.

A writer with a cosmopolitan outlook, McKay, tried to understand his people from a broad perspective. He was constantly coming to grips with the intricate problems of his race with his mental antennas sharp and sensitive. He would pick up signals indicating solutions to those problems. In his lifetime he was ready to accept certain ‘isms’ and ideologies that sounded promising for his race, yet as a writer of integrity and conviction, he never hesitated to reject the faiths and beliefs that did not work the anticipated way. It was quite natural, then that McKay’s espousals and rejections were to influence him as both an individual and a writer.

In order to understand McKay’s ideological involvements, it is important to ponder a little over his childhood influences in Jamaica. He received his education from his elder brother U’ Theo, who had already rejected their father’s Protestant orthodoxy. Under the tutelage of his brother, McKay got introduced to literature, philosophy, science and Fabian socialism. Quite inevitably, then, McKay also rejected his father’s Christian fundamentalism. As Bronz notes, at fourteen he was well acquainted with the works of Berkeley, Spinoza and Matthew Arnold and had become a free thinker and socialist. His contact with Fabian socialism at an impressionable age explains somewhat the ideological stances he was to take in the years to come. In this context, Wayne Cooper in his biography aptly remarks,

U Theo probably never dreamed that he was supplying his sensitive and romantic brother with ideas that would later serve as spring boards for more sweeping attacks on other bulwarks of Western civilization( 87 ).
Born and brought up as a British colonial subject, McKay, with the unpleasant experiences of daily life, soon became rebellious. McKay argues “Not that I ever openly rebelled, but the rebellion was in my heart and it was fermented by the inevitable rubs of life trifles to most of my comrades, but to me calamities and tragedies” (LWH, 12). By the time he left for America, he had acquired sufficient insight into the problems of discrimination, exploitation, the nature of capitalism and the imperial colonialism under which the colored races of the world suffered. But his racial experiences in American were far more shocking than they had been in Jamaica. It was in New York that he was constrained to work as a dining car waiter, a bar boy, a houseman, a longshoreman, a porter, and a fireman. All the same his experience at these jobs enhanced his understanding of the black working class under white capitalism. McKay had, by now, become an avid reader of radical journals. He was also making significant literary contacts of which the names of Frank Harris, the international behemain, and Max Eastman, the well known Marxist, stand out. These two figures played a key role in the development of McKay as a writer. Yet it was Eastman, the radical, with whom he had the greater ideological affinity, for both had come to agree that socialism was the answer to world problems. McKay’s faith in the rationalists and free thinkers had already been shattered at the outbreak of World War I, when as he wrote, “agnostics and rationalists, losing all sense of reason, had become rapid nationalists while denouncing one another” (Cooper, 84). McKay was watching with deep interest the post war world caught up in the throes of social change. The Russian Revolution in 1917 had taken the world by storm. To many intellectuals, Bolshevism seemed to be the first step toward the restructuring of the world in which Blacks would have a major role. As a poet full of hope and anticipation, McKay was to express himself in these lines from his poem *Travail*:

My ear is turned into new voices shrieking  
Their jarring notes of life exalting strife;  
My soul soars singing, with flame forces seeking  
The grandest purpose, noblest path of life;
Where scarlet pennants blaze like tongue of fire There where high passion swells is my heart’s desire. (Travail, lines 1-6, )

When McKay visited England during 1919-20, he got deeply involved in the British communist movement. At the international Club, he met many European and British left-wing speakers and heard Marxism being discussed with a religious fervor that for him would prove to be quite contagious. It was here that he felt the need to educate himself in Marxism. He read Marx at the British Museum and familiarized himself with the basic precepts of Marxist ideology. It is not difficult to guess why Marxism should have fascinated McKay. Marx’s emphasis on the all pervasive nature of the economic factors in society, his analysis of capitalism with its inherent evil of oppression and exploitation and its eventual downfall and the rise of the proletariat, and above all his insisting on all men being equal would have gone a long way to impress and influence McKay.

Consequently, McKay’s hectic involvement with Sylvia Pankhurst’s *Workers Dreadnought* resulted in numerous writings that carry his interpretation of Marxism in racial terms. At this juncture, he gave a fervent call for black men to seize opportunities presented by the Russian Revolution. In fact McKay was the first to signal the beginnings of a black colonial revolt against British imperialism which was to climax after World War II and thus became the predecessor of the Hampstead school of African socialism and the first to argue that socialism and nationalism were interdependent. These stances born of his Marxist experiences were bound to affect his future writing.

Yet McKay’s optimism did not last long, for while still in England his association with communism was beginning to sour. He felt that the color prejudice that was always lurking in the minds of British communists just could not be wiped off. He was to face a similar situation with American communism, so that his trip to Russia, even as a celebrity, could not draw him into the official party fold. Although his belief in communism as a remedy for exploitation had still not died out, he was gradually getting ascetical about its effectiveness in solving
the problems of African Americans. However not giving up completely, at the Fourth Congress of the Third Comintern in Moscow, he competently presented the issues pertaining to American blacks and informed the delegates how the American Communist Party had failed them. Russians gave him a sympathetic hearing and he saw Lenin grappling with the knotty problems of the American Negro. McKay believed for a time that the Russians understood the Negro question.

By the time McKay got down to writing his fiction, he had already passed through his phases of attachment to and detachment from agnosticism and communism. Besides, his long travels abroad had provided him with an international vision through which he could perceive the reality of his race in the world. These factors led him to adopt antagonistic stances toward Western civilization and its political and religious institutions a fact clearly reflected in his novels. Consequently, evident in these novels are certain conflicting tendencies, which may be defined as Marxist and bourgeois, international and national and Catholic and anti Christian.

The notion that McKay’s Marxist experience had a role to play in his development as a writer cannot be denied. The world, according to him had undergone a drastic change after the First World War, with the Russian Revolution bringing the European nations into closer relationship with African American. With an analytical mind that was ever sharp, lucid, and perceptive McKay spelled out how, under the new conditions, the African American race could make its voice heard. Due to growing American propaganda against African American, it became imperative for them to get organized in order to propagate their grievances. McKay felt that as the suppressed and persecuted minority, they should lift their cause out of national obscurity and force it as a prime international issue. Here it is important to point out the McKay’s international outlook, shaped by his Marxist experience as well as his travels abroad, only caused his vision to converge on the problems of his race. This attitude brings to another paradox when one discovers that as McKay became more and more international and continued to understand the racial problem from a broader perspective, he was unswervingly heading
toward the ideology of African American nationalism. Due to his interaction with communists, he had come to understand precisely what was lacking in his race. While participating in the communist gatherings, he would realize the importance of an organized group. Stressing the need for African American to have a group soul, he wrote in *A Long Way From Home*, “When you have your own voting strength, you can make demands on whites, they will have more respect for your potential strength”(LWH 266). Every other racial group in America is organized as a group except African Americans. In his emphasis on the need for African Americans to organize themselves, McKay was in effect asking them to organize themselves into a strong community with electoral powers. At this juncture one may say that McKay was actually paving the way for the civil rights and African American nationalistic movements that were to rise in the subsequent decades. McKay’s Negro nationalism, indeed, differed from the escapist brand of Negro nationalism advocated by Garvey. It also differed from the Utopian type of African American nationalism envisaged by communists in America. It was far more realistic and practical. In this manner, his insistence on ideas, such as African Americans developing a group soul and becoming a strong community, seems to be a kind of prologue to the slogans of black power during the 1960s.

On the literary level, McKay’s, African American nationalistic approach proved to be innovated indeed. This approach was the process of advancing certain principles for African American writing that were to become the bedrock of the African American aesthetics that matured in the 1960s and 1970s. So, while writing his novels, McKay was unconsciously giving to the world of African American literature certain percepts of a new literary theory. These novels revealed that African American aesthetics meant a depiction of racial pride, an affirmation of black identity, a celebration of blackness and black life, including primitivism, black culture art, music dance; going back to the racial African roots; a critical stance toward Western civilization and the development of a Third World sensibility.
McKay’s political activist would also differentiate him from most other participants in the Harlem Renaissance. While Renaissance writers did not ignore political issues, these concerns most commonly focused on explicit racial problems rather than any specific political ideology and were expressed through protest poetry rather than political activity. McKay expressed his anger toward the race riots of 1919 in his sonnet ‘If We Must Die’ and urged the African American to meet violence with violence, defying the odds and gaining dignity in their struggle. “Like men we’ll face the murderous cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back” (‘If We Must Die’). James Weldon Johnson in poems like ‘Fifty Years’, Langston Hughes, especially in his radical poetry of the early 1930s and Arna Bontemps in ‘A Black Man Talks of Reaping’, are only a few examples of writers protesting in their literature. However, this kind of protest writing was only small and on the whole, it contributes very little to the Renaissance. While virtually every writer involved in the movement produced one or two protest pieces, only two writers — Claude McKay and Langston Hughes made protest a significant element in their work, and even for them protest was never the exclusive or even the major characteristic of their writing. Also only these two gave serious consideration to communism as a potential solution to the racial and economic problems that confronted black America. Both men were prominent in the Harlem Renaissance. Both defined themselves as radicals, associated with socialists and communists. They visited the Soviet Union and expressed sympathy with the goals of the Bolshevik Revolution. More than anyone else associated with the Renaissance, they flirted with communism. It is not clear whether McKay or Hughes ever actually joined the Communist Party. Both, however, ultimately rejected communism.

Being a radical in his heart of hearts, Claude McKay was the first Renaissance writer to become involved with the Communist Party. McKay had become interested in socialism as early as he was a student. In New York, his literary contacts were not with the emerging Harlem literary community but with Max and Crystal Eastman and other Greenwich Village radicals. During 1919 and
1920, McKay spent several months in London, where at the International Socialist Club, his political education continued and he was first introduced to the writings of Marx. As McKay recalled in his autobiography, the International Socialist Club, a venerable institution founded in 1849 and located in the East end, served in the heady years following the Bolshevik revolution as the hangout for a wide assortment of prominent radicals from all over Europe and it was the scene of endless political discussions and debates. McKay adds,

for the first time I found myself in an atmosphere of doctrinaire and dogmatic ideas in which people devoted themselves to the discussion and analysis of events from a radical and Marxian point of view. The contact stimulated and broadened my social outlook and plunged me into the reading of Karl Marx. (LWH, 58)

Surprised to find that Marx was more of a scholar than revolutionary, McKay quickly became a convert, if not a soviet communism, at least to Marxism and marveled that any modern system of social education could ignore the man who stood like a great fixed monument in the way of the world. It is important to note that McKay would later stress that it was Marx the philosopher/historian who had excited him not Marx the revolutionary theorist.

As McKay’s commitment to revolutionary Marxism crystallized, he aligned himself with Sylvia Pankhurst’s Workers Socialist Federation, one of several factions in Britain’s confused jumble of leftist political groups that proclaimed wholehearted support for the Bolshevik Revolution and international communism. McKay took a job on the editorial staff of Pankhurst’s magazine, the Workers Dreadnought and during the five months that he worked there, he published twenty four political articles, poems and reviews, which represent his revolutionary thoughts at their most radical. Never comfortable with the intellectual discipline
that the revolutionary left imposed on its cadres, however, McKay had occasional disagreements with Pankhurst over the political content of his work. When, in the turmoil surrounding the arrest of Pankhurst and a general move to suppress bolshevism in England, McKay learned that he was suspected by some of his comrades of being a police spy, he decided it was time to return to the United States.

McKay arrived in New York in the winter of 1921. Continuing to follow the radical path he had entered in London, he went to work as associate editor of *The Liberator*, a leftist journal edited by his close friend Max Eastman and committed to the cause of the proletariat, Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik revolution. When Eastman left the magazine, McKay and Michael Gold shared control as co editors until they quarreled in a policy dispute in 1922 and McKay resigned.

In spite of his later denials, there is strong evidence that McKay either joined the Communist Party at this time or at least claimed membership. While in Moscow a dispute arose with the leadership of the American delegation to the party congress over McKay’s political status, and consequently his authority to attend as an unofficial visitor. In a letter published in the newspaper *Bolshevik* on 3 December 1922, McKay states unequivocally that he is a Communist. Whether this statement was accurate or merely an opportunistic attempt to gain status in Moscow, it convinced his Soviet hosts. McKay was invited to address the Comintern Congress on the Negro question; he corresponded with Trotsky on his subject and ultimately was commissioned to write a book for the Soviet state publishing house. The book, *The Negroes in America*, was published in Russian language. In the original translator’s introduction, McKay is described to his Russian readers as a working class black writer active in the labour movement and revolutionary activities in the United States and England, who became a member of the First World War in 1919, in the United States and joined the Communist Party in England in 1920.
During this period, McKay’s poetry reflected his political involvement. However, his best known poetry published in America, focusing on the black experience, and signed with his name was not overtly Marxist even though much of it examined the life of the black working class. Its themes were race and not about class. When he turned to political subjects, as in his most powerful protest poem ‘If We Must Die’, it was to protest racial oppression, not the plight of the proletariat. Typical of his work during the period was his study of a Harlem prostitute in ‘Harlem Shadows’, McKay neither moralized against prostitution nor romanticized it. Instead, he concentrated on the dreariness of the whore’s life, describing her weariness in the same terms he might use for a charwoman:

Through the long night until the silver break
of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the long night until the last snow flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth’s white breast,
The dusky, half clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

(Harlem Shadows)

When he wrote about his experience in the Soviet Union, as in ‘Moscow’, McKay’s sympathies with communism shone through but in no sense could the work, be labeled political doctrinaire:

And often now my nerves throb with the thrill
when in that gilded place, I felt and saw(Moscow)

McKay’s major body of work may have had a strong radical element, and much of it did examine the life of the black proletariat, but it cannot be classified as Marxist.

However, there is also a less well known body of McKay’s poetry, mostly written in England while he worked on the *Workers Dreadnought* and much of it
written under pseudonyms. In these poems and in a series of political essays, McKay proclaimed his allegiance to international communism. The Jamaican linked his new political commitments to his continuing concern with racial injustice by arguing that socialism and the international communist movement was the most appropriate way to bridge the gulf that has been created between the white and colored workers by Capitalism and its servant Christianity. In ‘Travail’, which appeared in Workers Dreadnought in January 1920, he claimed that international communism represented the grandest purpose, noblest path of life. While in April, in ‘Song of the New Soldier and Worker’, he followed his description of the hungry, hideous huge machine of capitalism with a call to the barricades. McKay expresses his radicalism in the following lines:

O pull the thing to pieces; O, wreck it all and smash  
With the power and the will that only holy hate can give;  
Even though our broken bodies may be caught in the crash  
Even so that children yet unborn may live.

(Song of the New Soldier and Worker)

This is not a great poetry, but it represented McKay’s politics at the height of his commitment to communism.

McKay’s ardour for communism took him to the Soviet Union, but it apparently was cooled by this visit. Years later, he would report that he had encountered some difficulty with the official American delegation to the Communist Party’s Third International Congress especially spokesman for black Americans. He would also maintain ardently that he had never joined the Communist Party during this period of leftist activity but had maintained his political independence as a free spirit. In the early 1930s he would claim that his real antipathy towards communism was based on the party’s effort to impose intellectual and artistic discipline on its members. He had a small taste of that in England on the Workers’ Dreadnought and a larger dose in Moscow. As he later explained in his correspondence with Nancy Cunard, he essentially agreed with the
social and economic programmes of the communists, but he objected to their attitude toward art and artists. McKay detailed these concerns as

I think the communist theory of proletarian art is wrong. It means really propaganda art and while I believe in organized political propaganda, I don’t in organized propaganda art. About art I am romantic (LWH, 246).

This romanticism about art made dogmatic politics ultimately unappealing to him.

McKay spent much of the rest of his life attempting to convince the public that he was not a radical and that he had never been a communist. After he returned to the United States, he believed for several years that his career was being sabotaged by liberals and radicals, who believing he had betrayed the left, were highly critical of his work and blocked his efforts to find a job. During this period, McKay became increasingly anti communist. He criticized the party’s call for the creation of a black homeland in the Southerner United States and continued to condemn the efforts of the party to suppress independent thinking and opposing opinion. In the late 1930s, McKay attempted to thwart the party’s efforts to expand its influence in the black community. First, he proposed to create an organization of black writers and journalists that would be concerned about the social and cultural poems of blacks but which would bar from membership anyone who did not believe in democracy of who pledged allegiance to any form of dictatorship. When this organization failed to take root, McKay made anticommunism the focus of his next book. Although *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* was promoted as an examination of life in the black city, the last third was devoted to lengthy and detailed critique of communist activity in the black community.

Despite his later denials and recantations, there is evidence to suggest that for a time at least, McKay was a communist. Certainly his association with the Pankhurst’s and the hardcore British left suggest so. Likewise, the accounts of his involvement with socialists in Kansas is not farfetched socialists were politically
active in Riley Country during the period that he lived there especially during the elections of 1912 and 1913 when the Socialist party fielded candidates. Finally his association with an official publishing house in Moscow and the correspondence with newspapers and the political leadership there indicate that he had convinced his Russian hosts of his credentials as a communist. However it is equally clear that whatever the extent of his youthful involvement with the left, McKay ended his days as an ardent anti communist, condemning and in turn feeling betrayed by those whom he had earlier supported.

So McKay had come full circle. While he had initially supported radical causes and sympathized with the Bolshevik Revolution, during the last years of his life he became an outspoken critic of communism. However, in spite of his rather dramatic shift in political beliefs, there was also a thread of consistency in McKay’s behavior. Throughout his career he was strongly attracted to order and structure. His poetry certainly reflected this proclivity, being stylistically very traditional and not at all experimental. In fact, many of his more radical poems, including ‘If We Must Die,’ and ‘Moscow’, utilized the highly disciplined and structured form, the sonnet. Also, McKay was initially attracted to a Marx who was not a torch burning prophet of social revolution but a scholar who developed a highly structured system of social and political analysis and who has studied the history and philosophy and science of the world, so that he might outline a new social system for the world. Then when his commitment to Marxism faded, McKay turned to religion. First in North Africa he flirted with Islam. After returning to the United States, he embraced Catholicism. The revolutionary enthusiasm of his youth had given way to a quest for structure and order.

Claude McKay’s autobiography A Long Way from Home has contemporary relevance for a number of reasons. Black intellectuals are still involved in the quest for an identity and an ideology and under circumstances similar to those of the period through which McKay lived. Present day pilgrimage of black Americans, West Indians and Africans to China and Cuba are reminiscent of the Moscow journeys of an earlier period. The dilemmas and contradictions that accompany
attempts to reconcile Marxism and black nationalism are as perplexing to the intellectuals of the 1960s as they were to those of the 1920s and 1930s. Stokely Carmichel, Eldridge Cleaver and James Forman find themselves confronted with the same type of problems that faced Paul Robeson, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. McKay came to grips with them earlier than any of the other and his autobiography documents the processes of discovery, growth, inner conflict, and disillusionment that all sensitive Black intellectuals experience in a world where racism is a pervasive reality.

A Long way from Home, like the autobiographies of other black writers since World War I, falls into a literary tradition that begins with the narratives of runaway slaves, including The Life and Times of Frederick Dougles, and continues in Booker T.Washington’s Up from Slavery and W.E.B.Du Bois’ Dusk of Dawn. The genre is one in which more intimate aspects of the autobiographer’s personal experience are subordinated to social commentary and reflections upon what it means to be a Negro in a world dominated by white men. There have been no black Marcel Prousts and Andre Gides. The traumatic effects of the black experience seem to have made confessions writing an intellectual luxury black writers cannot afford.

McKay’s narrative is unique in one aspect. Other accounts by prominent black men of their encounter with American have been written by those who were born and bred in the United States. Claude McKay was one of the more talented individuals in the stream of immigrants from the British West Indies who have been seeking in their fortune in the United States since the turn of the century. They were refugees from a poverty exacerbated by overpopulation, and from a social system in which British settlers and their mixed blood descendants had kept most blacks in a subordinate position. During the twenties and thirties, West Indians played an active role in the hectic polities of Harlem, a phenomenon that has been analyzed with insight and perception, and also some bias, by Harold Cruse in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual.
McKay’s life was a single episode in the 500 year old drama of the black diaspora, that massive dispersal of millions of men and women out of the great African homeland to the Caribbean islands and onto the American continents. He symbolizes their wanderings backward and forward between Africa and the New World, and from both of these areas to Britain and Europe. They have become detribalized in the process and have developed a Pan African consciousness. McKay does not emphasize his West Indianians but rather his blackness, his solidarity with African-Americans and Africans. He was keenly conscious of being a child of the diaspora, revealing sentiments similar to those in the Negro spiritual. McKay has borrowed the title for his autobiography from the blue 'Negro Spiritual'. 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home'. (Last line of Negro Spiritual).

McKay was twenty one years old when he arrived in the United States, soon after his first volume of poetry, Songs of Jamaica, had been published. He came ostensibly to study agriculture. After a few years he cast off the student role and began to wander and wonder, as he phrased it, taking menial jobs and writing in his spare time. The work of a black American had a decisive influence upon his life; of W.E.B. Du Bois’ The Souls of Black Folks, he wrote that it had shaken him.

Between 1912 and 1918 McKay wrote continuously but published only a few poems and these under a pseudonym. He wrote poems while running on the road as a dining car waiter, and also in the men’s room in transit and in his Harlem Lodgings during brief periods of respite from work. He obtained an interview with Frank Harris, the Irish American publisher and critic, who launched him into the literary world under his own name. Later he met Max Eastman, the Jewish radical editor, who was to affect his life profoundly. He had virtually no association at the time with what E.Franklin Frazier dubbed the black bourgeoisie, but he had been in very close contact with what his left wing friends referred to as the Negro working class. Yet his own literary heroes were written to conventional works. The sonnet was his favorite mode of expression, though some of his best poetry is in a free style.
In 1919 Claude McKay made his way to London, where he not only met some of the literary figures he admired, including George Bernard Shaw, but also began to read Karl Marx for the first time and to play an active part in radical politics, taking a job on a left labor journal. He expresses his surprise and disillusionment over the obtuse prejudices where their relations with coloured people were involved. His book of poems *Spring in New Hampshire* was published while he was in England, and some of the reviews were patronizing and implicitly racist. Frank Harris, though a helpful friend had not been entirely free of such attitudes. McKay concluded that among the British race, prejudice is almost congenital. When he had experienced enough of it, he came back to New York.

Max Eastman and his associates accepted Claude McKay as a peer and a friend. He was appointed associate editor of *The Liberator*. Here he functioned not as *the Negro poet* but as a responsible colleague helping to select and edit a wide range of material for publication. This was, no doubt, one of the happiest periods in his life. He kept in close contact with Harlem, where a black literary movement had just emerged what came to be called *The Negro Renaissance* or the *New Negro Movement*. Although Harlem litterateurs respected him, they did not claim him as one of their own. His roots were downtown in white radical circles.

During 1921, factional fights within the left resulted in the withdrawal of Max Eastman and his sister, Crystal, from *The Liberator* and a more doctrinaire brand of Marxists took control of the magazine. McKay, proud and jealous of his intellectual independence and integrity, lost his temporary ‘home’. If he had been of a different temperament, he might have found a new home with the strident and chauvinistic black nationalists in Garvey’s burgeoning movement, whose publication he occasionally wrote for. But he could no more follow the line of the Universal Negro improvement Association than he could that of the Communist Party.

Nevertheless, his sympathies were with the oppressed, and despite his difference with the Communist Party in the United States, he felt he should see the
results of the Russian Revolution for himself, to get the feel of it and to assess its implications for black men. He was determined, however, to visit the Soviet Union as an independent, unaffiliated writer, so he proceeded to raise some money by his own efforts. James Weldon Johnson, the Negro writer and NAACP leader, assisted him in selling copies of his *Harlem Shadows*, and Crystal Eastman helped him to secure contributions from friendly individuals. The leaders of the Negro Renaissance considered him enough of their own to attend a bon voyage party for him at James Weldon Johnson’s home, and both W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White of the NAACP were there. The guests would have been embarrassed had they known that the next morning Claude McKay went into the engine room of a steamer to work his way across the Atlantic as a stoker.

The year spent in Russia was both a high point and turning point in McKay’s life. Asian and European Communists assured the Russians that he was neither a spy nor a counter revolutionary and smoothed the way for him to secure a visa to attend the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. The Russians embraced him as a symbol of oppressed but heroic blackness. His seven chapters on *The Magic Pilgrimage* recreate the confusion and excitement of the revolution and of his own enjoyment of a situation where being black was an asset rather than a handicap. But the mixture of high purpose and self seeking, of idealism and chicanery, within the International Communist Movement repelled him.

The Russian experience left a permanent mark upon his life and his body. He returned to Paris ill and with the American Communists hostile toward him for refusing to join their ranks and submit to party discipline. In his book he charges them with spreading scurrilous slanders about him. The polemical and defensive tone of this section and of the one following it, ‘The Cynical Continent’, became the dominant mood in the next book he wrote, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, much of which is devoted to what McKay conceived of as an expose of Communist tactics. It was meant as a warning to the black community. He must have felt vindicated when younger Negro writers who did join the Party, such as Richard Wright, left it during World War II and defined the object of their former devotion as the God
that failed. But the anticommunism of *A Long Way from Home* has a tone of sadness, and irony touched with humor, rather than the crusading thrust of the later work.

McKay’s experiences with British Laborites and liberals and his feud with the American Communists brought him somewhat closer to the culture conscious segment of the black bourgeoisie, a number of whom were in Paris during the summer of 1923 when he was also there. But neither they nor the white expatriates in Gertrude Stein’s entourage were satisfying associates. Several years earlier, after returning to Harlem from his trip to Britain, he had written of the pleasure of being just one black among many. After his visit to the Soviet Union and Paris, he went to a French seaport to recapture something of that same feeling. In the Chapter *Marseilles Motley*, he writes of “a great gang of black and brown humanity. Negroids from the United States, the West Indies, North Africa and West Africa, all herded to gather in warm group” (LWH, 265). Later he went to Morocco and reports the satisfaction he felt in a country where Islamic Arabic culture and the cultures and people of the black world interpenetrated without overtones of racism. But neither Southern France nor North Africa was home. He did not have a change to travel below the Sahara in the ancestral homeland, which he romanticized in some of his poetry.

While going through the autobiography of McKay, one comes to know that there has been a permanent search for a home in the inner consciousness of Claude McKay. Every word of the title of his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home* is fraught with both intrinsic and extrinsic connotations. The phrase if one explores the implied meaning of ‘a long way’ one would be rather perplexed to bring out its real meaning. One has to look at it from the following point of view. A profound and prolific writer of literature like McKay should have meant only the ideological and imaginary home that he has been on the look out in his mind since he migrated from his native home Jamaica in 1912. He arrives at the most sought after home in Harlem where he is able to become one with the black intelligentsia. He is able to meet the like-minded people in Alain Locke and W.E. Du Bois and others. At
Harlem he finds the opportunities to promote the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Aesthetics. But outside the Harlem, i.e. in New York city he has to face a racial discrimination and segregation from the whites. Therefore he has to leave for other countries that can vouchsafe racial freedom and class-free attitude towards the African Americans. He does not mind facing criticisms like Alian Locke’s calling him ‘a spiritual truant’ (Qtd in LWH). McKay has become a colonial representative of the Black diaspora, a prototype of the modern migrant writers like Taslima Nasreen or Salman Rushdie, divided between different homes his native land (Jamaica), the colonial mother country (England), the island of emigration (the United States), the land of his temporary expatriation (France), the land of his ancestors (Africa). In fact, he remains an outsider everywhere characterised by a constant sense of dislocation. The protagonist of *Banana Bottom*, Bita, after six years stay in England and receiving the best western education there, does not get assimilated with a life in United Kingdom but chooses to come back to Jamaica to lead a simple and humble life in a forlorn rural atmosphere there. The artist McKay is able to create his protagonist to make a come back but he doesn’t go back to Jamaica but goes back to Harlem.