CHAPTER - II
Films in the 1920s’ radio in the 1930s, and television after the war caught America in an electronic web of overlapping cultural loyalties. Although the naturalists of the 1930s worked to create a total vision of America with diverse demographic representation the Afro-American identity was somehow misplaced. It found its ground for a leap of faith and optimism in the diffused idea known as the American Dream, only during the 1940s. The Afro-American thus was initiated either to believe in the American Dream at the cost of his historical personality and community values. However, the optimism flared from the rhythms picked up from the abolitionist agenda as articulated in slave narratives. These narratives absorbed the tenets of Christianity, the ideals of the Enlightenment and renewed its faith in the American Constitution. This redefining of the American Dream has become a practice of constructing a parallel vision that seriously interrogated the Dream itself. The clearest way out of the maze was to create the most overarching vision of black identity. Focusing on the situation of the Black in America, Ralph Ellison in his prophetic work *Invisible Man* helped create a style in which *orality, textuality and music* mingled to portray a vision of an America that has gone mad. In a world of paranoid discriminations and impersonal power, the imagination of the individual is the last refuge of will. Ellison moved closer to the realm of popular culture, absorbing its vitality and variety into a self-created coherence that mocked at official position even while pushing it to absurdity.
With the force of a revelation, the mind of Ellison’s protagonist discovered himself and his situation in re-possessioning the history of its own world and its myths. The making of that history embraced the visionary powers of such literary giants like Proust, Man and Joyce. Ellison realized the situation of the Afro-American individual as a representation at the crossing of the ways, and thus created in *Invisible Man* a compelling drama of *self* and *history*.

Although the novel in America makes its full acknowledgement of all the bitter social realities that are the consequences of racial animus in general, the terrifying capacities for violence and cruelty that are resident in the human heart are subtly articulated in Ellison’s work. His sense of the relationship of art to life, his merging of narrative with music and his deconstruction of race in the context of American civilization, constitute the narrative of *Invisible Man*.

Before elaborating on Ellison’s world view, I would like to discuss the historical context of the Black Experience in America during the 1960s and the 1970s.

The ‘struggle’ as it is known to the black community, for securing the legitimate space with dignity and honour in America started from the 1920s. Around the 1960s, the ‘black’ or the Afro-Americans carved a literary space for themselves. The emerging black hero or the *New Negro* in the literary writings finally arrived. The sudden emergence of a large number of gifted black writers auger in the inception of a Third Force in the American literary scene. The Harlem Renaissance is the product of
that creative upsurge. This awakening touched the peoples' sensibility and a new awareness emerged. Afro-Americans of the 20th century first encountered a large expression in lyric form of their ancestral memories and, then, the strange bitter *exactions* of their fated involvement in the American reality.

Amongst those associated with the Harlem Renaissance it was Langston Hughes, who had the longest productive career, and by the early 1960s, his impressive accomplishment won him a considerable following. But none of the other representatives of the Harlem movement succeeded in making any large impact on the general literary scene except Weldon Johnson and Countee Cullen, who were cherished within the Negro community for a brief moment. When Black writers and artists were felt to be wondrously strange, they were hawked about by such specialists as Nancy Cunard and Carl Van Vechten in the exotic *Tendenz*. As part of literary politics, critics such as Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley, and the editors of *The Hound and Horn* and *The Southern Review* simply ignored them.

The year 1963 marked the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation and it was notable, for huge demonstrations by Negro groups in cities of both North and South America. These groups pressed forward their demands for the abolition of desegregation of public facilities and for the extension of fair employment opportunities. As Congress debated over President Kennedy's proposal of a new Civil Rights Act, the flurry of activities were brought to a kind of climax on the 28th of August by the March to Washington For Jobs and Freedom. The event was sponsored
by hundreds of groups with national constituencies and many of their leaders – A. Philip Randolf, Roy Wilkens, Walter Reuther - delivered speeches before the large crowd. However, more than anything else, the rolling periods of Martin Luther King’s great movement culminated in “I have a dream...” that became symbolic of the national memory.

Less than a year after, in the Spring of 1964, under Lyndon Johnson’s Presidency, Congress enacted the most comprehensive civil rights legislation in the country’s history, giving the Attorney General effective powers to defend all citizens against any deprivation of their free access to public facilities, of their exercise of the ballot, and of their use of the nation’s public educational resources.

Amidst all this ferment, there was the cry for “Black Power” that began to sound in the Summer of 1966 by the Young Chairman of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee), Stokely Carmichael. Immediately, it had a mesmerizing effect on the youth. Although it did not bring about a radical change, it did keep the illusions alive for freedom. A new sense of assertiveness started taking shape that had a stirring effect in the homilies of James Baldwin. The perilous and exhausting civil rights battles in the South followed the Montgomery boycott that helped discover a sense of heroism of which the blacks were themselves capable. Nor were they untouched by the new vitalities that seemed to be at work south of the Sahara, in the achievement of independence by Ghana and Tanganyika, by Kenya and Zanzibar, by Sierra Leone and Uganda. Africa the Land of their forefathers, was at last beginning to be free from European colonialism and ready to take charge
of its own destiny. As they looked back at their own past—“rope, fire ... humiliation”—and at their brothers, sons of “Mother Africa”, they were wanting to affirm, with the force of a newly strengthened certitude, that here, in this saga of struggle and suffering, there is, as *The Fire Next Time* says: “something very beautiful” and something which, as they began to feel, stands to be betrayed by any vision of the future as involving nothing more than their assimilation into the world of white America. And thus, once Carmichael raised his cry of “Black Power”, in animating these passions, it was instantly captivating. The immediate response was, yes, - let us have Black Power, let us consolidate that which is distinctly ours, for as the watchword soon began to be – “Black is beautiful” and overnight, the semantics of self-definition made it *de requeur* amongst the youth that the term “Negro” be supplanted by the term “Black”.

The rapidly increasing assertiveness of this new mood in the 1960s had of course, certain consequences in the political arena, in the occasional disturbance of old alliances between Negroes and liberal whites and in various abortive programs of “Black Nationalism”. But its most telling result was observable in the changed tone of cultural enterprise which found its most vigorous expression in the emerging literary situation. In 1968, the young black writer Julius Lester said:

I’m an Afro-American. This implies that I’m an amalgam. It is my responsibility to reflect the Afro side of the hyphen. The other side has been too much reflected.
Lester’s intention was clear and loud. There was an attempt to distinguish the Negro writer with a separatist ethnicist attitude, disengaging him not only from the larger world of American literature but also from the entire Western tradition. The program was gradually worked out in such magazines as Freedomways, Negro Digest – later Black World – The Black Scholar, and in the writer’s conferences that were convened on campuses and in community centers all over the North in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Those who emerged as the chief strategists were the poet and playwright, Leroi Jones, who now calls himself Imamu Amiri Baraka, the novelist, John Oliver Killens, the ideologue, John Henrik Clarke, poets, Larry Neal and Don L. Lee, and the editor of the now defunct Black World, Hoyt Fuller.

The effort was an attempt at a radical reordering of the Western aesthetics vis-a-vis black aesthetics. The political overtone of the effort was resounding. The mood of the new aggression is expressed in the words of black nationalist leader Ron Karenga:

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

Leroi Jones says:

The black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his
rendering, and if they are black men, grow strong through this moving, having seen their own strength and weakness; and if they are white men, tremble, curse and go mad because they will be drenched by the filth of their own evil.\(^3\)

Adam David Miller maintains that a literature responsive to the black aesthetic is one whose task is not so much of "telling it like it is" as of telling it "like it needs to be ... [if a black man is] to make sense out of his experience".\(^4\)

John O'Neal says that a truly black art is:

Affirmation of the black reality ... Affirmation of black potential, not trying to take black dreams and paint them white till we don't know the difference anymore.\(^5\)

Addison Gayle conceives the black aesthetic to be:

A corrective – a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism.\(^6\)

In spite of various attempts at rediscovering or redefining the black art, what is most important for the Afro-American is to look back and consider the writings of some of their predecessors, because there had already been writers, like W. E. B. DuBois – a historian, a black leader and an educator, who sought not merely to manifest the inchaoteness of the whole ideology of black aestheticism, but to rewrite the history of Africa itself and to think in epistemological terms about what it means to be an African in the modern world and its significance for social research.
During his years at Harvard and the University of Berlin, DuBois boldly projected the possibility of subjecting to scientific scrutiny the problem of race in the modern world. He contended that the central object of American sociology should be the study of race. The intellectual core of what became a unique DuBoisian epistemology of race was a reconceptualization of Africa. DuBois sometimes openly, often quite subtly, sought out ways to reconceptualize the social, cultural and civilizational universe from an Africa-centered standpoint. Forthrightly, he insists in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

One who is born with a cause is predestined to a certain narrowness of view, and at the same time to some clearness of vision within his limits with which the world often finds it well reckon.\(^7\)

The review in a way locates both his intellectual style and the object of his project. He concludes by saying that:

In its larger aspects... the style is tropical-African. This needs no apology. The blood of my fathers spoke through me and cast off the English restrain of my training and surroundings. The resulting accomplishment is a matter of taste. Sometimes I think very well of it and sometimes I do not.\(^8\)

The Afro-American Church is the peculiar and characteristic product of the transplanted African. As a social institution, the Afro-American Church may be said to have antedated the African family on American soil. As such it has preserved, on the one hand, many of the family functions called "tribal functions" and "communal functions"
which preserved the African tradition of female authority. Even through the storm and stress of slavery, the Negro brought the African past to America. Primarily, the slaves represented everything African. Africa and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, in fact, immensely contributed to the foundations of the modern world economy. Moreover, the political and moral agencies of modernity, we can say, were disproportionately located in the slaves, their culture and resistance. Africans indeed are a moral force. Africans in America would give the first and most consistent examples of what Marx called the class-struggle.

The dialectical relationship between a person's self-image and his social position, which is a major determinant of social behaviour, is a problem particularly acute for Afro-Americans. Issues of self-image and social behaviour are most evident in several discussions of employment and criminal behaviour. The back-street corner men and women of whom DuBois writes in 1899 had a pervasive presence throughout American history. This presence is attested to in myriad historical studies and contemporaneous research monographs, not to talk of DuBois own The Negro American Family (1908). Discrimination against the black in the sphere of socio-economic activities placed him between a personal demand for self-respect and a non-affirming social structure. A subject, constrained by perceptions of an environment vacant of opportunity, may sink into despair and apathy, or may join the company of similar situated subjects, in that, projection of a self-chosen oppositional identity becomes the most basic and empowering form of human identity.
Such identical agencies span a range of identities from the constructive rebellion of those who pursue prizes reserved for the other to the wasted and bitter cry of the street hustlers, criminals and non-belongers. Social outcomes are neither structural inevitabilities nor behavioural destinies fated by genes or pathological cultures. Social outcomes are mediated by human choices that become part of experience. The mediation occurs within social institutions like the family, schools and churches. When institutions fail to affirm an individual’s self-image, his response to the status discrepancy corresponds to identity formation. To interpret what motivates these agencies, we must discover how social identity is related to social institutions that affirm or deny a self-image.

It is common knowledge that during the past quarter century, rewards received in the competitions for jobs are major affirmations or denials of the validity or the self perceptions of men and women. Explication of the social meaning of the concept of “slave” clarifies the relation between discursive location, identity and labour supply. Conceptually, the jobs of a slave makes several highly repugnant claims about the job and its occupant. If the metaphor is taken seriously, then being employed in a slave category, by self-admission, if not a slave precisely, is that the person becomes slave-like. Thus to work as a slave is likely to undermine one’s identity and self-esteem.

The most important characteristics of a slave job is that it entails repellant interpersonal relations. It involves a demeaning and close supervision. It does not offer a career – long time employees are doing
the same work, under the same demeaning conditions and it does not pay well, or for that matter, not paid at all, given its other characteristics.

The verbalized point of view of a slave is that he loses public respect in addition to losing self-respect. The point is illustrated nicely in the following rap poem delivered by a Baltimore street hustler during the mid 1960s:

A hustler is a very wise person, but yet he’s lost, he’s a person who refuses to “eight” (for Charlie) the white boss. His life consists of heartaches, a little pleasure and no pity, at times I hesitate to believe that hustlers are very witty. His profession ranges from dealing seconds to controlling the cue from conning, pimpping and cheating at crap and sometimes after making a misplay, he’ll gladly confess that being a back-street hustler is his own mishap.... Now when this man has a good day, you’ll see him smile, hear him say “All bonafide hustlers come forward, all suckers stay away”. The moral of this poem is very sad but true, a hustler’s life is not all roses most of it is blue and chumps you be glad the title “hustler” doesn’t mean you.9

This rap poem illustrates several aspects of the hustler’s philosophy and value system. His discursive location is that of the malcontent (DuBois refers to the slave as a malcontent). The underlying point of view emphasizes independence, self-determination with the choice of work, maintenance of social dignity and freedom from white control. While this rap piece provides evidence of pride in the lifestyle chosen, much of this pride is lodged in the negative act of refusing to be a slave – “eight” – under white supervision. About the actual lifestyle of the hustler, there is great ambivalence, even regret. The back-street
hustler's message is shaped by a gritty realism. He visualizes no prospect for a really satisfying life and his lifestyle would not be chosen under more favourable conditions. The hustler is doomed by his own chosen lifestyle and he knows it.

The tragic irony dominating this lyric renders an implicit statement of the malcontent's most central ideological stance, the trope of forced agency and the phenomenon of suspended values. Stated briefly, the trope of forced agency is a commonly articulated argument that rationalizes the commission of negative and immoral acts. The malcontent's discursive location is shaped by the discrepancy between his self-image and the value placed on him. As part of the Black Nationalist Movement, the South took the lead in formulating what is called Black Aesthetics. As John Killens said:

We are a Southern people, "because that is where our people are closest to Africa. But our literature does not show this".10

It was a process of return to the Africa of their forefathers, that the literary artists tried to formulate an aesthetic that created images and symbols in an attempt to make a paradigm shift. In spite of a resurgence in black writing, what was taken seriously note of is the way the black man was stereotyped. The prevalent mood was to restore honour and selfhood to the black man. The stereotyped depiction of the black man as half-man, at best, needs to be revised. The literature that engaged in projecting the whole-man of the Negro has to, on the one hand, protest
the hitherto representation of the black man, and on the other, transcend the boundaries of colour and race.

Despite the achievements of black writers in the era of the black aesthetic movement, a major area of the black experience was called to a halt. They have called a halt to the madness demonstrated by those who argued that black men were half-men at best, ersatz Americans at most, and that, via the vehicle of protest literature, a transcendence might occur which would allow for the existence of whole men. The emerging black writers called a halt to the themes of black pity and gratuitous black suffering. This call reiterates the significance of the South as a place where the blacks are not the eternal victims of the whites, nor is it a place where they lived complacently with fear and oppression, but a black South where black nationalism is closer to the reality than anywhere else in America. The American South is the place where black women and young people maintain their proud carriage and continue to look with defiance upon the white world; where the ghost of Harriet Tubman and David Walker, Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King remain omnipresent as constant reminders of the greatness of a race of men and women, who, forced to desert their gods and their land, struggled and survived the American diaspora.

The books that were published during the 1970s, attempting to capture the black situation have the same wavelength with *Invisible Man*. These works together move us from an all pervasive preoccupation with urban America towards an exploration of the other, and meaningful areas of the black experience. Houston Baker’s *Long Black Song* (1972) and
Askia Muhammad Toure’s *Songhai!* (1972), are different in terms of genre, emphasis and theme, but comparably important departures in the area of black literature and criticism.

*Long Black Song* is a scholarly critique, an examination of the roots and foundations of black literature from its oral tradition to the literature of the 1960s’ and 1970s’. *Songhai!* is a collection of verse and prose – melodic, rhythmical – weaving fascinating images and metaphors of the new black world, a-coming. Together they tell the same truth: that the strength of black people lay in a culture outside that of the white American. That the “New Jihad”, to use Toure’s phrase, is possible only after a return to the values and ethics of their African forefathers. While *Long Black Song* is descriptive of the odyssey undertaken towards reaching the new world. *Songhai!* is a celebration, as much of the odyssey as of the new world itself. The declaration of Ellison’s protagonist at the end of *Invisible Man* that perhaps he speaks for every man – “who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you”11 - in a sense, does not speak for a distinctive identity. Although critics point out the ambivalence in the utterances of the protagonist, he in fact makes a fundamental cultural statement that is part of his experience and legacy. The rights of passage that propels him on his quest for selfhood in this novel, becomes his *bildungsroman*. As a Southern black, the protagonist has inherited a past that is steeped in a history of slavery which, before he reaches manhood, must come to understand and accept. Later, when he bites into the hot buttered yams that he purchases from a street vendor, the protagonist declares: “I yam what I am”, signaling, in
many ways, his final internalization of his identity, including the historical past that is his legacy.

The historical context is necessarily significant to a black writer. In a sense, he is trapped in a history produced by the white man. He needs to liberate himself. The process of liberation, becomes contingent upon the exploration of the past. In black literature the past is ever present. The past and present of the black race is entwined with racism, otherness and loss of identity. To reconstitute the other and retrieve the lost identity, literary works must not forget history, but contextualize it in order to transcend the boundaries. The African persona, therefore needs to be reconstituted as reflexive, having the ability to meditate on selfhood, exploring his desires and fears, longings and terrors, in order to rewrite his/her own history.
REFERENCES


