CHAPTER FOUR

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent,
But I possess the courage and the grace
To bear my anger proudly and unbent

[My Emphasis]...

Words which made a stain of oil
came to me when my burning mouth
left a trace of dawn on your brow
I was a maker of dawns
I was a maker of organs and balafons
for a song suited to every hope
But the ears went to the thresher unprotesting
A curse to the tipsy bird!
What use is yapping?
It is the bow harp
that we must play in this country

[My Emphasis]...

In struggle is existence. What counts as significant and
relevant is how one confronts the trials and tribulations
of life and how one prepares for the inevitable. The way
one struggled and courted death is more important than
how one lived. This is the message that American
intellectuals promulge.

Moreover one endures with patience and will-power the
difficulties of life. One faces the struggles of life

with good grace as Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea*. It was a torturous mental struggle for Virgin Mary to see her son crucified. But she bore that pain with absolute grace. In fine, life is an endless struggle. In braving the struggles of life one is expected to gracefully accept them and endeavour to endure them and surmount them. Struggles cause extreme pressures on body and mind. One who accepts them and confronts them with patience, endurance and indomitable will-power exhibits sheer grace under pressure. One may lose in his battle against the problems of life but morally one wins. This is what the Passion of Christ richly demonstrates. Jesus Christ had to suffer insults, indignities and body aches. His tormentors gained just a physical victory. But the moral victory remains still that of Jesus Christ.

And McKay and Tchicaya U Tam'si set aside the philosophy of resignation which is the mask of a defeatist. On the other hand, with a deep sense of acceptance that life means, one has to court the struggles, problems and issues that are attendant on life. Therefore, by blending subjectivism with objectivism they argue that one cannot escape the struggles of life. What they recommend to the Africans in particular and mankind in general is that one meets the struggles of life with grace like Virgin Mary who is an embodiment of patience and endurance. She is a shining example to the weak-kneed and weak-hearted. She
demonstrates richly that one should never turn a defeatist and lose fortitude. One has to boldly face the challenges of life and thereby display one's grace under pressure. This is the recommendation of McKay and Tchicaya. In this they answer the American spirit and sentiment.

Life is one of harsh actualities qualified by misery, pain and suffering. O. Henry observes that "...life is made up of sobs, sniffles and smiles, with sniffles predominating." Angst adds to the pains of life. Scientific sophistication has done little to assuage but rather has only worsened it. While commenting on the present day situation Paul Tillich observes:

It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness and despair in all realms of life....

There is progressive degeneration and life has fallen to the level of a struggle, a scramble and a desperate fever. Nemi D. Agostino points out, while discussing


Hemingway's philosophy, how life has become a

...solitary struggle, a desperate fever of action, conscious of having no sense or reason beyond itself. Nothing can be justified, bettered or saved, no problem that can really be set or solved....

Man is ensnared in the dragnet of circumstances and is increasingly becoming a prey to gnawing worries and distressing fears. Apart from these incremental irks of circumstances and a world growing more competitive, there is the deep-seated primordial fear of being left alone. Man is continually assailed by the feeling of loneliness. Though space has shrunk and continents are only a hop apart, there is a yawning gap between man and man. He is alienated from his fellow beings. John Macquarrie explains this enigma thus:

Existentially, man is alienated from his own deepest being, he is not himself but simply a cipher in the mass existence of the crowd, a cog in the modern industrial world....

Despite his human quality of gregariousness, man at times of intense suffering, thus feels lonely, forlorn and alienated.

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Whereas in every human being loneliness is a passing phase of mental state, with the Black it is a way of life. Only against a permanent back-drop of loneliness, alienation and ostracism does he trudge along in pain, misery and penury, day in and day out. His life is a continuous struggle for survival where anguish and tears predominate as depicted by Dunbar in his poem "Life":

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a peck of trouble
And never a laugh but the moans come double,
And that is life....

The Black does not yearn for the cosy comforts of life. All that he craves for is to fulfil his daily needs. And he has to struggle hard even for the bare necessities of life. He is being pressed from all quarters and wherever he turns, he has to face only a sea of trouble. His very existence is in peril. Socially an outcast and economically an underdog, the Black man is treated as an anathema in every sphere of civilized life. David P. Arthur succinctly puts it thus: "The Blacks are historically the last to be hired and the first to be fired."


Being denied the opportunity to prove his worth and the means to earn his livelihood, the Black man is pressed against the wall. His past was traumatic. The present is barren. And his future holds out no promise of better things to come. He is crest-fallen and woe-begone. Wilfred Cartey comments on this aspect of the Black man's life thus:

And the black man's rhythm became the cry of his blood and the pounding of his oppressed heart. His song became a wailing on the wind; his body an object of scorn and laughter. His language was lost and stifled, his feelings repressed, his strength sapped and sucked, his woman prostituted....

The mendicancy and gullibility of the Black are exploited to the full by the White majority. The Whites are so much used to living off the Black man's labour that they find it hard to do without. They know pretty well that only so long as the Blacks sweated on the railroads, plantation and the work-houses like beasts of burden that the White majority could enjoy the fruits of their labour.

The moment the Black man ceases to be, all the humdrum and luxury of the White world would come to a grinding halt. So the Whites seek to keep the Blacks under their thumb, in sheer servitude and subservience. As part of

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this imperious process, the Whites have successfully invented and perpetuated the myth of the Black man's infantile docility. Elkins makes a pointed reference to the White society's low estimate of the Blacks thus:

[The Black man] is docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behaviour was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment; it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being....

The Black has been stripped of all normal human attributes and individuality. His inferiority and inability for independent existence have thus been systematically branded upon him. And he has been made out to be the common property of the Whites who could exercise their authority on him at will. As William Wells Brown states explicitly:

The negro is considered common property, on which any white man may lay his hand with perfect impunity....

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The following poem of David Diop gives a clear picture of the nerve-shattering ruthlessness of the Whites towards the enslaved:

The White man killed my father
My father was proud
The Whiteman seduced my mother
My mother was beautiful
The whiteman burnt my brother beneath the noonday sun.
My brother was strong.
His hands red with black blood
The White man turned, to me
And in the Conqueror's voice said,
"Hey, boy! a chair, a napkin, a drink."

[My Emphasis]...

The total surrender of that terror-stricken Black boy in that situation is inevitable. So are the thousands of Black men held in slavery. They are victimized, dehumanized and terrorized. They are unable to free themselves. Richard D. Heffner writes:

The Supreme Court declared that Negroes were at that time considered as a subordinate and inferior class of beings....A Negro has no rights which a white man need respect....


Not only is he physically held in serfdom but even his mind is in bondage. Wilfred Cartey writes:

The mind of the black man was held in bondage; his mind was often white-washed with a biting corrosive lime which seemed to eat away at the very structure of his life. The serfdom was not only menial, but moral, and black men seemed to be living forms without life, garbed and robed in the skin of Europe....

Thus the Black has meticulously and relentlessly been brain-washed down the centuries into accepting their lowliness. Though the Black has been declared to be politically free and franchised, they are certainly not free economically, socially or culturally. They have been hemmed in on all sides by the insurmountable colour barrier. They are made to feel little on account of their colour, which segregates them. Colour is a dead weight on them. Colour decides their destiny. As Martha Gruening remarks "Here Color is an added element of torture and humiliation in the life of the underdog." Colour-consciousness afflicts not only the lay men but also the men endowed with great intellect. Charles Glicksberg reveals the fact:


The writer [The Black writer] has his eyes fixed broodingly on one sector of experience, the suffering of his people, the fatality of "color," and he can think and write of nothing else. He must drink this cup of gall and wormwood to the lees. In novel and drama and lyric, the Negro writer voices in bitter and poignant accents the Golgotha his folk must tread. [My Emphasis]... 351

This bitterness makes the Black man feel inferior and form a very low opinion of himself. He feels that he is destined to do only menial jobs for the Whites. As Jean Wagner remarks:

...the Negro gradually develops a poor opinion of himself. Ashamed of his appearance, self-despising and projecting his contempt on all who resemble him, he sometimes ends up by hating everyone of his own race.... 352

This inferiority complex which is an outcome of colour consciousness leads to hating his own colour and total submission. The more he feels inferior the more domineering are the Whites who make his life more and more bitter. Richard Wright poignantly talks about the sufferings of the Blacks thus:


But we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror, horror would invent him...  

In spite of its demoralizing effect on the Blacks, colour-consciousness also creates a race spirit in them. As Georgene Seward points out:

The inescapable reality of the Negro existence in America is colour which is inherent in the concept of self, manifest in race-consciousness...

This colour-consciousness enkindles the flame of racial solidarity to counter the offensive mounted against them. Charles Glicksberg remarks:

Because the "whites" exalt "whiteness" as the mark of superiority, the source and standard of all that is truly excellent in the world of letters, the Negroes are constrained to take exaggerated pride in the contrasting of "blackness". "Color" thus becomes a category


of culture, and Negro writers are driven into a cultural Black Belt....

Another fall-out of this racial and colour discrimination is that the American Black becomes a split personality. He is torn between the two cultures - the culture of the Blacks and the culture of the Whites. While the former is so much a part of him, the latter steals upon him unawares. At the same time he is unable to attain perfect identification with neither. This cultural divide or this cultural pressure has to be faced by every Black man. The sense of not belonging or the identity crisis is not so much a physical one as it is mental.

Derek Walcott most revealingly presents this crisis:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both, Where shall I turn, divided in the vein?

[My Emphasis]...

This torturous mental dilemma and agony are inescapable in the Black diaspora. Uprooted from his native land and thrown on an alien soil, he is a vagabond in a hostile place. The imperial mechanized cultures of the West try to snuff out his Africanness. His mind is an embittered

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battlefield where the two conflicting elements vie with each other for supremacy. The resultant cultural tussle imposes a heavy burden on his mind. Charles Glicksberg asks:

Shall the Negro rediscover Africa and make common cause with black people the world over or shall he confine himself to his cultural past in the United States so that eventually he may become creatively and culturally identified with America? If he chooses the former alternative, he is doomed. If the latter, the question arises, how shall this be accomplished?... \(^{357}\)

In case the Black man chooses to identify himself with the White culture, this process of assimilation is not an easy one. Ezekiel Mphahlele points out:

...especially in the U.S., the Negro is in a state of siege culturally. He has to locate himself as a Negro with a double commitment; to share in the life of the Americans as a whole, and to assert his cultural importance, so that he is not integrated, into the white culture on the white man's terms... \(^{358}\)

The Black writers too feel this problem and focus their attention on this question of cultural divide. As in the words of Charles Glicksberg:


\(^{358}\) Ezekiel Mphahlele, "Writers and Commitment," in Introduction to African Literature Ed. Ulli Beier, p.XIV.
They (The Black writers) cannot, on the one hand, maintain that they are American born and bred, native sons of this land, and on the other, propose to alienate themselves from the American cultural tradition on the ground of racial solidarity with the people of Africa or black folk throughout the world....

Thus the Black man is tossed about on the cultural plane by these conflicting forces of inner urges and external expediencies.

Socially too, the Black man is doomed to take up a back seat. His presence in White circles is less than tolerated. The social liberties just do not exist for him. He has no right to talk to or walk with a white woman; let alone looking passionately at her. Clare Sheridan wrote in her American Diary thus:

> I see the Negro in a new light. He used to be rather repulsive to me, but obviously he is human, has been very badly treated... It must be humiliating to an educated colored man that he may not walk down the street with a white woman, nor dine in a restaurant with her....

> If the Black man disobeys, the only answer is lynching.

Social interaction between the two races is discouraged.


360 Clare Sheridan, Quoted in A Long Way From Home, p.101
at all stages. Be it in schools or in churches, the Blacks are shown their places.

Even Churches which are meant to promote love, fraternity and good-will perpetuate racial discrimination. No coloured man is permitted to enter a White Church. As Arnold Rose reveals the fact:

Negroes are not admitted to white churches in the South, but if a strange white man enters a Negro church the visit is received as a great honor. Likewise, a white stranger will be received with utmost respect and cordiality in any Negro school....

Socially respectable jobs are monopolized by the White race leaving the Blacks to fend for themselves. They end up as hewers of coal and drawers of water. They are thus perpetually in a state of dependence.

Though a Black man has all the credentials to get social recognition and reputation, he is denied that mainly because his skin is black. He is a taboo in White society because he is Black. He has to endure physical, psychological, political, cultural and social pressures in his life. As James W.Tuttleton points out:

The vision of Negro American life implied in this dismissal of psychological, theological and existential questions is shuddering to contemplate. It reduces the Negro to the role of merely victim of white brutality [My Emphasis]... 362

It is pertinent in this context to refer to a poem written by Muhammed Ali [Cassius Clay] when he returned from Rome after winning the Olympic Gold Medal in Boxing. The nations of the world admire him. But America, which he represented and which he claims to be his, is hostile and treats him as just a "nigger". He writes:

To make America the greatest is my goal,  
So I beat the Russian, and I beat the Pole,  
And for USA won the Medal of Gold.  
Italians said, "You're greater than the Cassius of old."  

We like your name, we like your game,  
So make Rome your home if you will.  
I said I appreciate kind hospitality  
But the USA is my country still,  
'Cause they waiting to welcome me in Louisville.  

Do you know what kind of welcome he received in America?  
He felt "shamed, shocked and lonesome" when a restaurant in his hometown of Louisville refused to serve him food. Why? Because he was a negro. What did he do then?  
He threw the gold medal in a river!... 363


In the case of the Black women the situation is even worse. They are caught in the midst of the whims and fancies of the White men, resentment of the White women and the powerlessness of the Black men. They live at the mercy of these people.

The capitalist planters see her as an inexpensive commodity and utilize her to the utmost. She is physically overburdened and sexually assaulted. Rape is a causal affair in the plantation life. The planters consider it economically beneficial too, because the children born out of such a relationship become their property and help to enhance their wealth and labour force. At the same time, the White woman sees the Black woman as devil incarnate who has robbed her of her man and corrupted a way of life. The Black man for his part, is far from being sympathetic and aggravates her suffering. He assumes that the Black woman seems to prefer the White man and that is the basis for their strained relations. As Alphy J. Plakkoottam says:

The black woman faced the reality of double discrimination, of both race and sex. She was a doubly burdened, doubly jeopardized person....The Afro-American woman bore a double-edge persecution: one, as a worker, both in the house as well as in the fields; two, as an object of sexual exploitation....

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After emancipation too, the scenario has not changed much. With growing unemployment among Black men, the Black woman has taken up the role of breadwinner. This is seen as insubordination and an insult to male pride. Gloria Wade-Gayles draws a powerful sexist image of the Black woman as seen from a male point of view thus: "...castrating women who exacerbate the powerlessness of Black men."  

Being victims of racial prejudice and discrimination, suffering is inevitable and inescapable in the lives of Black men and women. The average Blacks resign themselves to their fate. They suffer without demur until their deaths. Some others turn out to be rebellious and murderous. The bitterness of being in bondage and the oppressor's brutality have hardened them into rebels who resort to violence and murder. A third category of Blacks is concerned about their rights but at the same time is aware of their individual responsibilities also. They willingly accept their present deplorable condition and hope for a better tomorrow. They do not remain just passive sufferers. They voice their concerns. At the same time they do not become violent. They stand upright in spite of the various pressures they face in their lives.

365 Gloria Wade - Gayles, Quoted in "Racial and Gender Discrimination in Fiction By Afro-American Women," p.15.
They endure their sufferings gracefully like Hemingway's hero Santiago, who had physical as well as moral strength. The Blacks too exhibit a dignity in their sufferings. As Faulkner defines:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honour and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail...\(^{366}\)

The Blacks put up with their hardship courageously and reveal a remarkable capacity for endurance and resilience. On the face of circumstantial disaster and against great odds they keep their head upright. With great fortitude of mind and an indomitable spirit, they forge ahead. It is a silent crusade against the negro-baiters to prove their worth and to proclaim to the world that they are only too better off for their persecutions. Booker T. Washington remarks:

... out of this hard and unusual struggle which he is compelled to pass, he [the Negro] gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race [My Emphasis]... 367

This quality of the Black to valiantly withstand the sufferings inflicted upon him by the White overlords lifts him to greater heights. Both pain and suffering lose their sting upon him; rather they invigorate him. His blackness glorifies him and he rises above his master. As the born slave Antar points out:

Behold the sport of passion in my noble person!
But I have thanked my forebearance, applauded my resolution.
And the slave has been elevated above his master;
For I have concealed my passion and kept my secret,
I will not leave a word for the railers, and I will not ease the hearts of my enemies by the violation of my honor.
I have borne the evils of fortune, till I have discovered its secret meaning...
I have met every peril in my bosom,
And the world can cast no reproach on me for my complexion:
My blackness has not diminished my glory [My Emphasis]... 368

Thus colour, with its social and individual implications by being at once a stigma and strength, is an inescapable

368 Antar, Quoted in A Long Way From Home, p.91.
reality in the life of every Black individual. Claude McKay and Tchicaya U Tam'si are not exceptions. Being intellectuals, they experience excruciating mental and physical discomfort. Their reaction to their sufferings is of significance. They are unruffled. They keep their cool. Their endurance and patience, as exhibited in their writings, reveal grace under pressure.

McKay had never felt seriously about colour so long as he lived in Jamaica. But from the moment he set foot in the United States, he has been increasingly made to keep his place on the consideration of colour. Wherever he turns, the spectre of being coloured stares at him. It has become an abomination and a serious obsession with him. He feels restless. He openly declares in his autobiography:

What, then, was my main psychological problem? It was the problem of color. Color-consciousness was the fundamental of my restlessness [My Emphasis]...369

Every coloured man, irrespective of his being intelligent, educated or efficient, is denied his human rights. To be coloured is a shameful thing. He is not allowed to forget the fact that he is coloured. McKay writes:

369 McKay, A Long Way From Home, p.245.
The Negro in America is not permitted for one minute to forget his color, his skin or his race [My Emphasis]....

The word "coloured" is engraved on his psyche and no one could erase it from him. He and his colour are inseparable.

Even the Black man's achievements, accomplishments and intelligence cannot lift him from his low status and place him alongside the White. McKay points out:

All your education and achievements cannot put you in the intimate circles of the Whites and give you a White man's full opportunity. However advanced, clever, and cultivated you are, you will have the distinguished adjective of "colored" before your name [My Emphasis]....

Thus the tag of colour attached to the Black cannot be effaced. It is a mark of shame. The White man regards the Black as a savage, incapable of any reasoning or intellect. So he shuns the Black man and the Black man in turn feels hurt and becomes spiteful. And the yawning gap between the two widens. McKay beautifully juxtaposes the


371 McKay, Quoted in Marion Berghahn's Images of Africa in Black American Literature, pp.148-149.
White indifference and the Black indignation in his poem "The White House":

The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
A chafing savage, down the decent street;
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
Where bodily shines your shuttered door of glass....

James Giles comments on the above lines of McKay as follows:

In the eyes of the powerful white structure which excludes him, the black man is a "savage"; seen as a lesser being, he is viewed as unworthy to take part in American capital and industry....

McKay is worried that under the American capitalist society governed by the arrogant Whites, the Black man has to bear with endless tortures. Even laws were passed at that time by the powerful Whites to aggravate the sufferings of the Black. McKay states in The Negroes in America:

Laws were enacted [known under the name of "Jim Crow"] according to which all dark skinned people in all areas of social and commerical life were separated from whites like a race of lepers and lynch law began to


be practised -- a crime unknown even in the darkest days of slavery when Negroes were brought and sold for money [My Emphasis]... 374

The Black man's existence in the White society is a disgusting and disgraceful one. The physical struggle he has to undergo to earn his livelihood is clearly brought out by McKay in his poem, "When Dawn Comes to the City."

The tired cars go grumbling by,
The moaning, groaning cars,
And the old milk carts go rumbling by
Under the same dull stars.
Out of the tenements, cold as stone,
Dark figures start for work;
I watch them sadly shuffle on,
'Tis dawn, dawn in New York [My Emphasis]... 375

It is distressing to note that though it is dawn in New York, the life of the Black man is still engulfed in darkness. No dawn ever reaches him. His lot is only to toil and to suffer. He lags far behind the imperial White society which he has to behold onto for his sustenance. So suppression and victimization are inescapable.

McKay realizes this social pressure on him and writes in his autobiography:

374 McKay, The Negroes in America, p.15.
It is hell to belong to a suppressed minority and outcast group. For to most members of the powerful majority, you are not a person; you are a problem [My Emphasis]...

The Black labour force, which was once the back-bone of American economy, has now out-grown its utilitarian purpose. Technological advancement and mechanization have rendered it superfluous. And the Blacks have come to be considered an expendable commodity and a problem to be tackled. The Whites want to do away with the Blacks. The Blacks are in turn looked down upon, denied their rights, deprived of human status, shunned and ostracised. There is no where that the Blacks can turn to. This becomes a psychological torture for them. No White man could feel this pain and sympathize with the Black. McKay has deeply felt this bitterness and expresses it in his A Long Way From Home:

Yet no white person, however sympathetic, can feel fully the corroding bitterness of color discrimination. Only the black victim can...

The segregation due to his colour brings home to the Black untold miseries. McKay points out in his autobiography how this discrimination acts upon him and upon his people at large:

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376 McKay, A Long Way From Home, p.345.
377 Ibid., p.135.
I think the persons who invented discrimination in public places to ostracize people of a different race or nation or color or religion are the direct descendants of medieval torturers....It is a cancer in the universal human body and poison to the individual soul [My Emphasis]....

In spite of his sophistication and all refinements, the White man is no better than a medieval torturer. The biting pangs of ostracism delve deep into McKay's heart.

This exclusion from the White Establishment leads to so many economical, social and political pressures in the life of the Black. Economically he is downtrodden, socially unrecognized and politically neglected. McKay points out:

Negroes are denied all civil rights and all economic rights [My Emphasis]....

The Black race is an exploited race. Material prosperity is alien to the Black man. Poverty, misery and ignorance are his companions. He spends almost his entire life in utter poverty. Though he is a hard worker, he is sinned against by the Whites who unscrupulously rob him of his just wages. The rich yieldings of the fields are taken away by the wealthy White, leaving only the barren field

378 McKay, A Long Way From Home, p.135.
behind for the Black. McKay is irked at this injustice in his poem, "Quashie to Buccra":

You tas'e petater an' you say it sweet,
But you no know how hard we wuk fe it.
You want a basketful, fe quattiewut,
'Cause you know how 'tiff de bush fe cut.

De fiel' pretty? It couldn't less 'an dat,
We wuk de bes', an' den de lan' is fat;
We dig de row dem eben in a line,
An' keep it clean -- den so it mus' look fine

[My Emphasis]... 380

McKay points out how the Black toils and labours in the fields raising sweet potatoes only to be exploited by the White. His hard labour and pains go unmerited. Commenting on this poem Jean Wagner says:

These lines clearly establish the relationship of the black peasant to the whiteman, as McKay sees it; based on economics, not on race. The white man is always trying to deny the black peasant his due and is all the meaner, the richer he is. The White in the poem above wants to buy a basket of sweet potatoes, which he judges to be excellent, for the ridiculous price of a quarter.... 381

The Black man, in spite of his unremitting efforts and hardwork, suffers from hunger and starvation. He is unable to treat his wife's illness. He is not able to


381 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.207.
satisfy his ragged children's hunger and they suffer from starvation. It is mainly because of the fact that the White man, besides deceiving him of his labour also imposes heavy taxes on him. McKay laments over the lot of the peasant in his poem "Hard Times":

De mo' me wuk, de mo' time hard,  
I don't know what fe do;  

De taxes knockin' at me door,  
I hear de bailiff's v'ice;  
My wife is sick, can't get no cure,  
But gnawin' me like mice.

De picknies hab to go to school  
Widout a bite fe taste;  
And I am working like a mule,  
While buccra, sittin' in de cool,  
Hab 'nuff nenyam fe waste.

De clodes is tearin' off dem back  
When money seems noa mek;  
A man can't eben ketch a mac,  
Care how him 'train him neck

[My Emphasis]....

McKay feels sorry that socially too, the Black is looked down upon as a disgrace on the White refinement and hence he is denied his due place in society. McKay writes: "There can be no 'social equality!' A blessed phrase."

Even in the educational field, the barrier between the White and the coloured is prominently noticed. The

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presence of the Black in a White institution creates hostile feelings. McKay replies in an interview thus:

...in the university a white student does not tolerate a black student next to him at a lecture; negro children are not admitted into white schools, teachers of the colored children are boycotted and must employ forced heroics to avoid complete alienation [My Emphasis]... 384

The Black man could get education only through coloured teachers and that too in an institution specially allotted to him. Under this situation, even if he comes out successfully as a teacher, lawyer or a doctor, he is not acknowledged and his service is not accepted by the White society. He has to serve only the coloured people, most of whom are very poor. So there is little chance for an educated and highly qualified Black to achieve material prosperity. McKay observes in an interview:

No American would ever turn to a colored doctor or lawyer; this in our condition is absolutely inconceivable. These colored serve only negroes....Between whites and colored no [contact], and under the present conditions I clearly am unable to have a place in white societal contacts. They don't count us as people -- do you understand this? [My Emphasis]... 385


McKay is irked that the Whites not only disparage the Black intelligentsia but also they block possible avenues for employment. As McKay reveals the fact:

In the black belt of the New York City, where there is an estimated population of 100,000 Negroes, the Police Force, hospital, library and elementary schools -- patronized chiefly by colored people -- are entirely manned by white staffs....

Thus even educated Blacks have no chance of obtaining good jobs and making a decent living. Their lives end up only in misery and poverty. As McKay remarks:

Many colored doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers and preachers literally starve and are driven to the wall because the black working class does not earn enough to give them adequate support....

The Black man's desire to obtain good position in society is spurned. He finds only injustice and inequality everywhere. McKay points out:

The growing numbers of cultured Negro men and women find it extremely difficult to obtain

386 McKay, "Socialism And the Negro," in Wayne Cooper's The Passion of Claude McKay, p.52.

387 Ibid., p.53.
employment that is in keeping with their education under the Capitalist system of government. For one instance, had a scholar like Dr. Du Bois been white he would certainly have secured a chair at Harvard, Yale or Columbia University, for which he is eminently fitted. Many Negroes have obtained a sound education at great sacrifice, only to be forced, upon completion of their studies, into menial or uncongenial toil....

As McKay reveals in *The Negroes in America*:

A janitor in a kitchen or a cook, housekeeper, chauffeur or assistant: such was the lot of the northern Negroes....

The humiliation that the Black has to experience knows no bounds. He is prohibited from entering even theatres and restaurants. McKay is bitter that:

Even in mighty Manhattan, the pride of New York; in aristocratic Boston; in stinking Chicago; and in Clean Denver, Negroes are not allowed in the theatres and restaurants. They have to be some kind of pariahs on the dungheap of civilization [My Emphasis]....

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390 Ibid., p.37.
In the field of sports too, the Black is not allowed to display his talents and prove his worth. McKay poignantly reveals the fact thus:

...in the United States there is not room for a Negro, even in the area of sports. Only in the national American sport called lynching is he assigned first place [My Emphasis]....

McKay knows only too well that the Whites lynch the Black for their sport. In his poem "Lynching," McKay presents the heart-rending spectacle of the Black being lynched. The horrible scene of the Black body swaying in the sun is watched with dance and merriment by even White women and little lads.*

While a White man treats a Black woman with wantonness and can let loose his lust upon her at will with perfect impunity, the White society does not approve of any semblance of love between a Black man and a White woman. McKay points out this barrier of race which forbids even visual love in his poem "The Barrier". It is worth quoting the poem in full:

I must not gaze at them although
Your eyes are dawning day;
I must not watch you as you go
Your sun-illuminated way.

391 McKay, The Negroes in America, p.53.

* This bears repetition.
I hear but I must never heed
The fascinating note,
Which, fluting like a river reed,
Comes from your trembling throat.

I must not see upon your face
Love's softly glowing spark;
For there's the barrier of race,
You're fair and I am dark [My Emphasis]....

Likewise no legal marriage could take place between a Black woman and a White man. Some White men do love their Black women, but they keep them as mistresses only and never marry them. As McKay states this in his Long Way From Home:

How many white leaders are there anywhere who are married to colored women? They couldn't be and remain leaders. They love our women but they don't marry them [My Emphasis]....

As a result the Black women are burdened with bastard children who are public exhibits of their shame. McKay is also painfully aware of how the Black women fall a prey to the White man's lust and then in the end they are ruthlessly hanged and their infants butchered. He writes in The Negroes in America thus:

Negro women are also lynched and burned in bornfires. Recently a pregnant Negro woman was subjected to lynching by being hanged. While

393 McKay, A Long Way From Home, p.280.
hanging on the tree she gave birth to her child, and when the newborn baby lay trembling on the earth, a white man approached and with a blow from his heel kicked out its brains....

Lynching or maiming the Blacks is done with as much indifference as the Whites brand their cattle. Like stamping marks on their cattle, the Whites sever the organs of the slaves without compunction. As McKay points out:

The men are always castrated, and the sexual organs, fingers, toes, hair and other parts of the victim's body are removed triumphantly by men, women, and children as souvenirs....

In spite of all these hardships and privations, the Blacks struggle to obtain education, good living conditions and social recognitions in a hostile environment. As McKay remarks:

Negroes are striving for many things, but white Americans are striving with all their might not to allow them to come close to achieving anything....

394 McKay, The Negroes in America, pp.81-82.
395 Ibid., 82.
396 Ibid., p.54.
Besides these external factors which bring to bear upon McKay a good deal of pressures, there is the inner pressure which manifests itself in the form of a cultural divide. Like other Blacks, McKay is also torn between the two cultures -- his own hoary African culture and the Western culture. He is able to identify himself with neither of these cultures and undergoes a lot of mental agony. The quest of identification persists in him throughout his life. He feels that he has been rejected both by his own world and the Western world. In his poem, "One Year After," he observes:

Not once in all our days of poignant love,
Did I a single instant give to thee
My undivided being wholly free.
Not all thy potent passion could remove
The barrier that loomed between to prove
The full supreme surrendering of me.
Oh, I was beaten, helpless utterly
Against the shadow-fact with which I strove,
For when a cruel power forced me to face
The truth which poisoned our illicit wine,
That even I was faithless to my race
Bleeding beneath the iron hand of thine,
Our union seemed a monstrous thing and base!
I was an outcast from thy world and mine
[My Emphasis]...

Uprooted and ostracised as he is, McKay is nevertheless fascinated by the marvels of the Western civilization. He

cannot but admire the splendour and beauty of this "cultured hell". In his autobiography, he confesses:

For I was in love with the large rough unclassical rhythms of American life. If I was sometimes awed by its brutal bigness, I was nevertheless fascinated by its titanic strength. I rejoiced in the lavishness of the engineering exploits and the architectural splendors of New York.

McKay confirms the fact that the impact of the White city is too strong to be ignored. He writes in "The City's Love" thus:

For one brief golden moment rare like wine,  
The gracious city swept across the line;  
Oblivious of the color of my skin,  
Forgetting that I was an alien guest.  
She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,  
Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast.  
The great, proud city, seized with a strange love,  
Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove

[My Emphasis]...

Though McKay is fully convinced that the Western world was responsible for the undoing of his race and so he hates it, he is not able to free himself from the lures

399 McKay, A Long Way From Home, p.244.

*This bears repetition.
of the White city. He dislikes what he admires. The love-hate syndrome* explains the extent to which pressure swelles within him as a result of this cultural divide. This leads him to admit in *A Long Way From Home*: "I wrote a series of sonnets expressing my bitterness, hate and love." With these conflicting cultural elements trying to stretch his cohesive self, McKay is at pains to achieve a synthesis between the two contradictory cultures.

Thus the Black is surrounded by economical, social, political and cultural pressures. And McKay wants to show that the real worth of the Blacks lies in their boldly accepting and assimilating these sufferings. McKay highlights their endurance and patience. As Ezekiel Mphahlele affirms:

> He [McKay] ignores the white boss and focuses attention on the sweating, suffering, black laborer in order to show the latter's patience and dignity [My Emphasis]....

Thus McKay has a point to make when he presents the poor Black peasant in good cheers though burdened with poverty. He is not crushed in spirit though his sweating

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* This bears repetition.
labour is not justly paid. While taking the sugar to the market, his mind is filled with the thought of his bad economic condition. McKay portrays the picture of the Black peasant in "Two-AN'-Six" thus:

Cousin Sun is lookin' sad,
As de market is so bad;
'Pon him han' him res' him chin,
Quietly sit do'n thinkin'
Of de loved wife sick in bed,
An' de children to be fed --
What de labourers would say
When dem know him couldn't pay;
Also what about de mill
Whe? him hire from Ole Bill;

Ah, it gnawed him like de ticks,
Sugar sell fe two-an'-six!....

But his wife's consoling and loving words dispel all discouragement from his heart. As McKay observes in "Two-AN'-Six":

An' de shadow lef' him face,
An' him felt an inward peace,
As he blessed his better part
For her sweet an' gentle heart

[My Emphasis]....

The Black peasant's labour is not justly rewarded; yet he never loses his perseverance and endurance. In the concluding stanza of "Hard Times," McKay aptly puts it:

404 Ibid., p.90.
I won't gib up, I won't say die,  
For all de time is hard;         
Aldough de wul' soon en', I'll try.  
My wutless best as time goes by,  
An' trust on in me Gahd  

[My Emphasis]...

Endurance is the key to their lives. Undaunted by natural calamities and unnerved by man-made disasters, they have to forge ahead with their simple living. McKay's maxim, what can't be cured, must be endured, is reflected in the following poem, "Whe' Fe Do?"

Life will continue so for aye,  
Some people sad, some people gay,  
Some mockin' life while udders pray;  
But we mus' fashion-out we way  
An' sabe a mite fe rainy day --  
    All we can do.  

We needn' fold we han' an' cry,  
Nor vex we heart wid groan and sigh;  
De best we can do is fe try  
To fight de despair drawin' nigh:  
Den we might conquer by an' by --  
    Dat we might do.  

We happy in de hospital;  
We happy when de rain deh fall;  
We happy though de baby bawl  
Fe food dat we no hab at all;  
We happy when Deat' angel call  
Fe full we cup of joy wid gall:  
Our fait'in this life is not small --  
    De best to do.  

An' da's de way we ought to live,  
For pain an' such we shouldn't grieve,  
But tek de best dat Nature give --  
    Da's whe' fe do....

406 McKay, "Whe' Fe Do?," in Ibid, pp.27-29.
As Ezekiel Mphahlele points out:

McKay was bringing into the American situation memories of his plantation people in the West Indies, their suffering and endurance and their song [My Emphasis]...

The Black man endures all his sufferings patiently and comes out victoriously. McKay affirms it in A Long Way From Home:

Many a white wretch, baffled and lost in his civilized jungles, is envious of the toiling, easy-living Negro...

True to his dictum, in his own life too, McKay's sufferings moulded his character and he has the boldness to face any kind of situation. Amidst the most disgraceful and humiliating circumstances, he tries his best to preserve his human dignity and decency. As Wayne Cooper observes:

For in his poetry, he [McKay] best expressed the New Negro's determination to protect his human dignity, his cultural worth, and his right to a decent life [My Emphasis]...

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407 Ezekiel Mphahlele, Voices in the Whirlwind, p.21.
408 McKay, A Long Way From Home, p.146.
Under all circumstances, McKay never forgets his blackness. Whenever he feels slighted or ill-treated, he never curses his blackness. Instead he feels very proud of being black. He declares this in his poem, "My House" thus:

For this peculiar tint that paints my house,  
Peculiar in an alien atmosphere  
Where other houses wear a kindred hue,  
I have a stirring always very rare  
And romance-making in my ardent blood,  
That channels through my body like a flood.  
I know the dark delight of being strange,  
The penalty of difference in the crowd,  
The loneliness of wisdom among fools,  
Yet never have I felt but proud  
Though I have suffered agonies of hell,  
Of living in my own peculiar cell  

[My emphasis]...

The physical and psychological agonies he has to face being an alien in an alien country do not crush his undaunted courage and enduring spirit. As St.Clair Drake observes "being black was an asset rather than a handicap." Although blackness is viewed as a symbol of oppression, it is also a symbol of heroism. The blackness has strengthened and nourished McKay to face any kind of adversity. In his poem "Like a Strong Tree," he affirms that he is like a strong tree which cannot be uprooted by

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411 St.Clair Drake, "Introduction," in A Long Way From Home, p.XIV.
any storm of sufferings. His withstanding capacity thwarts adversity and helps him to stand steady. Jean Wagner points out:

As this pride is strengthened and tested by adversity, he raises racial consciousness to the aesthetic plane. One would almost be tempted to affirm that the poet is inaugurating a hedonism of color, when one beholds how with a supremely refined sensuality he savors the heady joy of his blackness, gaining awareness of it amidst a community that tortures him, but to which he feels superior in every fiber of his being [My Emphasis]....

McKay's poem "Baptism" is a fine illustration to prove how the Black could prevail over the most trying circumstances. McKay boldly confirms that he has the courage to go into the furnace alone. Not only that, when he comes out, he would be a refined, fine creature, capable of facing and enduring the inhuman treatments of the White. As James Giles states:

McKay's poems proclaim his 'desire' never to shrink from the repression and injustice which he faces .... He [McKay] "desires" to face the total meaning of his life and to grow from the encounter...What is definite is that Claude McKay never held back from any test [My Emphasis]....

412 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.223.

413 James R. Giles, Claude McKay, p.56.
McKay's "Castaways" depicts the intense sufferings of the Black in relative terms with the rest of the world's mirth and abundance. Even though McKay lacks the boldness to see the sight, he has the strength to bear it. It is worth quoting the poem "Castaways" in full:

The vivid grass with visible delight
Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth,
The butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight
Dancing and chirping for the season's birth,
The dandelions and rare daffodils
That touch the deep-stirred heart with hands of gold,
The thrushes sending forth their joyous trills, --
Not these, not these did I at first behold!
But seated on the benches daubed with green,
The castaways of life, a few asleep,
Some withered women desolate and mean,
And over all, life's shadows dark and deep.
Moaning I turned away, for misery
I have the strength to bear but not to see
[My Emphasis]...

Now that McKay is used to the miserable existence of his desolate people, he braces himself to bear the worst. He is all the more better off because of the privations as Arthur P. Davis remarks:

McKay's implied thesis in Home to Harlem is that the lower-class Negro, denied the civilizing opportunities of the white man, is the better off because of it. He is more natural and is not distressed as the whites are by the frustrations of an artificial, sterile way of life which is the modern way.

415 Arthur P. Davis, From the Dark Tower, p.41.
The denials and deprivations have helped him to eschew the seamier aspects of civilization. He is thus unaffected by the corruptive influences and artificialities of modern life. Kent E. George clearly points out:

As to the masses of Blacks, McKay felt in them a warmth, an assertion of spirit in the face of pain, a bounce and spontaneity of feelings and emotions and a striving for the fruits of life based upon deep and persistent responses to the rhythms of their universe. He tried to insist, despite threatening evidence to the contrary, that the ordinary Black possessed an instinctive healthiness and innocence which would secure him from the waves of corruption that pounded into his cage in Western Culture. [My Emphasis]... 416

The Black transmutes his pain into a regenerative force to achieve cohesion in his dislocated life.

As a writer, McKay feels that his race problem should be elevated to a higher level and should not be a hindrance to his sense of artistry. As Arthur D. Drayton observes:

...it is clear that McKay, like Countee Cullen after him, was determined that the dignity of the poet's calling was not to be sullied. He refused to allow the quality of his reaction as poet to be warped; and equally he refused to allow the quality of his ambitions and status as a human being to be destroyed.... 417

417 Arthur D. Drayton, "McKay's Human Pity," p. 84.
McKay's poems illustrate the point that art transcends every other consideration. James Weldon Johnson has also revealed the fact thus:

Mr. McKay gives evidence that he has passed beyond the danger which threatens many of the new Negro poets -- the danger of allowing the purely polemical phases of the race problem to choke their sense of artistry.

[My Emphasis]... 418

McKay exhibits extreme grace in assimilating the duress in life. Further, he aims at helping the Blacks to rise above their situation and free their minds of all the restrictions imposed on them by the racial problem. McKay expresses his wish to create black creativity in "For a Negro Magazine" thus:

We want to encourage Negroes to create artistically as an ethnological group irrespective of class and creed. We want to help the Negro as a writer and artist to free his mind of the shackles imposed upon it from outside as well as within his own racial group.... 419

Thus, according to McKay, the Black artists should not get bogged down with the colour problem. They must rather bear the pressures gracefully and bring out their artistic creation unhindered.


McKay hopes for a brighter and better tomorrow for the Blacks. Until then they have to be patient in enduring the sufferings. He expresses his wish in *A Long Way From Home* thus:

> Perhaps a day will come when, under a different social set-up, competent Negroes will be summoned like other Americans to serve their country in diplomatic posts...  

Thus McKay, in spite of all the inexplicable sufferings and pressures, has never been swept off his feet by discouragement. He has the long vision to look into the distant future which certainly will hold brighter prospects for the Blacks.

Like McKay, Tchicaya U Tam'si also reveals a similar agonizing self in his literary creations. The reader is led into the very personal world of the poet where an anguished soul is struggling to come to terms with the harsh realities of the external world. Tchicaya's childhood had been traumatic, his early adulthood strife-ridden and his manhood was marked by uncertainty. He does not have pleasant memories of his childhood because he was a forsaken baby. His mother left him soon after

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his birth and, for the most part, she remains a phantom figure in his poetry. Neither does he present his father in favourable perspective. Being thus left with a childhood he could not feel proud of,* Tchicaya time and again feels weighed down by a lacuna in life. Gerald Moore confirms the same thus:

Tchicaya had in fact been brought up in ignorance of his mother's identity, and even of her continued existence. The figure of the father in his poetry is also enigmatical, charged with tension and with perhaps a sense of opposition....

The following lines of Tchicaya in his Le Mauvais Sang also reveal his deprivation.

Open your mouth and your hands: nothing but cockroaches!
I see neither father nor mother nor brother....

Tchicaya has been so much overwhelmed by the sense of loss of his childhood bliss and parental love that he goes to the extent of calling himself an orphan. He is haunted by this orphan figure as is evident from the way he alludes to it repeatedly in his poems. He says:

422 Tchicaya, "Le Mauvais Sang," Quoted in Idem.

* This bears repetition.
River no sea no lake no, tree yes tree mauve
in the place
of the round sun, tree the night a thousand
thousand fireflies deep down a diamond crude as a birth and
I open my arms
seeking a mother-Misery! Pity! Splendour!
Clip-Clop infernal
cadence! river sea lake no no the goldsmith
comes I will
close my arms to find a heart of stone. Die
then!...

They move with the slow steps of orphans naked
with shame as
if with the sense we have of the world this
was permitted to
orphans privileged to be fatherless. What a
Comedy!...⁴²³

It is with a great bitterness of soul that Tchicaya muses
over the childhood loss. He is led to suspect his own
origin. As Dathorne affirms: "He [Tchicaya] bemoans his
origins because he seems to be without an ancestor."⁴²⁴

In an effort to establish his place in the family, he
sets out to seek the roots of his being. Tchicaya writes
in "Strange Agony" thus:

I met nothing but trees
which carried each other's fruit
trees none the less
but no one of my family
in their branches.... ⁴²⁵

Gerald Moore notes that "the tree becomes a 'family tree', a genealogy and an instrument of the poet's search for his own identity."\textsuperscript{426}

Tchicaya's search for identity is a bitter exercise in undoing the Gordian knot of his lineage which has taken a severe battering during the Congolese tragedy of subjugation and colonialism. He observes in "The Hearse" as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
sometimes in the night
the lightning showed its joy
in scorching the tree
vainly plundered by the storm....\textsuperscript{427}
\end{verbatim}

Notwithstanding, Tchicaya goes ahead with his quest for the roots of his origin. In \textit{Epitome} Tchicaya writes:

\begin{verbatim}
A tree at the summit of a hill
lifts like a torch a branch of blood;
the branch carries a green leaf in its fist
image of flame yellow and soft against the light
with demons hooting it!

Down from what tree?
I make my mourning from that unlikely tree.
Is the night really my mourning?. . . .\textsuperscript{428}
\end{verbatim}

Commenting on the above lines Gerald Moore says:

\textsuperscript{426} Gerald Moore, "Surrealism and Negritude in the Poetry of Tchikaya U Tam'si," p.104.
the poem develops both the genealogy aspect of the tree and the concept of the poet as a single leaf upon it, a leaf destined to fall without ever fully knowing what has fed it.... 429

It becomes obvious that Tchicaya has been seized with an identity crisis. A number of poems deals with it. Indeed, Betty O'Grady affirms that

...the collection entitled Le Ventre has been interpreted as the poet's attempt to understand his own identity in terms of his origins and his relation with his mother and Africa [My Emphasis].... 430

Tchicaya's sense of rootlessness deepens and leads him on to a feeling of desolation and loneliness. Being physically estranged from his native Congo, he has no one whom he could turn to for consolation. He turns his attention inwards and confronts solitude. As Wilfred Cartey points out, "U' Tam'si explores in a personalistic tone the solitude and loss which inform Brush Fire." 431

This is borne out by Tchicaya's own words in "Presence":


430 Betty O'Grady, "Tchicaya U Tam'si: Some Thoughts on the Poet's Symbolic Mode of Expression," p.31.

431 Wilfred Cartey, Whispers From a Continent, p.263.
Having found no men
on my horizon
I played with my body
the ardent poems of death
I followed my river
to the cold and surging billows

I opened myself to the world
of sea-weeds
Where solitudes crawl
[My Emphasis]. . . .

Responding to the above lines Gerald Moore observes that:

The imagined process of death in the magnificent opening lines is one forced upon the poet by his isolation in a white world which cannot share his concerns or comprehend his anguish. The sense of isolation grows still deeper in Epitome. . . .

Tchicaya's solitude is also a result of his personal incompatibility in an alien culture. Though he has been brought up in the West, he cannot but feel alienated. It is interesting to note that Tchicaya in his Brush Fire . . . explores the nature of being an alien black in Europe, articulating, in a frequently surreal manner, the cultural alienation he felt outside Africa . . .

Tchicaya is painfully aware of the implication of the process of Frenchification which is underway and which

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433 Ibid., p.154.
434 M.Susan Trosky, Contemporary Authors vol.129, p.427.
has already made serious inroads into his African cultural heritage. Elaborating on the process of Frenchification Egudu relates that

... the price paid by the African was high; he must cut himself off completely from his fellow Africans... he must abandon his African speech, dress, customs and religion and way of living and must assimilate himself completely to the French ways of life [My Emphasis]... 435

Tchicaya obviously refers to his dependence on France for his sustenance saying:

Behold me here in Europe
No cane in my hand
mouth bunched into a trumpet
expansive
more French than Joan of Arc [My Emphasis]... 436

Thus, being apprehensive about the dangers of losing his identity, Tchicaya evokes the plight of man using a series of seemingly grotesque images. He bemoans in Brush Fire:

the river flows
with broken thighs
alas the sow cries to me
bathes in the sun
or leaps to the sea
the cockroach will tell you of its foolishness


I remember
the times were as hard
as the blood was burnt
burnt forests
and I was the house of the whining cat
o mother my broken thighs
I saw myself dead in my dream
I had the teeth of a wild animal
and my cotton bush
the brain of a wild animal
in my nostrils . . . . 437

Tchicaya's cultural divide results in his solitude and
the latter gives rise to the former.

In fact Tchicaya's solitude characterizes him as a poet
of Negritude. Wilfred Cartey makes a pertinent comment:

In the poets of Negritude solitude is a
constant motif, solitude suffered in exile
from self, from country, from one's people. U' Tamsi's poem "The Slave," is a harsh
pessimistic song telling of solitude,
disintegration and loss.... 438

Tchicaya's poem "The Slave" runs as follows:

I have carried my dog days
along the oceans
my eyes bent on my misery alone
I have moaned without revolt

my brothers did not recognize me
and my integrity
my youthful days pass.... 439

437 Tchicaya, Brush Fire, p.7.
438 Wilfred Cartey, Whispers from a Continent, p.262.
Tchicaya finds himself as a slave of time. It is a pity that his own kinsmen suspect his integrity and shun him as a stranger. His misery extends beyond the landscape into the vastness of the sea.

Apart from his ostracism and feeling of loneliness, Tchicaya is being tormented by the developments back home in his native Congo. And Congo was then reeling under the colonial persecution. And his poems are an impassioned response to his country's sufferings. As Gerald Moore points out:

This tension between childhood memories of Africa and everyday mundane experience in an alien capital, between his passionate presence in the suffering Congo and his physical absence from it, is one of the dominating themes of his poetry....

Gerald Moore again makes a pointed reference saying:

The poems in the main sequence of Epitome each carry a superscription identifying them with particular phases or events of the struggle which raged on the banks of the Congo in 1959-61....

Epitome is a collection of poems which consists of such poems like "Summary of a Passion," "The Dead,"

"Viaticum," "The Scorned," "The Misogynous Eunuch," "Obolus," and so on. All these headings are vindicative of the summary of his passion which proclaim eloquently "the mute destiny /of my mortal heart" as Tchicaya puts it. His "Summary of a Passion" is surcharged with intense emotional elements. As Clive Wake observes, the poem deals with

...the events that followed on the outbreak of violence in Leopoldville (which Tchicaya refers to throughout his work as Kin) in 1959 (the date is mentioned in the text), a year before the country's independence. Something like two hundred African Civilians lost their lives in clashes with the Belgian forces of order. These events, in all their brutal reality, force the poet to come face to face with himself, to confront the introspection of a perhaps too theoretical poetry with the facts of life...

Tchicaya lamely relates in "The Dead":

Then 1959
Splendid meteorites
fell on the earth
at Kin and Kinshasa....

He also adds that "there was a curfew to spice their agony."
Tchicaya counterpoints fire and flower in the following lines to highlight the monstrosity of the raiders who win laurels for setting the city on fire. He also suggests the fire on the pyre and funeral flowers. He says:

From Kamina to kin three of their gangs
make flowers make fire nor fire nor flowers
enchant... .

It is pertinent to quote Gerald Moore who observes thus:

Here he [Tchicaya] is writing at the time of the Congo mutiny in 1960, when the Belgian paratroops had dropped again into the country, and there was so much strife going on -- not only between Katanga and the rest, but in other areas, in Kasai and various other parts of the Congo. There were struggles which were partly racial, partly tribal, and so forth. And he is looking at all this from Paris, and he doesn't like himself for looking at it from Paris...

In Paris Tchicaya gets only a second hand knowledge of things happening at Leopoldville. Tribal infightings and mutiny in Congo have made a mockery of independence which, indeed, was obtained at a great cost. Though he is

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unhappy about the unfortunate unfoldings in his native land, he is unable to do anything about it. He confesses his own helplessness. In "The Dead" he says:

They are dead
so that no evil grass may spring
so that no essence of teak or okoume
will leave its ashes
in flames of this fire lit for no household gods

I think only
that my head is rounded
from rolling only
on your body
on your body
on your body
at the whim of my torments

oh sea!... 448

Driven to desperation at his inaction, Tchicaya is at pains to apply salve on his pricking conscience thus:

Amid this pus of things well-made
to see my better world
I graft upon my retinas two orange-flowers
let them not be of flame
let them be white to freeze again
the dead in my dull conscience.... 449

Tchicaya's frustration at his helplessness and his disillusionment are best revealed in Betty O'Grady's words thus:

448 Tchicaya, "The Dead," in S P, p.44.
449 Ibid., p.40.
The concept of the brotherhood of man and, more particularly, of a united Congo, informs all Tchicaya's creative writing; it is something he believed in passionately, and his disillusion and bitterness were all the greater as he witnessed the internecine fighting that crippled the Congo Republic...

What comes as a death-blow to Tchicaya is the assassination of Lumumba by his own people. Lumumba was a great Congolese leader who was fighting for a meaningful Congolese and African unity. Betty O'Grady rightly remarks that

He [Tchicaya] was deeply shocked by the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, with whom he had worked and whose ideals he shared....

Thus Lumumba's death was a great personal tragedy and irreparable loss to Tchicaya. As Gerald Moore asserts, many of Tchicaya's poems in *Le ventre* "are haunted by the martyred figure of Patrice Lumumba." Tchicaya's lamentation over Lumumba's death in "The Belly Remains" is a fitting threnody for his slain leader. It runs like this:

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450 Betty O'Grady, "Tchicaya U Tam'si: Some Thoughts on the Poet's symbolic Mode of Expression," p.31.

451 Idem.

He falls beneath the flails
Then four or five planks
his companions are outside
or else a common grave
under a light covering of earth...

Yes! (A strident yes
for this rattling
of souls, axles and waves!)
A funeral flamenco for him!... 453

Tchicaya is thus wincing under the agony brought about by both personal and social predicaments. On the personal level, he is suffering from an acute sense of loneliness on the one hand, and on the other hand, non-identity assails him. At the social level, he chafes under too many irritants. In this context it is relevant to consider Ibitokun's observation which runs as follows:

Slavery, colonialism and their attendant evils are historical truths that provoke in Tchicaya a "Mauvais Sang". Metonymically he is that "Mauvais Sang."... The tense dramatization of his anguish lends a note of sublimity, spontaneity and pathos to his insular voice.... 454

Tchicaya is so much overcome with anguish at the turn of events that he says at "Presence":


and my hair roughened by all the winds
stands on edge
my hands moist to all seeds
carry my feet deep into space
and I resemble slow death with its rich suns... 455

A few of Tchicaya's poems in Epitome bear testimony to
the anguish swelling up in the poet's heart. He is highly
strung because of the disastrous events and of the
artificiality of his own simulated smiles. As Gerald
Moore points out:

Back in Paris, Tchicaya feels intensely the
falsity of the smiles he is himself obliged to
give, reflecting the diplomatic smiles of
Leopoldville... 456

Tchicaya's anguish is best illustrated in his own words
in "The Belly" thus:

I will stay at the gate with the wind in my side
but with tornadoes in my belly... 457

Though buffeted by a series of crises in his life and
writhing under the pain of anguish, Tchicaya never
succumbs to these pressures. He has had untold miseries
and sufferings, both personally felt and witnessed in

455 Tchicaya, "Presence," in "Introduction," to
S P, p.XV.

456 Gerald Moore, "Introduction," to S P, p.XII.

his fellow men. He weathers them all courageously and with great fortitude of mind. On the face of personal disaster and in the midst of carping criticism, character assassination and betrayal, Tchicaya manages to keep his composure intact and "still he is left with the gentle arch of laughter."458 The following lines of Tchicaya relate at what price he has maintained his endurance:

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don't ask me to die
for their eyes
if I have betrayed I know
what thirst sung harshly
in my severed throats
to remain a brother
at the heart of beaten flesh

it needs great riches
and fastening sap
to cure ripe fruit
of the slobber of the dead
to cure the day of tears

one night bends my soul
I seek a pure way
I have been promised
to be a sterile tree
I have relished the sharp winds
relished my loss of sex. . . . 459
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Tchicaya has indeed paid dearly for his endurance. It is forged by his self-abnegation, denials, self-mortification and sacrifice to the extent of forgoing his virility. And he reaches the zenith of endurance.

Tchicaya wears this crown of thorns which reflects the pain caused in him by the sufferings of others. Thus in a sense he assumes their sufferings. Tchicaya says thus:

by the salt of a wine
explain the weather as it is
turn away from all the sores that condition
the growth of thorns on my crown....

The taste of wine explains the weather condition. Similarly, the poet's sufferings speak eloquently for the intensity of his love towards his fellow country men. As Clive Wake affirms: "the poet's [Tchicaya's] commitment is to an awareness of the suffering of others, not his own." That Tchicaya suffers for others is borne out by his own words which run as follows:

From what love
at what cost
I die with each song of love....

While commenting on Tchicaya's suffering, Dathorne says that according to Tchicaya suffering "is meaningless if there is no reason why one suffers. For U' Tamsi' the reason for suffering is love for one's brothers,

460 Tchicaya, Epitome, Quoted in Clive Wake's A Celebration of Black and African Writing, p.133.


462 Tchicaya, Epitome, Quoted in Idem.
brothers of Negro obedience". The poet-protagonist suffers for such people of his own country who obey without thinking.

In suffering with others and suffering for others Tchicaya takes up the cross on himself. It consoles him. It enables him to endure. He declares explicitly:

I will console with one hand if they will let me torture with the other this dying heart....

As Egudu points out:

It is perhaps the consciousness of his vicarious role which makes the negro endure courageously the pains of suffering....

For Tchicaya, endurance is the key to existence. It forms the basis for life because it is a corollary of suffering and love. In his case it is the racial suffering rather than his personal and the love for his race. Thus his endurance transcends personal considerations and acquires global significance. As Dathorne points out:

465 Egudu, "Negritude versus Assimilation," p.44.
U' Tamsi is a poet of strong conviction. His poetry is not one-sided, but explores intensively the meaning of life, very often for a Black man in a world hostile to his existence.... \(^{466}\)

Tchicaya's endurance also assumes epical dimensions because of its religious overtones and Christ-like potency for forgiveness. Tchicaya says in "Viaticum":

\[
\text{And I forget to be negro so as to forgive}
\text{I will not see my blood upon their hands}
\text{I swear it}... \(^{467}\)
\]

As pointed out by Gerald Moore while commenting on "Viaticum," Tchicaya reaches out to the very brink of endurance verging on reconciliation. It

\[
\text{...is dictated by his own need for growth, his own need to keep flowing; and so he says two or three times in this section of the poem 'I will not see my blood upon their hands, I forgive them in order to be Negro'-- "Negro" here is used in the sense of wholeness, in order to be a whole person}... \(^{468}\)
\]

Tchicaya externalises his endurance and gives it a poetic expression through the archetypal image of the river. Brush Fire is replete with images of the river. The river Congo flows in him. Its flow is synonymous with his

\(^{466}\) Dathorne, The Black Mind, p.385.


endurance. The poet endures as the river endures thus:

his stream was the gentlest of cups
the safest
it was his most living flesh... 469

Wilfred Cartey draws a parallel between the enduring quality of the poet and that of the river. He also establishes that like the river, which cuts across hills and valleys, the poet's endurance also forges ahead cutting across time and space and barriers. Cartey says:

The poet leaps over waves and takes us across time and river. The poet endures because the river flows in him, because all the parts of his body move with the rhythms of the elements, with the rhythms of the river... The potency of the river is clearly accepted; the quality of endurance is reiterated by restatement of time's duration. Throughout the long poem the poet presents time, that is river, being dammed—present time is cut off by obstacles that have been brought there through colonialism and exploitation. Yet since all things endure, the river can melt away the obstacles and pass on. The river will bring with it peace and silence and life

[My Emphasis]... 470

In Brush Fire, Tchicaya articulates the saving grace of endurance through the redemptive power of the river by ritually enacting the process of cleansing. He writes:


470 Wilfred Cartey, Whispers From a Continent, p. 223.
the funeral bell rings the hour
over time and river
time fords the funeral bell
on its mounts of silence
and passes
my soul is ready
peace on my soul
light this fire that washes away my shame

[My Emphasis]...471

With peace on his soul, Tchicaya is ready to face life as it comes. He is ready, as he himself says, "to face life and not the accident of it."472

A discerning reader will easily notice the streaks of dissimilarity in the works of the two creationists, Claude McKay and Tchicaya U Tam' si. Though both are writing under the pressure of prosecution, they differ sharply in the tenor and tone of their response. And therein lies the individuality and uniqueness of these eloquent poets.

True to their family background, upbringing and social contacts their response to their yoke of bondage is also characteristic. Being poor and hailing from a peasant family, McKay makes pointed and specific references to the hardships of the enslaved. Be it at schools, or work houses, lynching places or on the pavements deep inside

471 Tchicaya, Brush Fire, Quoted in Whispers From a Continent, p.223.

472 Tchicaya, Quoted in Dathorne's The Black Mind, p.379.
Harlem, McKay's portrayal of the suffering Black is perfect, exact and complete. McKay speaks about the Black peasant being cheated by a White man of his sweet potato in the same vein with which he speaks of the Black writer being turned out of a theatre or an eating place. But Tchicaya, being an elite himself and living away from his people in Paris, is not so very specific or convincing like McKay.

But McKay and Tchicaya are caught in an identity crisis. They feel uprooted and lonely. McKay's worry is one of "Colour" whereas in Tchicaya it is his genealogical tree. McKay sees the spectre of "Colour" wherever he turns. And Tchicaya is tormented by the loss of his genealogy.

McKay as well as Tchicaya is acutely affected by cultural divide. While McKay is torn between the cultures of Africa and America, Tchicaya's Africanness is being eroded by Frenchification. McKay's agony stems from the social injustice that he finds in the American context where the Blacks are being denied social rights. Tchicaya's anguish is caused by the bloodshed and betrayal by his own people. McKay holds the majority Whites responsible for his sufferings and Tchicaya has only his people to blame.
A striking dissimilarity between the two poets is that Tchicaya works himself up to a sardonic humour in order to forget his tragedy. As Ibitokun points out:

Humor is his [Tchicaya's] best psychological arm for the restoration and maintenance of his mental equilibrium in a society or a world that has gone sour to his being.... 473

But McKay never hides behind such literary ruses. McKay only chooses to blast at his tormentors and never minces his words.

Despite their dissimilarities and the means they employ to reveal their tragic lot, both McKay and Tchicaya exhibit a remarkable ability for endurance. They are unmoved by the vicissitudes of fortune, unnerved by the taunts of the tormentors and unshaken by the viles of betrayers. To crown it all, they have unshakable faith in the enduring quality of their race. This endurance is grounded on the rock-base of hope. McKay reveals his hope thus in "When Dawn Comes to the City":

There, oh there! on the island of the sea,
There would I be at dawn.... 474

473 Ibitokun, "The Hemorrhage of Time in Tchicaya's Le Mauvais Sang," p.34.
Tchicaya too is overwhelmed by hope that surpasses time and space thus:

I predict a babel
of unoxidized steel
or of crossed blood
mixed in the dregs of all surges!
After the red man,
after the black man,
after the yellow man,
after the white man
there is already the man of bronze
sole alloy of the soft fires
we have still to ford. . . . 475

Dathorne points out: "Here there is hope; the man of mixed culture and race is 'bronze' and the hope of the world."476

It makes interesting reading how these two emphatically assertive poets keep their cool in the most telling situations. They are not smug and complacent onlookers of a struggling people. In no uncertain terms they register their strong protest. But at the same time they neither flex their muscles nor rise up in revolt. They keep their race spirit under restraint to allow the curative efficacy of time to lace the breaches. In the process they reveal their exemplary grace to put up with pressures on all fronts. Their endurance is also proof

that they are hopeful of a bright and rewarding future. Thus McKay and Tchicaya project the truth that patience and endurance would ultimately enable one to prevail over the dire circumstances. In endless struggles, one should display grace under pressure.