CHAPTER ONE

ASSERITIVE BLACK POETS

It is the Negro's tragedy I feel
Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal
Because I know the keenness of his pain.

So what I write is urged out of my blood
[My Emphasis]....

I forget to be negro so as to forgive
I will see no more my blood upon their hands
the world will repay me for my mercy
[My Emphasis]....

Commonwealth literature comprises a plethora of literatures, languages and cultures. It is definitely rich and diversified in character. In its wide scope and broad range Indo-Anglian, European, Canadian, Asian, Australian and African literatures get inclipped. Moreover, in its broad spectrum the British and American literatures interweave. Though Commonwealth literature is multidimensional, it allows for differential uniqueness and permits rich opportunities for the birth, growth and

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* and ** Hereafter referred to as S P
maturation of individual talents in outstanding Commonwealth geniuses in their own cultural and national contexts. It acknowledges a common factor, that is the significance and relevance of English as a world language. Yet again, it recognizes English as the most ideal vehicle to communicate the hopes, aspirations and realizations of the Black people living in Commonwealth nations.

Among this variety of literatures, African literature is an arresting and engaging one. African literature as a considerable component of Commonwealth literature opens up new vistas, fresh perspectives and projects new insights. Trevor James makes an interesting observation in this regard:

...it seemed to me that, ultimately what linked the various African peoples on the continent was the nature and depth of colonial experience; and this was the final irony. Colonialism had not only delivered them unto themselves, but had delivered them unto each other and provided them, so to speak, with a common language and an African consciousness; for out of rejection had come an affirmation [My Emphasis]....

African literature has emerged out of this situation. It reflects two major influences, the traditional culture

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and colonial experience. The African writers project themselves as the representative and effective spokesmen of their African race and its culture. Incidentally, African poetic tradition is characterized by appeal to the heart. In this context Alan Lomax records:

Heart rather than Soul epitomizes African traditions and black style. "Soul" is too other-worldly, too disembodied, too fleshless, too Greek, too Presbyterian a term to characterize black creativity...⁴

All the poets in the African tradition are delighted by Nature and Women and reveal man's longing for oneness with the Universe. This bond of feeling between the Universe and man unifies the varied poetry of the African people.

African literature divides itself into several local literatures. The African people, experiencing diaspora because of their displacement from their African homeland and scattered settlement in the European, Latin American and American countries and colonies, have produced remarkable literary works. These literary products are marked by a general African flavour which is common to all the Africans. Moreover, they are governed by their

deep convictions and faith. They are singular in voicing their discontent, their suffering under the yoke of slavery which was their common lot, their nostalgia and their longing to be free in a liberated Africa.

At the same time, these literary outputs of African creationists are pluralistic by being regional and sectarian in character. They depict the life style, manners and customs of the regions which they reflect. The locale is invariably the immediate surrounding. The plot concerns itself with the circumstances in which the displaced Africans found themselves in, be it toiling on the plantations, milling the work-houses or slaving at the dining cars. Consequently, this localism or regionalism gives rise to a broad variety of literatures but remain strangely within the main spectrum of African literature. It is of immense interest therefore, to record that there are the Black American literature, the Caribbean literature, Latin American Black literature, the West African, East and Central African and South African literatures and the Afro-French literature. Further, they can be brought under two broad categories. They are the Anglophone and Francophone literatures.

In this context, Black literature, by and large, is reminiscent in character. It is reflective, instructive and informative. Moreover, it carries the protest
element. Jean-Paul Sartre raises a pertinent question: What happened "When you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises?" What happened was "an awakening to consciousness." They sang about themselves, their state of being and they poured out their hearts.

The Blacks realize the urgent need for singing their own praises and creating a black consciousness. Yet again, as Sartre observes:

These black men are addressing themselves to black men about black men. Their poetry is neither satiric nor imprecatory; it is an awakening to consciousness....

To correct the wrong image of the Blacks as portrayed by the Whites becomes the ultimate motive of the African writers.

The Afro-American writers aim at decreating the stereotypes presented by the White writers about Africa and Africans. The average European imagines Africa as

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6 Ibid., p.7.

7 Idem.
monotonous and bleak. To the White readers, Africa remains, by and large, a dark continent with no meaning, shape or coherence.

The White writer presents Africa as one of deserts, hills and mountains, rivers, impenetrable forests, alligators, crocodiles, throbbing drums, frenzied dancers and primitive customs. And this picture that the White writer presents is only partially true and not completely representative because the White man has never visited the innermost parts of Africa. He conducted slave trade only on the shores of Africa. He was afraid of the anopheles mosquitoes, wild animals and poisonous snakes. So much so, his knowledge of Africa was ephemeral and superficial. With such minimal knowledge, the image that the White writer presents of Africa is far from being genuine.

That is why W.E.B. Du Bois wants to affirm the fact that Africa is the spiritual and cultural home of all Blacks. He writes thus in praise of Africa:

This is not a country, it is a world, a universe of itself and for itself, a thing Different, Immense... It is a great black bosom where the spirit longs to die. It is life, so burning so fire encircled that bursts
The White writer has invented and perpetuated a stereotype of the African which depicted him as "physically unattractive, intellectually incompetent and spiritually degraded." Africans, according to the Whites are barbarians, born slaves, great singers, loyal servants, hard workers and true Christians. Only very low and inferior roles are assigned to the Blacks. The African is considered to be a conglomeration of mere arms and limbs, bones and eyes and as meaningless as his forests, rivers and silence.

Moreover, the African is pictured as "docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy...his behaviour was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration." He was held inferior and subservient though "no Negro ever existed who corresponded to this

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portrait which is simply the fabrication of White people intent in finding some way to justify the legitimacy of slavery."\textsuperscript{11}

It is this myth which was sought to be exploded by the African writers on the dawn of the century. They impress on the fellow Africans that they are just as good as others in all respects. Tchicaya U Tam'si very pertinently argues: "Africa also has men who are by no means short of intelligence, who are not all fierce, crazy or randy chiefs of no importance."\textsuperscript{12}

Hence, the African writers emerge to explode the stereotypes and vitalize African literature. In their hands, African literature has played a vital role in this complex movement towards independence and self-knowledge. They use the English language as a powerful medium to express the African tradition, sentiments, aspirations and hopes. They seem to follow Sartre's recommendation:

\begin{quote}
Since the oppressor is present even in the very language that Africans speak, they will
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\textsuperscript{11} Stanley M. Elkin, Quoted in Jean Wagner's \textit{Black Poets of the United States}, p.12.

speak this language in order to destroy it....13

It is interesting to cross-link Sartre's recommendation and the practice of protest writers amongst Black artists and the cry of Caliban in The Tempest where the Imperial Colonialist meets his due in the English language taught to the native:

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you

For learning me your language
[My Emphasis]....14

Enjoying a first hand knowledge of their ancestral homeland and cultural heritage, the African writers represent the sole authoritative voices to present African life. They alone can project the disappointments, frustrations and inexplicable sufferings of the Blacks. Only the Black creationists who understand the problems and sufferings of the Blacks could give a right expression to their feelings, thoughts and experiences. Claude McKay echoes this idea in his sonnet "The Negro's Tragedy":

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13 Sartre, "Black Orpheus," p.16.
Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no White
Can penetrate into the Negro’s Ken,
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
Which hides and buries him from other men
[My Emphasis]....

The Black writer witnesses his people living under the shadow of "rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone." The Blacks experience denials, deprivation, dehumanization, misery, pain and angst at the hands of the Whites. As a race they have been exploited for centuries. Richard Wright records in cryptic fashion the condition of the Black man thus:

Held in bondage, stripped of his own culture, denied family life for centuries and made to labour for others....

The Blacks have had to undergo flogging and lynching and to taste the cup of sorrow and swallow the bitter pill of injustice. Their sufferings seem fatalistic in character. And it is this land of unique suffering that is distilled

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in the Left-Wing Blues, sung by the Jazz Singers of the twentieth century. As Sartre points out "The Black men of Harlem dance frenetically to the rhythm of blues which are the saddest sounds in the world."\textsuperscript{18}

The Black writers, as Shelley remarks, "tell of saddest thought"\textsuperscript{19} of the coloured people. Sartre points out that

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The black race is a chosen race because it has had the horrible privilege of touching the depths of unhappiness...The black man who is conscious of himself sees himself as the man who has taken the whole of human suffering upon himself and who suffers for all, even for the white man [My Emphasis]...\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

The agonies of others are the garments of a sensitive Black intellectual. Understandably therefore, the Black creationists cry over the lot of their race and try to create an awareness or consciousness of their race in the minds of the suffering Blacks. This awakening leads them to a bitter sense of rootlessness. All the Blacks are confronted with the feeling of emptiness, an inner void. They feel unrooted from their motherland Africa. Their search for identity is a very painful experience. The

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displaced Africans have to undergo the mental conflict arising out of the Cultural Divide.

The Blacks are torn between their love for their homeland with all its traditions, conventions, marriage ceremonies and funeral rites and the spell cast over them by the present Western languages, methods of living and traditions.

Oscillating between these two antagonistic elements of civilizations, they lose their balance. To choose their own past traditions of their ancestors or not is their present predicament.

There is the inexorable dilemma: if the Negro writer retreats into himself and develops his racial potentialities he is departing from the norms of American culture; if he imitates that culture, he may cease to be himself and destroy both his uniqueness and his creative vitality....

This cultural dualism is present in the African writers. As Sartre says: "He has become split and he no longer coincides with himself." But his "truncated life" must

22 Sartre, "Black Orpheus," p.12
23 Idem.
be unified and the "walls of this culture prison must be broken down."\textsuperscript{24}

The Black writers feel the innermost urge to define and create the right identity of the Blacks. The Black artists point out that there is nothing for the Blacks to be ashamed of since the Blacks are both sexually and physically potent and more powerful than people of all other races. Compared to the Whites, they have greater stamina and greater capacities to endure pain. Therefore, the Black creationists establish and point out that being Black is their privileged identity.

There arises the need for the Black artists to define Negritude. In reply to Wole Soyinka's assertion, Cyprian Ekwensi wrote: "A tiger does not shout his tigritude; this may be true when it is not necessary for the tiger to shout."\textsuperscript{25} But now

\ldots it was necessary for the black man to reassure himself of his pride in being black because the blackness has become a shameful thing, an undignified state... Thus negritude served as an affirmation of the African personality, the assertion of the human dignity of the black man....\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} Sartre, "Black Orpheus," p.13.

\textsuperscript{25} Oladele Taiwo, \textit{An Introduction to West African Literature} (Nairobi: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1967), p.49.

\textsuperscript{26} Idem.
Incidentally, it ought to be noted that Negritude is a new term first used in the Negro Student's Newspaper The Negro Student in Paris in 1934. Aime Cesaire defines Negritude in the following terms:

To set our own and effective revolution, we had first to put off our borrowed dresses, those of assimilation and affirm our being, that is our negritude... To be truly ourselves, we ought to embody the negro -- African culture in the realities of the 20th C... 27

Gerald Moore proclaims: "Let us be everything that the white world is not in order to complement the white world and build a new total civilization." 28 Leopold Sedar Senghor observes:

Negritude is the sum total of all the values of the civilization of the African world. It is not racialism, it is culture... 29

According to Heidegger "Negritude is the Negro's being-in-the world." 30

28 Gerald Moore, Quoted in Ibid., p.33.
29 Leopold Sedar Senghor, Quoted in Ibid., p.32.
30 Heidegger, Quoted in Ibid., p.33.
Thus, the term tries to define the common Black identity of all the Blacks all over the world. Negritude accepts the premise that the Whites and the Blacks are different in colour but it rejects the notion that the Blacks are inferior to the Whites. The Black creationists attribute innocence to the Blacks and corruption to the Whites. All the virtues that the Black possesses are original because they are derived from his roots. Ulli Beier has observed, "Black Africans are naturally unlike the Europeans." Negritude argues that the Whites are by nature analytical, objective, cold, detached and cerebral whereas the Blacks are warm, inherently intuitive, subjective, involved and sensual.

Black literature with the background philosophy of Negritude creates a sense of awareness and pride in the minds of the Blacks. It makes them realize their worth. Oladele Taiwo remarks:

Africans do not have to look or behave like people of other races. Africa does not have to produce a Shakespeare to be regarded as great...there is no need for the African to envy or imitate the cultural heritage of any other racial group....

31 Ulli Beier, Quoted in Egudu's Modern African Poetry, p.33.
32 Oladele Taiwo, An Introduction to West African Literature, p.46.
It is precisely because Africa is rich in hoary traditions and heritage and with an in-built literary strength of its own.

This blossoming of creativity among the Blacks has been steadily on the rise. The Anglophone writers writing in English and the Francophone artists expressing in French have formed the bulk of the African literature.* Though the earliest extant piece of work dates back to the 1740's it was during the turn of the nineteenth century, that their creativity picked up its momentum. The African literature owes its existence to such makers of Black literature like W.E.B. Du Bois, Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, David Diop, Okello Oculi, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen and their like.

The African poets can roughly be brought under two different categories depending upon their approaches to the creative art. The first category comprises of

...those who bring to their work an intense involvement with their indigenous poetic traditions and forms so that many of the refrains, image clusters and formal structures used in their own poetry are derived from those traditions...in African verbal-musical events....

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* This bears repetition.
Some of the notable exponents of such poetic ventures are Kofi Awoonor of Ghana, Mazisi Kunene of South Africa, Okello Oculi of Uganda and the Nigerian poets Romanus Egudu and Okogbule Wonondi.

The second category of poets, which is the larger of the two, includes such leading creationists like Lenrie Peters Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Braithwaite, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, David Diop, Diop Birago, Joseph Bognini, Tchicaya U Tam'si and Paulin Joachin. These poets

...appear to have come first to poetry through excitement with the works of French or English Literature studied at school or university. This early work is marked by imitation of certain chosen masters and only later do they seem to reorientate their writing towards a native poetic tradition....

Alain Locke argues that as a whole, the above mentioned creationists and a host of many such Black poets make the perceptive readers clearly feel "the pulse of the Negro World." They "shout out the great Negro cry so hard


35 Alain Locke, The New Negro, Quoted in Nirmal Bajaj's Search for Identity in Black Poetry, p.33.
that the world's foundations will be shaken."\textsuperscript{36} They superbly create a home culture.

A critical reading of Black literature cannot afford to ignore Claude McKay and Tchicaya U Tam'si. They are two significant Black creationists who sought to capture in verse the aspirations and dreams of their people. McKay and Tchicaya, "in attempting to capture the essence of their people, release a rhythmic flow, delving deep into their furthest beginnings, into the nearer past, the immediate present and the future of tomorrows unwinding to an infinite."\textsuperscript{37} The experiences of the displaced Africans get burnished into epic proportions at the hands of these two meaningful poets.

Claude McKay acts as one of the major influences in the search for identity among the Black Americans. Jean Wagner states:

\begin{quote}
...because of his [McKay's] outstanding gifts as a poet he remains beyond a doubt the immediate forerunner and one of the leading forces of the Renaissance, the man without whom it could never have achieved what it did....\textsuperscript{38}
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\textsuperscript{36} Cesaire, Les armes miraculeuses, Quoted in Sartre's "Black Orpheus," p.39.


\textsuperscript{38} Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.197.
As Robert Burns has made use of the Scottish dialect in his poems, McKay has used the Jamaican dialect in his *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. This has earned him the name of the "Bobby Burns of Jamaica." In his later poems he effectively makes use of the traditional sonnet form to clothe his ideas and feelings. He "converts Social Polemicism and Protest into poems of permanent values."\(^{40}\)

Michael B. Stoff reads the poetic approach of Claude McKay thus:

> In essence, the entire body of his art can be seen as a mechanism through which he sought to transform these personal problems into public issues...\(^{41}\)

It is interesting to record that Claude McKay emerged into an outstanding American poet by condemning America as the land that was indifferent to ethnic groups.

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Claude McKay, "the day star of the bright dawn" was born in the parish of Clarendon in Sunny Ville, Jamaica, British West Indies on 15 September 1889 to peasant farmers Thomas Francis McKay and Ann Elizabeth Edwards McKay.

McKay's early education at the denominational school in the British colony of Jamaica was on the British pattern. This fostered in him a sense of being a young Briton which was to remain in him and influence his activities throughout his life.

With an adventurous spirit, he came to America in 1912 and enrolled at Tuskegee Institute to study agriculture and then at the university of Kansas. But he never applied his mind to the study of agriculture but devoted most of his time and energy to English composition and writing essays. McKay writes: "If I would not graduate as a bachelor of arts or science, I would graduate as a poet."

During his formative years, he was influenced by his parents who instilled in him an appreciation for the

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purity of black blood and the value of pride in racial heritage. He inherited the universal spirit of love from his mother and the spirit of individuality from his father. Through his brother Uriah Theophilus and an Englishman Walter Jekyll, a folklorist, Claude McKay had access to the treasures of Dante, Milton, Pope, Keats and Shelley.

McKay tried his hands at various jobs. His role as a railroad waiter has had a perceptible influence on him in shaping his literary spirit. As with his gifted contemporary Langston Hughes, the wandering spirit of Claude McKay developed in him a keen sense of perception of the plight of the Blacks and their miserable living conditions. He travelled extensively and the role of "artistic nomad" moulded in him a universal human understanding. Addison Gayle aptly records thus:

For poetical inspiration and vision, Phillis Wheatley had gone to the classical writers; Paul Laurence Dunbar to the prevailing mythologists of the period; Claude McKay, however, went to the people....

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44 Arna Bontemps, ed. The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, p.142.

McKay was horrified to see his own race suffering and he wanted to revolt against the suppressor. He brought to his verse "a race spirit and a race soul" and published *Spring in New Hampshire* in 1919 and *Harlem Shadows* in 1922. He was nominated a delegate from the American Workers' Party to the Fourth Congress of Communist International in Russia. During the time of Harlem Renaissance, he played a significant role visiting Europe and North Africa. Finally he settled in the United States of America. Though McKay was an agnostic to begin with in his early life, he was converted to Catholicism in his later life, by the great influence of Ellen, a Roman Catholic Worker.

On comparative basis Tchicaya U Tam'si favours rich comparison with McKay. Tchicaya hails from Congo. Gerald Felix Tchicaya, better known as Tchicaya U Tam'si was born on 25 August 1931 in Mpili, Moyen Congo. His father was a distinguished Congolese politician who became an African representative to French National Assembly. So at the age of fifteen in 1946, he had to leave his native African soil and settle in France. He had his education in Paris at the Orleans Lycee and later at the Lycee Janson de Sailly.

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46 Addison Gayle Jr., *Claude McKay: The Black Poet at War*, p.17.
After the completion of his education, Tchicaya was engaged in various jobs. His poetic genius came to be accepted by the literary world with his publication of the collection of poems *Le Mauvais Sang* (*Bad Blood*) in 1955. In this collection, he deals mostly with the African themes and the cultural loss. Susan M. Trosky observes that "He [Tchicaya] wrote about the Congo from the perspective of a black man in voluntary exile. The tone and content of the author's writings were shaped by his memories of Africa; cultural loss, isolation and dark humor inform most of his poetry." 47

Tchicaya adopted over a hundred African folk tales for the French radio from 1957 to 1960. He worked as an editor for the daily, *Congo*, and contributed articles to various journals. He has written six volumes of poetry. His collection *Epitome* won the Grand Prize for Poetry at the festival of African Arts, Dakar, 1966. He has also served as an officer in UNESCO in the 1970s.

Claude McKay and Tchicaya merit a comparative study because both are effective spokesmen of the downtrodden Black race. But they are distinctly different from one another with their respective unique writing capacities, mother wit and native genius.

Claude McKay is an Afro-American or Anglophone poet using English as the medium of his expression. As he hails from Jamaica in the West Indies, he is naturally very much gravitated towards his native land Jamaica and his poems reveal his nostalgic feelings towards Jamaica. It is notably evident in McKay's "Flame-Heart." He says, "We were so happy, I remember/Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December." Thus it is revealed that McKay went back, in spirit, to his own time of innocence, in his own Garden of Eden, uncorrupted by Western technology and industrialization -- a land where emotions took precedence over cold, calculating reason, where nature reigned, not red in tooth and claw but tenderly and benevolently. Jamaica was to McKay what Tintern Abbey was to Wordsworth, Chicago to Carl Sandburg the Southland to Jean Toomer, Harlem to Langston Hughes. McKay reflects his deepest longing to be there in his hometown in "Home Thoughts." The poem "Home Thoughts" is quoted in full for it makes interesting reading.

Oh something just now must be happening there! That suddenly and quiveringly here, Amid the city's noises, I must think Of mangoes leaning to the river's brink, And dexterous Davie climbing high above, The gold fruits ebon-speckled to remove, And toss them quickly in the tangled mass Of wis-wis twisted round the guinea grass

49 Addison Gayle Jr., Claude McKay: The Black Poet at War, p.22.
And Cyril coming through the bramble-track
A prize bunch of bananas on his back;
And Georgie - none could never dive like him -
Throwing his scanty clothes off for a swim;
And schoolboys, from Bridge-tunnel going home,
Watching the waters downward dash and foam,
This is no daytime dream, there's something in it,
Oh something's happening there this very minute! 50

McKay makes use of the Jamaican dialect in his Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads* since he conceives Jamaica as his homeland eventhough his ancestors belonged to Africa. His nostalgia becomes all the more poignant because he is twice displaced from his ancestral homeland, Africa. Therefore, his diaspora, disorientation and reorientation have been acutely painful. It is interesting to recall the forceful concluding lines of Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" in this context:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation
With an alien people clutching their gods.
Should be glad of another death. 51

McKay associates racial values to the soil and attributes to his soil, the nurturer, all the strength of his


* This bears repetition.
character and his poetic worth. He neatly distils this sentiment in the following lines of his poem "My House."
"Shaping his metals into finest steel/Are elements from his own native earth/That the wise gods bestowed on him at birth." 52

Interestingly, of the two poets that are comparatively analysed, McKay, has childlike fondness for the motherly Sukee river which flows in Jamaica. In his poem "Sukee River" he eagerly reminisces his early attachment and avows never to part company with her.

Thou sweet-voiced stream that first gavest me drink,
Watched o'er me when I floated on thy breast;
What black-faced boy now gambols on thy brink,
Or finds beneath thy rocks a place of rest?

I shall love you ever,
Dearest Sukee River:
Dash against my broken heart,
Nevermore from you I'll part;
But will stay for ever
Crystal Sukee River. 53

Again, in the case of McKay, the sense of militancy is vehement when he gives expression to the plight of his suffering race. He bemoans their fate in "Enslaved" thus:

My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead
For this my race that has no home on earth.... 54

In his thought-provoking and much-criticised sonnet "If We Must Die," which is quoted in full below he raises a defiant cry over the "accursed lot" 55 of the Blacks:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back

[My Emphasis].... 56

McKay is so vehement that he would seek the help of the angels to punish the White man's world.

Then from the dark depth of my soul I cry
To the avenging angel to consume
The white man's world of wonders utterly:
Let it be swallowed up in earth's vast womb,
Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke
To liberate my people from its yoke! 57

55 McKay, "If We Must Die," in S P, p.36.
56 Idem.
57 McKay, "Enslaved," in Ibid., p.42.
But later on, as he advances in age and mellows down, McKay's hatred undergoes a sublimation. "To the White Fiends" reveals the African as being transformed into a light and he gives his pain a dignity.

But the Almighty from the darkness drew  
My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light  
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,  
Thy dusky face I set among the white  
For thee to prove thyself of higher worth;  
Before the world is swallowed up in night,  
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!\(^58\)

For instance in the poem "Polarity", McKay decisively tends to be conciliatory rather than assuming a pose of confrontation. The following lines make a pointed reading:

Nay, why reproach each other, be unkind,  
For there's no plane on which we two may meet?  
Let's both forgive, forget, for both were blind,  
And life is of a day, and time is fleet...\(^59\)

This transformation has been due to his extensive travelling and ever-widening experience which really did have a sobering effect on him. He has visited Russia, Germany, France, Spain and England besides his three-year

stay in Morocco in North Africa. He confesses in *A Long Way From Home* "All my life I have been a troubadour wanderer,..."\(^{60}\)

On the other hand, Tchicaya U Tam'si is an Afro-French or Francophone poet writing in French. He was born and brought up in the African soil until he was fifteen years old. Hence he is directly attached to Africa which is his homeland. He says, "The tree of my life"\(^{61}\) grows in the African soil and would "shed my sadness"\(^{62}\) in the Congo's "slow waters."\(^{63}\)

Tchicaya relates racial values to the Congo river which flows in Central Africa.

> His river was the gentlest dish
> the foremost
> it was his most living flesh....\(^{64}\)

The river that has enchanted his imagination is the Congo river. He confesses in "Strange Agony": "I longed to

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61 Tchicaya, "The Dead," in *SP*, p.47.


63 Idem.

make love to this river." In fact, the Congo river remains a vitalising life-giving force throughout his life. He makes recurrent references to the river and establishes his spiritual oneness with her. And in "Brush Fire" the river symbolizes the race thus:

The fire the river that's to say
the sea to drink following the sand
the feet the hands
within the heart to love
this river that lives in me repeoples me
only to you I said around the fire

my race
it flows here and there a river
the flames are the looks
Of those who brood upon it....

Along with the racial memories, the river also enkindles in him grief over the sufferings of his people.

In "Madness" Tchicaya talks about the "contamination that has poisoned his laughter, of the blood clotted in his vein." Sadly he says: "What slaughter in my poor blood." Tchicaya's passionate concern for his suffering race invariably brings pain and mortification.

68 Tchicaya, "Madness," Quoted in Idem.
In Tchicaya there is a conflict between dream and reality. He experiences a struggle between his quest for his racial and cultural roots and his anger over the racial riots taking place in Leopoldville. He depicts this scene of carnage in the following lines of the poem "The Dead" thus:

At Kinshasa . . . from Kamina
Three gangs from the heavenly forest of parachutes
. . . make of the shadows everywhere
nothing but stifled fires?

We shall live no more on flesh or blood
I am eating a dish of meat this evening
Why not the flesh of my brothers
burnt in the holocaust?

Already there were showers of flesh
of younger flesh under your sky
drenching the year 1908

Then 1959
Splendid meteorites
fell on the earth
at Kin and Kinshasa
A dove fell
upon a slaughter house
so fatally
that she had hallucinations

See how the laxative bodies move
in the constipated savannahs
See the forest of the sky
You who are so roughly burnt
by your natal sun [My Emphasis]... 

Tchicaya is thoroughly taken aback by these infightings among the Africans. He says:

false growths upon the roots of my tree
poison my utmost branch....

Tchicaya favours an end to the riots and factions among his people and creating a bond, a unity among his own race. As Clive Wake observes: "There is, in fact, a shift of emphasis from the hitherto essentially egocentric nature of his quest to the poet's relationship with the here and now of the African situation and the problem of the poet's commitment to it."  

What concerns Tchicaya most is the need for brotherly love, that very spirit of camaraderie richly defined by Jesus Christ by his life of love and missionary charity. He longs for a day "When man will be more loyal to man." He expresses his sadness at the failure of men of different races to form community. Shaken by the Congo riots, he says that there was

...an overflow of misery, undisguised and physical, a moral misery I would like to call it and there was this odd impression of forlornness, of utter solitude, a barred horizon. Certainly there is in my writing

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72 Tchicaya, "Communion," Quoted in Ibid., p.137.
this universe, this loneliness, sadness of man
-- man everywhere, whether he be black, white,
yellow etc.... 73

Furthermore, Tchicaya is afflicted by a haunting sense of
being segregated from his own people. Living in France,
as he did, he feels that he is an outsider to his own
kinsmen. He writes in "Epitome":

I taste the fruit from afar
Better keep quiet
the times are wild
Tell me whence the blood springs.... 74

Tchicaya is painfully aware of his exclusion thus:

Here I am in the limbo of all suffering
hunchbacked.... 75

He feels that he is no longer connected to his
motherland:

my soul my soul from head to foot of this umbilical
cord
which no longer ties me to my mother.
[My Emphasis].... 76

73 Edris Makward, "Tchicaya U Tam'si
Interviewed," Cultural Events in Africa,


75 Tchicaya, "Madness," Quoted in Whispers from a
continent, p.261.

Tchicaya feels sorry that he is inactive while his own people are dying at Kinshasa. He states this fact thus:

I close my body in three towers of flame
I betray my pride for cruel appetites
The summer oppresses my conscience more than you do
My deaths, my bitter stream, my jourdain, my savannah
To remake his bed by day the day delivers the soul
What colour the curtains I shall choose for my sleep
I die at Kinshasa without fire or soiled flowers.
[My Emphasis]....

He accuses himself of self-deception saying:

-- untouched by their mummies' breath
I dodge
cheating my heart I die in my own image....

He feels that his existence itself is miserable and remarks that:

my life which kills....

He further laments:

and I can no longer guess
between life and death which was my life
nor which path will bring me less regret....

78 Tchicaya, "The Dead," in Ibid., p.54.
79 Tchicaya, "The Dead," in Ibid., p.57.
80 Tchicaya, "Viaticum," in Ibid., p.63.
It is very pertinent to record that Tchicaya does not lose heart but rather picks up the courage to ask God,

... speak oh Christ speak
Tell me why I should suffer loving in my heart
A tree of dead life flowers my oblivion....

This aspect contributes to one of the strengths of Tchicaya's poetry. Moreover, the train of thoughts in Tchicaya only lends credence to the underlying fact that Tchicaya is an introvert whereas McKay is not.

Both Claude McKay and Tchicaya U Tam'si are undeniably assertive Black poets. As stated earlier, with a first hand knowledge about the downtrodden condition of the Blacks, they want to achieve material as well as spiritual upliftment. They assert that they too have their own dignity and must be treated as the Whites. They feel the need to assert their separate identity and their human and social rights.

McKay identifies himself with the suffering Blacks and he addresses them as "kinsmen." He affirms that he is a

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82 McKay, "If We Must Die," in S P, p.36.
son of Africa gifted with undaunted courage to go into the furnace alone in his poem "Baptism." He says: "I will come out, back to your world of tears/ A stronger soul within a finer frame." 83

The strength of his character, his power of endurance and his stoicism have all been inherited from his native soil. McKay asserts this fact in his sonnet "Like A Strong Tree." Like a strong tree he could weather any hardship and difficulty. It is worth quoting the poem in full for it brings to the fore the mind and art of McKay:

Like a strong tree that in the virgin earth
Sends far its roots through rock and loam and clay,
And proudly thrives in rain or time of dearth,
When dry waves scare the rain-come sprites away;
Like a strong tree that reaches down deep, deep,
For sunken water, fluid underground,
Where the great-ringed unsightly blind worms creep,
And queer things of the nether world abound:
So would I live in rich imperial growth,
Touching the surface and the depth of things,
Instinctively responsive unto both,
Tasting the sweets of being, fearing no stings,
Sensing the subtle spell of changing forms,
Like a strong tree against a thousand storms. 84

McKay presents the Blacks to be capable of maintaining purity on the face of sorrows and misery. He asserts the innate and innocent purity of his race. He uses the two

84 McKay, "Like A Strong Tree," in Ibid., p.45.
key words "innocent" and "uncorrupt" to qualify his race
in his poem "Flame-Heart": "All innocent of passion,
uncorrupt...."

The extent to which the young Harlem girls stoop to earn
a living is really unacceptable. But McKay looks at the
Harlem dancer from a different angle. It is relevant to
quote the poem "The Harlem Dancer" in full:

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the
girls,
Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;
But looking at her falsely-smiling face,
I knew her self was not in that strange place
[My Emphasis]....

McKay drives home the point that the dancer unwillingly
enacts the part enforced upon her by circumstances and
that her mind is not in that strange place. Thus, she
tacitly proclaims the innate purity of the race. She is
representative of a race which indulges in seemingly

unseemly things and by "falsely-smiling" disassociates and thus exonerates itself. It speaks eloquently of the validity and dignity of the race.

Bita Plant, a character in McKay's novel Banana Bottom, has readily internalized the concept of blackness. Characterized by an assertive self-confidence derived from a sense of her own innate worth she says:

I have never wanted to be anything but myself, I take pride in being colored and different....

McKay "ignores the white boss and focuses attention on the sweating, suffering black laborer in order to show the latter's patience and dignity." He asserts the fact that the Blacks are in no way inferior to the Whites. Their very sufferings constitute their wisdom-giving experiences. As such, they are superior to the Whites.

McKay argues that they must live on an equal footing with the Whites. The Blacks have been continuously struggling

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for equality and self-respect. McKay asserts that they must be given equal educational opportunities. He expresses his disappointment over the education offered to the Blacks. His mouthpiece Ray in Home to Harlem points out his contempt towards the educational system:

...modern education is planned to make you a sharp, snouty, rooting hog. A Negro getting it is an anachronism. We ought to get something new, we Negroes. But we get our education like -- like our houses. When the Whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for....

Such an education makes the Black only a misfit "...a misfit, with my little education and constant dreaming." In his autobiography, McKay laments:

My damned White education has robbed me of much of the primitive vitality, the pure stamina, the simple unswaggering strength...of the Negro race....

Naturally the Blacks find it very difficult to get decent jobs. McKay fights for equal job opportunities. He regrets:

91 McKay, in Ibid., p.145.
92 McKay, A Long Way from Home, p.229.
For me to linger here, alas,
Wasting the golden hours indoors,
Washing windows and scrubbing floors....

He wants his Blacks to be given more important jobs and
greater recognition in the society. He declares: "Our
Negroes were proud though poor. They would not sing
clowning songs for white men and allow themselves to be
kicked around them."

The Whites feel that the Blacks are born slaves fit to do
only menial jobs for them. But McKay wants to prove that
the Blacks are not born to be slaves. Rather they are
gifted with inborn talents and intelligence. He asserts
in "Heritage": "The best of me is but the least of
you."

McKay is emphatic that the Blacks must enjoy all the
human and social rights:

They like men, have a vote, and like men they
will in the long run tend to elect people and
parties who represent their whole interest ....

96 McKay, A Long Way From Home, p.352.
McKay thus voices the concerns of the Blacks all over in general and of the Blacks in America in particular. In fact, he asserts that they are a great force to reckon with on the socio-economic and cultural life of the New World.

Like Claude McKay, Tchicaya U Tam'si also asserts the identity of the Blacks. Incidentally, Tchicaya finds himself inseparably attached to his homeland Congo. Being physically absent from his land, he is passionately present in the suffering Congo. He asserts his oneness with his ailing land:

I have indeed the sickness of my land
-- but what land
-- the congo the congo.... 97

And his Black identity is his sustaining strength:

I would be cold already
if it were not for this taste of black salt
in your black blood.... 98

Tchicaya takes pride in being Black and he acknowledges the virtue of pride:

98 Tchicaya, "The Dead," in Ibid., p.41.
In the memory of man, pride has been a vice, I make it a God...I am a man I am black. . . .

He confirms: "My cheeks were all my dignity." Treated like savages, the Blacks are crushed under the feet of the Whites. He boldly asserts:

I cannot bow the head....

Naturally, Tchicaya points out that the suffering Blacks are superior to the Whites. As an authentic advocate of Negritude, he wants to affirm that they are a different race. The unique contribution of the Blacks is asserted by him in "A Mat to Weave." He says, "he came to deliver the secret of the sun." So he rejects the role of a slave assigned to the Blacks saying: "No slave's lament nor the Marseillaise either."

Tchicaya draws a great contrast between the Blacks and the Whites. He wonders at the corrupted, poisonous and

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100 Tchicaya, "Viaticum," in *S P*, p.61.
undignified life of the *soidisant* civilized Whites. He declares this with poignancy, fervour and conviction. The Whites are experienced and crafty whereas the Blacks are young, uncouth, generous and kind-hearted. Tchicaya asserts that the Blacks are gifted with finer qualities even at birth and claims that:

I am pure and naive  
my heart is pure...  

Not contaminated by his association with the Whites, even now he feels that he is as innocent as a child.

I was still an infant  
Folding my arms bowing my tender, kind  
weak-head....

Like McKay, he too believes in the innate purity of his race.

Tchicaya proudly talks about the therapeutic virtues of the Blacks which they have inherited from their African origins and traditions. This Black therapy can be applied to the White man to cure his madness. So he declares:

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104 Tchicaya, "Obolus," in *S P*, p.79.  
I can cure you.... 106

He implores the Blacks to recognize their significance and to assert their social rights. He asks them to proclaim it to the Whites:

You must have a megaphone in your gorge  
Speak to the world tell them what men we are  
dancing in sadness.... 107

The real worth of the Blacks must be recognized. They must be given all the social rights, which are denied to them.

These two Black creationists, Claude McKay and Tchicaya U Tam' si, project themselves as representative poets. They display a remarkable felicity to capture in verse the self-revelations, longings and aspirations of a people who have been deprived, denied and downtrodden for centuries. They are aware of the fact that "The contact of the black man and the White man is a historic tragedy." 108 When they explore their own selves, they want to assert their identity and social rights. They

107 Tchicaya, "Viaticum," in Ibid., p.63.  
also call upon and exhort their country men to assert in turn the nobility of their race and establish their fame and purity. Thus, on the very basis of their convictions, faith, authenticity and authority, they are poetically assertive. And it is precisely because of this, their note of assertion, that they continue to interest perceptive readers.