CHAPTER TWO

PROTEST POETRY

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?
Be not deceived, for every deed you do
I could match -- out-match

[My Emphasis]...

I must arm my people
against their destiny tonight
[My Emphasis]...

Protest literature is recognized as an accepted form. It has a hoary history and a tradition of its own. It must be recorded that Protest literature gained impetus and momentum immediately after the first Global war which witnessed dismemberment, displacements and mass killings. The generation gap came to be felt acutely. People back home were oblivious of the miseries, pains and deaths that characterized the situation in the battlefield. As a result the values of the elder generation were lost on the suffering soldiers. Thus Protest literature evolved as a strong and powerful medium to protest against the


110 Tchicaya, "Against Destiny," Quoted in Whispers _ From a Continent, p.266.
Establishment. The youth wielded it to lash at the elders who never sympathized with the youth. In the hands of ethnic minorities in America such as the Jews and the Blacks, Protest literature was the main weapon of attack against the Establishment and the Majority. Protest literature is characterized by slang terms, four-letter words and deliberately introduced deviants. One form of protesting against the Establishment was to make English language subservient. At this point it is interesting to briefly trace the history of Protest literature.

The tendency to register a protest was not of recent origin. It had been there ever since man began to exercise his rational powers. When he was dissatisfied or when his interests suffered a set-back, he expressed his disapproval and protest in diverse ways, in gestures, actions or in words. The Bible makes pointed references to protest elements. The earliest instance of protest is seen in the protest of Cain who was offended that God had rejected his offering while accepting that of Abel. It is said in Genesis, iv:8 "... Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him."  

The element of protest, which was hitherto limited to gesticulations, oral words and deeds, laid claims to

111 The Holy Bible, Genesis, iv:8.
the literary sphere and in particular to poetry in the twentieth century. World War I brought in its wake chaos, misery and despondency for the youth who were shattered in body and mind due to the tragedy that they faced in the theatre of war. There was much bloodshed. The consequences were really terrible, as Edward Thomas exclaims: "... the war began/ To turn young men to dung."\textsuperscript{112} Wilfred Owen in "Mental Cases" depicts a battle scene thus:

\begin{quote}
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,  
Treading blood from lungs that have loved laughter.  
Always they must see these things and hear them  
Batter guns and shatter of flying muscles,  
Carnage incomparable, and human squander....\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

The youth were butchered like cattle in the battlefield. Their conditions were deplorable. Wilfred Owen in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" cries: "What passing bells for those who die as cattle."\textsuperscript{114} The survival of the youth became a problem. In Collin's words, Sasoon's portrayal of the battlefield runs as follows:

\textsuperscript{112} Edward Thomas, Quoted in Collin's \textit{English Literature of the Twentieth Century} (London: University Tutorial Press, 1951), p.47.

\textsuperscript{113} Wilfred Owen, "Mental Cases," in \textit{The Faber Book of Modern Verse}, p.158.

\textsuperscript{114} Wilfred Owen, "Anthem For Doomed Youth," in \textit{Ibid.}, p.159.
... the unwholesome air, the rotten, naked corpses, the mud and the rats, the wiring parties in the darkness, the foul dug-outs, the mutilated and nerve shattered survivors, the agony and ignominy of death. The heroic was gone... \[115\]

Disappointed with life, naturally the youth could not attach any heroism or patriotic feeling to war. Patriotism, heroism, gallantry and valour came to be considered as grandiose terms with no real significance. War was something inglorious, inhuman and terrible to them. They understood the harsh realities that war resulted in mass killing, innumerable sufferings, contract diseases and starvation of the sexual urges. These had a dehumanizing effect on the soldiers. Cecil Day Lewis talks about the "Victims of a run-down civilization." \[116\] W.H. Auden speaks of the "dingy, difficult life of our generation." \[117\]

While commenting on Wilfred Owen's revolt against the elder generation Collins observes:

The sacrifice of the young by the old, the insensitiveness of civilians, the whole business of modern warfare forced strong

\[115\] Collins, *English Literature of the Twentieth Century*, p.50.


\[117\] Auden, Quoted in *Idem*. 
bitter phrasing from him. In the trenches men ceased to feel and lost imagination so that they might live and endure while back at home there were those who "made themselves immune to pity"....

What was true of Wilfred Owen was true of the youth in general. The sufferings of the youth forced them to rebel against the elders and the officials who were responsible for their sufferings.

The "generation-gap rebellion" started. Hardy perceived the spectre of "a new Dark Age" with

the barbarizing of taste in the younger minds by the dark madness of the late war, the unabashed cultivation of selfishness in all classes, the plethoric growth of knowledge simultaneously with the stunting of wisdom and a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation....

The rage and anger of the youth stimulated them to revolt against the elders. They used literature as a weapon to voice their anger and pour out their venom against the

118 Collins, English Literature of the Twentieth Century, p.53.
120 Hardy, Quoted in Collin's English Literature of the Twentieth Century, p.81.
121 Idem.
elders and the Establishment which drove them towards destruction. Thus anti-war poetry came to be written. Wilfred Owen, E.E. Cummings, Sasoon, Edmund Blunden, Rudyard Kipling, Edward Thomas and others expressed their anger towards "those fighting the war from arm chairs at home." Wilfred Owen expresses his bitterness towards them in "Insensibility" saying, "Cursed are dullards whom no canon stuns."

Seeing the inhumane attitude of the elders, the modern poets articulated their anger and protest in their poems. They opposed the attitude, feelings and opinions of the elders. Whatever was liked, admired and followed by the elders were opposed by the young. The youth veered away from the tastes of the old. They became carping critics of the contemporary world giving an exact picture of the contemporary scene. They broke with tradition. They aimed at bringing about a change both in matter and manner of writing. In all possible ways, they wanted to oppose the elders.

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The young writers preferred the unrefined, crude language to the sophisticated, cultured and chaste language of the elders. They used obscene, abusive terms and four-letter words. They cultivated the use of hard, vivid and brutal images. Protest literature originated thus.

With the whole class of war poets leading the way as protest writers, close on their heels came many other writers who protested against evils no less deplorable than that caused by the war which had just ended. The rage over the ignominy of its aftermath on the new generation began to simmer down when new protests were voiced and heard. The post-war depression and economic crisis evoked protest. Peter B. High observes: "In the early thirties, the first reaction to the Depression was a literature of social protest."^{124}

On the political plane, in India, nationalistic writers like Bharathi, and Sarojini Naidu protested in verse against the British Raj. Bharathi's protest against the British rule is expressed in terms of his longing in his poem "Thirst For Liberty":

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When will our thirst for freedom be quenched?  
When will our passion for thraldom die?  
When will our mother's shackles be broken?  
When will our misery come to an end?  .  .  .  . 125

Sarojini Naidu calls upon Mother India to break away from bondage in her poem "Awake":

Waken, O Mother! thy children implore thee,  
Why still dost thou sleep in thy bondage of sorrow?  
Awaken and sever the woes that enthrall us,  
And hallow our hands for the triumphs that call us!...126

In Ireland, the Irish Nationalists protested against their English oppressor. It is of relevance to quote the power packed lines from "Easter 1916" of W.B. Yeats.

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream....127

Women writers also protested against the deprivation of their rights by the male. Especially the Black women


writers in their race-oriented poems expressed their hatred for slavery. Maya Angelon, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gayl Jones, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison and Carolyn Roders are some of the Black women writers who fought for the liberation of women. Linda Brent observes:

Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own... 128

The women protested and did not accept the roles given to them as queens, princesses or idealized mothers with superhuman power and wisdom. They demanded to be recognized and projected as individuals by the male writers.

The Jews too fought for their freedom and voiced their protest against their oppressors. The Jewish race, perhaps, had been the most cruelly treated of all races. Down the ages the Jews had been hunted like wild animals. In the twentieth century, Hitler was their chief enemy. He specially contrived concentration camps and gas-

chambers for their extermination. More than a hundred thousand Jews fell a prey to Hitler's fiendish fury. And the Jews protested against this genocide and the subhuman treatment meted out to them.

Even after the second Global War the plight of the Jews continues. The Jews as a race suffer the worst kind of alienation. They are alienated by the Islamic and the Christian communities. The Christians segregate the Jews precisely because of the conflict in Christian religious thinking. The Jews do not accept Christ as the Messiah and argue that they are waiting for the Messiah whereas the Christians await the Second Coming of Christ. Thus, the Jews find themselves ostracized and alienated. Under these circumstances they could only protest. That is precisely what Allen Ginsberg does in his poem "Howl I"

Who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze

of Capitalism,
Who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and Undressing while the Sirens Of Los Alamos wailed them down, and Wailed down wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed,

Who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons,
Who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication,

Who howled on their knees in the Subway and were dragged off the roof Waving genitals and manuscripts....

Similarly in his poem "America" Ginsberg relates how his protest manifests:

America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry.

I smoke marijuana every chance I get. I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid. My mind is made up there's going to be trouble. You should have seen me reading Marx. My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right I won't say the Lord's Prayer....

Every ethnic writer feels the necessity to fight for liberation, equal opportunities and social rights. The


130 Allen Ginsberg, "America," in Ibid., p.146.
Black writer also falls under this category. The Afro-American writer in America could not afford to be a mere onlooker when his race suffered under the yoke of segregation. In this context Sartre observes:

During the centuries of slavery, the black man drank the cup of bitterness, to the last drop [My Emphasis]....

The disgrace heaped upon the Black race was so very complete and universal that Aime Cesaire concluded that his race was "the fallen race." But the desire for liberation was strong. Richard Wright argues to the point:

Time and again we rose and struck angrily for freedom; sometimes we revolted in two's and three's; at other times we rose by the thousands, trying to break through the white wall that hemmed us in....

This passion to revolt was kept burning by the Afro-American writers who voiced their protest relentlessly.

131 Sartre, "Black Orpheus," p.32.
132 Aime Cesaire, Quoted in Idem.
The period between the two World Wars witnessed among the Afro-Americans a "sudden awakening" called the Negro Renaissance. The Manhattan neighbourhood of Harlem came to be regarded as the "Mecca of the New Negro" and "a crucible from which a new spirit would emerge." This new spirit helped the Blacks to recognize their own individual worth. It enabled them to throw away the stigma of slavery which was still sticking on to them even though a century had passed since the Emancipation Proclamation.

The Black writers thus have come to plead the cause of the Blacks, denounce the social injustice, decry the cruelty heaped on them and protest against their oppression and ostracism. Charles Glicksberg states:

Creative Negroes voice the aspirations and resentments, the hurts and traumatic hatreds, the desires and dreams and terrible frustrations, of their own race. They know what it means to be a Negro in white America and they protest with all the force of their being against the myth of innate racial inferiority....

135 Alain Locke, Quoted by Jean Wagner, p.154.
Du Bois, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, Tchicaya U Tam'si and a number of other poets give vent to their anger through their artistic creations.

Among the Black writers, Claude McKay and Tchicaya U Tam'si are notable protest poets. It is their awareness of the miserable life of the Blacks, how the Blacks are subjected to lynching, flogging and other humiliating and horrible experiences which forces them to protest. McKay describes a terrible scene of lynching in his sonnet "The Lynching":

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.  
His father, by the cruellest way of pain, 
HAD bidden him to his bosom once again;  
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.  
All night a bright and solitary star  
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,  
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)  
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.  
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view  
The ghastly body swaying in the sun.  
The Women thronged to look, but never a one  
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.  
And little lads, Lynchers that were to be,  
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.  
[M My Emphasis]... [138]

While lynching is a death knell for the Black, it is one of merriment for the Whites. It is this awareness which

drives McKay to protest against the Establishment. Similarly, the element of protest is detected in the following lines from "A Mat to Weave" by Tchicaya:

here begins the poem of his life
he was trained in a school
he was trained in a studio
and he saw roads planted with sphinxes
still he is left with the soft arch of his laughter
then the tree then the water then the leaves
that is why you will see him
the marching canoers have raised once more
against the haulers of french cotton
their cries
this flight is a flight of doves
the leeches did not know the bitterness
of this blood
in the purest of cups
dirty gollywog
behold my congolese head
it is the purest of cups.
[My Emphasis] . . . . 139

The socio-economic and cultural backwardness to which the Blacks have been pushed to stirs in McKay a righteous indignation. In "The Wise Men of the East" he bemoans: "Oh, God, how gutter-low have black men sunk!"140 He laments in "Enslaved":

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,
For weary centuries, despised, oppressed
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place.
[My Emphasis]....141

141 McKay, "Enslaved," in Ibid.,p.42.
The age old struggle of the Blacks for survival against deprivation and distress drives him to invoke the avenging angels. Robert Smith observes:

"Enslaved" traces the ills and sufferings of the race during its sojourn in various lands. This is not the poetry of submission or acquiescence; this is not the voice of a gradualist; or is this the naive dialect of the jackass driver. It is one of scorching flame, a voice conscious of persecution, that dares to strike back with vehemence.

[My Emphasis]....

In "Harlem Shadows," McKay blames the Whites for the pitiable existence of the Blacks amidst White prosperity as follows:

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire's call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!
Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.
Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

[My Emphasis]....

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Robert Smith commenting on the "Harlem Shadows" argues that it is the

...passionate language of a persecuted race and its author did not make the least attempt to disguise his feelings. He did not attempt to please his white readers; his voice is a direct blast at them for their policy of discrimination. Many of the poems are saturated with protest. [My Emphasis]....

Being aware of the plight of the Blacks, their past tradition and present predicament, McKay is driven into an outburst of anger. McKay writes in "A Negro Poet":

"At first, I was horrified, my spirit revolted against the ignoble cruelty and blindness of it...."

Belonging to the fraternity of slaves, McKay felt it his noble mission to fight for their rights. He never hesitates to voice his protest because as Max Eastman points out:

He [Claude McKay] learned in childhood how a family of his ancestors, brought over in chains from Madagascar, had kept together by declaring a death strike on the auction block.


Each would kill himself, they vowed solemnly, if they were sold to separate owners. With the blood of such rebels in his veins...Claude McKay grew up proud of his race and with no disposition to apologize for his color.

[My Emphasis]....

Wayne Cooper observes that McKay "...Channeled [Sic] his anger into a decisive rebellion against the social system which supported such injustices."147

McKay declares in his Preface to "Constab Ballads": "Not that I ever openly rebelled; but the rebellion was in my heart."148 Further he claims in "Mulatto":

There is a searing hate within my soul,
A hate that only kin can feel for kin,
A hate makes me vigorous and whole,
And spurs me on increasingly to win....149

147 Wayne Cooper, ed. The Passion of Claude McKay, p.7.

* Hereafter referred to as D P
Braithwaite describes McKay as a "strident propagandist, using his poetic gifts to clothe arrogant and defiant thoughts."\textsuperscript{150}

It is interesting to note that McKay calls himself a consuming fire. He says in "Polarity":

\begin{quote}
And I am fire, swift to flame and burn,
Melting with elements high overhead. . . \textsuperscript{151}
\end{quote}

So, it only becomes of him that he articulates his anger and hatred stoutly and openly. As in the words of James Weldon Johnson, "McKay pours out the bitterness and rebellion in his heart."\textsuperscript{152}

McKay makes a clarion call similar to that of a war-cry in his sonnet "If We Must Die." On this point Thomas Sutton observes: "Writing under the lash of lynching and flogging, bombings and race riots his soul was goaded to a fury of hatred and rebellion."\textsuperscript{153}

\begin{itemize}
\item McKay, "Polarity," in *SP*, p.101.
\end{itemize}
Incidentally, at the time of this sonnet's composition in 1919, the Blacks in America were reeling under the trauma of the bloodiest of riots and violent deaths. Recalling the tragic events, John H. Franklin says: "From June until January, there occurred no less than twenty-five riots in major urban centres throughout the country." McKay, like all Blacks, was deeply disturbed and emotionally affected. And this sonnet "If We Must Die" was an immediate response to these bloody events. Wayne Cooper Comments:

"If We Must Die" was a desperate shout of defiance, almost it seemed a statement of tragic hopelessness. At the same time it loudly proclaimed that in Negroes the spirit of human courage remained fully alive....

Predictably, the poem "If We Must Die" became instantly popular with the Blacks and it even found its way to the pulpit in Black areas. It was because of the fact that the poem reveals with startling intensity "the unflinching courage and defiance" which is deeply rooted in the Black psyche. That the sonnet was on the


hands of every Black of the time becomes evident from a striking incident related by Eugenia W. Collier. There is, at the heart of the city of Chicago, a wall in a public place called the Wall of Truth on which the Blacks used to record in painting their moments of triumph and tragedy. One particularly impressive picture is that of a Black man slain and dying. Collier declares that

The body is beautiful and powerful, the face stern and unyielding even in death, the splash of blood, red and shocking. Clutched in the hand is a paper on which is scribbled a poem...157

That poem was McKay's "If We Must Die". Decisively McKay voiced a defiant cry of anger and protest. But, he also surcharged this sonnet with the emotional element that is caught by every perceptive reader. Thus the sonnet is an effective mob-rouser. It is capable of infusing courage into even the lily-livered Blacks inducing them to protest and to revolt. That is why, Winston Churchill, the war-time Prime Minister of England who was a fiery orator himself, picked on this particular sonnet to whip up courage in his countrymen. With resounding success Churchill could bolster up the sagging spirit of the

Britishers on the face of German onslaught during World War II. In this context Ulli Beier comments that:

…it is essentially a cry of defiance from the human heart in the face of a threat to man's dignity and civilization, a threat which was and is true of Nazism and the hatred of the Negro alike…158

Addison Gayle affirms: "The lines pulsate with anger."159 and "Such dagger like words cut deeply into the Negro Psyche."160

McKay's protest has a sharp cutting edge when he identifies the Whites with "mad and hungry dogs"161 and "monsters".162 He also draws a comparison between the White man and the blood-thirsty tiger in his sonnet "Tiger" as:

The white man is a tiger at my throat,  
Drinking my blood as my life ebbs away,  
And muttering that his terrible striped coat Is Freedom's and portends the Light of Day.  
Oh White man, you may suck up all my blood

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159 Addison Gayle, The Black Poet at War, p.23.
160 Ibid., p.33.
161 McKay, "If We Must Die," in S P, p.36.
162 Idem.
And throw my carcass into potter's field,
But never will I say with you that mud
Is bread for Negroes! Never will I yield.

The tiger in his strength his thirst must
slake!

[My Emphasis]... 163

Though fighting against heavy odds, McKay is resolute and he challenges the White man in his "Tiger". As James Weldon Johnson points out, McKay "was pre-eminently the poet of rebellion." 164 McKay declares in "America":

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.
[My Emphasis]... 165

McKay's protest carries him a step further in putting into action what he speaks about. He is ready to take up the lead. Jean Wagner points out that McKay's "Baptism":

expresses the poet's ultimate goal, which is to take on his shoulders when he emerges from this baptism of fire, the burden of all his race. ... 166

McKay writes in "Baptism":

Into the furnace let me go alone;  
Stay you without in terror of the heat.  
I will go naked in - for thus 'tis sweet --  
Into the weird depths of the hottest zone.  
I will not quiver in the frailest bone,  
You will not note a flicker of defeat;  
My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet  
My mouth give utterance to any moan.  
The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears;  
Red aspish tongues shout wordlessly my name.  
Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,  
Transforming me into a shape of flame.  
[My Emphasis].... 167

It becomes clear that Addison Gayle's following estimate of McKay gains relevance.

Claude McKay is a revolutionary poet. He is the militant poet, the angry poet, the poet who calls for revolutionary action.... 168

Besides being a protester, McKay wants to bring about an awakening in the minds of his own men. He exhorts the Blacks:

166 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.228.
168 Addison Gayle, Claude McKay: The Black Poet at War, p.39.
Cherish your strength, my strong black brother. Be not dismayed because the struggle is hard and long, O, my warm, wonderful race. The fight is longer than a span of life; the test is great. Gird Your loins, sharpen your tools! [My Emphasis].

McKay rouses his motherland "Africa! long ages sleeping, O my motherland awake!" Professor Sterling Brown has aptly remarked that "the poet is no idle singer of an idle day, but a man deeply concerned with the bite and tang of actuality." McKay realizes the need for an upheaval against the Whites. Addison Gayle remarks that "McKay brought a sense of immediacy to his poetry, an urgency that bespoke the possibility of cultural warfare."

Though McKay is a poet of rebellion, he is not an "out-and-out rebel," as Jean Wagner affirms. Richard Wright remarks: "To state that Claude McKay is a rebel is to

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172 Addison Gayle, The Black Poet at War, p.17.

understate it; his rebellion is a way of life." McKay's initial reaction to the wrongs done by the Whites manifests itself as rebellion and hatred. In course of time he softens and gives way to greater and more authentic values. A.L. McLeod says: "Later in life, McKay's spirit mellowed and this early ferocity was mollified." McKay's hatred as expressed in "Mulatto", "Baptism", "The White House", "In Bondage" and "America" has been kept under restraint. Jean Wagner observes:

> It is, indeed, admirable that in his case hatred and rebellion did not become, as they might have, a vehicle lurching onward without reins or brakes....

McKay's hatred as John Dewey has so well put it "is clean, never mean nor spiteful." Wagner explains further that McKay:

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176 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.235.

177 John Dewey, Quoted in Ibid., p.226.
Simply does not look on hatred as an end in itself. It is but a stage on the path that ends in the divine charity, for which its purifying action prepares the way. Understood thus, McKay's hatred is a holy anger. [My Emphasis]...  

McKay's hatred yields itself to be transformed, as Wagner writes, into "a tranquility that is not indifference, but a deepening and internalization of racial feeling." As a sort of divine mission or noble duty, McKay argues that he should not outsavage the savage White. This privilege of tolerating the oppressor is denied to the White race. Wagner observes: "McKay's hatred undergoes a sublimation that induces it to consume itself."  

McKay scales greater heights of restraint where the head reigns supreme over the heart. It becomes evident from his cryptic message to his rebellious heart in his "The Tired Worker": "Peace, O my rebel heart." 

Like Claude McKay, Tchicaya U Tam'si is also acutely aware of the sufferings, privations and tribulations of

179 Ibid., p.236.  
180 Idem.  
181 McKay, "The Tired Worker," in *SP*, p.79.
his race. Three centuries of suffering through slavery and colonialism has thoroughly dislocated normal living conditions. Mercer Cook observes: "As victims of racism, Black Africans know that they have been sinned against, they denounce injustice." 182 A succession of exploitations by European invaders and the slave trade have pushed the Dark Continent further deeper into darkness that Tchicaya laments in "The Hearse":

I feel I see the night I feel it I see it
the cock sang
the real sun is you the cock
the orphans had raved like this throughout the centuries
I had my rotten teeth
I could not tell the orphan that no
this sun was not the sun
that a pipe was more like the sun
than this cock with beautiful false feathers
that I had never seen the sun face to face
for night had reigned through the unending centuries. 183

Since Tchicaya has no glorious past to boast of save that of slavery, he says: "I am a man without history." 184 In this context, Clive Wake asserts that "Tchicaya U Tam'si is profoundly affected by the memory of slavery." 185


Having spent his childhood in Congo, Tchicaya has a filial attachment to Congo. Lewis Nkosi points out in *Tasks and Masks*:

Like the modern Jew, emotionally fraught, worn and frangible, U Tam'si is burdened with the disabling memory of racial persecution; he is, as he aptly epitomises himself the "Jew-negro wanderer in the desert of my country's heart...."\(^{186}\)

Besides the traumatic past of his country, Tchicaya's childhood memories haunt him. He says in "Le Mal" (The Wrong):

...when I was still a babe  
Arms bent, soft head inclined, dull and good,  
For my plump belly, my eye begged: alms. ... \(^{187}\)

Ibitokun observes in "The Hemorrhage of Time" that "the wound of the past on the black psyche is still purulent. This historic past then becomes a kind of leitmotif for Tchicaya's anguish..."\(^{188}\) Time and again Tchicaya alludes to this wound.

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\(^{187}\) Tchicaya "Le Mal," (The Wrong) Quoted in Gerald Moore's *Twelve African Writers*, p.150.

\(^{188}\) Ibitokun, "The Hemorrhage of Time," p.31.
The wound that's being washed in the stress
The dream dive in cut unawares.... 189

He further adds, "weep long live the outrage." 190

Overcome with grief and pain, Tchicaya becomes the embodiment of suffering. He says in "Strange Agony":

sweating the langour of a blues
from head to foot
listen I shed my pain at every step
I abandon all my limbs . . . . 191

He goes on to identify his suffering with that of the land:

I have often seen
carcasses in the air
where my blood burns.... 192

Not only does the poet suffer exile and loss, but also the total landscape tends to become a wasteland:

coffee bananas cotton tapioca
die die if you want to . . . . 193

190 Ibid., p.32.
192 Tchicaya, "Still life," in Brush Fire, Quoted by Wilfred Cartey in Whispers From a Continent, p.263.
As in the words of Ibitokun, Tchicaya's "soul-dehydrating reveries and melancholy"\textsuperscript{194} become evident with the suggestions of "cynicism, despair, savagery, bloodshed and forlornness."\textsuperscript{195} And Tchicaya says in Le Mauvais Sang: "In my broken destiny I carry spectres hideous."\textsuperscript{196} The inevitability of the fate of his people leaves no doubt in him. Tchicaya in "Strange Agony" captures this notion admirably:

\begin{quote}
no one knows now what pith
of what tree would make the fire brighter
at the heart of those who wait defenceless
and without sadness in the night of
their death....\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

Even children are not spared the horror. They are described as

\begin{quote}
children who ate hot embers
thus preparing themselves
for the orphanage. . . \textsuperscript{198}
\end{quote}

While the Blacks make a precarious existence, the oppressors are portrayed as jeering at their struggle in Tchicaya's "Oceans":

\textsuperscript{194} Ibitokun, The Hemorrhage of Time, p.33.
\textsuperscript{195} Idem.
\textsuperscript{196} Tchicaya, Le Mauvais Sang, Quoted in The Hemorrhage of Time, p.34.
\textsuperscript{197} Tchicaya, "Strange Agony," in S P, p.15.
\textsuperscript{198} Idem.
Break the conches of the sea  
throw vitriol and iodine at the mocking calm  
of the sky  
I want a setting sun stinking of our corpses  
to hear you talking of your childhood  
Your bed of verbena and how it all was  
The childhood which triumphs over its weak muscles  
with the aid of bitter quarrels echoing  
the bitterness of ancient litanies of the sea in labour  
breaking upon the reefs -- gulls and frolic waves  
profaning that ritual with unseemly laughter...  
Madame, madame yesterday's victim was sad!  
I who was lying there witness of dead waters  
was choked with panic come and drift with me  
I am only the old wind shaking the masts  
The sky was too peaceful before the salt maker  
sifting the salt of our dawns!  
[My Emphania]... 199

Piqued by the oppressor's derision, Tchicaya implores:

I have the life that kills  
give me my death. ... 200

In "Madness", he expresses his frustration:

I am no longer satisfied  
with my sea gull fate. ... 201

201 Tchicaya, "Madness," Quoted in Idem.
Wilfred Cartey observes that Tchicaya "chafes at the oppression and...yearns for a vital life."\textsuperscript{202}

The festering wound of his racial memories already putrefied by the agony of his people is made to bleed by the murder of Emmett Till. He was a young Black American who was lynched, killed and dismembered for looking with desire upon a White woman. Tchicaya is deeply moved by this gruesome act and mourns for Emmett Till in his "Fragile":

\begin{verbatim}
Endlessly I decalcify my joy
and lo its hands become islands
they surpass the Antilles!
Child I cling no longer to the zaire
I am no more master of my tears
master of this patchwork of time

what flowers to dress
for Emmett Till
child whose soul is bleeding in my own!

They killed him under the water
His mother threw his arms in the fire
to cook her midday meal
At once the sun miserable riot
of eunuch Caciques
smashed itself to pieces in his childish eyes
at his first ecstasy!
Then the strange martyrology -- Mother
I knew it!
The memory of that flesh burns deeper
than this sudden fire which seizes the arms
for his meal neither of noon or evening
He that death dissects with a flurry of kicks
in the loins...the story goes that the child
greeted a wanton
woman in the crowd...that evening he went to
the shore
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{202} Wilfred Cartey, \textit{Whispers From a Continent}, p.264.
to watch the tide of the river...he wanted to
sing the soul
Of that wanton woman...he had greeted: they
killed him under water
as they baptise hereabouts
in such christian fashion
never with a mother's name!...203

Hemmed on all sides by misery, ostracism and cruelty,
Tchicaya is filled with gloom. He writes in "Fragile":

We were men of night
A return of the tidal wave would have saved
but am I the sponsor of storms?
They had not stripped my tree.

I condemn myself to live on my tomorrows
without singing of my leaves.
I die of the delirium of ecstasy
The world which poisons me
Leaves me more memories than the nightingale
has scales to sing
in his dawn sadness.
[My Emphasis]. . . . 204

Tchicaya laments: "my poisons come snapping from the
vipers."205 These poisons enkindle in him a soul-searing
brush fire which both devastates and consumes his
emotions and passions. He says in "The Promenade":

To set the bush burning
I have grated my heart
against barks and crests
scrape the earth over me.... 206

204 Ibid., p.92.
206 Ibid., p.103.
Tchicaya's soul flees him and he sets about wondering which way it could have fled.

My ears swallow
the noise of dry blood-clots
was it by them, my soul,
that you fled away?... 207

His protest is perennial and his defiance steadfast that

The most learned of ethnologists
threw me into the sea
then listened, despite the dark murmurs
in a seashell's belly
the rumours of my soul;
this cold noise of the sea
within the seashell... 208

Tchicaya's soul's protests are expressed in the form of his songs. Ibitokun affirms:

And it is by singing his songs that he shows his protest and resistance and a full determination that he will not give up to the enemy. [My Emphasis]... 209

Tchicaya sings thus:

Like a lonely bird in the hub of tragedies
I sing so as not to be vanquished in the end.
[My Emphasis]... 210

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208 Ibid., p.105.
209 Ibitokun, The Hemorrhage of Time, p.35.
210 Tchicaya, Le Mauvais Sang, Quoted in The Hemorrhage of Time, p.35.
In his poem "Across Time and River" in Brush Fire he states:

I have cried
above the jungles
the integrity of forgotten paths.... 211

The fact Tchicaya has the germs of rebellion and protest is established beyond doubt by Gerald Moore in the "Uprooted Tree":

Tchicaya's blood, it seems, is "mauvais" in a double sense. The orphan's blood carries the heritage of a bitter destiny founded in ill, but it is also the "gros sang" (strong blood), of a new race, full of a rebellious urgency which breaks and remakes the physical world.... 212

Tchicaya's rebellious spirit finds an outlet in his "Le Gros Sang":

I have disrupted the winds to make myself heard
To rediscover all bloody the desires they sell me
I am the tempered blade, the fire of new races
In my coarse red blood troubled rivers lie foaming.

[My Emphasis].... 213

211 Tchicaya, "Across Time and River," in Brush Fire, p.3.


Tchicaya's strength of soul and defiant spirit to resist become obvious from his dictum given in "Across Time and River." He wishes to hang on even on the face of overwhelming odds.

One day one should be caught whirling above the winds like leaves from trees across dungheap and fire no matter if future times shall turn our souls to flints threatening naked feet we shall lie on all roads threatening thirst threatening love threatening time...  

And in his poem "The Hearse" Tchicaya reveals:

the storm has plundered the trees men dance no longer there I went close to the storm to watch the rain fall from nearer still around my body my soul stood firm against a swarm of locusts I lent my ten fingers to my soul to defend each blade of grass against the storm throughout all time I seek the fire that will warm the slow death from my fingers

[My Emphasis]...


Tchicaya presses into service a good deal of wit and irony to register his protest effectively. Lewis Nkosi affirms:

He [Tchicaya] can turn this wit into a lethal weapon against all the hatred, repressive institutions he has chosen for his targets....\textsuperscript{216}

Tchicaya waxes eloquent in "The Promenade":

I will tear our deliverance from
a wound in my flesh...
I am a rope-dancer
on the slack cord of a passion,
in summary, I gnaw the fingers of the hand
that led me into this desert
of dead eyes....\textsuperscript{217}

In "Marine Nocturne," Tchicaya makes an outburst of passion and challenges:

Truly I was a child couched on a bed of laurel
My bed of laurels
smelt sometimes of seaweed
at each new moon
my mother said
One question must be answered:
tell me this seaweed...

The sea goes I come;
the sea comes I depart:
thus we dance together

\textsuperscript{216} Lewis Nkosi, \textit{Tasks and Masks}, p.146.
Five continents float adrift
A man runs from his shadow
The sea opens its watery maw

its breath smells of the seaweed of my bed of laurel

have I never run from my own shadow?
I danced alone
the night my mourning my shadow

The water smells of the desert rose
What sea is richer in corals than my revolt?

Great fists are coming black
over the water of the astral stream
made red by the hot steel of my passion!

[My Emphasis]...

Tchicaya breaks loose of the shackles imposed by his colour and protests in "The Belly":

I rebel
I break out of my skin
I kill the Other
I despoil him
I subdue him
'the blacks are landing...
the arrows of laughter!'

This element of uncompromising protest in Tchicaya prompts Ibitokun to exclaim that Tchicaya "is a hero of epical dimensions."

Considering Tchicaya's target of protest, his protest can be said to be two-fold in nature. First and foremost is

his protest against "the barbarity of the colonial conquest."\textsuperscript{221} This protest against the White oppressors and exploiters is vehemently carried to the extent of protesting against the Church as an agent of the exploiters.

The European invaders are depicted as marauding ants and harbinger of night and doom to the African homeland. Tchicaya expresses his revulsion in "The Hearse":

\begin{verbatim}
the ant and its race
the night and its family of stars
cowardly
the ant and the night with locusts in their fists
shoeing with locusts the tracks of rough steel
for those whom men had killed to fill the ranks of death....\textsuperscript{222}
\end{verbatim}

The colonialists are portrayed as blood-thirsty people who ravaged the natural wealth of Africa in "Perpetual":

\begin{verbatim}
I have met those who walk over the blood of others acclaimed by regiments of drops in flower regiments of slugs in flower.
[My Emphasis]....\textsuperscript{223}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{222} Tchicaya, "The Hearse," in \textit{SP}, p.25.
\textsuperscript{223} Tchicaya, "Perpetual," in \textit{Ibid.}, p.94.
Their craftiness and brutality are brought out in "Promenade" as:

head fulled by boots
by boots cunningly nailed
by boots cunningly wicked.... 224

Tchicaya is grim that the oppressors used their scientific advancement to intimidate and argues that "they set their technical constellations against me." 225

In "Viaticum," he expresses his anger at the ill-treatment meted out to the Africans:

They give you what they have eaten
and what they have not known how to keep
the shadow, like them, had a certain reticence
I am full of spite with the sun.... 226

He wants his people to revolt in "The Promenade":

it is clear now
so long as the sea
will lift its leg
against the cliff
I shall have laughter that kills.... 227

Tchicaya's hatred is directed against the Church as a repressive institution. It also represents the colonizer's presence in Africa. Hence the Church, its minister, "popes and priests without shame"\textsuperscript{228} "remain the irredeemable butt of his humour"\textsuperscript{229} says Lewis Nkoshi. Tchicaya says in "The Promenade":

Yes on top of Vesuvius, of Kilimanjaro one sees the pope like Churchill smoking cigars...and that smoke! that smoke is bitter! What will happen when the Vatican demands to enter the atomic club to preserve the balance of power! [My Emphasis]...\textsuperscript{230}

The exploiters entering Africa under the guise of missionaries is attacked in "The Belly":

Those who came to us
carried beneath their nostrils
the cross and a banner
which showed a christ
and I forgot, a vomitive
in the chalices of either hand!...\textsuperscript{231}

The second target of Tchicaya's protest is against the race riots and infightings among the Africans. The racial carnage evokes vehement protest. At the same time, he does not hesitate to criticize his own inaction.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{228} Tchicaya, "The Promenade," in \textit{S P}, p.112.
\item \textsuperscript{229} Lewis Nkoshi, \textit{Tasks and Masks}, p.146.
\item \textsuperscript{230} Tchicaya, "The Promenade," in \textit{S P}, p.113.
\item \textsuperscript{231} Tchicaya, "The Belly," in \textit{Ibid.}, p.125.
\end{itemize}
At Leopoldville, Tchicaya witnessed betrayals and carnage of the Africans. He was also stirred by the cruelties in Harlem. In his poem "The Dead" he says: "the conscience of the world is silent with me over the drama of Leopoldville." He further adds,

The disasters unfold in silence
as one loved them in childhood memory
and a grey rain serves all our dreams
forcing me to become a forger
and holy assassin
despite the equinox
despite myself
despite the sorcery of the smiles
of my obedient black brothers.

[My Emphasis]...

This bloodshed was wrought by Europe in the Congo with the co-operation of the Blacks themselves. Tchicaya denounces that.

Further, the betrayal of Lumumba "by his brother Africans for the greater repose of European big business." as explained by Gerald Moore is also ridiculed by Tchicaya. And Tchicaya says:

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233 Tchicaya, "The Dead," in Ibid., p.49.
While my belly is warmed  
only with wine!  
He falls beneath the flails!...  

Tchicaya condemns the false Blacks who turn against their kinsmen in his "Scorner":

Ah what continent lacks its false negroes  
I have them to spare  
Even Africa has some  
The Congo has its false negroes....

Tchicaya does not spare his own self. At times he indulges in self-protest and criticism. Ibitokun observes that "Prominent among his [Tchicaya's] internal conflicts are the feelings of regret." Tchicaya, often finds fault with himself for his inaction. In "The Dead" he is indignant at his laziness: "Stinking of that sluggishness, I win at cheat-heart." In the same poem, he flays his own self-satisfied attitude saying:

I lived in the noiseless palace of oblivion -  
my heart in my fist --  
Since then a thousand excrescences have sprung in my heart

---

that butcher bargains with gold for my fetishes.
-- all my people live on that commerce now....

It is interesting to note that the whole of Tchicaya's protest fits in and is well expressed by one of his classic images. It is the image of Helen of Troy. Tchicaya says:

The Manille player
For a give-away prize
Sold to the sergeant
His daughter the Prett' Helen....

Ibitokun explains the poem thus:

Callous, irresponsible, hollow, thoughtless and easily won over with gold, the black man sold out, at a very cheap price, Africa to Europe who raped and soiled her maidenhood and exploited her procreational, socio economic strength and resourcefulness....

While the classical Helen stands for her tenderness, love and modesty, the sergeant stands for brutality, sensuality and rapacity. The tragedy of it is that the unseemly marriage took place even before she attained her maidenhood. ("Tomorrow I shall be out of my

240 Tchicaya, Le Mauvais Sang, Quoted in "The Hemorrhage of Time," p.32.
Thus, the image serves Tchicaya a kind of an objective correlative to project his two-fold protest.

Tchicaya, like Claude McKay, is gravitated towards what Claude Wauthier calls "Black Narcissism". This devotedness to the cause of the Blacks is evident from even a cursory glance at both Tchicaya's and McKay's poems. And it is this attachment which provokes them to protest vociferously against the excesses done to the race. Both the artists show, in their zeal to voice their protest, a marked preference to depict the White oppressor as exploitative and sadistic. Claude McKay speaks of "the White man's menace" in "Outcast" which interestingly reads thus:

For the dim regions whence my fathers came
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.
I would go back to darkness and to peace,
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.
Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart.

---


For I was born, far from my native clime,  
Under the white man's menace, out of time.  

[My Emphasis]...

Tchicaya also portrays the White man in "Epitome" as a criminal, not only exploitative but hypocritical and sadistic. He says:

The sea was already obedient to the lonely slave-ships  
the negroes let themselves be taken there  
despite the sorcery of their smiles  
the tocsin was sounded  
by a kick in the belly  
of the pregnant voyagers....

Apart from the above parallelisms, the two creationists show significant differences in voicing their protest. While Claude McKay goes to extremes in revolt, Tchicaya is even-keeled. Claude McKay is very pungent and carping. He lashes out at his oppressors. But towards the end of his life, when he grows more matured, he mellows down and strikes a compromising attitude. His anger and venom get sublimated giving way to rapprochement. On the other hand, Tchicaya is never too harsh. Never does he come to terms with the oppressor either. He is steadfast in his protest and he seldom wavers.

Another striking dissimilarity between these two artists lies in the objects of their protest. To McKay, it is the White man. Whereas to Tchicaya, it is both the White man and the Black. McKay assails none but the White oppressor. But Tchicaya protests against the European colonizers. At the same time he attacks the race-rioters and betrayers who are Black Africans. At times the protest is levelled against his own person too. McKay is point-blank in his attack. While reading Tchicaya, one wonders at places whether his object of attack is the Black man or the White. The most important aspect of their dissimilarity in protesting is that Tchicaya indulges in self-accusation, whereas McKay never gives way to self-reproachment. Tchicaya, overwhelmed with grief, occasionally indulges in self-deprecation and self-mockery as he does in "Viaticum":

I laugh with sorrow  
for once I will laugh at the sad gift  
of myself....

Thus it gets established that McKay and Tchicaya are convincing protest artists. Their protest is not merely to give expression to the Black artists' anger at the social injustices meted out to the Blacks by the Whites but also to uphold their social and human rights. Of course, there is the biting sarcasm, the cutting edge and

the sledge-hammer-like-hits levelled against the Establishment and the Whites. One detects the stern and stiff attitude of the Old Testament Prophets who cried vengeance against all social iniquities, wrongs and injustices. But the greatness of these two artists lies in their Protest literature carrying within it the therapeutic effect. Moreover, their Protest literature does not suffer any reductionism and slip to the debased level of mere mud-slinging. On the other hand, they are forceful Protest literature because they are educative in design and aim.