Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
Colour is an undeniable and indelible fact of the Black's existence. The inescapable reality of colour overwhelms and shadows the Black's emerging sense of self, making the development of racial identification an integral part of his self. The racial world for the Black is not only empirical, but also conceptual. A black man acquires value-laden racial labels and fragments of popular stereotypes to describe his own and other racial and ethnic groups. His acceptance of his race may decrease but it does not estimate the fundamental conflict involved in the development of his identity which can either be conscious or unconscious. The inferior, passive, and servile role that is forced on the black man tends to make him hostile and isolated from the mainstream culture. The black man's forebears are vaguely defined as "Blacks" from Africa whose supposed primitive existence is used by whites to confirm the inferiority of all Blacks.
Blacks brought from Africa to the different European countries, are uprooted from their own culture. They are unable to retain contact with the people of their own tribe or community and even family. Thus, they seem to have no apparent heritage or tradition to give significance to their existence or to instil hope for their future.

In the twentieth century the struggle of the blacks has gained dramatic and world-wide significance. Spurred on by the emergence of the African nations and the pervasive influence of the mass media, there has been a rediscovery of "Black culture" amongst the black people all over the world. There is a growing bond uniting Black people throughout the world. A whole new aesthetic has been created, a new consciousness has developed and blackness has been redefined in terms of human existence, essence, and experience.

"Colonialism" is most commonly used today to cannote the oppression, humiliation or exploitation of indigenous people by the colonizer. The gap between the white man and the black servants widened. There was a gradual transformation of the European into the American during the colonial era which led to a declaration of nationhood in 1776. But the relegated position of the blacks showed no improvement
in spite of the sharp rise in their population. The blacks brought from the diversified tribes of Africa did not find any common culture view. The only similarity they could experience was the attitude of the whites against the blacks.

While slavery was prevalent in feudal Europe, the Caribbean, as part of America, played a decisive role in the development of capitalism. Colonization in the Caribbean, as in America, involved social and economic organization. African slaves who displaced the native Indian were imported in large numbers to work in the mines, since they could produce twice as much as the Indian. Slavery became an indispensable asset to the progress and prosperity of the colonizer. It further manifested itself as the logical culmination of a process that was accelerated by the dissolution of feudalism and the emergence of capitalism.

Africans, removed from their own highly organized and effective cultures, were brought to America as slaves. The Europeans considered the African people as uncivilized. The slave status of the blacks was worked out within a framework of discrimination. There was an underlying assumption of the colonists that the Negro servant or slave was of a
special inferior status. The Africans were unchristian, and therefore, heathen. Their customs, habits and particularly their colour, were unfamiliar and consequently led to contempt.

Some of the first Africans who came to Virginia were not slaves but were probably indentured servants who became free men after serving a certain number of years. Slavery became a fixed institution in the 1600s when the first slave codes were enacted. As the economic factors were critical for a growing colony they turned to Africa for a labour force that was fixed and permanent and would not depart at the end of a brief period of service. Much of the wealth of North America, of the west, and of Latin America was produced in the first instance by the labour of black slaves.

Colonial religionists did not attack the institution of slavery. To do so would have alienated shareholder supporters. Rather, they sought to impress upon masters their Christian duty: the owners need to care for the souls as well as the bodies of their property. But these same clergymen invariably reminded the slaves of their obligations to their masters. The primary motive was to increase their usefulness and strengthen the assumption of the Negro's inequality and incapacity for freedom.
Oppression, both in America and the Caribbean, worked on two levels: that of the natives and of the people brought as slaves to America and the Caribbean islands. Though placed under two different perspectives there is evidence of a gradual awareness amongst them regarding their status in the society.

Africans, under the English regime, always maintained an isolated identity of their own, whereas some of the Africans under the French power easily identified themselves with the French and even aspired to be French. In America, when they tried to associate themselves, they were constantly pushed back into isolated slots, creating a sense of alienation. Black Caribbeans, in an attempt to assimilate, felt a sense of ruthlessness. The revolt against slavery thus emerged as the basic assertion of human dignity and humanity itself.

The status of a Black man in America or elsewhere is neither racial nor biological “but something purely social.” As Ellison asserts in Shadow and Act:

It is not a skin color which makes a negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by
the American experience, the social and political predicament: a slavery of that "concord of sensibilities" which the group expresses through historical circumstances and through which it has come to constitute a subdivision of larger American culture.¹

Thus to understand the predicament of the Black man 'socio-historical' approach seems viable in spite of the dehumanizing and degrading situation a black man is compelled into. As Sterling Brown affirms:

The conscious literary artist among Negroes thus goes as far back as America's colonial period. Antebellum Negroes, both slave and free wanted to be poets, read and studied as widely as circumstances permitted, and wrote down their thoughts in the forms approved by the times.²
However, one such writing was a mere imitation of accepted models in both theme and content and did not reflect honestly the experience of the Black man.

Blacks in the various colonial settings scattered in different countries tried to cultivate a sense of oneness, in opposition to Whites despite their varied cultural backgrounds. They drew upon their own cultural identities and collective commitments to reject oppression and to advance alternative social norms. Therefore they made themselves an ethnic as well as a racial minority. Laster Singer called this process "ethnogenesis" which is not limited to Black Americans alone. To create a sense of oneness these ethnic and racial minorities used art as one of the means to communicate an ideology rather than a mere means of entertainment. Literature as a written word which evolved from the oral tradition could reach only the literate. In an effort to reach out to the masses, theatre became an effective mode, more so with the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. Before 1914, blacks appeared in the plays whose roles were enacted by the whites focusing on song, dance and the humour of humble black characters. In the black musicals or coon shows, farcical caricatures of blacks were portrayed by whites. Between 1914 and 1930 he image of the "New Negro" emerged. This was the beginning of
the cultural, intellectual awakening, which engendered philosophical and sociological though and political awareness. Marcus Garvey, Bessie Smith, and Langston Hughes were some of the pioneers of these new developments.

With Du Bois' *Rachael*, theatre became a means of propaganda of racial awareness. After the Second World War, black theatre struggled to survive and black protest themes became rare.

Lorraine Hansberry and Jean Genet revived black drama in the late fifties and the early sixties. People like Baldwin and Jones defined the world in their own terms. Blacks were projected as real people with real concerns and problems: The focus thus turned towards the blacks in an effort to develop a "black aesthetic". Maulana Karenga set the ground for cultural ideologies. A common black culture was sought after, without which these ideologies "were only a set of reactions to whites."

The Black theatre movement of the sixties and seventies turned out to be essentially a populist movement. It projected a continuous human need to adapt to a changing hostile environment. It reflected the Marxian approach of art's task to make manifest the contradictions of
Being. Most plays that evoke black consciousness rather than black revolt use a dialectical approach by confronting blacks to awaken their consciousness to build a stronger and more militant psychology. This was in contrast to a defeatist psychology conditioned by a history of enforced servitude, discrimination, and racial denigration. Thus a gradual development from accusation and condemnation is found in Bullin's early works like *The Saviour* and *The Reluctant Voyage*. This leads to an awareness and acceptance which is very obvious in most of the works of Bullins. Then comes a stage of commitment and action.

Black literature, whether American or Caribbean, has similar themes. These themes can be ascribed to the historical, social and ethnic background of the blacks. The themes of the journey of the slaves from Africa, the master-slave relationship, the nostalgia for the native land, anti-imperialism are some of the themes. The heroic element has a totally new perspective. Though there is, in most of their works, a persistent pessimism and a sense of failure indignation is expressed through the courage to fight. While the Black American writer uses images from the materialistic and scientific world, a Black Caribbean uses images from "nature" and the "sensuous" pleasant Caribbean topics. Bullins plays, *A Son Come Home*, *Electronic Nigger* and *Clara's Ole Man*, were staged in
Martinique soon after they opened at the American place. The growing number of works of writers from Black Africa and from Black African descent in various parts of the world is now being viewed as the most vital, energetic, and significant contribution to the present mainstream international cultural scene.

Ed Bullins employed naturalism and surrealism, though not in the traditional sense, and finally realism, as different modes of theatrical expression. However, these works were exploited to expand similar themes of negritude.

Sartre sees in Black writers an Orpheus "going to claim Eurydice from Pluto." The myth of Orpheus encompasses the elements of a single theme, that of the balance between the conscious and the unconscious. It includes on the one hand the rationality, lucidity, self-awareness of the symbol Apollo, and on the other, the para-nationality ambiguity, and self-immolation of the symbolic Dionysus. Orpheus portends through all his changes the relation between language and reality and the ultimate harmony or unity. Thus a black man is able to retain a sense of individuality only through literature, which is the reflection of the unconscious. As Carl Jung states:
Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too ... as much as we can stand.³

It is this reflection of the unconscious that one finds in the works of the blacks. The Dionysian elements of death and destruction are but manifestations of the suppressed. The myth of Dionysus is replete with episodes of violence.

In Black literature the demarcation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian is very distinct. To be able to belong to the society he is in, a black man wears an Apollonian mask and has to conform to the norms of the colonizer. He is unable to retain his natural self. In his works of art are his dreams. Thus he plunges himself:

... into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, where man is not of lost in the isolation of consciousness and its errors
and sufferings, but where all men are caught in
a common rhythm which allows the individual
to communicate his feelings and strivings to
mankind as a whole. 4

The tension of projecting the unconscious through literature is heightened in the literature of the Blacks, as the medium of expression, i.e., language, belongs to the oppressor. The process of language learning is not merely an acquisition of meaningful signs and symbols for the purpose of communication. It involves a complete process of imbibing a certain culture and in this case the culture of the oppressor.

The colonizer is present in every word the colonized utters. There is no other language that the colonized can go back to, as he has been taught the language of the colonizer from childhood. However, certain traits of a society correspond to the untranslatable location of its language. Therefore, the black man, to be able to express that which he wishes to say, destroys the language of the oppressor.

Thus the language of the Blacks evolved into "a healthy, living form of language" developing its own grammar and manifesting various
linguistic signs of "separate development." The black vernacular reflects a larger social picture which segregated speech communicates. It has assumed a singular role as the black man's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue. It is through such language that a black man encodes private yet communal cultural rituals.

No play written or produced by an African-American was staged until 1925. A combination of economic, cultural, and social circumstances had restricted black playwrights. Plays written by black Americans were accepted only when the blacks were presented in stereotype roles, such as that of a Buffoon, a Mulatto caught in the predicament of not being accepted in the white society nor accepting the black community, a Christian slave, docile and obedient; a care-free primitive, exotic, a moral savage and a Black beast, a villain who seeks equality with white people. So black playwrights had to work within the framework set by white playwrights.

The economic depression influenced the black playwrights. The severity of life during the thirties prompted writers to question all aspects of life in the United States. This concern spread even to Broadway. However, black playwrights were granted the opportunity to tell their
stories within the purview of white norms. The theme of protest worked itself out of Broadway. It reached its climax in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, adopted for the stage by Paul Green, a white dramatist.

The decaying status of drama and fiction of the nineteenth century brought about a shocking change in its presentations with Strindberg and Zola as pioneers. Writers working in the framework of naturalism tried to reduce the distance between the fictive world of theatre and the real one through an objective and scientific exploration of reality and through a rejection of the stereotypical characters and set conventions of drama. Zola further defined the idea of verisimilitude. He expounded the concept of environment as a conditioning element and a reality to be reckoned with or changed by the individual. Thus characters become realistic. They do "not play, but .... live." Man is depicted as belonging entirely to the order of nature and does not have a soul or any other connection with a religious or spiritual world beyond nature. Man is merely a higher order animal whose character and fortunes are determined by two kinds of natural forces - heredity and environment. This explicitness of life and environment strengthened the concept of instruction through drama which in turn became an important mode for expounding ideologies so necessary for an ethnic group in stages of transition. Naturalism as a
mode of writing is till relevant says Martin Esslin, affirming the Naturalists’ call for a fresh start in complete freedom. Art as philosophy, he felt, was making the transition from a ‘closed’ to a totally open system.

Thus within a sense of “tragic optimism” writers like Baraka and Bullins from America, Cesaire, Senghor and Dumas from the Caribbean conscious of their Black status, specifically addressed the black audience. This they did with an aim of not merely educating the blacks but teaching them not to be slave archetypes.

Thus the Black writers now saw the world in a totally new perspective. They defined reality not as the whites wanted to see it, but as they felt and thought of it themselves. In the process of redefining reality, they claim to change their perception of the world and hence to change the world itself.

This revision manifested itself in the form of surrealism. The term ‘surrealism’ first appeared in Apollinaire’s ‘absurdist’ play. For him it expressed an analogical way of conveying essential reality. Thus an absurdist play aims not at recreating a slice of life but at creating symbols and images which express not only life but also a state of mind.
Surrealism seemed to have emerged from Dadalism which manifests an element of revolt and freedom. It is a revolution against all restraints on the free functioning of the human mind. Elements of the Gothic novel and the Symbolist movements are also present in surrealism. The pursuit of the insights of the sub-conscious and a reliance on the non-rational becomes the essence of surrealism.

Black writers, both in the Caribbean and American culture, use myths extensively as that could be the only way to communicate with the heterogeneous groups they form. It is with the help of a myth that they are able to form a "new reality" although it is only an illusion. A myth does not give man any power over the milieu nor over mankind. It gives him an illusion that he can understand the universe and that he doesn't understand the universe. Over the ages, whenever there was a threat to the status of an individual or a community, questions relating to existence itself were answered through myths. Thus in the mythic language the problems deal with creation and quest. However, in the modern world man seemed to have asked existential questions repeatedly only to find chaotic solutions. The ever increasing appeal of the mythic mind reveals to us the fact that "in all civilizations men face analogous situations,
undergo similar experiences." Mythology draws on the oldest memories and reassures mankind. While it depicts stories as actually happened it is mythopoesis that recreates the ancient stories giving them a symbolic value. The symbols created through myths represent an ideal or an ideology. Black writers, whose primary concern was the content expressing an ideology, used myths extensively.

The pre-occupation of Black writers with content and ideology finds better expression in dramatic form. Drama which began as an interaction of ideas and characters in society reaches out to a wide range of audience in the form of a dialogue. The didactic compulsion led writers to distort, create, or recreate history and even reality. Bullins tries to recreate reality by adapting characters from the day-to-day lives yet placing them in realistic situations.

Bullins uses naturalism, though some of his plays lack a formula structure. In an essay, "What Shape Shapes Shapelessness? Structural Elements in Ed Bullins Plays"; Hay argues that the search for structure must focus not on the development of the theme but on the recurrence of hopes for self completeness. The sense of incompleteness creates pessimistic characters. Don Evans in "The Theater of Confrontation : Ed
Bullins up against the Wall," observes that Ed Bullins is concerned with those suicidal practices that render the Black man impotent, and prevent him from reaching the goals so often spoken in the revolutionary rhetoric of the time.

Geneva Smithermann, in his essay "Ed Bullins Stage One: Everybody Wants to Know Why I Sing the Blues" focuses on one of the primary concerns of the blacks, "The Blues". Plays by Black writers have a "message". It is through the blues that they synthesize the values and thought pattern of the Black community. Blues are one of the life-renewing resources that have enabled Black folks to survive. He argues that Bullins integrates his revolutionary message in his tragic-comic vision. Bullins' prediction of a dismal future and his tragic vision, influenced by writers like Baraka, is discernible in John Brien's interview with Ed Bullins published in Negro American Literature Forus.

Alice Childress in the introduction to Black Scenes projects the need of dramatize plays of "Black experience." Plays presented on Broadway gain importance not only because of the capabilities of the writer but because they could be regularly reviewed and become universally known. Thus Black playwrights have experimented much in
the theatre and set new trends leading to the revolutionary theatre. In the introduction to *New Black Playwrights* William Couch Jr. discusses how Bullins calls the same theatre "the theater of reality." Theme and character become crucial to that of style and technique and Bullins *Goin' a Buffalo* is one such example. Clarence Major in the introduction to *The New Black Poetry* draws attention to the fact that poetry is referred to as an "elemental art of human communication." He says that there is a symbolic and mystic love in the works of Blacks, taking as his example *When Slavery Seems Sweet* by Bullins as one of the examples.

***
References:


