

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

America, the first tangible democracy in the world proclaims the doctrine of human optimism asserting that all men are born free and equal but down the centuries the growing hiatus between the black and white people has belied the feeling of fraternity advocated by democracy. America may be a land of opportunity but opportunity has failed to live up to its spirit of impartiality and has knocked only at the doors of the white community. To the suppressed and oppressed black masses, it has proved to be an illusory and elusive mirage on the distant horizon of the American Dream. Below the egalitarian surface in the United States, men are not born free and neither are they born equal -- they are enmeshed in an ancient, complex social web where there is, besides social, political and economic hierarchies, the insurmountable colour barricade.

Dreary decades have passed since the slave ships unloaded the Negroes in chains and transplanted them on American soil. Since then, they have faced social discrimination, persecution, calumny and severe privations. Still struggling to overcome racial prejudice, they are engaged in a slow, painful battle for integration into American society; social assimilation is beyond their concept for the time being.

Ethnic writing often mirrors the social and economic life of the group. The ethnic black writers nurtured and aired their hatred and resentment, in varying shades, for the white community. With compounding indignation and animosity, they lamented the sufferings of their race. Spewing anger and bitterness, they wove stories of the sensational type, thus exciting the black Americans to protest. Slave narratives and folk tales were a form of propaganda with a melodramatic content.

The 1920's heralded a singular epoch in the Negro's consciousness, marking the first cultural movement in his life. Known as the Harlem Renaissance, it declared unequivocally that the Negroes would fight for freedom to enable themselves to express their sensitivities and sensibilities without fear of controversy or consequences. Their writings, consequently, asserted their right to their culture and their history. A wide range of common black experience stimulated the talented young black writers to do away with all simulations and depict black life in its true colour. The story of their African heritage was celebrated in poetry, prose and fiction. Literary revolt was forged with social revolt and a political philosophy emerged which rejected assimilation and accommodation. The innate spirit of "Blackness" was exalted and cultural pluralism was accepted. For the first time, black literature came into its own.

However, one drawback of this exotic, artistic movement was that it remained circumscribed within the precincts of the cabaret halls and affluent homes and failed to permeate down to all the classes of black masses. The Depression sounded the dirge of the epoch-making Harlem Renaissance because it diverted the attention of the black people from the ethereal, artistic planes to the mundane level where the necessities of life demanded their full energy and effort.

Richard Wright emerged as a black writer in the middle of the Great Depression trailing a blaze of a new literary philosophy. Being sensitive, intelligent, emotional and observant, he realised very early in life that he was "worthless" with no individuality or identity. However, he adamantly refused to adopt the mannerisms of the stereotyped Negro as defined by the white society. He was determined not to be cowed down by the repercussions his actions would provoke.

At the age of twelve, Wright migrated with his family from the South to the North, presumed to be the "Promised Land" for the Negro. A new phase began in Wright's life when he read a virulent editorial in a white local newspaper attacking the writings of H.L. Mencken. Immediately, he made himself acquainted with Mencken's works and was introduced to a new medium of protest philosophy. Stimulated by the writings, he realised the magic and mastery that words could command. Words could rule, direct and

alter the world. He decided to hammer words into weapons in order to give fierce battle to the cruel social system. He resolved to become a writer and devote his time and skill to the deliverance of his people. He was ideally suited to the writing profession because he had two essential qualities of a writer -- he was curious and he was detached. Curiosity made him perceptive and his natural aloofness enabled him to be objective. Another significant resolution that he decided upon was that he would write for a white audience; the black man was already aware of the tragedy of his life. Intending to dispel the fallacies and prejudices that distorted the view-point of the white man, he decided to give "Blackness" a new dimension and interpretation, different from the one evolved out of the plantation tradition.

In preparation for the profession he made an intensive and extensive study of the social sciences. He was filled with wonder on reading of the peasant uprising in Russia which had shaken the centuries old Czar dynasty and transformed the feudal order into a modern industrial society. Expectations soaring, he joined, for altruistic motives, the Communist Party but broke away on discovering that the party had no real concern for the problems of the Negro.

With the natural eloquence of truth, he endeavoured to frame the Negro in his actual perspective through his literary creations.

With a will directed singly towards waging a righteous war against the white man who knew no reason, who's vision was distorted and who misinterpreted everything pertaining to the Negro, Wright examined the question of colour, human relationships and racial prejudice. His acrimonious writings spewing hatred and anger were the well-springs from which emerged the Protest Tradition in literature.

The literature of the Protest Tradition was coloured with racial feeling and seething with an innate revolt. It began a new wave in the struggle against segregation and discrimination. The writers gave way to rage and despair in the paroxysm of which they vented their half-smothered passions -- passions certainly not deficient in bitterness! They wrote frankly and clearly from hearts that grieved and were full of pity for the Negro who was shrouded in ignorance and assailed by a myriad fears.

Richard Wright's writings attested to the plight of the unfortunate Negro who was woefully deceived by empty promises and resigned wholly to despair. His theme was the black man, a common black man from the lower strata, whose patience had been worn out by the continuous severity of his fate. The Negro cherished a rankling feeling of revenge and was driven to extremities of violence by his deprivations. He was disillusioned, dispossessed and dehumanised. Persecution and prosecution had

driven him to bay and the only choice life gave him was for him to take flight or achieve martyrdom.

Wright wrote in the picaresque tradition as it enabled him to adapt his subject matter to the needs of the black writer. The picaresque hero was usually an iconoclast who desecrated the sanctity of the social mores and did not have scruples while violating the social conventions. Consequently, he was ostracised and threatened with the law of the land. To survive, he became a criminal or outlaw and proceeded on a symbolic journey in pursuit of identity and freedom. Not considering any price too high for living in accordance with his convictions, he preferred death to degradation. In each story there was a fervent hope that the succeeding generations would finally evolve strong enough to wrest freedom and dignity for their race.

Wright acquired some measure of fame in the literary circles when in 1938 he won the \$ 500 prize awarded by Story Magazine for Uncle Tom's Children (1938). In 1940, with the publication of Native Son, the Protest Tradition touched new heights in popularity. Native Son was a movingly told story of a Negro boy, Bigger, whose fate typified the fate of the Negro race engaged in the great struggle for life. It was the embodiment of black revolt against a brutal and despicable system that did not hesitate to violate human dignity. In 1942 The Man Who Lived Underground had the

theme of fear, brutality, violence, religion and non-identity interwoven to depict the barren landscape of the modern world. His other works of fiction, The Outsider, Savage Holiday, The Long Dream and numerous essays were all dominated by the social, political and economic theories related to the Negro and prevalent in the United States at that time.

Feeling that the white American ignored the positive qualities in black life, Richard Wright lamented the conflict between the white dominated environment and the actual "self" of the black American which precipitated mutual violence and hatred. The Negro was caught in a quandary -- if he revolted, he would physical death and if he did not he invited spiritual death. Richard Wright's works made conscious efforts to protest against the white American concept of the Negro being ugly and grotesque and at the same time endeavoured to transform the role of the Negro in society. He was not shaken by adversity, as he felt even an abortive attempt would not be wasted. The backdrop of the writings created an imagery of the black man destroying arbitrarily, irresistably and inexorably the myth of white supremacy. Bitter protest seared the pages of his books.

Before the fifties the mournful tale of the Negro was told in a voice stifled with fear and anger. Black writers depicted the Negro as a defeated and rejected victim of racial prejudice,

sullenly resigned to his inferior status and overpowered by the severity of his fate. Any idea he harboured of freedom seemed indicative of "madness". Physically his chains were broken but mentally he continued to be manacled to an age-old tradition of servility and inferiority. It is impossible to believe from the writings of the black writers of that period that the Negro had to contend with such an inhuman despotic social system prevailing in such a civilised country.

The accumulated injustices of the decades had made the Negro bitter but reconciled to the brutal system which dealt him blows liberally "to keep the nigger in his place". Consequently, black literature was bitter and denounced the white community which was a libel on civilised society and was responsible for the protracted suffering of the black man. However, from the fifties onwards a wind of change swept in a number of political and social forces which excited the Negro's hopes of a brighter tomorrow.

The momentous 1954 Supreme Court decision and other court decisions in favour of the Negro promised him liberty and equality. The changing world scenario - a number of social changes and legal verdicts, new African and Asian countries appearing in the galaxy of free nations, the Civil Rights Movement, Negro leaders with tremendous will - power and unshaken resolve emerging amongst the masses --spelt hope and confidence for the common black man in America.

The writers were stimulated by a new optimism. Though they vented their angry feelings in their writings, their compositions became less hysterical and more rational and sober. The Negro began to free himself from the "stereotype" of the white image in which he had been immured for centuries past and began to invest himself with dignity and respect.

Gradually, protest in writings began to wane, writings with protest themes that had ruled the roost till the beginning of the fifties, were ushered out. A search for new themes began. The black writers dabbled in topics related to housing, education, war, regional life, historical truths and autobiographical novels dealing with domestic problems, marital conflict, sex etc.

With high expectations, the black writers abandoned the Protest Tradition and tried to nurture the growth of universality in their literary creations. They chose to play down "colour" and all problems revolving around it. A section of writers did try their hand at assimilation, that is, joining the mainstream of American literature which dealt with complexities of human condition. This literary movement aiming at integration began heading towards the second Harlem Renaissance of the early sixties which finally evolved into the Black Aesthetic Tradition.

During this crucial transitional period when the Protest Tradition was petering out and the movement of integration into the

Reed has delved deep into the mysteries of the known and unknown and the measure of his range can be gauged from the fact that his novel Mumbo Jumbo has scholastic references and detailed bibliography of five pages. In his writings, reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, anachronisms from life, history, society, religion, magic and denizens of the other world are inter-fused and synthesised with a gay abandon and a generous sprinkling from folklore, mythology, caricature, Hoodoo and Voodoo to weave rollicking yarns to ridicule everything on the American landscape. By combining these in fantastic pluralities, he conjures up themes that defy interpretation till one tunes to his mental wave length.

Reed's writings are not at all racial and neither do they have any colouring of protest. The whites and the blacks become victims of his scatological wit. The black man's misery is not Reed's theme song. Though the black identity is clearly defined, his works are not celebrations of blackness. With his eclectic approach, he explores the black man's mythic and mystic past through the mode of mythopoesis. He examines slavery from a new perspective, his slaves are not docile, down-trodden creatures but outrageously cunning, who outwit unscrupulously the white man and the black man.

In the garb of humour and satire his outpourings contain the profundities of life that endeavour to make visible the invisible.

An odd-assortment of far-fetched similes, metaphors and imagery are used to catapult his darts of irony and caustic wit. The ludicrous and the ridiculous, the grotesque and the burlesque are melded into a bubbling, gurgling spontaneity which parodies the Church, the government and society. The satire, however, is gentle sympathetic and smile-provoking. This type of satire is known as cosmic satire in the mythopoeic system and is different from the western form of satire.

The flexible Neo-HooDoo aesthetic enables him to use the techniques of "fragmentation" and "condensation" to which is added symbology from African roots. Necromancers add excitement to the action. Reed grafts various techniques and literary devices to introduce a new "loa" in his works.

His first novel The Free-Lance Pallbearers (1967) adjusted the fictional art to mythic inception by distorting American reality into grotesque dimensions, aiming to lift the veil of hypocrisy. His next novel Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969) is a Neo-HooDoo western with its setting in the psychic world, any time during 10,000 BC and 1970 AD -- time and space have no meaning in this pioneer town named Yellow Back Radio. Mumbo Jumbo (1972) is a historic narrative with the first Harlem Renaissance as a backdrop to mythic cosmic satire. A revolutionary change takes place in the black world. The hero goes on a symbolic journey, hewing

and hacking an identity for himself. Though there is no final resolution, the hero succeeds in stirring up a sense of freedom, goodness and prosperity in the social sphere.

Trying his hand at mock-heroic epic, Reed emphasises social interaction in The Last Days of Louisiana Red (1974). History, politics, religion and folk-lore are blended homogeneously. The language is steeped in the black metaphor of the Black Arts Movement and a number of social values are parodied. Flight to Canada (1976) is a depiction of slavery and the slave is shown in a new light. Fantasy and reality play hide and seek, just as the slave and master do in the novel. A war of wits commences when the slave takes flight to Canada. The master tries all the tricks up his sleeve to bring him back into bondage. The Terrible Two (1982) is a surrealist, social-realist novel disparaging the people in the United States -- they grumble in the midst of plenty. Presidents Clift, Truman and Rockefeller are villains who knowingly and unknowingly become responsible for the travails of the common man.

Ishmael Reed is not only a prolific writer of fiction but has earned fame in no mean measure in the world of poetry. The four collections of his poems take the reader on surging swirls of rhythm through the Black Aesthetic Neo-HooDoo mode into worlds on the other side of the mental horizon.

Though Reed loves being outrageous to provoke a thigh-slapping hysteria, one can glimpse the orthodox moralist who peeps out now and then from his writings. He tries to bridge the various schisms and ideologies that divide the people. Reed spells out his anathema against orthodoxy, convention, tradition, political fundamentalism and against politicising the individual. Demagogues peddling different ideologies have desecrated the innocence of the individual. Satire is Reed's forte and through it he lampoons human relationships, nationalism of the militants, Marxism, cultural imperialism and the pillars of society. There is no racism or racial protest in his novels. He sits smugly on the bandwagon of the Black Aesthetic Tradition that is diametrically and dramatically opposed to the Protest Tradition.