Chapter 2

The Importance of the Ancestor for the African Americans

Much of the African American literary texts of canonical order written in the twentieth century can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space which could counteract the often touted allegation against black literary texts by the western literary and critical establishment that they are imitative since they lacked authentic black literature which would speak exclusively about black experience and culture – black identity, black ideas, superstitions, customs, social organization, and above all of a substantial black history. These allegations were nurtured by a huge gap – a gap present in history itself. This gap is often termed by critics as the Middle Passage, which American blacks had to face since they belong(ed) to a generation who migrated under compulsion rather than in search of opportunity. Having to leave Africa, their homeland: a land which nurtured their culture, the ancestors who are the founder of the race, their own history - a land which authenticates their being through space and time, has shattered their state of being in the New World. The Africans who survived the dreaded Middle Passage, sailing from West Coast of Africa to the New World, carried within them some aspects of African culture which could not be obliterated or which they willed not to forget. Thus, the ships landed on the New World harbour not only with African slaves but also their music, magic, myths, and folktales and most
importantly their own signifyin(g) language. What survived this process of violence and torment were fragments of multi African culture as the slaves were captured from various African tribes, mainly from the West coast. These preconditioned the emergence of a new African American culture which faced denial or which lacked visibility in the American white eyes. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., muses: "What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher? Nothing of white signification, and everything of blackness."(1) From early seventeenth century to late nineteenth century, the concept of “book”, constituted for the Negro in America a silent text in which the black men found no echo of his own voice. The Negro in America remained up to the twentieth century an absent face and voice though in-between reside black authors like Philis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth and the writers of the early slave narratives.

The period till the beginning of the twentieth century was marked by strong racist ideas that denied the creative ability of the blacks. The unjustified and untenable racist position is summed up by Gates, Jr. in the following words: “The eighteenth century abounds in comments from philosophers such as David Hume in “Of National Characters” and statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson in Notes on the State of Virginia, who argued that blacks were ‘imitative rather than creative’.” (2). Both slaves and ex-slaves wrote to end slavery as well as to fill up the absence of blacks in white American literature.

In the post-bellum period, the institution of slavery was replaced by a more psychologically painful institution – segregation, which underscored the philosophy of racism. Racism became more surreptitiously ingrained in the
psyche of the American nation, though slavery was now legally a thing of the past. Under the impact of racist humiliation, the black American saw the creation of literature as a weapon that could defeat racism. Thus, the struggle to define an African self in Western letters: “American Negroes are gaining their own voices, their own ideals,” in opposition to the situation that prevailed before the twentieth century when they were “led and defended by others”.

The political perspective was marked by the Washington-Du Bois debate between the opposite ideologies of assimilation and assertion, with Du Bois, at the turn of the century asserting that the “color-line” was the primary issue facing the African Americans. The emphasis on the color-line foregrounds the issue of race and identity, two items which consequently become central for the African American mind and its cultural and literary representations.

The emphasis on assertion in its turn necessitated the construction of a sense of identity separate from that imposed at the point of entry into the American space as slaves. The predicament is poignantly pointed out by James Baldwin:

The American Negro slave is unique among Black men in the world in that his past was taken from him, almost literally, at one blow... I am told there are Haitians able to trace their ancestry back to African kings, but any American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor.

The quest to recuperate and reassert individualism and identity, somewhere lost in the Middle Passage – a discontinuity in history imposed by history itself, is what complicates the situation of the Africans in America. African American imagination and intellect now got itself immersed in the recreation of this viable past as the shortest route to the viable future, and, hence, the
evocation of the ancestor and the ancestral, which finds itself dominating philosophical and creative writings in the twentieth century, achieving certain climactic moments such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black aesthetic movement.

The attributes linked to the ancestor as trope is determined not by any given perspective but by the shifting demands of social organization and cultural representation. If the Harlem Renaissance brought the ancestor into focus, the subsequent Black Aesthetic of the 1970s further problematised its position. The ancestor came to occupy a central position in theoretical formulations about literature especially when identity becomes an important issue in cultural politics. Harlem valorized the notion that identity is a matter of cultural affiliation. African Americans came to accept the view that their identity is a socio-historical construction, framed by experiences of slavery, emancipation, and betrayal, and not exclusively by considerations of race and biological affinities. Self-examination, self-explanation, self-actualization, and social legitimation, become the salient issues, and identity is often regarded as a function of place. In any formation of a sense of self, there appears a preoccupation with a contestation between the place in which they find themselves involuntarily and the larger cultural place they had to leave behind. It is physically distant yet poignantly alive and present in the collective memory traveling back to embrace even the timeless ancestor. Literary representations bear ample testimony to it: Africa figures time and again; Africa transcends the limitations of a mere geographical space and becomes a cultural entity, an ancestral space providing for the literary imagination both sustaining representative figures and an environment against which to measure
the predicament of the destabilized and displaced present. The ancestor and
the ancestral widen to include Africa in its past and present configurations.
The presence of Africa becomes a major factor in cultural and literary
representation: Langston Hughes traces the history of the Africans and the
African Americans using the river metaphor, linking the Nile and the Congo
with the Mississippi in his poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”:

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my heart near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(1921)

The metaphor of the travel back through time is noteworthy. The Harlem
Renaissance poet defines the identity of the contemporary African American
in terms of a continuity from as far back as the ancient ‘places’ marking
culture and civilization, the Congo, the Nile and the Euphrates. The history of
the African Americans goes far beyond the horrors of the Middle Passage. The
contemporary presence requires a reconnection through recovery. The poem
celebrates the link with the ancestor, bringing together the creative
imagination of the Africans in building the pyramids on the banks of the Nile,
the flourishing African kingdom on the Congo, and the experience of slavery
and emancipation signified by the Mississippi and Lincoln. Poets muse on the relevance of Africa. Countee Cullen meditates on the “Heritage” of the Harlem African American:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved.
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

(1925)

The poignant wish to go back in time, across the Middle Passage and across centuries signify the newly developing community consciousness of the Harlem black. The past becomes increasingly relevant for the African American. Arthur A. Schomburg in his seminal essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past” (1925) states:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future . . . For him (Negro), a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset. So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and opt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all. (5)

In the 1920s, the dissolute Jazz Age, the American Negro was facing the opportunity and the possibility of creating a new self, a new image for itself. Schomburg goes on to say:

Already the Negro sees himself against a reclaimed background, a perspective that will give pride and self-respect ample scope, and make history yield for him the same values that the treasured past of any people affords. (6)
The idea of the New Negro, more confident of a sense of identity and cultural expression, is summed up by Alain Locke in his essay “The New Negro”:

With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without. The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expressions of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education, and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about. (7)

This is a new generation which however finds its moorings by re-membering the past, the ancestor as a source of power and values, enabling it to overcome the sufferings since the middle passage at the same time re-living it and that which lies even before to go for a reverse passage to the land left behind. In this new formulation the African notions of the life force, the ancestor, and the African land becomes contributory creative factors. What Africa means can be examined by looking at what ancestors mean for the African Americans as derived from what ancestors mean for the Africans.

A notable feature of the African diaspora has been the interconnectedness amongst the descendants of Africa. This may be explained by a reference to the idea of the life force. Traditional Africans recognize a life force which influences everything in the present and the future, which originates from all life in the past, including one’s ancestors. The life force is comprised of and inhabited by all living things. It is believed that the human soul manifests out of the life force at birth, and, at death, reenters the life force which links the present with the past through one’s ancestor and one’s landscape. In the African way of life accent is on the community and not the individual. The African is both part of an extended family and a clan or tribe.
One’s activities are for the betterment of the group, rather than for oneself. The Western culture’s concepts of the individual did not exist within African societies for one could not be an individual without the knowledge and support of the group. The village was the heart of African life. Here it would be worthwhile to point out that Toni Morrison time and again emphasizes the centrality of the village community as opposed to the city in the sustenance of values and harmony in the African American community.

The concept of the life force points to the connection between the African descendants and their ancestors. The institution of slavery resulted in a disruption of relationship with one’s ancestors through displacement and also as a result of the violent and sorrowful fates of these people, mainly from Central and West Africa. Slavery forced the Africans away from their ancestral grounds where the spirits of their ancestors abounded within the landscape. Toni Morrison’s contemporary urban black communities show the result of what happens when a culture loses its connection to its traditions and ancestors. The narrative structures in her novels examine the nuances of such a predicament. It may be said that a state of restlessness that traps the modern individual has its roots in a dysfunctional relationship with the ancestors. African Americans have at sometimes a tragic relationship with their ancestors mainly because of displacement and migration. The Great migration periods of the first part of the twentieth century led to a second phase of displacement, disconnecting population from their habitat and ancestral burial grounds. Again the pressure to acculturate with the values of Western civilization causes the meaning of the ancestral culture to lose importance. Allied to this idea of the ancestor linked to the burial ground is the image of the African
landscape. The African Americans are a ‘landless people’ and that explains the idea of their looking to their ancestral homelands for wisdom, healing, beginnings, has the religious revalorization of the land, a place where the natural and the ordinary gestures of the black men were and could be authenticated.

The predicament of the displaced, the uprooted, and the one craving for moorings leaves an indelible mark on the creative imagination. Being transplanted and alienated from her roots, Africa, the migrant or expatriate author feels discriminated and uprooted from that which is her own. The question of origin, ancestry and homeland perpetually haunts her. It is not only geographical and cultural history but their very identity is at stake. Morrison states: “What makes one write anyway is something in the past that is haunting, that is not explained or wasn’t clear so that you are almost constantly rediscovering the past.” (8) Facing the danger of erasure or getting trapped in the construction as the ‘Other’, the expatriate hits back by creating her own “Imaginary Homelands” housed by her once lost communities, familial relations and the ancestor, the founder of the race. These “homes” not only provide solace and comfort to the blacks but also link them with that which was once their home:

Fifty years ago, novels were not important for the Black community. I mean a novel written a certain way can do precisely what spirituals used to do. It can do exactly what blues or jazz or gossip or stories or myths or folklore did – that stuff that was a common well-spring of ideas and again the participation of the reader in it as though it’s not alien to him. The people he may not know, but there is some shared history. (9)

Morrison realizes that physical alienation from the native land makes it virtually impossible for the American blacks to reclaim precisely and exactly those which are lost and in the process they are torn between two altogether
different sets of life, identity, culture and religion. Overlapping of the past and the present makes them a mutant. They live on the border, in a dichotomous mindset, wavering between the opposite poles of two cultures, and it is out of this mutation, this hybridization, that newness emerges; a newness which becomes very much their own. Morrison argues:

The community had to take on that responsibility of passing from one generation to another the mythologies, the given qualities, stories, assumptions which an ethnic group that is culturally coherent and has not joined the larger mainstream keeps very much intact for survival. The consequences of the political thrust to share in the economy and power of the country were to disperse that. Also, the entertainment world and fashion had eaten away at all of those moorings, so that the music isn’t ours any more. (10)

As a novelist Morrison visualizes her art as one of recovery. Her narrative space operates as a healing process for the African Americans who await psychological, spiritual, cultural, historical, and social recovery, and to whom her works are directed:

The problem is to distinguish those elements in ourselves as human beings, as individuals, and as a culture, that are ancient and pure or primitive – that are there because they’re valuable and ought to be there – and those that are primitive because they’re ignorant and unfocussed. (11)

In a context where the individual is subservient to the community, Morrison, in her narrative space, retraces to recover that which is ‘valuable’ and ‘ought to be there’ for both the African American individual and the community.

In the process of reconstructing the gap which had occurred due to the forcible separation over a period of centuries since 1619, three histories need to be stitched together – one that is left behind in some far away land across the Atlantic; one lost in the middle passage, where silence and trauma reside; and the one that is continually being defined and redefined by the African Americans in their negotiation with the larger cultural entity in the midst of
which they need to assert their rightful place. To be able to achieve the desired objective they need an anchor that would hold the different moments of time and space together. This is where the ancestor and the ancestral come in authenticating the descent and to bridge the gap in time and space. This ancestral voice is the authentic black voice, whose origin can be traced back to Esu Elegbara. Esu figures and re-figures as the trickster figure in black mythology in/of Africa, the Caribbean, and South America, indeed in the African diaspora. As a trickster figure it repeatedly appears and reappears in black cultures and hence is a repeated theme or a trope. Within the fragmented New World African culture Esu serves as a remnant of the Old World belief system. This figure carries over meanings that the black slaves often recreated from memory and preserved in the oral narrative. Esu occupies a distinctive place in black oral narrative traditions as the trickster figure and this trope speaks for the “blackness” of African American literature. This articulation of ‘blackness’ is what ensures the survival of the African American in the American space and of the African within the African American, and Esu as the signifying figure facilitates this interpenetration. Esu exhibits the characteristics of both the male and the female ancestors; it is timeless, ageless, and genderless, and inherits the nature of all the ancestors. In restating and reinterpreting memory it serves as the imaginary space where Africa meets Afro-America.

Karla F. C. Holloway defines the context in which Esu derives its importance: “For the African American, retrieval is not possible. Instead, recovery means an act of spiritual memory rather than physical possession.”

(12) Physical possession or affiliation is neither possible nor feasible. Yet
recovery is of paramount necessity as part of the avowed political imperatives. Esu is again a facilitator of this process of recovery of the ancestor and the ancestral in the cultural space of the African American: as Holloway further states:

Although the past may be recalled to the story, although ancestors and goddesses may filter through the visual screens, the dominant mediums of the text are behavior and act – sometimes to the extent that voice is intentionally silenced so that image can claim all our attention. (13)

Esu turns into a figure that colours the African American literary space with the many hues of the African nature and spiritual existence, thus becoming the seminal bridge signifying the mental excursion necessitated by compulsions of cultural politics. The importance of the ancestor lies in the context of the various levels of relationships that constitute one’s social and cultural existence. The individual’s relationships within social and cultural framework stands as the blue prints that encode his/her ancestral ties to the past and affirm a sense of continuity validating a sense of identity in the challenging postmodern world which is out to reject such validity. Achieving such validity is particularly important for the African Americans for whom as a community or a race, since early seventeenth century, it has been a continuing story of a struggle to achieve cultural continuity through recurring experiences of dispersal, displacement, migration, forced assimilation, assertion, and attempts at reconstituting bonds of togetherness across time and space. As an instructive presence the ancestor figure is both an essential part of the African American community and of its representative literatures. African American literature cannot be fully appreciated without acknowledging and understanding the ancestral presence.
References:

2. Ibid, 66
3. Ibid, 114
5. In Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (eds), 963
6. Ibid, 967
7. Ibid, 985
9. Ibid, 183
10. Ibid, 112
11. Ibid, 113
13. Ibid, 9