

RACIAL ELEMENTS IN CLAUDE McKAY'S POETRY

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Abstract:

Claude McKay (1889-1948) is a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance. In the early 20th century, the Americans saw a revival of African Culture and its expression through many artistic forms like music, dancing and poetry. McKay was born with 'black and blue' colour and brought up in the racial Jamaica. So very early in his life he was exposed to the racial-attitude of the white people. As a result, racial consciousness had become a part and parcel of his life. He was one of the members of the group of very sensitive black intellectuals and artists who had gathered in the name of race and colour, to give an unprecedented exposure to their problems, hopes and aspirations. McKay had added his colourful dash to this invaluable task done by the Harlem writers. This paper focuses on the racial elements found in his poetry.

Key Words: *Harlem Renaissance, race, racism, racial pride, racial consciousness, racial discrimination and race-riots.*

Introduction

Under the over dominance of the racial whites, the culturally awakened black writers, having been suffocated for years, had got, for the first time, the golden chance for

self-expression. Among those who wrote in this period were a few noted persons like Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman and James Walden Johnson. In this paper, an attempt

has been made to focus on the racial consciousness found in McKay's poetry because, as Max Eastman says "poetry was his forte", not prose. (qtd. in Tillery 1992:79)

Methodology and Area of the Study

This paper analyzes most of his poems published in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *The Selected poems of Claude McKay* (1953) edited by Max Eastman. The concepts like race and racism have been used while analyzing and interpreting his poetry.

The method used in this research paper is what Mr. Austin Warren suggested in *Theory of Literature*:

Understanding poetry passes readily into judging poetry, only judging it in detail and judging while analyzing instead of making the judgment a pronouncement in the final paragraph. (1978:250)

Analysis, Interpretation and Observations

Tyrone Tillery has aptly summarized the task done by the Harlem Renaissance in America :

The 1920s witnessed an extra-ordinary flowering of literary and artistic creativity among African-Americans. Critics hailed the emergence of a 'new Negro' who took pride in the black race and its African heritage, and whose writings exposed and attacked discrimination, explored the black folk culture, and strove to create a unique African-American Literature. (1992 : preface: ix)

Claude McKay's poem "Africa" speaks much of African heritage:

Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!
Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Flame!
They went. The Darkness swallowed thee again.
Thou art the harlot, now thy time is done,

Of all the mighty nations of the Sun. (1953:40)

Once Africa was a good seat of civilization and of the great black empire of the East. T. S. Eliot's poem "Journey of Maggi" paints three wise men of the East who had gone to the West. McKay also puts it in "The Wise Men of The East":

Oh, one was black of the wise men of the East,
Who came with precious gifts to Jesus' birth,
A symbol all men equal were at least,
When Godhead condescended to the earth.
The Ethiopian in Jerusalem
Was human to the preacher of our Lord,

Yes, and a great Black Empire was the first,
To change itself into a Christian nation,
Long before Rome its pagan fetters burst
And purged itself for Jesus Christ's oblation.
From the high place where erstwhile they grew drunk
With power, oh God, how gutter-low have black men
Sunk! (1953:48)

The poet bemoans the present degraded condition of the blacks. This poem reflects his acute historic sense.

Two selfish giants – joined hands to make one historic blunder. The first is the white man and the second his agent from black Africa. They treacherously caught the illiterate black men from the African Jungles and sold them on the auction blocks to the white colonists. And during the period of four centuries an ordinary black man was reduced to absurdity in his life. His hands were in chains, his food in white man's hand and his family scattered as usual.

The only reason for this wretched situation was that he was born with, 'black

color, broad nose, flaring nostrils, turned up lips, heavy bones, prominent buttocks and tightly spiralled dark hair on head and body' (1991:16:37)

The anthropologist A. L. Kroeber has given a three-fold configuration of mankind that has been divided into the races of the Homo-sapiens: Negroid (black), Mangoloid (yellow) and Caucasoid (white); and how each of these three tries to prove its superiority over the other. (1972:131)

Human genes cannot be proved superior or inferior. But one thing is true that the genes get themselves modified in the changing circumstances and they create variations among the human-beings.

Pierre L. Van Den Berghe – has rightly put it:

Race is a socially defined term, and the members of society draw unwarranted conclusions from the external features of people.... And racism is a theory or doctrine in practice based on the inherited physical characteristics,... its abuse has given rise to 'prejudice' and 'discrimination'. (1991:16:37-38)

Harold Cruse, a black critic, also exposes the condition of a Negro living in America: From the beginning, the American Negro has existed as a colonial being. His enslavement coincided with the colonial expansion of European Powers, and [it] was nothing more or less than a condition of domestic colonialism. (1968:41)

Poets are generally regarded as the sensitive antennae of society- being aware of what is happening all around them. McKay, being racially conscious, could not help expressing in "The Negro's Tragedy":

It is the Negro's tragedy I feel
Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal
Because I know the keenness of his pen. (1953:50)

In the preface to his *Constab Ballads* (1912) he writes frankly.
Not that I ever openly rebelled; but the rebellion was in my heart, and it was

fomented by the inevitable rubs of daily life- trifles to most of my comrades, but to me, calamities and tragedies. To relieve my feelings, I wrote poems, and into them I poured my heart in its various moods. (Ibid:7)

He had fulfilled the preliminary and the most important condition – sharing and suffering the same old mental agonies of the black people. So he writes:

Only a thorn – crowned Negro and no white
Can penetrate into the Negro’s ken,
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
Which hides and buries him from other men. (Ibid:50)

In America, the white man was at the centre of the cultural-circle, and the black man was pushed to the periphery – McKay laughs at the white man’s diplomacy.

Our statesmen roam the world to set things right.
This Negro laughs and prays to God for light! (Ibid: 50)

With empathy he could hear the pangs of living a Jim-crowded life.

Life was very hard for the Negroes in America in the days when McKay wrote poetry. James Baldwin, a noted novelist and essayist, says that ‘America is a land of crippling attitudes and habits.’ (1961:75)

McKay describes in “The lynching” the white Americans’ barbarism and mob-spirit. Very often, he could see a Negro lynched, in the racial South.

His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.

All night a bright and solitary star

Hung pitifully o’er the swinging char.
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. (1953:37)

Lynching is the best example of the white man's cruelty.

Matthew Arnold- a Victorian poet and critic talks of the necessity of painting an object or a thing "as in itself it really is". (1965:35)

McKay is expert in painting the things just as they are in society. He has grasped a harsh social reality in his well-known poem "The Barrier"

I must not gaze at them although
Your eyes are dawning day;
I must not watch you as you go
Your sun-illuminated way.

I hear but I must never heed
The fascinating note,
Which, fluting like a river reed,
Comes from your trembling throat.

I must not see upon your face
Love's soft glowing spark;
For there's the barrier of race,
You're fair and I am dark. (1953:80)

The colour-line, that had worked out the magic of separation, had definitely moulded his sensibility. Circumstances, had put the blacks and the whites side by side, but they could not understand and appreciate each other. One more poem "The White House" exposes the social reality:

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;

But I possess the courage and the grace
To bear my anger proudly and unbent. (Ibid:78)

He also warns his race :
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate,
Against the potent poison of your hate. (Ibid:78)

Is it not the process of immunizing his people against the disease of ‘white-hatred’? His stance is defensive. And, he is planting some ideas in the minds of his people about how to handle or deal with the racial whites.

We find one more poem- “Tiger” with its marvellous- metaphoric lines in which again the harsh social reality surges up.

The white man is a tiger at my throat,
Drinking my blood as my life ebbs away. (Ibid:47)

Nowhere in the whole American poetry, we see such lines easily summarizing the situation of black man in America. But suddenly his mind tells him:

New systems will be built on race and hate,
The Eagle and the Dollar will command.
But never will I say with you that mud
Is bread for Negroes! Never will I yield! (Ibid: 47)

He professes the philosophy of never yielding to the oppressive whites.

McKay’s scathing criticism on the American social life is found in the following lines in “Enslaved”:

Oh when I think of my long suffering race,
For weary centuries, despised, oppressed
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place
In the great life-line of the Christian West; (Ibid: 42)
He is, no doubt, pleading for justice.

In one of his celebrated poems “Harlem Shadows” he writes:

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 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.

This was the poor lot of the black people in those days. However, he could read some precious things in the dancing girl. Her body was perfect, her ‘voice was like that of the blended flutes’. Really she was more than a dancing monkey. His racial pride compels him to write the following lines about the girl.

To me she seemed a proudly swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm. (1953:61)

Sigmund Freud, the psychologist, says that when the reality is unbearable, the poet wants to change it at the unconscious level of his mind. So he indulges in the day-dreaming. According to Freud, art is a kind of day-dreaming. The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish. (1938: 235) McKay was lost in day dreaming when he found the social reality beyond his control. In one of his poems he dreams of burning all the whites into the ‘sacrificial fire’ to liberate his people from the ugly social reality. So he confesses that “The burden from my bossom will not pass”. (1953:43)

The poet becomes introspective and suddenly realizes that he too is able,

powerful, brave and bold, though cornered on all sides by the whites. He sings in “To The White Fiends”:

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm 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: am I not Africa’s son,
Black of that black land where black deeds are done? (Ibid:38)

McKay is arousing, and challenging the ‘civilized savages’ – of course – the white people, and warns them that once aroused, the blacks are savages too.

Fortunately a person is born with two things: body and soul. His body is the material with which his soul or spirit works. And if a person uses all of his or her inmost mighty will power- perhaps, most of the problems of life may fail to threaten and will fade away. ‘If We Must Die’, highlights the philosophy of existing in the adverse environment. It was written in the time of race-riots which broke out in 1919. The American history has recorded such repeated race-riots in 1813, 1919, 1960, and 1968 respectively. (1991:16:37) What a Negro should do when surrounded by the wild conflagration of white-hatred?

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While around us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain, then even the monsters we defy

Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back! (Ibid:36)

Saturated with the 'racial pride' these lines put only one condition before the blacks: 'do or die', - and 'live and die' with dignity. Be tigers, not lambs, if circumstances demand it and challenge the oppressive whites. He has touched, like Charles Darwin- the philosophy of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence. This poem does not profess the philosophy of violence. "if need be, let us prove ourselves brave" and, to tell the truth, the blacks are made of that stuff. People are neither created superior, nor inferior by Nature. However, if there is a sense of superiority or inferiority, it dwells in the developed or undeveloped human self. And the black American history tells us that the blacks were never given chances for their development. Justice- full and proper justice was never given to them but it was 'rationed out' slowly. McKay's writing had the implied meaning that the chances or opportunities are not the free gifts that we get from society, but we have to create them for ourselves.

In "I Know My Soul" McKay writes:

I plucked my soul out of its sacred place,
And held it to the mirror of my eye,
To see it like a star against the sky,
A twitching body quivering in space,

A spark of passion shining on my face.

I need not gloom my days with futile dread,
Because I see a part and not the whole. (Ibid:56)
He pleads in “The Negro’s Fiend”
Oh, segregation is not the whole sin,
The Negroes need salvation within. (Ibid:51)

That is the real problem- according to him. So he criticizes his black people for lagging behind in the mainstream American civilization. He is telling his people to look within and get the resources for development.

In “Like A Strong Tree” he requests them to live in America:

Like a strong tree that in the virgin earth
Sends for its roots through rock and loam and clay,
And proudly thrives in rain or time of dearth,

So would I live in rich imperial growth,
Touching the surface and the depth of things,
Instinctively responsive to both,
Tasting the sweets of being, fearing no stings,
Sensing the subtle spell of changing forms,
Like a strong tree against a thousand storms. (Ibid:45)

The typical question is – ‘Can a Negro come up with the august light in the darkness of his life? His optimistic soul decorates his thoughts in the religious costumes in “To The White House” :

But the Almighty from the darkness drew
My soul and said: Even you shall be a light
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,

Thy dusky face I set among the white
For thee to prove thyself of higher worth;
Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth! (Ibid:38)

It is clear that he wants his people to be the torch-bearers of the whole mankind- when it passes – treads and trudges through darkness. He showed them the path to power that goes through the blackness – through the pride of the black race. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan is of the opinion that ‘we must change the nature of the individual. Literature has this supreme function of raising the quality of human beings.’ (1983:158) McKay tried to do the same through his poetry.

Conclusion

To conclude, what else he could do when he was caught in the hell of hatred and discrimination in the racial America? Therefore, while writing poetry he had to harp on his black sinews and his heart’s strings, to create a new better world that was to be born, of course, through the racial encounters with the white colonialist. One thing is transparent that he had set the tone of the black literary movement, moreover, of the black power movement that we see in the latter decades in America. In his poetry, there is racial consciousness. And it has the latent militancy and the seeds of rebellion. Values are something we must live for. Of course, he created in his poetry certain human values with which his race was to live and die.

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