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CLAUDE MCKAYS AS A LEADING LITERARY FORCE IN THE NEGRO LITERARY RENAISSANCE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This research article at the outset, vehemently sheds lights upon the iconic, proliferate literary force Claude Mckay, who is the strong fixed pillar to be the initiator and nurture for the growing of Negro literary Renaissance. This research article is proceeded with the discussion of Claude Mckay and his finest literary works which picturized the faithful record of everyday reality of contemporary life of black multitudes in America, who were subjected to humiliations, inner sense of alienation, overwhelming rootlessness, denial, deprivation, dehumanization, agony and angst in the clutch of white America. And finally, it states that the works of Claude Mackay brings forward the rough reality of Black existence in America, It also examines how Black Literature is marked by an undercurrent of misery, privation and oppression suffered by the blacks in an alien soil.

Keywords

Renaissance, Literary, Force, Blacks, America, Rootlessness, Angst, Deprivation, Humiliation, Reality, Existence.

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Black Literature is marked by an undercurrent of misery, privation and oppression suffered by the blacks in an alien soil. As a race, they have been exploited for centuries. Sartre comments that "it has had the horrible privilege of touching the depths of unhappiness" (*Black Orphans* 30). There has been of late an upsurge of interests all round in Black Literature. This term has come to mean, in the United States of America, the literary creations of men and women belonging to the ethnic group of African origin. They are called the Afro-Americans. These Afro-Americans are the descendants of the black labour force brought to the American soil from Africa during the era of Slave trade to work on the plantations. The black war, as Richard Wright points out, "held in bondage, stripped of his own culture, denied family life for centuries and made to labour for others" (P 7).

The blacks are said to have experienced denial, deprivation, dehumanization, agony and angst at the hands of Whites. As a result, the black writers, to use the words of Persy Shelley, "tell of the saddest tales" ("To a Skylark" 46). Their literature is replete with instances of the excesses committed by the white oppressor and the segregation suffered by the ethnic minority. In this sense, the Afro-American literature may even be considered racial and ethnic. Claude McKay echoes the same sentiment

"Only a thron-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.
So what I write is urged out of my blood..."

(*The Negro's Tragedy* 50)

However, it should be made clear that the Black American literature has exerted a wider appeal and come to assume a larger literary significance. With the proclamation of the Emancipation Act of 1863, the millions of black slaves in the United States commenced their rather long journey towards attaining their civil liberties hitherto unknown to them. Their freedom of thought and freedom of speech having been officially recognized and granted, they began to relate their innermost feelings and personal experiences more spiritedly and

enthusiastically than before. In this context, the pertinent query raised by Jean-Paul Sartre is worth recalling, “when you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises” (P 5). Sartre asserts that the blacks woke up to a realization of their being and that it was “an awakening to consciousness” (7). They spoke about themselves, their State of being, their fetishes and, in short, they poured out their hearts.

Black literature, which is also called Afro-American literature, is by and large, reminiscent in character. There is an inexplicable longing for their ancestral homeland, Africa and cultural heritage. Jean Wagner points out the exaltation of the pre-colonial civilization of Africa. “All hope for a better future is based on the rediscovery and the celebration of the race’s past” (Wagner 3). Another dominant characteristic about the Black literature is the presence of a cultural dualism. The Blacks are torn between their love for their homeland with all its rites and conventions and the magical spell cast over them by their present western methods of living and traditions. Wavering between these two extremes of civilizations, one primitive and the other sophisticated, they often find themselves stricken with an inner conflict. Charles I. Glickesberg put it thus:

“There is the inexorable dilemma: if the Negro writer retreats into himself and develops his racial potentialities he is departing from the norms of American culture; if he imitates that culture, he may cease to be himself and destroy both his uniqueness and his creative vitality. (P 51)

It is this cultural divide that prompts Sartre to observe, “He has become split and he no longer coincides with himself” (Black Orphans 12). Thus, it may be said that the creative writer is confronted with an identity crisis which gets reflected in his creative work as well. A search for identity, tracing back to the roots and a longing to belong to, very often become the thematic concerns of the black writer: Oladele Taiwo observes:

“.....it was necessary for the black man to reassure himself of his pride in being black because the blackness has become a shameful thing, an undignified state.....” (Taiwo 49)

The black writer feels the compulsive urge to define and create the right identity of the blacks. He does so by asserting the superiority of the blacks over the writers and creating a black consciousness and racial pride in the minds of the blacks. Though the 1863 Act marked a significant milestone in the history of the emancipation of black Americans, they had begun to write or produce their own literature about 117 years earlier. The oldest extant work is a poem titled “Bars Fight” written by a black American, Lucy Terry, in 1746. Jupiter Hammon was the first black American to have got a poem printed in 1760. Phillis Wheatly was a fascinating poetess who was the first to voice the love of liberty and protest against tyranny in 1770. George Moses Horton (1797-1883) and later George B. Vashon (1820-78) established themselves as representatives voicing the concerns of the aggrieved people. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was a well-known abolitionist writer. Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906) may be considered to be the first prominent writer that the black race produced. Immediately after World War I (1912), there was an unprecedented literary and artistic flowering among the blacks in the United States. The Black American literature is greatly indebted to such makers of Black Literature as W.E.B. DuBois, Fenton Johnson, Jean Tommer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, Frank Marshall Davis, Richard Wright and a few others who brought out their artistic creations. “That sudden flowering in literature” (Cooper 297) during the post-war period snowballed into a movement. Alain Locke coined a term and called it the Negro Renaissance. The period between the two

World Wars in the United States is generally referred to by this term. Any attempt to go for study of Afro-American literature would be incomplete if it does not include Claude.

According to James Weldon Johnson, "Claude Mckay was one of the great forces in bringing about what is now called the Negro Literary Renaissance" (P 33). Alain Locke described Mckay as "the daystar of the bright dawn" (P 405). In the words of Jean Wagner, "Claude Mckay remains beyond a doubt the immediate forerunner and one of the without whom it could never have achieved what it did" (P 197). Claude Mckay was born in the parish of Clarendon in Sunny Ville, Jamaica who was then a British colony on the West Indies, on 15 September 1889. He had his early education at a denominational school in Jamaica on the British pattern. This nurtured in him a sense of being a young Eriton. Mckay's father, Thomas Francis Mckay, and mother, Anne Elizabeth Edwards Mckay, were peasant farmers. They developed in young Mckay an appreciation for the purity of black blood and a pride in racial heritage. He inherited the universal spirit of love from his mother and the spirit of individuality from his father.

Claude Mckay had an access to the works of Dante, Milton, Pope, Keats and Shelly, through his brother Uriah Theophilus and an English man Walter Jekyll, a folklorist. Mckay came to America in 1912 and enrolled at Tuskegee Institute to study agriculture and then at the University of Kansas. He never took his study of agriculture seriously but devoted most of his time and energy to English composition and writing essays. Mckay strongly believed, "If I could not graduate as a bachelor of arts or science, I would graduate as a poet" (*A Long Way from Home* 4).

Mckay wrote poetry first and he took to prose fiction later. He had published, when he was in Jamaica in 1912, two volumes of dialect poetry. *Songs of Jamaica* contained poems on the lives of the Jamaican people and the picturesque surroundings of the country side. *Constab Bellads* was mostly a personal account of his experience as an island constable. The sheer beauty and vitality of his dialect poetry earned him the name of "the Bobby Burns of Jamaica". Mckay entered the American literary scene in 1917 under the pseudonym of Eli Edwards. His two poems "Harlem Dancer" and "Invocation" appeared in *The Seven Arts* magazine. Mckay's best known poem was a powerful, terse and dramatic sonnet "If we must die" written in response to the bloody race riots of 1919. Almost all black magazines and newspapers immediately carried the sonnet and brought him instant popularity. He began to be looked upon as a militant and defiant poet.

Mckay's first book of verse to appear outside Jamaica was *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* published in London in 1920 with a preface to I.A. Richards. Richards states that the poems claim a place beside the best work that the present generation is producing in this country" (P 13). *Harlem Shadows*, a collection of poems published in 1922, was Mckay's first American publication. He has to his credit publication of three such novels like 1. *Home to Harlem* (1928), 2. *Banjo* (1929) and 3. *Banana Bottom* (1933). Mckay's first novel *Home to Harlem* sold more than 50,000 copies during its first year, becoming the first best-selling novel by an American Negro" (Larson 66). A.L. McLeod makes a pertinent observation thus:

"Actually, all that Mckay had done was to take a wide canvas and paint in bright rather than in pastel colours the often heroic struggle for survival in a celebrated setting of deprivation and distress... *Home to Harlem* is, then, a reliable depiction of life in the largest black belt in America in the 1920's...." (McLeod 68)

Mackay's second novel *Banjo* can be regarded essentially as a sequel to *Home to Harlem*. The revolt against the White standardized civilization in favour of the free and instinctive life

which the irresponsible and uneducated man can still manage to live is even more intense here than in *Home to Harlem*. McLeod comments:

“Again Mckay is an invaluable source of sociological information gleaned from observation and experience; again he demonstrates that black life is not a replication of white bourgeois existence.” (P 68)

Mckay’s third and last novel *Banana Bottom* shows a greater degree of artistic perfection compared to his earlier novels. As Wayne Cooper puts it, “In its unity of style and theme, as well as in the richness of its detail, *Banana Bottom* represents the high point of Mckay’s career as a novelist” (P 35).

The black diaspora was characterized by excessive movement and overwhelming rootlessness. While they longed to cling on to their cultural past, the western civilization made inroads into their very being. As a result, they felt more and more alienated. Driven by this inner sense of alienation and threatened by the everyday reality of social segregation, the blacks were an accursed lot. And Claude Mckay has attempted to capture and project their dilemma and frustrations with astounding clarity and vividness. Mckay’s writings in general and particularly his three novels reveal his “passionate gesture of identification with the people” (Scott 300). To be precise, Mckay’s novels are a faithful record of contemporary life for he has produced in print “the indignities and humiliations that make up the common experience of the black multitudes in America.

Like the majority of American black populace, Mckay’s characters in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* have no permanent living place of their own. They make up the floating populations of the industrialized “jungles of civilization.” (P 136)

They are always on the move. Jake’s vagrancy takes him from Petersburg to Harlem through Brest, France, London and New York and again to Pittsburg, Chicago and Marseilles. Similarly Ray has travelled from Haiti to Philadelphia, Harlem Pittsburg, Washington, Australia and then to Marseilles. While Jake is portrayed as “one black amoor that nourished a perfect contempt for place (*Home to Harlem*” 42). Ray is described as having “lived like a vagabond poet... quitting jobs when he wanted to go on a dream wish or love drunk, without being beholden to anybody” (*Banjo* 65). Almost all the other characters also show a tendency for shifting places. It is indeed a reflection of a facet of the author’s own character. As has been pointed out by Martha Gruening, “Claude Mckay is another vagabond poet who has brought a somewhat similar experience to rich fruition in his novels”. That the characters drift from place to place underscores their lack of deep attachment to society. They are excessively rootless. Being uprooted from their native land, they are cast upon an alien soil. Thus, they are unable to forge any meaningful and lasting relationship with the men and women around them. Ray is a typical case of a rootless exile. His rootlessness is complete to the point that “he enjoyed his role of a wandering black without patriotic or family ties” (*Banjo* 136).

The title of the novel *Home to Harlem* is ironic because their neither Jake nor his creator Mckay finds a real home in Harlem. Jake is in high spirits when he is about to return to Harlem after two years of wandering in France and England. He shouts “Oh, boy! Harlem for mine! Take me home to Harlem! Mister ship!” (*Home to Harlem* 9). But soon he is fed up with Harlem and moves out. Richard K. Barksdale makes a pointed reference saying: “As the novel ends, Jake is on his way to Chicago to find another home... They will keep moving on in a fruitless quest and never truly find a ‘home’ – not even in Harlem” (Barksdale 344). Mckay attempts to portray the harsh reality of contemporary black existence in America. In short, it may be said

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that his plot, incidents, characters and narrative reveal the disoriented and truncated lives of the millions of blacks living there.

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