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"THE CONCEPT OF THE MASK IN AFRO-AMERICAN  
POETRY OF THE 1960's"

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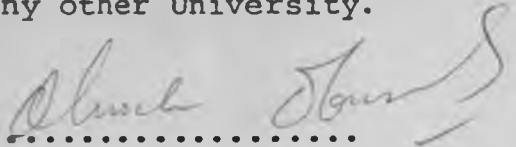
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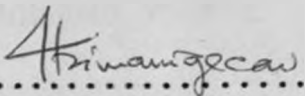
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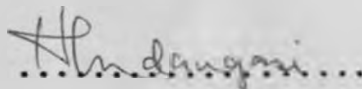
  
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THE CONCEPT OF THE MASK IN AFRO-AMERICAN POETRY  
OF THE 1960's

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THESIS ABSTRACT:

In the first chapter there is an attempt to trace the development of the Afro-American folklore. Through the examination of the different genres we are able to assess the importance they have for the black Americans. This chapter also serves to negate the myth that black Americans have never had a literature and an aesthetic of their own. By examining the folklore we are able to destroy some of the predominant myths about black slaves and the entire slave system. Such myths depict slaves either as contented and ever-happy creatures or as little children who revel in stealing from their masters. Their major trait is seen as docility and deceit. Going through the animal tales, stories dealing with slavery, work songs, and spirituals reveals a different reality. In unmasking the slaves, we find them to be sensitive people who wore various masks in order to survive in a hostile environment that gave them no opportunity to be themselves or what they wanted to be. The black man's consciousness was thus masked in songs, stories and laughter. Both at an individual and

societal level the mask became a distinguishing mark on the personality of the black race.

During the Harlem Renaissance, the mask the black man wears assumes different dimensions. According to poets like Claude McKay the black man is the sensual man who is close to nature and is untainted by the modern industrial world. At the same time this rising black intelligentsia was attempting to assert black manhood and to instil pride in black people. The literature produced by writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, McKay, DuBois, etc. was in itself a reaction against white prejudices. Sponsored by white publishers and critics, the black writers wrote what was expected of them. What emerged was, in the words of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "...the mask that grins and lies". There were those who wanted to write only of the lofty deeds of the black race - which meant writing of the "good" things America had conceded the black race: doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. Yet there were those like Langston Hughes who wanted to portray the anguish and hurt of the black man. Most of the writers saw the black man's problem as being solved through his acceptance into the American mainstream. The coming of Richard

Wright destroyed this illusion. More than any other writer he explored the root causes of the problems besetting the black race. Native Son is his statement to the world. Bigger's struggle is the black man's struggle in a racist and hostile America. He is a product of this environment. It is not only a question of race alone but also of class and economics. Bigger Thomas symbolises Wright's warning to America to either solve the problem of Bigger or be faced with the consequences.

During the 1960's we are dealing with the era of revolt throughout America. This is the era that saw the emergence of civil rights struggle which gave black people the illusion that freedom would come through integration in housing, busing, education and other facets of American life. Nationalist movements sprang up and drew a parallel between the oppressed in the Third World and America. This facilitated the growth of consciousness among the black populace. In the fore-front of this struggle were groups such as The Black Muslims, The Black Panthers, and Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.). The cultural arm of this movement was the Black Arts Movement. Black writers saw their works as weapons to be used in the liberation of black people. No longer fascinated by images from the white world,

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these writers drew from the experiences of black people. But some of the writers tended to mystify these experiences. It is on the above theoretical basis that we examine the poetry of the sixties. In this respect Imamu Amiri Baraka assumes a central role. In tracing his development, both literary and ideological, we are in fact engaging in a process of self-discovery by black people. We also examine him in relation to other literary figures who were out to create a "street corner" literature. What underlies the "cool-dude" image is what we are out to explore. Slogans such as "black is beautiful" are ultimately used as cliches to cover up an underlying barrenness of the correct ideological framework. The idolization of everything black is itself escapist. One needs a dialectical approach towards comprehending black people's problems. While the former mask of the "humble-turn-the-other-cheek-nigger" is negated, a new mask is created in its place. The act of mask-wearing is in-built in the system. This means that it can only be changed with the change of conditions that have given its rise.

OLUOCH OBURA

December 1980



INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this work is to offer a study in the concept of the mask in Afro-American literature. So far there has been no systematic study of this concept in black literature. Consequently, there has been a lack of concrete material dealing with this particular branch of knowledge. The present work, therefore, is merely a pioneering venture that attempts to examine and trace the development of the mask in black literature. Faced by environmental pressure, black literature tends to portray problems that black people encounter and their relationship with the wider antagonistic society. These are recorded in the literary pursuits of the race. The present work draws not only from the folk material of the slave period but also from written sources in black literature. The written black literature that the author deals with are simply what he considers significant landmarks in the development of black literature. Of special significance is the literature of the 1960s which forms the core of the study.

The author uses the sociological approach in examining these works. This methodology entails placing literary works within their social setting. By so doing one sees how the two factors affect each

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other. This method implies evaluating this literature from a human point of view. Its advantage rises from the fact that it offers a much wider perspective in the study of the mask concept. This has naturally led to a wide variety of works to be examined. These works vary greatly in style and content. While conceding the importance of balancing literary excellence to the subject matter, the author has, however, concentrated his analysis more on the latter element. The functions of black literature and how the new black writers view their works form an integral part of this approach.

Wearing the mask involves either a conscious or an unconscious effort on the part of the wearer to project himself as somebody other than what he is. The world only sees the mask but what underlies it is hardly recognised. Traditionally wearing the mask was a way of effacing oneself in the face of a hostile and racist environment. At other times wearing the mask might even take the form of posturing - "the cool dude", "the bad nigger", etc. Blackness was thus ritualised and turned into a sort of religion. Sometimes we begin to extol such qualities without questioning them and how they contribute to the development of the individual psyche let alone race.

It is within such a dimension that the whole process becomes emasculating, escapist and self-deceptive. Taken a little further, such a situation can and does quite often result in the character living the mask. This process develops into negation of the self and of the reality of the environment that surrounds one. At best, much of this tough talk can be viewed as constituting the evolving consciousness of the Afro-American. No doubt such actions just embarrass the status quo and do not even shake it. This is what Malcolm X attempted to render asunder by his analysis of revolution. He told blacks not to imagine that they were engaged in any kind of revolution by simply going out into the streets and engaging in protest marches or by totting guns without any meaningful direction.<sup>2</sup> Most of the black intellectual voices wrote of this kind of activity for this is what was demanded by the period.<sup>3</sup> Amiri Baraka correctly notes that most black writers saw whites as "the eternal enemies of Black people."

...many of us feel since we are "anti-establishment" that that makes us heroes. Nonsense. Most such anti-establishmentarianism is

just petit-bourgeois anarchism  
and failure to take up the  
responsibility.....

.....  
We need a poetry that  
directly describes the  
situation of the people  
and tells us how to change  
it.<sup>4</sup>

But as he correctly observes, this is difficult due  
to the class nature of the poets.

.....many poets, &c., in U.S. are  
petit-bourgeois - i.e. the class  
that vacillates. Revolving like  
tops between bourgeois interests  
+ consciousness + the interests +  
consciousness of the oppressed  
masses. The struggle to change  
that consciousness where it does  
not vacillate is a revolutionary  
struggle and it can only be  
achieved by struggling to change  
external reality! Earlier our  
own poems came from an enraptured  
patriotism that screamed against  
whites as the eternal enemies of  
Black people, as the sole cause  
of our disorder + oppression.  
The same subjective mystification  
led to mysticism, metaphysics,  
spookism, &c., rather than dealing  
with reality, as well as an ultimately  
reactionary nationalism that served  
no interests but our newly emerging  
Black bureaucratic elite and petit-  
bourgeois, so that they would have  
control over their Black market.<sup>5</sup>

The mystification that Baraka talks about is what writers such as Baldwin have continued to engage in. As one of the great theoreticians of black literature, Baldwin feels that the problems that black people face in America can be solved through love and understanding between the races. The problem, according to him, is white people's "inhumanity and fear" which causes them to make black people endure what they do.<sup>6</sup> Baldwin recommends that black people should love the whites since they are brothers and therefore their differences are of a family nature.

What the Americans do not realize is that a war between brothers, in the same cities, on the same soil, is not a racial war but a civil war.<sup>7</sup>

The only problem according to Baldwin is that the whites deny the blacks. It is Baldwin's further contention that the blacks should claim their white ancestry.<sup>8</sup> The road toward this can only be achieved when we ignore the issue of race when dealing with people.<sup>9</sup> Only this lays bare the avenues of love into which blacks must welcome white people. He says:

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....we, with love, shall  
force our brothers to see  
themselves as they are, to  
cease fleeing from reality  
and begin to change.<sup>10</sup>

The reality that Baldwin talks about is the reality  
of racial oppression and exploitation. As he  
correctly notes:

...the blacks, have been, and  
are, the victims of a system  
whose only fuel is greed, whose  
only god is profit. We know  
that the fruits of this system  
have been ignorance, despair  
and death, and we know that  
the system is doomed because  
the world can no longer afford  
it - if, indeed, it ever could  
have. And we know that, for  
the perpetuation of this system,  
we have all been mercilessly  
brutalized...<sup>11</sup>

The solution to all this is in bringing about a  
revolution as Baldwin says. But this is not in the  
sense that Malcolm used the concept to denote change  
of system and values. Baldwin says that we should  
try and bring a revolution in the American conscience,  
which is where everything has to begin.<sup>12</sup> The point  
one is attempting to put across is the confusion  
rampant within the black intelligentsia as to what  
exactly is the problem facing the black man in America

and how to solve that problem. Despite Baldwin's shortcomings, we still notice his concern with the black problem. This cannot be minimised. Most of the black literature that emerges during the sixties is ideological and attacks existing institutions while affirming blackness. It is a literature that created its own aesthetic standards and saw itself as serving the cause of the black man.

Most of the writers tended to mystify the nature of the black man and the solutions to his problems. The process of de-mystification - which in essence involves the removal of the mask - is part of what the present study attempts to explore. The author, therefore, departs from the traditional approach adopted by most critics of merely examining the aesthetic side of literature.<sup>13</sup> This study should be of sociological and literary value. The student of socio-psychology should find it interesting in terms of the psychological twists that prevail in black characters in their attempts to come to terms with life in America. This is made much clearer by examining the mask and how it responds to society at different times and places. Another added value of the study is the re-affirmation of

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the existence of a black literature and aesthetics that is guided by its own laws. But at the same time it provides a challenge to black writers to crystallize and infuse black aesthetics with high literary standards, especially when one is dealing with street-corner literature. It opens a chapter in the exploration of the underlying myths and assumptions within Black American literature.



CHAPTER ONE

THE AFRO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

The study of Afro-American Literature can be better and fully understood by going back to its roots, that is, the mass of unwritten literature whose themes continue to influence the black written literature. For us to comprehend this unwritten literature, which is called folklore by some scholars,<sup>1</sup> it is imperative that we examine the background from which it was created and the circumstances that led to it. With the rise of capitalism as an economic and social order<sup>2</sup> there arose a necessity to search not only for new markets for the finished products but also for the source of raw materials to keep the industries in Europe running. Voyages of discovery assumed important dimensions in this new economic order. The New World became an important source of raw materials to keep the cotton, sugar and tobacco industries going in the metropolises. The question of labour became very crucial in these new plantations. With the limited population of Europe in the sixteenth century, the free labourers necessary to cultivate the staple crops of sugar, tobacco and cotton in the New World could not have supplied in quantities adequate to permit large-scale production of these crops. Slavery was necessary for this, and to get slaves, the Europeans turned first to the aborigines and then to

Africa.<sup>3</sup> Blacks were stolen from Africa to go and work on the lands stolen from the native population in the Americas. This was because their labour was cheap. The native Indian had been exterminated through brutal force and by the spread of diseases brought by the new comers. White labour was insufficient and more expensive to maintain under the indenture system. Therefore, the planters turned to Africa and thus the African had to be fitted into a system already developed. The features of the man, his hair, colour and dentrifice, his "subhuman" characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the later rationalisations to justify a simple economic fact: It was cheapest and best.<sup>4</sup> There remains no doubt, therefore, as to the fact that it was European commerce, and especially British capitalism, that led to the slave traffic between Africa and the Americas.<sup>5</sup> The African slave suddenly found himself confronted by a new world with new values, and a strange people. One can imagine the damaging psychological impact this had on the slaves. Elkins notes:

Much of his past had been annihilated; nearly every prior connection had been severed.....The old values, the sanctions, the standards, already unreal, could no longer furnish him guides for conduct,

for adjusting to the expectations of a complete new life. Where then was he to look for new standards, new cues - who would furnish them now? He could now look to none but his master, the one to whom the system had committed his entire being: the man upon whose will depended his food, his shelter, his sexual connections, whatever moral instruction he might be offered, whatever "success" was possible within the system, his very security - In short, everything.<sup>6</sup>

Elkins' thesis is not totally acceptable because he credits whatever the slave achieved to the master. The struggle of the slave to survive is subordinated to the plantation owner. This is erroneous because while there existed a dialectical relationship between the world of the slave and that of the master, the former's world assumed a life and order of its own, independent of the latter. The slaves had to develop a new world view, one that would not pose a threat to their existence in the new world. Consequently, the slave developed survival instincts not only by playing on the bias and prejudice of the master<sup>7</sup> but also by creating a culture of his own. Black folklore was therefore created by and for

- No  
He is  
being  
realistic

the black masses. It forms part of their everyday life. As such this culture expresses their attitudes and portrays their feelings. Some of the genres such as the songs were created in action. They are an expression of the black man's physical and psychological interaction with the world around him. Work songs were created when working, spirituals were sung during hardships and reflect the atmosphere surrounding their creation. In other words, we can see different stages in the development of black folklore by examining the different genres from different periods. But this raises the question as to whether it is possible for black culture to develop under the American system. Harold Preece contends that under capitalism black culture has been too long stunted<sup>o</sup> and that its extensive development is impulsive:

When one surveys the development of the Negro culture, he realises that it has been one of evasion, whatever its intrinsic beauty. The educational and economic limitations of a dominantly white society have forced the Negro to express himself in ambiguous terms. Thus the folklore hero, John, always outwits his master through cunning; thus, Negro songs often satirise

the white man without the latter's being aware of any mockery. And while this quality is highly admirable for protective purposes, it obviously impedes further cultural development.<sup>9</sup>

While Preece's analysis is significant one cannot help but observe that he seems to see the cultural development of an oppressed people as only occurring in a society where oppression is non-existent. In the first place Preece is forgetting that in any class society there are always two cultures: one for the oppressed and the other for the oppressor. If oppressed people always waited to develop their culture when they attained full freedom then there would be no culture at all to express their condition. The people themselves always develop their own forms of expression and in most cases cultivate their artistic works independent of the master's. In this case we see the rise and development of black culture within America - it is a culture that is struggling against the stifling influence of capitalist America. Hence, this culture becomes an expression of the black people's struggle. The form which this culture takes is totally different from that of the western world. The linguistic medium while originating from English is different and is definitely identifiable as black.

This is evidenced in the way blacks from the ghettos and rural south speak to one another, in their songs, jokes, writings and other forms of oral expression. The core of black literature deals with the black experience within an exploitative and hostile environment. At the same time this literature also helps the black man to come to terms with his surroundings. Through jazz, blues and spirituals we feel and sense the psychological anguish tearing apart the black man in a society that thrives on and nurtures violence. To a certain extent, these musical forms are used to transcend the violence both psychologically and spiritually. The animal stories, especially the Brer Rabbit and the Signifying Monkey provide the black man with a sense of joy, identity, humour and wit. They also serve as a pointer to societal ills and prejudices. The toasts, the dozens and other forms of verbal communication help to fill the vacuity in black lives. At the same time they serve not only as a source of emotional release while providing a sense of masculine identity but also offer good entertaining competition.<sup>10</sup> But for the purposes of this study - which is an attempt to trace and examine the idea of mask wearing in black American literature - I shall only deal with the genres: animal tales, spirituals, and stories related to the slave period.

ANIMAL TALES:

Amongst the animal stories the ones concerning Brer Rabbit and the Signifying Monkey are the ones often told. In the story "Rabbit teaches Bear a Song"<sup>11</sup> we see how the Rabbit survives through the use of his wit and intellect. Miss Reyford promises to give her daughter to Brer Rabbit if he tells her who has been killing her hogs. In order to acquire the girl, Rabbit cunningly uses Bear. The latter is made to look like a fool and is a subject of ridicule. He is gullible and does not question the Rabbit's intention. When Rabbit sings

Who killed Mr Reyford's  
hogs,  
Who killed Mr Reyford's  
hogs?

the foolish Bear is the first to signal his own doom by answering

Nobody but me.

He is shot but manages to escape death and goes out to revenge on Brer Rabbit. The latter escapes through his quick thinking: he promises his adversary honey. It is the Bear's gullibility and foolishness that finally causes his death by the bees. What is glaring in this story is Brer Rabbit's fragile and diminutive physique placed in direct contrast to Mr Bear's massive body and

overpowering strength, and Rexford's power. But he uses his brains to defeat the two. In "Playing Godfather"<sup>12</sup> the Rabbit is depicted as being sly and greedy. He cheats Misters Fox and Possum. He is the kind of person who does not like working and would do anything to avoid it. He concocts a plan whereby instead of working in the farm with his other two colleagues he has to go away on the pretext of performing this or that task. In this respect Brer Rabbit expects to reap where he has not sown. His friends do not seem to be aware of this side of his character. Rabbit not only succeeds in avoiding work but also in eating the whole keg of butter alone. As usual he gets away with it and makes the wrong person suffer - Possum. The guile and trickery of the Rabbit makes him very unpopular. What astounds one is his ability to survive every type of hardship. What is important to note here is the inferior position of the rabbit against the other larger animals. His identifying characteristics of guile and wit help him to survive in the hostile jungle. The blacks saw their position as being identical to that of the rabbit and thereby what was important to them was the symbolic meaning of Rabbit's survival techniques. In "The Watcher Blinded"<sup>13</sup> Rabbit manages to cheat the wolf out of a whole slaughtered ox by pretending to be a girl in four different occasions. The wolf's weakness for the opposite sex causes him to give away all the meat to the "girls". When matters get on to



a head Rabbit hides in a hollow tree to escape from Wolf's jaws. Before the wolf can even fetch an axe to cut down the tree, Rabbit manages to delude and blind his watcher - the frog. He gets away and the frog ends up losing his tail on account of his negligence. Again, as in the other story, somebody else always suffers for the wrongs committed by the rabbit. He is always on the run and is rarely portrayed as violent except in a few cases. In one story we are told how Brother Fox had been trying to get Brother Rabbit for a long time.<sup>14</sup> A party is organized and all the animals are invited except the Rabbit - this is calculated to frustrate Brother Rabbit and to hopefully make him give himself up. Things take a different turn and Rabbit smartens himself up and gets his shotgun and forces his way into the party.

He walked over the table,  
got all he wanted to eat.  
Walked over the bar and  
got himself all he wanted  
to drink. He reached  
over and grabbed the Lion's  
wife and he danced with her.  
Grabbed the Ape's wife and  
did it to her. Then he  
shit in the middle of the  
floor and he walked out.<sup>15</sup>

Brer Rabbit's capacity to resort to violence is manifest

here. He will fight when slighted and does not take any insult. In the above story, he challenges the whole animal kingdom single-handed - a rare manifestation of bravery. Thus he is deemed as a force to reckon with. Nobody can ignore him and hope to get very far. Brer Rabbit emerges as the hero. He is the victim of organised and calculated group action not only to ostracise him but also ensure his elimination. The courage and determination he exhibits win our admiration.

Another animal that recurs in the stories is the monkey who is portrayed as somebody who likes causing trouble. He has enough guile and trickery to get out of tight spots. At times one would like to look at him as the clever fool who is an underdog among the larger animal species. In "The Signifying Monkey and the Lion" the monkey is presented as a trouble maker and a sadist who hates to see peace and quiet. In such moments he decides to "start some shit". An important aspect of the monkey stories is that he is always in charge of the situation. He decides when to make things happen to please himself. Nothing pleases him more than to see the larger and stronger animals fight. In the ensuing fight between the lion and the elephant, the former emerges "more dead than alive". The lion encounters the monkey after this humiliating adventure, and the latter decides to add insult to injury by threatening to kick his "...ass some more". From the tree the monkey slips

and falls and is caught by the lion. But he manages to outwit him and jump "clear of sight". In the other stories between the monkey and the Baboon, the latter is always the loser. When they play "cooncan" or "pool" the monkey with ease and grace and a lot of flamboyance wins heavily.<sup>17</sup>

What emerges out of these monkey and rabbit tales are characteristics that the white world has often associated with the black man. In the case of the rabbit we notice the incredible indolence which he seems to nurture. These stories are created by black characters in a racist and exploitative society. One wonders whether they are trying to portray the black man's stereotype. Even when we look at the character of the monkey we notice that he is playful, cheeky, and almost childlike in his attitudes and behaviour. It is no secret that white America has often looked at black people through the same eye as is used for seeing the monkey and the rabbit. In other words, these stories serve as a social commentary on the bias and prejudices of American society. It is justified to say that they do fulfil the personality stereotype that has characterized black people in America both in the fictional and real world. Amongst the qualities associated with the blacks are obedience, fidelity, humility, docility, cheerfulness. He has also been viewed as the untamed

savage, the brute with the Incredible sexual prowess. These are the traits that have been labelled on the black man. Elkins, in making a study of slavery and its effects both on the master and the slave notes:

Absolute power for him (master) meant absolute dependency for the slave - the dependency not of the developing child but of the perpetual child. For the master, the role most aptly fitting such a relationship would naturally be that of a father.....He must be ready to cope with all the qualities of the child, exasperating as well as ingratiating. He might conceivably have to expect in this child - besides his loyalty, docility, humility, cheerfulness, and (under supervision) his diligence - such additional qualities as irresponsibility, playfulness, silliness, laziness, and (quite possibly) tendencies to lying and stealing.<sup>18</sup>

A possible hypothesis that one can draw from the above is that in the collection of the tales, which was mostly done by whites, societal prejudices crept in. What one is trying to advance is that it is possible that the

story tellers shaped their stories to fit what was expected, by whites, of black people. In this case one remains ignorant of the true nature of the monkey and the rabbit. In other words, we can rightly argue that the monkey and the rabbit were all mask wearers. The dependency complex that Elkins is talking about is only apparent. It is meant to delude. It hides the true nature of the "underdog" and his intentions towards his adversaries. As we have noted in the above stories, the rabbit and the monkey who signify the position of the underdog, are not as vulnerable as they outwardly appear. We see them scheming and embarrassing the much larger and stronger animals like the elephant and the lion. The monkey and Brer Rabbit use their mental prowess and ability to outwit the larger animals. If they - the monkey and Brer Rabbit - appear dependent it is occasioned by physical force of the larger and stronger animals. But mentally they are alert. Consequently, the characters can be viewed as a conscious depiction of the black people under the yoke of oppression. These stories with their rural background, maintain the monkey and the rabbit as their heroes. They are always struggling against the larger and stronger animals. Only their wit, guile, trickery and quick thinking save them from total destruction. Brer Rabbit sees the world as a hostile jungle<sup>19</sup> where

it is not necessarily the strongest who must win. The rabbit does not lament his smallness and is determined to fight his way out of difficult situations.<sup>20</sup> Brer Rabbit is not one who is only acted upon, he also acts to change situations as in the story when he goes to the uninvited Bear party and "messes up" everybody. A parallel tends to emerge between the Rabbit's seemingly "thoughtless" acts and the black man's problems in America. The Rabbit is determined to get his share of the pie, come what may. The Rabbit being part of the animal kingdom has, impliedly, contributed to the development of that kingdom. The Afro-American has contributed to the creation and development of the American system but has been kept out of the diners' table. If the weak Brer Rabbit can get a gun and walk down to Brer Bear's place and assert himself so can the black man. The lesson to be gotten is one of protest - protest in the face of societal injustices. The line of argument we are trying to develop in this case is the relevance of these animal tales to the people who have created them. While appearing simplistic, these tales are in actual fact very complex. The monkey might look like a child with his signifying antics but he is cool and calculating. Neither is Brer Rabbit a mere clown when he dances with the Lion's wife (the lion being king of the jungle) and fucks the Ape's

*Wagner*

wife. What is glaring is the Rabbit's violation of very sacred taboos concerning sex and social life in America. Nor can a mere child, personified in the monkey, cause two sensible grown-ups to fight as in the case of the lion and the elephant. These are the problems that are raised in our minds as we go through these tales and witness the acts of survival of the "underdogs" which Roger Abrahams interprets as mere sadism as a result of repressed male sexuality.<sup>21</sup>

Roger Abrahams is being stereotypical in his analysis by interpreting these acts at a mere sensual level - a level at which blacks have been commonly conceived.

#### SPIRITUALS:

Spirituals have been defined as a body of folk-songs of a more or less religious nature, fairly loose in structure, generally designed for group responsive singing.<sup>22</sup> These songs sung by black Americans reflect both their spiritual and physical outlook. These songs are strongly influenced by christianity and consequently most of what they deal with is viewed through christian eyes. Spirituals, emanating from the time of slavery, reflect in their intensity the black man's attitude toward his physical and psychological bondage in the new world. These songs, in the words of DuBois, are the articulate message of the slave to the world.<sup>23</sup> They are

.....the music of an  
unhappy people, of the  
children of disappointment;  
they tell of death and  
suffering and unvoiced  
longing toward a truer  
world, of misty wanderings  
and hidden ways.<sup>24</sup>

Looking at the soil out of which the spirituals grew we can determine it as the African environment. John Lovell in "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual" observes that under new conditions blacks expressed themselves in spirituals.<sup>25</sup> This was one of the safest avenues of expression in that the slaves while appearing to give a celestial meaning to their songs in fact did attach a lot of secular importance to them without endangering their own personalities. These spirituals were in fact a mask that helped the slaves to go through the trying periods. The spirituals served as a bond that tied the slaves together in their use of its code which was only comprehensible to them. The mask of the spirituals was for protection against the white world. The spirituals contain much more than what appears on the surface. If one is to get any real meaning out of them, then they require a much deeper analysis. According to Russel Ames, the intense subtlety and irony found in these spirituals is primarily due to the social



conditions in America<sup>26</sup> which are often threatening the black man with reprisals in case he shows any consciousness. This is a point often misunderstood or ignored by many writers - especially white writers. Their analyses are often based on racial prejudice, false assumptions and a total ignorance of black culture. Newman I. White, a prominent collector of folksongs, says of the Afro-American:

In his songs I find him,  
as I have found him  
elsewhere, a most naive  
and unanalytical-minded  
person, with a sensuous  
joy in religion;  
thoughtless, careless,  
unidealistic, rather  
fond of boasting,  
predominantly cheerful,  
but able to derive  
considerably from a  
grouch; occasionally  
suspicious, charitably  
inclined toward the  
white man, and capable  
of gorgeously humorous  
view of anything,  
particularly himself.<sup>27</sup>

This type of attitude is not unusual with those who subscribe to and propagate the myth of black inferiority: the blacks can only be understood through the eyes of the white man. In interpreting black characters in this manner, one is in fact falling

prey to the white man's whims. The black man will assume characteristics white people imagine him to have.

His real self remains hidden, unknown. The black man is aware of this and exploits it. This cannot be more plain than in the following song:

Got one mind for white  
folks to see 'nother  
for what I know is me;  
He don't know, he don't  
know my mind when he  
see me laughing  
laughing just to keep  
from crying.<sup>28</sup>

What we are dealing with in this instance is a question of appearance and reality, of characters wearing masks to assume different identities for different purposes at different times. One cannot but agree with Thorpe's thesis that "...the supposed innate docility of the colored man is apt to be interpreted as a mask behind which he hides his true feelings. In other words, his docility, meekness, and humor were often, though not always, insincere. They were adjustment and survival techniques in a society where education, economic, political and military power were overwhelmingly against him"<sup>29</sup>. To understand the black man is not as simple as is often portrayed in many artistic works. Black characters are complex human beings who can only

be understood in relation to their society and how the latter affects them and vice versa. One marvels at the staggering psychological pressures and physical discomforts black people have to struggle against in their everyday existence. This is what has made Robert R. Morton to observe:

Properly to interpret the Negro one should understand at the outset that the psychology of the Negro is protective. The Negro everywhere has a steadfast purpose of survival... It (the race) has been subject to adversity; this has made the race cautious... This has made it secretive In the presence of preponderant power and general animosity.<sup>30</sup>

But this does not mean that the black man is always wearing the mask. At times the real self emerges in an atmosphere that is not hostile. The problem is that the black man's history has shaped his present psychological propensity, and therefore, no matter how hard he tries to run away from it, it will always affect him either positively or negatively; psychologically or physically. What we have to keep in mind is that wearing the mask is essentially a passive form of struggle. It only helps one to fit within the operational framework of the status quo.

It integrates one's personality. In no way does it change the status quo. The type of person that created the spirituals was one who was in bondage, whose mind the master was always striving to control or break, and who did not have anything to cling on to save his kind. Slave narratives give us social implications which are worth studying in order to understand the mind that created the spirituals.<sup>31</sup> In the narratives concerning people like Nat Turner or Frederick Douglass we notice that slave revolts were quite numerous. Often the slaves stood up to defend themselves as human beings irrespective of the consequences. John Lovell concedes that

.....the frequency with which such revolts occurred shows that the slaves rejected their plight. Uprising slaves were shot or hanged and that was the end of them physically; but the mind of the slave seethed ceaselessly..... If the Negro spiritual came from the heart of the slave, it should be covered with such sentiments. It is.<sup>32</sup>

And in the words of Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave

These songs told a tale  
of woe beyond comprehension.  
They were tones loud,  
long, and deep; they

breathed the prayer and  
complaint of souls  
boiling over with the  
bitterest anguish.  
Every tone was a  
testimony against  
slavery, and a prayer  
to God for deliverance  
from chains.<sup>33</sup>

If we look at the spirituals as dealing primarily with the religious aspect of man and his future happiness in heaven, then we shall see that they act as a kind of mental escape from worldly problems. In the song "No More Auction Block"<sup>34</sup> what we see reflected is the slaves utter rejection of his condition.

No more auction block  
for me, .....  
no more peck of corn  
for me.....  
no more pint of salt  
for me.....  
no more driver's lash  
for me.

The slave's physical impotence is turned into a source of hope in that he is able to wait for the move into Jordan. In other words, it saves him from utter hopelessness and despair. He manages to persevere for another day. In this respect the spirituals did serve a positive end. But at the same time we

can say that they did encourage a dependency complex: the slaves were waiting for Jesus or some other God-sent being to come and save them. In this respect, the spirituals destroyed both the initiative and self-confidence of the slaves - this resulting from the religious side of it. Religion encourages accommodation and tolerance toward suffering. It pacified the slaves, and thereby, to some degree, helped the slave masters to keep the slaves down. There were some slaves who believed in meekness, humility as taught by the Bible, and accepted their fate as God-sent. "I have met many religious colored people, at the South", wrote Frederick Douglass, "who are under the delusion that God requires them to submit to slavery and to wear their chains with meekness and humility. I could entertain no such nonsense as this; and I almost lost my patience when I found any colored man weak enough to believe such stuff."<sup>35</sup> But here we should be careful about taking the religious language of the spiritual literally. The slaves could have been using it as a camouflage. In a society where the slightest act of resistance was answered by lynching, the slave had to develop a language of his own whereby he could appear to be talking the same language as the master but in actual fact meaning something else. It is in this respect that we can see the slaves exploiting the Christian religion to express their heartfelt emotions and desires. In "Go Down Moses"<sup>36</sup> we can see the allusions to the

desire for freedom.

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egyptland  
Tell old Pharaoh  
To let my people go.

The slaves likened their condition to that of the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt. This was a means of expressing hope in the ultimate liberation of the blacks.<sup>37</sup> Egypt symbolises the land of captivity, and "old Pharaoh" represents the slave masters. The slaves are the children of God and therefore keeping them in bondage was to incur the wrath of the Lord. This is the reason for the important role played by the ante-bellum black preacher. He determined more than the spiritual destiny of the blacks in bondage. Many slaves found new strength, power and inspiration from his sermons. The spirituals then do perform a double-edged function. In the religious sense they challenge the morality of the white race that has brought this Christian religion to them. In the secular sense these songs pose a threat to the slave master, and also express the black man's quest for freedom.

"Thus saith the Lord"  
bold Moses said,  
"Let my people go;  
If not I'll smite your  
first born dead  
Let my people go."

In the above stanza the slavers are presented with a physical threat of destruction. This introduces a new element into spirituals which is often forgotten or goes unnoticed - its violent side. While appearing to advocate passivity, these songs also advocate methods other than prayers for bringing relief to the Afro-American. In the case of "Go Down Moses" the looming threat of violent reprisals indicate a psychological trait that cannot be ignored. It seems, therefore, that prayer must be supplemented with action. In "Steal Away"<sup>38</sup> this seems to be the implication.

Steal away, steal away  
to Jesus,  
Steal away, steal away  
home  
I ain't got long to  
stay here.

Apart from the obvious religious refuge in religion, the above song exhorts slaves to run away from their miserable conditions. This is achieved through the use of biblical terms and references. In the confines of their shacks and in the sweat of work, the slaves sung songs which provided them with a kind of secular hope which prevented them from total immersion in the self-destructive religious insomnia. On the religious angle, the slave perceives Jesus as providing a kind of haven free of persecution and earthly troubles. They would rather see them-



selves as the persecuted children of God in the wilderness of white oppression. There were those who preferred this interpretation because it saved them from the responsibility of taking action toward ameliorating their condition. In other words, the secular interpretation of religion is what produced people like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner who saw religion as a weapon to be used for liberating the oppressed. These songs, therefore, serve as a stimulation for the overthrow of the slave system. Religion is used as a means of getting people together and the expression of communal sentiments takes place in the form of these spirituals. What makes these songs even more important is the fact that they were sung by the slaves themselves. The words expressed are replete with emotion and intensity of feeling that can only be fully fathomed and appreciated by those who have undergone the same experiences. Those blacks who sang these songs found a unity of feeling and experience in them. The spirituals not only provide a basis for the historical understanding of black life in America during slavery but also help to gauge that period to the present. Even now whenever they are sung, it is because the black man finds that not much has changed since the Emancipation Proclamation. His parents built America into what she is and yet his descendants have no share of this abundant wealth. Today, the Afro-American labours in the same vein as his forefathers - without redress, without a "peck of corn". At times the black man likens his condition to that of Lazarus, the

poor man who used to sit outside the rich man's window and eat the crumbs.

Poor man Laz'rus,  
poor as I,  
When he died he found  
a home on high,  
He had a home in dert  
rock,  
Don't you see?<sup>40</sup>

The black man is poor right here on earth but the Lord will thank him and give him his share in heaven. He should be as patient and forgiving as Lazarus. He should not take on the traits of the rich man (In this case, the white man). God will punish the latter.

Rich man Dives, he lived  
so well,  
When he died he found a  
home in Hell.<sup>41</sup>

The contradiction is that while the black man would like to have a share of the cake, when this proves unforthcoming, he resorts to the biblical chastisement of the white man.

God gave Noah the  
Rainbow sign,  
No more water but fire  
next time.<sup>42</sup>

Note that the threat of destruction of the white man is "next time" and not now. This is tantamount to delaying tactics, a justification for the lack of courage to effect action when the wrong is still fresh in the wound. The vast Christian influence in these songs immensely shaped the psychology of the masses who sung them. Consequently the study of Christianity becomes unavoidable for any true comprehension of the role spirituals played and do play in black lives. Amiri Baraka sums it up for us:

Christianity represented a movement away from Africa. In early days of slavery, Christianity's sole purpose was to propose a metaphysical resolution for the slave's natural yearnings for freedom, and as such, it literally made life easier for him. The secret African chants and songs were about Africa, and expressed the African slave's desire to return to the land of his birth. The Christian Negro's music became an expression of his desire to "cross Jordan" and "see his Lord". He no longer wished to return to Africa. (Christianity took the slave's mind off Africa, or material freedom, and proposed that if the black man wished to escape filthy paternalism and cruelty of slavery, he wait at least, until he died, when he would be transported peacefully and majestically to the Promised Land).<sup>43</sup>

But at the same time in these spirituals we do find the black man's challenge toward God to deliver him from his bondage. That is to say the slave is asking God to bring the slave master's wall tumbling down as he did at the battle of Jericho. If Daniel could be delivered from the lion's den, then why should the black man not be delivered from the chains of slavery and exploitation? This mood is reflected in the following spiritual:

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
Then why not every man?

He delivered Daniel from the  
Lion's den,  
Jonah from the belly of the  
whale,  
The Hebrew children from the  
fiery furnace,  
Then why not every man?

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho  
Jericho, Jericho  
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho  
And the walls came tumbling down.

Oh Mary, don't you weep,  
don't you moan  
Oh Mary, don't you weep,  
don't you moan  
'Cause Pharaoh's army got  
drowned,  
Oh Mary, don't you weep.

One of these mornings at  
five o'clock  
This ol' world's gonna reel  
and rock  
Pharaoh's army got drowned

Oh Mary, don't you weep.

Don't know what my mother  
want to stay here for  
This ol' world ain't no  
friend of her, etc.<sup>44</sup>

In talking about spirituals, therefore, we must not forget the fact that whatever they reflect the black man's character had a lot to do with the whole social structure that produced them. The spiritual did not help the slave to understand slavery and the slave system. But it helped him to go through the trying times and offered a communal expression of grief and sorrow. At the same time, it remained a symbol, to the slaves, of their inevitable salvation. For the oppressed slave, it was psychologically relieving to know that one was not alone and that at least the whole community shared in the desire to be free. But of course the master never could understand this other aspect of the spiritual which offered a sort of passive resistance. The spiritual then was also another form of the mask. On the surface the slave conformed to what the master expected but deep down he was plotting how to best escape, or relieve his suffering. But the fact that the blacks knew of the harsh conditions of their existence meant that they developed a code of communication that was only known to them. The spiritual was this code. It was a communal expression of black feeling and desires. Out of

this communal feeling and understanding emerged the spiritual. On the surface the spiritual were talking about religion and biblical images to reflect their adherence to "massa's" religion. But the reality of the spirituals as a form of passive rebellion was lost to the master. The spirituals are not only a source of pleasure or contemplation but are also of historical and literary significance. This was recognised, albeit grudgingly and condescendingly, by no other than Booker T. Washington, one of the strongest adherents of the American dream who believed that slavery did in actual fact bring the black man closer to civilization.

When the Negro slaves were carried from Africa to America they brought with them this gift of song. Nothing else which the native African possessed, not even his sunny disposition, his ready sympathy or his ability to adapt himself to new and strange conditions, has been more useful to him in his life in America than this. When all other avenues of expression were closed to him, and when, sometimes his burden seemed too great for him to bear, the African found a comfort and solace in these simple and beautiful songs, which are the spontaneous utterance of his heart.

Nothing tells more truly what the Negro's life in slavery was, than the songs in which he succeeded, sometimes, in expressing his deepest thoughts and feelings.<sup>45</sup>

Of course, according to Washington, these songs were "simple" and "spontaneous utterances". But it is this assumption that prevailed in "massa's" mentality. That is why he could not grasp the essence and significance of the spiritual. According to the "massa" and the likes of Washington, the slave cannot think for himself - that is why these songs are "spontaneous utterances of his heart". According to slaves, these songs were complex and sometimes their meaning and message could not be easily fathomed because it entailed a great deal of imagination. It took time and thought to express these songs, to create the images and expression and to create a parallel between them and the condition of the slave in America. The cat and mouse game these spirituals played with master to elude his interpretation was not simple. These songs did not just serve as a point of solace but also played the crucial role of interpreting the world to the slave. Moreover, the fact that they were a group expression towards different aspects of life is significant. Even more challenging is the dual nature

of these spirituals: what they appeared to be dealing with and what they actually dealt with. Of course the spirituals accommodated the slave to the new realities of his existence in America. The spirituals did not openly advocate rebellion but offered elements of consciousness to the slave without risking his existence in this hostile environ.

#### MEMORIES OF SLAVERY:

Amongst the most cherished and memorable stories are those dealing with the slavery of the black man and his plight in America. These are of various types. Some are funny and evoke laughter due to their themes; some are sad and reflect the hardships the slaves experienced; some ridicule the slave masters, and others instil hope and courage in the slaves. In one of the stories "All God's Chillen had wings"<sup>46</sup> the Africans are depicted as a race that once had wings. This has the implication that they are the chosen race and are in God's favour. The other races are unmentioned, which goes on to suggest that they do not possess the above qualities. In fact this is given more weight when the slaves fly off and their oppressors remain grounded and cannot pursue them. The Africans are depicted as a suffering people who



have been taken into captivity and are driven to work for their oppressors. Note that this story does not mention who the oppressors are nor does it specify the locality where these atrocities took place. It is left to our imagination. A rationalization for this could be that the story-tellers feared reprisals from their masters if such stories got to them because one would be suggesting that they (masters) are not only cruel but that they cannot forever hold the blacks in bondage because sooner or later they could fly off to freedom. The story teller describes to us the hardships and tribulations encountered by the slaves. Their master was a cruel and insensitive man who "drove them hard".

They went to work at sunrise and did not stop until dark. They were driven with unsparing harshness all day long, men, women and children. There was no pause for rest during the unendurable heat of the midsummer noon; though trees were plenty and near.<sup>47</sup>

Here we are presented with the barbarous and callous situations which the slaves were made to endure. Regarded as mere beasts of burden they worked without rest until they "all grew weak with heat and thirst". The young woman with her newly-born baby are not spared from the harsh whip of the slave-driver. Still weak from child-birth she does not have enough strength to endure the

hard labour of the plantations. Three times she stumbles and falls but every time manages to stand up amidst heavy blows raining on her body. But she is not as helpless and passive as she appears. She is calmly plotting with the old man on when to take off. When the time comes she seizes it and off she flies "over field and wood". Soon all the slaves fly away and the masters are left alone, petrified. The message we get from this story is that the slaves were not as helpless as they appeared. They were daring and could plan right under their master's nose without him knowing or suspecting anything. The above story is a fantasy but we can see that it was being used to camouflage what was really happening all the time: the slaves were always plotting on how and when to escape. Their spirit was unbroken - something which the master sought to do through his harsh treatment of them. The above story does give us a sense of unity existing among slaves - a unity created by the commonality of oppression and race. On the other hand, it is also a unity based on a common origin - Africa. The story does not end with the slaves going to heaven. The allusion is that they fly back to Africa. This introduces the element of racial identity and the blacks seeing their future as not lying in America but Africa. Identity with Africa symbolises a negation of "Americanism" and all its values.

This was a theme that Garvey was later on to develop in the early part of the twentieth century, and what Malcolm X was later on to expand on and develop in the 1960's. When the slaves fly off to freedom they go as human beings: men clapping their hands; women singing and the children laughing and sucking their mothers' breasts. The scene is one of total harmony and happiness generated out of a common experience of having escaped bondage. The old man is the messianic kind of figure who possesses magic to save his people. To some extent he is comparable to Moses who leads the Jews out of captivity in Egypt. The old man becomes the rallying point, a symbol of black unity. He is the leader that will not let his people suffer. But at the same time he does not rush until he is sure of his step. The girl falls three times and it is only after the last fall that the old man tells her that "the time has come" and she suddenly flies off. This is a story of hope and courage and captures the slave's dearest desire: freedom. This is achieved by totally cutting oneself off from the master's world. In this case the slaves fly away out of the master's control and vision. This story appears to suggest that the black race can only survive when it creates its own kingdom.

There are other stories that deal with the way slaves won their freedom. It was not always through

fighting or running away. As some of the stories suggest, it was through "wit and humor". One of the last things that the master ever wanted to acknowledge was that his slave could outwit him. In "A Laugh That Meant Freedom"<sup>48</sup> we are informed that there were some slaves who had a reputation for keeping out of work because of their wit and humour. These slaves kept their masters laughing most of the time, and were able, if not to keep from working altogether, at least to draw the lighter tasks.<sup>49</sup> Such a slave was Nehemiah who due to his humour and wit escaped doing heavy work. When one looks at Nehemiah's character one would assume that he is lazy and is propensed toward puerile behaviour. Of course he gives an outward impression of an indolent character. But through this mask we can see a scheming personality who is conscious of what he is doing. We can see exactly what he is reacting against - working for his master. He emerges as the hero in this story because he wins his freedom through the use of his brains. But the master sees him as a small child whom he is obliging. This is what he wants to believe and this is what he chooses to see. But we know him (slave) as an intelligent person with thoughts and feelings. This is the side of him that does not surface. We see Nehemiah as a character who refuses to utilize his strength to work for the master and thus

please and profit him. He does not care whether the master thinks he is good or bad. He will not base his actions on the whims of the master. Nehemiah has nothing to lose save his chains. He outwits David Wharton and wins his freedom. In "How Buck Won his Freedom"<sup>50</sup> Master Harry Washington is also outwitted and tricked. Buck is described as "the shrewdest slave" who "could steal things almost in front of his master's eyes without being detected". Buck wins the bet against his master about the former's stealing abilities and thereby gains his freedom. Once more, it is a battle of wits - slave against master.

In the above two stories Buck and Nehemiah represent what Malcolm X called "the field nigger". The "field nigger" was the slave who refused to identify with his master. To him the master was a perpetual enemy, never a friend. The "field nigger" did the least work and got the most out of the master's property. He is the man who would fan the wind when the master's house was on fire. The field nigger identified with the other field niggers. Such a character was High John the Conqueror.

High John loved living, and although he was a slave, he made up his mind that he was gon' do as much living and as little slaving as he could. He used to break the hoes - accidentally of course. Set ol' massa's barn on fire. Accidentally, of course.

He always had a hard time getting to the field on time, and when he did get there, somehow the mule would accidentally tromp down a whole row of cotton before the<sup>51</sup> boss man knew what was happening.

The interest of the slaves was to do as little work as possible and get as few whippings as possible. They had various tricks which they used to make the slave owner's life a little less than easy. The most common, according to Lester, was

.....to appear to be the dumb, stupid animal that he knew his owner thought he was. It was to his advantage to appear ignorant, and the more ignorant he appeared to be, the less work he would like to do. Any sloppy work that he did would be accepted as all that he was capable of doing. The field slave took advantage of his alleged inferiority.<sup>52</sup>

High John the Conqueror was this type of slave who was willing to exploit the stereotyped image the white establishment accorded them. To coercion and punishment he responded with indolence, sabotage and revolt. Most of the time he merely was as idle as possible. That was his usual form of resistance, that is, passivity. Admittedly it was not changing his environment but it was a step toward the right direction. The docility of the black slave is a myth.<sup>53</sup> High John was a "field nigger". He had more sense than the master had, and more than once the master is put to shame and ridicule.

All along John uses his brains to survive. The continued existence of John was displeasing to the master since this was one "nigger" who had outsmarted him. The master arranges for a duel between John and another slave named Andy, a "house nigger". He is described as being so big and strong, they had him tied with chains. He was snorting and growling and carrying on so that they had to chain him to one of the pillars of the courthouse. He was so big that he had to stoop down at night to let the moon go by.<sup>54</sup> What we see here are the tactics of divide and rule whereby two slaves are set to kill each other at the amusement of the whites. Black life is not recognized let alone respected. Blacks are regarded as mere beasts of burden. But not that Andy, the "house nigger", is described as somebody inhuman. John is sly and sly and more human and admirable. Andy is all brawn and nothing else while John is brainy and is the subject of antagonism by the white population and Uncle Toms. John roughens the Governor and his wife, and beats up his daughter - an unheard of spectacle in America! In other words, he is challenging the power structure itself. He is cool and calculating. He knows that if he makes a slip it is the end of him. This has an immediate impact on his adversary, Andy.

Well, when that nigger Andy saw John hit that white girl, he started getting away so fast that he pulled

the courthouse down, broke his chains, and.....he didn't stop running until he got to Canada. Andy knew he couldn't whup John, 'cause if John was bad enough to slap a white woman, John was bad enough to whup him.<sup>55</sup>

John not only saves his skin but also ends up drowning the master by outwitting him. He has rejected white values and standards of life. He is the rebel who will establish his own code of behaviour. He is the man who has even defied death in much the same manner as Stagolee.<sup>56</sup> High John is the black man's hero and a point of identification. What are John's actions geared towards? John's ambition and aim is to establish an independent existence outside the master's. His psyche is constantly rebelling against authority. He is determined to live and live well. He knows the value of life and is out to ensure that nobody denies him a place in the sun. One can view John's life as one total revolt, a complete rejection of the system he is living in. Therefore, John becomes a symbol of black manhood. He is a man who has been shaped by the social conditions around him and is conscious of what he is doing. But his acts are individual acts. They do not involve the rest of the society. This element denies his actions the necessary effect of getting the whole slave society organised. John's action, therefore, merely serves as an example to the other slaves. In the other two stories



discussed above, Nehemiah laughs his way to freedom while Buck steals his way to freedom. But may be nothing summarises more what experiences the slave had than the song "slave song".

We raise de wheat,  
Dey gib us de corn.  
We bake de bread,  
Dey gib us de crust.  
We sif de meal,  
Dey gib us huss.  
We peel de meat,  
Dey gib us de skin.  
And dat's de way  
Dey take us in.<sup>57</sup>

With precision and an economy of words the whole slave picture is painted above. The song depicts the awareness of the slave. He is conscious of his work. He knows he has created the wealth and all that maintains the very system that oppresses him. He is not the ignorant and innocent child the master imagines him to be. No wonder Buck steals from his master, and Nehemiah refuses to work.

What we have stated above in relation to the folk material was going to form a base for the next phase of literature - written literature. The experiences of the slaves, their African background, the development of their nationalism - all these were to be a source of artistic inspiration for the first major decade of black writing at the close of nineteenth century and the 1920's. In other words, the Harlem Renaissance was rooted in the part we have been discuss

CHAPTER TWO

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance marks the first great wave of black writing. It is the first fundamental shift from the previous black literature which was essentially oral. As we have seen in the previous chapter, black people had their own literature. Therefore, when the rising black intelligentsia began writing it was not as if black literature had no base or roots. The significant shift is that the literature was not created by the black masses themselves for themselves. Rather it was the creation of the black intelligentsia some of whom did not always have the interests of the whole race at heart. The Harlem Renaissance is a period that marked a great transition in the lives of black people in the United States. It is during this period that we witness the intensification of the migrations, which of course had began earlier, from the rural south to the urban north. Great industries were being built in the north and these provided employment for the poor blacks. Economically, the north proved more attractive while the south with its plantation economy, which was increasingly becoming industrialised, evoked bitter memories of slavery that many blacks

wanted to avoid. The political and social climate of the north had the semblance of liberalism and tolerance that was lacking in the old south. To the black masses, the north symbolised new opportunities and freedom. It offered a break with the past both physically and psychologically. These were some of the sentiments harbored by the black masses as they descended onto the northern cities to form a new class of workers and at the same time to provide a reserve army of labourers. With the coming of World War I it meant that more blacks were required to work in the war industry and also to occupy some of the jobs left by white workers as they went off to the war front in Europe. Some blacks found their way into the armed forces and were shipped abroad.

The area that significantly stood out in relation to the activities of black people that swept the north was Harlem in New York. Thousands upon thousands of black people settled here from every corner of the globe. In this respect Harlem began to acquire a new look, that is, it became a "race" capital. It was the place with the biggest concentration of blacks, and with increasing politicization and awareness - a feeling of racial pride and solidarity was engendered among the blacks. With so many black people in one place it meant that this place was exposed to diverse ideas emanating from a common experience and also from else-

where in the world. It was right here in Harlem that the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey had set his UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) headquarters. The influence of his thoughts which centred around black unity and racial pride earned him millions of followers not only in the States but throughout the world, especially Africa. A strong opponent of racism, he constantly waged war against it and this of course was bound to antagonise the white community. He preached that black people need to stand on their own feet if they are to be respected as a race. Towards this end black people were to set up their own businesses to give them economic power which would ultimately earn them respect in the eyes of the world. More precisely, he was advocating black capitalism. He also advanced the idea of back-to-Africa whereby black people would set up their own nation and their own government without interference from white powers. In the same vein he insisted on "Africa for the Africans" - an idea that threatened the European colonial powers in Africa and generated their intrigue against his movement. More than any other person during this time he raised racial consciousness among the masses. He taught them to love their African origins and themselves. According to him, the future of the black man did not lie in America but in Africa. Towards this end he started a

shipping line that was supposed to conduct not only black business but also to help in ferrying across those black people who wanted to start a new nation of their own in Africa. Notwithstanding his ideological short-comings, Marcus Garvey was the man of the masses. He alone could talk the language they understood. Leaders like William Du Bois could not readily appeal to the majority of the black citizenry because of the way they viewed the problems facing black people. They saw this in terms of black people getting to be integrated within the system. This did not readily appeal to the black masses who wanted to be their own masters. Furthermore, Du Bois addressed himself mostly to the black intellectuals whom he saw as embodying the salvation of the race. Herein lies his idea of the "Talented Tenth" - the rule of the elite. He had little faith in the black masses shaping their own destiny. Consequently, he did not appeal to them directly, partly because he did not understand them and had no faith in them, and also partly due to his class position and prejudices. But Marcus Garvey appealed directly to the masses for they understood his language and he was closer to them. His black nationalist approach incurred him not only the wrath of the American government, but also that of the moderate accommodationist black leaders. In this category were to be found people like Du Bois, Owen, Randolph, James Weldon, etc. This

brand of black intellectuals were not very concerned with the problems of black people as perceived through black eyes. They tended to view the problem and its solutions from the point of view of the establishment. People like DuBois, for example, were only concerned with the "Talented Tenth" and consequently made appeals only to the black middle class and intellectuals. This is part of the reason DuBois' movement never became a mass movement like Garvey's. This partly explains the reason for the gulf that existed between these intelligentsia and the black masses. This incorrect ideological position did little in correcting their distorted ideas about the problems facing the black man which they imagined could be solved through integration. In order to achieve this position, what was needed was a more enlightened form of democracy.<sup>1</sup> The rising black middle class saw its place within the American system. The black intelligentsia merely expressed the wishes of this class - wishes which were dictated to it by its white counterpart. In the words of Alain Locke the black man ".....now becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization. The rising black middle class was bantering for acceptance into the American mainstream. Apart from people like DuBois this class seems to have minimised

the value of political participation. Unlike Garvey they saw accommodation as being much more practical. But even for those who valued political participation, they merely saw this exercise as happening within the existing political and economic institutions. Amongst the black intelligentsia were those who felt a concern for the race and therefore contributed towards creating a positive attitude towards it. Racial pride and solidarity were their key words. In this category lay people like James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, and many others. All these people were to be found in Harlem or nearby. As Huggins puts it Harlem offered "a platform from which the new black voice would be heard around the world, and an intellectual centre of the new negro".<sup>3</sup> It also becomes important to realize that it was during this time that the Russian Revolution of 1917 shook the world, with the creation of the first workers' and peasants' state. This must have provided the black downtrodden masses of America with a lot of hope for the future. Black intellectuals like McKay, Philip Randolph, and Hughes flirted with the Communist Party in America for a time by writing and editing in "communist" journals. Black soldiers returning from abroad brought with them new ideas and experiences. They saw the way black people were treated

in Europe and Africa and found no difference. They had fought for "democracy", so they believed, to save the western world, and the bullet had not shown any discrimination in the battle field. And now these black soldiers came home to face racial discrimination, economic deprivation, social degradation, and political oppression. People began to appraise America anew as if they imagined that the war had changed the nature of the monster. White soldiers, frustrated and tired after the experience of war, joined the general discontent. Old values were questioned and when found inexpedient were discarded. This attitude prevailed in every field. All these things served to raise the consciousness of the masses not only in Harlem but throughout America. With all these happenings, Harlem provided the raw material for anybody who wanted to write about black life. With the rising interest in black people being shown by the press, political circles, etc., it only became obvious that the black masses could no longer be ignored or taken for granted if America was to remain stable especially after the riots of 1919. In Africa, on the other hand, black soldiers from the war injected a new consciousness among the people as regards their colonial status. The demand for freedom became even more pronounced. From the foregoing, it is obvious that this sudden interest in black people and their culture was not accidental. Neither was



it purely out of goodwill or recognition of the fact that the black man possessed the same qualities as the white man. We have to remember that the world order was changing in terms of political and economic arrangements. The world capitalist order did not want another Soviet example. It therefore became necessary to harness the thoughts of black people within certain limits. The young black intellectuals who emerged during this period became very central in this ideological warfare to combat the new ideology which had attained fruition in the Soviet Union. Black people being poor could neither afford nor did they possess any printing presses. The mass media was white controlled and white owned. Salvation could only come through the patronage of the white world. Any black writer who wanted to make it in the literary circles had to woo the white publishers. The black writers wrote what the white publishers wanted to see and hear. In other words, blacks could not write exactly what they felt or wanted because of the demands of the publishers.

Greenwich Village, the white intellectual centre was not far from Harlem. Herein resided white intellectuals and a few philanthropists throwing their money around, who set it upon themselves to patronise, intellectually and otherwise, the new black intelligentsia. They set the pace and the standards which must be emulated by black

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writers. These white artists disillusioned with the world of their fathers wanted to create a new world of their own. They had seen what imperialism had done in World War I and they wanted to run away from it. Therefore, they advocated a return to nature. As such they invaded Harlem which to them was synonymous with the jungle setting seething with black faces of innocence and simplicity in an atmosphere unspoilt by civilization. In a way it was like the romantic movement after the Industrial Revolution when artists felt that technological advancement of the new capitalist order had dehumanised man and the only way to fight it was by going back to nature. The same could be said of the Harlem Renaissance writers. The literary upsurge afforded an escape for most of these middle class writers who were unable to confront the realities of this period. While distanced from the masses from an ideological and class perspective, they imagined that they knew and articulated the feelings of the black masses. This cultural ambivalence of the rising black middle class symbolized the symptoms that were to characterise this class after its formative years. The white intellectuals used Harlem to vent off their frustrations and fill the void in their lives. To them the black man was still in his natural state: his laughter echoed the richness of primitive life, he walked with a joyous abandon and generally took life easy. This was the image accorded

the black man. Huggins assessing the influence of freudianism on this trend of behaviour notes:

Freudianism had made popular the conceptions of the id and the super-ego. It could be understood too simply: the human animal hungers which are forever seeking fulfilment are controlled by social forces made necessary by civilization, order and decorum. Overburdened with conscience and guilt, civilized man indulged his passions always at the risk of neurosis or greater psychic disorders. By the same token, the man who was least touched by civilizing influences could be more immediate, more passionate, more healthy. Civilizing artifice stripped away, men could dance, sing and love with freedom and abandon. Seen through such lenses, looking at Harlem, it was easy to believe that Negroes had more fun.<sup>4</sup>

The whites wanted to see the black masses fit into this definition. The emerging black writers served to nurture this false feeling by pandering to such whims. In their writings they depicted the black masses as primitive, care-free and ever happy. Meier and Rudwick in their study of the Harlem Renaissance movement concede:

.....many white literati, who during the heyday of Greenwich Village made a cult of primitivism, regarded the Negro and Africa as possessing intriguing qualities of savagery, occultism, an uninhibited sexuality..... Whites attracted by jazz and the alleged exotic way of life among Harlem's citizens flocked to the Harlem speak-easies....<sup>5</sup>

The white writers set the direction and pace and the black writers took it up. This lack of resourcefulness and

perception coupled with dependency are characteristics of the black middle class. The black writers resented white paternalism but could do nothing about it since they depended on the whites for their sustenance and promotion. Langston Hughes could not get on well with his white benefactor because she wanted him to be "primitive", that is, act and write according to the stereotyped attitude of what blacks should be.

she wanted me to be primitive, and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American negro - who had loved the surface of Africa and the rythms of Africa - but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be.<sup>6</sup>

Later on Hughes was to write of these experiences and the problems incurred by the black writer who attempts to be himself. It is almost impossible to survive. In "The Negro Writer and the Racial Mountain" he writes:

The road for a serious black artist who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. The negro artist works against an undertone of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from whites. "O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," says the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites.<sup>7</sup>

McKay in his autobiography A Long Way From Home writes of such a relationship as described by Hughes. He talks of his white friends and how they helped to catapult him onto the literary scene as a writer. A few writers tried to use magazines which were either liberal or progressive and were also edited by blacks. Amongst such magazines were Crisis edited by William DuBois (this magazine served as the organ of the N.A.A.C.P.), Messenger, Opportunity (organ of the Urban League), Garvey's Negro World. These magazines were of immense significance to the blacks in that they were seen as a positive attempt at a reassertion of themselves. But the irony is that a lot of them depended on white philanthropy. The best known black independent paper was The Chicago Defender. These magazines did offer opportunities to budding black writers who were unknown and whose works could not be accepted by the white publishers. These magazines were the voices of the black intellectuals. No matter how remote, the black reading audience found something to relate to, something they could point as their own. It is in these magazines that we get what the black leaders thought and what conception they had of their society. According to people like Marcus Garvey, the black race should be free and pure. The black race must strike out for its place in the sun. He saw the suffering of the black masses in America and articulated them. It was for

this reason that he became very popular with them. He had little respect for the black middle class especially non "pure" blacks, who he saw as possessing inferiority complex and wanting to kill the race by calling for integration. This is what Langston Hughes had observed and termed it as ".....the urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mould of American standardization and to be as little negro and as much American as possible."<sup>8</sup> The black middle class woman/man

.....does not want a true picture of herself from anybody. She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe that all Negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be.....It is the duty of the younger Negro artist....to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white", hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "why should I want to be white? I am a Negro - and beautiful".<sup>9</sup>

Marcus Garvey was advocating the same creed. Only he felt that for the black man to be his own master he must move out of America and go back to Africa.

That we suffer so much today under whatsoever we live is proof positive that constitutions and laws, when founded by the early advocates of human liberty, never included and were never intended for us as a people.<sup>10</sup>

The black intelligentsia began to produce works of art that reflected racial solidarity and pride. This is ironical in the sense that this group was Garvey's

strongest opponent. To sing a little bit of blackness was the mood of the times, and they sure cashed on it. It was in this perspective that they saw the whole cultural reappraisal as symbolising the "new negro". Bone's analysis of the term is that it is not a descriptive term in any literary sense, and that it indicates a rejection of racial conservatism on the part of those who employ it.<sup>11</sup> Bone further advances the thesis that the term carried an air of modernity and that

....it became fashionable to use the term to refer to oneself. It also provided the literary movement of the 1920's with a unifying idea. This self-consciousness, this sense of belonging to a movement, made for a high group morale, and for an atmosphere which encouraged literary effort.<sup>12</sup>

But there rings a certain flaw in Bone's analysis in that he assumes that those who did not use the term - and by implication the black masses who did not write and did not participate in this middle class exercise - had a lower level of consciousness. This idea only becomes useful in relation to the rising black middle class who previously during slavery had always identified with the master and had never seen themselves as part of the black race. In this era when this class began to feel the frustrating effects of racial prejudice and its rejection by its white counterpart it began to assume a forced and

false identity with the black masses. Self-consciousness was always prevalent among the black masses during and after slavery. The conditions of existence brought this about. One needs only to look at a few slave autobiographies to ascertain this fact. The black middle class merely used the masses as raw material for their works. There was identification in so far as colour was concerned and in so far as one needed the masses to advance oneself economically. In fact these intellectuals claimed that they were not interested in writing protest literature or black literature. Their interest was purely "universal" literature. People like Hughes and McKay, were among the few writers who dealt with the subject of the common black man, and who felt no need to apologise about it. Most of the black intelligentsia felt slighted when they were called "negro poets" or when their literature was termed "negro literature". Basically the two groups saw their destinies as separate. Their supposed identity with the black masses was merely a condescending one. One could go further and question the degree to which these intellectuals understood the black masses in the ghettos. Meier and Rudwick in analysing this movement observe:

The new negro protested and demanded his rights of citizenship and insisted upon the value of a black sub-culture. Intellectually and artistically, he believed that Negroes should have pride



in their past and their traditions; and by using the themes from Negro life and Negro history as an inspiration for his literary work, the New Negro intended to enrich the culture of America.<sup>13</sup>

What we see from the above is that the new Negro while insisting on his cultural identity still saw himself as part and parcel of America. He saw himself as being able to contribute to the enrichment of American culture - through writing. While purporting to address themselves to a "universal" audience, they were in fact creating for the white audience. Garvey had proclaimed, and rightly so, that America was not built with the black man in mind. To this reality they failed to address themselves. No wonder there existed a wide chasm between Garvey and these intellectuals who were dying to throw the black masses into the bandwagon of the American dream. Most of these writers avoided the issue of politics and how it shaped the character of the black man; they ignored the dialectics of politics and economics and how it affected their situation. Their art reflected this flight. They were avoiding what was termed "protest literature". This literary mode involves defining and identifying problems within society from the perspective of the victim. The black writers gave a superficial treatment of black life in their works. They romanticised the poverty and the hurt. Very few of them cared to go to the root

causes of black people's problems. While it is true that they broke from the old tradition by dealing with characters from everyday life - pimps, prostitutes, drunkards - nevertheless they merely succumbed to the creation of a new stereotype by white people. Another way in which they differed from the earlier tradition of writers who merely wrote in the Victorian fashion was in the language they used. One needs to look at the works of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes in this respect. This is crucial because it marks a new era in the transformation of the form black art assumes. This form reflected the rhythm of the ghetto life. It was no longer a shame to speak in the black dialect. What had previously been frowned upon was now viewed as symbolising racial pride and group identity. For the black writers this reflected a new way of breaking through the audience barrier. By using this form of language it was assumed they were communicating to the masses. But as we saw earlier, this was far from it. While they were busy writing about "carefree niggers", the masses were busy rioting in the ghettos and struggling for bread amidst an atmosphere replete with lynchings and general discontent. While to the black artist the new experiment in language could be viewed as a protest against the established literary order, the same cannot be said to apply to the white artist. Some of the latter got fascinated by this

new linguistic approach because it symbolised rawness, the innocence of the black world. It was viewed as something quaint and therefore could not be questioned. A paternal attitude is what the white world developed in judging black art. It was not looked upon as art standing in its own right. To them black art was like a young puppy that could not yet stand firmly and still needed its mother to guide it towards maturity. Some of the black writers resented this attitude; others accepted it. But most of them viewed themselves simply as writers to whom the new form afforded new channels of expression, a flexibility hitherto absent in the earlier period.

Looking at the Harlem Renaissance movement in retrospect, we see that it had nothing to do with the interests of the masses at all. It was purely a cultural movement that refused to have any bearing on the realities of the American scene during this period. The black intellectuals failed to see the relationship between culture, politics and economics. They proclaimed that they were not interested in protest literature. This movement within this black middle class was but the flapping of a butterfly's wings which they mistook for a hurricane. They imagined there was a mass movement going while people downtown knew nothing about it. Don Lee (now known as Haki Madhubuti) aptly notes:

Today it is popular to refer to the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties as a successful "negro" literary movement in Black letters. This is only partially true. Actually, Black art then was active only at a very superficial, elitist level, mainly patronised by uptown whites such as Carl Van Vechten, Max Eastman, Du Bose Heyward. Black people in Harlem hardly knew that anything of a literary nature was going on.<sup>14</sup>

These same alienated black intellectuals began to be called the "leaders" of the people by the establishment. Their opinion was taken to represent the opinion of the masses. Whenever anything occurred they were the ones who would be consulted because they were "responsible" and "mature". They were the ones who were taken to symbolise racial harmony in America. The black masses were made to look up to them and draw examples from them. It was important at this time in the world to ensure that the rising black middle class was made to toe the line. This class would later be used during the burning days in the 1960's and 1970's to quell the masses. They would also be used as symbols of American fair play and justice. James Brown is a classic example. But for the time being they merely fall into the trap of the American capitalist system to subvert the consciousness of the masses by limiting it to a cultural level. The problem was viewed as a cultural one, not economic. This movement, nurtured and engendered by the white middle class, could only perpetuate bourgeois

values. That is why most of the black intellectuals saw their future within the American system. Ideas emanating from the new socialist world that was coming up had to be kept out and seen as impractical and utopian. From the point of view of the American ruling class this movement succeeded because it achieved what was supposed to be done - seek acceptance within the American way of life. The ideological struggle in the world was on. The Harlem Renaissance was part of it.

Jamaican born Claude McKay stands out among the writers of the Harlem Renaissance as one of the most militant, and perhaps the most prolific. It is within this light that I will deal with his works and use him as the central figure in this chapter. I will use the other writers merely as a contrast or to provide a basis for clarifying certain points and draw generalities from their various standpoints.

In his first novel Home to Harlem<sup>15</sup> he attempts to portray the life of Jake, the central figure in his novel. Disillusioned with the war in Europe, he comes back to Harlem where he meets Felice in one of the nightspots. He spends a night with her and then she disappears out of his life. The rest of the story is Jake's attempt to look for her. Jake is portrayed as a

"tough nigger", a successful lover of women and a man who lives from hand to mouth. Most of his friends lead the same aimless existence, unconscious of the world around them. Life is to be lived right here on earth and one had better make the best of it before one goes to the grave. McKay portrays Harlem in this light. The black masses are too busy laughing and loving - if they do not die on a Saturday night. Thinking seriously of the present, let alone the future, is unheard of. This is how McKay paints his black characters. The author clothes the black characters with the stereotypical regalia from the white society. The whites saw black characters in this light and encouraged it. Carl Van Vechten in Nigger Heaven<sup>16</sup> does the same thing. McKay is incapable of going deeper and analysing the forces that shape his characters. He does not go deep into their psyche. Harlem itself is accorded the general air of romance and nostalgia. Jake dreams about Harlem on his way from London in very sentimental terms.

Take me home to Harlem, Mister ship!  
Take me home to the town  
of brown gals waiting for  
the brown boys that done  
show their mattle over  
there. Take me home, Mister ship!  
Put your break right  
into that water  
and jest move along...<sup>17</sup>

Harlem is only viewed in sensual terms, a place where blacks live in an atmosphere of boundless loving.

This is all that Harlem means to Jake. This is the myopic vision McKay gives his main character. The thoughts of Jake are McKay's for this is the way he did see Harlem. The author gets carried away with this jungle atmosphere where shiftlessness and vacuity in people's lives are qualities to be extolled.

Oh, to be in Harlem again  
after two years away. The  
deep-eyed color, the  
thickness, the closeness  
of it. The noises of  
Harlem. The sugared  
laughter. The honey-talk  
on its streets. And all  
night long, ragtime and  
"blues" playing somewhere,  
dancing somewhere! Oh, the  
contagious fever of Harlem.  
Burning everywhere in dark-  
eyed Harlem....Burning now  
in Jake's sweet blood.....18

This world of make-believe is where Jake lives. For a time he decides to get a job with a railroad car because he is broke. He spends all his time in the nightclubs and parties and in the bosoms of women. This is "the cool dude" of Harlem, the symbol of McKay's manhood; no brains only brawn. It is Ray, his friend in the railroad car, who opens his eyes. Ray is the intellectual. He is sensitive and talks to Jake of the Haitian Revolution and Africa's greatness. Ray is a man proud of his race and culture. He sees the problem of his island in the Caribbean.

.....some day Uncle Sam might let go of his island and he would escape from the clutches of that magnificent civilization and retire behind the natural defences of his island, where the steam-roller of progress could not reach him.<sup>19</sup>

and again he says

.....civilization is rotten. We are all rotten who are touched by it.<sup>20</sup>

Ray the intellectual can only comprehend the problems of his times in terms of some vague notion which he calls "civilization". He has had a western education but he feels inadequate, empty. He cannot fit into the life-style of people like Jake. In the railroad car we see that he is shunned by his fellow workers. He in turn, keeps to his books. His education, which to him is synonymous with civilization, is the cause of his problems because it has alienated him from his race.

Ray represents the black intellectual elite who on one hand cannot fit into the white man's world and on the other he remains unacceptable in the world of the common Harlemites. Unable to understand the contradictions of his society, he begins to feel that civilization is rotten. He would like to be the care-free Jake who does



not have to worry about anything.

....I don't know what I'll  
do with my education.  
I wonder sometimes if I  
could get rid of it and  
go and lose myself in  
some savage culture in  
the jungles of Africa.

.....  
Nobody knows Jake.  
Anyway, you're happier  
than I as you are. The  
more I learn the less  
I understand and love  
life.<sup>21</sup>

Ray is against the falsity of bourgeois life but does not see the fact that Jake is equally living a false existence. He is continually running away from reality by wallowing in sex and booze. He insulates himself against the painful realities of a lumpen existence by appearing carefree and happy. This is the mask Jake wears and it is the mask the ruling class wants to see and believe. It is as if when Jake strips off this mask he can no longer be able to walk the pavements of Harlem without being forced to take action either against himself - which at the extreme might end in self-destruction - or the society that has forced the mask on him. Ray does not question what lies behind the rich laughter and the seemingly happy faces of Harlem. The white society, after it had discovered spiritual

usually  
a  
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Q.W.

sterility in capitalist America, took refuge in creating the myth of the ever-happy, care-free nigger. The American bourgeoisie wanted to believe that there was still an area unaffected by the dehumanising effects of capitalism. This class wanted to believe that the black man was still intact after coming into contact with the very same system that had set out to pluck him from his home and after that used him to create the wealth which the middle and upper classes were enjoying. This is what they wanted to see. The black man, as exemplified in Jake and other characters in Home to Harlem, plays to this fancy. Jake is unaware that he is subscribing to the white stereotype. He evades social responsibility towards himself and his race by playing the clown. In fact he seems to live it. It seems as if he is living the mask without being aware of it or its implications. The only time he comes close to shedding off this mask of his existence (or should we say of its existence?) is when he tells Ray that he would have liked to have an education like his, get a decent job - "no more chu chu for a white man" - and take care of his sister. What this implies is that he is unhappy with the type of life he is living, a life where he has to live according to the rules set by the white man. He does possess rudiments of consciousness and a potential for developing it further. This is the only time that McKay lets us

into Jake's inner self. McKay's sympathies are with Jake for he is the one shown as having some humanity in him - he is untouched by civilization! Ray the intellectual is unhappy and dreams of an innocent Africa where civilization has not devoured the essence of human life. He attributes his inability to get on well with the other black lower class elements in Harlem to civilization. He cannot see it as emanating from the material forces that have shaped his society. He tries to relate to his people at book level. That is why they make fun of him and call him "professor". Finally he runs away from Harlem and takes a ship to Europe. We next encounter him in Banjo in the "Ditch" at Marseilles in the company of stevedores, tramps, sailors and pan-handlers.<sup>22</sup>

Banjo exposes the life led by blacks abroad. In this novel the author exposes the prejudices of the French against the blacks. The "Ditch" becomes the focal point for all the black layabouts. It is another Harlem where sex, alcohol and fast life is the order of the day. Again the author brings in the element of directionlessness in the lives of black characters. When they get money they drink and use it on women. They scarcely think of another day. When one gets money, the rest have a share in it. They form a sort of community bound by ties of race and common experience.

Banjo is the successful male symbol - he plays the Banjo, has plenty of women, and is tough. Ray the intellectual is perpetually lecturing the gang on the importance of racial pride and identity. Though destitute, Banjo seems to be aware of his worth. He refuses to take insults from the white man. He makes this known to Malty's group.

You fellahs know what the white man think about niggers and you all ought to do better than you done when he 'low you on his ship to eat that dawggone grub. I take life easy like you-all, but I ain't nevah gwine to lay myself wide open to any insulting cracker of a white man...

.....  
You ain't got no self-respecting in you...  
You're just a bum and no more. I ain't a big-headed nigger, but a white man has got to respect me...<sup>23</sup>

Banjo seems to be suggesting that the black race has a lot to lose from blacks who misbehave. They are a let-down to the race. What this reflects is an unconscious desire to be recognized by the white society. Banjo seems to think that Malty and the gang should behave themselves in the face of dog-like charity. Banjo does not even

question the aspect of charity itself. He fails to recognize that the environment has a lot to do with the creation of characters like Maltby. In other words, the behaviour of the gang has much deeper causes and implications than McKay attempts to portray. It is not just a question of lacking dignity or contact with a foreign civilization that helps one to understand these destitutes. The causes are within the growing imperial order with its dire consequences on colonised peoples. Banjo realises the significance of racial awareness in the form of dignity. He is fighting against white prejudices. Ray, the philosopher of them all, negates white values and stresses the significance of racial pride and awareness. He identifies himself with Africa and all that it stands for. Later on he meets a black student who seems to think that "racial renaissance" is going back to savagery, thereby articulating the position of the black elite. To Ray, it is education that has confused such people - an education that teaches them to hate themselves and their people.

You get a white man's  
education and learn to  
despise your own people.  
You read biased history  
of the whites conquering  
the colored and primitive  
peoples, and it thrills  
you just as does a white  
boy belonging to a great

white nation.

Then when you come to maturity you realize with a shock that you don't and can't belong to the white race. All your education and achievements cannot put you in the intimate circles of the whites and give you a white man's full opportunity. However advanced, clever, and cultivated you are, you will have the distinguishing adjective of "colored" before your name. And instead of accepting it proudly and manfully, most of you are soured and bitter about it...<sup>24</sup>

This, as we can see, is McKay's own voice addressing us. He is condemning the educated elite. In Banana Bottom we encounter the educated girl Bitá who is proud of her race and does not let education get between her and her people. We see her longing to join her people's festivities and dances. She is torn between her people's way of life and her class position. Her white guardians expect her to desist from such activities. But finally she succumbs to her people's joyous and unpretentious ways because she finds moral fulfilment and satisfaction in them. She even refuses to marry a member of her class and joins in wedlock with a commoner - a mere worker. In fact it is Bitá, amongst all of McKay's characters,

who is treated fully in that we see her inner feelings and problems, her desires and anguish. When she finally responds to the call of the tom-toms, it is out of her own will; it is a development of her character. It signifies her rejection of western "civilization" and her identification with the people of her island - the black peasants and workers. It is this attitude that we can see Ray in Banjo trying to adopt. His attitude towards race is what causes Sterling Brown to dismiss him as a mere racist and fanatic.

Anti-bourgeois and anti-imperialist, seeing the "civilized world" from the bottom, Ray is nevertheless a racialist, not a radical.<sup>25</sup>

To define Ray's attitude "racialist" is too naive and simplistic. Ray is the force that carries ideological weight in Banjo. He is the one who is perpetually fighting for the uplift of his race and sees pride in his black history. His perception of colonial education and values is decidedly incisive and cannot be dismissed in the fashion Brown does. To McKay "the human and vital black man is alien in the sterile, mechanized European civilization".<sup>26</sup> Therefore, in order to be himself, he must go back to his roots in Africa, he must

identify with all that is black because the black world is the only one that is natural, beautiful and devoid of mechanical relationships. In the poem 'Outcast'<sup>27</sup> he is craving for a spiritual unity with Africa. He says:

From the dim regions  
whence my fathers came  
My spirit, bonded by  
the body, longs,  
Words felt, but never  
heard, my lips would frame;  
My soul would sing forgotten  
jungle songs.  
I would go back to darkness  
and to peace,  
But the great western world  
holds me in fee,  
And I may never hope for  
full release  
While to its alien gods  
I bend my knee.  
Something in me is lost,  
forever lost, some vital  
thing has gone out of my  
heart,  
And I must walk the way  
of life a ghost  
Among the sons of earth,  
a thing apart.

This identification with Africa though positive had its own weaknesses. McKay sees Africa as a "dim" region where "darkness" and "peace" prevail. McKay sees his history as having been removed and his links with Africa cut. That is why he "must walk the way of life a ghost". The distorted notion of Africa perpetuated by McKay is



nothing unusual about western scholars - people like Trevor Roper, etc. - who saw Africa as one sleeping giant whom they were going to bring into light and civilization. This same trend is also noticed in the poetry of Langston Hughes.

Africa,  
Sleepy giant,  
You've been resting awhile.  
Now I see the thunder  
And the lightning  
In your smile.  
Now I see  
The storm clouds  
In your waking eyes;  
The thunder,  
The wonder  
And the new  
Surprise.  
Your every step reveals  
The new stride.<sup>28</sup>  
In your thighs.

Such ideological confusions and vacillation characterised the response of the Renaissance poets towards Africa. McKay's feeling was that the black man's entry into the white man's civilization has destroyed the former's integrity.<sup>29</sup> We see this in Ray, the man who wants to be a universal writer and yet at the same time maintain his ethnic self.<sup>30</sup> Ray's attitude says something very intrinsic about the black intellectuals of this period who wanted to be called writers and not black writers. This is an attempt to run away from their identity.

They wanted to adopt what they termed as "universalism" and be judged by the white man's standards. Yet in the same breath they talked of blackness, and racial identity. There was an intense feeling of inadequacy on their part in so far as they were not recognised and judged by white standards. That is why one senses a certain falsity in Ray's statements about race. His tone is tinged with dejection rather than protest. Most of the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals such as DuBois were merely clamouring for acceptance into the white man's world.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that the Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be able a Negro and an American, without being cursed or spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>31</sup>

The dilemma of Ray is what DuBois would term "double-consciousness". If we are to adopt the analysis of DuBois then we can understand the problem of black intellectuals in the above perspective. Ray's quest is one of manhood in the face of white hostility and rejection. While appearing to look for it in some undefined territory, he is in fact in the white man's land looking for his manhood and asking them to accept him in their world. He wants to look at himself through his own eyes yet he will talk of "universal" standards without flinching. He does not try to create his own criteria for judging his own people's art. This can be extended to his social life as well. He is a black man but wants to be seen first as an American; and secondly as a black man. The extent to which we can consider Ray representative of the black masses is questionable. He represents the rising black intelligentsia that is forced to identify with the masses but rejects the aspirations of the latter and adopts that of the middle and upper classes. In the poem 'The White House'<sup>32</sup> McKay is alluding to the same thing.

The 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.

Here the author assumes the poise of a martyr; his voice appears stoical and at the same time mournful. Lacking opportunities in jobs, housing, schools, and discriminated against, McKay still has faith in America and unashamedly declares his love for her. In 'America'<sup>33</sup> McKay portrays this naivety which can hardly be taken to summarise the mood of the starving masses of Harlem.

•Although she feeds me bread  
of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat  
her tiger's tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life,  
I will confess  
I love this cultured hell  
that tests my youth!

It is impossible to believe that the masses who had sang the spirituals reflecting bitterness, resentment towards their oppression and a desire to be free would now proclaim their love for a situation hardly different from the one they were previously in. McKay's insensitivity and lack of perception of the pain of oppression is glaring.

Yet as a rebel fronts a king  
in state, I stand within her  
walls with not a shred  
Of terror, malice, not a  
word of jeer.

The poet's statement suggests the same old myth that has always been held by white Americans that the black man is humble, obedient, and always willing to play the white man's tune. In 'The White City'<sup>34</sup> he sees himself as bearing his "life-long hate" nobly and "without a flinch". Even when we consider 'If We Must Die'<sup>35</sup> which is supposed to be his most militant poem, there is hardly much difference. The tone is defeatist from beginning to end. From the first line he has already assumed and accepted death..

If we must die  
let it be not like hogs

The tone and rythm of the poem creates a feeling of death over the reader's head. The poem ends up as a kind of dirge instead of the militant one it is supposed to be. It carries a desperate spirit. It turns out to be a celebration of death.

If we must die,  
O let us nobly die.

Even in moments of death McKay is still obsessed with

being recognized by the white man. He still maintains some imagined spiritual bond between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the dying black masses and the "murderous cowardly pack". It is as if he is saying that in death one will have achieved some acceptance. He sees the "mad and hungry dogs" as still possessing some innate humanity that will force them to honour the victims of their machetes.

.....even the monsters we  
defy shall be constrained  
to honour us though dead!

McKay's position and ambivalence becomes even more acute when we compare his poems to those of Langston Hughes who sought to capture the pains and aspirations of the common blacks. To him life is not easy. It is a struggle. In 'The Evenin' Air Blues'<sup>36</sup> he captures the elements that elude McKay.

This mornin' for breakfast  
I chawed de mornin' air  
.....  
But this evenin' for supper  
I got evenin' air to spare

Believe I'll do a little dancin'  
Just to drive my blues away -  
A little dancin'  
To drive my blues away,  
Cause when I'm dancin'  
De Blues forgets to stay.

The above poem written in a very simple pattern tells the life of the poor blacks. This emphasises the concern Hughes has for the downtrodden. But what does the character in the poem do to assuage his hunger? All he does is "a little dancin'". The author introduces the role music plays in Afro-American life. Singing and dancing to blues become a means of escapism - an escape from the reality of hunger and poverty. The blues and the jazz which Hughes exploits for his artistry are nothing but masks the black society wears in order to accommodate their survival in America. Behind these forms of music we get deeper meanings they convey to the black man. This contradicts what McKay portrays in Home to Harlem where the black masses are permanently dancing and happy in an exotic and primitive atmosphere. What McKay mistakes for joy is in fact a cover up for the reality that haunts his characters. Dance and song become an extension of the Afro-American personality. They form part of his psychic world where he can always hide his true feelings. This is what Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote at the turn of the century. He attempted to fathom the true feelings of the downtrodden amongst his race. In 'Life'<sup>37</sup> he observes:

A crust of bread and a  
corner to sleep in,  
A minute to smile and  
an hour to weep in

A pint of joy to a  
peck of trouble,  
And never a laugh but  
the moans come double:  
And that is life!

A crust and a corner that  
love makes precious,  
With the smile to warm  
and the tears to refresh us:  
And joy seems sweeter when  
cares come after,  
And a moan in the finest  
of foils for laughter:  
And that is life!

In the above poem Dunbar captures what one might call "the double vision". Here he juxtaposes joy and sorrow and the relationship between the two. The poet adopts a depressing tone which symbolises the pathos of the black man who is ignored, misunderstood and exploited. McKay seems to have captured the "minute" of the smile and not the "hour" for tears. This becomes very telling of the kind of mentality that the writers of the Renaissance harboured. The white patrons and intelligentsia nurtured the conception that the "easy" life of Harlem was symbolic of the freedom that existed in black lives. Some of the Renaissance writers like Claude McKay and Countee Cullen captured the laughters and not the sorrow; moments of living not moments of death. They fulfilled the expectations of the white publishers and critics. People like Alain Locke confused this furor of the black



intelligentsia for a mass movement. This brings into focus the point that they never understood the aspirations of the masses they purported to be dealing with. Their art portrayed the common folk but completely misunderstood what shaped their psyche. The black intelligentsia helped in the creation of a stereotype. Dunbar writes very tellingly of this other personality of the black man. This is evidenced in 'We Wear the Mask'.<sup>38</sup>

We wear the mask that  
grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks  
and shades our eyes -  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding  
hearts we smile,  
And mouth with  
myriad subtleties.

.....

We smile, but,  
O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured  
souls arise.  
We sing, but oh,  
the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long  
the mile;  
But let the world dream  
otherwise,  
We wear the mask.

Though written in a mournful and resignatory tone, Dunbar nevertheless exposes the hidden pathos behind the black man's seeming content. It is not only a

physical state of dejection and pain but one of spirirual anguish. The black man resides in the moral dilemma whereby he knows what his true feelings are but makes the world (white) think otherwise. Dunbar's tone reflects one who is spiritually on the verge of despair, if not physical destruction itself. According to him, the idea of wearing a mask is a conscious act assumed by black people. This in itself presupposes the idea that the victim is conscious and is able to understand his environment. This is best illustrated when we examine Dunbar's 'An Antebellum Sermon',<sup>39</sup> where the preacher is using the sermon as a means of raising consciousness and preaching freedom. He does this while using religious language and symbols. The preacher here plays double roles. While maintaining himself as a preacher, he can safely talk politics and religion in the same breath. The preacher is conscious of this and so is the congregation. The latter also wears the mask of religiosity while finding comfort and solace in the analogies between "ole Pher'oh's" treatment of "de Hebrew chillun" in Egypt and the white man's treatment of the black man in the "wildaness" of America. The preacher starts in a very calm tone and rises in tempo and emotion as the sermon progresses. At such dramatic heights in his sermon he effectively used the Bible

story to elucidate his point that the black people will be free one day.

Dey kin fo'ge yo'  
chains an' shackles  
f'om de mountains  
to de sea;  
But de Lawd will sen'  
some Moses  
fu' to set his chillun free

The congregation is one with the preacher for he is telling them of their coming liberation. They should not despair. While the preacher talks of a Moses to come we should not simply view this as a tactic to delay action. On the contrary, he is raising consciousness, planting hope where there is despair. The church becomes a sort of forum for raising grievances without any danger of reprisals from the master. But in the fifth stanza he changes his tone and appears to undercut what he is preaching.

.....I'm still a-preachin' ancient,  
I ain't talkin' 'bout to-day.

The preacher here behaves like the signifying monkey because he uses the same tricks. He wants to make sure that the congregation understands but that the master does not. This in fact illustrates the danger of the mask, that is, its vagueness. In the sixth

stanza he chastises his audience and warns them against misinterpreting his sermon and getting him in trouble with the master.

Now don't run an'  
tell yo' mastahs  
Dat I's preachin'  
discontent.

Later on in the eighth stanza he shows the fruitlessness of oppressing the black race because God will raise his people from captivity - and the black race is no exception.

Fu' whatevah place  
you git in,  
Dis hyeah Bible  
too 'll fit.

And therefore God will send a Moses to save the race. In the ninth stanza the preacher says that he is

.....talkin' 'bout  
ouah freedom  
In a Bibleistic way.

In the last stanza the preacher's sermon ends with Moses coming into the scene and setting black "chillun" of God free. They also gain acceptance into the wider society.

An' we'll shout  
ouah halleluyahs,  
On dat mighty  
reck'nin day,  
When we'se  
reco'nised ez citiz' -

If we are to assume for a moment, Freud's hypothesis that if civilized artifice was stripped away, men could dance, sing and love with freedom and abandon,<sup>40</sup> what this implies is that the black man who was portrayed in the above light was the "true" black man. He was devoid of pretensions. The ones who wore masks were the whites because they were not being themselves due to the effects of "civilization, order and decorum."<sup>41</sup> Many white critics and black artists adopted Freud's analysis because they simply could not comprehend the inner psychology of the black masses. The root causes of the disease were to be found in the capitalist structure of America and not in the victims of the system. The black mask could simply be construed as forming part of the black man's survival techniques. But the wearing of the mask also carries the element of denying oneself - consciously or otherwise. According to Lionel Trilling this involves the element of role playing.<sup>42</sup> Since blacks have always played different roles in the presence of the master and when they are

alone, it means that they have negated themselves. They are less real, less credible. Using this sort of hypothesis what we would be implying is that black characters have always been insincere not only to themselves but also to the world around them. Trilling observes:

Negation of self,  
far from being the  
means by which the self  
is realized,  
is its destruction. 43

The problem with Trilling's analysis is that we would end up dismissing all the black characters as not being true and refuse to take them seriously. Again Trilling also assumes that the problem of not being oneself is always a question of individual choice made in the face of other better alternatives. One cannot talk about individualism and individual choices and morals. There is always the wider society which has shaped the individual and his responses. The social conditions necessitate the wearing of a mask. The American society cannot allow the black man to be himself without the fear of unfavourable repercussions. This can only be understood by looking at the formation

of black characters historically. Ray who lacks something to hold on to has to assume the role expected of him otherwise he perishes. If we look at the above works of Dunbar, it shows that those who wear masks are aware of it. It affords them a flexibility in life otherwise absent. Wearing a mask does not necessarily mean that they cannot realise themselves. But there also lies the problem of particular characters living the mask: the mask and the person become one. The character no longer realises his true self. The point I am trying to raise is connected with the dangers inherent in mask wearing and its implications and consequences. According to Dunbar it is the weeping, tortured, and neglected black man who lives behind the mask. Dunbar's perception seems to have been reiterated and injected with some strength by Countee Cullen. In the poem 'From the Dark Tower'<sup>44</sup> Cullen is dealing with the theme where black men "always plant while others reap".

We shall not always  
plant while others reap  
The golden increment of  
bursting fruit,  
Not always countenance,  
abject and mute,  
That lesser men should  
hold their brothers cheap;

Not everlastingly while  
others sleep  
Shall we beguile their  
limbs with mellow flute,  
Not always bend to some  
more subtle brute;  
We were not made  
eternally to weep.

The night whose sable  
breast relieves the stark,  
White stars is no less  
lovely being dark,  
And there are buds that  
cannot bloom at all  
In light, but crumple,  
piteous, and fall;  
So in the dark we hide  
the heart that bleeds,  
And wait, and tend our  
agonizing seeds.

While Dunbar makes the point that "with torn and bleeding hearts we smile" while "our cries.....from tortured souls arise", Cullen asserts that "we were not made eternally to weep". But he also exposes the double identity when he says that "...in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds". Countee Cullen rejects the plight of the black man as eternal, unchangeable. The poet here holds a kind of threat to the "lesser men" who "hold their brothers cheap". He is warning them of the impending social catastrophe. His attitude is reminiscent of James Baldwin's threat of "the fire next time".



We would do well to note that most of the poets of this period still think of the black man as the persecuted brother of the white man in America. They still see their future as lying within the American system. What they want is acceptance into the mainstream of white society and the attainment of the American dream. Langston Hughes in his poem 'I, Too'<sup>45</sup> reflects such sentiments. He sees himself as belonging to the same family as the white man. He assumes they have been created under the same culture. Being a product of the rising black middle class Hughes saw the salvation of the black masses as lying in this kind of false unity between the oppressor and the oppressed. Hughes and most of the black intelligentsia saw the problem of the Afro-American as a domestic quarrel between members of the same family.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in  
the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

The poet seems to be passively accepting the notion of inequality exemplified by his acceptance to eat in the

kitchen for he laughs and eats well and grows strong. He is contented with his lot only that he wants to eat with master at the same table. To attain this end he appeals to the morality of the oppressor. One wonders how he is going to achieve the respect and recognition he wants when he is at the mercy of the master who does not even contemplate of him as a brother. He ends on a note of optimism and proclaims his Americanism.

I, too, am America.

In another poem entitled 'Theme for English B'<sup>46</sup> Hughes reiterates the same desire to be accepted as an American by the white society. He says:

You are white -  
Yet a part of me,  
as I am part of you.  
That's American.

This then, was the kind of atmosphere that prevailed during the Harlem Renaissance among the black intelligentsia. In an attempt to prove to the white middle class that they were equally gifted in the arts, they went to pander to the stereotype of the sensual black man who is closer to nature and more humane.

These same poets achieved a momentary illusion of oneness in the literary world and imagined it to extend to the lower social order as well. This honeymoon was shortlived for this kind of activity had no base in the black masses. It was none other than Richard Wright who was to shatter this mask by penetrating the heart of Bigger Thomas, the symbol of rebellion. Bigger Thomas was to be viewed in a social context thereby giving us an insight into the forces that shaped him. This is what we are going to examine next.

CHAPTER THREE

NATIVE SON: THE AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

Wright's Native Son<sup>1</sup> marked a new era in literary creativity during the Depression years in America. After the so-called Harlem Renaissance, the period that Wright was writing in became the most significant in the sense of the new approach toward literary materials and the interpretations given to these. Richard Wright was a member of the Communist Party and an exponent of Marxism. It was Marxism that offered the black man a new interpretation to his problems and the means of achieving a viable solution. This interpretation was not only broad but also offered new vistas of hope to the oppressed. The greatest and most important difference between Wright and the earlier writers was that he saw the problems confronting the different races in America through a Marxist outlook. He saw these problems as emanating from the capitalist mode of production and relations and how this system affects the personalities of the oppressed. And it is within this ideological framework that we are going to look at the novel and how the characters are shaped therein, and how these characters react to change and how they

influence their environment. This is significant in that Native Son is one of the rare books that look at the problems confronting the Biggers of the world in terms of class struggle, and also how nationalism fits into the whole structure. It was within this context that Wright wrote this novel which is centred around the life of a black boy "in the slums of Chicago" who murders a powerful white liberal's daughter.

The novel opens in a room rented by the family of Bigger Thomas. It is here that we are shown Bigger's surroundings which are stifling and humiliating. Right from the beginning we are shown Bigger as a boy who is dissatisfied, irritable and one leading an aimless existence. Bigger is not unique in the type of life that he leads. He is the symbol of what the American capitalist system does to the millions of poor black youths who are deliberately made ignorant and forced to accept their miserable existence. The black world is a symbol of poverty and oppression while the white world stands for all that is powerful and rich. This is how things appear in Bigger's mind; and to a large measure this is true. It is people like the Daltons who have created the Bigger Thomases. That is why Bigger feels resentful towards Mary who he sees as trying to snatch

from him his only means of existence by asking him if he belongs to a union. What is even more terrible and annoying to Bigger is that this occurs in front of Mr. Dalton who is offering him a job.

He hated the girl then.  
Why did she have to do  
this when he was trying  
to get a job?<sup>2</sup>

Already Bigger hates Mary because he cannot understand why she is behaving in the way she does. To him, her behaviour is a trick meant to trap him. Bigger puts on the mask of a "good nigger" for he knows this is the only way to survive. In "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" Wright tells us of a similar situation where he went to look for a job and had to learn to put on Bigger's mask in order to get a job. He says:

.....I learned to lie,  
to steal, to dissemble.  
I learned to play that  
dual role which every  
negro must play if he  
wants to eat and live.<sup>3</sup>

The lesson, of course, is not lost on Bigger. Mary, in an attempt to appear natural by acting as if there are no barriers of race and class between her and

Bigger, ends up by arousing feelings of hate and suspicion in him. By their very nature, Bigger and Mary were bound to clash because the very basis of Mary's life negates the existence of Bigger. That is why Bigger responds in the only manner he has known - violently both at an emotional and physical level.

She responded to him  
as if he were human,  
as if he had lived in  
the same world as she.  
And he had never felt  
that before in a white  
person. But why? Was  
this some kind of game?  
The guarded feeling of  
freedom he had while  
listening to her was  
tangled with the hard  
fact that she was white  
and rich, a part of the  
world of people who  
told him what he could  
and could not do.<sup>4</sup>

Even Jan, Mary's Marxist boyfriend, does not realise the resentment his behaviour aroused in Bigger. He relates to Bigger on class terms with feelings that are supposedly aroused out of his political convictions. Jan and Mary may have acted sincerely out of their ideological leanings but when we encounter Mary we feel that she is too artificial and presumptuous. To her

the Marxism creed is a cerebral affair. The same feeling occurs when we come to terms with Jan except that he at least tries to understand Bigger. But this only occurs toward the end even though he does not come close to Bigger's inner feelings and emotions. Even Max, the lawyer who helps Bigger, cannot fathom the experiences of Bigger's life despite the fact that he manages to put across his client's case very strongly and convincingly. To him, Bigger's history and experiences are more of an academic adventure. But to Bigger it is the opposite - it is a way of life. This is where the contradiction lies. Mary and Jan thought that the best way to make Bigger feel that they are on his side is by driving with him in the same front seat and drinking and eating together. In fact this is more of an integrationist approach. Mary's and Jan's inability to be sensitive enough to Bigger's fears and suspicions suggests that they adopted a purely mechanical interpretation of Marxism. The mere fact that they are sympathetic to Bigger does not mean that he will immediately jump into their bandwagon. Bigger has undergone and does symbolise over four hundred years of capitalist oppression which to him is symbolised by white. It will not make him forget that he is black



and lives in a slum created and owned by the Daltons. In fact he becomes even more painfully aware of his miserable state, something which he would rather not think of.

...they made him feel  
his black skin  
by just standing there  
looking at him,  
one holding his hand and  
the other smiling.  
He felt he had no  
physical existence at  
all right then; he was  
something he hated, the  
badge of shame which he  
knew was attached to a  
black skin. It was a  
shadowy region, a no  
man's land, the ground  
that separated the white  
world from the black that  
he stood upon. He felt  
naked, transparent; he  
felt that this white man,  
having helped to put him  
down, having helped to  
deform him, held him up  
now to look at him and  
be amused. At that  
moment he felt toward  
Mary and Jan a dumb,  
cold and inarticulate hate. 5

Bigger not only hates his colour but also himself and his family. He hates himself because he is impotent and has to rely on others for his existence. His family is poor and so he hates them for it; for making

him feel responsible but unable to do anything. Their poverty and helplessness, therefore, accuse him, make him aware all the more painfully, of his impotence. This drives him to constantly shun his home. The shame of having to watch his mother and sister dressing, of living with rats, of going hungry and living in a poverty-stricken environment cause him to hate anything that reminds him of his background. He cannot separate his poverty, humiliation from his colour. Consequently, he hates people who expose this colour and remind him of it. The poverty of his family threatens his manhood. In fact it is a challenge to his existence. He ends up hating himself because he is powerless to stop the physical and spiritual destruction of his family. Bigger is unable to identify the problem that faces the likes of his family except in terms of colour. He cannot fathom the complexities of the relationships that have shaped his society. The complexities of class and race are incomprehensible to him. His impotence to face this powerful white world becomes in-built and wells up into a source of deep frustration that has to find an outlet. He is afraid of this outside world because he does not understand its nature and therefore he is afraid. That is why he fights Gus when they are supposed to rob Blum's store. Blum's store is symbolic

of the white world that Bigger does not understand and is afraid to challenge. He would rather confront that which is much weaker and easier to handle. His own people are his first victims. Gus symbolises this; and so does his family. Those are the only arenas in which he can operate and see the results. He can make his sister cry and cause his mother to shout. This gives him a feeling of his own sense and worth. He cannot achieve this when he is in the white world. They make him react in the way they want. Bigger is resentful of this because he cannot do otherwise. He is aware of it, but he cannot articulate it. It is all a maze of confusion in his mind. As a result of the hostile white world around him he has learnt to react instinctively to it. That is why he is seized by fear when he is confronted by Mrs Dalton in Mary's bedroom. He knows the consequences of being found in a white girl's bedroom. At this critical moment Bigger is faced with a decision as to what he should do. There is no way out. If she lives, it means death for him. Since he must live, there is no room for the two of them. He kills her so that her mother may not find him with her. Confronted with the white world he is finally forced to react towards it in the only manner

X <sup>liek</sup>  
He <sup>shd</sup>  
not  
do it  
on  
purpose.

stop misleading the reader.

he has learnt from this inhuman society - violently.  
For the first time in his life he feels he has attained something of value. He feels he is a person; he has a presence in the world. But it seems as if it is the white world he is forcing to see him - the same world that oppresses him. It is as if Bigger is disclaiming his invisibility. But he also knows that his own black society will begin to look at him with a new eye, as if they are also seeing him for the first time. Wright is making the statement that oppression and exploitation dehumanise and alienate both the oppressor and the oppressed. But after Bigger's first act of psychological emancipation, that is, the killing of Mary, he is no longer afraid. For the first time he relates to his friends without seeing them as a challenge to his life. The hatred and fear he feels in their presence is gone. The <sup>murder</sup> ~~murder~~ of Mary affords him a realization of himself. Fanon's analysis on the psychology of the oppressed offers us an insight into Bigger's mind. He says that at the level of the individual violence is a cleansing force and that

it frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.<sup>6</sup>

That is why he no longer fights his friends. His fear is gone and he is like a man newly born. Even his friends noticed this.

He waved at them and swung through the door. He walked over the snow, feeling geedy and elated. His mouth was open and his eyes shone. It was the first time he had ever been in their presence without feeling fearful. He was following a strange path into a strange land and his nerves were hungry to see where it led.<sup>7</sup>

Bigger's killing of the two girls, and especially Mary, brings him into a deeper realization of himself.

He had committed murder twice and he had created a new world for himself.<sup>8</sup>

His actions and thoughts become more deliberate and conscious. Towards the end he is able to account for his behaviour and is no longer as confused and incoherent a man as we encounter him at the beginning. He tells Max:

I didn't want to  
kill....  
But what I killed  
for, I am! It  
must've been pretty  
deep in me to make  
me kill! I must  
have felt it awful  
hard to murder.....

What I killed for  
must've been good....  
It must have been  
good! When a man  
kills, its for  
something....  
I didn't know I was  
really alive in this  
world until I felt  
things hard enough  
to kill for 'em....<sup>9</sup>

It is this conviction that makes him accept death at the end. He accepts this death not in a despairing or resignatory attitude. His tone at the end is of one who is victorious - victorious in the sense that he has achieved a purpose in life. He has recognised himself and has forced the world to recognise him. These are Bigger's most cherished moments because they are the times he confronts the world. But note that he confronts the world alone as an individual and therefore symbolises individual consciousness. Bigger's physical death at the hands of his oppressors is a kind of challenge to them. It is as if Bigger has to die in order to live. When we look at the level of consciousness Bigger attains

at the end we find that it is one that has helped him to see the world in a different light from the way he viewed it previously. The mere fact that he accepts Max's friendship and help, and the extension of his friendship to Jan, means that he has developed a new way of looking at the world. The author does not force a false consciousness on Bigger at the end. What we see in Bigger is a growing confidence and awareness. But this is not to infer that the Bigger we meet at the beginning is as dull and blind as he appears. His feelings are only suppressed and nobody cares enough to understand him. Even when he kills Mary, the Daltons and the authorities do not believe that such a carefully worked out plan could be the work of a black boy alone because it is too well executed. The arrest of Bigger does not convince them that he has acted alone. Mr. Dalton continues to plead with him in the hope that he reveals the mastermind behind the plan. What they are looking for is a white man. Blacks are supposed to be too daft to plan and execute such a crime against the all invincible white man. What we see at work is the whole stereotyping machinery. But Bigger is a person with an alert mind; he is aware of the injustices around him. That is why his crime is an act of rebellion and one that makes him feel like a

human being because he strikes out at Mary Dalton, a symbol of oppression. Sharley Anne Williams, writing on Bigger's behaviour says:

The murders which he commits.....are interpreted as rebellious acts whose origins lie in the frustration engendered by the systematic exclusion of Blacks from equal participation in American society.<sup>10</sup>

Williams assumes that the problem black people are facing is one of being accepted into the American capitalist society. This is to say that Bigger was expecting to integrate himself into the mainstream of American life. Had this been achieved the problem Bigger confronts would not have arisen. Furthermore this implies that in so far as Blacks are not allowed to join the American mainstream, there will always be Bigger Thomases. The critic in question does not take into account the type of society that has created Bigger. Bigger could as well have been white in another environment. He stands as a symptom of a far greater disease that Williams can imagine.



Bigger is tired and wants to throw off the yoke of poverty, exploitation and racial prejudice from his neck. He says:

.....a guy gets tired of being told what he can do and what he can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes, sweep streets; anything.....You don't make enough to live on. You don't know when you going to get fired. Pretty soon you get so you can't hope for nothing. You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say. You ain't a man no more. You just work day in and day out so that world can roll on and other people can live.<sup>11</sup>

Bigger is saying things no one would expect him to say. He has more feeling that we imagine. His comment reflects on his alienation from the society in which he lives. He is affirming that he wants to be a man; he wants to lead a decent life. Bigger also wants to control his environment; he wants to feel he is alive by making things happen. He refuses to be one who is merely acted upon and insists on making things happen in order to convince himself and the society around him that he is alive. The Daltons of this world have always taken him for granted. He entertains no illusions about those of his race who have attained higher positions in society. This emerges when he converses with Max. According to the Bigger

there is no difference between this class of blacks and the white folks.

- They rich, even though the white folks treat them almost like they do me. They say guys like me make it hard for them to get along with white folks.<sup>12</sup>

One wonders if Bigger is not conscious, albeit in a rudimentary manner, of class alignments. For him to make the above observation means that he is observant and does not assume that all black people are good. He has associated white people with wealth, power, and oppression. That is why he hates them. His historical experience makes it very hard for him to see them in any other light. That is why he is wary and suspicious of Jan and Max. And it is for the same reason he cannot like Mary. Consequently we cannot absolve the Daltons of the world for what they have made of Bigger. But this absurd attempt is what Bone engages in by subtly attempting to place the whole responsibility on the victim (Bigger) alone.

Wright chooses as Bigger's victim a girl who is "friendly to negroes", but whose kindness under the circumstances is a bitter mockery. By this device, Wright means to suggest that Bigger's sickness is too deep to be reached by kindness, and at the same

time to involve his audience in responsibility to Bigger's crime. The Daltons who are people of good will, hire Bigger because they "want to give negroes a chance". But they also own real estate on the South side, and have thus helped to make the black ghetto what it is. They are, in short, just as innocent and just as guilty as we.<sup>13</sup>

Bone's weak apology, and the inclination to universalise the basic weaknesses created by the American system and nurtured by the ruling class cannot clarify and explain the root causes of the problem. The ills of the system cannot be atoned by individual charity and personal goodwill as characterised by the Daltons. What Bone is saying is that Bigger is as much to blame for the weaknesses of society as the Daltons. This cannot erase the fact that Bigger is a product of the hostile American environment. What he engages in is a blind act of rebellion. Furthermore Bone goes on to erroneously equate Bigger's distrust of whites with what he calls "his negro nationalism".<sup>14</sup> Bigger's distrust has been cultivated by the society that has dehumanised him. He sees white oppression in terms of the rats in his home, the frustrations and poverty he sees his own family undergoing, and the general conditions which humiliate his race. It would be asking too much to expect him to start going into the fine details

Of sorting out individual whites who have not partaken in the plunder of his race. The white people as a race have oppressed him - a black boy. And he reacts to them as a member of the oppressed black race. Black nationalism merely calls for him to accept himself as a black man and to be proud of it. This being a first step towards self-consciousness as a black person who is exploited. Black nationalism also awakens him into the fact that he had a history and a culture before he was shipped to America. This same nationalism asks him to look at his people and their problems from a black perspective. But the irony is that Bigger is not even a black nationalist. He is not aware of its existence, and consequently lacks ideological direction, that is why he is confused emotionally and otherwise, and cannot comprehend the forces that have shaped him except in vague terms of black and white.

Bigger is symbolic of the destruction of the Afro-American personality and the absence of spiritual and emotional essence that is so crucial in the shaping of human beings in any society. But his society believes in profit-making and treats individuals as mere objects to be used towards one ultimate aim: individual appropriation of communal wealth. The relationship between human beings - if it can be termed that way at all - which emerges out of such a relationship is bound to be warped. That is why Bigger is alienated from himself and his family, and from the wider society. His

But according to Bone the "real tragedy is not that he dies but that he dies in hatred."<sup>15</sup> The issue at stake is not purely a moral one as Bone would have us believe. The fact that Bigger has been created by his society is important. Much more painful is the fact that a society that creates the likes of Bigger should be allowed to exist. How does one expect Bigger to embrace that which throughout his life has been struggling to destroy him? The likes of Bigger are born in poverty and hatred - conditions which subsequently help to define his world view. When Bigger talks to Max at the end one begins to feel that his feelings are beginning to be defined. He attempts to transcend the weaknesses imposed on him by his environment. At the time of death he is trying to place his action within an ideological context. But he has too short a time to comprehend all the influences of his history on his personality and psychology; We feel the genuineness through his voice when he tells Max:

I'm all right, Mr. Max.  
Just go and tell Ma I was  
all right and not to  
worry none, see? Tell  
her I was all right and  
wasn't crying none.....<sup>16</sup>

I'm all right. For real,  
I am.

Tell...Tell Mister....  
Tell Jan hello....<sup>17</sup>

These are Bigger's last words and they are hardly of the Bigger we met early in the morning with a skillet in hand symbolically killing a rat in the slums of Chicago. We see him reaching out to others, and he is no longer drawn within his own world. His escapist games of imagining he is a pilot, or playing the president are over. At the end of the story he is no longer the "tough nigger" we encounter when the novel opens. He is just an ordinary black boy trying to understand himself and his environment; By reaching out to others, he is going beyond the self, beyond the sense of blindly hitting out. He is trying to come to an understanding of all these things that have happened to him. He opens up his heart to his family and extends a hand of friendship to Jan, a white man. These actions constitute a significant development in his character. These are the qualities that redeem Bigger in our eyes. The creation of Bigger is, of course, a negation and a development from the image of the "happy nigger" who is always making love and drinking. In other words he breaks the myth of Ray of the Harlem Renaissance. He unmasks Ray as a false figure representing black life. Bigger's development of consciousness acts as a catalyst towards laying bare his soul and body. This is precisely the kind of person the establishment does not wish to see because he does not tally with the image they have created for him. The problem that Bigger faces can only be understood in relation to the environment that has created the problem. Richard Wright was warning America of

the impending catastrophe if the problem of Bigger is not solved. This chilling truth is what America refused to realize until too late. When the decade of the sixties exploded we were painfully reminded of Wright's predictions. The posturings of the "bad nigger" in the corner, the cool dude who is black and beautiful - all these can be seen in the same light as Bigger's fighting of Gus to appear tough and his constant reminder to us that he is "a bad cat". But do these emotional outbursts shake the foundations of capitalism or just embarrass it? The problem that Wright poses to us is whether we are ready to see the problem as this system or whether we are ready to see its offshoots such as cultural alienation and psychological malaise as the problem. These are the problems we are facing as we enter the tumultuous decade of the sixties.

PART II

CHAPTER FOUR

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE 'SIXTIES

The era of the sixties can be termed as the decade of revolt in America. This stemmed from what was going on inside and outside the country. Inside the country it was the era of freedom Rides and sit-ins. This was brought about by the fact that blacks refused segregated facilities in public transport, and schooling and called for an end to segregation in all aspects of American life. Blacks were tired of waiting for the American ruling class to grant them their rights. They had waited long enough; and now they resorted to action to assert their demands. The north, with its liberal facade, had disillusioned any blacks who had hopes that equality would ever be achieved in America. The South, long known for its racist nature and violent hatred of the blacks, continued to consolidate this attitude despite numerous court decrees forbidding discrimination and mistreatment of blacks. The white southerners were only willing to accept blacks as inferior beings and not as equals. Millions of blacks challenged the fake theories concocted to oppress them; and therefore when Mrs Rosa Parks refused to vacate her seat in the bus for a white person, she was merely expressing the sentiments that black people



felt in a country that they had laboured to build for over four hundred years. With this woman began the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the famous Freedom Rides. Blacks refused to board the buses unless they were desegregated. As a result a mass movement began which swept the entire nation. Blacks were no longer going to accept second-class citizenship. Never before were so many blacks united to fight a common enemy. United by a common ideal to fight segregation and racial discrimination, they poured into the streets and braved police dogs and hose-pipes, truncheons, and bullets, and tear-gas. The struggle to tear down barriers in other aspects of life continued, and many people - both black and white - joined hands. Most whites saw themselves as allies of black people simply because they "fought and won fresh skirmishes over front seats on the buses and won the right to eat hamburgers at the corner coffee shop."<sup>1</sup> The Civil Rights movement was financed by the white power structure and as a result many white were to be found in its ranks of leadership. They shaped events without necessarily exposing themselves to the black masses. That is partly why people like Martin Luther King were accused by radical organizations like the Black Muslims of being Uncle Toms. With King at the helm of the movement, Civil Rights gained prominence the world over partly due to his eloquence and partly due to the publicity the mass media offered him as the only "sane" leader of the blacks. He vied for integration and led many protest marches to bring to light the plight of black people. As a result

millions of black people became vulnerable to the violent attacks of the police state machinery and other racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Despite his ideological shortcomings, King managed to rally a lot of black people behind him with his philosophy of non-violence. King was a minister, and many Southern blacks are christians. This helped him to get a forum for organizing and consolidating his movement. This is explained by the fact that the Minister plays a very important role in the black community. In the absence of a secular leadership he assumes even greater significance. One important factor to note about King's movement is that it appealed to the morality of the white power structure. King was attempting to change white America's conscience by resorting to biblical exhortations. He saw the black man's future in America as coming through integration. The civil rights adherents spent a lot of their time trying to prove to white people that black people were equally human. Consequently, most of their action was centred around this unequal relationship whereby blacks were forced to justify themselves. They were also to emulate the white middle class as a way of gaining acceptance into the American mainstream. The Civil Rightists tended to see total integration of the black and white races as a final step in destroying the black man's negative self-image.<sup>2</sup> One wonders how this is possible when the victim depends on the aggressor for his own survival. The negative self-image is not a result of separation. It is caused by

Something much more basic: slavery, oppression and exploitation of the black race. These are historical facts which have developed certain psychological traits within the black race. These traits cannot be washed away without understanding their root causes. Begging the white man to let the black man use his toilets, schools, theatres, etc., does not give self-confidence and racial pride to the black people. In fact most people who showed enthusiasm over King's philosophy soon realized the futility of Civil Rights Laws because most of them were ineffective. King failed to deal with the basic economic questions that faced the people. Congress was not going to speed up integration or effect it by passing laws; neither was it going to change attitudes and force whites to accept blacks. It certainly is true that few blacks were given token acceptance in a few places. But it is also certainly true that the plight of the majority of black people remained unchanged. Amongst those who gained acceptance into the middle class there developed a trait of refusing to identify with the rest of the black masses. This was/is the class that is used to pacify the masses whenever there is trouble that threatens to disrupt the status quo in America. But as the years went by, the people became restless since there were no tangible results brought by the Civil Rights Movement. The leadership, being bourgeois and petit-bourgeois, was not going to attack the basic institutions for this would mean cutting their own life-line.

The whole atmosphere was changing due to the Vietnam war and the political events that were taking place in the Third World. The anti-war movement was demanding an end to both the war in Vietnam and repression at home. The campuses were up in arms against America's war effort in South-East Asia. Even King had to concede that there was a certain amount of relationship between America's foreign policy and what was happening at home. But this, of course, was toward the end of King's life when he became deeply concerned about and condemned the war in South East Asia.<sup>3</sup> King's movement was incapable of generating action and attaining significant steps in the amelioration of black life. His philosophy of non-violence, of course, did appeal to the status quo because King's power over the Southern blacks was tremendous. This was his base. Yet he continued to preach non-violence even in the face of enemy terrorism. He could not provide black people with defence against racist attacks. During the sit-ins tremendous violence was unleashed on those who took part in these activities. Yet King could not provide an alternative to this humiliating venture. Black people were still trying to put on a mask of being humane and respectable. King was not willing to shatter this mask. Instead he nurtured it. Black churches were bombed and many people either got killed or imprisoned in these protest marches. The mask did not lead them anywhere. White people were still the bosses while the blacks

remained poor and at the bottom of the social ladder. They soon found out that acceptance into a segregated restaurant or membership to an exclusively white club was not going to change their economic status.<sup>4</sup> Lerone Bennet Jr makes a correct assessment of this movement:

The Civil Rights movement was a necessary stage on the road to the Black Rebellion....The Civil Rights movement educated black people. It ripped away veils of illusion. And when it became clear that neither Jesus nor Gandhi nor Brooks Brothers nor Harvard was sufficiently persuasive in the white man's ethic to make him abandon racism, when it became obvious that the issue was power not the Ten Commandments or the Declaration of Independence, millions of black people moved on up a little higher, inaugurating the fourth stage of nationalist revolt (i.e. Riots and general violence)<sup>5</sup>

At this stage the battle front was moving northwards towards the urban centres. This was from around the year 1964. King had used religion to try and have blacks attain full American citizenship. This was primarily in the South where he was based. In the urbanised North there developed the militant anti-white nationalism, which was more challenging to the status quo and

whose base was not religion but politics. Religion assumes a secondary role and the black nationalist philosophy assumes the centre stage. The people wanted action and were not going to settle for less. In other words the radicalism was forced on the leadership and the ideologues of the movement who also in turn radicalised the masses. This position arose out of the disillusionment with the prevalent situation and the half-measures of the Civil Rightists. The Civil Rightists perpetrated the mask of servility and good nature. The black nationalists shattered this myth and instead provided a more redeeming philosophy to the masses. Black nationalism provides a source of hope and identity, and race pride. Blacks are taught to be proud of their cultural tradition; and that they should also attempt to gain control of their communities from white control. As George Breitman correctly observes:

It is the tendency for black people in the United States to unite as a group, as a people, into a movement of their own to fight for freedom, justice and equality. Animated by the desire of an oppressed minority to decide its own destiny, this tendency holds that black people must control their own movement and the political, economic and social institutions of the black community. Its characteristic attributes include racial

pride, group consciousness, hatred of white supremacy, a striving for independence from white control, and identification with the black and non-white oppressed groups in other parts of the world.<sup>6</sup>

The black middle class, a natural ally of its white counterpart and the enemy of the black masses, imagines itself to be exempt from the contempt in which the white society holds their race. In its attempt to appear "better" than the black masses, this class takes to aping the mannerisms and way of life of the white middle class. They despise anything black and imagine themselves to be at par with their white counterparts. Thus they are alienated not only from themselves but also from the society that surrounds them. Essien Udom, in his assessment of this group observes:

The intelligentsia of today do not identify with the interests and fate of the masses. This group has lost touch with the concept of "race men" in their concern over the legitimate importance of integration. In their desire not to appear racist in their thinking, they have repudiated all racially conscious movements and organizations, but at the same time, they find

themselves, because of this repudiation, powerless to move the negro masses toward their professed goals. This attempt to be at once negro and non-negro is an insoluble dilemma. To some extent it accounts for this disdain and rejection of the black nationalist movements. It also explains their failure to appreciate the as yet imprecise and conflicting yearnings of the negro masses for racial definition and integrity.<sup>7</sup>

The nationalist movement in the U.S. was chiefly influenced by the activities of Third World countries - particularly African countries. The era of the sixties is the era of African independence and most African countries attained their independence during this period. The black Americans drew inspiration from their brothers across the continent and saw their situation as being similar in many ways. They saw themselves as an oppressed people who were under colonial (white) domination much the same way as the African countries. With revolutionary movements in ferment in the Third World the American blacks could not remain on the periphery of the fire that was sweeping the world. Consequently, when King came with his philosophy of turn-the-other-cheek, it could not provide that



sort of vigorous race pride and independence of mind that blacks needed. Radical groups like the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther, emerged and gained more prominence as they tried to change black thought patterns and behaviour. Stokely Carmichael's election to the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.) chair in 1966 changed its ideology from that of liberalism to one of black power revolutionary adherence. This movement influenced a lot of the college audience. Its importance cannot be underrated especially in terms of raising the consciousness among the black college audience and also in influencing the other movements. In the words of Edwards:

...the SNCC hierarchy saw as its chief responsibility the need to redefine the situation and position of Black people in American society. Blacks had to begin to perceive themselves not as Americans but as colonized vassals under the heel of an oppressive and heartless system that seemed bent on carrying out a systematic and deliberate campaign of racist injustice to its inevitable conclusion - Black genocide. SNCC sought to bring about a new consciousness among Black people which would enable them to proceed effectively against institutionalised racism.<sup>8</sup>

As the consciousness grew so did the intensity of the black rebellion. It was a time when blacks sought not only to assert themselves culturally but politically and economically as well. The Black Panthers with their berets and guns became the symbol of black manhood, an assertion that the meek were waking up and asserting their rights. In a way the Panthers nurtured the image and idea of the "tough dude". More often than not the whole process was a mask worn to hide from an underlying ideological confusion and lack of political direction. Of course the Panthers were the Biggers of the decade imbued with a consciousness that hardly transcended "black-is-beautiful, soul-brother" talk. This is because most of them saw this as an opportunity to express this manhood but also to show the establishment that they were tough. Very few of them could analyse what they were involved in. The black masses became more of watchers than participants. What the movement was heading to was not clear to them. Lack of clear leadership also contributed to a lot of confusion. Malcolm was already dead and no leader of his stature had risen. Black people sought to control their own destiny and rejected attempts by whites to get involved in helping them: white people could begin by educating their own communities out of their prejudices. The Black Muslims demanded a black nation within America and also raised the important question of land. All in all this was a time of confusion with people getting to know themselves and

beginning to seek the survival of the community - for herein lay the survival of the individual. In other words black people had to live as a community, and struggle as a community. This is a significant step from the individual approach to black problems. It connotes a growth in the consciousness of black people.

Lerone Bennet Jr notes:

The rebellion grew out of and reflects the whole history of black and white men. Which is another way of saying that Black Rebellion is a rebound rebellion which developed in reaction to the acts of omission and commission of white Americans. Viewed from this perspective, the rebellion is characterized by an ascending spiral of radicalization which has not yet reached its peak. In other words, the increasing pressure of a quasi-colonial system in a favourable international climate radicalised the black masses; and pressure from the black masses radicalised the leaders who in turn, intensified the radicalism of the masses which became more radical in a deteriorating social climate and took new steps which pulled the leaders further to the left. At each step in the spiralling process of confrontation and contention some leaders and organizations dropped out and new leaders and organizations emerged.<sup>9</sup>

This growth of black consciousness had both its good and bad aspects. On the one hand there were those who saw black as inherently beautiful and incapable of any evil. In this group lay those cultural nationalists who sing black-is-beautiful without adopting any critical stand whatsoever. In most cases this normally entails condoning black ills and weaknesses - something that is very detrimental to the development of any progressive movement. These are the ones who wear masks of contentment and imagine that by wearing dashikis and beads and having an afro hair-do, one is in the revolution. This is the kind of mask that the establishment plays along with because it poses no danger whatsoever. On the other hand there were those who were aware of the Uncle Toms and refused to acknowledge them as black people. There was also a small group who, while adopting the class approach towards the whole issue of the minorities in the States, did not fail to recognise and emphasize the role that racism continues to play in the inter-personal relationships between people of different races. Larry Neal in "New Space/The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties" states:

Black consciousness is necessary and good only if it allows more light, more understanding of the complex struggles in which we find ourselves. But we must emphasize that it is impossible for a people to struggle

and win without a sense  
of collective consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

And in his own words Stokely Carmichael says:

This consciousness might  
be called a sense of  
peoplehood, pride rather  
than shame in Blackness,  
and an attitude of  
brotherly, communal  
responsibility among all  
black people for one  
another. In short, if  
I had to sum up this  
consciousness, I would  
define it as the undying  
love of Black people for  
Black people. A willingness  
not only to suffer and die  
for the oppressed black  
masses, but a willingness  
to kill for them if  
necessary.<sup>11</sup>

This sense of self-awareness was especially important among the students since the campuses complemented the ghetto in offering the challenge to the status quo. With increasing politicisation black students adopted a radical stand and demanded black programmes in the educational system. Many of them preferred this cultural aspect of the struggle because it was less demanding. We have also to keep in mind that a lot of college educated blacks were from the middle class - this factor seriously hampered their vision. Many of them saw their future as being within the American

way of life. But one cannot easily underrate the importance of the cultural aspect of the struggle. It opened up new vistas of faith to the black college audience who to a great degree did dedicate their efforts toward establishing black consciousness not only amongst themselves but also among the people.

Dr. Vincent Harding In "Black Students and the 'Impossible' Revolution" notes:

....the students learned not only of personal self-love..... but of love for the black community. They were pressed for a profound sense of that community's brokenness, its oppression, and its need. They were challenged to see its life and its liberation as their first calling.

Blackness meant a vision, too of the heritage of the fathers - in America and in the homeland of Africa. It meant the beginning, for some, of a profound search for roots, roots to let them stand firmly in the midst of the constant struggle, roots to feed long-felt but scarcely comprehended inner thirsts for meaning, authenticity and life.

Blackness meant, too, an increasing sense of solidarity with colonized and broken coloured peoples across the globe whose movement for new life and new control had quickened black Americans and in turn been strengthened by our struggle.<sup>12</sup>

What all nationalists stress is the concept of black unity and a mutual understanding and respect on the part of black people for each other. The aspect of collectiveness is important since this is what has helped the race to go through some of its most difficult times. But there is some weakness in the concept of black nationalism in the sense that it tends to regard all black people from diverse origins as one. The Uncle Toms are merely viewed as those corrupted by whiteness. The thesis here is that black nationalism has not been able to effectively respond to the critical issue of class alignments within the black community itself. In relation to the American society, the black nationalists have negated class struggle. The nationalists insist on looking at issues from a purely racial level. They do not see any possibility of alignment between the black and the white workers. If you are black you are poor; if you are white you are rich and powerful. It is true that black people constitute a very large number of the working class force. And also colour is used to deny blacks opportunities in jobs, housing and other aspects of social life. Therefore, there emerges the inevitable correlation between blackness and exploitation. Race is not seen in purely abstract terms. There is the concrete reality which acts as a point of reference. The mere fact that black nationalism does not advocate the workers' solidarity irrespective

of colour does not negate its importance in the development of racial consciousness. Quite to the contrary. In the words of James Boggs:

black nationalism has been and is progressive because it has bound black people together and given them strength, although Black nationalism in and of itself is not the sufficient answer to the problems of black people. Black nationalism represents the realization by Black people that their problems are unique and that their separation from whites can be a weapon in their struggle for freedom.<sup>13</sup>

But Boggs does throw some caution concerning nationalism and what it is supposed to achieve in the black nation.

Black nationalism has created a united black consciousness, but black consciousness which does not develop into a real and realistic attack on the causes of black oppression can only become false consciousness, in other words, a breeding ground for cultism, adventurism, and opportunism which are now rampant in the movement. Black revolutionary nationalism involves real and realistic struggles; not only against those who control the



very real institutions to make them serve human needs rather than the needs of the economic system for profit and technological development.<sup>14</sup>

But even Boggs is rather vague in his pronouncement. He does not clearly define who the enemies of black people are. He seems to be referring to the white power structure, if not the entire white society. This type of ideological confusion seems to be characteristic of most black movements. One is not discounting the issue of race. What one is trying to advance is that a movement that lacks a proper ideological direction is bound to have a very short span. One need not mention the numerous nationalist movements that have cropped up before and withered after a short while. While such movements have attained some political ground, as in the case of most African countries, they have proved incapable of facing up to the demands of the masses after independence. While extolling nationalism, the black nationalists in America must be aware of its shortcomings and be able to provide a more viable philosophy for the future.

#### MALCOLM X

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Nebraska on May 19, 1925. His mother was a West Indian; and his father a staunch

follower and exponent of Garvey and Garveyism. A staunch nationalist, his father preached the need for black pride and economic power. He also advocated a-return-to-Africa on the part of black Americans. Due to his activities he incurred the wrath of the white racists who developed a hatred for him. They plotted and finally murdered him in a most brutal fashion by running him over with an automobile. Poverty, anxiety and the effects of constantly moving in search of food finally drove Malcolm's mother into a mental institution.

As a man who barely went beyond the eighth grade, Malcolm rose to become one of Black America's most powerful spokesmen. But his popularity among the masses created a deep hatred and disgust not only on the white power structure but among the liberal blacks as well. In an attempt to trace the evolution of his thought, we can divide his life into three sections; his life before he was converted to Islam, his life during his association with Elijah Muhammed, and his life after the break with Muhammad. Prior to his prison life, Malcolm was a hard-core criminal in the ghettos and, as is the fate of most blacks, he was bound to end up in prison soon. He spent most of his time and energy engaging in criminal acts. It seemed as if he did not know where to channel his energies. Instead, he gambled, peddled dope and was a strong force to reckon with in the underworld. Finally, the police caught up with him and he had to take a ten-year stretch in jail. Ironically enough, his experiences before

his arrest and during his prison days were to prove very important in dealing with the black masses in the ghettos when he joined the Black Muslims and after he left them. He not only talked about them, he was one of them and they listened to him. They listened to him because they recognised him as one of them. It is not surprising therefore that it was in prison that he came into contact with the doctrine of Islam. Of course from the experiences of Marcus Garvey and Noble Drew Ali, the black Muslims had learned the importance of reaching out to the poor and dispossessed who in many cases led lives of desperation and hopelessness. The black man, they teach, has a manifest destiny, and the white man is the personification of the evil that separates the Black Man from his freedom, his moral development and his god.<sup>15</sup> To a man like Malcolm whose race is despised, exploited and brutalised, Islam proved irresistible. George Breitman comments on the influence of the Black Muslims over Malcolm:

The Black Muslims reached Malcolm at a time of acute crisis in his life: a young man in his twenties, he was in prison (1946-1952), alone, rebellious, groping to understand what had happened to him and where he fitted into the future. A movement denouncing white oppression had enormous appeal to him because he felt he had been

a victim of that oppression; he knew he would not have achieved an excessive 10-year sentence for burglary the first time he was convicted if he had not flouted white supremacist morality by having a white girl-friend as an accomplice. Perhaps a non-religious movement of the right type might have recruited him at that time - but none came into touch with him then, and the Black Muslims did. It was because the answers he was searching for were supplied by a religious movement. He embraced its religious along with its non-religious aspects. But its main attraction for him was its message that he had sunk to the depths because of white oppression and that the Nation of Islam provided a vehicle to combat and end that oppression.<sup>16</sup>

Islam raised the consciousness of the black man, taught him to respect his colour, and showed him that he had contributed a lot to society. For those who sought an identity and desired self-improvement, Islam proved the right channel.<sup>17</sup> Blacks were taught to be proud of their colour and their African ancestry. On the economic side they were encouraged to be self-reliant and not to let the white power structure control their lives. In other words the stress was on economic independence. This type of religion had more appeal to the alienated and dejected Afro-

American than Christianity or any other religion. Islam was out to rout the mask of dependency that was stifling the black people. For people to be themselves they must control their destinies. The black man must, therefore, control his economy. Note that it remains vague as to who in the black nation is supposed to undertake this exercise. The ideological shortcomings of such an exercise are not difficult to discern. Creating a black nation with exactly the same class structures and economic system does not provide any qualitative leap at all. But this is not to discount the positive aspects of the movement like the teaching of black people to respect themselves, and exhorting them to attain their independence. In the words of Essien-Udom

....the nation of Islam is important not because it tells whites how bitterly Negroes feel about their present conditions, but for showing the Negro masses "why" they feel the way they do, "how" they may get out of their degradation, and "how" they may become self-respecting citizens.....The Nation recognises the needs of Negroes, like other human beings, for membership and identity in some community. It insists that Negroes have the capacity to redeem themselves and recover their sense of human worth; that they must take the initiative in their struggle for human dignity.<sup>18</sup>

Addressing an O.A.A.U. (Organization of Afro-American Unity) Rally, Malcolm said:

I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any time I have to accept a religion that won't let me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with that religion. That's why I am a Muslim, because it's a religion that teaches you an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It teaches you to respect everybody, and treat everybody right. But it also teaches you if someone steps on your toe, chop off their foot.<sup>19</sup>

It was within the confines of this philosophy that Malcolm preached the doctrine of Islam. For a long time he was a fervent and faithful spokesman of the Nation of Islam. According to the creed of this religion, the white man is considered the enemy. The black Muslims shattered the mask of love that black people were supposed to have for white people. Prior to this, it was unimaginable for black people to voice their rejection of whites openly. They covered it under their smiles and bows. Underlying this was a deep hatred toward their oppressors. The Black Muslims voiced the discontent that the black masses felt for their lot in the U.S., with tokenism, gradualism and white hypocrisy. Malcolm as the chief spokesman of the movement well

understood that "racial and sexual attitudes were interrelated, and that the Negro could never achieve his freedom until he had straightened out his feelings about his manhood. He understood that the oppression of the Negro robbed him of his masculinity, his pride in himself, and his sense of dignity"<sup>20</sup>. Again the Black Muslims made it known to the masses that the so called "liberal" and "moderate" black leaders were merely serving the status quo and not the interests of the masses. Of course this unmasked these petit-bourgeois leaders who purported to represent black people. They were merely seen as appendages of the system and people who had no mind of their own. This unmasking had the effect of antagonizing their (the Black Muslims) position. In terms of attacking the real institutions that were shaping black lives, neither the Black Muslims nor the so called moderate leadership (King, et al) understood the workings of the system. The Black Muslims poured a lot of hot rhetoric which merely embarrassed but never shook the system. They never asked themselves what underlay the lynchings, police brutalities etc. These were seen in isolation from the economic-political structure of the nation. Instead black people were urged to unite within the Nation of Islam in order to crush their white masters. But the problem with Muhammad's group is that they refused to be deeply involved in the real political issues of the day. Yet they wanted to play militant and actually created that image. They remained content with wearing this mask of militancy and-

toughness. It was meant to reflect their ability and readiness to defend themselves in the face of attack by the enemies of the race. But many times black churches were bombed, children shot and the Black Muslims did nothing. Instead they gave the reason that Islam does not allow them to get involved in the politics of Non-believers even though they be black. The government is unjust and corrupt in the eyes of Allah. It would therefore be sinful for righteous Muslims to participate in its affairs.<sup>21</sup> For example, they looked with scorn and aloofness at demonstrations organised by blacks and other interested groups against the American government. Many a times appeals were made to the Black Muslims to help wherever action was involved, but they always declined. Eric Lincoln in assessing the Black Muslims observes:

The Black Muslims are neither pacifists nor aggressors. They pay zealous attention to the requirements of the letter of the law regarding peace and order. They engage in no "sit-ins", test no segregation statutes, participate in no "marches on Washington" or anywhere else. But they do believe in keeping the scores even, and they have warned all America that "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is the only effective way to settle racial differences.<sup>22</sup>



The Black Muslims were only aggressive verbally. They do not question the basis on which the society is structured. They only question the superstructure which is tied up with racism. The fact that they accept law and order as set down by the American ruling class means that they recognize the existence of the very institution that oppresses them. This also means that they cannot, therefore, destroy what they believe in. This type of contradiction in their philosophy raised eyebrows and alienated many. While it is true that the Muslims are preoccupied with the techniques of attaining good life here and now, nevertheless Muhammed taught all his followers that they must submit to the just acts of those in authority in public or private life, provided they do not conflict with their religious beliefs. At this juncture it is beneficial to recall that it was Muhammad the leader of the Nation of Islam, who was against Muslims getting involved in strikes and sit-ins because he saw the move as prejudicing the government's views on their movement. In effect he was playing according to the rules of the game as laid down by Uncle Sam. But within the Islamic movement there was a lot of discontent especially as regards the attitude of the leadership towards the growing tide of world revolution which Muhammad failed to grasp. Once again this limited the influence of his movement. Malcolm tried in his own way to get politically involved by speaking out on crucial issues. He spoke the language the people understood and expressed their heart-felt emotions with courage and zeal.

This elevated him in the eyes of his people who saw in him the new symbol of their manhood in their struggle against racial injustice and exploitation. By teaching them that exploitation was man-made and not God-sent he tore the mask that is normally used to justify exploitation that the way things are is the way they were destined and ordained to be. This was the first step towards his split with Muhammad. The latter's philosophy was more religious while Malcolm injected politics into the whole doctrine of Black Muslim philosophy. This provided more life and meaning for the poor blacks who sought a meaning in their lives. Margolies correctly analyses Malcolm's career and what he meant to his people.

He was successful because he expressed in a language his people could understand the feelings they seldom dared articulate even to themselves. He had the effrontery not only to "tell it the way it is" to Negroes but, more astonishingly, to their white liberal friends. He served therefore as a fiery symbol of black anger and courage for millions..... He was, above all, a teacher and a minister..... passionately devoted to his flock - the poor, the dispossessed, the pariahs, the menials - and he made them feel a dignity and pride they had never before experienced.<sup>23</sup>

The dignity and pride experienced was because of the things he taught them about their history, their ability to change their lot, and a courage of heart to confront their enemy. The masks of fear and humility, he taught, would take them no place. They must negate the white man's image of themselves. And when they saw him confront Uncle Sam on Television and over the radio stations they were willing to shed off their masks of servility and of playing the "good nigger".

The occasion for the split between Malcolm and Muhammad was to come after the assassination of President Kennedy when Malcolm made a remark that it was the climate of hate and violence which America had created that killed Kennedy. Elijah Muhammad used this as an excuse to silence him. But Malcolm was a man with a burning desire to fight for the cause of his people and even his religion could not be used as a vehicle for stopping him. It was precisely for this reason that on March 8th 1964 he left the Nation of Islam.

I felt the movement was dragging its feet in many areas. It didn't involve itself in the civic or political struggles our people were confronted by. All it did was stress the importance of moral reformation - don't drink, don't smoke, don't permit fornication and adultery. When I found that the hierarchy itself wasn't practising what it preached, it was clear that this part of its program was

bankrupt.

So the only way it could function and be meaningful in the community was to take part in the political and economic facets of the Negro struggle. And the organization wouldn't do that because the stand it would have to take would have been too militant, uncompromising, and activist, and the hierarchy had gotten conservative.<sup>24</sup>

In the same breath, Malcolm went on to espouse his new vision. He was no longer going to be limited in his fight for the black man's struggle. Neither was he going to be parochial in accepting help towards the advancement of his cause.

"I am prepared", Malcolm said, "to cooperate in local civil rights actions in the South and elsewhere and shall do so because every campaign for specific objectives can only heighten the political consciousness of the Negroes and intensify their identification against white society.".....

"There is no use deceiving ourselves," Malcolm said. "Good education, housing and jobs are imperatives for Negroes, and I shall support them in their fight to win these objectives, but I shall tell the Negroes that while these are necessary, they cannot solve the main Negro problem."

Malcolm continued:

"I shall also tell them that what has been called the 'Negro Revolution' in the United States is a deception practised upon them, because they have only to examine the fallure of this so called revolution to produce any positive results in the past year.

"I shall tell them what a real revolution means - the French Revolution, the American Revolution, Algeria, to name a few, There can be no revolution without bloodshed, and it is nonsense to describe the civil rights movement in America as a revolution....."

Malcolm said Elijah Muhammad had prevented him from participating in civil rights struggles in the South although he had had many opportunities to do so.

"It is going to be different now," Malcolm said. "I am going to join in the fight whenever Negroes ask for my help, and I suspect my activities will be on a greater and more intensive scale than in the past.<sup>25</sup>

By dealing with the above question of revolution, Malcolm X tore the mask asunder by teaching what real revolution means. He felt that it was false for people to call the Civil Rights movement a Revolution. Due to this movement's inherent nature

It was impossible to envisage it as a revolution. The civil Rightists, if anything, wore the mask of the "responsible" black man by appealing to the conscience of the white man and not attacking the real institutions that supported black oppression. They gave the impression of being engaged in a revolution while they were not. According to Malcolm, a revolution is not a picnic or fine rhetoric. A revolution demands sacrifice. It demands the shedding of blood. It was contrary to what the petty-bourgeois leaders were doing, that is, compromising non-existent or at most petty achievements. A revolution fights for certain concrete demands. In this case the black man was demanding his Freedom. He was not demanding an integrated cup of coffee. A revolution changes systems; it changes hearts; a revolution creates new men with new interests. It is by espousing the above that we view Malcolm as a man who rent the mask asunder. By talking of the Algerian revolution, the French Revolution, etc. he was showing the global nature of revolutions. A revolution cannot therefore be viewed in isolation. It must be seen in relation to other world movements. One could not certainly say this of the Civil Rights movement. The mask of revolution that most petty-bourgeois leaders wore was peeled off by Malcolm; and after that went on to expose what these movements were about.

A great shift in Malcolm's thinking occurs after his split with Muhammad. Formerly he was opposed to white people due to

the conditions of black people in America. The whole race, to him, was responsible for the plight of black people. But later, Malcolm learnt to treat them with caution and respect whenever they deserved it. He had met many white people during his trip to Africa who were deeply committed to the cause of the African Revolution. Quite a number of these white revolutionaries were to be found in North Africa. This caused him to reflect on his earlier anti-white position. Consequently when he went to America he was thinking of working with militant whites who were genuinely interested in joining black people's struggles. Colour was no longer that important in his philosophy. In other words, he was not going to use colour as the criteria for judging people.

We will work with anyone, with any group, no matter what their colour is, as long as they are genuinely interested in taking the type of steps necessary to bring an end to the injustices that black people in this country are afflicted by. No matter what their color is, no matter what their political, economic or social philosophy is, as long as their aims and objectives are in the direction of destroying the vulturous system that has been sucking the blood of black people in this country, they're all right with us.<sup>26</sup>

On another occasion, Malcolm was more explicit on the issue of interracial alliances. At a New York meeting on January 7, 1965 he said:

You have all types of people who are fed up with what's going on. You have whites who are fed up, you have blacks who are fed up. The whites who are fed up can't come uptown (to Harlem) too easily because people uptown are more fed up than anybody else, and they are so fed up it's not so easy to come uptown.

Whereas the blacks uptown who come downtown usually are the type, you know, who almost lose their identity - they lose their soul, so to speak - so they are not in a position to serve as a bridge between militant whites and the militant blacks; that type can't do it. I hate to hit him like that but it's true. He has lost his identity, he has lost his feeling, and..... he usually has lost his contact with Harlem itself. So that he serves no purpose, he's almost rootless, he's not uptown and he's not fully downtown.

So when the day comes when the whites who are really fed up - I don't mean these jive whites, who pose as liberals and who are not, but those who are fed up with what is going on - when they learn how to



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So when the day comes when the whites who are really fed up - I don't mean these jive whites, who pose as liberals and who are not, but those who are fed up with what is going on - when they learn how to

establish the proper type of communication with those uptown who are fed up, and they get some co-ordinated action going, you'll get some changes. You'll get some changes. And it will take both, it will take everything that you've got, it will take that.<sup>27</sup>

Malcolm watched with growing concern the happenings in most independent African countries, and America's role in world politics especially in Indo-China, Africa and Latin America. Consequently, he began to understand the nature of imperialism and he increasingly became more anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism. This was the start of his gradual shift towards the left. He noticed that many newly independent countries throughout the world were turning towards the socialist road. This in itself led him to question and finally understand that socialism is the only ideology that recognises the basic equality of mankind and which seeks to remove the exploitation of man by man. He unmasked the nature of capitalism and saw it as a vulture. What he was saying was that it would be impossible for a black man to achieve freedom in America. As far as he was concerned no amount of hard work would salvage the Afro-American from the position of an underdog. What Malcolm did was to unravel and destroy the mask of the American dream. Transcending the mask of this dream, he saw only the "American nightmare" -

the America of class and race differences. Commenting on the nature of capitalism, he said:

It is impossible for capitalism to survive, primarily because the system capitalism needs some blood to suck. Capitalism used to be like an eagle, but now it's more like a vulture. It used to be strong enough to go and suck anybody's blood whether they were strong or not. But now it has become more cowardly, like the vulture, and it can only suck the blood of the helpless. As the nations of the world free themselves, then capitalism has less victims, less to suck, and it becomes weaker and weaker. It's only a matter of time.....before it will collapse completely.<sup>28</sup>

The above quotation shows clearly the shift of emphasis from colour to a political system. Malcolm began to understand that the struggle in the world today is not between races but rather are based on ideology - the ideology of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Looking at the nature of the future struggle he said:

Where an ultimate clash between East and West is concerned, I think that an objective analysis of events that are taking place on this earth today points toward some type of ultimate showdown.

You call it a political showdown, or even a showdown between the economic systems that exist on this earth, which almost boil down along racial lines. I do believe that there will be a clash between East and West.

I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those who do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation. I believe there will be that kind of clash, but I don't think it will be based upon the color of the skin, as Elijah Muhammad had taught it.<sup>29</sup>

In fact Malcolm no longer viewed the white man as the source of all evil in America. He merely talked of particular white organizations and individuals who have set it upon themselves to be the custodians of the American system, and who never cease to threaten the existence of the black man. It was towards such people that Malcolm directed his attacks since the American government has failed to protect the lives and property of the blacks. That is why he urged the blacks to organize and protect themselves against this type of violence. Time and again he asserted that he was not a racist but the Press in America continued to give his former image during his Nation of Islam

days when he was totally anti-white and saw no possibility of anything good coming out of this group. This position was his philosophy but he had discarded it when he realized its shortcomings. But the press continued to paint him in negative images because it was obvious that a revolutionary Malcolm who appealed to all races to help in changing the American society was more dangerous than a narrow-minded one. Time and again he continued to stress that whites should be judged on their own merit. He began to see a situation whereby radical whites would be necessary in advancing the black man's cause.

....there are those who have accused me of being a racist. I am not a racist in any way, shape or form, and I believe in taking an uncompromising stand against any forms of segregation and discrimination that are based on race. I, myself, do not judge a man by the color of his skin. The yardstick that I use to judge is his deeds, behaviour, his intentions. And the press has very skillfully projected me in the image of a racist simply because I take an uncompromising stand against the racism that exists in the United States.<sup>30</sup>

A further aspect in the evolution of Malcolm's thought is to be seen in the internationalisation of the black man's cause. It was his contention that the injustices in the American system

could only be solved if the suffering and tolling masses of the world came in aid of their compatriots in the U.S. He felt that the U.S. should be brought before the United Nations Assembly and made to answer charges of violating the basic human rights by discriminating against the blacks. Malcolm felt that the first task confronting the black man was unity - unity amongst men of black colour all over the globe. That is why he created the Organisation of Afro-American Unity not only to enhance black unity but also to help blacks outside Africa to find their cultural roots in the mother continent. We can see Malcolm's emphasis shifting from religion to politics; and Organisation of Afro-American Unity was to act as a political party - much in the same way as the Black Panther Party which it preceded. As regards the relationship between Black Americans and Africa, he said:

I believe this, that if we migrated back to Africa culturally, philosophically and psychologically, while remaining here physically, the spiritual bond that would develop between us and Africa through this cultural, philosophical and psychological migration, so-called migration, would enhance our position here, because we would have our contacts with them acting as roots or foundations behind us..... And this is what I mean by a migration

back to Africa - going back  
in the sense that we reach  
out to them and they reach  
out to us. Our mutual  
understanding and our  
mutual effort toward a  
mutual objective will bring  
mutual benefits to the  
African as well as to the  
Afro-American.

To him, therefore, the fate of the Africans in the mother country was bound to affect the destinies of blacks in other parts of the globe. That is why he could not stand American Intervention in the Congo. He went further to identify with the oppressed of Latin America and Asia because he believed and felt that they were all fighting the same struggle - the struggle for a more humane and better existence amongst mankind. An existence that would establish equality between people. Consequently, he condemned American aggression in Vietnam and forecast that it would not be long before American Imperialism would be vanquished. In this quest for a world-wide revolution he stressed the role played by students and the young generation in changing reactionary regimes. The future is for the young and, therefore, they have to involve themselves in creating a better world. Malcolm was against any form of political apathy and he wanted everybody, young and old, to be actively involved in the day to day issues that shape the future of mankind. In him many young people saw and heard themselves. Malcolm demystified what

revolution is supposed to be. In simple terms he brought the message home to his people. But most important he taught them against thinking they were being revolutionary by merely making protest marches or eating in integrated restaurants. By unmasking the political activities that had been going on within the black community, he brought home to the black masses the truth concerning revolution. To be revolutionary they must go beyond the mask. But as yet very few people were willing to transcend the mask or challenge it. It is Malcolm who became the spirit of the sixties; more especially after his death he influenced the course of events. Black people began to understand what Malcolm had spent all his life for - to give them their dignity, raise their consciousness, and embark on their own liberation. Any movement that lays claim to be interested in Black liberation must pay homage to Malcolm for he was a leader in the spirit of the masses. To Malcolm, the revolt of the black masses was that of the oppressed against the oppressor. In the same vein he saw the world-wide struggle in terms of the exploiter against the exploited. He had transcended the stage whereby the struggle was viewed in racial terms.<sup>32</sup> He had seen the crux of the matter and had begun a relentless war against the enemy - capitalism and all its manifestations of imperialism. This is precisely why he was viewed as a dangerous man. Undoubtedly, Malcolm had his weaknesses as a man. We realize that he had not quite clearly crystallised his ideology at the time of his death. At times he did make



contradictory statements.<sup>33</sup> He was making rapid changes, and mistakes were bound to occur. But what emerges is a new Malcolm treading on the revolutionary path. But his journey was to be cut short on February 21, 1965 by an assassin's bullets. Thus a martyr was born. The decade of rebellion - the decade of the sixties - can only be understood by clearly understanding Malcolm, for he embodied the spirit of the times. The quest of the black artists is what Malcolm had been teaching his people during his whole life-time.

#### THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT:

Side by side with these political movements there developed the Black Arts Movement which served as the cultural arm of the black people's struggle. Black writers saw their works as weapons to be used in the black liberation struggle. They were no longer fascinated by images from the white world. Instead, they drew from the experience of black people. The Black Arts movement saw itself as being linked to politics. It is no wonder that one finds the black arts talking of the day to day struggles of the black man, his joys and sorrows. Of course there were those who mystified these real day to day experiences and dealt with them in terms hardly recognizable, that is, they had little semblance to the truth. But since black art undertook

the task of dealing with the black experience in art form, it was viewed as an extension of the community and of the self that had produced it. Therefore, it attempted to foster and advocate all that is beautiful and good for the black nation. As Larry Neal correctly states, Black Arts

....is primarily concerned with the cultural and spiritual liberation of Black America. It takes upon itself the task of expressing, through various art forms, the soul of the Black Nation.....The Black Arts movement.....reasons that this linking must take place along lines that are rooted in an Afro-American and Third World historical and cultural sensibility.<sup>34</sup>

The Black Arts movement saw itself as a unifying factor among all people in the Third World. Today, in the Third World, we have numerous liberation movements seeking to overthrow oppressive regimes, and consequently they provide a source of hope for the black man in America. The latter is a symbol and bastion of oppression and exploitation in the world today. Therefore there is no repressive regime that can exist today without American goodwill. Consequently a blow against colonial and neo-colonial forces anywhere in the world is seen as aiding the destruction of the very system that oppresses Afro-Americans. Toward this end the black artists create images of and for the

black community in a way that they can easily relate to. This art stands as a quest for manhood and an affirmation of the self. It negates the white way of looking at the world and judging black people. Black people must look at each other through their own eyes. When Black Artists assert that Black Art must speak to the lives and the psychic survival of Black people

they are speaking of an art that addresses itself directly to Black people; an art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that validates the positive aspects of our life struggle. It: an art that opens up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our own painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the vision of a Liberated future.<sup>35</sup>

Unless we look at the literature of this period from the perspective of the people themselves it is very easy to misconstrue the spirit that runs through them. It is a literature that is developing with the struggle. It is partisan and seeks no apologies about it. It ".....supports black nationalism, black consciousness, black cultural and institutional ideals."<sup>36</sup> Eugene Perkins in "The Black Arts Movement: Its

Challenge and Responsibility" sees black art as assuming the dimension of becoming part of the natural environment. By this he means that Black Art is part and parcel of Black life and can only be comprehended by looking at the black community and its history. Perkins, however, indicates his reservations:

.....there is an inherent danger to any cultural movement which arises during a period of social crisis that is bordering on revolution. Unless the aesthetic of the movement support and reinforce the struggle, then they have no real social or political significance, and become only sterile fads that are destined to be buried before their fruition, and rightly so. The Black Arts movement cannot afford to isolate itself from the Black Revolution. It should be as Larry Neal says, "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept." For like the Black Revolution, the Black Arts movement must seek to liberate black people from what Neal calls "the Euro-Western sensibility" that has enslaved, oppressed and niggerized black people..... there can be no dichotomy between the two. Both have to be inter-related and supportive of each other if true liberation is ever to be realized.

What we have to note is that a lot of black artists assumed they were in the midst of a revolution. Consequently they put on the mask of revolution and saw that as an end in itself. To the artists black art is meant for the whole community and not just individuals.<sup>38</sup> It seeks the dedication and understanding of the whole race. Black art is for the people's sake; and the people are the ones who help to shape it.<sup>39</sup> This brings us to the point that most of the Black art, especially the poetry, is not meant to be read and put aside, but to become a part of the giver and receiver.<sup>40</sup> Black poetry, therefore, seeks to hit the reader as hard as possible in order to create a big and long-lasting impression. It forces the reader to react to it emotionally or otherwise. By responding to this impact, the reader becomes a part, an extension of the poem. This establishes a dialectical relationship between the reader and the poem. That is why black writers use the harshest imagery and the most powerful language possible. The way black poets use language is very revolutionary in the sense that they use everyday street corner slang. This means that these poets delineate their audience as the ordinary black man. Furthermore the type of language used creates an immediate communication with this black man. Again black writers are constantly moulding language to suit their ends - thus creating new word forms and stretching the language to new limits. This offers a complete break from the way the earlier

black writers used to do it. This modern use of everyday black language is meant to create a sense of closeness between black people. As a result it has its class appeal, that is, since it is meant for the ordinary man, then the language will reflect that class. This serves to show that black people have a language of their own different from the one used by the larger society. It is an assertion of the community's individuality, and at the same time common experience. It also provides an attempt to look at oneself through the community's (black) eyes, and a reminder of where one's allegiance lies. Donald B. Gibson in his assessment of the black poet's use of language observes:

Black poetry's use of the language of the ghetto is not only a means of expression consonant with the poet's aim to communicate with people of a certain social-economic level; it is also an expression of a complex of attitudes and feelings. The language of the black urban ghetto is used to emphasize unity, commonality of expression, identity.....a certain language has come to be identified with black experience, with commitment to certain goals and ideals; and this language with its nuances of meaning, its conscious difference from standard English, its renaming of things and events (its recasting of experience into its own terms), gives unique character to the poetry.

The language of black poetry has another quite significant dimension: It is a language intended to be spoken rather than privately read. A great deal of this material goes dead when it is captured on the page, because the poet is an oral poet.<sup>41</sup>

The way the language is used becomes part of the artist's attempt not only to reach his people but to extend and develop the language of the community. It is part of the writer's commitment to his people. He is not just a poet but a Black poet, and his art must reflect that. The Black Arts Movement was an attempt 'to speak directly to Black people about themselves in order to move them toward self-knowledge and collective freedom. It is therefore not "protest" art but essentially an art of liberating vision.<sup>42</sup> It is also an art that attempts a genuine reflection of the poet's vision and his people.<sup>43</sup> This is what Amiri Baraka meant when he said that -

the black artist is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with, by asserting Black feeling, Black mind; Black judgement. The black intellectual, in this same context, is needed to change the interpretation of facts toward the Black man's best interests, instead of merely tagging

along reciting white  
judgements of the world. 44

And Baraka should know better for he is the one who has become the pace-setter for the other poets to follow. The poets of the sixties could not afford to lag behind the demands of the masses. The masses wanted a literature that reflected their condition and helped them to understand their position better. The black writers responded to this need by writing of the cultural aspects of the black man: know yourself, your history, and be proud of what you are. Most of the writers were content with extolling the qualities - both imaginary and real - of the black people. But most of them remained static and never went beyond the cultural fad. The energy and the anger of black people was not given ideological direction. This is basically what led to the failure of this euphoria. At the same time there emerged a new group of black radicals at the beginning of the seventies who took over and developed the struggle where Malcolm had left it.



CHAPTER FIVE

AMIRI BARAKA (LeRoi Jones)

Baraka was born LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey, on October 7, 1934. He came from a relatively wealthy background and had early associations with white kids in the neighbourhood. After High School, he joined Howard University, which he left in his junior year without completing his degree course.<sup>1</sup> At this early period of his life, Baraka closely associated with the white intellectuals in East Village where he was residing with them.<sup>2</sup> He was then known as LeRoi Jones, but by the summer of 1968 he had changed his name to Amiri Baraka as a symbol of adoption of his new philosophy of black nationalism. His residence also changed from East Village to the ghettos of Newark, N.J. This move drew him closer - both physically and spiritually, and ideologically - to the black masses. The latter became his preoccupation. His poetry took a different form, and its content also changed.<sup>3</sup> A further shift in the poet's ideology was later to occur in the seventies when he found nationalism to be insufficient, and consequently adopted Marxism as his new philosophy.

More than any other poet in the '60's, Baraka reflects the cultural arm of the Black Power movement. With the development

In his social awareness and ideological consciousness, one observes a certain shift of emphasis in his works. This is important in that it is meant to be part of the black man's quest for freedom and justice not only in the U.S. but throughout the world. The poems that we are going to examine in Black Magic Poetry<sup>4</sup> and in In Our Terribleness<sup>5</sup> clearly portray the poet's concern with developing a black world view and aesthetics. But this development grew out of his disillusionment with the poetry that he was writing earlier on. The collection of this early poetry that we are going to use as a take off point are to be found in Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note<sup>6</sup> - hereafter referred to as Preface - and in The Dead Lecturer.<sup>7</sup> These works offer an insight into Baraka's earlier period, and also help us to see his concerns then as a writer who was in the so-called mainstream of American literature. He closely associated with white writers who greatly influenced both the subject matter of his poetry, and the form that poetry took. According to Denise Levertov in "Poets of the Given Ground", white writers like William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley greatly shaped Baraka's earlier work.<sup>8</sup> This was the era of the cool over-intellectual Baraka spewing out intelligible abstractions for himself. In the fashion of his contemporaries and colleagues, he saw the world (America) as being hostile and unfeeling. According to the poet everybody is just interested in individual aspirations without

regard to other human beings. In this Inhuman spectacle the poet assumes the role of the lone Intellectual who is disgusted and disappointed with everything in the world. In the poem "To a Publisher.....cut out"<sup>9</sup> we come face to face with the poet's disenchantment with the world. Beginning on a sad, flat note, the poem symbolises the dryness of the poet's existence. He sees the world as devoid of both natural and human warmth. In such a "wet" and "unfriendly" world, with "the night cold and asexual" the poet asks the all pervasive question:

.....who am I to love anybody?

The question, loaded with the poet's own self-hatred and disillusionment reflects the degree to which he has removed himself from the world - a world of detestable beings engaged in mediocre pastimes and vacuous existence.

Charlie Brown spent most of his time whacking his doodle, or having weird relations with that dopey hound of his.<sup>10</sup>

The interesting observation is that Charlie gets on with a dog. Unable to see any worthwhile humans he resorts to animals

to provide him with the only source of warmth he requires. The dog provides for him the only form of communication that he is able to undertake in the world. The poet's own alienation is almost like Charlie Brown's if not identical. The inability to perceive his society's alienation as a decadence which is inherent in the social system that has shaped America causes him to adopt behavioral patterns that are as absurd as they are futile.

I ride the 14St. bus  
everyday.....reading  
Hui neng/Raymond Chandler/  
Olson.....  
I have slept with almost  
every mediocre colored  
woman  
On 23rd St.....At any  
rate, talked a good  
match. And frightened  
by the lack of any real  
communication  
I addressed several  
perfumed notes to Uncle  
Don  
and stuffed them into  
the radio.<sup>11</sup>

Going to meet other people becomes a futile and painful process because nobody is sincere. Everybody is busy trying to impress everybody else. An attempt at being oneself will not only raise eyebrows, but will also alienate one from the society. What the poet is

saying is that he has to live a life of pretence in order to survive in the world. He cannot go to meet other human beings without having to don the mask that society (especially white middle class) imposes on him. This is revealed in "Scenario VI" when he is going to meet Sylvia.

.....and I came out of  
it with this marvellous  
yellow cane in my hand,  
yellow cashmere jacket  
green felt pants and  
green boater....and green  
and  
black shoes, polished and  
fast, jiggling in the  
wings....till Vincente says  
"rollem"  
and I juggle out on the  
stage, hand in my pockets,  
the cane balanced  
delicately under my arm,  
spinning and clack clack  
clacking across the bare  
Sunday clothesline  
tilting the hat to avoid  
the sun and gingerly  
missing  
the dried branch I had  
put there yesterday.

What Baraka is questioning and satirising are the values of his decadent society, a society of falsehoods and pretence. Lifeless and stifling, one has to tilt one's "...hat to avoid the sun" - the life

giving force of the universe. At this point it is worth noting the way Baraka uses the image of the sun throughout his works. To avoid the sun, is to avoid the essence of the universe. It is a negation of man's place in the world. The poet seems to suggest that the negation of the self is a denial of the spirit to exist in oneself. And man without spirit is nothing. Sylvia comes ".....out in her smashing oranges and jewellery", much in the same way as the poet. But "her deep beauty doesn't include rythm". In other words she is lacking life. The lack of rythm suggests that she is mechanical, and unnatural. Therefore her beauty can only be fake. This is a situation where we are confronted with two people who are completely devoid of life-giving force. The question uppermost in our minds is: how are they going to relate to each other? Baraka's concern seems to be in unmasking his characters and reaching out to their true selves. In this exercise of self-search and groping for a meaningful existence, Baraka is trying the answers only at an individual level. But he is aware of the life around him and is seeking the sun, that is, he wants a meaningful existence.

Each morning  
I go down  
to Gansevoort St.  
and stand on the docks.  
I stare out  
at the horizon  
until it gets up  
and comes to embrace  
me.<sup>12</sup>

In his quest for a meaning in life, the poet becomes confused. He wants attention from the world but none is forthcoming. That is why in "The Turncoat"<sup>13</sup> he moans that he is

....alone and brooding,  
locked in with dull  
memories and self hate

But at the same time he begins to react against the white world. It is still a hesitant step that he is taking. In his tirades against the world he begins to react to the white world around him.

About my sister.  
(O generation revered  
above all others.  
O generation of fictitious  
Ofays  
I revere you.....  
You are all so  
beautiful)

The irony is beginning to seep through. But as yet he is still dissatisfied with the "ofays" in the same way he is dissatisfied with the rest of the world. He begins to see racist inklings in the lifestyle of his so-called sister.

my sister doesn't like  
to teach in Newark  
because there are too  
many colored in her  
classes.<sup>14</sup>

She is materially full but spiritually empty. Her life is so absurd that she can only acquire "...a faggot music teacher" who leads an equally pretentious and worthless existence. It seems they are drawn together by their deadness. They are so blind that they do not see the futility of their lives. Since they have many points of "similarity of interest" the two "ofays" will probably get married - and according to the poet, they will end up

smiling and glad/in  
the huge and loveless  
white anglo-sun/of  
benevolent step  
mother America.<sup>15</sup>



By the time he arrives at The Dead Lecturer the poet is only surer of his craft. He is cool and composed. He talks less about himself and his sense of worthlessness. There begins to emerge an outward looking dimension in his poetry. Society's problems are beginning to prod his conscience. He criticises his friends in "the politics of rich painters".<sup>16</sup> These are the friends he lives with in East Village. But now he begins to tear the basis of their world apart - and by implication his world too. They are pseudo-intellectuals who just want to cash in on the ignorance of society.

Just their fingers'  
prints staining the cold  
glass, is sufficient for  
commerce, and a proper  
ruling on humanity.

After exploiting their audience they can now sit back in luxury and hatch theories about the world. This is what prompts the poet in "The Political Poem"<sup>17</sup> to conclude:

Luxury, then, is a way  
of being ignorant,  
comfortably an approach  
to the open market of  
least information. Where  
theories can thrive, under  
heavy tarpaulins without  
being cracked by ideas.

But in reality these people are

...more ignorant than  
the poor tho they pride  
themselves with that accent.  
And move easily in fake  
robes of egalitarianism. 18

In Black Magic Poetry Baraka has already found the direction he wants his poetry to acquire. Poetry has become a weapon with which to vanquish the enemies of black people. Much of the obscurity and confusion prevalent in the earlier works is now gone. As one constantly aware of the plight of his people he calls for a new order of things. Black people are tired of being told to wait for things to change. This is the mood reflected in "A poem some people will have to understand". 19

We have waited the  
coming of a natural  
phenomenon. Mystics  
and romantics,  
knowledgeable  
workers of the land.

But none has come  
(Repeat)  
but none has come.

The poet is suggesting that the black man has historically accepted different philosophies that have done him little good. If anything, they have contributed to his passivity. In other words the black man must now wake up and do things for himself. He must effectively undertake action to change his situation. The task that must be accomplished requires selfless black warriors who are willing to die. According to Baraka in 'Ration'<sup>20</sup>

Banks must be robbed,  
the guards bound and gagged.

The money must be taken  
and used to buy weapons.

This theme is treated more fully in Jello<sup>21</sup> by the poet Baraka. In this play we encounter Jack Benny, who is a rich artist, and Rochester his black servant. The play begins with Jack Benny - J.B. as Rochester cynically dubs him - singing about his good life.

JACK BENNY  
(Comes out, begins to sing)  
I'M SO PRETTY  
AND SO GOOD  
AND I DON'T WORK  
FOR MY LIVELIHOOD

OH HOO HOO  
OH HO HO  
I'M A WHITE....CHRISTIAN!  
(PAUSE, looks guilty) 22  
Well....a recent covert, anyway.

With the above words and actions we are accorded sufficient theoretical justification for Rochester's act of rebellion - that is, robbing Jack Benny of all his money. Rochester is unconvincing as a character because he lacks a full development. When the play opens we see him rebelling against his employer but we do not see how he comes to acquire the sudden consciousness. One wonders whether he needed thirty five years to get to the point. The flippancy of his character does not in any way help to carry the underlying serious intention and message of the author. Baraka is dealing with the issue of black labour and exploitation. Rochester feels oppressed and exploited by his boss.

#### ROCHESTER

Wooooooh my ass. Friend.  
Damn, man what are you  
talking about? If I'm  
all that much your friend,  
why am I the chauffeur.  
If we so tight, why're  
you the one with all the  
money, and I work for you??

That don't sound like  
a friend, to me. Sounds  
just like a natural slave.....

JACK BENNY

Now, wait a minute, don't  
blame your lowly state on  
me. I hustled for what  
I have, friend. You'd  
better do the same,  
instead of looking to me  
all the time.<sup>23</sup>

What Jack Benny calls hard work is nothing short of robbery - the kind of thing that goes on day in and day out in the black communities. J.B. is part of the clique that controls the lives of black people in the ghettos of America. He is responsible for the run-down communities. This is how Rochester sees it but J.B. comes up with a typical bourgeois notion of hard work.

JACK BENNY

But I worked hard for this  
money.....you know that?

ROCHESTER

What you own, one of them  
appliance stores on  
125th Street??

JACK BENNY

Ohh, that's just one of  
my interests.

ROCHESTER

ROCHESTER

Yeh, you own a few butcher  
stores and stuff too.  
Prices ten cents higher  
than downtown too.

JACK BENNY

Look, I'm not there,  
I don't control the  
policies. I'm a comedian,  
an artist. You know that.  
We've been together for  
years.

ROCHESTER

Yeh, I know....that's  
why I'm getting my back  
pay right now.....what<sup>24</sup>  
they call severance pay....

But as far as we are concerned Rochester's action is nothing more than an individual act, even though there is the suggestion that there is somebody else involved with him. The getaway car provides a clue toward this end. We cannot but ask the use to which this money is going to be put. Is he going to buy cardillacs with it or is it going to be used "to buy weapons"? But Rochester lacks the weight of character to convince us that his action is no more than an experiment into adventurism. On the other hand we note that Rochester's act of getting his "severance pay", and the psychological break necessary to get the money from Jack Benny - these

in themselves throw a new light into his inner self. This is the side that J.B. never saw. To the latter he has always been a "good boy". It is precisely for this reason that J.B. cannot understand Rochester breaking away from him and striking out on his own. By leaving J.B.'s employ Rochester makes the necessary step toward his own personal independence. This is what hurts J.B. more than anything: that a black person has rejected him.

JACK BENNY

(Getting a little worried)

Rochester, Rochester, what's  
come over you?  
Why're you talking to me  
like this? We've been  
together for too long.  
We're supposed to be.....  
friends.<sup>25</sup>

That is why Rochester's act is one of rebellion. He is no longer willing to be subservient to his boss - who in this case symbolises oppression. In other words, Rochester sheds off the mask that American society has imposed on him for centuries. The shattering of the mask of obedience and contentment paves the way for a new personality in him.

By performing the seemingly simple act of defying his boss, he is making a profound statement concerning his manhood and that of the oppressed. But he is making it in terms of race. To be conscious is the first step toward liberation. But this is devoid of ideological clarity. That is why his symbolic rise against his oppressor encounters some roadblocks in our minds. The same act is further dramatised in Experimental Death Unit where the blacks stand facing the whites in a war of retribution. Baraka sees the two races as antagonistic - this results in a state of turmoil. In 'Square Business' this is what the poet attempts to explore.

The faces of Americans  
sit open hating each  
other. The black ones  
hating, though they laugh  
and are controlled by  
laughter. The white ones  
blown up hot inside, their  
projects are so profitable.....  
sixteen stories in a  
sultry town.....<sup>26</sup>

The reason furnished for this hatred is the oppression of one group by another. The blacks are bitter because of the sultry environment into which they are forced. Baraka sees this as most humiliating and debasing. But this is difficult to discern in the faces of black



people since no whites will ever understand the hurt in black lives. The blacks "laugh and are controlled by laughter". In other words this laughter is a cover up for their true feelings. It is a kind of safety device used by black people in the face of such odds as exist in American society. This laughter in such circumstances reflects the inadequacy to handle the situation. It saves black people from facing their own impotence. This can and does happen at two levels: at a conscious, and an unconscious level. The former requires a certain amount of consciousness at an individual, and possibly societal level. When a reaction in the latter case occurs it is more instinctive than anything else. This state of affairs is reflective of Dunbar's sentiments in 'The Mask' whereby the white world only sees what it wants to see. White eyes can never penetrate the conscience and the heart of black people. But before one can effectively talk of confronting the enemy, one has to find oneself. Self-awareness is the key to individual liberation. This enables one to comprehend one's place in the universe and how one came to be there. This is the first duty for any black person in "the wilderness of America". It is this longing, this quest for oneself

and identity that Baraka has been looking for all along. This, in itself, is symbolic of the black people's path toward nationhood. This is a quality that America could not offer the poet, and that is why his trip to Cuba becomes a significant landmark in his struggle toward self awareness. All along Baraka had not accepted himself and his people. In 'Numbers, Letters'<sup>27</sup> he asks himself what he was

....doing down there,  
freakin' off with  
white women

He seems to find the answer later on when he contends that he is "a black nigger in the universe" who must view himself in the light of his history.

And when I say something  
it's all of me  
saying, and all the  
things that make me,  
have formed me, colored  
me  
this brilliant reddish  
night<sup>28</sup>

He has now accepted his black race. This is a step forward from his earlier directionless quest for the self in Preface. Less individualistic now, he sees

himself as part of the larger black community. A dialectical relationship develops between him and his people. The poet's acceptance of them means that they have begun to shape his values. As we said earlier on, Baraka's quest for a definition of himself can be seen as the black man's search for his identity. The machine-gunners will not "step forward" unless they know themselves and the community they are fighting for. At the same time they have to know who their enemy is. We are, therefore, being prepared for the final shattering of the mask of subservience when the blacks will take up arms. In the period we are examining - that is, the sixties - this becomes symbolised by black rage and wars of liberation that were fought in the streets. What Baraka is doing - that is, his raising of black self-awareness - is to pierce through and discard the mask that has been imposed on black lives since slavery times. He sees the white establishment as devilish and intending to keep the black man in bondage through the acquisition of its decadent culture. This is part of the reason why black people must leave the white folks and their Uncle-Tom supporters "...dying in the dry/light, sand packed in their mouths/eyes burning".<sup>29</sup> White people

are viewed as "strange corpses". According to the poet these people are ghostly. They are not human. In 'Blue Whitie'<sup>30</sup> he confronts "whitey" with the question:

Tell us, sir, why are  
you so full of shit?

The poet has now exorcised himself of the fear of the white man. He is able to see through him now. What the poet is out to destroy is the myth of the omnipotent white man. This destruction has to occur first at a psychological level, for this is where a lot of black people have undergone castration. Any success must emanate from the eradication of this domination. Baraka is aware of the dangers and influences of the American system on the individual black psyche. In this instance one is talking about a black man's attempt at living white - a process that has crippled, both spiritually and physically, a lot of black people. In 'Premises not Quite Condemned'<sup>31</sup> we are confronted with one of the sycophants of the "lost uncivilizations".

An altered man  
in the sea of a city  
in his head he's a dreamer

white women and cars,  
the rotting artifacts  
of lost uncivilizations.

The message is clear: do not waste your strength on decadent ways, that is, women, cars, etc. It is worthwhile keeping in mind that to the black middle class, having a white woman and flashy cars are the signs of having been "accepted" in the "respectable" community of white people. A destruction of these symbols is a destruction of their uncivilized aspirations. Up to this stage the poet is still unable to explain the evils in American society except in racial terms. We can see this as an easy way out of explaining and to some extent justifying the evils persisting in the black community. The implication is that left alone black people will not pursue negative aspirations. The black man is made to put on the mask of "holier than thou". From the position of a "devil" he becomes a "saint". This offers a false ideological premise for understanding the relationship between black and white people, and between black people themselves. All in all, Baraka's intention is to use his poetry to achieve the task of destroying the negative images in black people's minds. As a result, he will

write poems that are

like fists beating niggers  
out of jocks on dagger  
poems in the slimy bellies  
of the owner - Jews.  
Black poems to smear on  
girdlemamma mulatto  
bitches whose brains  
are red jelly stuck  
between 'lizabeth taylor's  
toes.<sup>32</sup>

They are poems that are used to cleanse oneself of the  
filth that is whiteness. Anybody smeared with this  
filth is bound to have a terrible ailment.

....Either he is white  
or hates whites, but  
even in hating he  
Reflects, the dead image  
of his surroundings.<sup>33</sup>

Such a person becomes emasculated when he accepts the  
white values as being his own. His alienation is not  
only from his environment but also from himself. He  
cannot possibly be human because the white atmosphere  
around him is dead. According to the poet's aesthetics,  
white is not only the sign of evil but also symbolises  
death. That is why even when this black man rejects  
the white values and hates everything associated with

whiteness, this is viewed as reflecting "the dead image of his surroundings" - "the dead forests" of the "allergic kingdom". Such Uncle-Toms hide their impotence by taking out their frustrations on fellow blacks.

There is a sickness to  
the black man in white  
town, because  
he begins to believe  
he can beat everybody's  
ass<sup>34</sup>

This type of sickness is what Baraka seeks to cure with his poetry. Already there is a clear-cut rejection of white society. With this action goes the repudiation of the western world and all that it stands for. The western world is deemed lifeless and hypocritical as in the poem 'Reading and Weeping'.<sup>35</sup>

Lust hearts stalk  
nights dreaming heroes  
of themselves, lust  
hearts, screaming  
soul, soul, soul, soul,  
without the least  
memory  
of what a soul is  
like, they stalk  
nights dreaming  
reality is their  
dying flesh, predicting  
the deaths of everyone

but themselves, who are  
already dead.....  
.....  
....they will kill you  
if you cross them, if you  
dare to speak of a breathing  
world, they will menace you if  
you are stronger than they are  
they will try to bring you down. 35

Due to this, the black man finds it impossible to remain true to himself in the face of white destruction. This is the plea that the poet confronts the white society with.

You make it impossible  
to be myself in this  
place. 36

What this suggests is that one has to deceive the world and oneself. The message to the black people is that they have to throw off this mask and confront the "depraved eagles". Toward this end black people have to begin to be aware of themselves and work towards accepting each other.

We need to tighten up.  
We all need each other.  
We all need to stop  
lying and lock arms and  
look at each other  
like black humans struggling  
with depraved eagles. 37



The intended message is loud and clear. For black people to be anything they must begin by accepting themselves. The unity is on the basis of colour and historical experience. The poet adopts a very utopian and unscientific approach in getting black people together as a unit in a common struggle. He does not take into consideration the various class distinctions and alignments within the black nation. Needless to say the black race is far from being homogeneous. People with varying world outlooks and aspirations cannot be united by the common bondage of colour alone. Herein lies the great error committed by the nationalists - an error that is to account for the short lifespan of the movement. It is this ideological confusion that prevents the poet from comprehending the disunity of his people.

.....  
Why can't we love each  
other and be beautiful?  
Why do the beautiful  
corner each other and  
spit poison? Why do  
the beautiful not hang  
out together  
and learn to do away  
with evil?  
Why are the beautiful  
not living together and  
feeling each other's trials?  
Why are the beautiful not

walking with their arms  
around  
each other laughing  
softly at the soft  
laughter of black beauty?  
Why are the beautiful  
dreading each other, and  
hiding from each other?  
Why are the beautiful sick  
and divided<sup>38</sup>  
like myself?

Baraka becomes romantic in his attempt to seek unity and understanding among the blacks. In this respect he assumes the same ideological mishaps of the Negritude poets. This is a phenomenon that characterises a lot of Baraka's works, especially the plays. Taken to its extreme, the philosophy of black nationalism becomes a sort of neurosis, a mask for hiding and underplaying ills prevalent in the black society. The easy way out is to sing and moan about one's black position without adopting any meaningful ideological stand about it. This is the dilemma faced by most of the black artists: how to answer the racial question in America and remain dialectical. By this is meant the adoption of a stand that is beyond race but is sensitive to its effects and influence on the American psyche. Baraka's approach toward solving the problem of black nationhood - which is what his poetry is about - is the maintenance of racial purity. According to him the whites are

devils and should not be allowed to associate with black people. This, to him, is a god-given fact. This is what is embodied in his play A Black Mass whereby black people are seen as the original inhabitants of the earth. The original black man is imbued with higher spiritual qualities than the white man. This is what Nasafi tells Jacoub, the mad scientist who is responsible for the creation of the white race.

.....you are god, yet  
you destroy your  
heart with a self  
that has no compassion,  
with a mind that denies  
order and structure of  
the universe of human  
signs.<sup>39</sup>

The black man is now turned spirit. He is beyond humanism. In 'Human to Spirit Humanism for Animals' the poet declares:

....We are humans  
reaching spirit<sup>40</sup>

and again

We are reaching

as god for god  
as human  
knowing  
spirit<sup>41</sup>

In the eyes of the poet these are the qualities that make the black man spiritually superior. Consequently the poet feels that the black man is not cold and calculating like the whites. The black man who negates these special god-given qualities that distinguish him from the "depraved beast" is bound to come to a bad end. In the play A Black Mass Nasafi tells Jacoub that his error was

.....the substitution of  
thought for feeling  
A heart full of numbers  
and cold formulae. A  
curiosity for anti-life,  
for the yawning  
and gaps in humanity we  
feel sometimes when  
we grow silent in each  
others presence, sensing  
the infinite miles in the  
universe, as finite as it is.<sup>42</sup>

Apart from telling us that the black man is full of feeling, the poet does not tell us what this feeling is used for. When he accuses the whites of being

"anti-life", which to him goes hand in hand with a heart that is "full of numbers and cold formulae", it is as if he is suggesting that to survive in this world - and more significantly to change it - one does not need anything beyond "feeling" and a lot of "soul talk". Baraka has imbued the black man with a new mask - one of sanctity and godliness that elevates him above other people. There is a level in which this attitude can be seen as an attempt to justify or allay one's position vis-a-vis one's oppressor. This is a sort of spiritual or psychological catharsis that gives self-confidence and esteem to the victim but does not inspire one to critically confront the problem in its true nature and perspective. The white man cannot survive without the black man because he needs the life-giving force of the latter. This is the poet's creed. The black man is the centre of the universe. White people will always come for a dose of "heat" from the blacks. This is what is portrayed in Baraka's Experimental Death Unit. The two white characters - Loco and Duff - confront a black female, Woman, who generates life. Loco and Duff are cold and "in an ice-box". To gain a bit of sanity and an awareness of themselves, they must come into sensual

contact with the woman. They must drink from her inexhaustible well at the end of the dark alley. Loco goes on his knees whining, "we die without this heat".<sup>43</sup> Duff finally knocks him down because he is also starved and cold and needs the "big black thighs". When the combat weary black legionares come along they shoot all the three characters. They carry the white men's heads as souvenirs and march off. The poet is saying that the new black nation has reached a point where it cannot allow its womanhood to be defiled - a point reminiscent of the plantation days when black men watched, impotently, as the black woman suffered rape and humiliation at the hands of the slave master. In defending black womanhood the black man is asserting his own manhood. The black man now sees the beauty in his own woman and no longer strives to attain the white woman. This is the spirit we find in In Our Terribleness. He declares in 'Sisters':

I love you black  
perfect woman.  
Your spirit will  
rule the twenty-first  
century.<sup>44</sup>

The future of the black nation is in the hands of the

black woman. By protecting them, the poet is saying that we are willing to shape the future into the image the black people want.

So our sisters floating  
in to us  
faces in the soft blackness  
of  
spotlessness. They are our  
mothers and sisters and wives  
that we  
pledge to protect and love. The  
sisters.  
What we to them and they  
to us, will be the definition of  
our nation to be.<sup>45</sup>

But at times the idea of black manhood and womanhood does not go beyond exultation of either sexes. Occasionally it will assume absurd dimensions as in Madheart.<sup>46</sup> BLACK MAN hits BLACK WOMAN to symbolise the new role that the black man must now assume, that is, that he is the master of the homestead. It is well noting that the black woman has in most cases throughout the history of blacks in the States assumed the role of the breadwinner and consequently head of the house. One gets the feeling that BLACK MAN'S inability to effectively influence his environment is transferred to the only weak point he can control - BLACK WOMAN.

In controlling her he gets the illusion that he can also make the white world submit to him. Whether BLACK MAN'S consciousness goes beyond his personal relationship with BLACK WOMAN is something that is difficult to determine. When we compare this type of situation to that which prevails in The Life and Loves of Mr Jiveass Nigger<sup>47</sup> we cannot but view George's relationship with the white women in Copenhagen as a kind of revenge action. In sleeping with the white women he sees this as part of his struggle for survival since they pay him for it. But he is not alone in this. The other black men in Copenhagen do the same. They are all competing to sleep with as many white women as possible. This is the only activity that they are engaged in. To them, life is all "jive" as George terms it. Armed with the mask of the "sensuous black dude" they go through life without any worries for they know so long as there is still the myth of the black sexual potency they will survive. But Doc, who appears to be more sensitive than the rest of them tells George:

I know why you're here  
in Copenhagen, why you,  
Bob, Jero, that crazy-ass  
falstuff, and that  
pathological liar Bill,  
all you cats here to get



pussy, man. And that's  
as far as it goes. And  
why do you just want  
pussy? Because it gives  
pleasure for the moment,  
and because that's all  
there is.....after that  
there's death, loneliness,  
obscurity.....<sup>48</sup>

In other words what Doc is saying is that George is  
afraid to face reality - for this will mean having to  
take action. But George is content to live the  
stereotype for it accords him pleasure. He knows his  
life is fake and that he is just wearing a mask in  
order to survive. He says:

I give people if I  
don't trust them, see  
-----  
....everything is a  
lie. Life is a lie.  
But people don't know  
that, see. Only smart  
people like me know that.<sup>49</sup>

But George only manages to fool himself for there are  
those like Ruth Smith who see through his cover of the  
tough, sensual "nigger", the dude whose identity is a  
mystery. The fear of being seen through is terrifying.

It frightened George and made him shake when the woman called him by his real name. What if others knew his real name too and were just putting him on by pretending otherwise. Jive him, jiving Jiveass himself.

....What else did she know about him? Did she really know about his loneliness, about his neurotic fear of death?<sup>50</sup>

But George does not care as long as he hustles a living. He lives the character of the stereotype - he lies, makes love. Nobody is really worried in so far as he does not go beyond the limits set for him. This is what Ruth Smith tells him. To George, wearing the mask is a "functional" exercise - he can use it to his advantage.

He.....knew he had to play some phoney role, which finally would not be phony at all since it would get him what he wanted. He was Mr Jiveass Nigger himself, and knew that there was nothing under the sun that was really phoney if it was functional.<sup>51</sup>

But the important element in all this is George's conscious fact that he is wearing a mask. He knows that the mask makes him a "puppet, a zombie". But he is also aware that to remove the mask poses a danger to his existence. He tries to be himself but nobody is interested in that. All the "broads" see him as a stud and Mischa does not understand him either. This is what they also do to Bob. The white "chicks" know him but excuse him and sleep with him. What he calls living out of his inside simply means being able to confront reality as a black man. In a rare moment of self-search George reveals his awareness of black lives.

....every black person, seems to be living off someone or something else. Everything but their insides. Black men fancy themselves potent when they can flatter themselves to be gigolo. But for me now it seems that that's only an excuse for not being able to live off their insides.....  
I feel like I have been a puppet, a zombie. Ever since I been in this town. And before that even. I have said things I didn't believe, I've done things I did not understand. And it

has made my life seem  
empty and meaningless - 52

While BLACK MAN is not willing to associate with white people because he does not wish to be polluted and also from his desire to enhance racial solidarity, George Washington is willing to associate with the white person but at his own terms. This is how he survives. The dilemma is how does he survive without playing the double role of being the sexual symbol that he is associated with, the "cool nigger" in Copenhagen. It seems as if Cecil Brown is telling us the threat of destruction looms over black lives when they attempt to shed their masks. This, in a sense, is the tragic dilemma that faces black people who attempt to assert themselves. The implicit question is whether its possible to even meaningfully assert oneself as an individual without changing one's environment. George is like the sly Brer Rabbit who will survive in a hostile environment. How far his individual awareness helps him to face the challenge of changing the conditions/institutions responsible for his state is something that remains unanswered. In Madheart the situation is hardly different. We are left in the dark as to whether BLACK MAN has succeeded

in changing the conditions that initially created the unequal relationship not only between the races but also between black man and woman. It is difficult to envisage how the black man will create his own independence whilst residing in the same society with his oppressors. There is a romantic allusion prevalent in the circumstances because Baraka imagines that the black man's freedom can come from the same burning house that he is condemning. But what is of paramount importance is that the new poetry gives life and meaning to black life. It is not only moving but also engages. It portrays a people in motion towards change. The black man can at last tell off the white man. This psychological breakthrough is deemed necessary as a first step towards a people's liberation. Baraka's people are in "the wilderness of North America"; and the poet has come to bring them salvation. In "Nationalism Vs Pimp Art"<sup>53</sup> Baraka outlines the role of the artist and the use to which Black Art must be put.

If the artist is the  
raised consciousness,  
and this is what the  
Black artist strives  
to be, the raised  
consciousness of a  
people.....If the

artist is the raised consciousness then all that he touches, all that impinges on his consciousness must be raised. We must be the will of the race toward evolution. We must demand the spiritual by being the spiritual.

Black Art must be collective, is the spirit of the whole nation. It must be functional, it must have a function in the world to Black people. It must also commit black people to the struggle for National Liberation.

This struggle assumes diverse dimensions. In the case of Madheart we see BLACK MAN and BLACK WOMAN trying to reclaim their lost kin from the quagmire that is whiteness. BLACK MAN symbolically sprays Mother and Sister with a firehose - a process meant to clean, physically the lost children of the Black Nation. At another level it is a kind of baptism that cleanses the spirit. This is deemed necessary before Mother and Sister can finally reunite with their brethren.

BLACK WOMAN

You think there's any chance for them?  
You really think so?

BLACK MAN

They're my flesh. I'll  
do what I can.  
(Looks at her) We'll  
both try. All of us,  
black people.<sup>54</sup>

The poet's message is that black people cannot afford disunity. They must act together for they are bound by their colour and their history. Their origin is of a godly nature. Therefore, the unity that they strive for is beyond the physical association. It is a spiritual unity amongst black people. This is the spiritual aspect of the Black Arts movement. Any evil on the part of the black man is attributed to the white race. Anything white is anti-life, anti black. The people (black) have reached a point whereby they have negated the symbols and values created by the status quo to explain the order of things in the universe. Consequently, the black man is no longer ugly but beautiful; his colour no longer symbolises evil but saintliness, goodness. The way he talks, sings, acts - in short, everything about him - is beautiful. It is a beauty that permeates the spirit and encompasses his environment as well. This is what is echoed in the poem 'Stirling Street September'.<sup>55</sup>

I CAN BE THE BEAUTIFUL  
BLACK MAN  
because I am  
the beautiful black man,  
and you, girl, child  
nightlove,  
you are beautiful too.  
.....  
We are strange in a  
way because we know  
who we are. Black beings  
passing through  
a tortured passage of flesh.

This poem that begins with the individual assertion and discovery ends up as a poem speaking of black people's awareness of themselves. The poet does not go beyond that level into exploring further, the dynamics of his own race. According to him, the world is only made up of two sides: the good and the bad. The former are black, the latter white. In 'The Test'<sup>56</sup> the poet moans about what he considers the evil acts and intentions of the white man.

They drive us  
against  
the wall white  
people  
do, against  
our natures  
free and easy atoms  
of peaceful loving  
ness.



Black people are being driven against themselves and their nature (good nature) which has been polluted because of associating with "the evil one himself" who possesses a god who is also evil and anti-life. This is what is explored in In Our Terribleness:

....the entire body of  
europe is diseased. And  
dying. To survive you  
must draw away from it  
to what you are naturally  
anyway.

.....

Draw away from the  
diseased body.....  
STEP I

Embrace the blackness,  
the alternative.....  
STEP 2

The white man subjects the black man to a living hell right here on earth. Therefore, there is a need to put a stop to this, that is, the black man must attain his freedom. The voice of Baraka booms the warning over our heads:

- You see  
dead niggers wallowing  
in the street.  
You see  
the celebration of

ignorance and ugliness. This  
is the white man's image.  
This is what hell is.<sup>57</sup>

What is being exposed is the evil within black society  
which is viewed as being white rooted and engendered.  
This is what Lula exposes about Clay's seeming  
respectability in Dutchman. She sees through him, and  
prods his black middle class mask.

What've you got that  
jacket and tie on in  
all this heat for?  
And why're wearing a  
jacket and tie like  
that? Did your people  
ever burn witches or  
start revolutions over  
the price of tea?  
Boy, those narrow-  
shoulder clothes come  
from a tradition you  
ought to feel oppressed  
by. A three-button suit.  
What right do you have  
to be wearing a three-  
button suit and striped  
tie?<sup>58</sup>

Eldridge Cleaver in "Notes of a Native Son" notes that  
"the relationship between black and white in America  
is a power equation, a power struggle, and that this  
power struggle is not only manifested in the aggregate  
(civil rights, black nationalism, etc) but also in the

interpersonal relationships, actions, and reactions between blacks and whites where taken into account"<sup>59</sup>. Taking the above observation into account, we find that Lula as a white lady assumes the arrogant superior position of one who wields power. Clay, the black bourgeoisie, is the Uncle-Tom-wooly head type who is willing to please the power structure in order to survive. He wants to be an individual who has nothing to do with the rest of the black population. He feels that in identifying with them he puts himself at a disadvantage in relation to white people, who to him, are omnipotent, omniscient. Lula directly challenges Clay's manhood and identity. To her Clay is the timid white-handkerchief-head type. Provoked beyond endurance, Clay is forced to react. We see him reeking with potent hate and anger. He could easily destroy her and all that she stands for.

Let me be who I feel  
like being. Uncle Tom.  
Thomas, whoever. It's  
none of your business.  
You don't know anything  
except what's there for  
you to see. An act.  
Lies. Device. Not the  
pure heart, the pumping  
black heart. You don't  
even know that. And  
I sit here, in this three

buttoned-up suit, to keep myself from cutting all your throats.<sup>60</sup>

Clay's position (Uncle-Tomism) is similar to Freeman's in The Spook Who Sat by the Door<sup>61</sup>. He wears the mask of Uncle Tom, always doing what is expected of him. Unlike the other middle class blacks he plays his role superbly until he is taken into the C.I.A. He is quiet and unobtrusive. But he turns out to be a most dangerous person. He organises an underground network of black militant youths - the Cobras - to confront the military might of Uncle Sam. No one in the agency ever suspected why he joined the Agency. Playing Uncle Tom to the hilt, he learnt all that he needed for his future operations outside the C.I.A.

No one ever blew Freeman's cover. They accepted at face value what he appeared to be, because he became what they wanted him to be. Working for the agency, Freeman was the best undercover man the C.I.A. had.<sup>62</sup>

After five years he resigned from the Agency and joined a welfare body in order to get into contact with the street gangs so that he could use them as the

black army. Note that when he joins this welfare body he sheds his old mask in order to fit into his new role.

He boarded the plane  
and seated himself,  
moving with the grace  
and economy of a fit  
and well-trained athlete;  
gone the insecure shuffle,  
the protective, subservient  
smile, the ill-fitting  
clothes. The new Freeman,  
J. Pressed and Brooks button-  
downed, seated himself  
after placing his carry-on  
bag beneath the seat,  
fastened his seat-belt and  
opened a little magazine  
with a psychedelic cover  
to an article urging the  
legalization of pot.<sup>63</sup>

The white powerstructure, used to the subservient Uncle Tom, hardly suspect that they are dealing with a dangerous man who is playing their game while biding his time. Freeman is very conscious of the double-life he is leading. He wears the mask of Uncle Tom to hide his true rebellious self. Herein lies his success in that he uses that mask to defeat the enemies of the black community. Whenever he appears to live the mask it is for his own convenience. Even the other blacks do not see beyond the mask. They assume it to be his true self. Freeman transcends the mask precisely because he has an ideology to back

him up. He is a black nationalist who wants to have united black nation so that black people can stand up to the white society. Nobody expects him to have such ideas. His association with the street gangs is merely seen at the level of his getting them to reform and not engage in riots. He throws the security agents into confusion because of the mask that he wears and they cannot trace him.

He slipped on his cover like a tailored suit, adjusting here, taking in there until it was perfect and every part of him, except a part of his mind which would not be touched, was in it and of it. He found that most people did most of the work as far as his cover was concerned: they wanted him to be the white-type, uptight Negro of 'rising aspirations' and desperate upward mobility.<sup>64</sup>

But even at crucial moments Freeman betrays nothing, only the world casually behind his mask and saying the right things automatically. They never blow his cover and he continues to harass the establishment's forces everywhere. The establishment expects no "nigger" to have brains to organize such a movement.

That is why when he begins the rebellion no one expects it is him. No one could imagine he would want to destroy the white power structure. This is the same element that surprises in Clay when he threatens to destroy Lula because she can never understand "the pumping black heart". With these words Clay explains the whole traumatic history of the black man. His mask helps him to subvert the stifling oppression that threatens to destroy him. All that the white world sees is a mask. Baraka is saying that white people only learn a few things about black culture symbols but that they cannot penetrate the mask and discover "the ground of suffering and wisdom that is the necessity of this culture."<sup>65</sup> The oppression can never understand the view-point of the oppressed. Neither can he claim to speak for them because he will always see the position of the oppressed from his privileged position. Baraka of course, cannot see the dialectics of the oppressed and the oppressor. He is, in a sense, like Bigger Thomas who can only understand his oppression in terms of colour. Baraka feels that the white man cannot understand anything concerning the black man because he is an animal. The black man, on the other hand, is not only a man, but a man turning

into spirit. This is the message in 'Human to Spirit  
Humanism for Animals',<sup>66</sup>.

We are humans  
reaching spirit  
.....  
We are humans have been  
humans  
beings  
passing a  
way

Reaching  
changing  
Being

---

We are reaching  
as God for God  
as human  
knowing  
spirit

The white man is the opposite. He is "the pig", the  
"man/from all fours/from cold caves" who emerged "from  
cavelight television". The poet's vision here is that  
it is not in the nature of the white man to be humane.  
It is the black man who is the ultimate saviour of the  
white race - for he is the only one endowed with godly  
qualities.

Reach.  
humanism animals  
in the flame we throw  
upon you  
Reach  
in the red agony burning  
our souls reach



we burn inside  
transform the world  
spiritual  
reaching  
of humans.<sup>67</sup>

From the above we can see that as the black man discovers himself and sheds off the mask of subservience and oppression, he begins to acquire a new mask where he begins to see himself as being spiritually closer to God. He sees himself as being better than the white man. This unscientific viewpoint characterises much of the philosophy of this decade. It is the new mask that the black man is encouraged to wear as part of his process of self-discovery. Baraka sees the black man as a kind of divine magician.

.....Who we are is  
THE MAGIC PEOPLE....  
the Black Genius  
Prophets of the Planet...<sup>68</sup>

Endowed with such qualities black people can communicate to God and to each other in a unique manner. They can "hear each other apart/(without telephones)".

Time space manifest  
into the unity of  
the creator, the  
creator has all experiences

and we live as flying  
images of endless  
imagination. Listen  
to the creator  
speak in me now.  
Listen, these words  
are part of God's thing.  
I'm a vessel, a black  
priest interpreting  
the present and the  
future for my people  
Olorum-Allah speak in  
and thru me now<sup>69</sup>

The poet sees the future as being in the hands of black people and can in fact communicate with the future black leaders. He sees his role as that of a go-between-cum prophet in terms of the future and the present. It is this godly quality in him that accords him the power of passing such divine utterances. Through him the future black generations say:

".....  
Do not despair  
ancient people  
We are your children  
and we have conquered  
This is your blessing  
and this is your reward  
Do not despair gentle  
ancient  
groovy ancestors.  
We have conquered  
and we await the rich  
legacy  
of hard won blackness

which you create  
to leave us  
here in the black  
fast future  
here among the spiritual  
creations  
of natural man  
Do not despair ancient  
fathers and  
Mothers there in old  
America  
We are here  
awaiting your gorgeous  
legacy....."<sup>70</sup>

The future generations whose voices we hear have had their achievements through the recognition by their forefathers of the evil consequences of associating with the western world. This means a withdrawal from "europa" to what they "are naturally". This is the plea Baraka echoes again in 'DAZED AND OUT OF THEIR WOOL HEADS....' The tone is that of one in supplication. This in itself gives the poem an air of sanctity, divinity. To Baraka, poetry is part of the spiritual self. The street corner becomes the arena for this public evocation of the spirit. The brother in the street is the congregation, and the high-priest is the poet. In this case it is Baraka. He is like Moses leading the Jews out of captivity.

Oh my dazed and  
imprisoned brothers  
Sunpeople out of whose  
insides all warmth and  
light are created  
Be yourselves Be your  
self all  
selves into that big  
burning

Holy One  
Make it bright day  
for us all, so we  
can see better and be  
warm and happy  
Be your self again,  
son, Light up this dark  
old world.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed this idea of the poet seeing himself as a prophet is nothing new or isolated. The way in which the black critics have viewed the poets is significant. To the former the poets are the prophets to guide the black nation. Stephen E. Henderson aptly summarises the issue for us. He says:

Our poets are now our prophets. They have come to baptise us in blackness, to inform us with soul.

This baptism in blackness comprises two distinct elements which especially animate the recent pattern of black writing.....They are (1) the rejection of white middle-class cultural

values and (2) the affirmation of black selfhood, or, depending on the intensity of the writer's involvement, (a) the destruction of anything that stands in the way of selfhood and (b) a celebration of blackness.<sup>72</sup>

In Our Terribleness, then, is a dedication "for all the advocates of Kawaida" which is the new black philosophy. This book portrays the depth that the writer underwent in his black nationalist phase. It is a testimony to the manhood of the black nation that the black writers were trying to create. It is a celebration of blackness.

Terribleness - Our beauty  
is BAD cause  
we bad. Bad  
things.  
Some bad bad bad ass niggers.<sup>73</sup>

The language is black reflecting the black rhythm, a black aesthetic. It is an antithesis, a rejection of the establishment's norms and values.

Since there is a  
"good" we know is  
bullshit.....

....we will not be  
that hominy shit.

We will be,  
definitely, bad, bad,  
as a mother-fucker.<sup>74</sup>

One can almost hear/feel the pulsating rhythm and warmth of Baraka's poetry as he captures the "dude on the corner" talk.

"That's a bad vine that  
dude got on".

"Damn"

"Its a bad dude."<sup>75</sup>

Or at times he seems to be playing the dozens with his audience.

To be bad is one level  
But to be terrible,  
is to be  
badder dan nat.<sup>76</sup>

These are the qualities, according to Baraka, that facilitate Black survival in the face of a hostile America. This is part of his beautiful heritage. This is what he says in 'IMAGE'.

Our terribleness is  
our survival as  
beautiful beings,  
anywhere.<sup>77</sup>

The trend is self-adoration, self-glorification which is meant to counter the negative image perpetrated by the establishment. The black person no longer wants to be identified with America. This is what we see in 'ORDER OF SERVICE'.

Pray that we are not  
part of the western  
Empire, in soul.  
We know we are not  
In Our Terribleness  
We know exactly  
Who We Are.<sup>78</sup>

The implication is obvious. The black person is part of the western Empire in terms of his physical presence there; and in terms of his contribution towards its creation. The essence of man, according to the poet, is not to be found in the western world. Lacking a human soul, the western world is seen as being synonymous with decadence, death, and inhumanity. In the face of western cultural influence, the black person finds it almost impossible to be himself.

Survival of the black man means he has to acquire certain tools to defend himself - in terms of his spiritual self. 'PRAYER FOR SAVING' attempts to espouse this.

Consciousness is what  
we need. It is all that  
will bring us back to  
ourselves  
But we must organize  
and be in organization.  
An organization  
(FOI here  
from the mosque) is  
the swell of the  
next level consciousness.  
Bigger than the individual.  
We move from the single to  
the many  
to the larger the city,  
the nation. And then  
past there we move  
to many nations, as one,  
as Nkrumah and Garvey  
envisions, the many  
blacks into One Huge Black  
Nation, strong as the  
divinity in  
us.<sup>79</sup>

What is noticeable throughout is the vagueness of the whole philosophy. The poet does not define what he means by bringing "...us back to our selves". What it is that characterises this seemingly divine and immutable black essence is left unspoken. After the



attainment of consciousness, the poet sees the establishment of an organization as the next level of action. Note that he uses FOI (Fruit Of Islam) which is the militant arm of the Black Muslims. This symbolised what a Black nation should be: strong and capable defending itself. For this to happen it means that black people must be free. These are the thoughts and feelings running through Mari Evans when she declares in 'The Insurgent':

I shall be Free, or dead  
today.....<sup>80</sup>

In order to get the people to understand and join the move towards freedom, Mari Evans feels that one must confront them with "reason", "honesty", "Love and Courage and Care For/their Being". She is aware that even blackness can be ugly; it can also be harmful. This is her lesson in 'Speak the Truth to the People'.

A slave is enslaved  
Can be enslaved by unwisdom  
Can be enslaved by black unwisdom  
Can be re-enslaved while in  
flight from the enemy  
Can be enslaved by his brother  
whom he loves

His brother whom he trusts  
His brother with the loud  
    voice  
And the unwisdom  
Speak the truth to the people  
It is not necessary to green  
    the heart  
Only to identify the enemy  
It is not necessary to blow  
    the mind  
Only to free the mind  
To identify the enemy is to  
    free the mind  
A free mind has no need to  
    scream.<sup>81</sup>

Mari Evans seems to transcend the black-is-beautiful stage and instead adopts a slightly critical posture towards black people and their attitude of what comprises a revolution. In other words she also tears the mask that is often identified with the revolution by people who do not understand what revolution is all about. This arises out of an incorrect ideological position. But in her endeavour to demystify the revolution she ends up trapping herself in the unscientific philosophy of Kawaida which advocates blackness for its own sake. She says that black people should be moved towards a

.....BLACK ONENESS  
A black strength which  
will defend its own

Needing no cacophony  
of screams for activation  
A black strength which  
attacks the laws  
exposes the lies  
disassembles the structure  
and ravages the very  
foundation of evil.<sup>82</sup>

It is a 'ONENESS' that will make black people move

Thru ancestral blackness  
where one match  
Burns brighter than a  
thousand slogans and one  
bullet speaks  
Louder than a million  
marching feet  
For every Black Man's  
murdered back  
Death is the equalizer.

There is a company with us  
That should have ceased to be...<sup>83</sup>

It is as if she is fulfilling Haki Madhubuti's  
dictum that "to be black/is/to be/very hot".<sup>84</sup>

But the limitations of this kind of ideology are  
obvious - it is as vague as it is illusive. One  
wonders whether black heat is enough to change  
one's surroundings, or whether it clarifies the  
issues facing the black community without hiding  
behind catch phrases or slogans. This issue is  
important since a lot of nationalists were running

around mouthing phrases they half-understood. This is part of the problem posed by those who adhered to the "Kawaida" philosophy of Ron Karenga.

Sonia Sanchez seems to see through the problem posed by mere sloganeering or adherence to black nationalist philosophy. According to her that beautiful black rhetoric must mean something. Her plea is that it should not mean substitution of white capitalism with black capitalism whereby a few blacks do the exploiting. She sees through all the nonsense that is idolized in some works. She criticizes the phrase-mongering and nefarious habits like drug addiction and other decadent activities that harm the black nation instead of helping it. This is what concerns her in 'blk rhetoric'

who's gonna make all  
that beautiful blk/rhetoric  
mean something.

like

i mean

who's gonna take

the words

blk/is/beautiful

and make more of it

than blk/capitalism.

n dig?

i mean

like who's gonna

take all the young/long/haired

natural/brothers and sisters  
and let them grow till all that is  
impt is them selves moving in straight/  
revolutionary/lines toward the enemy  
(and we know who that is) like. man.  
who's gonna give our young  
blk/people new heroes  
(instead of catch/phrases)  
(instead of cad/ill/acs)  
(instead of pimps)  
(instead of wite/whores)  
(instead of drugs)  
(instead of new dances)  
(instead of chit/ter/lings)  
(instead of a 35C bottle of ripple)  
(instead of quick/fucks in the hall/way  
of wite/america's mind)  
like. this. is an SOS  
me. calling.....  
calling.....  
some/one  
pleasereplysoon.

Sonchez tackles very pertinent issues that affect black people in America. In tackling the issues discussed above, she unmaskes the trend that a lot of black writers called revolution. To her, all that talk is nothing. Its a sham. To quote Jiveass Nigger its all "jive". But the ambiguity arises out of what she calls "moving in straight/revolutionary/lines toward the enemy".

This confusion is later reflected in 'Questions'<sup>b</sup> when the poet questions herself as to why black people are busy killing each other instead of the "wite mother/fucka".

blk/people  
                  are we CIA  
agents          is that why we killing  
each  
                  other with re/gu/la/rity  
if we so angry  
why not kill  
that wite  
mother/fucka.

An even greater confusion arises when she states that the problems confronting black people can be seen in relation to the economic structure of society. This is what emerges out of 'indianapolis/summer/1969/poem'<sup>87</sup>

like  
                  i mean.  
                                  don't it all come down  
to e/co/no/mics.

She seems to think that the problems besetting the black nation would be minimised if black people

...programmed/  
other in com/mun/al ways loved/each  
blk/person starved so that no  
or killed each other on  
a sat/ur/day nite corner.  
then may  
be it wud all  
come down to some  
like RE VO LU TION. <sup>thing else</sup> <sub>88</sub>

But as we can perceive she is still evasive and unclear as to what actually accounts for the problems in the black nation. Consequently she gives vague solutions about loving each other in communal ways which to her might lead to a revolution. She does not tell us what she means by communal ways and what actually her concept of revolution is. What she does is to mystify her audience by clothing what she means in vague terms instead of providing ideological direction for her people. Her lack of understanding the situation is exemplified by her confusions and her vacillations. What is discernible is Sanchez struggling to tear off the mask that surrounded the black nation - the mask of the cool dude smoking pot, the Afro-haired sister, etc - in the process. This is the one of mystifying and

romanticising revolution. As she rightfully puts it,  
the Master

....cannot be destroyed  
with only:  
long dresses - swahili-  
curses-soul food-  
fervor-dashikis-naturrrals-  
poems-  
SOUL-rage-leather jackets-  
slogans-polygamy-yoruba.<sup>89</sup>

But according to her, the revolution is to be based on racial terms. Black people should carry forth this task. Here is the assumption of the uniformity of interests and backgrounds - factors that determine the course of any revolutionary movement. A lot of poets could not resolve this issue. They all remained static at the level of radical nationalism, which within its own limitations was useful, but ideologically very limiting because it tends to mystify issues at the level of race and colour. It is only Baraka's further development in ideology that helps him to shed off this mask and to resolve the confusions and contradictions that are engendered by nationalism.

We now come to the most decisive part of Baraka's political and literary development. It is decisive



in the sense that it offers a total break with what had previously occupied his mind. This is what we grapple with in HARD FACTS 1973-1975. This is Baraka at the apex of his political-literary development. It is Baraka at the stage where he has embraced "Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tse-Tung thought". What is at the forefront of concern is the people - the people and revolution. Baraka the poet has now assumed a much humble role compared to what he saw himself as earlier on. He was then the prophet, the seer who was going to teach his people the path toward manhood and consequently nationhood. But now he feels that "people are at a much higher level than intellectuals and artists". He is now willing to learn from the people. That is why his art must now serve them - and by serving them it enhances the revolution. In the pre-introductory chapter to HARD FACTS he says:

The study should be of revolution as well as art. But revolution 1st, and foremost.....Studying the world based on the science of Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tse Tung thought. Because this will clarify and change your class stand from petit-bourgeois to proletarian.

From a sideline watcher  
of the struggle, to  
remould your worldview  
to that of the working  
class and the  
revolutionary.<sup>90</sup>

He has now accepted Marxism which he had earlier on rejected and described as "white political thought". Reflecting on the stand that most black poets assumed during the decade of the sixties, Baraka feels that it "was reactionary when it focused on white people as the cause of our oppression rather than the system of monopoly capitalism"<sup>91</sup> The people do not want mystifying poetry. They need "...attack pieces,/ bomb, machine gun and rocket poems. Poems describing/ reality and methods of changing it."<sup>92</sup> His art is partisan and needs no apologies about it. As he correctly observes:

There is no art that  
is above the views on  
needs or ideology of  
one particular class  
or another; tho the  
rulers pretend that  
art is classless and  
beyond political  
definition. That is  
why we aim at an art

that serves the great  
majority of people, the  
working masses of people.  
That is why we make an  
art that praises what  
helps the people and  
puts down mercilessly  
what oppresses or  
exploits them.<sup>93</sup>

What is important is that he now assumes a class analysis/approach toward the problems confronting the majority of the people in America. He now perceives the role capitalism and imperialism plays in shaping the relationship between different peoples. The question of race has not been negated. Rather it has been placed in its correct perspective. It is now viewed in relation to capitalism, and the role racism itself has assumed in the world.

The poem 'When We'll Worship Jesus' symbolises Baraka's shift from his nationalist phase onto a new plane of social and political consciousness. It deals with the social functions of religion and the role it plays in society. The poet uses Jesus as the symbol of a people's oppression. In talking about Jesus he is also talking about "Allah-Olorum". They all symbolise oppression.

Jesus ain't did nothin for us  
but kept us turned toward the  
sky (him and his boy allah  
too, need to be checked  
out!)<sup>94</sup>

The challenge is on the myth of Christ (symbolising religion) which has been the opium of black people and the oppressed everywhere. He strips off the mask of piety and humanity with which the Church is associated.

...we'll worship Jesus when  
he get bad enough to at least  
scare  
somebody....cops not afraid  
of Jesus  
pushers not afraid  
of Jesus, capitalists racists  
imperialists not afraid  
of Jesus<sup>95</sup>

Later on in the poem Baraka goes to qualify why Jesus should cease to exist in the lives of the oppressed peoples and especially the blacks.

we aint gonna worship  
Jesus cause Jesus don't  
exist  
xcept in song and story  
except in ritual  
and dance, except in

slum stained  
tears or trillion dollar  
opulence stretching  
back in history, the  
history  
of the oppression of the  
human mind.<sup>96</sup>

Problems confronting mankind can only be solved by looking at them dialectically and from a human point of view. All the evil and good in the world is created by mankind. The whole history of the world is man centred. Therefore, the oppressed can struggle to change their situation. Nothing is god-given or immutable.

We can struggle against  
the forces of backwardness,  
we can change the world  
we can struggle against  
our/selves, our  
slowness, our connection  
with  
the oppressor, the very  
cultural aggression which  
binds us to our enemies  
as their slaves,  
we can change the world<sup>97</sup>

The world that the poet is concerned with foremost is the capitalist world in America. It is here that the

workers of all races need to unite and overthrow the whole system. Baraka is no longer talking of killing honkies as we saw in his earlier works. He is now talking about revolution, about changing the system. He is no longer talking about individuals. He is now dealing with the issues of class and race and the relationship between the two. For the revolution to succeed the people must unite in terms of class alignments. Class wars must be fought for they are deemed inevitable. This is what he is advocating in 'Rockefeller is yo vice president, and yo mama dont wear no drawers'.

Dont be fantasizin bout  
no other jive  
its time we sd it all  
and moved its now its here  
its real check it close  
describe reality and  
change it, build revolutionary  
systems, and confront the  
beast clear  
Seize the factories,  
land, sources of energy  
and state power  
dictatorship of the builders,  
the workers, the whole  
proletariat, black brown  
red yellow whites, to  
paralyze the instability  
of the multicolored  
middle-class  
and crush by force  
the resistance of the  
bullshitters.<sup>98</sup>

For this to achieve reality one needs to create a "new person" with a "new mind". This can only occur when there is a "revolutionary theory/Revolutionary Development/Revolutionary party" to guide and shape the future of the workers. The proletariat, tired of being exploited, will be forced to demand the just share of "the muscle in their arms".

Hypnotized by the machine,  
and the cement floor,  
the jungle treachery of  
trying  
to survive with no money  
in a money world, of  
making the boss 100,000  
for every 200 dollars  
you get, and then having  
his brother get you for  
the rent, and if you want  
to buy the car you  
helped build, your downpayment  
for it.<sup>99</sup>

This, the poet notes, is what leads to "the absolute control of our lives by the owners of the factories, / the absolute control of our lives by the owners of money, the absolute control of our lives/by the owners of the land".<sup>100</sup>

After driving one to the level of realising the evil nature of capitalism the poet virtually forces

one to react - either emotionally or intellectually.  
He poses the all challenging and haunting question:

You don't like it?  
Whatcha gonna do,  
about it??<sup>101</sup>

Aware of the inevitability of revolution, the ruling class will try to hinder the revolutionary upsurge by black people whom history stretches "out of old shape/ into new shape." But the black masses are ready to "make revolution". In a deliberately slow rythmical tone, the poet signs America's death warrant. "The sharp heavy hatchet" and "the gigantic sledge hammer" are poised for the final assault on the bastion of capitalism. Revolution is at hand. Nothing short of it is acceptable. 'A New Reality Is Better than A New Movie' defines the goal of the Revolution.

the goal of our Revolution  
is so the people can rule  
the goal of the revolution  
is so the people can rule  
the ultimate goal of  
socialist revolution is  
so the great majority  
of the people  
of the masses  
of people  
can rule<sup>102</sup>



This is what the people are fighting for. They have to be aware of it. That is why they need to "work and study" their situation and what has created the situation. Ideological clarity by the advanced section of the working class is a pre-requisite to this. The struggle of the black people is the struggle of the oppressed wherever they are. The latter are waiting for the next outburst - an outburst which will be crucial for the future of the masses. The people's war is imminent.

We are for the revolutionary  
outburst by black people  
We are poised in gradual  
ascendance to that rising  
But that next come up we all  
go down  
The whole of humanity focused  
in America  
We all get down  
The vibration that predicts  
the Black Explosion  
describes the explosion to  
all the people  
The outburst that creates  
the new system

We are for the Revolutionary  
outburst by Black People  
The liberation of the Black Nation  
We are for the Revolutionary  
outburst by all the People  
The freeing of America  
from bourgeois rule  
Not just an out burst, but  
the steel burning fire of  
The People's War

The violent birth process  
of socialism!<sup>103</sup>

This then is Baraka after the shattering of all masks. He shatters the mask(s) created by nationalism and thereby provides his characters with a chance to truthfully face themselves without any illusions as to what surrounds and shapes their existence. This is the qualitative step Baraka has over his fellow black artists. He views his characters in relation to their environment. Consequently he does not mystify the problem for the people. Instead he provides them with ideological clarity that helps them to see the problem in its proper dialectical context.

CONCLUSION:

The concept of the mask is used for different purposes depending on the personality and time. As a protective device against a hostile environment, it has been used since slavery times to the present. When the white power structure erected myths to justify slavery, the blacks developed a way of seeming to play the game of the master while in actual fact thinking otherwise. The black slave was assumed to be lazy, uncouth and untrustworthy. But as we saw in our earlier analysis the slaves saw no cause to work hard on something that was not theirs. Consequently, what was termed as their "laziness" was merely a way of ensuring that they did not do any work beyond the required standard. In other words, his so called lazy actions assumed a form of passive resistance. The slave narratives and folktales tell us a lot about the slaves reaction to what he considered was his rightful share of his labour. In the eyes of the master this was considered as theft. But according to the slaves they were only taking what rightfully belonged to them. The other myth was that the black man loved his condition and did not mind serving the master. Again

there are myths created to justify a system that was essentially exploitative. The spirituals and blues testify to the slave's great desire for freedom through the use of religious language and symbolism. Therefore, religion was merely a mask for voicing the desire of the slaves, not only to each other, but also to the supernatural forces. What they desired most was freedom. The spirituals, blues and work-songs carry the message of the slave to the world. The world has in most cases judged the black man from a superficial point of view. This is especially true of the American establishment. What is seen on the surface is assumed to be the essence of the man. Nobody cared to explore deeply the heart of this slave who was taken to be a child without any serious thoughts. The black folklore explodes this myth. When we draw away the mask that covers the black slave we find a man who is sensitive, intelligent and constantly aware of his surroundings. Above all he was a man who cherished only one dream: Freedom. Even the stories of the signifying monkey and Brer Rabbit all allude to the same thing. These stories, therefore, need to be taken much more seriously for they carry a lot of meaning, especially at a time when writing was

not encouraged among the slaves.

But the mask assumes different dimensions at different times. In other words, it develops. It is not static. We see this evolution in the black literature that we have examined. This evolution goes hand in hand with the social-political climate prevalent. During the Harlem Renaissance, for example, the black man was viewed by the white establishment as being close to nature. Consequently they were deemed sensual and primitive - and consequently more human. This was the image created and it is this image that was nurtured by writers like McKay and Carl Van Vechten. The shattering of this mask by Wright meant that the black person's soul was laid bare. It is here that we notice that the form the mask assumes depends on the degree of social consciousness. As the black populace becomes more politically aware they become more willing to shed off the masks that characterised slavery and their previous existence. As a result we notice, as in Bigger, the tendency to try and relate one's problems with the problems of society. Towards the end of Bigger's end we notice his willingness to accept Max, a white man as his friend. Bigger's fear slowly ebbing, he begins to

assume a more direct bearing toward the forces that shape his life. This is what in the decade of the sixties when black people reject the philosophy of turn-the-other-cheek and passive-non-resistance. The blacks threw off the mask of respectability and told off the white man what they felt about their condition. It is true that this only served to embarrass the political establishment and did not in any way change the economic arrangements. It became the fashion to tell off "whitey", and wallow in black-is-beautiful-soul talk. Consequently many black intelligentsia saw themselves as "progressive" by merely wearing Afro-hair and engaging in mystical and obscene black ritual. This was especially prevalent in the cultural sphere - especially the black theatre. Kunti Drama symbolises this. Engaging in these cultural fads became an end in themselves. What one is advancing is that another form of the mask was developed that negated any dialectical outlook at the black man's problems. By wearing this mask of cultural nationalism most of them imagined they were engaged in a revolution until Malcolm exploded the myth that tended to regard revolution as a picnic party. His ability to transcend the mask can only be seen in relation to his ideological development.

The poetry of the sixties reflects the ambivalence of the black intellectuals, their confusions and contradictions. This poetry also helped to perpetuate the new myth of the "the tough nigger" as exemplified by the image created by the Black Panthers. The majority of the black poets have been unable to transcend this nationalist aspect of black literature. That is why it is of prime significance to note Amiri Baraka's assumption of the new philosophy towards looking at the problems facing the black community. Baraka's poetry is no longer mystificatory. It looks at black problems from the position of the oppressed versus the oppressor. This has occurred because of his dialectical outlook toward life. But the total shattering of the mask can only occur with a change of the socio-political environment that makes it necessary for blacks to wear the mask. There is no way one can talk of the disappearance of the mask without examining the conditions that make it possible to exist. In so far as the mask is still prevalent, the black man will continue to be alienated from himself and from his environment. This is the message we get from the poetry of Baraka in Hard Facts and from black theoreticians such as Angela Davis and George Jackson. The struggle for the black man's liberation is directly tied up with the shattering of the mask. The poetry of the sixties

while destroying the myth of black passivity and contentment, also helped to create the new mask that was embedded in the cultural malaise of the black nationalists.



N O T E S

INTRODUCTION:

1. Paul Carter Harrison (ed), Kuntu Drama

New York: Grove Press Inc., 1974.

Oliver Jackson offers a useful discussion of Kuntu Drama and its relationship to the black cultural experience, especially the drama.

Note the vagueness of the whole philosophy and its tendency to mystify and ritualize everything.

2. See Atlantic Recording of "Ballots or Bullets"

3. Michelle Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, New York: Dial Press, 1979.

In the first part of her book, Wallace offers an interesting thesis on the above theme and what it all meant for the black move during the decade of the sixties.

4. Amiri Baraka, Hard Facts

Note that this book contains neither place nor date of publication. The numbering of the pages begin after the introductory scene.

5. Ibid.
6. James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time.  
London, Penguin, 1972, p.16
7. Angela Davis, If They Come in the Morning  
London: Orbach and Chambers, 1972, p.32
8. Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, A Rap On Race,  
London: Michael Joseph, 1971, p.7
9. Ibid. p.9
10. Baldwin. Op Cit. p.17
11. Davis, Op. Cit., p.23
12. Mead and Baldwin Op.Cit. p.10
13. Lee Baxandeil, Radical Perspectives In the Arts  
Middlesex: Penguin, 1972  
Also see: Leon Trosky, Literature and Revolution  
Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1971.

CHAPTER ONE: AFRO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE

(a) Hughes and Bontemps, The Book of Negro Folklore.  
New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1958.

(b) Francis Lee Utley, "A Definition of Folklore"  
in American Folklore, T.P. Coffin  
VOICE OF AMERICA FORUM LECTURES, MARCH 1968

Note Utley's definition of folk literature as that literature which is orally transmitted (p.3). Lee Utley makes the important point that to understand folklore we have to look at other non-verbal arts, and the traditional beliefs, customs, crafts and the way of life associated with the people one is dealing with.

Marx and Engels, "The Communist Manifesto" in Selected Works Vol.I, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973.

These authors provide a clear analysis of the contending social classes during this period and how the whole world was falling victim of capitalist expansion.

Eric Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, London: Andre-Deutsch, 1972, p.6.

According to Herskovits, if the slaves appeared passive it was only because they were biding their time until they could make a good and effective protest, or escape. But a lot of white historians viewed the situation differently. This is in support of the false notion that slavery was a benevolent system that benefited the victim in terms of civilizing him and saving him from the natural world of beasts, jungles and savages.

8. Harold Preece, "The Negro Folk Cult" in Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel, Alan Dundes (ed), New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973, p.38
9. Ibid. p.37
10. Roger D. Abrahams, Positively Black, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970.  
Abrahams offers a discussion of the various genres of black folklore. Also useful in this respect is The Book of Negro Folklore, Hughes and Bontemps.
11. Hughes and Bontemps, Op. Cit., p.3.
12. Ibid. p.6
13. Ibid., p.9

14. Roger D. Abrahams, Deep Down In the Jungle,  
Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970, p.72.
15. Ibid., p.73
16. Ibid., p.153
17. Ibid., pp.148-153
18. Elkins, Op.Cit., pp.130-131
19. Bernard Wolfe, "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent  
Rabbit" in Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel.
20. Ibid.
21. Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle, p.78
22. Bruce Jackson, "The Glory Songs of the Lord" in  
American Folklore, T.P. Coffin (ed) VOICE OF  
AMERICA FORUM LECTURES MARCH, 1968, p.121
23. W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk, New York:  
Signet Classic, 1969, p.267
24. Ibid.
25. Dundes, op.cit., p.456
26. Russel Ames, "Protest and Irony in Negro Folksong"  
in Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel, p.489.

27. Quoted in Russel Ames, "Protest and Irony in Negro Folksong", p.490
28. Ibid., p.489
29. E.E. Thorpe, The Mind of the Negro, Westport: Negro Universities Press, p.77
30. Quoted in Ibid., p.77
31. Ames, Op.Cit.
32. Ibid.
33. Frederick Douglas, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973, p.37.
34. Hughes and Bontemps, Op.Cit., p.291
35. Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and Freedom  
New York: Arno Press and the New York Times,  
1968, p.159
36. Hughes and Bontemps, Op.Cit., p.292
37. R. Bastide, African Civilizations In The New World,  
New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc., 1971
38. Hughes and Bontemps, Op.Cit. p.296

39. Dundes, Op.Cit., p.458
40. Hughes and Bontemps, Op.Cit., p.297
41. Ibid., p.298
42. Ibid.
43. LeRoi Jones, Blues People, New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963, pp.38-39
44. Julius Lester, To be a Slave, New York: The Dial Press Inc., 1968, pp.83-84
45. Booker T. Washington, The Story of the Negro, New York: Negro University Press, New York, 1969, p.260  
Jean Wagner offers a useful analysis of the spirituals and blues as folk poetry. According to him this is "popular poetry"  
This popular poetry.....offers us a much more subtle and realistic picture of the world of oppression than one could possibly find in the written poetry of the same period. The latter took shape in part on the fringes of the people's existence, whereas folk poetry was the very emanation of this existence.

The cleavage between these two forms of

expression....also reflects a  
divergence in their social origins.  
For by definition folk poetry  
expresses the feelings of the  
masses, while written poetry  
gives outer shapes to the  
aspirations of the middle class  
or bourgeoisie.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States,  
Urbana, Chicago, London: University of  
Illinois Press, 1973, p.36

Also see Malcolm's analysis on spirituals and how  
the slaves used the mask of religious songs and  
imagery to express their sentiments in:

Malcolm X, Malcolm X On Afro-American History  
New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974

46. Hughes and Bontemps, Op.Cit., p.62

47. Ibid., p.63

48. Ibid., p.67

49. Ibid.



50. Ibid., p.68

51. J. Lester, Black Folktales

New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1970, p.94

52. Ibid., pp.28-29

53. William, Op.Cit., pp.201-202

54. Lester, Op.Cit., p.107

55. Ibid., p.110

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This thesis is developed by Lincoln in the only book (the above cited) that gives an exhaustive analysis of the Black Muslims in America and their influence.

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Three days before his death, Malcolm emphasized this point at Columbia University:

We are living in an era of revolution, and the revolt of the American Negro is part of the rebellion against the oppression and colonialism which has characterised this era.....

It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of black against white, or as a purely American problem. Rather, we are greatly seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.

33. Ibid.

Breitman gives a thorough analysis of Malcolm's philosophy and the rapid changes that he underwent in the last year of his life.

34. Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Liberation"  
in EBONY, August, 1969, p.54
35. Ibid., p.56
36. Donald B. Gibson (ed), Modern Black Poets,  
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37. Barbour, Op.Cit., p.87
38. Don Lee sees black art as being committed to  
humanism. According to him it commits the community  
not just individuals. He discusses this in his  
Dynamite Voices I, Broadside Press, Detroit,  
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CHAPTER FIVE: AMIRI BARAKA

1. Letitia Dace, "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in Black American Writers (ed), Inge, Duke, Bryer, New York: St. Martins Press, 1978, p.127

2. Benston also notes this shift on his analysis of Baraka's works. He notes:

LeRoi Jones's journey from the hell of an alien tradition to home in blackness was not carried out in a historical vacuum. His search for identity while intensely personal, coincided with the dramatic changes in Afro-American sensibility which have been variously described as the Black Power, black consciousness, or Neo-Black movement. By whatever appellation, there did not occur in the 1960's a profound process of reevaluation, redefinition and regrouping, primarily among young black intellectuals and artists, which has irrevocably affected the shape of Afro-American culture.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Kimberly W. Benston, Baraka,

Subsequent quotes in relation to this book  
come from this edition.

3. Dace, Op.Cit.
4. LeRoi Jones, Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967  
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All future references to this text come from  
the above edition and will be cited by page  
number only.
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8. Inge, Duke, Bryer, Op.Cit., p.161
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