

## Claude Mckay and His Race-Consciousness

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It is the Negro's tragedy I feel  
Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,  
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal  
Because I know the keenness of his pain.  
Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white  
Can penetrate into the Negro's ken,  
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night  
Which hides and buries him from other men.  
So what I write is urged out of my blood.  
There is no white man who could write my book,  
Though many think their story should be told.  
Of what the Negro people ought to brook.  
Our statesmen roam the world to set things right.  
This Negro laughs and prays to God for Light :<sup>1)</sup>

The main characteristic of the early twentieth century Afro-American literature is the aspect of race war influencing black writers. The study of recurrent themes is essential for understanding Afro-American literature and the images and the realities of American society as seen in its perspective.

Claude McKay, one of the most militant poets, wrote many race poems. Many of his poems deal with racial conflicts and reveal his identity. As Alain Locke mentioned, race consciousness had become a great part of his consciousness about himself and the outside world. He was in bondage with this heavy chain of race-consciousness, and his life had been the struggle to cast off its weight.

What black authors consistently express and what marks their identity are the agony and sorrow of the oppressed, as well as hostility and

hate towards those who oppress them.

Every Negro poet has “something to say” simply because he is a Negro : he cannot escape having important things to say<sup>2)</sup>.

The experiences of blacks as a group, such as deportation and slavery, are unique, yet there always have been some kind of interracial conflicts and oppression in human society. In this sense, their problems are universal except that the Afro-American experience has been much more intense and severe. The significance of the literature by Afro-Americans, therefore, is that it gives the readers access to the vicarious experience of their lives in stories, and to their emotions expressed in their poetry. The literature leads us to understand and to feel the agony and sufferings of a segregated people, and at the same time it opens our eyes to the reality of injustice and the cruelty of human nature. Sometimes it was written only for blacks, to be read behind the scenes. At other times, it was meant to give pain to white readers, or intended to educate white readers. Provoking a sense of guilt, such writings may be judged discomforting and offensive by white readers. Nevertheless, it would be difficult or even dishonest to bypass or ignore such elements, since racial discrimination is the main reality that influenced the lives of blacks. After World War I, there had been many murderous clashes between whites and blacks, including shootings, hangings, and riots. Many black authors wrote their poems under the influence of such events. It was at this time, in 1919, that Claude McKay wrote the sonnet, “If We Must Die”:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, Oh let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain : then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead :  
O kinsmen ! we must meet the common foe !  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow !

What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!<sup>3)</sup>

Sir Winston Churchill quoted this poem in the confrontation with the Germans during the Second World War. He probably did not know that the author was a black, nor the background of the poem. However this poem must have been the most effective way to express what he had intended. The words are strong and the fighting spirit shown here is sharp and has the crystal shine of distilled water. The passion expressed here is universal. The beauty of this poetry is in the intensity, passion and the depth of the emotion, however crude or bitter or hostile it may be. The feelings expressed are the cry for equality and freedom and the cry of hurt pride. It is an extreme form of an emotion.

Harlem Renaissance writers of the twenties repudiated both the stereotype of Uncle Tom and the sexually aggressive savage. It was a time when more and more Negro writers had come to be recognized in the world of literature. Unlike their predecessors, the New Negro publicly wrote about racial issues. McKay's race poetry is more direct and more intense than that of his contemporaries. In his poems, the word "hate" is most frequent. He sought to show white readers what it is to be a Negro and how the Negro feels. His poetry clearly identified his racial background. One of the Negro poets of his time, William Stanley Braithwaite, in his open letter to McKay, wrote as follows, reported by McKay :

Because of the almost insurmountable prejudice against all things Negro, he would advise me to write and send to the magazine only such poems as did not betray my racial identity<sup>4)</sup>.

Yet for McKay, the writing of poems should be out of the own experience:

I felt more confidence in my own way because, of all the poets I admire, major and minor, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Blake, Burns, Whitman, Heine, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud and the rest—it seemed to me that when I read them—in their poetry I could feel their race, their class, their roots in the soil, growing into plants, spreading and forming the backgrounds against which they were silhouetted. I

could not feel the reality of them without that. So likewise I could not realize myself writing without conviction<sup>5</sup>).

In most of the reviews of his poems “there were flippant notes, either open or veiled, at the idea of a Negro writing poetry”<sup>6</sup>). His race poems are bitter and militant. Bernard Shaw had asked him why he did not go in for pugilism instead of poetry<sup>7</sup>). These poems are perhaps an over-correction of the Negro’s image as happy, submissive, and hedonistic folks.

Another trend of the epoch was the effort to demonstrate “that Negro intellect is capable of the same achievement as that of the white”<sup>8</sup>). Sometimes McKay’s poetry is overrun with poetic diction, though he says he has “striven to achieve directness, truthfulness and naturalness of expression instead of an enameled originality”<sup>9</sup>). But he did not hesitate to use old words, poetically overworked and dead, when he thought he could make them glow alive by new manipulation. When such efforts succeeded, the results were his most beautiful poems conveying strong feelings and emotions to readers.

Another uniqueness of McKay’s poetry is the sense of alienation. Though he represents the Afro-American authors of Harlem Renaissance, he is a Jamaican. His initial orientation to race relations was different from that of American blacks. He had spent a quite happy early childhood in a farming neighborhood in the beautiful hilly country of warm Jamaica. Jamaican blacks were a subject race under the whites. Still somewhat paternalistic British being only 14% of the total population, they were a majority. In case of the American blacks, they constituted a minority, who largely occupied ghettos due to mass migration to the industrial North cities from rural South since the abolition of slavery. McKay was an expatriate there and sometimes felt the antipathy of American blacks to West Indian immigrants. He was doubly alienated.

McKay originally was a college student to learn farming but he left to be a poet. He worked as a waiter, a porter, a fireman, a bar-boy, a houseman; belonged to the working class of Harlem. However, intellectually he was closer to educated white people. His extensive reading of English literature in his brother’s house gave him the background for a

literary career. He actually associated with white intellectuals closely. The heroes and heroines of his stories are a projection of his own image in a conflict of identity with the education of white civilization. His poetry, by contrast, had woven together the anger and the passion of his race, the sadness and the loneliness of his alienation from which resulted the profound expressions of his pain. The peculiarity of his experiences made him more individualistic compared to the American black writers of the literary group.

McKay's poetry is often regarded as protest literature because of the offensive tone in some of his poems. It was a response against oppression.

Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate  
Against potent poison of your hate<sup>10)</sup>.

He had to face segregation in every aspect of his life including his heritage, his love, politics, economics and religion. History taught him the suffering of his race in the past :

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,  
For weary centuries, despised, oppressed  
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place  
.....  
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead<sup>11)</sup>

His friendship with a white woman turned into a nightmare because of the taboos of the dominant white community.

I must not gaze at them although  
Your eyes are dawning day :  
.....  
I must not see upon your face  
Love's softly glowing spark :  
For there's the barrier of race.  
Your're fair and I am dark.

And politically Negroes did not have power.

What waste of time to cry : "No Segregation?"  
When it exists in stark reality.

Both North and South, throughout this total nation.  
The state decreed by white authority<sup>13)</sup>.

His people were poor and had to toil for bread.

Out of the tenements, cold as stone,  
Dark figures start for work :  
I watch them sadly shuffle on,  
'Tis dawn, dawn in New York<sup>14)</sup>.

Christianity, he thought, had no effect on injustice.

I thought the adoption of the Christ cult by Western civilization was its curse : it gave modern civilization a hypocritical façade, for its existence depended on force and positive exploitation, whereas Jesus was weak and negative<sup>15)</sup>.

Actually, he was brought up in a Christian environment at his brother's house. Its influence might have been stronger since his brother was a lay reader in an anglican church. Yet he was agnostic and encouraged Claude to the readings of many books including, Huxley, Lecky, Haeckel, Gibbon and others.

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<sup>16)</sup>.

Experiencing racial segregation, his mind had been obsessed with race-consciousness. In his poems, he tried disclose his passion, what was burning inside his bosom.

O tender word ! O melody so slender !  
O tears of passion saturate with brine,  
O words, unwilling words, ye can not render  
My hatred for the foe of me and mine<sup>17)</sup>

Because of the resulting militancy of his literature as well as his admiration of Marxism, the U. S. government marked him as a dangerous element. Russian Communists welcomed him as a pure blooded black

writer and agitator who represented the suppressed class of the United States. However, McKay proclaimed to a member of the Communist Party that he was a poet and not an agitator, which made the Party members angry. McKay believed as follows :

—an agitator is to lead people: a poet is to express his feelings whether it will lead some people act that way or not<sup>18)</sup>.

In any case, his poetry is loaded with the words related to racial issues such as “hate”, “race”, “blood”, “black”, “white”, “Negro” and also words related to passion, “anger”, “passion”, “proud”, “bitterness”, “sore”, and “bosom”.

The major feelings in his race poems are hatred and hostility against the force causing the segregation. The quality of the hatred actually changed according to his experiences and his concerns. His early poems express the hatred but it was more abstract, less personal, and less bitter. As he grew, gaining a sense of the subjection of his people, and with the actual encounters with interracial conflicts, his hatred had increased and became overwhelming. Because he was a sensitive and proud man, what could have seemed trivial to others became an obsessive burden to his respect for himself and for his people.

In the following section of the paper, I will try to demonstrate how the reality and his particular experiences had affected the development of his racial consciousness and how he had tried to overcome that as revealed in his poetry.

McKay was born to a farming family which lived in the middle country of Jamaica. As he later remembered, the Clarendon Hills had provided him a happy childhood. Yet there was the family memory of slavery already carved in his mind. The ancestors of his family had been shipped from Africa and sold at public auction in Jamaica. There had been the danger that the members of a family would be sold to different places. His ancestors resorted to a death strike to stay together. With this soul of revolt, and a sense of the subjection of his people in Jamaica, McKay grew up.

Jamaica is the nigger's place,  
 No mud whe' some dedare :  
 Although dem call me "no-land race",  
 I know my home is here,  
 .....  
 You hab all t'ings fe mek life bless',  
 But buccra 'poil de whole  
 Wid gove' ment an' all de res',  
 Fe worry naygur soul<sup>19)</sup>.

In this poem, "My Native Land My Home", there are feelings both of joy in home and resentment to "buccra" (white), who ruined this happiness. He described the idle white who exploited local blacks using Negro dialect.

You tas'e petater an' you say it sweet,  
 But you no know how hard we wuk fe it ;  
 You want a basketful fe quattiewut,  
 "Cause you no know 'tiff de bush fe cut<sup>20)</sup>.

Another song of peasant life that pictures the contrast of white and black :

De picknies hab to go to school  
 Without a bite fe taste :  
 And I am working like a mule,  
 While buccra, sittin' in de cool,  
 Hab 'nuff nenyawn fe waste,  
 .....  
 De peas won't pop, de corn can't grow,  
 Poor people face look sad,  
 Dat Gahd would cuss de lan' I'd know,  
 For black naygur too bad<sup>21)</sup>,

The image illustrated in all of the poems is of poor black peasants under white rule. It is about rural life of people attached to their new land, exploited by a dominant class of white. Basically his feelings were discontent and resentment for the past of his people and the economic exploitation by whites.

Later he had a position as a constable in a Spanish town near Kingston. For the first time he faced cold city life and the concrete reality of segregation by skin color. His hate against the white grew stronger in the circumstances.

Not that I am openly rebelled : but the rebellion was fomented by the inevitable rubs of daily life —trifles to most of my comrades but to me calamities and tragedies”<sup>22)</sup>.

He missed the rural life living in the city and suffered from the dual oppressions of skin color and socio-economic class discrimination.

If I'd followed a peasant's career,  
I would now be a happier lad ;  
You would not be abusing me here,  
An' mekin' me sorry and sad,  
.....

Fool! I hated my precious birth right  
Scorning what made my father a man ;  
Now I grope in pitch dark night,  
Hate de day whe ne poo' life begin<sup>23)</sup>,

Mckay hated the duty of the a constable, because he was the agent to oppress the lower-class Negroes.

'Tis grievous to think dat, while toilin' in here  
My people won't love me again,  
My people, my people, me owna black skin,  
De wretched t'ought gives me such pain  
.....

For 'tis hatred without an' 'tis hatred within ;  
An' how can I live 'donden (without) my heart ?  
Then Oh for de country, de love o' me soul,  
From which I shall never part !  
.....

But I'll leave it, my people ; an' come back to you,  
I'll flee from de grief an' turmoil  
I'll leave it, though flow'as here should line  
my path yet,  
An' come back to you an' de soil<sup>24)</sup>.

Here McKay's race-consciousness is seen emerging in the ideas of skin color determining his fate.

In 1912, he left Jamaica for the United States to study farming. After a few years of study at Kansas University and Tuskegee Institute, he had the urge to "wonder and wander", possessed by the spirit of the poet—vagabondage. After in success as a poet in Jamaica, he wanted higher achievements and a bigger audience.

I had no desires to return home. What I had previously done was done. But I still cherished the urge to creative expression. I desired to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America. Against its mighty throbbing force, its grand energy and power and bigness, its bitterness burning in my black body, I would raise my voice to make a canticle of my reaction<sup>25</sup>).

In his poems written in America, he did not use Negro dialect, unlike the Jamaican poems in which he tried to put local color and touch by using dialect.

He was full of hope and ambition in starting a life as a poet. He had had mixed feelings about America where he was an outsider.

For one brief golden moment rare like wine,  
The gracious city swept across the line ;  
Oblivious of the color of my skin,  
Forgetting that I was an alien guest,  
She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,  
Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast.  
The great, proud city, seized with a strange love,  
Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove<sup>26</sup>).

His life in the U. S., though, was not easy. In Jamaica, the English were a minority in population and despite their prejudice they had benevolent and paternalistic control of blacks. In America, there was much more severe prejudice and hatred of whites towards blacks. American blacks were a minority in a white civilization.

In his intellectual life, he had associated more with white friends than blacks, as he was in the intelligentsia. However, the color of his skin

separated him from their company in American society. In a weekend drive with two white friends, they tried to find a restaurant to dine in, but not a single restaurant would serve them together except one restaurant which they finally found invited to eat in the kitchen. He recalled that experience as follows :

It was one of the most miserable meals I ever ate, I felt not only my own humiliation, but more keenly the humiliation that my presence had forced upon my friends<sup>27)</sup>.

Such an experience gave him sore anger, and put hate and bitterness in his heart.

I think the persons who invented discrimination in public places to ostracize people of a different race or nation or color or religion are direct descendants of medieval torturers. It is most powerful instrument in the world that may be employed to prevent rapprochement and understanding different groups of people. It is a cancer in the universal human body and poison to the individual soul. It saps the sentiment upon which friendliness and love are built.

Ultimately it can destroy even the most devoted friendship..... It was at this time that I wrote a series of sonnets expressing my bitterness, hate and love. Some of them were quoted out of their context to prove that I hate America<sup>28)</sup>.

“The White House” is a poem expressing sharp hate and discontent.

Your door is shut against my tightened face,  
And I am sharp as steel with discontent :  
But I possess the courage and the grace  
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.

.....

Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,  
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,  
And find in it the superhuman power  
To hold me to the letter of your law<sup>29)</sup> :

The title “The White House” seemed to have political implications, but McKay denied that. It was meant to accuse the white middle class. What the poem symbolized was how Negroes were denied a share of the

capitalist society.

Another time, he went to see the play, “He Who Gets Slapped” as a drama critic. He had had an orchestra press ticket for balcony, yet he was sent to the remote corner of the theatre. He recalls :

He sat there, “apart, alone, black and shrouded in blackness, quivering in every fiber, my heart denying itself and hiding from every gesture of human kindness, hard in its belief that kindness is to be found in on nation or race.

.....I had come to see a tragic farce— and I found myself unwillingly the hero of one. He who got slapped was I<sup>30)</sup>”.

The following poems were based on the experience.

Poor, painful black face,  
Intruding into the holy places of the whites  
How like a specter you haunt the pale devils!<sup>31)</sup>

This poem is bitter and sour, reflecting the hate damaging the heart and filling it with a poisonous grudge, which can corrode even the strong heart.

I will not toy with it nor bend an inch.  
Deep in the secret chambers of my heart  
I muse my life-long hate, and without flinch  
I bear it nobly as I live my part.  
My being would be a skeleton, a shell,  
If this dark passion that fills my every mood,  
And makes my heaven in the white world's hell,  
Did not forever feed me vital blood<sup>32)</sup>.

In the two poems, “The Whis House”, and “The White City”, the word, “unbent” is the key to the meanings. Both poems have the sense of preserving pride unbent despite the forces trying to subjugate him and destroy him : The poetry records efforts to stand against the storm of humiliation that almost defeats his pride and self-esteem. The power of racial discrimination to destroy the oppressed is compared to that of a brute who hunts his prey.

The white man is a tiger at my throat,

Drinking my blood as my life ebbs away,  
And muttering that his terrible striped coat  
Is Freedom's and portends the Light of Day.

.....  
Europe and Africa and Asia wait  
The touted New Deal of the New World's hand!  
New systems will be built on race and hate,  
The Eagle and the Dollar will command<sup>33</sup>).

He was bitter with the gap between the ideals and the real injustices of America : He wanted the ideals to be realized.

It is true that McKay consistently attacked, in both poetry and fiction, the cynicism of an America which tried to export "democratic" principles to the rest of the world while maintaining racism at home<sup>34</sup>).

He had a sense of challenge to America : a giant foe worth confronting with all his might.

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,  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate.  
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.  
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.  
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,  
And see her might and granite wonders there,  
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,  
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand<sup>35</sup>).

While he kindled the ambition and the passion for the challenge, he could not escape the sorrow and misery of his life ; hard manual labor, segregation, and alienation. He had been taking manual work to live while he studied by himself for literary career. He lived among poor

blacks of Harlem.

Peace, O my rebel heart : for soon the moon  
From out its misty veil will swing aloft :  
Be patient, weary body, soon the night  
Will wrap thee gently in her sable sheet,  
.....

But what steals out the gray clouds red like wine ?  
O dawn ! O dreaded dawn ! O let me rest  
Weary my veins, my brain, my life ! Have pity :  
No ! Once again the harsh, the ugly city<sup>36</sup>).

The alienation of McKay was that of the expatriate who was amazed and enchanted with the new environment yet who missed his home.

About me young and careless feet  
Linger along the garish street :  
Above, a hundred shouting signs  
Shed down their bright fantastic glow  
Upon the merry crowd and lines  
Of moving carriages below.  
Oh wonderful is Broacway—only  
My heart, my heart is lonely.  
.....

As in a dream I stand and gaze  
At Broadway, shining Broadway—only  
My heart, my heart is lonely<sup>37</sup>).

His heart was made delicate from loneliness. The artificially illuminated city and the warm and sunny tropical home are in contrast in his poetry. In the following poem, the memories of home overwhelm McKay.

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,  
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,  
And tangerines and mangoes and grapefruit,  
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,  
.....

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze  
A wave of longing through my body swept,  
And hungry for the old, familiar ways,

I turned aside and bowed my head and wept<sup>38)</sup>.

Beside the strain of surviving the psychological burden of color consciousness, there was an additional alienation as a result of being a foreigner. With the stress pressing heavily on him, he felt the need to appeal to a supernatural power for emotional support.

“Mid the discordant noises of the day,  
I hear thee calling,  
I stumble as I fare along Earth’s way :  
keep me from falling<sup>39)</sup>.”

Despite all the pressure McKay had hopes. Fundamentally his posture was to bear the weight of the oppression and not to surrender.

During the race riot in 1919, many Negroes were slaughtered. Blacks were in danger of losing their lives. In this year McKay wrote many furious, militant sonnets. Compared to the others which expressed sore anger, the efforts to sustain his pride and to preserve his emotional stability, these sonnets are characterized by the bitter and potent hate against whites and by the more aggressive spirit to fight back against the menace if necessary.

His Sprit in smoke ascended to high heaven.  
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,  
Had bidden him to his bosom once again :  
.....  
The ghastly body swaying in the sun.  
The women thronged to look, but never a one  
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.  
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,  
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee<sup>40)</sup>.

What the poem creates is a picture of the oppressors as demons. The poem is crude, leaving a feeling of deep hate in it which will make the white readers uneasy and uncomfortable. The words are rather choppy compared to the sonnet, “If We Must Die”, where the feelings and expressions attain the sublime. “To the White Fiend” is another militant poem.

Think you I am not fiend & savage too?  
Think you I could not arm me with a gun  
And shoot down ten of you for every one  
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?<sup>41)</sup>

This is full of violent hostility and hate. The direct address form, too, enhances the force of passion. It is a challenge to the moral superiority of whites. The violent passions expressed in these sonnets can be seen as the grounds for the claim of his being a protest writer or agitator.

Disillusioned and disappointed, he deserted America to wander in other countries.

No more for you the city's thorny ways,  
The ugly corners of the Negro belt:  
The miseries and pains of these harsh days  
By you will never, never again be felt.

.....  
'Twas' sudden—but your menial task is done,  
The dawn now breaks on you, the dark is over,  
The sea is crossed, the longed—for port is won:  
Farewell, oh, fare you well: my friend and lover<sup>42)</sup>.

McKay tried to find his dream in different nations. He wandered through Russia, England, France, Spain and to Morocco. It was the Communist Party which invited McKay to Moscow. For the first time in his life, he felt proud of being a Negro strongly in Moscow.

Moscow for many loving tsar was dead...  
And yet I saw a bright Byzantine fair,  
Of jewelled buildings, pillars, domes and spires  
Of hues prismatic dazzling to the sight:  
A glory painted on the Eastern air,  
Of amorous sounding tones like passionate lyres:  
All colors laughing richly their delight  
And reigning over all the color red<sup>43)</sup>.

The poem expresses McKay's excitement. His idealization of the scene is represented by rich color of the buildings. Colorfulness also has some similarity to the colorful tropical home of Jamaica. The red is symbolic

of communism and that of joy and passion in the tropics. He regarded International communism as the way to eliminate segregation. However, he did not like the way the Communist Party regarded him as an agitator rather than a writer and he felt he was used for entertainment as a typical Negro. He was also disappointed with the communist dictatorship.

He had also lived in England for a year. England was the country he had fancied in his childhood in Jamaica.

I've longin' in me dept's of heart  
that I can conquer not,  
"Tis a wish dat I've been havin'  
from since I could form a t'o't,  
Tis to sail athwart the ocean  
An' to hear de billows roar,  
When dem ride aroun' de steamer,  
When dem beat on England's shore<sup>44)</sup>

The fantasy and the dream of Europe he had cultivated might have been the source of his vagabondage as well as of his pursuit of an ideal country and of an escape from color consciousness. But he found the English to be cold and he felt that the prejudice against Negroes had become almost congenital among them.

His life in France was mainly devoted to the writing of novels and short stories. He then wandered on to Spain. Spain with its warm climate must have provided him comfort, though not complete relief from his color consciousness.

I would be wandering in distant fields  
Where man, and bird, and beast, lives leisurely,  
.....  
But I am bound with you in your mean graves,  
O black men, simple slaves of ruthless slaves<sup>45)</sup>.

His happiness among the Spanish people is reflected in the fast-flowing rhythmic and dancing color of the following poem.

In Barcelona city they dance the nights  
Along the streest. The folk, erecting stands

Upon the people's pavements, come together  
From pueblo, barrio, in families  
Lured by the lilting playing of the bands.  
Rejoicing in the balmy summer weather,  
In spreading rings they weave fine fantasies  
Like rare mosaics of many-colored lights<sup>46</sup>).

The colorful images are a symbol of his joy. Still he aspired to find a place where he would not feel his skin color to be exotic. Thus he went to North Africa, to Morocco. In Morocco, he was free from color consciousness and spent one of the happiest periods of his life.

Oh wistful and heartrending earth, oh land  
Of colors singing symphonies of life!  
Myself is like a stone upon my spirit,  
Reluctant, passing from your sunny shore.  
    Oh native colors,  
    Pure colors aglow  
    With magic light<sup>47</sup>).

He could have become a citizen of Morocco by marrying a native woman. However he found it was difficult to be naturalized because of attitudinal differences in religion. He thought Islam too intolerant and fanatic.

Concluding the period of Vagabondage, McKay went back to the United States. Later he converted to Catholicism. He had certain idea related to color-consciousness even in preference to a denomination. He sees in Catholicism 'the one true international of peace and God Will to all men'.

The Catholicism had made of the Spanish people the most honest and humane of any in the world, while Protestantism had made Anglo-Saxon and their American cousins the vilest, hoggist and most predatory people in the world<sup>48</sup>).

As we have observed, his whole life can be viewed as an effort to set himself free from his race-consciousness and to pursue a Utopia where there would be no segregation. Ideologically, he thought Marxism as an inter-racial proletarian idea; geographically, he wandered through

different countries seeking the dream, a lost home, a new homeland and a humane cultivated civilization, and religiously, he found Catholicism to be closer to his ideal. He did not find his ideal anywhere in the world, but in the process he overcame the pains and agonies of external oppression and internal burden. Throughout his life, the memory of home was his emotional support.

So much I have forgotten in ten years,  
So much in ten brief years : I have forgot  
What time the purple apples come to juice,  
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not  
.....  
I have forgotten much, but still remember  
The poinsettia's red, blood-red, in warm December.  
.....  
We were so happy, happy, I remember,  
Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December<sup>49</sup>).

The colorful images of tropical flowers and plants are echoed in the places he liked abroad as well in different objects. He did not go back home, though. Instead he kept the memory of home to always remember.

Thou sweet-voiced stream that first gavest me drink,  
Watched o'er me when I floated on thy breast :  
.....  
While I am roaming in an alien land?  
No wonder that my heart is happy never,  
For I've been faithless to thee, Sukee River  
    I shall love you ever,  
    Dearest Sukee River :  
    Dash against my broken heart,  
    Nevermore from you I'll part :  
    But will stay for ever,  
    Crystal Sukee River<sup>50</sup>).

Memory of the tropical country warmed his heart, which was chilled by cold, grey Northern cities and countries. As a matter of fact, in his adulthood, he moved from cold places to warmer countries. When he moved closer to his ancestral land Africa, he was happier. His attitude

toward segregation was not that of escape nor of negligence. He faced the reality of the world and of his psyche, expressing his anger and hate without hesitation. At the same time, he sought ideals and wandered the world, remaining always sensitive to the reality around him.

Into the furnace let me go alone :  
Stay you without in terror of the heat.  
I will go naked in—for thus 'tis sweet—  
Into the weird depths of the hottest zone  
I will not quiver in the frailest bone,  
You will not note a flicker of defeat :  
My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet,  
My mouth give utterance to any moan.  
The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears :  
Red aspish tongues shout wordlessly my name.  
Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,  
Transforming me into a shape of flame.  
I will come out, back to your world of tears,  
A stronger soul within a finer frame<sup>51</sup>).

McKay did not bend under the pressure but sustained himself against the destructive forces. He became stronger than before.

Like a strong tree that in the virgin earth  
Sends far its roots through rock and loam and clay,  
And proudly thrives in rain or time of dearth,  
When dry waves scare the rain-come sprites away ;  
Like a strong tree that reaches down deep, deep,  
For sunken water, fluid underground,  
Where the great-ringed unsightly blind worms creep,  
And queer things of the nether world abound ;  
So would I live in rich imperial growth,  
Touching the surface and the depth of things,  
Instinctively responsive unto both,  
Tasting the sweets of being, fearing no stings,  
Sensing the subtle spell of changing forms,  
Like a strong tree against a thousand storms<sup>52</sup>).

McKay lived throughout his life being always sensitive to racial

issues. It could be said that McKay did not necessarily become free from race-consciousness. As long as segregation and injustice existed, he could not help perceiving the reality and being aware of it. As creatures in nature live under the effect of the storms that come their way, so do people in society live under different pressures. In McKay's case, the problems of race were the main issues facing him. Some people may try to avoid reality, either by removing themselves from it or by dulling their sensitivity to it. McKay could have removed himself from the area of conflict and lived a more peaceful life, in Africa or Jamaica. Once he had learned the facts of segregation and the oppression forced on one group of people by a stronger one, he could not stay away from them ; he stayed and continued to probe the problem.

His reaction to the issue was on the one hand to seek an ideal such as Marxism which, he thought, might be able to solve the problems. On the other hand, he expressed his hatred in his poetry : his emotional reaction to oppression. The hatred had a double source : It was both a spontaneous outpouring of emotion and an attempt to raise the consciousness of the oppressor, to educate all whites about the cruelty being done to black people. Raising his voice against this lack of consciousness of evil and forcing himself to be sensitive and race-conscious must have been painful for McKay. However, McKay lived through it and grew to have deeper perspectives on reality. Unconquerable will and pride and intelligence are the strengths shining behind his poetry.

### Netes

- 1) Claude Mckay, "The Negro's Tragedy", *Selected Poems of Claude Mckay* (New York : Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1953), p. 50.
- 2) Stephen Bronz, *Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness* (New York : Libra Publishere, 1964), p. 14.
- 3) "If We Must Die," *Selected Poems*, p. 36.
- 4) Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York : Lee Furman Inc., 1937), p. 27.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 88.

- 7) Ibid., p. 88.
- 8) Ibid., p. 28.
- 9) Claude Mckay, *Harlem Shadows* (New York : E. P. Dutton and Company, 1922), p. xxi.
- 10) "O Word I Love To Sing," *Selected Poems*, p. 43.
- 11) "Enslaved," *ibid.*, p. 42.
- 12) "The Barrier," *Selected Poems*, p. 80.
- 13) "The Negro's Friend," *ibid.*, p. 51.
- 14) "When Dawn Comes to The City," *ibid.*, p. 62.
- 15) *A Long Way from Home*, p. 25.
- 16) "Outcast," *Selected Poems*, p. 41.
- 17) "O Word I Love To Sing," *ibid.*, p. 43.
- 18) "A Long Way from Home"
- 19) Claude McKay, "My Native Land My Home," *Song of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica : Aston W. Gardner & Co. 1963), p. 84, p. 85.
- 20) "Quashire to Buccra," *ibid.*, p. 1.
- 21) "Hard Time," *ibid.*, p. 53.
- 22) *Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness*, p. 69.
- 23) Claude Mckay, "A Labourer's Life Giive" *Constab Ballads* (London : Wutts and Company, 1912), p. 71.
- 24) "The Heart of Constab," *ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- 25) *A Long Way from Home*, p. 4.
- 26) "The City's Love," *Selected Pooms*, p. 66.
- 27) *A Long Way from Home*, p. 134.
- 28) *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- 29) "The White House," *Selected Poems*, p. 78.
- 30) *A Long Way from Home*, p. 145.
- 31) *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 32) "The White City," *Selected Poems*, p. 74.
- 33) "Tiger," *ibid.*, p. 47.
- 34) James Giles, *Claude McKay* (Boston, Mass. : Twayne Publisners, 1976), p. 52.
- 35) "Tiger," *Selected Poems*, p. 47.
- 36) "The Tired Worker," *ibid.*, p. 79.

- 37) "On Broadway," *ibid.*, p. 67.
- 38) "The Tropics in New York," *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 39) "A Prayer," *ibid.*, p. 55.
- 40) "The Lynching," *ibid.*, p. 37.
- 41) "To The White Fiends," *ibid.*, p. 38.
- 42) "Rest in Peace," *ibid.*, p. 77.
- 43) "Moscow," *ibid.*, p. 83.
- 44) "Old England," *Song of Jamaica*, p. 63.
- 45) "In Bondage," *Selected Poems*, p. 39.
- 46) "Barcelona," *ibid.*, p. 85.
- 47) "A Farewell to Morocco," *ibid.*, p. 88.
- 48) *Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness*, p. 87.
- 49) "Flame-Heart," *ibid.*, p. 13.
- 50) "Sukee River," *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 51) "Baptism," *ibid.*, p. 35.
- 52) "Like a Strong Tree," *ibid.*, p. 45.

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