



CLAUDE MCKAY'S FICTION AS NOTHING BUT "A PICTURE OF THE SHEER MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM OF BLACK SOUL AND IDENTITY"

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Abstract

This research paper is a small attempt to picturize Claude Mckay's as a novelist with a poetic outlook with a focus on his fiction as nothing but "a picture of the sheer magnitude of the problem of black soul and identity" and also explains how Mckay has made a successful attempt at achieving wholeness of the black personality through a process of tapping the African Wellsprings of the black psyche, its rich native heritage. Thus, Mckay advocates a return to blackness by accommodating western in heritance.

Key Words: *Black Personality, Black Psyche, Native Heritage, Magnitude, Black Identity.*

Claude Mckay was better as a poet when he took to writing novels. But his very first novel itself namely **Home to Harlem** was an immediate success. Shari Mali Ali rightly says thus:

"**Home to Harlem** was the first novel by a black writer to reach the commercial best-seller list; it was reprinted five times in two months". (p.210)

That was adequate proof for his popularity. Though **Home the Harlem** was generally well received by the white reading public, the black critics denounced it. Similarly, Mckay's second novel **Banjo** was also condemned as filth. But with the passage of time, a sober assessment of the novel was socially affirming came to stay. Mackay's three novels **Home to Harlem** (1928), **Banjo: A Story without a plot** (1929) and **Banana Bottom** (1933) form a trilogy. Any perceptive reader will be able to find the singular strain of thought that pervades the three novels, namely, the question of a valid sense of black identity. While **Home to Harlem** is a detailed account of the lowly life of the blacks in Harlem, **Banjo** in any aspects is a sequel to **Home to Herlem**. "**Banjo**" is essentially **Home to Harlem** moved to the Ditch in Marseillies".

Two major characters, Jake, the Protagonist and his friend Ray, reapper in **Banjo**, forming the basis of a link between the two novels. Ray in fact dominates a major chunk of the narrative in **Banjo** that he may well be called a co-protagonist. The conflict introduced in the first novel and heightened in the second finds its climax and resolution in the second finds its climax and resolution in the third novel. An inquisitive reader inorder to get the right perspective of the 'lives and struggles of the blacks, their strength and weakness and their longings and attainment may read the novels in their sequence. In the event of its being not done so, it will only distort his view of the three-dimensional picture of the black life that the novelist is at pains to pain and he may miss the "secure grasp of the big picture, the sheer magnitude of the problem of Black soul" (Kent, 49).

According to Robert P. Smith, "the Kay's book attracted the curiosity of many writers of his day because of the true-to-life portrayal of his characters" (pp.55-56). His physical and moral portraits are so captivating indeed that George E. Kent admires him saying", Mckay manages to get into his gallery a variety of portraits and to celebrate African and American black soul" (p.48) Mckay's vision of effecting black progress lies in achieving individual wholeness. The black men in America need not be



a split personality. He need not have a dual vision of himself; one seen through the eye of the colonizer and the other that of the colonized. Rather his must be a unified self, perfectly attuned to the racial rhythms. McKay uses his character Ray in **Banjo** as a tool to delineate and to establish his concept of wholeness. Ray is unable to find a home or discover a community. He represents the innumerable immigrants adrift in the New World. It is true that he reveals a great understanding of life and an intellectual perception of African history and culture. Nevertheless, his attitude towards blackness is ambivalent. “No happy nigger strut for me”, he declares. At times, his annoyance at being one of the “Yankee Coons” develops to perfectly articulated racial self-hatred. When Agatha, a black woman, who shares his intellectual inclinations, expresses her love for him, Ray flees from her. Thus, he shuns rather than befriends. Ray’s redemption comes in the form of his friendship with Jake, the only person with whom he develops a semblance of close association. The friendship helps him grow both on the personal level as well as on the community level. It is through his understanding of Jake, his outlook on life and his attitude towards his blackness that Ray comes to the realization that his western-oriented education has deracinated him. Exasperated, he wails, “I am a misfit” (HH, 274). Further he asserts:

“We ought to get something new, we Negroes. But we get our education like – like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff...”
(Home to Harlem, 243)

Ray discovers the corruptive consequence of imperialism on the colonized psyche which is the tendency to doubt and devalue oneself and one’s own people’s worth. This potentially liberating revelation does not prompt him to act. But, rather, he chooses to leave the United States. Ray reappears in McKay’s second novel, **Banjo**. He is still the bewildered intellect looking for his salvation, but he is more matured. Marseilles in France serves as the backdrop for his quest for a tangible sense of identity. Here he reaches deeper levels of self-discovery and attains a more profound understanding of his dilemma. He lives among the beachcombers philosophizing on the question of establishing a valid sense of black identity amidst the “obscene phenomenon ‘of western civilization’” (Banjo, 278). Ray asserts much more confidently that the western education impoverishes the non-western psyche by distorting the receiver’s perception of himself and his own culture. He theorizes:

“What’s wrong with you all is your education. You get a white man’s education and learn to despise your own people... Then when you come to maturity, you realize with a shock that you don’t and can’t belong to the west...” (p.200)

The authorial pronouncements are conveniently done through Ray’s words. Ray is pontifical that the first step towards achieving one’s wholeness lies in de-westernizing the colonized black consciousness. It involves the need to “get rid of false moralities and cultivate decent manners – not society manners, but man-to-man decency and tolerance” (Banjo, 268). Judging by Ray’s guidelines, “Jake, despite rootlessness, is a whole man. He is neither... divided from himself by self-hate or education, nor contaminated by the ‘promiscuous thickness’ of Harlem Life” (Greenberg, 243).

The possibility of a permanent and tenable home still eludes Ray’s grasp. The community of outcasts, exiles and loafers on the waterfront of Marseilles cannot be substituted to a viable stable and supportive community with solid structures. His quest for a ‘home’ thus continues because the act of Ray and Banjo’s transplanting themselves from Marseilles to another city can hardly be a permanent solution to



their dilemma. Much of what Ray envisages as requisite for preserving one's wholeness and securing one's home finds its contextual interpretation in Mckay's third and last novel, **Banana Bottom**.

To conclude, Mckay has made a successful attempt at achieving wholeness of the black personality through a process of tapping the African Wellsprings of the black psyche, its rich native heritage. Thus, Mckay advocates a return to blackness by accommodating western in heritance.

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