

Constructing and Reconstructing Homeland 'Spaces' in African American Writing

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Abstract: African American writing is epitomized for the literary articulation that portrays the struggle of a dispossessed and dismissed man from non-entity to entity. The idea of homeland is widely conceived in African American writing not only as a geographical region but as a mental construction that ranges from actual to virtual, to imagined and re-imagined, and from past and present to futuristic spaces.

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African American writing is epitomized for the literary articulation that portrays the struggle of a dispossessed and dismissed man from non-entity to entity. A black man, at his arrival in America, as an immigrant African slave, was deprived of even human status. African American writing portrays him as a representative of an uprooted community which had to travel a long way to regain his human status in the new world. His attainment of identity was not merely a combat against the inhuman institutions like slavery but was also characterized by his own cultural metamorphosis. Since a current allows forming and deforming, shaping and reshaping, blending and segregating, and also moulding and adapting amass, the things are bound to transform in the process. The socio- artistic history of Black authorship presents a paragon of such constructive, as well as deconstructive synthesis. The cult of African American authorship is considered as a sub stream of American mainstream. It might have sprouted in a definite region, but has universal appeal that consists in its involvement with the fundamental instinct of emotional and ideological protest against the negation of human dignity. Its representation of a black man's attempt to search for their roots constitutes the idea of 'homeland'. It is inherent in their endeavours to recuperate history and regain lost cultural heritage. But where is the forgotten and forlorn Homeland?

Claude Mc Kay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) introduces one of these familiar themes in Black fiction. It evinces a desire to discover or return to one's home. As in the case of Afro-Americans, the difficulty of feeling at home in America combined with an ignorance of the historical home of one's people, adds agony to the sense of loss and disorientation. Different Black characters react to this quirky situation differently, but most of the time, when they search for home their experience is peculiarly chaotic

and terrifying. McKay's trilogy *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo*, and *Banana Bottom* constitute a direct and serious confrontation with this issue.

The act of going home ought ordinarily to be an act of rediscovery, but the paradox is that, in black fiction, going home becomes an effort at escape from a cycle of punishment, the idea of home itself being unknown and utopian. (Roger Rosenblatt, 90)

Another well-known Harlem writer Countee Cullen also chooses the setting of Harlem for his novel *One Way to Heaven* (1932). He shows a new and different aspect of Harlem life. Contrary to McKay's cabaret, pool rooms, gambling houses, prostitution houses and amusement basements that meant to serve as specimen of primitivism and exoticism of the Negro culture, Cullen's Harlem is the world of sophisticated intelligentsia and respectable Church going common folk. He concentrates on the theme of Negro Church and the intellectual world of Harlem and demonstrates that the sex and animalistic instincts are not the only aspects of Negro Harlem life. Its chief characters, Sam Lucus and Constantia Brandon become the spokespersons of these two different streams of Harlem world namely religious and intellectual nerves of Harlem throbbing. Harlem section of New York turns into a newly discovered 'homeland' for a black American who in his second wave of uprooting migrate from sothern plantations to northern ghettos. It offers him not only an ever sought liberation from the slavery and oppression of plantation life but also a sense of belonging, freedom for socio-political activities and cultural practices. A black man celebrates the overcrowded ghetto in a corner of a metropolitan city for acquiring at least a space for setting his new homeland. But with the passing of the time his idea of homeland becomes more and more disillusioning. His cultural identity becomes more and more complex and he finds himself sailing in the two boats. In the words of Du Bois, a black man in America questions:

What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and white America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? (Du Bois, 195)

In his perusal of Americanness in him he gradually becomes aware of modern man and anxieties and depression of an industrialised world. Amidst such socio-political milieu a black man reconsiders his utopian image of northern industrial America that had promised freedom and an aperture for the realisation of American dream at the point of his emancipation. His dilemma consists in whether he lives in a corner of America or he is an integral part of America whom he considers as his new home after being uprooted long time back. He has travelled long passing through much historical and political tribulation to be finally acknowledged as a citizen of America but still he is the subject of discrimination and psychological segregation in America society. Although he has indiscriminately internalised the American virtues as well as vices during his long stay in this country yet feels discontent and

troubled. After so long a period where does he find himself? Is he at home or somewhere wandering in a foreign land? The protagonist of Wright's novel *The Outsider* Cross Damon exhibits the same detachment. He is a black postal clerk in Chicago. He finds himself an outsider in the American society despite having embraced all the vices of American culture. He has indistinctly identified himself with the unscrupulous American soul, yet remains at the margin of social periphery. As, his friend Joe remarks, "Somebody said that Cross was trying to imitate the United States' Government. They said the trouble with Cross was his four A's. *Alcohol, Abortions, Automobiles and Alimony.*" (Wright, 371). Wright's black protagonist is a modern man of renewed sensibilities. He cannot celebrate an illusory existence. He is socially, politically, economically, culturally more aware and reactionary. Instead of deceiving his rebellious instinct he prefers to revise his conception of 'self', nation, identity, history, culture, country and homeland. By virtue of being a modern man of 20th century America he questions the contradictory notions of his being declared as insider as well as outsider.

When a black man fails to connect with the rest of the populace of his country how can he harp on his being discovered a new home in America and presume being all happy there? Big Northern American cities like New York and Chicago no more offer him the feeling of home. Cross's predicament reveals how isolated a man is in the jungle of complex relationships. Hence, at the very outset, the author sets, placing the protagonist at pivot, the emotional, moral and social complications of interpersonal alliance. The modern man inevitably confronts it in the modernity of a monotonous, depressive, anxiety ridden, unethical, and valueless world. The subway accident in which the lumped corpse of other Negro boy of his age and built mistaken as Cross's, provides him a rich opportunity to escape from his present deadlock. He aspires to animate a new being out of his own outwardly physical, legal and moral death. But, invention of an altogether new life is a challenging task. It necessitates binary movement, backward and forward, simultaneously, along with, quite paradoxically, remaining static and scaling stability in relation to the present. What Wright allegorically signifies through the incident is that the Afro-American quest for assuming a new identity in American context has also been the same three dimensional ordeals. Being uprooted, they needed to build a new past, restructuring their folk traditions, myths and legends in the form of an exquisite black culture, on the other hand, the invisible future is to be trod with their ongoing socio-political struggle for the exploration of new imports. The prerequisites of 'new past' are always agonizing. It compels the subject to quench his innate nostalgia forever as Cross meditates,

He must sever all ties of memory and sentimentality, blot out, above all, the insidious tug of longing. Only the future must loom before him so magnetically that it could condition his present and give him those hours and days out of which he could build a new past. (Wright, 460)

When a black man reconstructs his past and tries to recuperate history he confronts the idea of his lost homeland Africa. The image of primitive Africa serves as an immortal imaginary homeland that still exists on

some part of the globe to recognise and accept his blackness which a racially prejudiced society could not do in centuries. But how practical their thought is? As in Wright's another novel 14 years *Fishbelly* and his playmates in their growing sensibilities discuss the idea of Africa as their lost home and rationality and practicality of this idea. The Afro-American process of weeding oneself out and planting in alien soil was equally traumatic as of Cross in the context of assuming a new identity to run away his life problems. He fails since there never existed any practical way 'back to Africa' as had been claimed by Garvey. In metaphorical way, Wright depicts that African Americans are bound to assume new identity in relation to the white world in America itself. Their adventure might prove thrilling and, indubitably, demanding but they need to search their identity in the American context. One cannot exist in vacuum. Past, present and future all the three contribute to shape one's existence. Africa can neither politically nor culturally embrace an American black as its native citizen. Wright's prudent and practical conclusion is more realized in his literary disciple James Baldwin in his novel *Another Country*. Baldwin's black protagonist Rufus committed suicide jumping from the Washington Bridge in his frustration yet the novel ends with his homosexual white partner Eric waiting for his lover Yves coming from Paris. He gives a different picture of cosmopolitan America that contains all possibilities of turning into a homeland for various cultures. Love transcends racial, sexual and national boundaries. Perhaps such love, true in nature and exalted in spirit, is able to outstrip all the petty notions involved in egoistic and arbitrary definition of one's separate identity. On account of the emotional force of love Yves is able to envision a heavenly 'another country' in America. It realizes Baldwin's belief in transformation, a possibility to make over, and a note of optimism.

Yves looked up joyously, and waved, unable to say anything. *Eric*. And all his fear left him, he was certain, now, that everything would be all right... He strode through the barriers, more high hearted than he had even been as a child, into that city which the people from heaven had made their home. (Baldwin, 338- 339)

The visualization of homeland in African American authorship becomes abstruse, amalgamated and even innovated. It is an image that evokes belongingness, security, nostalgia, association, and a series of unregimented remembrance. So black fiction delineates a spatial discourse in which an African American confronts many troubling questions in his search for 'homeland'. It includes many issues and leads to construction and re construction of the idea of 'homeland' in African American writing. They question whether their native world exists as a piece of land remote in time and place or it is to be constructed out of fragmented memories in the new land itself? As Baker quotes Wright who in the first section of *12 Million BlackVoices* "Our Strange Birth" states:

We million of black folks who live in this land were born into Western civilization of a weird and paradoxical birth. The lean, tall, blond men of England, Holland, and Denmark, the dark, short, nervous men of France, Spain, and Portugal, men whose blue and gray and brown eyes glinted with the light of future, denied our human personalities, tore us

from our native soil, weighted our legs with chains, stacked us like cord-wood in the foul holes of clipper ships, dragged us across thousands of miles of ocean, and hurled us into another land, strange and hostile, where for a second time we felt the slow, painful process of a new birth amid conditions harsh and raw. (quoted by Baker on Pg 203)

A black man was forcefully displaced from his homeland Africa. But it was a historical event that no more bear the same significance in the present national and cultural realities. An African American stands between these two worlds the real America and a dreamy vision of lost Africa. There exists a long stretch of temporal and spatial distance between him and his mental constructions. How does their imaginary homeland stand in the relation to altered face of the globe? Is it primitive Africa of their imagination bequeathed by their ancestors or the new decolonized country which emerges as a liberated political force on the world map? In the course of development homeland remains no more distant but is looked for in the new cultural space acquired by them in America itself. The temporal-spatial discourse assumes varied forms and multi dimensional shape in the African American authorship. It portrays the individual suffering of an uprooted immigrant concurrently evoking collective consciousness of an ethnic group. It moves from regional geographical images to outstretched philanthropic perceptions with the growing sensibilities of a black man who has changed from Negro to mulatto to quadroon and octoroon with the advancement of time. It paves the way for his conception of homeland further being reconstructed in the context of the globalised world where the superficial boundaries of class, creed, race and gender are gradually melting away. Such developments are evinced by Samuel R. Delany in his fictional works which fit in the genre of science fiction. Delany elaborates on the projection of such new world which is no more in the position to boast of pure racial, gender, cultural or national identities. In such world homeland does not exist in global but cosmic context.

Reviewing Delany's works is equivalent to embarking on an expedition to distant and bizarre planets, situated somewhere amidst mysterious constellation. His diptych novel entitled *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), is set in the interstellar context. The plot of his novel pegs its two central figures namely, Marq Dyeth and Rat Korga into future world. They belong to two different planets namely Velm and Rhyonon, which are located in the extraterrestrial sphere. Both the worlds have their own peculiar features, systems and arrangements. Rhyonon destroys itself by its self-generated cultural chaos that can be interpreted in terms of socio-economic pressure and technological perturbation. Rat remains the sole survivor of this utterly destroyed world. But, before demolition, he undergoes a procedure that is dubbed as 'Radical Anxiety Termination' (RAT), which involves jamming the same synapses used to connect the mind with GI, i.e., General Information, a system allowing practical instantaneous mental access to all available data. GI is invented by an organisation the Web, whose personnel are known as spiders. It is the Web, which instigates the meeting between Dyeth and Korga. Dyeth

is an industrial diplomat, a man of learning, privilege and sophistication - a kind of aristocrat. His planet, Velm, is far more progressive than Rhyonon and practises bureaucratic anarchy which is socialism bearing the marks of capitalism too. Eventually, Dyeth and Korga turn out to be each other's perfect erotic object. The novel is unique in its futuristic orientation and evinces the progressive element of African American authorship. Rat an emigrant from Rhyonon finds space and his perfect counterpart Marq on a new planet Velm which is scientifically, socially and culturally more advanced than his lost world and they turn into perfect erotic objects for each other. A lost soul finds place on a new planet making the world of his counterpart his new 'homeland'. The idea of homeland is widely conceived in African American writing not only as a geographical region but as a mental construction that ranges from actual to virtual, to imagined and re-imagined, and from past and present to the futuristic spaces. It is interestingly evolved and much variedly portrayed in African American authorship in local, global and even cosmos spaces.

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