

## Romantic Elements in Claude McKay's Poetry

**Dr. S.T.Waghmode**

Associate Professor,  
Department of English,  
P. V .P. Mahavidyalaya,  
Kavathe Mahankal,  
Dist sangli,  
Maharashtra, India.  
&

**Mr. Somnath Kisan Khatal**

Editor,  
Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal,  
ISSN2249-9598.

### Introduction

Emergence of the 'New Negro' is the special feature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century American Literature. In the second decade, all the African-Americans, who had gathered together in the name of race and colour in Harlem, a part of New York City, had just started expressing themselves in words and actions. Having been suffocated for centuries, under the over-dominance of racial whites, these culturally awakened writers had, for the first-time, the golden chance for self-expression. 'The Negro was in vogue,' (1940:288) to use the words of a noted African-American poet Langston Hughes.

Among those who wrote in this period were a few noted persons like Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Margaret Walker, Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson. This paper focuses on some of the aspects of Claude McKay's poetry.

### Methodology and Area of the study

Although Claude McKay has written novels, short-stories, autobiography, essays and poetry, this paper studies most of his poems published in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *the selected poems of Claude McKay* (1953) edited by Max Eastman with the purpose of finding out some romantic aspects of his poems. The romantic theory has been used while analyzing and interpreting his poetry.

The method used in this research article is what Mr. Austin Warren suggested in *Theory of Literature*- 'understanding poetry passes readily into judging poetry, only judging it in detail and judging while analyzing instead of making the judgment a pronouncement in the final paragraph.' (1978:250)

### Analysis, Interpretation and Observations

Claude McKay was born and brought up among the Clarendon Hills, in Sunny Ville- in Jamaica, West Indies. In his village, he had the perfect freedom to play, read and think, During his formative period- his school days which he spent with his elder brother who had been for some time a school teacher, he had read much of Byron, Blake, Milton, Poe, Dante, Goethe, Baudelaire and Shakespeare-the writers who had moulded his poetic sensibility. Very early in his life he had started imitating them. One reminds S. T. Coleridge's remark, 'we unconsciously imitate those whom we love.' (1989:27)

We have 'the first great lyric genius that his race [has] produced' (1953:7) who sang of Nature in his poem *Suki River* :

Thou Sweet voiced stream that first gave me drink  
 Watched over me when I floated on thy breast;  
 What black faced boy now gambles on thy brink,  
 Or finds beneath thy rocks a place of rest?

What naked lad doth linger long by thee,

Or heed the pea-dove in the wild fig-tree. (1953:17)

His untainted love for his birth-place is seen in these lines. This is the memory of his happy childhood which he had spent on the banks of the Suki River. While writing about diaspora, Uma Parameswaran refers to Wilson Harris who rightly said that 'memory is the cornerstone of identity'. (2007:320) McKay's childhood is still alive in his Nature-poems.

The memory of his childhood ..... 'The sacred moments when he played/ All innocent of passions, uncorrupt' (1953:13) in the lap of Clarendon Hills and on the banks of the river keeps him ever sensitive to his past. So he has some promises to keep:

I shall love you ever  
 Dearest Suki River:  
 Dash against my broken heart,  
 Nevermore from you I will part. (1953:17)

He writes in *To Clarendon Hills and H.A.H.*

Loved Clarendon Hills  
 Dear Clarendon Hills  
 Oh! I feel de chills  
 Yes, I feel de chills.  
 Coursin' t'rough me frame  
 When I call your name,  
 Still my love's for you  
 Ever ever true  
 Though I wander far,  
 Weary wander far. (1912:106)

How forcefully he feels the past while remembering his Clarendon Hills!

Here are some lines carved on his soul- in the poem *My Native Land, My Home*:

Dere is no land dat can compare  
 Wid you where'er I roam  
 In all de wul' none like you fair,  
 My native land, My home.

His unconditional love for his land is seen in the following lines:

Though you may cas' me from your breas'  
 An' trample me to deat'  
 My heart will trus' you none the less,  
 My land I won't forget (1912:84)

The Jamaican black-dialect and slang don't interfere with our understanding of his love for his homeland.

McKay's love for all natural objects and animals is extraordinary. He has captured not only the 'lazily moving time' but also the movements of some of the birds and animals like 'crickets', 'lizards', and 'humming birds' in *North and South*:

There by the banks of blue and Silver streams  
 Grass-Sheltered crickets chirp incessant song,  
 Gay colored lizards loll all through the day,  
 Their tongues outstretched for careless little flies

A breath of idleness is in the air  
 That casts a subtle spell upon all things,  
 And love and mating time are everywhere.

The fluttering humming-bird darts through the trees,  
 And dips his long beak in the big bell-flowers.  
 The sea beats softly on the emerald strands-  
 O sweet for quiet dreams are tropic lands. (1953:20)

Definitely, there is a Keatsian beauty in the above stanzas. His memory still lingers on in *A Dream*:

A winding footpath down the woodland leads,  
 And through the tall fox-tails I wend my way  
 Down to the brooklet where the pea-dove feeds,  
 And bucktoes' in the water are at play.

And watching as the bubbles rise and fall,  
 I hear above the murmur of the dale  
 The tropic music dear to great and small,  
 The joyous outburst of the nightingale. (1912:96-97)

His poetry is not only of eye, but of ear. It paints the graphic reality of the beautiful Clarendon Hills.

He couldn't live there in his youth and adult life. Unfortunately, he had to migrate to distant places and cities- in the name of education and job. However, his Jamaica's-Nature followed him wherever he went. It speaks through his mouth in *Home Thoughts*:

O something just now must be happening there!

Amid the city's noises, I must think  
 Of mangoes leaning to the river brink,  
 And dexterous Davie climbing high above,  
 The gold-fruits, ebon-speckled to remove  
 And toss them quickly in the tangled mass  
 Of wis-wis twisted round the guinea grass.  
 And Cyril coming through the bramble-track  
 A prize bunch of banana on his back;

And Gorgie-none could ever dive like him –  
 Throwing his scanty clothes off for a swim;  
 And school boys, from Bridge tunnel going home,  
 Watching the waters downward dash and foam.  
 This is no day time dream, there's something in it,  
 O something's happening there this very minute! (1953:21)

He has delineated the natural beauty of Jamaica with so simple words. This poem is as good as Wordsworth's sonnet 'Upon the Westminster Bridge' as far as the natural images are concerned. Moreover, it is more attractive than the sonnet because the images are down to earth natural.

A well known critic Addison Gayle, Jr., has aptly remarked:  
 Jamaica was to McKay what Tintern Abbey was to Wordsworth,  
 Chicago to Carl Sandburg, the Southland to Jean Toomer and Harlem  
 to Langston Hughes- a reservoir for the spirit- filled to over powering  
 with hours of happiness.(1972:22)

'An increasing interest in Nature and in the natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life', (1998:769) is one of the dominant aspects of romanticism. Almost all romantic poets have realized this delight in Nature. McKay also took delight in singing of *Morning Joy* that comes after the cold-wind-night.

At dawn, behold! the pall of night was gone  
 Save where a few shrubs melancholy, alone  
 Detained a fragile shadow.  
 And the following beautiful lines flow from his pen:  
 The sun rose smiling by the river's breast,  
 And my soul, by his happy spirit blest,  
 Soared like a bird to greet him in the sky,  
 And drew out of his heart eternity. (1953:70)

The sad night fades away with darkness, giving place to the light of eternity. McKay is a poet of positive capability and sensitivity in the above poem. The comparisons, the personifications, the metaphors and the similes all are appropriate and there is no scope for artificiality and excessive exaggeration.

Once in New York, McKay saw some finely displayed fruits in the window of a fruit-shop

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

Immediately he became restless with the memory of his native place. He says in *The Tropics in New York* :

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. (1953:31)

A rare example of nostalgic mood it is! We know Wordsworth whose heart leaps up when he sees a rainbow in the sky; or his heart starts dancing with the daffodils which he recreates with his imagination in solitude. But here we have McKay who weeps for the loss of the sheer sight of his loved land and its mellowed fruits. It is, of course, a spontaneous response and there is not a stress of pretended gesture.

Some poets universalize their feelings. Sometimes, the sincere individual consciousness melts into the wider cosmos of the collective consciousness. Sometimes, some plants and flowers are made immortal in literature. e.g., 'daffodils' in Wordsworth, 'Casuarina Tree' in Toru Dutt, 'The Banyan Tree' in Dilip Chitre and the like. McKay has made 'Spanish Needle' plant popular with his feelings for it. The dividing curtain between the animate and inanimate things soon vanishes, and the poet's passionate communication begins in *Spanish Needle* in the following way :

Lovely dainty Spanish Needle  
 With your yellow flower and white  
 Dew-bedreched and soft sleeping,  
 Do you think of me tonight?

Do you see me by the brookside,  
 Catching crabs beneath the stone?  
 As you did the day you whispered:  
 Leave the harmless dears alone?

Do you see me in the meadow,  
 Coming from the woodland spring,  
 With a bamboo on my shoulder  
 And a pail slung from a string?

Lovely dainty Spanish Needle,  
 Source to me of sweet delight,  
 In your far-off sunny Southland  
 Do you dream of me tonight? (1953:24)

Although he had much travelled in the realms of the world, his heart grieves much for the loss of his favourite place and plants.

J. A. Cuddon is of the opinion that there is 'an affirmation of the need for a freer, more subjective expression of passion, pathos and personal feelings' in romantic poetry. (1998:771) He paints his love for his mother in *December, 1919*:

Last night, I heard your voice, mother,  
 The words you sang to me  
 When I, a little bare foot boy,  
 Knelt down against your knee.

'Tis ten years since you died, mother  
 Just ten dark years of pain,  
 And oh, I only wish that I  
 Could weep just again. (1953:23)

A sense of loss engulfs him. He realizes that all the other activities in Nature, as usual, are performed without any change in them. He writes in *My Mother*:

The older people are at their peaceful toil

Over the earth where mortals sow and reap –  
Beneath its breast my mother lies asleep. (1953:22)

He finds himself in the fleeting moods. A sense of loss is subdued by the sense of belonging to the soil where he was born. It is a kind of rootedness.

With his uncommon imaginative sensibility he speaks to the Moon that shines in the sky in the poem *The Moon*:

Go spill your beauty on the laughing faces  
Of happy flowers that bloom a thousand hues,  
Waiting on tiptoe in the windy spaces,  
To drink your wine mixed with sweet draughts of dews. (1953:69)

There is a marvellous personification in the above stanza. Look at the following desire of the poet in his poem *Thirst*:

My spirit wails for water, water now!  
My tongue is aching dry, my throat is hot  
For water, fresh rain shaken from a bough,  
Or dawn dew heavy in some leafy spot.

Pure water from a forest fountain first,  
To wash me, cleanse me, and to quench my thirst! (1953:109)

For him, his native land is both incitory as well as cathartic. His native water has a healing power. It has a kind of cathartic effect on his soul. The above lines express his deep attachment with his native soil. His alienated soul longs for the visit to his native place.

Raman Shelden opines that, 'alienation, like Sin, is a foundation for good works'. (1988:443) Even Malcolm Bradbury says that, '.. We can take alienation as a force from outside, driving the writer away and into exile; or we can regard it as something internal and structural to the artistic condition in particular individuals or in artists. (1988:454) McKay's 'self exiled' situation was a blessing in disguise for him. His sonnet *I shall Return* is a monument of paramount beauty in words about his homeland Jamaica:

I shall return again. I shall return  
To laugh and love and watch with wonder eyes  
At golden noon the forest fires burn,  
Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies.

I shall return to loiter by the streams  
That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses,  
And realize once more my thousand dreams  
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.

I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife  
 Of village dances, dear delicious tunes  
 That stir the hidden depths of native life,  
 Stray melodies of dim-remembered runes. (1953:32)

P. B. Shelley's definition of poetry- 'poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.' (1962:251) properly suits to McKay.

As a true lover of Nature, in his poems, he has painted many natural things that he had seen in his Jamaican environment. One feels the pulse of William Cowper-who summed up his understanding: 'God made the country and man made the town' (1989:256) while reading McKay's Nature-poems. Although he visited America, England, France, Russia, and Morocco, the din of city had not truly entered into his consciousness. His 'peasant-heart' always sympathized with the labourers. In the *Tired Worker* the hard worker says:

The wretched day was theirs, the night is mine;  
 Come tender sleep, and fold me to thy breast.  
 The worker requests the dawn:  
 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. (1953:79)

He had a firm belief that the city takes away from any person the vital part of human life. So he writes:

I will not toy with it not bend an inch  
 Deep in the secret chambers of my heart  
 I muse my lifelong hate, and without flinch  
 I bear it nobly as I live my part. (1953:74)

In *When Dawn Come to the City* he says :

The tired cars go grumbling by,  
 The moaning, groaning cars,  
  
 Under the same dull stars.  
 Out of the tenements, cold as stone,  
 Dark figures start for work;  
 I watch them sadly shuffle on,  
 'Tis dawn, dawn in New York. (1953:62)

He always preferred the countryside life to the city life. His heart was there in the Hills-where the 'cocks are crowing; the hens are cackling; the old horse is neighing; the tethered cow is lowing; the old Ned is braying, and the shaggy Nanny goat is calling.' (1953:63)

### Conclusion:

To conclude, no other African-American poet is as deeply rooted in his soil with all his sensibility and consciousness and with autobiographical persona or self as

Claude McKay is in American poetry. He had an exceptional thirst and hunger for his naïve life, and he always longed for their satisfaction.

Some remarks must be made about his poetic diction. We do not find 'over styled poetic diction' in him. Again, nowhere he is seen hopelessly and labouriously grappling, like Matthew Arnold does in his lengthy elegies, for the proper words. His choice for the sonorous and singing words is supreme. The felicity of diction is amazing. One wonders with his abrupt and marvellous sonnet-ending. He has a mastery over the fixed rhyming composition- i.e. the sonnet form. Most of his sonnets are the best poems. His Nature-poetry is the unique contribution in the Jamaican poetry. His almost all Nature-poems are without any tinge of morbid philosophy. Unlike Wordsworth, he never could hear, 'the still, sad music of humanity' in Nature. His poetry is not over-shadowed by the philosophic tones.

All of his poems are short and sweet, unlike the 'uncontrolled and lengthy poems' of Shelley and Byron, though they are the best romantics. Like Byron, he too, 'loved not the man less, but Nature more!' and looked beyond the polished life of educated men in cities to the wider and cruder ways of living. Although he is a modern poet, he is not unnecessarily complex and complicated. Nowhere his 'untamed imagination' looms large. He has an extraordinary control over his simple words and expression. Therefore, one always finds his poetry readable and simply enjoyable. In brief, his poetry is romantic, rich in native tunes and local colours; and with the Jamaican peasant sensibility.

### Works Cited

- Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. England: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Eastman, Max. *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1953.
- Enright D. J. and Chickera Ernest De. *English Critical Text*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Gayle, Addison, Jr. *Claude McKay: The Black Poet at War*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. New York: Hall and Wang, 1940.
- Legouis, Emile. *A Short History of English Literature*. Trans. V. F. Boyson and J. Coulson, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- McKay, Claude. *Songs of Jamaica*. New York: Fisk University Library Negro Collection, 1912.
- Parameswaran, Uma. *Writing the Diaspora*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2007.
- Shelden, Raman. *The Theory of Criticism*. New York: Langman Group UK Limited, 1989.
- Wellek, Rene and Warren, Ausitn. *Theory of Literature*. New York: Penguin Books, 1978.