

‘Creativity in the Face of Despair’ in John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent for You Yesterday*.

Dr. S. Geetha,
Former Head and Associate Professor,
The Research Centre,
Fatima College,
Madurai – 16.

Evangeline Sweetey,
Research Scholar,
Fatima College,
Madurai – 16.

Abstract:

*African Americans suffered a long period of socio-economic exploitation and psychological trauma at the hands of the white ruling class which established its hegemony by erasing their culture. When they were forcefully dislodged from Africa, they were deprived of their language, symbols, beliefs, traditions, religion, and institutions which were once a part and parcel of their lives. The long travail of African Americans reveal that they were subordinated by the white dominant class through a set of attitudes, beliefs and values validated by them as the dominant ideology. Snatched from their homelands, they were packed and transported in ships as human cargo living with their own excreta. As though enduring the horrendous Middle Passage was not enough, these Africans were sold as cattle on auction blocks in the New World. They had to serve the needs of the white capitalist masters and eventually became victims of racism that was born out of slavery. Music, which had been a powerful medium for the African Americans, transformed their everyday experiences, their pent up agony and frustration into something less formidable. John Edgar Wideman is a contemporary African American writer whose works focus on the deterioration of the urban environment. In his novel, *Sent for You Yesterday* which won the 1984 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, Wideman asserts that creativity and imagination are important means to transcend despair in black urban communities.*

Key words: African American history, African American music, blues, John Edgar Wideman, Sent for You Yesterday.

In their well-known book *German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels held that:

...the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling
ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of

society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.

(Marx and Engels 67)

African Americans suffered a long period of socio-economic exploitation and psychological trauma at the hands of the white ruling class which established its hegemony by erasing their culture. When they were forcefully dislodged from Africa, they were deprived of their language, symbols, beliefs, traditions, religion, and institutions which were once a part and parcel of their lives. The long travail of African Americans reveal that they were subordinated by the white dominant class through a set of attitudes, beliefs and values validated by them as the dominant ideology. The white man could view the world only in contesting binaries. Elaborating on this western dualism, novelist Charles Johnson explains it in his *Middle Passage*:

Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind: Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other – these ancient twins are built into mind like a stem-piece of merchantman...They are signs of a transcendental fault, a deep crack in consciousness itself. (98)

The popular critic Arendt Flick, talks of racism and slavery in particular that they have risen from “ a deep fissure that characterizes Western thought in general, our tendency to split the world into competing categories: matter and spirit, subject and object, good and evil, black and white.” (153). As a consequence, the black man’s notion of his own self got completely eroded by mere gaze of the Americans. The African Americans developed a peculiar sensibility what DuBois calls the “double consciousness”:

They developed ways of looking at one’s self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (3)

Snatched from their homelands, they were packed and transported in ships as human cargo living with their own excreta. As though enduring the horrendous Middle Passage was not enough, these Africans were sold as cattle on auction blocks in the New

World. In due course of time, families were separated- mother from her children, husband from his wife and so on and were made to toil under the cruel white masters who treated them as mere robots and reduced to inhuman levels. They had to serve the needs of the white capitalist masters and eventually became victims of racism that was born out of slavery. The whites were bent upon beating their cultures and languages out of them as they feared their congregation would lead to slave mutinies and insurrections. The conniving whites knew that if the culture of a group of people is destroyed, then in due course of time you could also destroy them.

All that they were left with in America were memories of their oral tradition, the folk tales, and songs. Such were the black oral forms or the vernacular which informed the literature of the African Americans since the nineteenth century. The Africans had also carried their rich musical heritage along with them to the New World as life and work in Africa was accompanied by music. Every task they did in Africa was done with the company of music or by singing. While being slaves in the southern plantations, they used loud hollers, field shouts or work songs to communicate messages with one another across long distances and were responded to by a chorus. This is what is known as the “call and response”. Spirituals were another form of music where the African slaves blended concepts of Christianity with their musical aspects to mold a new form that expressed their political as well as spiritual needs. Such songs had coded signals for freedom:

He delivered Daniel from de lion's den,
Jonah from de belly ob de whale,
And the Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,
And why not every man? (Allen 148)

Franklin Rosemont notes in his preface to Paul Garron's seminal text on Black music:

The sublimative energies that in different conditions would doubtless have gone into writing, leashing, sculpture, etc. were necessarily concentrated in the naked word and the naked gesture--in the field hollers, work-songs, and their accompanying rhythmic movements--in which gestated the embryo that would eventually emerge as the blues. Black music developed out of, and later side by side with, this vigorous oral poetry combined with dancing, both

nourished in the tropical tempest of black magic and the overwhelming desire for freedom. The extreme repressive context of its origins, and its consequent subsumption into itself of the whole gamut of creative impulses, together give the blues its unique intensity and distinctive poetic resonance.

(Rosemunt 7)

The slaves who were forbidden to read or write or even use drums as these were seen as tools of insurrection by the white masters, resorted to such creative displays of music. Such a creative expression not only provided excitement in an otherwise unbearable situation but were also often coded as it used masked language to exchange their inner thoughts that they didn't want their masters to comprehend. Such oblique references form the basis of the blues and influenced the twentieth century black writing with its distinctiveness.

Everything that African American musicians created or innovated was borrowed and popularized by the white American musicians as their own. West African ideas of pitch and rhythm encountered both repression and appreciation when it entered the New world and emerged transformed in a family of sounds –blues, jazz, rock, gospel etc. Black music is the foundation for the American popular musical culture which is an amalgam of the traditions of Africa, Europe and the Americas. There can be no American music without its African American influences which were so fundamental to its creation. Music which had been a powerful medium for the African Americans, transformed their everyday experiences, their pent up agony and frustration into something less formidable. It had the power to express the ever festering racial problems in an artistic way. Just as the African American culture evolved over the years, so did their music too which documented the dynamic nature of black cultural identity. There have been various musical genres in the African American musical tradition and each genre mirrored a specific social or historical context.

John Edgar Wideman is a contemporary African American writer whose works focus on the deterioration of the urban environment and how it adversely affects the African American ghettos. The critically acclaimed writer who has won two PEN/ Faulkner Awards, a MacArthur grant and many other regional recognitions involves in an in-depth analysis of racism in his works and tries to offer decisive solutions to overcome it. Throughout his oeuvre, he has been able to provide insight into broad, societal issues

and personal concerns while retaining a literary mastery over his material. In his novel, *Sent for You Yesterday* which won the 1984 PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, Wideman asserts that creativity and imagination are important means to transcend despair in black urban communities.

African Americans were under the grinding pressure of slavery from the seventeenth century until the end of the Civil War, and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Though slave trade was abolished in 1865 with the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S Constitution, the postbellum period could not bring to reality the much anticipated freedom, equality and opportunity for the blacks. Disenfranchisement, lynchings, segregated schools and colleges, random violence and systematic oppression became very common. During the 'Great Migration', Ex-slaves in the south who lived in servitude started fleeing to industrial north to escape violence and to serve its needs of cheap labor which promised their supposed new freedoms.

As a result of Depression during which the economy plummeted, Harlem could no longer be the comfortable home for the African Americans. Streets were overcrowded, houses rat infested, and unemployment and poverty haunted the black's survival. They felt more alienated and disturbed in the destructiveness of ghetto life as they suffered at the hands of social and economic racism. Such changes were reflected in country blues such as "Eisenhower Blues" by J.B Lenoir and "Ain't Times Hard" by Floyd Jones. Even after the Second World War, even after losing life and limb in war, the conditions remained the same and African Americans were astonished and angry at the same time as American society still relegated them to second-class citizenship. Such times witnessed the development of urban blues which were more aggressive with a more vibrant beat that matched the faster pace of city life and lyrics that spoke of the concerns of their urban listeners. During the 1960s, their fury fueled up as they sang, marched, picketed, rioted and died for freedoms that was yet not granted to them. The new 'Black Nationalism' which arose challenged the assimilationist beliefs as African American artists and intellectuals took to streets to voice out concerns of the people. During such times, songs of hard times, loneliness and heartbreak could be heard sung by the developers of urban blues such as Otis Rush, Freddy King and Jimmy Dawkins. Thus, throughout their painful history African Americans resorted to creativity either in literature, or music or sculpture or painting which established their otherwise repressed feelings and at the same time eased them through sufferings.

Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday*, presents two characters namely Albert Wilkes and Brother Tate who avow that creativity and imagination can be the only means to

surpass the excruciating urban realities and its underlying racism. Music, the leitmotif which runs throughout the novel is ascribed with a transcendent value which safeguards them from the pressures of urban American life. Images of poverty are embedded within the novel. The narrator describes the street- Cassina Way which accommodated the migrated mass from south where his grandparents- Freeda and John French resided:

Rows of wooden shanties built to hold the flood of black migrants up from South. Teeming is the word I think of. A narrow, cobbled alley *teeming* with life.... And the city around them which defined and delimited, which threatened but also buoyed and ferried them to whatever unknown destination, this city which trapped and saved them, for better or worse, never quite breached Cassina's walls.

(Wideman 20-21)

Such a crowded place is isolated from the city. The men of the ghetto loiter and drink away their time in McKinley's bar as none of them find a respectable job. Blacks were given only menial jobs as cleaning the spittoons at bars or setting up barber shops. John French is an expert wallpaper hanger. But he rarely is picked up by the whites for such a job for which he gets up early and waits all day to be hired. He looks at his "brogans which were spattered with every kind of work John French had ever done. Paste and paint and mud and plaster. They didn't have a color anymore. He wondered if they ever did, because he couldn't remember what it was if it ever was." (Wideman 62). John French who loved his wife Freeda and daughter Lizabeth feels dejected and alienated as he is unable to find proper means to support them. Moreover, his job has given him a terrible back pain and he is bent over "like he's picking cotton and got a two-hundred-pound sack slung cross his back." (Wideman 62). His close friend Albert Wilkes, the foster child of Mr. and Mrs. Tate tells him about the picture of the rack that he had seen in his white woman's book: "They [Whites] got us on rack, John French. They gon keep turning till ain't nothing connected where it's supposed to be. Ain't even gon recognize our ownelves in the mirror." (Wideman 62). Wilkes refers to the physical and psychological disintegration of a black man as a result of racism. Time and again, Wideman reminds his readers that the conditions have not improved at all for the African Americans though they have come a long way out of slavery. But Wilkes had a way of lighting up the people of Homewood with the way he played the piano. While the whites

could rip away black identities, Wilkes could encourage those broken selves to see their worth by mirroring their real identities:

Albert wouldn't have to say a word. Be like a mirror in the middle of the floor and you could walk up to him and see what you been missing. When Albert on that piano it was like a mirror anyway.... Music started coming out that you could find yourself, find your face grinning back at you like in a mirror. (Wideman 68)

Music is the artistic expression which evokes the spirit of black America and becomes the fictional motif for the expression of survival instinct. In *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison describes the blues as,

an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (78- 79)

According to Richard H. Rupp, "Ellison finds them (blues) vital and authentic celebration of negro experience" (163). Blacks had a unique way of remaining sane, positive and even comic in grimmest conditions. Albert Wilkes reflected such blues spirit which helped the fragmented men in Homewood realize who they really are. When Wilkes disappears from Homewood for seven years after killing a white man, French exclaims "when Albert stopped playing you could look down at your toes and see that black pit start to open." (Wideman 69). He is however killed by the whites when he returns to Homewood and while he plays his favorite piano at the Tates'.

The other fascinating character who remains largely silent is Brother Tate whose "strange color and silence were part of Homewood" (Wideman 15). He chooses not to speak 'English' and expresses himself instead through variety of sounds like singing scats, drumming, gestures, paintings and by spontaneously playing piano. The very skin tone of his subverts the notion of color. In the words of the narrator:

...Brother had no color.... I was always afraid to see through him, under his skin, because there was no color to stop my eyes, no color which said there's a black man or white man in front of you.
(Wideman 15)

The spirit of Wilkes is seen in Brother as he mysteriously plays the piano exactly like Wilkes at the Elks Club. Brother's supernatural musical performance scares his close friends, Carl and Lucy. Carl observes: "Brother turned it out. All by himself at the piano. The more he played, the better it got [but] I couldn't look over at the bandstand where he was playing...Didn't know what I wanted to see. Cause it wasn't Brother over there."
(Wideman 91).

Brother plays for five more years until the loss of his son, Junebug who also was an albino like his father. After Brother's death, Lucy discovers his drawings of the people of Homewood with wings attached to their shoulders. Brother had understood the transcending power of artistic expression and seems to have denoted it through the image of flight in his painting.

Wideman seems to forge a connection between Albert Wilkes' music and Brother's creative expressions reminding us the novel's epigraph:

Past lives live in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest.

In order to face the myriad struggles of the present which is as grinding as it was in the past, an African American needs to be courageous like his ancestors who could fight their hostile environment by their naturally creative selves.

Works Cited:

- Allen, William Francis, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison, compilers, *Slave Songs of the United States*. New York : Oak Publications, 1965.
- DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1970.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964.
- Flick, Arend. "Stowaway on a Slave Ship to Africa". *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Yearbook 1990*. Vol. 65. Ed. Roger, Matuz. Detroit: Gale, 1991. 152-54.
- Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Scribner, 1990.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *German Ideology*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976.
- Rosemont, Franklin. "Preface." *Blues & the Poetic Spirit*. By Paul Garon. New York: Da Capo P, 1973.
- Rupp, Richard H. *Celebration in Postwar American Fiction 1945-1967*. Florida: University of Miami Press, 1970.
- Wideman, John Edgar. *Sent for You Yesterday*. Boston: Mariner Books, 1983.

