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JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S REUBEN: SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUALITY OF THE PROTAGONIST IN HIS BLACK COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Wideman brought out *Reuben* in 1987, and substantiated his claim he made through his earlier book *Brothers and Keepers* (1984) of his being integrally associated with his black community of Homewood. It was reaffirmation of his association with his roots of the black legacy. And, in this assertion, culminates, to some extent, his relentless search for the self and the family. His protagonists follow through.

Taking up the role as a writer-intellectual loyal to his community, Wideman discovers various ways to explore the nuances of his community in consonance with his whims and fancies. He is no longer over-burdened with the pessimism of the modern society, and is free to tune his black voicing to interpret the problems that the Homewood community faces. In *Reuben*, Wideman constructs a cultural edifice buttressed on the African and Afro-American traditions, and Reuben picks up the opportunity to root himself in the ambit of black experience. The story is fictionalised presentation of the biographical nuances of Reuben's life, in which human ideals and black values play prominent role in pushing him forward to serve the larger interests of the black community.

Key Words- Black, Community, Pessimism, Reuben.

Introduction

Wideman seems to be inspired by the Kongo cosmology created in the book of Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*. In particular the personality of Reuben and the aura created around him appears to be intensely framed on the line of the second chapter, "The Sign of the Four Moments of the Sun Kongo Art and Religion in the Americas", of Thompson's book. Wideman has himself commented on the demeanour of Reuben saying that he is a kind of person who looks for the means and ways to his people. Reuben always finds his own self in the service of his people. As Wideman remarks, he is a " 'kind of a god or spirit' trying to 'hold his community together, prop people up, keep

them going'." ¹ But the statement is more remarkable for the fact that Reuben's role in the betterment of the standard of black life is, in fact, that of an insider. The protagonists of *Hiding Place*, and *Damballah* also had become the integral part of the black society, and they worked for the good of the community. The protagonist of *Sent for You Yesterday* used his skill of music to bring about a constructive change in the life of black community. But, Reuben is the embodiment of the saviour's spirit who invariably works for Homewood, and traces his own self in the black community that resides over there. His unbreakable integration with the Homewood community is similar to that of Albert Wilkes and Brother Tate. But, unlike them, he

is an intellectual, and presents himself alongside Doot. It can also be argued that Reuben is the developed and grown up persona of Doot. It is because Doot disappears in *Sent for You Yesterday* at the end while trying to be an integral part of the black community, and seems to have appeared as Reuben in *Reuben* as insider of the community working for its welfare.

Reuben is a lawyer by profession, and poor fellows of the black community come to him for legal assistance. It is true that the black people do not think that Reuben is an angelic character who has come to save them from their otherwise imminent ruin. But, they certainly believe that Reuben is a great saviour working for the community. For instance, Kwansa Parker, whom Reuben helps in her legal battle against her boyfriend, feels to have been "seeing him her whole life ... [Reuben was] part of Homewood like the A&P's big window, the pillars of the bank, the music pounding from Dorsey's record store, the sweet burnt grease smell floating half a block on either side of Hot Sauce William's rib joint".² The fact of the matter is that Kwansa is entangled in a ferocious legal battle against her boyfriend who tries to get legal custody of their son, and Reuben helps her in her attempt to neutralise his attempt. Reuben uses his trailer as his office to conduct his law practice. Kwansa believes that Reuben's trailer has some extra-terrestrial quality that helps him in his effort to save the poor fellows:

Trailer sits in the vacant lot behind Hamilton over near the school. Wonder is nobody runs him away from there. I mean, you can't just plop no trailer anywheres you wants now. Guess it's too old to bother with. Guess it looks like it's just growing out the ground like the rest of the weeds over there. Now, I ain't never heard nothing but no color. Think it was blue last time I looked. Kinda sickish, peeling, light blue. They say one time under the moon it was blood red. They say it shivered like silver or gold when it stood Saturday afternoons up on Homewood Avenue. Course no police gon bother it. Reuben's the law, ain't he?³

There is another character, Wally Carter, who too is amazed to feel Reuben's personality as an omnipresent saviour of the black community. Carter is a graduate from the University of Pennsylvania and a former player of basketball. Presently, he works as a recruiter of basketball team in a college, but he is psychologically ill. His mind wanders in the realms of abstraction, and he conducts himself quite insensitively. However, Carter has faith in Reuben's abilities as a saviour. He believes that Reuben can give direction to his wandering psyche and can help him re-establish worthy contacts with the world outside the periphery he has closed himself in. Carter meditates upon the lost opportunity when Reuben could have been an indispensable part of his existence. He went to Philadelphia leaving Reuben and his inspiring companionship behind at Homewood. The narrative says:

Wally has memories of those school years that don't make sense without Reuben around. If not Reuben, somebody likes Reuben talking to Wally. Or maybe it was more a matter of missing Reuben, the way you miss your water after the well runs dry. But you got to have the water first, don't you? Like wouldn't he have to know Reuben *before* he could miss him. You had to have a thing at least once or you couldn't miss it, could you? ... When Wally deserted Homewood for college and all that knowledge, he'd left Reuben behind so how could the old man be in both places. He hadn't been. No way ... Wally had never spoken to Reuben till he returned from the university so he couldn't have carried Reuben's conversations to Philadelphia. Couldn't have missed him because he didn't know him yet.⁴

The narrative does not make Wally directly accept that Reuben would have been a great influence on his growing mind, had he lingered his stay in Homewood. But, it certainly reveals one aspect of Reuben's personality that he possesses inspiring, enlightening, and mesmerising spirit, which helps everyone who comes into his contact. And Wally is no exception. Reuben perceives his presence in the entire community of Homewood,

and he identifies himself with the comm. on man of the black community.

Like Doot in *Sent for You yesterday*, Reuben is an intellectual. But Reuben's intellectuality is reflected through its content, whereas Doot creates intellectual myth with the process and method he chooses. Reuben's intellectuality is replete with ideas, while Doot's is perceptive and full of illusion. The primacy of content makes Reuben's intellectuality loaded with well-articulated ideas and the reality of Homewood life. There is no ambivalence in Reuben's conceptuality regarding the realities of black community which define the Homewood vibrancy. But the reality that Doot's intellectuality presents is merely suggestive, and not self-evident.

Reuben has evolved his real self through successive inspirations he receives from diverse corners inhabited by panorama of humanities, and from vignette of art and literature. For instance, he is greatly inspired by the photographs taken by Edward Muybridge, an English-born photographer of nineteenth-century. Reuben tries to interpret the photographs of Muybridge, and concludes that the photographs represent the reality of life to a major extent. Perhaps, words, with all potential they have, may not reflect reality to that extent. As the narrative says, words are "seen as real by weak creatures like [Reuben] who pretended they were authors of the universe".⁵ According to the perception of Muybridge, words do not have power to express reality. Therefore, he preferred photographic camera to express the essence of life, defined through motion, in its frozen state. So, he captured men and animals in various moods and positions using a series of frames. However, Muybridge could not make his camera capture motion and the hidden energy that keeps the life moving. He failed to understand that motion and its visible form, life, are so sacrosanct that they cannot be captured in frozen, stationary state. Moreover, life and the energy that propels it to motion are undefinable entities just as the reality. Muybridge inspires Reuben to comprehend the indefinability of time, the most fundamental and the subtlest ingredient used in the making of universe. The parameters, cause and effect, motion and

mutability, initiation and termination, that science and metaphysics use to define, shape, and formalise a concept or an object, fail to conceptualise time. James Coleman writes:

If reality, life, and time are unknowable, undefinable, then the meaning of existence is an illusion constructed from various fictions about reality, life, and time. But at this point, Reuben dismisses Muybridge and refuses to withdraw from participation in the affairs of the black community. Reuben knows that there is life in the black community, although as an intellectual he believes that he can know only the illusion and not the essence of that life.⁶

The white society has created an illusion of realities for the black people of Homewood, and the community adheres to that illusion. However, the blacks perceive distant possibilities of quality life, and aspire to realise them. Reuben, being a legal luminary, has courage and desire to transform illusion into reality. Propelled by the intensity of the urge, he endeavours to create a counter-illusion in the socio-cultural life of black community through teaching, training, and temerity.

The most prominent aspect of Reuben's personality is that he identifies himself with the black community, and is devoted to its cause. In his initial stage, he believed that reality is nothing but subjective fiction, and nothing is factually real. But, in due course of time, he shifts his position from the state of resignation to the state of realization. Being an intellectual-activist, he evolves a system of values and workable ethos. Through right approaches and well-directed attitude, he prepares himself for desirable actions while retaining his identity as an insider in the black community. Therefore, the fiction that he creates with his personal history helps him in his efforts to gain strength enough to direct his focus and energy towards his community. The utmost important aspect of Reuben's personality is that his activism pertains to the solicitude for positive change in the life-style of the black community. In his endeavour to be an activist, he sheds off the philosophy of resignation that his misconception about the reality that it is a subjective fiction has created. In *Sent for You*

Yesterday, Doot comes to the decision to be an activist at the fag end of the narrative, but Reuben begins his career as a community activist, and the turn of events bring him to realization.

Like Doot, Reuben too is an intellectual-activist. Therefore, he constructs his own edifice of value system. He identifies the ways and approach; he evolves a well-defined attitude, and creates his own myth for the good of the black community. Thus, before taking a plunge into the social work for the good of the community, he prepares himself with a set plan and well- designed road-map. This myth that Reuben creates and the fictions that unfold subsequently give him strength to perform and prove his mettle. He draws inspiration from them to be well-directional and intuitionally-focussed. Reuben develops his myth with such an intensity that it works against the restricting, imprisoning, and enslaving myths created by the white community and imposed from outside on the activists like Reuben, individuals, and the hapless black community. The myth that Reuben creates pushes him forward, and he succeeds in creating illusions of progress, positive change, and public movement within a stipulated period of time. The illusions prove to be extremely conducive, increasingly inspiring, and exceedingly mobilising for the black community, and thus the community moves ahead with a desire to help itself.

In fine, Reuben believes that the black community lives in imagined ghetto or illusory existence that has kept its psyche bound with stagnancy. But he also believes that the impression of impotency carved on the black psyche is the imposed phenomenon caused by the extraneous agency, such as, the domineering white society. And he also believes that the black community has the potential to come out of the imagined shell of illusory existence. He is required to stand erect and give necessary push, and the black community will pick up motion and move:

The black community, and particularly Reuben as the intellectual-activist, must create and live its own sustaining illusions and not those imposed by white society through its debilitating fictions. Sustaining illusions of existence are all that the black

community has, and Reuben's fictions at least prepare him to take the actions in the community that create these illusions.⁷

Thus, Reuben creates another myth and illusory shell for the community, which casts positive impact on the community, and makes it move out of the imagined and restricting shell imposed by the white society. The legal expertise that Reuben possesses helps him create this counter-illusion for the black community. It prevents the community from getting entrapped in the imprisoning illusions created by the white society. In this perspective, Reuben looks at Muybridge's photographs, which represent "illusion of motion".⁸ He considers Muybridge's work similar to that of his own, especially, the legal help he provides to the black community of Homewood. Kwansa's case is only one example taken from a set of such incidents. Involvement of the black individuals in legal proceedings creates a "fiction of motion", as the Muybridge's photographs do. It propels the community towards progress, enthusiasm, and improvement. After assisting Kwansa in her effort to fight for her right, Reuben begins to involve himself in other matters that pertain to the black individuals. It is because of the fact that Reuben realises that his efforts would definitely be instrumental in bringing the entire black community out of the negative illusions that the white society has imposed on them. After her first legal conference, Kwansa leaves Reuben's trailer. But, suddenly Reuben realises that he should call her back to his trailer, and "go over the familiar territory [of her story] until it wasn't familiar anymore, till it was a starting place unlike anyplace either of them had been before. Unless they started fresh they'd be caught up in one fiction or another and that fiction would carry them wherever it was going. And its destination would have nothing to do with where they needed to go."⁹ Of course, he does not call her back but the direction in which his mind is working certainly becomes clear.

Reuben broods over the plan of action he should take, and comes to the conclusion that he should get into the traditional rituals of the black community so as to make him acceptable to the black community. He decides even to "stoop to the

black magic trick" and accomplish his objective. Thus, he begins to construct a myth around his personality. In this course of action, he creates a fiction of African genesis. Taking the help of the story narrated by the "old Dogon sage Ogotemmel" Reuben tries to win a place for himself so that he could take constructive action in "this bad dream of Homewood and lost children and mothers grieving".¹⁰ Reuben creates the myth with the presumption that he understands the strength and direction of time in which the movement would proceed, although he has earlier confessed to himself that the direction of time's movement is always unpredictable, just as the reality and life are undefinable. Reuben studies the chain of events that occur with regular intervals, and strives to create a fiction, but, very soon, he finds himself lost as the famous song "Chain of Fools" created by Aretha Franklin suggests. He loses heart, and becomes pessimistic. He conjectures that his attempt of creating myth may not succeed, and it may happen that he may not be able to come out of the labyrinth of imprisoning illusion designed by the white society: "Maybe nobody ever escapes. Maybe it's boxes within boxes within boxes cutting off your air. But you smile anyway when you hear of crazy coincidences or when they happen to you".¹¹ Reuben's pessimism continues for some time. His perplexity, his confusion, and his hopelessness continue to dishearten him. Coincidences continue to happen for some time. Then he realises that he should narrate a story to create a myth so that he could come out of his state of confusion, and reach a position wherefrom he could start action of some positive note:

Reuben tugged the gold watch from its nest below his heart. Eleven forty-seven. Coincidence? All numbers had their secrets, but this one didn't even try to be coy about what it was hiding. Eleven once. Then eleven again as the sum of four and seven. What do you have: eleven twice. Four ones equal four. East, west, north, south are the four points of the compass. The four corners of the world. Four moments of the sun. A circle connects them. Everywhere, everywhere, perfection.

He smiles at the tired ivory face of the clock cupped in his hand... The whole world ... , including the intersection of Homewood and Hamilton, where lunch will be waiting in a tiny, four-table Muslim restaurant eleven steps from the corner.¹²

Reuben creates a myth around himself with utmost precision. The language that he uses and the way he communicates with the people establishes him in his community as a person who has all the ability to define anything under the sun, and solve all the problems the black community faces. Reuben is believed to have the knowledge of the very core of things – reality, life, and time. Reuben's myth takes him to the epicentre of the cultural legacy of the black community. And he succeeds in constructing a myth of the self and the black culture, which facilitates the position of centrality to him. This centrality puts him in the state of continuity, consistency, and endurance so as to make him strengthened enough to help the black people. As the events take turn, "Reuben has reached a point where he can further develop a myth that will lead to action through powerful personal fictions of sacrifice, love, purpose, wisdom, and commitment."¹³

The fourth chapter of the novel is entitled "Thoth", and it is not without significance. Thoth is the name of an ancient god of Egyptian theology, and is believed to stand for wisdom, learning, and magic. Through such title, Wideman strives to draw an analogical parallel between Thoth and Reuben. While Thoth blesses the Egyptian people with wisdom and scholarship, Reuben empowers the people of African-American tradition through perpetual teaching and training. Thoth finds his roots and identity in Egyptian tradition and Reuben identifies his self and his family with the people of Homewood. He displays his wisdom, his learning, and his magical skill, and endeavours hard to bring out the black people from the boggy mud-land of exploitation and hardship.

As a great activist prepared to do anything for the good of his people, Reuben takes upon himself the powers of Thoth to create a necessary myth with charm and rituals so that he may succeed in realising his dream to help Kwansa. He sets his

myth out of the any definable time frame. To his comfort comes the chronicle of his own legacy. His mother had taken birth not the present period, but "in another century", and the event of his own birth along with his twin brother, "happened too long ago".¹⁴ It is true that he took birth just like any other mortal, but he believes he was "just there, where he'd always been, under the rock of darkness waiting". As a wise activist, he does not take a plunge into the messy quagmire, but he takes up the issues "one after the other". He does not try to dismantle the old order, and set new. He does not define the set of new changes, and reduce time, since he knows his limitation as a mortal that he cannot breach the core of the time's cocoon. Instead, he prefers to create a magical charm to break into the time's cycles. Thus, he succeeds in creating a fiction that appears to be a set of "perfection". The illusion that he creates presents him as a symbol of love, sacrifice, and compassionate. And his incarnation as such symbol makes him do what he does in the coming days. The describes the charm Reuben has created:

At th bottom of his watch a brass charm was attached by the thinnest gold wire. Reuben fingered the bullet-shaped object. The wire passed through a hole in the bullet's nose, then through a loop on the watch. To see the charm Reuben had to pull his watch from his vest pocket and to check his watch he had to drag out the charm. Since the watch was linked to a chain and the chain pinned inside his vest and his vest fastened around his midsection, the container of his heart, lungs, liver, et cetera, Reuben sometimes thought of the charm wearing him. Conceived of himself as an elaborate headdress flowing from the pointed helmet crowning his brother's skull. Because the charm was an image of his brother. Yes. If you looked closely, you'd see that the object decorating Reuben's watch was not a bullet, not a miniature whistle or pencil but a man, severely stylized, African style, all torso and brow and arching crown. Only the barest suggestion of arms, little

amphibian nubs held stiffly at its sides, and stubby, elephant-toed feet. Years of rubbing, of talking to the little statue with his fingertips, had streamlined its features. He'd fashioned a man ... Honed for motion, speed, a charge of bristling energy compressed under the conical cap.¹⁵

In his effort to present a magical act, Reuben goes on talking to the charm to construct an image of his brother. And his endeavour of incorporating the image of his brother's life into the ritual performance presents him as an individual has a treasure of love and sacrifice since time immemorial. At one point of time, "in a dream or vision or during one of the extra lives he grew more certain he had lived, the longer he lived".¹⁶ In his attempt to search for his self and an association with family, Reuben keeps the image of his brother's life inseparably close to him. When he performs ritual penance at night, he puts the watch chain around his neck so as to make it look like a noose. It appears as if he tries to tie himself with the unending grief of his brother and also with the infinitely folded cycles of time. The narrative says, there are "circles within circles within circles linked over his bony chest, which rises and falls almost in time with his brothers".¹⁷ The myth that comes into existence signifies the fact that Reuben's love for his brother has neither its beginning nor end.

Reuben's relentless search for his self and family keeps him associated with brother's life. But he looks for his own self when he connects himself with Kwansa and the affairs of Homewood. He incants the power of Thoth to help him in his endeavour to work for Kwansa and other people of Homewood: "O Thoth, Myghty Moonglow Maker, Great Inkspotter and Inkblotter, the one who puts the Tick in my Tock, be with me this morning. You and anybody else willing. Do your best. Help me with this child's [Kwansa's] business. Reuben's watch beats in his vest pocket. Telling time, the job he must do".¹⁸

However, Reuben still feel the urge for his self and his family. Only Kwansa cannot be his centre of concentration. He creates another charm that symbolizes his commitment to the people of Homewood more intensely. Envious voices continue

to call him ghost-charmer, witch doctor, charlatan, and fool. There are opponents and mischief-mongers who are "all of Philadelphia laughing him out of existence." Reuben has not yet succeeded in making him potent enough to resist or keep in check the destructive attitude of his own people. They do not know that the destructive fiction has been opposed upon them by the oppressors, and they have taken it as the mischief of their fate. This destructive fiction comes in the way of Reuben's constructive fiction, and negates the very existence of Reuben and his ability to work for the black community. Reuben, therefore, appears to fail in his attempt to create a constructive fiction or constructive illusion for the black community of Homewood. But his attempt continues indefinitely.

The fiction of Flora is again the creation of Reuben, and it is also the constructive fiction for the good of the Homewood people of black genesis. Flora was attractive, fair-complexioned, and graceful in look and gait. But she was a whore, and was notoriously popular. While Reuben was at the University of Pennsylvania for pursuance of his learning in the Department of Law, he came into the contact of Flora and fell a prey to her beauty. Certainly, it proved to be a short-lived love affair, but it cast its shadow on the life of Reuben. The white fraternity around Reuben was interested in watching secretly the probable love-making scene related to the Reuben-Flora affair. The fraternity was expecting an exciting scene between the healthy and gorgeous Flora and physically weak and deformed man like Reuben. The fraternity being aware of Flora's inheritance, and thought it would be a brief entertainment for Reuben. But Reuben was serious, and he fell in love with the beautiful lady. He shared his intimate feelings with her, and swore by her love for her. But, when he came to know about the truant that his white fraternity had played with him, he decided to take revenge on the miscreants who had made fun of him. However, the loud conversation going on between Reuben and Flora, overheard by the fraternity, made the members furious, and they decided to punish Reuben and Flora by outraging Flora's modesty in presence of Reuben while he would be forced to watch the heinous crime meekly and helplessly.

They got a chance to rape Flora, but the cruel act was disturbed by the conflagration initiated apparently by Dudley Armstrong, the former black lover of Flora. Flora died in the fire, and Reuben survived after a fatal fall from the second-storey window. The illusion that the story creates is related to the time space of years ago when Reuben was considerably a young university student in Philadelphia. The atmosphere that the event creates is again that of racial prejudice exhibited by the white fraternity against the black members of the society. It is the white fraternity that insults Reuben, makes a mockery of his emotional advances, and gives the event such a turn that an innocent life is demolished simply for fun.

The relationship Flora that remained short-lived gives a shape to Reuben's philosophy of life. Flora lingers on in his innerness, and becomes an immortal entity out of the realms of time and space. Flora becomes an idea that hovers over Reuben's head. The reality of Flora becomes an illusion that emanates values and attitudes which are timeless and have the potential to move into the infinite. The important aspect of the "Flora fiction is both timeless and specific enough to move Reuben to action in the context of the black Homewood community and the problems confronting Kwansa. The fiction silences, temporarily at least, the hostile voices with their overtones of black American racial stereotype that shouted Reuben out of existence at the end of "Thoth" ".¹⁹

The fact of the matter is that Reuben gets an attitude to combat any attempt of racial discrimination. And before he could take a plunge into the ebb-like bog of racial prejudice, Reuben needs to have the passion to fight against prejudice, and he gets this passion from his relationships with the brother and Flora. It is evident from the promise that he makes to Flora after his survival from the fire and fall. He swears to take revenge upon the white boys, and do everything needed to give solace to the soul of Flora. He reveals to Wally that his relationship with Flora has enriched his heart with mixed experiences. Love and hate cast their shadow on his mind at the same time. Of course, Wally fails to understand as to what Reuben means by "hate" while talking about Flora. But there is no ambiguity

in Reuben's thought process. He is very clear about his cultivated feelings about the white fraternity. It is the animosity towards the white fraternity he has cultivated that propels him forward to serve the black people with utmost care and commitment. And it reflects in his service to Kwansa. The antagonistic feeling that Reuben has developed towards the white community is essential from the perspective of the worldly affairs. It helps him set an atmosphere in which the black people could behave proactively against the racial discrimination. Wideman opines, "The Flora fiction prepares Reuben by giving him a practical, specific example of oppression that the fiction of his brother did not give him. After Wally leaves, Reuben again takes out the charm that is symbolic of his work for Kwansa and Cudjoe and the folder with information about the case; this time the hostile voices do not assail him."²⁰

It is not certain to ascertain the magnitude of the impact Floras episode has cast on Reuben. But, it is clear that he is invariably in search of something missing in him. And he traces the missing constituent in his black community. He helps the community in every possible way. Being an intellectual, he always remains in the meditative mode, which leads him into confusion, shadowy realms, and illusion. Naturally, for a man of such intellectual and unusual wanderings, life cannot be a systematically drawn out phenomenon. There is, therefore, no orderliness in the events that take place in his life. And he does not give much importance to systematic pattern and order in the sequence of events, personal or social. The only thing that is important to Reuben is the interest of the black people. He can do anything for them. The black people have their own perception regarding life, its daily chore and quality. The black people perceive reality of their everyday struggle quite differently, and their perception is not similar to Reuben's idea of illusory existence. Therefore, Reuben does not need a well-defined, well-designed system of life, but strong attitudes and values of mythic proportion. It is these attitudes and the value-systems that propel him to action. And while making action he ceases to give any cognisance to his own physical existence or any discrepancies

whatsoever. Naturally, Flora episode becomes important in the sense that it is this episode that gives him the necessary attitudes and value system.

Another aspect of Reuben's intellectuality is related to his tireless search for a proper definition of the reality of life. If possible, he would like to define the reality of life within a system of parameters – motion, movement, and progress. He does understand whether motion is progress. From his association of Muybridge and his works, he has come to speculate that motion, life, and reality cannot be synthesized together and explained:

No matter how many cameras, a different Reuben in each frame, a slightly altered poses a separate reality. Amazing isn't it. How protean the simplest gesture. And each pose real, definitive, if we possessed a means of capturing it. If we could see everything. If we bore God's eye in our foreheads. A paradox, an irony. To slow things down, we must click the shutter faster and faster. Do you see what I mean? Less light. More and more pictures as the time scale shrinks. The shutter blinks a million times an instant yet it's not fast enough. Motion defeats it. Motion slips through the net no matter how fine the weave. Motion the sum of all the tiny inchings forward but something greater, irreducible. Fantastic. Don't you agree, Mr. Reuben?²¹

The notion of movement is very much experienced by Kwansa. The trying situation puts Kwansa through penance and sacrifice, and she perceives a kind of progressive movement in her life. Similarly, Reuben meditates upon the task he has taken upon himself as his responsibility to accomplish. But his meditation passes through the myth created by his brother and Flora episode. Both of them are not present in Reuben's life, and are lost to them. Therefore, he perceives a life for himself in which penance and sacrifice for them remains at the core.

Reuben always remains in dilemma between his intellect and his cultivated values. On one side is Kwansa's life and the entire black community of Homewood, and on the other his legal

profession: "His spit-shined shoe returns to the sidewalk [from the step of the courthouse]. It gleams impersonally. No face in its depths stares back at him. If the shoe fits ..., if it doesn't touch the floor when you scoot back into a chair ..., you are Reuben. You wear it. You hobble off toward Stanley's Bar and Grill [where you can make the actual legal compromises to help Kwansa]." ²²

In his search for the self and the family, Reuben becomes an integral part of the Homewood community. His brother, his Flora, and all associated with him have been merged in the abstraction of Homewood community. He is an abiding ubiquitous spirit wandering all over Homewood for the good of the black community. He traces his own self with such intensity that he transcends ambivalence, action-negating attitude of the intellectual world merely to act for Kwansa: "Reuben ends as Reuben does so. The intellectual's act represents an assertion of faith that what he is doing is meaningful because he is making black people happy. The act, the assertion of faith, thrusts him beyond selfish, inactive, residence in his own private world of intellectual belief in the illusory quality of everything we can create. It thrusts him into active participation in what he knows is the illusory reality of other people, but what is important is that these people feel he will make a difference." ²³

Reuben, therefore, succeeds in constructing a myth of black culture that makes the people of Homewood proactive. In his effort of creating such myth, his personal experience, accumulated as personal history, instigates him to help the black people. And he gets success in bringing the people of Homewood out of their ghettoised existence of resignation, and putting on the threshold wherefrom the region of proactive assertion begins. The myth that Reuben creates is deep-rooted in the culture and tradition of the black community extended to the African legacy. The continuity of black belief, ritual, and spirituality carries timeless, enduring, and constructive values that become an integral part of Reuben's life. And these values inspire Reuben to be a part of struggle of the black community, and devote his life in the service of the community.

Another protagonist, Wally Carter, is a character of the other kind. He lacks in the intellectual depth of Reuben's magnitude. Therefore, in his endeavour to search for the self and the family, he shrinks within himself. He is a black man with adequate and quality education. But, he has drawn an unbreakable line in his inner faculty to separate his own self from the rest of the world. Whereas Reuben searches his own self in the black community and in its tradition, Wally Carter looks for himself in his own innerness. He enjoys his disjointed existence, and never tries to stretch his wings out to others. However, he finds a complementing personality in Reuben. Reuben possesses what he does not. But their working patterns are entirely different. Wally creates an imagined personage "the Recruiter" and conceives an imaginary thought "abstract hate". It is this imagined thought that defines his relationship with the white and the black communities. The narrative says, "Wally's abstract hate involves coldness, callousness, insensitivity, and isolation, while Reuben's fictions convey love, sacrifice, responsibility, purpose, commitment, and loving feeling toward others." ²⁴

Wally Carter is an educated black man who isolates from the outer world in an effort to search for himself in his inner confinement. He likes his dreams to float in an open sky without any impediment or control. He is also to have a fluid identity for himself. In his dreams, Wally is confident and sure of his self. He fails to understand that the world is so complicated and the worldly affairs are so complex and confusing that it cannot allow anyone with complete detachment and mental exclusivity to survive. However, Wally opts for exclusivity and solitary existence. And it is futile to say that he is lost in the quagmire with no one to pull him out of the bog of confusion and non-identities. His search for the self and the family continues relentlessly. On the other hand, Reuben merges his identity with the identity of the black people, and becomes a part of the bigger mosaic. He succeeds in locating himself and a definable family in the voluminous self of the black community. Through his actions, Reuben makes the black

community identify with him. And he identifies himself with the ethnicity of black people.

Wally, while living in the shell of his dreams, believes that the movement of time is without any pattern, and life is illusory. So he fails to identify his self, and relentlessly longs for it. Life eludes him, because whatever he has he does not believe it, and whatever he longs for is dream having no real existence:

Wally treats his life as a memory so he won't worry about what's happening to him. Since the shit was already over, since it had gone down the way it was going to go down, like it or not, he would treat what he was doing as if it was happening to someone else. Stand way back. Be sorry for the sucker. Laugh at him. No sense in worrying. Too late. And since his life was a memory, he could change it next time he played it. He could tell any lie he needed to get by. It's all in your mind. A dream made up as you go along.

But if you're not there, living smack-dab in the middle of your life, then where the fuck are you? Every once in a while the question stings Wally. If your life's not a memory or a tale you concoct at will, playing it fast-forward or reverse, stopping and starting in the middle or end, if your life's more than this mix of yes or no and maybe and skipping and losing and somebody else working the dials, then who are you? A fly tracking across the dome of the [basketball] arena, a spider curled in the rafter's shadow?²⁵

Wally and Reuben have similar views of life, which is undefinable, illusory, and can be comprehended only from a certain distance. But, whereas Reuben gets himself involved into it in order to have a feel of it, Wally opts to let life pursue its own wayward course. However, whenever he feels that he is lost in the bog, he begins to raise questions against his own cynicism and renunciation. Intentionally, he withdraws himself into seclusion, and tries to manipulate life's all possibilities with lies, spoken here and there. It is true that Wally does not exhibit the urge to get rid

of the pressures exerted by the white society on the black community. But there are other sensitive black men, like Reuben, who shed off their doubt about their potential and come out of the demoralising burden of racial discrimination, and relate themselves to the problems of their community to help the black brethrens.

Although it requires super-human efforts, yet Reuben reinvents himself and presents an altogether new Reuben to involve in the lives of other black men of Homewood. He becomes indifferent to the humiliating treatment meted out to him by the racial hegemony of the society, and becomes dead to his personal feelings. In his new avatar as a reinvented individual, he sheds off his second name and surname, and retains only his first name to make himself acceptable to any one belonging to his colour and genesis. He creates a mythic aura around him to produce a set of values and a pattern of flexible attitudes needed for his smooth entry into the lives of the black people.

It does not mean that Reuben puts down his personal experiences by force or by intimidating his feelings, but he manipulates them in the extremely fluid atmosphere of men and manners so that he can act as per his motives. In this way, Reuben searches the self and his sympathisers in the greater mosaic of the black community. Wally Carter acts differently. He allows his personal experiences that hurt him while living in the contaminated environment of racism to overtake him, and to push him into the realm of isolation. Thus, while Reuben searches his own self in the good work that he does for the black people, Wally searches his own self in the secluded life of isolation and resignation. Wally's effort of withdrawal into seclusion takes him farther from the self and the family. Wideman opines, "The difference is the creative shape that the men choose to give their lives. Reuben overcomes intellectual doubt and what he believes is racist experience to make other blacks feel that they are progressing. Wally builds intellectual doubt and racist experience together into an isolated tower of cynicism and hatred."²⁶

Wally creates the recruiter out of his philosophy of "abstract hate", and later it comes to the notice that the recruiter is none other Wally

himself. And the portrayal re-establishes Wally as an intellectual heading farther and farther into self-isolation, rather, self-denial, and into the state of overwhelming abstraction. His philosophy of "abstract hate" makes Wally kill his perpetrators in his mind. And the crime that he commits in his mind gets into such a colossal dimension that it overtakes him, and pushes him into oblivion. As he says, he does not know whether he killed the white perpetrator or not. Moreover, he does not understand that the story of "abstract hate" he narrates is equally "lie", as is evident from the details of the recruiter's life. Therefore, Reuben's myth, his fiction, or his "lies" take him closer to a definitive role that he plays in the black people's lives. But, on the other hand, Wally's "lie", in the form of "abstract hate" takes him out the human fabric into the realm of self-isolation and abstraction. Thus, in his effort to search his own self, Wally goes further away from the self.

The chapter 9, "Bimbo" is further revealing of Wally's detachment from the community and the self. He pretends that he is writing letters to other people while he is jogging. It is his way of getting into touch with his people. This way, he is "being in touch ... Learning other lives are as arbitrary, disposable, unlikely as own ... Letters answering his letters confirm Wally's fictions ... If he's wrong, it matters not. Lives he makes up keep him moving".²⁷ It revitalises the inference that Wally is fast sliding down into the bog of mental deterioration. A popular singer, Bimbo is the childhood friend of Wally. He is physically impaired, and is unable to perform any meaningful action. So, whereas Bimbo is physically handicapped, Wally is mentally impaired or handicapped. Bimbo wants to commit suicide, because his life is more horrible than death, and he wants to get rid of its burden. But Wally is so consumed in his abstractions and worthless isolation that he cannot even help his friend, Bimbo, in his effort to commit suicide. It is obvious to infer that Wally's resignation into isolation as dreadful as Bimbo's resignation into helplessness.

Even as a kid, Wally showed his predilection to search his own self and comforting companion in seclusion and in the act of resignation. And as a grown up person, he has detached himself from the

rituals of youth and vitality. The rituals that could have induced him into the contact of life and vitality have always been distasteful and disgusting to him. The game of basketball could have proved to be such a ritual for him, but it could not be. Age and work have restricted his agility so much so that he has confined himself only to jogging. Even jogging does not inspire him to be in meaningful contact with others. Instead, it revitalizes his attitude of callousness and insensitivity. Reuben, in his own way, tries to impress upon the psyche of Wally, and motivate him into life of sense and sensitivity, but fails miserably.

Kwansa and Toodles are two others protagonists, who are also in relentless search for life and its meaning. They are not intellectuals as Reuben and Wally are. But their attitudes present them as some enthusiasts looking for a way to create a fiction about the self and the family so that they could construct an illusion of existence. Kwansa's problem is that she does not have fiction of herself and of life so that she could save her from the devastating fictions imposed on her from outside, particularly, from the white society. When Reuben asks her to narrate her story, she fumbles and fails to answer. She believes that she "has no story. Her life is now. The pain sitting on her lap is her life".²⁸ She does not have ability to construct a myth so as to develop an attitude and set of values to help others. But the pity is that she does not even have the story or fiction about her own self to deal with the problems of her own life. Waddell and his fair-complexioned sisters can tease and torture her mentally because she does not have an idea of self. She is black, ugly, and inferior. When she compares herself with others, she realises that they have better chance of winning the race of life. Even her grandmother unwittingly helps her in her realisation that she is ugly, and unworthy of leading a meaningful life. Kwansa, therefore, internalizes the notion that she is a bad and unattractive woman of no worth. However, her motherly love, which is natural and instinctual, for her son, Cudjoe, saves her from imminent destruction. It is this maternal affection that helps her survive and makes her indulge in meaningful activities. So her search for the self meets some ground when she realises that

she is a mother. Indeed, Kwansa has some realisation of good and bad. She has a clear notion of life and its melody that keeps her meaningfully alive. It is this realisation that prevents her from falling into the trap of inaction and resignation, into which Wally has fallen.

Conclusion

In *Reuben*, Wideman has reached the culmination of the philosophy of definability. Like other novels that Wideman has written, the present one also deals with the subject of the self and the family. Here too, the protagonists are indulged in relentless search for the self and the family, but they choose here different paths. Reuben tries to become an insider, and traces out his self in the community. He identifies his self with the community, and succeeds in his efforts. Wally, the other protagonist, continues his search while divorced from the society, and never reaches the goal. Both are black intellectuals. Wideman, through *Reuben*, has given primacy to interaction of a black intellectual with the black community. In his earlier books, there were some black intellectuals, such as, Cecil in *Hurry Home*, Thomas Wilkerson and Littleman in *Lyncher*, and Doot in *Sent for You Yest erday*. But Reuben is differently placed in the scheme of things in the present novel. Like Cecil, Reuben lives in the world of fantasy for major period of his life. But, when he comes to his senses, he creates fictions that push him out of the world of fantasy, and makes an integral part of the black community where he finds his self and his family. And, naturally, his search ends. Reuben is as intelligent and sharp-witted as Littleman is. But the bitterness of personal experiences and frustration due to oppressive white community do not melt away his potency to act. Moreover, there is no confusion in Reuben's innerness about his role in the black community, and he locates his self very comfortably in the crowd of the directionless black people.

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