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Faction, Kitsch and Seditious Sexuality as Strategic Motifs in Nelson George's *Night Work*

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Abstract

This paper critiqued the nascent interface between postmodernist literary dispositions and African American fiction by exploring certain postmodern techniques as strategic motifs in Nelson George's *Night Work*. Some contemporary literary scholarships have described African American fiction as monotonous, and not experimental enough in the postmodern sense. Other positions designate postmodernism as an ideology completely incompatible with postcolonial black experience. Although these have continued to generate polemics, scholars are yet to thoroughly evaluate counter-perspectives of postmodern trends in African American literature. This study therefore examined postmodern practice as a trope in contemporary black American writings. Jean Francois Lyotard's rejection of metanarratives, complemented by critical reaction to postmodern techniques such as faction, kitsch, and seditious sexuality, are adopted as pivotal theoretical approaches in this study. This paper therefore submits that *Night Work* encapsulates an innovative disposition to different postmodern techniques, namely faction, kitsch, and undisguised use of vulgar expressions, all peculiar to postmodern writings, and as such, establishes and justifies the innovative presence of postmodern techniques in contemporary African American literature.

Keywords: African American literature, Metanarratives, *Night Work,* Strategic motifs.

Introduction

Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) can be summarized as representing the significance of black history. This work of literature by implication calls for continuous interrogation of African American experience, which, for centuries, has been copiously reflected in the literary works of African American writers. Wright laments that American seems to have forgotten her past, arguing further that the American past must be revisited through continuous introspection of tales of slavery. More than half a century later however after Wright's submission, Kenneth Warren's (2011, p.1) argument that "the collective enterprise we now know as African American or black literature is of rather recent vintage..." retrospectively dismisses any logic in relating to African American past, particularly with reference to pre-Jim Crow era. Warren continues, insisting that "as for the status of the fiction, poetry, and letters written

before the Jim Crow era, my claim is that the mere existence of literary texts does not necessarily indicate the existence of a literature (5)." Or perhaps Warren fall into Belinda Hurmence's bold statement, indicated as title in edited book of slave narratives, *My Folks Don't Want Me Talk About Slavery* (1984). Clearly, his conclusion about African American literature becomes antithetical to Wright's inclination about the significance of black history vis-à-vis its literature.

But Warren's delineation of the beginning of African American literature ironical is premised on the same history that he hitherto dismissed. More controversial is his conceptual argument on the downward slide of African American writings. The title of his essay, "What was African American Literature" is a hasty summary of thematic and historical dearth of African American literature. He concludes that there is no "coherence for a contemporary African Americanist literary project (5)." But the twenty-first century has witnessed an array of African American writers who, through their unique styles, have attempted to redefine both individual and collective existence of the African American people. Influenced by the post-modern age, contemporary African American writers are beginning to respond to existing postcolonial issues of race, identity, gender and so on, expending an unprecedented approach. It is on this premise that this scholarship gravitates towards the study of Nelson George's *Night Work*, which is embedded with obvious strategic motifs in postmodern discourse, which set a different stylistic pace in describing the experiences of blacks in America.

Postmodernism and African American Literature

Postmodernism remains one of the most thought-provoking topics in contemporary times. David Harvey (1990, p.219) describes this phenomenon as "a mine-field of conflicting notions". His explanation buttresses strong reservations on postmodern discourse among its critics. It is ttherefore foreseeable that since the mid-twentieth century, many articles have made recourse to the signification of the term in the daunting tasks of elucidating on radical changes that provoked a reconceptualisation of what the world then knew and believed as reality. Consequently, there arises a significant threat to the epistemological hegemony on which the larger part of twentieth century modernism thrives. By extension, postmodernism has continually provoked rancorous debates among diverse fields of endeavour, particularly among the literary circles (Harvey, 1990), and that the epistemology of its nomenclature accrues to complex variations in terms of its definition, delineation and classification. That is why Hans Bertens (1995, p.1) introduces postmodernism as "an exasperating term" because its description is "deeply problematical almost right from the start."

The argument here, in tandem with voice of like of Bertens, and the likes, is that it is somewhat problematic to present a holistic definition of the term 'postmodernism'. A very specific attempt presupposes a much complex proposition of the concept, if not an exact contradiction to its implied meaning and/or groups of meanings. Rather than occupy its own space as a significant historico-cultural exegesis, postmodernism merely appropriates a multiplicity of 'others', especially in relation to literary criticism. It is in this regard that Harvey (1990) views "postmodernism as powerful configurations of new sentiments and thoughts". This definition reiterates the significance of postmodernism as a radical approach to a

modern world, which is reactionary to the social-cultural exegesis of a previous preponderating way of life - modernism.

One of the principle arguments on the origin of postmodernism is the delineation of an exact date, or one should say a 'presumed' date. There are multiple postulations on the advent of the postmodern era. While some critics and philosophers claim that it emerged in the 1940s and 1950s in Europe and America respectively, others have argued that the terminology originated in New York among critics and artists in the 1960s and then became widespread in the 1970s. Perhaps this was why Hicks in his book *Explaining Postmodernism* (2004) carefully avoided any presumption towards a concrete periodisation. Daniel Bell, a renowned sociologist of the postwar period, preferably used the term 'post-industrial' to illustrate the radical changes in capitalism, as evidently discussed in his book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973). Six years after, Jean-François Lyotard, a key proponent of postmodern thought, shifted the world's attention to the evolving discourse of language and epistemology in his world class book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Clearly, the two postmodern thinkers have explored two significant positions in the evolution of the postmodern era.

Among other proponents of postmodernism is Michel Foucault, who not only rates as an undisputable authority, but whose epistemic pattern of thoughts remains fundamental. While being critical as not to assume that all contemporary African American texts would readily respond to the nuances of postmodernism, this research endeavour is evidently premised on Foucault's expression, or put more succinctly, his insightful recognition of postmodernism, which he describes as: "Something new is about to begin, something that we glimpse only as a thin line of light low on the horizon" (Foucault, 1973, p.384). This statement becomes very apt in exploring and conceptualizing the impending future of African American literature. More germane hereafter is the attempted interpretation of postmodernist nuances, which are not just evident but prevalent in the select text for this paper.

The world, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, has quickened its pace in specific spheres of human endeavour, with technological advancement as its fulcrum. If a given society changes slowly or in fact rapidly (as in this case), the literature produced would, no doubt, respond and/or in fact react to such new-fangled trends. The viewpoint here is that both contemporary African American literatures, by all means, have only come alive by themselves, refusing to be neither stagnant nor rigidly apathetic to its present and by extension, the future. Rather, each literature has found a way to adapt and reabsorbed itself into the fast-pace society. Likewise, each chooses to reaffirm its distinctive literariness, buttressed by recurrent themes of the 'past' which remained naturally relevant even today. Prevalent in this research, among others, is the continuous search for identity or variances of such in a conflicting network of human relationships. Perhaps through these revolving thematic expressions, each literature gradually constructs its own very identity in its response to the changes in the society. Each literature becomes a significant representation of the present-day world which is fragmented into intricate but interrelated tales. Timothy Spaulding (2005, p.3) attests to this assertion, while appraising the stylistic import of budding African American writers, stating that:

> ...Even as they reject realism and embrace non-mimetic devices in their treatment of history (a quality they share with other postmodern fictions), many writers of postmodern slave narratives retain a stable conception of identity and historical authority that comes out of the cultural and racial politics of the sixties... In so doing, these writers forge a distinctly African American form of postmodernism – one influenced by postmodern thought but rooted in black history and informed by black identity politics.

Linda Hutcheon (1988), in the preface of the book, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, advocates the study of (the) cultural phenomenon (postmodernism), which "has attracted much public debate, and so deserves critical attention". African American literature, by all means, has only come alive by itself, refusing to be neither stagnant nor rigidly apathetic to its present and by extension, the future. Rather, I hereby submit that African American literature has found a way to adapt and reabsorbed itself into the fast-pace postmodern society. It reaffirms its distinctive literariness, buttressed by recurrent themes of the 'past' which remained naturally relevant even today. Prevalent, among others, remains the continuous search for identity or variances of such in a conflicting network of human relationships.

Since the 1970s, writers such as Robert Elliott Fox, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Brian Phillip Harper, and so on have argued for the postmodern presence as part of the distinct evolution of African American literature. They emphasise certain stylistic features of African American fiction which connect to postmodern literary and cultural theories. This paper therefore examines the postmodern literary representations in Nelson George's *Night Work*, with the view to reassessing Warren's extrapolation and by extension attempt a reappraisal of the direction of African American literature in contemporary times.

Nelson George is one of the renowned black American writers who wrote during the late twentieth century into the twenty-first. Although his works reflect salient issues of race, gender and history, these literatures accentuate a deep reflection of African American postmodern rage. Therefore, George falls under the category of contemporary writers who forge this distinct African American form of postmodernism. He is an author of four novels and six works of non-fiction, which include *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (1988) and *Hip Hop America* (1998). Both texts were nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His book, *Night Work* (2003), readily establishes a visible connection between postmodernism and contemporary African American literature. Remarkably, bell hooks (1990, p.25) readily foregrounds this association, insisting that "if ... postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of 'authority' as 'mastery over' must not simply be a rhetorical device". In other words, the new phase of theoretical approach on African American literature must equally be functional in addressing issues pertaining to the black community in America.

As experienced in other cultural climes, there is an acknowledgement of the radical changes that affect the African American novel in the late twentieth century. From the 1980s to the 1990s, there was a significant shift in cultural debates on African American literary works. Hitherto, the institution of literary canons, particularly in the academics and the media was heavily dependent on issues of Black Nationalism and feminism. The thrust of contemporary debates extends beyond these to questions on multiculturalism, sexuality and postmodernism. *Night Work* is a classical representation of these thematic preoccupations and theoretical ideologies, categorically appropriating the postmodern thought as a stylistic template. Defined as a movement that subverts conventional assertions about the essence of reality and truth, postmodernism becomes relevant to the (re)construction of contemporary African American literature and the interpretation of aesthetic and thematic preoccupations (Bernard W. Bell, 2004). Therefore, an exploration of certain postmodern techniques in *Night Work* would justify its postmodern affiliation.

Faction, Kitsch and Seditious Sexuality in Nelson George's *Night Work*

Night Work encapsulates new phase of schismatic writing, with an impressive disposition to faction, kitsch, intertextuality and unapologetic presence vulgar expressions that are peculiar to postmodern thought. Perhaps what is striking the most is prevalent expression of identity reconstruction in the twenty-first century and reconstruction of meta-narrative of African American slave experience. Here, the story of contemporary African American experience is retold from new perspective, despite the fact that American society still tolerates the same issues of race, gender and identity. The central character, simply known as Night, is conditioned as a sex worker to well-to-do white women. In order to survive, he is at their mercy. However, there is a subversion of control during the act, as he skilfully directs the pace. He preys on the weaknesses of his victim and soon, he is known and recommended for his 'talent': According to him, "…in the sex-for-cash business, control was as important as money. Control is what kept you safe". (George, 2003, p.97)

Apart from being a gigolo, Night's dream is to become a professional singer. Although he is quite talented, his racial stereotype limits his dreams and aspirations. He is the narrative voice in the novel; but his narration oscillates between real life settings to his subconscious thoughts, shuffling back and forth in time, which indicates the character's frustration about his uncertain future. *Night Work* is a novel that relates to postmodern trends; its compelling narrative captures a vivid imagery of characters undefined, stream of consciousness, faction, sex and other postmodern reflections. The book begins with a revealing ingress of faction, the acknowledgment of and the importation of events and people into a novel. In the novel, there are reflections of persons or places or events whose involvement eventually shape the ideology of the character narrator. Through his ambivalent personality, which was buttressed by stream of consciousness technique, the protagonist, Night, showcases his troubled past, with allusion to real life settings which complicate stereotypic fictional mood of conservative readers.

> When I was a boy in Brooklyn, I 'd look into
> our bathroom mirror, not in admiration but

> pain… I'd think of Michael Jackson, the boy-man who was so large during my childhood. He 'd made himself into science fiction by shedding layers of skin as I so wanted to. This should have been the perfect solution- to shred it all and escape my burden… (George, 2003, p.3)

References to the metropolis of Brooklyn, a socio-historical location in New York, United States of America, and life personalities such as Michael Jackson, which all are factual entities, deconstruct any conventional fiction mood that could have been perceived in the novel. It further foregrounds the significance of faction, a key postmodern technique. Faction can be described as the mixing of historical events and fiction without a clear definition of whether the work is fictional. The lack of clarity is further enhanced by episodic nature of plot structure in the novel, which echoes Umberto Eco's (1984, p.66) description of postmodernism as "not a trend to be chronologically defined".

Using Brooklyn as the setting of the novel is essential, especially in relation to the history of black Americans as well as the postmodern thought. Although regarded as a cultural enclave, the locale is remarkably populated by African Americans; it does have a profound historical record of racial struggle and subjugation. But it also records a high number of efficacious black Americans in various fields of endeavour, who have thrived beyond the oppressive conditions of racial subjugation. In the last couple of decades, Brooklyn has played a major role in varied aspects of the American culture in terms of arts, cinema, literature, music, theatre and so on. But from the beginning of the twenty-first, the city began to birth new artistry influenced by the postmodern touch (Alexandria Symonds, 2016, in the article "One Celebrated Brooklyn Artist's Futuristic New Practice"). George grew up in Brooklyn and his novel was greatly influenced by his personal experiences.

Correspondingly, references to real life figures such as Michael Jackson, Curtis Mayfield, Wesley Snipes and Michael Jordan epitomize the fact in the supposed fiction novel. However, it is important to stress the purpose of these references as a connotative indulgence to ideological reconstruction. These individuals, in real life, are successful African Americans, who rise against all odd and become celebrities in their various fields of endeavour such as music, movie industry and sports. However, there is much focus on Michael Jackson, as the most influential of the brood. The protagonist, Night, reflects on the controversies that surround the king of pop music, especially concerning his apparent dissatisfaction with his skin colour. Influenced by Jackson's decision to alter his pigmentation from black to white, the protagonist, as a young black American, viciously reacts to this, stating that, "For Michael, there was a ghost face unlike anything I, or anyone else, had ever seen. His black skin had withered and no amount of soul singing could bring it back… Michael was too naked, too damaged and damaging, for me to follow his path." (George, 2003, p.3)

Through the use of faction as a postmodern technique, George re-awakens the consciousness of the effect of racism in the twenty-first century in a different way. Michael's decision to alter his skin from black to white radicalises the perception of

racial construct in the novel. As much as it aggravates basic stereotypic stance of white hegemony, young Night's criticism of Michael transcends sheer discontent and disappointment. First through Michael, there is a distinct tone of self-denunciation, in which young Night, in his effort to emulate the Pop star, tries to peel of blackness from his skin but to no avail: the musician had "made himself into a science fiction by shedding layers of skin as I so wanted to" (George, 2003, p.3). However, through Michael also comes self-realisation and final acceptance of his skin colour. Night finally acknowledges the exquisiteness of his black colour and later thrives in the course of the narration primarily because he is black and naturally endowed: "Michael's face finally put me in check. No way could I allow anyone else's poison in me. I began to understand that my skin had to be loved if I was to love myself" (3). This character ambivalence is one of the postmodern techniques recorded in the novel.

Moreover, a metaphorical level of interpretation, there is radical shift in the perspective of racism in the novel, in which a black man (Michael) explicitly becomes the oppressor. It is an unconventional subversion, one that is suitably processed through the lens of postmodern criticism. Warren's (2005, p.4) objection is that "the persistence of racism is not to make a particularly profound social observation or to engage in trenchant political analysis". He argues that "a political and social analysis, centred on demonstrating that current inequalities are simply more subtle attempts to reestablish the terms of racial hierarchy, misunderstands both the nature of the previous regime and the defining elements of the current one (4)". He concludes that this contributes to the decline of contemporary African American literature. But hooks (1990, p.8), in her article "Postmodern Blackness", addresses the redundancy in the discourse of racism, arguing that,

> To take racism seriously one must consider the plight of underclass people of colour, a vast majority of whom are black. For African-Americans our collective condition prior to the advent of postmodernism and perhaps more tragically expressed under current postmodern conditions has been and is characterized by continued displacement, profound alienation and despair.

It is not a question of entrenching racial hierarchy; it is about the continuous interrogation and subversion of stoic racial process which defines both present and future of not only the black Americans but American nation as a whole. The response of the character Night to Michael's action initially registers that feeling of alienation and disaffection. But that becomes a constructive standard for the protagonist in terms of his identity reconstruction, a reconceptualisation of himself vis-à-vis an unsympathetic American society. With such conceptualisation comes an established ethnic identity, not just collective but strongly more individualistic. The character states: "So, the day I turned sixteen I became Night and I reclaimed my face. And just in time, help arrived… Michael Jordan… And Wesley Snipes, who said "always bet on black," and so I did." (George, 2003, p.4). Nonetheless, he further affirms his

reliance on collective strength, adding that "these brothers, and others, helped me reinvent the world around me… Black was black, all in, we 're going to win. Night had been intended to be my shield. Then things changed and it became a sword. (George, 2003, p.4)

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist experiences displacement of identity, lack of value and self-worth, as a result of his skin colour. But later his perception of himself changes, as he realized that what he needs to success lies within himself. The metaphor of 'Night', as a synonym for black, sabotages the principles of 'order' and 'control' that the society pretends to establish for all its citizens. Throughout the novel, Night battles to regain control of his life from socially constructed hegemonies such as dangerous gangsters, racial police and so on. In fact, he attempts to gain control over his elusive dream, his highest level of fantasy which is "standing at a Radio City Music Hall podium and accepting the Grammy for Album of the Year from a jealous, pouting Alicia Keys (George, 2003, p.32)". Although Night's aspiration proves to be illusory, his charisma and strategic actions towards achieving his goals is concretised in the reader. Therefore, faction, as a postmodern technique, in the novel transcends mere stylistic import but proves to be a literary tool in the subversion of power and reconstruction of identity in twenty-first century American society.

Another postmodern technique, which is also widely expressed in *Night Work*, is kitsch, which also becomes a literary template for the subversion of power. In an attempt at defining the elusive nature of kitsch, Matei Calinescu (1987, p.226) suggests three definitions (a) that the German word *kitsch* means sketch in English (b) That its possible origin is from German verb *verkitschen* which means "to make cheap" (c) that is could also be derived from the German verb kitschen which interprets as "collecting junk from the street". The common trend across these definitions is that *kitschen* epitomizes the mundane or privation of originality. In Calinescu's words, it implies 'banality' and 'triteness'. As a postmodern technique, Javad Zangouei (2013) avers that kitsch "might be likened to a process whereby the mundane is raised to the level of the eternal, and so it looks at everything as trite". While modernism tries to keep a leash on profane language and voluptuous scenes, postmodernism explores discomforting demonstration of unabashed obscenity and crassness, particularly in relation to literary texts.

In George's *Night Work*, sex scenes and vulgar expressions are well detailed. The deviant choice of language is characterised by sexually expletives such as "fuck you", "bitch", "ass", "fucking", "asshole", "nigga", "motherfucking", "fuck-the-pigs" and so on. In sum, the brazen expressions are fundamental trope in the deconstruction of modernist writings. Monica Kjell-man Chapin (2013, p.ix), in "Introduction: Kitsch in History, Theory and Practice," describes kitsch as evoking "mental images of cutesy collectibles… or perhaps anemic appropriations of canonical works of art". Not just art, it preys on the weaknesses of imperialist literary texts, characters or actions, that are generally indubitable. The significance of kitsch in *Night Work* therefore lies in playful 'delegitimation' (Lyotard 1979, *The postmodern condition*…) of prosaic meta-language of the modern novel, of which order construct of the modern era, in the first place, foregrounds restrictive sensitivity towards vulgarism. The novel is not just heavily saturated with sexual tunes; there is conscious and methodical exposé of

sexuality as one of the core social reflections of contemporary American society. In fact, the concept of identity reconstruction revolves round an intense presentation of homosexual culture in the late twentieth century. Apart from implied counter-discourse to heterosexual metanarrative in his book, George exposes undercurrents and gradual rise of pluralistic inter-sexual lifestyle in Brooklyn and reveals a potpourri of multi-layered sexuality and how this newfangled sex wave defines and (re)defines the identity process.

As an illustration from the text, the protagonist Night is introduced to a beautiful woman, Raffaella, a successful female pimp who "employed small stable men, ranging in age from nineteen to fifty, many of whom served gay men since that was 'steady money' (George, 2003, p.103). Raffaella represents the subversion of gender inequality in which male chauvinism dominates the modern era. The stylistic nature of kitsch in this episode impishly positions women at the centre, rather than the usual periphery of sexual domination. Kitsch therefore is a manifestation of "the lifestyle of counterculture" (Zangouei, 2013), which concretises postmodern ideology in this novel. Perhaps more distinct in *Night Work* is not just the presence of highly offensive expressions but the deconstruction of the sacredness of religion and its most important personality, God. Calinescu (1987, p.235-236) classifies two major categorises of kitsch: the first is that kitsch can be used for entertainment purposes, especially in relation to literature. Secondly, kitsch is also produced for propaganda, that is, 'political kitsch', 'religious kitsch', etc. The protagonist-narrator is an example of kitsch-person, who mocks everything, especially what is considered to be un-mocked. In this case, kitsch "nourishes religiously dangerous claims" (Javad Zangouei, 2013) about the veneration and sacredness of the God-entity. In the novel, the understanding of God is uncharacteristically contextualized within the ambience of characterization. That Supreme nature is demystified and the power, reference and identity usually ascribed to the Supreme Being are radically subverted.

> As I walked across the dance floor, I was surrounded by my voice coming from speakers. I felt good. I felt light-headed. I felt like my back was being touched by the right hand of God and his left was massaging my dick. (111)

The deconstruction of God as a spiritual force here alludes to Nietzsche's prediction of the death of God. We are reminded that postmodernism is sceptical about all possible meta-narratives. More importantly, it challenges them, hence the attempted demystification of God in the novel. In order for the protagonist to express his delight at his achievement in his song being played, he could only situate the extremity of his pleasure within the chaotic context of the reader's imagination. The protagonist-narrator, Night, denounces the God hegemony based on theoretical application of Nietzsche's submission on faith as an oppressive force that incapacitates man's control to make decisive decisions. There is the subversion of that grand nature of God into a concrete personality and ultimately parodies that inviolability with playful sexual truancy which instantaneously explodes on the face of conformist

reader. Zangouei (2013) concludes that with postmodernism, nothing is neither sacred nor sacrosanct, hence the scope of parody in any postmodern fiction. Ihab Hassan (1986) uses the term "decanonisation" which explicitly relates to critical denouncement of all conventions of authority.

The trite synchronisation of God, universally recognised by untarnished characteristics of righteousness and morality, and distasteful sexual expression 'dick' creates an explosion of immoral discordance and eventually, an overriding identity consciousness in the mindset of the reader. In answering the question what exactly kitsch means, many authors have ranged itself description within the ambience of inappropriate forms of art reproduction, decorative bric-a-brac, political propaganda, votive objects and erotic images... (Anna Brzyski, 2013, p.1)". Susan Sontag in the 1960s, while still citing Brzyski (2013) in her article "Art, Kitsch and Art History," confirms this assumption, arguing that kitsch is re-enacted in "our eager willingness to watch the very best "bad movies" or to relish with a hint of revulsion the extravagantly 'awful'". The above excerpt in the novel simply defamiliarises claims to innocence or purity, further foregrounding "the fundamental characteristic of kitsch which is the element of evil in the value system of art" (Calinescu, 2013).

Also, through these postmodern techniques, there is the resonation of banality in terms of heterosexual trope which forms the centre discourse in *Night Work*. Lois Tyson (1999, p. 317), in her article "Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism" acknowledges prevalent muteness of homosexual experience and more importantly its awareness, as recorded in literary texts. She decries this stigmatic undulation of lesbian and gay criticism in literary texts, arguing that very little is discussed about canonized writers, who are gay or lesbians, such as the likes of James Baldwin, Oscar Wilde, Langston Hughes, Virginia Woolf, Langston Hughes, T.S. Elliot and William Shakespeare. While affirming the relevance of personal information of author's background in the interpretation of texts, she questions unrestricted marginalisation of homosexual orientation, suppressed by racial hegemony of heterosexual constructs.

Generally speaking, the text *Night Work* is indeed a kitsch-text because it playfully parodies the sacred values attached to heterosexual orientation with a deep-seated foregrounding of different layers of homosexual practices. Through the narrator-protagonist and other characters, it playfully subverts homophobic reading, which is informed by abhorrence and fear of homosexuality, with appreciable degree of trite. For instance, a rich white character, Nate Perl, invites Night over to his expensive apartment strictly on sex business. He instantly pays Night for sex, stating expressively that it is in favour of his wife:

> Night:
> "Mr Perl, what would you like me to do?"
>
> Mr Perl:
> "My wife and a friend are in that room I just came out of. I want you to dance with my wife, fuck her with your big black cock and then leave."
>
> Night:
> "Sounds doable," I said.

> "One thing," he (Mr Perl) added… "You must wear this." It was a mask with Miles Davis's picture on it. There were holes for my eyes, nose, and mouth, but otherwise it was the late, great trumpeter's face. I put it on and Mr. Perl smiled. (George, 2003, p.93-94)

In *Night Work*, the representation of sexually ambiguity is pronounced and its postmodern affiliation reacts against heterosexual plot on which modernist novels are generally structured. Lois Tyson (1999, p.347) states that, "the heterosexual narrative is shadowed by a homoerotic sub-text" in a pervasive manner that could generate psychological disproportion; causing a disruption of "heterosexual sexual narrative". The first part of the above excerpt undermines the upheld standard of fidelity, mostly common in heterosexual relationships. The use of possessive pronoun 'my' and also a possessive nominal 'wife' illustrates a peculiarly global identity value which is fiercely constricting, particularly in relation to sexual practices. This socio-cultural identity is loosely devalued and its inviolability is playfully deconstructed, given Mr Perl's unusual instruction to Night, one which he did not even hesitate to pay for. But while proceeding on the act, Night becomes aware of Perl's hidden agenda when he (Perl) attempts penetrating Night's ass with his manhood:

> Night:
> "What the fuck are you doing?" I said as I turned to find Mr Perl behind me with a didlo strapped to his waist and a surprising long red-veined erection underneath.
> Mr Perl:
> "I paid for this, Miles."
> "No, motherfucker," I told him. "My butt is way off limits. (George, 2003, p.96)

Mr Perl's insistence that Night should wear the mask with Miles Davis's picture is not only significant but also proves racial subversion of identity. Using faction as a convenient background, Miles Davis is indeed a real-life character, who was born in 1926 and died in 1991. He is an African American and renowned worldwide for his expertise in Jazz music. During his lifetime, Miles recorded milestone success as an American Jazz trumpeter, bandleader and composer. But he is bisexual and appeared to have series of sexual relationships with other men. In the same vein, the naked female character, referred to as 'friend' (George, 2003, p.94) is already with Mrs Perl by the time Night walked in. She too was also wearing a mask with the picture of Billie Holiday, another real life African American jazz musician. Holiday's success as a composer, singer of Jazz is also smeared by her bisexual activities which she didn't even bother to hide. The wearing of the faces of these popular African American by Night and the unknown female character deliberately creates role play, in which there is a subversion of 'class' order.

In addition, since sex is control; since control is also defined as a synonym of power, Mr Perl's determination to sexually abuse Night and eventually the female character characterizes the racial subversion of power. Mentally, Mr Perl thinks he is asserting control over the black race, with his warped imagination of dominance on

the rich and popular black class. As far as Perl is concerned, Night ceases to exist, thus his deliberate reference to Night as Miles. He sees no difference and he does not care, even though Night repeatedly insists that he is not gay. Mr Perl: "The custom is always right!" His little face was crimson... "What's the big deal?" he said. "You guys are all gay anyway". (George, 2003, p.98).

At a metaphorical level of interpretation, sex and sexuality, in whatever form, betrays a strong notion of racial discrimination, which eventually leverages on identity reconstruction. Night violently refutes Mr Perl's hegemonic reconstruct. But significant also is Mr Perl's insistence that Night returns the Miles Davis mask. Despite Night's strong challenge, he insists that Night gives him back his mask, which connotatively translates to control. Deviant, Night takes 'Miles' with him, much to the chagrin and disappointment of Perl. Through this, Night seems to establish firm control over his personal sexual identity, as against narcissistic construct of a racial Mr Perl. But the sex scene purely radicalizes any self-absorbed heterosexual mentality. David Rosen (2016) defines the iconic representation of postmodern sexuality in terms of female and male hetero- and homoerotic porn, as reflected in the text. In the preface of *Sin, Sex & Subversion: how what was a taboo in 1950s became America's New Normal*, Rosen discusses how America's moral order was subverted; by subversion, he means a critical social and political engagement that challenges established authority. Whichever way it swings, sexuality in the twenty-first century cannot be distilled from the quest for identity, or its reconstruction. Hutcheon (1988, p.8) correctly asserts that,

> The political, social, and intellectual experience of the 1960s helped make it possible for postmodernism to be seen as what Kristeva calls "writing as experience-of-limits" (1980a, 137): limits of language, of subjectivity, of sexual identity, and we might also add: of systematization and uniformization. This interrogating (and even pushing) of limits has contributed to the "crisis in legitimation" that Lyotard and Habermas see (differently) as part of the postmodern condition.

African American experience, as expressed in *Night Work*, undergoes periodic oscillation, especially in relation to its stylistic import. However, there is a cyclical order of its thematic enterprise in terms of racism, class, sexuality and identity. And in the continuous search for identity, there is consistent subversion and reconstruction in the midst of intense inter and intra-personal conflicts, racial struggles, and endless psychological insurrection. In the end, Night finds reconciliation as a roadmap towards identity reconstruction. He finally heeds his sister's advice and reconciles with his aging father, who represents the stoic African American past. "I looked over at him and he hugged me, and I buried my face in his dry gray hair and dreamed of being a better man." (George, 2003, p.250) The point here is that irrespective of

contemporary identity construct, the African American experience must always relate to its history, as the unwavering foundation of the basic form of truth and reality.

Conclusion

Contemporary African and African American novels are undergoing literary metamorphism, represented by diverse postmodern imports, as this study underscores the rising import of postmodernist tenets in African American literature. Since black American writers are beginning to reflect nuances of postmodernism as strategic motifs in their works, the question to whether this development will, in the future, alter the traditional/modernist trope of writing is stimulating. In sum, this paper recognises this unconventional literary style in contemporary African American literary world as a principal tool in interrogating the worldview of black Americans in contemporary times.

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