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**NEW BLACK AESTHETIC FEATURES IN
 THE WORKS OF JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON**

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Abstract:

This paper discusses about the features of New Black Aesthetic art and how the first Pulitzer Prize winning African American short story writer James Alan McPherson proves himself a new black aesthetic artist with reference to his short story Elbow Room. New Black Aesthetic writers reject the rigidities of Black Aesthetics towards blackness and aim for greater pluralism. They acknowledge the multiple and culturally divided nature of an African American as natural. They move beyond DuBois' double consciousness and follow polyconsciousness and do not want to be an African or American but try to adopt world citizen status. They consider assimilation as a positive trait. New Black Aesthetic writers follow multiculturalism while black aesthetics believe in Afro-centricism. They blame Black Aesthetics too narrow, overtly political and prescriptive. Applying these features, an analysis was made to browse the new black aesthetic tenets in McPherson's short story Elbow Room.

Kew Words: *Multiculturalism, Polyconsciousness, Afrocentricism, Pluralism, Avant garde, Cosmopolitanism and Cultural mulatto.*

The Black Aesthetic of 1960s was a racial product of the Black Arts Movement. Black Aesthetic refers to certain artistic rules based on Blacks' ethnicity and preoccupations. They trust, only the blacks are capable of creating and judging African American Literature that represents black communities. They rejected the American standard yardstick applied to the African American literature and demanded that black literature must be judged according to an aesthetic grounded in African American culture. Hoyt Fuller asserts that, the black Aesthetic is “a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflects the special character and imperative of black experience” (9). Darwin T. Turner prescribes certain norms to be followed by these new critics,

All the new critics agree that the literature should not be judged good or bad according to its imitation of the styles and tastes of Europeans, according to its presentation of the styles and traditions stemming from African and Afro-American culture. For example, they point out the foolishness of expecting iambic meter in work of a poet who moves instead to rhythms of jazz or be-bop and they argue that it is supercilious or even racist to complaint that literature does not conform to the patterns and tastes of the white literary world if it does suit and meet the needs of black people. (315)

The most dominant characteristics of Black Aesthetics are its celebration of blackness, black essentialism and black heritage. They believed in “Afrocentricism”. They believed that African American identity is linked to Africa. They romanticized every facet of Africa. Black aesthetics were developed based on these African influenced elements. The slogan, “Black is Beautiful” shows the spirit of Black Aesthetics. This rigidity of the black aesthetics made them blind to deny African American diversity.

During 1970s, a few black writers raised against black aesthetics. They were called New Black Aesthetics. They blamed Black Aesthetics too political and prescriptive. Thus a new literary generation appeared in 1980s and 1990s. They objected the black aesthetics' racial desire for total dissociation from Western thought. They disowned the black essentialism of the black arts movement and adopted

multiculturalism of the 1980s and 1990s.

In his essay, “The New Black Aesthetics” (1987), published in *Callaloo*, the novelist Trey Ellis coined the term, the New Black Aesthetic and introduced this group of young writers as “new cultural Mulattoes” (235). The term genetic mulatto is used to refer to a black person of mixed parents and cultural mulatto refers to a person educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures. This group of cultural mulattoes ignites New Black Aesthetics. The New Black Aesthetic artists do not believe in DuBois' double consciousness. They do not want to confine themselves within a small boundary of blackness instead they try to be one with the universe. According to Trey Ellis, the salient features of the New Black Aesthetic art are,

1. Artists can borrow and reassemble across class and race line.
2. A parodic relationship to the Black Nationalist movement.
3. A group comprises of elitist and avant-garde artist.
4. Looking at black culture in a new unflinching way.
5. A belief in finding the universal in oneself.

(234-242)

In his essay, Trey Ellis suggests that the New Black Aesthetics must avoid the strict adherence to the traditional blackness. They should not believe in borders which will constraint their growth. They should aspire to liberate themselves from constrictions.

The first Pulitzer Prize winning African American short story writer James Alan McPherson deviated from the regular genres of African American Literature and followed a new technique of storytelling. Themes in his stories are entirely different from the regular traditional themes like suppression and racial discrimination. As avant-garde artist McPherson handled stories with different themes to show how his characters shifted from margin to the centre.

Two collections of short stories “Hue and Cry” and “Elbow Room” established him an important writer. In many ways, McPherson proves himself a typical new black aesthetic artist. He underwent a broad education and wide experience which made him a new black aesthetic artist. McPherson's progress as a young man was a movement away from Savannah and into the world. In Iowa, he befriended Japanese author Kiyohiro Miura, developing an interest in Japanese culture that led him to his lecturing in Japan. He also immersed himself in Greek and Roman classics. This provided him a fine novel platform where he can borrow and assemble various race and class lines. In his essay *A Region Not Home* McPherson says,

I have many friends here black and white and other... I am confident that here I am first of all a person, a human being. I have been accepted into the life of the community. I have open and free access to what in this community has meaning and value (96).

In the short story *Elbow Room*, James Alan McPherson enumerated all the possible problems faced by the inter-racial couple Paul and Virginia. *Elbow Room* can be viewed as a new black aesthetic story. The first feature of new black aesthetic art states that the artist is free to borrow and reassemble across race and class lines. In *Elbow Room*, McPherson fulfills this first feature of new black aesthetic art while introducing the protagonist, Virginia Valentine “a classic kind of a negro” (*Elbow Room* 286).

Virginia was born and brought up in a country town outside Knoxville, Tennessee. She enjoyed a degree of freedom that American blacks have not known before. She drifted through India, Kenya, Egypt and Israel. She travelled all over the world that made her understand that the oppositions to her blackness that she faces in America are not universal. She met many people like her. She made many friends. She was proved to be a person who understood the world and had witnessed the damages caused by racism. In his essay “Developing a sense of self: The Androgynous Ideal in McPherson's 'Elbow Room'” Mary A. Gervin explains Virginia as a self-assured person with a cosmopolitan outlook and a woman of the world. As a Peace Corps volunteer, she has travelled to Africa and the Far East. She is aggressive, suspicious, callous, and abrasive because of her myriad experiences. She had not entered into an interracial marriage lightly,

but with the full knowledge of the sort of opposition that she and Paul can expect. After marriage they never tried to dominate the other. They not only developed the attitude of looking at the world different ways but also regenerated themselves and found new directions for their life. Virginia is presented as a smart and a confident woman, who is bold enough to withstand the racist forces that may diminish her spirit. The narrator remarks as,

To people like her, imprisonment for generations, the outside world seemed absolutely clear in outline and full of sweet choices. Many could not cope with freedom and moved about crazily, much like long chained pets anticipating the jerks of their leaches. Some committed suicide. Others seeking safety, rushed into other prisons. But a few like Virginia rose and ranged far and wide in flight, like aristocratic eagles seeking high, free peaks on which to build their nests.

(Elbow Room 258)

McPherson artistically pictures Virginia's urge for freedom and aspiration to fly beyond borders. Paul describes Virginia as, "She is a bundle of contradictions. She breaks all the rules. All of you do" (Elbow Room 269). Besides he comments,

In this house we pay close attention to reality. By public definition Ginny is black, but in fact she's a hybrid of African, European, and India bloodlines. Out in the world she roughhouses, but here at home she's gentle and sweet. Before anybody else pretends to be tough, but with me she's a softy. It took me a long time to understand these contradictions, and it'll take my family longer (Elbow Room 269).

This contradiction is the cause of her wandering around the world. Another example of crossing and borrowing aspects of other countries is when; the narrator projected Virginia as a magical story teller.

Virginia Valentine was a country raconteur with stock of stories flavored by international experience. Telling them, she spoke with her whole presence in the complicated ways. She was unique. She was a classic of narrator. Virginia Valentine was a magic woman (Elbow Room 263).

This made possible because she feels free to make transcultural references and embody of cross cultural sensibility. Her travel around the world widens her understanding and embraces cross culturality. She does not want to be either an African or an American but tries to adopt a world citizen status. After their marriage Paul and Ginny tried to live in cosmopolitan style.

But they made special efforts to live in cosmopolitan style. Both of them were learning Spanish from their Chicago neighbors. They chose their friends carefully with an eye on uniqueness and character. They were the most democratic people they have ever seen. They simply allowed people to present themselves, and they had relationships with Chicanos, Asians, French, Brazilians and black and white Americans. But they lived in a place where people were constantly coming and going (Elbow Room 267).

When Virginia invites the narrator to the Mass on New Year's Eve, she says,

One thing, I learned from travelling is you accept the people the way they are and try to work from there. Africans can be a cruel people. Arabs I never did learn to trust. And there's a lot of us niggers that ain't so hot. But them raggedly-ass Indians taught me something about patience and faith. They ain't never had nothing, but they still going strong. In Calcutta you see crippled beggars out in the street, and people just walk on around them (Elbow Room 273).

This aspect of accepting everything in an unflinching way fulfills the fourth feature of New Black Aesthetic art which is looking at black culture in a new unflinching way.

The New black aesthetic artist McPherson is crafty and conscious in character making. He expresses the impact and influence of the features of the new black aesthetic art in his characters. Like Ellis, McPherson has also given a new and a complementary meaning for the term "mulatto" in his stories

while a tragic meaning was given by other African American writers. McPherson has contributed for the future further improvement of African American Literature with the new black aesthetic themes.

All these unique qualities of James Alan McPherson made Ellison comment on *Elbow Room* as the most rewarding collection of short stories to come his way in quite some time. In them James Alan McPherson reveals a maturing ability to convert the ironies, the contradictions of American experience into sophisticated works of literature. To his mind McPherson ranks with the most talented and original of their younger writers.

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