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**Self, Family and Community in John Edgar
Wideman's *Hiding Place***

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ABSTRACT : Through *Hiding Place*, Wideman has come out with more focused approach towards the black psyche, and has tried to give a perspective to the black community. In the novels written earlier, he does not involve himself in his deliberation. Moreover, he has seen at the black protagonists and the black community from a distance. But in *Hiding Place*, Wideman has given exclusive voice to his black protagonists. In addition, the theme is more focused, and more black-centric. However, as usual, the protagonists continue to be relentless searcher for something missing. And that something is family and community.

INTRODUCTION

It is a notable fact that the black intellectuals are importantly given peripheral status in the *Hiding Place*. Probably, Wideman has realised that intellectual artist may not essentially be separated from the community as an stand-apart individual. So, Wideman has striven this time to characterize the black intellectuals as integral part of the common populace of black origin. However, before integrating them with the black community, Wideman has made sure that the common folks belonging to the community have capability to rise above the destined stratum and transcend their isolation, frustration, despair, and ire to trace out a sense of belonging in the family

and the black community. For the first time, Wideman has tried to portray his characters capable of finding out resources to validate their proposition that the black community has a formidable culture.

Wideman has intentionally concentrated on the positive aspects of the folk community. The positive aspects which may have minuscule presence, but they are substantively potent enough to keep the black culture sustained. And because of his focus on the folk culture, Wideman has to leave away the intellectual perspective which has been very dominant in the first few novels. Wideman had got the intellectual perspective from the creative tradition of white writers, and also

from the traditions that never gave any weightage to the richness of the black culture. He could transform himself by directing his imaginative faculty away from the refined and variegated tradition of white perspective to the black folk tradition which has strength to survive amidst oddities and hostile preferences. Wideman puts the folk perspective at the centre and story emerge from the black folk perspective. Now the interpretation of the problems is made from the view point of the black community. Now, Wideman allows his black protagonists to emerge from the chaotic past, and put up a fight against the biased forces to solve their problems. Hence, Wideman allows the black perspective to emerge from the treasure-trove of the black traditions which have potentiality to connect the present with the past as well as with the future. Moreover, the perspective evolves from the wisdom and struggle of the black protagonists.

Even if the new perspective emerges from the traditions of the black folk community, it does not hesitate in inviting intellectual analysis. The critical giants and other analysts will certainly be amazed to find genuine rhythm and emotional richness in the perspective, although it finds all the vitalizing energy from the thoughts and deeds of the common folks. It is certainly not a perspective imposed by any extraneous agency such as intellectual narrator or intellectually refined viewpoint. James Coleman writes:

Since Wideman adapts his voice and viewpoint to that of the folk characters who actively and effectively cope in their world, we do not encounter well-intentioned, intellectual black characters who become trapped in their own imaginations and rendered ineffectual by the level of their thinking, as is the case in *Lynchers*. Wideman's approach deepens and enriches our appreciation of black folk wisdom, although the folk characters do not become fully aware of the broad implications and effects of their practices and beliefs.¹

From the portrayal of Clement, Bess, and Tommy, it is evident that the black protagonists are alienated, frustrated, and isolated from the mainstream life-light. Their present life is a saga of great suffering. But the outstretched world of mythic archetype provides an atmosphere to the protagonists so that they can trace out positive elements and optimistic notes for their survival, and also for quenching their thirst of getting an identity in the hostile surrounding, a family when little love exists, and a community when sense of collectivity has almost died down. And, with little hope and residue of the melted strength, they begin their journey to search for the self, family, and community.

While enduring the fear, anxiety, frustration, and alienation in the present life, the protagonists

embark on the course of journey into the realm of future seeking inspiration from the anecdotes, traditions, moral systems, and established conventions of the family, community, and race which survived through ages. They pick up the best possible from the treasure-trove of experiences of the black generations that lived in the past and made Homewood a place of cultural adequacy. The thoughts, deeds, and imaginations of the black folks who lived in the past in Africa and American South before finally settling at Homewood become the guiding spirit for the economically deprived, socially discriminated against, and racially marginalised protagonists.

Wideman gives utmost importance to the inner life of the protagonists as he has done in *Hurry Home* and *The Lynchers*. However, focus on the inner world that exists inside the protagonists does not deprive Wideman of his vision to concentrate on their dream-world made through their imagination. It is to be noted that the protagonists of the *Hiding Place* do not lose their identity in their isolated world of imagination and dream-fantasy. They continue to live in a place where they use their acquired voices to solve their problems. Coleman writes:

The black folk voices often speak internally but from a psychic region where the characters partake of the saving world of mythic archetype and use what they find to affect their actions in the present. The characters draw on

the repository of memory to find the positive, timeless values and traditions of black community and ancestry.²

The protagonists are full of imaginative dreams. But their dreams are not always tortuous, tiring, and terrifying. Very often, dreams give meaning to the imagination and creative faculties of the protagonists. The dreams provide sometimes divine perception and meaningful perspective to the protagonists. Coleman opines:

Memory centered in the mythic, archetypal world is also at least partly responsible for dictating the characters' language, and the ritualization of language reinvokes the traditional values in the present. In this sense, language is magic in a different, more positive and substantive way than it has been in *Home* and *Lynchers*. Dreams and language contribute to Wideman's black voice in *Hiding Place*.³

The protagonists of the *Hiding Place* have, undoubtedly, capacity and opportunity to get back to the traditional treasure of their forefathers and take the advantage from their experiences. But Wideman has an alternative plan for their characterization. He does not super-naturalise their personality, and portray them in such a way that they can use their potential to maximum use and solve the problems of their lives on their own. They are allowed with fair amount of freedom to

define their individuality, their family, and their community, and seek their companionship. It does not mean that they are required to face many problems. In fact, they are made to pass through severe tests and tribulations. The problems they face in everyday life put up challenges so serious before them that their experiences, imaginations, and the language fail to rescue them and put them back to the mainstream tradition. For instance, Bess suffers from memory-collapse, and her dreams become more terrifying and less tendering. In his imagination, Tommy always himself reaches the ideal he has set for himself. When he comes to real awakening, he finds himself in nightmarish situation. Tommy is, in fact, materially a successful man, as he is a public singer and rapper of wide repute. So there should be little worries for him, but reality is quite different. Moreover, when he lands himself in crisis, he finds that his talks and personal magic give very little solace to him. He experiences no specific transformation in his fortune.

However, one thing goes beyond any controversy. Whenever the protagonists land themselves in great crisis and spiritual agony because of hostile conditions and some human flaws, they fall back to their memories, dreams, and rituals of the traditional language they have inherited from their black genesis. And, as Coleman correctly says, **“At the end, these values produce a positive relationship between Bess and Tommy, give**

each of them a positive sense of self, and reintegrate Bess into family and community”.⁴

Clement, another protagonist, is all-pervasive spirit that serves as the inter-connecting force in the community. He works as a vehicular system for the sustainability and propagation of the black tradition. On the surface, he appears to be a nincompoop, and therefore, he is not taken by the people seriously. But Clement possesses most of the positive aspects of the black tradition. In fact, Clement's natural and uncontaminated demeanour represents the true essentials of the attitudes, habits, and traditional values of the black community, although the community is unaware of all these things. Clement's innocence, his non-cunning attitude, and simplicity make him an unconceited individual. And these are the traits, in fact, black community is known for. However, unassumed nature of Clement makes him non-egoistic person, who looks for the self, family, and the community.

Big Bob's barbershop, one of the major community centers, is the place where Clement lives for all seasons. It is the place where he dwells, rests, and works from. It is his undesignated home, the people who come to the barbershop are his family, and these people form a sociable community he feels he belongs to. This family and this community of people depend upon him for their presentable appearance and their cleanliness. He keeps the barbershop clean for his so-defined family and so-defined community.

And, this way, he presents to his family and the community as valuable caretaker. Moreover, he does not have any face in his innerness or before his eyes to identify as his mother, as he is an orphan. But he has a very strong, positive, and recognizable image, of course with a common face, of his mother, and keeps it strongly protected in his imaginative mind. Clement may not be as articulate as a black intellectual, but his genuineness speaks the true relationship with the self, family, and the community most impeccably.

Clement's innocence, his behavioural purity, and his faith in human relations compel the alienated constituents of the community to come together. Because of his unbiased and humanly attitude he works as the cementing force between the antagonised segments or between the envious individuals. He is a facilitator of human sensibility. He may not be a good communicator himself, but he is certainly a very conducive medium of communication. Therefore, it is not surprising to note that he **"is the line of communication between Big Bob and Miss Claudine, seemingly hostile opposites representing the profane and ungodly and the conservative and refined, respectively. He keeps Bess in contact with others in the community who try to avoid her totally because they fear her strange powers."**⁵ Clement mediates between Bess and Big Bob. He carries away the number Bess plays with Big Bob, and, in return, carries away the money from Big Bob to

Bess. Big Bob is greatly apprehensive about the super-natural powers of Bess, and is scared of any direct dealing with her in person. But Clement has no such apprehension.

Clement's represents the brotherhood, familial emotions, and social collectivity. When he sees John, the educated brother of Tommy who has little affection for his brother or has a kind of animosity for his brother, he finds familiarity with him. He identifies similarities between John and Tommy, and begins to look for humane feelings in him. John is, in fact, Wideman's fictitious transformation. Clement sees in John a brother, a friend, and a member from the same social segment. He instantly draws conclusion that John's eyes are same as the **"eyes of the ghost [Tommy] on Bruston Hill. Eyes that could scream across a room, through a wall"**.⁶ A great bond of togetherness exists between Clement, Bess, and Tommy. But it is his relationship with them that makes the link between Bess and Tommy legitimate and socially acceptable. Moreover, it is this relationship that exists so unbreakably between them that gives legitimacy and potentiality to the family and community bond. Clement is always alive to the binding energy that keeps the communication and linkage between diverse constituents of the community intact and unbreached. Clement can trace out the same glare in the eyes of John and Tommy. In the similar way, he can also comprehend and attend the **"silent call"** from Bess.

At one point of time, Bess finds recluse on the top of Bruston Hill because of severe frustration, alienation, and mental agony, and indulges there on the Hill in strange thoughts, not befitting her real self. She becomes cynical, distressed, and embittered with the entire social system. Every now and then, she reminds herself that she has taken a vow to disown Christianity and die on her own terms. The death of her only son she had given birth to in her late years continues to haunt her. In fact, she had become a mother after a long wait with her barren and infertile existence for many years since her marriage. She has already lost her husband. At present, her life is struck in the past, and she finds no way to shift the track from past to present. Wideman has narrated a story in the very beginning of the novel. The story is related to spring and Bess's youth. The theme of the story is so focussed that it has settled down in the consciousness of Bess. The story originates in the realm of Bess's dream. The name "Bess" appears in the story repetitively which appears to be irritating. Its only significance is that it indicates the emotive conversation between two individuals where call-and-response is a real and lively affair. Even if the story has nothing to do with the reality, it causes tingling impact in the memory which brings Bess back to life:

But she was young again and it was spring and she'd listen till whoever was telling the story got tired of telling it.

Her fingers played in the coarse grass [in Westinghouse Park in Homewood]. Over her shoulder and to the left toward the train tracks and the foot bridge, she could hear the chains of swings creaking. Somebody would be flying, gulping the blue air and trying to swallow it, keep it down before the next rush, the next mouthful when the swing soared to the end of its tether and you thought it just might pitch you into the middle of the steel rails.

Bess ... Bess. It was her man [her husband] calling. But he was long dead. He couldn't be telling the story. No one was telling the story because the sky was falling and the music dying and her man's voice was far away now, far and high away as the birds. Her man was a speck. A raisin, a seed, then a tiny hole in the sky like a stone makes just for a second when it hits the water.

Bess ... Bess.

She is saying her own name alone in the light that is not morning yet or night still but in between somewhere so she's not sure either has happened or will happen again. Bess. Saying her name so it's like the end and chases the story away.⁷

The episode of the spring story is the beginning of alienation, and gradually she finds herself completely depressed, isolated, and living with negative memories. Ugly dreams, strange and frightening thoughts, and cynical way of talking become her routine. However, her more and more interaction with Tommy relieves much of her agonised presence. Gradually, with Tommy's help, she comes back to her consciousness. She begins to recall the stories and episodes related to family. Re-union with the rituals and traditions of the community brings her back to the community as a loving, caring, and compassionate individual. She becomes a lively member of the community. She reminisces Homewood which happened to be a pleasant place for the community-living, and she had shared experiences of inter-human support, community-religiosity, and emotions of togetherness. Then, religiosity of the community did not impede the free flow of secular spirit. Her husband, Bill Campbell, and Tommy's grandfather, John French, were the prominent members of the blues music. Blues music was a link between life of Homewood and the life that existed in the past in the American southern region. In her childhood, Bess lived in the lively atmosphere of a supportive, caring, and active family. The pleasant atmosphere of the family where shared emotions of togetherness ruled the roost had capability to transform any bad eventuality in the refined good. Later, when she grew old and led an embittered life, she remembers, her family members tried to extract

benefit out of her evil power. An episode instantly comes to her mind when Tommy's sister, Shirley, came to her after all the doctors had lost hopes to save her child. It was believed that her single kiss could save the child. Shirley's child could not survive. Bess also attended the last rites. Bess still remembers the funeral, and the sad face of Tommy. The memory still haunts her, and inspires to dream of the family and the community:

The boy sleeping in her shed was Lawson and his sister was Shirley, Lizabeth's middle child. She had seen the boy at the funeral when they buried Shirley's baby.

She said the words again to herself *buried Shirley's baby* and the words were what she had been avoiding all along since she saw the baby's face. But she couldn't help herself. Even if the words roced the flimsy shack, rocked her soul as it plummeted with the crashing walls down toward the center of the earth. Sooner or later she'd put the faces together and say something like *buried Shirley's baby* and saying the words would be like hearing her man whistling the blues knowing her first step toward him would crack the earth knowing the crack was too high to get over and too wide to get around and too low to get under but knowing she can't help herself and moving toward that

sound, toward the emptiness which is all there is which is what she knows she will find after she stepped toward him and the earth has swallowed him again, swallowed his hair brushing blues and all there is of him left to love. Those words she said to herself, couldn't help saying to herself *buried Shirley's baby* moved her off of Bruston Hill and down again into the Homewood streets where people were singing and crying and making love and losing children and changing names like names could make a difference, like any of it made a difference.⁸

The words in the above quote are soft, emanating tragic notes, and talking about the events having taken place recently in the family. Repetition of the words, shabby punctuation, and semi-broken sentences reinforce the grave notes with density of emotional outburst, weighty sensibility, and powerful stroke-play. The entire quote evokes intense feelings for the family, and the helplessness of the community life. Bess, with her intensity of thought, appears to be most rhythmic, most phenomenal, and most flowing. The “singing and crying and making love and losing children and changing names” is the routine activity the people of Homewood have been involved in for generations together. Coleman says, “The words also remind Bess of the emptiness she associates with the loss of her

husband, but within this painful feeling, there is the full, all-encompassing support of God on the part of the individual and the community that is incorporated into the traditional Negro spiritual sung over the generations”.⁹ The words are pathetic, and they contain the grief settled down deep in the heart of Bess because of the sad demise of her husband. But these words are indicative of the omniscient presence of God who is “too high to get over and too wide to get around and too low to get under.” Life may be unusually threatening, it may be terrifying in spite of the presence of God, but the traditional essence of the black community believes that God is not biased. God always saves the innocent. Individuals, family, and the community are under His patronage, and therefore, Bess has still hope of reuniting with the family and the community.

Even funerals are symbolically important events that reinforce the intra-family and intra-community bond. Because of the funerals, family and the community feel reunited with greater bond, and absence of the deceased makes the people assembled at the funeral realise the importance of the family and the community. In particular, the realization of the importance of family and community is more intense in the innerness of Bess, because she has been a party to a baby's funeral. The repetition of “buried Shirley's baby” in ritualistic rhythm speaks volumes of the turmoil created in Bess's mind. And this turmoil compels her to re-see her family

and her community. She, therefore, appears excessively agitated, and she **“couldn't stop making the connections she knew she'd have to make”**.¹⁰

Wideman's use of repetitive words and sentences explicitly illustrates the agonising experience of the protagonists. In fact, it is the language ritualization that expresses various phases of the transforming process that goes on within the tumultuous mind of Bess, and that makes Tommy a real existence in flesh and blood. Repetition of words and sentences also reveal how the tempest inside Bess's mind forces her re-align herself with the family and the community. The following passage from the beginning the second section illustrates the intensity of her desire to get back to family and the community:

Don't you think I know you were out there? Don't you think I saw those long feet sticking out my shed. How you gone hide those long fet, those long legs. I knew you were out there. Where else you gone be?

She said it to herself a dozen times before she said to him. And didn't say it to him when she shook him awake. No, she was quiet then, quiet as the morning which wasn't even morning yet, quiet as dawn, as the dew and darkness still hanging on when she wrapped her sweater around the nightgown and

pulled on her coat over both and shuffled outside in her slippers to shake him awake. She was as quiet as the half sleep world when took hold to the stick leaning against her bed and dragged it and dragged herself out to the shed where she knew he'd be sleeping. That quiet when she grabbed the shoulders like she grabbed the stick laid beside her bed in case him or some other nigger was crazy enough to try and take her house, grabbed the knob of bone in his shoulder which felt like the knob of her walking stick and shook him awake without saying what she'd said a dozen times to herself beginning when she dreamed the feet and again when she looked through the walls, through the black night and saw them poking out her shed and again when she made herself awake, made herself struggle with the sweater and pull on the coat saying it a dozen times at least before she crossed to the shed and shook him awake. And didn't say it out loud till he was sitting at the table again like something the cat drug in and she was starting a fire in the stove because he sat there shivering, his eyes closed, a shadow hardly more real than the shapes moving on the ceiling as the stove flared to life and she got the kettle and got that water going.

Then she spoke to the shadow as if speaking to it might stop its shivering, make it real.

Don't you think I knew you were out there? Don't you think I saw those long feet sticking out my shed? How you gon hide those long fet, those long legs. I knew you were out there. Where else you gon be?¹¹

The above quote has, in the beginning, the words of Bess expressed in the form of an interior monologue. There is a flood of thought that keeps Bess's mind increasingly busy. Wideman has used traditional words and way of expression used by the common folks of Homewood. The entry of the third party narrator heightens the ritualistic intensity of Bess's disturbed mind. After taking over, the narrator keeps the charged atmosphere afloat albeit with greater emphasis. Narrator's repetitious iteration of Bess's ritual revitalizes the depth and meaning of Bess's repetition of words, sentences, and ritualization of language. After many repetitions of the words and sentences, Bess pronounces the ritual to Tommy, present only in "shadow", in audible tone, as if she were conversing to "real" Tommy. The entire book is replete with such repetitive expressions which reveal the intensity of longing of the protagonists for the self, family, and community.

With a changed outlook, Bess looks at the world around her. Now Tommy is not only in her

memory, but he has become a "real" existence. She now understands the meaning of relation, and she is extremely curious to protect it, make it stronger, and keep it in an endeared corner of her life. Often the dreams that the protagonists see are agonizing, but they also serve them in a way. They make the protagonists shelter-house for the traditional values of the black community. The word ritual Bess uses in the previous passage quoted above, conceives a physical ritual. Bess acts to make her relationship with Tommy potent and meaningful. As the quote says, Bess feels an urge in her heart to go outside in the shed to have a feel of his physicality. She wants to shake him awake, and requests him to come inside. In order to attempt actions, she dreams even in the shed. As the quote reveals, "**she dreamed the feet and ... looked through the walls, through the black night and saw them poking out her shed.**" Thus, the desire to have family relation close to her heart is so deep-rooted in her conscious that it makes its appearance through her dream. Hence, family and community are the objects Bess relentlessly solicit to associate herself with. And her her search goes on.

Bess struggles to establish a really tenable relationship with Tommy, which proves to be soothing and softening. This relationship with Bess inspires Tommy to look for traditional meanings of family and community, and search for the utilitarian value of such institutions. His search for family and the community to get

strength and inspiration begins now. Let us peruse a passage from the text:

He says, *Well, that's that, old woman, not knowing exactly what he means, saying the words because he's heard them before and said them before so they come easy but he doesn't know what he means, hadn't planned to say anything until the words come out just as he said them, almost as if they had found him and didn't bother to let him know what they were talking about. Well that's that. And he addressed the words to her because she was in the dark room with him, because she had taught him to plant [a garden], because she sent the boy [Clement] for Iron City, because she was sipping nasty shine in nasty water with him and it had been three days now and he was tired now, and high enough now to need somebody else to speak to, to draw him out of the fog into which he was sinking. The fog of his own thoughts, his own body, his own life which was settling over him again like the darkness draping her shack.*¹²

From the above quote, it becomes evident that Tommy is now ready to come out of himself, and is contemplating to adhere to a relationship with Bess and the community. His responsive gesture enables him to reshape his link with Bess, who is, in fact, everything for him – friend, philosopher,

and guide. Bess's nick name is 'Mother Bess'. And with the changed outlook of Tommy, Bess can become motherly to him in addition to her meaningfulness in many other ways. Earlier also, Tommy has heard and spoken such words, but then, words were powerful enough to use him. Now, the same words have provided a perspective to him. Now he is, seemingly, falling into the avenues of some system, and is ritualizing the words in an established pattern. The words have gathered meaningful connotation, and, therefore, they make Tommy realise the traditional value of family and community. His search, therefore, comes to a certain pause, but the life-story of relentless search for the self still continues.

CONCLUSIONS

Theme of the *Hiding place* is, therefore, the frustration and alienation of the contemporary black community. However, positive changes that occur in the psyche of the protagonists is very inspired by the mythic traditions, value system prevalent in the black community, and sustained conventions which refine the outlook of the archetypal black community. Bess and Tommy, two prominent characters of the novel, survive physically as well as psychologically because of the values, traditions, and customs rooted in the black folk community. While looking for identifiable self, family, and a resonant community, the tired protagonists reach out to the extended family and a sensitive community which have been existing in the Afro-American

community since ages. These ageless traditions and customs always come to the rescue of Bess and Tommy whenever they find themselves lost and wretched.

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