‘The Man’ in ‘the Artist’ in Select Novels of John Oliver Killens

1 Introduction:

One of the two approaches to literature- Art for Life’s Sake- holds that literature to be serving some purpose of life. It relates literature to life. In fact, literature cannot be aloof from life. As T.S. Eliot has mentioned in his trend setting essay- Tradition and Individual Talent, while explaining the concept of impersonal theory of poetry, that feelings/experiences in the life provide raw material to poetic process, which it objectifies in poetry. Eliot further explains that those feelings, necessarily, need not be the poet’s personal feelings, they may be fictitious one also. The latter opinion of Eliot may prove valid in incase of the affluent poets, but the middle class poets, to be exact, belonging to the suffering class need not look for any fictitious/hypothetical experiences for the poetic creation. S/he may express/project the feelings in literature. It seems true in case of the noted but underestimated African-American novelist and political figure John Oliver Killens, popularly known as John O’ Killens. He is recognized as the spiritual father of the Black Arts Movement.

2 Profile of John Oliver Killens

John Oliver Killens was born on January 14 1916, in Macon, Georgia to Charles Myles Killens Sr., a restaurant manager, and Willie Lee Coleman, an insurance company clerk. He was the second of the three sons. His parents were well read and kept abreast of trends and events important to African Americans. Killens' parents nurtured his pride in his Black cultural heritage, and aroused his interest in African-American history, folklore, and literature and a belief in the power of the arts to effect social change. His paternal great-grandmother told him stories of African–American endurance during the dark days of slavery. His maternal great-grand mother was raped at the age of twelve by her Master's son, with the result that she gave birth to his maternal grandfather.

Early in life, Killens wanted to become a physician; during his adolescent years, he intended to become a lawyer; and after his war experiences, he decided to become a writer. (Harish Chander. John Oliver Killens)
Killens was the founder and chairman of the celebrated Harlem Writers Guild, the oldest organization of African-American writers in the United States and perhaps the world. Killens became a spiritual father of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Killens strongly believed that there is no such thing as art for art’s sake. All art is propaganda, although there is much propaganda that is not art. A mentor to generations of black writers and inspired young black writers like poet Maya Angelou and Ossie Davis, Sarah E, Wright, Lonne Elder and Paule Marshall.

Killens graduated in 1933 from Ballard Normal School in Macon, a secondary school for blacks in Georgia. With the aim of becoming a law graduate, Killens attended college at various institutions like Edward Waters College (Jacksonville), Morris Brown College (Atlanta) and Howard University (Washington, D.C.) To fulfill his dream of becoming a law graduate he also attended the Robert H. Terrell Law School in Washington, D.C., but left without degree to study creative writing at Columbia University in New York. During this period, Killens joined the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) which kept him touch with the labor movement throughout his life. In the wake of World War II, he joined the military service. Killens served from 1942 to 1945 in a U.S.

Just as significant is his far ranging impact beyond the circles of writers and work-shoppers. Throughout his literary career, the home of John Oliver and Grace Killens remained refuge and meeting ground for the young and old, established and promising, among and between writers, musicians, actors, producers, dancers, painters, businessmen, politicians, students and activists, historians, journalists, statesmen, and exiled guerilla fighters of most persuasions, entering his home and sharing their moments with each other and with John O. (Louis Reyes Rivera, John Oliver Killens: Lest We Forget, 14)

When Killens was not writing, he worked for social causes and racial equality. A man whose low-key manner belied his hard-edged activist beliefs, Killens worked under influence of Malcolm X—and knew Martin Luther King JR. Killens was clear about his role as a writer with cause. He said, "My fight is not to be a white man in a black skin, but to inject some black blood, some black intelligence into the pallid mainstream of American life." He worked as a writer-in-residence at Howard University; Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee; and Medgar Evers College in New York. Killens was instrumental in establishing black writers' conferences at
each of the schools. In 1947, he organized workers for the Congress of Industrial Organization. He was known to visit with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and became close friends with Malcolm X, with whom he co-founded the organization for Afro-American Unity in 1964. (Erica Taylor, The Tom Joyner Morning Show Little-Known Black History Fact: John Oliver Killens).

Dr. Killens held a strong belief in the revolutionary power of writing and the need for people of color to bring their stories to light. That revolutionary power did not cease with the passing of the sixties, or the achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement.

Killens was a novelist, literary biographer, an essayist. Killens also wrote plays, screenplays, and numerous articles and short stories that appeared in publications ranging from *Black Scholar* and the *New York Times* to *Ebony* and *Redbook*.

His non-fiction works include *Black Man's Burden* (1965), essays on race in America; *Great Black Russian* (1989), a biographical work on the poet Alexander Pushkin; and two books for young readers, *Great Gittin' up Morning* (1972), a biography of Denmark Vesey, and *A Man Ain't Nothin' but a Man* (1975), which describes the adventures of John Henry.

In addition to these works, Killens wrote for both cinema and stage. He wrote a play *Lower than the Angels* in 1965 and screenplay for the film *Slaves* in 1969. He also had co-writtten a screenplay for the film *Odds against Tomorrow* in 1960 and a play Ballad of the Winter Soldier in 1964.

Many works of Killens have been translated into other languages like Italian, Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian, Hungarian, German, etc. His work are taught and studied in more than fourteen different languages in the world universities. But he's ignored in America.

Killens’ organizational and literary contributions earned him some notable awards which earned him vice presidency of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship (1980), and a Distinguished Writer Award from the Middle Atlantic Writers Association (1984). The Before Columbus Foundation, which sponsors the American
Book Awards, cited Killens for lifetime achievement in 1985. He was honored with the membership of the Georgia Writers’ Hall of Fame.

During the 1970's, Killens served as the writer-in-residence at Howard University's Institute for the Arts and Humanities. He also taught at Fisk University, Columbia University, Bronx Community College and the New School for Social Research. He spent the final years of his life as the writer-in-residence at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York. Killens died of cancer on October 27, 1987 at Brooklyn.

*Youngblood* (1954) is John Oliver Killens' landmark novel of social protest. It records the story of protest of a black family of in Crossroads, Georgia. The major characters in the novels are Joe Youngblood, a figure of heroic physical strength; Laurie Lee, his strong-willed wife; Richard Myles, a high school teacher from New York; and Robby, the Youngbloods' son. This first novel of Killens novel reveals a southern Black family's struggle to assert human dignity in the face of white racial atrocities. In the novel, Killens details the racism with which southern African Americans had to contend and how their manhood is suppressed in a systematic way. As the blurb observes this is not a protest novel pleading, but a revealing and passionate document concerning the real ways African Americans garner that inner strength in order to combat the social, economic, educational and religious dictates fully against them. Here Robert Youngblood becomes the mouthpiece of Killens. Killens also evidences how the black efforts of racial goodwill bear no fruit in America.

Killens’ second novel *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962) has its backdrop the period of World War II. It focuses on the hardship and segregation faced by the African American soldiers into a racist military, from basic training in Georgia to battlefields. In the climax it describes a bloody confrontation between white and Black American soldiers in Australia.

Solly Saunders, the novel's protagonist undergoes a striking change -- from an accommodationist who wanted to be accepted in the world of white folks to a blossoming Black Nationalist willing to risk his life on behalf of his people, from a submissive soldier to sacrificing his ambitions in favor of making a common cause with his race (Louis Reyes Rivera, John Oliver Killens: Lest We Forget, 11)
Killens' third epic, 'Sippi (1967), happens in the wake up of the social struggles resulting into the Civil Rights period. The book’s title denotes the Black refusal to accept the white terms indicating racial supremacy, from Miss-issippi to 'Sippi. Largely, like Youngblood, in this novel also, Killens uses many of his own experiences of Georgia, and thus novel becomes a more realistic expression of the Black American’s than ever- seen.

Through the character of Charles James Richard Wakefield, Killens provides a peep into the superficial progressive thinking of a changing "white man" and exposes the vanity of reformist politics, and the semblance of progress without the essential substance of human rights intended to be changed at all. In the midst of bombings, beatings, lynching and other forms of indiscriminate murder, African Americans move to insist upon their voting rights as the least bloody method of gaining control over their own lives.

The Cotillion: or one good bull is half the herd (1971) is set in New York City, Manhattan and Brooklyn, unlike other novels of Killens that have south as their backdrop. One finds a shift from the southern America to North America. The novel successfully attempts a de-whitening tendency of the Black Americans. The protagonist Ben Ali Lumumba successfully orients the Black family of Lovejoys to their African roots and culture instead of the white Cotillion. The middle-class skin game among African Americans in their attempt to emulate white society is explored as metaphor to the need for self-definition. Similarly, the Afro version of a debutante's ball (the cotillion) serves as metaphor to the European yardstick that's been absorbed by African Americans while engaging that search for their own point of reference. The process of Africanizing the cotillion calls into question the validity of adopting someone else's rites of passage. (Louis Reyes Rivera, John Oliver Killens: Lest We Forget, 12-13)

Killens' last novel The Minister Primarily remains unpublished to this date. It is a comedy of errors where an African American returns to the States, New York, Washington, Mississippi, as a double for the Prime Minister of a small nation. Here again Killens undertakes a search for an African roots exposing the want of morality and the greed for anything counter to European models without giving any second thought to validity of the models.
A reading of the record of Pulitzer awards proves how the white racial mainstream literary and governmental agencies treated Killens with prejudice. The mainstream white media and white literary award agencies refused to acknowledge merit and potentials of Killens’ wiring. Whenever Killens’ novel was nominated for the Pulitzer Award for Fiction, the Award Committee decided not to award any book in those respective years. In the words of his own son in law Louis Reyes Rivera:

John Oliver Killens was and was not the only writer ever to receive and not receive the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction three consecutive times, all in a row, and yet never receiving it once, even when critics were announcing that he was the only one who could get it. Each time he was nominated, his book would be the frontrunner all the way, yet by the end of the running there’d be no winner that year (John Oliver Killens: Lest We Forget, 14).

There was no Pulitzer given for fiction in 1954, the year *Youngblood* was published. In fact the book had been the first book produced by Harlem Writers’ Workshop. It marked the rise of a new and contending voice in American letters. The critics and the public commended it but the committees refused oblige it.

Again, there was no Pulitzer given for fiction in 1964, the year when *And Then We Heard the Thunder* was published and there were no other books even being nominated. Killens’ was the only one written with WWII as backdrop, but again the committee remained adamant on saying that no work deserved the award.

The same happened in 1971; the year that *The Cotillion* was published. But the committee once again recorded it as incapable and unwilling to acknowledge good African American fiction.

Since 1918, according to record, the Pulitzer committee has continuously made awards in fiction. In addition to the three times that Killens should have received the prize. These three mentioned books are each considered classics in American fiction. No other American novelists except Booth Tarkington and William 'racialist' Faulkner were the only novelists up through
1976 to receive the Pulitzer twice. Had not the Committee been unfair, and if the society were not racist, John Oliver Killens would have been the first novelist to have won that prize three consecutive times. But the racially prejudiced committee preferred to ignore the work.

John Oliver Killens will take a position against the enslavement of our minds, like Paul Robeson, with no other choice but to bear the brunt of injustice, like Paul Robeson, and yet continued to do what his conscience demands straight through to his death, even while he was pushed into obscurity by the racial indifference.