

I, Too, Am America: A Journey from Protest to Affirmation

(Special Reference to the Poetry of Langston Hughes)

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Abstract

Langston Hughes is considered to be the representative African American poet who had been the leader of the most important literary and political movement in America known as The New Negro Movement or The Harlem Renaissance. It was an unexpected outburst of creative activity among African Americans. Harlem Renaissance as a golden age of African art was an effort to remove the masks of racism. Langston Hughes is known for registering the sufferings faced by the Blacks in the hands of Whites in his poems. He witnessed the racial discrimination and he presents America is the affluent society only for the Whites and segregated society for the Blacks. The close reading of his poems reveals a feeling of estrangement and exploitation of the Blacks. Racial discrimination is well presented in his poems. His poems are not an imaginary illustration of unregistered evil directed against the Blacks. The present paper will examine the pathetic plight of Blacks and his poems reflect his anger against the white capitalists and the realization of freedom through constant protest.

Keywords: The Harlem Renaissance, The New Negro Movement, Racial Discrimination, Segregation, Capitalists.

Introduction

The word "racial", is the adjective form of the noun "race", which reflects to a group of persons related by common descent, blood or heredity. Discrimination, as a concrete form of racism, is known as an unfavourable action towards people because they are members of a particular ethnic group (McLemore 108).

Racial discrimination is a type of hatred based on the race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin of an individual or a group which is likely to humiliate, insult or frighten. It takes place when a person is treated less favourably than another person in a similar situation because of his race, colour or nationality, the individuals of the less privileged group start realizing their inferiority and helplessness. Protest refers to the revolt of an individual or a group of people against something that is established as a truth. This protest arouses when the individual or the group feels that the established truth is made to curb his freedom. So a revolt is a violent action against a government or a ruler that opens a clash between the two opposing groups.

African American writing evolved to protest racism and tyranny of the White Americans, and also to gain self pride and identity. Langston Hughes was one of the most influential Black writers of 1920's. He witnessed racial discrimination, segregation and prejudice, and as a literary activist he raised his voice against injustice and suppression. He longed for freedom from the shackles of prejudice and segregation to attain equality. He wrote during the time when Black culture became more appealing to White society through the jazz and other music that the Negroes produced. Throughout his poetry, Langston Hughes depicts the pathetic predicament of the downtrodden African Americans. The closer reading of Langston Hughes' poetry reveals a hostility and mistreatment of the Negro community in America. The Negroes lived in an environment where they were subjected to tortures and torments. They lived in fear and apprehension. Langston Hughes with tremendous force raised his voice for the hurts and humiliations suffered by Blacks. These deeply felt emotions turned out to be angry outburst against colour prejudice, social injustice and economic inequality and exploitation. While presenting the present

inter-racial discrimination in America, M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham explains:

The publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773 by Phillis Wheatley, then a nineteen- year old slave who had been born in Africa, inaugurated the long and distinguished, but until recently neglected, line of black writers in America. The complexity and diversity of the African-American cultural heritage- both Western and African, oral and written, slave and free, Judeo- Christian and pagan, plantation and urban, integrationist and black nationalist- have effected tensions and fusions that, over the course of time, have produced a highly innovative and distinctive literature (215).

Robert Blaumer is of the view that the doctrine of racism usually involves the idea that one's race is superior and has the right to rule others. It holds that the white race is superior to the coloured, and it also has the belief that the races are unequal in general and specific abilities (46).

Aim of the Study

The study of the present paper traces the development of Langston Hughes as a man as well as a poet through his poetry. This study focuses on analyzing the various poems of Hughes. These poems were written when there were mistreatment and oppression faced by African American people. Hughes represented the black people as an oppressed race. However, through these poems Hughes tried to encourage black people to love themselves, and be proud of what they are.

Poetic Discussion

The period known as Harlem Renaissance also called The New Negro Renaissance, is mostly associated with 1920's. During that period an unprecedented amount of Black writing was published. Langston Hughes is a representative voice of the Blacks, who had to bear the burden of oppression and callous exploitation. The discriminating system to which he was subjected, forced him to think that he was alienated and not treated as an integral part of the civil society established by the white European settlers in America. Slavery had placed the Blacks in dehumanizing conditions. Hughes' poetry brings forth the anguish of the Black American who was entrapped in self doubt. He gives eloquent expressions to the feelings of bitterness and scorn of the Blacks in his poems.

Born in Missouri in 1902, Langston Hughes, made remarkable contribution to the Afro- American literature and regarded as a leading voice of America. Influenced by the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Walt Whitman, and Carl Sandburg and inspired by the movement of DuBois, he began to write poetry in the young age of thirteen (Leach).

Langston Hughes published his first poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, when he was nineteen. Hughes's first book of poetry, *The Weary*

Blues, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1926. After graduating from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, won the Harmon gold medal for literature in 1930. He wrote about his travels to Cuba, Haiti, Russia, Soviet Central Asia, Japan, and Spain during its Civil War during the 1930s in his *I Wonder As I Wander* (Lopez).

He wrote novels, short stories, plays, poetry, operas, essays, and works for children. With the encouragement of his best friend and writer, Arna Bontemps, and patron and friend, Carl Van Vechten, he wrote two volumes of autobiography, "The Big Sea" and "I Wonder as I Wander", as well as translating several works of literature into English. With Bontemps, Hughes co-edited the 1949 anthology "The Poetry of the Negro" (Wikipedia).

Hughes himself was the victim of racial discrimination, prejudice and segregation. He narrates how he was humiliated as he was legally classified as second- citizen. He, in his biography writes about one of such incidents that happen to him:

I remembered, when I was in my teens, coming up from a summer in Mexico on my return to school in Cleveland, I had gone into the dining car one evening as the train was heading through Texas. I was seated alone when a white man came in. Without looking, he sat down opposite me. When I glanced across the table, I saw that the man was staring at me with a look of utter amazement. Suddenly the man jumped as though he had been shot and cried, "Why, you're a nigger, ain't you?" Then the man fled from the dining car as though he had sat down in front of a lion by mistake. As many Negroes as there are in Texas, what could there be about just one at a table in a public dining car that could so startle a white man? The colored waiters who saw the incident laughed, and so did I (Hughes 83).

Langston Hughes had a vision of Africa, the land of his ancestors, which his racial brethren still inhabit. When he published the much anthologized poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", a poem dedicated to Dubois, he had not visited Africa. In this poem, the geographical and historical associations gradually culminate into an intensity of experience as the speaker identifies with the rivers. Expressive of the heritage and strength of the Black, the poem is profound and mysterious, capturing the force of the spirituals. "My soul has grown deep like the rivers", is a significant metaphorical expression. Rivers represents depth timelessness, like the history of the Black race which has witnessed the rise and fall of civilizations associated with the rivers:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. (Rampersad 23)

Then there is a shift from the Nile to the Mississippi. The Negro soul is so deep and ancient is still conscious of its heritage and strength.

In "Sun Song", he addresses the Negroes as:

Dark ones of Africa,
I bring you my songs
To sing on the Georgia roads. (Rampersad 122)

Geographical association with African and South American locales provides a firm soil to the roots of ever growing tree of awareness. Africa is a distant ideal which Hughes integrates with contemporary realities of the American life of the Blacks.

The Africans were brought to America not to be treated as humans, but the intentions of the Whites were to exploit them as slaves. They did all this due to the black colour of the Africans. Hughes depicts the issue of black colour in "Aunt Sue's Stories":

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves Singing sorrow songs on
the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly (Rampersad 23).

Uprooted from the natural environment of Africa, the Blacks in America feel suffocated for the lack of freedom, joy and happiness. In "Negro", Hughes establishes a definite identity between the Negro of America and the continent of Africa:

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.
(Rampersad 24)

Hughes devoted considerable attention to South in his poems but at the same time he failed to identify with the life and spirit of the South. In *Crisis* he writes:

South was an unpleasant sound, an overtone of horror and of fear as the blacks were made to suffer racial persecution, economic exploitation, segregation, lynching and a host of other indignities (Hughes 162-163).

Lynching of the Blacks on the charges of raping a white woman was one of the most commonplace events. Fear to the race and hatred for the Black by White, lead a knife at his genital, a rope aroused his neck and fire all over him. It is because the Black man demanded freedom and resisted the superiority of the White, is lynched (Bajaj 115-116). In "Sothern Mammy Sings", Hughes writes:

Last week they lynched a colored boy.
They hung him to a tree.
That colored boy ain't said a thing
But we all should be free.
Yes, m'am! We all should be free.
(Rampersad 227)

In the poem, "One Way Ticket", it has been accepted by the Blacks that there is nobody to protect them;

including God. So they have to seek other sources of power to protect them.

To make the Blacks powerful from within, Hughes tries to transform the self image of the Black. The exploited and lynched Black is not depicted as a helpless victim of the White oppression but a martyr like Gandhi and Christ who died for a cause so that the suffering and oppressed might live with dignity (Bajaj 118). In a brilliant autobiographical poem, "Christ in Alabama", Hughes projects the Negro image of Jesus Christ:

Christ is a nigger,
Beaten and black:

Nigger Christ
On the cross
Of the South. (Rampersad 143)

The expression, "Nigger Christ", is symbolically significant picture of Christ. In his "Bible Belt", Hughes makes the Black realize that even if the Blacks were as sacred, pure and moral as Jesus Christ, they would be lynched:

It would be too bad if Jesus
Were to come back black.
There are so many churches
Where he could not pray
In the U.S.A.,
Where entrance to Negroes,
No matter how sanctified,
Is denied,
Where race, not religion,
Is glorified.
But say it—
You may be
Crucified. (Rampersad 440)

Lynching has been symbolically equated with crucifixion. In "Christ in Alabama", Jesus Christ is created in the Negro image.

There is another significant dimension of Hughes' poetry of 1920's and 30's. it may be pointed out that "The New Negro", of "The Harlem Renaissance", becomes the "Red Negro" of 1930's. The poor and Black were brought into the stream of world-wide movement against oppression. The union is forged under Communist Party. In "Good-Bye Christ", hughes appears to have been completely influenced by Marxism. In this poem he says to Christ:

Make way for a new guy with no religion at
all —

A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin. (Rampersad 166)

It would be wrong to regard Langston Hughes as a hard-core Marxist. He was no card holder member of the Communist Party. But his sympathies for the working class can be traced in his poems, composed in 1925 and in 1928 respectively. When Marxism became popular in 1930's Hughes saw in the movement a hope for the oppressed Blacks. He believes that a revolution alone can bring about changes in the social order and economic set up by wiping out all kind of differences. He bids "Good-bye" to Christ and asks Him to "make way for

Karl Marx. Hughes feels that the emancipation of the society lies in the hands of the workers who have the power to break the backbone of the vested interests. In "Revolution" he feels strongly that the "great mob" composed of the workers of the world has no fear and that they will inflict a crushing blow upon the enemy-the capitalist. Under the influence of The Negro Movement Blacks started violating the laws called Jim Crow Laws established against them. According to Woodward:

Negros were incapable of being assimilated politically, socially, or physically into White society----. They were either excluded from railway cars, omnibuses, stagecoaches and steamboats or assigned to special "Jim Crow" sections; they sat when permitted, in secluded and remote corners of theatres and lecture halls; they could not enter most hotels, restaurants, and resorts, except as servants. They were educated in segregated prisons, nursed in segregated hospitals and buried in segregated cemeteries. (Woodward 18-19)

Conclusion

Hughes has made it clear that America is not the land of White race but of all those who inhabit there. After a lot of rebellion, the Blacks have started imagining of America with all love and harmony between Blacks and Whites. He believes that a time will come when White man will realize the worth of Blacks as an indispensable member of his society. A time will come when White man will feel ashamed of his cruelty and exploitation of the Black and will believe that the Blacks also represent America.

Aware of his American heritage like any other Afro-American, Hughes seeks power within his self, his community and his country. His poem, "I Too", explains the identity of the American Blacks with

America itself. He is confident that by dint of the new strong image he would acquire equality and then:

They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed —

I, too, am America. (Rampersad: 46)

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