



A TRUMPET FOR THE HIDDEN LIFE OF AFRICANS: A STUDY OF LANGSTON HUGHES' SELECTED POEMS

KEYWORDS

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The suppression and exploitation of the marginalised 'Other' people have been hidden in the utter darkness of the perpetuating Ideology and they have been unspoken and unrecorded in the glorious pages of history. Literature and above all, the power of words are used to give life and blood to these murdered experiences. It stresses the belief that words are 'not mere black marks on the white paper' instead they are capable of addressing or explaining the social, economical, political and cultural aspects of the society.

The renowned Afro- American poet Langston Hughes sought refuge in the world of poetry to express the terrible experiences and hardships of Africans in America. As Carey Nelson usefully points out:

" It is one thing to decide that poetry can help illuminate, a real political world, but it is another thing to imagine that poetry is itself a terrain of political action, that what poetry does to and for people, what people do for themselves with poetry's assistance, reshapes the political arena itself" (183".

The lives of Africans were hidden in the White world and they were denied even the right to live only because of the colour of their skin. The dominant Ideologies of the white people have been Othering and exploiting the black people. Langston Hughes used his poems as weapons to fight against the whitish brutality and he created his poems as an inspiration for the Black people to assert their identity that "I am a black". His clarion call for the Afro-Americans to rise up is clearly evident in his poems " I too sing America", Theme for English B" and "My people".

African American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. Throughout the history of African American literature, the degraded life of Africans comes to light. It begins with the works of such late 18th century writers as Phillis Wheatley. It was mainly dominated by the slave narratives at the beginning. They are the written accounts of enslaved Africans in Britain and its colonies. It depicts the slavish lives of Africans and how brutally the human lives were held up as a commodity to be sold in the market the whippings they faced were not just physical but they crated shame in the Africans to be Blacks. The slave narrative "The interesting narrative and the life of Ouladho Equiano" is an example that describes Equiano's time spent in slavery and it portrays his journey from slavery to freedom and parallel journey from heathenism to Christianity. The fictional accounts of slave narratives were there like Harriet Beecher Stoves' Uncle Tom's Cabin and Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the life of a slave girl that addresses the struggles and sexual abuse that slaves faced on the plantations.

The movement Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a time of flowering of literature and the arts. It was a cultural movement that spanned the 1920s. During the time, it was known as New Negro movement, named after the 1925 anthology by Alain Locke. The movement also included the new African-American cultural expressions across the urban areas in the north east and Midwest United States affected by the Great Migration. It is generally considered to have spanned from about 1918 until the mid 1930s. Until the end of the civil war, the majority of African Americans had been enslaved and lived in the south. After the end of slavery, the emancipated African Americans, freedmen, began to strive for civic participation, political equality and economic and cultural self determination.

Most of the African American literary movement arose from a generation that had lived through the gains and losses of Reconstruction after the American civil war. Many in the Harlem renaissance were part of the Great Migration out of the south into the Negro neighbourhoods of the north and Midwest. During the early portion of the 20th century, Harlem was the destination for immigrants from around the country, attracting both people seeking work from the south, and an educated class who made the area a centre of culture, as well as a growing Negro middle-class.

Harlem Renaissance was an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the New Negro, who through intellect and production of literature, art and music could challenge the pervading racism and stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics, and racial and social integration. The creation of art and literature would serve to "uplift" the race. The major themes of Harlem writings are influence of the experience of slavery and emerging African-American folk traditions on black identity, the effects of institutional racism, the dilemmas inherent in performing and writing for elite white audiences, and the question of how to convey the experience of modern black life in the urban North. The notable writers of this movement are Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Omar Al Amiri, Langston Hughes etc.

The Harlem Renaissance was successful in bringing the black experience clearly within the corpus of American cultural history. This new identity led to a greater social consciousness and African Americans became players on the world stage, expanding intellectual and social contacts internationally. It helped to awaken the self determination and identity of Blacks.

Langston Hughes is the forerunner of Harlem Renaissance. He asserted that "the negro was in vogue when Harlem

was in vogue". He was born in Joplin, Missouri. He grew up in a series of small mid-western small towns. Hughes father left his family and later divorced his mother, going to Cuba and then to Mexico, seeking to escape the enduring racism in United States. After the separation of his parents, while his mother travelled seeking employment, he was raised mainly by his maternal grandmother. He sought to overcome his loneliness was by losing himself in the world of stories and by writing poetry. Writing enabled him to let out his feelings and express what he felt by forcing him to take a searching look at himself the world around him. He opined that "i believed in books more than people". His career had an influence of his grandmother. Through the Black American oral tradition and drawing from the activist experience of her generation, Mary Langston instilled in him a lasting sense of racial pride. The same ideas are carried along by Hughes through his entire poems.

Most of the early poems of Hughes focused on how it felt and what it meant to be black. The sounds and music of black culture attracted him, above all, he could identify with black culture's theme of feeling alienated from the rest of the society, and he embraces all black society in his poetry. Hughes, himself, experienced the evil hands of racism. During the time that Hughes was entering college, most universities made it very hard for blacks to gain admission. The blacks who were admitted to such universities usually had to live in segregated dormitories or else find private housing off campus. He also faced difficulties when he entered Columbia University. When he began to write, there were harsh objections. In 1926, Langston Hughes shared his thoughts on the challenges facing African American artists of his time in an essay "The Negro artist and the racial mountain" that:

"Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears"(65).

When Hughes spoke of human suffering, he was specific. "We Negroes of America, he told in the second international writer's congress, "are tired of a world divided superficially on the basis of poverty and power- the rich over poor, no matter what their color. We Negroes of America are tired of a world in which it is possible for any group of people to say to another: You have no right to happiness, or freedom or the joy of life"(124). Hughes could not separate his interest in Blacks from his poetry. Hughes identified unashamedly black at a time when being black was thought of a curse. He stressed that "black is beautiful". He asserted a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate. His thoughts united the people of African descent across the globe to encourage pride in their diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. His poems Theme for English B, My people and I too sin America are

the finest examples for his revolutionary attitude towards the evils of racism and he trumpets the hidden lives of Blacks through his poems.

Theme for English B is a finest poem of Hughes'. The poem sets in the background of a classroom. The teacher tells the speaker to go home and write a page tonight; this page should come from himself and be true. The speaker wonders if it is that simple. He begins by writing that he is twenty-two, "colored," and born and schooled in Winston-Salem, Durham, and at college in Harlem. He writes that he is the only "colored" student in his class. He walks down a hill into Harlem, crossing streets before arriving at the Harlem branch of the Y. He takes the elevator up to his room, which is where he is writing this page.

The speaker writes that at his young age, it is hard to know He hears New York. He likes to eat, drink, sleep, be in love, work, read, learn, and "understand life." He likes receiving pipes and records (Bessie Smith, Bach or bop) as Christmas presents. Just because he is "colored" does not mean he does not like the same things that people of other races like. He wonders if his page will be "colored" because it is his and he is not white. The speaker writes that his page will be a part of his white instructor and a part of himself, since he is a part of the instructor - "That's American." Sometimes the instructor does not want to be a part of the speaker and sometimes he does not want to be a part of the instructor, but they are a part of one another, and that is the truth. They learn from each other, even though the instructor is older, white, and "somewhat freer". He concludes, "This is my page for English B."

Hughes uses this poem to speak that blacks have the same right to live and exist that cannot be denied to any dominant class. His inspiration is evident in the lines:

"I guess colored doesn't make me NOT like

the same things oth

er folks like who are other races.

So will my page be colored that I write?"

He speaks that blacks have the equal position in America and above all, he justifies that even the Whites are incomplete without blacks. The Whites have been marginalising the blacks but Hughes brings a new idea that even the blacks can deny the whites. it is ,of course, an attempt to awaken the blacks to believe that their race is not wrong. It is represented as:

" You are white----

Yet, a part of me, as I am a part of you.

That's American.

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me

Nor do I often want to be a part of you".

Hughes' poem "I too sing America" also asserts that the blacks are also Americans. It articulates the experiences of the Blacks and the decision to fight against the domination of White colour. Hughes wrote "I, Too" from the perspective of an African American man - either a slave, a free man in the Jim Crow South, or even a domestic servant.

The lack of a concrete identity or historical context does not mitigate the poem's message; in fact, it confers on it a high degree of universality, for the situation Hughes describes in the poem reflects a common experience for many African Americans during his time.

The speaker begins by declaring that he too can "sing America," meaning that he is claiming his right to feel patriotic towards America, even though he is the "darker" brother who cannot sit at the table and must eat in the kitchen. This alludes to the common practice of racial segregation during the early 20th century, when African Americans faced discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives. They were forced to live, work, eat and travel separately from their white counterparts, had few civil or legal rights, were often victims of racial violence, and faced economic marginalization in both the North and the South. The speaker does not languish in despair, however. He proclaims that "tomorrow" he will join the others at the table and no one will dare send him back to the kitchen. It is expressed as :

**Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.**

Not only that, but the "others" will see "how beautiful" the speaker is and will therefore feel ashamed. This statement is extremely hopeful and optimistic. The speaker demonstrates a heightened sense of self and proclaims his ambition to assert his legitimacy as an American citizen and as a man.

The invocation of America is important, for Hughes is expressing his belief that African Americans are a valuable part of the country's population and that he foresees a racially equal society in the near future. Many critics believe that "I, Too" is an unofficial response to the great poet Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing." This is likely given Hughes's expressed affinity for Whitman's work, as well as the similarity between the titles and choice of words. In Whitman's poem, a variety of Americans - including a mechanic, carpenter, boatman, and mother - sing joyfully about America. Langston Hughes also sings of America and thereby he gives voices to the silences of Africans.

His very short but weighty poem "My people" plays an important role in bringing out the hidden life of Africans. His trumpet come in these short lines :

**"The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people
The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.
Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people".**

The speaker proclaims that the night and his people are beautiful. The stars are beautiful, as are the eyes of his people. The sun is also beautiful, and so are the souls of his people. Hughes wrote this short and charming poem in three two-line stanzas, using very simple language. He compares the darkness of the night to the faces of his people, describing both as "beautiful." However, he also compares his people to the sun - which mirrors the dignity and brilliance their souls. Many of Hughes's Harlem Re-

naissance contemporaries and critics wanted him to focus his writing on the best and brightest African Americans in order to make a case for racial equality, but Hughes preferred to write about the working class; the men and women that he lived within his childhood and later, in Harlem. Throughout the poem he speaks of "his people" and justifies that black is beautiful and it is not to be condemned. The assertion of identity shows the oppression that they faced because of being Black.

Hughes wrote about the black people, black music and black experiences, while using black American speech rhymes and dreams. His poems Theme for English B, I too sing America and My people are the notable poems of Langston Hughes that he uses to trumpet the hidden life of Africans in America. Langston Hughes was the spokesperson of the shaded and vague life of Blacks. He alters the identity of Blacks from suppressed and exploited to the strong and powerful race as he says in a poem: "I am the NEGRO, of much sterner stuff, And not the "old darky", so easy to bluff". It is the ideology that Hughes perpetuates in his poems.

