



African American Experience in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes' contribution to the African American Literature is unquestionable. He is a massive name that has worked for the welfare of the Negro race facing all the problems in the white dominated American society. His sufferings put a remarkable impact on his thinking, mind and soul which have found its creative outlet in his writings. This impact makes him a poet of Blacks. The critics call his poetry as by Black, of Blacks and for Blacks. Thus, he is regarded as a leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance. The present paper attempts to explain the dominant presence of African American experience in the poetry of Langston Hughes.

Keywords : Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, African Americans

Introduction

History of the Negro race is a grim tale of ups and downs. Aborigines of Africa, they were as rich, as strong and as old as any other race of mankind. But with the arrival of the Whites the existence of the Blacks was poisoned. They were traded as Black slaves by the Portuguese in 1644 to the USA. Later on more and more countries joined hands in this human business. But finally this age old suppression resulted into a struggle where some black people started making efforts to assert themselves through various ways as painting, music, sculpture, poetry, drama etc. All Black American artists from the early 1920s through to the early 1930s termed this period as "Harlem Renaissance." All the major artists of the "Harlem Renaissance" as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon, etc captivated the literary scene and the Harlem area "became the national centre of African American culture including the art of painting, theatre, music, and dance" (Abrams 147). About the Harlem Renaissance, Nirmal Bajaj tells:

Harlem Renaissance grew out of social, psychological transformation and blossomed during the decade.....symbolizing the liberation of the Black in mind, spirit, and character. It was an emotional experience for those who lived it. It gave birth to sensitive, sophisticated, complicated and resourceful human beings who were capable of tolerance, cooperation, and love. (Bajaj 7)

African American Experience in Hughes' poetry

Langston Hughes, born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, has received most of his studies in Lincoln, Illinois, Cleveland, and Pennsylvania, where the African Americans are considered to be the students of minority but their capability in rhythm is widely accepted. He records one of his childhood experiences, "I was a victim of stereotype. There were only two of us Negro kids in the whole class and our English teacher was always stressing the importance of rhythm in poetry. Well, everybody knows-except us that all Negroes have rhythm, so they elected me as class poet" (Hughes, TBS 71). Hughes, including domestic atmosphere tells about his father James Nathaniel Hughes, "My Father hated Negroes. I think he hated himself too, for being a Negro. He disliked all his family because they were Negroes and remained in United States where none of them had a chance to be much of anything but servants...." (Jemie17). Therefore, Langston Hughes lived in a society that was completely dominated by White men. He remembers the company of his grandmother, "She...held me

in her lap and told...stories about people who wanted to make the Negroes free...." (Emanuel19). Thus, not only social atmosphere but his family experiences have also made him to use poetry as a weapon by which he could give an effective expression to cultural and ethnic qualities of his black race in order to shape a society. "He has asserted his voice of self-acceptance" (Berry 87). For the first time, there has been a man on the literary scene to glorify his "Blackness" and not to feel ashamed of his being Black.

In fact, Langston Hughes is proud of being a Negro. He takes his colour as an inspiration for becoming active and strong. In his poetry, he wishes to transform the self image of the Black. In his poem, "My People" he speaks,

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. (Hughes, Selected Poems 13)

His verses reflect a keen insight into the life of the Negro masses and give a vivid picture of their sorrow, miseries and poverty through the ages. But for this, he has never used bitterness in his poetry. "Cross", "Mulatto", and "Christ in Alabama" are some of the poems where the poet has used inflammatory images to produce a cool controlled anger, as in the following verses of a poem "Negro", he writes,

I've been a slave"

..

I've been a worker:

..

I've been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs,

I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:

..

I am a Negro:

Black as the Night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa. (Hughes Selected Poems 8)

Many critics have alleged that Langston Hughes' poetry is "too simple, unserious, unreflective and very common in nature" (Wagner 108). However, Hughes depicts some of the major issues of the Blacks in his poetry. Milton Meltzer suggests, "To read Hughes with sympathy and clear sightedness opens the doors to regions still dim to our perceptions. The function, of literature and our special need, is to awaken such awareness" (Meltzer 71). In his poetry, Hughes chooses his material from the Black culture, which is declared by the Whites, as well as upper middle class Negroes, as inferior, ugly and unworthy of any good art and literature. He declares about himself and his fellow beings:

We younger Negro artists, who create, now intend to express our individual dark skinned selves without fear of shame. If White people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.... We build our temples for tomorrow...free within ourselves. (Hughes TNAATRM 694)

Some critics like Saunders Redding and Faith Berry see him as a radical voice asserting the rights of the African Americans for a dignified place in American society and claiming all the privileges due to them as citizens. His poetry shows that a Black is also an equal creature of the world as White man. Not only a mature Negro, but also a small child is conscious of his black skin and like his whole race, he too, demands a place for himself. In his poem "Merry-Go-Round", a coloured child at Carnival asks:

Where is the Jim Crow section

On this merry-go-round,

Mister, cause I want to ride?

Down South where I come from

White and colored

Can't sit side by side (Hughes, Selected Poems 194)

Richard Wright, a Black American novelist and critic, affirms, "...the Negro tried to learn to live the life of new world in an atmosphere of rejection and hate" (Emanuel 7). Perpetual sufferings and servitude forced him to ask himself that whether he, too, belongs to this world or not.

Throughout his life, Hughes seems to be searching the identity of the Black. He carries on this search in many directions to find his roots. He even tried to create a mythical unity between the souls of Blacks and unending rivers of Africa. In the poem, "The Negro Speaks of the Rivers," he defines

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers, ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My Soul has grown deep like the rivers.

...

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My Soul has grown deep like the rivers. (Hughes, Selected Poems 194)

Like many of his Contemporaries, Hughes also looks to Africa to find his roots and feels an urge and need to go back to Africa. But his search answered only a few questions and raised many more. After having visited Africa, Hughes writes, "was only an American-Negro who loved the surface of Africa but I was not African" (Hughes IWAIW 203). Thus after having been grown up in America, Hughes seems to be content with the conclusion that "American Blacks were American not Africans" (Berghahn 167). In his poem, "I Too," he sings

I, too, sing America

I am the darker brother (Hughes Selected Poems 275)

Though Hughes uses the word black frequently in his poetry, he is proud of being an American. He asks, "Why should I want to be White I am a Negro and beautiful!" (Richardson and Fahey 47). He has the courage and hope that one day in America he, too, like a White man would be able to enjoy the same freedom. In his poem, "Dream Variations," he sings with high hopes,

To fling my arms wide

In some place of the Sun.

To whirl and to dance

Till the White day is done. (Hughes, Selected Poems 14)

Conclusion

Thus, it is the very African American experience which makes him as an ardent humanist who deals with the problems of the African Americans in the white dominated American society. He says, "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind" (Hughes IWAIW 106). He believes in the ideals of liberty, equality and universal brotherhood. His creative oeuvre reflects that how he constantly struggled for the dignity and equal rights of African Americans.

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