

Color and Poverty in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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In this paper, we attempt to gain some insight into the problems faced by the African-Americans before they attained equal rights in American society. The exploitation of Afro-Americans started as soon as they stepped on the land of America in 1607 at James Town, Virginia. Initially they were brought as indentured laborers but the whole scenario got changed after some time and slavery became the practice of the day. In the middle of the eighteenth century people began writing about the racist, arrogant and oppressive treatment of the white Americans to bring awareness and unity in the Afro-Americans to fight for the common cause. Many following generations of writers have been inspired by this tradition and tried to free their people from the shackles of bondage. Langston Hughes, an Harlem Renaissance poet of the early twentieth century was also one among them who fought through his writings to create a better state for his people based on equality. In this article, we have chosen those poems of Hughes which throw light on how they were exploited and marginalized based on color.

Writing about the social issues is not an easy venture for a poet. In this concern Hughes says:

Poets who write mostly about love, roses and moonlight, sunsets and snow, must lead a very quiet life. Seldom I imagine, does their poetry get them into difficulties. Beauty, lyricism are really related to another world, to ivory towers, to your head in the clouds, feet floating of the earth (Hughes 205).

Hughes was a lyricist not of natural beauty but of poverty. He was born poor and had a very hard life from the beginning. Jim Crow laws and poverty shaped him into a radical writer. In his early poems he wrote about his own personal difficulties. Sometimes, certain aspects of his personal problems coincided with that of many other people. Truly speaking, his own problems of putting up with the American life were the same as those of millions of segregated Afro-Americans. Langston Hughes writes in his article *My Adventures as a Social Poet* :

The moon belongs to everybody, but not this American earth of ours. That is perhaps why poems about the moon perturb no one, but poems about color and poverty do perturb many citizens (Hughes 205).

What Hughes tries to convey in these lines is writing about existing social problems stimulates ones awareness to fight against those evils and helps them to lead better life.

In the poem *Migration*, Hughes depicts racial problems of the Afro-Americans especially of those who lived in the Southern States. The very critical of those problems were, the widespread lynching and racism in the South. To escape this they tried to migrate to the North, with the hope of getting good jobs and good schooling for their children. When the migrated children went to their schools they were being treated badly. Not only the whites even the colored people of the North ill-treated them.

In relation to this he writes:

The colored children
Hate him, too,
After awhile
He is a little dark boy
With a round black face
And a white embroidered collar (8-13)

Noticing this, Hughes wrote this poem to make them feel better by telling that the colored people of Southern parts are in no way different from those of the North in their ancestry. This also shows his concern to bring unity among the Afro-Americans of different regions in America by depicting the real problems of his people. In the poem *The White Ones*, he pleads the white people not to torture the Afro-Americans on the basis of skin color. The lines:

I do not hate you
For your faces are beautiful too.
I do not hate you
Your faces are whirling lights of loveliness and splendor, too.
Yet why do you torture me
O White strong ones
Why do you torture me? (1-7)

Beauty cannot be used as a yardstick to decide the superiority of the people. All the colors have their own different status. It will be shallow if some one considers white as more beautiful and black as ugly. Moreover the Afro-Americans conceded that white represents loveliness and splendor, yet they were not out of discrimination and torture. That is why Hughes persuades whites not to give any problems to them as they do not hate anybody. The tone implies their helplessness of not doing something to come out of that kind of discrimination.

Grant Park the poem plunges at once to the life of utter poverty of the Afro-Americans where their everyday life seems to be a kind of struggle to get out of that social evil. In this poem Hughes concentrates on the adverse effects of poverty. The odd menial jobs tax their body and mind. Often they work and sleep on iron benches in the Grant Park of New York City in chilly weather. The parks are meant for recreation, but for these unfortunate ones that is a refuge after a long day's work. Due to this they are made to take any risks and difficult jobs which result in deep pain in their body and hands. The following lines go well with this idea:

The haunting face of poverty
 The hands of pain
 The rough gargantuan feet of fate (1-3)

The poet doesn't see an immediate end to their plight. They feel pain in their hands when they do work profusely. Even their heart aches deeply as they have not done anything wrong to anybody but in return they are denied of their rights and oppressed by the whites. The situation is quite tragic and the pain experiences are unending. In *A Song to a Negro Wash Woman*, the poet praises the qualities of the Afro-American woman, her hard work and her physical powers.

Oh wash woman
 Arms elbow deep in white suds
 Soul washed clean
 Clothes washed clean
 I have many songs to sing you
 Could I but find the words. (1-6)

Hughes employs that colored ones are hard working and pure in heart. It seems in America all the menial jobs are done by the Afro-Americans. Many a times this is more of exploitation than employment in spite of it they do their work diligently. Diligence will not come out of nothing but pure self. The poet wants to show the relationship between a pure self and diligence and he succeeds here in that. The poet appreciates the wash woman so much that he wants to sing to her or sing about her but his problem is that he is at loss for words. In other words the poet wants to say that 'words' cannot fully express beauty of her hard work that is symbolic of the poet's love and understanding of the washwoman. The poet has some special place for the Afro-American women because she is doubly oppressed. Even the poem *Troubled Woman*, depicts the agony of oppression with the metaphorical image of a flower.

She stand
 In the quiet darkness,
 This troubled woman
 Bowed by
 Weariness and pain
 Like an
 Autumn
 flower
 In the frozen rain,
 Like a
 Wind-blown autumn
 Flower
 That never lifts its head again. (1-11)

It describes an Afro-American woman, standing in complete darkness with her head

bent down which is symbolic of her slavery and subjugation. He compares the helplessness of the woman to an autumn flower which is unable to lift its head due to heavy rain and strong wind. The suffering of woman is a very common theme among the Afro-American writers and Alice Walker's novel "The Color Purple" also deals with this theme. Celie, the leading character in the novel was harassed, ill treated and exploited throughout her life by her stepfather, husband and her children. But the only difference between these two women is that troubled woman in the poem accepts her defeat but the oppressed woman Celie in the novel learns to resist and tries to define herself in the end.

As Marxist historian, Bettina Apthekar has rightly observed, 'the subjugation of woman is the oldest form of human oppression, with origins that date back to several thousand years before Christ. It was in essence the first class division in society, for woman's oppression is rooted in the fact that she was made the property of man and reduced in a literal sense for centuries to the status of the slave.' In all capitalist social formations women's oppression 'is embedded in law, theology, work and in assumptions about marriage, the family, sexuality and procreative capacity' (Apthekar 87).

The following lines of the poem *Park Benching* reflect the plight of the Afro-Americans in finding works for their survival.

I've sat on the park benches in Paris
Hungry.
I've sat on the park benches in New York
Hungry.
And I've said:
I want a job.
I want work.
And I've been told:
There are no jobs.
There is no work. (1-10)

Most of the times jobs they get are either hunting or gardening. They at times unwillingly accepted those jobs with the feeling that world will fetch them better jobs later. The poet himself has experienced the odds of poverty and the impact of class and racist society. He tried a lot to keep his hunger away when he had no money to eat anything. But it became so difficult for him as it keeps coming back intensely. He writes in his autobiography "The Big Sea" as 'Going to bed early and sleeping late couldn't keep hunger away' (Hughes 151). This hunger made him to travel to Paris and New York in search of jobs but everywhere he faced discrimination. Most of the times people thought him to be an illiterate and were offered the jobs of elevator operator, bus boy, seaman and sharecropper. Langston Hughes was not an illiterate; he had his college education and was also a poet which the racist society ignored. Hughes at times accepted the jobs of an elevator operator, bus boy or seaman and happily worked. For him at that time survival was most important than protesting against the racial prejudice.

The poem *Cross*, depicts Hughes as a child of multiracial decent. Like many other

Afro-Americans of his time he battled with identity, blaming his parents, which he discusses in this poem.

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black? (9-12)

The poem also describes the differences between the death of a white man and the death of an Afro-American woman, one of privilege and one of poverty. This poem may not be actually discussing the death of his parents. But the significant fact is that many rich white men had children with African American women, yet they kept separate lives, and often kept it as secret. This poem is a representative of the racial mindset and hypocrisy of whites.

In the above poems Hughes portrayed the realistic society of his times. Though it throws light on many of the problems faced by the Afro-Americans, those are interwoven with the main problems of color and poverty. Hughes had the first hand knowledge of all the problems faced by Afro-Americans felt the need for his art to take a socio-political stand to affirm the dignity of all human beings. The beatings, lynching and daily humiliation of segregation that African Americans suffered in the South and elsewhere outraged Hughes. So he accepted the responsibility to speak out against these injustices in his writing and tried to restore the rights of his people by bringing awareness in them. Even now his poems inspire them to move forward and to create a better future.

Works Cited

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