An Analysis of Racial Discrimination in Langston Hughes Selected Poems

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James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright and columnist. He is one of the great Harlemite and spokesman of the black consciousness. He was one of the earliest innovators of the new- literary art form jazz poetry. Hughes is best known for his work during the Harlem renaissance.

Langston Hughes published more than three dozen books during his life time, starting out with poetry and then expanding into novels, short stories and plays. Hughes’s work often spoke plainly about the lives of ordinary black people which in later years earned him great reputation as one of the major black voices of the 1900’s. His work include the poetry volumes The weary Blues (1926) and Shakespeare in Harlem (1942) The novel not without laughter (1930), and the short story collection The ways of white folks (1984). He wrote two personal memoirs: The big sea (1940) and I wonder as I wander (1956). His poems depicted the sorrows, sufferings, yearnings, longings, dreams and plight of his race (blacks) in America. He along with other writers of Harlem Renaissance ventures out to bring a great change in the life of the blacks.

Blues is the daily record of woes and sufferings of Afro-American. It is the sad music through which the Negro expresses his feelings. It presents the occultration of the Negroes. In the poem “Weary blues “a black man plays his blues in an old piano in a Harlem bar. “the dull pallor, lazy sway, gas light “reveals the atmosphere of sadness. 

“He did a lazy sway . .
He did a lazy sway…”

He made a sad rangy syncopated tune. The Negro sings that he got nobody in this world except himself and he felt hopeless and wishess to die rather than to live. This shows the life of the blacks in America. He sings all over the night and went to sleep overnight and slept like rock or a dead.

“Aint got nobody in all this world,
Aint got nobody but maself

While the weary blues echoed through his head
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead”

These lines show the pathetic condition of the blacks during that time. The negroes had to work hard and they were treated like an inanimate object by the whites. The negro expresses his sorrows through singing (blues).

In the poem “cross “Hughes expressed the pathetic condition of a mullatto.

“My old man is a white old man
And my mother is black
If at all I cursed my white old man
I take the curses back”
The speaker is neither black nor white. And he is born for a white man black mother. The poet confesses that if at all he cursed his parents he wishes to take the curses back because there is no use in cursing the He says:

“My white old man died in a big house
And my mother in a shack
I wonder where I’m gonna die
Bieng neither white nor black”

He expressed the difference between the death of Whiteman and the death of black women, one of poverty. This poem is about the speaker’s life. However, it is not about Hughes himself but could also reflect his own life.

The poem “mother” to son is about black mothers advise to his son. Amidst poverty, suffering and hardship she survived because of her determination. And she wants her son to follow her footsteps. Life for her is not crystal stairs.

“Well, son, I’ll tell you;
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stairs”

This poem carries the message for the universe that is determination helps one to survive amidst hardships. The struggles we face today are nothing when compared to struggles of our ancestors. The mother, even though she was poor, was able to give her son advice that was priceless.

“Don’t you set down on the steps
‘cause you find it’s kinder hard”

Hughes like a jazz trumpet announces the world the culture of the black. The blacks were not rich, they were poor. The mother advises her son not to give up amidst of all sorrows.

“Life for me ain’t no crystal stair
It had tracks in it
And splinters”

These lines show the life of the blacks. There is no any carpet in their way. It is bare. They have to face hard life filled with darkness. The black mother advises son to climb without giving up in life, with hope. She wants her son to climb up in life. This shows the clear picture of the life of the blacks.

The voice in the poem “The Negro mother” is that of the black mothers through the ages. In the opening line the narrator addresses her children.

“Children, I come back today
To tell you a story of the long dark way
That I had to climb, that I had to know”

In the narrative that follows, the poem depicts the capture and hardship of black slaves and speaks of the will to endure that kept them going.

“I am the darkgirl who crossed the red sea
Carrying in my body the seed of the free
I am the woman who worked in the field
I am one who labored as a slave,
Beaten and mistreated for that I gave“

The mother urges the children to transform the future so that that they may live in dignity and freedom from white depression.

Hughes depicted realistically the ordinary lives of black people. Many of his poems, written in rhythmical language, have been set to music. Hughes’s poems were meant to be read aloud,
Hughes had expressed with ardent voice sociopolitical protests. He portrayed people, whose lives were impacted by racism. He wrote about southern violence, Harlem street life, poverty, prejudice, hunger and hopelessness. He wants his people to see the world through the black soul and not through the white eye. His mental disintegration, his search for identity and belonging are well expressed in his poems. Through his poetry he depicted the complexities of Negroes.

Works Cited: