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Voicing “Black man’s Soul”: A Study of Select Poems of Langston Hughes

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Abstract:

Langston Hughes was a recognised poet during 1920s and a representative leader of Harlem Renaissance. It was he who wrote about that period as “the negro was in vogue”, which was later rephrased as “when Harlem was in vogue”. The Harlem Renaissance has paved way for African American writers to write themselves and their experiences into the grand narrative of American identity. Elements of African American culture and tradition are renovated in his poetry. His poems resonate the idea of black-consciousness and try to create a new identity for Afro-American community. There is a celebration of blackness in his poems. This paper endeavours to focus on six select poems of Langston Hughes- “A Dream Deferred”, “I, Too”, “Negro”, “My People”, “As I Grew Older” and “The Weary Blues”. All these poems are short, personal in its tone and talk about the “dreams” of the poet and amalgamate it with the political plight of America. The reflection of the lives of working class Blacks in America and confronting the racial discrimination are major themes in his poems. Hughes’ poems blends both celebration and resistance, and this makes him an unique voice during the great revival period in African American literature and arts.

Keywords: African American Identity, Black-consciousness, Old Negro, New Negro.

It was during the era between the two World Wars (1914-1939), there occurred a revival in American literature and that resulted in “modern literature” in America. Though the Great Depression of 1929 has created a huge economic as well as political crisis in the country, it has paved the way for new thinking and Renaissance in the mid-nineteenth century. America, always known for its idea of Great American Dream, began to face difficulties in fulfilling, achieving its dream of giving equity and equality to everyone. Many writers during the period manifested their disillusionment and alienation through their literary outputs. The same period has also witnessed the strong waves of Harlem Renaissance which started after First World War (1917) and continued through 1920s. At that time Harlem has developed “into a vital center of African-American culture in America” and made the period remarkable for its innovations in “literature, music, dance, painting, and sculpture by African-Americans” (Abrahams 126). The Harlem Renaissance has paved way for African American writer to write themselves and their experiences into the gran narrative of American identity. The period was known for its tremendous number of literary output and literary experiments. Writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Nella Larson and many other contributed their literary outputs toenrich the literary production of the time. All these writers tried to establish

their own writing style which celebrated their identity as African Americans, and at the same time their writings were an act of confrontation against the white supremacy. Though Afro-Americans are known for their music and art, during this era both these genres gained more popularity because of the new experiments in this field were done by New Negro artists. It has also contributed to the literary innovations such as Jazz, Spirituals, Blues and other literary works which unravels the plight of African Americans.

Langston Hughes was a recognised poet during 1920s and a representative leader of Harlem Renaissance. It was he who wrote about that period as “the negro was in vogue”, which was later rephrased as “when Harlem was in vogue” (Hughes). The Harlem Renaissance was a moment when the New Negro identifies his self and celebrates his ethnicity with pride. The blackness was celebrated during this period of revival. Langston Hughes renovated this elements of African American culture and tradition in his poetry. His poems resonate the idea of black-consciousness and try to create a new identity for African American community. The representation of black working class and their lives and culture in his writings make Hughes an authentic voice of the Harlem Renaissance. His was “the project of constructing an entire literary tradition upon the actual spoken language of the black working and rural classes- the same vernacular language that the growing black middle class considered embarrassing and demeaning, the linguistic legacy of slavery” (qtd. in Hutchinson 107). The poems of Hughes always brim with the African American literary innovations such as Jazz and Blues. This paper attempts to focus on four select poems of Langston Hughes- “A Dream Deferred”, “I, Too”, “Negro”, “My People”, “As I Grew Older” and “The Weary Blues”.

“A Dream Deferred” or “Harlem” is Langston Hughes’ short poem which echoes the disillusionment of African American community after II World War. Though the African-Americans were liberated from the chains of slavery through the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation legally, they are still discriminated from the main stream of the society due to the racial prejudice of the White people. Civil war has given right to vote, right to property and all other rights to this group of people, but all the rights remain only in legal documents. The dream of the Black people in America, to live freely according to their will and enjoy the freedom like Whites, always continue to be deferred. When this dream gets constantly deferred or postponed the people stay at the crossroad between hope and hopelessness. The speaker of the poet asks “What happens to a dream deferred?” (1)

The poet compares the deferred dream to a raisin that dries up in the sun. The real dream is like a fresh and juicy grape, but it becomes raisin, losing all the freshness and moisture within it, when the dream is constantly postponed. The poet goes on comparing the deferred dream to many other images. He compares it with a “sore” that “fester” (4). By bring this image the poet tries to portray the pain and sufferings of the African American people. The image of “rotten meat” (6) intensifies the sense of disgust. A dream deferred may also stink and it also indicates the catastrophic results of ignoring or filibustering people’s dreams. Again the deferred dream is compared with the “crust” formed on a “syrupy sweet” and to a “heavy load”, to show the roughness and heftiness of the situation. The final line of the poem is rebellious in its tone when the poet asks “does it explode?” (11) The poet

foresees that one day all the frustration will end up in an explosion, which results in crossing all the boundaries of restrictions and limitations. America offers pursuit of happiness for all its citizens, but the White society restricts the Black people of the same nation in many ways and suppresses them. In his book, *The Epic of America* (1931) James Truslow Adams defines American Dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman” (Cullen 7). But the dreams of the African Americans always remain under the despotism of the White supremacy.

The same revolutionary tone is seen in Hughes another poem “I, Too”. According to Alain Locke, the Negro spirituals have revealed themselves by breaking the stereotypes set by the Whites. Their minds have “slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority”. So they should shed “the old chrysalis “for achieving a “spiritual emancipation”, and this will enable the Negro community “to enter a new dynamic phase” with a “renewed self-respect and self-dependence” (2). Langston Hughes celebrates his race and takes pride in his race’s skin colour. He is not at all ashamed of calling himself as a “darker brother”. The Blacks, even after getting liberation from the Whites are being exploited. An African American is not allowed to sit with a White, because they consider the Blacks inferior to them. They send them to kitchen, and there the “darker brother” sits and “eat well, / And grow strong” (6-7). The second stanza of the poem starts with “Tomorrow/ I’ll be” (8-9), this shows the poet’s fortitude to do something in the future. The following lines are highly rebellious in its tone, which nuances the poet’s invincible spirit of action. He says, when tomorrow the company of the Whiteman comes, he will not go to the kitchen but he stay there at the table. This has some resemblance with the famous speech of Martin Luther King when he says “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” (King 4). At the end of the poem Hughes proudly proclaims that “I, too, am American” (18).

By creating a black consciousness Hughes tries to “redress the negative self-image created in many black people by their long history of enslavement and discriminatory treatment made inescapable” (Ashcroft et al. 24). Through his poems, Langston Hughes tries to create a new identity –“New Negro”, who is different from the “Old Negro” who had “long become more of a myth than a man” (Locke 1). In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), Langston Hughes clearly explains the mind set of young African-American artists, who are unconsciously hating their race and yearn to be like Whites. The essay also talks about the aversion that parents instil in the minds of African American children against their own race. Hughes in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” advocates the young writers to overcome the barriers of racial discrimination not by imitating the Whites, but by understanding the spirit of their own race. For him the mountain or the barrier that stands in the way of “any true Negro art in America” is the “urge within the race toward the whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mould of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (Hughes).

In the poem “Negro”, the speaker takes pride in his identity and asserts that “I am a Negro” (1). He is shedding away the ‘Old Negro’ concept and trying to make ‘New Negro’ with a new identity with his own ethnicity. He is never ashamed of to proclaim his identity as a Negro. The same notion can be seen in the poem “My People”. “Negro” presents the self-proclamation of the poet and in the poem “My People” he becomes the mouthpiece for his community. He says:

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa. (1-3)

“My People” is a six lined short poem in that he says:

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. (1-6)

In this the speaker identifies and recognises his own experience with people in his community. He announces that he belongs to a community, where the people and himself are as beautiful as night. Like that every person in his community is also beautiful as night. The speaker identifies himself with the group and celebrating the blackness of their complexion. Here Hughes is trying to make a new ideological construction that is “New Negro, by breaking away all the negative stereotypes created against them. Emily Bernard in her essay, “The Renaissance and the Vogue” says that:

The New Negro was more than a persona: he was an idea, an ideological construction. The New Negro was invented, in part, by blacks attempting to correct the negative stereotypes about them that were already in play by the time they arrived in the New World. . . . Black people created the “New Negro as an attempt to convert popular stereotypes about blacks from those based upon absence (of morality, intelligence, and other basic features of humanity) to presence. (qtd. in Sanders 29)

This redefining and reconstructing of black identity is reflected in Hughes’ poems.

Langston Hughes addresses the issues racial discrimination in his poem “As I Grew Older”. The speaker compares the racial barriers with a wall that separates him from his dream, which is as bright as a sun. When he grew older the wall also begins to rise and it touches the sky. It shadows his dream by shedding darkness and makes him lie down under that shadow. He is incapable of resisting back against the racial discrimination and yielded to the oppression. The poem lambastes the White supremacy and at the same time the speaker takes pride in his racial identity. He declares that- “I am Black” (18) and feels proud in saying

that his hands are black. This same image of dark comes in his poem “The Weary Blues”, where the hands of the singer is described as “ebony hands” (9). But towards the end of the poem, the speaker shows a rejuvenated spirit by calling his fellow beings to unite their thoughts and actions and it is illustrious.

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night.
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun! (24-33)

The speaker’s call for his people is to break the wall, to wipe out the shadow, to shatter the darkness and to smash the night. The speaker advocates his people to turn the darkness of oppression into dreams of freedom and equality. This poem is a polemic against the racial discrimination nevertheless a celebration of a New Negro’s racial identity.

The Weary Blues is path-breaking artistic expression in the form of music around the end of nineteenth century during the Harlem Renaissance period. The African Americans used these musical expressions as medium to unravel their agonies, pains, sorrows and anxieties. The racial oppression makes their life more pitiable. In the poem “The Weary Blues”, the poet says that the “Sweet Blues! Coming from the blackman’s soul” (14-15) is not satisfying the musician. It is drowsy, lazy and melancholic in its tone, because in his poem “Negro” he says:

I’ve been a singer:
All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime. (10-13)

Though the song is sorrowful he chooses to play Weary Blues because it is song within himself. During the period it was the only medium for him to express the sufferings and agonies of the common Black people in America. He is longing for more Blues and he cannot satisfy himself with this alone. Ragtime refers to a kind of popular music developed by African American musicians in the 1890s and played especially on the piano, characterized by a syncopated melodic line and regularly accented accompaniment. Again

and again he proclaims "I got the Weary Blues/ And I can't be satisfied" (24-25). Even when he sleeps, his semi-conscious is reverberating new Blues: new medium and in the pastures new. At first he tunes the Blues, then he plays it, after that he croons it and finally he stops singing, but his inner soul searches out for more Blues.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. (32-35)

After his performance he becomes so tired and he goes to bed, but his head is echoing with Blues. The only channel through which the singer can drain off all the agonies and sufferings in his life is Blues. When he sings it from his soul, his mind becomes free and he is able to sleep like a dead person, away from the eerie world of miseries and agonies. James Smethurst in his essay, "Lyric stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes" opines about the ending of the poem like this:

The authenticity of the scene of the re-creation of the folk voice is guaranteed both by the speaker's original distance allowing a sort of objective account and by the speaker's final identification with the singer demonstrating a deeper understanding of the folk spirit contained in (really produced by) the music, as well as a potential if not altogether happy healing of the split consciousness of the speaker" (qtd. in Hutchinson121)

Langston Hughes embraced Blues music and believed that "a 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" (Hughes).

The ancestors of Langston Hughes were slaves and the racial pride instilled by his maternal grandmother enabled him to love his race. He never felt ashamed of his race and his complexion, rather he celebrates and glorifies this in most of his poems. All the four poems are reflections of this. Though most of the African American writers tries to depict the agonies of their lives, Hughes takes up the same themes in a different manner. His poems are full of hopes and dreams, which shed rays of light to the darker fears of African Americans. He advocates his people to dream, because if dreams die, he says in his poem 'Dreams', "Life is a broken-winged bird/That cannot fly"(2-3) and if there is no dream "life is a barren field/ Frozen with snow" (7-8). Undoubtedly one can tell that Hughes' poems are highly inspirational and revolutionary in its tone and treatment of the theme, which has the power to influence artists of his generation and the following generations. Hughes writes poems on racial theme and they are more personal, because he takes incidents from the lives of common working class Blacks of America.

In his essay he admits that, most of his poems "are racial in theme and treatment", derived from the life he knows and he tried "to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz" (Hughes). Because for him Jazz is "one of the most inherent expressions of

Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work: the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile” (Hughes). Through his poems he is trying to portray a ‘New negro’, who is ready to accept his race and skin colour whole heartedly: a ‘thinking Negro’ who celebrates his life in the fullest; and an ‘intellectual Negro’ who walks par away from mimicking the Whites and turns against the White domination. His poems redefines and breaks away the perceived negative stereotypes about the African American community, and there is a hope of liberation that overtones all his poems. Hughes celebrates his own culture, identity and race in his poems and it also becomes mouthpiece of resistance.

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