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Langston Hughes: A Revolutionary Poet

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Abstract:

The paper describes Hughes as a stout champion of the working class and his passionate identification with it. This paper justifies itself by stressing Hughes's strong belief in revolution and his message that communism is all cure for the economic evils and social evils the struggling and starving masses are suffering from. His Communistic leanings during this period are traced, and the poems reflecting his angry outburst against the capitalistic white people. It's his belief Communism alone will ring the death knell of Capitalism and rescue the workers from the tentacles of Capitalism. The hapless and humiliating conditions of the have-nots throughout the world touch the heart strings of Hughes, in particular the economic exploitation suffered by the Blacks in the hands of the unfeeling masses. The Blacks' pathetic plight and abject poverty stem from the forces unleashed by the Whites. Hughes, though a revolutionary, is not just a revolutionary only, but a revolutionary idealist like Shelley. Hughes gives expression to his conception of an ideal world where love that passes understanding he has built. This is almost Shelley's conception of an ideal world where love that passes understanding will be the basis of all kinds of human transactions. Thus Hughes has put poetry to varied uses – poetry as exposure, poetry as a weapon, poetry as music, poetry as a morale booster, poetry that could induce the spirit of his people and poetry as a means of effectively communicating his revolutionary ideas.

Keywords: Black Sufferings, humiliation, revolution and communism.

I do not need my freedom when I'm dead
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread

- ("Democracy", *One Way Ticket* 87-88).

Hughes is one of the important poets of America today, and so far is the only established Negro writer whose work tends to leave the beaten track of petty-bourgeois and bourgeois Negro literature. Hughes has been for a number of years a contributor to new masses and the revolutionary poet who uses his writing as a weapon in the struggle against capitalism, for the emancipation of toiling humanity in all countries says Lydia Filatova (*Langston Hughes Before and Beyond Harlem* 162).

This paper justifies itself by discussing the poems written in accents of anger about the injustice done to the Blacks by the White God and the White Capitalist. It speaks of the struggle the poet wants the people to carry on against all types of injustice. It also underlines

Hughes's strong belief in Revolution and his message that communism is all cures for the economic evils the struggling and starving masses are suffering from. It's his belief the communism alone will ring the death knell of Capitalism and rescue the workers from the tentacles of Capitalism.

Hughes's an International poet, and a voice of the underdogs. Weary of oppression and humiliation Hughes was ready to fight for the welfare of the Black people. Hughes strongly believes that revolution alone could usher in a new order and help the workers get a better deal. He goes to the extent of urging the poets to write on the subject of "Revolution" which they had hitherto ignored (*Good Morning Revolution* 3-4). Some of the poems written during the 1930's were angry outbursts against social injustice and exploitation.

Faith Berry, while editing the Revolutionary poems of Hughes, points out:

Hughes's most outspoken prose and poetry is from the 1930's. This was a period when many American artists and writers, concerned about the economic depression in America and the rise of Fascism in Europe and disillusioned by the values of Capitalist society as a whole, were moving towards the Left. Hughes's revolutionary writing of the decade was a result not only of those forces but of his travels to Russia, China and Spain all of which are reflected in this volume

- (*Good Morning Revolution* VI).

In his foreword to this volume, Saunders Redding endorses her views by writing:

... these militant revolutionary pieces give expression to a vaunted unattained American idea and that their emotive characteristics communicate the wish, the hope, and the faith that was Langston Hughes's all along and that indeed inspired and were the themes of nearly all he wrote (*Good Morning Revolution* X).

So the poems written during this period are powerful enough to fuel the hearts of the depressed masses and bring about an awakening among the Blacks so that they would chose to come under one banner and fight a pivotal battle against the Capitalists who have remained blind to the Blacks' hardships and humiliations for a long period.

But Hughes has never had a defeatist mentality. Nor is the White supremacy a permanent thing with him. Exuding confidence, the poet visualises a glorious future for his people, and for him it is a certainty. But the Blacks should get ready for a long drawn battle against an unequal enemy, instead of remaining passive and suffering meekly. Thus some of Hughes's poems are a clarion call to the members of his race to put up a firm fight against social injustice. Commenting on the literary works of Hughes, Onwuchekwa says in this context:

In short, Hughes calls for a functional literature of what Jean Paul Satre was to call 'literature engagee' a literature committed to revolution. As he sees it the Black writer has a clear and unequivocal role in the struggle for revolution, for the struggle is being waged for him and his[sic]

(Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry 13-14).

Langston Hughes accuses God as being partial towards the rich for whom he treated this world: In “God to Hungry Child”

Hungry Child,
I didn't make this world for you.
You didn't buy any stock in my railroad.
You didn't invest in my corporation.
Where are your shares in standard oil?
I made the world for the rich.
And the will-be rich
Not for you,
Hungry child

-(The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes48).

Hughes pictures God as telling a hungry child that it cannot get his prayers answered, for it has brought no shares and made no investment in any company or corporation. God turns a deaf ear to the hungry child crying for food. Hughes finds God deaf to the hungry child's cry. That God is benign, kind and impartial to all people is a myth; prolonged suffering makes Hughes conclude that God has made the world exclusively for the happiness of the rich. He makes a claim that if Christ were to make his appearance as a Black into U.S.A, he may not be permitted to pray in any of the churches in the U.S.A. These churches are there to glorify the race, not religion, just the opposite of what Jesus lived for.

Hughes creates a hypothetical situation in which God is supposed to tell a child crying for food, a bitter truth, that He has created the world exclusively for the rich capitalists and for “the will-be rich” and not for the poor and the less fortunate, and certainly not for the hungry child incessantly crying for food. God speaks in the vein of the capitalist who wields the world's economy. So He tells the child that its prayers shall not be answered as “you didn't buy any stock in my rail road / you didn't invest in my corporation” and as it has no shares in Standard Oil. Hughes thus identifies God with the Capitalist as He had not done anything by way of alleviating the suffering of the impoverished. Centuries of suffering on the part of the workers drive Hughes to the conclusion that God has a partisan attitude towards the rich and He has made the world exclusively for the happiness of the affluent and “the will-be rich.” This idea is expressed in the poem “Bible Belt:”

It would be too bad if Jesus
Were to come back black.
There are so many churches
Where he could not pray
In the U.S.A.,
Where entrance to Negroes,

No matter how sanctified,
Is denied,
Where race, not religion,
Is glorified.
But say it-
You may be
Crucified

-(*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 440).

If Christ were to come back as a Black he would be shocked to find that the world has moved far away from his teachings. Hughes imagines a situation in which Christ was to make his appearance as a Black in the U.S.A. If the Black Jesus takes it upon himself to point out their sin, He will be nailed to the cross, but this time by the people who claim to be His true followers. He would find the world too bad because its activities have become unchristian and anti-Christian in that much cruelty has been inflicted on a section of the people just because they are coloured.

Hughes poem deals with the suffering of the Black people not in terms of Black/White conflict but as part of the struggle of the proletariat against the ruling capitalist minority. Hughes's ideological shift, from the folklore poetry of the Harlem Renaissance to the Revolutionary poetry of the 1930's, is emphasized in his poem "White Man" where the racial conflict between blacks and whites is replaced with the class struggle of the majority against economic exploitation and Capitalism. Hughes makes a scathing attack on the White Capitalist:

You're the smart guy, White Man!
You got everything!
But now,
I hear your name ain't really White
Man.
I hear it's something
Marx wrote down
Fifty years ago-
That rich people don't like to read.
Is that true, White Man?
Is your name in a book
Called the *Communist Manifesto*?
Is your name spelled
C-A-P-I-T-A-L-S-T?
Are you always a White Man?
Huh?

-(*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 194-195).

The White man has denied the Blacks even a decent job and a decent dwelling place. The White capitalist has exploited even Louis Armstrong by getting a copy right over Louis Armstrong's record and the profits have gone to fill the purse of the Whiteman. Thus the Black man Armstrong's music did not profit Armstrong and the members of this race. Hughes became a champion of workers of all colours and races, and he, through his poems, did wage a relentless battle against exploitation and injustice. For a while, "Like many young men of the thirties, he saw hope for the oppressed in the Marxist position" (*Langston Hughes: Black Genius* 28). He believed communism alone would help the struggling workers out of the steel bands of exploitation. So he wrote, idealizing communism, in poems like "Good-bye Christ," wherein he openly declared that "Christ ain't good no more" and added "Make way for a new guy named / Marx Communist Lenin Peasant, Stalin worker Me" (*Good Morning Revolution* 36-37).

Hughes feels communism is the one and only way to fight against the white people." Jazz goes against the grain of the accepted and the expected in music (Western music) and in life (Puritan Christian life). It challenges the established: Western industrial society and its weary materialism, its demand of work, work," its destruction of human beings with inhuman machineries" (*Langston Hughes : An Introduction to the Poetry* 22).

Hughes's an International poet, and a voice of the underdogs, weary of oppression and corruption was ready to fight for the welfare of the Black people. Hughes strongly believes that revolution alone could usher in a new order and help the workers get a better deal. Hughes goes to the extent of urging the poets to write on the subject of "Revolution" which they had hitherto ignored (*Good Morning Revolution* 3-4). Some of the poems written during the 1930's were angry outbursts against social injustice and exploitation.

During this phase of his poetic career, Hughes had no faith in the established and ritualistic religion which he thought had preached his people into slavery. He felt that Christ's time was out, Only Marx and Lenin could be the real saviours of the down-trodden and the needy. This he voices forth in "Good – Bye Christ," wherein he says that the days of Christ are over. The new saviour is none other than Marx, Lenin Workers. Even "Saint Gandhi" and "Saint Pope" are misfits. Gandhiji's 'ahimsa' and Saint Pope's kindness will not work in the world where people have become worshippers of money. He asks Gandhiji and Pope to "make way for a new guy with no religion at all—A real guy named—Marx, Communist, Lenin, Peasant, Stalin, worker and Me/- I said ME! "(*Good Morning Revolution* 36-37).

Hughes looks upon Christ as a rich man's God after all. In "God to a Hungry Child" he accuses God of showing favour to the rich capitalists by writing, "Hungry child, / I didn't make this world for you." Hughes was a truer man of religion than those in the church because to the end he fought to end the cruelty and pain inflicted on the poor workers whose docile suffering reminded him of Christ. He wanted the workers to be paid fair wages and they should be treated as a human beings and so he was a Christian in the true sense of the

word. Hughes has ever been too much in love with life, despite its seamy side. He would hang on to life grittily even when death would be a welcome relief. In Hughes there is also a metaphysical who could write in the vein of Donne and Emily Dickinson.

Like the moderns, Hughes has a contemporary social consciousness. He did not turn away from crowded cities and things that were sordid and ugly. He fights against the white people for the liberation of Black people. This attitude makes him a lifelong spokesperson of his race and the oppressed workers the world over.

Hughes, though a revolutionary, is not just a revolutionary only, but a revolutionary idealist like Shelley. Hughes gives expression to his conception of an ideal world where love that passes understanding he has built. This is almost Shelley's conception of an ideal world where love that passes understanding will be the basis of all kinds of human transactions.

Thus Hughes has put poetry to varied uses – poetry as exposure, poetry as a weapon, poetry as music, poetry as a morale booster, poetry that could induce the spirit of his people and poetry as a means of effectively communicating his revolutionary ideas. Hughes is also a Black historian and, as one critic observes:

If one were to arrange Langston Hughes's poetical works in chronological order one could have an excellent penetrating topical commentary on the American race issue since 1926, a commentary far more perceptive and meaningful than a library of sociological works (*Langston Hughes : Black Genius* 31).

Hughes is not just a poet of Harlem and a champion of the cause his race. He could jump out of his skin, rise above colour prejudice and see things in a wider perspective. Wagner writes, "... neither Harlem nor race to which he belonged can claim to possess Langston Hughes entirely for he voiced, beyond any frontier of color the eternal aspiration of all men whose love is freedom" (*Black Poets of the United States* 474). He adds that, "... no poet has ever found more moving tones to utter Freedom's beautiful name" (*Black Poets of the United States* 474).

Hughes's association with the Leftist Movement and the Russian Revolution has its impact upon Langston Hughes. Therefore he is convinced that a revolution alone will pull down the existing society of glaring economic inequality and he urges the workers in the entire world to sink their individuality and organize themselves into a great mob free of fear.

Langston Hughes looks forward to the day when the toiling masses of the all colors and races form themselves into the Red armies of the International proletariat and "raise the blood, Red flag/ that will never come down," ("Always the Same," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 166). Once it is hoisted, Langston Hughes does not feel hesitant to call the unfeeling, unscrupulous capitalists "the Gangsters of the World". ("Gangsters," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 237).

The poem "Black Panther" is an outcry by way of reaction and angry protest shown by the Blacks against the White master's atrocities:

Pushed into the corner
Of the hobnailed boot,
Pushed into the corner of the
“I-don’t –want-to-die” cry,
Pushed into the corner of
“I don’t want to study war no more”
Changed into “Eye for eye,”
The panther in his desperate boldness
Wears no disguise,
Motivated by the truest
Of the oldest
Lies

- (*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes 555*).

The thrice repeated past participle “Pushed” brings out the prolonged torture suffered by the Blacks when beaten by the White police with the hobnailed shoes leaving the Blacks gasping for breath and life. A hunted animal at bay begins facing the hounds and hunters when it is impossible for it to escape from them. So also the Blacks when they are cornered with no way of escape find themselves forced to fight back and not lie low. The only way open to the Blacks is to kill the White man and not to get himself killed by the White man. The Black will never say “No more war with the White master but will raise a war cry against White reign and White laws: “blow for blow,” and “blood for blood,” This is not a disguised statement but a statement uttered by the Blacks in a firm resolve to revolt against the White masters. The poem does bring out the defiant attitude of the Blacks.

The Whites follow a policy of social segregation and color prejudice. The Blacks are reserved seats at the rear of the bus. They are not permitted to sit along with the Whites. They follow, a sort of untouchability but when they are in the romantic heat of lust, their color prejudice evaporates. The White man doesn’t bother sleeping with a Black boy’s sister or a white girl having a Black girls’ brother as a bed fellow. It’s an irony these White men and women love the Blacks in the night time.

A stout champion of the Blacks, Hughes is a robust optimist looking forward to the days when the Blacks would not be lynched by the brutal White police. A spokesman of the Blacks, Langston Hughes wrote poems exposing the exploitation of the workers by the unfeeling capitalists the world over. Hughes’s association with the Leftist Movement and the Russian Revolution has its impact upon Langston Hughes. Therefore he is convinced that a revolution alone will pull down the existing society of glaring economic inequality and he urges the workers in the entire world to sink their individuality and organize themselves into a great mob free of fear.

Hughes is not just a poet of Harlem and a champion of the cause to his race. He could jump out of his skin, rise above colour prejudice and see things in a wider perspective. Wagner writes, “... neither Harlem nor race to which he belonged can claim to possess

Langston Hughes entirely for he voiced, beyond any frontier of color the eternal aspiration of all men whose love is freedom” (*Black Poets of the United States* 474). He adds that, “... no poet has ever found more moving tones to utter Freedom’s beautiful name” (*Black Poets of the United States* 474).

This paper, thus, makes a study of Langston Hughes’s articulation of Black anger, and a bold call for Revolution, militancy and struggle for freedom expressed in his Poems. In those outbursts and protests we see Hughes as a Revolutionary Poet.

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