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Racial Predicament and Anticipation of Freedom in the works of Langston Hughes

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Abstract

For generations, African Americans have experienced racial discrimination in the most powerful country of this world, America. Harlem Renaissance, led by Langston Hughes, was a significant literary and political movement for Black in the history of America. As a literary warrior who experienced racial prejudices, segregation, and discrimination, Hughes raised his powerful voice against oppression and injustices. In order to achieve equality, he yearned for release from the restrictions of prevailing prejudices and segregation. Langston Hughes accurately captured the oppressed's pitiful plight and discussed African Americans' aspirations regarding their freedom. The spoke of the co-existence of blacks in harmony and fraternity with whites. The racial plights of Negro populations in racially separated America can be seen through a deeper study of his works. Black people experienced torture and constant terror. Their futures were gloomy, unpredictable, and fraught with doom. However, it was through their combined efforts that they were able to liberate themselves from slavery, prejudice, and persecution. This study examines the works of Langston Hughes to evaluate their unfortunate situations and the seeds of liberation sowed by the poet.

Keywords: Discrimination, racial predicament, segregation, inequalities, emancipation, optimism, freedom.

Introduction

African-Americans were affected by the two most delicate problems namely slavery and racial segregations. United States of America in particular is a classic example of a nation that faced these problems, particularly from the start of the slave trade in the 17th century till 1960s in the 20th century. Between the early 1700s through the 1860s, ancestors of African-Americans were bought and sold into slavery. They were transported to places like Canada, the Caribbean Islands, and the United States. Black Americans were the name given to the Africans brought into American territory. On their journey to America, they endured a lot of suffering and struggled to stay alive. They were made to work as slaves on cotton plantations and fields, where they were subjected to forced labours, brutalities, mistreatments, humiliations, and demoralizations. Douglass in his book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* explains the plight of African Americans. He says "the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart" (Douglass 34). He describes his condition after his master's death as like other property of his master he was sent "to be valued with the other property". (39) He also describes the pathetic condition of the blacks

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. (39)

African-Americans continued to put up with the injustices and miseries. Racial discriminations are forms of hostilities that are motivated by individuals or groups based on races, colors, nationalities, or ethnic origins resulting in degradations and insults. Racial discriminations occur when individuals are given less favorable

treatments than other in similar circumstances due to their race or color or descent or nationality. Racial segregations occur as a result of racial prejudices. The members of the less fortunate group began to recognize their inadequacies required for enhancing their social lives. Majority of African American authors wrote about racial predicaments when they were treated as slaves instead of being treated as citizens. African Americans started voicing their views using literature more than any other medium where Langston Hughes was one of their most effective spokesperson. His poetry conveyed Black people's lofty aspirations and their sentimental attachments to their homelands. He accomplished this by utilizing native languages, music, and folk poetry of Africans in addition to their proprietary modes of speech. Onwuchekwa mentions Hughes' interests in Blacks as "Hughes has always stressed the social responsibility of the black artist, and no doubt saw his own career as fulfilling that socially responsible role" (Jemie 198). This research work highlights racial predicaments experienced by African Americans and ways of overcoming them through Hughes' optimistic views.

Racial Predicament:

The skin tones of African Americans' served as the foundations for early American prejudices. Whites brought the Africans to America with the goal of using them as slaves rather than to treat them as people or build relationships with them. Because they were exploited as slaves, African-Americans endured racial prejudices for a long time. They also had to deal with internal migrations from America's South, where they were employed as field labourers. Their lives were dominated by poverty and most of them were jobless and illiterate. Langston Hughes produced his poems during a point in history when poetry and literature in general served as the springboard for anti-racism revolutions by Black. He embodied the spirits of African predecessors who were recognized for their battles and

extended them for their future generations. These ancient spirits serve as inspiration for the present and the future by embodying optimism and hope. In order to create the future that Black people themselves desire-a future of freedom and equality-Hughes relied on a combination of imagery from past Black histories and images of the present. Being in a desperate situation is risky and won't help the African American community raise an optimistic generation. The poet impresses upon his readers the need to assess and honor African American historical struggles of the past and present for drawing hope and optimism and fight racial injustices. The poet had personally faced prejudices, discriminations, and segregations during the initial years of his life as Blacks were secondary citizens even to the law and could not freely access public places. Hughes points this out in his autobiography:

Once I was late for an evening engagement because, at a river crossing where the bridge was under repair, a ferry was being used. But all the Negro cars on the road had to wait until all the white cars in line, no matter how far back, had gotten on the boat. The ferry captain would fill his boat up with white automobiles and leave the Negro cars standing there. By the time the boat crossed the river and came back, more white drivers had gathered. The ferry master would again motion the whites onto the boat ahead of the Negroes. (Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes Autobiography: I Wonder As I Wander* 82).

The skin color of Blacks culminating in racism is portrayed sympathetically by Hughes:

Black slaves

Working in the hot sun,

[. . .]

Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river

Mingle themselves softly. (Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 23)

This poem stands out for its visual depiction of the pitiful Negro slaves, who are seen "Working in the blazing heat", "Walking in the dewy night", and "Singing sorrow songs" to express their anguish. They have not only endured the anguish and suffering of their servitude, but their spirit has also been damaged. The White Americans have sought to enslave them only due to their dark skin. Hughes here captures the feeling of isolation, helplessness, and melancholy felt by the impoverished slaves. The problem with skin tone is clear in the poem *Me and the Mule* where Hughes dedicates two stanzas in his comparison of Afro-Americans with old mules:

My old mule,

He's got a grin on his face.

He's been a mule so long

He's forgot about his race. (239)

The third line indicates how African Americans were held in lower regard in comparison than other races and almost treated equal to animals. The name "mule" implies that people of African descents were ignorant and could be domesticated like animals. The final line of the verse illustrates how pointless and futile it is for Blacks expect equality from Whites. African Americans will always be servants and workers for the Whites. Hughes boldly admits in the second line that the condition of African-Americans was only a little better than "old mules".

I'm like that old mule-

Black-and don't give a damn!

You got to take me

Like I am. (239)

Whites exploited Blacks in a variety of ways based on their dark skins. The poet compared Negroes with old mules based on similar skin tones and unattractiveness of the

animal and more importantly the position of Blacks in society who need not receive better treatment. Although Afro Americans have been in the US for a considerable amount of time, their social statuses and legal rights did not change and the likelihood of change in the near future seemed bleak. The verses indicate somberness and negativity of tone. They believed that the Black people had primitive manners and were not cultured. They had fallen prey to the Whites' brutality and abuse. A sizable body of Hughes' poetry has demonstrated how White people used to despise black people and lynch them for fabricated rape cases. Hughes wrote several poems on Negro lynching by whites in south American areas. He uses his powerful imagery to convey the harshness of Whites in Southern part of America in the poem *The South*.

For a Negro's bones.

[. . .]

But she spits in my face.

And I, who am black,

Would give her many rare gifts

But she turns her back upon me. (26-27)

The poem rife with animalistic images depicts historical instances of whites lynching blacks after accusing them of raping a white woman. Their protests are meaningless as they can't prove their innocence. Assault by Blacks on White women was considered equal to inviting their death. A Black is sentenced to death by being castrated, burned, and hung. Women of the South have been characterized as being modern with sexy attitudes. But their modern thoughts do not permit them to be compassionate towards Blacks. In *Southern Mammy Sings*, the poet expresses lynching of Blacks by Whites:

Last week they lynched a colored boy.

They hung him to a tree.

That colored boy ain't said a thing. (227)

This poem expresses the pitiful and helpless states of Blacks. It rightly points out that even using the term "freedom" was forbidden amongst Blacks, and anyone who dared to do so would be lynched. The victim is lynched by the Ku Klux Klan after being carried to "some lonesome area" for defying whitish assertions of racial superiority:

And then they kicked me

On the ground.

A klansman said, "Nigger,

Look me in the face-

And tell me you believe in

The great white race". (253)

The derogatory term "Nigger" and the threatening phrase "Look in the face" demonstrate how whites detested African-Americans and that they were often referred to solely by this term. Afro-Americans were supposed to accept their social roles and live alongside white dominance, as exemplified by the poem *Ku Klux Klan*. Ku Klux Klan (Covert group of whites in Southern America who opposed social progresses and equal rights for blacks with violence) referred to whites as "The great white race" to emphasize their dominance.

The Whites were never prepared to accept Blacks into their supposedly superior culture. The blacks continued to put up with harshness and bigotry of Whites and were helpless and without any hopeful future. In America, living as a Black was scary and had to live in dreadful and bleak conditions, it could come only from God. Langston Hughes had a strong belief in God and prayed frequently and a sizable section of poetry was devoted to prayers and cries of unhappy, heartbroken, and dejected Blacks. He yearns for a godly touch from God and begs forgiveness to Jesus,

Sorrow like a sea.

[. . .]

At yo' feet I stand.

O, ma little Jesus,

Please reach out yo' hand. (78)

The African Americans in America patiently waited for the day when White Americans would strive to comprehend humanity and accept the Black person as an integral part of society. However, the moment never arrived, and the Negro could only see White people's deep-seated prejudices and discriminations. They experienced oppressions, bigotry, exploitations, and social segregations. However, they ultimately comprehended freedom's value and expressed them through their spirituals, start of their creative inner feelings. They began to recognize that they have to live for themselves not the Whites for accomplishing their aspirations. They discovered pride in their ethnicity. Langston Hughes is a well-known poet among his people because of the racial pride and optimism in his poems.

Anticipations of Freedom for Blacks:

Hughes, who was unmistakably black, promoted the idea that "black is lovely" while delving deeply into the black human situation. His main concern was helping and encouraging his fellow Blacks whose abilities, fortitude, courage, and sense of humour and depict their generic life with Whites. His poems depicted the working-class black life in America, portraying them as being full of hardships, pleasures, laughter, and songs. Hughes in his article *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* asserts African-Americans artists as:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or 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, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free

within ourselves (Hughes, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* 36).

Black people who were being oppressed made an effort on their own to end racial discriminations when even God was unable to hear their cries. They realized that for achieving their inner aspirations, education was the only solution. In the poem *My People* he illustrates an element of trust:

The night is beautiful,

So the faces of my people.

[. . .]

Beautiful, also, is the sun.

Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. (Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 36)

Hughes' "My people" shows his connection to blacks with whom he lived. His Negro neighborhood, in his opinion, is rich in beauty, strength, and power. All of his parallels are appropriate in light of the value of black life. In America, white people had a low opinion of black people. In his poems, Hughes has properly captured the Negroes' uprising from the helpless, oppressed African Americans to the revolutionized, freedom seeking people. A sizable portion of Hughes' poetry collection reflects these uprisings and emancipation related actions. The earliest indications of Blacks uprising for freedom from the chains of slavery are reflected in his poems where Blacks refuse work and food.

However, as time went on, it became apparent that Black people were employing other, more cunning, and hence more powerful, methods of expressing their disapproval. Freedom's Plow expresses such disapproval:

was a colored man who had been a slave

But had run away to freedom.

[. . .]

John Brown was hung.

Before the Civil War, days were dark,
And nobody knew for sure
When freedom would triumph. (266)

The "coloured guy who had been a slave" is motivated and inspired by the sacrifices made by black rebels like "John Brown" who gave their lives in defense of freedom and equality. The Negro was eluding his slave-related responsibilities in order to band together with other slaves to fight for their liberation. The lyric "And nobody knew for sure/When freedom would win" conveys his optimism for success. When black people made the decision to attain liberation at any cost, their fights for liberation grew stronger. Since they were now aware of their human rights, they could no longer be discrimination victims. The speaker is more determined to discuss his freedom in a democracy:

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And on the land. (289)

The equality of whites and blacks was a topic that Negroes begun to discuss. The embodiment of the "other man" is the entire white race as a whole, which is entitled to freedom. The idea of equality gives the guy hope, and he decides such:

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread. (289)

Older generations pacify the speaker to hold off on seeking independence for a little longer without any effect on him. The man is unwilling to give up his independence in

exchange for "tomorrow's food" (future). He is willing to use force to free himself and his people from centuries of slavery because he cannot wait for "things to take their course" to bring about freedom. The final lyric depicts independence and the Afro American population's longing for it. In this line, Hughes does not explain where freedom should be pursued; rather, he simply affirms its practical necessity and, as previously, refers to African Americans with rights equal to that of the whites.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.
I live here too.
I want freedom
Just as you. (289)

The poet uses a philosophic tone and the metaphor: "seed", the primary component of an organism. Black people's latent seeds of freedom begin to blossom in both their subconscious and conscious brains, much similar to how plants grow. When Black people began breaking the rules, known as Jim Crow Laws, which were enacted against them, the movement assumed a furious form. According to Woodward:

Negroes were incapable of being assimilated politically, socially, or physically into white society[. . .] they could not enter most hotels, restaurants, and resorts, except as servants[. . .] were often educated in segregated schools, punished in segregated prisons, nursed in segregated hospitals, and buried in segregated cemeteries(Woodward 18-19).

The time had come to act in order to awaken white people and convince them that black people were full participants in American

society, just like white people. To prove to the rest of the world that America is also theirs, they began breaking the rules created to keep them out. Hughes describes one of their violent deeds in his poem, Lunch in a Jim Crow Car:

Get out the lunch-box of your dreams.
Bite into the sandwich of your heart,
And ride the Jim Crow car until it screams
Then-like an atom bomb-it bursts apart.
(Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 467)

The determination of Negroes was clear, and they thought that only their rebellion could make the blind and heartless Whites recognize their need for independence. The words "Bite", "ride", "screams", "atom bomb" and "bursts" all imply war, namely the open war the Negroes have launched on their oppressors. "Jim Crow" rules were no longer important to them; instead, they would eat "lunch-box of their dreams" and "bite into the sandwich" of their "heart" in the "Jim Crow automobile". Consonant rhymes also evoke the words spoken during bloody processions. An intelligent and wise leader can enliven and strengthen the independence movement. Such a poem, *The Freedom's Plow*, is filled with patience and drive:

America!
Land created in common,
[. . .]
If the fight is not yet won,
Don't be weary, soldier!
The plan and the pattern is here,
Woven from the beginning
Into the warp and woof of America.
(267)

Hughes confirms America as a land inhabitants with other races exist along with whites. The poem's main character, the

revolution's commander, informs the Blacks that their dreams of freedom and equality can be achieved as long as they stick together and do not waver from their purpose. The phrase "soldiers" dispels any confusion that the poem is focused on revolutionary Negroes' contribution to the independence movement. When the mob fails in their "fight", the leader motivates them on not accepting defeat by repeating their inner "Dream cultivated in common" (freedom and equality) where their "strategy and pattern" require them to continue to suffer consequences of Ku Klux Klan's actions and continue to demonstrate against their foes:

All men are created equal.
no man is good enough
to govern another man without
that other's consent. (267)

The poem simply argues that although The Almighty made all men equally, some strong individuals do strive to dominate the weaker ones on our planet. They abandon the others without whatever they require to lead the lives of their desires. But the poem's main character asserts that no one has the right to "Govern" another person; instead, he should let the other person exist as a free spirit. Following extensive revolt, black people have begun to envision a united, loving nation where black people and white people live in harmony (Great American Dream). Instead of venting their fury and animosity, the penniless, unrecognized Negroes have an opportunity to achieve concord and friendliness with whites, signs of respect in the American society. This belief is vividly described by Langston Hughes in his well-known poems. The speaker in *I, Too* is ecstatic to discuss his independence and brotherhood:

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,

Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 [. . .]
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed -
 I, too, am America. (46)

The main character thinks that eventually he will be able to blend in with white culture and that his identity quest will be over. In the poem, he expresses his desire for the White man to recognize his value as a crucial component of his culture and grant him permission to share meals with him. Additionally, he thinks white men should feel ashamed of mistreating and exploiting Blacks as Blacks are also part of America. White Americans could only live in luxury because to the laborious work of Blacks who were their slaves. The poet now thinks that the White will at last give the Negro a just recompense for all of his labor and anticipate attractive futures for Blacks.

Conclusion

A significant portion of Langston Hughes' poetry explores the difficulties faced by African Americans who live in America as a minority. The introduction of this research provides background information on poet Langston Hughes who wrote against slavery and other forms of injustice against American Blacks during a time when racial segregations were common in America. The poet highlights parts played by African Americans in igniting optimism and hope for the ultimate goal of liberation. The study's first component examines how slavery and segregation are depicted in a few chosen poems, revealing the repressive nature of White people against Black people. The poet's primary tactics in his poems address one of history's most delicate issues, slavery, in a simple manner. The second half follows, in which the poet tries to persuade his audience that optimism must be maintained as

the key to human freedom. Hughes argues that African Americans must maintain upbeat outlooks throughout their history in order to achieve permanent freedom. When people or groups believe that laws or institutions or social standards intend to limit their freedom, they will protest where revolts spark conflicts between two opposing parties. It demonstrates that the person or group does not consent to being manipulated or persuaded. They go out to attain their goals, which they can do once they are freed from the constraints of society, politics, and religion. In addition to depicting African-Americans' exploitation, persecution, segregation based on race, and blatant rebellion against their oppressors. Langston Hughes' poetry also expresses a spirit of peace and fraternity between the colored and Whites. Thus, it can be concluded that Hughes' poetry nourished and bloomed awareness amongst Blacks to be together and live in harmony, thus saving the world's most powerful nation from collapse.

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