

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## LANGSTON HUGHES: THE LEADING VOICE OF HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes is probably the most prominent and leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes, like others active in the Harlem Renaissance, had a strong sense of racial pride. His writing does not only tell the story of his people including both their pains, sufferings and their love for music and laughter but also portrays the actual culture of black community. Through his essays, novels, poetry, plays, and children's books, he encouraged equality, criticized injustice and racism, and celebrated African American culture, spirituality, and humor. Though his work mainly focused on race and racial discrimination yet he cherished his freedom as an artist. He was both cosmopolitan and nationalist.

**Key Words:** Harlem Renaissance, race and racism

African American literature has been always a literature of protest against injustice, discrimination and inequality. Various social movements that challenged the prevailing ideology and the structure of American society came into existence in American and African American literature. These movements, fighting for change for women and people of color, represent decades of building tension and advocacy for change within America. Most important among them were Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement and Black Arts Movement.

The first cultural movement to attain widespread recognition both within and beyond communities is the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance began after the end of the Civil War as a result of the changes in the African American community. It started when millions of blacks moved north due to pathetic condition in the South. This movement is called the Great Migration. The movement raised significant issues affecting the lives of African Americans through a variety of literature, art, music, drama, painting, sculpture,

movies, and protests. The significance of this movement to African American literary art lies in the efforts of its writers to praise the legacy of African Americans and to use their unique culture as a means toward re-defining African American literary expression. Harlem Renaissance was the era when African-Americans for the first time had a real reason to experience pride and rejoice in their identity. In Harlem they found something that was uniquely their own. The Harlem Renaissance was a turning point in African American literature; it was no longer read mainly by black people, but started to be absorbed into the whole American culture. Due to all reasons mentioned above Harlem Renaissance stands as one of the most celebrated movements in African-American culture and American history. It is known as the golden period of African American art and literature. It is also considered as the source of the black culture that we see today.

Lots of poets, dramatists and novelists, emerged during this period and made their

contribution to Harlem Renaissance and African American literature. One of the chief poets who emerged from the period was Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes stood at the center of the Harlem renaissance.

His dynamic and insightful portrait of African-Americans during the renaissance period and beyond touches the souls of many. His book of poetry *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926, is widely considered to embody the very spirit of the era, employing rhyming qualities inspired by jazz and blues standards.

He was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri and spent most his youth in the American Midwest. He first came to New York in 1921 to attend Columbia University. A year later he shipped out as a salesman and cook's helper on a tramp steamer to Africa and Europe. He lived and worked in Paris and Italy and then returned to the United States, where he took a job as a busboy in a Washington DC, hotel. There in 1925, the poet Vachel Lindsay was discovered him. He praised Hughes's poems and advised him to devote himself to literature.

Langston Hughes lived in a society that was completely dominated by white men. He remembers the company of his grandmother, "She...held me in her lap and told...stories about people who wanted to make the Negroes free..." (Emanuel 19). Thus, not only social atmosphere but his family experiences had also made him to use poetry as a weapon by which he could give an effective expression to cultural and ethnic qualities of his black race in order to shape a society. "He has asserted his voice of self acceptance" (Berry 87). For the first time, there had been a man on the literary scene to glorify his "Blackness" and not to feel ashamed of his being Black.

Langston Hughes in his essay "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain" (1926), expressed the new rebellious mood of the Renaissance writers:

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy", and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of

Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of his own beauty. (Ervin 48)

He who lived during a time of worldwide racial oppression against black people also wrote about racial discrimination in his poem "As I Grew Older".

It was a long time ago.  
I have almost forgotten my dream.  
But it was there then,  
In front of me,  
Bright like a sun—  
My dream.  
And then the wall rose,  
Rose slowly,  
Slowly,  
Between me and my dream.  
Rose until it touched the sky—  
The wall.  
Shadow.  
I am black. (Hughes 11)

In this poems he beautifully describes that how racial discrimination becomes a wall between his dreams and him. He wanted to fulfill his dreams but his black color does not allow him to do so. Though his writings he wanted to motivate black people not to feel guilty of his color but feel proud to be black. He was a staunch advocate of his race.

Langston Hughes also wrote about racial segregation issue in his poem entitled "I, Too".  
I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.  
Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America. (Gates and McKay 1258)

This poem was written when Hughes was in Genoa, Italy. The poem shows how black people were treated unequally during the slavery. The "darker brother" (black) is waiting for his opportunity to share the table of freedom with all Americans.

He was perhaps the most original of African American poets in the breadth and variety of his work and assuredly the most representative of African American writers. He believes in the ideals of liberty, equality and universal brotherhood. His creative works presented that how he constantly struggled for the dignity and equal rights of African Americans. He was undoubtedly the leading Voice of not only Harlem Renaissance and but African American Literature also.

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