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HUGHES' VOYAGE FROM CHAINS TO LIBERTY

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ABSTRACT

Hughes bespeaks like his people, of his people, and for his people. He puts emphasis on the splinter self not only of his people suffering affronts in American society but also all the downtrodden suffering pangs of exploitation and estrangement in the society. He tries to affirm in his poetry that distinctive identity of his race through inherited blues and jazz which lay buried under the false stereotype of Jim Crow America. His poems play a significant role infusing new spirit in oppressed people and the revolutionary Negro of his poetry accomplishes his dream of freedom and equality. The revolution which he calls for brings about the much needed and much desired change in America- that of being a state wherein the black and the white reside hand in hand- that is, achieve the ideal of equality and brotherhood.

Keywords- splinter self, exploitation, identity, revolutionary, freedom

Hughes is known as the poet laureate of his ethnicity for the simple reason that he bespeaks like his people, of his people, and for his people. Hughes highlights their plight and Jim Crow experiences in the American civilized society. Jean Wagner rightly points out that Hughes' poetry recognizes and defines an African American on account of "his African origins, his history and his particular contribution to the civilizations in which he had been, involved."¹ In his poetry, he aims to speak in a voice that is both personal and authentic, that expresses his own feelings but is spoken as people really talks and is thus accessible to a wide audience. He wants to portray black people's lives in a way that is both realistic and dignified. He can also be classified as a modern poet who puts emphasis on the splinter self not only of his people suffering affronts in American society but also all the downtrodden suffering pangs of exploitation and estrangement in the society.

He is the most satisfying reporter of the Black Renaissance, its artistic, political and social

significance. In this context R. Baxter Miller opines: Langston Hughes is perhaps the most wide ranging and persistent black American writer in the twentieth century. From the Harlem renaissance of the early twentieth century, to the Black Arts reorientations of the sixties, his short stories, novels, dramas, translations and seminal anthologies of the works of others at home and abroad has helped to unify people in the African Diaspora. He has also helped to nurture, in other words, so profoundly the generations after him.²

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He tried to affirm in his poetry that distinctive identity of his race through inherited blues and jazz which lay buried under the false stereotype of Jim Crow America. Gwendolyn Brooks maintains that:

he is a noble poet, an efficient essayist, and an adventurous dramatist and his works and deeds are rooted in kindness. Whether it was 'artistically correct' or not, his point of departure was a clear pride in his race. Race pride may be craft, art, or a music that combines the best of jazz and hymn. Langston frolicked and chanted to the measure of his own race-reverence.³

His sensibility as a creative writer was largely inspired and shaped by the earlier black Americans who advocated liberty and justice for their race. Hughes is a man with a boundless zest for life. His central concern is the Afro American people, namely, their struggle for freedom. One of the aims and the ultimate effects of his work is the raising of our consciousness, the strengthening of black people in their struggle in America and elsewhere.

We find all harsh memories of bitter experience in his poetry. Like in a poem "Merry Go Round" he has drawn a picture of a child who may not ever ride the merry-go-round in life out of fear he may not allowed because of being black. The poet feels that his freedom has lost and he wants to regain that freedom by showing how cruel segregation it was:

"To a merry go round

Where is the horse

For a kid that's black?" ("Merry Go Round", CP, 240.)

Now the poet's mind is being fired and he tries to arouse us. In an era of resistance and protest, his poems play a significant role infusing new spirit in oppressed people, like in "Union":

Not me alone —

I know now—

But the whole oppressed

Poor world,

White and black,

Must put their hands with mine

To shake the pillars of those temples
Wherein the false gods dwell
And worn-out altars stand
Too well defended,
And the rule of greed's upheld —
That must be ended. ("Union", CP, 138)

The political voice of Langston Hughes was the beginning to speak loud and clear. He also had agreed with Michael Gold's New Masses essay declaring that "poetry must become dangerous again. Let's have poems thundering like 10- ton trucks and aeroplanes."⁴ The crisis of the thirties was so acute that it was impossible for any poet to ignore it. The generation saw increase in tension. Thus the new poetry is poetry of revolt which can be seen in the form and content of poetry. Especially, the axis on which the subject matter of the poem "Pride" rotates is the social protest:

Let all who will
Eat quietly the bread of shame.
I cannot,
Without complaining loud and long,
Tasting its bitterness in my throat,
And feeling to my very soul
Its wrong.
For honest work
You proffer me poor pay.
For honest dreams
Your spit is in my face,
And so my fist is clenched
Today-
To strike your face.⁵

The revolutionary Negro of Hughes's poetry is determined to accomplish his dream of freedom and equality. In His poem, like in "Freedom Train" the New Negro is not deceived anymore by the false promises of American freedom and democracy:

I read in the paper about
the freedom train.
I heard on the radio about the
freedom train.
I seen folks talkin' about the
freedom train.
Lord, I been a-wait in' for the
freedom train.
Down South in Dixie only train I see's
got a Jim Crow car set aside for me.⁶

He infers that the revolution which he calls for will bring about the much needed and much desired change in America- that of being a state wherein the black and the white reside hand in hand- that is, achieve the ideal of equality and brotherhood. After all this is known to Langston Hughes that "the mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n."⁷

Today the black man in America is beginning to learn the secret of success. He is at the point where he can stand on his own two feet and look at himself. In the privacy of his home or on public streets, he can look at himself and say, "I" am black. The constant acceptance of "white is right" is out. Black people are finding a freedom that they never had before- the freedom to be themselves. And the credit for all this goes to Langston Hughes who is hailed as the poet laureate of black America, the first to commemorate the experience of African Americans in a voice that no reader, black or white, could fail to hear. It seems that Hughes' dream of freedom has come true as he said in his poem "Freedom":

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet,
And own land. ("Freedom", CP, 289)

Evidently, he radiated joy and humanity and this was how Hughes covered his voyage from chains to liberty.

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