

Racial Discrimination- A Study of Langston Hughes' Poems

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Abstract

The chief purpose of this paper is to present the experience of African-American poet Langston Hughes through the realms of racial humiliation to recognition among the white. The present research work is an attempt to exhibit the poet how he acquires recognition in America after passing through different stages of crisis vis-à-vis self-identity. The credit of nourishing the black literature and inventing the cultural integration goes to James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967). A streak note of racial humiliation and struggle for self-recognition runs through the whole poetry of Langston Hughes. The feelings of racial humiliation, struggle for self-recognition and discrimination lands the poet into a world of double consciousness in which the poet always hangs in doubt whether he thinks himself an American or an Outsider. The attitude of the white forces the poet to feel that he is not a native of America but an alien. It results that the poet suffers from what Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish Philosopher termed as Existentialism which emphasizes on individual existence, freedom, choice and decision. It is completely based on the human existence. After passing through a number of difficulties during his life time, the poet does not lose hope. He remains optimistic and tried to recognize himself in the white society. The structural elements of Langston Hughes' poetry (alliteration, rhyme, assonance and tone) exhibit racial discrimination between the black and the white. The poetry of Langston Hughes also reflexes the racial discrimination. One can see the glimpse of negritude and the revolutionary ideas in his poetry that takes the readers into a world of mysticism. The chief purpose of the present study is to exhibit how the blacks were compelled to leave their native countries and were made slaves in certain parts of the world as in America.

Keywords *African-American literature, existentialism, double consciousness, Harlem Renaissance, racial discrimination, NAACP.*

I. Introduction

Born in Joplin, Missouri on February 2, 1902 Langston Hughes, the foremost American Poet of the twentieth century is one of African- American poets in the history of American poetry. His life has been difficult and miserable from the very beginning but his mother taught him to stand against injustice and racial discrimination. His grandmother inculcated the feelings of self-pride in him. After the death of his grandmother, Hughes went to live with Auntie Reed. Graduated from Grammar School in Lincon, he composed his first real poems in the fashion of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and his themes were love, steel mills and slums. In the beginning of his poetic career, he could not show his poems to any one as he thought of them very serious and was afraid that people would dislike his poems because of his inclination for the identity of his race. In Harlem, the regeneration of black culture and ethnicity took place in the 1920's and they became race conscious to a great extent. It was termed "Harlem Renaissance" by the critics and scholars who became interested in it and its values. Harlem embodied bourgeois values for the Negroes and became the Mecca of migrants. This place had become the biggest and brightest spot in a promised land for the black. The Negro slavery system was introduced to the new world by a Dutch who sold twenty one slaves to the colonist of Virginia in the year 1619. The study of the poet understands the problems and internal psyche of the African-Americans. It surveys the history of The Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement also known as New Negro Movement in the city Harlem, New York in the year 1920s. This Movement produced an unprecedented explosion of literature in the field of poetry, drama and novel created by African-Americans. An intense study of Hughes' poetry also exhibits the role of 'Antebellum Press' in abolishing slavery and NAACP exhaustively which make the readers aware of the longevity of blacks in America. This will also discuss how southern blacks rushed into America and brought the debate on racial identity to the forefront which finally helped the black in forging a future for the black masses through recognition or existentialism. His first collection of poems *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926 suggested a sense of superficiality of the white. He imparted a powerful expression to the liberation of the black identity in his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". His second anthology "Fine Clothes

to the Jew" published in 1927, Not without Laughter in 1930, Shakespeare in Harlem in 1942, Fields of Wonder in 1947, One Way Ticket in 1949 and Jim Crow's Last Stand in 1960 had achieved worldwide recognition and fame.

II. Literary Review

Jemie Onwuchekwa, Milton Meltzer, Jean Wagner, Saunders Redding, Faith Berry, Tish dash, and Calvin Hernton guides us how to read Langston Hughes. Onwuchekwa proclaims that Langston Hughes was a writer who faced opposition both from the white and the black. The above-mentioned critics consider the poet not only a product of significance but also undervalued forces of his time. Langston Hughes also attempts to follow the principles of Dunbar, Chesnutt and Jean Toomer. The poet himself declares, "Most of my poems are racial in themes. His theory of existentialism emphasizes individual existence, freedom, decision and choice. Arnold Rampersad and Onwuchekwa also try to prove how the poet transforms his journey from a journey of frustration and humiliation to recognition. Langston Hughes' poems such as The Negro Speaks of Rivers, Aunt Sue's Stories, Negro, As I Grew Older and A Black Pierrot appeared a real condition that happened to the black. A streak note of racial humiliation and identification runs through the whole poetry of Langston Hughes. The feelings of humiliation and recognition landed the poet into a strange world of double consciousness. He hangs in doubt whether he thinks himself an American or an outsider. Thus, the structural element of his poetry shows racial discrimination between the white and the black. Based on the aspects of racial discrimination the poetry of Langston Hughes resulted inequality and ethnicity. Racial unification against oppression, slavery and racial discrimination are observed in the poem "Sun Song".

Sun and softness
Sun and the beaten hardness of the earth,
Sun and the song of all the sun-stars
Gathered together
Dark ones of Africa

Langston Hughes occupies a prominent place in the history of African- American Literature. He speaks in the place of those black writers and poets, "Who would surrender racial pride in the name of a false integration. As a slave, Negro was forced to do menial jobs incessantly. The African's plight in America in the form of slavery and racism made the poet understand the power of tolerance. The poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" imparts the message how the black have suffered at different stages at different places throughout the world. Arnold Rampersad argues that "Langston Hughes moves steadily from dimly starred personal memory towards a rendezvous with modern history." Personal anguish has been acclaimed by the poet into a gracious meditation on his race. The poet also expresses a deep meditation and appreciation for the black in this poem. Donald C. Dickinson comments on the poem "This is a beautiful poem and an epic tribute to the Negro race, rich in expression and moving in its message. It emphasizes the dignity and sensitivity of the Negroes; a theme was to use throughout his career." Here "I" in the poem shows the collective voice of African-Americans striving to affirm their humanity which was usually remained unacknowledged on account of the background of social and political oppression.

I have known rivers:
I have known rivers ancient as the world and the older than the
Flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I have known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

The celebration of pride and tolerance of the black in America by the poet highlights the frustration and depression of the African-Americans. The Poem "Negro" reveals how the poet has explained the frustration, depression, humiliation, racial discrimination and slaughter experience of the black in America. The poet lays emphasis on the historical subjugation of the black among the white. Langston Hughes asserts the affirmation of the Negro when he says, I am a Negro: Black as the night is black, Black like the depth of my Africa. The oppression and slavery of the Black is also highlighted in his famous poem "Aunt Sue's stories" first published I "Crisis" in the year July 1921 where the poet highlights the exploitation of the black by the white. Here the dark-faced child listens the impressive stories of his Aunt Sue that may be real and collective based on her experiences Thus Aunt Sue's Stories have become the symbol of Africa in America.

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night
And black slaves
Singing sorrows songs on the banks of the mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice
The dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's Stories

The feelings of racial discrimination and recognition also landed the poet into a world of double consciousness. The white forces the poet to feel that he is not a native of America but an alien. Sometimes he thinks himself an American or an outsider. It results that Langston Hughes suffers from what Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish philosopher termed as Existentialism which lays emphasis on individual existence, freedom, and choice. Through a career of four decades the poet remains optimistic and tries to recognize his own identity among the white. The chief aim of the poet is to achieve his poetic discourse and the existence of his race. Highly influenced by the theory of W.E.B. Du Bios, the founder of "The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" (NAACP), Countee Cullen, Claude Mc Kay and Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes harmonizes the participants of the Harlem Renaissance and uplift the voice of the black in America. The poetry of Langston Hughes gives eloquent expression to the black and expresses the lyricism connected with the individual identity. The law and order made by The United State pertains to the white and the Black exclusively. But the poet does not want to wait for freedom; he wants to fight for freedom and for a change. The poet also raises the voice for equality between the white and the black. One of his most important poems "I, Too, sing America" published in the year 1924 exhibits the poet's consciousness and search for the real identity for his race. He says,

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.
Then
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes's poem "Democracy" published in 1949 emphasizes on the idea that democracy will not be given to the black through compromise and fear which sharp the message of racial injustice in the American society. He clearly states that the black want their rights and freedom in the society. 15th amendment in the United State was not for all Americans. Langston Hughes expresses the Afro-American fragments in his famous poem "Afro-American fragment" published in the year 1930. In this poem the poet reminds of the black filled with dusky maidens and has a true affection and devotion to his motherland, too far from him. It is very difficult for the poet to keep the memories of his motherland alive. But On Wuchekwa Jemie tells that Africa is a "potent realty in the Afro-American soul-psyche, a conclusion which carries an implicit optimism." The poet cherishes," So long, So far away is Africa. Not even memories alive". "Freedom's Plow" a prominent and prolific poem written by Langston Hughes narrates the vision and new experience of the black who wanted to acquire their racial existence in America. In the beginning of the poem, a slave was pulled from his land and was compelled to settle in America where the slaves came in the hope of freedom, cooperation and fraternity. But the black were persecuted by the white. Here the poet mentions the speech of the third President of United state Mr. Jefferson who said, "All men are created equal..... Endowed by their creater with certain inalienable rights.....among these life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. A great political leader Frederick Douglas lays stress on the importance of freedom, happiness and fraternity. He asserts, Better to die free, Than to live slaves.

III. Conclusion

Thus the journey from humiliation to recognition will establish Langston Hughes as a poet of optimism and existential fervor. The poet is finally able to make a balance between his dual personality, psyche and thought. The failures and achievement of Langston Hughes as an African-American poet will also be taken up in this chapter. More over stress will also be laid to prove how the poet transforms his journey from a journey of frustration and humiliation into one where the goal of recognition has been achieved. The recognition in America strives a new path for the poet and his masses where there will be no pessimism and frustration. Thus the poet evokes the vision of a just society with a spiritual transcendence and ever-widening horizon of joy and hope. Langston Hughes presents the theme of alienation, marginality of blacks through institutional racism and the attempt to integrate into a diverse community; the use of African folk material; the blues tradition and the paradox of writing or performing for elite audience.

To conclude, the present research is an effort to study how an underdog turned into a poet of great significance and meaning. He was able to transform his frustration into a boon and that essentially is the greatest achievement of the poet.

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