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Condemned Racism and Injustice in the Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The present study makes an appraisal of the poetry of Langston Hughes, one among the foremost representative African American poets who had been the leader of the foremost necessary literary and political movement in America—Harlem Renaissance. The closer reading of Hughes' poetry reveals a sense of estrangement and exploitation of the Negro community in an exceedingly racially white nation, America. The Negroes lived in an environment where they were subjected to tortures and torments. But their collective effort to attain freedom made them reach their goal; the liberty from slavery, racism and oppression. The current study can examine the pathetic plight of those humans and their realization of freedom through their constant revolts.

Keywords: discrimination, prejudice, cruelty, segregation, inequality, revolt

Racial discrimination is a type of hatred based on race, color, nationality or ethnic origin of an individual or group which is likely to humiliate, insult, or frighten. Racial discrimination takes place when a person is treated less favorably than another person in a similar situation because of their race, color, descent, and nationality. It occurs when an individual is subjected to unequal treatment because of their actual or apparent distinction. Racial discrimination leads to racial segregation. The individuals of the less privileged group start realizing their inferiority and helplessness to add value to their social life. They are separated from the dominant group as an estranged community.

Injustice refers to the revolt of an individual or a group of people against something that is established as a truth. This protest arouses when the individual or the group feels that the established truth – a law or an institution or a social standard – is made to curb their freedom. So, a revolt is a violent action against a government or a ruler that opens a clash between the two opposing groups. It shows that the individual or the group does not accept or agree to

be controlled or influenced. They set for the realization of their dreams which they can achieve once they are relieved of social, political and religious shackles.

African American writing evolved to protest racism and tyranny of the white Americans, and also to gain self pride and identity. It is this experience of the African Slaves that Langston Hughes tries to record in his poetry. Hughes recollects the pathetic plight of his ancestors that were sold into slavery between the early 1700s and 1860s. They were moved to American soil, Canada, and the Caribbean Island and other parts of the world to be exploited as slaves. The Africans taken into American land were referred to as 'Black Americans'. They faced a great deal of misery and agony, and tried to survive hardship on arrival to America.

They were engaged into forced toil, maltreated, abused, humiliated and demoralized on the cotton fields and plantation where they were compelled to work as slaves. The African Americans kept tolerating the cruelty and suffering, since there was no one to hear their voice. But there came a time for them when they started realizing the value of their freedom. They began expressing themselves through Negro spirituals which marked the beginning of the artistic expressions of the black emotion. They began to understand the worth of their life which was not to live for the Whites but for themselves to realize their dreams. They found a pride in their race. This Racial Pride and Optimism in Langston Hughes' poetry makes him a famous poet of his people. Much of Langston Hughes' poetry deals with the struggles of African Americans living in America as a minority.

Hughes was transparently black and emphasized the theme of "black is beautiful" as he investigated the black human condition in a multiplicity of depths. His major anxiety was to support and boost his fellow Negroes whose strengths, resilience, courage and humor he wished to evidence as a part of the general American experience. His poetry portrayed the lives of the working class blacks in America— lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. He declared the role of African American artists in his essay:

We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves (The Nation 1926).

I'm like that old mule-
 Black-and don't give a damn! You got to take
 me
 Like I am. (Selected Poems 125)

The comparison of the Negro with the old mule is done on the basis of his black color that does not give his body the grace as the mule is an ugly animal. He and the mule have the same place in the society and because of the comparison to the mule; the person does not need to be treated in a better way and just wants to be accepted in the society as he is. Even though the Afro-Americans have been in the US for a long time, their position in the society and their rights have not changed, and based on this analysis, they will not change in the future too. So the poem is characterized by its gloomy and pessimistic mood.

Based on the skin color, the White Americans sought to exploit the Negroes in different ways. They considered the Blacks uncivilized and unsophisticated in mannerisms. They had become the victims of exploitation and cruelty of the Whites. A substantial corpus of Hughes' poetry has revealed how the Whites used to hate the Negroes and lynched them for fake cases of rapes. A number of Hughes' poems have been devoted to lynching of Negroes in the South (the vicinity of rich whites).

It is well known fact that when something in life becomes unbearable, the man starts to devise plans to get rid of it. The African Americans in America waited and waited for the moment to see that one day the White American will try to understand the humanity and embrace the Negroes as an indispensable member of the society. But the time never came and the Negro could see only the discrimination and prejudice in the heart of the White. He was oppressed, discriminated, exploited, prejudiced and socially segregated. Education among the African Americans played a very vital role in the reawakening of the African Americans.

When even the God was not there to hear the voice of these underprivileged Negroes, for the realization of their dreams, they themselves strived to find out the way to get rid of all the troubles of racial discrimination and physical tortures by the Whites, and the way was only to revolt against their oppressor for freedom. Hughes has faithfully recorded the rebellion of the Negroes from the powerless, downtrodden to the revolutionized and freedom seeking African Americans in his poetry. A substantial corpus of Hughes' poetry depicts such revolts and protests for emancipation. The early signs of this revolt for liberation from the shackles of slavery can be found in the poems where the slaves refuse to eat or work. But with the passing of time, the Blacks were seen using other more clever and so more effective techniques of expressing their protest. Such a protest is expressed in *Freedom's Plow*:

He was a colored man who had been a slave
But had run away to
freedom.
And the slaves knew
What Frederick Douglass said was true.
With John Brown at Harpers Ferry, Negroes died.
John Brown was
hung.
Before the Civil War, days were dark,
And nobody
knew for sure
When freedom would triumph. (Selected Poems 294)

Here, the "colored man who had been a slave", is inspired and encouraged by the sacrifices of black revolutionaries like "John Brown" who died for the sake of equality and freedom. The Negro is running away from his duties as a slave to join hands with other fellow slaves for their freedom. His hope for victory can be perceived in the line "And nobody knew for sure/When freedom would triumph."

The movement for liberation became stronger when the blacks resolved to achieve it at any cost. They had become conscious of their rights as humans that they could no more be the victims of racism. The Negro has started talking about equality of whites and blacks. The "other fellow" is the personification of the whole white race which is enjoying the freedom rights. The man is encouraged by the thought of equality and he resolves in the following

lines:

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. (Selected Poems 285)

The elder's advice for the speaker to wait for some more time for freedom to come does not have an impact on him. The man is not ready to delay his freedom for "tomorrow's bread" (future). He cannot wait for the "things to take their course" to come as freedom, rather he is ready to take strong steps to liberate himself and his race from centuries' long slavery.

The last stanza depicts the freedom and the need of the Afro- American people to achieve it. Hughes does not mention here where the freedom should be sought, he just mentions the actual value of it and again describes the Afro-Americans as people with the same rights as the white people.

The poet becomes philosophical here and uses a metaphor of a "seed" which is the essential part of organisms. The seed grows sooner or later to give rise to a new plant, and here the "seed" of "freedom", which was dormant there in the Negro race, has started germinating in the subconscious and conscious minds of theirs.

ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL. NO MAN IS GOOD
 ENOUGH
 TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN WITHOUT
 THAT OTHER'S CONSENT. (Selected Poems 296)

The poem states the bare fact that The Almighty has created all men equal and it on this earth that some powerful people try to overpower the others. They leave the others devoid of all that they need to live a life full of their dreams. But the protagonist in the poem declares that no one can take the authority in hand to "GOVERN" the other, rather he should allow the other to live as a free soul.

After a lot of rebellion, the Negroes have started imagining of America with all love and harmony between the blacks and the whites (Great American Dream). The wretched, overlooked Negroes have a possibility not to show the anger and bitterness but to reach the harmony and brotherhood with their white counterparts and attain their grade and admiration in the American society. Langston Hughes has intimately documented this belief of Negroes in his recognized poetry. In *I, Too*, the speaker is extremely excited to talk about his freedom and brotherhood:

Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 ... They'll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed —

I, too, am America. (Selected Poems 275) The protagonist believes that in the time to come, he will be able to be assimilated by the white society and his search for identity will be complete. In the poem, he hopes the White

man will realize his worth as an indispensable member of his society and will allow him to share food with him. He is also of the opinion that the White man will feel ashamed of his cruelty and exploitations of the Blacks, and will believe that the Black also represents America. It was all Blacks' hard work as slaves that White Americans could enjoy the luxury of life. Now the poet believes that finally the Negro will be duly rewarded for his hard work by the White. He hopes for a beautiful future for all his fellow humans.

So, Langston Hughes' poetry not only portrays the slavery, exploitation, oppression, discrimination, prejudice and racial segregation of the African Americans and their sheer revolt against their oppressor but also expresses the sense of harmony and brotherhood between Whites and Blacks. Therefore, it can be said that it was Hughes' poetry which nurtured and flourished the white and the black psyche to come closer and live in congenial environments, and ultimately saved the world's most powerful nation from disintegration.

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