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Foregrounding Black Identities In Select Poems By Langston Hughes

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“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.”

- William Wordsworth (*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*)

To quote Meena Alexander “The poem is an invention that exists in spite of history... In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some way to reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist... Poetry’s task is to reconcile us to the word – not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense, to return us in love, the province of the imagination, to the scope of our moral lives” (Yale Political Union, 23 April 2013).

Poetry serves as a powerful medium through which poets express their thoughts, experiences, and memories, often preserving the histories and cultural identities of marginalized communities. By addressing social issues, challenging established norms, and inspiring change, poetry acts as a mirror reflecting society's complexities. Throughout history, racial discrimination, gender biases, inequality, and slavery have persisted, profoundly affecting marginalized communities. The struggles of lower-class societies, particularly those of African American descent, have been marked by ongoing oppression and a constant fight for existence. The poetic journey of Langston Hughes, a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, offers a profound exploration of the histories and struggles of African American people. Hoyt W. Fuller aptly observes that Hughes “chose to identify with plain black people... precisely because he saw more truth and profound significance in doing so” (Fuller, *The Darker Brother*).

Langston Hughes, born on February 1, 1901, in Joplin, Missouri, to a middle-class family of mixed ancestry, emerged as a leading American poet, playwright, and novelist. His life and work were profoundly shaped by the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement aimed at establishing a distinct African American identity and empowering black Americans to live as free citizens. Hughes' parents, James Nathaniel Hughes from Kentucky and Carrie M. (Langston) Hughes from West Virginia, separated shortly after his birth, leading to his upbringing by his maternal grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston. The

divorce of his parents and the abandonment by his father deeply impacted Hughes, influencing his thematic focus on racial identity and the struggles of black Americans. Encouraged by his mother and inspired by Walt Whitman, Hughes began writing poetry at a young age. His first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," was published in *The Crisis Magazine* in 1920 when he was just 17 years old, a piece he composed while crossing the Mississippi River on his way to meet his father in Mexico.

Hughes believed in the responsibility of the younger generation of black artists to challenge societal aspirations towards whiteness, famously stating, "To my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering 'I want to be white,' hidden in the aspirations of his people, to 'Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful!'" This conviction is evident in his extensive body of work, which includes *The Weary Blues* (1926), his first published book, introduced by Carl Van Vechten, a patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes, who had worked in various roles including truck farmer, waiter, cook, sailor, and doorman at a Paris nightclub, played a crucial role in pioneering jazz poetry. This genre utilized musical rhythms and patterns to celebrate the everyday life of African Americans, as exemplified in his famous poem "I, Too."

This paper seeks to foreground black identities in selected poems by Langston Hughes, exploring how his work reflects the lived experiences, cultural heritage, and resistance of African Americans. The research question guiding this study is: How does Langston Hughes use poetry to articulate and affirm black identity within the socio-cultural context of the early 20th century? By examining the themes, stylistic elements, and cultural significance of Hughes' poetry, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which his work both mirrors and challenges the societal constructs of race and identity.

We have such contemporary writers associated with Harlem Renaissance, they are Claude McKay who wrote *If We Must Die* (1919) which explores defended black rights, "Harlem Shadows" (1922), is notable for the plight of black sex workers, *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) depicts a picture of a celebration of peasant life, addressing the peaceful death of his mother and *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1929), a novel for a black vagabond who lives in the French port of Marseilles. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Are Watching God* (1937) is about Janie Crawford's journey of her searching for love, independence and self-fulfillment during this period. Jessie R. Fauset *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1928) is an exploration of the theme of passing and *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) depicts a portrayal of longing for respectability among African-American middle-class society. Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* (1928) explores a young woman seeking for love, acceptance and a sense of purpose and her another novel *Passing* (1929) revolves around two light skinned women, one is Irene but marries a black man living in Harlem, and the other is Clare who marries a white man but does not want to reject her black cultural ties. Wallace Thurman is famous for his three novels *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929), which expresses inter-racial conflicts associated with skin color and another famous novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932) explores the theme of Harlem Renaissance and *The Interne* (1932) is about the discrimination of the black. Eric Walrond's short stories "City Love", "Miss Kenny's Marriage", "On Being Black", "The Godless City" all of which shows his attitude of his new home that is Harlem. Rudolph Fisher was eminent for his short stories, reflecting the Harlem Renaissance and most of his work concerned with the adjustment of Southern Black migration, are "City of Refuge", "High Yeller", "The South Lingers On", "Blades of Steel" and "Miss Cynthia".

The objectives on understanding the black identity and Harlem Renaissance through the eyes of Hughes are that it helps exploring the role of literature in shaping black identity and their cultural struggles and the impact of racism. Examine this topic meticulously a sense of politics, art, influence of Jazz and other musical forms, social justice in Langston Hughes' works and the relationship between his poetry and African

American experience, challenges and role of his works to shape the black literary movement can be well understood. Increases to delve deep into our thinking of the historical background and the significance of the movement, shedding light on the art and literature reflecting social and political change. By the nuanced exploration of Langston Hughes poetic journey, he invites the readers to look on the struggle and history of black identity, inequality, racial bias, cultural difference in America and enhance the power of enunciation.

After the First World War in 1920s emerges a movement which was all about revival of African American Music, dance, art, poetry called Harlem Renaissance standing as a turning point in black history, offering artists and writers to share their experiences this period. In 1920s there was a law called Jim Crow laws which was there in America. And according to this Jim Crow laws, no black people was allowed to enter the restaurant where white people used to eat, no black people cannot use the restrooms of the white people, cannot use the bus, the travelling services where white people used to sit. They cannot even use the same water from the fountain of white people. They are not allowed to go to the theatres where white people used to go. So, it was sort of slavery. Black people were prohibited for the basic human rights even the law, the legal system which has freed the black Americans from the slavery. The Constitution has prohibited the slavery but they still feel and that nothing is going right in their direction. So, what happened was that these black people who were living in South America started migrating from South America to North America particularly in a city called Harlem. This Harlem is in a part of upper Manhattan in New York City. The white people living in North America was against slavery and that is why they accepted the black Americans, coming from the South America. So, in a particular city Harlem, these black Americans started living there. These black people who were living in South America and move to the North America, they migrated to North America. They were suddenly free citizens now. For many many centuries they were slaves and now they are free from slavery. They were living at commands of white men and now they don't have any history. This Harlem Renaissance is a movement which was a need of an eye because they don't have history. They cannot find out that what is their identity. So, this Harlem Renaissance worked as establishing their identity, their culture. It was not all about histories of African American, it's about the presence of African Americans living in North America. An important term which is associated with this movement that is New Negro Movement about new culture, new identity and it allowed these black people to behave in certain ways. It helped both white and black people living in North America to live in peace and harmony. We have writers associated with Harlem Renaissance, they are Langston Hughes, Claude Mackey, Zora Neale Hurston and Alan Locke. It is not like that these writers are only black Americans who were writing works, who were in North America. Harlem Renaissance which is a movement, is established sort of identity, trying to help the black Americans how to behave and how to live life as free citizens. Another reason is there were no black Americans in the history, they all suddenly disappeared after beginning the 20th century and now there were black American writers who came up and started writing about their culture. So, this is another reason for the emergence of these new sort of writers. A lot of novels, essays were published and then a music was invented- jazz music some sort of a new invention in the history of musical industry. They expressed themselves through jazz music and their poems also co-aligned with this jazz music.

Langston Hughes' poetry emphasizes to celebrate and explore the traditions, culture and experiences of the African Americans who were suffered from social injustice, inequality, racism, discrimination and their struggles for existence. In his poetry he depicts a picture of everyday life of black people in America. Their struggle for freedom and liberation explores how their lives are affected by the pasts. By focusing on his poetry, he gives a strong and enduring voice for African American black identity. Here, we shall discuss about another great poem on the 'black identity' and for the black people of America by Langston Hughes. Written on 1925, the poem "I, too" is about nothing but a cry of protest towards the racial discrimination in the American society of white people. The structural framework of the poem lies on the first and the last line of this poem. A transformation of 'singing' to 'being' can be noticed from the first line and the last line of the

poem. With wonderful metaphoric thoughts, the poem displays the horrifying dining beauty of the American society. Here, Langston has portrayed an unknown speaker who is denied to have a seat in the table for the dinner. The poet has incepted the message that the speaker, who is 'the darker brother', has also sung for the America. So, the word 'sing' is metaphoric. It specifically signifies the contribution of the black people in the American society. When the speaker remarked that "I, too, sing America." (line 1). It shows that the black people were absolutely deprived from the social status and all, but speaker's confidence symbolizes the self-belief for the better tomorrow. Having being deprived, till they're the inseparable part of the country. That's why, Hughes ends the poem by saying "I, too, am America." (line 18). This poem is actually an allusion to one of the poems written by Walt Whitman, 'I hear America singing'. Here the word 'kitchen' signifies that the common white people used to get various benefits from the black people because they were just appointed for the basic household needs. After getting the benefits from them, the white people generally send them to the background instead of giving them an equal chair in the dining table to dine symbolizes the racial discrimination in America. And so, the speaker remarks, -

"They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes." (line 3-4)

Then Hughes has drawn the picture of tolerance, endurance, confidence of the speaker who doesn't care about the ignorance at this moment, he's calmed and composed. He's just waiting and preparing for the day when he'll be much stronger.

Langston Hughes' another masterpiece on this topic is "The Negro" (1922) where the poet again tried to draw a phenomenal picture of the society with black people. The poem is illustrating the presence of those people with black identity and their enormous contributions in the history of America. In the first stanza, the poet has described himself as a person with black identity by starting the poem with this –

"I am a Negro" (line 1)

Here, he has compared his skin tone with the 'dark night' and the 'depths of his Africa'. By comparing his skin tones with these two, he has just portrayed his pride to have skin tone. In one hand, the dark night is a beautiful aspect consisting various stars etc. in the sky and in the other hand, the word 'depths of his Africa' also consists positivity. It is also a place with wonderful scenic beauty of a desert which is totally covered with sunlight. By comparing his skin tone with these two, he is pointing his torch in the natural beauty of the people with black identity. The second stanza described his life as a slave and reveals the inner pain of those people. He mentions the name of 'Cesar' to show the time span of their painful life of slavery. The poet again says that 'I brushed the boots of Washington.' indicating George Washington and exhibiting the presence of them serving as slaves.

"I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.

I made mortar for the Woolworth

Building." (line 8-11)

If we take a look at the ancient period, we may trace that they were the workers who constructed the pyramids. Even in the recent era (i.e. 20th century) the workers made wonders for the America. So, it's clear that they have contributed enough to decorate this globe more beautifully.

In the next stanza the poet describes him as a singer of their sorrows –

“I’ve been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs.” (line 12-15)

Many of them used to sing songs to disclose their sorrows and the melancholy tone of their sorrows has been spread around the globe. They have also developed the singing style called ‘ragtime’. They not only worked physically but also contributed to develop the cultural aspects as well.

Then Hughes tried to illustrate the hard luck of the people with black identity as they become victims in many aspects, they often treated oppressively. The poet describes two incidents of the Congo and the lynching in Mississippi, showcasing the painful life of those people. In the final stanza, the poet has repeated the first one. He again proudly reminds the reader about his skin tone and again compares it with those natural phenomena just to be proud to have this skin tone which has enough similarities with the nature.

Langston Hughes, in this poem, tries to draw the historical aspects of the people with black identity. From their ancient period to current era, they were deprived from every aspect. They have pride of their contributions in the betterment of this world. This poem of Langston Hughes has a huge impact on the movement that was going on that time for the black people. As it portrays a clear scenario about the deprivation of the black people in this globe.

Now we will pay attention to Hughes’ another poem “Cross” (1926). Through its vivid description explore the themes of racism, identity, resilience and belonging. The poem begins with the description of his white father and black mother. Later in poem it is clear that both of them have passed away and so the speaker is feeling regret for anything bad he might have said:

“If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.” (line 3-4)

In the second stanza the speaker also calls off his curses which he says on his “black old mother” for whom he wished “in hell” now “wish her well.”. Then he concludes his poems by explaining that both his father and mother are dead now.

“My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.” (line 9-10)

By these lines Hughes evokes of the social inequalities in the society. At the end of the poem, he expresses his wondering whether is going to die as a white or a black identity, emphasizing mixed heritage, biracial or two parts of himself.

In 1926, for the protest against the typical white society, Langston Hughes wrote an outstanding poem named ‘Dream Variations’ which draws an amazing picture of the dream of a black guy who is living in a society surrounded by white folks. This poem was published in his collection named *The weary Blues*. The speaker here speaks about his dreams where he wants to dance all the day till the black night comes. At night he dreams to take rest. The night is compared to the skin tone of the black people. And the word ‘dream’ is used metaphorically in both the stanza. In the poem, the poet began by drawing some of the pictures of his eternal dreams. He wants to have a situation in the future where he will be able to express himself totally despite being a people with black identity. The poet is dreaming for a future where he can freely stay in the society of white the people. But at the end he tries to describe the gentleness of the black night. It never comes harshly, it comes gently –

“While night comes on gently

Dark like me-

That is my dream!” (line 7-9)

The lines “While night comes on gently / Dark like me- / That is my dream!” (lines 7-9) from Langston Hughes’ poem encapsulate the poet’s profound connection between the night and his own skin tone, symbolizing the collective identity of black people. While the stanzas may appear similar at first glance, a deeper examination reveals subtle yet significant shifts, particularly in the transformation from the “cool evening” to a broader, more inclusive vision. Throughout the poem, Hughes uses the metaphor of the night to represent the dream of black people—to be free from the shackles of racism and to find a place of equality within society, where they can coexist with white individuals in an independent and dignified manner. This artistic contribution underscores Hughes’ vital role in the broader movements advocating for black identity and equality.

In analyzing these elements, we gain profound insights into the lived experiences of black individuals, their culture, contributions, and the pervasive attitudes of white society toward them. Hughes, through his poetry, not only highlights the struggles and complexities inherent in racial discrimination but also utilizes his work as a tool of protest, critiquing the fundamental social injustices of his time. For instance, in the poem “Negro,” Hughes eloquently portrays the historical victimization of black people, their labor as slaves, and their significant contributions to the beauty and development of the world. Their artistic legacy, often overlooked, is powerfully asserted in his verse. Similarly, in “I, Too,” Hughes uses the metaphor of the dining table to depict the poignant realities of racial discrimination, while “Dream Variations” reflects his vision of a society devoid of prejudice—a dream of equality.

Through these works, Hughes persistently shines a light on the issue of racial discrimination, reinforcing his voice as a critical contributor to movements like the Harlem Renaissance. His poetry provides a lens through which we can better understand the deep-seated social issues of racial inequality. This dissertation has attempted to highlight the discussions embedded within Hughes’ poems on these themes, emphasizing his enduring relevance in the discourse on race. However, this analysis also opens up further questions: How do Hughes’ metaphors evolve across different contexts? What are the implications of his work in the current socio-political climate? These questions suggest the need for continued research, which will undoubtedly yield more nuanced understandings of Hughes’ contributions and the broader cultural and social implications of his work.

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