



RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

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Abstract

Afro-Americans were not originally Americans, but they were forcefully brought to America as slave to work in the fields. They neither displayed any indication of going home back nor did they want to stay in a foreign land. They were pitilessly kept captivated like animals for gratifying the needs of White people. They remained helpless lot suffering from the evils of slavery in the hands of their cruel masters. Theirs was a very miserable condition as neither they could go back to their homeland nor they could live with dignity within the White camp. They were deprived of their basic rights. The literatures produced by the Afro-American writers underscore the horrible life of poor Blacks in the USA thrown into the dark, shady, and the seedy place. One of such figures is Langston Hughes of Harlem Renaissance period. Through his poetry, he has created a new, egalitarian world that is free from racial consciousness and segregation. A close study of Hughes' poetry reveals that he was preoccupied with his perception of the Black life, Black experience, their protest and resistance.

Keywords: *Racial Consciousness, Black or Blacks, Marginalization, segregation, Afro-Americans*



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Segregation on the name of race had been an evil imposed by the powerful White people to uphold discrimination as well as to gain unfair advantage over Afro-Americans permanently. Despite the provision of laws, slavery had been the reality. The pity is that the Afro-Americans had been content to live in the worst condition. The privileged people had been totally indifferent to the welfare of the people who slavishly have been serving them. The literatures produced by the Afro-American writers underscore the horrible life of poor Blacks in the USA thrown into the dark, shady, and the seedy place. One of such figures is Langston Hughes of Harlem Renaissance period. He is particularly known for his insightful, colorful portrayals of Black life in America from the twenties through the sixties. He wrote novels, short stories and plays, as well as poetry, and is also known for his engagement with the world of jazz and blues. He wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including both their suffering and their love of music, laughter, and language itself. He began his literary career with the publication of his first poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* that appeared in the magazine *Crisis* in the year 1921. After this publication, he became an important writer and thinker in Harlem Renaissance.

Since life had become a kind of terrible ordeal of physical suffering and emotional torture; painful and without any immediate hope of salvation, the sentimental singing of the blues became an objective correlative of their feelings of desperation, frustration and alienation. The Blacks did not have access to the forms of entertainment or recreation enjoyed by the White majority. Because of this restriction, their suppressed urge for creativity and recreation found expression in the songs written and sung by themselves. The blues expounded the plight of the Black existence with traumatic experiences. Therefore, Hughes's poetic expressions found resonance in the hearts of the Black population. He has given expression to the subconscious desire for a Black utopia in most of his poems. The Blacks' recall of the slave days piles up imagery in such poems as *Trumpet Player*. There is a muted voice of protest here, coming out like the lamenting tones. Here are the first two stanzas of the poem:

“The Negro
With the trumpet at his lips
Has dark moons of weariness
Beneath his eyes
where the smoldering memory
of slave ships
Blazed to the crack of whips
about thighs
The negro
with the trumpet at his lips
has a head of vibrant hair
tamed down,
patent-leathered now
until it gleams
like jet—
were jet a crown”

(Hughes n. pag.)

The present poem is one of Hughes's musically oriented poems and is written in the spirit of his jazz poems. The setting is a bar where a trumpeter is on stage playing his instrument, telling his story-aspects of the personal and collective Afro-American experiences faced in the United States. The first stanza emphasizes the dark rings of weariness under the trumpet player's eyes. This weariness, deeper than temporary tiredness, is born from the racial

memory of the African American slave experience, the slave ships of the Middle Passage, and the whips against thighs on southern plantations to the streets of the urban north. The second stanza describes the musician's hair, which has been 'tamed', smoothed down until it gleams like patent leather. *The poem* suggests that some things, like music, can ease the pain of past suffering, but that these memories will always be with them, in the back of their mind. It also talks about the collective Afro-American experience apparent in the identification of the musician as 'The Negro,' whose heritage includes the pains and degradation of slavery as noted in reference to the 'memory/ Of slave ships' and the 'crack of whips'.

A close study of Hughes' poetry reveals that in the decades of 1940s and 1950s he was preoccupied with his perception of the Black life, Black experience, their protest and resistance. The Harlem Renaissance shaped the poetic sensitivity of Hughes and all other Black creative artists. It serves as a background to it. Most of his poems are concerned with Harlem. In fact, the early years at Harlem were filled with enthusiasm, a zeal for life, jazz and spiritual musings. But the later period saw a gradual waning of that cheerful spirit and gloom descended over Harlem. Behind the happy façade melancholy, frustration, depression, desperation prevailed there. The arrival of great depression of the late 1920s caused economic stagnation and further degradation and decline in the Black people's status. These conditions disillusioned the inhabitants of Harlem and transformed it into hell. In the South, the life for those Black people became an infernal experience. They suffered from untold miseries due to the racial segregation and the lynching law which allowed the Whites to capture and lynch a runaway Negro slave. Hughes has made an ironical assessment of the practice of lynching in the Southern states in the poem *The South*:

“The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth.
The sunny-faced South,
Beast-strong,
Idiot-brained.
The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
For a Negro's bones.
Cotton and the moon,
Warmth, earth, warmth,
The sky, the sun, the stars,

The magnolia-scented South.
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
Passionate, cruel,
Honey-lipped, syphilitic —
That is the South.
And I, who am black, would love her
But she spits in my face.
And I, who am black,
Would give her many rare gifts
But she turns her back upon me.
So now I seek the North —
The cold-faced North,
For she, they say,
Is a kinder mistress,
And in her house my children
May escape the spell of the South.”

(Hughes, 26)

In racist America, The Blacks were prohibited from travelling in the same railway compartment along with the White passengers. Any attempt to board a train carrying only the Whites always invited terrible punishment from the authorities. Hughes’ poem *Freedom Train* is a song of freedom that expresses a desire and dream of the Blacks to board in a train that will not have any discriminatory warning boards or signs such as ‘for colored’ or ‘White folks only’. This desire transcends the narrow racist boundaries of social and racial segregation and attempts to bind the Blacks with their White co-inhabitants of the planet. Therefore, it has an assimilatory tone that glosses over the earlier intensity of bitter protest. He writes and wonders whether this segregation would end or not. He writes:

“When it stops in Mississippi will it be made plain
Everybody's got a right to board the Freedom Train?
Somebody tell me about this
Freedom Train!
The Birmingham station's marked COLORED and WHITE.
The white folks go left, the colored go right—

They even got a segregated lane.
Is that the way to get aboard the Freedom Train?
I got to know about this
Freedom Train!
If my children ask me, *Daddy, please explain*
Why there's Jim Crow stations for the Freedom Train?
What shall I tell my children? . . . *You* tell me —
'Cause freedom ain't freedom when a man ain't free.
But maybe they explains it on the
Freedom Train.
When my grandmother in Atlanta, 83 and black,
Gets in line to see the Freedom,
Will some white man yell, *Get back!*
A Negro's got no business on the Freedom Track!"

(Hughes, 323-324)

Similar kind of poem *Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes also expresses the same idea. Here a mother advises her son to be strong in the pursuit of his goal. She instructs him not to go back down the stairs even if he thinks climbing is hard. He should try not to fall because his mother is still going, still climbing, and her life 'ain't been no crystal stair.' The mother tells her son:

"Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.”

(Hughes, 186)

In the above-mentioned poem, a Black mother asks her son to be conscious of the problems, difficulties and challenges that lie ahead. She convinces him that life is not an easy affair and an easily accessible carpet-walk on the floor. Here a mother advises her son that he will face many adversities in life, and yet he must overcome them and keep going. The mother compares the journey through life to ascending a staircase. She says that for her life has not been a staircase made of crystal. Rather it has been quite rough with nails and pieces of wood, with full of obstacles boards torn up and places where the carpet was missing. However, she has kept climbing, through landings, corners and darkness in spite of such discomforts. She then asks the boy to walk in her footsteps and keep moving forward without turning back or giving up because he finds the journey arduous. She wants him to take inspiration from the fact that she is still going steady despite life's hardships. During the slavery time, the Black slaves passed through many hardships, then even they never gave up their self-respect and fought bravely. After getting freedom, now it is the duty of a new generation to fight for equality and justice and carry on their freedom fight.

Such was the freedom spirit of Afro-American writers during the Harlem Renaissance period. The Harlem Renaissance shaped the poetic sensitivity of Hughes and all other creative artists. It occupies significant place in his poetic consciousness. It serves as a background to it. In other words, it can be said in the case of Hughes that Harlem becomes an actor or character in his writings. His poems convey his message to the Black community that it should struggle to rise above the life of subservience and self-hatred and raise to the higher level so as to attain universal freedom and dignity for the entire mankind. Hughes was truly a poet of the Black masses who wrote poetry out of his people's need for self-respect, identity and self-assertion. The Harlem Renaissance increased community visibility in him. So he aimed at greater acceptance of the rights of African-Americans, who were still treated as second class citizens by the dominant white, upper class, male population of the United States. Hughes was not as

aggressive as other exponents of this movement, and wanted greater integration of the African-American community into the mainstream of the American population.

Thus, the poetry of Langston Hughes has been preoccupied with discrimination based on race and cultural legacies. This is due to their history of enslavement and colonization. He often tends to focus on racial prejudice and color hierarchies. The people of his community have been subject to some of the worst forms of physical, political, social and education deprivation. All has been reflected in their works of art. His poetry retains a broad political focus on both racial consciousness and national culture by redefining the terms of social reality. Truly, his poetry is a protest poetry that fights against the racial discrimination, marginalization and social injustice. The conflict in American society has been the conflict of culture. Some cultures are hailed as predominant while others are considered to be subordinate. One can review the apparent visible racial identity as a cultural identity as race is a cultural tool abused by the Whites to segregate the Blacks. The cultural politics of marginalization and segregation creates imagined peripheries dividing culturally oriented communities. The Blacks have been subjects to this cultural marginalization and all this is visible in his poetry.

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