

A Search for Black Identity, Consciousness and Dreams in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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Abstract: Langston Hughes wanted to capture the dominant oral and improvisatory traditions of Black culture in his poems and thus he wanted to manifest his distinctive Black identity and dreams. Hughes stresses the importance of a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate, that united people of African descent and Africa across the globe and encouraged pride in their own diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. In order to do so, Hughes chose themes from Black life and explored Black consciousness in his poems. He revolutionised Black writing and introduced rhythms of Jazz and Blues in his poetry. He very often uses 'stanza forms', deriving from Black secular music, especially from the Blues music and adapted the vocabulary of everyday Black speech in his poetry without affirming stereotypes.

Key Words: Black identity, Harlem Renaissance, American dream

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Langston Hughes, who was one of the most popular and versatile genius of the many African-American writers, connected with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, wanted to capture the dominant oral and improvisatory traditions of Black culture in his poems and thus he wanted to manifest his distinctive Black identity and dreams. In order to do so, Hughes chose themes from Black life and explored Black consciousness in his poems. Influenced by *The Bible*, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Walt Whitman Hughes depicted realistically the ordinary lives of Black people and became one of the foremost interpreters of racial relationships in the United States. He revolutionised Black writing and introduced rhythms of Jazz and Blues in his poetry. He very often uses 'stanza forms', deriving from Black secular music, especially from the Blues music and adapted the vocabulary of everyday Black speech in his poetry without affirming stereotypes. Many of his poems, written in rhythmical language, have been set to music. All of these devices helped him to articulate prominently the philosophy of the Black, their dreams and the rhythms of their inner consciousness.

In 1920s Hughes described the immense difficulties in store for the serious Black artist, "who would produce a racial art" and even discussed his own experience of facing all these problems in composing self-proclaimed "Negro" poetry in his famous essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain".

The younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too.

The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If coloured people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.

For his pioneering contribution in the domain of Black writing and in the representation of the racial concerns of the Harlem Renaissance by the 1930s Hughes was being called "the bard of Harlem". His works prepared the ground for extreme cultural nationalism of 1960s.

In his poem "Harlem" or "A Dream Deferred", Langston Hughes wonderfully depicts a picture of disillusionment and depression of the Black folk, when their long-cherished dreams are shattered. Here the dream of the Black symbolises the dream of freedom, equality, liberty, fraternity, prosperity and economic development, that the African-Americans cherished in their minds for ages. In this poem Hughes tries to probe into what happens to a 'deferred' dream :

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore-
And then run ?
. . . Or does it explode? ()

Here Hughes points out that a race, deprived of its dreams, may be plunged into the abysmal depths of despair, but it can also give a backlash to the dominating race even at this stage of being extinct. The loss of dream of the race here symbolises the loss of identity of the Black. But as the enunciator of the renaissance among the Black Hughes is here confident that a deprived race can tolerate all the exploitations and injustice of the dominant ruling class to certain extent but one day they would 'explode' in order to bring a radical change in the whole society that unleashes inequality and deprivation. Here Hughes almost ushers the possibility of a revolution by the Black mass against the oppression of the white.

In the poem "Mother to Son" Hughes explores the typical mother-son relationship. Here he depicts a picture of an ideal Black mother, who teaches her son how to progress and go ahead in his life surmounting all the obstacles.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 It's had tacs in it,
 And splinters, . .

Here mother uses the metaphor of 'crystal stair' which symbolises even, elegant and easy path. But mother says that life had never appeared to her as such soft and easy 'crystal stair' which symbolises even, elegant and easy path. But mother says that life had never appeared to her as such soft and easy 'crystal stair'. Life is not the bed of roses, but it has its thorns. Life has tacs and splinters. The way of life is not always lighted and one has to pass through darkness. Life has all its problems and obstacles, but the mother never wants his son to stumble down.

But all the time
 I've been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's . . .
 So boy, don't you turn back.

She wants that her son should always go upstairs and reach landing, that perhaps symbolises here an elevated position. She does not want her son to turn back or fall, but always to climb on in order to reach to his destination and grab his goal. Here Hughes not only explores the mother-son relationship of the African-Americans, but also highlights the strong-willed, unbending personality of a Black mother, who is the living symbol of Black perseverance and magnitude.

In another poem "Democracy" Hughes holds a plea for freedom and equality of the Black like the White Americans. Here Hughes exhibits the dream of democracy of the Black, who are tired of hearing about the hopes of future. Generations after generations pass but democracy remain a far cry. So here the poet boldly asserts his right to get liberty and dignity as an Afro-American like the White Americans. Hughes, like many black writers and artists of his time, was drawn to the promise of Communism as a manifestation of his dreams as well as an alternative to a segregated America. Many of his lesser-known political writings have been collected in two volumes published by the University of Missouri Press, which reflect his attraction to Communism. An example is the poem "A New Song" :

. . . Revolt! Arise!
 The Black
 And White World
 Shall be one!
 The Worker's World!
 The past is done!
 A new dream flames
 Against the
 Sun! (Rampersad, 643)

In "I, Too, Sing America", Hughes manifests the pain felt by a Black in a world dominated by the Whites. Hughes here also shows that it is impossible to negate the identity of the Black, who are an inseparable part of the America. Here the poet sarcastically shows how a White man tries to suppress the identity of their 'darker brother' who may be nothing but their 'dark double' by sending him behind the curtain.

I, too, sing America. I am the darker brother.
 They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 . . . Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table . . .
 Then. Besides, They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed . . . I, too, am America.

The poet thinks that now it is high time for the black to proclaim their right, recognition and identity and to emerge on the stage of the world out of his confinement as the Blacks are as essential part of America as the Whites, who can no more deny this truth.

In "Note on Commercial Theatre" Hughes throws his sheer contempt for the hypocrisy of the Whites, who have stolen the rhythms of the Black song and have used it for their own commercial purposes under their own names, suppressing the name of the Black contributors. So the poet grieves that Whites have taken the Black music like Blues and fused them in their own American plays and cinemas. The Whites have also extracted the philosophical wealth of these songs and have adjusted them to their own plays. But in doing all these, the Whites have always concealed and suppressed the name of their Black brothers, who are the real contributors. The poet hopes that in future that memorable day would come when the Black people would dare to sing about the "black and beautiful", ignoring the oppressions of the White. Here Hughes actually beckons the Black writers to be undaunted in writing more and more about the Black cultural heritage and the Black genius.

In "Theme for English B", Hughes tends to approve American "assimilationism". Here the poet ironically expresses that in spite of their hatred and indifference for each other the White and the Black are parts of each other as both of them are Americans. So Hughes here almost rationalises that it is best for both of the Blacks and the Whites to discard their personal hatred for the larger synthesis by which they can create one strong and unified nation.

In his signature poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", the Black poet-speaker presents the views of a Negro, who has adopted himself to the multiculturalism of America. This Negro has been acquainted with other great African rivers and now he is introduced with the American rivers. The poet tries to manifest that the Negro is part of this natural world, and hence there is no relevance in the White American's making distinction between the White and the Black.

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
 flow of human blood in human veins.
 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
 I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
 I danced in the Nile when I was old
 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
 went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
 I've known rivers:
 Ancient, dusky rivers.
 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.(Rampersad, 620)

The Black man has loved all the American rivers like the rivers of his native country, Africa and assimilated himself with the American culture, as well as the world. In this way the 'souls of the black folk' have grown with an identity, which is deep like those great rivers. Here Hughes almost sings a panegyric of the Black, Afro-American culture, which will endure and deepen like these great rivers of the world. Practically Hughes, through his poems, emerges as the "people's poet", who endeavours to re-educate both the audience and the artist by lifting the theory of the Black aesthetic into reality as he expresses in the poem "My People":

The night is beautiful,
 So the faces of my people.
 The stars are beautiful,
 So the eyes of my people
 Beautiful, also, is the sun.
 Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. (Rampersad, 623)

Langston Hughes is one of the few black writers of any consequence to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists. His work is pervaded with a sense of pride in the African American identity and its diverse culture. In his work he confronts racial stereotypes, protested social conditions, and expands African America's image of itself. His main concern is the uplift of his people, of whom he judged himself the adequate appreciator, and whose strengths, resiliency, courage, and humour he wants to record as part of the general American experience. Thus, his poetry centred generally on insightful views of the working class lives of blacks in America - lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. Moreover, Hughes stresses the importance of a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate, that united people of African descent and Africa across the globe and encouraged pride in their own diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. Langston Hughes is, indeed, one of the few black writers of any consequence to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists. Langston Hughes is not only a role model for his calls for black racial pride instead of assimilation, but the most important technical influence in his emphasis on folk and jazz rhythms as the basis of his poetry of racial pride.

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