

Unveiling the Image of Blacks in White American Society: Dream, Desire, Hopes and Despair in the Poems of Langston Hughes

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Abstract:

Langston Hughes is one of the greatest voices of America. He is a pioneering figure of Harlem Renaissance. Blacks in America find its origin with the slave trade from Africa, sold in American markets. Even after the formal declaration of abolition of slavery it prevailed in south of America for long time. African-American Literature explores the issues of freedom, equality, racist torture, culture, religion and many more which has been denied to them from long back.

Langston Hughes spoke fearlessly against injustice and gave solutions to face and rise above the practices of racist discrimination. In his poems he talks about dreams, desires, hope and despair of blacks in the White American Society. Further the research will focus on the essence of Hughes who feels himself as a part of America and unveils the contribution of blacks in making of America. But at the same time he is heartbroken seeing and undergoing racial discrimination prevailing in the American Society. The paper will finally deal with the Hughes optimism full of hope for better America, valuing equality and freedom devoid of class, creed, race and sex.

Keywords: African-American, racial discrimination, injustice, equality, desire, hopes

Blacks in America find its origin with the slave trade from Africa, sold in American markets. The three hundred years of slavery has made a prominent scar in their lives. Throughout seventeenth and eighteenth century people from Africa were kidnapped and sold as an indentured labor and labor for crop and cotton production. In the mid of nineteenth century America witnessed Slavery Abolition Movement with rise of Civil War. Even after abolition of slavery in the end of eighteenth century, slavery continued as direct or indirect form in the South of America as South faced economic crisis and so they continued slave labor.

African-American Literature explores the issues of freedom, equality, racist torture, culture, religion and many more which has been denied to them from long back. Their writings make readers critically examine and explore the unique experiences of their life as African descended. By reading the experiences of Black authors is to honor their legacies, understanding the unrespectable life they have undergone for centuries and finally gain the ability to empathize humanity. Langston Hughes is an eminent Black Writer and a leading figure of Harlem Renaissance. He is a great novelist, playwright, essayist and children's book writer. Through his writings, he presents prominent themes such as American dream, dignity, aspiration, racism and self-actualization. He founded a style of poetry called "Jazz Poetry" in which the poem when read aloud goes in rhythm and sounds like jazz music.

Like Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes too is known to be the voice of America as his poems picture the daily life struggles of the common man. His writings deal with the welfare of the society. He believed for what America has promised equality for all. He spoke fearlessly against injustice and gave solutions to face and rise above these practices of racist discrimination. Regarding his work it is stated that "Hughes more than any other black poet or writer recorded faithfully the nuances of black life and its frustration." (Wagner: 94) According to Donald B. Gibson "Hughes differed from most of his predecessors among black poets, and (until recently) from those who followed him as well, in that he addressed his poetry to the people, specifically to black people."(7)

In the poem "I, Too, Sing America" Hughes is highlighting the plight of African-American and the torture they have experienced under slavery. He reveals how blacks were treated badly against humanitarian ground. Despite of the despair in their life, the speaker of the poem is optimistic and full of faith. He is sure that in future whites in America will accept and embrace them. The speaker is hoping a dignified life for the blacks. He hopes for the better future in the democratic America.

But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong. (I, Too, Sing America)

"I, Too, Sing America" expresses inequality, injustice and racial discrimination faced by the African-Americans. The poem also conveys the fact that despite the differences of colour, the dawn is sure where all will be treated equally. He sees a ray of hope.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then. (I, Too, Sing America)

The whites in this poem acts as a true colonizer who pinpoints blacks and mistreat them by not allowing them to sit on table and eat with them.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes, (I, Too, Sing America)

At the end poet mentions that in future whites will regret and feel ashamed about their attitude and suppression they had levied on the blacks because of their skin and color. The title of the poem shows Hughes deep concern by declaring that he too can "sing America" and he has complete right to feel patriotic even though his white brothers do not embrace him. The first line opens with a confession that he is American and nationalist of America. The poem focuses on the racial discrimination prevailing in the early 20th century and the violence, and economic marginalization faced in both North and South America. The last line "I, too, am America", shows his belongingness to his country America despite of all the odds faced by blacks. The poem has dualism. At one stance Langston Hughes feels proud that he is an American born and grown up in America, at the same time the worse treatment by whites make him feel that he is not a part of America. Thus discrimination affects the personalities and leads one to a confused state of life.

Langston Hughes' poem "Let America Be America Again" is a poem written during the Great Depression era and early Harlem Renaissance period. Hughes talks

about disillusionment with the American Dream and opines that America has failed to fulfil the promise of freedom and equality.

Let America be America again.

Let it be the dream it used to be. (Let America Be America Again)

The above given lines which are the first two lines of the poem focuses on the idea of American dream of freedom, liberty, equality, happiness, and how it has been turned down. Hughes expresses the reality how poor, black and the downtrodden feels the American dream just an illusion. The poem also represents poor whites, red men, Native Americans and other minority groups who are the disadvantaged lot in America. The poem discusses about the American Dream which was never achieved by blacks and other minorities. Besides criticizing injustice existing in America, the poem of Hughes, at last, shows some signs of hope about the existence of the American Dream in the near future (F. Leach 94). The poem is a cry from the wounds and a passionate plea for America to re-establish the lost Dream. Hughes believes that the people who made America, sacrificed their life, flourished it with their blood and sweat should be acknowledged. Their contribution that helped America to be land of wealth should be appreciated. The poem focuses on the spirit of hope and will power to fight back and make America dream again.

O, let America be America again—

The land that never has been yet—

And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.

The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—

Who made America,

Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,

Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,

Must bring back our mighty dream again. (Let America Be America Again)

The speaker of the poem claims that he has never experienced equality in America. Talking about the farmer and servant, Hughes represents them as starving poor, and disenfranchised person, struggling for their rights and the way to survive in the “land of dreams”. The speaker claims that he is the one who dreamt of a free land living under the umbrella of ‘trust’ and has built it with his own sweat and blood.

The poem ends with an optimistic ending and a ray of hope. In the last line the poet urges old America to believe and appreciate the contribution of blacks in making the land green and beautiful and fulfill the American Dream.

We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again! (Let America Be America Again)

Langston Hughes metaphorical complex poem “Negro” deals with the emotional appeal the blights in human history, black slavery. In this poem he is making a comparison of the blacks then and now. The poem metaphorically takes us to the journey of black slavery since ancient time. Whether it was King Caesar, Egyptians Pharaohs, Belgians native Africans have always suffered great oppression. Throughout the poem Hughes touches the heart by making readers realize the scorching pain undergone by them.

I’ve been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me still in Mississippi. (Negro)

In the last stanza Hughes relates black color to the darkness of night. Darkness further symbolically relates to ignorance and decadence. The color ‘black’ is unfavorably used for blacks who has pure heart and contributes their best to White America. In contrast white color which is a symbol of innocence and purity exploits blacks and treat them inhumanly.

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa. (Negro)

The title of the poem “Negro” is enough to understand the plight of the blacks. The very first line “I am a Negro” makes reader curious to know about the lives of blacks. To describe ‘Negro’, Hughes has used words associated to them, such as ‘slave’, ‘worker’, ‘singer’, and ‘victim’ and also have painted a picture of each roles. The choice of the

pronoun “I” represent entire black community. The choice of diction reflects Hughes’ tone. He very courageously and proudly let the world know the great work and achievements of the blacks such as building of “Woolworth Building” in America and “Great Pyramids” in Egypt. Here Great Pyramids represents marvelous art of architecture and knowledge of mathematics. It also represents slavery for which they never had a say ‘no’.

The poem shows hope and gives message to the world. As all the oppression in the past has come to an end, all the empires has collapsed, it is the warning to the American ruling class to end up their tyranny else they too will suffer in the same way. Hence whites in American should immediately stop racial discrimination. He gives message that if America does not abandon racial discrimination, than they too will face their ends like those of ignorant empires from the past. The poem “Negro” is a cry of Hughes, of all blacks for liberation.

“Dreams” by Langston Hughes is one the most credible poem for its enthusiasm and message for the readers talking about the significance of dreams. Hughes encourages readers to spark in them dreams as dreams can only ignite desires and goals in their lives, without which life is meaningless. It is the dream which makes humans progress and succeeds in their life. The very first line “Hold fast to dreams” signifies the importance of dream. It is the thing which keeps life interesting, enthusiastic and moving. He conveys the message to readers to pursue the dreams till satisfaction and accomplishment. In the following lines

For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly. (Dreams)

Hughes compares the dying of dreams with the broken wings of birds. He makes readers visualize how important dreams are. One without dreams is like birds with broken wings which cannot fly. Similarly without dreams one cannot get success and be happy. Broken-winged bird is symbolizing hopelessness, pessimism and slavery. Thus the life of a person without dreams is purposeless. The diction ‘if’ stresses on the consequences of the lack of dreams. Hughes portrays a powerful imagery with gruesome effect in the line

“Life is a broken-winged bird” making the reader understands the depth, intensity and necessity of dreams.

In the second stanza poet repeats the line “Hold fast to dreams” to emphasize the significance of dreams. He further stresses on the idea that life is like a barren field without dreams. Barren field is unproductive and so is the life of human beings without dreams. The other idea which he presents is the comparison with frozen land, which too represents a man with hindrances and lack of motivation. He presents it in the form of metaphor.

For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

This poem has universal meaning. It is for all devoid of race, class, culture and nationality. Hughes encourages people to never give up and stop dreaming. If a person stops dreaming than it means that the person is going through pessimistic phase of life. Person is leading a worthless life. In such situation dreams can work as a wonder. It gives hopes, and a way to achieve one’s goal in life. No matter what the dream is it can be accomplished and achieved by sincere hard work.

Hughes poem “As I Grew Older” is yet another projection of the lost dreams of blacks. The narrator of the poem begins by making readers aware that he is looking back at his childhood where he had dreamt about bright future and respectful life. But as he grew older he had almost forgotten his goal, his purpose of life. As a child, his dreams were “Bright like a sun.” The poem takes a dark turn specifying a blockage of wall, which rose till sky. The poet uses the metaphor ‘wall’ to represents discrimination, racism and prejudice which shattered the dreams of a child. It actually represents the broken dreams of the blacks. Further the poet makes the reader aware of the impact it has in the lives of blacks. The narrator doesn’t have courage anymore to go in sun and brighten his dreams rather he now moves in the shadows of life. Shadow represents the blocking of light and therefore, hints the existence of darkness in life. The wall of oppression has become so strong and thicker that the speaker is engulfed in it and unable to come out of it. Thus the narrator is unable to achieve his dreams due to racial discrimination and subjugation.

The speaker gathers courage and decides to break the wall and see the bright sun shine. He stresses in finding his dream again which he has forgotten as he grew older. The child must be let out of shadow, find space to flourish and accomplish his dreams. The child should walk breaking the shackles/wall of racism, biasness, prejudice and extremism faced by blacks. The child will live in the world of dreams where dreams are meant for achieving.

Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun!

Hughes being born as black, makes a point to spread his message that though being born as color of skin, or ethnic background a person should not be stopped in achieving his dreams in a white-dominated society. In the start the tone of the poem is depressing and angry. But still the poem is optimistic as in the last stanza he talks about hope and he is confident and sure that he will be able to achieve his dreams. The change in the tone from pessimism to optimism signifies change in the attitude and perception of the speaker about life and his dreams. The poem ends with a strong move towards hope, courage and confidence.

Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams Of sun! (As I Grew Older)

Langston Hughes realized that not all people residing in America enjoy the same rights, privileges and opportunities. Racial and ethnic discrimination prevails in abundant in America. He could see the shattered dreams of blacks in the white-supremacy society.

He sees America with no opportunities for blacks. In his poems rather than getting disappointed due to racial prejudice and discrimination he celebrates racial pride, desires and dreams. Some of his poems reflect pain, anguish and anger but his poems end with optimistic note. He urges to end up the racial discrimination with a strong stand. He dreams a place filled with peace, harmony, justice, freedom equally for both blacks and whites in America. The concept of ‘American Dreams’ is the blood vein of his poems and well as his life. He wants government to take active part in fulfilling the dreams of oppressed, suppressed, marginalized and racist lot of the country. In the poems discussed above Hughes has very artistically and successfully portrays the image of blacks in White-American society. The discrimination and injustice faced by them and the courage of blacks aspiring with desires and dreams to have a better future in the white-society. Hughes hails proudly for being black and inspires the readers to support equality worldwide. The concept of “Black is Beautiful” can be very well sensed in his writings.

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