

Stifled Voices of Blacks in American Literature : Special Reference to the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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Abstract

The history of America is filled with the exploitation of black i.e. Afro-Americans. They were brought in the New World through slave trade which was introduced by the white Europeans who were migrated from Europe to America. Throughout their lives the blacks struggled hard to establish their identity. They strove hard to be accepted into the mainstream of American society dominated by the whites. The pain, suffering, and agony of the blacks can be observed in the literature written by the blacks i.e. slave narratives. The voice of the blacks were stifled intentionally by the whites. Langston Hughes in his poems tried to portray the fibers and threads of the contemporary American society where voices of the negroes were stifled.

KEYWORDS : New World, Slaves, Declaration of Independence, Great Migration, Thomas Jefferson, World War, Harlem Renaissance, Jazz and Blue.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in America the blacks were lynched, degraded and looked down upon by the whites. As a result blacks tried to establish their own identity by creating a literature which is embedded in their African roots and folk tradition. As the literature of Black America shows Afro American attitude towards Africa are not only defined by the dominant image of the continent but also by the position which blacks occupy as a minority in white America on and their racial experiences.

In 1807 Thomas Jefferson signed legislation that officially ended African slave trade. But that could not eradicate the slave trade. On the contrary it ignited the domestic slave trade in America. Slaves were discouraged to read and write and any kind of rebelliousness on the part of slaves provoked brutal punishment. Thomas Jefferson , principal drafter of the Declaration of Independence, was a tireless promoter of civil liberties. Some of his thoughts were recorded in his “Notes on the State of Virginia”.

The abolition of slavery, after effects of World War I and the great social and cultural, disenfranchised, segregation, denial of civil and political rights to African Americans by reactionary white governments of southern states, heavy Industrialization, great migration of African Americans to northern cities from south rural areas, uplifted economic status and finally circumstances leading to great depression gave rise to a new mass culture during early 20th century in United States. African Americans sought a better standard of living and relief from the institutionalized racism in the South. The migration of Southern Blacks to the North changed the image of the African-American from rural, undereducated peasants to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led to a greater social consciousness, and African-Americans became players on the

world stage, expanding intellectual and social contacts internationally. The progress—both symbolic and real—during this period, became a point of reference from which the African-American community gained a spirit of self-determination that provided a growing sense of both Black Identity, Black urbanity and Black militancy as well as a foundation for the community to build upon for the Civil Rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s. The urban setting of black community especially in Harlem city near New York provided a venue for African-Americans of all backgrounds to appreciate the variety of Black life and culture. “The Harlem Renaissance” encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture; for instance, folk materials and spirituals provided a rich source for the artistic and intellectual imagination and it freed the Blacks from the establishment of past condition. This is also known as the great Negro movement. Through sharing in these cultural experiences, a consciousness sprung forth in the form of a united racial identity. The Great Migration greatly expanded Negro communities, creating a greater market for Negro’s culture and Jazz and Blues. The Negro’s music of the South came to the North with the migrants and was played in the nightclubs and hotspots of Harlem. At the same time, whites were also becoming increasingly fascinated by Negro’s culture. A number of white artists and patrons began to offer Negro’s access to "mainstream" publishers and art venues.

Despite the increasing popularity of Negro’s culture, virulent white racism, often by more recent ethnic immigrants, continued to impact African-American communities, even in the North. Race riots and other civil uprisings occurred throughout the US during the 1919, reflecting economic competition over jobs and housing in many cities, as well as tensions over social territories. The famous “Three Plays for a Negro Theatre” were written by white playwright Ridgely Torrence, featured Negro actors' conveying complex human emotions and yearnings. They rejected the stereotypes of the blackface and minstrel show traditions. JW Johnson in 1917 called the premieres of these plays "the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American Theatre." Another landmark came in 1919, when Claude McKay published his militant sonnet "If We Must Die". Although the poem never alluded to race, to Negro readers it sounded a note of defiance in the face of racism and the nationwide race riots and lynching then taking place. By the end of the First World War, the fiction of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Claude McKay were describing the reality of contemporary Negro life in America. The Negro movement produced a great deal of African-American music such as blues, spirituals, and jazz during the 1920s, and became very popular with the citizens of US and later gained national and worldwide recognition. The Negro movement through intellect and production of literature, art, and music helped to challenge the pervading racism and stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics, and racial and social integration.

Blacks used art to prove their humanity and demand for equality. The Negro Movement led to more opportunities for blacks to be published by mainstream houses. Many authors began to publish novels, magazines and newspapers during this time. The new fiction attracted a great amount of attention from the nation at large. Some authors who became nationally known were W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Eric D. Walrond, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen.

The period known as Harlem Renaissance also called the New Negro Renaissance is mostly associated with the 1920s though its beginnings can be traced to the years just and some of its spirit continued to exist in the years just after until the Great Depression brought about a new set of issues that further changed the nature of African American literature. During the 1920s an unprecedented amount of black writing was published and accepted by the white literary establishment, promising not only a better future for race relations, but, equally importantly a new sense of black race pride. The renaissance connotes a rebirth, but it also refers to a focused period of extraordinary cultural production. The Harlem Renaissance fulfills both connotations: a new optimism replaced the mood of cultural uncertainty that characterized black America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and it manifested itself in a spectacular artistic outburst. Harlem Renaissance brings about the many dimensions in African American literature. The search of identity is one such dimension. The problem of Negro identity has various dimensions like the colour, community and class. The role which a Negro has played in the American society has been inferior, passive and servile. The inescapable mark of oppression which the Negro grudgingly bears leads to aggression and hostility.

The turn of the 20th cent. saw the young Negroes tried to establish their own identity through their songs. There is a conscious attempt on the part of the Negroes to forget their bleak and dismal past and embrace the future which is beckoning them with open arms of course with obvious challenges. Although the Negroes accept the challenge with smile. The literature of the blacks is the product of the peculiar situation in which he is forced to put. It originates from his personal and group experience in America. The negroes felt the necessity of protecting their self from distortion and destruction in the hostile American society which is dominated by the whites. Under these circumstances he strove hard to seek the natural self. Having very little of the African culture the negro developed his self image inevitably in his experience in America which slowly and gradually brought about some cohesion in the negro society.

The anguish, ecstasy and aspiration of the American negro's psycho is intensely exemplified in the poetry of Langston Hughes. The credit for nourishing the black sensibility and inspiring it to create Afro American literature and transforming it into a literature of struggle goes to Hughes. The poetry of Hughes aesthetically is concerned with the lives of common black folks, their thoughts, feelings, dreams and aspirations in their own forms of expression. Hughes inaugurated the movement of "negritude" which may be regarded as the soul of Harlem. This movement defines the sensibility and historical consciousness of the Afro Americans. Born in Missouri in 1902 Langston Hughes made remarkable contribution to the Afro American literature so that he came to be regarded as the leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance of black art. He was influenced by the poetry of Paul Dunbar, Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. He began to write poetry in the age of thirteen.

We have tomorrow

Bright before us like a flame.

Yesterday, a night-gone thing

A sun-down name.

And dawn today

Broad arch above the road we come,

We march.

These lines from the poem “Youth” by Langston Hughes clearly show that there is a conscious attempt from the blacks to forget their bleak and dismal past and to embrace the bright future in America. The literature of the blacks is the outcome of the weird situation and predicament in which he is placed. It is a literature of the identity of his own-self.

Langston Hughes who is said to be the father of African American literary movement. Langston Hughes started off by affirming the dignity and humanity of the African Americans. He believes in the ideals of liberty, equality and universal brotherhood. He strongly asserts their claim for equal participation in the American polity despite occasional hankering after a past which through its absence has become an attractive mythic presence. Langston Hughes very firmly and determinedly concentrates on the Americanness of the experiences which shaped the collected personality of African Americans. Outrightly rejecting the Jim Crow stereotype, he brings out the underlying experiences which define their authentic humanity. In the middle of his life he also came into influence of Marxist ideology and was writing poetry of radical protest. But the Marxist overtones do not indicate adoption of the outlook of scientific socialism.

Langston Hughes fervently outpours the double consciousness of the African American community as being Africans in terms of roots and Americans in terms of shared history. This double consciousness which kept on reverberating in African Americans’ minds is most clearly expressed in the last phase of the poetry of Langston Hughes. He had an ear that could listen to their cries, hear the sighs of their suffering and a heart that could feel the injustice to which they had been subjected.

Langston Hughes attempts to recoup the buried primordial identity which his people had brought with them from Africa and which was never completely expunged or obliterated. While depicting the sorrowful state of African Americans, he looks back to his warm tropical Africa in order to get strength and solace from it. He also tries to recapture in this way their deep sense of racial pride and their spiritual grit. His dealing with beautiful and atavistic Africa in poems like “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” “Negro,” “My People,” “Our Land,” “The Weary Blues,” “Lament for Dark People” is not a romantic escape from harsh realities of the actual life, but a strategy to muster courage and confidence in order to resist oppression. He uses cultural and folk traditions of his race not merely for catharsis but for defining the cultural physiognomy of the community.

In his early life, Langston Hughes’s central urge remains to affirm the underlying humanity and natural beauty of this people which had remained unrecognized because of their being an oppressed and underprivileged class. While depicting

the bitter experiences of his people, he puts an emphasis on the recouping of a distinctive identity for the blacks of which their primordial experiences preserved in their collective memory form an important component. With the passage of time, however, there is an advance from this vein of negritude and heavy emphasis on the ethnic aspect to a more focused attention on the pain, agony and miseries of the African Americans as also on the causative factors in their situation responsible for this type of experience.

The middle phase of Langston Hughes's poetic career, especially the period of 1930s and early 1940s when he came under the influence of Marxist ideology, is that of a poet who advocates the need for concerted efforts to eradicate all the evils prevalent in American society. He exhorts the deprived sections of the society to rise and struggle against oppression and exploitation and work for the creation of a genuinely fraternal society. Getting away from the nostalgia of Africa, Langston Hughes now speaks in a different tone. He gives a clarion call to the oppressed and downtrodden to get united and ask for equal participation in the stream of democracy in the United States of America. He advocates the need to break the shackles of oppression and pleads with the disadvantaged community to uncage itself from the "circus of civilization" that has been a "cultured hell" for them. There is also an increased awareness of the causative factors being basically economic and producing institutional oppression and exploitation of the African Americans as well as other deprived sections of society.

In his later life, Langston Hughes's treatment of African Americans' predicament is neither a romantic longing for what is not nor there is any radical strain. He acquires a long-term perspective and writes about future hopes in an equable and sober mood. His attitude is now based on achievement of a long-term objective involving preservation of an African American's ethnic identity which is consistent with their active participation in American social life. He asserts the cultural identity of his people but instead of a simple obliteration of a long spell of historical experience, he stresses the need of serious efforts to translate the deferred dream of American ideals into a reality so that all the marginalized and deprived sections including the African Americans get integrated into America's collective identity as a nation. He advocates the harmonized and unified working of all the ethnic groups to create a society without any discrimination, oppression, segregation or exploitation.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that there was the exploitation at the gross level of blacks by the white community of America. They were degraded to the minimal, stifled and grinded. Langston Hughes in his work captures this very thread with minute observation. We can observe that throughout the literary career Langston Hughes raises the voice of the have nots i.e. Negroes. He tried to that Negroes should not be looked down in the society and they should be accepted and should be treated as equal with White Americans with pride.

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