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Racial Discrimination and Protest in the Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The present study makes a critical analysis of the poetry of Langston Hughes, one of the most representative African American poets who had been the leader of the most important literary and political movement in America—Harlem Renaissance. Hughes witnessed the racial discrimination, segregation and prejudice, and as a literary crusader, sang his strong voice against injustice and suppression. He longed for freedom from the shackles of prejudice and segregation to attain equality. Throughout his poetry, Langston Hughes faithfully recorded the pathetic predicament of downtrodden African Americans in America— the richest and the most powerful country of the world—and talked about the dream of freedom of African Americans. He talked about harmony and brotherhood between whites and blacks. The closer reading of Hughes' poetry reveals a feeling of estrangement and exploitation of the Negro community in a racially segregated nation, America. The Negroes lived in an environment where they were subjected to tortures and torments. They lived in fear and apprehension. These people were left in the lurch with no security to their lives and existence. They were clueless about the future and hesitant of what lies ahead. Negroes constantly lived in trepidation and uncertainty, pessimism and gloom, at times placing them in severe unpleasant positions in their lives. But their collective effort to attain freedom made them reach their goal; the freedom from slavery, racism and oppression. The present study will examine the pathetic plight of these humans and their realization of freedom through their constant revolts.

Keywords: discrimination, prejudice, cruelty, segregation, inequality, revolt, emancipation.

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Racial discrimination is a type of hatred based on race, color, nationality or ethnic origin of an individual or group which is likely to humiliate, insult, or frighten. Racial discrimination takes place when a person is treated less favorably than another person in a similar situation because of their race, color, descent, and nationality. It occurs when an individual is subjected to unequal treatment because of their actual or apparent distinction. Racial discrimination leads to racial segregation. The individuals of the less privileged group start realizing their inferiority and helplessness to add value to their social life. They are separated from the dominant group as an estranged community.

Protest refers to the revolt of an individual or a group of people against something that is established as a truth. This protest arouses when the individual or the group feels that the established truth – a law or an institution or a social standard – is made to curb their freedom. So, a revolt is a violent action against a government or a ruler that opens a clash between the two opposing groups. It shows that the individual or the group does not accept or agree to be controlled or influenced. They set for the realization of their dreams which they can achieve once they are relieved of social, political and religious shackles.

African American writing evolved to protest racism and tyranny of the white Americans, and also to gain self pride and identity. It is this experience of the African Slaves that Langston Hughes tries to record in his poetry. Hughes recollects the pathetic plight of his ancestors that were

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sold into slavery between the early 1700s and 1860s. They were moved to American soil, Canada, and the Caribbean Island and other parts of the world to be exploited as slaves. The Africans taken into American land were referred to as 'Black Americans'. They faced a great deal of misery and agony, and tried to survive hardship on arrival to America. They were engaged into forced toil, maltreated, abused, humiliated and demoralized on the cotton fields and plantation where they were compelled to work as slaves. The African Americans kept tolerating the cruelty and suffering, since there was no one to hear their voice. But there came a time for them when they started realizing the value of their freedom. They began expressing themselves through Negro spirituals which marked the beginning of the artistic expressions of the black emotion. They began to understand the worth of their life which was not to live for the Whites but for themselves to realize their dreams. They found a pride in their race. This Racial Pride and Optimism in Langston Hughes' poetry makes him a famous poet of his people. Much of Langston Hughes' poetry deals with the struggles of African Americans living in America as a minority.

Hughes was transparently black and emphasized the theme of "black is beautiful" as he investigated the black human condition in a multiplicity of depths. His major anxiety was to support and boost his fellow Negroes whose strengths, resilience, courage and humor he wished to evidence as a part of the general American experience. His poetry portrayed the lives of the working class blacks in America— lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. He declared the role of African American artists in his essay:

> We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build

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> our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves (The Nation 1926).

An expression of this faith is illustrated 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. (Selected Poems 13)

The poem reveals that Hughes identifies himself with his race, "my people"—the men and woman of working class he lived with. He believes that there is no dearth in the beauty, strength and power of his Negro community. His comparisons are all justified to suit the worth of Negro life. The whites in America looked down upon the Negroes

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed huge exploitation, oppression, torments and tortures of African Americans in the US -- the most powerful country of the world. One of the most prominent African American literary figures, Langston Hughes, came to the literary scene to project out the very condition of the Negroes in the racially segregated America. Almost all his poems provide the evolution of the African Americans in the twentieth century. The African American characters in Hughes' poetry show all the complexities of life. They show how they were brought from Africa, and sold in America as slaves. They were oppressed, exploited, tortured and tormented and lowered to the standards of animals.

In the first two decades of the century, Hughes himself had been the victim of discrimination, prejudice and segregation. He narrates how he and his fellow Negroes were not allowed to visit

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certain public places as they were legally classified as second-citizens. Hughes writes about one of such incidents happened to him in his autobiography:

> Once I was late for an evening engagement because, at a river crossing where the bridge was under repair, a ferry was being used. But all the Negro cars on the road had to wait until all the white cars in line, no matter how far back, had gotten on the boat. The ferry captain would fill his boat up with white automobiles and leave the Negro cars standing there. By the time the boat crossed the river and came back, more white drivers had gathered. The ferry master would again motion the whites onto the boat ahead of the Negroes. (I Wonder As I Wander. 82).

First of all, in America racism began on the basis of skin color of the Africans. The Africans were brought to America not to be treated as humans and establish social relations with them, but the intention of the Whites was to exploit them as slaves. They did all this due to the black color of the Africans. Hughes has sympathetically portrayed the skin color issue of the racism in *Aunt Sue's Stories*:

> Black slaves
> Working in the hot sun,
> And black slaves
> Walking in the dewy night,
> And black slaves
> Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
> Mingle themselves softly (Selected Poems 6)

What is notable about this poem is the photographical portrayal of the pathetic Negro slaves "Working in the hot sun", "Walking in the dewy night", "Singing sorrow songs" of their misery. Not only have they been bearing the suffering and pain of their slavery, their soul has also been

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wounded. It is all because of their black skin that the White Americans have tried to enslave them. Here, Hughes portrays the sense of loneliness, helplessness and desolation of the poor slaves. In the poem *Me and the Mule*, the skin color issue is evident. The poem consists of two stanzas in which Afro-American is compared to an old mule. The first stanza is devoted to the description of the old mule.

My old mule,
He's got a grin on his face.
He's been a mule so long
He's forgot about his race. (Selected Poems 125)

The third line of the stanza states that Afro-Americans are not equal and considered to be inferior for a long time lowering them to the standard of an animal. The use of the word "mule" indicates that Afro- American people are stupid and, in fact, can be tamed like an animal. The last line of the stanza shows that it useless and hopeless for the Negro to fight to become equal to the white people. They will always be just slaves and workers for someone else. In the second stanza Hughes admits openly that the Afro-Americans are just like the "old mules" and they will not become anything different as they have always been.

I'm like that old mule-
Black-and don't give a damn!
You got to take me
Like I am. (Selected Poems 125)

The comparison of the Negro with the old mule is done on the basis of his black color that does not give his body the grave as the mule is an ugly animal. He and the mule have the same place in the society and because of the comparison to the mule; the person does not need to be treated in a better way and just wants to be accepted in the society as he is. Even though the Afro-

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Americans have been in the US for a long time, their position in the society and their rights have not changed, and based on this analysis, they will not change in the future too. So the poem is characterized by its gloomy and pessimistic mood.

Based on the skin color, the White Americans sought to exploit the Negroes in different ways. They considered the Blacks uncivilized and unsophisticated in mannerisms. They had become the victims of exploitation and cruelty of the Whites. A substantial corpus of Hughes' poetry has revealed how the Whites used to hate the Negroes and lynched them for fake cases of rapes. A number of Hughes' poems have been devoted to lynching of Negros in the South (the vicinity of rich whites). The ugliness of The South is delivered with overwhelming images 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.
…
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.(Selected Poems. 173)

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The poem is infested with bestial imagery. The poem captures the historical incidents of lynching of blacks by the whites for accusing him of raping a white woman. A black man accused of molesting a white woman is equal to death where protest and innocence are useless. He is hanged, he is castrated, and he is burnt — is what he is punished with. The women of the South have been portrayed with all fashionable attitudes, full of sexuality. But they are heartless towards Negroes. The poem *Southern Mammy Sings* again expresses the concept of lynching of Negroes by the Whites:

Last week they lynched a colored boy.
They hung him to a tree.
That colored boy ain't said a thing
But we all should be free. (Selected Poems.162)

The pathetic and helpless condition of Negroes has been conspicuously expressed in this poem. A "colored boy" is lynched, "hung" to a tree, for he talked about his freedom as a human being. So, the poem tells that even mentioning of the word freedom was not allowed and the one who dares to do so, was punished by lynching. In *Ku Klux*, the man is taken to "some lonesome place" and lynched for resisting the white men's claims of racial superiority:

They hit me in the head
And knocked me down.
And then they kicked me
On the ground.
A klansman said, "Nigger,
Look me in the face —
And tell me you believe in
The great white race." (Selected Poems 163)

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The unpleasant address "Nigger" and threat "Look in the face" show how the white people used to despise the Afro-American people and that the Afro-Americans were usually called only by this word. The white society which is represented in this poem by the Ku Klux Klan also demands the Afro-Americans to accept their position in the society and to deal with the superiority of the white race. To expand the superiority of the white race, the spokesman of the Ku Klux Klan describes the white race as "The great white race." The Whites are never ready to accept and assimilate the Negroes in their so call supreme society. The Negroes, helpless and hopeless of their life, keep tolerating the load of White man's cruelty and prejudice

Life for blacks in America was a cry and a prayer. In such an unfortunate and poor situation in their own country, if there was any hope for the poor African Americans, it was from the God. Langston Hughes himself had an immense faith in God and prayers. A considerable body of Hughes' poetry is devoted to prayers of miserable, brokenhearted and depressed African Americans. In *Feet o' Jesus*, the speaker prays for mercy, longing for Jesus' hand:

At the feet o' Jesus,
Sorrow like a sea.
Lordy, let yo' mercy
Come driftin' down on me.

At the feet o' Jesus
At yo' feet I stand.
O, ma little Jesus,
Please reach out yo' hand. (Selected Poems 17)

The speaker, who has been victimized, exploited and lynched several times, has only "sorrow like a sea" as a reward for his tireless endeavor to please the whites. America, his habitat is all full of pain and suffering. His sentiments, his cry for mercy can be felt in

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the phrases like "At the feet o' Jesus/At yo'feet I stand." In *Shout* the appeal for mercy is via prophets and saints—"Listen to yo' prophets,/Little Jesus!/Listen to yo' saints!"(Selected Poems 19) The poem *Prayer* is the sorrowful outburst of a painful soul that can be observed even by a cruel man:

I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
Lord God,
I do not know. (Selected Poems 18)

Here, the tormented and tortured Negro is begging from the Savior to show him the path in his miserable condition. He is articulating his misery and despair which are due to the brutality of the whites. The unbearable cruelty of the whites has forced him to ask the "Lord God", the questions which he himself cannot answer. Here, Hughes not only depicts the helplessness of a Negro but also the uncertain future of the ill-treated Negro in the phrase "I do not know." He is surely fated to die in the hands of the proud Americans because the God is also indifferent towards the Blacks. Another poem, *Litany*, records encouragement and inspiration among the black folk by a priest in the Church:

Gather up
In the arms of your pity
The sick, the depraved,
The desperate, the tired,

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…
Gather up
In the arms of your pity.
Gather up
In the arms of your love-
Those who expect
No love from above. (Selected Poems 24)

Here, the expressions "pity", "sick", "depraved", "desperate", "tired", "weary" are apparently suggestive of the ruthless exploitation of the blacks by the whites. The poetic empathy associated with painful physical afflictions on the Negros is unique in the sensory art of Hughes. The speaker in the poem is quite conscious of the fact that only "In the arms of your love", "In the arms of your pity" the Negros can sustain their existence when they can "expect/No love from above." It is the men and women of their own race who can understand and share one another's sufferings when even the God has shown no sympathy on them.

It is well known fact that when something in life becomes unbearable, the man starts to devise plans to get rid of it. The African Americans in America waited and waited for the moment to see that one day the White American will try to understand the humanity and embrace the Negro as an indispensable member of the society. But the time never came and the Negro could see only the discrimination and prejudice in the heart of the White. He was oppressed, discriminated, exploited, prejudiced and socially segregated. Education among the African Americans played a very vital role in the reawakening of the African Americans.

When even the God was not there to hear the voice of these underprivileged Negroes, for the realization of their dreams, they themselves strived to find out the way to get rid of all the troubles of racial discrimination and physical tortures by the Whites, and the way was only to revolt against their oppressor for freedom. Hughes has faithfully recorded the rebellion of the

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Negros from the powerless, downtrodden to the revolutionized and freedom seeking African Americans in his poetry. A substantial corpus of Hughes' poetry depicts such revolts and protests for emancipation. The early signs of this revolt for liberation from the shackles of slavery can be found in the poems where the slaves refuse to eat or work. But with the passing of time, the Blacks were seen using other more clever and so more effective techniques of expressing their protest. Such a protest is expressed in *Freedom's Plow*:

He was a colored man who had been a slave
But had run away to freedom.
And the slaves knew
What Frederick Douglass said was true.
With John Brown at Harpers Ferry, Negroes died.
John Brown was hung.
Before the Civil War, days were dark,
And nobody knew for sure
When freedom would triumph. (Selected Poems 294)

Here, the "colored man who had been a slave", is inspired and encouraged by the sacrifices of black revolutionaries like "John Brown" who died for the sake of equality and freedom. The Negro is running away from his duties as a slave to join hands with other fellow slaves for their freedom. His hope for victory can be perceived in the line "And nobody knew for sure/When freedom would triumph."

The movement for liberation became stronger when the blacks resolved to achieve it at any cost. They had become conscious of their rights as humans that they could no more be the victims of racism. In *Democracy*, the speaker is more resolute to talk about his freedom:

I have as much right
As the other fellow has

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To stand
On my two feet
And on the land. (Selected Poems 285)

Here the Negro has started talking about equality of whites and blacks. The "other fellow" is the personification of the whole white race which is enjoying the freedom rights. The man is encouraged by the thought of equality and he resolves in the following lines:

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread. (Selected Poems 285)

The elder's advice for the speaker to wait for some more time for freedom to come does not have an impact on him. The man is not ready to delay his freedom for "tomorrow's bread" (future). He cannot wait for the "things to take their course" to come as freedom, rather he is ready to take strong steps to liberate himself and his race from centuries' long slavery.

The last stanza depicts the freedom and the need of the Afro- American people to achieve it. Hughes does not mention here where the freedom should be sought, he just mentions the actual value of it and again describes the Afro-Americans as people with the same rights as the white people.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.
I live here too.
I want freedom
Just as you. (Selected Poems 285)

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The poet becomes philosophical here and uses a metaphor of a "seed" which is the essential part of organisms. The seed grows sooner or later to give rise to a new plant, and here the "seed" of "freedom", which was dormant there in the Negro race, has started germinating in the subconscious and conscious minds of theirs.

The movement took a fierce shape when the Blacks started violating the laws called Jim Crow Laws established against them. According to Woodward:

> Negroes were incapable of being assimilated politically, socially, or physically into white society…… They were either excluded from railway cars, omnibuses, stagecoaches and steamboats or assigned to special "Jim Crow" sections: they sat, when permitted, in secluded and remote corners of theaters and lecture halls; they could not enter most hotels, restaurants, and resorts, except as servants. …….were often educated in segregated schools, punished in segregated prisons, nursed in segregated hospitals, and buried in segregated cemeteries."(Woodward 18-19).

It was the need of the hour to take some actions to awaken the whites and make them believe that Blacks were as much the members of the American society as the whites were. They started violating the laws framed against them to show the world that America also belongs to them. One of the violent acts of theirs is expressed by Hughes in his poem, *Lunch in a Jim Crow Car:*

> Get out the lunch-box of your dreams.
> Bite into the sandwich of your heart,
> And ride the Jim Crow car until it screams
> Then—like an atom bomb—it bursts apart. (Selected Poems 180)

Here, the Negroes' resolution is quite conspicuous that only their revolt is going to awaken the blind and indifferent whites to understand that enough is enough. The phrases "Bite", "ride", "screams", "atom bomb", "bursts", all are suggestive of a war—the war Negros have openly declared against their oppressors. Now, they do not care for the "Jim Crow" laws, instead they will

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eat "lunch-box of their dreams" and "Bite into the sandwich" of their "heart" in the "Jim Crow car". The rhyming of consonants is also suggestive of the slogans used in violent processions. The freedom struggle becomes stronger when inspired and led by a wise and astute leader. The *Freedom's Plow* is such a poem infested with motivation and patience:

America!
Land created in common,
Dream nourished in common,
Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on!
…
Don't be discouraged, builder!
If the fight is not yet won,
Don't be weary, soldier!
The plan and the pattern is here,
Woven from the beginning
Into the warp and woof of America: (Selected Poems 296)

The poet has made it quite clear that America is not the land of one race (white race) but of all those who inhabit her. The protagonist in the poem, probably the leader of the revolutionaries, fills in the awakened Negros that their dream of freedom and equality will come true provided they remain united and resolute in their mission. The word "soldiers" clarifies the doubt that the poem is devoted to the working of freedom struggle by the revolutionized Negros. The leader encourages the mob reminding them their "Dream nourished in common" (dream of freedom and equality), and that they cannot be "weary" and give in once they fail in their "fight". Their "plan and the pattern" is to keep tolerating the inflictions by the Ku Klux Klan (a secret organization of white men in the southern states of the US who used violence to oppose social change and equal rights for the blacks) and keep protesting against their enemies because:

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ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.
NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH
TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN WITHOUT
THAT OTHER'S CONSENT. (Selected Poems 296)

The poem states the bare fact that The Almighty has created all men equal and it on this earth that some powerful people try to overpower the others. The leave the others devoid of all that they need to live a life full of their dreams. But the protagonist in the poem declares that no one can take the authority in hand to "GOVERN" the other, rather he should allow the other to live as a free soul.

After a lot of rebellion, the Negroes have started imagining of America with all love and harmony between the blacks and the whites (Great American Dream). The wretched, overlooked Negroes have a possibility not to show the anger and bitterness but to reach the harmony and brotherhood with their white counterparts and attain their grade and admiration in the American society. Langston Hughes has intimately documented this belief of Negros in his recognized poetry. In *I, Too*, the speaker is extremely excited to talk about his freedom and brotherhood:

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
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,

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"Eat in the kitchen,"

…

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed —

I, too, am America. (Selected Poems 275)

The protagonist believes that in the time to come, he will be able to be assimilated by the white society and his search for identity will be complete. In the poem, he hopes the White man will realize his worth as an indispensable member of his society and will allow him to share food with him. He is also of the opinion that the White man will feel ashamed of his cruelty and exploitations of the Blacks, and will believe that the Black also represents America. It was all Blacks' hard work as slaves that White Americans could enjoy the luxury of life. Now the poet believes that finally the Negro will be duly rewarded for his hard work by the White. He hopes for a beautiful future for all his fellow humans.

So, Langston Hughes' poetry not only portrays the slavery, exploitation, oppression, discrimination, prejudice and racial segregation of the African Americans and their sheer revolt against their oppressor but also expresses the sense of harmony and brotherhood between Whites and Blacks. Therefore, it can be said that it was Hughes' poetry which nurtured and flourished the white and the black psyche to come closer and live in congenial environments, and ultimately saved the world's most powerful nation from disintegration.

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