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**The Reality in Langston Hughes' Poems**

**Nila Ekanath, Ph.D.**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the real depiction of society in the Harlem poems of Langston Hughes. The introduction deals with the origin of slavery and the beginning of Harlem Renaissance. The African Americans begin to understand their significance in America. The Black writers of the twentieth century started to express this newborn feeling of having significance in society, the need for social equivalence, protesting against injustice, wanting to go in search of African roots and the feeling of belongingness in America. Langston Hughes especially, among many other writers took to freezing history in the lines of his poems. The most remarkable pieces of work are the poems that deal with the happenings in Harlem.

Right at the beginning of his literary career Hughes was determined to weave his literary works purely from human experience as he saw it and what he perceived in real life. The element of History resounds so strongly in the poems that deal with Harlem. Harlem is the international Black capital. Hughes observed the surging folk life in the haunts of the habitues of Beale Street or at the common places on Rampart Street, and the active and

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the creative imagination of Hughes was busy with highlights of the Great Migration to Harlem.

Hughes formed his subject matter based on the misfortunes of lovers, personal sorrow involving death, poverty, loneliness, oppression, alienation and other grief. The poems sound the sorrow of the Black folk. Sometimes a simple crucial experience comes to life through a dramatic picture appealing to imagination. The paper discusses this sociological approach and Langston Hughes's ability to picture life in Harlem in the realm of his poems.

### **Literary Works Based Only on Human Experience**

Right at the beginning of his literary career Hughes was determined to weave his literary works purely from human experience as he saw it and what he perceived in real life. Realism in literature is an "attempt to describe human behaviour and surroundings or to represent figures and objects exactly as they act or appear in life". Hughes has an avowed concern for human conditions, and especially the African American condition. He drew liberally from the rich heritage of the Black people and dwelt on the African-American culture, aesthetics, feelings, emotions, attitudes and their folk life. Confronting the real condition of the African Americans has a cathartic or a therapeutic effect on the poet.

### **The History of the Blacks in America**

The History of the Blacks in America started in the sixteenth century when a Dutch ship brought the first set of slaves to the shores of America from Africa. This reminds the words of Wilberforce who wrote "There is something shocking in the idea of our unfortunate fellow creatures in captivity and exile, exposed to public view and sold like a herd of cattle" (quoted in Nelson 8).

After years of slavery, struggle and misery, the African Americans started to get an awakening and cry out for emancipation. Pieces of writings started to appear and most often the subjects dealt with were the suffering of the Blacks under slavery. The themes prevailed on the social and cultural conditions of the marginalised group and the African-American Diaspora.

The struggle of the African-Americans for emancipation finally concluded in the proclamation of Emancipation in 1863. The thirteenth amendment to the American constitution appeared in 1865 which confirmed the abolition of slavery. The fourteenth amendment was brought in 1868 and this granted citizenship to the free slave and the fifteenth which came in 1870 gave them their right to vote and defended them against

restrictive legislation. But many devices adopted to unofficially curb the African-Americans from rising up to take their rights or reach high posts and the activities of the Ku Klux Klan which worked against the Blacks pushed the marginalised community to a condition where it silently suffered racial segregation.

### **African-American Literature**

African-American literature included all the troubles faced by the race and also its innate beauty and aesthetics. Amidst the juxtaposition of diverse aesthetic sensibilities, African-American literature was able to popularise as well as enforce the reality of its cultural and traditional aesthetics and also impress the stamp of individual beauty and value. The real importance of the race came out in the wash only after the Harlem Renaissance which was also known as the New Negro movement. It was during the 1920s and there was a composite of different types of persons. The history of Black America and its cultural forms has been a history of survival and the poetry of the African Americans reflects this

### **The Literary Reach of Langston Hughes**

Hughes never believes in only portraying the better side of life and his theory of art was to portray the ugliness as readily as the beauty of African-American life, the unsavoury and the admirable. He portrays their life as he saw it and his people were porters, elevator boys, shoe shine boys, cooks, waiters, nurses, maids, gamblers, drunks, piano players, cabaret singers, chorus gents, and ordinary decent, hard-working men and women. They are the ones who crowd the street corners, bars, beauty shops and barber shops and churches, hot rented rooms and stuffy apartments and even the Black sections of cities. They are the dwellers on Beale Street, State Street, and Seventh Avenue, Central Avenue and Lenox Avenue. They are the ones who made Chicago's South side and New York's Harlem both famous and infamous.

### **Poems of Hughes**

In poems like "Mother to Son" and "The Negro Mother," Hughes proves himself to be a dramatic social poet. He speaks in a multiplicity of voices, through a multitude of personas, each purveying authentic Black attitudes, views and lifestyles that are as heterogeneous as the African-American population. He wanted to drive the message home that Harlem is neither a gay nor a healthy city and that it was basically a tragic and frustrated city. It is a full and many sided community and there is the pathos of night funerals of Black celebrities, their vice squad detectives, bitter anti-Semitism, churches and street corner orators. It is a Harlem of a community of objectives and melodies. He

pictures a Harlem of some gaiety and of much sardonic laughter; among all else it is Harlem of a dream long deferred.

### **Portrayal of Black Suffering**

The beatings, lynchings and daily humiliation of segregation which African Americans suffered in the South and elsewhere outraged Hughes. As a member of the Harlem society and the African-American community, he accepted the responsibility to speak out against these injustices in his writing and the volumes of poetry that poured out of his pen contained the most ironic and powerful lines that he ever wrote. In accordance with this view, Christopher opines in “Rage, Repudiation and Endurance: Langston Hughes’s Radical writings” as follows:

The Scottsboro incident of 1931 set the tone for much of Hughes’s radical poetry and prose...The incident involved nine African American teenagers who were jailed in Scottsboro, Alabama, for allegedly raping two white prostitutes in an open rail road freight car. After a trial in Scottsboro, eight of the youths were sentenced to the electric chair and the ninth to life imprisonment. In ‘I Wonder as I Wander’ Hughes reveals that Ruby Bates, one of the white women involved in the incident, later recanted her rape testimony and admitted that she fabricated the entire story. (De Santis 31)

Taking this incident very much to heart, Hughes took a firm stand in expressing his feelings for the African Americans. The theme of African-American rising up against the oppression of Whites was the prevalent theme in most of his post-Scottsboro writing. There is a juxtaposition of humanity and nature. As shown in the poem “Warning.”

Negroes,  
Sweet and docile,  
Meek, humble, and kind:  
Beware the day  
They change their mind! [...] (1-5) (CP 365)

Hughes relates to the dispossessed slaves in the Southern fields and to the plantation overseas. It is a revelation that fury will not sprout from the meek and humble, but rather from the oppressed, the brutalised and the displaced.

## **The Blacks During Depression**

It was a time of depression and along with depression came hunger, oppression and racial violence and Hughes entertained revolutionary feelings and thoughts as he reacted to this upheaval. He believed that the significant role of poetry was depicting the life of the people. He felt it should deal with the circumstances and the conventions of experience, like manure giving birth to some beautiful growth.

Harlem became the principal referent and metaphor for the world that he wanted to interpret and he was proud of being an African American. He talks of his people in “My people.”

The night is beautiful,  
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,  
So the eyes of my people [...]. (1-4) (CP 36)

## **Portraying the Beauty and Strength of the Blacks**

Hughes was committed to see the strength and beauty of the African Americans and he celebrated African-American beauty. One of the predominating themes of Hughes is the world of Harlem. His poetry constantly expressed the wonderful Black Metropolis and its colourful inhabitants. The capricious moods of the African-American ghetto, the variety in its people and their changing thoughts and actions are touched upon. The problems of the Harlemites, their experiences, their life style and their language interested him. There is a display of the drama of African-American history in his verses. He also hopes for brighter days in Harlem as shown in “Hope for Harlem:”

Now there's a new skyline in Harlem.  
It's rising tall and free-  
And if it keeps on rising  
There'll be a brand new me [...]. (13-16) (CP 436)

There is a common feeling that the African-Americans are reaching the heights. “‘Ebony’ and ‘Jet’ magazines are an ongoing certification that black success does not require rebellion and resentment; and because of that, they will live on in Black America as “oldies but goodies” (McWhorter 9). There are poems on simple tones, which seem to comment on something light and common, but they come not without a slight punch undermining which brings the reality of Harlem life. Such as in “Comment on Curb.”

You talk like  
They don't kick  
Dreams around  
Downtown [...]. (1-4) (CP 428)

The scenes portray the happenings in the New York Black ghetto involving manifold feelings and emotions. The African-American life style and their bohemian ways is expressed in the poem. There are also social variations in status amidst African Americans that are evident in the Black ghetto which is pictured in 'Low to High!':

How can you forget me?  
But you do!  
You said you was gonna take me  
Up with you- [...] (1-4) (CP 411)

### **Life in Harlem**

Harlem, despite the fact that it witnessed lot of misery that befell its inhabitants due to racial segregation had its gay and happy side too. It had its songs, dances, and parties. The "Parade" talks of "Seven ladies and seventeen gentlemen" who plan a typical Harlem parade:

Seven ladies  
and seventeen gentlemen  
at the Elks Club Lounge  
planning planning a parade:

Grand Marshal in his White suit  
Will lead it [...]. (1-6) (CP 388)

There are many more such vivid pictures of Harlem life, the African-American folk life, which have been spread out in many poems. When things grow worse the poems become interrogations in verse. There is doubt and anxiety in tone, there is the feeling of being lonely and lost, expressions of disappointment and sometimes impatience too. A poem like "Harlem [2]" proves this point.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore –  
And then run? [...]. (1-5) (CP 426)

The interrogative mood shoots from the expectations that are failed. When things do not work, the way they should be doing, emotions come out with great heat. Though there are no expectations for answers, the questions come with earnest yearning to tear free from the shackles of injustice, disappointment and frustration at failed hopes. The throbbing life and happenings in Harlem provided inspiration for most of his poems.

### **The Pride in Black Identity**

Poems like “Negro,” “My people,” “The South,” and “Mother to Son” reveal the pride he had for being Black and being a poet of the Harlemites. In “Negro” he soars high in celebrating the beauty of Blacks and the height of their achievements. He also touches upon the injustice afflicted on them.

I am a Negro:  
Black as the night is black,  
Black like the depth of my Africa.  
I’ve been a slave: [...]. (1-4) (CP 24)

Every line in this poem echoes with racial pride. There is praise of African- American life style. There is pride that it still survived with strength in the face of odds. The hard luck days Blacks face when they are hired and fired also highlight the unpleasant side of Harlem. “Park Benching” is one of such a kind.

There are no jobs.  
There is no work.  
So I’ve sat on the park benches  
Hungry [...]. (9-12) (CP 49)

The poem echoes the misery of poverty and unemployment in Harlem. The scenario of Harlem life depicted the particular lives of its inhabitants. The Black ghetto becomes a platform of the individual achievements of African-American heroes.

The African-American urban life was tragicomic and was a mixture of tendencies. There were hopes, triumphs, new beginnings, optimism, confidence and mental strength on one hand and on the other betrayals, anger, frustration, misery, craziness, oppression and loneliness in the urban African-American life. Hughes saw the Black ghetto as a

symbolic place that was a personification of African-American life. He laughs with, cries with, and speaks for the African Americans more understandingly than any other writer for which he rightly came to be known as the poet-laureate of Harlem.

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