

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain:
A Reading of Langston Hughes's Selected Poems

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Langston Hughes



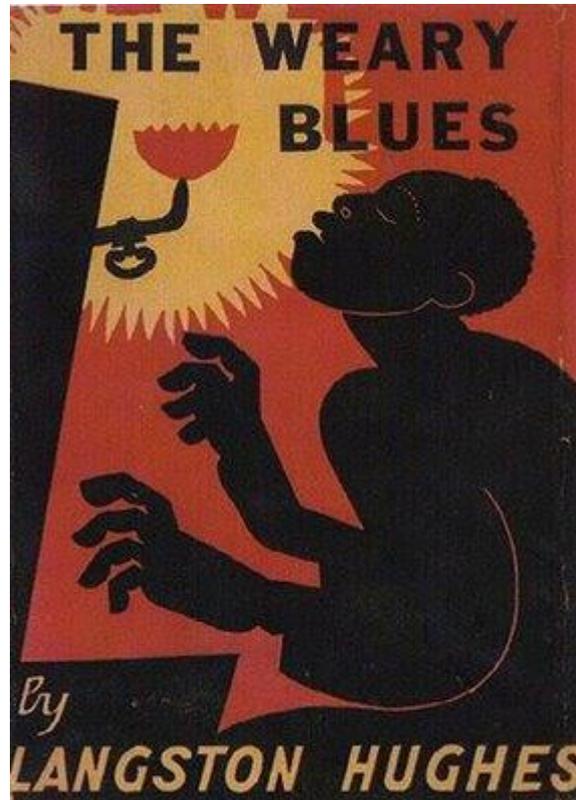
Langston Hughes (19-2-1967)

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Langston Hughes is one of the well-known black American writers. He has not only written poems but plays and novels too. It is his poetry which has gained him a permanent place in the canons of African American literature. His poetry is simple, rhythmic yet complex in nature. There is something in his poems that makes them hard to forget. He was an active writer during Harlem

Renaissance of twenties and thirties. During that time, he penned down his credo of art as well. This paper aims at analyzing his selected poems from his own criteria of Negro art as expressed in his manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain, published in 1926.”

Black Writers Have a Responsibility



Before a close reading of his poetry is undertaken from the above set perspectives, it would be in place to first mention his aesthetics of art. Hughes proclaims that Negro writers have a responsibility towards their race and heritage. They should not betray their race by neglecting their legacy. He further argues that every black writer in United States has to climb a ‘racial mountain’. It is not possible for the black authors to write in their true black selves because middle class blacks disown it and whites dislike it. In order to bring his point home, Hughes states an anecdote.

Once, a black poet apprised Hughes that he never wanted to be a Negro poet. He wanted to write like whites hence unconsciously, he wanted to be white. Hughes explains that the reason behind such a wish is that the fellow poet comes from a black middle-class family. His father is in a reputed job, his mother is a respectable lady. The entire neighborhood that he comes from consists of doctors, politicians, landlords and teachers. The children in such a surrounding attend integrated schools. These families maintain a good house and two cars in South and visit white theatres in the North. They

believe in the perennial judgement, “white is always right.” In their homes, they read white magazines and white newspapers and repeat, “don’t act like niggers.”

Should be Faithful to Own Race

Hughes wonders that a person coming from such a background is not likely to be bothered by his heritage. He believes that a Negro artist should be faithful towards his own race. There is ample content available for the Negro artists to derive his substance from. He points out that the majority of the Blacks living in America are poor and live in slums. This is how he describes his own people poetically

But then there are the low-down folk, the so-called common element
and they are the majority- may the Lord be praised! The people who have their
sip of gin on Saturday Nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or
too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go around (Ervin 45.)

Subject Matter of A True Negro Art

Hughes suggests that these are the people whose life should be the subject matter of a true Negro art. These are the people who live their lives to the fullest. They dance whole heartedly, sing whole heartedly, jump whole heartedly, laugh whole heartedly and when they weep, they weep whole heartedly. While praying, their prayers are in the form of ecstasy, they don’t restrain themselves to pose as civilized. His point of view is that a true Negro artist should not be afraid of reclaiming his heritage. He should not fear Whites, he should not be carried away by middle class Blacks rather he should remain firm to his roots. He portrays a dilemma encountering a Negro artist that blacks want him to present them as smug and nomadic like whites and whites bribe him to stay within stereotypes. He illustrates that whenever any Negro writer writes in Negro style or takes substance from Negro life, he is either dismissed or not read at all.

The writers like Charles Chesnutt and Jean Toomer were not given their due respect in their time because they were too negro like. Therefore, Hughes concludes that every Negro artist has a responsibility on his shoulders. He should express the Aspirations and predicaments along with hopes and fears of his race in front of the entire world. He ends his argument on a positive note: “If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter, if colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for

tomorrow..." (Ervin 48)

Expression of the Pains and Pleasures of His Own People

As far as Hughes' own poetry is concerned, he adheres strictly to what he promotes. His poetry is an expression of the pains and pleasures of his own people. He does not flatter whites by remaining with stereotypes. He doesn't cater to middle class blacks by portraying them as neat and clean like whites. He is a poet of masses. He sings with them and sings for them. He presents them as honestly as he can. There is sincerity in his delineation of black life as lived in slums and ghettos. He is not ashamed of his people and their manners. He writes his poems in true Negro dialect with true Negro characters. To quote his own words; "Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know." (Ervin 47).

According to Arthur Davis:

From the very beginning of his literary career, he was determined to forge his art, not of the secondhand material which came from books, not out of fads dictated by a demanding patron, but out of the stuff of human experience as he saw it. He remained faithful to his decision. (281)

Cross

To begin with, one can cite "Cross." it is a beautifully crafted poem with rhythm and music involved. It is a small poem of twelve lines with three stanzas of four lines each. In this poem, Hughes vocalizes the psychological trauma of being Mulatto in white American society. The result of intermingling of white and black races was the birth of a new category of human beings called Mulatto. It was a mixed race in which people were neither black nor white. They were neither accepted by white because they had black shades in them nor they were embraced by blacks because they had white blood in them. Hughes has also penned a play entitled *Mulatto*. In this play, Robert, the central character dies in the end in quest of his place in the society. His father is not willing to accept his claim and he is too white-like to be accepted by blacks.

In the poem too, the poetic persona is in a state of conflict. It seems as if he cursed his father initially because he did not know that a white man was his father. He has also cursed his mother because he has inherited her blackness. Hughes portrays his effort to reconcile with his parentage when he writes:

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back. (Harper and Walton 143)

Here, Hughes is not catering to the white audience. He is neither satisfying the whims of black middle class. He is exhibiting the trials and tribulations of his own brothers and sisters who are neither white nor black. Hughes himself was of mixed race, so he might also have undergone psychological trauma of being left out. In the last stanza of the poem, Hughes skillfully pin points the big void between both the races in terms of their financial positions. Whites were powerful, they had money, so they could easily die in big houses whereas blacks and mulattos were poor and most of the time out of work or with bare minimum wages, so, they died in utter poverty. Hughes writes:

My old man died in a fine big house
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die
Being neither white nor black? (Harper and Walton 143)

Christ in Alabama

In his famous poem, "Christ in Alabama," Hughes allegorically points out the tortures of South for blacks. South, as is known, was inferno for the Negros. During slavery, countless slaves escaped from South to North and further to Canada because in South they had to undergo excruciating tortures. After slavery, South continued to remain as hell for Blacks because of Jim Crow. The violence in the form of lynching and segregation made South almost neither world for the African Americans. Until 1960s, the condition remained more or less the same.

Hughes argues that had Christ been born in South, He would have been treated like a Negro. He takes the God of Christianity to subvert the entire paradigm of oppression. Until now, *Bible* was cited to justify the wrongs inflicted on the Blacks. Hughes postulates that had Christ been a nigger, he would have been exposed to torture and trauma. The overall tone of the poem is that of bitter satire and irony. For example:

Christ is a nigger
Beaten and black
Oh, bare your back! (Harper and Walton 143)

Here also, Hughes is voicing the concerns of his race. He is not worried about becoming famous or infamous. For him, honesty and fidelity towards his race is more important. He reproduces a couple of phrases in this poem which were always reverberating in South at both the times- slavery and sharecropping era. The phrases such as ‘Oh, bare your back!’ and ‘Silence your mouth,’ are present in both slave narratives and segregation narratives in plethora. Hughes no doubt is people’s poet.

He equates the suffering of black men with the suffering of Jesus Christ. The way Christ was hanged, so was Black man. Lynching became the order of the day in post-bellum South. White, in order to sustain their terror, constantly hanged black men for no valid reason. Negroes were accused of being rapists and cheaters. Richard Wright in his *The Black Boy* also counts the horrors of South escalating into lynching and shooting. Hughes also in *Mulatto* shows the frenzy of the mob that wants to slay a black man. James Weldon Johnson too in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* depicts the horrifying scene of lynching witnessing which, his narrator decides to move North forever and to pass for whites.

Hughes concludes the poem on a tragic note. There is dark humor, but it is dominated by a note of sadness. Hughes writes:

Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the cross
Of the South. (Harper and Walton 143)

Dream Variations

In “Dream Variations,” Hughes explains the aspirations of his race in a very subtle way. He is portraying the dreams and desires of his own brethren. One wonders, after reading the poem, that even very basic things were denied to negroes. They were treated as second class citizens. Even today racism exists; at least psychologically. The poetic persona expresses his dream. This can be considered as a counter narrative to the Great American Dream. Like his white counterparts, the protagonist in the poem is not dreaming about material success. He is not thinking about cars, gadgets, bank accounts, land, houses etc. He does not want to be a Managing Director of a company. He does not want acres of property. His dream is a fundamental dream of living life with freedom and without discrimination.

He wants to jump freely, dance freely, roam freely, and rest freely. He wants to enjoy sunrise and sunset. He wants to lie down in a carefree manner at night. In a way, Hughes is questioning the idea of freedom expressed in American constitution. According to the constitution of America, everyone is entitled to live life fully and holistically. It guarantees the individual right of equality and pursuit of happiness.

If a person is dreaming about enjoying mornings and nights without being hampered, one can surmise that life for such a man is not easy at all. Hughes vocalizes the desires of his race poetically and subtly:

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening...
A tall, slim tree...
Night coming tenderly
Black like me. (Harper and Walton 144)

Frosting

Likewise, in “Frosting”, Hughes preaches to his race to rise up and speak for itself. He argues that freedom given to Blacks will remain sham until blacks themselves stand up for their rights. He acts like a preacher on the pulpit or leader on the podium who urges his community to stop being docile. For him, poetry is not just an expression of feelings, it is also a way to reach out to masses. He attacks the ways of the white folks within the span of eight lines. He insists that blacks have to ask for their fundamental rights otherwise the democracy of the whites will continue behaving in an undemocratic way.

He jots that the freedom from slavery did not prove fruitful for the blacks because they had to live under a system of segregation. The system of share cropping which was bequeathed onto the blacks actually proved to be gruesome. Constant shifting from one field to another and whites taking away their profits and leaving blacks with a few morsels was actually no freedom at all. George A. Towns in *The Sharecropper*, depicts the exploitation of the black farmers. The proprietor of the land, after witnessing the immense crop asks the poor sharecropper to leave his farm at once so that he can enjoy the entire harvest himself. Similarly, Alice Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*,

portrays the homelessness of a share cropping family which is exploited by the system of share cropping.

Hughes pinpoints that Blacks must stand against the policies of discrimination otherwise the freedom which they received after emancipation would amount to nothing. The promise made by the Government to give each black family a mule and forty acres would remain unfulfilled until blacks themselves unite and ask for their rights. He pens:

Freedom
Is just frosting
On somebody else's
Cake –
And so, must be
Till we
Learn how to
Bake. (Harper and Walton 145)

Harlem Sweeties

In the same way, in “Harlem Sweeties,” Hughes goes onto portray the black women’s beauty. Indirectly, he is anticipating the ‘black is beautiful movement’ of 1960s and 70s. Davis also remarks, “Harlem is the predominating theme in the poetry of Mr. Hughes. Either stated or implied, used as subject or background or protagonist, and on occasion even as a symbol for Negroes everywhere, Harlem has been a constantly recurring theme in Langston Hughes’ poetry” (282).

After reading the poem, it seems that the speaker is not at all fascinated by the beauty of white women. For him, white face, blue eyes, blonde hair and thin nose have no attraction. He is captivated more by the beauty of his own race. Black women for him are as sensual and erotic as people consider white women to be. The central character of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola craves for the blue eyes of white beautiful women. Had somebody recited this poem to her, she might have revised her concept of beauty. Though Hughes’ description of a Harlem beautiful girl is as patriarchal as it could be yet one can exonerate Hughes with the view that he is not eulogizing the white women.

Subject Matter of Hughes’ Art

The subject matter of Hughes’ art is totally black as he himself proclaimed. The black women described in the poem are chocolatey and sweet brown. He enumerates the types of beautiful women

found in Harlem. The speaker addresses Harlem's beauty as 'caramel treat', 'honey gold-baby', 'peach skinned – girlie' and 'pomegranate lipped' so on and so forth. His descriptions are sensual enough to arouse even the feelings of a white man. He is not ashamed in acknowledging his racial heritage. He concludes the poem with the same enthusiasm with which he begins it:

All through the spectrum
Harlem girls vary-
So, if you want to know beauty's
Rainbow-sweet thrill,
Stroll down luscious,
Delicious, fine Sugar Hill. (Harper and Walton 147)

Hughes paints his race in multiple colours. After living such a terrible life of slavery, torture and segregation, blacks, no doubt, had a desire to run away. In fact, in 1920s when Hughes was writing; there grew a movement called 'Back to Africa' led by Marcus Garvey. The fact of the matter is, how so ever blacks might try, it is not possible for them to leave their mother land. The desire to leave America and to find a safe heaven somewhere on the Earth was perennially present in the hearts of the blacks, at least before 1960s. Hughes argues that there is no place in the entire world free from the presence of whites or Europeans. Even if the Negroes decide to escape to Africa, they would find European presence there in the form of capitalism and imperialism.

That's why blacks should try to settle down where they are and try to make their both ends meet. He exhorts his countrymen as:

I'm looking for a house
In the world
Where the white shadows
Will not fall.
There is no such house
Dark brothers
No such house
At all. (Harper and Walton 147)

Black Migration

During 1920s and 30s, there happened a large-scale exodus termed 'black migration'. Countless families came down to North from the South. They believed that the opportunities in the

North were far better. They were also tired of living life as field workers. North offered them industrial atmosphere. Suddenly, the streets and slums of New York and Chicago were inundated with blacks. Harlem, a neighborhood in New York became a center of black migration. Somehow, it also gave birth to Harlem Renaissance of 20s and 30s, a time when black art flourished. The immediate result of black migration was overcrowded ghettos. Whites again cashed in and made immense money. They owned many buildings in major cities of North which they now started renting to the black.

The rent was exorbitant, and the facilities were nil. Blacks had to pay the rent and survive with rats and insects because they had no other option. “Madam and the Rent Man” presents such a situation where the rent collector is in dialogue with the paying guest. He has arrived to collect rents, but the lady in the house denies paying the rent because she did not receive the basic amenities in the house that she was promised. *The Native Son* by Richard Wright also unfolds the decaying conditions of these hovel like apartments. Hughes presents the dialogue between the lady and the rent collector in a comic way.

The lady in the house says that she does not want to pay the rent because there is no water in the sink, the floor squeaks, the roof leaks, the back window is broken and there are rats in the cellar. Hughes again portrays the troubles and tribulations of his race. This time, his overall treatment of the subject matter is mixed with humor. His descriptions are cheerful, and the tone of the poem is that of defiance and courage. For example:

He said, Madam,
I ain't pleased!
I said, Neither am I
So we agrees! (Harper and Walton 148)

Mother to Son

Similarly, “Mother to Son” also encapsulates agony and anguish of a black mother in white society. The mother here is motivating her son to face the trials of life with fortitude. She conveys rather encouragingly that life for her had never been a bed of roses. She had to walk bare feet on thorns and bushes. There were countless obstacles that she had to pass through. The troubles are not over yet. Therefore, her son should take inspiration from her and move on. What she is articulating is that life for blacks is full of challenges in white society.

At every stage, they have to face the color bar. The racism of white America never lets them grow. Their potentials are always unrealized under the system of segregation. They don't exercise much freedom because of their marginalized status. The entire poem is scathing lambast of the system of domination and cruelty. Hughes uses metaphors such as 'splinters' and 'carpets' to point out the difficulties faced by Negroes. He writes:

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor-
Bare.
But all the time. (Harper and Walton 148)

Speaks More When Read Between the Lines

Hughes is a crafty poet. His poetry speaks more when read between the lines. He leaves ample space for his readers to manipulate and surmise. He is not one of those who would speak overtly. For example, in "Personal," he writes an exchange of letters between God and black man. The poem is not more than six lines. He does not provide the content of letters still, on the basis of overall ambience of his poems and attitude of whites towards blacks in general, one can easily guess the content. He writes:

In an envelope marked:
Personal
God addressed me a letter
In an envelope marked:
Personal
I have given my answer. (Harper and Walton 149)

Because blacks were treated with utmost disdain, that's why they must have harbored strong grievances against whites. Because they could not ask for justice from whites, so they directly would have complained to God. They must have written letters full of pain and sorrow addressed to God, at least psychologically. They must have also received responses from God at least psychologically. In the above lines. Hughes portrays the hidden and unspoken agonies of his own race. He doesn't provide the subject matter of the letter because as one understands, it is obvious.

Many a times, blacks might have contemplated suicide because of tortures they had to pass through. They might have imagined retribution in the heaven. They must have thought that God would definitely receive them well and would punish the whites in paradise. E.W. Grimke also reveals the same in her short story “Black is, as Black Does: A Dream.” She demonstrates that in heaven, the Almighty is sitting on his throne and punishing the whites. God doesn’t like whites because they did not follow his command on the Earth. He had conveyed through Moses to men to respect his neighbored and he punishes the whites because they did not respect their neighbors.

Death Wish

Hughes also highlights the death wish present in his race leading to suicide. He also seems to be arguing that perhaps, after death blacks would get their desired place. In his usual, crisp and compact style, he envelopes this tendency of his people in three lines in “Suicide.” He writes;

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss. (Harper and Walton 150)

To quote Davis, “fascinated by the Black Metropolis and its colorful inhabitants, he is never tired of delineating the endlessly changing moods of the ghetto” (282). That’s why, Hughes talks about the pride of his people. He, like historians, believes that blacks were the first born in the cradle of civilization. It is a commonly accepted fact that among all human races, Africans were the first. So, he is not a poet who is always talking about crisis and troubles of his race, he also talks about the positive aspects of his people. He is trying to give courage and motivation to his people in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”

He says that blacks should not be ashamed of their colour, the way whites want them to feel. In fact, they should be proud of their own historicity. Blacks were the first race on this Earth and black civilization was the most ancient and the greatest. Blacks were there when humanity at large was absent. He connects black history with four rivers chiefly: Euphrates, Congo, Nile and Mississippi. He asserts that blacks know more than others because they have witnessed the rise and fall of many civilizations. They know more than others because they are present on this Earth since the beginning. They have given this world many things such as iron melting techniques and pyramids of Egypt. So,

they should be proud of their ancient heritage. Slavery was just a bad chapter in their history and their existence in America takes that chapter forward. He writes:

I've known rivers:

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. (Harper and Walton 150)

To Conclude

To conclude, it can safely be argued that Langston Hughes is truly a black poet. He is a representative of his own race. He does not bow down on his knees to flatter the whites. He remains true to his grain. He exposes the whites and sides with the blacks. He practices what he preaches. His poetry is indeed an application of his theory of art. He is not afraid of not being published. He does what he believes in and he believes whatever he does.

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