

## Racial Discrimination and Identity Crisis: Black Americans in Select Poems of Langston Hughes

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze claustrophobic and conflict-filled life of Black Americans whose culture, identity and existence are constantly questioned and suppressed by mainstream whites. The agenda of this paper is to find and identify the exceptional talent of Langston Hughes (1902-1967) making his literary form as the most powerful tool to represent voice of the voiceless. The theme of the following poems *Theme for English 'B'*, *As I Grew Older*, and *The Negro speaks of Rivers* are taken for study in this article.

**Keywords:** Poems of Langston Hughes, Colored men, Racial politics, Dignity, Assimilation, Identity, Existential crisis

The United states of America is a country which is rich with different innate cultures, heritage, and traditions. As always America's diversity is glorified by its literature. General and American ethnic writings are appreciated. It is the literature which helped America to establish itself by constantly questioning and healing it. The role of American ethnic writing in all these is undeniable. American ethnic literature took its birth in the preceding years of Civil War through the publication of novels, poems, histories and autobiographies of newborn writers who belonged America's ethnic and racial minorities. Such writings revealed American rich heritage. As the ethnic writings constitute a major path in the legacy of literature, writings from racial minorities of America powerfully demonstrate their plights as they are living in a white dominated society.

Racism is a concept which took its birth magnifying the differences between people of European origin and African descent whose ancestors had been involuntarily transported to America with a tag of 'slave'. Racism turned in to a form of oppression by one race against another. Only because of being colored African Americans were compelled to give up their human dignity and identity. Black Americans faced a lot of restrictions politically, socially, and economically, which were completely against the concept of freedom. Even the racial politics remained as a

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major phenomenon in socio-economic equality. As the racial stratification continued to occur in all fields like house, education, employment and government, writers like Tony Morrison, Zora Neale, Langston Hughes, and Alice Walker started to rise their voice in order to represent the voiceless by linking the past and the present to inform the future generation using their literary forms as the most powerful weapons.

Langston Hughes, one among the central figures of Harlem renaissance, always had a tendency to establish their denied identity of being an American due to their colored skin. With the understanding of the fact that being colored is not a crime and their role in America's legacy is equally great and valid, Hughes states that, 'I, too, sing America'. Although he is a darker brother, though he never got a chance to share dining table with his white masters, he believes that definitely one day America will become free from racial prejudice.

Although the poet has an optimistic hope for future, Hughes does not deny the fact that racial discrimination is not so easy to vanish. It grew as a giant wall between colored men and their dream for a life with dignity and equality in its all perspective without any racial criteria. That is visible from these lines:

And then the wall rose,  
Rose slowly,  
Slowly,  
Between me and my dream. (16)

Due to the cognition that breaking walls is a hardship, Hughes tries to make conscious his darker brothers and asks them to help him shatter the wall of darkness through his poem *As I grew older*:

Help me to shatter this darkness,  
To smash this night,  
To break this shadow  
Into a thousand lights of sun,  
In to a thousand whirling dreams  
Of sun! (16)

Hughes is in a hurry to awaken his darker brothers as well as to protest against white domination. His poems become a strong proclamation for the protest he and his companions going to do.

You are white ---  
yet a part of me as I am a part of you.

That's American

sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me. (247)

These poetic lines taken from the poem *English 'B'* clearly show what Hughes feels inside of him regarding his identity. Speaker of the poem is of 22 years old and his white instructor instructed him to prepare a page of his purest opinion. Hence, the speaker tries to prepare a real account of his opinion by the realization that at the age of 22 it is not so easy to speak what is true. Still due to his firsthand experience being a black he can hear Harlem's pathetic plight and to speak for Harlem as a representative of all subjugated black Americans.

Since the class struggle of whites and blacks exists, speaker is in a dilemma about his instructor. His tutor, according to speaker, is a part of white society. Hence for him it will not be so simple and obvious to accept his words which actually counter racial oppression created by whites. Though the speaker acknowledges that what is true for him is not truth for others because he is black, and their cultural beliefs, heritage and social background are entirely different from each other. But the speaker continuously expresses his urge for dignity which will be possible only when the whites accept the Blacks as human beings.

Hughes has a clear-cut knowledge regarding their role behind the legacy and emancipation of America. That's why through his poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* he tries to establish their footprints and identity by continuously mentioning different civilizations. By plotting civilizations of Nile and Euphrates, the poet tries to prove their strongest input in America's basement. By throwing light upon Abraham Lincoln's attempt to abolish racial discrimination he tries to depict glimpses of his heritage and memories attached to ancient rivers in Africa. Indirectly Hughes attempts to put forth a suggestion that being an African they all have memories of native land still. They adopted America's cultural spirit. Although displacement and dislocation created a confusion, they all adopted it and later turned to be admirers of America. Now no one can deny their citizenship because majority of them will be the most toiled and moiled person for America's empowerment. Majority of population will be a sidelined one by tagging and categorizing them as minorities but, in reality, their contributions will be the greatest.

Almost in all poems of Hughes there will be a speaker, through him his claustrophobic like experiences are being shared. Speaker of Hughes is just a representative of lakhs of people whose dignity, identity and existence are being constantly questioned and suppressed by whites because of their colored skin. Being colored were treated as a sin and inhuman feature. Due to the second consideration, black Americans were continuously ill-treated and subjugated. In fact, in all racially and ethnically structured institutions like slavery, segregation and internment camps, people were treated as animals by denying their fundamental rights.

Hence, it is proven that Hughes tries to make his darker brothers realize the reality and to make strong verbal protest against mainstream white society who exploited blacks. Always literature identifies and describes lives and objectives of human beings as they are. Here, Hughes attempted to prove that for human being both dignity and identity are essential just as other fundamental wants. His contributions in the realm of literature is undeniable because he is a strong protestor who raised his voice using his pen. As far as American Ethnic Literature is concerned, it always exhibits unheard voices from the past and the present, and links these with the future in order to help children.

Hughes, being a part of Ethnic Literature, opened a gateway towards ethnic writings. In the modern scenario in which people are in a hurry to become *fair* using artificial creams and all (a new form of indirect racial politics), writings of Langston Hughes become really essential elements of literature.

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