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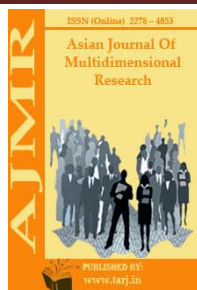
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POETICS OF NEGRITUDE AND THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

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ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes has widely been acclaimed as the poet-laureate of African Americans. His creative genius lies in his inescapable bond with his ethnicity. His poems are expressions of his people's myriad experiences in a racist America where white was always right. The central element of Hughes' poetry, asserts Raymond Smith, is the "affirmation of blackness" (18). His concern for his people's identity through their acceptance of being black and a corresponding pride in it, and valorization of African history and heritage make him a poet of negritude. This paper attempts to map out myriad strands of negritude and how Hughes celebrates those strands in his poetry to lead his people in creating a place and space for them in a capitalist America and live a good life in a genuinely fraternal society.

KEYWORDS: *Acclaimed, Inescapable, Experiences, Genuinely, Capitalist.*

INTRODUCTION

Before the analysis of some of the more important poems of Langston Hughes, it is pertinent to comprehend the term 'negritude' and its associated components. Negritude is an "attempt to extend perception of the negro as possessing a distinctive 'personality' into all spheres of life, intellectual, emotional and physical" (Ashcroft 162). Negritude is the sustained existence in the African Americans of the identity formed by their primordial heritage that had apparently been suppressed by them and overlaid by a false stereotype forced on them by the unfavourable circumstances of slavery. As a term, negritude is supposed to have two implications: it may mean, argues Ronald Berman, "recognition of black identity, and a corresponding pride in that identity—or it could be a mystery of ever-more centripetal musing of African personality" (245-246). James A. Emanuel maintains that negritude is a "complex of traits, sensibilities, and historical consciousness peculiar to black Americans" (147). It is a "medium of reappropriation of the dignity of oppressed peoples," opines Celestin Monga (21). In other words, negritude is to look into the fullness of the past without shame or fear, to take pride in being black, and celebrating traditional African values and culture.

In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, Hughes maintains that the African American is aware of the historical consciousness of his American past and attempts to affirm and redefine his black personality and collective experience. The poem reveals that an African American considers Africa to be his spiritual and emotional homeland when he says:

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.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young

I build my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids about it.

I heard that singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and
I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (*Collected Poems 23*)

The poem, opines James A. Emanuel, is “a boy’s testament of love for his race” and draws our attention to the entire historical process of development through which the collective identity of the African Americans has been forged (150-51). It is a record of the contribution of the African Americans in the history of civilization both as natives in Africa and as slaves in the United States. The inner reserves of strength displayed by the African American in different phases of his historical existence gives his soul a character that can be apprehended only through a metaphor which calls it “deep like the rivers.” This soul will enable them to endure all hardships and secure for them a place in the making of civilization. Arnold Rampersad is of the opinion that the poem “blends aspects of existential gloom with the life-affirming spirit of the black race” (*Southern Review 705*). Through the repetition of the word ‘I’, which is the collective voice of the African Americans, the poet seeks to affirm his ethnicity’s role in history which has enabled it to develop strength to bear cheerfully the hardships forced on them in the present day by the racist whites.

“Negro”, Hughes’ another meaningful poem, poignantly displays the historical plight of a negro who has successfully borne affronts and maltreatment from white racists all over the world yet has survived. He recollects his suffering, pain and mental agony and says:

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black as the depths of my Africa.

...

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs.

I made ragtime.

...

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo

They lynch me still in Mississippi. (*Collected Poems 24*)

The poet does not fight shy to describe how he has been mistreated as a slave. His life has been a tale of suffering and sorrow. He, however, takes pride in being a black and draws strength from it. This, perhaps, forced Onwuchekwa Jemie to assert that this poem is “both a catalogue of wrongs against the black man over the centuries and a celebration of the strength by which he has survived those wrongs” (99).

Negritude, which includes in its dimensions the importance of a African American’s colour, and recognition of African heritage with a corresponding pride in it has another aspect, that is, durability. This means the African American’s unrelenting endurance of his sufferings, indignities and humiliations both as a slave and as a disadvantaged minority living in America. Negritude, thus, becomes an insignia of extraordinary resilience and moral toughness. “Mother to Son,” for example, depicts a black mother’s struggle in a racist America and how she endured subjugation with full equanimity:

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

I’ve been a-climbin’ on,

And reachin’ landin’s,

And turnin’ corners,

And sometimes goin’ in the dark

Where there ain’t been no light.

(Collected Poems 30)

Her life had been a tale of sorrow, yet, she admits, she kept on fighting and asserting herself. Through the character of the mother, there is an “affirmation of a people’s determination to reclaim their humanity,” argues George Houston Bass, “to celebrate their dignity, to grasp their own destiny and define it” (Bourne 99). A similar vein runs through “The Negro Mother” highlighting the African American mother’s endurance and staid character. She outlines the long dark journey she has travelled in a racist America:

Children, I come back today

To tell you a story of the long dark way

That I had to climb,

...

Look at my face—dark as the night—

Yet shining like the sun with love's true light.

I am the child they stole from the sand
Three hundred years ago in Africa's land.

...

I am the one who labored as a slave,

Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave— (*Collected Poems* 155)

As in "Mother to Son," this poem also reveals the parlous effects of slavery. She becomes the seed carrying her African heritage and its values and sensibilities. Hughes' stance, nevertheless, seems to have undergone a change from his earlier poems for he also shows the African American mother talking and nurturing the dream of American ideals also:

I was the seed of coming Free.

...

Stand like free men supporting my trust.

Believe in the right, let none push you back. (*Collected Poems* 156)

"The Negro Mother," in fact, asks her black progeny not to remain submissive forever. Although the poem gives ample space to the distinctiveness of African character, culture and a corresponding pride in it, there is suppressed anger and resentment against racism and subjugation prevalent in American society.

In "My People," Langston Hughes highlights the beauty and charm of his people. The poem has a cool and calm yet passionate tone when the poet says:

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. (*Collected Poems* 36)

The poet seems to suggest that the colour and features of the blacks are their primordial heritage which collectively makes them particularly beautiful and enables them to feel pride in their collective identity. The cool stance that the poet keeps here adds to the resonance of the poem's meaning.

Another dimension of negritude, that is, durability finds forceful expression in "Still Here". This short poem depicts the African American's tolerance of manifold atrocities from the white racists believing in their racial superiority. The poet says:

I've been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
Snow has frize me, sun has baked me.

Looks like between'em
They done tried to make me
Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin'—
But I don't care!
I'm still here! (Collected Poems 295)

Despite all the odds that life has inflicted upon the African American, he has the guts to carry on and be still there to stand and defeat racial discrimination. There is an assertion to negate all the evil forces that stop him from laughing, loving and living.

Hughes' poetry reveals that he has been historically conscious of the African American's American past which had been a sad tale of dehumanization and oppression. He "admired the word 'Black' when that word was less than a darling flag," maintains Gwendolyn Brooks and adds that he, "believed in the Beauty of Blackness when belief in the Beauty of Blackness was not the fashion, not 'the thing,' not the sweet berry of the community tooth" (12). As a firm believer in the aesthetic of negritude, Hughes regards Africa as the spiritual homeland of all the African Americans and writes about Africa in a vibrating and nostalgic tone. In "Africa," for instance, the poet presents an immersive image of Africa:

Sleepy giant
You've been resting awhile.
Now I see the thunder
And the lighting
In your smile.
Now I see
The storm clouds
In your waking eyes:
The thunder,
The wonder,
And the young
Surprise.
Your every step reveals
The new stride
In your thighs. (Collected Poems 441)

At the surface level, the poem evokes a palpable figure of Africa that is more than a living giant symbolizing strength and courage: it is splendid and a matter of self-esteem for the African Americans. At the deeper level, nonetheless, the "sleepy giant" may mean the passive tolerance of the African Americans in America and then their "new stride" may mean assertion of their rights and true identity. By and large, the poem fills the African Americans with a sense of fulfillment and confidence in being Africans and also gives them a sense of belongingness.

Langston Hughes' poems highlight the appreciation of the African Americans' African heritage and their corresponding pride in it. He is, says Edward Mullen, a "quintessential black poet" that is spontaneous and remained engaged in depicting black themes in his poetry along with creating diasporic and social miseries of his people (Quoted in Jackson 88). His continuous brooding on the psychology of his people created in him a desire to resuscitate his people's ethnic past which laid buried deep in their collective psyche and remained alive in a modified form in folk songs and tales. His poetry highlights the shared experience that had been reshaped by the historical experience of living under subjugation in America for centuries. As a devotee of an old, black American tradition of dissidence and valorization of an identity disdained by the slave trade and servitude, Hughes displays African Americans' African values very powerfully in his poetry.

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Dear **Sanjeev Kumar**

I am very pleased to inform you that your article/research paper titled **POETICS OF NEGRITUDE AND THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES** has been published in **Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research (AJMR) (UGC approved journal No. 47638) (ISSN: 2278-4853) (Impact Factor: SJIF 2017 = 5.443) Vol.7, Issue- 10, October, 2018.**

The scholarly paper provided invaluable insights on the topic. It gives me immense pleasure in conveying to your good self that our Editorial Board has highly appreciated your esteemed piece of work.

We look forward to receive your other articles/research works for publication in the ensuing issues of our journal and hope to make our association everlasting.

Thanking you once again

With Best Regards

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