



Langston Hughes: Voice of the Harlem Renaissance

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Abstract:

The chief aim of this paper is to present Langston Hughes as the voice of Harlem Renaissance through the realms of racial humiliation to recognition among the white in the history of Afro-American literature. The present research work is an attempt to exhibit the poet how he became the voice of Afro-Americans in the United States after passing through a number of difficulties. The credit of nourishing the black in the United States and inventing the cultural integration goes to Langston Hughes who struggled for the existence of the black. In the era of Harlem Renaissance, Hughes stands against racism and the national rise to prominence of the Ku Klux Klan. The NAACP's aggressive campaign heightened public awareness of and opposition to mob violence against the black and firmly established the organization as the national spokesman for African Americans. Harlemites focused their attention on the issues of the existence and equalities. Harlem Renaissance is a rare and intriguing movement in which the black considered themselves the instrument of race-building in African-American society based on cultural integration. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the great depression among the black in Harlem was such a self-concept. The people were so convinced by the movement that they provoked the black to make a new Renaissance in the United States and recognised their role, "how goes the Renaissance?" Of course, the beginning of the movement connoted the violence, poverty and crime in Harlem. Ghetto and Harlem became the most interchangeable words in America. One can see the glimpse of Harlem, Blues and jazz music that take the readers into a world of pessimism and mysticism. The chief purpose of the present study is to exhibit how Langston being Hughes recognised himself as voice of the Harlem Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson believed that Harlem promised a future of greater and greater things for the Afro-American; he wrote as much in black Manhattan, notably published in 1931." (Huggins Nathan Irvin, *Harlem Renaissance*. P. 4).

Keywords: *Harlem Renaissance, Blues and Jazz Music, Double Consciousness, NAACP, Afro-American Literature.*

Introduction:

The History of the black refers to the early 16th century when plenty of slaves from Africa were transported to America and settled their colonies in Mexico, Caribbean and South America. The colonists and settlers visited America in search of good wealth and started cultivating crops, vegetable and fruit with the assistance of the black. Thus, the slavery system was introduced to the United States, for the very first time, when a Dutch sold twenty slaves to the colonists of Virginia in the year 1619. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the British also settled their colonies in America in search of good business, due to various social, economic, and political conditions. They believed that the United States was their colony and it should be under their control. In 1638, the price tag for American male was around twenty-seven dollars, while the salary of a European labourer was about seventy cents per day. Here, the governors and the military commanders were appointed by the British government. Thomas Jefferson, the drafter of American Revolutionary war, a promotor of civil liberties expressed his beliefs on state constitutional government, slavery system, individual liberty and independence of American colonies in his famous work *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Here, the author redirected questions about the slavery system that represented the mentality and anxiety of African-Americans in the United States.

In the beginning of the American Civil War, four million slaves from South Africa were transported to America in the production of sugar, rice, cotton and tobacco. Approximately, twelve or thirteen million slaves were smuggled into the nation illegally. Gradually, the business of capturing and trading the slaves had become a fundamental part of American society. The company captured millions of slaves from Africa and sold them to north America in Virginia colonies. In the last decade of the seventeenth century, the value and presence of slaves from Africa grow after 1676 in the colonies of Virginia. The white found employment in British industries and the numbers of African enslaved increased in the United States. Some critics hold the view that the white indentured slaves scorned the black after Bacon's Rebellion, occurred in Virginia. This forced migration, also known as the African Diaspora in the United States is one of the most prominent tragedies in the history of the world. The attitude and policies of the British government in America were responsible for the American war of independence. The principle of British mercantilism, against the establishment of self-government in the United States led to a number of problems that emerged in America after the declaration of the war of independence.

In the mid of the eighteenth century, there was no constitution and or the central government in the United States. The first Continental Congress, a meeting of delegates from British colonies in the year 1774 in the United States established the government machinery under the articles of Confederation. For seven years from 1774 to 1781, there was no government in the United States except that of Continental Congress. On 4th July 1776. 13 colonies of the United States claimed their independence from the clutches of England and Philadelphia Convention or Continental Convention implemented the Constitution of the Unites States on 4th March 1789 under the first president of America George Washington.

The role of press plays a very significant role in the abolishment of slavery in the Unites States. The black journalists and their supporters focused on the issues related to the slavery system and the real existence of the black in America. America's first newspaper, 'freedom's Journal' in the year 1829, founded by African American named Rev. John Wilk raised the issues of cultural integration, existence and separation of the black in the Unites States. Freedom's Journal (1827-1829) originated in the year 1827 in New York City, the first African-American newspaper promoted cultural pride of the black in The United States and the exchange of the ideas of the black and the white. According to this journal, the black must strive for their rights and full citizenship and assimilation in America. A weekly newspaper named The Colored American (1837-1842) published by Charles B. Ray and Philip A. Bell determined the status of the black as downtrodden people. The North star (1847-1851) edited by Frederick Douglass, published before the civil war, the most complicated black play a very significant role in Harlem. This paper presented various essays on astronomy, recreation, intellectuals, insurrection and rebelliousness, intemperance, injustice and religion, as well as poetry and passages from different literary books. The journalist died in the year 1861. The early decade of the twentieth century was the real time for a new beginning and Renaissance in the history of the United States. Like the white, the black was becoming urban rather than rural. A number of negroes settled in the northern cities. Harlem was now developed a real estate for the black and it was converted into the biggest and most elegant place in the United States. It had thus become a great concentration of the black. Harlemites started feeling that their community were special for their strength and positive attitude. They inspired black men and women to reform the cultural inequalities. Consequently, a number of Negroes joined Harlem and it became attractive for everyone who wanted to visit this place. Langston Hughes related to Harlem even before he visited the place in the year 1921.

Literary Review:

Harem had become a kind of opportunity and promise for all kinds. It was thought that negro professors, doctors, advocates and administrators found it possible to use their ethics in Harlem. It opened great opportunity and possibilities for the common men to set up their colonies in this real estate in the year 1918. C.J. Walker became a millionaire and bought a mansion at Irvington-on-Hudson. Of course, with the passage of the time, Harlem became the nerve centre of Afro-American and the capital of the black who wanted the political and social changes in the United States.

Harlem gained from that migration, as shortly after, in world war 1st, it gained from the waves of the black who came to fill the war industries, labour needs that had been aggravated by the war -severed. (Huggins Nathan Irvin, *Harlem Renaissance*. P. 14).

The second decade of the twentieth century was an era of liberation and newness in America. By the end of the first world war in the year 1919, African-Americans, as they were called radicals, became militant and self-assertive because they were segregated from their native land. Now, it was the origin of the New Negro Movement in the United States. An organization of Negro volunteers returned to the United States after the first world war and negro officers were rejected from their service. The result of it was a spectacular revival of racism, inequality overwhelmed in the United States. The new Ku Klux Klan commonly known as KKK, an organization of the white founded by Nathan Bedford Forrest, a supremacist hate group, supported the white throughout the country. The people of America stated that this change not only affected the black but also had a profound effect on the Americans. The poem, Ku Klux Klan is a paean of praise to black beauty. Langston Hughes prophesied in this poem that the Black would be recognized as beautiful and all would see that black soul lay deep in the hearts of the people. He inculcates among his fellow beings a sense of dignity and self-respect as far as the true meaning of "soul" is concerned. The poet says that "soul" is "a sort of synthesis of the essence of the Negro folk arts.

The Ku Klux Klan was extremely visible in the years after the civil war. Their protest of African-American suffrage, as well as economic and intellectual advancement, promptly deadly attacks against and lynchings of the black, families, communities and their supporters. (Brown Lois, *Encyclopaedia of the Harlem Renaissance*. P.300).

The poet shows sympathy for his black masses in the United States where they suffer. “The Negro Speaks of the Rivers” portrays the nostalgic journey of Hughes in Africa.

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.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

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

I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids about it.

I heard the 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.

I’ve known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(Alfred. A. Knopf, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. P. 4).

“The Weary Blue” a poem based on the pain and beauty, written in the year 1916 in Kansas City, describes not only the journey of Langston Hughes but also a black singer, playing a piano in the Bar of Harlem, late into night at Lenox Avenue. The music seemed to cry and had a piercing effect of sadness on the poet as if his deepest loneliness had been harmonized. The boy in the poem was playing piano in dim light from an old gas lamp. Swayed lazily on the piano bench, “rocking back and forth”, the boy expresses the tune of tiredness and sadness of the black in the United States. The first four lines of the poem introduces to the readers to the place named Lenox Avenue where a droning and drowsy boy plays the piano and sings a song of melancholy. This song is related to the Blues and Jazz music. The use of alliteration, consonance and rhythmical couplet in the first three lines increase the beauty of the poem. In fact, the feelings of Langston Hughes and his masses are portrayed in the poem.

The song also reflects the poet's turbulent emotions for his masses. Sometime, the poet wants to forget his troubles and lives a luxury life but then he wished to die as he felt that he belonged to the black in the United States. The poem purges the poet's sadness and feeling of double consciousness which transforms his pain into melody. Hughes presents the idea of transformation in his famous poem "The Weary Blue".

Droving a drowsy syncopated tune,
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway. . .
 He did a lazy sway. . .
 To the tune O' those Weary Blues.
 With his ebony hands on each ivory Key
 He made that poor piano moan with melody
 O Blues!
 Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
 He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
 Sweet Blues!
 Coming from a black man's soul.
 O Blues (IBID. P. 34).

James Mercer Langston Hughes' "Aunt Sue's Stories" portrays the nostalgic journey of South Africa where the poet's grandmother Mary Langston narrated the plight of the black. The poet heard a number of stories from his grandmother and explains these stories in his poems. These stories were about the black who worked day and night in Africa. They would sing sad songs on the banks of a river and their songs mingle with the sound of the river. Aunt Sue's voice also mingled with the sounds of the black. The dark faced child, attentive listener understands that his aunt's stories were real. she never imagined any of them or got them from any book. They were her own experiences, stories from her life. In fact, all her sad stories are true the child. 'Aunt Sue's Stories', a poem of twenty-five lines in four stanzas takes the poet into the nostalgic journey of Africa where the imagery of 'black slaves' is expressed very strongly.

Langston Hughes draws strength, courage and inspiration from his sense of Negritude. He took pride in his color and features that provided him confidence. He wished

to recognize the Negro in terms of “his African origins that contributed to the civilizations in which he had been involved. He defined and explored his identity with the Continent of Africa and the black of America in his next poem “Negro”, which appeared in the “*Crisis*” in January 1922, and was the opening poem of the collection “*The Weary Blues*”. The poem describes the historic role of the Negro and his unending struggle against hate, oppression and social discrimination. In this poem, Langston Hughes once again moves back to Africa and is not at all ashamed of his black color. He relates his black color to blackness of the night, the mysterious night. He admits that he has been a slave. The Negro’s singing, which now has become ‘ragtime’, has also been mentioned here. Hughes’ reference to rivers, more than once, shows that his race is deep and ancient like the rivers. The depths of Africa are not only literal, but also the metaphorical depths of an ancient culture. Thus, the attitude of the whites is also a blessing in disguise, as it never allows the poet to forget his far away ancient Africa. Langston Hughes tries to establish a definite identity between the Negro of America and the continent of Africa.

The Double Consciousness of the poet also makes him realize that he must make his past in order to make his future. How important the study of Negro life and history was can be felt by the first association which was founded in 1915 by Carter G. Woodson, a famous Negro economist. He wanted to inculcate group esteem and self-respect among the Negroes, by conducting researches on their history and achievements and by publishing books, articles and tracts. His official organ, *The Journal of Negro History*, urged the Negroes to study their history and to teach it in the Negro schools. In the schools and universities of United States where national ethnic myths and history were nourished and nurtured. The association made special endeavor to convince the Negroes who could never acquire respectability in society if they despised their history and looked upon themselves as inferior. Thus, elevation in their status was closely linked with the appreciation of the Negro color and culture. Langston Hughes’ kinship with fellow human beings and Africa got matured as the time passed. The political edge of assertion of the dignity of the self and demand for a fair deal for the Negroes as citizens in a modern democratic polity, however, became more pronounced as his poetic talent developed and matured. He knew that the denial of freedom and injustice perpetuated on the Black could be most starkly seen in the context of the South. The brutal inhumanity of the South could be forcefully demonstrated through scenes of lynching.

The Black put a big question mark on the efficacy of Emancipation and revealed the actual condition of the black in the United States. The poem “Negro” not only presents

the critical situation of the poet but also the condition of the black masses. Here, Hughes exhibits the plight of the black in the United States where they suffer from the feelings of remorse. The strong attraction among the Negroes of America towards Africa can be perceived by the emigration movement of the nineteenth century. Though, even before the nineteenth century, there had been a certain amount of support among Afro-Americans for a return to their native land Africa. Evidently this support reflected in a very basic way the manifold connections of black Americans with Africa. The earliest resettlements plan, which have survived, date back to the eighteenth century. The Negro says very proudly:

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Buildings.

I've been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black, (IBID. P. 8).

Conclusion:

Thus, the journey from humiliation to recognition will establish Langston Hughes as the voice of Harlem Renaissance. The poet is finally able to make a balance between his dual personality, psyche and thought. The failures and achievement of

Langston Hughes as an African-American poet will also be taken up in this research paper. More over stress will also be laid to prove how the poet recognised himself as a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. The journey of frustration and humiliation takes the poet and readers into a world where the goal of recognition has been achieved. The recognition in America strives a new path for the poet and his masses where there will be no pessimism and frustration. Thus, the poet evokes the vision of a just society with a spiritual transcendence and ever-widening horizon of joy and hope. Langston Hughes presents the theme of alienation, marginality of the black through institutional racism. To conclude, the present research paper is an effort to study how Langston turned into a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. He was able to transform his frustration into a boon and that essentially is the greatest achievement of the poet. Langston Hughes occupies a prominent place in the history of African- American Literature. He speaks in the place of those black writers and poets, “Who would surrender racial pride in the name of a false integration. As a slave, Negro was forced to do menial jobs incessantly. The African’s plight in America in the form of slavery and racism made the poet understand the power of tolerance.

Through a career of four decades and in the face of opposition not only by the white but also from the black, the poet discovered what he wanted to do and how he would accomplish it. He wanted to interpret the sufferings of the common black folks, their habits, thoughts and dreams in America which would give the black masses due recognition in the country called America. His essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” the manifesto of Harlem Renaissance brings forth the social, ethical and class-conscious development of the Black poetry. His poetry results a streak note of Marxism that would be based on socialistic and dialectic theory. In this essay, the poet himself declares, “I want to be a poet-not a negro poet. I want to write like a white poet. I would like to be a white poet.” He opines that African American writers can create great art only after expressing the mass culture of the black in America. The poet rejects the culture submission of the black who says, “I am not a Black artist-only an artist who happens to be Black.” (Arnold Rampersad, *Langston Hughes in African American Writers*. P. 203).

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