

The Quest for Identity: An Analysis of Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea*

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ABSTRACT

The history of human civilization, culture and progress tells that, in major parts of the world, the powered class had remained at the centre and remaining major community remained at the fringe. The powered class, without considering egalitarian ideology either on the base of religion or rational, preferred their prosperity first and neglected the other community. The marginal community remained unnoticed and were just puppets in the hands of the powered class. They did not have their identity or power to protest or put forth their individual or collective thought before the society. Autobiography paves way for the search for the identity of the marginalized. Identity is one of the most contested issues in marginal literature. The identity, the symbol of voice is not just the author's but of a whole community. Thus, it is not a one man's identity we are looking into but the identity of a whole community which the author tries to represent.

KEYWORDS:

Autobiography; Identity; Marginality; Blacks or African-American

The history of human civilization, culture and progress tells that, in major parts of the world, the powered class had remained at the centre and remaining major community remained at the fringe. On the base of physical and mental hard work of the marginal class, the powered class had enjoyed the fruits and always tried to remain at the centre for long. All resources or sources at the centre were with the powered class. So the people of this class, without considering egalitarian ideology either on the base of religion or rational preferred their prosperity first and neglected the other community. So the marginal community always remained unnoticed, and in wretched condition. They had remained

nothing but the puppets in the hands of the powered class. They did not have their identity or power to protest or put forth their individual or collective thought before the society.

Marginalized autobiography paves way for the search for the identity of the marginalized. They try to identify themselves with the social structure. They have their own way of life, which should not be disvalued. Identity is one of the most contested issues in marginal literature when it comes to autobiography which is all about establishing one's identity the process becomes all the more difficult for a marginal writer to come out of the various boundaries of domination

and make his voice heard. The identity, the symbol of voice is not just the author's but of a whole community, race, caste, class or gender. Thus it is not a one man's identity we are looking into but the identity of a whole community, race, caste, sect or gender, which the author tries to represent.

America is the fastest growing country in the world, yet it is notorious for its rigid race system. The words – pain, sorrow, resistance, protest, classism, oppressed, suppressed, slavery, untouchable, discrimination, segregation is found in the literature of this country. The present research paper examines the history of suppression, condition of the suppressed and origin of Black writings through the autobiography of Langston Hughes. It also dissects the stark realities of the Blacks and their commendable attempts to upraise socially. It explores how Black community struggled for equality and liberty. This is a journey of oppressed for the quest of identity through their autobiographies. The autobiographies of oppressed people (Blacks) are creative to elevate themselves from the orthodox and conservative societies.

Black autobiographies interpret self, society and conflict within these two and give more importance to the society and the community rather than individual emotions. They summon truth from the past about poverty, helplessness along with resistance. The autobiographies of the African-Americans serve as a dissident space within the literary public in which the African-American writer can speak out against slavery and contest the institutional narrative that race no longer functions as a social force in modern America. As Paul Gilroy claimed for African-American autobiographies, that is, "a process of 'self-emancipation' in the creation of a 'dissident space' within the public sphere" (Mostern 11). At the same time, as Gilroy claims, they are also, "a process of 'self-creation' through the

narration of a public persona" (Mostern 11). As a result, autobiography serves as means for Black writers to reclaim narrative authority over the construction of the 'Black self'.

The Blacks survived the evil practice of slavery and brought out their sufferings in the form of speech and writings for mass emancipation. These oppressed people's writings are creative to elevate themselves from the orthodox and conservative societies.

Marginality is a blotch on humanity as a universal phenomenon. Marginality may have different forms but it exists globally. As R. Bhongle writes: What is Marginality? The term applies to those areas of human interactions and activities which had only peripheral values, which were relegated to and looked upon as irrelevant and insignificant to the mainstream interest, and which appeared occasionally either to entertain or as an object of pity and sympathy in the so-called mainstream literature. (25) As a result, marginality and suffering result into the search for the self-esteem and self-establishment.

The autobiography as a genre is a search for identity. Autobiography is a product as well as the process of self-exploration. Autobiographies pose a question 'Who am I'? And provide an answer to 'How did I become What I am'? Autobiography involves the process of 'becoming' which is very complex and involves many complex factors. According to James Olney 'autobiography is, "a monument of the self as it is becoming" (Olney 35).

Autobiography, as a genre of literature, is a metaphor for self and journey of author's own life and achievement. It is a very influential genre through which Black writers have portrayed a realistic picture of the Black world. It is the recent development emerged after post-colonial in America, which is the most important tool of Black literature. It is not just a recalling of past, but a shaping and

structuring of them in such a way as to help perceive one's life. Black writers have been using writing as a weapon for their social proclamation. For them, writing an autobiography is a social activity for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and arouse resistance against different forms of oppression. Thus, Black Writing is essentially an expression of the reality of human life.

As autobiography is an important medium and is a matter of life study for 'other' human beings, the Blacks themselves merge with the autobiographies. As mentioned earlier, the autobiography is one of the genres of literature, is writing about self. The autobiography is an extremely powerful genre through which Black writers have depicted the actual image of the Black world. Considering autobiography as the ideal form of privileged access to the experience of an author, the present paper examines African-American autobiographical tradition in its search for identity. The main focus is placed on how the autobiographies create a series of characteristics that define the African-American tradition, and how the autobiographers of the Black community recover them, thus making them prevail in the future of the tradition. The autobiography of Langston Hughes is an appropriate example of this process.

The issue of identity has been a contested category from the very beginning, especially for the people existing on the peripheries. This paper would try to explicate how Langston Hughes reconstruct the concept of margin in context of identity formation. Langston Hughes seeks to break away from structural ideologies built around the work of a Black author and overturn these institutionally created barriers.

The paper will focus on the concept of history formation within the context of the existence of multiple margins and further

explore Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea* in the same line of thought. The most thought-provoking facet of comprehending the author is that his identity is a potpourri of different yet very strong traits. The magniloquent autobiography which has been constructed and carved in the consciousness of the masses needed to be deconstructed and reformulated. Studying the autobiography of Langston Hughes confers an insight into his life encased in the culture of his respective community. By using the same, it tries to analyze the workings of the autobiographical tradition which he enumerates and represents. It further liberates the confinements of patterns and structures imposed upon these subaltern voices. It tries to chart the narratives of the life of the author and explain how he attempts to emerge out of the compartmentalization in which he is subjected to. The paper also focuses upon the application of the idea of difference which subaltern theory encapsulates and sees his autobiography and identity formation process; not on the note of lamentation or enchantment with the past but as a beacon for the future generations, emancipating them from any kind of structural fixation.

The Big Sea by Langston Hughes is the autobiography which focuses on the quest for identity. Langston Hughes, a poet, dramatist, fiction writer and journalist, was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri as the second child of Carrie Mercer Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes. His parents were of mixed-race origin, a combination of African American, European American and Native American blood. He emerged as a strong Black man who achieved his identity as the well-known writer of the Black or Afro-American community which can be seen in his autobiography *The Big Sea*.

Langston Hughes was first recognized as the most celebrated literary figure during the 1920s, a period known as the "Harlem

Renaissance". He was one of the most celebrated and prolific writers throughout the Harlem Renaissance. He was known during his lifetime as "the poet laureate of Harlem". Hughes was one of the most important autobiographers of the time who opposed the refined image of the New Negro and fell back on the Black folk to define individual and collective identity. Through the stories of his life of hardships, sufferings and his ultimate success as a writer, he helped to facilitate a transformation from the psychology of the – Old Negro typified by an implied inferiority of the post-Reconstruction era when Black artists often did not control the means of production or editorial privileges to the – New Negro described as self-assertive, racially cognizant, expressive, and, for the most part, in charge of what he produced.

The Big Sea is and as valuable as it is as a record of the Renaissance produced by one of its major writers, it is still a limited, often intentionally guileless, view of a complicated, multi-faceted time. Hughes's *The Big Sea* has over the years been described by critics as one of the most profound studies of the Harlem Renaissance ever written by one who had actually lived during that time.

A crucial element of *The Big Sea* is the exploration of one's identity. Hughes makes use of his own background and upbringing to examine the forces that played a pivotal role in his belief system and his life, and, in the process, explores the powerful notion of what it means to live being an African-American. The thematic notion of Hughes' work is that identity is something that is formed through the blending of an individual with the society. This book presented Hughes's lasting themes, established his style, and suggested the wide range of his poetic talent. It showed him committed to racial themes - pride in Blackness and in his African heritage, and the everyday life of the African-Americans - and democracy and patriotism.

Langston Hughes *The Big Sea* deals with the experiences of a Black boy in the suppressive White world and his constant struggle to defeat the circumstances to keep his 'self' intact. A close and analytical analysis of *The Big Sea* brings out the fact that it is heart-rending records of endless struggle of the 'self' of its author against the cruel socio-cultural and political domain of his time. During the course of his development, the psycho-social self of the author was cornered by a number of hindrances created by this milieu, and to protect itself from those forces, the 'self' was required to employ various means of protest.

An insightful study of Hughes's autobiography shows that the struggle of existence for the 'self' or 'identity' of the narrator commences from his own family. It is believed that home is a place where one gets mental solace, a sense of protection from the external forces, much-needed love and care from other members of the family, a kind of mental, physical and social security which is indispensable for the smooth, positive and all-round development of the younger members of the family. But it seems that the familial atmosphere of Langston was least conducive to the proper development of his personality. Although descending from a notable family, his early years were dislocated by the breaking up of his parents not long after his birth. While speaking about his family, Langston Hughes writes: "I was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, but grew mostly in Lawrence, Kansas. My grandmother raised me until I was twelve years old. Sometimes I was with my mother, but not often. My father and mother were separated" (13-14).

As his parents were separated when he was a little child, naturally Langston lacked the much-needed mental support and familial affection from them. This resulted in a very loose familial bond between him and his parents. Like all other neighbouring children

of his age, Langston expected love and care from his parents. But his misfortune forced him to live with his maternal grandmother, while his mother travelled from one place to another looking for better jobs, and his father lived far away in Mexico.

Though his father treated him in an ill-manner, Langston lived with him hoping that someday he would help him to attain the education of his own choice. But his father would not budge. He wanted Langston to study in Europe, whereas Langston insisted to study in America. Finally, his father gave in and Langston was admitted to Columbia. He was very happy to come to New York as it gave him the opportunity to visit Harlem. But he did not like Columbia. He hated the cold atmosphere of the campus. He was an unwelcome guest for both the teachers and the students there. So he did everything except the studies. Actually, he did not want his father to interfere in his life. But his father kept on writing him, asking every minute details of the money he had spent. It made Langston dislike his father more and more.

Finally, his dislike took a form of subtle hatred for his father. He wanted to tell his father that he wished to live a life of his own. This constant conflict with his father resulted in intense mental trauma for Langston. So, that year in Columbia, Langston finished: "without honours. I had no intention of going further at Columbia, anyhow. I felt that I would never turn out to be what my father expected me to be in return for the amount he invested. So I wrote him and told him I was going to quit college and go to work on my own, and that he needn't send me any more money"(85). This incident reflects Langston's rebellious spirit that wanted to grow as per his own principles.

Hughes's rejection of his father is very significant as it indicated his decision to define his identity through a cultural lens that was not distorted by adhering to white patriarchy as the standard. At the same time, it

symbolizes his acceptance of Black culture and his Black origin. His awareness of the intricate connection between African-Americans and their racial roots in Africa becomes evident in his autobiography when he described the circumstances of the composition of his poem *The Negro Speaks of River*.

After leaving Columbia, Langston started to apply for a job. He was ready to take any kind of job like office boy, clerk, waiter and busboy. But his restless spirit, coupled with his colour and the racist attitude of America used to come in his way of getting a job. He had a wanderer's spirit. He never liked to stay at one place for longer period of time. During one of such wanderings, he visited Paris. The times were very difficult for a Negro with no specific skill. There was a scarcity of jobs. He was virtually starving. So he wrote a letter to his mother asking for money. But she did not help him even during such a hard time. On the contrary, she scolded him for wandering aimlessly all over the world. In her letter, she asked: "what was I doing way over there in France? Why didn't I stay home like decent folks, get a job, and go to work and help her - instead of gallivanting all over the world as a sailor, and writing from Paris for money?" (155).

Such an attitude of his mother towards Langston illustrates what kind of familial life he had at home. Actually, when he had come back from his trip to Africa, he had brought a monkey as a gift for his younger brother (for whom he spent quite a big amount of money he had saved on his job) and also helped his mother with whatever money he had been left with. But now he could not get any financial or emotional support from his mother. Of course, she was worried about job and money all the time. No doubt, she herself was going through a crucial phase of her life, but as a mother, she should have done whatever little she could for her son.

In another incident, too, Langston mentions how his mother did not care for him. During his wanderings, Langston had been to Italy and there somebody picked his pocket and all his money and passport had gone. He tried to get help from the American Consul. However, the officer dismissed him saying he had no funds to help the people like him. He was forced to stay there until he was hired as a work away without pay on a ship. After getting home, Langston first worked at a wet wash laundry and then as a busboy. By this time, he had published some of his poems in magazines and people had started to recognize him as a poet. In the laundry, he felt humiliated when the customers stared at him. It created a terrible mental stress and he decided to have rest for some days. But his mother did not take proper care of her exhausted son. On the other hand, she told him that he would not get anything to eat. Langston writes:

My mother said she was tired of working, too, and I could either get up from there and go back to work, or I would not eat! But I was really tired, so I stayed right on in bed and rested and read - and got hungry. My mother refused to feed me on the food she prepared for my little brother when she got home from work. And I didn't blame her if she didn't want to feed me. (214)

Engulfed by such familial situation, Langston could not really understand the complexities of his relationship with either his father or his mother. As a young boy, he wanted to lead his life with absolute freedom. His free spirit did not want to be controlled by anybody. As a result of his broken family, he was compelled to live with his grandmother. Though she looked after him properly, after her death, there remained a huge emotional void that came in the way of his proper personality development. The atmosphere in and around the home was vicious, trying to imprison the

spirit of growing Langston. But Langston was not made of such stuff as to be shattered by any recurring adverse situations and environment. He protested strongly against all those who dared to come in the way of his search for an identity.

As discussed above, Langston was victimized by the members of his family owing to various issues related to family backgrounds like the financial crisis, lack of understanding between husband and wife and sometimes between parents and children. In addition to this, the psycho-social self of Langston Hughes is further crushed by the members of his own African American community. In fact, it was ironical to have such obstacles in the path of his self-development in the form of his own community. This mental and physical trauma has forced Hughes to voice his anguish against his own people through his autobiography. His autobiography makes one aware of the positive as well as negative roles played by the Black community in the development of Langston's identity.

Apart from being oppressed by his family, Hughes had also been traumatized by the question of his racial identity since his childhood. As a mulatto with a multiracial lineage, he was puzzled in the web of America's racial history because he did not have a race of his own to belong to. He became intensely conscious of his own race and began to understand how important and how challenging racial and ethnic identity was for himself and for others like him with multiple ancestries. He referred to his ancestors in the autobiography, some of whom were Native American, African American, Indian and English. The attempt to reconcile between uncertain identities - African American, Native American, African and mixed blood- presented not a liberating choice of selves for Hughes, but rather a stifling concern of not belonging anywhere. He states: "You see unfortunately I'm not black. There are lots of different kinds

of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word 'Negro' is used to mean anyone who has Negro blood at all in his veins"(36).

This marker 'Negro' initiated a lot of trouble for Hughes during his formative years. While studying at an otherwise all-white public school in Topeka, Kansas, he felt alienated and sometimes, was even attacked as the only Black boy in the school. In another occasion, he remembers being severely beaten up by a group of White boys for his going far into the White neighbourhood strictly forbidden for Black children. He faced a similar disapproval when he was sitting in a restaurant and a white man came and sat across his table. When the man recognized him to be a Negro, it put him in great trouble. Through his encounters and experiences within the context of his schoolyard association and outside, he personally confronted whiteness and blackness and the terrain pacifying White and Black. Such spiteful mindset and contemptuous behaviour of the Whites produced different emotional disorders and confusions in him.

The White terror had become an alarming monster that rejected all the rightful hopes and aspirations of the Black children to have a natural and positive growth. Consequently, these children suffered many mental traumas during the course of the development of their self, making them harmful in their personal, familial and social environment. That is why, as a means of his protest against the mainstream aesthetics, Langston Hughes has narrated a number of incidents in his autobiography focusing upon his victimization at the hands of White Terror. In one of such incidents, Langston is seen severely beaten up by a group of White boys for his going far into the White neighbourhood which was strictly forbidden for Black children. Somehow, he managed to escape

from the brutes and return home with 'both eyes blacked and a swollen jaw'.

Langston Hughes's reaction to his continuous oppression from his childhood to early youth is neither violent nor tactfully guised under irony, humour or sarcasm. He had almost silently borne all that befell him in the White racist world. However, when he took a job as a sailor on S.S. Malone, he threw all his books into the sea and for the first time in his life, he felt relieved from the horrible pressures of unwelcome happenings. By his seemingly melodramatic act of throwing away the books into the sea, it seems that Langston wishes to suggest his sense of freedom in a symbolic manner.

With a view to developing his identity, Hughes, after returning from Mexico, moved to Harlem where he could engage in the African American community. His shift to Harlem leaving Columbia University thus represented another vital attempt to cultivate his independent identity as a poet in defiance of his father and the racial prejudices he faced at the university.

Hughes's identity crisis and cultural schizophrenia resulting from centuries of severance from his roots made him bank on Africa as a frame of reference. His endeavour to identify himself with Africa is, in the words of Essien-Udom an –attempt to affirm his humanity. (Essien-Udom 258) He pressed for realizing the dream of equality and self-esteem by returning to Africa. Initially, Hughes conceived of Africa as an unachievable ideal, a foil for his idea of a racist America where blacks were dehumanized. He defied western colonial narratives of Africa as a pre-historic and pagan land and affirmed a sense of race pride through a restoration of Africa and its culture. Hughes's initial conception of Africa has a romantic feature simply because it was not based on a real image of Africa but on an Africa of the young poet's fantasy and imagination. With this romantic image of

Africa in his mind and imagination Hughes in 1923 set sail for the land of his ancestors.

The section entitled 'Black Renaissance' of the autobiography documents his time spent living in Harlem and delineates his growth as an African-American writer among other artists of the period. Noticeably at this stage, he was less concerned with idealizing Africa and his African identity. His writing shifted; he was then determined to celebrate the ordinary common Negro in America in his poems and to bring this black mass culture to a larger audience. —My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all humankind, Hughes is quoted as saying (Rampersad 418).

The Big Sea depicts Hughes's struggle with his racial identity and his final acceptance of his two credos of identity: African and American, of the duality of his existence as an American citizen and a member of the African diaspora. It also deals with Hughes's attempts to reconcile dilemmas of identity and principles he confronted as an African American professional writer and scholar. Decided on a literary calling at a time when no African-American had been able to survive on his or her writing, hindered by penury, deprivation, racism, and lack of prospects, and forced down by the expectations and demands of readers and critics of all stripes, Hughes had to fall back on his deftness as a negotiator among opposing statuses with the aim of preserving his art, his honesty and his exclusive position as the literary voice of common African Americans.

On the whole, the autobiography of Langston Hughes demonstrates that he had realized the power and value of written words

and so had made deliberate efforts to master the art of writing. But it should also be taken into consideration that the path of Negro writer was never smooth. As he was trying to enter into the area which was strictly cordoned off and meant only for the Whites, it is natural that there were numerous tiers of obstacles in his way, which he had to overcome before getting into the mainstream of creative works.

Thus, one can conclude that in *The Big Sea*, Hughes tells an intimate story not only of a struggling writer but also of an individual striving to overcome racial barriers to success. The book provides young readers with an important study of American cultural and social conditions in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Through his autobiography, Hughes shows the sufferings of being African American in the United States. The autobiography painfully recounts his dilemma of identity and marginalization spawned by familial tensions, financial duress and above all American racial prejudice. The cruel socio-political conditions of his time together with an unsupportive family disintegrated under the pressures of racism not only deprived the author of each and every prospect required for his evolution as a Black poet but also denied the very existence of his identity. Being pinned down by a number of hindrances in his journey of identity exploration, he drew on different means of resistance to overcome those forces. In view of that, Langston Hughes's autobiography unswervingly articulates all these facets of defiance and also the stratagems employed by him to triumph over various social, cultural and political establishments of the white society.

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