

## **Langston Hughes –A Protest Poet**

**Mrs. K.R. Vijaya**

Lecturer, Department of English

Rajalakshmi Engineering College (Anna University)

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with the way, the protest poet— Langston Hughes had reflected on the problems of race in his poems. To unravel the secrets buried in the depth of his complex poetry, the readers have to carry the appropriate tools to know the social, political, and racial dimensions. There is a strong notion that the Black literature should be analyzed in social, political, and cultural contexts. The interpretation of the chosen poems of Langston Hughes is done against the Sociological background that the Black sensitivity is preconditioned to the interpretation of Black poetry. As a protest poet, Hughes had responded to the racialisation of society and the culture and politics of nineteenth-century United States and recorded his feelings in his poetry. The study examines the poems of Langston Hughes as protest poetry. Regardless of its call for revolution and counter-violence against oppression, the protest poetry of Hughes is distinguished by a quest for a better world where people can learn from the painful experiences of the past.

### **KEYWORDS**

Langston Hughes; Racism; Political and culture.

Hughes' poems are a voice of the human experience. His poems are not detached from history and politics. Matthew Arnold said that a poet alone can work for the redemption of society, as he is believed to possess the power to view life steadily and thus reintegrate the society and transform it into a 'spiritual commonwealth'. That is the aim and mission of protest poetry in African American Literature.

A study of the select protest poems of Langston Hughes can provide insight into the issues and problems African Americans face during their lives and the ways these black people respond to them. It can also provide insight into the self-conception of the protestor. The protest literature ventures out a moral position from which, it criticizes its object. The protest poet points out that the behaviour

of some people or some circumstances is unjust and deserves to be condemned. As one reads these poems, one considers the moral tradition upon which each establishes one's critical perspective and understands how the author invokes that tradition through language, form, or content. Hughes tries to create awareness, exposing the ills of the society and invoking a revolution and thereby a social transformation.

The concept of race is socially constructed and based on a gross human misunderstanding. The term racial group is reserved for the minorities who are classified according to obvious physical differences. They experience unequal treatment and have less power over their lives. In the United States, immigrants have come from different places and their diversity is well known. The Africans were

brought to the country simultaneously along with the permanent white settlements. Maulana Karenga, in his *Introduction to Black Studies*, points out,

It is clear from all historical evidence, that the European slave trade and its accompanying violence, destruction, and enslavement was one of the most catastrophic events in the history of humankind (Karenga 78).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the British saw the newly established American colonies as the land of opportunity. So, the English planters brought more African slaves to America to raise their profitable tobacco, sugar, and rice crops and to provide other forms of labor in mines. Gradually, laws were enacted, that defined legal status ensuring that Africans and their descendants would be slaves. As a result, the Africans were brought as slaves in bondage. In contrast to the basic rights and privileges enjoyed by the White Americans, black people lived under a system of repression and terror due to the institution of slavery. This kind of system of slavery could not continue for long. African Americans started to resist the system of slavery which resulted in many revolts and social tensions in the white and black people's existence. As a result, on 1st January 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the emancipation proclamation. Even then, Reconstruction was followed by decades of neglect, and the position of blacks deteriorated in the United States.

The race is not a major issue on today's agenda of the United States. Unbelievably, Barrack Obama has become the President of the United States recently. Yet, the race was once a colossal issue in the U.S. When the poems of Langston Hughes are read, one can see how race played a wicked role in the lives of African Americans. His poetry is not about the blooming flowers, blue sky, and beautiful

rivers. There is, on the other hand, a great deal of protest demanding social change.

This paper analyses the poetry of the African American poet Langston Hughes as the result of racial discrimination, exploitation, and repression and finds how protest is a way of life for social transformation. The protest poetry of Hughes is a response to the painful experience of the black people in America which transforms their bitterness into a powerful mechanism of anger and revolution.

As a black writer facing racism every day, he had an exotic knowledge of the words and words of a speech that would best convey his messages to both the blacks and whites. Exploring racial problems from a class struggle perspective, Hughes celebrates the revolution of the masses against the forces of oppression:

Good morning Revolution:  
You are my best friend  
I ever had.  
We gonna pal around together from  
now on.  
Say, listen, Revolution: (Good  
Morning Revolution 5).

Listen, Revolution,  
We're buddies, see –  
Together,  
We can take everything:  
Factories, arsenals, houses, ships,  
Railroads, forests, fields, orchards,  
Bus lines, telegraphs, radios,  
(Jesus! Raise hell with radios!)  
Steel mills, coal mines, oil wells, gas,  
All the tools of production.  
(Great day in the morning!)  
Everything –  
And turn'em over to the people who  
work.  
Rule and run'em for us people who  
work.

Hughes deals with the suffering of the black people not only in terms of black and white conflict but as part of the

struggle of the working class against the ruling capitalist minority. In his poem *White Man*, where the racial conflict between blacks and whites is added to the class struggle of the majority against economic exploitation and capitalism:

Sure, I know you!  
you're a White Man,  
I'm a Negro.  
You take all the best jobs  
And leave us the garbage cans to  
empty and  
The halls to clean.  
...  
You're the smart guy, White Man!  
You got everything! (Collected  
Poems 194).

In Hughes's protest poetry, there is no place for the romanticism of the Harlem Renaissance as he transforms his poems into angry poetics which resemble proletarian threats which make the blood run to fists to fight the terror and pave the way for a bright future. He warns blacks and all the oppressed people in America of tragic consequences if they ignore the revolution against the capitalist forces of hegemony. In *Memo to Non-White People*, he says:

They will let you have babies  
to... use your kids as labor boys  
for army, air force, or uranium  
mine.  
they will gleefully let you.  
They will let you have dope  
Because they are quite willing  
To drug you or kill you  
They will let you have babies  
Because they are willing to  
pauperize you  
They will let you have alcohol  
Sodden and drunk and foolish  
They will gleefully let you  
kill your damn self any way you  
choose  
with liquor drug or whatever...  
(Good Morning Revolution 14).

Denouncing the systematic exploitation of the poor classes by the capitalist minority, Hughes calls for violent confrontations with the forces of tyranny identifying himself with the oppressed people of the world:

Great Mob that knows no fear-  
come here!  
and raise your hand  
against this man  
of iron and steel and gold  
who's bought and sold  
you  
for the last thousand years.  
Come here,  
great Mob  
and tear him limb from limb,  
split his golden throat (Collected  
Poems 175).

From these lines, one can know the miseries of the black people in America during the 1930s resulting from their poverty-stricken condition and the continuation of racist policies in the North. In the poem *Dream Deferred*, Hughes describes thousands of black children starving to death in the streets of Harlem. Unlike white kids, they are deprived of life necessities and they are not allowed even to dream. Viewing the frustrated dreams of his people, Hughes utters a cry of anger and threat:

What happened to a dream  
deferred?  
does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
or fester like a sore  
and then run?  
does it stink like rotten meat?  
(Selected Poems 268).

This poem focuses on images of deterioration, drying, rotting, souring, and loss of natural features. The black American is cut off from his African roots to be abandoned in the American wilderness where he rots like a raisin lying neglected in the scorching sun. The rotten meat signifies the black lynching in the American South where black bodies are left

on the trees without being given a decent burial. The reference to the spoiled candy symbolizes the false promises of equality given by the white society to keep the blacks under control. This poem is an indication of the institutional limitations to black ambitions and their struggle for survival amidst poverty and squalor. The poem ends with a warning to the white rulers that if they continue to dehumanize the blacks, it may explode into a revolution. The significant ending of the poem is a manifestation of the existence of a black revolutionary potential that may be transformed into a violent revolution defending the rights of the black people.

Hughes's lynch poems could be considered historical documents and testimonies of White supremacy. In "The Bitter River," Hughes views the tragedy of two black young men lynched in Mississippi in the early forties. The poem visualizes the lynch phenomenon as a river of bitterness overflowing through the South where blacks are forced to drink. The lynching rituals in Hughes's poems are underlined as indications of the brutality of man to man. In his poetry, Hughes denounces the racist practices which took place in the South clarifying that lynching is not only used as a punishment for male blacks accused of sexual harassment of white women but also as a retaliation ritual against those who seek freedom:

Last week they lynched a colored  
boy  
They hung him on a tree

That colored by ain't said a thing  
but we all should be free. (Selected  
Poems 162)

The poem reveals that blacks are lynched because they are weak and powerless. Lynching was not the only racist practice used by whites in the South to keep the black people subjugated and oppressed. But there were other forms of torture and oppression that were pursued every day, reflecting the brutality and racist mentality of the oppressor. Therefore, Hughes denounces all forms of racial segregation which ignore the feelings of the black people.

The protest poetry of Hughes is a historical document that recorded the catastrophic history of black people in America calling for revolution against the constructs of racism and slavery. Traumatized by their painful experience and agony in exile, he transforms their poetry into a protest instrument challenging the hegemonic forces, which attempt to banish their people outside human history. Confronting racism oppression, humiliation, and violence against his people, he aims to reconstruct history and rewrite the story of slavery and colonization from the perspective of the colonized, the oppressed, and the humiliated. Regardless of its call for revolution and counter-violence against oppression, the protest poetry of Hughes is distinguished by a quest for a better world where people can learn from the painful experiences of the past.

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