

A TALE OF SLAVERY THROUGH HUGHES' POETRY

Sangita Mehta

(Research Scholar) HCTM, Kaithal

Dr. Ajay Sharma, Reader, MSC, Saharanpur. India.

ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes shows the hard times of African American children when they had to go through all that racism, discrimination and hatred and has also tried his best to give a voice to their claim. Hughes presents the miserable condition of the negroes by expressing his genuine emotions and says that it is not just the white man who is American. I am also an American and in fact we all are American. Hughes has compared life to a journey. Being fully aware of the suffering of his people, the poet rejects the Jim Crow America in order to highlight its ugly face. He wants whites to view blacks as both black and American, not just black. He just wants blacks not to be afraid to express themselves as they really are. But in spite of having bitter experiences because of racial discriminations he never loses his heart or he never hates whites.

Key Words: African American Culture, Racial Discrimination, Slavery, Blacks

INTRODUCTION

Hughes' poetry is a reflection of the African American culture and Harlem. Much of his poetry shows the picture of poverty, hardships, racism, inequality etc. of the African American people, as African American Literature is grounded in the experience of Black people in the United States. African-Americans have long claimed an American Identity during most of United States history, and Langston Hughes has tried his best to give a voice to their claim. He strongly asserts their claim for equal participation in the American polity. He concentrates on the American-ness of the experiences which shaped the collected personality of African American. This sorry state of affairs has been the focus of Hughes' poetry.

Langston Hughes, one of the leading voices of this period, articulates their experiences with great eloquence. He presents the world of his people in its positively underscoring their strength and ability to survive.

Hughes always felt hurt when the white people made him realize apart from the land of which they are an important part from the time of evolution. In his famous poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, which he wrote while traveling in a train to visit his father to Mexico, shows that they have been around as long as rivers. They have been all over the world. The rivers are known to them from the very birth of a human being (Arnold Rampersad: 65). He says:

"I've known rivers I've known rivers as the world and older than flow of human blood in human vein. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in Euphrates when dawn were young, I built my hut near Congo and it pulled me to sleep I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids above it" (Langston Hughes: 23)

In a poem "*Merry Go Round*" he has drawn a picture of a child who may not ever ride the merry-go-round in life out of fear he may not be allowed because of being black. He makes us realize the pains of a father who must seek the permission, can my child ride? Here once again the poet makes us aware about his and his people's pain and sufferings and he wants to relocate his self by showing how cruel segregation it was:

"To a merry go round
Where is the horse
For a kid that's black" (CP: 240)

Again in his poem "*I Too, Sing America*," Hughes presents the miserable condition of the negroes by expressing his genuine emotions and says that it is not just the white man who is American. I am also an American and in fact we all are American. By using a pictorial quality he draws a picture before our eyes what life was in 1930's:

"I am the darker brother
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes
But I laugh
And eat well and grow strong" (CP: 206)

This historical plight of the negroes is also highlighted in "*Aunt Sue's Stories*," a poem first appeared in *Crisis* in July 1921 where the female speaker portrays the inhuman treatment given to the black Americans by the racist whites:

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,

And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice... (CP: 23)

This can also be seen in "Mother to Son" where Hughes has compared life to a journey. He is presenting the hardships of his people through a mother who is talking to her son:

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 (CP: 30)

"The Negro" in Crisis in January 1922, the poem asserts the affirmation of the negro when he says:

I am a Negro:
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:
 Ceasar 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. (CP: 24)

Hughes remains a faithful articulator of the many-faceted experiences of his people in the United States. He shows the hard times of African American children when they had to go through all that racism, discrimination and hatred. He presents a moment in history as experienced by a child who asks:

“Where is the Jim crow section
On this merry go round
Mister Cause I went to ride”(CP: 240)

Being fully aware of the suffering of his people, the poet rejects the Jim Crow America in order to highlight its ugly face. Sometimes, the poetic persona in his poems feels frightened to be a lonely lamb among the racist wolves. “Afraid,” for example, highlights this aspect of his people:

We cry among the skyscrapers
As our ancestors
Cried among the palms in Africa
Because we are alone,
It is night,
And we’re afraid.

(CP: 41)

The fear here represents the extent to which the black Americans were tortured and harassed.

But in spite of having bitter experiences because of racial discriminations he never loses his heart or he never hates whites. The rejection was never anti white. He wants whites to view blacks as both black and American, not just black. He just wants blacks not to be afraid to express themselves as they really are. He never puts down the white race for being prejudiced. He always tries to encourage his own people to feel proud of their individuality, of their own heritage, to appreciate their own diversity and culture. He just wants African Americans to patronize their own business, see beauty in their own race and learn African history.

References

Arnold Rampersad,. *The life of Langston Hughes, Volume I: 1902-1941*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), p. 23. All subsequent references from the book, abbreviated as CP, are included in the text.