

**THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES:
REDEFINING AFRICAN – AMERICAN CULTURE**

AN ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION: Hughes began writing poetry early and in his own words “even before I was six, books began to happen to me,”¹ and by eight grade he was elected class poet. On being asked to define poetry, he said, “it is the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop, into atomic words.” Further, on being asked to describe a poet, he stated: “a poet is a Human Being...each Human Being must live within his time, with and for his people, within the boundaries of his country.”²

He understood that he was claiming a place in history for himself as an inhabitant, a culture-bearer and an interpreter as well: “recording what I see, commenting upon it, and distilling from my own emotions a personal interpretation.”³ As is seen in the following poem, the poet visualises himself as a keeper and exhibitor of the dreams and aspirations of his people when he writes:

Bring me all of your dreams,
You dreamer
...Heart melodies
That I may wrap them
In a blue cloud-cloth
Away from the too rough fingers
Of the world.



(TWB,p.94)

As a “dream-keeper” he clearly wanted to battle injustice through exposition and protest, but in doing so he tended to be gentle rather than violent, more good natured than bitter, and as such his stories are serious and provocative

beneath their smooth surfaces while in most time they constitute a plea for tolerance and understanding. For a poet who refused to be ‘just a poet – not a Negro poet,’⁴ Hughes also refused to transcend his Blackness for the sake of assimilation.

As an artist, he participated in the task of exploding the old boundaries of poetry in English by infusing it with a Black⁵ sensibility independent of the received stereotypes, by expanding it to accommodate the African-American experience, language and style. In his work there is no noticeable “sham, pretension or self-deceit.”⁶ He represented the subject of oppression through satire, understatement or wry sardonic humour as illustrated in the following poem:

I play it cool
 And dig all jive----
 That’s the reason
 I stay alive.

My motto,
 As I live and learn
 Is
 Dig and be dug
 In return.

(PLT,p.11)

Hughes lambastes those who claim that he presents an “unfavourable image” of his race, for he believed not only in the inherent worth of his people, but in the need to present the truth. Hughes’ art is grounded in his

life, a life that embodied the classic American theme of a search for identity. He is a writer who knew his medium and also the people he addressed through the medium. He himself stated that “art must do more than stand as a representation of the world as it is, it must also be a vehicle for transcendence.”⁷

The poet revisits the tradition he inherited. He frequently alludes to the African-American folk ballad, rooted in the oral tradition with which the whites were unfamiliar. Harlem became the principal referent and metaphor of the world he wanted to interpret. Hughes’ work reveals the predominance of elements that are derived from the folk culture and oral tradition underscoring the fact that African-American written literature is much closer to oral folk tradition than is the literature of the ‘mainstream.’

It is not surprising to note that after he had written and published two books of his poems, his readers realise that the quality of youth was as much in the poems themselves as in his personality and many of his young readers also thought likewise. In fact, in a career which spanned four decades Hughes managed to maintain a “readable newness distinctly his own.”⁸

The Harlem renaissance marked tremendous gains for the African American: its legacy was a higher degree of racial consciousness and more freedom to deal with folk themes. Hughes believed in the transformation of the African-American sensibility, from the Euro-centric perspective to the true

American creed that gives the African-American their dignity and sense of true freedom. While he assigned to himself the task of recording cultural history, the pattern of the events imagined, as well as the values he decoded, ensured that these would live beyond Harlem.

Hughes offered a redefinition of African-American culture primarily by offering his art as a platform and a basis for Black Aesthetic for later writers to stage their struggle and resistance. To understand the nature and intricacy of his art one need to see how technique and subject matter fuse into a tradition of the African-American culture that later writers explore. An attempt has to be made to understand Langston Hughes' contribution of African-American aesthetics in the light of what he has achieved through his poetry. It is important to situate him within the Harlem Renaissance. The view that emerges is of a writer grounded in his time but whose voice sounds authentic even to day.

Chapter – I: **PROPAGATING THE BLACK AESTHETIC**

The term Black Aesthetic was first used by Larry Neal in 1968 in the manifesto “The Black Arts Movement”; the term is used to refer to the cultural identity of the African-American. The Black Aesthetic set out to make the African-American artist aware that he must refuse to accept the European-American definition of reality and to offer instead an African-American

definition that went beyond the traced boundaries imposed by the white racist imagination. African-American art, it was felt, must challenge the stereotypical figure of the African-American created by white America. W.

E. B. Dubois radically expected African-American literature to be indisputably 'propagandistic'. In "Criteria of Negro Art," Dubois emphatically expresses disinterest in any art that does not attempt to bring beauty, truth and justice to African-American writing. James Weldon Johnson, however, wanted the African-American to deepen his understanding of the folk form and style. He instructed writers to find an aesthetic form to define the identity of the African-American, while others like John O. Killens (in "Opportunities for Development of Negro Talent") called for writers to explore and create the means of achieving deeper and broader dimensions of artistic reality in their interpretation of who they were, where they came from and where they were going. In, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1934), Richard Wright regretfully observes that, rarely has the best writing been addressed to the African-American himself.⁹

The Black Aesthetic is therefore directly opposed to, and becomes a reaction against a Euro-centric art form. It seeks to impose an Africanised art form which has its roots in the oral. In "The Myth of a Negro Literature" (1966), LeRoi Jones points that writers like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer,

Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin returned to “Negro Music”¹⁰ (which is an African-American indigenous art form) and incorporated what is a “highly stylised and personal version of the Negro’s life in America”¹¹ in their writings.

Hughes rebukes those writers who felt they had to run away from themselves in order to be “universal”, those who said they wanted to be “a poet—not a Negro poet”. He asserts: “why should I want to be white? I am a Negro---and beautiful!”¹² The poet claims that most of his poems are racial in theme and treatment and derived from the life that he was familiar with. In *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, the poet testifies to the maturity of his self awareness, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”. In it he talks of the birth of a “man-child, soft-spoken, almost casual, yet noble and proud, and black as Africa.”¹³ Like other African-American poets and artists, he rightly refuses to talk to a “universal void”,¹⁴

His poetry is radical; it’s hallmark is not only experimentation with new technique but more importantly, the formation of a new radical consciousness. In his journals, Hughes underlined the urgency for creation of African-American culture derived from the wholesome elements of the African-American consciousness. This was something that had its roots in the African-

American folk. Thus he fashioned a new order of hearing, a new order of seeing, that was true to his people and to the age:

So will my page be colored that I write?
 Being me, it will not be white.
 But it will be
 a part of you, instructor.
 You are white ----
 yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
 That's American.
 Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
 Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
 But we are, that's true!
 As I learn from you,
 I guess you learn from me----
 although you're older – and white----
 and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

(MDD, p.39)

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” is a seminal document that provides an understanding of the Black aesthetic in the context of Hughes’ poetry and it contributed to moulding of contemporary African-American identity. The essay calls for the development of vision, passion and courage in the African-Americans. For Hughes, to be regarded as an artist but not as an African-American artist – as though the two aspects were mutually exclusive – is, in effect, to turn his back on his identity, to accept the white world’s definition of his people as ugly and inferior, unworthy of serious dedication to art. Hughes rebukes African-American writers and poets, who surrender their

racial pride for the sake of what he sees as a fraudulent integration. Hughes argues that, “no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself,” and he also adds: “We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If they weren’t, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”¹⁵

The Black Aesthetic, therefore, consists of an African-American cultural and aesthetic tradition with the African identity at its core. It is a positive construct that affirms the creation of a new African-American reality. This aspect of the redefinition of African-American culture is manifested through multiple layers in contemporary writings. The stand that Langston Hughes takes as an artist is inflected with an awareness of the political and cultural existence of African-American as a suppressed “nation within a nation”.¹⁶ Though oppressed, their unique consciousness and their commitment to the ideals of liberation reflect their distinctive character. He refers to them as suppressed people who have always tried to preserve their folk heritage as a desirable means of guaranteeing cultural and group survival.

In actual fact, Hughes' propagation of the Black Aesthetic is a call for discipline and an attempt to redefine the African-American vision of reality. Although Langston Hughes did not specifically use the term Black Aesthetic, yet he laid the foundation, for a purely African-American critical construct that was to be exploited by latter day artists. In his own creative way he succeeded in making the world aware of the multilayered realities of what would later be called the Black Aesthetic.

Chapter – II: THE BLUES SENSIBILITY

The blues as a major musical expression forms an integral part of African-American music and is deeply rooted in a folk tradition, that goes back to “a nation” that has endured the pains of slavery “within” another “nation”.¹⁷ The poet's utilisation of African-American musical forms – jazz, blues, the Negro spirituals, gospel songs, sermons, is the most comprehensive and profound in the history of African-American literature.

By 1926, Hughes had published his first volume of verse, *The Weary Blues* where he utilises the deceptively simple but classic blues structure. The most outstanding feature in *The Weary Blues* is the use of African-American music as a model for a number of poems. In an innovative way, he fuses the music of the African-American as a prime source and expression of cultural truth in his poetry. John Unterecker in his forward to Onwuchekwa

Jemie's *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, points out that Langston Hughes' art is one that responded "less to literature than its roots," and its "link is with music" rather than with "poetics."¹⁸

Langston Hughes recognised music as the quintessential Afro-American art, as it was into music more than any other art form that African-American people poured their hearts out. Hughes, therefore, tried to put life as he knew it into the moulds magnificently provided by African-American music. The blues themselves appear in various guises. There are the family blues, when a man and a woman have a quarrel, and the quarrel cannot be patched up; the loveless blues, when one does not have anybody to quarrel with; the left-lonesome blues, when the person one cares for, has gone away; the broke-and-hungry blues, a stranger-in-a strange-town blues, and the desperate going-to-the-river blues.

Blues subject matter is inexhaustible mainly because in the final analysis the subject of blues is the singer himself, his experiences, problems, emotions and moods. How expertly Hughes uses this form can be seen in his evocation of the complex feelings of an African-American who feels alienated by the indifference of 'white' America in the Northern states of America where he has come to look for means to earn his livelihood in lines like these:

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I come up north de
Whole wide world's turned cold...

... Weary, weary,
Weary early in de morn.
Weary, weary,
Early, early in de morn.
I's so weary
I wish I'd never been born.

(TDK, p.44)

One important characteristic of blues is that it was created by a people determined to survive, and who deployed humour to survive. Since humour was deemed an integral part of the African-American survival strategy, they have skilfully incorporated and utilised it, to alter the master-slave relationship in the past (where a master who was ready to use the whip might lose his determination, if he could only be made to laugh). African-American humour, therefore, represents a profound criticism of America, a sane antidote to an insane circumstance. The ability of the African-American masses to see the funny side has helped them survive oppression. Laughter and comedy, therefore, are the important manipulative tools used by the African-Americans in the past. Humour is also used to highlight the African-Americans as a people full of vitality and exuberance.

In the spirit of the blues tradition “to be”, is to be “as honest as the blues.”¹⁹ Hughes learnt to use the blues form as a means of narrating events or situations that are recurrent in the lives of the oppressed African-American people. Here, blues becomes a passive mode of articulating resistance as the following lines indicate:

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
 Ten Bucks you say is due?
 Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
 Till you fix this house up new.
 Police! Police!
 Come and get this man!
 He's trying to ruin the government
 And overturn the land!
 MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
 TENANT HELD NO BAIL
 JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL
 (MDD, pp.24-25)

The poet sees it as one of the writer's challenges to translate into literature the ethnic distinctness of the African-American, with its, “heritage of rhythm and warmth, incongruous humor that so often, as in the blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears.”²⁰ This incongruous, ironic humour, an ability to laugh in order to keep from crying, is at the heart of blues.

However tragic or serious his subject matter, he always see the humorous and the ironic side, and this is precisely what the blues artist also does. Even while the poet himself had to endure racism he had to laugh at it as well, for humour powers his capacity to endure and prevail over it in the spirit

of tragicomedy. As a form, blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically:

Sun's a settin',
This is what I'm gonna sing.
Sun's a settin',
This is what I'm gonna sing:
I feels de blues a comin',
Wonder what de blues'll bring?

Sun's a risin',
This is gonna be ma song.
Sun's a risin',
This is gonna be ma song:
I could be blue but
I been blue all night long.

(TDK, p.47)

Sherley A. Williams in her essay *The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* points out that “the internal strategy of the blues is action, rather than contemplation...the impulse to action is inherent in any blues which functions out of a collective purpose. ...the blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place.”²¹

Ralph Ellison explains the blues as, “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism.”²²

Hughes' blues poetry lacks apology, the wearying appeal to pity, and the conscious philosophy of defense.²³ In being itself it reveals its greatest charm.

Blues as a literary form received a fillip in the poetry of Langston Hughes. One notes, however, that the analysis of the blues element in Langston Hughes' poetry leads one to the inevitable conclusion, that the blues tradition as used by contemporary writers traces its roots to Langston Hughes' poetry. In the poetic employment of this tradition, not only was the spirit of an age recreated and preserved in one of its great cultural forms but the survival of the African-American was also assured.

Chapter – III: **THE JOURNEY MOTIF**

The journey motif in Hughes' work is at once both psychological and physical. It emanates from the poet's own sense of personal restlessness. He allegorises his people's journey down the West African coast through "the unimaginably inhuman Atlantic crossing"²⁴ into slavery in the New World when he writes:

Sea charm
 The sea's own children
 Do not understand.
 They know
 But that the sea is strong
 Like God's hand.
 They know.
 But that sea wind is sweet
 Like God's breath,
 And that the sea holds
 A wide, deep death.

(TWB, p.80)

Here, he is reflecting upon the circumstances of an unknown journey that will take his people away from the familiar world. There is an element of foreboding in the allusion to the mysterious quality of an unknown sea that does not reveal the secret of what lies ahead. In his work Africa represents the lost roots and a distant past that can never be retrieved. In the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the poet finds an analogy between the river that flows through the Midwestern part of the United States of America and the ancient rivers that water the lands of his ancestors:

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 bathe in the Euphrates...
Went down to New Orleans...

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(TWB, p.51)



In the poem, Langston Hughes undertakes a subterranean journey into the depths of the human imagination, symbolised by the flow of unknown rivers that have shaped his identity. There is a pervading sense of the inward flow of the rivers which, finally, takes him back to himself. Thus “my soul has grown deep like the rivers” is an espousal of Black identity. It is also a moment of an

epiphany, marking the maturation of the consciousness of the self. The poet not only talks about prehistoric origins but also of the long journey his people have had to undergo in the past.

Hughes made his appearance in the literary scene amid the developments that followed in the wake of World War I. He had first hand knowledge of the great migration in the decades between 1916 and 1926 when African-Americans uprooted themselves from the south and journeyed north in hope of better jobs and better pay. He was a witness to the impact of the economic depression on American life and letters, and the historic evolution of African-American culture from its roots in the rural south to its often tangled exfoliation in the cities of the north. The journey motif in the poet's work therefore indicates a movement from innocence to experience.

Hence the journey motif in Langston Hughes' poetry can never be said to be linear. The journey undertaken by the poet persona is also a symbolic one, a revisiting of the past in order to retrieve it for a fuller sighting of the future. There is a constant sense of movement, in time and out of time, beyond geographical boundaries, and a shifting of perspectives that locates the poet's experiences in a psychological locale after it has travelled metaphorical distances in order to understand itself.

The journey towards a redefinition of African-American culture takes Langston Hughes in the 1930s, into greater political consciousness and altered attitudes. A shift in perspective is clearly detected when Hughes concern shifts from the issue of race to that of class. When one examines the journey motif, one understands, therefore, that the journey undertaken by the poet is a continuation of the journey of the past from the African continent to the American continent. The next step of the journey in Hughes' poetry is the psychical exploration of the African-American identity. Also, the poet's journey in Africa and his return to America are important physical milestones in the fulfilment of a more cosmic journey. Reflected even in the issues that his poetry is concerned with is Hughes' poetic dynamism. His poetry is a constant journey charting his people's movement and delineating their fulfilment, consciousness with greater poignancy:

I been scared and battered.
 My hopes the wind done scattered.
 Snow has friz 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!

(PLT., p.32)

Yet there is always reflected in his poetry a constant yearning for the completion of the African-American identity. This, in itself pre-supposes

the challenges on which Langston Hughes had set out to scale new creative and linguistic heights in order to define the African-American through his poetry.

CONCLUSION: Although he was primarily a “protest” poet yet he was not a racist in the political sense of the word. Theodore R. Hudson, sees Hughes dipping his pen in ink and not in acid.²⁵ His method was to expose rather than excoriate and to reveal rather than to revile, and as such one cannot easily label him a propagandist. His view of the future is an extension of his faith in the essential goodness of the human heart. The night, gloom and the darkness in the life of the African-American may have been a challenge, but never disillusionment, and as such he envisaged the ultimate flowering of democracy in America. His vision of a new day for his people is not always unclouded by a lingering sense of weariness. At times his dream may be hazy, but the important thing is that he dares to hope. His optimism is clearly stated in the following lines:

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

Yesterday
A night-gone thing,
A sun-down name.
And dawn-today
Broad arch above the road we came.

(TWB, p.108)

In the poem *Warning* he continues to caution his readers against the danger of stereotyping the African-American into, “Negroes, / Sweet and docile, / Meek, humble, and kind: /” because the danger lies in “the day” when “they”, meaning both the white people and African-Americans, might “change their mind!”²⁶ He refuses, therefore, to “meekly live”²⁷ and to take things lying down. He writes:

Let all who will
 Eat quietly the bread of shame.
 I cannot,
 Without complaining loud and long,
 Tasting its bitterness in my throat,
 And feeling to my very soul
 It's wrong.

(PLT, p.39)

Langston Hughes' view on history is that it “has been a mint / of blood and sorrow. / That must not be / True of tomorrow.”²⁸ As a forward-looking individual with a very developed conscience, he fully comprehends the absurdity of violence because he feels that resorting to any violent confrontation serves little purpose when both sides “might lose.”²⁹

In his book of poetry called *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which was published in 1951, Hughes encodes the struggle of the African-American into his idea of a “Dream Deferred”,³⁰ a great dream-yet-to-come and always yet-to-become ultimately and finally true. Hughes also poses, what may be

described as, the creative challenge of the age when he asks, “what happens to a dream deferred?...does it explode?”³¹

With the socialistic leaning that was clearly evident after World War II, Hughes’ concern begins to shift from the issue of race towards the issue of class. He sees his audience as inclusive rather than exclusive, cutting across the lines of race as he puts it:

Mingled
breath and smell
so close
mingled
black and white
so near
no room for fear

(MDD, p.65)

Langston Hughes speaks in the voice of his people until it also becomes a cry for justice for all humanity. He recognises that the African-Americans are enslaved, but so are the white workers, and the two are brothers in suffering.

The greatest achievement of Langston Hughes lies in his ability to reach out to audiences across the world. He is able to bridge divisions through the kind of poetry that could be taken into the streets and into households, creating an awareness that had never been achieved by African-American poets before.

A close study of Hughes' poetry reveals him as a prophet of hope and reconciliation, who artistically advocated the healing of old wounds. Hughes believed it was possible for an aesthetic movement to transform social reality. More importantly, he is an African-American poet who stakes rightful claim upon an American identity:

I, too sing America.

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.

Tomorrow,
 I'll sit at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.

Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed,--

I, too, am America.

(TWB, p.109)

Langston Hughes is an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance. His vision encompassed the future in such a way that contemporary writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison derive partially, if

not wholly, their aesthetic legacy from him. His world view captures the essence of the African-American culture. He pioneered a world-view that filled in the gaps in American understanding of the African-American. It would not be an exaggeration to say that one's understanding of the African-American has been greatly shaped by Langston Hughes' poetry.

END NOTES

¹R. Baxter Miller, *The Art And Imagination Of LANGSTON HUGHES* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1989). 21.

² Arnold Rampersad, David. Roessel. eds. *The Collected Poems Of Langston Hughes* (Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc, New York. 1995) 5.

³ See 1 above. p.31.

⁴ Berndt Ostendorf, *Black Literature In White America*. (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982). 123.

⁵ In order to maintain consistency, the term African-American has been used throughout the dissertation, except on occasion where the term "Black" or "Negro as used by the writer himself, cannot be avoided.

⁶ Caroline Riley, Phyllis Carmel Mendelson, eds. "Contemporary Literary Criticism". vol. 5. Michigan: (Gale Research Company, 1976) 190.

⁷ Vartan Gregorian, "The Langston Hughes Review". vol IX (Afro-American Studies Program, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. 1991) Intro.

⁸ Langston Hughes, *Don't You Turn Back* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) Intro.

⁹Hazel Armett Ervin, *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. (New York: Twain Publishers, 1999), p.12.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.6.

¹¹ LeRoi Jones "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" (1966),p.107.

¹² Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", *Nation* 122 (23 June 1926), p.694.

¹³ An Excerpt from *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1, 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America (OUP, inc) 1986.

¹⁴ Michael W. Peplow and Arthur P. Davis, eds., *The New Negro Renaissance: and Anthology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975), pp. 471-76.

¹⁵ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", *Nation* 122 (23 June 1926), p.694.

¹⁶ Anthony Dawahare, "Langston Hughes Radical Poetry and the 'End of Race'," *Melus*, Vol. 23, No. 3. (California State University, Northridge Fall, 1998), p.25.

¹⁷ Anthony Dawahare, "Langston Hughes Radical Poetry and the 'End of Race'," *Melus*, Vol. 23, No. 3. (California State University, Northridge Fall, 1998), p.29.

¹⁸ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *LANGSTON HUGHES An Introduction To The Poetry*. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1976), p.x.

¹⁹ Berndt Ostendorf, *Black Literature In White America*. (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982), p.122.

²⁰ See 18 above. p.9.

²¹ Langston Hughes, *The Dream Keeper And Other Poems*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p.30.

²² See 18 above. p.38

²³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁴ Harihar Kulkarni, *Black Feminist Fiction, A March towards Liberation*. (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999), p.44.

²⁵ Daniel G. Marowski ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. (Michigan, Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1985), p.211.

²⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Panther And The Lash (Poems of Our Times)* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, inc. 1967), p.100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.91.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

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**THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES:
REDEFINING AFRICAN – AMERICAN CULTURE**

WANPYLLAITPHAR KHONGSNGI



*Submitted
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement of
the Degree of Master of Philosophy
In English*

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
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I, **Mr. Wanpyllaitphar Khongsngi**, hereby declare that the subject matter of the dissertation is the record of the work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.


This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.



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October, 2008.

WANPYLLAITPHAR KHONGSNGI

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INTRODUCTION

Hughes began writing poetry early and in his own words “even before I was six, books began to happen to me,”¹ and by eight grade he was elected class poet. On being asked to define poetry, he said, “it is the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop, into atomic words.” Further, on being asked to describe a poet, he stated: “a poet is a Human Being...each Human Being must live within his time, with and for his people, within the boundaries of his country.”²

Langston Hughes' career was marked by controversies with critics viewing him as “a poor misguided soul” laboring in an unrewarding “ethnic province,” searching for an illusory “racial art”. Some dismissed him as “too simple, too quaintly humorous, unserious, unreflective, parochial, limited in scope, without a metaphysic and without profundity.”³ Other African-American reviewers denounced him for writing about “trashy” or “repulsive”⁴ subjects. He understood that he was claiming a place in history for himself as an inhabitant, a culture-bearer and an interpreter as well: “recording what I see, commenting upon it, and distilling from my own emotions a personal interpretation.”⁵ As is seen in the following poem, the poet visualises himself as a keeper

and exhibitor of the dreams and aspirations of his people when he writes:

Bring me all of your dreams,
 You dreamer
 ...Heart melodies
 That I may wrap them
 In a blue cloud-cloth
 Away from the too rough fingers
 Of the world.⁶

As a “dream-keeper” he clearly wanted to battle injustice through exposition and protest, but in doing so he tended to be gentle rather than violent, more good natured than bitter, and as such his stories are serious and provocative beneath their smooth surfaces while in most time they constitute a plea for tolerance and understanding. For a poet who refused to be ‘just a poet – not a Negro poet,’⁷ Hughes also refused to transcend his Blackness for the sake of assimilation.

As an artist, he participated in the task of exploding the old boundaries of poetry in English by infusing it with a Black⁸ sensibility independent of the received stereotypes, by expanding it to accommodate the African-American experience, language and style. In his work there is no noticeable “sham, pretension or self-deceit.”⁹ Although most of Hughes’ work abounds in protest poetry, yet it does not necessarily succumb to bitterness. Perhaps he learnt to be optimistic early in life when his grandmother reprimanded him for discarding an apple by saying, “what’s the matter with you boy?” “You can’t expect every apple to be a perfect apple--- just because

it's got a speck on it you want to throw it away. Bite the speck out and eat the apple, son. It's still a good apple."¹⁰

He represented the subject of oppression through satire, understatement or wry sardonic humour as illustrated in the following poem:

I play it cool
 And dig all jive...
 That's the reason
 I stay alive.

My motto,
 As I live and learn
 Is
 Dig and be dug
 In return.¹¹

On being asked why he chose the theme of stark social realities —of deprivation and not moonlight romances— he replied, “roses are fine,” but “almost all the prettiest roses I have seen have been in rich white people’s yards— not in mine” and “sometimes in the moonlight my brothers see a fiery cross and a circle of Klansman’s hood. Sometimes in the moonlight a dark body swings from a lynching tree”.¹² Harlem was the source of his art. It allowed him to expose the White exploiter and simultaneously laugh at himself as a victim of exploitation. While his speakers perform the rites associated with the Harlem renaissance, they supersede its historical sequence by articulating the ideals that transcend time.

Much of his poetry is in the African-American idiom, usually cast in free verse and as such his choice of language appears to have been borrowed from the pre-emancipation period where 'bad' English was discovered to be an effective weapon of resistance, for, by cultivating it, an African-American was able to adopt a stance of incomprehension towards his master's speech.

The language he uses is that of the work-a-day urban world marked by a deft economy of words which distinctly separates his works from the rest. His idiom is simple and colloquial. It is emulative of African-American speech, vivid because it is private, a kind of emotional shorthand, by which African-Americans expressed themselves and their relationship to each other. Hughes never felt that in using the vernacular, he had betrayed his talents.

For a poet, who has had to confront racism since childhood, it is easy to understand why he took up a radical position. The following poem illustrates the pain he and others felt while growing up as children in a racist country like America:

A little Southern colored child
Comes to a Northern school
And is afraid to play
With the white children...¹³

In the words of master Rampersad,¹⁴ his biographer, one marked characteristic of Hughes was that whenever he

encountered racism on a personal level, he was able to subdue his rage and keep his balance and be almost untouched by insults.

Low-down folk or common element formed the subject of Hughes' poetry. He became his people's mouthpiece and his treatment is stark and unsentimental, capturing at once the wretchedness and beauty of the lives of his people. As Charles S. Johnson has pointed out, there is in Hughes' depiction of them, "no pleading for sympathy, or moralising; there is a moment's blinking perception of a life being lived beneath the drunken blare of trombones,"¹⁵

Hughes chose neither to address his work to little circles of experts or to some secret society of art, nor did he withdraw into formal complexity for the sake of wider acceptance. His work portrays the beauty and variety of the African-America experience as well as the diversity of emotions, thoughts and dreams that he saw common to all human beings. He believes that in ways such as these, the local, the regional— can and does— become universal, since the foundational elements of human experiences which relate to the circumstances attending birth, death, growth, emotions of joy, grief, love and hate, anger, pain and fear are common to all humanity. Despite being pilloried, the universality of Hughes' art is unquestionable. His aim was to unite the academy and the street so

that the minimally educated and the maximally schooled would find themselves hugely rewarded in reading his work.

Hughes lambasts those who claim that he presents an “unfavorable image” of his race, for he believed not only in the inherent worth of his people, but in the need to present the truth. Hughes’ art is grounded in his life, a life that embodied the classic American theme of a search for identity. He is a writer who knew his medium and also the people he addressed through the medium. He himself stated that “art must do more than stand as a representation of the world as it is, it must also be a vehicle for transcendence.”¹⁶ His is a spontaneous art which stands or falls by the sureness of his readers intuitions and they will stand to gain those who judge them with their hearts as well as with their heads.

The poet revisits the tradition he inherited. He frequently alludes to the African-American folk ballad, rooted in the oral tradition with which the whites were unfamiliar. Harlem became the principal referent and metaphor of the world he wanted to interpret. He often employs the dialect distinctive of the African-American urban dweller. Throughout his literary career he experimented with and adapted different versions of the African-American musical forms to his work, namely the Blues and jazz to impart a “subtle sense of suffering and despondency.”¹⁷ Hughes’

work reveals the predominance of elements that are derived from the folk culture and oral tradition underscoring the fact that African-American written literature is much closer to oral folk tradition than is the literature of the 'mainstream.' His poems are non-literary, oral, vocal, compositions to be spoken or shouted to the accompaniment of drum and flute and bass, and it is for this reason that many of his poems have been set to music.

Langston Hughes wrote with appropriate liveliness about a career that was marked by a succession of footloose adventures, warm friendships, sharp quarrels and dramatic gestures only to move towards his definition of what it is to be young. To him it is to care more for the quality of one's life than the fact of life itself. Zena Sutherland notes, that while working with inner-city children in Harlem schools, the children responded spontaneously to the poems of Langston Hughes since most of them are, brief, childlike in their simplicity and timeless in their interpretations of black dreams, sea-longing, or the triumphant affirmation of faith. His poetry remains honest, amusing and provocative. It is not surprising to note that after he had written and published two books of his poems, his readers realised the quality of youth was as much in the poems themselves as in his personality, and many of his young readers thought likewise. In

fact, in a career which spanned four decades Hughes managed to maintain a “readable newness distinctly his own.”¹⁸

Hughes identified at least three different roles of the artist, as a celebrant, celebrating a tradition he believed in; a performer, performing for the people who wanted to be entertained and a seer, illuminating the significance of the African-American experience.

The Harlem renaissance marked tremendous gains for the African American: its legacy was a higher degree of racial consciousness and more freedom to deal with folk themes. The African-American became aware of the role that oppression— which comes in new sophisticated guises as the use of power in white hands— has now moved beyond physical violence. Hughes believed in the transformation of the African-American sensibility, from the Euro-centric perspective to the true American creed that gives the African-American their dignity and sense of true freedom. One way of achieving this objective Hughes knew, was to fight the charges made against the African-Americans as people mentally and culturally inferior to their white American counterpart.

While he assigned to himself the task of recording cultural history, the pattern of the events imagined, as well as the values he decoded, ensured that these would live beyond Harlem.

While he speaks in a multiplicity of voices, through a multitude of personas, each of them becomes the purveyor of authentic and diverse African-American attitudes. Hughes clearly understood that his role as an African-American artist is of one who is entrusted with the task of providing a soothing balm to the aching consciousness of his oppressed people and help them to escape from the ugly realities through his writings. He writes:

...SEND FOR THE PIED PIPER TO PIPE OUR RATS AWAY.

(And if nobody comes, send for me.)

(PLT, p. 21) ¹⁹

The attempt is to understand Langston Hughes' poetry in the context of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, so-called because it marked a watershed in the all-round development of the African-American art and culture. Sterling A. Brown and Arthur P. Davis argue that the Harlem Renaissance can be more properly termed the New Negro Renaissance or the Modern Negro Renaissance. It witnessed the emergence of African-American intellectuals, critics, poets, novelists and scholars such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Dubois, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and others. The Harlem Renaissance is significant mainly because it became a history bound to the needs of those who wanted

to possess a history but most importantly, it represented a search for the beginning of a “genuine” or “definable” black art- a Black Aesthetic.²⁰ Hughes owes his originality to the ‘oral’ nature of his work. He started the tradition of transcribing oral folk tradition to written forms and made them accessible to people who appreciated the changed idiom. Hughes offered a redefinition of African-American culture primarily by offering his art as a platform and a basis for Black Aesthetic for later writers to stage their struggle and resistance.

To understand the nature and intricacy of his art one need to see how technique and subject matter fuse into a tradition of the African-American culture that later writers explore. An attempt has to be made to understand Langston Hughes’ contribution of African-American aesthetics in the light of what he has achieved through his poetry. It is important to situate him within the Harlem Renaissance. The view that emerges is of a writer grounded in his time but whose voice sounds authentic even to day.

ENDNOTES

¹ R. Baxter Miller, *The Art And Imagination Of LANGSTON HUGHES* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1989). 21.

² Arnold Rampersad, David. Roessel. eds. *The Collected Poems Of Langston Hughes* (Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc, New York. 1995) 5.

³ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *LANGSTON HUGHES An Introduction To The Poetry*. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1976). 187.

⁴ Sharon K. Hall, ed. "Contemporary Literary Criticism". vol. 44. Michigan: (Gale Research Company, 1986). 508.

⁵ See 1 above. p.31.

⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926). 94. (hereafter cited as TWB).

⁷ Berndt Ostendorf, *Black Literature In White America*. (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982). 123.

⁸ In order to maintain consistency, the term African-American has been used throughout the dissertation, except on occasion where the term "Black" or "Negro as used by the writer himself, cannot be avoided.

⁹ Caroline Riley, Phyllis Carmel Mendelson, eds. "Contemporary Literary Criticism". vol. 5. Michigan: (Gale Research Company, 1976) 190.

¹⁰ See 1 above. p.30.

¹¹ Langston Hughes, *The Panther And The Lash (Poems of Our Times)*. New York (Alfred A. Knopf, inc. 1967). 11. (hereafter cited as PLT)

¹² See 3 above. p.17

¹³ Langston Hughes, *Fields Of Wonder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945) 99.(hereafter cited as FOW)

¹⁴ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Vol.1: 1902-1941, *I. Too, Sing America*. (Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁵ See 3 above. p.26.

¹⁶ Vartan Gregorian, "The Langston Hughes Review". vol IX (Afro-American Studies Program, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. 1991) Intro.

¹⁷ Dedria Dryfonski, ed., "Contemporary Literary Criticism". vol. 10. Michigan: (Gale Research Company, 1979). 280.

¹⁸ Langston Hughes, *Don't You Turn Back* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) Intro.

¹⁹ See 11 above. p.21.

²⁰ Emory Elliott, Gen ed. *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) p.

Chapter-I

PROPAGATING THE BLACK AESTHETIC

The term Black Aesthetic was first used by Larry Neal in 1968 in the manifesto “The Black Arts Movement”; the term is used to refer to the cultural identity of the African-American. The Black Aesthetic set out to make the African-American artist aware that he must refuse to accept the European-American definition of reality and to offer instead an African-American definition that went beyond the traced boundaries imposed by the white racist imagination. African-American art, it was felt, must challenge the stereotypical figure of the African-American created by white America. The Black Aesthetic also emphasised the need for African-American art to highlight the paradigms of the African-American past that enabled the African-American to survive the American nightmare. It set out to critique actions that are detrimental to the health and well-being of the African-American and sought to wage, what must be seen as, a perpetual warfare in creative and intellectual terms, against the American attempt to dehumanise the African-American.

In “The Black Arts Movement”, Larry Neal says that the African-American writer ought to be, “speaking directly to the needs

of the Black man's experience in the racist west and developing [his] own Black Aesthetic".¹ However, Darwin Turner in the introduction to his book, *Afro-American Literary Critics*, sees the Black Aesthetic critic being handicapped by the necessity of devising theory prior to the creation of works. Turner argues that even Aristotle examined works that he and other Greeks admired and distinguished the elements these works shared. Aristotle then stipulated that great literature must include such elements. Mathew Arnold, too, deduced his theories from literature already created. This privilege was not available to the African-American critics who structured theories even while calling for writers to create the works that are needed to demonstrate the excellence of the theories. Langston Hughes fills up the vacuum by demonstrating that the African-American had a large oral resource from which he could draw from in a creative manner.

W. E. B. Dubois radically expected African-American literature to be indisputably 'propagandistic'. In "Criteria of Negro Art," Dubois emphatically expresses disinterest in any art that does not attempt to bring beauty, truth and justice to African-American writing. James Weldon Johnson, however, wanted the African-American to deepen his understanding of the folk form and style. He instructed writers to find an aesthetic form to define the identity of the African-American, while others like John O. Killens (in

“Opportunities for Development of Negro Talent”) called for writers to explore and create the means of achieving deeper and broader dimensions of artistic reality in their interpretation of who they were, where they came from and where they were going. In, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1934), Richard Wright regretfully observes that, rarely has the best writing been addressed to the African-American himself.²

The Black Aesthetic is therefore directly opposed to, and becomes a reaction against a Euro-centric art form. It seeks to impose an Africanised art form which has its roots in the oral. In “The Myth of a Negro Literature” (1966), LeRoi Jones points that writers like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin returned to “Negro Music”³ (which is an African-American indigenous art form) and incorporated what is a “highly stylised and personal version of the Negro’s life in America”⁴ in their writings.

As an artist and a man, Langston Hughes profoundly identified with the ordinary struggling African-American. In his poetry he views them as “the most wonderful people in the world”⁵ and exhorts them to uphold their racial pride in lines such as:

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.

(TWB, p. 58)

As an African-American, Langston Hughes grew up with the ugly realities of racism, but his vision of the African-American was according to V. F. Calverton only: “the vital aspect of him, as he really [was], without ornament, without pretense...”⁶ This innate understanding of who the African-American really was, can be traced to his grandmother’s legacy of heroic tales through which he also learnt African-American history, understood the nature of racial pride and imbibed African-American folk thought. He immortalised the debt he owed to his grandmother in the following poem:

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
 Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
 Summer nights on the front porch
 Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her
 bosom
 And tells him stories.

And the dark-faced child listening,
 Knows that Aunt Sue’s stories are real stories.
 He knows that Aunt Sue
 Never got her stories out of any book at all,
 But that they came
 Right off her own life.

And the dark-faced child is quiet
 Of a summer night
 Listening to Aunt Sue’s stories.

(TWB, p.57)

Unlike Countee Cullen who repeatedly insisted upon seeing himself and being seen by others simply, “as a poet, not a Negro poet”,⁷ only to find that the racial theme would not leave him alone (and that his strongest poems tended to be those rooted in his experience as a black man and those that defined him as a distinctly black poet), Hughes rebukes those writers who felt they had to run away from themselves in order to be “universal”, those who said they wanted to be “a poet-not a Negro poet”. He asserts: “why should I want to be white? I am a Negro---and beautiful!”⁸ The poet claims that most of his poems are racial in theme and treatment and derived from the life that he was familiar with. In poems like the one following the poet makes an appeal to his people to embrace their skin color with a sense of pride rather than with a sense of shame:

Wear it
Like a banner
For the proud...
Not like a shroud.
Wear it
Like a song
Soaring high...
Not moan or cry.

(PLT, p.67)

In *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, the poet testifies to the maturity of his self awareness, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”. In it he talks of the birth of a “man-child, soft-spoken, almost casual, yet noble and proud, and black as Africa.”⁹ Like other

African-American poets and artists, he rightly refuses to talk to a “universal void”,¹⁰ but insists upon addressing his people directly. Hughes poems also express his boundless enthusiasm and justifiable pride in his African roots, in words such as:

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

(TWB, p.9)

Hughes’ art moves towards an affirmation of the African-American heritage embracing the black struggle. His central concern is for the African-American people and their struggle for freedom and as Richard K. Barksdale observes, he is the “spokesman-poet”, who was “never permitted the luxury of emotional or aesthetic distance...”¹¹ As such, Hughes actively participated in the creation of a separate identity for his people.

Langston Hughes insists upon creating a distinctively Black art that breaks away from the framework of the past, the white-master-imposed-upon structures even in the face of what W.E.B. Dubois called the African-American’s “double consciousness”¹² of both his African heritage and his American experience. Hughes’ art revolves around an effort to confront this double consciousness and work out an aesthetic resolution that would authenticate the paradoxical nature of the African-American experience. Through

his work he vehemently opposes and fights against the caricatures, distortions and inconsistent portrayals of the African-American which, according to him, serve to confirm the white prejudice and perpetuate the oppression of the African-American people.

His poetry is radical; its hallmark is not only experimentation with new technique but more importantly, the formation of a new radical consciousness. In his journals, Hughes underlines the urgency for creation of African-American culture derived from the wholesome elements of the African-American consciousness. This was something that had its roots in the African-American folk: Thus he fashioned a new order of hearing, a new order of seeing, appropriate to his people and to the age:

So will my page be colored that I write?
 Being me, it will not be white.
 But it will be
 a part of you, instructor.
 You are white ...
 yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
 That's American.
 Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of
 me.
 Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
 But we are, that's true!
 As I learn from you,
 I guess you learn from me...
 although you're older— and white...
 and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

(MDD, p.39)

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” is a seminal document that provides an understanding of the Black aesthetic in the context of Hughes’ poetry and it contributed to moulding of contemporary African-American identity. The essay calls for the development of vision, passion and courage in the African-Americans. For Hughes, to be regarded as an artist but not as an African-American artist— as though the two aspects were mutually exclusive — is, in effect, to turn his back on his identity, to accept the white world’s definition of his people as ugly and inferior, unworthy of serious dedication to art. Hughes rebukes African-American writers and poets, who surrender their racial pride for the sake of what he sees as a fraudulent integration. Hughes argues that, “no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself,” and he also adds: “We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If they weren’t, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”¹³

He contends that, far from being assimilated into American life, the African-American had in fact retained his ethnic

distinctiveness. He regards it as an asset for African-American people and a boon for African-American artists. Hughes' essay is a call for the re-education of the African-American artist, a call for the emergence of the African-American audience who according to Charles S. Johnson, a contemporary observer and interpreter of the arts of the Harlem Renaissance,¹⁴ would perhaps give to the world its truly great African-American artist, one who is not afraid of being true to himself.

In the 1960s LeRoi Jones of the Black Arts Movement called for the African-American to establish a Black Aesthetic of his own. It would give them a vision of life and validate only what is truly African-American to challenge white imposed ideas. Hughes in the following poem, too, argues for such a redefinition:

To fling my arms wide
 In some place of the sun,
 To whirl and to dance
 Till the white day is done.
 Then rest at cool evening
 Beneath a tall tree
 While night comes on gently,
 Dark like me,...
 That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
 In the face of the sun,
 Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
 Till the quick day is done.
 Rest at pale evening...
 A tall, slim tree...
 Night coming tenderly

Black like me.

(TWB, p.43)

The Black Aesthetic, therefore, consists of an African-American cultural and aesthetic tradition with the African identity at its core. It is a positive construct that affirms the creation of a new African-American reality. This aspect of the redefinition of African-American culture is manifested through multiple layers in contemporary writings. The stand that Langston Hughes takes as an artist, is inflected with an awareness of the political and cultural existence of African-American as a suppressed “nation within a nation”.¹⁵ Though oppressed, their unique consciousness and their commitment to the ideals of liberation reflect their distinctive character. He refers to them as suppressed people who have always tried to preserve their folk heritage as a desirable means of guaranteeing cultural and group survival. Hughes refused to believe that the African-American are “misbred, misread and misled”.¹⁶ He finds richness in African-American humour and beauty, in black dreams, and in the dignity of their struggle. He exemplifies his beliefs in words such as:

I am black.

I lie down in the shadow.
No longer the light of my dream before me,
Above me.
Only the thick wall.

Only the shadow.

My hands!
 My dark hands!
 Break through the wall!
 Find my dream!
 Help me to scatter this darkness,
 To smash this night,
 To break this shadow
 Into a thousand lights of sun,
 Into a thousand whirling dreams
 Of sun!

(TWB, p.55)

African-American folk culture, therefore, becomes the weapon and African-American social and economic sufficiency the prize fought for. By extolling African-American heritage, the poet in a way was instrumental in “aiding the survival of the Afro-American as a distinct people”.¹⁷ Hence, the Black Aesthetic as propagated by Langston Hughes greatly contributed to the ultimate establishment of the African-American identity. The sensitive and transforming energy of Hughes’ art irradiates his representation of African-American people.

African-American intellectuals like Martin R. Delany felt that it was time for African-American leaders to “expose the lie that Africans were inferior, and reveal how this racial falsehood began.”¹⁸ As a member of the United States Congress, politicians like James T. Rapier went on to strongly deny that African-American’s were “innately inferior,” and that he, “cannot willingly accept...to present [himself] as a candidate for any brand of inferiority”.¹⁹ Other

African-American politicians like Robert Smalls, echo a similar view when they declare that “my race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life.”²⁰ Such sentiments expressed by the African-American poets, intellectuals and politicians showcase their pride in their cultural antecedents.

In actual fact, Hughes’ propagation of the Black Aesthetic is a call for discipline and an attempt to redefine the African-American vision of reality. Hughes was not trying to change the American world-view. If anything, he refurbished it by adding to it vast dimensions of the African-American cultural and aesthetic tradition that goes on to anticipate the future contours of Black Aesthetic as reflected in the writings of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. Although Langston Hughes did not specifically use the term Black Aesthetic, yet he laid the foundation, for a purely African-American critical construct that was to be exploited by latter day artists. In his own creative way he succeeded in making the world aware of the multilayered realities of what would later be called the Black Aesthetic.

END NOTES

¹ Lary Neal while categorising the literary movement, that is, “The Black Arts Movement” as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,” he specifies the responsibilities of black writers as such.

² Hazel Armett Ervin, *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. (New York: Twain Publishers, 1999), p.12.

³ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁴ LeRoi Jones “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’” (1966), p.107.

⁵ An Excerpt from *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1, 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America (OUP, inc) 1986.

⁶ V. F. Calverton, “This Negro,” in *The Nation*, Vol. CXXXI, No. 3396, August 6, 1930, pp. 157-58.

⁷ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *LANGSTON HUGHES An Introduction To The Poetry*. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1976), p.7.

⁸ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, *Nation* 122 (23 June 1926), p.694.

⁹⁸ An Excerpt from *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1, 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America (OUP, inc) 1986.

¹⁰ Michael W. Peplow and Arthur P. Davis, eds., *The New Negro Renaissance: and Anthology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975), pp. 471-76.

¹¹ Richard K. Barksdale, “Requiem for ‘A Dream Deferred’,” in his *Langston Hughes: The Poet and His Critics* (American Library Association, 1977), pp. 99-131.

¹² W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) (New York, 1953), p. 3.

¹³ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, *Nation* 122 (23 June 1926), p.694.

¹⁴ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *LANGSTON HUGHES An Introduction To The Poetry*. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1976), p.32.

¹⁵ *Anthony Dawahare*, "Langston Hughes Radical Poetry and the 'End of Race'," *Melus*, Vol. 23, No. 3. (California State University, Northridge Fall, 1998), p.25.

¹⁶ *Julian C. Carey*, "Jesse B. Semple Revisited and Revised," in *Phylon*, XXXII (Copyright, 1971, by Atlanta University), second quarter (June), 1971, pp.158-63.

¹⁷ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *LANGSTON HUGHES An Introduction To The Poetry*. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1976), p.199.

¹⁸ V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Biography Race Vindication and African-American Intellectuals: Introductory Essay*, p.6. <http://www.jstor.org/thenegrostudy/> 10 December 2007.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Chapter - II

THE BLUES SENSIBILITY

Paul Robeson describes the blues in the following words: “the music of basic realities, the spontaneous expression by the people...of elemental emotions.”¹ The blues as a major musical expression forms an integral part of African-American music and is deeply rooted in a folk tradition, that goes back to “a nation” that has endured the pains of slavery “within” another “nation”.²

The poet’s utilisation of African-American musical forms – jazz, blues, the Negro spirituals, gospel songs, sermons, is the most comprehensive and profound in the history of African-American literature. It was also in the 1920s that the blues structure evolved in its classic form: “three lines of verse (sung to twelve bars of music), the second line repeating the first: and the third rhyming with the first two. Sometimes the second line is slightly altered, sometime omitted altogether.”³

Helen Sewell identifies the differences between the blues and the spirituals in her definition which states that, the blues, unlike the spirituals, have a strict poetic pattern: one long line, repeated, and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and

sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted. Unlike the spirituals, the blues are not group songs. Under natural circumstances, they are usually sung by one man or one woman alone. Whereas the spirituals are often songs about escaping from trouble, going to heaven and living happily ever after, the blues are songs about being in the midst of trouble, friendless, hungry, disappointed in love, right here on earth.⁴

By 1926, Hughes had published his first volume of verse, *The Weary Blues* where he utilises the deceptively simple but classic blues structure. The most outstanding feature in *The Weary Blues* is the use of African-American music as a model for some of the poems. In an innovative way, he fuses the music of the African-American as a prime source and expression of cultural truth in his poetry. He writes a fundamentally new kind of verse, one that tells of the joys and sorrows, the trials and triumphs, of ordinary African-American folk, in the vernacular speech of his people. John Unterecker in his forward to Onwuchekwa Jemie's *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, points out that Langston Hughes' art is one that responded "less to literature than its roots," and its "link is with music" rather than with "poetics."⁵

Langston Hughes saw the creators of African-American music and dance including the blues, rooting themselves

in the African-American tradition and exploring its vast cultural richness. What African-American musicians have done with folk music, he pleads persistently in his poetry and essays, African-American artist can and should do with African-American folklore and folk life.⁶

Langston Hughes recognised music as the quintessential Afro-American art, as it was into music more than any other art-form that African-American people poured their hearts out. Hughes, therefore, tried to put life as he knew it into the moulds magnificently provided by African-American music. He proposed to do in literature what others were doing in music; to create, in effect, a literary equivalent of African-American music. He wanted to create literature that is rooted in the life of the folk and which is as deep and accessible to them as African-American music is. He spoke of a literature in which the African-American masses would find their life's experiences reflected and illuminated. In short, he enunciated what may be understood as a literary form of public art. His work is similarly suffused with the spirit of African-American music. Hughes states: "I do not understand the tendency today that some African-American artists have of seeking to run away from themselves, of running away

from us, of being afraid to sing our own songs, paint our own pictures, write about ourselves – when it is our music that has given America its greatest music”.⁷ From his early years he was a sensitive and involved witness to the growth and maturation of what, in the mid 1920s, emerged as African-American music. In tune as he was with the currents and cross-currents of life around him, it is not surprising that he came to regard this music as a paradigm of the African-American experience and a metaphor for human life in general.

The blues themselves appear in various guises. There are the family blues, when a man and a woman have a quarrel, and the quarrel cannot be patched up; the loveless blues, when one does not have anybody to quarrel with; the left-lonesome blues, when the person one cares for, has gone away; the broke-and-hungry blues, a stranger-in-a strange-town blues, and the desperate going-to-the-river blues. The following excerpts reflect how much of these elements Hughes incorporated in his poetry:

Gimme six-bits' worth o' ticket
On a train that runs somewhere.
I say six-bits' worth o' ticket
On a train that runs somewhere.
On a train that runs somewhere.
I don't care where it's goin'
Just so it goes away from here.⁸

Folks, I come up North
 Cause they told me de North was fine.
 I come up North
 Cause they told me de North was fine.
 Been up here six months—
 I'm about to lose my mind...

...Believe I'll do a little dancin'
 Just to drive my blues away—
 A little dancin'
 To drive my blues away,
 Cause when I'm dancin'
 De blues forgets to stay.

But if you was to ask me
 How de blues they come to be,
 Says if you was to ask me
 How de blues they come to be—
 You wouldn't need to ask me:
 Just look at me and see!⁹

My life ain't nothin'
 But a lot o' Gawd-knows-what.
 I say my life ain't nothin'
 But a lot o' Gawd-knows-what.
 Just one thing after 'nother
 Added to de trouble that I got...

...Tell me what makes
 Love such an ache and pain?
 It takes you and it breaks you—
 But you got to love again.¹⁰

...Who do you think I am?
 Give me second- class schools,
 Second-class houses

— And second-class schools.
 You must think us colored folks
 Are second-class fools.

...All you got to offer
 Is a white backlash.

(PLT, p.8)

The subject matter of blues is practically endless. Blues can be found ranging from flood songs to graphic descriptions of pneumonia. Blues subject matter is inexhaustible mainly because in the final analysis the subject of blues is the singer himself, his experiences, problems, emotions and moods. His theme is the world as it touches upon his world, life as it affects his life. To the poet, nothing is irrelevant as long as it is relevant to him and nothing is out of place. What he experiences, he briefly recounts and what he strongly feels he strongly expresses like he does in one of his poems:

Goin' down de road, Lawd,
 Goin' down de road.
 Down de road, Lawd,
 Way, way down de road.
 Got to find somebody
 To help me carry dis load.

— Road's in front o' me,
 Nothin' to do but walk.
 Road's in front o' me,
 Walk...and walk...and walk.
 I'd like to meet a good friend
 To come along an' talk.¹¹

Loneliness, despair, frustration, and a nameless sense of longing are all represented in blues poetry: These themes dominate not only the works of Hughes but also those of most African-American writers. At any rate, the blues poems are illustrative of how effectively the poet has incorporated this art form, even though his blues poem are read and not sung. How expertly Hughes uses this form can be seen in his evocation of the complex feelings of an African-American who feels alienated by the indifference of 'white' America in the Northern states of America where he has come to look for means to earn his livelihood in lines like these:

When I was home de
 Sunshine seemed like gold.
 When I was home de
 Sunshine seemed like gold.
 Since I come up north de
 Whole wide world's turned cold...

... Weary, weary,
 Weary early in de morn.
 Weary, weary,
 Early, early in de morn.
 I's so weary
 I wish I'd never been born.

(TDK, p.44)

One important characteristic of blues is that it was created by a people determined to survive, and who deployed

humour to survive. Since humour was deemed an integral part of the African-American survival strategy, they have skillfully incorporated and utilised it, to alter the master-slave relationship in the past (where a master who was ready to use the whip might lose his determination, if he could only be made to laugh). African-American humour, therefore, represents a profound criticism of America, a sane antidote to an insane circumstance. The ability of the African-American masses to see the funny side has helped them survive oppression. Laughter and comedy, therefore, are the important manipulative tools used by the African-Americans in the past. Humour is also used to highlight the African-Americans as a people full of vitality and exuberance. Hughes celebrates the spontaneity and exuberance of the African-American people when he writes:

What is money for?
To spend, he says.
And wine?
To drink.
And women?
To love.
And today?
For joy.
And tomorrow?
For joy.
And the green sea
For strength,
And the brown land
For laughter.
And nothing hereafter

(TWB, p.77)

In the spirit of the blues tradition “to be”, is to be “as honest as the blues.”¹² Hughes learnt to use the blues form as a means of narrating events or situations that are recurrent in the lives of the oppressed African-American people. Here, blues becomes a passive mode of articulating resistance as the following lines indicate:

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
 Ten Bucks you say is due?
 Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
 Till you fix this house up new.
 Police! Police!
 Come and get this man!
 He's trying to ruin the government
 And overturn the land!
 MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
 TENANT HELD NO BAIL
 JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN
 COUNTY

(MDD, pp.24-25)

The poet sees it as one of the writer's challenges to translate into literature the ethnic distinctness of the African-American, with its, “heritage of rhythm and warmth, incongruous humor that so often, as in the blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears.”¹³ This incongruous, ironic humour, an ability to laugh in order to keep from crying, is at the heart of blues. As may be observed in the following poem, the poet was able to combine the

tragic with the comic in typical blues tradition. It captures the homesickness of the poet persona who overcomes his longing for home by laughing at his pathetic condition:

De railroad bridge's
 A sad song in de air.
 De railroad bridge's
 A sad song in de air
 Every time de trains pass
 I wants to go somewhere.

I went down to de station.
 Ma heart was in ma mouth.
 Went down to the station.
 Heart was in ma mouth.
 Lookin' for a box car
 To roll me to de South.

Homesick blues, Lawd,
 'S a terrible thing to have.
 Homesick blues is
 A terrible thing to have.
 To keep from cryin'
 I opens ma mouth an' laughs.

(TDK, p.36)

Hughes once noted, that more often than not, the mood of blues is gloomy and yet when blues are sung, people start to laugh.¹⁴ Blues can also be said to be based on a philosophy of endurance of the apparently unendurable. Hughes captures the essence of blues thus:

In one hand
 I hold tragedy

And in the other
 Comedy,...
 Masks for the soul.
 Laugh with me.
 You would laugh!
 Weep with me.
 You would weep!
 Tears are my laughter.
 Laughter is my pain.

(TWB, p.53)

The poet himself states that he tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street. Langston Hughes describes blues as, “sad funny songs – too sad to be funny and too funny to be sad”.¹¹ While commenting on the use of tragic humour in his work the poet notes, “The race problem in America is serious business, I admit.....” and goes on to ask, “But must it always be written about seriously?”¹² He is of the opinion that if ever it must be written it must be done so in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Langston Hughes made a life-long effort to integrate his poetry with music. Hughes’s major poetry lives and breathes, to use his own phrase, in the “shadow of the blues”.¹³ In Hughes’ poetry, one finds that there is a sense of being politically incapacitated by a weariness that is born of social oppression. However, this is not to say that one will not find forms of personal joy, relief and resistance in cultural activities such as music, dance and song.

However tragic or serious his subject matter, he always sees the humorous and the ironic side, and this is precisely what the blues artist also does. Even while the poet himself had to endure racism he had to laugh at it as well, for humour powers his capacity to endure and prevail over it in the spirit of tragicomedy. The ironic tragi-comic aspect of his blues poems can best be exemplified by the following excerpt from one of his poems:

Droning 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 gaslight
 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...
 ...And far into the night he crooned that tune.
 The stars went out and so did the moon.
 The singer stopped playing and went to bed
 While the Weary Blues echoed through his
 head.
 He slept like a rock or a man that's dead

(TWB, p.23)

For Hughes, blues signified the triumph of a people, a people whose spiritual intensity captivated the poet. It reminded him that great art subsumes and transcends great pain. His blues are lyrically alive and defined by the dynamism of living poetry. Blues contain the cheerfulness of a people and their pain, most often, in

the same beat and breath. Blues is for the most part vocal and mellow. As a form, blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically:

Sun's a settin',
This is what I'm gonna sing.
Sun's a settin',
This is what I'm gonna sing:
I feels de blues a comin',
Wonder what de blues'll bring?

Sun's a risin',
This is gonna be ma song.
Sun's a risin',
This is gonna be ma song:
I could be blue but
I been blue all night long.

(TDK, p.47)

Sherley A. Williams in her essay *The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* points out that "the internal strategy of the blues is action, rather than contemplation...the impulse to action is inherent in any blues which functions out of a collective purpose. ...the blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place."¹⁴ White America has often misinterpreted blues as resulting from a mood; whereas the blues artist always aims for the creation of a mood. Hughes transcribed the entire blues tradition on to a literary form that has impacted other African-American writers as well.

Ralph Ellison explains the blues as, “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism.”¹⁵ While explicating upon the roots of blues, the great blues singer Henry Townsend, in an interview with Samuel B. Charters (*The Poetry of the Blues*, 1963), states that “when I sing the blues, I sing the truth...the blues from a point of explaining yourself as facts, is the truth and I don’t feel that the truth should be condemned...”¹⁶ The creator of blues turns despair into song instead of murder; and, one has a feeling that the mood of blues is often one step away from death. The presence of blues makes it possible for the anguished one to direct sorrow inward into song and to find happiness in its expression. One such example is available in the following poem:

...Slug me! Beat me!
 Scream jumps out
 Like blowtorch.
 Three kicks between the legs
 That kill the kids
 I’d make tomorrow.

(PLT, p.18)

Hughes’ blues poetry lacks apology, the wearying appeal to pity, and the conscious philosophy of defense.¹⁷ In being

itself it reveals its greatest charm. The songs no doubt represent the sorrows of his heart but despair is not the dominant emotion. His soul strains for more than life is capable of giving. The spirit of blues wells up from the centre of his being until his system is purged of depression. His imagination channels and sublimates the negative emotions into art. In them is "the curious story of disillusionment without a saving philosophy and yet without defeat."¹⁸

Blues as a literary form received a fillip in the poetry of Langston Hughes. One notes, however, that the analysis of the blues element in Langston Hughes' poetry leads one to the inevitable conclusion, that the blues tradition as used by contemporary writers traces its roots to Langston Hughes' poetry. In the poetic employment of this tradition, not only was the spirit of an age recreated and preserved in one of its great cultural forms but the survival of the African-American was also assured. Hughes recreated a musical tradition that was purely oral in nature and captured its essentials in the form of the written word. The blues sensibility may now be understood to be one that pertains to the human condition. Although the blues sensibility locates Hughes within the Harlem Renaissance, typified by innovations in the realm of art, yet this is the sensibility that ultimately defines the

resistance and evolution for the African-American artist in contemporary time.

END NOTES

¹ V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Biography Race Vindication and African-American Intellectuals: Introductory Essay*, p.9. <http://www.jstor.org/thenegrostudy/> 10 December 2007.

² Anthony Dawahare, "Langston Hughes Radical Poetry and the 'End of Race'," *Melus*, Vol. 23, No. 3. (California State University, Northridge Fall, 1998), p.29.

³ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *LANGSTON HUGHES An Introduction To The Poetry*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p.43.

⁴ Langston Hughes, *The Dream Keeper And Other Poems*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p.30.

⁵ See 3 above. p.x.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁸ Langston Hughes, *Shakespeare in Harlem*. New York, Alfred. A Knopf, inc. 1947), p.37. (hereafter cited as SIH)

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.38-39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.103-04.

¹¹ Langston Hughes, *The Dream Keeper And Other Poems*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p.30. (hereafter cited as TDK).

¹² Berndt Ostendorf, *Black Literature In White America*. (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982), p.122.

¹³ See 3 above. p.9.

¹⁴ Langston Hughes, *The Dream Keeper And Other Poems*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p.30.

¹⁵ See 3 above. p.38

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁸ Hazel Arnett Ervin, *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. (New York: Twain Publishers, 1999), p.181.

¹⁹ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p.90.

²⁰ See 14 above. p.181.

²¹ See 3 above. p.32.

²² *Ibid.*

Chapter – III

THE JOURNEY MOTIF

The journey motif in Hughes' work is at once both psychological and physical. It emanates from the poet's own sense of personal restlessness. He allegorises his people's journey down the West African coast through "the unimaginably inhuman Atlantic crossing"¹ into slavery in the New World when he writes:

Sea charm
The sea's own children
Do not understand.
They know
But that the sea is strong
Like God's hand.
They know.
But that sea wind is sweet
Like God's breath,
And that the sea holds
A wide, deep death.

(TWB, p.80)

Here, he is reflecting upon the circumstances of an unknown journey that will take his people away from the familiar world. There is an element of foreboding in the allusion to the mysterious quality of an unknown sea that does not reveal the secret of what lies ahead. Like the poem "Suicide's Note", the charm of the sea or of the river seems to be irresistible:

The calm,
Cool face of the river

Asked me for a kiss.

(TWB, p.87)

Although both poems speak of uncertainty, there is, however, a spirit of adventure that draws the poetic personae to a fate as yet unknown to them. Langston Hughes identifies intimately with the historical reality of being “snatched from Africa,” and “thrown down into the harsh historical environment of slavery.”² In his work Africa represents the lost roots and a distant past that can never be retrieved. In the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the poet finds an analogy between the river that flows through the Midwestern part of the United States of America and the ancient rivers that water the lands of his ancestors:

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 bathe in the Euphrates...
Went down to New Orleans...

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(TWB, p.51)

In the poem, Langston Hughes undertakes a subterranean journey into the depths of the human imagination, symbolised by the flow of unknown rivers that have shaped his identity. There is a pervading sense of the inward flow of the rivers which, finally, takes him back to himself. Thus “my soul has grown deep like the rivers” is an espousal of Black identity. It is also a moment of an epiphany, marking the maturation of the consciousness of the self. The poet not only talks about prehistoric origins but also of the long journey his people have had to undergo in the past. The flow of human blood is synonymous with the flow of archetypal rivers, both signifying a continuum and a constant renewal, similar to the veins that network the body. Water becomes a kinaesthetic metaphor for the contemplative flow of the poet’s imagination. In effect, the poem reclaims Africa as the origin of all life.³

Oh, singing tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

Were Eve’s eyes
In the first garden
Just a bit too bold ?
Was Cleopatra gorgeous
In a gown of gold?

Oh, shining tree!
Oh, silver rivers of the soul!

(TWB, p.25)

When one discusses the journey motif in Langston Hughes' work, it may be noted that migration or any form of travel for that matter, constitutes an important element in the discussion of the poet's art. In this, he is not unlike other African-American artists and intellectuals who have attempted to come to terms with the massive dislocation of African-Americans following their journey from Africa to America or the migrations that are constantly taking place within their adopted country.

Hughes made his appearance in the literary scene amid the developments that followed in the wake of World War I. He had first hand knowledge of the great migration in the decades between 1916 and 1926 when African-Americans uprooted themselves from the south and journeyed north in hope of better jobs and better pay. He was a witness to the impact of the economic depression on American life and letters, and the historic evolution of African-American culture from its roots in the rural south to its often tangled exfoliation in the cities of the north. One result of the war was that many African-Americans, whose experiences had been limited to their own backyards, were suddenly conscripted and transported to foreign shores where they were coerced into new modes of thinking and living. Many others who were left behind immediately left the southern cotton fields for the industrial centres of the north and west.

The journey motif in the poet's work therefore indicates a movement from innocence to experience, in much the same way as with the invisible protagonist in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me. ...When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination-indeed, everything and anything except me.... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.

The south is often portrayed in Hughes' poetry as being inimical and oppressive, and the following excerpt highlights this most tellingly:

The Lazy, laughing South
 With blood on its mouth.
 The sunny-faced South,
 Breast-strong,
 Idiot-brained.
 The child-minded South
 Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
 For a Negro's bones.

So now I seek the North...
 The cold-faced North,
 For she, they say,
 Is a kinder mistress,
 And in her house my children

May escape the spell of the South.

(TWB, p.54)

Such portraiture tends to represent the south as a site of terror and exploitation, of racial horror and shame, Farah Jasmine Griffin writing in the Introduction to *"Who set you flowin'?" The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995), notes that "southern (white) power is inflicted on black bodies in the form of lynching, beating, and rape."⁴ Many African-American who escape to the north prefer to distance themselves from the south (which has always been the inhuman site) where their ancestors experienced the crass insensitivity and sheer callousness of the whites. Hughes, however, deliberately identifies with the slave experiences in the south and ironically evokes the mind-set of people who ran away from their past. The south and the north for Langston Hughes are but aspects of a larger experience that he is always trying to encompass in his poems. Hughes directs his satire against 'folks' who 'head' north. In the lines quoted below, the words "heart of gold" is played upon to pinpoint the indifference of those who travel north in quest of material happiness:

If I had a heart of gold,
As have some folks I know,
I'd up and sell my heart of gold
And head north with the dough.

(PLT, p.98)

The spirit of the great migration of the 1920s has been explored by Langston Hughes in much of his poetry. It links itself with the familiar narratives of movement from the south into a “freer” north:

...Don't you know
That tomorrow
You got to go
Out yonder where
The steel winds blow?

(PLT, p.54)

The north stands as an ideal, for the realisation of a long deferred dream. In the poem, “Same In Blues,” it is mentioned that, “There’s a certain / amount of traveling / in a dream deferred”⁵ and points to places such as Harlem which subsequently become ‘the melting pot’ of African-American cultures:

Good morning, daddy!
I was born here, he said,
watched Harlem grow
until colored folks spread
from river to river
across the middle of Manhattan
out of Penn station
dark tenth of a nation,
planes from Puerto Rico,
and holds of boats, chico,
up from Cuba Haiti Jamaica,
in busses marked NEW YORK
from Georgia Florida Louisiana
to Harlem Brooklyn the Bronx
but most of all to Harlem
dusky sash across Manhattan

(MDD, p.71)

Hughes emphasises the commonality among people of African descent everywhere in the world:

We're related— you and I,
You from the West Indies,
I from Kentucky.

Kinsmen— you and I,
You from Africa,
I from the U.S.A.

Brothers— you and I —

(MDD, p.66)

Langston Hughes' experiences during his early growing years seem to have left a lasting effect upon him as a person and an artist. In later life he appears to be emulating his mother's pattern of constant movement from one place and one job to another. Notwithstanding the fact that he had a rambling and a picaresque life throughout, Hughes sums up a telling feature of his life when he says to Richard Wright: "six months in one place is long enough to make one's life complicated."⁶ Interestingly in the poet's many expeditions to Africa, the people whom he met with were surprised to find that he considered himself part African. In a way, his work reveals this effort to integrate the past, which is Africa, with the present and the future which will forever remain America. This is an important dimension of Langston Hughes' poetry, for it reflects upon a sensibility that

moves backward and forward in physical time and within a physical space from Africa to America and vice versa:

Dark ones of Africa,
I bring you my songs
To sing on the Georgia roads.⁷

Hence the journey motif in Langston Hughes' poetry can never be said to be linear. The journey undertaken by the poet persona is also a symbolic one, a revisiting of the past in order to retrieve it for a fuller sighting of the future. There is a constant sense of movement, in time and out of time, beyond geographical boundaries, and a shifting of perspectives that locates the poet's experiences in a psychological locale after it has traveled metaphorical distances in order to understand itself.

In "Freedom Train," the train is evidently a symbol of the long awaited freedom of the African-American:

... Will his Freedom Train come zoomin' down the track
Gleamin' in the sunlight for white and black?
Not stoppin' at no stations marked COLORED and
WHITE,—
... Where there never was no Jim Crow signs
nowhere, ...
... For the Freedom Train will be yours and mine!
Then maybe from their graves in Anzio
The G.I's who fought will say,
We wanted it so!
Black men and white will say,
Ain't it fine?
At home we got a train
That's yours and mine!

(MDD, p.47)

One notes here the element of pathos that comes from Langston Hughes' recognition of the impossibility of the existence of such a train. The journey towards a redefinition of African-American culture takes Langston Hughes in the 1930s, into greater political consciousness and altered attitudes. A shift in perspective is clearly detected when Hughes concern shifts from the issue of race to that of class. He has, realistically speaking, boarded a train that takes him towards a better understanding of the ground realities that prevailed in the racist America of those days. It does not necessarily take him closer to any political utopia, but in boarding the metaphorical "freedom train", he is able to confront the contradictory situation surrounding the African-American. When one examines the journey motif, one understands, therefore, that the journey undertaken by the poet is a continuation of the journey of the past from the African continent to the American continent. The next step of the journey in Hughes' poetry is the psychical exploration of the African-American identity. Also, the poet's journey in Africa and his return to America are important physical milestones in the fulfillment of a more cosmic journey.

Broadly speaking, Hughes' poetry encompasses the evolution of the African-American traceable from the anecdotes found in the slave narrative to the Harlem Renaissance and beyond it

to the second wave of migration after World War II into the present day. He moves from the racial consciousness of the African-American to a consciousness of class distinction after the 1940s, and thence to more socially-oriented concern with ghetto life: He himself states that, “we negroes of America are tired of a world divided superficially on the basis of poverty and power, the blood and color, but in reality on the basis of poverty and power, the rich over the poor, no matter what their color.”⁸ Reflected even in the issues that his poetry is concerned with, is Hughes’ poetic dynamism. His poetry is a constant journey charting his people’s and delineating their fulfillment, consciousness with greater poignancy:

I been scared and battered.
 My hopes the wind done scattered.
 Snow has friz 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!

(PLT., p.32)

The journey motif in Langston Hughes is not as well defined as his innovative use of the Black Aesthetic and blues. Yet there is always reflected in his poetry a constant yearning for the completion of the African-American identity. This, in itself pre-supposes the challenges on which Langston Hughes had set out to

scale new creative and linguistic heights in order to define the African-American through his poetry.

END NOTES

¹ Harihar Kulkarni, *Black Feminist Fiction, A March towards Liberation*. (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999), p.44.

² Vartan Gregorian, *The Langston Hughes Review*. Vol.IX (Afro-American Studies Program, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. 1991), p.94.

³ R. Baxter Miller, *The Art And Imagination Of LANGSTON HUGHES*. (The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), p.57.

⁴ Hazel Arnett Ervin, *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. (New York: Twain Publishers, 1999), p.425.

⁵ Langston Hughes. *The Panther And The Lash (Poems of Our Times)*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, inc. 1967. p.31

⁶ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *LANGSTON HUGHES An Introduction To The Poetry*. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1976), p.xxv.

⁷ Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, ed., *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1995) pp.162-63 (hereafter cited HCP)

⁸ Anthony Dawahare, *Langston Hughes Radical Poetry and the "End of Race"*. *Melus*, Vol. 23, No. 3. (California State University, Northridge Fall, 1998), p.32.

CONCLUSION

Langston Hughes was a divided man whose art sprang from the psychic tensions of a man who wished to come to terms both with his African heritage and the American culture he had embraced. The poet expounds this complex feeling in the following lines:

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?

(TWB, p.52)

Although he was primarily a “protest” poet yet he was not a racist in the political sense of the word. Theodore R. Hudson, sees Hughes dipping his pen in ink and not in acid.¹ His method was to expose rather than excoriate and to reveal rather than to revile, and as such one cannot easily label him a propagandist

His view of the future is an extension of his faith in the essential goodness of the human heart. The night, gloom and the darkness in the life of the African-American may have been a challenge, but never disillusionment, and as such he envisaged the ultimate flowering of democracy in America. His vision of a new day for his people is not always unclouded by a lingering sense of weariness. At times his dream may be hazy, but the important thing is

that he dares to hope. His optimism is clearly stated in the following lines:

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

Yesterday
A night-gone thing,
A sun-down name.

And dawn-today
Broad arch above the road we came.

(TWB, p.108)

The poet sees no reason why he should hate the ‘whites’ but at the same time expresses his inability to understand why the whites should torture him. His basic optimism does not allow him to foster hatred for his fellow human beings and he remembers how in school “one white boy who always took up for him”. He later admitted, “I learnt early not to hate all white people, and ever since, it has seemed to me that most people are generally good.”² He writes:

I do not hate you,
For your faces are beautiful, too.
I do not hate you,
Your faces are whirling lights of loveliness and
splendor, too.

(TWB, p.106)

In the poem *Warning* he continues to caution his readers against the danger of stereotyping the African-American into, “Negroes, / Sweet and docile, / Meek, humble, and kind: /” because

the danger lies in “the day” when “they”, meaning both the white people and African-Americans, might “change their mind!”³ He refuses, therefore, to “meekly live”⁴ and to take things lying down.

He writes:

Let all who will
 Eat quietly the bread of shame.
 I cannot,
 Without complaining loud and long,
 Tasting its bitterness in my throat,
 And feeling to my very soul
 It's wrong.

(PLT, p.39)

Hughes denounces justice as a “blind goddess”⁵ in whose clutches the African-American has become wise. At the same time he takes a dig at liberty and justice calling them hollow virtues or “lies written down / for white folk / ain't for us a-tall: / Liberty and Justice – / Huh! – For All?”⁶ He has a very clear understanding that:

Freedom will not come
 Today, this year
 Nor ever
 Through compromise and fear.

(PLT, p.89)

Langston Hughes' view on history is that it “has been a mint / of blood and sorrow. / That must not be / True of tomorrow.”⁷ As a forward- looking individual with a very developed conscience, he fully comprehends the absurdity of violence because he feels that

resorting to any violent confrontation serves little purpose when both sides “might lose.”⁸ He also clearly understands that it will take time for this realisation to dawn upon his people:

Freedom
Is just frosting
On somebody else’s
Cake—
Till we
Learn how to
Bake.

(PLT, p.84)

In his book of poetry called *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which was published in 1951, Hughes encodes the struggle of the African-American into his idea of a “Dream Deferred”,⁹ a great dream-yet-to-come and always yet-to-become ultimately and finally true. This aspect of the African-American dream of well-being is one whose fulfillment has constantly been obstructed by racism. While being fully aware of the discrepancy between the American reality and the American dream, Hughes also poses, what may be described as, the creative challenge of the age when he asks, “what happens to a dream deferred?...does it explode?”¹⁰ In the poem:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be...

...Let America be the dream the dreamers
dreamed—
Let it be the great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above...

...I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
 I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
 I am the red man driven from the land,
 I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
 And finding only the same old stupid plan.
 Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak...

(ANS, p.9)

In this poem the title is ironic because it conjures up the picture of an America that has perennially denied the African-American, the right to life, to liberty and to the pursuit of happiness. The supposed "dream" is a farcical one, because in reality none of the ideals of freedom have been nourished or sustained. Hughes expresses his disillusionment with the American dream of freedom and equality because he is acutely aware of the wasted potential of the "little dreams" of the African-American reality:

Little dreams
 Of springtime
 Bud in sunny air
 With no roots
 To nourish them,
 Since no stems
 Are there—
 Detached,
 Naïve,
 So young,
 They're hung.

(PLT, p.95)

Hence the ironic ambiguity of his poems implies that the African-American has been marginalized in the pursuit of the

American Dream even though, as an American citizen, the African-American has every right to stake a claim on it.

Hughes laments the failure of the American Dream and pleads for a truly democratic and egalitarian America. The poet knows that not only is the road to freedom a long and painful one but that it also demands resilience on the part of the oppressed African-American:

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'se been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's,
 And turnin' corners,
 And sometimes goin' in the dark
 Where there ain't been no light.
 So boy, don't you turn back.
 Don't you set down on the steps
 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
 Don't you fall now...
 For I'se still goin', honey,
 I'se still climbing',
 And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

(TWB, p.107)

and as such, he exhorts the oppressed African-American to:

Get out of the lunch-box of your dreams
 And bite into the sandwich of your heart,
 And ride the Jim Crow car until it screams
 And, like an atom bomb, bursts apart.

(PLT, p.99)

He, in other words, is making an impassioned appeal to all Africans-Americans to express themselves in order to facilitate transcendence, and to create a parallel force of creativity to counter oppression.

With the socialistic leaning that was clearly evident after World War II, Hughes' concern begins to shift from the issue of race towards the issue of class. He sees his audience as inclusive rather than exclusive, cutting across the lines of race as he puts it:

Mingled
breath and smell
so close
mingled
black and white
so near
no room for fear.

(MDD, p.65)

Langston Hughes speaks in the voice of his people until it also becomes a cry for justice for all humanity. He recognises that the African-Americans are enslaved, but so are the white workers, and the two are brothers in suffering. Hughes has an implicit vision of a decisive moral encounter that will see the realisation of fraternalism, which means brotherhood and the establishment of ties between common people the world over:

...And I'm gonna put white hands
And black hands and brown and yellow hands
And red clay earth hands in it
Touching everybody with kind fingers
And touching each other natural as dew.

(PLT, p.101)

The greatest achievement of Langston Hughes lies in his ability to reach out to audiences across the world. He is able to bridge divisions through the kind of poetry that could be taken into the streets and into households, creating an awareness that had never been achieved by African-American poets before. He is also the first African-American poet to be able to earn a livelihood through poetry. Like his fellow African-Americans, Hughes was able to cultivate in his work an indifference to white opinion and to laugh at some wry Jim Crow incident or an absurd nuance of the colour issue. He knew that Jim Crow was not always funny and that the race problem in America was serious business, but he does not see the point in always writing about it seriously, for he believed that if African-Americans were to take the entire white world's daily boorishness to heart and weep over it as profoundly as some of the serious African-American writers did, they would have been dead long ago. At times, he sneers at white ideas and ideals, and views them as the ridiculous conventions of a people who have never learnt to live. He is of the opinion that the lack of humour is unnatural, something akin to a lack

of humanity and as such he does not write for those African-Americans who have turned their backs on the spirituals and blues, the bedrock of their culture.

A close study of Hughes' poetry reveals him as a prophet of hope and reconciliation, who artistically advocated the healing of old wounds. Hughes believed it was possible for an aesthetic movement to transform social reality. More importantly, he is an African-American poet who stakes rightful claim upon an American identity:

I, too sing America.

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.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,--

I, too, am America.

(TWB, p.109)

Langston Hughes is an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance. His vision encompassed the future in such a way that contemporary writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison derive partially, if not wholly, their aesthetic legacy from him. His world view captured the essence of the African-American culture. He pioneered a world-view that filled in the gaps in American understanding of the African-American. It would not be an exaggeration to say that one's understanding of the African-American has been greatly shaped by Langston Hughes' poetry.

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- ¹ Daniel G. Marowski ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*.
(Michigan, Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1985), p.211.
- ² R. Baxter Miller, *The Art And Imagination Of LANGSTON HUGHES*. (The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), p.21.
- ³ Langston Hughes, *The Panther And The Lash (Poems of Our Times)*
(New York, Alfred A. Knopf, inc. 1967), p.100.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.91.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.45.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.49.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.69.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.53.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.14.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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