

## **Eyes of Optimism Look for Freedom in Langston Hughes' Selected Poems**

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### **Abstract**

The current study tackles how slavery and racial segregation, which have obviously made an enormous impact in the United States of America for many years, can be defeated through optimism. The study opens with an introduction that clarifies some background about Langston Hughes as a poet who writes against slavery and oppression done to the American Blacks during an era which was known for racial segregation in the United States of America. The poet sheds light , in his poetry, upon the role of African Americans in activating hope and optimism to get freedom which has been reached at the end. The first section of the study analyzes the meaning of slavery and segregation as reflected in some selected poems, showing the oppressive face of the Whites against the Blacks. The poems exhibit simplicity as the poet's main strategy to raise one of the most sensitive cases in history; that is slavery. The second section comes next where the poet works on instigating his people towards the necessity of keeping on optimism as the key that will lead to man's freedom . Finally , the conclusion that sums up Hughes' message of how African Americans must convey the optimistic view throughout the African American history for eternal freedom.

African Americans have suffered from racial discrimination for years as they have been used as slaves. They also have to face an inner migration from the South of America where they are used as workers in the farms which belong to the White owners , and to some blacks who managed to have prosperity at the expense of the poor Blacks. Poverty has dominated their life and most of them have become jobless , in addition to being uneducated. The poet writes his

poems in time that literature , in general, and poetry , in particular, represent the spring from which the Blacks start their revolution against racism. He presents the African spirit of their ancestors who are known for their struggle and strife making their cause extend to include the next generations. Optimism and hope can be seen in these old spirits as a motivation for the present and the future as well. Hughes depends on some images that are taken from the Blacks' history with other images are seen in the present in order to build the future that the Blacks themselves look for ; the future of having freedom and equality. Being desperate is something dangerous and cannot lead to build up an optimistic generation in the African-American community. The poet's message is to run after the eye which looks at the optimistic spirit which put the reader in the position of evaluating the African-American history that celebrates the human strife in the past and the present by reminding his people of hope and optimism as the main source for their battle against racial discrimination.

**Key words:** optimism, racism, freedom, African-American struggle, segregation

### **Introduction:**

Slavery and racial segregation are considered to be the most sensitive issues that the world suffers from. The United States of America is the typical country which had to deal with such issues , especially , during the slavery era in the seventeenth century up to the sixties in the twentieth century. Most of the African American writers who wrote about segregation belong to African origins but after migration to America, they have become African Americans. They have occupied the position of slaves not citizens. Literature is found to be the most proper genre through which African Americans can protest against racism.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) belongs to the Harlem Renaissance which was a literary movement in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century. Afro-American writers, including Hughes, depict this movement as "a bastard child, born out of wedlock, baptized in the gut bucket of life, midwife by oppression and fathered by racial hate, circumscribed by fear and guilt-ridden detractors".<sup>1</sup> "Hughes was a black internationalist, but much of his work was explicitly concerned with the struggle for black citizenship in the United States, as well as with articulating the meaning and power of black cultural expression in the context of 'Americanism'."<sup>2</sup> Racial hate becomes an inevitable outcome for the whites' oppression.

As Hughes states, his poems keep him away from depressions and despairs: "For ten years I had been a writer of sorts, but a writer who wrote mostly because, when I felt bad, writing kept me from feeling worse; it put my inner emotions into exterior form, and gave me an outlet for words that never came in conversation."<sup>3</sup> His poems tackle African Americans' suffering in America during different times. These poems deal with slavery, seeking freedom, and how racial segregation was found as a threat that may happen anywhere and anytime. Writing poetry, "Langston was absolutely ecstatic, ... He glowed with satisfaction at what he had done. He was so tremendously happy, as if he was sure he had done something very good."<sup>4</sup> His style encourages his readers to be optimistic, rather than gloomy.

### 1.1 Reflection of Slavery and Segregation in Selected Poems

One of the most crucial themes in Hughes' poetry is slavery which started in the seventeenth century when the roots of slavery in the U.S. A. began with "The twenty Negroes that were left at Jamestown in 1616 by the captain of a Dutch frigate, [they] were the beginning of the involuntary importation of human beings into the mainland."<sup>5</sup> Afro-Americans here are considered as slaves; the American South is the African American's home where farms should be run by his hands as "a small farmer but also a nonslaveholder"<sup>6</sup> because the southern properties belonged to the white masters. North is the opposite thus most of the southerners' dream is to flee to the North where they may meet freedom. Movements, in fact, call for the Blacks' freedom have appeared in the North and many abolitionists cry for giving African Americans their own rights. However, segregation extends its claws

to the North as well. "All the Northeastern states had abolished or taken steps for the gradual abolition of slavery within their own borders by 1804 , but racial discrimination , segregation and injustice still flourished and often proliferated in those regions."<sup>7</sup> Therefore , a border line has been existed namely Dixie line to separate the South from the North. This is what Langston Hughes talks about in his poem "In Explanation of Our Time":

You say you thought everybody was called Mister ?

No , son , not everybody .

In Dixie , often they won't call Negroes Mister. ( p.281)<sup>8</sup>

This poetic conversation shows two African Americans talking about how the African-American people are treated and segregated in the South where they have been called "Negroes" and the whites have the supremacy to be called "Mister" . The word "Negroes" implies humiliation while "Mister" clings to the meaning of the Whites' superiority over the Blacks.

African Americans lack the Whites' rights , such as , voting and owning a land ; they have to submit to the Jim Crow laws which deprive them of practicing their normal human rights. Their life has been devoted to work for the white race. The Blacks as a matter of fact have economically been exploited and slavery for the white Americans is a trade which depends on such exploitation: "To the southern colonists, slavery was first an economic institution inaugurated for the purpose of solving an aggravating economic problem."<sup>9</sup> The labor of whites proves failure and so the colonists saw that enslaving African Americans is the only solution available at that time. Immigration has undoubtedly made them weak to the extent that they turned to be slaves. If one desires to compare the population of segregated Blacks in America , he will be astonished by the fact that the U.S.A. is the only country which enslaves a huge number of blacks : "The only American slave power readily comparable with the United States in geographic area is Brazil."<sup>10</sup> According to this statement, Brazil probably is the second country that may have less than the United States does.

In "Negro", Hughes shows the historical roots of African Americans who were working for the white natives :

I am a negro :  
 Black as the night is black ,  
 Black like the depths of Africa .  
 I've been a slave :  
 Caesar told me to keep his door –steps clean .  
 I brushed the boots of Washington .  
 I've been a worker :  
 Under my hand the pyramids 2 3 .  
 I made mortar for the Woolworth Building .  
 I've been a singer :  
 All the way from Africa to Georgia  
 I carried my sorrow songs .  
 I made ragtime .  
 I've been a victim :  
 The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo .  
 They lynch me still in Mississippi .  
 I am a Negro :  
 Black as the night is black ,  
 Black like the depths of Africa.( p.8)

Hughes states in this poem that Afro Americans used to be slaves for a long time. They participated in building pyramids in Egypt and they served as slaves under the reign of Caesar. "Slavery in the Greek and Roman empires is well known . In both periods the traffic in men from Western Asia and North Africa brought a continuous stream of slaves to perform the personal services and to till the fields for the master class."<sup>11</sup> The poet is proud of his ancestors' history; he starts his poem with the word "Negro" which is known as a word of racial segregation given by the Whites. Uttering such a word is regarded as a kind of humiliation to African Americans. Hughes challenges the Whites using this word and implicitly showing that his and all the Blacks' unforgettable history.

When Hughes traces African Americans' history as slaves , this does not mean that he shows them weak or void of determination , on the contrary , they had a long history in fighting Belgians who arrived in Africa and colonized some regions. "The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo .They lynch me still in Mississippi"; these lines show how African Americans had undergone physical torture like cutting

off their hands and other kinds of physical pains . Nevertheless , they struggled to the end and for long years up to their arrival to America, Mississippi, where they settled down. More importantly ,they played a very important role in building "the Woolworth Building" which is completed in 1913 at a 792 feet, 1 inch height. It was designed and built to be the tallest building in the world.<sup>12</sup>

As for the reign of Caesar, the Blacks worked as slaves and served in his household. The poet compares this situation to the Blacks' situation living in the era when John Washington was the president of the U.S.A. Although eighteen centuries passed, African Americans remained slaves suffering from racial persecution: "I brushed the boots of Washington." Slavery during the ancient Greek and Roman times might be justifiable because there was no room for Human Rights. But, after eighteen centuries , it matters to consider that slavery should not exist at all , especially , with all slogans that call for human rights ironically raised by white Americans.

"Me and the Old Mule" is Hughes's two stanza poem in which the poet presents a personification of an African American as an old mule:

3

My old mule ,  
 He's got a grin on his face .  
 He's been a mule so long  
 He's forgot about his race.  
 I'm like that old mule-  
 Black-and don't give a damn!  
 You got to take me

Like I am. (pp.125-126)

The first stanza describes an old mule which has a smile on his face. This mule forgets about his race as a mule. Hughes chooses the image of the mule for his personification to illustrate that African Americans have been enslaved and segregated as if they were mules. He assures the whites' dehumanization for the blacks who are used just to work. This image describes the state of inferiority the blacks

used to live in. However, the word "grin" reflects hope and a possible change ; no one can deny the fact that African Americans are helpless but not hopeless. They apparently do not have power yet they still have determination and strong will for change.

In the second stanza , the poet's intention is clearly stated by his call for accepting the Blacks as they are. The comparison reveals the similarity between the mule and how the Whites used to treat the Blacks. The poet does not want to be judged by his skin color. Society should accept differentiation and variety in races. The personification used in this poem is meant to expose the inequality that was widespread in the American society. The whole poem is a cry for awakening the American society in order to fight racial segregation. .

Being lynched and discriminated , Blacks are deprived of having proper opportunities for education and jobs. Hence , most of them plan to leave the South heading to the North in an attempt to find freedom. "Island", though written in a pessimistic mode , conveys the discontent with the South and how the Blacks are eager to taste freedom:

I see the island  
Still ahead somehow.  
Wave of sorrow  
Do not drown me now. ( p.78)

The island here is a metaphor where Hughes sees a new destination of freedom. He , just like many depressed African Americans, dreams of this island as a place that sets for their salvation. The island stands for the North or any other place that can preserve humanity. The speaker is determined to experience such a journey to the island no matter obstacles he may confront. "Waves of sorrow" shows the poet's determination to be spiritually strong and to abandon all that despair and sorrow in the South . He encourages his community to have strength and not to let suffering defeat their African spirit nor to drown in the endless dark sea of slavery. Hughes continues to enhance the description of the island : "the sands are fair" ; the word "fair" stresses the poet's criticism of the unjust American society asking that society to be as just as the sands of this island. The poem is ended with the speaker's need to reach freedom: "Wave of sorrow, Take me there " Take me there".(p.78)

The next poem, "Not a Movie", introduces the Afro Americans to another place where they may find real freedom. He refers to the 133rd street in New York. The title of the movie suggests that violence in the South is a fact and not made up like it can be shown in a movie. The first stanza starts analyzing the difficulties of Blacks in the South:

Well , they rocked him with road-apples  
because he tried to vote  
and whipped his head with clubs  
and he crawled on his knees to his house.(  
p.231)

The phrase "road-apples" is used for the clarification that the Afro-Americans embraced indignity and dehumanization. It is a phrase embeds an American slang term originated in the mid 20th century for horse dung or droppings. This phrase alludes the appearance of horse droppings which is in size and shape similar to apples.<sup>13</sup> The poet moves to the reason behind all these segregation forms announcing that African Americans have claimed their right to vote and be as equal as Whites. As for the third and fourth lines , they describe the brutal violence of the Whites and so the Blacks were motivated to desert the South. In the lines follow , Hughes mentions the place of freedom according to which the Black community can build up a free life:

and he got the midnight train  
and he crossed the Dixie line  
now he's living  
on a 133rd . (p.231)

Beside the place of freedom which is the 133rd street , Hughes also goes to the Dixie line ; the border that separates the South from the North. It is the decisive line which segregated blacks are supposed to pass so they can gain their ultimate goal.

Next , the second stanza describes the difficult journey to New York passing some other cities that are not situated as proper areas for having and enjoying freedom:

He didn't stop in Washington  
and he didn't stop in Baltimore  
neither in Newark on the way. (p.231)

The structure of these lines is related to the geography of these locations. Washington is the first one , secondly Baltimore which lies above Washington , and finally Newark which is above the two previous cities. The more difficult the journey is the more determined the Blacks would be. The stanza goes on with their success to reach the target at last:

Six knots was on his head

But , thank God , he wasn't dead! (p.231)

Hughes here uses a metaphor that the "six knots" rope which is a noose used for hanging people , expresses how much the African Americans used to be lynched and terrorized at the hands of the whites. But , the mood becomes serene in the second line since God has given them a hand to accomplish their ultimate goal. They actually did manage their escape to the North before they got executed. As it can be observed, the two lines are rhymed for the purpose of making the reader feel happy just like the African Americans once they achieved their goal. The last two lines of the poem confirm success by again mentioning the 133rd street in New York:

5

And there ain't no Ku Klux  
on a 133rd. (p.231)

Hughes points out that the Ku Klux Klan, whose members were organized as white protective societies, was busy in keeping African Americans stagnant while the new Black Codes were enacted by Southern leaders.<sup>14</sup> The number of these racial members in the North is less than the South. So, Blacks in the North will not be as persecuted as they used to be in the South. The poet sums up his poem with the optimistic mood to find the free land that hopefully brings freedom.

"West Texas" depicts another location for the African Americans' pain in contrast to New York. This poem analyzes African Americans as farmers not satisfied with their life as they work for Whites. The cotton farms are considered as the most important source for nourishing economic life in the U.S.A. , thus they resorted to constitute a wide net of black slaves. The black workers witnessed miserable conditions , especially , in Texas where an evil sun shines:

Down in West Texas where the sun  
 shines like the evil one  
 I had a woman  
 and her name  
 was Joe. (p.164)

Hughes here follows an interesting story telling style to attract his readers' attention to his intention. The sad story starts in West Texas where evil exists and controls the African Americans' life. The poet specifies the sun with evil ; it represents the white people's behavior. Living in West Texas is as hard as living in the South , so leaving again is the suitable solution for the Black people :

So we cranked up our old Ford  
 And we started down the road  
 Where we was goin'  
 We didn't know  
 Nor which way. (p.164)

They are miserable in this city and live in severe poverty. They are so poor that they cannot own cars other than Ford. This kind of cars is cheap and of a bad quality. Then , the description of their abandonment comes to state that once they leave this place , they have no specific destination. All they want is to leave the place which presents nothing but racism.

The last stanza of the poem emphasizes the fact that Texas is not appropriate for the blacks :

But West Texas where the sun  
 Shines like the evil one  
 Ain't no place  
 For a colored  
 Man to stay! (p.164)

Hughes again explains the reason behind Blacks' inability to continue living in West Texas where colored people have to struggle against a very strong white supremacy. As in the first stanza , the poet symbolizes this supremacy for the evil 6 that shines to warm the white race, on one hand, and to burn the black people, on the other.

The white race supremacy has led to torturing and all other forms of violence towards Afro- Americans. It has been seen that "the

evidence of race conflict and violence , brutality and exploitation in this very period is overwhelming. It was , after all , in the eighties and early nineties that lynching attained the most staggering proportions ever reached in the history of that crime." <sup>15</sup>

"Ku Klux" is another poem tackles the violence towards an African American . It sheds light upon how cowardly the Ku Klux Klan worked against the black community:

They took me out  
To some lonesome place.  
They said , "Do you believe  
In the great white race?" (p.163)

Lynching is what the speaker talks about when he was attacked by the Ku Klux Klan men in an isolated place forcing him to believe in the white race. The racial supremacy is so obvious here that the oppressed speaker follows the direct speech style to get his voice reached. As the poem continues , Hughes goes on telling the rest of the story :

They hit me in the head  
And knocked me down.  
And they kicked me  
On the ground. (p.163)

This group of whites does the gangs' jobs purposefully to show their supremacy over society, in general, and the Blacks, in specific. By such threats of brutality , the Whites want to maintain their superior power and they managed this target as long as the African American community cannot fight back. Following up the last stanza of the poem , the poet uses the direct speech in order to let his reader know and be aware of what is going on inside the American society:

A klansman said , "Nigger" ,  
Looked me in the face  
And tell me you believe in  
The great white race. (p.163)

They try to demonstrate their race superiority and the Blacks for them are just "Niggers" whom they rudely despise and loathe. The Ku Klux Klan in this poem are the representatives of all whites who adopt the policy of demolition against the black community. The

spokesman of the group , on the other hand , describes his race as "The great white race" which corresponds with the outlook of the American society and the typical behavior of their people towards African Americans. In addition to physical violence , they have been spiritually discriminated in different aspects of life ; one example is press. One of the modern abolitionists , Earl Conrad, describes how journalists should write about black people:

Whenever a Negro is  
arrested use the word  
'Negro' after his name;  
when Negro  
organization pres: 7 ases  
arrive in the  
mails throw them in the  
wastebasket ;when  
Negro delegations  
accompanied by white  
friends come to the office  
to protest anti-  
Negro policies, humor  
them along. The In  
his book Invention of the  
Negro, Earl  
Conrad states that  
"Through the centuries of  
the slave trade, the word  
race was rarely if  
ever used..." and the word  
"negro" is used  
instead.<sup>16</sup>

Metaphorically speaking, the word "Negro" is depicted to demonstrate segregation, especially , white people are always addressed as Mr. and Mrs. unlike African Americans who are wrongly judged as just "Negros". This can be considered as a new kind of segregation that is verbal. In "Porter", Hughes focuses on how his people used to be enslaved even verbally:

I must say  
Yes , sir ,  
To you all the time.

Yes sir!  
 Yes sir! (p.163)

"Yes sir" indicates the status of the Blacks in the American society and to what extent they have been looked at as unequal. Uttering the phrase "Yes sir" is something obligatory to maintain slavery, otherwise African Americans would never continue life. Hughes later explains the orientation towards history:

All my days  
 Climbing up a great big mountain  
 Of yes, sirs! (p.163)

Using exaggeration, the poet suggests "a great big mountain" as a metaphor for how many times the black man has used such a phrase throughout history showing full submission to the superior white man whose habit was to humiliate humans, merely different in their skin color:

Rich old white man  
 Owns the world .  
 Gimme yo shoes  
 To shine.  
 Yes, Sir! (p.169)

It seems that African Americans are actually reconciled with their position and the poet uses this reconciliation to simply describe the Whites' supremacy over helpless community. Hughes also tackles in some of his poems the social values the blacks have during the period of Jim Crow Laws. Jim Crow is known as the name of the racial caste system which activated primarily but not exclusively the anti-black laws in the South between 1877 and the mid 1960s.

It has been stated that this rigid law system originated as "one of the strangest things about the career of Jim Crow was that the system was born in the North and reached an advanced age before moving South in force."<sup>17</sup> Blacks hence suffered from being incapable to be socially, politically, besides physically assimilated to the white society. Examples are many for the segregation African Americans witnessed; in railways cars, they sit when permitted in secluded corners. They could not enter hotels and restaurants except as servants. Even their education was segregated in inappropriate schools, nursed in

segregated hospitals , and buried in segregated cemeteries.

The "Ennui" is a poem written by Hughes to discuss the Jim Crow laws which prevent African Americans from social justice. It demonstrates how poverty devastated them:

It's such a  
Bore  
Being always  
Poor. (p.131)

Poverty here is connected to boredom, a fact that Blacks are unable to enjoy the simplest needs of life because of lack of fair job opportunities as Whites used to have. In "Elevator Boy", the speaker talks about such opportunities when he finds himself working as an elevator boy, how he and other African Americans felt about it:

Job ain't no good though.  
No money around.  
Jobs are just chances  
Like everything else. (p.195)

He points out that his job is insufficient to earn enough money for living. The speaker cannot recognize his self in this job ; it is meaningless for him and it can disappear suddenly just like a chance disappears once it is hindered by the whites' moods. Moreover , the poets goes to another job as a shoe polisher and a servant in the kitchen to underline inequality as concerned with the issue of job opportunities:

Or somebody else's shoes  
To shine,  
Or greasy pots in a dirty kitchen.  
(p.195)

These lines show not only how African Americans had been given these simple jobs , but also put in dirty places of responsibility.

Obviously , "Negroes" are meant to be humiliated by doing such jobs. A negro for white Americans must be made to work and do the lowest jobs. The African American does not know his or her place in this society. Blacks seem to be confused to have their parts and roles as individuals having human rights and a human voice for the right of life in the United States and any other place of the world.

## 1.2 Optimism is the Key for Freedom

Hughes directed his mission for change towards celebrating his remembrance for his roots and the urgent need of preserving the African American pride. Harold Bloom states that "While Hughes remained optimistic , he saw that other black writers were slipping into pessimism , focusing on the pain and suffering of racism , not the triumphs , the heroes , or the possibility of change."<sup>18</sup> He is determined to tell his people that freedom is a birthright for everybody and no one has the right to stop them hoping for a better future. The poet is provoking Blacks' need for survival through his optimistic invitation to be "strong in will. To strive , to seek , to find , and not to yield,"<sup>19</sup> no matter what happens to them. It is obvious to notice that Hughes uses materialistic images in his poetry to deliver his readers the spiritual strength they need for their battle. In "Poem", for example, he ties hope to the physical pain that should disappear one day. The whites' dominant power may break the African American spirit , yet this spirit overcomes its pain and recovers showing revival and rebirth:

Beating your fists against the wall  
 Sometimes you break your bones  
 Against the wall  
 But sometimes not. (p.417)<sup>20</sup>

In order to inspire his people , the poet goes on asserting their strength and individuality in a society hindered their right to live as equal as other races with no discrimination. To confront the Whites' domination is something inevitable for all Blacks who have been estimated as inferiors descended from different colored races. Countries other than the United

States of America may have witnessed war of a different kind , but the racial war here is concerned with color, therefore, African Americans should stand till victory releases its voice:

Freedom's not just  
To be won Over There.  
It means Freedom at home , too  
Now right here! (p.291 )<sup>21</sup>

A whole generation of the African American youth has been not only inspired but also awakened to take the responsibility of protecting their heritage. He is so courageous to admit that Blacks used to be heroes regardless of the color of their skin. They can also be immortalized throughout history whether books mention them or not : "Do not say there were no living Negro heroes....We know we are not weak , ignorant , frustrated , or coward. We know the race has its heroes whether anybody puts them into books or not. We know we are heroes ourselves and can make a better world."<sup>22</sup>

Poetry for Hughes should be "direct , comprehensible and the epitome of simplicity."<sup>23</sup> This philosophy is evidently reflected in his poems carrying powerful messages meant to be easily understood. For this, his poems are seen different from the complicated works of his peers. Beside the themes that encompass the unfair treatment of the Blacks , Hughes' works mostly Revolves around the social context of the time. He focuses on social needs which his people strive for ; in the essay "What the Negro Wants" , Hughes has listed the things African Americans needed and fought for:

A chance to earn decent living, equal  
educational  
opportunities all over America and decent  
housing was 10  
essential, as well as full participation in  
Government  
municipal, state and national; also a fair deal  
before the

law. Blacks wanted public courtesy, the same  
 courtesy  
 that is normally accorded other citizens.  
 Lastly they  
 wanted social equality in so far as public  
 services go. We  
 want the right to ride without Jim Crow in  
 any  
 conveyance carrying the traveling public. We  
 want the  
 right to dine in any restaurant or seek  
 lodgings in any  
 hotel or auto camp open to the public which  
 our purse  
 affords.<sup>24</sup>

For winning these rights, optimism and love are necessary ; in another magnificent poem entitled "Still Here" , Hughes manifests his optimistic style and manages to incorporate a facet of love , dignity , pride , and hope for his people:

I've been scared and battered.  
 My hopes the wind done scattered.  
 Snow has friz me , sun has baked me.  
 Looks like between them  
 They done tried to make me  
 Stop laughin' , stop lovin' , stop livin'  
 But I don't care!

I'm still here! (p.295 )

The poet is telling his people that they can overcome their predicament if they have the right attitude ; they must stay strong now and things will get better. It may be stormy now , but rain and storms cannot last forever. Some power , the power of slavery wants him to give up loving , laughing , and living. However , he will not give up and all African Americans must do the same. The poem shows that man is prone to ups and downs of life , yet he should embrace it with wide open arms and an optimistic spirit. In this poem and in "I , Too" , Hughes uses the first person pronoun "I" to speak in the voice of the Blacks' American community saying that America is

the home of not only the Whites but the Blacks as well. Segregation is coming to an end as he says:

Tomorrow  
I'll be 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.( p.46 )

The poem depicts the view of African Americans in the past and their strength to move forward since they have a consciousness that reflects their integrity and beauty while simultaneously demanding respect and acceptance by others. They will not let their society down because they live an honest living with moral strength.

Sense of hope and promise continues in Hughes' poetry to make people believe in change more than before. "Hope for Harlem" considers hope for brighter days in Harlem and celebrates the possibility of getting freedom:

Now there's a new skyline in Harlem.  
It's rising tall and free  
And if it keeps on rising  
There'll be a brand new me...( p.436 )

The quality of life is determined by the powerful sense of hope which also beautifies the world. Hughes values life itself and the dignity of all human beings. He, in fact, nurtures an immense love for mankind, but living joys of life does not give anyone justifications to trespass others' rights. His "Daybreak in Alabama" is also a plea on behalf of all people and not just African Americans. This is not just an idea about brotherhood and unity, but it is an incorrigible attitude of optimism towards the health of mankind and the world as a whole:

When I get to be a composer  
I'm gonna write me some music about  
Daybreak in Alabama...  
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  
In that dawn of music when I  
Get to be a composer  
And write about daybreak

In Alabama. (pp.220-221 )

The poem is a vision of an Eden-like recreation where as the Bible says in the Book of Revelation, the Divine One will wipe away every pain, every tear, and every lament. It evokes a day when, according to the Bible, symbolically lions that lie down with lambs and peace will overwhelm the whole world. The poet borrows such prophesy from the Bible to enhance the sense of optimism in his poem. Hughes seeks heaven on earth for human beings, in general, and for the American dream, in particular, to be a tangible reality. In this regard, Hughes encourages himself and others to be champions for all those who have been marginalized by predominant powers. The poet reflects his religious faith confirming an eternal fact that God does not abandon all people, especially, those who find themselves in need of Him. This condemns an accusation, that in one of his poems "Goodbye Christ", Hughes shows atheism which makes the poet defend himself, saying in his statement:

Perhaps the most misunderstood of my poems was "Goodbye Christ". Since it is an ironic poem (and irony is apparently a quality not readily understood in poetry by unliturgical minds). It has been widely misinterpreted as an anti-religious poem. This I didn't mean it to be, but rather a poem against racketeering, profiteering, racial segregation and showmanship in religion. I have been termed on occasion a communist or an atheist. He confessed I am not now an atheist and have never been an atheist.<sup>25</sup>

Hughes relies on two bases in his mission of planting optimism in African Americans' soul. "Freedom's Plow" highlights these dimensions ; holding on to religious beliefs and ancestors' heritage of the past. They should keep believing that:

All men are created equal...

Endowed by their Creator

With certain inalienable rights...( p.265)

He , at the same time , thinks that his people should be proud of their heritage and they should not try to be something they are not. More specifically , they should embrace their heritage , and accept and love themselves for being what they are:

Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!

If the house is not yet finished,

Don't be discouraged , builder!

If the fight is not yet won,

Don't be weary , soldier! (p.267)

The poet is urging the black folk to rely on their history of slavery when they used to hold the plow and never let it go. He inspires them to have hope and faith in God and in their heritage because they will be able to build the future after slavery and oppression are abolished by faith.

## Conclusion

For Langston Hughes, segregation and slavery have significant meaning since he does not want his people to gain an oppressed race. By writing his poems, he has demonstrated how the American society, namely the whites, behave towards American citizens descended from African races. He depicts his folk as victims to the white predominant power which ripped the Blacks their natural rights to live as equal as other races. The poet's message has focused on injustice and oppression that African Americans used to witness for many years. Various descriptions of the blacks' dilemma have been tackled, but all ended with one statement that African Americans must fight and surrender for the good.

As far as the poems have been analyzed, one can observe the simple poetic style used by Hughes in order to be easily understood. The poet purposefully wants to show that these poems are written to be read by simple poor African Americans, those who are enslaved in the South. He gives a chance to everybody to see his people's suffering throughout history. The speaker of the poems is usually a male African American who describes in a story telling style racism through the stories of black and white models. He demonstrated the physical pain besides the spiritual one to make the world aware of the crimes committed by the Whites towards the Blacks.

Hughes has made his message built on three grounds; one is reminding African Americans of their heritage as a glorious history, the second is to preserve faith in God because they fight for a noble case, and the third is optimism. Although some poems seem to carry painful experiences, they and other poems celebrated hope and a promise for a better future. Having faith in God and heritage is the source of optimism and hope. Unlike other African American poets, Hughes evokes his readers' spirits to stand and not to be desperate at all. He always urges them to embrace moral strength till their dream of enjoying freedom can finally be achieved. The poet's inspiration extends not only to his time but to the coming generations as well. Whites go further in their American dream crushing the dreams of humanity as a whole.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> John Henrik Clark . *Harlem ,U. S. A.* .Edited and with an introd. (Seven Seas Books) , 1964 , p.28 .
- <sup>2</sup> George Hutchinson , ed. .*The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* ( New York : Cambridge University Press , 2007 ) , p. 4 .
- <sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes . *Collected Works of Langston Hughes : Autobiography : I Wonder as I Wander* (University of Missouri Press , 2002) , p.39 .
- <sup>4</sup> Arnold Rampersad . *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume 1 : 1902-1941 , I , Too , Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press , 1986) , p. 42.
- <sup>5</sup> John Hope Franklin . *From Slavery to Freedom : A History of Negro Americans* , Alfred A. Knopf , I (New York , 1974) , p. 324 .
- <sup>6</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp . *The Peculiar Institution : Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf , 1956) , p. 30.
- <sup>7</sup> C. Vann Woodward . *American Counterpoint* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press , 1960) , p.153 .
- <sup>8</sup> All subsequent lines are taken from Langston Hughes . *Selected Poems* , Vintage Books Edition , 1974.
- <sup>9</sup> John Hope Franklin . *From Slavery to Freedom : A History of Negro Americans* , Alfred A. Knopf , (New York , 1968) , p.86 .
- <sup>10</sup> C. Vann Woodward . *American Counterpoint* , p.83 .
- <sup>11</sup> John Hope Franklin . *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (1974) , p.30 .
- <sup>12</sup> February 26 2013.<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/medny/buttowski/> .
- <sup>13</sup> March 15 2013. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/road-apples.html>
- <sup>14</sup> John Hope Franklin . *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, p.327.
- <sup>15</sup> C. Vann Woodward .*The Strange Career of Jim Crow : A Commemorative Edition with a new* afterward by William S. McFeely (New York :Oxford University Press Inc. , 2001) , p.43 .
- <sup>16</sup> Quoted in "Race , Democracy , and Citizenship" *Race and Membership in American History : The Eugenics Movement : A source Book* by Facing History and Ourselves , Facing History and Ourselves Foundation , Inc. (2002) , p. 39 .
- <sup>17</sup> C. Vann Woodward . *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* , p.17 .
- <sup>18</sup> Harold Bloom . *Bloom's Bio-Critiques : Langston Hughes* (Philadelphia: Yale University , Chelsea House Publishers , 2001) , p. 46 , as cited in Ms. Sangita Mehta . *Hughes' Poetry: A Pictorial Presentation of Black Beauty* , Maharaj Singh College , Saharanpur , India , Journal of Arts , Sciences , and Commerce , V. 2 , 3 July 2011 , p. 129 .
- <sup>19</sup> Christopher Ricks. *Tennyson* , Second Edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press , 1989) , p.115.

- <sup>20</sup> All lines are taken from Nathan Irvin Huggins. ed. , *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) .
- <sup>21</sup> All lines are taken from Langston Hughes . *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Classics , 1994).
- <sup>22</sup> Nathan Irvin Huggins . ed. , *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 417.
- <sup>23</sup> Arnold Rampersad. *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II:1941-1967: I Dream a World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) , p. 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Arnold Rampersad. "Langston Hughes" *Voices and Visions-The Poet in America*. Ed. Helen Vendler (New Delhi: Tata Mcgraw Hill , 1984) , p. 393 .
- <sup>25</sup> Arnold Rampersad. *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 2, p. 15.

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## عيون التفاؤل التواقفة للحرية: قصائد مختاره للانغستون هيوز الباحث : م.م. شيماء نعمه محمد مخيلف

### المستخلص :

تتناول الدراسة الحالية تأثير العبودية و الاضطهاد العنصري في الولايات المتحدة الاميركية و على مدى سنوات عديدة و كيفية هزيمة ذلك الاضطهاد بايجاد حالة من التفاؤل لدى الاميركان المنحدرين من اصول افريقية و الذين يعانون من الممارسات العنصرية من البيض اذ تبدأ الدراسة بمقدمة عن الشاعر لانغستون هيوز و هو شاعر اميركي من اصل افريقي كان قد شهد حقبة الاضطهاد العنصري و تأثيرها على ابناء مجتمعه لذا تضمن شعره مقاومة ذلك الاضطهاد من خلال تسليط الضوء على دور الاميركان السود في تفعيل الشعور بالتفاؤل و الامل من اجل الوصول الى الغاية المنشودة و هي التحرر. و يذهب المبحث الاول الى تحليل معنى العبودية و العنصرية في بعض القصائد المختاره عارضا الوجه العنصري للبيض ضد المواطنين السود اذ يستغل الشاعر اسلوبه البسيط كاستراتيجية تبين مساوئ الاضطهاد العنصري حيث يعتبرها من اكثر القضايا اهمية في العالم. و يبين المبحث الثاني عمل الشاعر على حث مجتمعه الاسود على ضرورة الاستمرار بالشعور بالتفاؤل لأنه المفتاح الذي يقود الى الحرية الانسانية. و تنتهي الدراسة بالاستنتاج الذي يلخص رسالة الشاعر المتضمنه حث ابناء جنسه على مواكبة النظرة التفاؤلية لتأريخ المقاومة في المجتمع الافريقي الاميركي نحو التحرر الابدي.

تأتي معاناة الأميركيين من أصول أفريقية بعد الهجرة من أفريقيا الى اوروبا بحثا عن حياة جديدة خالية من الفقر خاصة بعد استعبادهم و شراءهم كعبيد لعدة قرون مما دعا الى اخراج صوت ينادي بحقوق الحريات الانسانية التي يفتقر اليها هؤلاء الناس. انتقل الناس من ذوي البشرة السوداء و الذين هاجروا الى اميركا الى هجرة داخلية بدأت من الجنوب حيث كان معظمهم يعملون عبيد مزارعين لملاك الاراضي من ذوي البشرة البيضاء ثم استعبدوا بعد ذلك على يد عدد من المواطنين السود الذين استطاعوا الحصول على ملكية بعض الاراضي من الأميركيين البيض. اصبحت معاناة السود اكبر اذ اتسمت حياتهم بالفقر و الجهل و المرض و انسلخوا عن هوية الوجود الانساني و بشكل كبير. ينطلق لانغستون هيوز من مبدأ وجوب الدعوة الى المطالبة بحرية المواطنين من اصول افريقية كونهم يتعرضون الى ايشع صور الاستعباد و خاصة في تلك الحقبة التي شهدت ظهور الحركات التحررية في اميركا و كان الادب بصورة عامه و الشعر بصورة خاصة لاعب الدور الرئيسي في شحذ الهمم نحو المطالبة بحرية السود و ذلك من خلال التحلي بروح التفاؤل و الامل الذي تحتاجه الروح الافريقية الاصيلة و التي عرفت بنضالها الطويل ضد التمييز العنصري في اميركا. العين التي تنظر الى المستقبل بروح تفاؤلية لا تستطيع ان ترى سوى طريق الحرية المرسوم لها منذ زمن بعيد ، انه زمن الاسلاف الذين جعلوا من تراثهم مرتعا ترتوي منه الاجيال اللاحقة من أجل الاستمرار و البقاء. و من هنا يستمد الشاعر قوته في كتابة قصائده التي تعرض فكرة دعوة ابناء جنسه الى البحث عن الحرية من خلال النظر الى ماضي الاسلاف بعين التفاؤل و الامل من أجل مستقبل حر تسوده العدالة و المساواة. يريد الشاعر ان ينقل رسالة اخرى مفادها ان قوة الثورة ضد التمييز العنصري و المطالبة بالحرية تنشأ من الشعور بوجود الامل الحاضر بين المسضعفين و دليلا مسقبليا نحو التحرر الابدي. لا يمكن لليأس و التشاؤم بناء جيل يستطيع مقاومة العنصرية و التمييز حتى و ان هيات لهذا

الجيل الظروف المواتية للقيام بثورة من اجل التحرر ، يستوحى الشاعر بعض الصور من الماضي ومقارنتها مع الحاضر من اجل الهام العين المستقبلية برؤية طريق الحرية الابدية و المعتنقة للنظرة التفاضلية ومهما بلغت درجة التمييز العنصري يمكن لهذه العين ان تنظر بروح تفاؤلية قادرة على الاخذ بيد الذين خضعوا للاضطهاد العنصري و انتشالهم من ظلمة التمييز العرقي الذي سلبهم حقوقهم كبشر. يجعل الشاعر القارئ في موقع الناظر الى تأريخ الاميركان من أصول أفريقية على أنه تأريخ حافل بالنضال الانساني و الذي يمتد الى الحاضر و منه الى المستقبل من خلال تذكير هؤلاء الناس المضطهدين بالامل و التفاؤل الذي حمله ابناء جنسهم و لعقود طويلة كمصدر اساسي في مقاومتهم للتمييز العنصري.

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