

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

Langston Hughes' Representation of African-American Anger

Aayushi Sangharshee

Post Graduate,

Department of English,

SGTB Khalsa College,

University of Delhi, Delhi, India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.5.18

Abstract

Set up in the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance, this paper seeks to explore the response of the Black Americans of the early twentieth century upon crumbling of the promised American Dream. Langston Hughes belonged to the second phase of the Harlem Renaissance in which the intellectuals were much more rebellious and critical of the American experience, in comparison with the early intellectuals, who did not criticise, but instead tried to reclaim their identity by portraying Harlem as their cultural hub. Through his poems, Hughes seeks to bring forth the Black American consciousness, their composite identity and their disillusionment with the cherished American dream.

Keywords- Harlem Renaissance, American dream, Disillusionment, Black Americans

Langston Hughes was an African-American poet, novelist and social activist from Missouri in the United States. Hughes was one of the central figures of the Harlem Renaissance of the twentieth century, which was a cultural and an artistic movement of the blacks in America and was named after the city where it took place i.e. Harlem, New York. During the period when Harlem Renaissance thrived i.e. during the 1920s, a multitude of African-Americans migrated from the South to Harlem and strived to make the city their cultural capital with an inherent aim to reclaim their identity among the whites. The literary works of the Harlem intellectuals can be grouped into two: those belonging to the first phase of 1920s and those belonging the later phase of 1930s and 1940s. Though the works of the intellectuals of Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s glorified the African-American experience in Harlem, the intellectuals of the following decades of 1930s and 40s, of which Hughes was a part, differed from them by portraying their experience from a more critical point of view. The intellectual voice of the 1930s and 40s was more rebellious and Harlem was no longer projected as a cultural capital, but as a ghetto where the blacks faced isolation based on their racial consideration. Through his critique of the Harlem, Hughes voiced his anger and discontent about the conditions of African-Americans and the disillusionment with the American dream.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

Hughes' poetry took a rebellious form as he expressed a stark critique of the race relations in America, where even years after the Civil War, the African-Americans were not treated as equals with the white Americans. His works portray the inabilities of the American dream which had promised to ensure equal opportunities to all Americans irrespective of their race and class. In one of his poems, while referring to the American dream, he asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?" ("Harlem", 1). He wonders what fate it encounters: whether it dries up or whether it becomes a suppurating sore or whether it stinks like decomposed meat. By the end of the poem, he partly answers his question by saying, "Maybe it just sags/ like a heavy load" ("Harlem" 9-10). Hughes makes the readers contemplate the plight of the black-Americans for whom the American Dream is no more than a castle in the air. In another poem, "Theme for English B", Hughes portrays the African-American experience through the consciousness of a black school kid who feels socially excluded from the larger American community. In the poem, when the kid's instructor asks him to write a page on a 'true' account of himself, he reflects how complex the task would be because, he, being the only coloured student in his class, would make him different from his other classmates and even his instructor. He feels one with Harlem but asserts that he, being a black is as much a part of his instructor, who is a white, as much as his instructor is a part of him. He acknowledges that many a times, both of them do not want to be a part of each other but being an American requires them to recognise their composite identity and learn from each other. The readers of the poems get a sense of the anger and the protest of the African-American community, who, in spite of being guaranteed a share in the American dream, do not feel a sense of inclusiveness with the white community as much as the white community does not similarly feel a sense of inclusiveness with the blacks. Hughes' disillusionment with the American dream and the resulting anger which manifests itself in his writings makes his readers connect with the black American experience.

One of Hughes' most celebrated essay titled, "When The Negro Was In Vogue", which forms a very significant part of his autobiography, provides an insight into the life experiences of the 'Neo Negro' of the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke, who is hailed as the architect of the Harlem Renaissance, conceptualised the figure of the 'Neo Negro' of Harlem, in the backdrop of the Great migration of the blacks from South, in order to create a new African-American identity and that would shrug off their legacy of slavery, leading to a new collective cultural ethos. If Locke valorised and glorified the new found opportunities to the South migrants, Hughes presents the other side of the coin by explaining the actual grim situation of the 'Neo Negro' in America. He says, "The gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 20s was not too gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked" (Hughes 635). In the essay, his anger against the whites blazes forth as he expresses his utter dislike of the influx of the white Americans to Harlem whose only attraction was to watch the coloured delight themselves in the clubs. He says, "Harlem nights became show nights for

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

Nordics” (Hughes 636). He expresses the ground reality of the ‘Neo Negro’ who was considered no more than mere entertainment for the Americans who came to Harlem.

It is also significant to note how Hughes considered jazz music as a proponent of African-American consciousness and often the fusion genre of jazz poetry is associated with him. Most of his poems are rhythmic with loose phrasing in order to mimic jazz as much as possible. He considered jazz music to be an art form uniquely impersonating the African-Americans experience. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” which is one the essays in his autobiography, he expressed how the continuous beatings of jazz music can be seen as expressions of the African-American anger.

It is evident that the contribution of Hughes in voicing out the trauma of the Negro experience in America was enormous. His poetry brings into light the dissatisfaction of the Negroes with the American dream.

Works Cited

- Hughes, Langston. “When The Negro was in Vogue.” *The Big Sea*, 1940. pp. 632-637.
- Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” *The Big Sea*, 1940.
- Hughes, Langston. “Harlem.”, “Theme for English B.” *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Eds. Arnold Rampersad, David Roessel. Vintage Books: 1994. Web.
- Huang, Hao. “Enter the Blues: Jazz Poems by Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown.” *The Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*. vol. 17, no. 1. (Spring 2011), pp. 9-44. Web.