

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

**CULTURAL- MUSIC COGNITION: ANALYZING LANGSTON HUGHES INNOVATION OF
AFRICAN MUSICAL FORMS INTO ENGLISH POETRY**

D. WILFIN JOHN

M.Phil., St. Johns College

Palayamkottai

pr.devaasirvatham@rediffmail.com



D. WILFIN JOHN

ABSTRACT

The African people were enslaved by American slave-owners for centuries and were deprived to enjoy even basic human rights. Even after the slave Emancipation Act of 1863, Afro-Americans were exposed to racist police brutality, discriminated in transport, hotels and segregated everywhere. The Afro-Americans of Harlem section of New York City started voicing their strong criticism against the racial prejudice and inequality in their society soon after the First World War. Harlem Renaissance was built upon the 'New Negro Movement' of 1917 with its chief aim of revolting against race and class issues. It also paved way for the renewal and embellishment of black literary and musical culture. Black artists who supported the renaissance consciously broke the traditional white regime and eliminated their classical music and even poetry and established a new genre in arts. As a result a revival in arts, especially in literature and music happened. Langston Hughes a prominent Afro-American writer had introduced many musical rhythmic patterns and forms into English poetry thereby gaining a unique Identity in the poetry of 1940's. This research paper attempts to analyze the various musical forms used by Hughes and further prove that his preference for music from his Cultural traditional brought a post-modern 'Global Identity' to the African musical form and also to his people.

Key- words: Renaissance, Musical Culture, Revival, etc.

Experimental observations are only experience carefully planned in advance, and designed to form a secure basis of new knowledge.— *Sir Ronald Fisher*

The modern day Afro-American musical forms like Hip-Hop, House, post-disco were influenced heavily by the previous musical genres. Even world's famous American musicians like Michael Jackson, Bessie Smith, Etta James, etc. were relied on the Afro-American musical forms like blues, jazz, funk, house, etc. In the post-modern

context, the word 'Globalization' is very powerful. Afro-American musical forms are no more used in American countries alone; they are used by musicians all over the world in all forms of compositions. Many Afro-American artists had struggled hard to exhibit their art and culture in the beginning period and one such artist is Langston Hughes, the said leader of Harlem Renaissance Movement of 1920s.

Langston Hughes who can be called as an unofficial poet Laureate of black Americans was a

versatile and prolific writer. He had contributed to various genres of literature like poetry, plays, novels, essays and even children's fiction. He introduced various Afro-American musical forms into his poetry thereby creating a new genre in poetry called as Jazz poetry. The essence of Hughes poetry relies primarily on blending of several cultural issues and musical-literary technique. Writers like Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Mina Loy and Hart Crane wrote Jazz poetry before the artists of Harlem Renaissance emerged, but they lacked the quality of improvisation, syncopation and forceful rhythmic pattern which made critics comment on their poetry as 'Jazz related Poetry' and not as 'Jazz Poetry'. Hughes is the first true jazz poet and his contribution in Harlem renaissance is remarkable. His life and work spanned more than a half-century of the modern Afro-American experience, ranging from the great urban migration and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s through the stirrings of the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements of the 1960s. (Hokanson 114).

A psychological study helps in a better understanding of Hughes poetic works as it was deviated from the main stream literature and the works of other poets. Cultural-music cognition study in psychology helps us in giving a clear detailed view on the impact of culture on individual's music-cognition. It includes individual's musical preferences, emotional recognition, etc and said to believe that music-cognition is developed from the infancy. Similarly on observing Hughes poetry his musical preference, his emotional musical recognition can easily be traced. The thing which differentiated his works from his contemporaries is that Hughes had a better understanding over the dynamics of Jazz music and its applicability in poetry. His awareness of the fundamental difference between blues language and poetic language helped him to write poetry exactly of the kind of blues and jazz.

The Jazz type of music is characterized by improvisation, syncopation and forceful rhythms. While Blues expresses the feeling of melancholy, depression and characterized by call and response pattern with rhymed simple narratives in style. Ralph Ellison describes blues poetry as "a chronicle

of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (Anita Patterson 141). Even though the origin of Jazz and Blues music was much earlier before the Harlem renaissance emerged, the black musicians of Harlem took the particular musical form to its glory. Hughes introduced new forms in American poetry by combining the Jazz musical rhythm and thereby labeling the new poetic genre as Jazz poetry.

In his poem "The Weary Blue" (1925), Hughes points the difference between a Black musician and the poet. When the poet heard an Afro-American play a tune in a piano, he was able to recognize the tune suddenly as Blues. But the poet commented that the Black played it like a 'musical fool', and further writes his poem as weary Blues. This poem proves that Hughes already had a strong knowledge on Blues music even from his childhood in Kansas where he had been taken to the black churches on Sundays by his auntie Reed (Jack Rummel 18). His intention of setting English lyric into Blue's music shows the poet's true spirit of renaissance and his ironical representation of honoring the traditional Black music by using a recognized foreign language.

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 gas light
He did a lazy sway . . .

He did a lazy sway . . .

To the tune o' those Weary Blues . . . (CP 50)

Similarly in his poem "Jazzonia", Hughes elevates the Afro-American Jazz culture by comparing the dancing girls to Cleopatra and Eve, thus by breaking the American hegemony on the blacks and giving a new identity to the blacks tradition. The repetitive use of the word 'Silver', 'Shinning rivers of soul' enhances the quality of the poem and gives a completeness as jazz poetry. Sascha Feinstein observes that this poem "emulated the rhythmic imagery of twenties cabaret in which Jazz and dance, sound and sight, become one aesthetic response" (44)

Oh, silver tree!/ Oh, shining rivers of the soul!/In a Harlem cabaret/Six long-headed jazzers play./A dancing girl whose eyes are

bold/ Lifts high a dress of silken gold.
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!/In a whirling
cabaret/ Six long-headed jazzers play.(CP
34)

In his later collection of poems "*Montage of a Dream Deferred*"(1951), Hughes use of 1940's Jazz style called "be-bop" the most immediate and pervasive embodiment of the jazz tradition in Montage. Originally it began as a revolt against more commercial forms of jazz. Marshall Stearns defines 'be-bop' as "It wasn't exactly new to jazz, but bop made a practice of featuring variations upon melodies that were never stated" (229). Thus the new musical genre though rooted in the traditional of improvisatory jazz form has its own dramatic extensions and possess a unique form. Hughes himself in his introductory note to the text defines the new form of music as:

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop —this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition. (387)

"Be-bop" was later derived as "radical" jazz form. Even the title of the Collection 'Montage' signifies a new form in jazz poetry. 'Montage' refers to the technique of selecting, editing, and producing a new composite from fragments of text or music. Ralph Ellison in his 1964 essay recalled the new form of sound as

It was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its riffs jeering "Salt peanuts! Salt

peanuts!". Its timbres flat or shrill, with a minimum of thrilling vibrato. Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary, its drummer's frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos. And in it the steady flow of memory, desire and defined experience summed up by the traditional jazz beat and blues mood seemed swept like a great river from its old, deep bed. We know better now, and recognize the old moods in the new sounds, but what we know is that which was then becoming. (203)

In his other poem "Same in Blues", Hughes implementation of the new jazz form 'be-bop' can be clearly seen. The refrain is separated from the body of the piece to show clear signs of 'Montage'.

I said to my baby,
Baby, take it slow.
I can't, she said, I can't!
I got to go!

*There's a certain
amount of traveling
in a dream deferred.*

Lulu said to Leonard,
I want a diamond ring.
Leonard said to Lulu,
You won't get a goddam thing!

*A certain
amount of nothing
in a dream deferred.* (CP 427)

Hughes handling of boogie-woogie a popular musical genre of 1920's Afro-American community into poetry is remarkable. Tracy suggests that the boogie poems replicate the playing of a boogie-woogie pianist, "combining the rumbling infectious bass beat and rhythm with treble variations and improvisations" (234).

In the poem "Dream Boogie", two speakers speak seemingly at a cross purpose. The conversation is made between the poet/ narrator and his friend.

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?
Listen closely:

You'll hear their feet
 Beating out and beating out a—
 You think
 It's a happy beat? (CP 388)

Hughes implementation of the elements from traditional African folk music into poetry is also notable in many of his poems like "125th Street" and "Wonder". His over use of folk materials into poetry, his unflattering images of blacks, his vernacular choice of words made him a successful poet of representing the "folk tradition" in which the new forms of Jazz rests upon.

Early blue evening.
 Lights ain't come on yet.
Looky yonder!
They come on now! (Wonder CP 394)

Face like a chocolate bar
 full of nuts and sweet.
 Face like a jack-o'-lantern,
 candle inside.
 Face like a slice of melon,
 grin that wide. (125th Street 407)

Another innovative Hughes poem is "Tambourines" which is based on Gospel music. Hughes recognized that gospel music, which has maintained a close link to folk traditions, could have an appeal to both black and white audiences (Sanders 114–115). Like jazz, gospel music also allows for spontaneous improvisation and strong harmony. Joseph Mc Laren writes Masterson's lecture on Gospel music as a "free-wheeling art form not restricted by pre-formulated patterns which might tend to stifle the needed fervor of its composers and participants" (80).

Tambourines!
 Tambourines!
 Tambourines

To the glory of God!
 Tambourines
 To glory!

A gospel shout
 And a gospel song:
 Life is short
But God is long!

Tambourines!
 Tambourines!
 Tambourines
 To glory! (CP 465)

Hughes use of Afro-American musical form in his poetry is unique. In the poem "Negro" he had mentioned about ragtime which is an 1890's music of the black community with the characteristics of syncopated melodic line and regularly accented accompaniment.

I've been a singer:
 All the way from Africa to Georgia
 I carried my sorrow songs.
 I made ragtime (CP 24)

Hughes preference of Vernacular black tradition and black music into his poetry rather than Euro-American culture made him a true contributor to the Harlem renaissance. As a modernist experimentalist Hughes tried the sounds and shapes of jazz and vernacular folk tradition into poetry, thereby holding the successful position as a true representative of modernism and as a true Harlem poet. His handling of new musical forms into poetry created a big impact among his contemporaries to confidently write vernacular folks themes as their subject of works. Music was a never separable one from his life even in his funeral his friends played a mixture of blues and jazz as a token of love and honour to the great poet. Veda Boyd Jones records the funeral of Hughes in his "A story about Langston Hughes" as "People at his funeral didn't know whether to laugh or cry. They did a bit of both as mournful blues and toe-tapping jazz were played by a group of his friends. The memorial service was a celebration of Langston's life. His friends decided he wanted them to laugh and cry at the same time, the way the blues had made him feel"(60)

Thus it was the impact and the strong liking for African culture helped Hughes to prefer his native music style and made him emotionally recognize it in all his works till his death. His use of African music style also contributed to gain a post-modern 'global' identity to his Cultural music form and also to his people.

ABBREVIATION

- 1) CP- The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes

WORKS CITED

- Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Vintage Classics. 1994. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. "The Golden Age, Time Past." *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House.1964. Print.
- Feinstein, Sascha. *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present*. London: Feinstein.1997. Print.
- Hokanson, Robert O'Brien. "Jazzing it Up: The Be-Bop Modernism of Langston Hughes." *Bloom's model Critical Views- Langston Hughes*. New York: Info-base publication. 2008. Print.pg 114-134
- Jones, Veda Boyd. *Jazz Age Poet A Story About Langston Hughes*. USA: Millbrook press. 2006. Print.
- Laren, Joseph Mac. "From Protest to Soul fest: Langston Hughes Gospel Plays." *Bloom's model Critical Views- Langston Hughes*. New York: Info-base publication. 2008. Print.pg 79-94
- Patterson, Anita. "Jazz, Realism, and the Modernist Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes." *Bloom's model Critical Views- Langston Hughes*. New York: Info-base publication. 2008. Print.pg 135-164
- Rummel, Jack. *Langston Hughes*. New York: Chelsea House Publication. 2005. Print.
- Stearns, Marshall W. *The Story of Jazz*. 1956. New York: Oxford University Press. 1972. Print.
- Sanders, Leslie Catherine. *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows To Selves*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1988.Print.
- Tracy, Steven C. *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1988. Print.