

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

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

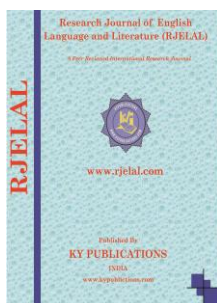
THE PORTRAYAL OF THE BLACKS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF LANGSTON HUGHES – A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes is one of the most anthologised Black writers of today. Many of his poems, short stories and essays are a commentary on the unmitigated sufferings, endless torture extreme cruelty inflicted upon the Blacks. One of the Harlem Renaissance writers, Hughes brings about an awakening among his people. To get ready for a prolonged struggle to achieve their freedom is the wakeup call to the Blacks from Hughes. The short stories Hughes wrote give expression to grim reality about the Blacks, the cruelty and the pain they endured, the marginalisation they were subjected to, the economic backwardness and the racial discrimination they suffered and the sexual violence committed on the Black woman. The present paper aims at bringing out how the Blacks' life is presented in the fictional output of Langston Hughes. In his writings, Hughes has dealt with the political oppression, religious discrimination and social injustice the Blacks suffered in the hands of the Whites.

Key Words: Racial Discrimination, Lynching, Klu Klux Klan, Langston Hughes' Short Stories

Discussion

Langston Hughes heralds the Harlem Renaissance injecting a new blood into the veins of the Blacks through his revolutionary writings that proclaim him a staunch supporter of the Blacks in the White country, America. He started his literary career as a poet and extended his genre and became a columnist, a short story writer and a dramatist all rolled into one. Gwendolen Brooks, poet laureate of Illinois and a former consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, wrote of Hughes, "His point of departure was always clear pride in his race. Race pride may be craft, art, or a music that combines the best of jazz and hymn. Langston frolicked and

chanted to the measure of his own race-reverence" (*The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes* 72).

Predominantly, Hughes' short stories revolve around the Harlem, a black cultural Mecca and a neighbourhood of New York and Manhattan in America. As a result of World War I, slave trade registered a decline which forced the North American Whites to recruit the Blacks from South America. It became an immediate cause for the Great Migration towards Harlem between 1900s – 1930s. It is a place of Blacks cultural and artistic enrichments.

Hughes' universality of outlook can be witnessed in his writings because of his so many voyages to various countries such as Paris, France,

Africa, etc. The world-wide tour made Hughes assert: "The world is two-thirds colored and only one-third white... China, Japan, India, Ethiopia and Nigeria are all colored countries with millions of people ("Only Human" 104). While making a visit to the various countries, he came to know about the hardships meted out by the Blacknot only in America but also everywhere the world over. At the outrage he felt at the economic exploitation, he wrote:

Africa was not free politically, nor was it free economically. The African people were not allowed by their political masters in Europe to manufacture goods from their own raw materials. Materials such as palm oil, cocoa beans, and mahogany were shipped to Western countries, turned into various products, and then returned to Africa at a high price; the African people were given no jobs in producing these goods. (*Langston Hughes: Poet* 34)

Such a sorry state of the Blacks forced Hughes to join hands with Marcus Garvey and became a member of Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that gave the clarion call "Back to Africa". Further, Hughes eye-witnessed the geographical exploitation of Africa by the various colonial countries: "Most of West Africa was divided between the British and the French, although tiny Belgium ruled the huge colony of the Belgian Congo (later called Zaire), and Portugal controlled the vast colony of Angola in southwest Africa (34)."

After visiting Africa, he was upset by the abject conditions of the Blacks in his own mother land, Africa. It made him hate himself. As a result, he threw away all the books into the sea that he carried while starting his voyage at New York and bust out:

It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart — for it wasn't only the books that I wanted to throw away, but everything unpleasant and miserable out of my past: the memory of my father, the poverty and uncertainties of my mother's life, the stupidities of color-prejudice, black in a white world, the fear of not finding a job, the bewilderment of no one to talk to about things that trouble you, the feeling of always being controlled by others—by parents, employers, by some outer

necessity not your own. All these things I wanted to throw away. To be free of. (32)

And then, Hughes started to have a dig at the origin of the Blacks. He identified that: "the day they (the Whites) brought the first Negroes off that slave ship in Jamestown, ... and have been trying to keep us working for nothing, or little of nothing, ever since ("Four-Way Celebrations" 128).

When the Blacks laid their foot on the soil of the Southern part of America for working as slaves in the cotton fields, they were subjected to untold sufferings physically and mentally. The horse riders who stole the Blacks sold them like selling the cattle in the market. The white masters molested the Black women and made them pregnant and separated them from children selling her children to others.

Unable to bear the atrocities of the Whites towards the Blacks, Hughes wanted to raise a voice of protest and to prepare the Blacks with a thirst for freedom in the White country through his writings. This spirit of optimism led him to become a columnist in *The Chicago Defender*, an additional Newspaper (*The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes* 60). In the column, he opened the third eye of the Blacks and ignited their feeling to stand united against the Whites. In his column writings, he has tactfully used the fictional Character Jessie B. Simple who is a trump card for his protest against the ill-treatments meted out to the Blacks in the hands of Whites. The same character he brought into focus while writing short stories and dramas. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross praise the artistic creation in the literary corpus of Hughes' short story: "One night that the author spent at a Harlem bar near his St. Nicholas Avenue address. That night in 1942, the one great fictional character that Hughes was to conceive, Harlemitte Jesse. B. Semple, was born.... (*Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America* 196)."

In all, the short stories, Hughes followed the colloquy type of narration between one Simple and another Boyd. Hughes well-balanced both the characters to depict the disgrace of America in terms of racism holding the Whites responsible for the legal discrimination such as Jim Crow Act,

Slavery, One-drop Rule, Klu Klux Klan, etc. against the Blacks.

Degrading discrimination was widely vogue throughout the South. Schools, cars, buses, hospitals, public places witnessed the large scale practice of segregation. Black children and women bore the brunt of attack.

Jim Crow Act is a discriminatory legislation passed against the Blacks by the White jurists. It is a draconian measure denying opportunities to Blacks to study in White schools, or to get treatment in hospitals meant for the Whites only or to travel by bus or train exclusively for the Whites, or not to permit them to play on the playfields reserved for the Whites. Add insult to injury laws have been enacted against getting married to or having sex with Whites. The Whites display so much enthusiasm in executing Jim Crow Act against the Blacks. The short story by Hughes "Jim Crow's Funeral" shows his reaction against the Jim-Crow Act:

If Jim Crow was only human, maybe Jim Crow would get sick, catch pneumonia, get knotted up with arthritis, have gallstones, a strain, t.b., cancer, else a bad heart - and die. I would not mind seeing Jim Crow's die. If necessary, put to death. In fact, I would pay for Jim Crow's funeral - even send flowers. (94)

Hughes equates the Jim Crow Act with the diseases like Tuberculosis, Cancer and Heart attack because of its adverse effect of ringing the death-knell to the lives the Blacks.

The contribution of the Confederate States in discriminating the Blacks from the Whites is no means small. When slavery was abolished, the states Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Virginia protested it vehemently. Hughes was an eye-witnesses to such inhuman acts of injustice. In a fiery tone, Hughes writes:

I would like to have hands so big I could pick up Georgia in one and Mississippi in the other, and butt them together. .. I would also like to slap Alabama on the backsides just once, and shake Florida so bad until her teeth would rattle and she would abolish separate schools. ("Big Round World" 31)

The off-shoot of Jim-Crow Law is Klu Klux Klan, an anti-black Whiteman's Group that wants the Blacks to die - those who violates the Jim - Crow Law and other discriminatory measures. They masked themselves and rode during the nights and killed the Blacks brutally using the iron rods, dragged them under the horse and hanged them on the trees, etc. They want the Blacks to fear and bow their head to the Whites. These kinds of ill-treatment towards the Blacks infuriates Hughes and he says: "I would sneeze - and the Klu Klux Klan out of Dixie. I would clap my hands - and mash Jim Crow like a mosquito ("Big Round World" 31)."

Lynching - another barbarous way of capturing, torturing and butchering the Blacks was practised by the Whites. When the Blacks refused to do something or escaped from the White masters or when the black women and child refused to share bed with the Whites, they would be stoned to death or their heads would be cut-off and setup on the gibbets in full view of the passers-by on the road side. Hughes wants this sort of untouchability to end, when the White man does not bother sleeping with the Black boys' sister or a white girl having a black girls' brother as bedfellow. Hughes points a picture of the horrible lynching in his short story "Four-Way Celebrations":

I would dedicate a TV show to lynching, and show black bodies swinging on Southern trees in the name of rape never done, and show Negroes burned at the stake because some white woman dreamed she saw a colored man in her sleep. Also I would show little young boys Emmett Till, killed because some white man thought the kid had looked sidewise at a white woman. (129)

The story goes even the Blacks encountering the Whites in their dreams would not be spared and will become the victims of lynching. The White man or woman may look at the Black boy or girl and they molest them violently, but the Blacks should not even look at the Whites. Emmett Till, an innocent Black boy, who stood by the side of a White woman, were killed on the pretext that he cast a lecherous looks and lurid glances at the White woman.

The White Americans discriminate only the Blacks who live in America, not the Blacks living elsewhere. The Blacks born on the soil of America

learned their language and practised their culture. But they were treated as vagabonds. Whereas, the people who are, blacker than the American native Blacks, from other countries visit America and speak Spanish or French fluently not English, they are offered red carpet. On seeing it, the native Blacks' eyes are enflamed and develop animosity towards the Whites. Hughes describes the heart-beat of the Blacks:

I have been in this country speaking English all my life, daddy - o, yet and still if I walk in some of them rich restaurants downtown, they look at me like I was a varmint. But let somebody darker than me come in there speaking Spanish or French or Afangulo and the headwaiter will bow plumb down to the ground. I wonder why my mama did not bear me in Cuba instead of in Virginia? ("Purito Ricans" 64)

Hughes feels the mind-set of the Americans among the Blacks that "Just be foreign - then you don't have to be colored (65).

When Simple goes to White Sulphur Springs Hotel, he requests the receptionist to book a room to stay there. But she refuses to book a room for him and mocks at him: "Negro, are you crazy? ... This hotel is for White folks" (64). Forthwith Simple retorts: "No, I am not crazy. I am just American" (64).

The discrimination exists not only in the public places but also in the working places. The Whites are appointed higher position, whereas the Blacks are assigned menial work. Hughes arrays questions towards the people to recognize the status of the Blacks in the American country:

The atom belongs to white folks. I have not seen a Negro with an atom nowhere in his possession, not even a speck of an atom, not even atom dust. Have you? have you ever met any black atom makers? Do you know any colored man with an atom? ("The Atomic Age" 70)

During the World War II also, they Blacks were not allowed to take one little old grain of atom, about the size of a pinhead, and heat a great big whole apartment house. They were used to dig out the coal from the mines and carry it to the factories only but not allowed to use the atoms. Further, Hughes

wants the Blacks to think of the post-war condition of the Blacks. Because of the war, the economic condition of the country will come down. In such a situation, unemployment is inevitable. If so, Hughes asks: "who do you think will be the first to be thrown out of work? Negroes! ... when the atom comes in, Negroes go out. 'Last to be hired, first to be fired'" (70). Even though the Blacks work for long years, they will be thrown away from the factory, the young Whites will be appointed in the place of the Blacks. The uncertainty is a destiny of the Blacks in every walk of their life in America.

The law-makers of America have legislated that the Whites should have no marriage with the Blacks. At the same time, they encouraged the Whites to have sex with the Blacks. This dual mind of the Whites is brought out by Hughes: "Them governors talk against intermarriage, but don't say a word about intermating, which amounts to practically the same thing - and there is many a yellow Negro to prove it" ("With All Deliberate Speed" 59). This kind of announcement was not only in the past, but also continues in the present. During an international event i.e. Olympic in Soviet Russia, a number of mixed-race children born because of an illicit relationship of the Russian women with the men from various countries Africa, Latin America, or Asia. Such children faced discrimination. As a result, Siberian-born Pletnyova, head of the Russian parliamentary family committee, warned that 'Russian women could end up raising mixed-race children on their own, before referring to the 'Children of the Olympics' after the 1980 Moscow games (*Daily Mail*, Jun 16, 2018)." They want only the white children, not the mixed.

The discrimination does not stop with the Blacks, further it extended to the Blacks pet animals too. Even the pet animals of the Whites were not allowed to play with the Blacks'. Trilby is the pet dog of South white lady Mrs. Jenkin. It always plays with the colored woman's dog. It cannot be digested by that lady and often calls Trilby. She dragged the dog and showed love, and provided fresh bones to stop Trilby from going to the colored women's home. But the dog stared at Mrs. Jenkins and went away. Hughes humorously mocks at the discriminatory attitude of the Whites: "Trilby would just play with

the Jenkin's dog in the yard, but never go in the house. .. Neither did she (the old white lady) like her dog playing with a colored woman's dog. But dogs will be dogs, so she could not stop that ("A Dog Named Trilby" 43)."

At the core, Hughes projects the White's ill-treatment of the Blacks, whereas he never fails to offer remedies to all. Certainly, he calls for the White friends to know the cruelties of Jim-Crow in Dixie and he proclaims to the world: "Killing a man doesn't kill the form of the crime. It just kills him. What we need to do is get at the basic roots of evil, just as a physician tries to get at the roots of disease." ... "It is the sick root that should go, not the whole green tree." ("Jim Crow's Funeral" 93). He upholds the theory of "Love thy neighbor as thy self" ("Again Cousin Minnie" 96). The Blacks want to be treated on equal footing with the Americans. He wants the Blacks to sit and drink on the same table with the Whites, board the bus or train and take the seats side by side with the Whites.

The harrowing experiences undergone by the Blacks against the Whites got printed on the memory of Langston Hughes. The economic disparity, the racial animosity, the sexual violence, the social injustice, the religious fanaticism, the political oppression are the unpleasant chapter in the history of the Blacks in the White America. Langston Hughes's shortstories by the portrayal of the Blacks' life awaken the slumbering conscience of the Blacks and prepared them for the long drawn out struggle against the Whites. Making clarion call for better tomorrow and better living conditions of the Blacks.

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