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Exploring Silent Strength in Langston Hughes's Poetry

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Abstract

This article explores the power of silence in Langston Hughes' selected poems through an African-American lens, reflecting the spirit of the era. It examines how Hughes' work captures the visionary imagination and inner conflicts of Black Americans in their daily lives, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance. Drawing from his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), Hughes addresses the cultural, political, and social issues faced by Black Americans, especially in the context of white domination and exploitation. The analysis of his poem *The Weary Blues* highlights his reflections on these themes. The article positions Hughes as a visionary poet who anticipates a future of freedom and justice for Black people through his poetic expressions.

***Keywords**:* slavery, racial conflict, dream, freedom, envision.

Introduction

Langston Hughes imparts the meaning of human existence to the readers through his literary imagination. This imagination, as a vehicle, helps him mediate between social limitation and dream of freedom. To Hughes, imagination reconciles and identifies man and nature, the subjective with the objective, the internal mind with the external world, the conscious with the unconscious, and the self-consciousness with absence of self-consciousness. It relates the static to the dynamic, the passive to active, the ideal to the real, and universal to the particular. His metaphors and metonyms disclose the sense of self. For Hughes, like Coleridge, visionary imagination is not an act of fancy; it is the ordering power that shapes his poetic creation. So far as Hughes's visionary imagination is concerned, this study focuses on his artistic struggle for literary forms, particularly because they reveal the writer's personal and social dream.

Method and Materials

The analysis is based on the qualitative approach to read the visionary and imaginative faculty of Hughes through his selected poems. To justify the themes of justice, domination and discrimination felt by the African-Americans, it has taken the critics' insights into consideration. Along with this, the research is guided by the the sources collected from the library and other secondary source about the black poets in general and Langston Hughes in particular.

Results and discussion

Visionary Imagination, also known as apocalyptic imagination, according to Johan J. Collins, "evokes an imaginative world that is set in deliberate counterpoint to the experiential world of the present. Apocalypticism thrives especially in times of crisis, ant it functions by offering resolution of the relevant crisis, not in practical terms but in terms of imagination and faith"(42). Hughes, in his poetry, seeks the resolution of crisis in Black people's life by envisioning blacks going beyond the social limitations imposed upon them by whites. He senses their heroism in both the physical and spiritual magnitudes. His imagination focuses particularly on black women. He looks at them as the symbol of creator. In his poems like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" there is no physical presence of black woman as a persona, yet there is her invisible presence in the fertility of the earth and the water. He draws the metaphor of woman from the historical sources, black folklores, and the Civil Rights Movement. For him, black women represent various symbols which he perceives through his apocalyptic imagination.

His two famous poems "Mother to Son" (1922) and "The Negro Mother" (1931) are the most famous of the matriarchal verses. In both of the poems, Hughes has presented black mother as strong matriarchal figure. In twenty line of the former poem a black persona addresses her son. Making clear the hardships of black life, she tells him the paradox of the American myth, which proposes that all American are equal. Subsequently, she teaches the child her struggle as well as triumph: "Well, son, I'll tell you:/And life for me ain't been no crystal stair" (1.2). Structurally, the poem provides the folk diction and rhythm that make the woman real. "Mother to son" is portrait of black woman. She is woman struggling to emerge as an all caring mother. In making her way form failure to success, she moves from worldly vision to religious one. For her, the evolution of soul is more important than progression of body. Through the power of her will an imagination, she has given the society far more than the society ever has given opportunity to her. While the social world hardly dignifies her, she nevertheless dignifies it. This quality of her increases the

depth of her humanity. She cares her son, "Don't you fall now" (17). Because she associates the quest with her vision, any separation from it implies the fallen world. While the poem is complex in its meaning, it nevertheless tells the design of self-realization. The mother tells her children "I's been a climbin' on"(18). Her climbing upward, despite obstacles, inspires her children to move onward.

The black woman in the poem confronts secular reality, and the tension reveals the idea of black suffering. Dilapidated board and bare feet imply the presence of poverty in the house. Because the mother lived literally in a poorly constructed building, she risked physical hazard throughout her life. Yet she has averted any fatal injury to the Black American soul. Her internal light illuminates the outer world.

Hughes's Poetics of Silent Strength

"The Negro Mother" aligns with "Mother to Son" in its message. It gives the division of itself into three parts. The first introduces the reader to the spirit or ghost of the mother, who represents the racial as well as historical consciousness of black. In addressing her children, the mother identifies herself with universal mother, Africa. The second part shows that the mother's religious faith enables her to endure suffering:

I couldn't read then. I couldn't write.

I had nothing, back there in the night.

Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears.

But I kept trudging on through the lonely years. (23-26)

Despite being illiterate and undergoing a lot of suffering, in spirit the mother merges with her children to guarantee continued racial success. In part two the mother returns from the past experience to express herself in direct address. In the last section, she cautions her black children about the barriers still ahead: "Remember how the strong in struggle and strife/Still bar you the way and deny you life--" (45-46).

Myth means, in this instance, the religious overtones that cloak the parent-to-child monologue, implying pilgrimage. In opposing secular history--namely, the woman's being stolen from Africa—the tone heightens the tension between the real and the ideal. When the mother remembers the selling of her children after she "crossed the wide sea," the biblical story reminds the reader of the human of the human wandering in Exodus.

The second part shows a shift in emphasis from the mother to the children who must

continue the holy quest. To express her belief, she prepares them by using metaphor and simile: "But God put a song and prayer in my mouth/God put a dream like steel in my soul" (18-19). In identifying with a Christian woman, Hughes shows his talent to create an independent persona. Mother's faith in the second part indicates her Christian humanism: "Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and my prayers/Impel you forever up the great stairs" (49-50). Christian images help reveal her code of heroic sacrifice. When Hughes concentrates on Christian images, the "Valley complements the journey's "road." Subsequently, the narration lays out the blessing that the mother urges the children to take. When she tells them to "look ever upward" (48), it suggests once more the place of departure. In Christianity it is the metaphor of travelling. Mother encourages the children to climb the "great stairs" which imply racial quest as well.

The female figure in "Negro Mother" functions much like that in "Mother to son" Being mythic it becomes disappoint in secular reality. From an opposition of divine quest and earthly limitation emerges the theme of social restriction. We can imagine how Black suffering existed in the United States for three years. During that time, experience aroused the "dream like steel" in the mother's soul. This dream inspired her to survive in a valley "filled with tears" and a road "hot with sun." Though the mother has been beaten and mistreated, and though she warns her children that racial restriction still exist her spirit has triumphed. While we do not know the strength of limitation, we understand that these surpass neither the will of the mother nor the potential strength of children whom she inspires. That in the second part of the poem the mother overcomes her inability to read and write supports our understanding. So, do the sweat, pain, and despair she remembers in the third part, after having transcended them. She has endured the whip of the slavery's lash. In combining social limits with Christian myth, Hughes uses his alliterative skill: "Remember how the strong in struggle and strife/still bar you the way, and deny your life"(45-46). Here, the sense of pain and dismay which is common to all the black people have been represented by this expression.

To illustrate the design of social confinement, the black mother functions as Nature. The imagery and idea of nature can be perceived in her presence. Picture of light and dark, plants that grow or seeds that imply growth, all signify that presence. Hughes distributes five images of Mother-Nature in the first part and three in the second as well as in the third. For example, the mother speaks of the "long dark way" that speaks of her past-self as the "dark girl." In the later instance she becomes the image of the black Africa transported across the sea. The darkness of the

travelled way and the female figure that must ravel it through time fuses with diurnal cycle.

Consequently, the black woman expresses the past in cycle metaphor: "I couldn't read then. I couldn't write. I had nothing, back there in the night"(23-24). Yet her advice to others will make for a different future. One of heroic progress as her "banner" is lifted from the "dust." This is a echo of Christian myth suggesting immortality. In the third part of the poem, the mother instructs her children to make of her past a "torch for tomorrow," thus teaching them the secret of what James A. Emanuel calls "Black art: "the conversion of suffering into personal and social good. In lighting her way, the torch signals moral progression"(53). In the above statement, the anticipation and positivity and rays of hopes are carried as represented by the Hughes in his poems.

A natural complex unifies the first and second parts in "The Negro Mother." Like corn and cotton the black race grows. While the product described grows for the purpose of human consumption, Hughes implies that black race develops in order to end exploitation. As corn and cotton grew in the field in which the mother worked, suffering enhanced her wisdom as well as her spirit. In tending the field outside herself, she nourished within herself the dream and seed of freedom. The lesson she wants her children to learn.

Other natural icons show that the unity of the poem depends upon the maternal portrait. The mother's general description as woman in the first part prepares for the particular depiction of her as the "Negro Mother" in the second and third parts. In the second part, the woman is the seed of an emerging free race. She becomes one with her children, who are young and free. Similarly, the black woman's advice in the third part displays both her courage and the bond between a woman and her children: "Stand like free men supporting my trust" (42). The banner that she urges her offspring to life show her firmness. The first part makes clear the mother's place in the history of black people, as through internal rhymes the color of her face blends with the history of the race.

Hughes's other poems about women are equally memorable. Even among them "Madam Poems" are the most memorable. The image of woman operates throughout these works in at least eleven diverse ways, which are not always separable. His poems illustrate the different functions quite well. The title characters in "Aunt Sue's Stories" and "Mexican Market Woman" are natural foils to each other. Having survived adversity, Aunt Sue tells a black boy stories about the past and though she tells them as fiction, he knows that they are true as well. While only his imagination seems at first to confirm the authenticity of her myth making, history does indeed verify her story

as the narrative self-renders it clearly. If the listening boys has not yet lived a generation through African-American history, the speaking self almost surely has even by 1921. Not entirely parallel with the narrated world, his silent history marks an oblique angle toward her very credible fiction and toward historical truth. He mediates, in other words, between her imaginative world and the world of history, the latter deferred only by the lyrical power of the poem itself. Unlike Aunt Sue, the Mexican marked woman remembers the joy of her past:

This ancient hag
Who sits upon the ground?
Selling her scanty wares
Day in, day around
Has known high wind-swept mountains,
And the sun has made
He skin so brown (1-7)

She is, despite her hard life which she spends selling "her scanty wares" in the sun, yet happy, because we hear no where she is complaining in the poem. Though the female figure in this short lyric is less transcendent than is Aunt Sue, she narrator achieves rhythmic success.

In the poem "Strange Hurt" the persona probably seems masochistic because it appears getting pleasure from its own pain and humiliation:

Some man has deserted a woman, and
Bowed by
Weariness and pain
Like an
Autumn flower
In the frozen rain,
Like a
Windblown autumn flower
That never lifts its head
Again. (1-9)

This poem almost appears a religious chant, a subdued form of the black folk sermon. Further,

In months of snowy winter
When cozy houses hold,

She'd break down doors
To wander naked
In the cold. (10-14)

The woman, losing love or a part of spiritual reality, becomes indifferent to physical reality. Remarkable, the poem displays the ability to subsume and transcend fear through confrontation. Despite snowy winter, she comes out and walks in the cold. Stormy weather, burning sunlight, and snowy winter in the above poems mark the physical harm that African-Americans face. To stand without fear against the elements is to be free in spirit. In one reading, the poem "Cora" gives the racial dilemma nearly allegorical:

I broke my heart this mornin'
Ain't got no heart no more.
Next time a man comes near me
Gonna shut an' lock my door
Cause they treat me mean
The ones I love.
They always treat me mean. (1-7)

Is a chance for true worth the risk of renewed despair? While Cora tells the story of her love life realistically, she incarnates the mixed feelings of the race. Because a man broke Cora's heart this morning, she refuses ever to try love again, yet her tone suggests a fit of temper rather than sureness. While Hughes's analogy is subtle, it is sure as well. Insofar as the matter of race emerges, it reminds the hurts given by history. But perhaps Blacks will try again. The words "Gonna shut an' lock my door" are not straight.

Over time, Hughes diversified the design of the Divine Mother into some broader treatment that is heroic, comic, and despairing. As the years were on, he had to free the image from religious myth. In part, the change depends on his diminishing optimism. When "Southern Mammy Sings" bridges "Mother to Son" and "Down Where I Am," the speaker has lapsed from energetic hope into hope into overpowering fatigue a generation later. Tone and sense reverse themselves drastically:

Too many years
Climbin' that hill,
'Bout out of breath.

I got my fill.
I'm gonna plant my feet
On solid ground.
If you want to see me,
If you want to see me,
Come down. (5-12)

The speaker's tone does not match with what he intends to tell. It appears her is revealing his achievement but with a voice filled with overpowering fatigue. Hughes, with a whimper far more than a bang, brings to a close lifelong preoccupation with the myth of woman only indirectly. "Southern Mammy" marks the turning point because he uses the female figure there to represent spiritual as well as physical exhaustion: she despairs because whites have hanged a "colored boy" whose only crime was saying people should be free. The "Southern mammy" herself is an allegorical foil to the "Miss Gardner," "Miss Yardman," and "Miss Michaelmas" she mentions, though each of those women personifies a place in a way that "mammy" does not do at all. Having no place in the country or world, the alienated servant has seen the death of her sons; now she anticipates only war and death, "And I am getting' tired!" (Line 16)

Often the "Madam" poem embodies folk themes in dialogue, though at least one of them, "Madam and the Phone Bill," uses dramatic monologue, as a whole, the group humorously illuminates the ideas of nationalism, self-reliance, and self-doubt, while the secular world displaces the mythic one for good. "Madam and the Fortune Teller," for example, is a particularly skillful poem of the kind. Here the fortune teller imparts self-determination to the customer, but the customer, unwilling to accept the humanistic burden, continues to press for divine intervention. When the teller refuses to give her any, the customer shifts the ground impatiently to another external "power": What *man* you're talking 'bout?" (Line 21). Now aware that the customer declines to apprehend the truth, the teller asks for another dollar and half before she proceeds to read the other palm. As the folk ballad goes, the teller sure "picked poor robin clean"--but only because Robin refuses to live without illusion.

What Hughes dramatizes so brilliantly in the poems is his discernment of himself and humanity. In the pursuit of some external decision, the seeker overlooks her own responsibility on earth. She needs always the sign of something beyond, the absent ideal of which the present realism reminds us only indirectly. Whereas the early poems mark, sometimes dramatically, an ascent form

earth to heaven, the later ones embody often no only the re-descent to earth but the closure of the great stairway. In the process Hughes recasts his fictional self as Madam. Though the customer can read in her cards the obvious fortune only of what teller narrates forthrightly, the teller reads the deeper irony of the human self ever in struggle with destiny and history. What separates the two women is Madam's human imagination.

In "Mother and Son" and "The Negro Mother," however, which combine Christian myth and folk experience, Hughes becomes one of several American poets--Edward Taylor, William Cullen Bryant, Emerson, Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevenson --to deal with a problem of religious belief. These literary artists have believed (or disbelieved) in god, the American Dream, the Power of Transcendence, or the American Myth. Taylor and Bryant believed in God. Emerson believed in transcendence, and his contemporary, Whitman, believed in himself. Whitman had faith in a power that could reinvigorate the word through enthusiastic perception. Wallace Stevens, who was humanistic like Whitman, believed more in man than in external divinity. To Steven, indeed, man is divinity, since divinity must "live within herself" (Murphy 287). Closer still to our time, T.S. Eliot, through his Christian conservatism, restored to American poetry a sense of the divine.

But no American poet seems combining myth and pragmatism better than Langston Hughes does in the poems on women. No doubt, in the1950s he turned his attention more to prose than to poetry, and by the 1960s he lost the intensity of his once lyrical gift, but he never completely abandoned the folk source of his grandmother's stories. They had been the form trough which his poetic spirit had taken shape most powerfully. He blended their essence with his visionary with his visionary imagination to create his art. Through his art black women tell tales about their yesterday; their confrontation with death' their attempt to transcend hardship; and their bitterness aroused due to racism. These women are not always professional, but they are still Madam as much as Madonna. They are more human than almost any other female figures.

Conclusion

Langston Hughes is among the most eloquent African-American poet who creates female image as the source of life and respect through his poetic imaginations about the wounds caused by injustice. He is above all poet of touching lyric beauty, and the issues such as race and justice. He never seeks to be all things to all people but rather aims to create a body of work that epitomizes the beauty and variety of the African-American and the American experiences, as well as the diversity of emotions, thoughts and dreams that he sees common to all human beings. He starts

out as a poet with a deep regard for the American part. The past emphasizes the realities of African-American life and the idealism out of which springs the most radical American democratic beliefs. He shows that he at last has found his own poetic voice.

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