LANGSTON HUGHES'S POEMS AS MANIFESTATION OF RACIAL PROTEST

Studi tentang Puisi-Puisi Langston Hughes sebagai Perwujudan Protes Ras

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of Langston Hughes’s poems presumably considered as manifestation of racial protest. Its main goal is to prove whether or not the above statement is true, and to examine the kinds of racial injustices Hughes’s protest poems try to project.

Conducted under the discipline of American Studies which employs interdisciplinary approach – historical, sociological, and literary ones, the research proves that the selected poems truly manifest racial injustices. The racism took the forms of racial discrimination, racial segregation, and racial lynching. The discriminating issues contained in the protest poems are about injustices in employment, African-American social life, and education. Racial segregation is ridiculed in poems representing the application of Jim Crow system and lynching is portrayed through the cruel treatment of the white mob toward the black victim who is hung to a crossroad tree. His indignation, however, does not drive him to conduct violent or destructive protest. In his own specific way, beside previous three discriminating issues, he rejects the ill of racism by composing poems about race pride and African-American greatest expectation which he covers in poems about African-American dreams. In grace, he points out the good sides of his community as well as his pride as both an African-American and an American citizen. He truly believes that the blacks in America, well-known as “homeland of the free”, still have better future, equal rights and opportunity to achieve their goals, and to realize the African-American dreams.

Key words: racial protest -- discrimination -- segregation -- race pride -- lynching
--- African-American dream

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INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century, racial protesting struggles undeniably existed in the United States. Various exponents of the African Americans, no matter what job or position they might occupy, have been involved in the movements. Through the field of politics, economy, or arts (such as literature, music, theater, etc.), they fought for equality. Their main goal was to set the African Americans free from any racial oppression or injustices.

Langston Hughes, one of the exponents, has explicitly exposed himself to get involved in the struggle through literary intermediaries in the period of Harlem Renaissance and after. Famous for his versatility, he was a talented black writer, poet, playwright, and also an anthropologist. To be a poet, he realized that one out of his many responsibilities was to illuminate the life of his people, the African Americans. As a partial evidence, Ramperad (410) once wrote: "There is no poem [...] with which Langston Hughes does not have some direct or indirect, personal and emotional connection. They are not purely imaginary or contrived poems [...]. They are poems that come out of his own memories and his own life, and the lives of people he has known, loved, and cried for, [...]."

Racial protest is thus assumed as a prominent mode of his poems, beside another one, i.e., poems about black life using the spirit of jazz and blues (Baym, et al. 1756). Trying to be honest to himself and the world, he frequently spoke out against and wrote about the institutionalized racism of government in a powerful country like America. Believing that a part of a poet's job is to inform the minds of his people, he devoted his lifetime to voice his concerns on racism and argued passionately a belief in human equality, and a wish for color-line brotherhood. With his rich poetic capability, nurturing generosity, warm humor, and abiding love of black people, Hughes was one of the dominant exponents in American literature of the twentieth century (Lauter, et al. 1480).

In relation to previous assumptions, this study is conducted to prove that Hughes's protest poems truly manifest the reality of racial injustices faced by the African Americans, especially in his era, and to give a brief view that racial discrimination is considered as a shameful conduct of mankind, because its impacts on the so-called lower races are evidently destructive, either physically or mentally. This may give a valuable reflection to all human races that all men are created equal and remind all of the people that racism should be banished from any community or any nation.

Since the study is conducted under the discipline of American Stud-
which evidently depict various racial discriminating issues such as those in employment, social life, and education.

To share the blacks’ bitter experience of facing discrimination in employment through literary intermediaries, he proceeded a poem entitled “Necesary” to reflect the hardship of the blacks in getting a job. The opening line, only a word Work?, can be interpreted as a short interrogative statement to respond a question of another person as “Don’t you have to work today?” or the questions alike. The second up to fourth lines inform the readers that he has no job. He has no significant daily activity but eats, drinks, stays black, and later on, if time comes, dies. He stays in a little old furnished room, very little that he ‘cannot whip a cat without getting fur in his mouth’. His life is even more difficult as ‘the landlady can overcharge this little poorly furnished room’. He realizes that he has to be capable in affording his life, but the condition of the society does not give him enough opportunity to get a decent job. Every person on earth surely has necessities that he has to fulfill. Normally, he will work to afford all of them; he has to hold an occupation. Thus, there is an ironic correlation between the idea in the title with the content of the whole poem because the persona still has to fulfill his needs of life while being an unemployed.

The previous bitter episode can be equated with what the speaker of “Puzzled” tries to tell. Through this poem, he represents a community living in Harlem, a central area of the blacks in New York City. For years they suffer economically. Sugar, bread, cigarettes, and probably some other staple food became more expensive. Having been jobless, certainly they suffer even more. The ‘only’ reason mentioned by this character was that because they were colored, a matter having nothing to do with universal requirements for a man to get a job.

In social perspective, Hughes performs painful lives of the blacks. A poem “Little Old Letter”, for instance, contains a racial threatening issue in American society. It reveals a black character just having found an anonymous letter. In details, he mentions that the time is in the morning, the letter is not very long, less than one page, but the content scares him to death. Obvious enough, the identification of the sender is not clear. The reader thus can imagine the kind of letter he has received. By writing ‘You don’t need no gun nor knife’ (the second line of the last stanza), Hughes wants to emphasize that a superficial matter, like an anonymous letter, can change a person’s life; can make somebody wish he were dead. It was widely known that such white racial organization as the Ku Klux Klan had threatened many blacks through destructive actions. Hughes, depicting the threatening moment of a person getting a racial anonymous mail, is capable to arouse the emotion of the readers in a direct tone and simplistic choice of words.

Regarding the contribution of black women, Hughes’s poetry makes room for the experiences of women. In the analysis of poem “Mother to Son”, one can explore the way he turns women’s experiences into emblems of the African-American experience. The poem is a soliloquy of a mother expressed to her children. She conveys the unceasing struggle of reaching the goal, i.e. to step out of racial injustices, to gain their freedom, to experience a full human right. The mother also implores the son to keep moving forward, to keep making progress so that their race will not be left behind. Her sorrow hopefully becomes the fertilizer of the blacks’ future Promised Land. In self-reliance, poverty should be substituted by prosperity, and the opposition should be replaced by freedom.

Whereas in education, Hughes overtly protests the poor educational opportunity of the blacks through a poem entitled “Theme for English B”. In this poem, the readers may find a story told by a black character that is asked to do an assignment to be submitted the day after. The instructor gives information how to produce a good passage, i.e. by being honest to himself so that the idea will flow easily. An only colored student in his class, the speaker realizes that this easy task for others may become a very difficult one for him. The process of finishing the task will not be as simple as it seems. A twenty-two and colored student of a college, he finds the impossibility of producing a good passage when he is not honest to himself. If he denies the color line problem faced by his community, the page will not be true.

Finally, he decides to be true by writing down what he has in mind frankly. He knows that it may offend his white instructor. He only thinks that this will be his opportunity to expose his indignation toward the employment of racism in his surroundings. A colored person, he always believes in having an equal right of being a good citizen. He expects a lot that his capacity will not be valued merely based on his skin color. The virtue of a person will come out of his good and sincere deeds instead of heredity. He longs for equality in America. The blacks and the whites should hand in hand build the country.

Indirectly, this poem uncovers the limited opportunity of the blacks in education. The black character proves to be the only colored student in his class. Sometimes this student gets inferior treatments from the instructors. Being truly indignant of the educational problem faced by the black, the speaker tries to convince all races in the United States that they can share knowledge. Education, as an important way of improv-
ing the capability of the people, is believed to be an effective intermediary for cross-culture understanding, in this case between American blacks and whites.

The Application of Jim Crow Law

One goal to promote the absurdity of racial segregation is done by Hughes through his poems protesting the application of Jim Crow Laws. This system is also well known as racial segregation, referring to the act of separating and isolating members of a racial group from the main body (Kitano 61). Hughes’s “Merry-Go-Round” and “Freedom Train” become the two of his most effective poems to express the stupidity and the heartbreak of racial segregation.

Brilliantly, “Merry-Go-Round” shows not only the poet’s emotive power but also his considerable technical skill within the bounds of aesthetic simplicity. In this poem, spoken by a “Colored Child at a Carnival”, he assumed the voice of a small child. The use of merry-go-round to pose the existence of Jim Crow laws effectively sharpens the absurdity of the segregation in the South. In a merry-go-round, one will never find the front or back parts. Every riding horse will return to its previous position since this entertainment works by moving around. Innocently, the child asks the “Mister” to show the Jim Crow section in this entertaining vehicle. He is afraid of making a mistake, namely, riding the horse in an area strictly provided for white children. Living Down South, known as the land of “separate but equal”, he is accustomed to know his inferior position. This time, he finds difficulty in determining the position he has to take. In the segregated transportation, he has to sit in the back.

Another satire on segregation is “Freedom Train”. A quite long poem, consisting of various sectional stanzas, it becomes the explosion of the poet’s underestimation of Jim Crow transportation. The stanzas comprising various numbers of lines versify the rhyming couplets. Completely enough, it contains the detailed aspects of racial segregation in the South. In resemblance with the other poems, in a vernacular language, the character tells that he has read, heard, seen, and waited for the existence of Freedom Train. Every day, they have faced the negative impacts of the Jim Crow laws. In Dixon, the trains were all segregated, and the back door was provided for the entrance of the blacks. Signs of FOR COLORED or WHITE FOLKS ONLY were familiar in various places. The engineer, or high position, was held by the whites, the blacks were the porters. The blacks were excluded from all formal activities. They gradually lost jobs in government, which they gain after the Civil War. Whites owned the land, the police, the government, the courtrooms, the law, the armed forces, and the press. The political system denied blacks the right to vote. The Jim Crow laws seem to the poet the most antiquated and barbarous thing on this continent, and should be broken up immediately.

Racial Lynching

The acts of lynching conducted by white mobs in various areas have driven Hughes to criticize in a poem entitled “A Song for a Dark Girl”. Written in 1927, it clearly shows the readers about the hanging of a black victim to a crossroad tree. In the first person point of view, the speaker, obviously a dark girl, mourns for the death of a young lover. The body is bruised high in air. This suggests the loneliness and saddest moment of the victim’s soul, the lover, and perhaps the family. Also, it describes the position of the victim between heaven and earth. Then the “I” asks Jesus a “racial” question in lines 7 and 8. The reader will be startled by the word white in “I asked the white Lord Jesus / What was the use of prayer”. In Christianly, everybody on this earth is allowed to pray since prayers signify the breath of life, the food of the soul, and the way to communicate with God. Jesus, the Christian Lord, was born into a Jewish family, as to Hughes a white race. By writing such lines, he wanted to mock whether Jesus (the ‘white-skinned’ God), as the Creator of human kind and the universe, also takes the race into consideration in answering the prayers, in blessing His creatures. The poem, therefore, can be a harsh attack on religious hypocrisy.

The poem illuminates the evil conduct of the whites. Supposed to be spoken by a single speaker, it is addressed to all dark girls, boys, men, and women who have suffered from the whites’ mistreatments. Hughes squeezed the blacks’ sorrow into the blues lyricism since it was above all a way of feeling. It reflects the result of his meditation and then expresses his feeling concerning this unpardonable act of lynching. He protested the horrible method of the whites’ jurisdiction, i.e. by ignoring due process of law, which according to him would disgrace the Christian civilization.

Race Pride

Pride means feeling of satisfaction arising from what one has done, or from persons, things, etc. one is concerned with; self respect; knowledge of one’s worth and character (Horney 662). Race pride in this thesis thus is defined as the feeling of satisfaction arising from what the group of hereditary community has done. The term contains self-respect and the knowledge of the race’s worth and character. If a person wants to
into the adoration of the white’s standard of beauty, i.e. blonde hair, blue eyes, white-skin. Implicitly he implied that God created the blacks with their own positive and negative sides, as also owned by other races.

**African American Dream**

The exposure of one’s dream can provide a way of getting recognition from others. Considered as a subordinate race group for years, the blacks come to the point of awareness about their having greatest expectations. Motivated by this idea, Hughes skillfully delivered the African-American dreams through the three representative poems entitled “Harlem”, “Let America Be America Again”, and “I Dream a World”. He did it as a covert racial protest.

To African-Americans, Harlem denotes the perception of life as both a triumph of hope and a deepening crisis. Since the emergence of Harlem Renaissance, the black experience has been brought clearly within the general American cultural history. Harlem became a crossroads where blacks interacted with and expanded their contacts internationally. Profited from a spirit of self-determination, the name, more than the place, became synonymous with new vitality, black urbanity, and black militancy. Nevertheless, the negative implications have been clear. The blacks, unlike other immigrants, had no immediate past to celebrate. Slavery is regarded as the scar and dent that are not easily erased from the blacks’ mind.

Hughes, however, revived the African-American dream and hope once existed during Harlem Renaissance in the poem entitled “Harlem”. Opened and ended by posing questions, the poem is quite difficult to interpret. Readers will not easily grab the intention of the poet in asking “What happens to a dream deferred?”. Some critical questions about the poem’s content might occur, such as “What is the dream the poet refers to?” or “Why might it explode rather than dry up?”. The result of the analysis exposes that “Harlem” has close relationship with Hughes’s other poems, the two of which are “Let America Be America Again” and “I Dream a World”. The dream the poet refers to, and the answer of some more questions can be found in those poems.

“Let America Be America Again”, a definite statement of his attitude to his country, gives space to understand Hughes’s view about America and African-American dream. He emphasizes his permanence of place in the nation. This land America belongs to him as well as his people. Naturally, they love it – it is a home – and they are vitally concerned about its mores, its democracy, and its well being. They try to look
at it with clear, unprejudiced eyes. Their ancestry goes back for generations on American soil - and some of them also through Indian blood, many centuries more. Their background and training are purely American. They are old stocks as opposed to recent immigrant blood. Yet many recent arrivals enjoyed rights and privileges denied to them. The wealthy white immigrants may repeat the Oath of Allegiance with its ringing phrase of "liberty, equality, and justice for all" with a deep faith in its truth. The Negroes, the Indians, and the forgotten repeat the oath, too, but they know that the phrase about "liberty, equality, and justice" does not apply fully to them. They are Americans - but some are colored, red, the poor. As an example of the blacks inferiority in society was that in most places, even in their own communities, blacks could not hold even minor clerical jobs in banks, offices, and stores. As for the Indians, they were driven from their own land into camps restricted for these native people. Yet America is a land where, in spite of all its defects, the voice of democracy is still heard; freedom, though poorly applied, still rings its bell. Hughes realized that America was a land of "transitions". He knew it was within their power to help in its further change toward a finer and better democracy than any citizen had known before. The American Negroes, through this poem, believe in democracy. They want to make it real, complete, workable.

With grace, Hughes repeatedly reminded all population of the United States about the vice of racial injustices and inequality, but without all judgment to particular figures. He did not blame anyone for the embarrassing circumstance of racism. He, on the contrary, invited all to rebuild the country as expected by the Founding Fathers. America for years has been internationally known as the people of paradox. Possibly, Hughes was willing to give correction for the seamy side of the New World. Belonging to the Indians, African-Americans, Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, English-Americans, as well as later immigrants, America is admitted as a melting pot, later on well-known as salad bowl country. The homeland of the free and prosperity is owned by the people endowed with "certain unalienable rights" and "among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Perfected in "I Dream a World", Hughes's African-American dream becomes more universal. He did not restrict himself to USA only. In direct tone, he dreamed of a world "where nobody will scorn others", "where love will bless the earth", and "where black or white will share the bounties of the earth". Greed, wretchedness, and avarice will no longer exist. Joy pervades the mind of all mankind. Shortly speaking, these are the dreams Hughes refers to in "Harlem". His convincing view enables his readers to interpret the African American dream, which mythically means the success, the uplifted condition from oppression (poverty) to freedom (wealth). He insisted that the 'lost period' of African-American life needed to be recovered. Instead of dry up, fester, run, stink, or crust, the dream deferred will explode. The African American dream will never disappear since it is rooted to the soul of every black folk.

CONCLUSION

The movements protesting racial injustices have evidently existed in the first half of the twentieth century, following the era of the black struggles during the nineteenth century. Widespread revolts were the direct result of the seamy side of human manipulation, in this case the whites toward the blacks, especially in Southern states. The Americans of African origin have affirmed strongly toward every form of racism. Not merely in the forms of economical or political practices, literature has been taken into consideration as an effective weapon to blunt the force of racism. Langston Hughes, through literary intermediary, proves this. Solidifying his reputation in Harlem Renaissance, obviously he translated the very features of the era, i.e. voicing their hopes, their frustrations, their dreams, their need to be socially free from the oppressed situation. He refused to differentiate between his personal experience and the common experience of black America. Admitting that a poet could not run from his own cultural roots, he wanted to tell the stories of his people without personalizing them, so the reader could step in and draw his own conclusions. Through these writings, he reaffirmed a belief in the political potential of African-American poets.

In Hughes's view concerning race relations, whites and blacks alike had to set about establishing a new relationship. He knew that the principle of the Emancipation Proclamation has been arrived at, and the attempts to crave out a place for the blacks in a white-dominated America have been taken since the Reconstruction period of 1865s, but he observed that the practice was still capable of arousing emotions and conflicts. The white race dreams itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth and in power. In the view of the Constitution and in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, ruling class of citizens. The US Constitution is colorblind, neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.

In short, Hughes's poems manifesting racial protest signify a reaction, a response of a poet toward racial injustices happening in his surroundings enforced by the white racists. They teach the readers how to
refuse and fight against such treatments. The struggles conducted by the African-Americans in the US to gain full equality during the first half of the twentieth century show that no one in this world can endure the humiliated and horrible life inflicted by racism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


INTRODUCTION

As nature poems “Sunday Morning” (1923), “Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird” (1931), “The Ideas of Order at Key West” (1936) created by Wallace Stevens represent modern American idea, belief, and attitude toward nature. Nature to them is not just a scenery, it is a spiritual resources, a living being speaking to the soul in a language that feel—

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