
THE DUAL SELF: IDENTITY SYNTHESIS IN THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

Dr. Mamta

Associate Professor of English
Pt. CLS Govt. College, Karnal

Abstract:

Starting from the cruel system of slavery, the black people have suffered and struggled a lot in America. Their sufferings, humiliation and resilience found expression in the writings of the black writers. One of the crucial questions that these writers grappled with was the question of their identity, for the centuries of oppression and rejection had almost erased them from the records of human history of the times. Langston Hughes, the leading voice of Harlem, also struggled with the same question in his poetry. He became “an outspoken critic of racism and segregationist policies.”(Leach xii) In his attempt to establish the identity of his race, he moved in both directions; African past and American present and to a great extent assimilated both these identities to create an identity of his own for the new Negro. The present paper is a humble attempt to explore this identity in the works of Langston Hughes. His poetry embraces the American dream while holding firmly onto the African roots which provide him with strength and endurance.

Key-words: Perseverance, Harlem Renaissance, Self-Humiliation, Rejection, Acceptance

The journey of black people, from their forced migration to the American continent as slaves to the present day ones realizing their political and social dreams, has been a very complex one, presenting a history of struggle, endurance and perseverance. Black writers played a very significant role throughout this journey. They challenged the existing governing narratives of the white people and provided the black experience with a sincere and strong voice of its own. The problem of identity had always been central to the existence of the black people in America and had a strong influence on the expression of every Afro-African writer in one way or the other. Slavery formed a part of the racial experience of black people and the insulting treatment meted out to them for many years resulted in a degeneration of their self to the zero degree. The greatest challenge before a Negro writer, in the beginning, was to raise himself in his own eyes first, to come out of his animalist existence and place himself at par with his white counterparts. The abolition of slavery in 1865 was just the beginning, a lot more needed to be done to find a place for the black people in the so-called human society. The Jim Crow treatment and the frequent incidents of racial violence put a question mark on the identity of the black people; “...in some form or the other, every Negro American is confronted with the question of ‘where he is’ in the prevailing white society.”(Bajaj 3) Writers like Langston Hughes rejected the cultural hegemony of the dominant white people and affirmed their new identity— an identity

embracing their deeply rooted African heritage as well as their American past. Langston Hughes was one of the prominent figures of Harlem Renaissance, the movement that revived the African American culture and imbibed a sense of pride and determination in the black population. Every form of art was used to give expression to the black intelligence and experience and create a new image for the black people claiming racial equality.

In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial mountain” (1926), Hughes asks the artists to portray their ‘individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame’. He says, “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.” It’s important to notice that in his enthusiasm to assert his identity, Hughes doesn’t reach the extreme levels of self-pride or the negation of American experience. The purpose of his poetry, to use the term from deconstructive theories, is to erase the boundary or hierarchy between the two identities— African and American. He has been considered “the most prolific and the most representative of the New Negroes”. (Redding ix) Actually, the African roots were indispensable to the black American. The end of Civil war brought the end of slavery in America, but the dream of equality and acceptance was still a dream. The black American tried to locate himself in the white society but he was always placed in the back. The rejection that he faced at every step in the dominant white society created a blank and induced a sense of identity-crisis. To fill this blank, he searched for his African roots as his color came from there. This recognition and assertion of African identity is quite crucial to the freedom of the self for it can help the self to break free from the shackles of ‘American standardizations’. This way, the self can develop and practice its own cultural identity without any kind of embarrassment. Moving back to his centuries old African roots, the self now can take pride in the fact that it has survived all the past civilizations. In “*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*”, the poet asserts, “I’ve known rivers:/Ancient, dusky rivers./My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” In “*Aunt Sue’s Stories*”, Hughes considers the slavery in black American past not a matter of shame, but a bond that unites the generations. The tales of slave-sorrows, passed from one generation to the next and so on, form a string to tie all of them together and give continuity to their identity. These tales also establish a strong sympathetic consciousness in the black people. In “*Mother to Son*”, the poet uses the metaphor of a staircase. The mother tells her son that her life “ain’t been no crystal stair” and exhorts her son; “Don’t you fall now—/For I’se still goin’, honey,/I’se still climbin’.” The Jim Crow section was always there to make the black people constantly realize the truth of their rejection and segregation by the white. The poet questions the validity of this segregation and highlights its absurdity. In the poem “*Merry-Go-Round*”, he uses the image of a merry-go-round to show the circle of life. He questions the white standards, which hold no logic, when he asks, “Where is the Jim Crow Section/ On this merry go round, Mister, ’cause I want to ride?” This cyclic movement of merry-go-round, where nothing is ahead of nothing, constitutes the free play of life. The inhuman treatment and the humiliation experienced by the black self could not degrade it.

The poet asserts that the natural form and color of the black people is as beautiful as any object of nature,

“The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people
The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people
Beautiful, also, is the sun,
Beautiful, also, the soul of my people.” (*My People*)

Hughes is not some over-enthusiastic sentimental poet. He celebrates the Negro existence but accepts its ugliness too. In “The Negro Artist and the Black Mountain”, he says, “We know we are beautiful. And ugly too...” The Negro in America, ‘snatched from Africa’ identifies himself with Africa, when he sings;

“I am a Negro
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.” (*Negro*)

Hughes blends, in his poetry, the blues and jazz to create a peculiar music of his own that gives expression to the moods of sorrow and gaiety of the black people. The questions raised in “*Harlem*” define various responses and reactions of the black people in America. The poet does not alienate himself from the American dream. He is very much a part of it and as he is deprived of his right to equality and freedom, the dream cannot be said to be realized, this deferred dream “dry up like a raisin in the sun” or “fester like a sore—/And then run?” or “Maybe it just sags/ like a heavy load,/Or does it explode?” The African identity of the past, established and imbibed by the poet, is not unconnected with the American identity of the present existence; this American identity is his living reality. Not only blacks, Hughes, like any great poet, shares the misery of all those who suffer and are deprived of their rights. Along with the Afro-Americans, he gives voice to the suffering Native Americans too. He links the black struggle with the world-wide struggle against oppression. Instead of hating the oppressors, his call is for peace and unity of all. He gives expression to Locke’s vision of culture citizenship,

“I do not hate you,
For your faces are beautiful, too.
I do not hate you,
Your faces are whirling lights of loveliness and splendor, too” (*The White Ones*)

Whitman’s celebration of America echoes in the poetry of this black poet. After so long a period of togetherness, America has become a part of his existence and identity. He had been one of the contributors to the making of this great nation and so he comes up with the claim; “I, too, sing America”. He is quite hopeful of the change and visualizes the time when it will happen. Though the present is bleak,

“But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong”

The exclusion, forced by the white and accepted by him for the time being, will not pass onto the coming generations. The future contains the hopes of acceptance

and brotherhood for he knows that he is the 'darker brother' of the white and won't remain rejected forever,

"Tomorrow,

I'll sit at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen" "(I, too, sing America)"

His belongingness to the country cannot be denied to him for long as he has almost reached the point where he himself is America and the poet embraces and celebrates this new existence. The two identities of an Afro-American Negro were thought to be in clash with each other on both sides. Hughes' poetry looks towards a time when these two will co-exist in harmony, at both the levels— inner as well as outer. Most of his poetry gives expression to two-fold actions; one going on in the life of the Negro in the contemporary social set-up and the other going on in his mind. The challenge that the poet aptly handles is to come at par with the whites not only in the social structure but also in the deep recesses of the psyche. After decades of rejection and humiliation, the real obstacle is to come out of the state of inner escapism and self-humiliation. The searching out for the roots in the African past is a part of the poet's attempt to self-discovery, for the state of rejection by the whites had its roots in the African identity— the uncivilized black existence. So the poet connects himself there and brings out what is beautiful and everlasting in that existence, that has survived all the hardships and struggles of ages. He recognizes "his African origins and his particular contributions to the civilizations in which he had been involved." (Wagner 395) but this does not work to cut him off from his American existence; rather it makes him suitable to fit himself in the present American culture, removing the elements of shame within him and also in the outside world. Now the African and American selves within as well as the black and white individuals in the society can comfortably co-exist for both have come to the realization that they 'are beautiful and ugly too..' For harmonious coexistence, the condition is that the two must have their highs and lows, realized and accepted. In this direction, the efforts on the part of the poets like Hughes did not turn futile as America saw its African American president Barack Hussein Obama in 2009.

References :

1. Bajaj, Nirmal. *Search for Identity in Black Poetry*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1990.
2. Leach, Laurie F. *Langston Hughes: A Biography*. Greenwood Press, 2004.
3. Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Knopf, 1994.
4. Hughes, Langston. *The Weary Blues*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.
5. Redding, Saunders. Foreword. *Good Morning, Revolution: Uncollected Social Protest Writings by Langston Hughes*, edited by Faith Berry, Lawrence Hill, 1973, pp. ix–xii.

6. Wagner, Jean. *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*. Translated by Kenneth Douglas, University of Illinois Press, 1973.