

Of Race and Literature: Langston Hughes

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In the post-Reconstruction era, the northern cities of the United States served as the Promised Land for the African-American population who attempted to sever their traumatic relationship with the Southern part of the United States which still revelled in the Jim Crow laws and the right to segregation of the public facilities on the basis of race. The First World War and the swift industrial expansion in the North contributed to the myth-making of a reworking of the race relationships within the over-arching image of America being the defender of civil and political rights, democratic ideals, and social equality and justice. Alain Locke's *The New Negro* chooses to celebrate this moment of self-affirmation in the face of the tone of appeasement that Booker T. Washington advocates for achieving social rights. For Locke, the moment of the new Negro becomes a clear departure from the politics of accommodation (Locke 12). Alain Locke's attempt is to put on display the intellectually and artistically gifted African Americans who become a metonym for the African-American population. The carefully constructed image of the new Negro becomes an embodiment of the middle-class aspirations. The new Negro is the flag-bearer of the cultural equality that it has achieved through its own art and intellect. For Locke, it is through this politics of self-empowerment that the younger generation of African Americans will be able to negotiate social, economic and political rights (Locke 13). It was only in 1920 that the harmonious and congruous picture started getting distorted in the face of the demand for equal social, political and economic rights by the African-American population who were confronted with the limitations of northern city life. In the face of the proposed consistency and harmonious self-projection in Alain Locke's work, Langston Hughes' works become the pertinent vantage point from where the incongruities and inadequacies of the Harlem Renaissance and the image of the new Negro can be explored.

Hughes' autobiography *The Big Sea* puts forward the vicissitudes of the lower-class black life which constantly negotiates the twain challenges of race and class. His confrontation with the intertwined challenges of race and class begins with the image of his father who recognises the interpenetration of class and race in his refusal to stay in the United States. For Hughes' father, the economic exploitation of the black population was over-determined by the factor of race.

My father hated Negroes. I think he hated himself, too, for being a Negro. He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes and remained in the United States, where none of them had a chance to much of anything but servants-like my mother, who started out with a good education at the University of Kansas, he said, but had sunk to working in a restaurant, waiting on niggers, when she wasn't in some white woman's kitchen. My father said he wanted me to leave the United States as soon as I finished high school, and never return- unless I wanted to be a porter of a red cap all my life. (Hughes 40)

Hughes' father's disillusionment seems justified with the persistence of Jim Crow laws in the Southern States which were infamously legalised by the 1896 Supreme Court decision of "Separate but equal" in the Plessy v. Ferguson case. His father's bitter experiences with the race make him abandon the frameworks of American society for good. In his withdrawal from the country, there is an apparent undertone which highlights the agony of the African-American population where even the principles of free market capitalism operate within the white supremacist structure and the individual merit was forsaken. Hughes fails to come to terms with his father's pursuit of wealth outside the framework of American society and their relationship remains strenuous and unmanageable (Hughes 71). At the same point in time, he himself also goes through a similar experience when he throws his books into the sea and assures himself of delinking with his past experiences which were largely shaped by the troubled family life and race-prejudiced society (Hughes 98). However, it is through these

experiences of the outside world that Hughes harnesses a sense of solidarity with the race which becomes the pillar of the cultural nationalism that he advocates.

The image of the black population constantly on the move to earn a living is reinforced through the experiences of Hughes' mother and stepfather. His mother's second marriage is marked by several episodes of separation-reunion which are sometimes driven by their movement to yet another city in search of yet another job. The northern cities do not hold out what they promised. The family moves through a lot many northern cities: New York, Pittsburgh, Washington, D. C., Chicago, Cleveland, and Atlantic City. The rootlessness and restlessness of their family life seem to be a part of the larger narrative of the experiences of the black population. The disillusionment of the African-American population with the ideals of democracy permeated into their daily lives with economic hardships, crowding of the cities, and ghetto existence. Hughes writes:

...Negroes were increasingly beginning to wonder where, for them, was that democracy they had fought to preserve. In Cleveland, a liberal city, the color line began to be drawn tighter and tighter. Theatres and restaurants in the downtown area began to refuse to accommodate colored people. Landlords doubled and tripled the rents at the approach of a dark tenant...Negroes were often discharged from their jobs and white men hired in their places. (Hughes 51)

However, Hughes problematizes the notion of class intertwined with that of race by bringing in the experiences of the educated middle-class black population which were equally comfortable with the Jim Crow laws in the South and concealed discrimination on the basis of race in the North. While talking about the Washington-based black population, Hughes

seems to harp upon a section of the black population which was economically self-reliant but at the same time remained politically quiet by choosing to neglect race solidarity (Hughes 206). He elaborates:

...the “better class” Washington colored people...drew rigid class and color lines within the race against Negroes who worked with their hands, or who were dark in complexion and had no degrees from colleges. These upper class colored people consisted largely of government workers, professors and teachers, doctors, lawyers, and resident politicians...they lived in comfortable homes, had fine cars, played bridge, drank Scotch, gave exclusive “formal” parties, and dressed well, but seemed to me altogether lacking in real culture, kindness, or good common sense. (Hughes 206-207)

It is the notion of “real culture” or the authentic experience of the African-American population that Hughes seems interested in (207). For Hughes, the authentic culture of black life is something quintessential to the underclass black population. It is this articulation of the authentic culture and cultivation of the racial consciousness that Hughes finds fundamental to his proposition of the aesthetics of black literature. In his seminal study “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes proposes that the working-class African-American population has maintained its ethnic distinction in the mosaic of American society. There is little historical explanation that he is interested in. For Hughes, the African-American writer has to translate this racial uniqueness into the literature that he is writing. It is the African-American self that stands to serve the aesthetics of literature. In his exploration of the various strands of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes seems uncomfortable with the acquiescence of the black artist with the cultural and artistic indoctrination of Eurocentric values. Hughes writes:

The Negro critics and many of the intellectuals were very sensitive about their race in books. In anything that white people were likely to read, they wanted to put their best foot forward, their politely polished and cultural foot-and only that foot...when Negroes wrote books they wanted them to be books in which only good Negroes, clean and cultured and not funny Negroes, beautiful and mice and upper class were presented. (Hughes 267)

Here Hughes recognises that the majority of the readers for the African-American authorship were still from the white section of the population. But what Hughes seems to refrain from is the politics of co-option, blind integration to the American society, and hence succumbing to the hegemonic system. Hughes recognised the significance of the moment of Harlem Renaissance. It was for the first time in the history of the race relationship that the white society was waking up to listen to the African-American experiences. The voices of the African-American writers were being recognised and there was little questioning of the self-validation. Even if does seem to be a self-emancipatory moment, nevertheless, it was a moment of self-assertion. (Basu) If any independent identity was not carved out, there was a breeding ground for such politics. Hughes seems to warn against the abandonment of the self which was largely infested with the working-class and underclass experiences. The propagation of the self-hate which was best symbolised in his father's persona is born out of the prejudices that the white majority has indoctrinated. Hughes argues that this self-hate is a part of the "Nordicized negro intellectual" who has fallen victim to the process of Americanism and hence does not do justice to the representation of the masses. (Hughes 3) For Hughes, the black artist must stand for his "racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, his incongruous humour that so often, as in the blues, becomes ironic laughter with tears." (Hughes 2)

Here he is not advocating a homogenous image of the African-American self. It is most evident in his self-conscious attempt to diverge from his patron in New York. He proposes to

abandon the limitations that the image of the new Negro and the Harlem Renaissance artist puts forward. For him, the African-American experience is far more diversified. The new Negro does not seem to represent the masses but a section of the population who have made it in the northern cities. Hughes does not totally debunk the image of the new Negro but seeks an expansion of the term where the multitudes can also find artistic expression and representation, thus countering the romanticized and consistent image. This could also be seen as the nebulous phase of cultural nationalism where both the black artist and the black middle class are invoked to cultivate a sense of acceptance of the rich and complex experiences which are infested with racial existence.

It is interesting here to explore the international experience of Hughes. For the African native population, he remains an Americanized voice incapable of articulating their experience. In the garb of Marcus Garvey's movement, where there is an attempt to create a sense of race solidarity, Hughes' experience problematizes this advocacy of race pride and race solidarity. For the Mexicans too, he remains "muy Americano." (Hughes 41)

Works Cited

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