

Langston Hughes' Poetry and the Dialectics of Minority

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Abstract: African Americans' place in the American society has changed over time, so has the focus of African American Literature. The 1770s marked the beginning of African American poetry with the publication of Phyllis Whitley's collection of poems, on various subjects: religion and moral just on arrival in America. It can therefore be assumed that silence on the part of black creativity after this time was due to their dehumanization by whites and not on a deficient black creativity. The educated white men assumed that the blacks could not express themselves, talk less of writing poetry. They declared them only fit for slavery, to be exploited, and to be servants of their supposed superiors in America and the rest of the world. In their writings, African American writers sought to resurrect their lost identity. Poetry thus became one of the mirrors through which the plight of the masses, their sufferings and their sorrow was projected. Langston Hughes is one of the key figures of this resurrection of the already dehumanised identity of the Blackman. His poetry delves into the dialectics of minority communities by not only portraying their plight, but also showing their potential and then writing to inscribe a new selfhood to the African American minority in the United States of America.

Key Words: African American, Dialectics, identity, Langston Hughes, Poetry.

I. INTRODUCTION

African American poetry falls into three main groups. The first group falls under the Vernacular tradition, during the era of slavery. Most African Americans who wrote during the nineteenth century focused on the struggle to bring about an end to slavery, where black writers concentrated on themes of emancipation, freedom and so on. Given the fact that the majority of African Americans before the twentieth century had no power to change their condition and were mostly illiterates, we can take into consideration the fact that substantial black poets as well as audiences only emerged from the twentieth century.

In the Anthology of American Literature titled *African-American Poetry: An Anthology 1773-1927*^[1] poets during this era were Phyllis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Paul Laurence Dunbar. These poets depict the conditions of enslaved blacks, criticize the treatment given to blacks by the dominating white masters, plead for the better treatment of blacks after slavery and expose blacks' post slavery conditions. In *Call and Response*, Harper^[2] in the poems "The Slave Mother," and "Bury Me in a Free Land," paints heart-grabbing pictures of the separation of families and the yearnings for freedom for which blacks longed during slavery. The concluding quatrain of "The Slave Auction" illustrates the first point: "Ye may not know how desolate/ Are bosoms rudely forced to part,/ And how a dull and heavy weight/ Will press the life-drops from the heart" (350). Added to this, "Bury Me in a Free Land" indicts the country for its unholy practice of enslaving human beings: "Make me a grave where'er you will, /In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill,/"

Make it among earth's humblest graves,/ But not in a land where men are slaves" (352). This example, therefore, indicates the major preoccupations of the first group of African American.

The second generation of African American poets span through the period of segregation, the Jim Crow laws and Ku Klux Klan. From the Harlem Renaissance, post-civil war era, until 1968, African Americans were marginalized, denied the right to vote, to hold positions, to have respectable jobs, or get an education and other opportunities like their fellow white Americans. The blacks were also denied a place in the legal system as police and judges and this made it difficult for blacks to win court cases and to triumph in violence orchestrated by the Ku Klux Klan, which was on the rise. Black citizens were thus tortured and lynched. Segregation in public transportation, lynching and general restrictive conditions for blacks, characterized this era.

Concerned with the situation of African Americans in the United States, poets of the Harlem Renaissance take up from where Harper and Dunbar leave off in the second category of African American poets during segregation and the Jim Crow eras. Openly addressing contemporary conditions, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennett, Angelina Weld Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, and Jean Toomer comment on the social and economic conditions of the African Americans in the early twentieth century. They also portray the socio-economic conditions that keep them locked in poverty, and the unwavering resentment that turns hope into resignation when they leave the violent South for what they anticipate is a more receptive and tolerant North. Hughes depicts the violence that prompts black folks to move to the North in "One-Way Ticket," the resistance they meet there in "Ballad of the Landlord," and their resignation to inner-city life in "Harlem." However, unlike his contemporaries, Hughes demonstrates in most of his poems that in spite the bleak situation, there is a glimmer of hope for downtrodden African Americans in America.

The next generation of African American writers focused more on novel and drama and used these to vividly describe the modern and the postmodern predicaments in the American capitalist society. Writers focused more on castigating the political obstacles to equality, which were presumably removed. Even though the American government seemed to have put an end to slavery, Jim Crow Laws, Ku Klux Klan oppressing acts, the colour line still met the Blacks wherever they found themselves in the United States. This is to say that the modern American society still struggles with issues of racial discrimination especially against minority peoples in America like the African Americans. This explains why this study sets out to discuss the dialectics of minorities in the poetry of Langston Hughes, one of the most emblematic figures of African American Literature.

^[3]Frederick Douglass remarks in his article "The Color Line" that the Negro has been denied work in the workshop, denied shelter in the inn, denied a fair vote in the ballot-box and denied a fair trial by the jury-box. He goes further to say that:

He has ceased to be the slave of an individual, but has in some sense become the slave of Society. He may not now be bought and sold like a beast in the market, but he is the trammelled victim of a prejudice, well calculated to repress his manly ambition, paralyze his energies, and make him a dejected and spiritless man, if not a sullen enemy to society fit to prey upon life and property and to make trouble generally. (18)

This describes racial discrimination towards the blacks despite the emancipation of slaves in America. This shows that the colour line meets the African American everywhere and shuts him out from all respectable political, social and economic undertakings. Although the American Federation of Labour (AFL) of 1886 focused on higher wages, better working conditions and shorter work hours, it failed because it discriminated

against the blacks. At one point in time, it had constitutional clauses limited only to whites. This supports Douglass' claims that America continued to be a segregated society to the blacks as they had for a very long time been looked upon as second-class citizens. Blacks in the twentieth century were still separated from the whites in most public areas, including schools, seats in buses, residential quarters and even churches, talk less of cemeteries. Blacks could not eat in the same restaurants, drink from the same water fountains, watch movies in the same theatre halls, play in the same park, and study in the same schools with whites. Often they had to sit at the back of the bus and usually gave up their seats to the whites when instructed to do so.

It is important to emphasise that Hughes belongs to the second group of poets, which is characterized by radical writings where African American poets believed that poetry was a weapon they could use to change the status quo. Hughes, in particular, believed in poems that would instigate and rally the masses to rise up against the existing discrimination in the United States of America and assert themselves to prove their importance and intelligence and clamour for a better existence.

America of the early twentieth century was predominantly a segregated society to the blacks as they were still looked upon as second-class citizens by the whites. The Whiteman for a very long time looked at and treated the black man as a member of the inferior race. The colour line met the African Americans everywhere and blocked them from all respectable trades and callings. As a result, they were marginalised in the social, political, psychological and economic domains. Hughes equally projects the issues threatening the African American life in the United States, showing how the African and the American identities have conflicted from time immemorial. It has often been said that to be born black in the American society during the first half of the twentieth century was a terrible predicament- an anathema. Martin Luther King Jr confirms this point of view in *Great People of Our Times*^[4] when he says that:

To be a Negro in America is to hope against hope. The advent of the Blackman in the United States, from the position of slave to that of proud and equal citizens, is slow. The Blackman's hopes have often ended in despair. Of the good things in life he has about one-half those of whites; of the bad he has twice those of the whites.
(62)

It is clear from the above quotation that the African American has often been regarded as a debased human being in the American society. In effect, he has no feeling of expectation as his hopes have always ended in despair. In the United States for a very long time after the end of slavery, social life was still characterized by significant racial stratification as substantial disparity in wages, unemployment rates, income and wealth levels, criminal victimization, and mortality rate existed between blacks and whites.

Twentieth century America witnessed an artistic explosion in social and racial consciousness. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s marked a unique period in the literature of African Americans and in that of the African diaspora. This was a period of artistic creativity and revival where writers went back to the vernacular tradition for inspiration. It was considered to be the rebirth of African American Arts. The Harlem Renaissance from 1920s to 1940s was the name given to the social and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem. Harlem during this period was a cultural centre that attracted black artists, musicians, photographers, poets and scholars. This marked the flowering of African American Literature and art as African Americans worked with a sense of creativity that has never before been experienced by many artists in their troubled history. Art was a response to their social condition as well as it was an affirmation of their dignity and essence.

African American writers in their various art forms had a vision to liberate the black masses from their oppressors. Hughes, who led the first school of thought, saw a need for black culture to be an artistic base for all African American writers. Hughes knew his society and the people he was writing about very well. He therefore anticipated and projected buoyancy in proving the energy and enthusiasm of the African Americans in his

Poetry. Hughes projects in his poetry that for America to stay alive, the African Americans are very important because they have done a lot as far as the history of America is concerned.

African American literature can generally be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States of America. It puts focus on the role of African Americans in the American society and what it means to be an American. According to Knife Abraham^[5] in *Politics of Black Nationalism: From Harlem to Soweto*, the black intellectuals of the twentieth century were more conscious of the indignities and humiliations suffered by their race than any other previous dissident group (11-12). This is evident in their literature, which explores the issues of freedom and equality long denied to blacks in the United States. It presents the experiences of the blacks from an African American point of view. The Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, is a time in which it became fashionable to showcase the musical and literary talents of the African Americans, and this gave Hughes the literary success which helped him to establish what lasted until his dead in 1967.

Before the American Civil War, African American Literature primarily consisted of memories of people who had escaped from slavery. Writings consisted of slave narratives which included accounts of life under slavery and the path from injustice to freedom. In African American literature, the vernacular tradition refers to church songs, blues, jazz, ballads, gospels, rap sermons and stories that reflect black expressive character. The Vernacular tradition, according to Gates and McKay^[6] in the prologue of *The Norton Anthology of African Literature*, is a rich tradition that has influenced many works especially the works of the Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson and Ralph Ellison.

II. LANGSTON HUGHES DISCOURSE OF DESPAIR AND HOPE.

Even though Hughes published works in a wide variety of other forms: fiction, drama, memoir, cinema, song writing, essays, autobiographies, and histories, he first and foremost saw himself as a poet. He referred to himself sometimes as a “folk poet.” According to him, “A poet is a human being,” and “Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country.” He constantly calls himself for courage and endurance necessary to write according to the belief “Hang yourself, poet in your words” (Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: I wonder as I Wonder 2*)^[7] Hughes is perhaps the most widely recognized African American poet of the early twentieth century. In his lifetime, he wrote and published about eight hundred poems and these poems are found in different collections such as: *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Fine Clothes of the Jew* (1927), *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1958), *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994). He focused his work on modern urban black life and modelled his stanza forms on the rhythms of jazz music. He also adapted the vocabulary of everyday black speech to poetry. This awarded him as a prolific black writer who strived for cultural liberation and blackself-consciousness. He provided innumerable possibilities for the liberation of black identity and cultural expression.

It is equally important to note that, although Hughes’ poetry later became revolutionary, this does not mean it became protest poetry: it does mean it kept abreast of the time and was able to record the situation in his poetry. In the 1930s, in response to the Great Depression, Hughes altered certain features of his verse as he began to emphasize the need for radical political action. The critic David Little John^[8] in *Critical Comments- Langston Hughes* says of him:

On the whole, Hughes’ creative life has been as full, as varied, and as original as Picasso’s, a joyful, honest monument of a career. There is no noticeable sham in it, no pretension, no self-deceit but a great deal of delight and smiling irresistible wit (147).

This shows that Hughes' works not only mirror the problems encountered by many blacks, but they also show their happy moments. He therefore presents an accurate picture of the racial situation from the twenties through the sixties, when he died. Inasmuch as he stood out from his contemporaries through his poetry, Hughes emerges as the most far-reaching African American poet because his poetry represents the most overturning of racial realities. He attempted to preserve himself as a poet beyond race and other social pressures. However, Hughes puts his "soul" into his writing. He did not try to portray the black man as faultless, but attempted to portray a perfect picture of the black man in the ghetto streets with his joys and hindrances. These happen to be the reflections of the feelings he experienced in his own life which therefore, make the understanding of his life very important in order to analyse his works. The aforementioned historical background has greatly influenced Hughes' poetry directly or indirectly. It is therefore necessary to discuss Hughes' contentions of minority discourse in America.

This subsection analyses the differences inherent in the African and the American identities, showing how both identities conflict with each other. The color-line originally referred to the racial segregation that existed in America after the abolition of slavery. This concept, according to Nathan Newman^[9] in his article titled "The Border is the Colour Line of the 21st Century," was the line that reserved the best jobs in the economy for one group of people, while denying them to another through both the law and private institutions such as businesses. To this effect, many unions refused membership and jobs to those on the wrong side of the colour line. W.E.B Du Bois^[10] says "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line, the question as to how far differences of race... will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation" (3). This shows that racial segregation continued to be an issue even after the abolition of slave trade as blacks, because of the colour of their skin, are unable to enjoy the privileges enjoyed by their white counterparts.

First, Hughes brings to the fore social prejudices in his poem "The Ballad of the Landlord". This poem projects the deplorable housing conditions of the blacks. Hughes points to the social injustice in the American society and the exploitative white property owners. Black tenants live in houses with holes on the roof and even the stairs to the houses are broken but the landlords are only interested in the money they pay. Being black, the landlord expects the tenant to live quietly in this broken house since he would not be given a fair treatment by the law if he dares to complain. This conversation between the landlord and the tenant shows the point more clearly.

Landlord, Landlord,

My roof has sprung a leak.

Don't you 'member I told you about it

Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,

These steps is broken down.

When you come up yourself

It's a wonder you don't fall down. (*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes 402*).

The above excerpt describes the squalid living conditions – a leaking roof, broken stairs and difficult access to the houses in which the African Americans live. Given that the African Americans live in separate quarters, they still live under deplorable conditions. We see how the tenant tries to resist the exploitation of the landlord by

telling him he can only pay his money and even pay more when he gets the roof and the stairs fixed yet he is helpless because the police, press and the court are unfair to him, he says in the following lines of the poem that he will even pay more if the house is renovated:

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?

Ten Bucks you say is due?

Well that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you

Till you fix this house up new (Ibid 402).

The above excerpt indicates how, the social space of the Black man is restricted, squalid and unfairly forlorn. It is almost a space filled with scatology as the roof leaks and this makes the reader to imagine a home in which the furniture is soaked, damp, smelly and, in short, destroyed. This is to say that, the poem is an indictment of the segregatory tendencies whereby the African American is relegated to poor living conditions, resulting in weakness and poor health on the part of the blacks. A more critical look at the poem points to differences in social status between the African Americans and the Whites. This could be implied in standards of living, strength and health.

This poem also illustrates the social injustice in the American society. The tenant is exploited by the property owner; yet, he is helpless because he is not given a fair judgment at the court. The tenant gets favour from nowhere as the police, the law and the press only help landlords to exploit the tenants the more. All the landlords can do is to collect money from the tenants and not repair the houses and when the tenants try to protect themselves, they are arrested and imprisoned. Hughes makes it clear in "The Ballad of the Landlord" that the landlord, the court and the press are a representative of the white institutions of discrimination as seen in the following lines: MAN THREATENS LANDLORD/TENANT HELD NO BAIL/JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL (Ibid 403)

These lines point to segregation in the political spaces. In these spaces, the African American gets confronted with hatred, indifference and unfair treatment. This is why when the tenant threatens the landlord, he is locked up for 90 days. The idea of segregation in this poem is closely related to Marxism and its tenet of class struggle. The whites could be looked at as the bourgeoisie and the African Americans as the proletariat or the lower class which is reflected in this poem. This poem is therefore a dramatic demonstration of racial discrimination in the United States of America. It presents the deep feeling of a Negro from an ordinary perspective like the relationship between the tenant and the landlord, with precise details of significance like the leakage of the roof and the broken steps. Hughes in this poem dramatizes the disparity in socio-political relations between the blacks and the whites in America during the twentieth century. It shows that social and political spaces are arenas in which African Americans are most segregated against.

Hughes goes further to indicate the psyche of the various races in his poem titled "Theme for English B." The poem is written against the backdrop of discrimination of the Blacks in an educational milieu. All through, Blacks were given very little right to education and because of this they feel uncomfortable and were taunted, teased and even mocked at when they find themselves in white schools. In order to maintain the white supremacy and fear that the blacks would challenge the whites, many whites felt threatened and did not want blacks to become educated. Hughes confesses the truth about the contradictions between the black and the white race in the American society by bringing to light a black boy in the face of discrimination in the twentieth century. The black man has gone through social prejudice, torture, violence and harassment in many parts of the United States, as compared to Americans of the pure white skin. The speaker explains what he had to go through being the only Black student in his class saying;

The instructor said,

Go home and write

a page tonight.

And let that page come out of you-

Then, it will be true.

.....

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me

At twenty-two, my age, but I guess I'm what

I feel and hear: Harlem. I hear you:

hear you, hear me- we two- you, me, talk on this page.

...

I guess being colored doesn't make me not like

The same things other folks like who are other races.

(The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes 409)

The Black student in this poem expresses dissatisfaction in the American racist society of the twentieth century. Even though Blacks were allowed in some white schools, they did not feel comfortable or equal to their white peers and this played greatly on their psyche. The fact that the speaker is the only coloured student in his class makes him already have a premonition about the kind of treatment to expect from his white instructor. He is in a dilemma and wonders what he is going to write about himself, he is twenty-two and barely knows who he is that is why he says he is what he feels, sees and hears about his environment. He goes ahead to explain that it is not easy for him at his age and the fact that he is Black and just twenty-two years old to know what is true for him.

Nevertheless, he thinks he deserves the right to eat, sleep, drink and be loved just like his white counterparts. He would love to have the chance and right to enjoy goodness of everything. Hughes reveals segregation through the eyes of this young learner who comes to realise the fact about himself that makes him different from his other classmates, considering that he is the only African American in his class and the fact that he lives in Harlem. According to his society, his skin colour should define what he likes. This points to the fact that black kids during the early twentieth century were not given the opportunity to "understand life," listen to music, sleep and even eat, since according to the society being "colored" prevented them from liking what their other white fellows liked. This shows that even though these young learners are in the same class, they are divided along racial lines and their differences are far extended than just skin colour. These differences extend to the psyche of various races and the African Americans feel psychological restrictions while the White Americans feel freedom. The young learner clearly shows the difference when he notes that his instructor is white and "more free." Hughes, from this young learners' point of view, shows the differences found between whites and blacks in the American society in relation to their experiences, both in school and in the society. This young learner, therefore, tries to figure himself out as well as talk of segregation and insists on tolerance for blacks in the white community.

Despite the fact that they will not like to tolerate or accept the other races, they also have something to offer as much as the whites do. The speaker has accepted his place as the minority, yet he equally tries to raise awareness on the possibility of Blacks and Whites to cohere and help each other towards the creation of a better America. Hughes in this poem goes a long way to project a psychological analysis of self by an African American. In this self-examination, the speaker comes face to face with the psychological barriers that he must encounter and overcome in the social space of his school and his classroom. He also examines the great disparity between what his white counterparts feel, enjoy, do and aspire for which according to the white Americans, he can never do or feel. He makes a suggestion say, "I guess being colored doesn't make me not like/The same things other folks like who are other races" (ibid 409)

In another dimension, Hughes in his poem, "Silhouette," projects a social space of interpersonal relationship. The persona in this poem cautions the white ladies to try and overcome their emotions towards the black men because they bring nothing but trouble to them. The punishment given to any black man who attempts to like a white lady is lynching and mostly they are hanged to roadside trees by white men for motives of protecting white womanhood. In fact, blacks were not even allowed to talk to a white woman, talk less of having a relationship with her. Hughes comes to the conclusion that the blacks during the first half of the twentieth century were still subjected to violence and harassment in the social space of interpersonal relationship. This is to say that, white brutality against blacks was still at the peak as evident in the second stanza of "Silhouette":

They've hung a black man

To a roadside tree

In the dark of the moon

For the world to see

How Dixie protects

Its white womanhood

(The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes 305)

African Americans faced violence, cruelty and prejudice in the twentieth American society. The image of a black man in the moonlight hanging from a tree projects brutality, which points to discrimination in the social spaces. Hanging a black man to a roadside tree makes the reader to wonder what this man must have done to deserve this kind of punishment. The speaker explains that this harsh punishment is to protect the white women from having a relationship with blacks in the South. The black man is seen as a dehumanized human being deprived of feelings and subjected to violence and harassment. The black race is looked upon as a race, void of love and with a dreary life style. The punishment given to any black man who attempts to like a white lady is lynching and mostly they are hanged to the roadside trees. This harsh punishment given to this black man happens to be a warning to all the black men, with the intensions of wooing a white woman. The fact that African Americans are not given the opportunity to mingle with their white counterparts shows that America, at a point in time, faced problems of interpersonal relationships and the relationship between blacks and whites was not cordial, in fact, it was even forbidden.

In like manner, Hughes portrays a socio economic space and interpersonal relationship in the poem "I Too" where the speaker in the first line claims that he "too" sings America. He says he is the "darker brother" who is sent to eat in the kitchen "when company comes" but he laughs and eats well and grows bigger and stronger for he says tomorrow, he will sit and dine at the table "when companies come" (ibid 46) and no one will venture to

ask him to eat in the kitchen. He further explains that they will see his beauty and will be ashamed for he concludes; "I, too am American." (*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 46)

This poem captures segregation which brings to light, the socio cultural realities of the American society during the twentieth century. Hughes, in this poem, alludes to the common practice of racial segregation during the twentieth century when the African Americans faced discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives. They were required to live, work, eat and even travel separately from their white counterparts. Moreover, African Americans had little civil or legal rights. They were often victims of racial violence and again faced economic marginalisation. This shows the painful complexities of racial spaces and the socio economic relationship between the whites and the blacks wherein the blacks were looked upon as secondary, subordinate, and inferior citizens. Moreover, Hughes' poem explains why they are out of sight and eat in the kitchen rather than eating in the dining room like their white counterparts. From this poem therefore, the powerful voice of the African Americans is heard through the speaker who confronts the socio economic and interpersonal relationships that will gradually change and emancipate the blacks as well as bringing them into the house of American democracy.

African Americans lacked the Whites' rights such as voting and owning land; they had to submit to the Jim Crow laws which prevented them from practising their normal human rights. Their life was devoted to working for the white race. The Blacks, as a matter of fact, were exploited economically because slavery for the white Americans was a trade which depended largely on such exploitation. Franklin Hope John^[11] in *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, remarks that: "To the southern colonists, slavery was first an economic institution inaugurated for the purpose of solving an aggravating economic problem" (86). White labour proved ineffective. Consequently, the colonists saw that enslaving African Americans was the only solution available at that time.

Economic marginalisation has been for a long period of time closely related to racial differences or issues that have to deal with descent Gunnar Myrdal.^[12] a Swedish economist concludes in his 1994 study "An American Dilemma." that "The Negro was brought to America for the sake of the white man's profit. He was kept in slavery for many generations in the same interest." (2) In other words, the racially subjugated or the Negro has been made a slave for a long period for the interest of the white man since the primary reason for even bringing Negroes to America was for material and financial gain or to boost the Whites' economy.

In the poem "Negro", Hughes expatiates on the African American and their unabatedly deplorable working conditions. The poem illustrates the socio-economic conditions of blacks' lives right up to the twentieth century. Also, Hughes projects African Americans as Negroes, as have been slaves, been workers, singers and have been victimised by the White Americans. It is evident that the American society throughout has been irrational to the Blacks both socially and economically. Hughes in the following lines explains how the African Americans beginning from the time of slavery to the modern times have been wedged in the grip of the so-called American covetousness and civilisation.

I am a negro: ...

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door –steps clean.

I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.

I made mortar for the Woolworth Building....

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of Africa (*ibid* 24)

Hughes states in this poem that Afro-Americans have been slaves for a long time. They took part in building pyramids in Egypt and they served as slaves under the reign of Caesar. The poet is proud of his ancestors' history; he starts his poem with the word "Negro" which is known as a word of racial segregation given by the Whites. Though uttering such a word implies a kind of humiliation to African Americans, Hughes proudly declares in line one that "I am a Negro." he challenges the Whites using this word as he implicitly shows the unforgettable history of the Blacks as slaves. This poem happens to be written in the early twentieth century, a time when blacks were badly treated because of their race and skin colour.

Moreover, when Hughes traces African Americans' history as slaves, it does not mean that he shows them as weak or void of determination. On the contrary, they had a struggling history in fighting Belgians who arrived in Africa and colonised some regions. "The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo/They lynch me still in Mississippi"; these lines show how African Americans had undergone physical torture like cutting off their hands and other kinds of physical pains. Nevertheless, they struggled to the end and for many years up to their arrival in America, Mississippi, where they settled down. More importantly, they played a very vital role in building the Woolworth Building that was completed in 1913 at the height of 792 feet and 1 inch and was finally designed and built to be the tallest building in the world. As for the reign of Caesar, the Blacks worked as slaves and served in his household. The poet compares these situations to the Blacks' situation that lived in the era when George Washington was the president of America. Although eighteen centuries had passed, African Americans remained slaves, suffering from racial persecution: "I brushed the boots of Washington." Slavery during the ancient Greek and Roman times might be justifiable because there was no room for Human Rights. However, after eighteen centuries, slavery should not be in existence, especially with all slogans that call for human rights, ironically raised by white Americans.

Although the social, physical and the economic space of the African Americans as projected by Hughes in the poem, "Negro", has been associated with unmitigated sufferings, they never gave up. They chose to stay on their feet and remain optimistic. They have been suppressed from ancient times as slaves dragging stones to build the Pyramid right up to modern times carrying mortar for the construction of Woolworth building and again their hands being cut off in the Congo or even being lynched, yet they never resign in their struggle to become free. As such, their socio- economic space is limited, compared to that of their White counterparts; still, they remain positive and hold on to their identity as "Negros."

Hughes also brings to notice the Jim Crow laws, which prevent African Americans from the right to social justice in America. The poem, "Ennui", demonstrates how poverty- stricken the racially discriminated are. The speaker makes us imagine how miserable and boring life was to the poor African Americans during the twentieth century. He says: It's such a/ Bore/ Being always/Poor (*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 305)

Poverty here is connected to boredom, a fact that projects how the Blacks are unable to enjoy the simplest needs of life because of the lack of fair job opportunities as the Whites. This shows how poverty has dominated the lives of the African Americans and equally expresses their displeasure with their situation. The desperate situation of the persona does not only project how devastated they are but equally gives them reason to desperately look for ways of improving on their present situation through revolutionary tendencies and self-assertion.

Hughes continues to develop his view on the African American identity in his poem "Share Croppers." He points out that the Blacks constitute the working class, yet they benefit little or nothing from the country's economic resources. This poem exposes segregation in the economic spaces where the African Americans are working hard and doing all the tilling, planting, harvesting and manufacturing but they are often rejected when it is time to harvest. The persona pathetically reports how the whites just come in to take everything when it is ready and leave them with nothing in the following lines.

When the cotton's picked
And the work is done
Boss man takes the money
And we get done
Leave us hungry, ragged
As we were before
Year by year goes by
And we are nothing more
Than a herd of Negroes...

(The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes 185)

The "Boss man" in this poem indicates white supremacy, which symbolizes exploitation. The white capitalists earn the money without doing any fieldwork, while the Negroes work hard to produce the crops and the rich White lords only sell the crops to make more money for themselves. Hughes exposes the cruel exploitation of the Black workers who are driven to the fields as if they were a herd of cattle to do all the "ploughing, planting, hoeing/to make cotton yield." and whites only come in when all the work is done. Ironically, the Blacks produce the cotton meant for spinning and weaving of clothes in America but they are "Nothing more / than a herd of Negroes / Driven to the fields." The whites do not care about the living conditions of the blacks; they remain poor and isolated while they keep on toiling for their white masters, year in year out. Hughes cannot help seeing the white capitalists earn money without doing any work. That is why this poem demonstrates Hughes' satire of the American avaricious and racially segregated society through his dialectics of minority discourse.

III. CONCLUSION

This historical outlook shows the dialectics of a minority discourse in which Langston Hughes projects the injustices the Blacks have suffered in America. However, it can be said that Hughes' poetry is geared towards improving the circumstances of the Black's existence in America. Hughes' view of the Black identity, therefore, was with optimism as he seeks to reflect particular historical events that have had a great impact on African American lives and have harmonised the racial spaces that existed between the Blacks and the Whites in

America. It can be observed from this analysis that the assumption of a better life based on hard work, as enshrined in the American dream, has not yielded enough, as those African Americans who work extremely hard tend to achieve little or nothing. This is clearly evident in the poems treated in this paper. The examination shows that the reward to hard work is rather despair. The work that African Americans in America do is mean and the wages are meagre which reveals the endless cycle of poverty for African Americans trapped in the exploitative hand of their White masters. Hughes' poetry therefore succeeds in projecting the socio-economic and political problems in America, which according to Marxism, portrays a society handicapped by differences wherein the minority continues to suffer from the exploitative greed of the upper class. Hughes' poetry reflects the American society before and during the time of his writing and thus pre-empted a future for the said society free of identity differences or better still, racial differences. This, therefore, ties to the belief that every literary piece is a reflection of the historical, socio-cultural, political and economic spirit of its society from which it is written. It is no doubt then that an African American has ruled America. Even though all the discriminations and instances of racial segregation have not been removed, there is ample evidence that progress is being made, even though it is little by little, towards a more equitable society.

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