Priti Sehrawat

American Literature

14 November 2017

Langston Hughes Representation of Anger in African-Americans

“An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose”. (Lee)

Langston Hughes, ‘the King of the Harlem Renaissance’ is known for his social commentary on the African-American community as well as on struggles of black. Langston Hughes portrays ignorance, anger and struggle of the African-Americans about race, about establishing their identities. Hughes dreams of a world free from the burden of color not just a free colored world.

Harlem is perceived as the centre of African-American culture and black ghetto. White residents in Harlem never welcomed the migration of blacks into the city and protested against what is known as ‘Negro Invasion’. The Great Migration (1916-1970) brought many African-American to Harlem from South to North. They were enchanted with the idea of having great income and new opportunities in the new city with no racial inequality. Harlem is a black area in New York City that became a home for many wandering blacks to settle in the first half of 19th century. The recurrent theme of Hughes poetry is about dream being deferred, which clearly portrays dismay and disappointment from life that blacks faced in Harlem. In his later works, his disillusionment with Harlem is visible as he now portrays Harlem as urban community not in his usual celebratory verses. In his poem, “Puzzled” (1949), he compared Harlem to hell which is an unexpected transition on part of Hughes; he expressed frustrations, discontent and feelings of Negros throughout America. Harlem as a space of ghetto is seen as a symbol of capitalist exploitation of black minority not as a cultural space for communal identity. In his poem, “Harlem”, he depicted the realities and conditions of blacks in place of Harlem. “Harlem” is composed to reflect the marginalization and discrimination of the African-Americans and to spread awareness for the emancipation to occur. It seeks to emancipate the heart and mind of black Americans, which would help them to achieve intellectual development and pursue better lives within society.

In his poem, “Theme for English B”, the student is asked to write an assignment about anything on a paper true from his own mind and thoughts. The student is the only black in the class and is thus expected to be intellectual individual because of his color. He is in dilemma about the instructor’s expectations about him. He quotes about the racial attitudes and describes that he and his instructor are part of each other. The poem teaches a moral lesson about racial equality and identity within society. Although they are different because of color but they are human beings and very much alike, the White Americans and the blacks are part of each other. The poem ends with sense of disappointment, regret and anger that whites are still freer than blacks are. The Negros was living as prisoner between American materialism and civilization. Their own life can be summed up into one word, ‘suffering’ which cannot be mitigated. America is a land of taboo, restrictions and inhibitions and Hughes is trying to show the suffering of black within these restrictions. He gave solutions through his poem to be proud of being black and cope up with their emotions, pains, emptiness, suffering and vagueness towards their life. He wanted them to be self-dependent. They must fight for their rights and resist force and end injustice and inequality of which they were part. In other poem, “Negro Speaks of Rivers”, he seized the soul of black community. The river is used to indicate their history, pain, anger, struggle and perseverance. From the beginning of the first line, he connects the flow of river with the blood that flow in their veins of blacks that their culture, heritage is deep and old as river and that fill them with great wisdom. Rivers like the black have struggled a lot to be what they are now, “My soul has grown deep like rivers” (Rampersad 23).

W.E.B. Du Bois enumerates the idea of double consciousness and veil that appears in the poems of Hughes. Their identity has been divided into various parts which is impossible for blacks to have unified identity of their own. Their self-identity is made through the perception of others i.e., through the eyes of black people. The identity being stamped by an oppressive community in contrast with one’s own struggle in forming their identity allowed Hughes to incorporate his thoughts and anger into writing for greater cause. “Madam’s Calling Cards” shows articulation of Hughes reflection on racial equality and the changes happening in society. The mode of behavior that Madame holds is exceptional as she is trying to have authority like the white Americans tried to have over African-Americans. Double consciousness creates a dispute within black Americans, as they strive to reunite their identity as black and as American citizen. Hughes poems deals with the idea to strive for an identity of oneself, identity should be given by looking at their struggle and hardships they faced, not based on their color of being black. Hughes has always felt pride in his identity as a black. He expresses his love for his black identity in many of his poem.

For Langston Hughes, being black is beautiful, it is pure than white. It is a symbol of strength not weakness. He wrote poems to encourage African-American to support them and help them get free from all the restrictions of Americans. His poems serve not just a platform for showing the anger against Americans but also to make African-Americans realize the importance of their black identity. Hughes have always considered himself one with the black American not as individual. In his poetry, he always talks about the collective state of mind as his own merging his own poetic personality with the African-Americans. Hughes was called as ‘People’s Poet’ as his poetry talks about the stark realities of blacks in America, about their poverty, suffering and plight of women.

Langston Hughes being referred to as the titanic figure of the 20th century American literature. Hughes aim was to show the difficulties faced by the black writers to be represented in the literary canon. Hughes emphasizes on the racial attitudes that black writers as well as blacks should accept their black identity. His literary approach starts by questioning, “Why should I want to be white?” (Hatem, 210), and ends by claiming that most of the themes of his poems are derived from the life. He viewed himself as a racially representative writer.

Work Cited

“Dreams of Blacks Deferred in the Poetry of Langston Hughes Essay.” Web. 9 November 2017.

<https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Dreams-of-Blacks-Deferred-in-the-Poetry-FK77UUZTJ>

Kavitha, B. “An analysis of the poetry of langston hughes the voice for the voiceless.” Shodhganga@INFLIBNET: *An analysis of the poetry of langston hughes the voice for the voiceless*, Karaikudi, 10 July 2010, hdl.handle.net/10603/139162.

Lee, Ashley. Words from Mr. Hughes. *Black Art; Real Stories.*

“Poetry of Langston Hughes The Black American.” 7 February 2005. Web, 9 November 2017.

<https://www.essaytown.com/subjects/paper/poetry-langston-hughes-black-american/78817>

Rampersad, Arnold, editor. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. First Vintage Classic Edition , 1995.

Slate, Nico. Langston Hughes and Race as Propaganda. *The Prism of Race*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014. Pp.57-84.