

PORTRAYAL OF RACIAL-GENDER ISSUES IN THE POEMS OF LANGSTON HUGHES

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ABSTRACT

From time immemorial, racial gender issues are a constant subject for discussion. The spread of education, rising sense of awareness have made many eminent scholars to bring out the racial and gender issues to limelight. It is the poets way of exposing the atrocities and the painful experiences of the colored people in America and other countries. Among the galaxy of many black scholars, Langston Hughes is of considerable importance. So an attempt is made to portray the issues of racism and gender inequalities as presented by Langston Hughes in his poems.

Keywords :- Colored, Apartheid, Suppression, Pessimism

Langston Hughes, a dominant black poet of the Harlem Renaissance, is noted for his representation of Afro-American gender race and culture. His exploration of the convergence of race, gender and culture earned him the title, ‘The Shakespeare of Harlem.’ The thematic scope of his poetry covers the faithful portrayal of social realism, primitive naturalism and democratic current of protest against racial and sexual injustice in America. To Hughes it seems that identity is in-separable from the individual and society.

The vigorous force of his poetry is derived from the collective consciousness of his race. Hence, he could be called a true cultural ambassador of his race. His intellectual observations show his strong ethnic sense of origin, nativity and identity. Associated with other literary figures at Harlem like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Henstar, Countee Cullan, W.E.B Du’ Bois and Claude Mckay, the poet was a witness to socio-political ups and downs in that particular period. His radical views are shaped by his observations of Marxists thinking.

Hughes and Black Female Consciousness –

Hughes’ female character confronts gender-racial myths in their struggle for identity. In ‘Southern Mammy Sings’ the poet takes on a female voice to contrast the gender-racial stereotype of the ‘mammy’ with the reality of black woman’s domestic work:

Miss Gardner’s in her garden

Miss Yardman's in her yard
 Miss Michaelmas is at de mass
 And I am getting tired!
 I am getting tired!

The happy expose of white woman is sharply contrasted with a black woman's experiences. In 'Ruby Brown' the domestic work of a black woman is contrasted with the work of black female prostitute. A young black woman, in her white employer's house, is struck by two questions:

What can a colored girl do
 On the money from a white woman's kitchen?
 And ain't there any joy in this town?

Ruby Brown, the speaker in the poem, decides to adopt sex work as an economic need. Her motives for accepting prostitution reflect economic need and not moral corruption on her part. The poet has successfully depicted that economical and social conditions have shaped the identities of black women in white America.

With the exposes of the uneven world, a sense of oneness runs as an important thread throughout his poems. The collective resistance to the gender-racial oppression, constitutes sisterhood. Similarly, the 'Madam' series of poems catalogue genders racial resistance in black women's lives. The series focuses on the life of Madam Alberta K. Johnson, a black woman, who asserts her pride in taking the name Madam. Talking to readers she proudly proclaims:

I do cooking
 Day's work, too!
 Alberta K. Johnson
 Madam to you

The poem 'Madam and Her Merdam' narrates an incident in which Merdam (black woman) reacts against her overworking before her employer:

I said, Madam,
 Can it be
 You know, Alberta,
 I love you so!

This passage shows the convergence of race, class and gender in a black woman's dealing with a white woman. The change in attitude, in the employer, points to the historic relationship between white and black women. At the same time, calling her by her name by the employer is an attempt to negate Madam's status as a real woman. The poem underlines the rejection of the mythic relationship between white and black women.

Hughes demonstrates that oppression of black women and men are linked with race, but are manifested in gender specific ways. The poem 'Mulatto' is addressed to the consciousness of a white male plantation owner. The black boy in the poem feels:

What's a body but a toy?
 Juice bodies
 Of nigger wenches
 Blue black
 Against black fences.
 O, you little bastard boy,
 Whats' a body but a toy?

“ I am your son, white man!” is an uproar given by the black boy, challenging the myths used to justify the rape of his mother and the economic exploitation of both the mother and the son. The language of the protest becomes a slang only to bring into words, the height of rage and anger against the socio-cultural make-up that desperately cuts the growth, health and freedom of African minds.

The sexual exploitation of black women by white constitutes the subject matter of the poem ‘ Father and Son.’ Bert, the illegitimate son of Colonel Norwood, resists the label ‘bastard’ pinned on him by his father. The confrontation between the father and son reaches its climax when Bert kills his father in self defense.

The oppression of the mother (Coralec Lewis) and the son is linked to racism but its consequences are manifested in gender-specific ways. Lewis is penniless since ‘the dead man left no heir.’ She is looked down upon because of her association with the white man. The lynching of Bert and his brother is the result of their demanding legitimate rights and status.

‘Song for the Dark Girl’ questions the very meaning of love and prayer. The girl recalls the body of her lover hanging by a cross-road tree bruised and whipped. The girl is of the opinion that the use of prayer is not really worthwhile for human sense of life. The horrible experience in life drives her to the conclusion that love is nothing but a mere shadow. The poem ends on a note of pessimism about love and life.

Hughes and Black Race Identity

The message never to regret or stop in the way always surfaces in the poems of Langston Hughes. It echoes in ‘Mother to Son’ where the mother desires to generate courage and patience in her son. She becomes an agent of wisdom, which has been earned through bitter life experiences. She wants her son to know how life has been a thorny path for her and how she had overcome all the barriers by self-motivated spirit of courage, goodwill and patience. The path of life, particularly for those deprived of freedom and status, has never been rosy or easy. To accomplish in life, the mother opines, patience and courage are badly needed. The child thus, is made fit to live and fight in order to gain the ultimate goal in life.

The poetic world of Hughes considerably contributes in raising the issue of race as a means of exploitation. He questions the validity of the white notions that judge blacks’ existence. In ‘ Same in Blues’ the poet focuses on the frustration that a man feels at not being able to fulfill the male ascribed role of provider and protector, because of racial & economic constraints.

The inability of black male to discharge the duties initiates Hughes’ female character. In ‘Hard Daddy’ Hughes discusses a woman’s frustration with her man’s insensitive response, she laments:

I cried on his shoulder but
He turned his back on me.
He said a women’s cryin’
Never gonna bother me.

Though both the characters react in typically gender ascribed ways, the poet gives a thematic twist at the end of the poem. The female characters rebels against her man’s insensitivity, thus:

I wish I had wings to
Fly like the eagles flies.....
I’d fly on ma man an’
I’d scratch out both his eyes

The disturbed consciousness thus has been depicted as a result of multiple oppression. An appeal to break down all oppressive social elements runs through all his works.

Love among black men is a revolutionary act. It not only generated the feeling of oneness among the blacks but also contributed to their strength of resistance. In 'I Love my friend' the poet directly challenges racism and sexism in whites and internalizes racism and sexism in the self love for one's race, to the poet, is the source of deepest power. The racist's bias that treats people as objects of fear and scorn has been rejected.

Conclusion

Hughes' poem is a cry of protest resulting from his exploration of African ethnic identity. His creative corpus stresses the cultural tension resulting from racism and conflict with the whites' ideology. The agony of the blacks in their slavery and suffering, exploitation and torture stand as the historical back-ground for his writing. His poetry, especially demonstrates strong advocacy for black existence, the African tradition and culture. He actively spreads the seed of social reformation that aims at the re-contextualization of black identity.

Works Cited:

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