

الوعي المزدوج في قصائد مختارة للانغستون هيوز

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Double Consciousness in Langston Hughes's Selected Poems

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المستخلص

يقدم البحث وصفاً لنهضة هارلم كحركة ثقافية و يوضح كيف أن ازدهار هذه الحركة مكن الكتاب الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي من إحداث تغيير اجتماعي. علاوة على ذلك، فإنه يوضح مدى تأثير هذه الحركة على تمثيلات العرق والمكان. كما يسلط الضوء على دور الذاكرة الثقافية في إعادة بناء القصص الشخصية وإعطاء صوت للفئات المهمشة و الغير مسموع أصواتها. يتناول البحث انقسام الهوية لدى لانغستون هيوز. ويظهر كيف يعمل الوعي المزدوج بشكل استطرادي لتعكس على أنها تجربة مؤلمة و مُمكنة . وباعتباره شاعراً أمريكياً من أصل أفريقي، يعاني هيوز من التناقض. وبالإضافة إلى أصله العرقي، يتطرق البحث إلى بعض العوامل الشخصية التي تشكل وتعيد تشكيل شخصيته المزدوجة. وقد تم اختيار ثلاث قصائد، وهي صليب (1926)، و مولاتو (1926)، و لسان غير زنجي غريب (1974)، لتحليلها في ضوء مفهوم "الوعي المزدوج" لدي بوا. وتتناول كل هذه القصائد هوية هيوز المجزأة ككاتب أفريقي يعيش في الشتات الأمريكي. يناول البحث طريقة عمل ذاكرة هيوز وكيف أنها ساعدته في إعادة تشكيل شخصيته وشعره. كما إنه يكشف كيف ان ذكريات هيوز مكنته على السفر جغرافياً وفكرياً إلى أماكن مختلفة و سماع أصوات متعددة.

ويخلص البحث إلى أن الهوية العرقية بطبيعتها لا تمتلك شكلاً ثابتاً لأنها يمكن أن تمثل نفسها في مناصب عليا أو أدنى، في مواقع السلطة أو المراقبة. وإن البياض والسواد عبارة عن بنيات اجتماعية وأيديولوجية يمكن تشكيلها بشكل استطرادي. علاوة على ذلك، فإن موقف هيوز الوسطي يمكنه من استعادة وطنه الماضي وتضمينه في مشهده الحالي حيث تتشكل شخصيته الجديدة.

Abstract

The research paper provides a description of Harlem Renaissance as a cultural movement. It demonstrates how the flowering of this movement has made possible for African American writers to bring about social change. Moreover, it shows how it has its impact on the representations of race and place. It also highlights the role of cultural memory in reconstructing personal stories and giving voice to the silenced and marginalized groups.

The research discusses Langston Hughes's identity split. It shows how double-consciousness operates in a discursive way as a tormenting and empowering experience. As an African-American poet, Hughes experiences ambivalence. In addition to his ethnic origin, the research touches on some autobiographical factors that shape and reshape his hyphenated persona. Three poems, namely "Cross"(1926), "Mulatto"(1926), and "Strange-un-Negro tongue"(1974), are chosen to be analyzed in the light of Du Bois' concept of 'double consciousness'. All of these poems deal with Hughes's fragmented identity as an African writer living in the American Diaspora. The research reflects on the workings of Hughes's memory and how this refashions his persona and poetry. It reveals how Hughes's reminiscences help him to travel geographically rather than just intellectually to different topographies where diverse voices can be heard.

It concludes that racial identity is amorphous in nature for it can represent itself in superior or inferior positions; in positions of power or surveillance. Whiteness and blackness are social and ideological constructions that can be discursively configured. Moreover, Hughes's in-between stance enables him to recapture his past homeland and embed it in his present landscape wherein his new personality is fashioned.

I. The Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro, the Vogue: An Introduction

"It was the period when the Negro was in vogue"
(Langston Hughes, 2002, p.178)

To define what Harlem Renaissance means is hard. As an aura, it is characterized by complexity and conflict. People barely can reach an agreement in defining it. Metaphorically speaking, it however comes to be associated with a vogue, a word that Langston Hughes introduces to readers in his autobiographical book, *The Big Sea* (1940) to refer to the Harlem Renaissance which has begun earlier in 1924 as "the first significant literary and cultural movement in African American





history”(Hutchinson,2007, p. 28). Vogue has become an essential aspect of the Harlem Renaissance, decoding and signifying the fashionable celebration of blackness that must culminate in its rebirth. As a vogue, the Harlem Renaissance, which is built on contradictions, celebrates black self-assertion against white supremacy, but such celebration is achieved in anticolonial context ever since the inception of Africans in America after Emancipation in 1863. This results in the birth of the black American identity or what is called the 'New Negro.' More than a persona, the term 'New Negro', that is invented during the Harlem Renaissance, is meant to correct the negative stereotypical presentations that had been "already in play by the time [Africans] arrived in the New World (Hutchinson, p. 29).

Henry Louis Gates (2015) remarks that these New Negroes, upon setting their feet in America, have immediately "set out to redefine __against already received racist stereotypes__ who and what a black person was, and how unlike the racist stereotypes, the black original indeed actually could be” (p.131). Embarking on their journey to liberate black people from all the shameful stereotypes that psychologically, socially, and even politically have pressured blacks, the Harlem Renaissance black intellectuals feel the urge to invest "in the ideology of the New Negro all of their ambitions,"(Hutchinson, p.30) or even the tendency “toward a cultural self-reconstruction and a Negro aesthetic”(Hutchinson, p.4).

The New Negroes develop a desire to socially assert their blackness in divided America and reflect on their lived experience through their American artistic production. Metaphorically speaking, the New Negro stands for the cultural mediator whose persona must have been structured around the convergence and divergence of oppositional views and identities (Hutchinson, p.16). For Alain Locke (1925), young intellectuals manage to rethink racial identity by speaking like Negroes rather than for Negroes or to Negroes. They come to reconsider race as a gift which is responsible for endowing them with meaning about themselves and the world as a whole (Locke, p. 48-49). In other words, wholeness is conceived by this formation of ‘New Negro’ in the sense that this new image makes possible for the Blacks as a denigrated and silenced ethnic groups to be represented in an antithetical way and be powerfully recognized by its “sign of plenitude, ... [as well as its] reconstructed presence”(Gates, p. 130)

In his remarkable essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” first published in *The Nation* in June 1926, Hughes speaks about this dream of upward mobility and describes the hard task that a

Negro artist in America_ like the promising Negro poet who tells Hughes that he wants to be a poet but not a Negro one_ needs to fulfill. For Hughes, the Negro artist needs "to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be a little Negro and as much American as possible"(Hughes, 1999, p.55). Using a metaphorical language, Hughes in this essay goes further to say that mountain will be high and the road will definitely be rocky if the serious black artist continues writing and producing a racial art. As a result, the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, as other blacks or New Negroes incepted in America, comes to view "Africa through the black internationalist lens that [is] definitely American"(Hutchinson, p.4).

It is through this American context that Hughes has given articulation to his power of black cultural expression, succeeding both in gaining black citizenship in the United States and establishing himself as a black internationalist. With the publication of his first poems, Hughes has become the voice of black America during 1920s. Catherine Morley (2012) has described him as not only "the unofficial poet laureate of Harlem,"(p.197) but also "one of the most important figures in the twentieth-century black American writing"(Morley, p.197). Writing from the American diaspora, Hughes invests in what Henry Louis Gates (2015) calls the "culturally willed myth [of the New Negro],"(p. 132) producing poems that show sometimes primitivism, with Africa romanticized or Africans ashamed of and suffering from feelings of inferiority that relate to their denigrated slave past. Put like this, it can be inferred that the new invented term 'New Negro' with its contradictory assertions of inferiority and triumph,"(Hutchinson, p.30) is what adversely affects the black African- American artist's psyche and makes him feel as if he was living in a limbo without any sense of wholly belonging either to America or Africa. According to W. B. Du Bois (2007), this persona will be perpetually caught in

a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, _an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder... In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism. (p. 8)

II. Langston Hughes's Double Consciousness



It is stated earlier that dual consciousness has afflicted Langston Hughes's persona. This is clearly articulated in his twelve-line poem titled "Cross," which appears in *The Weary Blues* (1926). The poem deals with the tragic mulatto theme. According to Arthur P. Davis, this theme is a reflection of Hughes's own experience with his father (Jackson, 1978, 202-203). Biracial in origin, Hughes presents the speaker of the poem as a mulatto. In literature, the mulatto is a mixed-blood character who is often portrayed as the offspring of a white father and an African-American black mother (slave). Accordingly, the speaker starts his poem, lamenting his being neither white nor black and expressing his feelings of loss, frustration, and agony. Moreover, he curses his white father and blames his colored mother for his plight of being a mulatto. After cursing his parents, the speaker soon regrets and forgives them. The poem closes with his in-between feelings.

Hughes's sense of being a mulatto is shown through his symbolic title of the poem. The speaker's mulatto identity, like the cross on which Christ is crucified, is what inflicts the speaker and is responsible for his feelings of belonging/ unbelonging to his parents in terms of ethnic origin. Cross, as a word, connotes and generates a multitude of meanings like crossroad, crossbreed, the crucifix and many others (Duki, 2017, p.166). Moreover, the image of the Cross appears repeatedly in Hughes's works. He has used it deliberately for he considers it to be his ace in the hole or a weapon whereby he can get his audience's attention with the use of such words (capitalism). His capitalization of this word is meant to send hidden messages that this word carries such as upward mobility. Hence, double-consciousness, shown through the use of the word 'cross', can be a gift and an infliction at the same time.

The speaker's words in line nine "My old man died in a fine big house" and line ten "My ma died in a shack" are significant. These two lines cast light on the disparity in the way of life the speaker's parents have led. In addition to the separate death places, these two lines, though vaguely relate to, speak of "the idea of abandonment on the part of the white father" (Johnson, 2014, p. 76) which is responsible perhaps for the feelings of envy of his father for living in a fine big house rather than a shack where, one assumes, the speaker lived with his mother. Split into two different selves and rejected, the speaker of the poem (may be Hughes himself) is caught by his 'two-ness'. Along with his other works that deal with the tragic mulatto theme, Hughes's "Cross" explores Hughes's "fruitless search for a father and a home" (Johnson, p. 76). This idea finds its clear reflection in the first line of Hughes's "Mulatto". This



poem is published in his collection *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927). Of it, Hughes says:

I worked harder on that poem than on any other that I have ever written. Almost every night that summer I would take it out of the table drawer and retype it and work on it, and change it. When I read it one night at a gathering at James Weldon Johnson's, Clarence Darrow said it was more moving than any other poem of mine he had read. It was a poem about white fathers and Negro mothers in the South (Hughes, 2002, p.201).

The above quotation reveals that Hughes's poem, like the mulatto, also suffers from fragmentation until it is made whole. To be put in its final form, Hughes's 'Mulatto' is typed, retyped, and changed. However, these fragments get recollected at the end unlike the mulatto's fragments as he with all his fragments is denied union with and thus acknowledgement by his white father. The first line of the poem begins: "I am your son, white man!" is uttered with rage. The angry voice of the speaker here is addressing his father who has rejected him in spite of his frequent attempts at recognition. Since childhood, Hughes has been concerned and occupied with the ideas of biracialism and parental acceptance, two ideas that he entwines as he puts down the following observation:

You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word "Negro" is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*. I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother an olive-yellow. (Hughes, 2002, p.36)

In spite of the fact that Hughes's parents aren't white, both of his father's grandfathers are white and "on his mother's side there was both French and Cherokee ancestry" (Lamb, 2008, p.134). Though both father and son are black, Hughes's life is full of conflict: shortly after his birth in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, he is abandoned by James Hughes, his father (a successful lawyer and businessman) who goes to Mexico, the place that he moves to escape racism in US and where he, getting associated mainly with white German, English, and American businessmen, manages to rise above the economic and social limitations imposed upon him years before his move. Hughes's mother, Carrie Hughes has left Hughes to be raised mainly by his grandmother and family friends while she is in search for a job. Deserted by his parents and traumatized by the marital breakup of his parents, Hughes has failed to understand what it is like to belong to a home where peace and harmony reside. Brought up in a split home, he hasn't managed to know his father until he is seventeen. Only when he goes to Mexico to meet his father, Hughes comes to believe in his



mother's description of him as a "devil on wheels" (Johnson, 2014, p. 80). What complicates Hughes's real-life dilemma of racial identity is his father whom he describes: "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 be much of anything but servants" (Hughes, 2002, p.56)

Not abiding to his father's desire to study engineering in Switzerland or Germany so as to pursue a career as a mining engineer or settle in Mexico, Hughes follows his dream to be a writer after having enrolled in Columbia University. When he tells his father about his desire to be a writer, his father asks him if writing will enable him to make any money. When the Harlem Renaissance gives way to the Great Depression in the 1930s, Hughes, armed with his determination to sustain his career as a poet, decides to bring his poetry to his people: "I wanted to continue to be a poet. Yet, sometimes I wondered if I was barking up the wrong tree. I determined to find out by taking poetry, my poetry, to my people. After all, I write about Negroes and primarily for Negroes. Would they have me? Did they want me?" (Hughes, 1964, pp.41- 42)

To such determination, critics who have already read his autobiographical writings, raise two questions regarding his commitment to his people: Does he really feel one with the lower-class African-Americans in expressing their thoughts, or does he do so to capitalize "on the vogue of portraying [mulatto] characters in print?" (Lamb, p.133). Hughes's interrelatedness of two identities in his poems makes critics divide also in understanding his real intention behind writing about Negroes or mulattoes. Locating his own persona between two polarities of consciousness, the American poet and the Negro poet, Hughes has "assumed for himself a third identity which is that of the 'singer'," (Johnson, p.84) whereby he can "resolve the dilemma of divided consciousness" (Johnson, p.133).

As in "Cross," the feelings of despair and loss are expressed in Hughes's "Mulatto," but this time they are accompanied with anger, with the mulatto affirming to the father in line five that he is his son "I am your son, white man" and the father, even more intensely and aggressively. Hughes includes a diversity of voices in this poem. The typographical device of italicization (words written in italics or not) is creatively used by Hughes to cartographically give voice to the voiceless. Hence, the protagonist's silenced voice is heard through Hughes's intentional use of this poetic device. He makes readers conscious of how marginalized Blacks can reclaim authority through self-expression. The mulatto is an example of the New Negro whose voice and presence can come into

being, heard, and felt after going through the ongoing process of double-consciousness. In line six, the father denies any responsibility for the mulatto's existence "you are my son! like hell". Ironically, all kinds of negative feelings are captured through the dramatic dialogue between the father and his rejected mulatto son. The poem shows that the rejected son is conceived through the sexual oppression (of his colored mother). This is a common scene of brutality in the American South during slavery. In spite of the fact that he repeatedly detaches himself from any sexual activity with the mulatto's mother or any responsibility for the mulatto's existence, the mulatto's father speaks of his lustful relationship with the black mother in line eleven and twelve, using expressions that show his enjoyment, ecstasy, and pleasure: "What's a body but a toy?/ Juicy bodies". Here again black women's bodies are exploited by the whites as they view them as mere sex objects or even dolls to satisfy the sexual desires of the white oppressor.

More distressing is the degraded condition of the mulatto's birth which is communicated symbolically through Hughes's description of "the phallic and physical stinging of the black night (mother) by the white pine (father)" (Lamb, p. 143) in terms of scent: out of the pine wood whose smell is ironically "associated with cleanliness, purity, and idyllic lovemaking," (Johnson, p.79) the father creates "an inverted and distorted symbol of the sordid act of copulation between 'blue black'... and fallen white pillars of the temple" (Lamb, p. 134). Ironically too, in line twenty "Silver moonlight everywhere", the poet, projecting upon the landscape, also declares how the white father's voice or the voice of superiority is "represented by the moonlight triumph," (Lamb, p.143) signifying that the father's voice, rather than the boy's call for parental recognition, is going to be heard. Doomed to be silenced, the mulatto's voice is symbolic of "the impossibility of any sort of multiracial family or community" (Lamb, p. 134).

In Hughes's "Strange un-Negro tongue," the mulatto's memory doesn't enable him to relive Africa. Racially conscious of his double-self, Hughes expresses nostalgic feelings for Africa. Living in American diaspora, Hughes's identity crisis and fragmented self are revealed. Separated from his roots for years and exposed to American culture instead, Hughes desires, infused by his African blood, to write poetry. However, he realizes that he has lost his memories of the faraway land, Africa. Furthermore, the words, which have flown out of him, are expressed not in African language, but in 'Strange un-Negro tongue.' Like him. Hughes's language is split into two. Both selves and tongues appear to be



perpetually caught at war as a result of his inception in America (Gohar, 2008, p. 56).

III. Conclusion

Hughes is the New Negro son that the Harlem Renaissance gives birth to. It is not an innocent birth; it gives life to many contradictory values that are in perpetual conflict and are responsible for the creation of a conflicted persona. Born to the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes keeps being ambivalent in his attitudes and perceptions, losing any sense of complete belonging to Africa or America. Ironically, he sometimes celebrates inclusion and laments exclusion. Poetry, whether African in perspective or American, remains his final resort to vent out his two-ness.

Hughes feels the urge to represent the Blacks positively and portray the negative side of whiteness (for example the father image who is depicted as a usurper) to reverse and deconstruct stereotypical representations that racist narratives hold to. For him, all ethnicities, no matter what their color is, share commonalities. As a Harlem Renaissance poet, Hughes feels the urge to correct the racist narratives which tend to portray Blacks as inferior beings, without past, and unable to produce literature. He contributes to formation of new Harlem aesthetics

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