



## A Deferred Dream, Lies, Deception; Between the American Dream and the Search for Freedom in the Postcolonial World in Langston Hughes' "Let America Be America Again"

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"Let America Be America Again" (1936) by Langston Hughes

"Let America be America again.

Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let it be the pioneer on the plain

Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--

Let it be that great strong land of love

Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme

That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty

Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,

But opportunity is real, and life is free,

Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,

Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*

*And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,

I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.

I am the red man driven from the land,

I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--



And finding only the same old stupid plan  
 Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.  
 I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
 Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
 Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
 Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
 Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
 Of owning everything for one's own greed!  
 I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
 I am the worker sold to the machine.  
 I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
 I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--  
 Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
 Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!  
 I am the man who never got ahead,  
 The poorest worker bartered through the years.  
 Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
 In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
 Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
 That even yet its mighty daring sings  
 In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
 That's made America the land it has become.  
 O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
 In search of what I meant to be my home--  
 For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
 And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
 And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
 To build a "homeland of the free."  
 The free?



Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay--  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.  
O, let America be America again--  
The land that never has been yet--  
And yet must be--the land where every man is free.  
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's,  
ME--  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.  
Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America!  
O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath--  
America will be!



Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
 The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
 We, the people, must redeem  
 The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
 The mountains and the endless plain--  
 All, all the stretch of these great green states--  
 And make America again!"

### Abstract

The African American writer and poet, James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in 1902 and died in 1967. As a writer, Hughes is considered one of the most influential penman. He hold the case of the Black people experiences, in the United States, on his shoulder and represented it to the world through poems and prose (Kuiper 566). Hughes portrayed the suffering of his people through poems and prose, covering a variety of themes relating to the right of people, specifically the minorities. In his poem "Let America be America Again", Hughes searches for freedom and raises his people's voices. Thus, this paper will analyze the theme of freedom in two concepts: First, freedom as one of the most important aspects of the American Dream, since there is a direct reference to the American Dream and the dream for freedom; and second, the author is searching for freedom in a postcolonial world, hence, the paper applies postcolonial criticism to the poem. Finally, through looking for freedom in a postcolonial world and the American Dream, the author manifests the lies, deceptions, and hypocrite of the society. Whether through the Definitions of the American Dream or through the theories of postcolonialism, freedom is stolen and Hughes is confirming this deception.

### Introduction

Most of Hughes's poems portray the themes of freedom, hope, and future reflected through dreams. Poems like "Dreams" 1923, "Dream Variation" 1924, "The Dream Keeper" 1932, where he says "Hold fast to Dreams/ for if Dreams die/ Life is a broken-winged bird/ That cannot fly" (Hughes 1-4). In his poem "Harlem", which is also known as "Dream Deferred" 1951. Hughes is concerned about the deferred dream "What happened to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" (1-3). In another poem which published in 1941 under the name of "I Dream a World", Hughes expresses in his truthful wish of having equal rights with other races; "A World I Dream where black or white,/ whatever race you be, / will share the bounties of the earth and every man is free." (9-12). Then "As I Grew Older" written in 1926 to express how he has forgotten his dream, due to the difficult circumstances of racism and the hardship of life which described as a "wall" between him and his dream.



During World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) and the Great Depression that started in 1929 and ended in 1939, Hughes experienced the difficult circumstances of the country. During the Great Depression, in 1936, he published his poem "Let America Be America Again". It is another poem that talks about his dream; the simple dream of freedom. The poem was written to manifest the harsh circumstances people went through during the Great Depression, especially the Black Americans where they experienced the loss of financial flexibility and the increase of unemployment.

In the poem, Hughes uses dream to reflect on a variety of themes, the dream of freedom to live, freedom to speak and a freedom to dream; the dreams of any nation. In the use of dream, Hughes refers to the American Dream in a very implicit language. Thus, this work defines America and the American Dream and provides two concepts within the poem; a critique of the country, and an assertion of the ideal American as a dream. In the first part, the paper will analyze the American Dream in the poem, between the truth and the lies. While the second part applies post colonialism to the poem in search for freedom in the postcolonial world.

#### 1- The American Dream; Freedom of Dream

The poem is revolutionary in its nature and theme. The poet opens his poem by talking about the dream "[l]et America be America again/[l]et it be the dream it used to be" (Hughes 1-2) then he describes the kind of dreams, dream of freedom, equality, liberty, and opportunity. All these dreams reference the American Dream. The later term has been defined via different scholars since the first time it came out in 1931 by the historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*. In the book, Adams stated that "The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams 404). Furthermore, he stated "a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (375).

In 2001, Wang **Fang**, a Chinese researcher, described the dream as "the dream of exploitation", moreover, it is "the dream of freedom and democracy", and not to forget the material dream of "being strong and rich" (88-99). The American Dream has been interpreted through and among individuals differently. Moreover, Jim Cullen shares his thoughts by saying, "you will never really understand what it means to be an American of any creed, color, or gender if you don't try to imagine the shape of that dream"(13) while the writer admits that "the American Dream of the Founding Father was freedom" (41) he also admits that freedom was not a dream "but a living reality", here comes Alexander Bruno and refers to the American Dream as "an illusionary reality" (6) based on Cullen's thoughts.

In 2019, Bruno published an article asking "What Really is the American Dream?". In the process of finding the answer to this question, he went back, traces its



origins back to the Declaration of Independence (1776), then to the nation's Constitution (1787), moving to the Constitutional Bill of Rights (1791), and even reached the American Creed (1917) to propose two definitions to the American Dream. He firstly suggests it as "an indigenous belief in the unbridled freedom and unique heritage of a people" or, secondly, he assumes it is "the belief in self-actualization of the good fortunes, guaranteed by American liberties, opportunities and freedom" (1). In scanning both definitions, it shows that freedom, liberty, and success are the cornerstone of the American identity, in dream and reality.

Defining the American Dream may vary, yet the concept is almost similar, simply, freedom, liberty, welfare, and fortune are the common ideas in people's mind. Hughes got influenced by the American Dream. In his poem, "Let America be America Again", he seeks the dream. Hughes addressing people, government or whoever is listening directly for America to be as it used to be. The title suggests that America now is not like what America once promised to be. Not regarding specific historical time, Hughes simply arouses the belief of freedom in America. People were deluded of a land where they can have freedom of speech, of dream and of practice. This freedom, to the poet, happens to be a dream they cannot reach, Hughes is demanding America to fulfill its promise.

For Hughes, the American Dream is freedom, justice, hope, and opportunities. The poem "Let America be America Again" is written in a hopeful and protesting tone. The hope where he is asking for a simple dream he always dreamt of "Let it be the dream it used to be,/ let it be the pioneer on the plain,/ Seeking a home he himself is free" (Hughes 2-4). Yet he is protesting, because they made their simplest rights merely a dream cannot be gained, where he constantly demanding for it; "Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream" (39). The poet also has a pessimistic and an optimistic tone; he is optimistic in asking for the dream of "freedom", "Liberty", and "Equality" (4, 11, 14). However, he is pessimistic about that right, because he could not fulfill his basic right of freedom and equality; "Equality in the air we breath/ There's never been equality for me,/ nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free'" (14-16). Thus, a right became a dream in his land.

When the declaration of independence was first announced, it started with a general reference to all people *We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America*. It did not limit the speech to a group of people, specific race, gender, and nation. Yet "the poor white/ the Negro/ the red man/ the immigrant" (Hughes19-22) were excluded from that dream, Hughes shows how the poor white is pushed apart, the Negro is enslaved, the red man driven from his land and the immigrant seeking hope desperately. (19-22). His bloodline was mix of American, Indian, and Negro; they were slaves, warriors, and planters; these pictures were



depicted in his poem. Thus, he feels their suffering. And from his ancestors, stories he prized freedom (Presley 381). However, instead of freedom, people were tangled in chains, the farmer to the soil, the worker to the machine, and the Negro to serve people (31-33).

The second half of the poem, Hughes changes his tone, he is protesting against that false Dream. He claims there is no freedom if they don't have their simplest rights. He ironically says "O, let America be America Again--/ The land that never has been yet--" (62-63). Another sarcasm is the reference to immigration to America, people came from all around the world; Ireland, Poland, England, and Africa "For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,/ And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,/ And torn from Black Africa's strand I came" (47-49) to fulfill the American Dream of freedom "To build a 'homeland of the free'" (50). But, "Who said the free? Not me?" (52).

The poet employs irony to criticize the homeland of freedom, who said it is the land of freedom, if it is not the poet, then is it "[...] The million on relief today? / The million shot down when we strike?/ The million who have nothing for our pay?" (53-55). These rhetorical questions raise awareness in the reader, whether they really consider themselves living in the "homeland of the free" (50). He emphasizes the situation by illustrating how people were suffering due to poverty, living on aid, they do not have freedom of speech; during the strike they were killed, and hard workers have nothing; because marginalized people were paid far less than others. Those figures built America as a dream land, but they cannot fulfill their own dream and make it true, hence, freedom was a false dream.

Between lies and deception, a dream has been lost. People's basic dream is the freedom, the poet depicts the feelings of people who have been deceived and lied to on their simplest rights; the freedom to speak and the freedom to dream. However, Hughes' poem gives hope to his reader, and assures that one day "America will be!" (80).

## 2- Postcolonial World and the Search for Freedom

Criticism in postcolonial became prominent in the west following the publication of Edward Said's theory in which published in 1970. The theory Orientalism exposes the stereotypes through which Europeans dehumanized the westerns. On the other hand, some critics argue that postcolonialism's foundation can be traced earlier, precisely to Albert Memmi's publishing of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* in 1965. Ross Murfin explains the concept of postcolonialism, "the prefix post- in postcolonial implies opposition as well as chronological sequence," in her explanation, she states that postcolonial studies are not limited to the time following independence form colonization. But also, address the ongoing consequences and resistance to colonial power. (Murfin and Ray 526).



Nevertheless, several works written prior the period of postcolonial critical theories but contain the themes that align with its interest. For instance, works of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929), and the poem "Let America Be America Again" 1936. These mentioned works can be seen as early contributions to the postcolonial studies. Later, criticism of postcolonial theories were developed in response to such literary texts, and "Let America Be America Again" is one of the significant works in the world of literature and postcolonial works.

Within the poem the parenthesis voice states "(America never was America to me)" (5), elucidation for the speaker's inner thought and wishes, asking for home "[s]eeking a home where he himself is free" (4). The poem expresses the aspiration to live in a place that guarantees freedom, it is the only condition to be called home. In the third stanza, Hughes draws attention on the essential right of living on a "land" that is defined by "[l]iberty" (11). The substance lines describes liberty though the presence of opportunities and social equalities in their lives, "[e]quality is in the air we breathe" (14).

In the discussion of the three voices of poetry, T. S. Eliot argues that poetry has three voices that each poem has three voices; the first voice is the poet speaks to himself, the second voice is the poet addressing the audience, and the third voice is the poet creating dramatic character (Eliot 98). In analyzing the poem, "Let America Be America Again", we see Langston Hughes implication of the three voices. The first voice is written in normal fonts, the second voice is expressed through parentheses, where he reflects on his internal emotions and suppressed thoughts that cannot be said freely due to the lack of freedom of speech "([t]here's never been equality for me,)". The poet is not contradicting himself but rather it is the internal unspoken truth. The idea is reinforced in line 17, where the poet utilizing parentheses in the phrase "mumbles in the dark" to symbolize the thoughts of the poet that remain hidden within the mind. In response to the parenthesis voice, a third voice emerges, posing questions such as "[s]ay, who are you that mumbles in the dark? / [a]nd who are you that draws your veil across the stars?" (17-18), these lines are italicized to distinguish this third voice from the others.

Furthermore, Hughes lists various groups within American society: "the poor white," "the Negro," "the red man," "the immigrant," "the farmer," "the worker," and "the people,"(19-34) these groups represents individuals in the society who are searching for a better future they hope for a free country that respects their dreams and speech "clutching the hope I seek--" (22). Moreover, the author portrays variety of people in American society who are enslaved in various, the worker is controlled by the machine, and the black individuals who only serves, these laborers are treated as commodities, exploited for the benefit of the others over the years:

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.

I am the worker sold to the machine.



I am the Negro, servant to you all.

I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--(31-34)

The poorest worker bartered through the years. (38)

Throughout the poem, the poet is continuously looking for freedom; whether in form of dream or a hope. Hughes portrays freedom as a fundamental right, yet it remains unattained dream, thus freedom is not gained rather dreamed. The dreamer is characterized as strong and brave, nevertheless, people do not dare to dream "its mighty daring sings" (42). The dream exists in every inch, furrow, brick, and stone that made America today. In line 45, Hughes finally depicts his quest for home; he sailed across the seas, went through many places to get into this land and build a 'homeland of the free' (50).

The writer uses a rhetorical question to emphasize the idea of freedom. Hughes clarifies that this question does not need an answer since it is the right of every human being, not only him. At the same time, he is only speaking, as a poet, for the rights of his people.

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?

Surely not me? The millions on relief today?

The millions shot down when we strike?

The millions who have nothing for our pay? (51-55)

Moreover, he is shedding light on the concept of freedom, so the "tyrants" consider their request and let them not only dream freely but be able to speak freely because this dream is reaching its end without being fulfilled "[e]xcept the dream that's almost dead today" (61). The speaker talks more freely as the poem gets to the end; in the second line, he said "[l]et it be the dream it used to be" while in line 63, he affirms that this land was not what it used to be "[t]he land that never has been yet-- ." The absence of the parentheses is noticeable, basically because the poet is expressing his thought more freely than before. Hughes insists on the importance for this land to be free and gives freedom to every man, as it is what is meant to be "[a]nd yet must be-- the land where every man is free" (64). John Lowney interpreting Hughes's tone in the line when he says "who said the free?" as apocalyptic; a black man struggling. (Lowney 64)

"Sure, call me any ugly name you choose-- / the steel of freedom does not stain." is a strong picture the writer uses to portray the invincible and robust essence of the concept of freedom. He symbolizes himself to the freedom, that whatever name they intend to call him with, his nature will remain pure as gold. So, the core of freedom



will not change, just like the steel. And the land should be retaken from those who live on the work of others, making them slaves and be America.

The final stanza is very revolutionary in its description, revolution to rescue the lands, mines, plants, rivers, mountains, vast plain, and the green states:

We, the people, must redeem

The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.

The mountains and the endless plain--

All, all the stretch of these great green states--

And make America again! (83-87)

The above lines are an obvious declaration to his people to stand against those who took their lands and enslaved them. Hughes challenges the worker of all races to take back their place and build a new America again, America that gives them the freedom to speak and dream.

Anything that has been written by authors who lived in countries that once were ruled by the European nations is called postcolonial literature. Among all Afro-American poets, Langston Hughes has a special entreat to the black experience in his works. He is richer and more varied in style and meaning, and critics consider him the most productive in his publishing career (Preminger, et al. 23). In comparison, postcolonialism theory is written to investigate and question the circumstances of the people who were colonized during and after the colonization. Ross Murfin has suggested in her book *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* that postcolonialism criticism does not necessarily refer only to the time of actual colonization, and "Let America Be America Again", which was written in 1936, is a great example of a literary work written before the establishment of postcolonialism criticism that was first recognized after Said's theory of Orientalism. It may occur with works expressing the slavery of the African Americans or the outcome of slavery of others. Literary pieces written by African American writers may demonstrate the viewpoints and interpretations later invented by postcolonialism (Murfin and Ray 526).

People in Africa were trying to achieve autonomy and gain their freedom, taking back their lands and being ruled with equality. Hughes, in his poem, did not talk about black people as much as he spoke about the freedom of every human being. He did not specify black America; he only said America. The poet has mentioned all varieties "poor white, Negro, red man, immigrant, young man, farmer, worker, and people" in general (19-34). The action of slavery started a long time before postcolonialism started its theories and ended by the end of World War II. But, the theme of slavery is presented solemnly by relating it to postcolonialism. Furthermore, Hughes portrayed the suffering of his people from being enslaved in his poem:

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.



I am the worker sold to the machine.

I am the Negro, servant to you all.

I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--(31-34)

The poorest worker bartered through the years. (38)

The farmer is obliged to work in the field without wages. The worker is part of the machine's properties. The Negro working and serving everyone with no salary, being sold throughout the years from family to family, plantation to plantation, and many more circumstances turns these people into slaves.

"Seeking a home where he is free" (4), "[i]n search of what I meant to be my home--" (46). Although he lives in his country, America, the poet is in the quest of finding a home. Hughes expressing the idea when the country exists but home does not. This idea is related to what Homi K. Bhabha, an Indian philosopher of postcolonialism, calls his theory "unhomeliness", this concept is referred to by some postcolonial critics as double consciousness (Bressler 205).

I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.

I am the red man driven from the land,

I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--

And finding only the same old stupid plan

Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. (20- 24)

When the Negro is enslaved in his/her country, s/he lacks a home. When the red man is taken away from his land, he lacks a home. They are in between two things, they cannot belong to either of them; they have two personalities, identities, names. People look at the Negro as a slave and make them think of themselves as salve-Negros. Same with the red man who is being tortured, his lands are being taken, and hence, they become immigrants in their own lands, and being identified as immigrants and red Americans at the same time creates the double identity. Bhabha names the process of the immigrant who is trying to seek hope in another land as a hybrid. The hybridity is when two different cultures meet, and the newly created environment creates new characteristics and culture. However, Hughes gives another description of the immigrants, those who came to this land searching for freedom, but they get shocked by the same society they fled from, where "dog eats dog" (24). Bhabha states that the feeling of unhomeliness exists within the colonized people or the oppressed people in this poem trying to find their "homeland of the free" (50). Hughes expresses his uncertain feelings towards his country by repeating figures of slavery, African American culture, and the Middle Passage. (Westover 1207)

Hughes, in this poem, is rejecting all the official rules put by the dominant group. Such writers as Bhabha states that a writer should believe in pluralism and stay away



from the absolute truth because it does not exist. In other words, it should give them the freedom to express their beliefs and thoughts (Bressler 206). Jeff Westover also talked about the freedom of speech from Hughes definition, the interpretation and meaning should stay open-ended instead of ultimate. "Let America Be America Again" is between two contradicted ideas of home, the ideal home 'homeland of the free' (50) and the truth of "(no freedom in this 'homeland of the free.')" (16). Dramatizing Hughes' idea of home, presenting Freud's sense of the uncanny which means the "unhomely". Schelling presents it as "the name of everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light" (Westover 7-8). Hughes has helped in bringing the light to remind "the worker, the Negro, the people" of their forgotten rights of being free.

Throughout Hughes's career, many of his poems concerning the life of the African American Negro, often depicts the social concerns and objections, a significant portion of his poems draws upon folk traditions. (Davis 282) The poem, "Let America Be America Again" presents Hughes's political struggle. It was written a year before its publication in *Esquire* magazine. However, a short version of the poem was published, only the first fifty lines. *A New Song*, published the full version of the poem two years later, including its conclusion, which has been called "dialectic solution" in "*Poetry by the Negro*". Michael Gold, in his introduction to *A New Song* stated: "He has expressed the hopes, the dreams, and the awakening of the Negro people. He has done it naturally, like a bird in the woods; but in choosing this theme, he has been led on and on, until he has been a voice crying for justice for all humanity. The Negroes are enslaved, but so are the white workers, and the two are brothers in suffering and struggle. This is his message today" (Lowney 64).

## Conclusion

Poetry is not just perfect words or rhythm within lines that comfort the ears. Critics sees poetry as a message, a sound of truth, a search for freedom, a call for action, and a loud sound to be heard. Poems present the unspeakable truth, undeniable right, and the poet's believes. Hughes believes in America, believes in the freedom of this state however, he is searching for it. The author shows some pessimistic and other optimistic feelings. This can be seen as skeptical, however, he is not. Hughes believes in a country of freedom, he is dreaming of freedom, but he could not find this freedom within his nation. The dream of freedom might be deferred to Hughes thus he is demanding it, for his colored people and marginalized nations. Since Marginalized people have been suffering for variety of reason and the outcome is same, lack of freedom, absence of home, and silenced voice. The center theme of the poem is freedom; beyond the literal meaning, its structure implies how the notion of freedom has evolved from the beginning to the end. By the conclusion, Hughes is able to express his voice more freely and forcefully. He reveals the truth that America is not the land of freedom, yet he insists on transforming the conditions into a country that respects other voices and ensures equality for all human being. In his vision, Man is



free to dream, act, and speak. Davis notes in his article that Hughes's poem tends to be statements than symbolic expressions. The poet, Hughes, uses simple language to portray what he observes, depicting the man with empathy and emphasizing the rights equally for all citizens (Davis 296).

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