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BLACK ATHEIST: ASPECTS OF COMMUNISM IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract:

This paper aims to study the perspectives of communism as a dogma in Langston Hughes's selected poems. Hughes was an African American poet who observed communism as an outlet for his problems and suffering under the social prejudice of whites. He reflected the impact of discrimination in part of the race and social segregation in most of his poems. Hughes embedded communist aspects in some of his poems like Good-Bye Christ, as an outcome of the recurrence of the daily conducts of discrimination and racism against Afro-Americans. Thus, this paper is conducted in the light of "Speaking out for Justice" to denote the injustice situations of the dark-skinned people via adopting atheism in an idealized society, America. Some questions will be articulated to uncover the ideology of Hughes in discussing his issue as such how did Hughes reflect communist trends and religious tensions in his poetry?

Keywords:

Atheist, American Dream, African American, Communism, Religion

Introduction

Communism is a term that refers to the effect of capitalism on society which brings inequality and suffering of a powerless group of people. Racism and social inequality play an effective role in the United States where black people suffer for centuries till the present time because the religious institutions exploit black people under the umbrella of religion. So, many writers and activists attempt to call for a protest to overcome oppression of injustice system and among of those activists is Langston Hughes who called for the improvement of the corrupted religious

institutions of the white society. Thus, the poems of Hughes have been considered a significant part of American Literature (Rampersad, 1997:4) since they have reflected social discrimination against black people. Besides, his poems emphasized that a dream can be fulfilled in case if black people united and fight for achieving their dreams, which means the American Dream. This paper focuses on the question of how Hughes believed in Communism as the only strategy to overcome discrimination and social segregation mentioned above: and he adopted Communism in his own life as well as poems?

Hughes regarded communism as a chance to bring communities with all their differences together. Furthermore, he believed that Communism is the only way to achieve justice, freedom, and his dreams beside the dreams of all black people. Hughes was being considered the most considerable and controversial poet in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States. According to Arnold Rampersad (1997), "he was possibly the most original of African American poets and...variety of his work, assuredly the most representative of African American writers" (Rampersad, 1997: 4). Langston Hughes was first known as an important literary character in the 1920s, an era that had been realized as the Harlem Renaissance due to the number of arising black writers in poetry. The racial boundaries of American society had been questioned by Langston Hughes, and he had become an icon in the struggle for equality of rights. Focusing on racial equality was repeatedly theme in African American writers, Hughes's poems stirred the issue of equality; it came from his personal experiences and symbolizing his ideology on the race issue, which he had experienced and changed his lifestyle.

According to Henry Gates (1993), "Hughes was active in social and political issues, by using his poetry as a vehicle for cultural protest and fighting social segregation with his writings." (Gates, 1993: 2). Moreover, the objective of Hughes's poems is to display how various economic, political and social factors that have affected Hughes's ideology in writing different sorts of poems consisting of communist trends and influences in America. The black people had faced a harsh treatment from whites in the field of labouring since generations till the present time. This unfair dealing with black colour people urges Hughes to portray his suffering in his poems like *One More 'S' in the U. S. A*, *Ballads of Lenin*, *As I grow older*, *Democracy*, *Goodbye Christ* and *Justice*, to prove how Communism created a religious tension which made him deny all his beliefs in Jesus Christ.

Hughes' Communist Trends

Communism is a doctrine that aims to establish equality and balance in the society as well as the fair distribution of the wealth and natural resources of a society. Communism is "a kind of socialism—a higher and more advanced form that aims to improve the conditions of working-class people" (Dagger& Ball, 2019: 3). Hughes believed that the working class has to rise against the capitalist owners because they deprived them of their social rights and democracy. And then, they could set up a new society without the control of the whites. In contrast, communists show that the capital economic and political regimes are to be overthrown by a revolution.

Hughes believed in Communism as a saviour structure that enhances equality and looking for eliminating social distinctions. Besides, Hughes suggested that black people have to fight for their rights as American citizens and no more to be slaved for Whites and they should have owned their business. This policy, which had been adopted, came with poor outcome due to

this disingenuous strategy like what happened to the Soviet Union when poverty became so widespread because rebellions had resulted in the disintegration of the Union. Hughes's goal is to convince Americans of the promising of Communism which is different from the myth of the American Dream that failed to grant them their rights and freedom in America.

However, Hughes wrote many pomes that showed his belief in Communism and its characteristics, but the important one to start with is: *One More 'S' in the U. S. A* (1934). This poem reveals the objective of the poet to call for a revolution in America and change the social hierarchy in this the country and making it another Soviet. In this context, Hughes wrote:

"Put one more s in the U.S.A.
To make it Soviet.
One more s in the U.S.A.
Oh, we'll live to see it yet.
When the land belongs to the farmers
And the factories to the working men —
The U.S.A. when we take control
Will be the U.S.S.A. then"
(Dawahare, 2003: 107)

Hughes predicated that tomorrow will be for black people when they will get their full rights as Whites. He was certain that the situation will be changed, and the social status of the black individual will be amended rather than to be discriminated and live in poverty. Some critics claimed that Hughes through this poem, call for a rebellion against the government and its policy because he did not mention Whites who were not working at that time and this could be regarded as a racism against whites. However, Hughes believed in Communism, not as a doctrine, but he admired the goals of Communism which manifests the equality and rights to all classes of society. Preoccupying with the soul of Communism also could be seen in his language, expression, and theme in the poem *Ballads of Lenin* (1938). In this poem, Hughes spoke through the persona of a peasant, and to him a peasant is a low-level class, by describing a worker who works hard in muddy soil attempts to achieve a social status in the American society. In this respect, he penned:

"I am Ivan, the peasant
Boots all muddy with soil.
I fought with you Comrade Lenin.
Now I've finished my toil.
Comrade Lenin of Russia,
Alive in a marble tomb,
Move over, Comrade Lenin,
And give me room.
I am Chico, the Negro
Cutting cane in the sun.
I lived for you, Comrade Lenin.
Now my work is done."
(Rampersad, 2001: 140)

The fantasy of Russia as a racial heaven was maybe one of its best, both as a dream to Afro-American writers over the diaspora and a technique in the African American struggle for political acknowledgment and recognizing their rights. Hughes inferred that the Soviet Union was simply part of a long journey of black imaginative and political rebellion; as he mentioned in this poem (Wilson, 2017:6). He also remarked that his life is for the sake of Lenin, in other words, he concentrated on the idea of Communism via the use of the word Comrade that is used by communist members. It is obvious that Hughes focused on the life of farmers or working-class because they were more marginalizing people. Here, the idea has been associated with the goals of Communism as well as his new ideology in fighting racism by Communism.

Hughes attempted to describe the circumstances of black people in the shade of racism and social discrimination. His poetry has implied the lives of the working-class, specifically Blacks in America whom he portrayed in full of struggle, joy and music. He had faced the racial stereotypes from his childhood when he could not find a place in the hostel of the university, when he was at college. At that moment, he understood that it is difficult for a colored-man to live in America. He came with different style to assert his position in society as an artist and an activist. According to John Smethurst: "what is formally more interesting regarding Hughes's poetry, in the 1930s, is the wide variety of voices, styles, and themes in the late 1920s and early 1930s" (Smethurst, 1999: 3). Thus, the last two lines in this poem reveal Hughes's admiration of Communism and his work cannot be done without it.

Accordingly, in his poem *As I grow older* (1925), he emphasized the idea of his dream that has not been accomplished because of racism and segregation. He described the darkness surrounded him like a thick wall that preventing him from achieving his dream. Perceiving Hughes' poem, being black or from the working class, it is an undesirable life because it is life without fulfilling one's dreams or hopes. Hughes stated:

"It was a long time ago
I have almost forgotten my dream
But, it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun –
My dream
And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly
Between me and my dream
Rose until it touched the sky
The wall.
Shadow.
I am black"
(Rampersad, 2001: 38)

This poem sheds light on Hughes's success in conveying his questionable message through noteworthy symbolism and similitude. Hoyt W. Fuller explains that Hughes attempted to be identified with black people because he believed that doing such a thing is more "truth and sophisticated" (Fuller, 1968: 5).

Indeed, Hughes explained the hardships of being black and lived in white society. He shared radical politics and participated in writing about democracy and methods of achieving individuality. In his poem *Democracy (1949)*, he showed a sense of pessimism in which freedom will not be achieved now but may be in future. It is obvious that Hughes emphasized on the meaning of equality and sharing rights among people. He said:

"Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever

.....

I want freedom
Just as you".

(Rampersad, 2001: 170)

Hughes used his poetry and prose as a vehicle to clarify the beauty of colour people, their strength and suffering. So, he uncovered the lost dream of achieving democracy and opportunities of the black individual due to racism and religious institutions of America.

Finally, Hughes could stir the hearts of black people in the United States via his perspective which expressed through his claim for equality and freedom for Blacks. Unfortunately, many politicians of the United States comprehended this perspective as a communist trend so that Hughes was accused of being communist. He was under an extraordinary investigation from the "McCarthyism Committee" and he was blamed for adopting communist aspects in his poetry and conduct. Once, he admitted to Arthur Koestler the cause that pushed him to join the Communist Party, so that he stated, "It was based on strict discipline and the acceptance of directives that I, as a writer, did not wish to accept" (Wilson, 2017:3).

The Religious Tensions in Hughes's poetry

Studying the poetry of Langston Hughes closely, a reader can realize almost bipolar usage of religion within his poetry. Firstly, Evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson denounced Hughes from her Angelus Temple pulpit as a "radical and anti-Christ," by explaining that some critics criticized Hughes's poem *Goodbye Christ (1932)* as if it were written by a new devil, of black colour, referring to the poet. She said that "there are many devils among us, but the most dangerous of all is the red devil. And now there comes among us a red devil in black skin!" (Best, 2013: 2). This can be a reaction to Hughes's poem which is regarded to be anti-Christ and has a reference to atheism. In this poem, Hughes stated:

Listen, Christ,
You did alright in your day, I reckon —
But that day's gone now.

.....

The popes and the preachers've
Made too much money from it.
They've sold you to too many

.....

Goodbye,
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
Beat it on away from here now.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
A real guy named

Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—

You're getting in the way of things, Lord.

(Rampersad, 2001: 228)

In the above lines, Hughes presented the replacement of Christianity and saints to exchange them with communist symbols. He concentrated on these communist aspects as solutions for his woe of being as a workman and no one will sell him. Actually, *Goodbye Christ* has created controversial discussions regarding Hughes's political efficacy of poetry and the position of Christianity. Many critics regarded this poem as a statement of Hughes's "Atheism" or an indication of his membership in the Communist Party (Rampersad, 2019:8). At that time, he questioned God why black people were *chosen* to bear the heavy burden in striving for social, economic, and moral acceptance. According to Hughes' ideology, he criticized the distressing conditions of life in America which came as a significant doubt in religion, especially toward those individuals who exploited Christianity as a shroud to justify their harsh treatments against black people. In this poem, Hughes releases his psychological problems that infect his own life only because of his blackness. Hughes also makes use of expressions of outrage against the policy and the mentality of the government which clarify his political stance.

It was, rather, a denunciation of what Hughes has comprehended to convict the corrupting consequences of capitalism on American churches, which provide a profitable sum to corrupted clergymen. The poem is integral to a culture of complaint and critique among clergymen as well as laypeople who accused American churches for social inaction during the Great Depression. According to the poem, it is apparent that Hughes does not need Christ anymore and He has to take all saints and corrupted religious institutions. Hughes claimed that Marxism and the aspects of Communism will replace Christianity, "when religion used and has been marketed for greed" (Best, 2013: 5).

Likewise, in his poem *Justice* (1938), Hughes depicted the absence of justice in the presence of the corrupted religious institutions which exploited black individuals with several aspects of racism. Hughes asserted this impact when he compared justice to blind-goddess, he said:

"That Justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are wise:
Her bandage hides two festering sores"

. (Rampersad, 2000: 160)

In these lines, the poet portrayed the life of Afro-Americans lacking justice by indicating that there will be a revolution which will remove the corrupted religious institutions and clergymen. For Hughes, the conditions of black people were very miserable and full of sorrow. The poet wanted to deliver his message that such life and circumstances had required a democratic system that could guarantee equality and freedom for black people. He believed that a revolt against such mess is the solution for black people to obtain equal rights. So, many clergymen such as Evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson accused Hughes to be atheist and obtained Communism instead of Christianity.

Finally, religion is frequently understood as a medium, or an ideology, in which groups reach power and material resources within the nation-state. For Hughes, religion is denied since there has no equality among people of different colours and races. So that "religion becomes an

oppositional political medium and thus prone to violence under conditions of material want and inequity”(Friedland, 2009: 47).

Conclusion

Hughes reflected the aspects of Communism by calling for Communism, as a perspective expressed through his claim for equality and wealth that shared among people. Many politicians of the United States express this perspective as a communist trend so that Hughes was accused of being a communist and atheist for adopting the communist aspects in his poetry. Hughes explained his appeal of Communism because of the political and social marginalization. He revealed his repudiation of religious institution in a unique style through his poetry. Hughes's poems like: “*One More ‘S’ in the U. S. A*”, “*Ballads of Lenin*”, “*As I grow older*”, “*Democracy*”, “*Goodbye Christ*” and “*Justice*” beseech the African-Americans to replace Christianity for the sake of Communism to achieve the rights of black man in America. According to the poems that have been studied in paper, Hughes may believe in Communism as an outlet for the miserable state of black people in America, but he was never one member of the Communist Party. In addition, he adopted only the communist aspects as he declared formally after the investigation of the Congress Committee that he was not a part of the communist party and he would never be because he was an American man.

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