

Langston Hughes: The New Negro and the Integration Complex

Sukeina Hatem *

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□ ABSTRACT □

This article aims to show the difficulties African writers faced in American society due to the fact that the literary canon was mistakenly represented and confined to white American writers. The criterion problem triggers subsequent problems manifested in the internal and external conflict of African writers in improving their literary presence in American society. Langston Hughes tries to fathom the problem of integration with its two folds: physical and cultural. Hughes's poems raise the quintessential question of accepting and embracing the black identity by black writers themselves so that they can be accepted by others in American society. Hughes's emphasis on his racial focus in his poems constitutes an incentive for other black writers to accept their black identity and produce it in their writings.

Keywords: Americanness, Africanism, integration.

* High studies diploma. English Department. Faculty of Arts. Tishreen University. Lattakia, Syria.

لانغستون هيوز: مفهوم الزنجي الجديد وعقدة الانتماء

سكينة حاتم*

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□ ملخص □

يهدف هذا البحث إلى إظهار المصاعب التي واجهت الكتاب الأفريقيين في المجتمع الأمريكي بالاستناد إلى حقيقة أن الميزان الأدبي قد تم تقديمه وحصره بطريقة خاطئة بين الكتاب البيض الأمريكيين. وقد أدى التقديم الخاطئ للميزان الأدبي إلى ظهور مشكلات أخرى تمثلت في الصراع الداخلي والخارجي للكتاب الإفريقيين في تحسين حضورهم الأدبي في المجتمع الأمريكي.

وقد حاول لانغستون هيوز سبر أغوار مشكلة الانتماء بشقيها الثقافي والجسدي، فطرحت قصائده السؤال الجوهرية الذي يدور حول قبول الكتاب السود أنفسهم؛ الشخصية السوداء؛ ليقلهم الآخرون في المجتمع الأمريكي. وشكل تأكيد هيوز على الهوية العرقية في قصائده حافظاً للكتاب السود الآخرين لدفعهم إلى قبول هويتهم وإبرازها في كتاباتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأمركة، الإفريقية، الانتماء.

*قائم بالأعمال. قسم اللغة الانكليزية. كلية الآداب. جامعة تشرين - اللاذقية، سوريا.

INTRODUCTION:

The movement of the New Negro marks a crucial historical and cultural turning point in America, because it represents the blacks' attempts at reclaiming their black identity and obliterating the sense of othering and marginalization by proudly presenting their black identity to American society. The Blacks' need for assimilation within American society is also associated with the difficulty of the cultural integration due to the dominant notion of "Americanness" and the racial ideology which highlights the function of the white male views in crystallizing the American canon and marginalizing the presence and attributes of "Africanism" in the constitutive construction of the literary canon.

Aim and importance of the research:

The discussion of the racial focus in Hughes's poems sheds light on the difficulties black writers faced in accepting and embracing their black identity. This paper aims to show the reasons for these difficulties, and how Hughes overcame this problem by suggesting that Africanism is not a foil for whiteness. He advocates that Africanism and Whiteness are two sides of the same coin, and together they contribute to the wholeness of American society.

Research Methodology:

Historical analysis is applied in the first half of the paper to analyze the integration dilemma. The second half of the paper including relevant poems is analyzed according to a formalist's point of view. The formatting of the paper follows the MLA style.

OUTLINE

- I- Africanism and the canonical problem.
- II- Hughes and the integration crisis.
- III- From cultural integration to physical integration.
- IV- Conclusion.

As one of the pioneers of the New Negro Movement, Langston Hughes observes and addresses the reluctance of many black intellectuals to reclaim their black identity and their desire to claim and represent whiteness in their writing. On the surface, these black intellectuals accept their black identity, but they are hesitant to celebrate their blackness in their writing, fearing that this would jeopardize the status of the literature of the black culture because the literature is based on defining and reclaiming the culture: "Such a reclamation takes place by remembering history, defining identity, gaining recognition, and celebrating blackness" (Dobie 198). The acceptance of their black identity is not adequate to sustain the cultural literature, for the sustainability of the black literature is founded on accepting and celebrating blackness along with the dependence on the black history and culture which has always been an ignored part of the American history. In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", Hughes narrates the incident when a promising young Negro poet told him that he "want(s) to be a poet---not a Negro poet" (1). Even though the New Negro Movement encourages the acceptance of the physical aspect of blackness represented by the skin pigmentation, Hughes interprets the desire of the black poet to represent whiteness in his writing as a spiritual escape from his race which would finally lead to the physical refusal of the black identity. Hughes believes that with the black poet's fear of being himself, there will be a barrier to become "a great poet". In addition, he will be contributing to the building of the racial mountain which will stand "in the way of any true Negro art in America" (1). The black poets' denial of their black identity will jeopardize the continuity of the black tradition and art "in face of American standardization" (Hughes 2). Hughes is aware of the canonical problem of American literature because the American canon is built on the assumption of the absence of African contribution to the uniformity of American literature. This issue speaks back to the black poet's desire of writing like a white poet so that his work may be canonized and accepted by the white society.

Hughes's outcry against the spiritual escape of the black intellectuals from their race shapes his literary approach, which starts by questioning "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful", and ends by declaring that "Most of my poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know" (3). Hughes is not concerned about whether or not his poems will be welcomed by white society. He also refuses to restrict the thematic approach of his poems to the taste of white readers. Rather, he is sincere in his representation of the black life, which constitutes black tradition and culture. This is why Hughes's critics view him as "a racially representative writer" (Jones 1). Hughes is one among other Harlem poets who no longer "asked for white approval of their work but wrote intentionally for black readers. They no longer tried to conceal faults that might earn white approval but instead turned to condemning the shortcomings of the dominant culture" (Dobie 197). Hughes is conscious that although the literature of the black culture had been a vital constituent of American history, black artists struggle to "find an identity in a world that it was not theirs" (Dobie 179), and this explains the black poet's propensity to surrender his black identity and claim whiteness in his writing.

Though Hughes addresses the black reader in his poems, his dedication to the racial representation in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "I, Too," and "Mother to Son" highlights the problematic representation of the difficulties of integration. As Arthur P. Davis explains in his essay "Integration and Race Literature" how "the idea- not the fact obviously- but the idea of integration threatens to split the nation into two hostile camps" (156). Thus, Hughes tries to invite both the white and black societies to pull down the racial barrier between the blacks and whites and more importantly, between the traditional white

American literary canon and the African canon. He considers the physical and cultural integration of African Americans as a vital method which preserves the traditional literature of the blacks and enriches American literature.

In his poems, Hughes avoids the representation of what he calls, in his essay: the "self-styled 'high-class' Negro" because he thinks that he is a truer representation of whiteness rather than blackness, for his black individuality is poured "into the mold of American standardization". He lives and acts "like white folks"; he has the privileges of the white people, and his parents are intellectuals and occupy respectable positions in society. Furthermore, he owns servants in his house and escapes from what reminds him of his blackness by being engaged with the white culture and even going to "white theatres and white movies" (Hughes 1). Thus, his skin color becomes the only remnant of his black identity, with which he is afraid to accept or confront the world. Hughes finds his true representation of the black identity in the "low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority" (2). He finds in the ordinary, simple black people the essence of blackness and the expressive portrayal of the black identity due to the fact that they "still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization. And perhaps these common people will give the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself" (2). Hughes finds in this lower class the authentic material for the quintessential characterization of the black identity.

In his poems, Hughes portrays the black individual who is aware of the suffering of the past, but at the same time he is a future-focused individual who sees the segregation of the past as a transient step on his way to freedom. By the same token, Dickson D. Bruce Jr.¹ accentuates the notion that "Certainly, there remained a continuing assertion that the black voice could, and should, provide a unique perspective on American events, especially in regard to issues of slavery and color" (95). In this connection, Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" embodies the voice of enslavement by presenting the most cognizant reminder of the enslavement period, which is rivers. The rivers remind the blacks of the worst future that confronts them which is "being sold down the river" particularly the Mississippi river. Even though the rivers remind the blacks of their painful past as slaves, Hughes conceptualizes the rivers to highlight his notion of integration.

First of all, when Hughes portrays the movement of the rivers from different places to terminate in the ocean or in larger water bodies, he symbolizes the movement of the blacks from the peripheries to the mainstream body of America. However, the same movement portrays their painful transition from alienation to recognition. The fact that all the rivers Hughes mentions in his poems such as the Congo, the Nile and the Mississippi that terminate in larger bodies of water highlights the blacks' assimilation with the prevalent culture in American society. Hughes does not concentrate on the larger water bodies which encompass the rivers; rather, he concentrates on how the rivers enrich those water bodies and contribute to their continuity. These rivers represent the strong rootedness of the blacks and their attachment to their own land, but they have come and brought with them the tradition and culture of Africa in order to find place in the New World. They bring along with them memories from the lands through which they pass in order to finally come to America. Hughes' focal point is not the suffering associated with the journey of the blacks on their way to America, but it is the inability of the American culture to survive without the traditional African culture.

¹ A History professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

The black culture empowers American literature and the diversity of American culture because on the one hand, the rivers, in his poem, relate to their sources or homeland and on the other, they terminate in America. Thus, African literature tends to encompass various literary aspects, and it is constantly changing and progressing. It bridges between the African canon and the American canon. Hughes suggests that the American canon or the white society should welcome the arrival of the African canon as the larger water bodies welcome the arrival of the rivers, and the cultural assimilation should be complete. When the rivers mix with the sea or the ocean, they constitute an undistinguishable and harmonized unit. Similarly, when the African canon becomes one with the American canon, the result would be a cohesive canon that unites the African and the American cultures in one mold which is the literary canon. Hughes foresees the complete integration of the American and African cultures when he characterizes the movement of the rivers to the larger water bodies. He envisions Professor Gates' thought of the "merging of Negro expression with American expression" (Joyce 293) when he uses the metaphor of the rivers ending in the ocean or the sea. Hughes is not concerned about the physical assimilation of the blacks in the new land; rather, his concern is the loss of African tradition due to the estrangement imposed on black literature by the white society. Thus, he suggests cultural integration as the best solution that preserves both the African culture and the universality of the American literary canon.

Though Hughes concentrates on the cultural integration, he does not neglect the importance of the physical integration and the New Negro's confrontation with the white society in order to assert his black identity as he substitutes the inferior image of the Negro with the proud crystallization of the reclaimed black identity. Hughes' "I, Too" falls into Joyce's definition of black art when he says in his essay "Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism": "black creative art is an act of love which attempts to destroy estrangement and elitism by demonstrating a strong fondness or enthusiasm for freedom and an affectionate concern for the lives of people, especially black people" (296). Hughes's "I, Too" connects the sufferings of the past with the opportunities of the future. His revolutionist Negro does not search for a future where he is obliged to surrender his identity or live in the shadow of the white people. On the contrary, his Negro fulfills what Arthur A. Schomburg suggests in his essay "The Negro Digs in His Past" when he says: "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future" (61). The American Negro in Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" represents the vehicle by which the African culture finds its way in American society. By the same token, the American Negro in Hughes's "I, Too" bridges the past and the future in an attempt to rectify the wrongs that are done to the blacks in the past and reshape the black identity which the American Negro is proud to reclaim.

Hughes starts his poem with "I" to assert his Negro's individuality and his agency in representing himself rather than being represented and spoken about by his owner. His personality is materialized, and his voice imposes his presence in the new society. He is no more a commodity or the "formula" which Alain Locke² talks about in his essay "The New Negro." He rises above the commodification and dehumanization which make, as Locke suggests, "His shadow [...] more real to him than his personality" (47). Now he recognizes and reclaims his personality, with which he will confront the world and assert his presence on equal terms with the white society.

² An American educator, writer and philosopher, who is best remembered as a leader and chief interpreter of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Negro's individuality, however, does not isolate him from his brothers. On the contrary, as Schomburg observes, "we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and apt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all" (61). This is why Hughes uses the collective "I" to individually and collectively refer to the New Negro. His usage of "I" is indicative of the Negro's awareness of his individuality as well as his conscientious thought of representing black brothers and his role in articulating their problems and concerns in American society.

Hughes presents the problem of assimilation right after the Negro's self-recognition and reclamation of his individuality when he says "I, too, sing America " (28). He gives the American Negro the agency to reclaim his identity in America after the attempts of the white society to obliterate the individuality and marginalize the personality of the American Negro during the enslavement period. Hughes's Negro, however, confronts the world with his black identity as he says "I am the darker brother" (28). The Negro here is asserting his proud black identity which distinguishes him from others. He is also proud to talk about his blackness, which gives him his uniqueness in society. He is aware that he is different from others, but at the same time this difference does not alienate him from the others. On the contrary, he asserts his presence and rootedness in American society when he says that he is a "brother;" who has the right to claim his citizenship of the land. He is no more a stranger in the land of the whites, rather he is the "darker" brother of the white American in his own land. America is no longer considered the land of white Americans; it is instead the land for both blacks and whites, and the relationship between them is not based on a master-servant relationship, but is established on the new notion of brotherhood. In the past, the American Negro was obliged to be sent to the margins, he accepted to be treated as an inferior to his owners. However, now he does not want to be sent to eat in the kitchen with servants. He no longer accepts these social barriers which categorize him as an inferior according to his skin color. He recovers from the shackles of slavery and is prepared to confront the world with his revolutionary behavior:

To-morrow
I'll sit at the table
When company comes
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen"
Then (28).

Hughes makes his Negro utilize the pain of the past in order to better his future. He once accepted the social marginalization imposed on him during the enslavement period and had to recover from the internalization of inferiority to others during the reconstruction period, but now he frees himself from the visible shackles of slavery, which exploit his physical labor. He also frees himself from the invisible restraints of servitude, which perpetuate the hierarchical order and classify him as an inferior to his white brother. When the Negro reaches the stage of self-realization and accepts his black identity, he examines the necessity of moving from pain toleration to societal confrontation. Blackness does not stigmatize him anymore, but it distinguishes and empowers his personality. The fear of seeing his black skin disappears and is being replaced by his acknowledgment of his beauty and his desire that his white brothers could accept his blackness in order to see what is beyond the color. He wishes they would understand the beauty of his personality and regret their discrimination and prejudice against their black brother. Hughes says:

I am the darker brother.
 They send me to eat in the kitchen,
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong (28).

Hughes allows the American Negro to claim his right to assert brotherhood with the whites, and finally he allows him to completely identify himself with his new place. He is not only a citizen in America ; he becomes as Hughes's metaphor portrays him: "I, too, am America " (258). He reaches the complete identification with the place. He no longer needs the permission of the whites to claim his citizenship in America; he is identified with the place and, consequently, he is in his land and there is no need for him to ask for an authorization to stay in a place which is rightly his.

In her essay "Our America' That is Not One" Monika Kaup³ illuminates the black experience in American society and the complexities that hinder the blacks from finding home in a country that is not theirs. She says (90):

Eschewing both nostalgia and redemption through progress, the black experience in the Americas can be molded as a pendulum, swinging back and forth irregularly between opposite poles of homelessness and homecoming in the nations of the Americas . Rather than identifying successive and separate states of past and present, the black voice of exile and the black affirmation of inclusion present alternating pulses.

Though Hughes is aware of the Negro's fluctuation between his distant past, uncertain present and his vague future, "I, Too" represents one of his immature poems in which he is uncertain of achieving the blacks' dream of complete integration in American society. Kaup suggests that Hughes's "I, Too" "represents only one side of a pendulum: its uprising to progress, inclusion, inter-racial brotherhood, the utopian hope of national reconciliation, the end of the Middle Passage and the legacy of slavery" (90). Hughes, however, concentrates on the Negro's progress in America and his achievements in reclaiming his blackness and forcing his identity and his right of citizenship in a society where he was considered an inferior and an outcast.

Hughes's "Mother to Son" is one of his blues in which he presents "earthly, honest commentaries on life difficulties, some of them spiritual, some material, that offer no apology or defense but never admit defeat or ask for pity" (Dobie 200). This poem, however, characterizes both sides of Kaup's pendulum: homelessness associated with pain and alienation and homecoming associated with a sense of integration and inclusion. The poem symbolizes a black mother's experience in American society and the difficulties that she faces during her attempt to identify herself with the place. The poem is divided into two sections that symbolically represent the movement from one side of the pendulum to the other. In addition to the thematic movement from alienation to recognition, the poem portrays the temporal movement associated with this transition from the past to the present. The keyword that marks the division of the poem is "bare" because it separates the mother's experience in the past from her present experience. The use of diction in the first section of the poem and the use of gerund in the second contribute to Hughes' concern for integration. In the first section of the poem, Hughes says:

Well, son, I'll tell you:

³ Associate professor of English at the University of Washington.

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 It's had tacks in it,
 And splinters,
 And boards torn up,
 And places with no carpet on the floor—
 Bare (Hughes 40).

The mother describes the past using words such as "tacks" and "splinters" in order to explain the pain associated with the past. The words, however, imply physical pain rather than spiritual suffering. The referential meaning of these words indicate the enslavement period during which the blacks had to bear the physical pain of servitude and the humiliation of being whipped and tortured by white owners. This section does not refer to the mother's engagement with the life imposed on her. She only describes what kind of life she was presented in American society. She talks about the fragmentation of her life; how her life was "torn up", and she had to stay in places with "no carpet." Then she reaches the point when she realizes that all that American society offered her was "Bare." The mother's experience is replete with emptiness and suffering caused by the "tacks" and "splinters." She has come to a world that has nothing to offer but pain and hollowness. When the mother realizes the bareness of her past experience and her marginalization in American society, she sets off for another difficult journey in order to integrate with a society in which she is not accepted.

In the second section of the poem, Hughes says:

But all the time
 I've been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's,
 And turnin' corners,
 And sometimes goin' in the dark
 Where there ain't been no light (Hughes 40).

In this section, the mother shifts from talking about what life offers her to her own reaction towards the present situation. She uses the gerund in most of her words in this section such as: (climbin', reachin', landin', goin'). The use of the gerund further highlights the mother's difficulties in integrating with the American society because the gerund is a feminine rhyme that creates a lingering sound that occurs in the final, unstressed syllable of the word. It is less decisive and less emphatic sounding rhyme which adds another layer to the mother's voice and weakens her determination in finding a home in the new land. The use of the gerund symbolizes the action of the mother and the reaction of American society during her attempts of integration. For example, one can imagine her saying "reach" in order to indicate the finite integration in American society. However, the reaction of American society towards the mother's attempts of integration is represented by the gerund added to the word "reaching" to mark the continuity of her attempts and to indicate the continuity of the refusal of society towards these attempts of integration. The omission of the "g" in the gerund weakens the affectivity of the society's reaction in opposition to the mother's determination on finding a place in the new society, but it keeps the hesitant sound of the mother which symbolizes the difficulty of her attempts. The physical pain represented in the first half of the poem disappears in the second half, but the sound of the gerund "in" resembles the sound of moaning and suffering, but at this time the

pain is spiritual and not physical. The mother's pain is that of homelessness in the new society; it reflects the difficulties in identifying with the place.

The word "bare" separates and links both experiences of the American Negro. It represents the life of the African American and illuminates how "in the phrase of Mathew Arnold, he is living between two worlds"-one not yet dead, the other not fully born" (Davis 156). The mother is trying to terminate the hyphenated experience of the African American represented by "bare." She refuses to accept living between these worlds, and she is trying to find a wholly materialized world for her in America, and the best method for this is the complete integration with the American society. The mother is, thus, conscious of the difficulties of her attempts at integration, but surrendering is going to be more difficult for her, and it will relegate her to live on the hyphen and to be stripped from her American aspect of her black identity. Hence, in the last section of the poem, Hughes highlights the difficulties of integration, but at the same time, he has hopes that the black people can overcome these difficulties and live in American society without being discriminated by whites. Hughes says:

So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair (Hughes 40).

Hughes's critics find in his poetry "a direct relationship between black lives-black realities- and black literature" (Napier 239). Hughes adopts the themes of "Black pride, self-respect as opposed to self-abnegation or even self-veiling" (Napier 295) in his poetry in an endeavour to eliminate the racial mountain in the Negro's self on the one hand and between the blacks and whites on the other. Consequently, he tries to reach the perfect formula of American society and culture in which black culture is accepted and celebrated as a vital part of the American canon.

Hughes's attempts to make the black writers embrace their identity is the first step in making the canonical society in America embrace their black identity as writers. In his poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "I, Too," and "Mother to Son," Hughes explicates the fact that Africanism or blackness is not an obstacle impeding the black writers from finding their voices in America's literary scene. He emphasizes that for the black writers to be recognized as members of the "white" canonical society in American, they should be recognized as black individuals first, and they can then integrate in society as individuals and not as unanimous voices referring to black writers.

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