

## CHAPTER - I

### I N T R O D U C T I O N

Langston Hughes is described as the poet<sup>in</sup> Laureate of the American Negro. He is always held in grateful remembrance for his Afro-American literary activity. He is called a New Negro, a radical, a conservative. He was famous as a poet, and he achieved international reputation in this respect. He is a poet with artistic bent of mind, the power to transform his experiences regarding the plights of black life in America into poetry of high artistic merit, and he is remarkable for his extra ordinary power of expression. He is a creative artist in the field of Afro-American poetry and is universally regarded as one of the original figures in his poetic style, art and technique, descending from Walt Whitman, Lindsay, and equality, which are more boldly and clearly expressed through and reflected in Hughes's poetry. Langston Hughes is a minute observer of almost all the tendencies of twentieth century American poetry, which he has mirrored with meticulous care in his poetry.

Langston Hughes came of an ambitious and educated family in Joplin, Missouri. He was brought up in cities in

the Middle West. He graduated from Central High School in Cleveland. He was appointed a teacher of English in Mexico, when he was eighteen only. He spent one and half years in Mexico, a year at Columbia University and some time as a worker on the high seas. His early years were spent in Kansas and Cleveland; he stayed in and travelled France, Italy and Spain where he undertook varied works, stayed with people of various professions and mixed with people of different classes. His wide travels, and stay in different places and with different classes of people enriched his experience and poetic mind.

Hughes's poetic career spanned four decades. Throughout his forty years as a poet he was always found active. As writer, adviser, and confidants, he always stood in the forefront of Afro-American literary activity from his poems published first in the "Crisis" in the early twenties until he breathed his last. In the "First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar", he received homage from black writers and artists from all over the world, to whom Hughes's works were their literary inspiration.

Langston Hughes's writing was greatly influenced by Lindsay, Sandburg and Amy-Lowell to whom he was introduced when he was in grammar school, for he began to write verse during his

student life. His career as a poet began when his first poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was published in The Crisis, June 1921, the journal of Negro life and Opinion edited by W.E.B. Du Bois. He received recognition as a poet when he published his first volume of poems The Weary Blues.<sup>(1)</sup> With the publication of his first volume of poems it was witnessed that Negro art was revived. This opened up a horizon in the Negro World, and the Negroes themselves began to prove the quality of their inheritance.

The Weary Blues made him so famous as a poet that his name spread far and wide. It engaged the attention of critics. Hughes began to be evaluated. Alain Locke, the leading exponent of "The New Negro" eulogized him. He described Hughes' as a true people's poet. Hughes's poems of this volume seem to be based on rhythms as seasoned as folk songs and on moods as deep-seated as folk-bellads. This volume of poems imparted to him admiration from Negro intellectuals who accepted him as one of them. Like them, Hughes dignified Harlem with a genuine art life. With the passage of time, he attained the prestige as a spokesman for his own race i.e. the Negroes in America. In it, the poet is always intensely subjective, passionate, keenly sensitive to beauty and possessed of an unflinching musical sense.

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1. New York : Knopf 1926.

His second volume of poetry Fine Clothes to the Jews, published in 1927 while he was a college student. This volume honored him as the poet laureate of the American Negro. Hughes visited Haiti in 1932 and called on Jacques Roumain, the great Haitian poet, who described him as the greatest Negro Poet who had ever come to pay honor to Haitian Soil. Langston Hughes widened his appeal with the poetry of Fields of Wonder (1947) Shakespeare in Harlem (1942), The Dream Keeper (1932), Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951), Ask Your Mass (1961), The Panther and the Lash (1967), Jim Crow's Last Stand (1943) (Negro Publication Society of America), Freedom Plow (Musette, 1943) Lament For Dark People and other poems (1944). All these poems deal with the spectrum of Afro-American life.

Langston Hughes had wide-ranging experiences about the social, cultural, emotional and political life of the Negroes in America, which he has clearly and comprehensively expressed in his two autobiographies - The Big Sea <sup>(2)</sup> and I Wonder as I Wander. <sup>(3)</sup> Langston Hughes was an explorer and interpreter of black life. He tried his best to explore black life especially the black life in urban areas. Harlem typifies life in urban Black America, which was characterized by violence racial

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2. Knopf 1940.

3. Rinehart, 1956.

confrontation, death and murder in the streets, brutality and police repression; and black life, Hughes has mirrored in blues and jazz poems. He has been highly praised by J. Saunders Redding in his essay "The New Negro Poet in the Twenties" (pp. 26-27) for portraying a complete and authentic picture of Negro life in America. He wrote :

"Hughes is the most prolific and the most representative of the New Negroes. By training and experience he is at the opposite end from Cullen, that is to say, he is a Negro divinely capable of realizing (which is instinctive) and giving expression to (which is cultivated) the dark perturbation of the soul - there is no ~~assum~~ otherword - of the Negro. There is this difference between the physicians, the social workers think, the domestics, The porters, the dock hands, the factory girls, and the sweet walkers feel - feel in a great tide that pours over into song and shout, prayer and cursing, Laughter and tears. More than any other writer of the race, Langston Hughes has been swept with this tide of feeling."<sup>(4)</sup>

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Hughes had the opportunity to see Harlem and came in direct contact with Harlem, especially the Negro urban life in

4. "The New Negro Poet in the Twenties" (editor's title). From J. Saunders Redding, To Make A Poet Black (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press 1939).

Harlem when he was studying engineering in Columbia University. To him, Harlem was more than a place or setting. His interest as a poet lay in its people - in their manners, their talks, their gestures of bravado, their dances, their clothes, their thoughts, and dreams, both deferred and inferred. Though he travelled far and wide, Harlem remained his spiritual, esthetic and emotional home. In the early period of his poetic development, he regarded Harlem as a place of that excited and emotionalized his artistic bent of mind; but as soon as he attained maturity as a poet in the fifties and sixties, Harlem was viewed by him as a place of gray, squalor and urban blight. Yet he continued to enjoy the sounds, colours and rhythms of his people. He was the most prolific and the most successful of the major black writers who brought about "The Harlem Renaissance" during the 1920s. As the Harlem gave way to the Depression, Hughes made his mind to sustain his career as a poet by bringing his poetry to the people. The Depression compelled him to think a new about the relation between his poetry and his people. He wrote in The Big Sea, his autobiography :

"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 wrote about Negroes, and primarily for Negroes."<sup>(5)</sup>

Undoubtedly, Langston Hughes can be called the exponent of the "Harlem Renaissance". He dignified Harlem with a genuine art life. He boldly and freely used the modern poetic content and form with a view to making the life, feelings and speech of people in Harlem more prominent than they were made by other black writers contemporary with him. His presentation of the life in Harlem is characterized by sentimental naturalism. The characters, he has shed light on, are whores, gamblers, drug addicts, gangsters, drunks, and the like, so that his Harlem becomes a lurid place also detached from the actual city.

Langston Hughes was highly impressed by Harlem's glamour, primarily its music, dancing, and laughter which he has mirrored in the poem "Minstrel Man".<sup>(6)</sup>

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5. The Big Sea : by Langston Hughes (New York Knopf, 1940).

6. Published in The Crisis, December, 1925.

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
And my throat  
Is deep with song  
You do not think  
I suffer after  
I have held my pain  
So long ?

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
You do not hear  
My inner Cry ?

Because my feet  
Are gay with dancing  
You do not know  
I die ?

Harlem is not only a place of joviality but danger and death are inseparable traits of Harlem also. Guns and knives are the instruments of fun. The pleasures in Harlem emanate from liquor, music, sex and money. These confirm the perverted tastes of Harlemites.

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Langston Hughes was a poet of the Negroes; he wrote for the black people. He highlighted racial discriminations in his poetry. Black people were oppressed not only as a race but as members of the working masses. Most of his poems are racial in theme and treatment. He tried his best to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in the United States of America. He appealed to other black writers to write freely, and to express freely also, disregarding the displeasure of whites or blacks. "If white people are glad, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful, and ugly too. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."<sup>(7)</sup> His poems written on and about Negro life in America are the valid statements on the Negro life in America.

Racialism, violence, brutality, oppression, social injustices and inequalities constitute the major themes of the poems written on Negro life. Through his poems he has boldly voiced those inhuman treatments of which the black masses are victims.

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7. Published in The Crisis in 1922.

Claude Mc Kay's (1889 - 1948) view of racial discrimination had a distinct bearing on Hughes's handling the theme of racialism, violence and brutality. Mc Kay's third volume of poetry Harlem Shadows engaged the attention of black writers traced in it the documentary picture of racial discrimination and violence. It gives an account of the interracial strife of the period just after the War.

Langston Hughes was well-acquainted with folk-culture, the Negro Life in America, the historical background of the Negroes as an exploited and oppressed race in America which provided him with the themes of writing poetry on them. He wrote several poems in which he developed the theme of racial brutality and violence.

"The South" is an example in point :

The lazy, laughing South  
With blood on its mouth,  
The Army- faced South,  
Beast - strong  
Idiot - brained  
The child - minded South  
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes  
(8)  
For a Negro's bones.

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8. Published in The Crisis in 1922.

Hughes was deeply perturbed by the miseries of the black masses who work as a slave, a laborer, singer, singing sad songs and a victim whose hands were chopped off and then put to death. He has given a concrete account of these miseries in the poem "The Negro."

I am a Negro :

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave :

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clear.

I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker :

Under my hand the pyramids across

I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer :

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs

I made ragtime.

I've been a victim :

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.

They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro

Black as the night is black

Black like the depths of my Africa.

(9)

The inhuman attitude toward the black women is revealed in the poem "I Thought It was Tangiers I Wanted." Here the black women are sold to be sexually enjoyed. The second stanza confirms it :

I know now

There is a Crystal Palace in Antwerp

Where a hundred women sell their naked bodies,

And the night - lovers of sailors

Wait for men on docks in Genoa.

(10)

As racial discrimination, violence and brutality form the major themes of his poetry, Hughes continued to write poems on these themes up to his mature stage of poetic career. Violence and brutality are obvious in the poem "Birmingham Sunday" (September, 15, 1963) in which the poet narrates how four little girls, who went to Sunday School, were brutally lynched :

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9. From The Negro Blues : Published in The Crisis 1923.

10. Copyright 1927 by Langston Hughes. Copyright renewed.

Four little girls  
Who went to Sunday School that day  
And never came back home at all -  
But left instead  
Their blood upon the wall  
With spattered flesh  
And bloodied Sunday dresses  
Scorched by dynamite that  
China made aeons ago  
Did not know what China made  
Before China was ever Red at all  
Would - redden with their blood  
This Birmingham - on - Sunday wall. (11)

"Always the Same" is a poem in which Hughes has fearlessly accused the white Americans of exploiting, torturing, robbing, shooting and killing the blacks. They are exploited and their blood which is sucked by the white ones is converted into dollars, pounds, francs, pesetas and lire, which make their fortune :

Black :  
Exploited beaten and robbed ;  
Shot and killed.

Blood running into

Dollars

Pounds

Francs

Pesetas

Lira

For the wealth of the exploiters -

Blood that never comes back to me again.

While dealing with racial discrimination, violence and brutality Langston Hughes was vigilant of the miserable conditions of the Negro working class which is economically victimized. The poems "Sonn for a Dark Girl", "Reet O' Jesus" "Homesick Blues", "Mulett" "Mass Spitoons" "Porter" etc. of Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927) reveal the Negro working - class. In "Porter" the poet decries economic discrimination made to the Negro Porter. The ending of the poem is sarcastic :

Rich old white man

Owens the World

Giime yo' shoes

To Shine.

Yee, Sir !

Hughes lambasted economic discrimination in his poem "Elevator

(12)  
Boy". The portrait of the Negro workman in "Brass Spitoong" reveals the fact that the Negroes in America are made to discharge inhuman works which the white ones think the suitable works for the Negroes. This is also a type of exploitation through racial discrimination. The poem begins :

Clean the spittoons, boy.  
Detroit !  
Chicago  
Atlantic city  
Palm Beach.  
Clean the spittoons,  
The steam in hotel kitchens,  
And the smoke in hotel lobbies,  
And the slime in hotel spittoons :

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Although Langston Hughes's fundamental concern lies in the black condition in America and the affirmation of blackness, the integration between the two (white and black) communities was his one of main purposes. This integration does not mean that he wanted the abolition of the black class. He wanted that the two classes of Americans should live in peaceful co-existence and should be integrated on the bond of fraternity. The black community co-exists with the white one with distinct

12. Jack Benso (ed) : Monterey (Calif) Peninsula Herald, December 12, 1958.

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identity and culture.

Hughes favoured dual-consciousness or dual-identity. He asserted the interrelatedness of the two identities. His vision of social and political life was that he was both an American and a Negro. In the greater national sense he asserted his Americanism, and within this range, he affirmed his blackness. The black people maintain a distinct race from the white ones within the American social and political life. Langston Hughes always affirmed his faith in his being a black American. He was ashamed for those black writers who wanted to be more concerned with his being poets than being members of the black Americans. Disregarding their identities and distinct culture, some black writers wanted to be accepted into the mainstream of American literature, but Hughes always maintain distance from this philosophy or the principle of being a poet. He asserted black aesthetic. He is optimistic of the view of one nationality with two distinct classes, which is clearly hinted in the poem "I, too, Sing America" :

I, too, sing America  
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.

Tomorrow

I'll be at the table  
When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me

"Eat in the kitchen",

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful

And be ashamed -

(13)

I, too, sing America.

In the "The Negro" published in the Crisis (1923) Hughes advocated two souls, two thoughts knitted so tightly not to be torn into two separate parts.

Langston Hughes highlighted the problem of dual-consciousness in essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". He wrote : "One of the most promising of the young Negro poet", said to me once, 'I want to be a poet - not a Negro poet', meaning subconsciously 'I would I like to be a white poet'; meaning

13. From The Weary Blues (New York : Knopf 1926).

behind that, 'I would like to be white'. And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And 'I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro Art-in America - this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

Hughes added : ... "But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duty at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering. 'I want to be writer', hidde*d* in the aspirations of his people, to "why should I want to be writer? I am a Negro - and beautiful."

Hughes continued to state : "So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, 'I want to be a poet, nor a Negro poet', as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world."<sup>(14)</sup>

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The miserable working conditions of black working

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14. Published in The Nation, C XXII (June 23, 1926).

class inspired the poet and provided him ample scope and theme to write poetry about. In this respect, Hughes had direct but bitter experience. While in School, he managed a job in a hotel where he cleaned toilets and spittoons. This is revealed in the poem "Brass Spittoons". Here he has represented himself as the representative black labor in America. In the poem "Laughters" Hughes touches on the working conditions of the Negroes :

Dream singers  
Story tellers,  
Dancers,  
Loud laughters in the hands of Fate -  
My people.  
Dish - Washers,  
Elevator - boys  
Ladies maids,  
Crap - shooters,  
Cooks,  
Waiters,  
Jazzers,  
Nurses of babies,  
Leaders of ships,  
Rounders,  
Number of writers,  
Comedians in Vaudeville  
And bandmen in circuses-  
Dream - singers all -

Politics constituted one of the major themes <sup>of</sup> Langston Hughes' poetry. Unlike some great Negro poets, aiming to become poets only, denying the interest of people of their own community, Hughes' primary aim and purpose was not to be regarded as a poet only, but as a poet championing the causes of the black interest in America. He strove to shed light on the racial discrimination which was essentially a social sin that maligns the national character of America. The Negroes are socially oppressed, politically deprived and economically exploited.

The Great Event of the Depression of the 1920's drew Hughes attention to the communist ideals. The Negroes were passing through utter poverty. Millionaires as well as poor people lost everything. Everyone fell in this catastrophe together. Hughes became interested in the socio-economic situation of Russia and communism. He was sure that it was communism that could save people from poverty. The sympathetic attitude of the communists to the socially and economically oppressed and exploited class and their attempts to ameliorate the labor conditions impressed Hughes. Hughes was greatly attracted and influenced by the Marxist ideals of the "Dictatorship of the Proletariate" which could alone make the Negroes conscious of their rights of

which they have been so long deprived. This does not mean that Hughes aimed at forming political party to capture power in America. Nor was he interested in power politics. What he intended was to instill into the Negroes the consciousness of their rights - through the Marxist ideals.

Langston Hughes was committed to democracy. He was the Prometheus in the American Negro World. He was a rebel humanist. He strove to have democracy ensured to the black Americans. The Negroes are born free but they are always and everywhere chained. The black Americans are a deprived race. They are always discriminated in terms of justice and opportunities. "Liberty and justice" after which the black ones aspire is a far cry from them. The denial of granting democracy to the black Americans has widened the gap between the black and the white Americans. Hughes sought to break down distinctions. His aim to break down the kinds of distinctions which make racism possible is not unrelated to his yearning to break down distinctions of all kinds. The following two lines of "Let America Be America Again" reveals the fact of inequality between the white and the black Americans :

There's never been equality for me

Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free."

Hughes launched the movement for democracy meant for not only the Negroes, but for all black and white alike, who are deprived of it. In his essay titled "My America" Hughes gives full expression to the feelings about American, and the Americans whose freedom is denied. He begins the essay with the hope of the democratic development of America :

"This is my land America. Naturally, I love it - it is home - and I am vitally concerned about its mores, its democracy, and its well-being." These confessions highlight Hughes's commitment to America as his own country. The essay ends in another testament of faith " . . . , We know . . . that America is a land in transition. And we know it is within our (black people's) power to help in its further change toward a finer and better democracy than any citizen has known before. The American Negro believes in democracy. We want to make it real complete, workable, not only for ourselves - the fifteen million dark ones - but for all Americans all over the land." (15)

Langston Hughes was the spokesman for black democracy. He lampasted the inequality prevailing in every sphere of black life. He was quite aware of the fact that the black will not be given freedom on the ground of humanity. He warned the black ones that their white counterparts would not agree to

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15. Langston Hughes Reader (New York): George Braziller, Inc., 1958 pp. 300-301.

grant them freedom through compromise. The opening lines of :

"Freedom" reveal :  
Freedom will not come  
Today, this year  
Nor ever  
Through compromise and fear.

The concluding lines reveal that Langston Hughes has succeeded in instilling the aspiration for freedom into the minds of the Negroes :

Freedom  
Is a strong seed  
Planted  
In a great need  
I have here, too.  
I want freedom  
Just as you.

Langston Hughes was well-acquainted with Negro history. Their historical, cultural, political and social life engaged his attention. He tried to remind the Negroes of some past incidents in order to bring about their consciousness in connection with the Negro life in America. The Negroes were afraid of the civilization, for it stands for dehumanization to them. The

while one exploited them in the name of their civilizing mission in America since, the discovery of America in 1492. Their civilizing mission was followed by tortures, murders and exploitation. There are several incidents that reveal that the black ones could not tolerate it and made abortive attempts to liberate themselves from the hands of the white ones." October 16 : The Raid" deals with Negro participation in John Brown's raid in Harper's Ferry, launched to achieve freedom. But the revolution did not succeed. Brown was captured, tried and sentenced to death by hanging. This is a memory, connected with the Negroes' aspiration for freedom :

Perhaps

You will remember

John Brown.

John Brown

Who took his gun,

Took twenty-one companions

White and black

Went to shoot your way to freedom

Where two rivers meet

And the hills of the

South



Look slow at one another -  
And died  
For your sake.  
Now that you are  
Many years free,  
And the echo of the Civil War  
Has passed away,  
And Brown himself  
Has long been tried at law,  
Hanged by the neck,  
And buried in the ground -  
Since Harpers Ferry  
Is alive with ghosts today,  
Immortal raiders  
Come again to town -  
Perhaps  
You will recall  
(16)  
John Brown.

"Our Land" in The World Tomorrow (1923) and "Afraid" in  
The Weary Blues deal with the poet's generalization of a  
Negro fear of civilization. Hughes' "Lament for Dark Peoples"  
(June 1924) portrays that red and black men are taken from their  

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16. Published in "Opportunity" in 1931.

primitive homo and "caged in the circus of civilization". In the poem "I Dream a World" Hughes speaks of freedom for all - whether black or white. He dreams America to be an ideal land where freedom for all will prevail :

A World I dream where black or white,  
Whatever race you be,  
Will share the bounties of the earth  
And every man is free . . . .  
(17)

Langston Hughes, apart from dealing with the Negro life in America, has successfully examined Negro soul. In "Necessity" in Montage of a Dream Deferred, he deals with the complexities of Negro soul. He also exposes the folk jibe :

I don't have to do nothing  
but eat, drink, stay black and die ;

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Although the major theme of Hughes' poetry is racial, non-racial theme, which he has touched upon in about twenty poems, has eliminated the monotony of theme in his poetic works. This theme is essentially appealing to readers.

His non-racial theme consists in love, death, life

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17. Published in Tom Work, February, 1945.

and nature. Interracial physical love finds its fullest expression in the poems "Hallow", "Harlem Night Club" etc. Hughes' conception of death is essentially philosophical and transcendental. I do not know whether Langston Hughes read Emily Dickinson or not, but his conception of death is identical with that of Dickinson. Hughes's belief is that death is an agent that helps souls merge ultimately with the Divinity. "Three" of Fields of Wonder (1947) deals with it :

Where death  
Stretches its wide horizons.  
And the sun gallops no more  
Across the sky.  
There where nothing  
Is all,  
  
I  
Who am nobody,  
Will become Infinity,  
Even perhaps  
Divinity.

In his opinion death brings eternal rest and peace. A man in grave can alone enjoy it. Hughes expresses this view in the poem "Grave Yard" of Fields of Wonder :

Here is that sleeping place,  
Long resting place  
No stretching place,  
That never-get-up-no-more  
Place  
Is here

Yet, some of his poems which deal with death are instinct with gloom, fear and sadness.

Hughes' nature poems deal with the moon, the sea, rain etc. The poem "Winter Moon" published in the Crisis (1923) deals with the external feature of activities of the moon in winter. "Moonlight Night : Camel" of Fields of Wonder is a lyrical expression of the beauty of nature decorated by the surging waves and illuminated by the moon light :

Tonight the waves march  
In long ranks  
Cutting the darkness  
With their silver shanks,  
Cutting the darkness  
And kissing the moon  
And beating the land's  
Edge into a moon.

Hughes was keen on natural beauty. The beautiful image of the new moon, seen through the passing clouds is excellently created in the poem "New Moon" of Fields of Wonder. "Birth", a poem of Fields of Wonder deals with different natural phenomena of the cosmic world :

Oh, fields of wonder  
Out of which  
Stars are born,  
And moon and sun  
And me as well.  
Like stroke  
Of lightning  
In the night  
Some mark  
To make  
Some word  
To tell.

Hughes has painted beautiful nature - portraits in the poem "Fulfilment" of Fields of Wonder. The moon is here represented as an old grand mother who cuddles and lulls us. The poem ends :

The moon,  
Like an old grandmother,  
Blessed us with a kiss  
And sleep  
Took us both in  
Laughing.

In the poem "Silver Rain" of Fields of Wonder, rain is represented as an enlivening power of nature. The poem opens :

In time of silver rain  
The earth  
Puts forth new life again,  
Green grasses grow  
And flowers lift their heads,  
And over all the plain  
The wonder spreads  
Of Life  
Of Life  
Of Life

In the poem "March Moon" in The Henry Blues (1926) the moon is painted naked and unblushing. In the opinion of Hughes the sea is mysterious creation of nature. In the poem "Sea

Calm" in The Weary Blues the sea is presented as a natural phenomenon of fear and weariness.

The theme of human life is another non-racial theme in his poetry. "Mexican Market Woman" in The Crisis (1922) highlights the poet's role in preserving the beauty of human life and nature.

Hughes's conception of love is both racial and non-racial. On the one hand he lambastes the white Americans for their discriminatory attitude towards the black ones, on the other hand, he is not aggressive and vindictive to all the white Americans. He also loves the white ones as much as he loves the Negroes.

Love, joy and frolic are interlocked - in his poetry "Gypsy Melodies" of Fields of Wonder is filled with love, joy and laughter :

Songs that break  
And scatter  
Out of the moon :  
Rockets of joy  
Dimmed too soon.

Besides, Langston Hughes has touched upon romantic love, physical

love and love between two-opposite sexes in his poetry. "Ardelle" and "A Black Pierrot" both in The Weary Blues are suffused with conventional physical love. "Sleep" of Fields of Wonder deals with the feeling of physical love. "The Breath of a Rose" deals with the ephemeral nature of love. "Walls" of Fields of Wonder highlights the permanent value of human life.

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Langston Hughes's conception of religion is fundamentally non-sectarian. His attitude to Christianity as it prevails in America is satirical. He was not a spiritual man leading a spiritual life; he had not explained and interpreted life from the point of morality or didacticism. He opined that religion should be human and serve the purpose of man alike.

Hughes has explained and interpreted Christianity from <sup>the</sup> standpoint of social and economic background of America. He excoriated the commercialization of Christianity. He tried his best to illuminate how the value of Christianity has been cheapened and degenerated in the hands of popes, preachers, robbers etc. in the poem "Good-bye Christ" :

But it's dead now,  
The popes and the preachers 've  
Made too much money from it,  
They 've sold you (Christ) to too many



Kings, generals, robbers, and killers -  
Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks . . . .

Langston Hughes, though he was greatly inspired by Marxism, did not look upon religion as the "Opium of life". He had firm faith in ideal Christianity which can give men a power to face all the challenges of life and tide over all sorts of adverse circumstances - facing life. This view of religion is essentially non-sectarian. But the malpractice of religion which entails misery and causes exploitation and oppression, has been exposed by the poet in his poetry.

Langston Hughes explained clearly to John Kirkwood of British Columbia's Vancouver Sun on the 3rd December, 1958 about his attitude to religion in the following words :

"I'm not anti-Christian. I'm not against any one's religion. Religion is one of the innate needs of mankind. What I am against is the misuse of religion. But I won't ridicule it . . . whatever part of God is in anybody is not to be played with, and everybody has got a part of God in them."

There are about sixty odd poems, written by Langston Hughes, which deal with religion (Christianity). The simplest are traced in a group of six lyrics and songs versified variously between 1926 and 1964 that celebrate the story of the Christ

Child. In "To Artina" Hughes humanizes Jesus Christ. "Judgment Day", "Prayer Meeting", "Sinner" and "Acceptance" reveal his attitude to religion, for in these poems Hughes has concentrated on the religious beliefs of the protagonists.

Hughes's attitude to religion is rational. He believes in the immortality of soul which merges with the Great Soul. In this respect, he was deeply influenced by the Indian religious scriptures and Walt Whitman. The idea of immortality of soul and its subsequent merge with God is revealed in the poem "Three" of Fields of Wonder.

But Hughes is quite critical of distorted Christianity in America. In "Christ in Alabama" (1931) he reveals that the racial evils have long out-faced American Christianity. Hughes excoriates the preachers' concentration on their service charges and commercial mentality in the poems "Ballad of the Man Who's Gone" (1942) and "Night Funeral in Harlem" 1931. He has sharply criticised the racketeering in the Churches.

Langston Hughes has bitterly criticized the misuse and malpractice of religion. He has also taken a critical view of so-called Christianity in which there is racial discrimination and class hatred. In "Bible Belt" (1966) he says that had Jesus been born black, he would have been disallowed entrance to many public places.

It can be undoubtedly said that Langston Hughes had deep faith in Christ. In the poem "Graduation" he deals with it and urges the black people :

Praise Jesus

The colored race will rise !

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Langston Hughes is a poet-artist. The folk life of America which is the centre of interest in his poetry, has been transformed into high poetic art. Hughes possessed great poetic power by which he has poetically expressed his experiences about the black life in America. The beauty of Negroes' faces, eyes and souls has been poetically rendered into fine poetry as revealed in "My People" published in The Crisis 1922 :

The night is beautiful

So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,

So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.

Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

Langston Hughes was a poet of excellent poetic power. The excellence of his poetry lies in its directness, vitality,

inventiveness, actuality, humor, and sanity. He seldom exploited the oblique, elliptical style of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. His technical inventiveness is traced in the poem "Dream Boogie":

What did I say ?

Sure,

I'm happy !

Take it away

Hey, Pop

Re- hop

Mop

(18)

Y-e-e-h

His "Song for a Dark Girl" published in The Crisis (1923) gives a few instances of Hughes's strongest poetic virtues. Simplicity, vivid and appropriate imagery, economy and social significance are marked here. Ironic juxtaposition and unforced symbolism (cross-road) are also typical Hughesian techniques worthy of notice.

Langston Hughes is direct and explicit; his poetry is free from obscurity. The charge of obscurity may be brought against Hughes by one who is not acquainted with the Afro-American words, phrases and folk dialect. The language of Hughes's

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18. From Montage of a Dream Deferred, 1951.

poetry is simple, lucid and clear and he writes in a conversational style. The conversational technique of his poetic language and the directness of his expression of ideas are revealed in the poem "Esthete In Harlem" in Dear Lovely Death in 1930 :

Strange,  
That in this nigger place  
I should meet life face to face  
When for years, I had been seeking  
Life in places gentler speaking.  
Until I came to this vile street  
And found life stepping on my feet

The dialects which Langston Hughes used in his poetry are ~~are~~ authentic. The charge of obscurity is refuted by the authenticity of the dialects.

Charity, frankness and explicitness, which mark black poetry are conspicuously reflected in the poem "The Negro" :

I am a Negro  
Black as the night is black  
Black like the depths of my Africa.

The jazz rhythms and the idiomatic language of the blues have

excellently decorated his poetic language. But Langston Hughes had no control over the consciousness of diction and the metrical freedom of Imagist poetry. Yet we cannot deny or overlook the innovativeness of his rhymes and diction.

Hughes was more keenly interested in poetic form than language. He laid special emphasis on metrical symmetry. His power of inventiveness lies in the blues form. In the prefatory pages of Fine Clothes to the Jew Hughes explains: "The Blues ..... have a strict rhyme pattern: One long-line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two sometimes ..... the second line . . . is slightly changed and sometimes . . . it is omitted." "Po' Boy Blues" is written strictly in accordance with the blues form. It opens:

When I was home do  
Sunshine seemed like gold.  
When I was home do  
Sunshine seemed like gold. (19)

The jazz poem is opposed to the blues one in so far as the rigidity of form is concerned. The jazz poem is with any fixed form, and thereby it is a sort of free verse. The vocality and mellowness of the jazz are opposed to the instrumentality and aggressiveness of the blues. Yet, the jazz poetry

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19. In Poetry November, 1926

is laced with the bouncy of rhythms and exuberance. It is essentially musical. "Mother to Son" published in The Crisis December (1922) is rhythmic and musical. It paints picture of a matriarch (A Negro Woman) who labors her son with her own persistence : She is quite vocal about her situation but tolerant :

Well, Son, I'll tell you :  
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.  
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.  
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've still goin' honey,  
I've still climbin'  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The language of Hughes's jazz poems is swift-paced and the expression of jazz poems is spontaneous. The language is most often colloquial. The effect of his choice of forms and his easy and smooth handling of the forms is quite brilliant and unequivocal in the black world. The rhythms and diction are syncopated and, this syncopation of rhythms and diction is really novel and innovative in the history of Afro-American poetry.

Langston Hughes has always stood away from the traditional poetic language. His language as used in poetry is essentially conversational. The sentences are grammatical and syntactical, and grammatically worded.

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Langston Hughes is a lyricist per excellence. His lyricism is simple and economical. Spontaneity is one of the most striking features of his lyrics. His lyrics are the pure effusions of the poet's heart. Music and melody are welded in his lyrical poetry. His lyrics are meant to be sung to the musical accompaniment. In his lyrics he has strictly maintained rhyme and music. His Fields of Wonder is purely lyrical. The intensity of feeling and a deep passion mark the lyrical qualities of his lyrics. His "Earth Song" in Fields of Wonder is purely lyrical :

It's an earth song-  
And I've been waiting long



For an earth song,  
It's a spring song  
I've been waiting long  
For a spring song ;

Strong as the bursting of young buds,  
Strong as the shoots of a new plant,  
Strong as the coming of the first child  
From its mother's womb-  
An earth Song !  
A baby song !  
A spring song !  
I've been waiting long  
For an earth song.

Langston Hughes is eloquently praised by critics as a great poet for his superb poetic art, techniques and style. He is praised as a poet, having the power to express poetically his experiences. The most important characteristic of his art is his accurate recreation of the imagery, idiom and syntax of black speech.

Hughes's early attempts in the twenties to fill the role of a Poet Laureate of the Negro led him to create a body of work that was organic in nature. The traditional literary sources of inspirations were for the most part bypassed. The sources of

his poetry was to be found in the anonymous unheard black masses: their rhythms, their dialect, their life styles. Hughes sought to incorporate this untapped resources of black folk languages into a new kind of poetry. His personal experiences as related in his autobiography, combined with this folk material to provide thematic dimension to his work. The basic themes regarding the American dream and its possibilities for the black man were always in his poetry. The tension between the unrealized dream and the realities of the black experiences in America provided the dynamic. This tension between the material and theme laid the ground work for the irony which characterised Hughes's work at its best."<sup>(20)</sup>

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