

DESIRE, DEJECTION, AND ANGER: A STUDY ON THE SELECTED SONNETS OF LANGSTON HUGHES

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Abstract:

Freedom and love are two basic needs of human beings, but these two were kept unattainable to black people for centuries.

With the series of movements, black people fought for their rights through their writings. Harlem Renaissance brings a social awakening and it is an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theater, and politic. This movement was also called as New Negro Movement, named after *The New Negro* an anthology edited by Alain Lock in 1925. Among the Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes holds a special place. The simple language of his works influences more people than any other writer's works did. Langston Hughes adopted the traditional form of European poetry and adapted it to express his grief. This article is an attempt to explicate the emotional influences of the author to support the movement through his writings. Desire, dejection, and anger are three dominant emotions that are interconnected and repeated in a cycle in the works of Langston Hughes. These dominant emotions are exposed along with hidden emotions.

Key Words: Harlem Renaissance, Freedom, Desire, Dejection, Anger.

Freedom and love being the basic needs of every human being in this world, have become the deepest desire of black people since time immemorial. As longing grows for centuries a sense of desire, dejection, and anger accumulate in the minds of every Afro-American. The suppressed feelings were out-busted in the form of literature in the period of the Harlem Renaissance.

With the expansion of European colonization, black people were bought as slaves to cultivate the colonized lands. They were subjugated, tormented, and toiled in the alienated land for centuries. It is recorded that the first ship with twenty African slaves was landed at Point Comfort in Virginia in 1619. They were sold in slave market. African people were owned by white people to work in their fields. To maintain white's social order numerous restrictions were made on them. Some restrictions are, slaves could not be away from their owner's premises without permission, social gatherings were not allowed unless a white person is present. They cannot

own firearms, they are restricted from learning and writing, and they cannot marry.

With the declaration of independence in 1776 America faced a revolution to overthrow Britain's rule to set sovereign of its own. To fight battles, black people were also trained and armed. Black slavery abolition started with the winning of the American Revolution, series of movements took place for the abolition of slavery. Movements started in American Revolution exploded in the Industrial Revolution, by the 1920's people migrated to urban areas for jobs, and livelihood, and so the area of Harlem in Manhattan was occupied by black people, literature flourished in Harlem and a renaissance took place. Harlem renaissance is an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theater, and politic. This movement was also called as New Negro Movement, named after *The New Negro* an anthology edited by Alain Lock in 1925

Sad emotions always had a major part in black people they were not given the proper identity

in any land. Langston Hughes in his autobiography *The Big Sea* mentions that all negro writers faces a common problem of a dual identity crisis, when he was in America he was not considered as an American because it is defined that people with any negro blood will be called Negro, and on his visit to Africa he was denied to be considered as Negro because there it is defined that people with all Negro blood will be called as Negros.

Langston Hughes in his lifetime wrote sixteen collections of poetry, twelve novels and short story collections, eleven major plays, eight books for children, seven works of non-fiction, and numerous essays. With all those successful writings Langston Hughes is considered to be an unofficial poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance. Some of his notable poems are *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, *The Weary Blues*, and *I, Too, Sing America*. Hughes as a poet wrote various forms of poetry, along with it he also wrote considerable numbers of sonnets.

Africans in an alien land of America adopted a traditional form of European poetry and adapted it to express their grief. Traditional forms of sonnet such as Petrarchan, Shakespearean, Spenserian sonnets, explores the themes of Love, Religion, Mortality, Passage of time, etc... but during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, poets experimented with the same genre to express their grief. According to William Wordsworth "Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity". Harlem Renaissance is a time where poetry is written neither as a spontaneous overflow, nor recollected in tranquillity, rather it is written as a result of severe sufferings for centuries with the hope of freedom and love.

The word sonnet is derived from the Italian word 'sonetto' which means "a little sound or song". There are various forms of sonnet they are Petrarchan, Shakespearean, Spenserian, Miltonic, Terza Rima, and Curtal. All follow different rhyme schemes and meters. One of the major elements of a sonnet is to discuss a problem or rising a question in the first part, and during the occurrence of Volta – a pause, a change of idea happens, and solving the problem or answering to that question raised in the first part happens in the second part of the sonnet. Langston Hughes incorporated this main element and discussed the pain and suffering of black people.

Focusing on the sonnets of Langston Hughes, Hughes never failed to fulfill his duty as a sonneteer, and he filled all the social happenings and sufferings of black people in his sonnets in the language of a layman. All of his sonnets are in free verse, he does not follow the complete English traditional way rather he wrote in a free verse without any meter or rhyme. The following free verse sonnets *Uncle Tom*, *Reverie on the Harlem River*, and *Militant* are taken for the research study and discuss the longing for freedom and love with his expression of Desire, Dejection, and Anger.

Sonnet *Uncle Tom* is a note to Harriet Beecher Stow's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852, a century later in 1952 publisher Dood, Mead and company invited Langston Hughes to create an introduction and select illustrations for the new edition of Stow's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Langston Hughes rewrites the novel in a form of the sonnet and he is successful with absorbing the essence of the whole novel in a fourteen-line sonnet with an expression of desire at the end. The desire for equality and the desire for freedom, this sonnet address a character called Uncle Tom, the main character in the novel and a common figure representing all black martyrs who died because of the ill-treatment of slavery.

The first part of the sonnet remembers the pain of black martyrs suffering for ages. Black people were tormented in the fields, and they were punished severely whenever they disobey the laws constituted by white people. In this sonnet, Hughes says Uncle Tom is a great story and the image of Uncle Tom stands for the dream of every black people. By remembering Uncle Tom they can remember the lashes, their scream, and groans.

After the first quatrain a change of tone occurs with the usage of 'but' at the beginning of the next sestet. Any idea followed by a 'but' usually creates a different tone to the former. Here it changes the dejected tone and gives hope to the readers. The sestet is a transition portion in this sonnet, Hughes says the pain of slavery is long gone with Uncle Tom, we are going to enjoy the freedom that Uncle Tom did not know. In the later part of the sonnet, Hughes expresses the in-depth desire of black people, desire to be free with equality in society. After all these painful experiences Hughes says that all those bowed heads, lashes, and pain of slaves should not be in the

vain of people now. Because he believes in a better tomorrow that all black children will be wholly free. The usage of 'may' in the thirteenth line "Tend your freedom that tomorrow may see,"(302), and an exclamation mark in the ending of the last line " Uncle Tom's children wholly free!"(302) indicates that they have not achieved the freedom yet. Hughes desires that their children should not suffer the pain they have gone through. In the novel, the character Uncle Tom was loved by a little girl called Little Eva, whose father was the owner of Uncle Tom, in her deathbed she wished her father to release all the slaves but sadly the story takes Uncle Tom to a different place and killed him at the end of the novel. Every abolitionist hoped for the betterment of black people through children. Langston Hughes desires to present freedom to future children.

The desire of children to enjoy the freedom which they struggle for is replicated in the near future of Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King Jr in his famous speech "*I have a dream*" mentions that "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character"

The desire for freedom and equality is not fulfilled for more than a century, a speech which was delivered in the latter part of the twentieth century carries the same desire and hope of a sonnet which was published in the mid of twentieth century, that carries the same sufferings of black people and social background of a novel published in the mid of nineteenth century.

The sonnet *Reverie on the Harlem River* is set to express the true dejection of black people, the dejection of loneliness, and the dejection of losing one's love. The longing for freedom to be loved is also expressed in this sonnet. The narrator expatriates himself from the home of new land to the river bank at Two a.m midnight. The setting itself explains the darkness prevailing in the life of black people, during the daytime, they have toiled in the fields and they have no time and freedom to express their love or to think of their loved one. The sonnet is filled with interrogative sentences through questions raised in the first part the speaker gets his answers to his final question. Unlike usual sonnets, this answers

the first part and discusses the problem in the latter part.

This sonnet expresses the extreme dejection of black people where the narrator feels happy for his mother's death, "Did you ever think about your mother? / God bless her, dead and gone!"(262). The usage of an exclamatory mark at the end of his statement indicates that the narrator is not assured about his mother's absence. The question in the fifth line also indicates the rareness of his mother's thoughts. He feels happy about his mother's death because he feels death is an easy escape from this slavery, his mother is good to die than toiling in the fields. The level of dejection increases when the narrator speaks about his sweetheart, he says "Did you ever think about your sweetheart / And wish she'd never been born?"(262). Freedom to express their love is restricted in slavery. The love he has for his sweetheart is intensely high since he couldn't resist his love within himself, at the same time he is restricted to express and enjoy his love, and so he wishes his sweetheart not to be born in this world.

The narrator feels it's easier to be without his sweetheart than carrying the love in himself. Again the questioning statement gives the meaning that he rarely thinks about his sweetheart even though he loves her very much.

The setting of the sonnet is mentioned twice "Two a.m. midnight by yourself?"(262) and "Two a.m / midnight / by yourself"(262), this gives more impression on the narrator's loneliness. The sonnet is written in the form of conversation, questioning, and answering, he questions himself and answers himself.

As the sonnet goes towards the concluding part the intensity of dejection is high, the narrator wishes for his death, he feels death can save him from this dejection but he decides not to die because he has one primary question at the end of the sonnet "But who will miss me if I left?"(262). The sonnet ends with an Irony, the narrator wants to die because he has no one left in this world, and meanwhile he doesn't want to die because he has no one left in this world to miss him once he is gone.

The sonnet *Militant* expresses the anger of Langston Hughes because he feels that the condition of African people is still the same for centuries, in whichever country they live they were treated as slaves. Critics say

whenever Langston Hughes makes a slave to narrate a poem the tone of that poem will be subordinate and weak, and when he writes it in a first-person narrative the tone will be strong and influential being true to it this poem *Militant* is also an influential and strong sonnet. Hughes says to improve black people's life they should change their perspective and demeanor, they need not remain slaves anymore. This sonnet can be divided into three parts a sestet, a quintain, and a tercet.

In the sestet, Langston Hughes addresses his people with anger, not only the rest of the world used to take Africans as slaves, for centuries Africans who worked as slaves got adopted to slavery and they forgot to rebel against white people and raise their voice. He calls slavery is a bread of shame to Africans. He says he is going to let people to have it whoever eats the bread of shame quietly without rebelling, but he couldn't have it any longer, he is going to complain about it in a loud and long until it reaches the ears of both masters and slaves.

"Let all who will

Eat quietly the bread of shame.

I cannot,

Without complaining loud and long,"(131)

The taste of slavery is extreme bitterness that it passes the throat and he feels it with his soul. These lines of sestet provoke the reader to rebel against slavery. The simple tone and language of Langston Hughes is an added advantage to his success and influence on readers.

Quintain addresses the white masters and their wrongs "It's wrong"(131). Black people work hard both in field and in industries, they were tamed and persecuted for the benefits of white people. In spite of fair profit generated by blacks to white people, they were not paid properly accordingly to their hard work, they were paid poorly "For honest work / You proffer me poor pay"(131). The slavery restricts black people from dreaming of freedom and equality, freedom to love and to be loved. All of their dreams are genuine and honest, instead of encouraging them, white people punished blacks "For honest dreams / Your spit is in my face"(131). The eleventh line describes the intensity of whites' ill-treatment and it stands as proof that black was considered mere subjects.

Langston Hughes suggests fighting back gives the result of what they expect. Tercet

concludes the sonnet with whaction to be made to achieve the freedom they dreamt of for centuries, Hughes says "And so my fist is clenched / Today - / To strike your face."(131). Black people should be ready to fight back to get what they lost in the past. Langston Hughes suggests that violent revolt is a better solution to eradicate slavery and to attain betterment in their life

In all the sonnets of Langston Hughes these emotions are vividly expressed, and along with the discussed main emotion other two emotions were also added in every sonnet. In the sonnet *Uncle Tom*, the emotion of desire is explained, along with it the sonnet also has a huge impact on dejection. The pain that *Uncle Tom* has gone through is explicated in the first part of the sonnet gives the tone of utmost dejection that black people suffered for centuries. It also ignites the thoughts of people to revolt by recollecting the memories and giving an impression of how their ancestors suffered and how their life is still the same. In the sonnet *Militant* the anger is exposed in light and at the same time the dejection of slave life is also exposed by describing how black people were eating the bread of shame for centuries involuntarily and he also desires to give back what white people gave them for centuries, he wants to strike them back and desire to bring all black people together for good cause is also expressed. These two emotions were hidden under the shade beneath the voice of revolt. All other sonnets also contain these three elements is predominant.

The emotions of desire, dejection, and anger are interconnected. The desires which are unfulfilled for the long term make a person feel dejected, and dejections that cannot be solved in a period make a person angry toward it, and it repeats itself in a cycle. Among these three emotions, dejection stresses the situation, and to get relief from the stress the narrator takes a stand either to desire for betterment, or the narrator bursts out in anger.

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