

“Civilization did not begin with the White Man”: A Celebration of the African Heritage of the African Americans in Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “I Too.”

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Abstract

Langston Hughes [1902-1967] is one of the most significant literary figures of the United States of America. He lived and wrote during the first half of the 20th century. He produced an immense body of writings which dealt largely with the conditions of the African Americans during those days. The racism and discrimination which were legacies of the slavery of the 19th century largely dominated the minds of the white Americans of those times and caused racial segregation. Hughes was one of the pioneers of the movement called “Harlem Renaissance” which evoked a sense of belongingness and pride among the blacks. Hughes was composing poetry which dealt with a wide range of topics. One important issue that he tried to discuss or negate in some of his poems was “Eurocentrism”. The two poems chosen here for discussion, “The Negro speaks of Rivers” and “I Too”, can be seen as powerful presentations of the idea that the “white man” is not the creator of civilization. Both these poems try to talk about the importance of the African culture for the American blacks and try to throw light on the importance of Non-European cultures in the history of civilization. These two poems were composed to bring in a sense of pride among the poor and ill-treated African Americans of Hughes’ days. The present discussion will talk about the two named poems and will try to analyze them in order to show how they did try to present the view that “civilization did not begin with the white man.”

Keywords: Langston Hughes; Eurocentrism; Civilization; Racism; Segregation; Africa.

The black man in Africa had mastered the arts and sciences. He knew the course of the stars in the universe before the man up in Europe knew that the earth wasn't flat. - Malcolm X.

Racism is one of the most important issues in human social relations. While there has never been one universally accepted definition for it, racism basically means the belief in the physical and intellectual superiority of certain races over the other existing races of humans. We know that scientifically it is not true. While human features like complexion, body hair, height and the shape of eyes do differ among the various races, the most essential elements of humanity like the brain, intellectual abilities, bipedal movement and affection remain the same among all the people around the world. However, racism has been responsible for some of the biggest injustices done upon humans by other humans. In the present discussion, an attempt is at hand to look upon the racist behavior of the Europeans towards the Africans and Asians which was a result of the immense colonization by the major European powers during the 15th and 16th centuries. But the paper will chiefly talk about the subject matter of two poems by the renowned African American poet Langston Hughes. The two poems chosen here for discussion are “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “I Too”. In these poems, Hughes tries to present a picture of the past of the blacks and pleads his fellow African Americans to feel a sense of pride and build a better future for them. Because of the utmost care taken by Hughes in the composition of these poems, they have gone on to become two masterpieces of American as well as world literature.

Slavery was legal in the USA during the first half of the 19th century. Originally, slave ships used to bring people from Africa to America and these men and women were bought and sold like livestock. The cruelty, brutality and injustice slavery resulted in was immense and hence an abolitionist movement began to garner support from many affluent whites who wanted the buying and selling of humans to cease. There was never much slavery in the northern states; there was never any slavery in Canada; on the other hand, the southern states were full of fertile lands and the economy was wholly dependent upon the cultivation of crops like cotton and sugarcane and hence slaves were indispensable to carry out the arduous labor the cultivation and care these crops required. The injustices of slavery were well documented in several great works of fiction, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1852] and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* [1884] [despite the fact that Twain's novel appeared in the 1880s, years after the abolition of slavery]. The growing interest among the northern population to eradicate slavery and the unyielding desire among the southern slave-owners to continue on with the practice brought them into a conflict and this resulted in one of the bloodiest wars in the country's history, the American Civil War [1861-1865]. The war ended in the defeat and destruction of the southern states but, on a positive note, slavery came to an end. However, the blacks were still not of equal status with the whites. The southern states enforced the infamous segregation laws called the ‘Jim Crow Laws’. On the other hand, the condition of the blacks was not much better in the northern and coastal regions as well. By the 20th century, however, a lot of things changed.

A movement in the art and culture of the blacks started to flourish in the Harlem neighborhood of New York. It later came to be called the “Harlem Renaissance”. One of its major figures was Langston Hughes. Born and brought up in the state of Missouri, Hughes understood the problems of the blacks from his earliest years. He started to discuss his fears, grief and hopes in some of his finest poems. The present discussion has selected two of his poems in order to show how he wanted to celebrate blackness.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is one of the earliest poetic works by Langston Hughes. It is regarded today as one of the most important pieces of poetry produced in America by a non-white. The poem talks about rivers and their importance in human civilization. Hughes starts the poem by saying, “I’ve known rivers”. This ‘I’ is not exactly Hughes himself but one person who is not white. The narrator continues with his views upon civilization. He says that rivers as ancient as the world and civilization are familiar to him. Here, Hughes tries to present the view that civilization did not start with the whites but the non-whites. We know that the great civilizations of Mohenjo-Daro, Egypt and Babylon are from Asia, not Europe. The ancient astronomers of India understood that the earth is round much before the Europeans did. The ancient American cultures of the Aztecs, the Mayas, the Olmecs and the Incas understood the elliptical orbit of the earth and the movement of the planets ages before the European astronomers like Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Kepler, Galileo and Newton were even born. Europeans borrowed most of the pioneering concepts from the Asians. As most of the civilizations of ancient world grew up on the banks of the rivers, the narrator of the poem states that he has known rivers as ancient as man. Furthermore, Hughes tries to bring in a sense of superiority among his fellow African Americans by talking about the Nile and the Pyramids. It is widely believed that enslaved people were used to build these structures, and hence Hughes tries in the poem to make the people understand that slavery has often been there. The poem is a continuous telling of the things which have been there for the blacks and the things which have been very important for civilization. While the poem was composed taking into consideration the history of Africans, this poem is surely a fine presentation of the legacy and pride which the blacks in America should enjoy.

Another fine poem by Langston Hughes, “I Too” is often seen as a work of poetry which has inspired African Americans more than any other work. The poem deals with the issues of inequality, injustice and racism. It first appeared in 1926 in the poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*. The poem is often read as a reaction to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* where the importance of equality in diversity was advocated. Scholars believe that Whitman talked about America and Americans but he took only the whites into consideration. Hence the speaker of Hughes’ poem dictates that ‘he’ too ‘sings’ America, meaning that the blacks are also a part of the country. The poem is written from the point of view of a black servant who works for a prosperous white family. The family is ashamed of him and tries to hide him from guests. But the narrator dreams of a day when equality will prevail in the country and he and his fellow black men will be respected and provided with equal status and opportunities with the whites. Just like as in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, in this poem also we get a celebration of the black race. However whereas the previous poem dealt with the past, this one deals with a dream which can be seen to be of similar nature with the famous speech by the civil rights activist Martin Luther

King Jr. King talked of a dream which he had. This dream was of a land where no one will be treated or judged on the basis of skin color and equality will prevail. Hence we can see that in this poem also Hughes tried to encourage and inspire the African Americans.

Most of Langston Hughes poetry tried to present a picture of the America of his times. But the poems discussed here are unique on the basis that they not only present the reality but also a hope for a brighter future on the basis of a prestigious past. While the whites have always been proud of their 'whiteness' which they regard as a sort of superiority, Hughes tried to prove that not being white does not mean being 'savage'. The Asians brought most of the ideas upon which civilization and technology rests and Africa was the birthplace of humanity itself. Although the Europeans did invent and discover a lot of ideas and material objects, the pioneering concepts upon which these inventions worked were mostly not European. For example, the printing press was invented in Europe but paper was invented in China. At the same time, the Indian medical practice of Ayurveda existed much before the invention of antibiotics. We can understand that the Europeans did not invent things themselves but just modified and further improved the already existing ideas. Hence, they are by no means qualified enough to consider the Asians and the Africans 'uncivilized'. The symbolic usage of rivers in Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" apparently presents this idea.

To conclude, it will be appropriate to say that Langston Hughes was tired and saddened by the perennial injustice and racism that dwelt in America and hence he composed these two landmark poems which tried to tell the white man that 'he' is not the sole embodiment of civilization as the blacks existed and prospered long before he even realized how to be a man from a beast.

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