

<b>Political Romanticism in Langston Hughes's poetry</b>	<b>Dr. Mamdouh M. El-Hiny Minia University Faculty Of Arts</b>
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The purpose of this study is to shed light on the political romanticism of American poetry in the thirties with a special reference to the poetry of Langston Hughes, an American black poet. Before one proceeds to do this it seems interesting to refer to political romanticism as the dominant characteristic of British poetry of the same period, 1930s when the poets longed for a perfect life and a classless society through embracing Marxism. They had an idealised vision of communism as a magic weapon against Fascism and Nazism.<sup>(1)</sup>

Coming to American society in the thirties one finds that it suffered from similar conditions and threats such as social injustice, unemployment, economic crisis and constant fear of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. This led the poets, the artists and the intellectuals to believe in communism and what it promises.

Great changes was expected to happen in world economy at the hands of Russian leaders because

“Russia in those days [the thirties] did not impress us as a despotism or as the great antagonist in a struggle for world power; it was busy trying to create what promised to be a happier future”<sup>(2)</sup>

It is interesting to note that Langston Hughes's dream of the realisation of the promises of communism at first satisfies a personal interest. One of these promises is to fight against racism from which the poet personally suffered all his life.

In his poem "Good-bye, Christ", Hughes attacks the society in which he lives. It lacks the ideal and moral principles that Christ calls for such as equality, justice, brotherhood and love

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

.....

They've soled you to too many.  
kings, generals, robbers, and killers" (3)

Certain critics consider the poem a severe attack against Christianity and the church. However, other critics defend Hughes's view that American society

"was saying good-bye to Christ and his principles of tolerance, love and spiritual friendship."<sup>(4)</sup>

In a figure of speech Hughes says

"Good-bye Christ' does not represent my personal viewpoint."<sup>(5)</sup>

Yet he does not deny his belief in the power of communism to emancipate the oppressed Negroes:

“Christ Jesus Lord God Jehovah

.....

Make way for a new guy with no religion at all-

A real guy named

Marx communist Lenin Peasant Stalin worker ME”<sup>(6)</sup>

In “Scottsboro limited” which is a play in verse, Hughes reveals brutal racism in America through handling a real life episode. It is the story of the oppressed eight Negro youths on sham trial for raping a white woman. While the guards take the helpless Negroes from the court to the prison, they hear the voices of the communists who come to help them<sup>(7)</sup>.

“We’ll fight for you, boys. We’ll fight for you  
The Reds will fight for you.

.....

And the red flag, too, will talk for you.<sup>(8)</sup>

After arguing with each other about the communists’ offer of help, the accused Negroes accept them as their defenders.

“Now out of the darkness  
The new Red Negro will come:  
That’s me !  
No death in the chair!  
The voice of the red world  
Is our voice, too.

.....

Who else is there to help us out o’ this” ? <sup>(9)</sup>.



The communists support them again:

The voice of the red world is you!

.....

We'll go forward

Out of the Night"<sup>(10)</sup>.

Visiting the Soviet Union in 1932 Hughes was highly impressed by equality and freedom which the coloured enjoyed in the communist society. Thence he recalled the racial injustice in his own country and was inspired with his poem "The Ballad of the Landlord".<sup>(11)</sup> It tells the story of a poor Negro tenant who has got no rights at all.

"Landlord, landlord,

My roof has sprung a leak.

Don't you "member I told you about , it...

.....

These steps are broken down

When you come up yourself

It's a wonder you don't fall down."<sup>(12)</sup>

The poor Negro is not allowed to complain against the aggressiveness and injustice of the white landlord who asks him to pay the rent on time in spite of the refusal of the latter to make repairs; worse still is that the Negro will be dismissed out of the house:

What? you gonna get eviction orders?

You gonna cut off my heat?

You gonna take my furniture and

Throw it in the street?<sup>(13)</sup>

Though the Negro tenant finds no help from the government, law or any social organisation, the unjust landlord is given every support from the police, the judge and the press.

“Police! Police  
Come and get this man!  
He’s trying to ruin the government  
And overturn the land!

.....  
Arrest [him]

.....  
Man threatens Landlord  
Tenant Held No Bail  
Judge Gives Negro 90 Days In county Jail <sup>(14)</sup>.

Commenting on the poem, Jemie says that though the miserable, poor Negro is oppressed, he is considered on outlaw in the eyes of the society.

“Hughes paints a picture ... of the forces of law and order who are ranged on the landlord’s side and who, like the landlord, equate the assertion of tenant rights with revolution, for the tenant’s refusal to accept and pay for substandard and dangerous living

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conditions is a threat to society”<sup>(15)</sup>.

If Hughes sticks first to communist ideology for a personal interest, that is, the liberation of the oppressed Negroes, his increasing support for communism is later due to an impersonal interest, that is, liberation of all the oppressed all over the world.

In “Always the same” the poet urges the oppressed represented by world working classes to unite under ‘the blood- red flag’.

“Until the Red Armies of the International proletariat,  
Their faces black, white, olive, yellow, brown,  
Unite to raise the blood - red flag that  
Never will come down.”<sup>(16)</sup>

The same call for workers union is found in  
“Chant For May day”

“All the workers:  
white workers,  
Black workers,  
yellow workers,  
Proletarians of all the world  
Arise,  
Grow strong,  
Take power,  
Till the forces of the earth are yours”<sup>(17)</sup>

It is in "Open Letter to the South" that Hughes encourages the proletariat, black and white, to unite and then revolt against the capitalist ruling class:

"Let us become instead, you and I,  
 One single hand .  
 That can united rise  
 To smash the old dead dogmas of the past-  
 To kill the lies of colour  
 That keep the rich enthroned  
 And drive us to the time-clock and the plow  
 Helpless, stupid, scattered and alone-as now-  
 Race against race,  
 Because one is black,  
 Another white of face"<sup>(18)</sup>

Moreover he asks them to take over means of production, factories, lands, mines... etc to dominate the situation

"Let union be  
 The force that breaks the time -clock,  
 Smashes misery,  
 Takes land,  
 Takes factories

.....  
 Takes tools and banks and mines

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.....  
 Until the forces of the world  
 Are ours!" (19).

Analysing the poem, Jean Wagner states that

"There revolutionary ideas were ... mainly communist-inspired . Thus Hughes came under the same influences as a considerable number of his fellow citizens, who turned toward the Soviet Union in the hope of finding the solution to their own problems (20).

All the problems of the world, in the concept of the communist leaders of Russia, lie in capitalism, which is nourished by racism and the exploitation of the proletariat. Accordingly, Hughes believes in the ideal solution that communism offers - revolution.

"Ballad of Lenin", which was written in memory of the idealised communist leader, Lenin, expresses a call for world revolution in a rather sharp tone of voice.

Comrade Lenin of Russia  
 High in a marble tomb

.....  
 I am Ivan, the peasant

.....  
 I Fought with you, Comrade Lenin

.....  
 I am Chico, the Negro



.....  
 I lived for you, Comrade Lenin.  
 .....

I am Change from the Foundries:  
 On strike in the streets of Shanghai  
 For the sake of the Revolution  
 I fight, I starve, I die. <sup>(21)</sup>

Here Hughes becomes an international poet<sup>(22)</sup> who would be the spokesman and supporter of the oppressed all over the world – the Negroes, the poor whites, the Chinese. He would support the world proletariat to get better pay, better working and living conditions. He would also back the Chinese in their fight against colonial rule.

The poet's romantic attitude towards communism reaches its height in "One More S in the U.S.A". He not only romanticises communist revolutionary ideas and the land of communism, the Soviet Union, but he also wishes to sovietize his own country. In other words he hopes that U.S.A becomes a copy of the Soviet Union.

“Put one more S in the U.S.A  
 To make it Soviet  
 One more S in the U.S.A  
 Oh, we'll Live to see it yet.  
 When the land belongs to the farmers  
 And the factories to the working men-

---

The U.S.A. when we take control  
 Will be the U.S.S.A. then.

.....  
 Hail communistic land

.....  
 Come together, fellow workers  
 Black and white can all be Red. <sup>(23)</sup>

Hughes dreams that people in America, with their different races, classes and colours, enjoy life as people do in Russia where all distinctions are eliminated, where every one is on equal footing with the other. In an essay entitled "Negroes in Moscow", Hughes gives the same note.

"There (in Russia) are among the permanent foreign working residents of Moscow, perhaps two dozen Negroes.... Like the Indians and the Uzbeks and the Chinese, the Negro workers are so well absorbed by Soviet life that most of them seldom remember they are Negroes in the oppressive sense that black people are always forced to be conscious of in America."<sup>(24)</sup>

More surprising is the moment of disillusionment when Hughes, as many other Americans, discovered that he was deceived into thinking that communism was the only power through which the oppressed can get their freedom and their rights. He was deeply shocked when he knew about the treaty of alliance between the

communist leader, Stalin, with the Nazi Hitler of Germany in 1939.

Commenting on such alliance and its frustrating effect on Hughes, Faith Berry says

"It hit Hughes like a thunderbolt ... to see Josef Stalin and the communist regime ally with the Nazis ..."<sup>(25)</sup>

What pained Hughes most was that four days before the declaration of the alliance between Stalin and Hitler, Hughes and some other artists in the Daily Worker decried the

"accusations that the Soviet Union and the totalitarian states were alike."<sup>(26)</sup>

Arna Bontemps, a Negro writer and a friend of Hughes asked him then not to write again about communism or the communists because

"they change their line too much"<sup>(27)</sup>

Hughes reaction to the change extended to the kind of poetry he used to write at that time. He decided to stop writing political poetry and restrict his poetic themes to nature, love, Negroes. In a letter to Louise Thompson dated January, 19, 1940 Hughes says

"I'm laying off political poetry for awhile... I am going back to nature, Negroes and love". (28)

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He even declared his discontent with his previous political poetry which was devoted to communism considering it

“outdated, unrepresentative of his ideals”<sup>(29)</sup>

Nothing could point out Hughes’s political disillusionment like “Freedom Plow” which was written in the early forties. In this poem the poet shows that the solution to world problems does not lie in adopting foreign ideologists<sup>(30)</sup> because

“The plan and the pattern is here  
Woven from the beginning  
Into the warp and woof of America.”<sup>(31)</sup>

Injustice, slavery and racial discrimination would not end by bloody revolution as he noted before in “Revolution”

“Great mob that knows no fear

.....  
And raise your hand  
Against this man.

.....  
Who’s bought and sold

You –

.... Tear him limb from limb

Split his golden throat”<sup>(32)</sup>

but through patience, keeping on work and integrating into American society:

“Keep Your Hand on the Plow

.....  
Freedom will come  
.....

Out of war came, bloody and terrible!

But it came !

Some there were, as always,

Who doubted that the war would end right

That the slaves would be free,

Or that the union would stand.

But now we know how it all came out.

Out of the darkest days for a people and a nation,

We know now how it came out.

There was light when the battle clouds rolled away”<sup>(33)</sup>

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### Notes

- 1- Raghukul Tilak, W. H. Auden (New Delhi : Ramy Brothers, 1993), pp. 5-6.
- 2- Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1973), p.433.
- 3- Nancy Cunard, Negro Anthology 1934, edited and abridged with introduction by Hugh Ford (New York : Frederick Ungar, 1970), p. 428.
- 4- Walter C. Daniel, "Langston Hughes Versus the Black Preachers in the Pittsburgh Courier in 1930" in Critical Essays on Langston Hughes. Ed. Edward J. Mullen (Boston G. K. Hall & Co., 1986) p. 131.
- 5- Faith Berry, Langston Huges Before and Beyond Harlem, (United States of America : Lawrence Hill & Company, 1983), p. 296.
- 6- Nancy Cunard, Op. Cit., p. 428.
- 7- Jean Wagner, Op. Cit., p. 434.
- 8- Langston Hughes, Scottsboro Limited (New York: Golden Stair Press, 1932), p. 10.
- 9- Ibid, p.11.
- 10- Ibid, p.12.
- 11- Faith Bery, Op. Cit., p. 182.
- 12- Langston Hughes, The Langston Hughes Reader (New York : George Braziller, 1958), pp. 101-102.

- 13- Ibid, p. 102.
- 14- Ibid.
- 15- Onwuchekwa Jemie, Langston Hughes (New York : Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 71.
- 16- Nancy Cunard, Op. Cit., p. 427.
- 17- Quoted in Faith Berry, Op. Cit., p. 276.
- 18- Langston Hughes, New Song (New York : International Workers Order, 1938) pp. 27-28.
- 19- Ibid, p. 28.
- 20- Jean Wagner, Op. Cit., p.433.
- 21- Quoted in Faith Berry, Op. Cit., pp. 207-208.
- 22- Ibid.
- 23- Ibid, pp. 205-206.
- 24- Ibid, p. 182.
- 25- Ibid, pp. 286-287.
- 26- Ibid.
- 27- Arna Bontemps Interview with Hughes, October, 1940.
- 28- Faith Berry, Op. Cit., p. 288.
- 29- Onwuchekwa Jemie, Op. Cit., p. 14.
- 30- Ibid, p. 125.
- 31- Langston Hughes, Selected Poems (New York : Alfred, A. Knopf, 1985), p. 296.
- 32- Quoted in Faith Berry, Op. Cit., pp. 208-209.
- 33- Langston Hughes, Selected Poems, Op. Cit., p.295.