Chapter Five

Forging a New Experience

He has battled with Earth:
He has won;
…..
He has conquered the Sea:
Proud he rides
…..
And he goes through the Air
On wings.
He has won everywhere,

Having no illusions about America and the experiences of the Negroes, Claude MacKay in the above quoted lines pays tribute to his race for their contribution and resoluteness. The successful resistance towards the corrosion in America will ultimately make them triumphant. Similarly, due to the heart felt experience of Hughes about his devastation by the whites, the subject of an over-whelming portion of his poetry is the struggle of blacks for political power and economic well being within the American framework of the Declaration of Independence and the constitution. There is nothing in the present American experience which can inspire the poet. Also one cannot survive simply by keeping abreast the lost African heritage and its experiences which, no doubt were beautiful but no more with the poet now. Still, the poet was not struck down by sorrow, but keen to forge an improved future for himself and his race. He wanted to become an Afro-American, where there will be an amalgamation of the African strength along with the equality, faith and justice of the American dream. But in order to achieve this he had to create a path for himself
and his race. The path was difficult but not impossible. Moreover pessimism and disillusionment are not the solutions. The poem “Island” brings forth the same optimistic view,

   Wave of sorrow,
   Do not drown me now:

   I see the Island
   Still ahead somehow.

   I see the Island
   And its sands are fair:

   Wave of sorrow,
   Take me there.  (SP 78)

The title of the poem testified the grit and hope that abounded the personality of Hughes as a poet. The experience of an island is unique as it is surrounded by water, and yet not attacked by it. Similarly the blacks with the hope of freedom stand erect and undaunted amidst the nefarious activities of the whites. The words ‘ahead’ and ‘fair’ anticipated a new and progressive future for the poet. The repetition “I see the Island” also gives a fair vision to the poet where freedom and justice awaits him. The America of his time was nigglng in many respects but his avowed aim of forging a new future speaks of his inner strength,

   The past has been
   A mint of blood and sorrow
   That must not be
   True of tomorrow!  (In Bajaj 120)

Whenever we talk of a bright future for the blacks, we talk about it in terms of equality for the blacks. But the pertinent question is, equality in what respect? It is
very difficult to say that two people are equal or unequal. There is no yardstick to measure it. We are all equal in some respects that we all are born and we all have to die one day. On the other hand with the possession of personal characteristics each one of us is unequal in one way or the other. Then the fact that men are all human beings, and in this respect all men are indeed equal makes our task all the more complex. In reality, what we mean by equality is having the same rights or being treated the same as other people in social, financial and political status, without differences such as race, religion or sex.

The blacks are not treated as human beings and, as such they are not given any opportunity to participate in the mainstream of life in America. This reason helps us to understand as to why there is no sound of apology or no appeal for pity in the poetry of Langston Hughes. It is worth reading the poem “Roland Hayes Beaten (Georgia, 1942)” here in order to understand the psychology and the state of mind of the poet in such a situation,

Negroes,
Sweet and docile,
Meek, humble, and kind:
Beware the day
They change their minds!

Wind
In the cotton fields,
Gentle breeze:
Beware the hour
It uproots trees! (SP 167)

Only about a score of the hundreds of poems written by Langston Hughes strongly develop the theme of violence and the poem under consideration exactly does
this. It is imbued with the slow fire of modern Negro spirit and the impending holocaust. The poet simply wants to reinforce the idea that though his consciousness has been hybridized yet it has made no impact on his inner strength and maturity. He still possesses the power and the potential to change the American system. The blacks pine for political freedom because they are conscious of themselves not only as individuals but also as members of various groups and ethnicities. They are part and parcel of the American nationality and their future is bound up with the country in which they breathe, live and die. They demand political freedom because only then they can forge their future and to some extent be the masters of their destiny. Political freedom is implied in democracy: all citizens should vote; all should hold office and take part in administration; all should have the same rights and privileges and there are no unenfranchised classes. The blacks are the citizens of America but unfortunately they were denied the right to vote whereas political freedom means the right to universal suffrage. The right to vote enables a man to play his part in the decision-taking procedure. The bare possession of a vote does not confer much political freedom nor does it enable a man to participate in public life to any significant degree. But the blacks were deprived of even to this small opportunity. More important, therefore, is the authority exercised in voting or the liberty of holding views about political matters and of ventilating those views in public, the right of addressing those with whom the decisions rest, and the liberty of seeking and holding office.

Political freedom can be provided by laws and other constitutional means and any government can be forced to amend its laws and ways of governance over the minorities and deprived. But resorting to such forceful tactics can never change the
hearts of the citizens in a country. Social change is more important but the most
difficult to attain and the poet was fully aware of this reality and aimed to attain social
freedom through his poetry. It is here that the composition and the manner of poetry of
a poet become crucial to attain the desired goal. Unlike the works of many great
literary writers who remained in ivory towers, Hughes’ poetry appeals to the illiterate
as well as the scholar. His poetry “tends to be the poetry of statement rather than of
symbol.” (Bajaj 127) His poetry has a beauty and colloquial vigour and is marked by
evocative imagery. It creates a heightened sense of awareness in the oppressed and the
exploited black race. His poems are courageous and emotionally involved. To him,
poetry is more than an art of expression and experimentation. Art is social life force
strengthening bonds and evoking purposive action. There must be a purpose at hand in
whatever is expressed by a poet in his creativity. Consequently, it inaugurates the age
of racial consciousness and self-conception without any apology and pity. And if a
new future has to be forged and reformed, such an attitude is essential.

The purposive action is evoked successfully by another poem “Mother to Son”
which strikes, “the ever-recurring theme of the Afro-American’s endurance and
enduring hope.” (Berry 30) The most significant trait encompassed in the poem is of
durability and self persistence. This poem, using homely images like tacks, splinters,
and torn-up boards, shows a poor Negro woman instilling her strong feelings into her
son. The woman has the same unconquerable determination that imbued the poet
himself. The poem is a metaphor of life as a journey where the account of the mother
speaker’s quest for freedom, with all the struggles of human soul and the over-coming
of the hurdles that lie on the way, is dealt with. The mother speaks to her son that,
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. \((\text{SP 187})\)

The mother recalls her past experiences to make her son aware of the fact that life was not smooth for her. Sometimes she was submerged in the flood of sorrows and difficulties but she plodded steadily on. She kept climbing the stair even though it became more difficult to go on,

And sometimes goin’ in the dark

Where there ain’t been no light. \((\text{SP 187})\)

In spite of this difficulty, she never lost her faith. The mother encourages her son, who feels defeated, and says that nothing is impossible for an individual with a definite purpose and the determination to accomplish it, no matter what the odds, obstacles, or sacrifices are involved. She also reminds him that she is still fighting for the better future,

For I’se still goin’, honey,

I’se still climbin’,

And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair. \((\text{SP 187})\)

There is a clear message for the black race that the goal of attaining their dreams and aspirations is cumbersome and they have to build a ladder by which they can rise from the earth below to the vaulted skies. They must mount to its top step by step, one seed at a time and the forest will grow. The poem is “sentimental to be sure,
but a revelation to members of a race haunted by self doubt.” (Rampersad, *Voices* 364) The Afro-American’s sense of self-belief gets reinforced through this poem and this understanding in the poet indicates that his new Afro-American personality has taught him of the new ways to prosperity and equality; to a new and bright future.

“Poems of hope and better future are, and ought to be, popular among a writer’s followers when written with compelling imagination and sincerity.” (Emanuel 130) As already discussed, though in fragments, “Freedom’s Plow” is a poem where the poet tells in seven pages the importance of a visionary experience,

First in the heart is the dream.

Then the mind starts seeking a way. (SP 291)

When there is a definite dream in our heart, at that very moment our mind commences its steady and reasonable approach to fulfill that dream. When ever we feel too lonely we “Keep thinkin’ [we] won’t be lonely By and by.” (SP 35) Thus, the greatest attribute attained by the poet from the Afro-American experience is hope, compelling imagination, sincerity, faith in the public and a broad perspective.

The experiences of Hughes convinced him that the dream of a future America is implausible if the whites are excluded from it. Harold E. Davis is absolutely right when he says, “The Amalgamation of peoples and cultures and the evolution of new elements from the inter-action of these streams with geography have produced what we may rightly call American people and American culture.” (6) The poet had also realized this from his long term understanding and believed in the creative cooperation where,

Free hands and slave hands,

Indentured hands, adventurous hands,

White hands and black hands
Held the plow handles. (SP 292)

The poet had full faith in the people as the merger of different people and their culture always evolves a new kind of experience which at times is matchless because, The people often hold

Great thoughts in their deepest hearts (SP 295)

The poet knew the importance of such a broad perspective. He knew that only such an amazing cooperation will wash the bad spots from the pages of America’s history,

That plow plowed a new furrow

Across the field of history. (SP 297)

The Afro-American poet gradually starts talking in a tone where he comes closer to all human beings and their concerns. “Whereas every tenth person in America has been said to be Negro, roughly every tenth poem by Hughes has no reference to colour.” (Emanuel 127) Such poems, in fact are closely connected with the experience of all human beings who are suffering just like the blacks. This makes Langston Hughes a poet of all subalterns besides being a poet of his own race. The past inspiration of Africa, the present dolorous conditions in America and his multifarious experimentations throughout his life finally made him a poet who knew no barriers of region or race.

A new kind of experience that can be discerned in the poetry of Hughes is his universality and love for all human beings. “Birmingham Sunday: September 15, 1963” amply testify such concerns of the poet. The poem encapsulates the transcendentalist in the poet,
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 acons ago
Did not know what china made
Before China was ever Red at all
Would redden with their blood
This Birmingham Sunday wall

Four tiny girls
Who left their blood upon that wall,
In little graves today await
The dynamite that might ignite
The ancient fuse of Dragon Kings
Whose tomorrow sings a hymn
The missionaries never taught
In Christian Sunday school
To implement the Golden Rule.

Four little girls
Might be awakened someday soon
By songs upon the breeze
As yet unfelt among
Mangolia trees. (Hughes 200-201)

The poem implicitly generates a new feeling in the poet that the dream of a new and better future is still alive but he (also) has to look elsewhere for sources for fulfilling it. And while the means are not specified, the complex out of which those means are likely to develop is broadly hinted at. The distant hope (but nevertheless a hope) is in the emerging modern powers of African homeland, and in China. In other words, in a gathering of third world forces and its inhabitants, all of whom have suffered oppression from the white man; Hughes envisages revenge and redress, this time from a powerful China for the four little girls killed in Birmingham, Alabama in September 1963, when the white terrorists bombed their church. For centuries, China made explosives, but used them for entertainment. In fact, fireworks originated in that country. Europeans borrowed China’s explosives, harnessed them to weapons of death and conquered the world with them. Now history has run full circle. China, borrowing modern technology from the west, has now harnessed the same explosives for death, although China’s power is as yet unfelt, least of all in Dixie. But not for long; China too is building a nuclear arsenal, and on the day of judgment (the day of nuclear destruction of the world) these four girls will have their revenge. At this point of time, it might be argued that China and Africa are distant threats! Certainly they are. But the most important aspect of the whole discussion is that although “God has not protected black folks from police brutalities,” yet somebody surely will, but who? (Jemie 127)
These are the avenging forces of the third world. In a way the better future of the blacks is in their hands. Today China or the other third forces represent not only the cause of blacks but also of all humanity who is suffering. Of course the whole discussion does not present Hughes to be supporting violence but it certainly enforce the poet as one who has gained wisdom and has devised ways to strike a change in the American scenario.

Hughes forged a new future for his race by using the personal pronoun to weld himself tightly to his people, making his voice their voice. The poet completely identified himself with his fellow brothers and he was perennially worried about their well-being. But the poet also used the pronoun ‘me’ by which he publicly established a private, personal relationship to the emotions or action at hand. The use of ‘me’ is an occasional effort to disengage himself from the crowd and momentarily relish his individuality. “It is not egotism on the contrary; it may be all black men, but not all the time.” (Jemie 130) At times it may refer only to the individual poet, or it may embrace all humanity, all sufferers of the world. This aspect is important as it enlarges the scope of Hughes’ experience in his poetry. He is not only worried for the blacks but all the sufferers anywhere.

Another aspect of Hughes’ poetry is also very significant. He seeks to create a bright and glorious future for his race. But such a vision can be achieved once his own class shows dedication to this objective seriously and sincerely. The effort has to be collective for carving a new experience but it does not blind the poet against his own black bourgeoisie. Hughes’s usual fairness and his unbiased intraracial attitude is amply visible here,
Now you’ve got your Cadillac,
you done forgot that you are black.
How can you forget me
When I’m you? (SP 249)

“As I Grew Older” is another poem, where the present and the future are fused together by a continuous struggle for freedom, which is like a dream for the blacks.

The dream of liberty, equality and fraternity is always there in the mind of the Afro-American but he is forced to forget it,

It was a long time ago.
I have almost forgotten my dream.
But it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun --
My dream. (SP 11)

A wall is created by the whites between the blacks and their privileges,

And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly,
Between me and my dream.
Rose slowly, slowly, (SP 11)

This wall suppressed the whole personality of the Afro-American. He is forced to live in a state of forgetfulness and oblivion. He feels himself to be unimportant,

I lie down in the shadow.
No longer the light of my dream before me,
Above me.
Only the thick wall.
Only the shadow. (SP 11)
But he has the power to break this wall and see his dream of freedom fulfilled,

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun! \( (SP\ 11-12) \)

The strong desire to fulfill the dream of freedom is possible if his fellowmen
and the rest of world unite and help him to break the barriers erected in his way to
freedom. The goal can be achieved only when men recognize the otherness of other
individuals. They should try to understand their own nature, and with self-
understanding there would be a greater understanding of their environment and of
their fellowmen. They would then love all human beings, despite the various barriers.

Langston Hughes’ poetry is written for a particular class, yet it is classless, as it
transcends the limits of a particular class or country and embraces all humanity.
“Merry-Go-Round,” is the most representative poem in this context and it pictures the
experience and the dilemma of a migrant Southern Negro child who can not decide, at
a carnival, which horse to mount. Man has divided every district, state or nation for
different groups. Water is essential for every human being and every creature and yet
people fight over it. But no one, by any scientific or other method, can tell exactly
about the nativity of a drop of water? This is very difficult, almost impossible. God
has not divided or reserved its treasures for any particular class. They are for all and it
is man who is solely responsible for such cruel and unjustified classifications. Afro-Americans are ill-treated in America only because their skin colour is different. This is absolutely ridiculous. On the bus they are put in the back. But can anyone tell where back seat on a merry-go-round is? Can anyone tell which horse is made by God for the blacks? These are transcendental questions and establish Langston Hughes as a transcendentalist poet; a poet who raises certain metaphysical questions that deal with the essential truth of life. The poet is concerned over the effect of prejudice and the pathos of innocence assembling tainted pieces. The poem is not a sermon but an eye-opener,

Where’s the horse
For a kid that’s black? (SP 194)

Thus, life is a unique gift of God, and man has a mission, which he must constantly seek to fulfill. Those who live for themselves alone and do little for their underprivileged fellowmen and society prove unworthy of the trust reposed in them by the Creator. It matters not how long we live, but it is how we live that matters. Any good that we can do, or any kindness that we can show towards our fellow brothers, must be shown here and now. We should not defer or neglect it, for we may never get the opportunity again. There are loyal hearts, brave spirits, souls pure and true; they alone give their best to the world, and they alone are the ones to whom the best will come back; and the experiences of the poet have made him optimistic that the number of such true hearts will increase in the near future. Then there will be a crowd of people around him irrespective of caste, creed and colour. “Heaven” will be established on the earth,
Heaven is
The place where
Happiness is
Everywhere.

Animals
And birds sing --
As does
Everything.

To each stone,
“How-do-you-do?”
Stone answers back,
“Well! And you?”  (SP 55)

Langston Hughes is a poet who decries the violent attitude of the whites not only against the blacks but all humanity. The intent to be conveyed through his poetry is that we are all human beings, so everybody deserves love, human treatment, freedom and a heaven. To preserve their identity, the poet wants affection deeper than that bestowed. He knows that America is not only for the whites but also for the Afro-Americans as in “Theme for English B,”

You are white --
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That’s American.
Sometimes perhaps you don’t want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that’s true!
As I learn from you,
These lines reflect Langston Hughes’ views that even though there is a conflict in their relationships, yet the fact remains that they cannot exist without each other; they are interdependent. He knows that whites are powerful but their contribution is also equal in the creation of America. His purpose is to eliminate this conflict and live in harmony. He further says that the problem of discrimination can be solved only when the whites and the blacks are in rapport with each other. He is aware that without a cordial relationship between the blacks and the whites their success to freedom and bright future is bleak. He states that in the past they had made progress only when the blacks and the whites worked in unison and the fundamental problem of discrimination can be resolved when there will be a mutual understanding between the whites and the blacks. He welcomes all Americans for the freedom of the blacks since the feelings of the Afro-Americans are as significant as those of the whites towards freedom and liberty.

Langston Hughes is one of those poets who “do not write for poets alone, but for men.” (Wordsworth 19) “I believe,” Hughes himself said, “that poetry should be direct, comprehensible and the epitome of simplicity.” (In Rampersad, Voices 393) These words echo what William Wordsworth states, “to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men.” (3) Hughes’ people are the lower classes, the urban folk, hard workingmen and women. So it was quite appropriate on part of the poet to deal with such people in their own language. More important than language, is the power within us to eliminate the causes, which bring misery or mental anguish for the members of society. Therefore, it is the duty of every rational and conscientious person to strike for a better world where the mud should be
washed away. This eminently desirable objective was achieved through a purposive approach and an ever evolving idiom by the poet. The poet passionately asserts,

My motto,
As I live and learn,

Is:

*Dig And Be Dug*

*In Return.* (SP 234)

Thus, through his poetry Hughes tried to convince that the Afro-Americans are also human beings and the hope of freedom and a better new world have made them to bear all the affronts. They should never feel hauled down due to their skin colour. Nobody can prevent them from marching on the path that will ultimately take them closer to their avowed goals. In any case, they are,

. . . strong in will.

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. *(Fifteen Poets 410)*

Langston Hughes used poetry to comment on the American political and social issues. The poet knew the power of literature in promoting social change and used his talents as a writer to probe the conscience of America. Through literature he revealed the realities of being a black man in America and compared the present with the past. He evaluated the consequences of past experiences and decisions to forge a new future for the Afro-Americans where they can proudly say,

We have tomorrow

Bright before us

Like a flame. (CP 163)