Chapter Six

Conclusion

The pain and anguish of extreme segregation has always forced the Negroes to ask for every thing separate but then they objected to label these institutions as coloured or Negro. The name, the Afro-Americans think, will save them from the disgrace. It does not matter so much what the thing is called as what the thing is. The Negro would not cease to be what he is by calling him something else; but, if he will struggle and make something of himself and contribute to the modern culture of America, the world will learn to look upon him as an American rather than as one of an undeveloped element of the population. This is exactly the experience that Hughes as a poet learned and subsequently taught to the Afro-Americans. There is nothing to be gained by running away from any name or label. People who are born great or turn themselves great gradually require no branding of any kind. Langston Hughes taught the Negroes exactly this and today they have learned to live with all these titles.

The experiences of Langston Hughes are varied and multidimensional as he speaks for all the blacks in his poetry who have suffered indignities under slavery and segregation and had to accept the Jim Crow attitude for survival in the United States. In speaking for the blacks he becomes the collective voice of all those who have been oppressed, maltreated and exploited in and outside America. At the same time, in doing so the poet has to face many grim realities in the New World, the most prominent being double consciousness. Hanging between two worlds “one dead and other powerless to be born” (Arnold 41) the poet’s personality gets divided into two. He looks at himself from two perspectives. Firstly he identifies himself with Africa,
its history, culture, tradition, music and dance. Subsequently he takes himself to be an American, though with a sad and doubtful heart. The exploitation, violence and indifference of the whites always remind him that he is a foreigner nevertheless. The result is that he feels a type of twoness -- an American and a Negro; an American soul and a Negro soul.

The experiences of the poet with others, especially with the whites, remind him that he is not a native of America. America does not belong to him and the, “world, which seems; To lie before us like a land of dreams; So various, so beautiful, so new; Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light; Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” for the Afro-Americans. (Arnold 3)

The problematic experience of Negro identity has many dimensions for the poet including colour consciousness, a sense of affiliation to a distinctive community and an awareness of exploitation and humiliation as a subordinate class. As an individual experience, it involves an attempt to recognize and comprehend one’s own innermost self. But it more usually means a sense of group identity that gets implicated in a larger identity in the sense of being a part of a modern formation like a class, civil society or nation. Nirmal Bajaj writes in this connection, “The Negro poet sees himself and the entire community reflected in his image like a devotee with the icon. In this way, the poet merges his ego with the external reality or else absorbs the reality in his own dormant body.” (2)

In the effort to define the identity of the Afro-Americans, the poet never felt ashamed of his blackness, rather took a pride in it and ultimately displayed unlimited potential for the resurgence of the self and the assertive potential of the entire community. Langston Hughes has forcefully displayed this experience in his poems.
He, to use the words of Brooks, “admired the word *Black* when that word was less than a darling flag. He believed in the Beauty of Blackness when belief in the beauty of blackness was not the fashion, not *the thing*, not the sweet berry of the community tooth.” (12) This attitude made the Negro feel self-confident and he took pride in the collective identity formed by the shared role in history. He outgrows the Jim Crow syndrome and rejects out rightly the submissive humility, which provided legitimacy to the paternalistic attitude of the oppressor finding expression through mercy, sympathy or compassion from anyone condescending from a higher position. He no longer regarded himself inferior to anyone as a human being. He gave expression to attitudes and assumptions, which showed his feeling of self-esteem and pride. His colour and features were taken as palpable signs, which made nexus with his race possible and helped him to recognize his self-identity. Hughes never treated his characters or personas negatively possessing sweeping self-doubt, or a sense of inadequacy, self-hatred and dejection but looked upon them as worthwhile human beings possessing unlimited potential for a better future. Nathan Irvin Huggins writes, “For it appears that in the decade of 1920s, the Afro-American came of age; he became self-assertive and racially conscious as if for the first time. He proclaimed himself to be a man deserving of respect, not a ward of society, nor a creature to be helped, pitied or explained away.” (3) This was a very crucial early experience imbibed by the poet in his initial formative years.

Langston Hughes’ single minded effort to see and understand the lives and experiences of common black folk, their thoughts, habits, dreams and struggles for a better life made him a powerful poetic voice. He had committed himself to the black
folk expression. We, however, have to take note of the fact that the great black
two divergent implications of the black identity mentioned earlier received different
positions taken by those taking part in this controversy. The Negro in
America was burdened with a double identity; a double experience, a “double-
consciousness . . . two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring
ideals in one dark body.” (Jemie 2) Langston Hughes initially tried to end the
controversy by being one or the other or the two selves but his experience as an Afro-
American convinced him to weld them together into a single and undivided whole. He
sought a total effacement of the stereotyped image of the nigger and to recover from
beneath it, the authentic human figure constituted by centuries of collective struggles
in America on the basis of the strength derived from the original African experiences.
Occasionally, there was also an attempt to get integrated into the American culture on
the basis of equal rights and privileges. The aesthetics of Negro poetry became very
important in the initial period of the great black controversy and the idea of a
distinctive black art flourished at that time.

Langston Hughes is one of America’s greatest poets. Like so many writers, he
wrote about what he knew -- the people, places and events around him. Although
Hughes was friendly with people from all walks of life: the rich, the middle class and
the poor, it was the people he called the “low-down folks” who had the greatest
influence on his poetry. He admired these people because “they accept what beauty is
their own without question.” Langston Hughes loved the music of his people,
especially the blues, songs that express sad themes and depressing experiences. He heard them in clubs in Chicago, New York, Kansas City and Washington. The songs he heard were about people who were determined to overcome hardships. In “Songs Called the Blues,” Hughes said this music was sung by “black, beaten but unbeatable throats.” Langston Hughes believed in using his art and experiences to get across his feelings about politics, injustice and racial issues.

One of the foremost interpreters of racial relationships in the United States, Langston Hughes also experienced the influence of the Bible, W.E.B. DuBois, Walt Whitman, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg. It helped him to realistically depict the ordinary lives of the Afro-Americans. It was the marriage of these widely varying aesthetics, modernism mixed with an almost religious devotion to the power of repetition and musicality in the blues that gave rise to Hughes’ experiences and their related outpourings. Many of his poems, written in rhythmical language, have been set to a new kind of experience -- music. Hughes’ poems were meant, “to be read aloud, crooned, shouted and sung.”

Langston Hughes stressed the importance of racial consciousness, cultural nationalism and the absence of self hate that united the people of African descent and Africa across the globe and encouraged pride in their own diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. With an enormous experience to his aid, Hughes was one of the few black writers of any consequence to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for the black artists. His Afro-American race consciousness and cultural nationalism have influenced many foreign black writers such as Jacques Roumain, Nicholas Guillen, Leolald Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire. As an American poet,
Hughes offers a call to change to his readers as an alternative to Whitman’s optimism. With both his politics and his formal innovations, he has influenced countless poets of difficult styles and schools in the twentieth and twenty-first century including Yusef Komunyakaa, Afaa Michael Weaver, Kevin Young, Robert Creeley, Frank O’Hara, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Martin Espada and others. Langston Hughes is not only a role model for his calls on black racial experience, but also the most important technical influence in his emphasis on folk and jazz rhythms as the basis of poetry on the theme of racial pride.

We have established in the previous chapters how Langston Hughes exposes the white people who are enjoying their life by crushing the aspirations of those who are inferior just because their skin-colour is black. The Americans treat them as “desperate, hungry and tearless” (SP 91) their so-called prosperous country. If this is not enough, they “Slug me! Beat me!” (SP 197) very mercilessly and cruelly so that the blacks are in doubt that they have landed in a wrong country or are trespassers! Separate seats for them in trains, buses or on a “merry-go-round” (SP 240) make their segregation complete. And once it is asserted that “A Negro’s got no business on the Freedom Track” (SP 277) the experience of double consciousness is up to the brim in their mind. After the identification of this base behaviour the poet vents it out very vividly in his poetry. But the poet never becomes pessimistic; rather, the subterranean rumbling echoed in the poem gives way to hopefulness and anticipation. He asserts that he, “too, (is) America.” (SP 275) This is no propaganda as Hughes himself said, “We know we are beautiful and ugly too.” His experiences make his poetry a kind of functional literature. The whites deem him to believe that he is a tenant or an intruder
in America and as a result he has lost his identity. Still the poet remains optimistic and patient and there is no apology or self-pity in his poetry. This double consciousness later inaugurates his racial consciousness and self-determination. Survival of any one is almost impossible without this experience and its awareness. The harshness in some of the poems of Langston Hughes can be explained on account this awareness.

Another dimension of the experiences of Langston Hughes is that in the harsh and unpleasant America the first place that provide solace to his mind is Africa. It must be kept in mind here that “Africa, negatively or positively, never ceased to occupy a tangible place in Afro-American life and in particular in the writings of Afro-American intellectuals.” Langston Hughes is no exception. He identified with Africa in which the black man lived with freedom and dignity. He made a more thorough going attempt to cut himself loose from occidental values. He idealized Africa as a Garden of Eden in which the blacks were free to live a durable life. Hughes asks his fellow men to “wear the banner of their native land proudly.” (CP 30) The poet consciously escapes to his past and primitive land not because he is a coward and an escapist. But because he knows very well that it is the experiences in the lap of nature, which can save them from the psychic double consciousness that afflicts modern industrial man including the white. His wild and primitive native experience does not make the poet vulnerable to talk about the need to educate the Africans, or to civilize them. On the contrary, he considers the Africans superior to the western people in many ways. His people are “Beautiful like the night” (SP 13) and this beauty is skin deep. Memory about that “far away . . . Africa” (SP 3) is quite vague but the poet has full faith that it is the only space in the present world where he can “fling his
arm wide in some place of sun and dance.” (SP 40) This sense of freedom is generated by the past, which hitherto was thought of as ugly and uncivilized. “My People” (Davis 35) also emphasized vehemently on racial pride and the celebration of Negroes’ faces, eyes, and souls.

The poet skillfully counterbalanced his double consciousness and as a result was able to create a new course and road for the Afro-Americans where there will be no “mint of blood or sorrow,” (SP 19) where the “island” (SP 78) will be fair to live upon. The most important aspect of this new experience is that it is devoid of excessive militancy and radicalism with regard to aims and modes of expression. The poet now has the audacity and the belief to assert that “all men are created equal” (SP 296) and it included both the blacks as well as the whites.

You are white --

Yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. (SP 248)

The assertion in the above lines is not an emotional outburst. Although the task is difficult; it is not impossible. “Sometimes when I’m lonely . . . keep thinkn’ I won’t be lonely” (SP 35) because the poet knows that they are interdependent and once this fact is realized with an open heart the double consciousness will coalesce into one consciousness. Then the whites and the blacks will turn truly into human beings. Then only the plow will cast “a new furrow across the fields” (SP 291) of America as a democracy.

Langston Hughes has perhaps earned the reputation of being the greatest black writer worldwide. Unlike his predecessors and successors the poetry of Hughes is addressed directly to the black people using a language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar to anyone who possess the minimal of ability to read. Although he started in a
state of double consciousness, yet he was able to retrieve the lost energy of his people by reminding them of their humanity, which has sustained them for centuries; and by forging a new future of cultural meditation through soul searching experience and reflections. More than that, through the Afro-American experience in his poetry, the poet evokes a vision of a just society with a spiritual transcendence and an ever widening horizon of joy and hope.