Chapter Three

The Nostalgic Experience

The reclamation of Afro-American history in literature is not an altogether new phenomenon. Even in the fourth quarter of the 20th century, it has propelled imaginatively an unusual number of black writers and poets into the past, producing a new literary genre that is today known by the name - the neo-slave narrative. Building on historical novels such as Jubilee and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Afro-American literature reopened the scars of slavery in search of keys to the meaning of freedom in the post-civil rights era. The most celebrated and distinguished of the neo-slave narratives, however, is Morrison’s, Beloved, rivaled only by Ellison’s The Invisible Man as the most influential Afro-American novel of the 20th century. Thus one can safely say that the past can never be obliterated, not at any cost. The recuperation of history of blacks is very necessary in order to understand the experiences of Hughes and his race. In fact to comprehend and acknowledge the history of blacks is indispensable to appreciate any black writer.

It is for this very reason that the first period of the literary career of Langston Hughes shows an acute awareness of the Afro-American’s historic cultural heritage and the pristine atavistic Africa that had become a part of his unconscious. His attempt remains to seek and redefine his people’s continual struggle to assert them against a background of social and political oppression. For the faithful representation of his people’s past glory and present plight, Hughes is celebrated as the poet-laureate of his ethnicity. Leopold Senghor, the noted Senegalese poet and exponent of African
negritude, finds Hughes “the most spontaneous as a poet and the blackest in expression.” (In Smith 357) His blackness, an informed reader knows, is deeply rooted in his atavistic Africa -- its blues and jazz, gospels, beauty and racial features. The value of this purely African experience can be realized once the poems of first phase are studied carefully in which the poet remembers his glorious but lost past and this nostalgia of the lost glory made him a sober and gentle poet of the 1920s.

Hughes’ art is responsive to the needs and emotions of the black world even as he held to an inclusive view of America and the whole world. Basking in the high regard of his primary audience, which was black, Hughes always looked to them, and their experiences, for direction and inspiration. The sheer quantity and variety of his written work inevitably have led some critics to question whether Hughes sacrificed his integrity and his talent as an artist for a more functional vision of himself as a man of letters. The charges may have certain authenticity, but the fact remains that his poetry, “with its original jazz and blues influence and its prominent demotic element, almost certainly is the most influential written by any black” in the previous century. (African American Writers 203)

The first phase of his poetic career coincides with Harlem Renaissance that proved to be a blessing for the budding writers. During this phase of his literary career, Hughes expresses his anger and resentment against the Jim Crow America by fondly remembering his atavistic Africa, its rich heritage and its unique experiences. He seems to reject the ongoing atrocities on his people and, by presenting their ethnic Africa, provides them solace and comfort. He highlights his African heritage, takes pride in being a black, and celebrates it with pride and gusto as a superior version of
humanity. There is, indeed, a tint of primitivism in the poetry of first phase but this primitivism was the solution provided by the poet to modern man’s alienation and the fact is that there is a therapeutic pursuit in it.

In his first important poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” published in Crisis in June 1921, Langston Hughes traces the historical benefaction of his community in the making of world civilizations. The poem was actually composed a year before when Hughes was crossing the Mississippi, slowly, over a bridge and began to think what that river had meant to Negroes in the past -- how to be sold down the river was the worst experience which could overtake a slave in times of bondage. The poem celebrates the tolerance of the Negro during different phases of world history.

Commenting upon the genesis of the poem, Charlemae H. Rollins suggests,

He thought of the Ohio, which Eliza crossed to escape the bloodhounds in Uncle Tom’s Cabin; the Nile, where the Egyptians princes found the baby Moses, who was to become the leader and emancipator of his people; the Euphrates, where a dark-skinned people watched the stars and invented a way to keep exact records by their light; and the Congo, flowing through the green jungles of Africa and into his memory and his blood. (18-19)

The African’s continuous plight first in the form of slavery and then in the form of racism has made him not only somber but taught him the power of tolerance that has created a niche for him in various civilizations he has contributed in. The poet proudly says,

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids about it.
I heard that singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (The Collected Poems 23)

The poem is a chronicle of how the blacks have suffered at different levels at different places throughout the world. Here, argues Arnold Rampersad, the poetic persona “moves steadily from dimly starred personal memory... toward a rendezvous with modern history.” (The Southern Review 703) There is an ennobling vision whose final effect gleams in the evocation of the Mississippi’s “muddy bosom” turning at last “all golden in the sunset.” The setting sun magically changes the “muddy” river into a “golden” one and the same will happen to the future of blacks with the arrival of a new dawn. Personal anguish has been alchemized by the poet into a gracious meditation on his race, whose despised and muddy culture and history, irradiated by the poet’s vision, changes within the poem from mud into gold.

The free form and the easy, simple language show the influence of his ideal, Carl Sandburg, but the subject matter and the emotional thrust are distinctively
Hughes’ own. The poem celebrates the Negro, his pride in his race, and his benefaction during each phase of civilizations all over the world and creates an aura of his stamina and strength. The motive force behind the poem, according to Edward Marx, is the idea that “African blood was African whether living in Africa or America…the water in the external rivers of black experience mirrors the internal blood that connects the American Negro to his ancestors.” (87) The external continuity of black experience near the rivers is internalized; the soul is like a river through which black experience flows, the river that connects the timeless “I” of the poem.

Hughes has eloquently expressed a deep admiration and appreciation for his race in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” The poem is an evident example of the concern that was Langston Hughes’ forever as a literary artist. This is a beautiful poem, argues Donald C. Dickinson, and is “an epic tribute to the Negro race, rich in expression and moving in its message. [It] emphasized the dignity and sensitivity of the Negro, a theme he was to use throughout his career.” (14) The journey of the Negro is a tale of suffering and hardships they had to face for being black. Jean Wagner perceives that the poem,

…. heralded the existence of a mystic union of Negroes in every country and every age. It pushed their history back to the creation of the world and credited them with possessing wisdom no less profound than that of the greatest rivers of civilization that humanity had ever known, form the Euphrates to the Nile and from the Congo to the Mississippi. (394)
The poem, a close look reveals, has latent anger at the historical plight of the Negro misused by all the civilizations for their personal gains. This also shows that the Negro always remained in bondages that left him no choice but to bear all the affronts thrust on him from all the civilized societies. The “I” in the poem, we should not forget, is the collective voice of all the Afro-Americans striving to affirm their humanity which has usually remained unacknowledged on account of the background of social and political oppression.

The celebration of pride and tolerance of his people by the poet highlights his unhappiness over the undue exploitation of the Africans by the selfish whites all over the world. This historical plight of the Negroes is also highlighted in “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” a poem first appeared in Crisis in July 1921 where the female speaker portrays the inhuman treatment given to the black Americans by the racist whites,

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of Aunt Sue’s voice

At some point in ones life everyone hears a story either from a parent or an aunt. In the same way the dark-faced child listens to the splendid stories of Aunt Sue, that are real and correlative -- based on her experiences and not concocted, which
prepares him to meet all the affronts that life has for him. Aunt Sue becomes a symbol of Africa and of tolerance, care and persistence and Hughes’ presentation of the life of a black American in the United States exhibits suppressed anger and protest of the exploited masses through her. Aunt Sue is trying to pass down her stories in the hope that the past experiences of blacks are preserved by the future generations and will always guide them.

This can also be witnessed in “Mother to Son” where Hughes has used the metaphor of life and its experiences as a journey. Composed entirely in dialect, Arnold Rampersad asserts, the poem is “free of the stereotypes of low comedy or extreme pathos that had come to mar most black dialect verse.” (African American Writers 194) A tale of slavery and freedom, the poem exposes how and to what an extent the blacks in America were caught in the complex web of segregation, whether de jure or de facto, that marred the lives of blacks particularly in the South but also virtually across the country,

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
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. (CP 30)

The mother’s journey symbolizes the onerous globe trotting of the entire Negro race. The expedition for the whites has always been easy but for the Afro-Americans, the road has been dusty, dark and blood-stained. Their past experiences were full of splinters and uprooting. This, however, also symbolizes the grit, stamina and
endurance of the people that were maltreated because of their colour and racial features. The mother adds,

But all the time
I’se been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light. (CP 30)

Despite the odds that life in a racist society inflicted on her, the Negro mother kept climbing the ladder of life. She faced all the brutalities boldly and now inspired her son not to turn his back to life. She is an icon that represents the pride and consistency in her life which makes one wonder over her grit and stamina. Here, argues Nathan Huggins, “pride inevitably wrestles with pathos” at the same time “power and clarity of image suffer in the uncertainty.” (150) This uncertainty, nonetheless, is to be understood as part of the folk-wisdom that the poet tries to imbibe here. The poem is a “quiet dramatic monologue,” maintains Arnold Rampersad, “sentimental to be sure, but a revelation to members of a race haunted by self-doubt.” (Voices and Visions 364) Hughes’ depiction of the pride of the Afro-American and his endurance makes him a true representative of the Afro-American experiences and an ardent follower of negritude.

Langston Hughes exhibits in his poetry all the aspects associated with negritude. He eulogizes his colour and takes pride in being a black. He sings of the endurance that the black community has shown over the centuries. He also carries
violent ideas that lay buried in his poems of 1920s but expressed eloquently in the poetry of 1930s which makes him one of the “most eloquent American poets to have sung about the wounds caused by injustice.” (Rampersad, Collected Poems 3)

“Negro,” for instance, reveals how the poet has exposed the slaughtering experiences of blacks during different phases of history. Nevertheless, the poet keeps his old history close to his heart throughout the poem. First published as “The Negro” in Crisis in January 1922, the poem asserts the affirmation of the Negro when he says,

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Buildings.

I've been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me still in Mississippi.

The poem has references to the historical subjugation of blacks around the world where they were either enslaved or remained deprived. “The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo” refers to the rule of King Leopold of the Belgians as sovereign of the Congo Free State (1885-1908) where a labour tax of ten percent was
instituted. Failure to pay the tax was punished by flogging, execution, and occasionally destruction of the entire village. Soldiers were required to produce the right hand of villagers who had been executed for not paying the tax and the procurement of hands became an end itself, reportedly leaving thousands of maimed victims. Similarly, lynching in Mississippi refers to the summer of 1919 when Ku Klux Klan lynched several Afro-Americans in Longview, Texas.

A conscious reader can see how the black speaker draws his historical plight in these lines. One can also notice that the poet is more concerned about the ignition of feelings of dissatisfaction and anxiety that lead to bitterness for the racial bigotry prevalent in the U.S. This bitterness is the concealed anger and protest that the poetry of this phase inherits. Notwithstanding the latent anger and protest of the Afro-Americans, such poems should be seen as assertive of their splinter self that was due to the evil effects of slavery and subjugation in America.

The poems of this phase impress upon the readers that the poet was quite conscious of the hurdles that lay before the oppressed Afro-Americans. The fact that the poet looks back to his Africa as a place with which his community could become one is largely because of the fact that America, for his people, was a torture room with no window and full of poisonous gases suffocating them to spiritual and psychological death. Following the alien-and-exile tradition, Hughes’ poetry, says Arthur P. Davis, portrays the American Negro as “an alien, perpetually estranged, and deeply nostalgic over the loss of his beautiful sun drenched land” -- the spiritual homeland of his community. (23) Nevertheless the African experience is life giving and life affirming.
The African experience urges the blacks to take inspiration from their glorious past experiences so that they may live with dignity and freedom in the times to come.

During 1920s, Hughes does not altogether forget the discriminating experiences that have degraded the Afro-Americans. There is due recognition of the racial injustice prevalent in America during this phase that creates vacuity in the soul of the American Negro. This racial injustice was more common and had a brutal shape in the Southern parts of America where, even after emancipation, Negroes were still lynched if they protested against slavery and other dehumanizing pressures. “The South,” for instance, describes the bitter experiences of Southern America,

The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth.
The sunny-faced South,
    Beast-strong,
    Idiot-brained.
The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fire’s ashes
For a Negro’s bones.
...
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
    Passionate, cruel,
    Honey-lipped syphilitic --
That is the South. (CP 26-27)
This poem not only unravels the life and experiences of a Negro in South but also poses a number of questions for the reader to ponder. What is the solution to life in South? What future does the North holds for blacks? The repulsive image created in the poem evokes terror and fills the Afro-Americans with anxiety of their existence. This threatening reality of the “lazy, laughing” South has sucked the Negroes’ blood with its “sunny-faced” mouth. The suffering Negro adds,

And I, who am black, would love her
But she spits in my face.
And I, who am black,
Would give her many rare gifts
But she turns her back upon me.
So now I seek the North --
The cold-faced North,
For she, they say,
Is a kinder mistress,
And in her house my children
May escape the spell of the South.  

(CP 27)

The poem describes the brutal experiences of South that forced the black Americans to ponder over leaving it for a more harmonious place in North. This, however, was not enough because the North was also “cold-faced,” though less cruel toward the Negroes. This description of torturous South is an attempt to affirm the Afro-American identity in an atmosphere of danger and threat. This is a way to assert
the disintegrated self in an atmosphere of racial bigotry. If the solution is available neither in the South nor in the North, may be it will be available in the East!

Hughes, in this phase of his poetic career, at times moves away from the regressive vein of negritude, and asserts his ethnicity’s individuality even in the present. The unconditional love that Africa offered to them has been juxtaposed by Hughes to the hatred that the whites showered upon the Negroes. The capitalistic system, the poet argues, was also against the oppressed for it failed to provide them any security and justice. He, as a result, sees law as a blind goddess unable to see and judge judiciously. In “Justice,” first published in Amsterdam News on April 25, 1923, the poet says,

That justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are wise.
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes. (CP 31)

This poem opens our eyes toward the blind law that has shut its eyes toward the bad experiences of the Negroes. The American Negro, nevertheless, is aware of this travesty of situation which makes him wise. The equivocal poise that the poetic persona assumes here frees him to share the fate of his community. He joins his people and becomes a voice of affirmation of their disintegrated self. This conveniently short but deceptively moderate poem of Langston Hughes raises the key issue of importance of historical-political context, of language and energy streaming in from events and experiences which were averse for the blacks when the poem was composed.
This affirmation of Afro-American experience has yet another dimension that relates to pondering over the pathetic present and looking for a more secure place to live in. “Our Land,” for instance, is an attempt to recoup the pristine glory through the simmering memories of Africa when the poet writes,

We should have a land of sun,
Of gorgeous sun,
And a land of fragrant water
Where the twilight
Is a soft bandanna handkerchief
Of rose and gold,
And not this land where life is cold.

We should have a land of trees,
Of tall thick trees

... 

Ah, we should have a land of joy,
Of love and joy and wine and song,
And not this land where joy is wrong. (CP 32-33)

The poetic persona wants to move away to a land full of natural beauty and abundance. He is disenchanted with the land and society he is living in for it gives him nothing but stings and suffering. A mindful reader, nonetheless, may find this an escape from the harsh realities to a world which still resides in their memories. This is not an escape, Hughes’ poetry reveals, but a strategy to muster courage and hope to fight back the forces that deny the Afro-Americans’ affirmation and assertion in America. It is nothing but catharsis for the poet and this gives pleasure to the poet -- a prerequisite for any creation and creativity. Going back to Africa is a way out to relive the experiences of the atavistic land which will facilitate them to live in a land of dreams.
The experiences of the dream land, the poet asserts, has proven to be fiasco in so far as its realization in the life of a black American is concerned. One can find numerous instances where the poet slides away to his spiritual homeland and shows his disgust for the American Dream. “Shadows,” first published in Crisis in August 1923, depicts the Negro’s disenchantment over the dream land because of his oppressed life. The poet says,

We run,
We cannot stand these shadows!
Give us the sun.

We were not made
For shade,
For heavy shade,
And narrow space of stifling air
That these white things have made.

…

We must break through these shadows,
We must find the sun. (CP 34)

A close look at the poem shows that the poetic persona feels suffocated in the “narrow space of stifling air” that the “white things” have given him. This forces him to leave everything behind to find the sun of his life that could provide him light and energy, and make his life worth living. The persona, even so, cannot be separated from the rest of his people who also share the same feelings of segregation, discrimination and injustice in a society mired in deceit and corruption. A more careful reader, however, can also see the hidden anger and resentment here that may help them to “break through [the] shadows” of racial bigotry.
Hughes’ everlasting concern for his people kept on pricking his soul and incited in him creative energy to raise voice against all types of discrimination prevalent against the black Americans. There is no tone of anger or violence here rather it is passionate with due recognition to the fact that they cannot live as a separate ethnicity in the American pluralist set-up. That is why, perhaps, in “The White Ones” Hughes says,

I do not hate you:

For your faces are beautiful, too.

I do not hate you:

Your faces are whirling lights of loveliness

and splendor, too.

Yet why do you torture me,

O, white strong ones,

Why do you torture me? (CP 37)

The poetic persona asks this question out of his innocence. The question, nonetheless, is a complaint against the racist attitude of the “white strong ones” that is put in a complacent mood with the expectation that it may mellow their hatred toward the oppressed masses. The concealed protest of the poet actually is a means to assert his people’s disintegrated self.

Most of Hughes’ poems composed during 1920s present his experience in a restrained way and are evidence of his hidden anger and resentment toward racism. “Lament for Dark Peoples” presents the poet’s wretchedness and gloom over the undue marauding of the whites into the domain of the Negroes. The poetic persona
feels uprooted as he has been driven out of his atavistic Africa and, now, feels encaged in the land of dreams,

I was a red man one time:
But the white man came.
I was a black man, too:
But the white man came.

They drove me out of the forest.
They took me away from the jungle.
I lost my trees.
I lost my silver moons.

Now they’ve caged me
In the circus of civilization.
Now I herd with the many --
Caged in the circus of civilization. (CP 39)

The poetic persona laments over his forced exile from his atavistic Africa to an alien land stagnant with slavery and racial chauvinism. He is deeply upset to be driven out of his fascinating forest and made unable to witness his “silver moons.” The comparison between America and Africa that Hughes makes persists in the poetry of this phase. Onwuchekwa Jemie states in this connection,

Africa is for him a distant ideal, foil and backdrop for his portrait of the present reality that is America. America to him is a cold, joyless wilderness, Africa a carefree tropical paradise. (98)

An informed reader, at the same time, feels that the poet has streaks of primitivism when he recalls Africa and its charms. The poems discussed above bring forth the idea
that cultivating primitivism as a spiritual and cultural alternative in fact is a means to reflect the alienation of black Americans. Creating an alternative set of values rooted in Africa that remains primitive, natural, and uncorrupted by destruction, alienation, and war is a strategy to survive in America. This romantic pursuit was significant as a mechanism for the search of human values, opines Robert A. Coles and Diane Isaacs, a “search for a more remote, naturally good, and uncorrupted Africa -- free from the white racism manifested in western civilization.” (6) 

Hughes’ poems of 1920s have multiple dimensions. If there is primitivism, there is also anger and resentment for racial bigotry. In “Dream Variations,” published first in Crisis in July 1924, the poetic speaker aspires to fling his arms wide,

To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night come on gently,
    Dark like me --
That is my dream!  

The “white day” refers to racism and the poem is a wish to go away from the present subjugation and maltreatment that the black Americans face in the United States. Unfortunately he is not free as his feet are chained in the shackles of slavery, as was the case on plantation sites. There is hidden protest and heartfelt longing in the poem that is a way to assert his distinct individuality beneath the ugly sky of racism.

Hughes remains a faithful articulator of the many-faceted experiences of his people in the United States. Being fully aware of the sad quandary of his people, the
The poet rejects the Jim Crow America in order to highlight its ugly face. Sometimes, the poetic persona in his poems feels frightened to be a lonely lamb among the racist wolves. “Afraid,” for example, highlights this aspect of his people,

We cry among the skyscrapers
As our ancestors
Cried among the palms in Africa
Because we are alone,
It is night,
And we’re afraid. (CP 41)

The fear here represents the experiences of the black Americans who were tortured and harassed. Speaking for the entire black ethnicity, the persona in the poem conveys his indignation and rancour against the brutal treatment that he has experienced and which has turned him into a sheepish creature unable to move freely in the United States. The cry in Africa was like tears of joy, where the poet was not alone and lived in the company of nature that was consoling, but here it is a shiver and terror giving cry among the concrete and aloof skyscrapers. No one is a companion here!

In the poems that Hughes wrote now, there is an intensification of the anger and resentment which is more palpable in “I, Too” than in any other poem of 1920s. It is a poem, argues Arnold Rampersad, “with particular appeal to hemispheric cultures unhappy with the appropriation of the name America” by the United States. (The Life of Langston Hughes 178) The poem describes the experience of racial discrimination and advocates also the egalitarian approach of the poet. Calling himself the darker
brother, the Afro-American shows his resentment when he is forced to eat in the
kitchen,

    Tomorrow,
    I’ll be at the table
    When company comes.
    Nobody’ll dare
    Say to me,
    “Eat in the kitchen,”
    Then

    Besides,
    They’ll see how beautiful I am
    And be ashamed --

    I, too, am America  \(\text{(CP 46)}\)

The black American, a darker brother, authenticates his right of equality in an
assertive and Whitmanic tone. The poem shows the slow advancement of Hughes
toward open protest, for the voice in the poem has anger that is smouldering and, with
the passage of time, will turn into a volcano of protest. A more conversant reader can
see that the poet prefers to make political assertion a necessary condition for
happiness and fulfillment. After all, the blacks are in a great competition with the
whites as they also share a common history with them.

“Park Benching,” first published in *Workers Monthly* in April 1925, is another
fine poem that exhibits another facet of Hughes’ experience and is written as a protest
against unemployment. The poetic persona is hungry but has nothing to eat and no work to earn his living. He is sad and full of annoyance,

I’ve sat on the park benches in Paris
Hungry.
I’ve sat on the park benches in New York
Hungry.
And I’ve said,
I want a job.
I want work.
And I’ve been told,
There are no jobs.
There is no work.
So I’ve sat on the park benches
Hungry.
Mid-winter,
Hungry days,
No jobs,
No work.  

The jobless black American has to suffer hunger and physical weakness. Nonetheless the poetic character does not opt for mean and low tactics to earn his two-ends-meet. There is clear signal in the poem that the oppressed is not ready to surrender before the domineering economic forces. One can also see the political inclination and overtones in the poem which receives greater emphasis in Hughes’ poetry of 1930s.

Another experience that finds eloquent expression in the poetry of Langston Hughes is that the poet asserts the Afro-American self that got fragmented under the white duress in America. In the early phase of his poetic career, Hughes can be seen to
have worked out his sensibility in relation to his ancient land as well as the present status of his ethnicity. His sensibility of the whites’ hatred and malevolence toward the blacks in America is explicitly visible in the poem “To Certain ‘Brothers,”

You sicken me with lies,
With truthful lies.
And with your pious faces.
And your wide, out-stretched,
mock-welcome, Christian hands.
While underneath
Is dirt and ugliness,
And rottening hearts,
And wild hyenas howling
In your soul’s waste lands. (CP 55)

The Afro-American in the poem is fed up with the pretentiousness and shrewdness of the racist whites as was done earlier by Thomas Jefferson, the history books tell. The direct arraignment in the poem is an attempt to relocate the splinter self of a maltreated and exploited black American.

“The Jester,” first published in Opportunity in December 1925, is another kind of experience of how the marginalized black American becomes a jester of the world. He holds tragedy in one hand and comedy in other. These are the masks for his tortured soul. He asks the white oppressors to laugh and weep with him. But he is doubtful about their positive response and their readiness to share his laughter and sorrow. He says,

Tears are my laughter.
Laughter is my pain.
Cry at my grinning mouth,
If you will.
Laugh at my sorrow’s reign.
I am the Black Jester
The dumb clown of the world,
The booted, booted fool of silly men.
Once I was wise.
Shall I be wise again? (CP 56-57)

When the Afro-American calls himself the jester or dumb clown of the world, he, in fact, satirizes the racial oppression which became a part of the American system. He is a booted fool for the silly white men who would want him to obey them. Before he was enslaved, the black was free, and relaxed, and wise. But once made a slave, he no longer stands for wisdom. The question posed at the end of the poem is actually an assertion that the fragmented self of the black American will be able to relocate itself once he is free.

Langston Hughes’ poems also exhibit the two dimensional personality of the Afro-Americans. They would willingly involve in merry-making forgetting their humbled life in a period when Harlem was in vogue. First published in Crisis in December 1925, “Minstrel Man” explores this aspect of his poetry,

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song.
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long?

...
You do not hear
My inner cry?
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing,
You do not know
I die?  

The Afro-American puts his case before the racist whites in simple but straightforward manner to draw their attention to his sad subsistence. His singing and dancing, he seems to suggest, is nothing but a temporary way out to be numb against the ongoing atrocities on them. The poem is an instance of affirmation of the collective identity of black ethnicity through humble and submissive ways. Hughes’ poems of this phase, we must not forget, are affirmative of shared identity of his folk but with a tinge of hidden protest in them.

In January, 1926, at the height of interest in the New Negro, Knopf published Hughes’s first book, *The Weary Blues*. In the introduction Van Vechten described Hughes’s experiences and promised that he would create an important place for himself in the world of letters, a place at least equal to that held by Paul Lawrence Dunbar or James Weldon Johnson. The poems were arranged in groups to reflect Hughes’s personal views on Mexico, Africa, Harlem, and the sea. As a whole the book may be taken as a kind of verse chronicle of Hughes’s experiences and impressions up to that time.

Because of the interest in everything relating to the Negro, and the appreciative introduction by Van Vechten, *The Weary Blues* received more than the usual attention given to a first book of poems. DuBose Heyward opines,
Always intensely subjective, passionate, and keenly sensitive to beauty and possessed of an unfaltering musical sense, Langston Hughes has given us a ‘first book’ that marks the opening of a career well worth watching. (4)

The reviewer in the *New York Times* echoed this sentiment saying, “If he can go on as he has begun, America bids fair to have a poet worthy of far more than passing mention.” (Review, Hughes 6) In the *Times Literary Supplement*, however, the poems were classed as superficial, flamboyant, and sentimental.

*The Weary Blues*, like most of Hughes’s writing, is a vivid and vibrant index to contemporary Harlem life and the poet’s experiences. David Daiches, in a discerning comment on Hughes’s literary objectives and experiences, emphasizes this when he said,

Langston Hughes’s poetry is what, in terms of the art of the motion picture, would be called documentary. His concern is to document the moods and problems of the American Negro. (4)

It is clear from one of Hughes’s own statements that he agrees with this analysis. In answer to a question about his experience as a writer and a Negro he said that the “major aims of my work have been to interpret and comment upon Negro life, and its relations to the problems of democracy.” (Phylon 307)

Hughes’ poems, at any rate, document the varied dimensional racial experiences found all around in the American continent. The concealed protest now, however, starts receiving the manure of stern tone that makes it visible to a cognizant reader. “Mulatto,” a poem first published in *Saturday Review of Literature* on January
29, 1927 reveals the poet’s concern over the maltreatment that a mulatto receives from racist white who replies to his claim of being his son,

What’s a body but a toy?  
Juicy bodies  
Of nigger wenches  
Blue black  
Against black fences.  
O’ you little bastard boy,  
What’s a body but a toy?  
(CP 100)

The conceited white father rejects out rightly the claims of a mulatto child. He is not accepted as a brother by the white children. This poem, according to Arnold Rampersad, is “caught disastrously between the black and white worlds, but especially between longing for acknowledgement by his white father and being disowned by him.” (The Life of Langston Hughes 3)

If this is against the exploitation of a black woman by a white racist, there are other poems where, toward the end of 1920s, the poet starts asserting and relocating his people’s fragmented self in a more vocal tone. “As I Grew Older” directs the attention of the white racists to open their eyes toward the malcontent when the subjugated black Americans are becoming ready to uncage themselves from the chains of racial oppression. The oppressors should start putting off their notions of racial superiority because the oppressed is ready to give a hard punch to the wall of racism in America. The poet says,

I lie down in the shadow.  
No longer the light of my dream before me,  
Above me.  
Only the thick wall.
Only the shadow.

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream! (CP 94)

The poetic persona, now, is ready to break and shatter the shadow of slavery through his own “hands.” He is ready to illumine the darkness of racism in America. The tone, nonetheless, has changed from being submissive and latent to direct and assertive marking a gradual shift in the expression of his experience.

The second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, was published midway through Hughes’s college career in 1927 and concentrated chiefly on the Negro folk music. As Charles S. Johnson observed, the poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* were a departure from those in *The Weary Blues* since the new book “marked a final, frank turning to the folk life of the Negro, striving to catch and give back to the world the strange music of the unlettered Negro -- his *Blues*. (83)

The early reception of the book was not greeted by the white counterparts as in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a headline proclaimed “Langston Hughes’ Book of Poems Trash,” where as *The New York Amsterdam News* commented “Langston Hughes -- the Sewer Dweller.” (The Big Sea 266) Benjamin Brawley claimed it would have been better if the book had never been written since it concentrated on “the abandon and vulgarity of its age.” (248) Hughes recalls what Eustace Gay wrote in the *Philadelphia Tribune*,

> It does not matter to me whether every poem in the book is true to life.

Why should it be paraded before the American public by a Negro author
as being typical or representative of the Negro? Bad enough to have
white authors holding up our imperfections to public gaze, our aim
ought to be to present to the general public, already misinformed both
by well meaning and malicious writers, our higher aims and aspirations,
and our better selves. *(The Big Sea 267)*

Allison Davis, writing in *Crisis*, claimed that the defects he saw in *Fine
Clothes to the Jew* could be charged directly to Van Vechten. These weaknesses
included false primitivism and over-emphasis on sordid and trivial experiences. Davis
stated that Vechten had “misdirected a genuine poet, who gave promise of a power
and technique exceptional in any poetry,” and thereby cut off what promised to be a
distinguished literary career. (269) Hughes answered these charges with characteristic
vigour, saying that most of the poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* had been written in
Washington before he met Van Vechten and further that they “were not about him, not
requested by him, not misdirected by him and some of them not liked by him.”
(Hughes, *Crisis*) In spite of diverse views the white reviewers generally praised the
themselves when read aloud and show craftsmanship and experience of a high order.”
(221) In *Poetry*, Julia Peterkin commented, “Tragic cries and questions, prayers and
hallelujahs are turned into poetry with an art and skill that makes them available for
the enjoyment and experience of all human beings, regardless of colour or race.” (45)
The reviewer in the *Independent* said,
Mr. Hughes is best in his ‘Blues.’ It is hard to praise too highly one who expresses a race’s emotions -- and a moment in its life. Mr. Hughes has done both. (396)

The book is less a study of Hughes and more a study of the Negro and his experiences. If one finds lack of depth in the blues poems, no one can deny the strength of feeling they project. However, because of their form, the poems in Fine Clothes to the Jew are somewhat more restricted in nature than the best work in The Weary Blues. Redding offers a thoughtful and precise analysis of Hughes’s ability in this line,

There is this difference between racial thought and feeling; what the professors, the ministers, the physicians, the social workers think; the domestics, the porters, the dock hands, the factory girls, and the streetwalkers feel -- feel in a great tide that pours over into song and shout, prayer and cursing, laughter and tears. More than any other writer of his race, Langston Hughes has been swept with this tide of feeling. (116)

By the time Hughes arrives at the end of 1930, his voice is no more a romantic longing for what is not but an authentic call for assertion of the rights due to him and his race. His voice starts becoming militant and the protest that has remained concealed during the 1920s expunges replacing it by visible anger and resentment. “Militant,” for instance, declares that the oppressed Afro-American can no more remain humble and submissive but aggressive to strike back the racist whites,

Let all who will
Eat quietly the bread of shame.
I cannot,
Without complaining loud and long,
Tasting its bitterness in my throat,
And feeling to my very soul
It’s wrong.
For honest work
You proffer me poor pay,
For honest dreams
Your spit is in my face,
And so my fist is clenched
Today --
To strike your face. (CP 131)

The poetic persona has become militant now and is ready to take any step in order to preserve his identity and assert his rights and privileges. He has borne enough afflictions and ignominy and his tone seems to suggest that this cannot go forever. His fists are clenched now to strike the oppressor back to teach him a lesson.

The Afro-American, like all Americans, also nurtured hopes and aspirations associated with the American Dream. American Dream is a national ethos which includes the opportunity for prosperity and success. It believes that life should be better, richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. But the American Dream brought nothing but disappointments to the Afro-Americans. Most of the
poems of first phase mock at the American Dream and all its promises. As a member of the disadvantaged community, the Afro-American wanted to be free, to be treated equal and given all rights due to him. But he got none and, by and by, started developing malice towards this dream.

As a poet laureate of the Afro-American community, Langston Hughes voices protest against racial bigotry in the United States of America in an authentic and powerful voice so that the racist whites realize the worth of the black community and give them the rightly deserved respect. Since they are reluctant to do so the poet has to devise ways to reorient and reshape his desires and aspirations. There must be something to substitute the horrible and bleak present. After all, honourable life and prosperity is also his right. He plunges himself to Africa and the Afro-American cultural values in the form of blues, jazz and other spirituals. His fondness for blues and jazz is a mean to assert the individuality of his people. It is a way to affirm the fragmented self of his people who have lost their roots and hence their real self. The search for his roots makes him nostalgic about African history and culture. The racist messages in books, history, day-to-day life and conversation, material self-interest of the whites or may be the fear of becoming an outcast among their own whites have forced the whites to hate and detest the blacks for centuries. Narcissism, dichotomous thinking of the whites and their moral blindness have completely demolished the grit and determination of the blacks. It is here that the African past comes to the rescue of the poet and his masses. It gives him the energy and faith that even they belong and are not rootless and vagabonds. It prepares the poet and his people for the hardships and difficult experiences awaiting them in the so called cultured and modern America.
The tone of the poems of this phase has a mode of latent anger and resentment which is conveyed through the symbol of Africa and its heritage. In poem after poem composed during 1920s, Hughes ardently sings of Africa, its primordial heritage and its mysterious beauty that provides succour and courage to the Afro-Americans to bear the pangs of alienation in an equable poise. By the time he enters the 1930s his tone, under the diametrical influence and experience of Marxism, changes and he becomes militant and revolutionary ready to replace Capitalism to Socialism.