Chapter Four

Experiencing the Double Consciousness

The experience of blacks in America was harrowing and vexing. The American Negroes were caught in the “circus of civilization.” (*Collected Poems* 39) The discriminating system, to which they were subjected, forced them to think that they were alienated and not treated as an integral part of the civil society established by the white European settlers in the New World. Who were they? Where were they at present? Why were the suffering there? These questions reverberated in their mind for ever. The place and face value of Negroes rested upon proper answers to these questions. Slavery had placed the Negroes in dehumanizing conditions and even after the emancipation they were not really emancipated. They had forgotten their original African dialect, but developed rudiments of a new ethnic idiom. They found themselves on a darkling plain. America lay before them “like a land of dreams so various, so beautiful, so new” and with unbounded opportunities but for them it really had “neither joy, nor love, nor light; Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” (Arnold 484) They felt emptiness in their soul and often thought of their existence as a nullity. The inescapable reality of being dark-skinned and having peculiar features became the obvious basis of their subhuman status, whatever their intrinsic worth as human beings might be. This was their harrowing American experience.

Langston Hughes’ poetry brings forth the anguish of the black American who was entrapped in self-doubt but was also aspiring for affirmation of his human dignity. He gives eloquent expression to the black community’s feelings of bitterness and
scorn in his poetry and also expresses the lyricism connected with the affirmation of its dignity as a collective human entity. Langston Hughes’ writings are “filled with evidence of a lifelong struggle against racial bigotry” spread throughout America. (Sundquist 56) His poetry shows deep and open love of the black masses and devotion to their folk forms. He brings out with extraordinary vividness and force the warm affability and irrepressible mirth of the Negro community so that a kind of bond could be established among the Afro-Americans. He strongly advocates black beauty and feels proud of giving expression to the quality of negritude. It would be helpful to us to delve into negritude before exploring some of Langston Hughes’ poems in detail that expose the real America before our eyes.

Negritude was once defined simply as survival in the American Negro of the identity formed by his primordial heritage which had been suppressed or overlaid by a false stereotype forced on him by the conditions of slavery. It is usually defined in the context of black poetry as “that complex of traits, sensibilities, and historical consciousness peculiar to black Americans.” (Emanuel 147) Negritude usually highlights the primordial part of this consciousness. The term was first used by Leopold Senghor with two implications, “It could mean recognition of black identity, and a corresponding pride in that identity -- or it could be a mastery of ever-more centripetal musing of African personality.” (Berman 245-246) In practice, the second implication dominates in Leopold Senghor’s formulations. Under this type of thinking Africa is regarded as the spiritual homeland. A poet devotee of negritude recognizes the importance of skin colour in his poetry as also the persistent and ever surviving rootedness in the tribal culture to which the ancestors of American black slaves belonged. But an important component of negritude, which is generally under
emphasized, is concerned with the Negro’s historical consciousness of his American past. Nathan Irvin Huggins, in his notable book *Harlem Renaissance* draws our attention to the larger meaning of negritude when he says,

> It is to look into the fullness of the past without shame or fear. To be, and to relive the slave and the peasant and never be separated from that reality.... To know and to accept slavery, the horror of it, the pain of it, and the humiliation of it. To absorb it all, the living and dying past, as part of blood and breath. The Negro has to embrace the slave and the dwarf in himself. (Huggins 186-87)

The brotherhood in the Negroes certainly arose due to a life lived and are hurt for it attitude. Three hundred years of slavery and bondage gradually generated a kind of race consciousness in them. But the first question that arises in our mind is why the whites continuously and perpetually hate the black Americans, in fact all the blacks anywhere? Is it simply because of their skin colour, which is black? The answer to this question lies in the history of blacks. The habit of keeping slaves was already there in European culture and tradition long before the trans-Atlantic slavery took place. But at that time people of white and coloured skin were indiscriminately enslaved. Gradually, the Negro group was elicited and debased as they easily adapted into the system of slavery and later on the rift between the two ethnic groups got amplified curtesy the legal sanctions. The whites gradually sensed and believed that the blacks were more suitable for the status of slaves than others and thus the inhuman business of trading in black slaves commenced. For the white community it was not possible to accept the blacks as their brothers and sisters owing to their dichotomous thinking and
moral blindness. The various legal, social and political sanctions against slavery after the Civil War in 1965 may have forced the merger of the whites and the blacks but their hearts are still beating separately and Langston Hughes is very much alive to this dichotomy. Blacks still want to achieve a state of fearlessness in their heart,

Mingled
Breath and smell
So close
Mingled
Black and white
So near
No room for fear. (Selected Poems 265)

But when the poet saw the present plight of the Negro class in America he did not find the white man as an angel. Rather, he found how the whites were suppressing the Negroes through their ruthless behaviour. The present of the Negroes in America, as elsewhere was bleak and devoid of basic human necessities. They were not living like human beings; rather, they were leading a life which was worse than that of animals,

We are desperate
Who do not care,
The hungry
Who have nowhere
To eat,
No place to sleep,
The tearless,
Who can not
Weep. (SP 91)
The vagabonds are the people who have been rejected by all the sections of society. In the poem “Vagabonds” Langston Hughes identifies the starvation and misery of the black race that have been rendered rootless in a country towards which their contribution is immense. They are alien in their own land struggling in dolorous conditions and the pressure on them is such that they cannot even weep to unburden their grief and pain. If they do so, they are further crushed and tormented by the whites, as Langston Hughes relates in “Third Degree,”

Hit me! Jab me!
Make me say I did it.
Blood on my sport shirt
And my tan suede shoes.

*Faces like jack-o’-lanterns*
*In grey slouch hats.*

Slug me! Beat me!
Scream jumps out
Like blow-touch. (SP 197)

The short lines, visual imagery and repetition of sounds in this poem help to create the defiant tone and dark experience. The elements express the theme of abuse, and their effect on the reader is of anger and ill feeling. Hughes probably called this poem “Third Degree” because it implies multiple meanings -- burn, interrogation, and murder. The ambiguity allows for many interpretations, but the most probable purpose of this poem is social criticism. It is a reflection of abuse (specifically by police) towards blacks of Hughes’ time. Structurally the poem is composed of many short lines but the lines are fast and blunt and are like punches to the reader which help us
understand the persona’s pain. This is the treatment meted out to them by the whites and that too in an ideal democratic state of Whitman. Whether the true meaning of “Third Degree” be murder, burns, or interrogation, one can conclude that Langston Hughes here meant to express the experience of a perennial struggle. He shows this through the poetic form and structure of the poem as well which moves the reader’s eye quickly through the chaos. The imagery and sound effects make the reading more explosive so that the end effect is of pain and sadness. Langston Hughes most likely wanted to show the injustice of racism and accusations toward black people, because that is what he has experienced in his life! The poem has three stanzas symbolizing the long and three phased journey of the blacks that has now brought them to the chamber meant for third degree.

The whites, from the very beginning, never considered the blacks, as part of American mainstream. In fact, the blacks had to continually remind the whites that they are also equal to them, as they also brought the “Democracy” to the same land,

I have as much right  
As the other-fellow has  
To stand  
On my two feet  
And own the land.  

(SP 285)

It is no surprise that democracy in the United States was non existent in the early 1900s and throughout the Jim Crow era for the blacks. They had no rights and the democratic experience for them was laughable, a joke and outrightly biased. The laws made by the government pertained to the whites exclusively, excluding all Afrio-Americans. But the poet doesn’t want to wait for freedom; he wants to fight for
freedom and for a change. Democracy implies free and equal representation of people; it implies free and equal right of every single soul to participate in a system of government. Therefore, Langston Hughes felt compelled to speak his mind for equality and his birthright freedom through such kind of poem. He has to assert that the land also belongs to him as he and his race have made great contribution in the development of this land. This awareness shakes the poet and makes him speak that he “too” should assert his right on America very vehemently. Langston Hughes thinks of the American blacks as an integral part of the American society. It is on behalf of the Negro as an American citizen that he raises his voice for equality between man and man, regardless of his origin, colour and features. He affirms the brotherhood of the black and the white people through his art in one-way or the other. One of his most celebrated poems, “I, Too” composed in 1924, shows his egalitarianism. The poem is stoical as well as affirmative. It is “a poem with particular appeal to hemispheric cultures unhappy with the appropriation of the name America by the United States.” (Rampersad, *The Life of 178*) “I, Too” shows the consciousness of Langston Hughes of black people’s aspirations for equality and democracy in America. He says,

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

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.  

The word “too” in the poem is assertive but one doesn’t expect an individual to assert his rights in such a pleading way in a free nation. The Americans can not send him to his native land which by no means is America. So they send him to the kitchen to isolate. The poet can not bear it long and ultimately break his silence and says “Undemocratic doings take place in the shadow of world’s greatest democracy.” *(The Big Sea)* 206) These undemocratic doings are more horrifying in the South of America, for the simple reason that the black man’s experience is most vehemently evident there. In fact, the word lynching has its birth in this part of the world only. The most merciless experience waits for the blacks in the South. The rope around his neck, the knife at his genitals, and the fire all over him is all the due process he could ever hope for. Even a timid and naive boy is not spared by the white oppressors,

Last week they lynched a colored boy.
They hung him to a tree.
That colored boy ain’t said a thing
But we all should be free.  

*(SP 162)*
Such oppressive and repulsive experiences divided the poet’s identity into two warring ideals. The process of searching his real identity was painful to the blacks and it forced the poet to present a realistic account of their condition in the present America so that the question of existence can be answered once for all.

Langston Hughes’ another important poem “Song for a Suicide”, written in 1924 and published in the Crisis in May the same year also depicts a Negro, who suffers too much under racial oppression. Exhausted by life’s hardships, he craves for a deep slumber and says in depression,

Oh, the sea is deep
And a knife is sharp
And a poison acid burns;
But they all bring rest
In a deep, long sleep
For which the tired soul yearns --
They all bring rest in a nothingness
From where no road returns. (Poetry of the Negro 198)

Although Langston Hughes claimed that the poem was entirely personal, it could still be read as dealing with the collective fate of the black Americans. The poem shows that the Negro has suffered and endured too much of racial discrimination and now his burdened and “tired soul yearns” for “rest in a nothingness.” The poet can say elsewhere that “I’m-gonna-be-happy-anyhow-in-spite-of-this-world” but, as a matter of fact, the reality is that the present experience of America induces in him a sense of suicide. (Hughes, Jazz 493)

The experience of the blacks with the Ku Klux was more harrowing. The whites in Tennessee created the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist organization, in 1865 in
order to torture the black race. The Southern whites used this organization to avenge and reimburse their prestige demolished by the Civil War and radical reconstruction. After its emergence, the terror against the blacks took a severe turn. The mutilated bodies of the blacks with their ears or noses chopped off or eyes poked out were the common methods of Ku Klux Klan in dealing with the blacks. The reign of terror was established in a civilized society and the poem “Ku Klux” was composed in the same melancholic mood whereby the present plight of the blacks is given a free voice that confirmed their alienation from the “white American world.”

They took me out
To some lonesome place.
They said, “Do you believe
In the great white race?”

I said, “Mister,
To tell you the truth,
I’d believe in anything
If you’d just turn me loose.”

The white man said, “Boy,
Can it be
You’re a-standin’ there
A-sassin’ me?”

They hit me in the head
And knocked me down.
And then they kicked me
On the ground.
A close reading of the poem clearly suggests that it holds five hundred years of history in capsule, spotlighting the physical violence by which the whites established themselves and forced the myth of their superiority over the rest of the world, including the black races. The poem clearly divides and demarcates the blacks from the whites forcing the poet to have a divided vision of himself and his race. The poem, it seems is in continuity to the earlier poem “Third Degree,” and we are once again transported inside the victim; looking out, feeling the blows and intensity of pain. The police violence depicted in the poem takes place in the North signifying that this also is not a promised land for the blacks. Their discrimination can take place anywhere be it the North or the South.

Again in “Ballad of the Landlord” one more experience of the blacks is described in stunning terms which once again reminds of their dual existence. In the poem, the black speaker is talking to a white landlord for the improvement of his roof. The landlord is instigated by this behaviour as he considers it as an act of infringement against the authority. He summons the police to arrest him,

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

   (SP 239)

The weak position of the tenant can be contrasted with the comfy position of the landlord. The tenant must have got justice in his native land Africa, but here, he
can not claim justice as his right. The tenant calls on the landlord twice and gets no action; the landlord calls on the police once and that too in a false case, and gets immediate action! Is it rule of law or rule over low? The fearless manhood of the tenant is ineffective and fruitless against the organized might of the white lord. Even years later, in the poem “Merry-Go-Round” (1942), such discrimination by a white child forces a black child to hold on to his integrity and launch a protest,

Where is the Jim Crow section
On this merry-go-round,
Mister, cause I want to ride?

(SP 194)

If we ignore the transcendentalist part in the poem, it unfortunately depicts the custom of back-seat Jim Crow rules on trains and buses and demolishes the whole American structure to pieces. In such a scenario the innocent child is trying to assemble his self-image, which has broken into pieces and being a small child he doesn’t know what his fault is in the present scheme of things. The same experience was repeated in the year 1960 when very painfully, the poet once again remembered one of his childhood experience where a Santa Claus didn’t pay any attention to the Negro children and didn’t give any gift to the poet! Hughes’ concern of the American prejudice especially against the children is amply visible in the poem.

Sometimes, Langston Hughes, depressed at the fate of the oppressed Negro, look towards heaven for mercy. He first asks the Americans for the answer but soon remembers that they can only provide the problems and not their solutions. Consequently he makes a complaint to God and asks Him to intervene in the poem “Prayer,”

I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
Lord God,
I do not know.  (CP 51)

The poem, it seems, tries to convey the anguish and restlessness that has accumulated in the Negro community on being deprived of the dignity and privileges that go with the citizenship of a democratic social order. In the same mood in “Summer Night” he says,

I toss
Without rest in the darkness,
Weary as the tired night,
My soul
Empty as the silence,
Empty with a vague,
Aching Emptiness,
Desiring,
Needing someone,

Something.  (CP 59)

To what an extent the poet was awed by the bitter experiences of America can be felt by us once we read his poem “Freedom Train” with a keen heart. In 1947-48 a patriotic train containing historical documents and mementoes toured the United States. The train symbolized the promise of America, an America of dreams. The poet
also was inspired by this train and in his excitement composed this poem. Just as the poet had seen trains with special Jim Crow Car for his race; he is still skeptical about the present Freedom Train,

I hope there ain’t no Jim Crow on the Freedom Train,
No back door entrance to the Freedom Train,
No signs FOR COLORED on the Freedom Train,
No WHITE FOLKS ONLY on the Freedom Train. (SP 276)

The capitalized letters show the psychological effect of the white oppression on his sensibility and consciousness. The promise of a new America by the whites in the form of Freedom Train causes apprehensions in his mind. Many of us are struggling not only with racial injustice in society but we are also struggling against the injustice that we place upon ourselves. The greatest injustice any person can place upon himself is to draw hope and faith in dreams and future. But even in such fond hopes the poet is still worried about the gruesome behaviour where he would be treated as a beast. His nervousness, as a result, increases when he reaches Birmingham station,

The Birmingham station’s marked COLORED and WHITE.
The white folks go left, the colored go right --
They even got a segregated lane. (SP 276)

So the poet unsurprisingly asks,

Is that the way to get aboard the Freedom Train? (SP 276)

He thus, is now more convinced with his doubts that all attempts to bring equality in America are ineffective and futile as the present is unrelenting to change. He wants to verify,

I’m gonna check up on this Freedom Train (SP 276)
He is still in doubt whether the blacks have been provided the chance to play a part in the life stream or are they still menial workers or porters,

Can a Coal black man drive the Freedom Train?
Or am I still a porter on the Freedom Train?  

(SP 276)

The train, thus, serves as an experience of America’s ability to fuse the many into one. “But the fusion cannot be complete, America’s unity train cannot run full stream until a coal black man, his colour and strength in unison with earth’s great energy source is also free to drive that train.” (Jemie 74) When this time will arrive, is not known to the poet, but, the thing about which he is positive is that the present is still not conducive to his overall development and divides his personality into two,

When my grandmother in Atlanta, 83 and black,
Gets in line to see the Freedom,
Will some white man yell, Get back!
A Negro’s got no business on the Freedom Track!  

(SP 277)

The present train is unattractive as it has black and white bogies in it. The train, thus, is a metaphor taken from the Afro-American seculars, which clearly stresses that it is a reverie, which has not come true and will not come true for the Afro-American masses. The juxtaposition of black and white bogies will always haunt and remind the Negroes of their dual position in the American society; that they are neither American nor African and it is a painful experience.

In his seminal essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” Langston Hughes says, “To my mind it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the face of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white,’” hidden in the aspirations of his people, to “Why should I want to be
white? I am a Negro and beautiful.” (Peploo 475) The essay clearly shows the aesthetic-valuation of black culture but a deep analysis also shows the dilemma of the black persona in the present situation. “Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro and beautiful” is not only a rejection of the white preference but it is also in a way acceptance of the fact that he is a Negro and hence inferior. Thus, everywhere we find such instances where the dual existence of the poet comes to the forefront and it only reminds him of the plight they are in.

Langston Hughes started his literary career as a poet on May 31, 1916 and he kept on writing as he grew more political and mature in his vision and understanding of the Afro-American’s predicament. His first mature poem from the critical point of view is “When Sue Wears Red.” Composed at the age of seventeen, the poem deals with a chocolate-skinned girl from the South whom the poet once saw in a flaming red dress. He at that moment wrote this well-known poem and paid a glowing tribute to the historic beauty of the black woman unprecedented in the literature of the race. He says,

When Susanna Jones wears red
Her face is like an ancient cameo
Turned brown by the ages.

Come with a blast of trumpets
Jesus!

When Susanna Jones wears red
A queen from some time-dead Egyptian night
Walks once again.

Blow trumpets, Jesus!

And the beauty of Susanna Jones in red
Burns in my heart a love-fire sharp like pain.

Sweet silver trumpets,
Jesus! (CP 30)

He ecstatically praises the beauty and history of the Africans in America in praising Sue. One critic prefers to describe the power of the poem in terms of an abstract human entity when he says that it “derives its power from its vision of eternity and from the holler and shout of religious enthusiasm.” (Jemie 133) But Langston Hughes’ vision is more specific. He links the black woman to Africa while ecstatically praising her beauty. His use of “red” symbolizes -- royalty and passionate love. Langston Hughes’ ecstatic outburst “either expresses Sue’s holiness and regalness, or her passionate sensuality. There is a special exuberance of spirit associated with Afro-American culture and Langston Hughes was not prudish about celebrating it.” (Neal 85) When he wrote this poem, Hughes felt that race experience was of primary concern to him and it had to be reflected in his art.

The oppression by the whites does not fill the heart of the poet with hatred and revenge; rather, the poet uses it as a mode to affirm the unity of blacks everywhere. The trip to Africa, in August 1923 by Langston Hughes, made him think of his people and their sufferings. He wanted to revive their old prestige and glory but found the Africans baffled and humble even in their homelands. But he did not want to return hatred for hatred. Rather Hughes recognized that the baffled heart of black Africans forced his race to endure white domination. The poet’s basic impartiality appears once again here in his refusal to condemn the white people en masse. In “The White Ones” he 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)

After his trip to Africa, Langston Hughes experienced Europe and it made an impact on his racial and social consciousness. He concluded that the Negro snatched of happiness, feels enclosed in the cage of civilization. The recognition of race discrimination comes to the mind of the poet through the twofold realization created in him by the whites. The whites create a type of awareness in the poet’s heart to remember and worry about his natives and relatives living at a far off place from America. The poet then believes that the Negro is the darker brother of the whites. “Lament for Dark Peoples,” Langston Hughes next notable poem, presents his personal response to being a non-white in the western world. He says,

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

They drove me out of the forest,
They took me away from the jungles,
I lost my trees,
I lost my sliver 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 mourning by the poet once again reawakens his consciousness and portrays red and black men as having undergone a powerful wrenching experience of being taken away from their primitive homes and caged in “the circus of civilization.”

It must be noted here that in the early phase when negritude is identified with the African roots, the poet apparently falls into a regressive mood of seeking relief from pain by extricating himself from various hardships of life. A seductive element in the poetry of this phase does exist, but the primary effect left by the poems is of a strenuous effort to scoop out a distinctive identity for the oppressed people so that they can learn to take pride in it and hold their heads high. This effort to scoop out an identity does not sap their energy but tends to revitalize them and prepare them for facing the present hardships and experiences with greater dignity. The poet thus recreates a new meaning for himself and his masses in the double existence of his identity that was sparked in him by the attitude of the whites.

In his notable poem “Cross,” he explores the mulatto themes, to which he comes back again and again in his later poetry as well. In the American society the Negroes, including the mulattos felt extremely uncertain about their life and fate. The poem is written in the form of a ballad and is about miscegenation. “Cross” presents the doubt and confusion of a mulatto when he says,

My old man’s a white old man
And my old mother’s black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother,
And wished she were in hell,
I’m sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house
My ma died in a shock,
I wonder where I’m gonna die,
Being neither white nor black? (CP 58-59)

This poem is about his ethnic roots. At that time Caucasions had all the rights and money while the Afro-Americans had nothing. In his anguish the mulatto cursed his grand parents but then tries to take those curses back. Being uncertain of his future, the mulatto is unable to affirm his identity. His white father’s and black mother’s crossing make him lose his confidence and in the process his identity. His father’s was a grand funeral but his mother died un lamented. So the black clouds of doubts puzzle him. Although the major issue in the poem is political and economic discrimination (the big house versus the shack) yet it drives the white reader to an uneasy silence. His choice both of voice and of subject matter makes it clear that Hughes had committed himself to an art of social protest. But the message, brought out by the poem, very explicitly confirms the crossed identity of the poet that forces him to believe that his condition is worse in both the situations. He cannot redeem himself neither as a black nor as a white. Still the poem places the Negro in the spiritual mainstream of the modern thought.

Langston Hughes’s one of the strongest poems “Mulatto,” once again deals with the strange experience of having a mixed blood. He has written in his autobiography *The Big Sea* that he never worked so hard on any other poem than “Mulatto.” Published in *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1926, it is a poem about white fathers and Negro mothers and mulatto children in the South. The mulatto,
unable to relate himself with either the blacks or the whites, feels confused. He belongs to nowhere but still tries to assert himself when he says,

_I am your son, white man!_

Georgia dusk
And the turpentine woods.
One of the pillars of the temple fell.

_You are my son!_

_Like hell!_

The moon over the turpentine woods.
The Southern night
Full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

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?

The scent of pine woods stings the soft night air.

_What’s the body of your mother?_

_Silver moonlight everywhere._

_What’s the body of your mother?_

Sharp pine scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A nigger yellow
Bastard boy.  

The Negro mulatto is abused by the whites and is called a bastard. The whites used the Negro’s mother only to satisfy their carnal desires. They don’t give the
yellow body a proper place in society and hence he is perplexed and worried about his double sentience, which even the hybridization has brought no results or fruits for him. The poem opens with the adamant voice of the son, but gradually it gets transformed into a passive Negro feminine presence exuberantly recalled by the white father. Just like the male dominated America, the poem also becomes father’s poem in the end. The father finally has the last laugh! His belief that neither whites nor blacks consider him as their brother is confirmed,

Now, you ain’t my brother,
Niggers ain’t my brother,
Not ever.
Nigger ain’t my brother.

Get on back there is the night,
You ain’t white.

I am your son, white man!
A little yellow
Bastard boy.  

His efforts of affirmation fail and he feels alienated and discarded. Langston Hughes, himself a man of mixed blood “is caught disastrously between the black and the white worlds, but especially between longing for acknowledgement by his white father and being disowned by him.” (Rampersad, The Life of 3) The son is the catalyst but it is the father who glows!

The poem “Mulatto” very aptly describes the agony and rejection of the Negro mulatto. It reminds him again and again that he is neither a white nor a black whose
roots lie in Africa. The fact is that the profound racial material in the poem convincingly explores a white father’s subconscious that finally prevails over the ironic position of the blacks in America.

In July 1930 in the Crisis, Langston Hughes came out with “Afro-American Fragments.” In this poem, he turns his face again towards Africa to find some solace from it, idealizes primitive Africa filled with dusky maidens and magical moonlit evenings. He wants to surrender to the spell of his motherland i.e. Africa, as the white America reminds him that he has a fragmented personality and only the half of it belongs to someplace called Africa. This may be the poet’s final experience and approach to Negritude that arouses his historical consciousness of their African past that the blacks were losing gradually. He has a true respect for and curiosity concerning African motherland when he says,

So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood --
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue --
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.               (CP 129)

His motherland is too far away and it is difficult to keep its memories alive. But is there an alternative choice for him? The music from Africa was subdued and now has been completely lost in America. The memories of Africa “beat back into the
blood” but the phrase “beat out of blood” suggests that these songs came out of black suffering and in doing so he certainly has lost something. As he had been uprooted from his atavistic land long ago, Langston Hughes is unable to understand the primitive music and song. His experiences with the whites have reminded him time and again that he has lost a paradise. He says,

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums -- and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place --
So long,
So far away
Is Africa’s
Dark face. (CP 129)

This poem shows Africa as time-distanced and not fully understood in America. But, as Onwuchekwa Jemie tells us, Africa is “a potent reality in the Afro-American soul-psyche, a conclusion which carries an implicit optimism” in an otherwise pessimistic scenario. (173) It is a recovery and rediscovery of the African heritage, which in the present mood provides spiritual sustenance for resistance and protest in bearing the present experiences in America.

Another poem “Christ in Alabama” concerns autobiographical experience of a kind, never far below the surface of Hughes’ mind. The poem caused excitement and threats of violence the night Hughes read it on November 21, 1931 at the University of
North Carolina. The poet was inspired by the thought of, “how Christ, with no human father, would be accepted were He born in the South of a Negro mother.” (In Emanuel 97) The shock of the Southern whites at the poem indicated that everything was not normal. It is worthwhile here to quote the whole poem wherein Jesus is pictured as a lynched black man. The poem also tries to show, how a black poet is trying to reconcile and yoke his divided self into one. One part of the poet’s self is looking at himself as a black man and the other is trying to search his identity in a white semblance,

Christ is a nigger:
Beaten and black,
Oh, bare your back!
Mary is His mother;
Mammy of the South,
Silence your mouth.
God is His father;
White Master above
Grant Him your love
Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the cross
Of the South. (CP 143)

Christ is a nigger if viewed historically as a brown-skinned Jew, with a brown-coloured mother -- both late adopted into the white West and given a lily-white heavenly appearance. The tragedy is that if Christ is taken as a brown-skinned Jew, then the white people of the United States would not readily call themselves Christians and they would stop going to the churches. But when the historical Christ is
accepted by the Negro, he is segregated from other human beings. The idea behind the whole logic in the poem is that there is a separate God for the whites and the blacks. There is duplicity in the ways of God. The white and black Christ evokes predominantly two different attitudes. White evokes a positive response such as good, beautiful and striking whereas black is invariably seen as hideous and ugly. White reflects humanity and black can be associated with everything inhuman and hellish. Thus, treating Christ as Negro is nothing but an effort for reconciliation of the duality that exists in the Negro body. If, the whites can accept a historical black Christ to be their God, then they may accept them, at least, as human beings in the years to come. He reminds his fellow brothers of the road not taken by them in the wake of faltering Christianity. The poem thus presents the poet’s implicit vision of a decisive moral encounter that will bring brotherhood to America.

It must be noted here that brutality of the whites towards the Negroes by no means filled their heart with anger, disgust and hatred. The same whites taught them the value of stoicism and it helped them to transcend the man-made barriers of caste and colour. When the poet finally experienced the influence of Marxism, especially during the first world war, he showed his concern for equal rights and privileges of every man (either black or white). The communist party, which came into power in the USSR and spread in the industrial countries outside, broke down all barriers of race and creed. The proletariat and downtrodden of the world got united under the communist banner to replace the old order with the new. The poet also highlights the experiences of the disordered black world and “New Song” is a testimony to this,

Revolt! Revolt!

The Black
And white World
Shall be one!
The worker’s world! (In Bajaj 120)

The poet wants to cleanse the whole system in America by breaking down all barriers of caste and colour. The plight of the blacks, no doubt is miserable but the attitude of the whites has also done no good to them.

The most important experience that pricked the conscience of Langston Hughes is the sense of double consciousness, a term devised by W.E.B. Dubois. Double consciousness isolated the blacks in their own country. The most important poem that reflects this division of consciousness is “Let America Be America Again.” It expresses a wishful longing for racial equality and intends to represent all the poor hard-working people who live in America, whether they come from across the waters or are the natives. It speaks of the freedom and equality which America boasts but never had. The poem also conveys that America used to be the land of the free but now it has changed for the worse and hence, needs to turn back again. The poet here concentrates on the relations between Negroes and America. At every step, it has been emphasized that he does not belong to the country and like a stray dog he moves for solace and searches for his lost identity. The poem begins on a bright and hopeful note,

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed --
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.
(It never was America to me). (Hughes, The Poetry of 193)
But the parenthetical remark smashes all such illusions and creates a poem within the poem alike to a black who has a body within a body enforcing his double existence. He has no courage to speak loudly against the oppression of the whites. He sees the government and the business people as full of greed and not treating the lower class fairly. But he only mumbles and makes a silent protest for whatever his master likes, he can speak only those things. He speaks but his comments are unwelcome and are not invited by any one. He is forced to believe that he is a pseudo-American who has no where to go and none to weep. He has lost his native land Africa and is gaining the experience to learn to live the life of the new world in an atmosphere of rejection and hate.

This experience is so suffocating that at times the blacks secretly and in a very personal way communicate their fears and requests to God. The whole correspondence is utterly private and off the record which hints at the wretched plight and dread of the Afro-Americans in America,

In an envelope marked:

*Personal*

God addressed me a letter.

In an envelope marked:

*Personal*

I have given my answer. (SP 88)

The poet as a spokesman of his class cannot unfold his heart to the whites. The matter of fact is that only they are responsible for his horrible condition. When everyone shuns us in hour of crisis then to whom shall we look for respite? With whom the poet will share his feelings and unburden his heart? It is God only, the most benevolent.
Following this, in another poem, the Negro removes the mask (hence parenthesis) from his face and shows himself what he is at the present moment -- made to suffer and befooled forever. Though he feels undaunted, bold and full of courage, yet the reality is that he is a slave in the four walls of America. He very honestly accepts his dual existence in the so called free and democratic America,

I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek --
And finding only the old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of might crush the weak,
I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain of grab the land.  (Hughes, The Poetry of 193)

The poet thus becomes the representative not only of the Negroes, but of all the unprivileged, the bereaved, the poor of America who are working as slaves in one form or the other.

“Freedom’s Plow” is a significant and prolific poem because its meaning is still relevant in modern times. The poem narrates the dream and work of the Negro slaves who wanted to build and spiritualize a new America. Thus the poem presents the vision of the blacks. The speaker dreams to make America a free-land, where everybody is free. But he makes it clear, that this dream is not of an individual but of all the natives of America. The poem starts with the description of the slaves, who were pulled from their homeland and were thrushed in America, yet they came here in hope of seeking freedom, creative cooperation, faith in public and acquiring a broad perspective. It is for this reason that the poet deliberately creates a brighter side of the picture when he quotes the words of some great political leaders who fought for the political freedom of the blacks. First of all, he mentions the statement of Jefferson, the third President of United States of America and a thoroughgoing democrat, who said,
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL. . .
ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATER
WITH CERTAIN INALIENABLE
RIGHTS. . .
AMONG THESE LIFE, LIBERTY
AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS. (SP 293-94)

The poem picks up where, “I, too, Sing America” let off. Basically, it is also a protest poem in the classic sense, addressed to white America, and more to their heads than to their hearts. The poet starts to attempt to reason with white folks for the present predicament of the blacks. He urges them, through the voice of these great men, to return America to first principles and according to the poet even these principles are not there in the foreign ideologies. The blueprint is right there in their home, it’s just a matter of building and consolidating upon it,

The plan and the pattern is here,
Woven from the beginning
Into the warp and woof of America. (SP 296)

The song, made up by the slaves themselves, gives strength and robustness to the refrain, “Keep your Hand on the Plow! Hold on!” This is the same refrain that was sung by the slaves long ago. But there is no solution at hand and there is only endurance, patience and a continuous struggle for the blacks or the words of support of Lincoln,

NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH
TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN
WITHOUT THAT OTHER’S CONSENT. (SP 294)

The above two speeches are important not because they were spoken by two great leaders but by two great white leaders. Thus, strength is given to him by no
others than the whites and it, at times rekindles new hopes and aspirations in the heart of the poet and his masses. If, it inspires a dual consciousness in him, it also revitalizes his energy making him brave and enduring in the face of present struggling experiences. The slave turned political leader Frederick Douglass also emphasized the importance of self dignity and freedom of any kind and asserted,

**BETTER TO DIE FREE; THAN TO LIVE SLAVES**  
(SP 294)

We have seen that the early experiences of Langston Hughes were concentrated in general on the appreciation of the black man’s African heritage and the joys of the Harlem jazz age. Most of the poems were set to the rhythms of blues and to Negro spirituals. His continuous brooding on the psychology of his people created in him a desire to resuscitate the atavistic past, which laid buried deep in the collective psyche and remained alive in a modified form as it had been reshaped by the historical experience of living under oppression in America. He also tries in some of the poems to bridge the gap between blacks and whites, between blacks and blacks, and between blacks and mulattos. The affirmation of blackness, which distinguished Langston Hughes’ experience from other poets, is the central element in his early poetry. He sings about the wounds caused by injustice; the trials and triumphs of black people in their typical language composed out of a genuine love for these people. Onwuchekwa Jemie says,

Hughes is very much aware of his historical placement, of the imperatives of his *race, moment, milieu*, and he makes his art respond to those imperatives, which include the raising of consciousness among an oppressed people, the affirmation, conservation, and onward
transmission of their culture, and battling of injustice through exposition and protest. (197)

Langston Hughes is a highly original talent and both the matter and manner of his art were rooted in the black folk experience. The central urge was to affirm the underlying humanity and natural beauty of an oppressed community. His poetry derives its vital nourishment from the black folk heritage. Apart from traditional literary sources, Langston Hughes got his material and experience from anonymous black masses, their rhythms, their dialect and their life style. With the help of material drawn from there, he created an organic body of work, which made him the poet laureate of the American Negro. As a poet, he is steeped in the richness of Afro-American culture exuding his affection for black Americans across all divisions of region, class and gender. In the earlier phase of his poetic experience, greater emphasis falls on recoupment of a distinctive identity for the blacks by highlighting their indebtedness to the African continent. Even though the primary effort here is to discover the basic humanity, which does not get whittled down or spoiled by centuries of conditioning by a foreign and oppressive cultural set-up, there is in the poetry of this phase a seductive music of psychological relief through a regressive impulse.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that like any other ethnic writer, Langston Hughes strived to create a space for the blacks while he experienced the present marked by racial and social injustice. While facing the ugly and dilemmatic present the poet wrote protest poems, but fortunately his protest poetry did not succumb to bitterness. By experiencing and accepting the dual consciousness, the poet tried to search and hence amalgamate his real identity but unlike Claude MacKay never turned defiant or rebellious. The poet tried to comprehend the situation like a
true intellectual. Protesting against the white dominated present, Hughes turned to his rich African heritage to secure for himself and his race some energy that will help them to forge a new experience.