Chapter-I

PROPAGATING THE BLACK AESTHETIC

The term Black Aesthetic was first used by Larry Neal in 1968 in the manifesto “The Black Arts Movement”; the term is used to refer to the cultural identity of the African-American. The Black Aesthetic set out to make the African-American artist aware that he must refuse to accept the European-American definition of reality and to offer instead an African-American definition that went beyond the traced boundaries imposed by the white racist imagination. African-American art, it was felt, must challenge the stereotypical figure of the African-American created by white America. The Black Aesthetic also emphasised the need for African-American art to highlight the paradigms of the African-American past that enabled the African-American to survive the American nightmare. It set out to critique actions that are detrimental to the health and well-being of the African-American and sought to wage, what must be seen as, a perpetual warfare in creative and intellectual terms, against the American attempt to dehumanise the African-American.

In “The Black Arts Movement”, Larry Neal says that the African-American writer ought to be, “speaking directly to the needs
of the Black man’s experience in the racist west and developing [his] own Black Aesthetic". However, Darwin Turner in the introduction to his book, *Afro-American Literary Critics*, sees the Black Aesthetic critic being handicapped by the necessity of devising theory prior to the creation of works. Turner argues that even Aristotle examined works that he and other Greeks admired and distinguished the elements these works shared. Aristotle then stipulated that great literature must include such elements. Mathew Arnold, too, deduced his theories from literature already created. This privilege was not available to the African-American critics who structured theories even while calling for writers to create the works that are needed to demonstrate the excellence of the theories. Langston Hughes fills up the vacuum by demonstrating that the African-American had a large oral resource from which he could draw from in a creative manner.

W. E. B. Du Bois radically expected African-American literature to be indisputably ‘propagandistic’. In “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois emphatically expresses disinterest in any art that does not attempt to bring beauty, truth and justice to African-American writing. James Weldon Johnson, however, wanted the African-American to deepen his understanding of the folk form and style. He instructed writers to find an aesthetic form to define the identity of the African-American, while others like John O. Killens (in
“Opportunities for Development of Negro Talent”) called for writers to explore and create the means of achieving deeper and broader dimensions of artistic reality in their interpretation of who they were, where they came from and where they were going. In, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1934), Richard Wright regretfully observes that, rarely has the best writing been addressed to the African-American himself.\(^2\)

The Black Aesthetic is therefore directly opposed to, and becomes a reaction against a Euro-centric art form. It seeks to impose an Africanised art form which has its roots in the oral. In “The Myth of a Negro Literature” (1966), LeRoi Jones points that writers like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin returned to “Negro Music” \(^3\) (which is an African-American indigenous art form) and incorporated what is a “highly stylised and personal version of the Negro’s life in America” \(^4\) in their writings.

As an artist and a man, Langston Hughes profoundly identified with the ordinary struggling African-American. In his poetry he views them as “the most wonderful people in the world”\(^5\) and exhorts them to uphold their racial pride in lines such as:

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

(TWB, p. 58)

As an African-American, Langston Hughes grew up with the ugly realities of racism, but his vision of the African-American was according to V. F. Calverton only: "the vital aspect of him, as he really [was], without ornament, without pretense..." This innate understanding of who the African-American really was, can be traced to his grandmother's legacy of heroic tales through which he also learnt African-American history, understood the nature of racial pride and imbibed African-American folk thought. He immortalised the debt he owed to his grandmother in the following poem:

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

And the dark-faced child listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue
Never got her stories out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right off her own life.

And the dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's stories.

(TWB, p.57)
Unlike Countee Cullen who repeatedly insisted upon seeing himself and being seen by others simply, “as a poet, not a Negro poet”, only to find that the racial theme would not leave him alone (and that his strongest poems tended to be those rooted in his experience as a black man and those that defined him as a distinctly black poet), Hughes rebukes those writers who felt they had to run away from themselves in order to be “universal”, those who said they wanted to be “a poet-not a Negro poet”. He asserts: “why should I want to be white? I am a Negro---and beautiful!” The poet claims that most of his poems are racial in theme and treatment and derived from the life that he was familiar with. In poems like the one following the poet makes an appeal to his people to embrace their skin color with a sense of pride rather than with a sense of shame:

Wear it
Like a banner
For the proud...
Not like a shroud.
Wear it
Like a song
Soaring high...
Not moan or cry.

(PLT, p.67)

In The Negro Speaks of Rivers, the poet testifies to the maturity of his self awareness, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers”. In it he talks of the birth of a “man-child, soft-spoken, almost casual, yet noble and proud, and black as Africa.” Like other
African-American poets and artists, he rightly refuses to talk to a “universal void”, but insists upon addressing his people directly. Hughes poems also express his boundless enthusiasm and justifiable pride in his African roots, in words such as:

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

(TWB, p.9)

Hughes’ art moves towards an affirmation of the African-American heritage embracing the black struggle. His central concern is for the African-American people and their struggle for freedom and as Richard K. Barksdale observes, he is the “spokesman-poet”, who was “never permitted the luxury of emotional or aesthetic distance...” As such, Hughes actively participated in the creation of a separate identity for his people.

Langston Hughes insists upon creating a distinctively Black art that breaks away from the framework of the past, the white-master-imposed-upon structures even in the face of what W.E.B. DuBois called the African-American’s “double consciousness” of both his African heritage and his American experience. Hughes’ art revolves around an effort to confront this double consciousness and work out an aesthetic resolution that would authenticate the paradoxical nature of the African-American experience. Through
his work he vehemently opposes and fights against the caricatures, distortions and inconsistent portrayals of the African-American which, according to him, serve to confirm the white prejudice and perpetuate the oppression of the African-American people.

His poetry is radical; it's hallmark is not only experimentation with new technique but more importantly, the formation of a new radical consciousness. In his journals, Hughes underlines the urgency for creation of African-American culture derived from the wholesome elements of the African-American consciousness. This was something that had its roots in the African-American folk: Thus he fashioned a new order of hearing, a new order of seeing, appropriate to his people and to the age:

So will my page be colored that I write?  
Being me, it will not be white.  
But it will be  
a part of you, instructor.  
You are white ...  
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.  
That's American.  
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.  
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.  
But we are, that's true!  
As I learn from you,  
I guess you learn from me...  
although you're older— and white... and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.  

(MDD, p.39)
"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" is a seminal document that provides an understanding of the Black aesthetic in the context of Hughes' poetry and it contributed to moulding of contemporary African-American identity. The essay calls for the development of vision, passion and courage in the African-Americans. For Hughes, to be regarded as an artist but not as an African-American artist— as though the two aspects were mutually exclusive — is, in effect, to turn his back on his identity, to accept the white world's definition of his people as ugly and inferior, unworthy of serious dedication to art. Hughes rebukes African-American writers and poets, who surrender their racial pride for the sake of what he sees as a fraudulent integration. Hughes argues that, "no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself," and he also adds: "We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If they weren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored peoples are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves." 13

He contends that, far from being assimilated into American life, the African-American had in fact retained his ethnic
distinctiveness. He regards it as an asset for African-American people and a boon for African-American artists. Hughes' essay is a call for the re-education of the African-American artist, a call for the emergence of the African-American audience who according to Charles S. Johnson, a contemporary observer and interpreter of the arts of the Harlem Renaissance, would perhaps give to the world its truly great African-American artist, one who is not afraid of being true to himself.

In the 1960s LeRoi Jones of the Black Arts Movement called for the African-American to establish a Black Aesthetic of his own. It would give them a vision of life and validate only what is truly African-American to challenge white imposed ideas. Hughes in the following poem, too, argues for such a redefinition:

To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and to dance  
Till the white day is done.  
Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes on gently,  
   Dark like me,...  
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide  
In the face of the sun,  
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
Till the quick day is done.  
Rest at pale evening...  
A tall, slim tree...  
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

(TWB, p.43)

The Black Aesthetic, therefore, consists of an African-American cultural and aesthetic tradition with the African identity at its core. It is a positive construct that affirms the creation of a new African-American reality. This aspect of the redefinition of African-American culture is manifested through multiple layers in contemporary writings. The stand that Langston Hughes takes as an artist, is inflected with an awareness of the political and cultural existence of African-American as a suppressed "nation within a nation". Though oppressed, their unique consciousness and their commitment to the ideals of liberation reflect their distinctive character. He refers to them as suppressed people who have always tried to preserve their folk heritage as a desirable means of guaranteeing cultural and group survival. Hughes refused to believe that the African-American are "misbred, misread and misled". He finds richness in African-American humour and beauty, in black dreams, and in the dignity of their struggle. He exemplifies his beliefs in words such as:

I am black.

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!
Help me to scatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun!

(TWB, p.55)

African-American folk culture, therefore, becomes the weapon and African-American social and economic sufficiency the prize fought for. By extolling African-American heritage, the poet in a way was instrumental in “aiding the survival of the Afro-American as a distinct people”. Hence, the Black Aesthetic as propagated by Langston Hughes greatly contributed to the ultimate establishment of the African-American identity. The sensitive and transforming energy of Hughes’ art irradiates his representation of African-American people.

African-American intellectuals like Martin R. Delany felt that it was time for African-American leaders to “expose the lie that Africans were inferior, and reveal how this racial falsehood began.” As a member of the United States Congress, politicians like James T. Rapier went on to strongly deny that African-American’s were “innately inferior,” and that he, “cannot willingly accept...to present [himself] as a candidate for any brand of inferiority”. Other
African-American politicians like Robert Smalls, echo a similar view when they declare that "my race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life." Such sentiments expressed by the African-American poets, intellectuals and politicians showcase their pride in their cultural antecedents.

In actual fact, Hughes' propagation of the Black Aesthetic is a call for discipline and an attempt to redefine the African-American vision of reality. Hughes was not trying to change the American world-view. If anything, he refurbished it by adding to it vast dimensions of the African-American cultural and aesthetic tradition that goes on to anticipate the future contours of Black Aesthetic as reflected in the writings of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. Although Langston Hughes did not specifically use the term Black Aesthetic, yet he laid the foundation, for a purely African-American critical construct that was to be exploited by latter day artists. In his own creative way he succeeded in making the world aware of the multilayered realities of what would later be called the Black Aesthetic.
END NOTES

1 Lary Neal while categorising the literary movement, that is, “The Black Arts Movement” as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,” he specifies the responsibilities of black writers as such.


6 *V. F. Calverton,* “This Negro,” in *The Nation,* Vol. CXXXI, No. 3396, August 6, 1930, pp. 157-58.


