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Refiguring the African Image in the Counter Hegemonic Discourse of the Bestial Other in the Poetry of Claude Mckay and Langston Hughes

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ABSTRACT

The stereotyping discourse in which the African was seen as the bestial other and consequently the lower order had long survived in Western scholarship and held on to as a necessary justification for years of exploitation through slavery, colonization, Neo-colonization and other forms of Postmodernist contraption such as globalisation. In this negative discourse, the African suffered great indignity as his tormentor sought to exclude him from the rights and benefits of his society. Goaded by the need for a creative re-assessment of the African image, pioneer Pan-Africanists like W.E.B Du Bois championed an intellectual crusade to counter the hitherto hegemonic discourse that treated the African condescendingly. African-American Poets of the Harlem renaissance such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes particularly, creatively exploded the stereotypes in their angry denunciation of oppression and racial injustice. At once they artistically rejected and reversed the stereotypes using different stylistic strategies thereby connecting, sharing and responding to the overall African colonial experience. This paper discusses the strategies adopted by McKay and Hughes in their poetic counter-rhetoric as a way of forging the African image, a major motif in colonial and post-colonial literary articulation in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of the Black man as the bestial other had long survived in Western literature with corresponding portrayals in anthropological and pseudo-scientific theorizations as a vehicle of humanizing the West and the Caucasoid race. This demonising of the Black other is predicated on a rationalization and justification of the ordered exploitation of the African through slavery, colonialism, imperialism and the postcolonial contraption, globalisation - all in the name of civilizing him. Thus, systematically the stereotypization of the African held sway in that hegemonic discourse of the West that constantly questioned and doubted the humanity of the Blackman or that reluctantly admitted him into the human family. A response to this discourse constitutes an attempt by writers to counter this negative portrayal of the African by deconstructing the racist view through explosion and often reversal of the stereotypes. This counter discourse itself becomes stereotypical. Alan Rice captures this thus; "The ways in which people react and survive in the face of exploitation and colonization is manifested in part through a stereotyping discourse" (107). This paper focuses on this counter discourse in the poetry of two Harlem Renaissance writers, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, as astrategy of making cogent polemical points deliberately aimed at extolling the Black race.

The poetry can be considered as a healthy challenge to the myth of the savage other, which fell within the cadence of the boisterous literary mood that marked the New Negro Renaissance in the 1920s. Generally, Black writers in their artistic assessment of their validity and identities exploited different discourse strategies including the use of primitivism in a creatively new sense to address their concerns and re-configure their identity. Though not all writers subscribed to primitivism, this strategy has implications for pan-Africanism as it enabled the African American writer to recognise and carry out a "...cultural critique by modifying White conceptions of the primitive or by over-turning the hierarchy of modern civilisation over primitive savagery" (Edward Marx 163). Among the writers that exploited this were Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer.

Hostile socio-historical and economic factors continued to have a terrifying impact on the psychology of the African American writer in the turn of the 20th Century. The intellectual leader of the period, W.E.B. Du Bois had come to identify the problem of the 20th Century as that of the colour line (iii). But the problem of the conflicted personality of the writer had equally been described as that of a double consciousness, owing to the

allegiance to African roots on one hand, and to America, on the other. The upsurge of literary activities in Harlem as a culminating point of the Northward migration had provided an opportunity for a spontaneous declaration of race pride, consciousness and solidarity elaborately expressed in the literature. As the literary ferment gathered momentum in the 1920s gradually but steadily, the "stock images of Africans as cannibals and savages had begun to make room for a new set of images as proud and exotic, images that contemporary Black Americans could experience as a heritage rather than a curse" (Marx 170). These came about not because the Euro-American view of the African had become dramatically revised but because the African American writers had created such positive images.

Deliberately antithetical to the depiction of the African as savage is McKay's consistent poetic outburst, and characteristic trenchant language in the poems, “Tiger”, “To the White Friends”, “If We Must Die”, “Birds of Prey”, “America”, etc. In these sonnets, McKay angrily talks back to White America and represents it as the bestial other. In other words the white man is deconstructed as the cannibal, the predator, with the Black man as the prey or victim. This metaphor of white cannibalism draws from the social reality of the exploitation of the Black man in America. In “Tiger” for instance, the octave reads:

> The white man is a tiger at my throat,
> Drinking my blood as my life ebbs away,
> And muttering that his terrible stripped coat
> Is Freedom’s and portends the Light of Day.
> Oh white man, you may suck up all my blood
> And throw my carcass into potter’s field,
> But never will I say with you that mud
> Is bread for Negroes! Never will I yield. (Baker, Jr. 168)

The cannibal trope is employed here, though metaphorically to underscore the correlation between the white man’s treatment of the Negro and the predatory act of cannibalism. In addition to the savage activity of sucking blood, the logical agent involves in doublespeak. Even the idea of white claim to civilization is seriously questioned in this poem in the face of the representation of white America as murderous and destructive of dreams of the other. This is again strongly implied in the poem “America” that has the following opening lines:

> Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
> And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,

> Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
> I love this cultured hell that tests my youth! (Sherman, 30)

These lines equally engage the question of who really is the primitive. The Black man had long been seen as such in western discourse. If civilization is understood as a suppression of the instinctive, how then can white America's bestiality towards the Negro be rationalized? This question lies central in McKay's counter-hegemonic poetic discourse. The author seeks to upturn this rationale thus making a case that White is also uncivilized in its unrestrained demonstration of hatred for the other. The poem "White House" and "The Lynching" also express very poignantly White hatred. In "White House" particularly, the poet persona is engaged in an epic struggle with self to control the tide of anger from his disdainful treatment from America, symbolized by the 'white house'. He mobilizes himself to cling to the law despite the potency of the hate. By admitting he is "A chafing savage, down the decent street", he warns his tormentors of his potential for explosion, vengeance and violence. The suppressed rage expressed here highlights the stoic dignity of the persona, who in spite of much provocation keeps his heart "inviolate". Between the display of open hatred by America and control by the Black persona is a highlighted difference that points to his nobility of character contrary to Western construct of the Black man as the primitive other.

Along the lines of this discourse is the poem "Lynching" which amply demonstrates and typifies the White America as fiercely murderous. Davis describes the last four lines of this elegiac poem as "lines that concisely detail the horror of lynching far better than whole chapters written in the subject" (38). These lines are:

> The women thronged to look, but never a one
> Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
> And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
> Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee

In this poem, there is an apparent lack of compassion even from the white women that witness this horrific sight of a lynched Negro; thus setting them off from the women that saw and sympathized with the crucified Jesus. That the young lads would dance joyfully in such a tragic situation speaks volumes of the pathological hatred for the Black man, which makes them treat him as an animal. But the poetic rhetoric is ironic. It is the lynchers who have given themselves away as savages, *san humaneness*, *san* mercy, but

with all the beastly cruelty that uncivilized and unrestrained passion can manifest .

McKay's "If We Must Die", one of the most articulately militant poems in African American poetry, similarly presents a tormentor-beast whose desire is to humiliate and annihilate. Though no mention is made of race, the poem captures the African American experience and the poet's wish and call for a determined and fiercely resolute counter-attack to balance white terror. The defiance expressed is in reflection of the mood of the Negroes of 1920s, their bitterness, frustration and need for collaborative action. However, in spite of the aptness of this poem in capturing the temperament of African Americans of the time, McKay claimed that his poem was universal and addressed the concerns of the exploited and marginalized the world over (Huggins 219).

Langston Hughes' poetic canon also reflects a countering of the stereotyping discourse of the Black other. From his first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", to the last the poet dwelt on the thematic monolith of the hostility of America to the Negro and the anxieties and frustration as a result of this. In his concern for social and political justice, Hughes made himself a poet of confrontation and legislator of the ordinary man whose speech forms he brought to bear in his poetry. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in which he encapsulates his poetic vision, there are references to the most important rivers in Africa often associated with civilization - the Nile and the Congo. It is pertinent to note that interest in Egyptology was growing at the time of the Harlem Renaissance and the discoveries from that area were salutary to the African American people of the time.

"The Negro" presents the Black man as a victim of history and a worthy partaker in the building of America. The fourth stanza of the poem conveys the bestiality of the other ironically; I've been a victim:

> The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo
> They lynch me still in Mississippi
> (Rampersad and Roessel, 24)

The lines above capture the historic violence and barbarous amputation of hands in Congo during the reign of King Leopald of the Belgians for failure to pay the instituted labour tax of 10 percent. As Babb records in the *Historical Dictionary of Zaire* (1988), "Failure to pay the tax was punished by flogging, execution, and occasionally destruction of entire villages. 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 in itself, reportedly leaving thousands of maimed victims" (55). The persona

in Hughes' poem identifies himself as a victim of this cruelty thus making himself one and the same with the suffering Africa under colonial pestilence. The same fate befalls the Black man in America symbolized by Mississippi, and the lynching by the horrifying Ku Klux Klan. In all this, the statement made is the barbarity of the white tormentor whose sense of injustice, greed and hatred are all too pervasive for any humanness to be recognised. By invoking the past and its detritus, Hughes becomes a historian of his people, a chronicler of the injustice meted to the Black race. This runs through the body of his poetry. It is also seen in the references to dates, places, people, organisations, etc. In "Ballad of the Seven Songs" for example, Hughes extols the Black personalities: Sojourner Truth, Father Divine, Frederick Douglas, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, etc as people to be proud of. Such panegyric tone can be noticed in "The Heart of Harlem" where African American stars – singers and sportsmen - are mentioned as great contributors to the Harlem culture. Race pride is strongly implied in these poems as a tonic for asserting and demanding justice for the Black man.

The primitivist but exotic image of Africa is painted in the poem, "Lament for Dark Peoples" in which the white man is portrayed as one that dispossesses:

> They drove me out of the forest
> They took me away from the jungles
> 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.

Here the poet romanticizes Africa as a 'dream-lit'' land of freedom as antithetical to the imprisonment in the so-called Western civilization. A celebration of this atavistic craving is also expressed in "Our Land" and "Dream Variation". Ikonne asserts that this identification with Africa is an ambivalent attitude that is merely expressive of the dissatisfaction with the social condition in America. McKay was not free from this ambivalence towards Africa as can be seen in the unfortunate clash of the image of Africa as a caring and inspiring mother with that of a worn-out and insignificant prostitute. Even though the poet romanticizes Africa, he shows no genuine interest of embracing Africa for its own sake (17). This is a leitmotif in Harlem Renaissance poetry generally. However, the invocation of Africa has

a massaging psycho-spiritual dimension to the extent that it gives the poet a sense of rootedness in a society he floats as a rootless individual.

But by far, Langston Hughes' discursive strategy to bestialize white America receives more ardent expression in terms of the racial injustice manifesting as the putrefying sores of lynching, segregation or Jim Crow regime, exploitation and destruction of dreams. That all these are perpetrated by white America against the Negro serves to make a point that has been highlighted in this paper – that the stereotyping of the other for exploitative purposes reflects an undignifying aspect of the projected self. In the pursuit of the agenda of demonising the other, the self becomes less humanized as he betrays himself as demonic as the other if not more. This is an implied argument in McKay's and Hughes' poetic discourse of othering. Consistently in the writings of these authors, it is the Black man who is preyed on and not the other way around. The countering of the hegemonic discourse is not therefore to stereotype the white bestial other for any exploitative purpose per se; rather it is meant to express outrage and defiance by typically representing the cannibalistic dimension of a programmed and institutionalised white hatred. By doing this, the writers interrogate the negative portrayal of Blacks as well as demonstrate the falsehood in that portrayal.

At another level of forging a positive identity is Langston Hughes's fusion of oral folk forms in his poetry. In "Afro-American Fragment", the musician hybridises art forms - of African ancestry and Western ancestry:

> So long
> So far way
> 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.

Like Lloyd Brown notes of this poem, there is a real experience of African heritage as a creative process different from the misrepresentations in history books (8). The African past is woven into Western present by the poet-musician in his articulation of his identify. This use of traditional material in reflecting the predicament of the African-American is recurrent in the poetry of Langston Hughes with a pan-Africanist interest.

CONCLUSION

So far we have explored the poetry of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes on the perspective of countering a hegemonic discourse of the African as the bestial other, long entrenched in the Western mind and held and pursued for exploitative reasons. The horrors of slavery, and colonisation and dispossession of Africans stand as evidences of the sinister motives of the inferiorization of the African other. The 'Equino-Caliban Complex' as Steve Ogude coins slavish mentality, is destructive to the African image and reflective of the many centuries of "unequal relationship" between Africa and the West (717). There is a need for artistic expression that interrogates this discourse in our potential quest for the authentication of our identities. Like Achebe has hoped, the twenty first century should "see the balance of stories among the world's peoples", a consolidation of the gain of "re-storying" peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession" (79). In this injunction lies the need for a creative current of inter-generational dialogue to foster a pan-African spirit.

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