

Maternal Love, Social and Political Activism as Vehicles of Self Assertion in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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Abstract

This paper investigates the place of maternal love in the formation of the African American self and how that self has evolved from the subservient racial hegemonic American society. It is an interrogation of the role of the African American woman in Afro futuristic dream of equality and the assertion of a distinct African American self with all its uniqueness. The essay also interrogates the socio political impulses in the poetry of Langston Hughes and how these impulses contribute to the assertion of the black American distinct self in the American society. Langston Hughes' poetry carries feminist impulses that are interpreted to be the basis for the African American communal society. The significance of this paper lies in the fact that it will unravel how the African American woman's love for her children serves as a catalyst for the socio political activism of the entire black race and how this ultimately lead to the assertion of the black self. The paper adopts a psychoanalytical and feminist position as theoretical frameworks in the analysis of the selected poems of the poet. The strand of feminism adopted here is motherism. Through qualitative research methodology, the paper submits that the role of maternal love cannot be ruled out in the socio political activism that will bring to reality the afrofuturistic dream of the entire black race in American society.

Key words: Maternal love, Racial hegemony, Socio-political activism, Afrofuturism, Self assertion.

Introduction

African American poetry is one of the genres of literature that captures the sensibilities of the African Americans in the American society. The Blacks in America went through series of disgusting and mind dismantling experiences that were capable of defeating any iota of assertive tendencies in any group of people. However, for the African Americans, these experiences instead of

working against them rather became impetus that provided them with frontiers for artistic creation. These creations are for them avenues for demanding their freedom from the white racial American society whose desire is to ensure the perpetuity of their slavery. The black man in the American society therefore latches on art as escape route from such mind numbing experiences. Poetry became therefore one of the earliest form of arts that was utilized for the demand of the black man's freedom from the American racism and slavery. The very earliest African American writers like Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry and Jupiter Hammon were majorly poets. Their creative ingenuities were majorly religious but they were creatively couched in such a way that though they drew heavily from the metaphors from the bible and the European classics, such metaphors were domesticated in the African American world view and impregnated with the ideologies and sensibilities of the Blacks. The Blacks were thus required to follow the European models if they were to be considered non-inflammatory and thus gets published. However, they subjected the biblical metaphors and allusions to the mould were it can shape the experiences and agitations of the Blacks. Concerning this issue, Patricia Hill notes that "... these restrictions also allowed them to covertly communicate ... with other slaves who no doubt understood embedded meanings, simultaneously allowing them to convict the conscience of white people" (4). Again, the choice of poetry as a medium for this early agitation is justified in the fact that it is in poetry that the linguistic resources of any language can be stretched to the fullest. Apart from this, the African cultural, cosmological and ideological worldview was basically oral and since poetry is linked to this area, it was not a major challenge for the black early writers to get adapted to this form. The above assertion is buttressed by Hill when she avers that "For cultural expression therefore, they drew essentially from their African oral heritage in which music and poetry were inexorably linked" (3).

This paper adopts psychoanalysis as one of its theories. This theory interrogates the 'why' of human behaviour as well as personality. It is a pattern of interpreting the text based on the analysis of the character's psyche as well as that of the society where the art emanates. For the psychoanalytic critics, art is an avenue for the purgation of repressed emotions or drives. Also, the psychic temper of the milieu that supports the creation and production of such art is equally important. The three cardinal classification of the psychology of individual are the conscious, the unconscious as well as the subconscious. Sigmund Freud believes that an individual is made up of the instinctive drive, (i.d), the ego and the super ego. These three exist as checks on one another toward the wellbeing of the

individual. The interplay of the i.d, ego and the super ego is succinctly explained by Abang Isangedigi. He avers that:

The id is the first in human development. It is the raw instinctive drive for need gratification. As the individual matures in age, the ego emerges. It is the object reality for need satisfaction.... The super ego is a moralistic system. The conscience that monitors the rightness and wrongness of the thoughts and actions of the ego (5)

Charles Bressler talking about Freud's position on this issue puts it this way;

The irrational, instinctual, unknown and unconscious part of the psyche Freud calls the id, and the rational, logical, waking part, the ego. A third part, the superego, acts like an internal censor, causing us to make moral judgment in the light of social pressures (89-90).

The major proponents of this theory are, but not limited to, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. The latter was a student of the former who later disagrees with his teacher on the contents of the tripartite nature of the human psyche. For Jung the human psyche, yes, is made up of the conscious and the unconscious but their content according to him is not what he proffers. Jung avers that:

The human psyche consists of three parts. The conscious, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious.... The collective unconscious, which houses the cumulative knowledge, experiences and images of the entire human race (92)

Other proponents of this theory are Northrop Frye, Jacques Lacan etc. For this essay, we will be following the path of Sigmund Freud. On the other hand, feminism is a theory that seeks equality for the sexes. It is a quest towards the creating of an atmosphere that permits the woman to

contribute her quota to the development of the society. This study toes the womanist lane of feminism. Alice Walker who happens to be the major proponent of this, notes in *"In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens"* that a womanist is "A black feminist or feminist of colour...A woman who loves other women,... appreciate and prefers women's cultures, women's emotional flexibility committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female. (xi). However, this paper prefers to follow the strand of womanism that is pioneered by Cleonora Hudson-Weems. She says womanism is "grounded in African culture and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflicts between the mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana womanist. The conclusion is that Africana womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both white feminism and black feminism; ..." (155). We will interrogate the poetry of Langston Hughes as an escape route from suppressed emotions and desires for freedom and self actualization. We will follow the artist as neurotic who is purging his individual and communal unconsciousness from the suppressed desires and as a means of walking himself back to sanity.

Self-Assertion in African American literature

Self-Assertion within the latitude of African American literature implies a striving or pushing forward of the African American for the purpose of asserting their true self. The concept obviously births forth because of the wrong notion held by the racial Whites about the Americans of African descent. From the early period of slavery, racial Americans believed that the African slaves did not possess any intellectual or rational distinctiveness or capacity. As such, they were treated as sub-humans. These Africans began to assert themselves through art. Although these early artists were forced to compose to the taste of the racial Whites if they must get published, they did so by twisting the metaphors of the Christian religion to assert themselves. Holt, Rinehart and Winston aver:

Simply by writing effectively in the literary forms that whites respected, the early black writers of the United States forced many of their readers to reconsider long standing prejudices. Because` not all Africans had a written language, whites

had assumed they were uncivilized and intellectually deficient (136).

Whereas the above has been stated, it is important to underscore that to a very great extent, the psychological event that prompts the quest for self-assertion on the part of the African American writer is basically the goal of creating a distinct self, different from that of racial America. One thing stands out that the African Americans, right from their early stage of slavery in the new world, had been kicking and wailing for the assertion of that personality or self that bears the nuances of the African cosmological ideologies. This had always found expression in their art; songs, spirituals, hollers, blues etc.

Again, the point also remains that the quest for self-assertion on the part of the African Americans even after the emancipation proclamation is basically because of the social pressures they are subjected to in the American society which the White Americans are not subjected to. Also their skin colour seems to put them on a segregated and discriminated pedestal different from the white Americans.

With all these pressures, institutionalized, environmental and chance influences, the Negro in America is confronted with the question of his true identity in the American society. He faces the danger of being negatively portrayed by the racial American if he remains mute. He therefore, in an attempt to define his identity or self, tends to rely on the African cosmological ideologies as well as the repressed emotions of his unconscious as he creates.

We can argue that the assertion of this self had degrees. The kind of assertion evident in the pre-emancipation period of Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon and Lucy Terry is not exactly the same with that found in Dunbar and Hughes. For the first three, it was an assertion that sought for expression of grievances as a result of injustice meted to them as slaves with no option other than a forced submission. They were agitating for a better cultural condition for adaptation in the new society and culture they find themselves. Nevertheless, with the emancipation proclamation, the Negroes begin to assert themselves from a different dimension. Now, it was more of a psychological reordering of social patterns. By this we mean a recalibration of the mental or ideological and the social interaction that accompanied their new status. Now, as freed men, they were exposed to a world that denies them "equal participation" even though they have been offered a nominal

equality in that world. Langston Hughes poetry therefore seeks to create a distinctive other for the Blacks in America.

Self-assertion as a concept in African American literature is not restricted to African American poetry alone. The concept is revealed in the other genres, namely, prose and drama and even other art forms like painting and sculpture. Nevertheless, our choice of poetry is anchored on two factors: one, we believe that it is in poetry that language is stretched to its highest level of elasticity and perhaps, it is even broken into pieces and the pieces gathered again into a new shape of language which will be able to carry the idiosyncrasies and artistic vision of the artist. This assertion is in line with Geoffrey Leech's position when he notes that: "The creative writer, and more particularly the poet, enjoys a unique freedom amongst users of the language, to range over all its communicative resources, without respect to the social or historical context to which they belong" (5).

Again, this paper holds that the culture of a people as well as their beliefs and aspiration are encoded succinctly in their oral culture which poetry is chief. This case is particularly true of the African Americans. Thus, we believe that the language of any group of persons is the reservoir of all their cultural, spiritual, social and even educational paradigms. Hence, one would expect that the English language which the African- American uses in the creation of his art should tilt toward the enslavers' ideologies. However, this was never the case, since the English language as a universal recipient language received the imposition of the African culture, values as well as their dreams.

Maternal Love and Self Assertion

Langston Hughes' writings have been greatly influenced by the women in his life. These women include his grandmother. Calvin C. Hernton notes concerning his grandmother that;

It was this woman who nurtured, raised, taught him and served as Langston's mentor for the twelve formative years of his life. ... Often she would hold the young Langston on her lap and tell him long, beautiful stories about people who wanted to make the Negroes free (91).

In this section we will trace how Hughes' attachment to women influences his creative muse and how he married this attachment to his thematic concern. The thematic concern here is the theme of self assertion.

In "Mother to son" this marriage plays out as the love and attachment of the mother is to serve as a stimulus for the son to assert himself. The persona tells the son that life has not been easy but that she has the objective of remaining alert and to keep asserting herself. She encourages the son never to give up trying for it is only when he does, that he will fail to reach his goal. Hence the mother here serves as the influence or stimulus for the son to assert himself and to pursue his dreams to the finish line. It must be noted that Langston Hughes' "Mother to son" was written in the 1920s. This period was the period that saw high spirit of assertiveness in the African American literary circle. The mother here tells the son to keep pursuing his dreams because she has not given up herself:

But all the time
I'se been a-climbin on,
And reachin' landin's
And turning corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there aint been no light
So boy, don't you turn back
Don't you set down on the steps
'cause you find it's kinder hard.

The influence of the mother here goes beyond just encouraging the son to keep moving forward to the point of pointing out to him the danger of giving up. She tells him that if he stops trying then he will "find it's kinder hard". One thing that stands out here is that the maternal love is some kind of inspiration to the son. She tells him that "I'se been a-chmbin' on" despite all her challenges. This same inspiration and optimism is portrayed in "Aunt sue's stories" here, the persona posits: "the dark-faced child is quiet". This must be interrogated deeply. Quietness connotes thoughtfulness, meditation, planning etc. Hence, by listening to the stories of Aunt Sue which are full of the experiences "Right out of her own life" the young child begins to meditate, think and plan never to have such experiences as the mother or Aunt. This meditation comes from the realization that her stories are not just gotten from books and therefore real to all Blacks. This capitulation gets him planning to avoid the repetition of the same situation that Aunt sue faced. The above assertion is validated in the third stanza of the poem:

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 out of her own life

In "The Negro mother" the inspirational motivation becomes very pronounced. The persona who is a black woman begins by stating that she wants to tell her listeners a story of how she "had to climb,..." she identifies herself as a black woman "I am the child they stole from the sand/ three hundred years ago in Africa's land". She goes ahead to narrate her harrowing experiences under slavery including her children and husband being sold. Despite all these, she remains vehement in her dreams to see freedom if not for herself, at least for her children. This dream is so strong that it is compared to steel. "God put a dream like steel in my soul". She knows that it is impossible for her to attain that dream except she does it through her children. She therefore writes in a motherly and lovely tone to the children to make sure that that dream is accomplished. To corroborate this, she avers;

Now through my children, I'm reaching the goal.
Now through my children young and free
I realize the blessing denied to me.

She sees herself as the carrier of the seed of freedom and the dream of freedom. She notes that then they were mere dreams but now it is time for the children to bring forth that dream. This is what is meant when she posits:

I had only hope then, but now through you,
Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true:
Make of my past a road to the light
Out of the darkness, the ignorance, the night
Lift high my banner out of the dust.

She ends by charging the children to continuously look up to the stars and "ever upward at the sun and the stars". The stairs here is metaphorical and resonating. We must remember that in "mother to son", the mother had said that it has not been a "crystal stairs" for her. Stairs here refer to the dreams and the aspiration of the African Americans. The dimension of this

assertiveness shifts from a general reference to the children to female assertiveness in such titles as “Mama and Daughter, “Madam and the census man”, Madam and the movies, “Lament over love” etc. These new shifts of assertiveness are towards the empowering of the female self. It is to be observed that in the poems we have treated under this heading so far, the listener or audience seems to be the general black race but in the above titles, they are majorly females. The poet, through his personas speaks to assert a distinct female self.

In “Mama and Daughter” the persona warns the young girl of making the same mistake she made when she was a girl. The girl came to her to announce that she wants to go and see a man that she has fallen in love with. The mother warns that men will only pursue to possess a lady just to abandon her at the very next moment. She admonishes the young girl to “Turn around”. The mother here believes that men should be left behind and not just that, they should be brush away from even that behind so they don’t keep following the female to perpetuate torments. The choice of words here is very important to note. The girl asked the mother to “brush off my coat” but in response, the mother says “Turn around-I’ll brush behind”.

‘Behind’ is not the same as coat at all levels of stylistic interpretation. Hence, this paper argues that the mother is discouraging the daughter from going after men because she has been a victim. Her experience with men and their deception left in her some kind of hatred for them which makes her to advise the daughter on the contrary. This is conveyed in the stanzas below:

Daughter, once upon a time-
Let me brush the hem-
Your father, yes, he was the one
I felt like that about him
But it was a long time ago
He up and went his way
I hope that wild young son-of-a-gun
Rots in hell today.

The reason for this hatred is not far fetch. The women here have been often betrayed and abandoned. For those who manage to keep their partners, there is no iota of romance and love again. The women are therefore left to seek alternatives and unfortunately these alternatives are mere mirages of the real. This is the focus of “Madam and the movies”. The persona in this poem goes to the movies to watch romance but she wonders “why real life

ain't got/no romance-man". This situation therefore paves the way for the female to seek for avenues of asserting herself. This is clearly portrayed in "Madam and the census man". Here the persona, using the "naming medium", asserts her distinct individuality and self. She rejects the identity imposed on her by the patriarchal society as well as the racial America. She insists on her name as defined or asserted by her and not the census man -- a representative of patriarchal and racial society. What she is confronted with in this endeavour is a tripartite wall of being a Negro, a woman and a black woman. An insistence in her name is a symbolic gesture that reveals her desire to be herself. The reaction of the census man is the pressure on her definition and assertion of herself.

I said JOHNSON,
ALBERT K.
But he hated to write
The K that way

The case of the alphabets of this naming is equally very stylistic with semantic implications. It connotes an unequivocal assertion of herself. In physics, "K" represents constant. The "k" therefore in her name is an insistence on her identity as being a black woman constantly. She does not desire any American identity that erodes her Africanhood. She wants to be herself and nothing of America. This struggle presupposes that there is an attempt by the American society to alter the black woman's distinct identity. The rejection of the census man and his desire to stamp his own perceived identity on her "K-A-Y" is quickly rejected and confronted. This is seen in the discourse that followed:

He said, I'm gonna put it
K-A-Y
I said, if you do
You lie
My mother christened me
ALBERTA K
You leave my name
Just that way
He said, Mrs.
With a snort
Just a K
Makes your name too short.
I said, I don't

Give a damn
Leave me and my name
Just like I am.

Social and Political Activism as a Tool of Self Assertion

Apart from the female influences in the life of Langston Hughes and the fact that these influences reflect in his writings, he is equally known to be the champion of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance took place in early 20th century. It was a literary, social and political rejuvenation or insurrection for the Negroes in America. It was a movement that had a serious influence on the social consciousness of the Blacks. It was marked by political, social and literary action and moves that were intended to change the self image of the Negroes from that of slaves to that of fellow citizens in America. In the literary sphere, it asserted itself through the celebration of the black cultural ethos. Some of the factors that facilitated this move were; the exposure of Black soldiers in World War I, the job opportunities in Harlem, the endeavours of literary journals like the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* as well as the migration of the Blacks to Northern cities.

The writers of this period, including Langston Hughes, encouraged the Negroes to fight for and continuously remain committed to their total freedom. His writings with this thematic concern were intended to imprint in the readers and the Negro community a social consciousness and political alertness against the racial status quo they were subjected to.

In 'Tired' the poet persona says he is tired of waiting for the freedom to come to him/them. He therefore tries to gather together those who are like him to fight back and provide solution to the problem that is challenging them collectively. He notes;

I am so tired of waiting
Aren't you
For the world to become good
And beautiful and kind
Let us take a knife?
And cut the world in two
And see what worms are eating
At the rind.

Their collective desire is to see the world become good, beautiful and fine. These could be metaphors for the racial equality and recognition of their distinct individuality in the American society. This impediment to the equality that they are seeking is seen as the worm that is eating the back of the wood of their social structure. For them therefore the solution is to cut the world (American society) into two to see that which is the worm of the racial divide. For them it is until this worm is taken out and dealt with that there can be a society where equity and fairness shall reign. The action of taking a knife and cutting is a very assertive one. It is a rejection of the status and a confrontation of the pains and injury that this racial worm has cause. The division of the world is a metaphor for a separation between the Blacks and the racial American society. The persona says "and cut the world in two". This connotes a total severing of the two races in the American society. Hence, the poet through his persona is advocating for a rejection of the mercy seat - a situation of waiting for help somewhere else. For him, if the situation will be solved, then those who are suffering must realize that they are the architects who will bring their desired change to birth. Therefore he calls for a mobilization, be it violent or remedial to solve the problem. This Sartrean call is further pursued in 'Drum'. The poet again, through his persona, calls on the people that, if they intend to sit back and endure the pains because of the fear of death, then they need to come to terms with the fact that they will still die all the same. He therefore calls on them not to cling to life and endure the pain of racism. The persona polemics that, if they don't rise now, for fear of death, they will still die at the long run. He notes that death is a drum beat that continuously beats:

Till the last stars falls,
Until the last atom
Is no atom at all,
Until time is lost
And there is no air
And space itself
Is nothing nowhere,
Death is a drum
A signal drum
Calling life
To come

There are some words that demand a deeper interrogation for the semantic impulses of the poem to come forth. Stars are hot gases that produce heat and other small amounts of heavier elements. Stars in metaphorical terms

are the best in any endeavours. Hence he calls on them to note that death will take all their potential stars if they don't rise up. The slavery in America is such that any African American who aspires for greatness is viewed as a threat to the American segregationist and racial hegemony. Again, Atoms are small particles that combine together to form elements. In metaphorical terms, the strong African Americans though little they may be now, if the present generation fails to rise up, these atoms will grow up to die- "until the last atom/ is no atom at all". He posits that though death is inevitable, it always give birth to life. However, he philosophizes that the kind of death one dies determines whether life will be birthed or not. He urges them to die the kind of death that will bring forth true life-the free life and the life marked by racial equality- "calling life/to come! /come! /come!"

The poet, through his persona, again in "Call to creation", underscores that the problem of racial, political and economic inequality is a global problem, hence the need for the gap to be breached between the two divides- the Whites and the Blacks, the elites and the masses and the bourgeoisies and the proletariats. He therefore calls on all artists -- literary artists, painters, sculptors etc to stop creating for beauty or art for art sake but that they should paint the reality of the harshness, pains, hunger, lies and hypocrisy, killings etc. that is going on in the world:

Listen!
All you beauty-makers,
Give up beauty for a moment.
Look at harshness, look at pain,
Look at life again.
Look at hungry babies crying
Listen to the rich men lying
Look at starring China dying
Hear the rumble in the East:

The persona comes out plainly that it is only by paying attention to these that can guarantee them freedom-"To be free!" He therefore invites them to join the freedom fighters in creating this new world. Hence;

Listen!
Futile beauty-makers
Work for a while with the pattern-breakers
Come for a march with the new-world makers.
Let beauty be!

By this call, the poet through his persona asserts his true identity and that of his group. The Blacks become very assertive by resisting the imposed, subjugated, subservient and racially inferior identity tagged on them. They advocate for a new world of racial, political and economic equilibrium. The above needs deeper interrogation. The question is this; what pattern is the persona calling the “futile beauty-makers” to break? The pattern is the unholy racial hegemony that characterizes the American society.

These seeming subtle mobilization graduate to a more violent and revolutionary tone in “Union”. Here, the persona calls on all the oppressed people not only in America but in the world at large, to join hands with him in bringing down every altar of inequality:

Not me alone
I know now
But all the whole oppressed
Poor world,
White and black
Must put their hands with mine
To shake the pillars of those temples
Where in the false gods dwell
And worn-out alters stand
Too well defended,
And the rule of greed’s upheld
That must be ended.

It seems that, here, the persona’s interest is not that of the Blacks alone in the world “but the whole oppressed”. His mission is to pull down temples and altars of “false god” who have enjoyed supremacy of the masses for too long a time

This same motif is carried into “Open letter to the south”. He calls now specifically on the white proletariats to join force with the black proletariats to fight to make the future better:

Let us new lesson learn
All workers
New life-ways make,
One union form
Until the future burns out

Every past mistake

The purpose of this mobilization is not just for past mistakes to be burnt alone but to ensure that such mistakes do not repeat themselves in the future. This, the persona posits, can only be achieved through a union that will not pay attention to race nor colour but one with the singular mission of destroying dogmas. Hence:

Let us become instead, you and I,
One single hand
That can united rise
To smash the old dead dogmas of the past
To kill the lies of colour
That keeps the rich enthroned
And drive us to the time-clock and the plow
Helpless, stupid, scattered, and alone-as now-
Race against race,
Because one is black
Another white of face

In summary, the poetry of Langston Hughes is characterised by a high degree of assertiveness. His philosophy is basically the liberation of the entire oppressed folk of the world whether they are White or Black. In the above lines, he calls for the unity of the entire suffering masses, the deprived, the devoiced, the oppressed and the segregated. His call is a united force against the perpetrators of racial, economic and political hegemony. This is captured succinctly in the lines: "Let us become instead, you and I,/One single hand. It is a call to the breaking of the power, political, racial and economic chasm in the world.

Conclusion

The African Americans in the united state have gone through a lot of racial and political turbulence right from the slavery era to the reconstruction and the Harlem renaissance period. They have also remained resilient in the face of this struggle and have surmounted the racial mountains that confront them. The Renaissance period saw the highest degree of this confrontation or what this essay calls assertiveness in the African American literary history. Langston Hughes wrote during this period. His sociopolitical activism was part of the definitives of this period. In his works, we discovered the shading of the subtlety of the slavery era as well as the pretence of the reconstruction. We discovered that the blacks were now moving away from

the begging position of being accepted into mainstream America to the position of creating a distinct individuality and identity for themselves separated and different from that afforded them by the racial American society. We equally saw a new dimension of self assertiveness: the feminist assertive move. We see the female self demanding for a separate identity different from that of the racial American and patriarchal society. Langston Hughes' dream comes to materialization with the assertion of a distinct identity for the black race in the American society. We come to the conclusion that the mother image in the African American literature is a metaphor for the entire African American society. The African American woman's love for her children both male and female serves as a catalyst for the assertion of the general African American distinct self.

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