
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Shaping of African Identity in Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

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| ABSTRACT

The poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* by Langston Hughes is a very strong representation of the African American identity that builds on the cultural continuity and historical memory. The paper shares a review of the abundant use of metaphors of rivers in the poem as a symbol of the trauma and strength of the African diaspora. Following the speaker in his relations to ancient rivers, Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi, Hughes redefines the notion of Black identity as a dynamic and changing tradition that cuts across both time and space. This paper will examine how the symbolic use of these rivers by Hughes is cultural reclamation and spiritual renewal that deals with the theme of displacement, survival, and ancestral wisdom. Based on the postcolonial theory and the diasporic memory and the cultural renaissance of the Harlem renaissance, the paper posits that the poem of Hughes provides a historical continuum, which binds individual experience with a shared legacy. Through analyzing the imagery, tone, and structure in the poem, the present research points to the fact that the work of Hughes is not just a reflection of the past, but is more of a philosophical picture, linking the past to the present, and renewing the African American experience. Finally, this poem is an anthem to identity, personal and collective, that is a historical set of testimonies to cultural survival.

| KEYWORDS

Identity, African American, Harlem renaissance, black, postcolonial, African diaspora

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1. Introduction

The concept of identity has taken center stage in the literature and cultural studies especially the postcolonial and African American discourse. Literature can be considered not only a form of art, but it is also a place of protest and recovery, self-branding and self-identification. Writers have attempted to revive fragmented history of race, memory, and belonging that centuries of colonization and slavery had suppressed through poetic language and historical fantasy. Langston Hughes is one of the most recognizable figures among those voices, and he was one of the brightest representatives of the Harlem Renaissance movement that transformed the culture of intellectual and artistic life in the first half of the twentieth century. His poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1921) serves as a symbolic assertion of Black identity based on the richness of the ancestral memory.

The poem by Hughes places the African American experience in a larger scale of human civilization. Tracing the soul of the speaker with the help of rivers, which are as old as the world, Hughes restores the splendor of African roots but faces the trauma of the historical displacement. The rivers are made literal and metaphorical, and it is an indicator of the passage of time, culture, and consciousness that connects generations across continents. In a way, this poem does not require any lyrical expression; it is a group autobiography of the Black nation, as a living being and not as a dead history.

The Importance of this study is that it tries to redefine the vision of Hughes by incorporating the cultural continuity and the historical reconstruction. The aesthetic and symbolic meaning of the poem has been studied in the past, but few studies have examined how Hughes has approached the African identity as an evolving and dynamic tradition that merges the past, the spiritual, and the modern. This paper thus explores the connection between African heritage and identity in the poem by Hughes, how its imagery, tone, and structure convey a vision of cultural perseverance and regeneration amongst African diaspora.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Identity in Postcolonial and African American Frameworks

The notion of identity in literary studies has transitioned from a fixed personal category to a fluid cultural and historical process. Stuart Hall (1996) posits that identity ought to be regarded as an ongoing construction influenced by representation, memory, and historical contexts, rather than as a static essence. This realization is in line with the concept of cultural hybridity by Homi Bhabha (1994) where identity is formed as a result of in-betweenness of negotiation between the colonizer and the colonized. In postcolonial and diasporic contexts, these hybrid spaces allow marginalized voices to reshape their histories through storytelling and creativity. Negotiation of identity has been directly associated with the efforts against racial oppression and cultural eradication by African American writers. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) introduces the concept of "Signifyin(g)": a rhetorical technique used by Black authors to reinterpret traditional Western ideas, thereby asserting African American linguistic and cultural autonomy. The literature is therefore turned in an exercise of creation and reclaiming: a process by which the marginalized groups reclaim their place in history (Gates Jr., 1988).

2.2 African Heritage and Cultural Memory.

The book *The Black Atlantic* by Paul Gilroy of 1993 discusses the African diasporic identity as fitting in the movement of the people themselves, ideas, and cultural practices across the oceans. Gilroy emphasizes that Black identity does not exist in a single location, but, instead, it travels beyond borders and develops a counterculture of modernity that resists the nationalist border. This gives such a malleable concept of identity the same way that Hughes employs rivers to demonstrate how history remains the same. His rivers symbolize the trauma of exile and strength of the cultural memory, which is also related to the concept of Gilroy that the movement can be considered as a metaphor of being alive and transforming (Gilroy, 1993). Heritage as a form of inheritance and resistance is also a common phenomenon in African American studies. According to Toni Morrison (1992), Black writers have the responsibility of re-defining the knowledge that history has suppressed. In this sense, Hughes is not merely expressing his nostalgia towards Africa; he is seeking to reaffirm his culture and to be able to ground himself spiritually. The allusions to Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi in the poem are likened to the movement of memory always, flowing, and in a manner that makes it active.

2.3 The Rebirth of Culture and the Harlem Renaissance

Harlem renaissance (1919-1935) was a defining moment in the process of renegotiating the meaning of being an African American. In 1925, Alain Locke wrote a book known as "the New Negro" which discussed the role art and intellectual expression could play in bringing the people of other races together. Locke saw the creation of a generation of artists who were able to transform the old Negro stereotype into a symbol of cultural pride and creativity. Langston Hughes was a poet who would come to speak in this movement, who could identify the past of Africa with the existent racial issues in America. David Levering Lewis (1997) views Harlem as the geographical area and the psychological area- a place where writers, musicians and artists of the visual world collaborated to establish a subjugating aesthetic. A good example of such a synthesis is Hughes poetry: combining the rhythms of jazz and blues with the images of African origin it creates what Houston A. Baker Jr. (1987) terms a blues matrix, a structure of the creative work, which encodes both suffering and transcendence. The Harlem Renaissance provided Hughes with the historical and cultural background to discuss an African identity that was old, new and continuing to thrive.

2.4 Langston Hughes and the Poetics of Heritage

Arnold Rampersad (1986), in his biography of Hughes, calls "*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*" the poet's "declaration of intellectual lineage." Hughes wrote the poem when he was only nineteen years old. It shows how he continuously tried to show his experience as a history for everyone. By connecting the African American soul to rivers "as old as the world," Hughes creates a broad history of Black life that goes back before and continues after slavery. Baker Jr. (1987) posits that Hughes's imagery of flowing water represents a "rhetoric of continuity," connecting personal memory to ancestral resilience. In the same way, Mae G. Henderson (2002) says that Hughes's poetry changes how we see ourselves through rhythm and ritual, turning historical pain into aesthetic power. These interpretations underscore that Hughes's vision transcends mere celebration, engaging in a philosophical exploration of the essence of Black identity within a context of displacement and remembrance.

3. Methodology

The method of the close textual analysis is used in this work, and it is supported by the synthesis of the critical and theoretical sources connected, as the work of a qualitative research is applied. The study takes an interpretive methodology, which is aimed at investigating the thematic, symbolic, and linguistic aspects of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* by Langston Hughes. By doing so, the poem may be not only addressed as a literary piece of writing but also as a cultural-historical manifestation of self. Various theoretical viewpoints have been combined in development of an analytical framework in the study. It applies the postcolonial theory in dealing with issues of identity formation and historical consciousness, particularly concerning the issue of colonial displacement and cultural negotiation. Moreover, the concept of diasporic memory is employed to discuss how the poem reflects on a transhistorical connection between African background and African American identity. The transatlantic model proposed by Paul Gilroy, which provides the possibility to understand the spreading of culture, history, and identity across the geographical boundaries, also justifies it. In addition to this, the research applies the concept of identity as production of Stuart Hall, which is an understanding of identity as a changing and current process and not a static essence. In this way, it is possible to see how the analysis of the way in which the identity in the poem is constantly constructed through the experience of history and the cultural manifestation. The aesthetic and intellectual environment of Harlem renaissance also contributes to the methodological approach according to which the poem is situated in the movement in which the aesthetic creativity and the renegotiation of the Black identity occurred. The fact that these theoretical approaches are combined in the study leads to the multidimensional methodology as a result of which one can interpret the poem in a subtle way. The synthesis is not meant to blindly combine theories but is meant to do so strategically to combine complementary perspectives in order to enrich the scope of analysis. The methodology, in its turn, is a systematic mechanism which determines the analysis of the intersection of the literary form, historical memory, and cultural identity in the text.

Examination and Discourse

1. Rivers as Places of Cultural Continuity

The Negro Speaks of Rivers is one of the examples of historical consciousness where rivers are not only the physical features of the land but also the symbol of time and spiritual stability. The rivers that played a role in the history of the African and African American identity are rivers such as Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi. The time-traveling of the poem, between ancient Mesopotamia and contemporary America, sets the Black experience into a greater historical perspective pre-slavery, pre-colonization. The poem has an ancient setting through the Euphrates which is referred to as one of the cradles of civilization. Hughes links the soul of the speaker to this river indicating that Africans existed at the beginning of mankind. This metaphor contradicts the colonial accounts about civilization with the idea that it was only an aspect of the west. The Congo, as the heartland of Africa, evokes the image of cultural diversity, along with the exercise of colonial power. Hughes refers to the Congo as a nurturing power and says, I set my hut by the Congo, and the Congo was making me sleep. This is a line that causes one to reclaim the image of Africa that is shrouded in the dark light of the colonial discourse. The Nile, which was linked with the greatness of the Egyptian society, proves the intellect and creativity of the ancient African inhabitants. It also makes the readers remember that Black history is significant to the development of the entire world. Lastly, the Mississippi River marks the end of the journey across the Atlantic Ocean to America. Its "muddy bosom turning all golden in the sunset" shows how suffering can change people—how enduring pain can turn it into cultural wisdom (Lewis, 1997). Hughes uses these rivers to create what Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) calls a "rhetoric of ancestry," which is a way of using language to link personal identity to group heritage. The rivers become places of memory and renewal, flowing through time and seeing both human suffering and strength. In this way, the poem acts out a ritual of remembering that turns history into spiritual continuity (Gates Jr., 1988).

2. The Poetic Voice as a Shared Memory

The speaker in the poem is not a person but a symbolic consciousness that represents the experiences of an entire race. Hughes's use of the first-person singular "I've known rivers" is both personal and universal. It represents what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls the Black Atlantic consciousness, a transnational identity formed by movement, exile, and cultural exchange. The statement about knowing rivers as old as the world (I have known rivers ancient as the world) transforms a story of victimization into one of wisdom of bygone times. The speaker acts as a historical witness who recalls what the dominant narrations have attempted to forget. This poetic is corresponding to the values of the Harlem Renaissance on the whole. Alain Locke (1925) envisioned that through creative affirmation, African American art would become a means of reconstructing the culture and reinventing oneself. This poem by Hughes reflects the idea of the blues matrix described as a structure of repetition, endurance, and transcendence to transform suffering into song that was elaborated by Baker (1987). This is done through the mixture of personal emotion and common past. The voice of the speaker is the means of historical consciousness, a combination of spiritual languishness of the past and poetic immediacy of the present.

Conclusion

The poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* is a poetic work of protest condemning the dehumanization of African culture and the persistence of Black Womanhood. Hughes uses the theme of rivers to create a symbolic genealogy that goes across time and space making the poem a historical and spiritual continuum. Every river, as the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, the Mississippi, is not only a geographical point of reference; it is a cultural memory. The Euphrates represents the birth of civilization, and it states that the presence of Africa and wisdom of the people can be traced back to the very beginning of humanity. The Congo represents the motherly nature of Africa and the suffering of that continent under colonial rule. The Nile is a commemoration of the intellectual and artistic prowess of the continent, whereas the Mississippi is the symbol of transformation and reintegration in the framework of the African American freedom struggle.

In the analysis, Hughes remakes African identity as a dynamic and continuous descent of identity as opposed to a fixed legacy. The poem is also a statement of what Stuart Hall (1996) calls a process of becoming, where identity is created by remembering and recreating. This is done when Hughes intertwines the memory of his ancestors with modern consciousness to create a story that reinstates dignity to history that was previously sidelined by colonialism and slavery. In its unstoppable movement, the rivers are an image of the energy and endurance of that heritage a stream of wisdom, suffering, and success that still guides the identity of the masses.

The poem makes sorrow spiritual in its rhythm, imagery and tone. The refrain, my soul has grown deep like the rivers, is echoed as confession and statement: a confession of an uphill battle and a statement of power. This misery coupled with survival is the phenomenon of African American literature and culture in a word. Such transformation, as it is proposed by Toni Morrison (1992) and Houston Baker (1987), is a larger cultural value: historical pain is turned into creative power.

Finally, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* is no longer confined to a historical period, but it applies the same message to humans everywhere. Although it has its foundation in African traditions, it makes any reader think of the unity of human beings and nature throughout the ages. The poem not only glorifies the African contribution to the civilization but also the common spiritual ability to endure and revive. In its musical rhythm and imagery, Hughes brings the Black experience closer to the level of symbolic continuity: a song of memory, identity, and hope that should be sustained all around the world.

In this regard, the timeless value of the poem is that it combines history, art, and philosophy. It is turned into a statement of the life itself, and makes the readers remember that the identity is not rooted into the circumstance, but is constantly reborn with the help of the rivers of time. The voice of Hughes, resounding in the waves of his poetry, is eternal testimony to the fact that the soul of a nation, the rivers of which it creates, can never be drowned or dormant.

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