

THE MOST THOUGHT PROVOKING POET IN AMERICA--LANGSTON HUGHES**D.S.Parveen Banu***Lecturer and Head, Department of English (SF), M.S.S. Wakf Board College, Madurai-20***Biography of Langston Hughes (1 Feb 1902 - 22 May 1967)**

An American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist. He was one of the earliest innovators of the then-new literary art form jazz poetry. Hughes is best known for his work during the Harlem Renaissance. He famously wrote about the period that "Harlem was in vogue."

Ancestry and Childhood

Both of Hughes' paternal and maternal great-grandmothers were African-American, his maternal great-grandfather was white and of Scottish descent. A paternal great-grandfather was of European Jewish descent. Hughes's maternal grandmother Mary Patterson was of African-American, French, English and Native American descent. One of the first women to attend Oberlin College, she first married Lewis Sheridan Leary, also of mixed race. Lewis Sheridan Leary subsequently joined John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 and died from his wounds.

In 1869 the widow Mary Patterson Leary married again, into the elite, politically active Langston family. Her second husband was Charles Henry Langston, of African American, Native American, and Euro-American ancestry. He and his younger brother John Mercer Langston worked for the abolitionist cause and helped lead the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society in 1858. Charles Langston later moved to Kansas, where he was active as an educator and activist for voting and rights for African Americans. Charles and Mary's daughter Caroline was the mother of Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, the second child of school teacher Carrie (Caroline) Mercer Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes (1871-1934). Langston Hughes grew up in a series of Midwestern small towns.

While in grammar school in Lincoln, Hughes was elected class poet. Hughes stated that in retrospect he thought it was because of the stereotype that African Americans have rhythm. "I was a victim of a stereotype. There were only two of us Negro kids in the whole class and our English teacher was always stressing the importance of rhythm in poetry. Well, everyone knows, except us, that all Negroes have rhythm, so they elected me as class poet." During high school in Cleveland, Ohio, he wrote for the school newspaper, edited the yearbook, and began to write his first short stories, poetry, and dramatic plays. His first

piece of jazz poetry, "When Sue Wears Red", was written while he was in high school. It was during this time that he discovered his love of books.

Relationship with Father

Hughes had a very poor relationship with his father. He lived with his father in Mexico for a brief period in 1919. Upon graduating from high school in June 1920, Hughes returned to Mexico to live with his father, hoping to convince him to support Langston's plan to attend Columbia University. Hughes later said that, prior to arriving in Mexico: "I had been thinking about my father and his strange dislike of his own people. I didn't understand it, because I was a Negro, and I liked Negroes very much." Initially, his father had hoped for Hughes to attend a university abroad, and to study for a career in engineering. On these grounds, he was willing to provide financial assistance to his son but did not support his desire to be a writer. Eventually, Hughes and his father came to a compromise: Hughes would study engineering, so long as he could attend Columbia. His tuition provided; Hughes left his father after more than a year. While at Columbia in 1921, Hughes managed to maintain a B+ grade average. He left in 1922 because of racial prejudice, and his interests revolved more around the neighbourhood of Harlem than his studies, though he continued writing poetry.

Adulthood

Hughes worked various odd jobs, before serving a brief tenure as a crewman aboard the S.S. Malone in 1923, spending six months traveling to West Africa and Europe. In Europe, Hughes left the S.S. Malone for a temporary stay in Paris.

During his time in England in the early 1920s, Hughes became part of the black expatriate community. In November 1924, Hughes returned to the U. S. to live with his mother in Washington, D.C. Hughes worked at various odd jobs before gaining a white-collar job in 1925 as a personal assistant to the historian Carter G. Woodson at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. As the work demands limited his time for writing, Hughes quit the position to work as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel. There he encountered the poet Vachel Lindsay, with whom he shared some poems. Impressed with the poems, Lindsay publicized his discovery of a new black poet. By this time, Hughes's earlier work had been published in magazines and was about to be collected into his first book of poetry.

The following year, Hughes enrolled in Lincoln University, a historically black university in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He joined the Omega Psi Phi fraternity. Thurgood Marshall, who later became an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the

United States, was an alumnus and classmate of Langston Hughes during his undergraduate studies at Lincoln University.

After Hughes earned a B.A. degree from Lincoln University in 1929, he returned to New York. Except for travels to the Soviet Union and parts of the Caribbean, Hughes lived in Harlem as his primary home for the remainder of his life. During the 1930s, Hughes became a resident of Westfield, New Jersey.

Some academics and biographers today believe that Hughes was homosexual and included homosexual codes in many of his poems, similar in manner to Walt Whitman. Hughes has cited him as an influence on his poetry. Hughes's story "Blessed Assurance" deals with a father's anger over his son's effeminacy and "queerness". To retain the respect and support of black churches and organizations and avoid exacerbating his precarious financial situation, Hughes remained closeted.

Death

On May 22, 1967, Hughes died from complications after abdominal surgery, related to prostate cancer, at the age of 65. His ashes are interred beneath a floor medallion in the middle of the foyer in the Arthur Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. It is the entrance to an auditorium named for him. The design on the floor covering his ashes is an African cosmogram titled Rivers. The title is taken from his poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". Within the center of the cosmogram, above his ashes, is the line: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers".

Career

First published in *The Crisis* in 1921, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", which became Hughes's signature poem, was collected in his first book of poetry *The Weary Blues* (1926). Hughes's life and work were enormously influential during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, alongside those of his contemporaries, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Aaron Douglas. Except for McKay, they worked together also to create the short-lived magazine *Fire!!* Devoted to Younger Negro Artists.

Hughes and his contemporaries had different goals and aspirations than the black middle class. They criticized men who were known as the midwives of the Harlem Renaissance: W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Alain LeRoy Locke, as being overly accommodating and assimilating eurocentric values and culture for social equality. Hughes and his fellows tried to depict the "low-life" in their art, that is, the real lives of blacks in the lower social-economic strata. They criticized the divisions and prejudices

based on skin color within the black community. Hughes wrote what would be considered the manifesto published in *The Nation* in 1926,

"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" Hughes was unashamedly black at a time when blackness was *démodé*. He stressed the theme of "black is beautiful" as he explored the black human condition in a variety of depths. His main concern was the uplift of his people, whose strengths, resiliency, courage, and humor he wanted to record as part of the general American experience. His poetry and fiction portrayed the lives of the working class blacks in America, lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. Permeating his work is pride in the African-American identity and its diverse culture. "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind," Hughes is quoted as saying. He confronted racial stereotypes, protested social conditions, and expanded African America's image of itself; a "people's poet" who sought to reeducate both audience and artist by lifting the theory of the black aesthetic into reality. An expression of this is the poem "My People":

"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."

Hughes stressed a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate that united people of African descent and Africa across the globe and encouraged pride in their diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. Hughes was one of the few black writers of any consequence to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists. His African-American race consciousness and cultural nationalism would influence many foreign black writers, such as Jacques Roumain, Nicolás Guillén, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Aimé Césaire. Along with the works of Senghor, Césaire, and other French-speaking writers of Africa and of African descent from the Caribbean, such as René Maran from Martinique and Léon Damas from French Guiana in South America, the works of Hughes helped to inspire the *Négritude* movement in France. A radical black self-examination was emphasized in the face of European colonialism. In addition to his example in social attitudes, Hughes had an important technical influence by his emphasis on folk and jazz rhythms as the basis of his poetry of racial pride.

In 1930, his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, won the Harmon Gold Medal for literature. The protagonist of the story is a boy named Sandy, whose family must deal with a variety of struggles due to their race and class, in addition to relating to one another. Maxim Lieber became his literary agent, 1933-1945 and 1949-1950. Hughes's first collection of short stories was published in 1934 with *The Ways of White Folks*. These stories are a series of vignettes revealing the humorous and tragic interactions between whites and

blacks. Overall, they are marked by a general pessimism about race relations, as well as a sardonic realism. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935.

The same year that Hughes established his theater troupe in Los Angeles, he realized an ambition related to films by co-writing the screenplay for *Way Down South*. Hughes believed his failure to gain more work in the lucrative movie trade was due to racial discrimination within the industry.

In 1943, Hughes began publishing stories about a character he called Jesse B. Semple, often referred to and spelled "Simple", the everyday black man in Harlem who offered musings on topical issues of the day. Hughes seldom responded to requests to teach at colleges. In 1947, Hughes taught at Atlanta University. Hughes, in 1949, spent three months at University of Chicago Laboratory Schools as a visiting lecturer. He wrote novels, short stories, plays, poetry, operas, essays, works for children, and, with the encouragement of his best friend and writer, Arna Bontemps, and patron and friend, Carl Van Vechten, two autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, as well as translating several works of literature into English.

During the mid-1950s and -1960s, Hughes' popularity among the younger generation of black writers varied as his reputation increased worldwide. With the gradual advancement toward racial integration, many black writers considered his writings of black pride and its corresponding subject matter out of date. They considered him a racial chauvinist. He found such writers, for instance, James Baldwin, lacking in such pride, over intellectual in their work, and occasionally vulgar.

Hughes wanted young black writers to be objective about their race, but not to scorn it or flee it. He understood the main points of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, but believed that some of the younger black writers who supported it were too angry in their work. Hughes's work *Panther and the Lash*, posthumously published in 1967, was intended to show solidarity with these writers, but with more skill and devoid of the most virulent anger and terse racial chauvinism some showed toward whites. Hughes continued to have admirers among the larger younger generation of black writers, whom he often helped by offering advice and introducing them to other influential persons in the literature and publishing communities. This latter group, including Alice Walker, whom Hughes discovered, looked upon Hughes as a hero and an example to be emulated in degrees and tones within their own work. One of these young black writers observed of Hughes, "Langston set a tone, a standard of brotherhood and friendship and cooperation, for all of us to follow. You never got from him, 'I am the Negro writer,' but only 'I am a Negro writer.' He never stopped thinking about the rest of us." Undoubtedly Langston Hughes is an amazing and thought provoking writer in America.