

## Harlem, Hughes And Black Poetics

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### Abstract

*The American history has been known for Harlem movement during 1920s. The period is attributed by flourishing of culture drawn from Afro-American roots. One of the components of this culture is growth of Afro-American literature, especially poetry which was acknowledged by literary critics as "Harlem Renaissance". Langston Hughes was one of the central figures of Harlem Renaissance. He wrote of the pain as well as the unique genius of black Americans. He remained faithful to black roots in his works and his poetry is best example of that. The history of the American Negro is the history of struggle and in this struggle it seems that Afro-Americans have lost their identity and personality. Hughes does not wish to bleach his Negro blood in the flood of white Americanism. He believes that Negroes have yet a message for America and remaining world.*

**Keywords:** *Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, Afro-American, black movement, black poetry, Negroes, blues and jazz*

America witnessed a great social and political change after World War I. It was also a time for immense creativity and intellectual movement of blacks in America. The Afro-Americans experienced a renewal of their culture in New York City during this time. They also felt and accomplished a sense of pride from this resurgence of artistic expression throughout the United States. The Negro artists and intellectuals depicted their unique culture and civilization through their works. That is why, the decade is commonly known as "roaring twenties" (The Roaring Twenties). The large number of African-Americans migrated to the North and ended their journey in New York City, particularly the Harlem section of Manhattan. The Harlem Renaissance was a movement that celebrated black art, music, culture and literature in 1920s. This movement is marked as an imperative event, because the culture of Afro-American was measured remarkable for the very first time in America.

Hughes is one of the major black American literary figures of the 20th century. His writing comprises poetry, fiction, short stories, autobiography and criticism. All of Hughes's writings concentrate on the story of the Blackman in America; his joys, sorrows and hopes. The story is told with sadness for the events that have oppressed him but with a sense of optimism for the better world. "Hughes's poetry still one of the touchstones of American civilization, in its originality feeling an open commitment to social transformation" (Baraka IX). His famous essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), is considered the manifesto of Harlem Renaissance. He speaks in a voice familiar to all blacks. He became a writer not merely to amuse either the white or Black audience but under a strong inner urge to express the experience of being a member of Black community in America.

Langston Hughes's life had been very difficult and miserable from the very beginning. He

came from a separated family, which could not give him love and security. He encountered segregation from his very childhood. Only his grandmother used to hold him in her lap and tell him tales of heroism, of slavery and freedom and especially of brave men and women who had striven to aid the coloured race, who struggled to make Negroes free. These stories influenced Langston Hughes as he says:

Through my grandmother's stories always life moved, moved heroically towards an end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother's stories. They worked or schemed or fought but no crying. When my grandmother died, I did not cry, either. Something about my grandmother's stories (without her ever having said so) taught me the uselessness of crying about anything (Hughes, *The Big Sea* 17).

Langston Hughes inherited cultural and ethnic qualities of the Black community, all this shaped his sensibility. He gives an effective expression to those inherited tendencies of black community in his art. He believes in the black race and tried to affirm it in the United States through blues and jazz and spirituals, inspired by the articulation of freedom and equality along with brotherhood by the earlier black writers. He is one of the rungs of that ladder of writers who voiced protest against slavery and dehumanization of the blacks in the United States. He is one of those pioneers who reflected the Afro-Americans suppressed feelings and impressions through literature. These writers expressed the black Americans aspirations to be free to get equality, to get recognition of black art, culture and aesthetics.

As the poetry is thought to be most concentrated, compact and most allusive of verbal arts, it was poetry through which the Blacks in America tried to get recognition and establish their identity. Jean Wagner defines, "Since poetry was one of the most ancient traditions of the black race, it was as a consequence" (172). He further says that "best fitted to express the psychic states of a whole people on the point of acquiring self awareness and beginning to articulate its demand for social and cultural emancipation" (172). So it would be worthwhile to have a brief look at the history of black poetry which shaped Langston Hughes's art and made him the poet laureate of Blacks in America.

Black Poetry is the poetry, which is written by a person or a group of persons of known black African ancestry. Its themes, structures and even vocabulary are identifiably black. This poetry has its own Black aesthetic. It has a specific sociological, historical, political and cultural identity. It can be properly understood only after considering the ethnic roots of Black Americans that lie in Africa itself. Even when we see no novelty of language or form, imagery or ideas in black poetry it looks rather quaint, it is original in itself. It has the power to bring the reader very close to reality and arouse in him genuine emotions with the help of its virtues of simplicity, sincerity and veracity.

Black Literature depicts the "universal theme of rebellion against oppression" (Henderson 11). It directly or indirectly stems from the Blacks own bitter experiences, humiliations, sufferings on account of their status as an oppressed group or as slaves. They express their intentions and themes with their historical background in their minds. In this way, one can say that as the Black people in United States define and clarify their conception of themselves, their literature reflects this process of self-definition with greater clarity and resonance. In fact, Black poetry assumes its distinctive character because of the beastly oppression and tyranny that the Blacks have suffered. Its fundamental thrust is that of raising a voice against slavery and segregation. Even after the emancipation, the blacks had to suffer indignity and humiliation. Their poetry is an outcome and resonance of that injustice and discrimination.

Black poetry developed with the passage of time. In the beginning some poets only wrote because they wanted to show their caliber of writing. There were some who used their talent in the abolitionist cause. There was another group who wrote in dialect and chose to portray the lives of the common folk. There were also poets like Paul Lawrence Dunbar and James Edwin Campbell who presented wholesome, if not altogether realistic, portraits of black folk life. The period “preceding the Harlem Renaissance, not only produced the dialect poets but found many black poets studiously avoiding overt racial considerations” (Henderson 14). Poetry was a romantic escape for many of them and not a perception of reality.

In fact, it was during Harlem Renaissance when Negro life was depicted rationally in black writings in an efficient manner. It was the time when the Blacks portrayed the seamy side of their life. For the first time it seemed literature, which was by the blacks, about the blacks and for the blacks was being produced. Afro-American writers felt that it was the appropriate time for themselves to look at what they were; without any doubt and disgrace. This period and movement was a natural source to groom their art. Black poets felt that true religion, freedom and education could not come to them unless they decided to be united and determined. The poetry of the Negro in essence was “the process of self-definition made clearer and sharper as the self-reliance and racial consciousness of an early period revived and raised to the level of revolutionary thought” (Henderson 16). This poetry made them think of themselves and added their self-knowledge, and maintains that Black poetry is. He further illustrates,

An art that addresses itself directly to Blacks; and art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that validates the positive aspects of our life style opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, and art that posits for us the vision of a liberated future (16-17).

Here one can observe the idea of the liberation from isolation, discrimination, slavery and segregation with an ardent love to embrace Africa asserting itself as the dominant theme of Black poetry right from its beginning. There are some special contours, movements and directions of Black poetry. It moves in the direction of freedom and liberation. The great theme of Black poetry in the United States is “liberation and it draws its strength from historical songs, the tough minded power of the blues, the inventive energy of Jazz and transcendent vision of God in the spirituals and the sermons” (Henderson 21) This rich heritage of folk creativity strengthened the idea of liberation.

The formation of black poetry is drawn from two basic sources – Black speech and Black music. To know Black poetry it is very necessary to have a deep knowledge of Black music and Black speech. The speech spoken by majority of Black people in America is called Black speech. Black music means various Black songs spiritual, jubilees, shorts, gospel songs, blues, jazz and non-jazz by Black composers who consciously or unconsciously draw upon the Black musical tradition. Both Black speech and Black music are inseparable. Without considering the verbal components of these two, one cannot talk about or discuss the spirituals or blues or formally literary Black poetry.

The sources of Black speech and songs are journals of the Black slaves kept by the whites. But the living speech of Black community is the most important source that forms a kind of continuum of Blackness. The ear, no doubt proves to be the best guide when one meditates Black speech and music. A black poet could say things beautifully even if it were ugly things. It might be called slang and dialect but black people called it soul talk. Black poet communicates, to the readers without any leakage or loss of force their sense of blackness and fidelity to be observed and intuited truth of the

“Black Experience” (Henderson 62). Their poems must never be considered in isolation but in relationship of their reader or audience. Further the reader must also take into consideration the wider context of the phenomenon of Black Experience. A character in black poetry, whether it is described objectively or autobiographically might be perfectly black. It is the blackness of the black that is put before the reader for his consideration. Because “the knowledge of blackness is the knowledge of pain and oppressions as well as joy, it is a knowledge rooted in history and real world, in all its in completeness and fragmentation” (Henderson 69). The persona in black poetry is the sum of different parts – action, speech or thoughts. The character may be an invention based on real life observations or may be a historical or legendary figure.

Much of Hughes's poetry celebrates his African and African-American heritage. Early in his career he began writing poems that provided counter histories to those of the dominant American culture that viewed Africa and Africans as uncivilized. Langston Hughes considered freedom of the Blacks a core subject for his poetry. The credit for nourishing the black sensibility among writers of later generation and inspiring them to create Afro-American literature and transforming it into a literature of struggle goes to Langston Hughes. A great disciple of black art, Langston Hughes inaugurated a distinct movement of 'Negritude' that may be regarded as the soul of Harlem. The Negro history is incomplete without a reference of Harlem, the Negro metropolis that hardly existed before 1910. The Negro migration during the First World War gradually converted it into a great Negro city. During the period other cities of the North such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore also had huge population of Negroes. But Harlem was the capital of Negro America and gradually the “birth of a new spirit of an achievement and opportunity for collective creative expression by black writers” (Fredman 137) commenced here.

The racial pride was welled up and expressed by intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Fredrick Douglas, David Walker, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt. It was further enhanced and established by Claude Mckay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, the four pillars of the 'Harlem Renaissance'. Langston Hughes was deeply associated with 'Harlem Renaissance' and ultimately emerged as the strongest literary legend of it. Harlem Renaissance took birth with the flowering African-American culture in 1920's. During this time Afro-American Literature, art, music, dance and social commentary began to flourish in Harlem, a section of New York City. This African-American culture movement became 'The Negro Movement' and was later known as 'The Harlem Renaissance'.

More than a literary movement the Harlem Renaissance exalted the unique culture of African-Americans and redefined their expression. The American Negroes were encouraged to celebrate their heritage. The main factors contributing to the development of the Harlem Renaissance were African-American urban migration, trends towards experimentation throughout the country and the rise of radical African-American intellectuals. The Harlem Renaissance transformed African-American identity and history but it also transformed the American culture in general. It was first time that the so many Americans had read the thoughts of African-American and embraced the African-American community's art and aesthetics.

Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community; it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum of a fringe; it is a located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city. It is not a quarter of decrepit apartments, but is made up of new law apartments and handsome dwellings, with well-paved and well-lighted streets. It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops and theatres and other

places of amusements. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth (Singh 8).

Harlem, the 'Negro City' became the hub of all the activities of the blacks. Although Afro-American had lived in New York, the promise of a better future seemed tangible in Harlem, so it fascinated more migrants. With the progress of the United States, the blacks found more job opportunities in the North, so they started migrating from the South. The cause of the flowering is not completely explicable. The reason behind the migration from South to North is clear to some extent in the words of V.I.Lenin, "For the emancipated Negroes, the American South is a kind of prison where they are hemmed in, isolated and deprived of fresh air" (Ivanov 10).

No doubt Harlem was the place that gave Blacks a feeling of belonging together; Negritude that may be regarded as the soul of Harlem. The city was "a symbol of elegance and distinction, not derogation" (Singh 8). Alaine Locke defines it in his famous essay "The New Negro" (1925).

Within this area, race sympathy and unity have determined a further fusing of sentiment and experience. So what began in terms of segregation becomes more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding. Hitherto, it must be admitted that American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is or promises at least to be – a race capital (Peplow and Davis 390-91).

The seeds of Harlem Renaissance were sown earlier but it flourished in 1920's. As M.H.Abrams says,

The decade of 1920's was also the early period of the Harlem Renaissance, a period of remarkable creativity in literature, music, dance, painting, and sculpture by African-American as a result of the mass migrations to the Urban North in order to escape the legal segregation of the American South, and also in order to take the job advantages open to African-American at the beginning of the world war I. The population of the region of Manhattan known, as Harlem became almost exclusive Black and the vital center of African-American culture in America (Abrams 114).

The American Negro was reborn out of the ashes of an age, which was dark and unfavorable for his physical and mental growth. Harlem Renaissance gave voice to the hopes, aspirations, fears and joys of an ordinary Afro-American. Harlem – the capital of Negro America was glorified highly in the writings of the Negroes. They expressed self-respect and self-faith, broke all the barriers of disillusionment and replaced it with race pride. The American Negroes felt pride, joy and fulfillment in being black for the first time. Hughes defines that "Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere" (Hughes, *The Big Sea* 240).

Undoubtedly, Harlem Renaissance is the rebirth of the Negroes awareness to their rights out of the ashes of oppression; the dark ages of slavery. It was an era of self-assertion, the recognition of their existence, their chances for group expression and self-determination in life and literature. Before the emergence of Harlem Renaissance, the blacks were really lacked in self-conscious and self-understanding. "The life of the Negro community is bound to enter in a new dynamic phase, the

buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without” (Peplow and Davis 389).

The racial aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance focused on the black folk. Although such writers as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Waddell Chesnutt utilized folklore before the Harlem Renaissance, the Renaissance writers of 1920's used folk material more extensively. Hughes was the first black writer to make a living entirely from his writing and a vital inspiration and mentor for many young black writers of the 1960s. He himself accepted that “most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment derived from the life I know” (MacGowan 79).

Langston Hughes writes in his famous essay “The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain” (1926). In this essay Hughes explores a significant statement of his philosophy that would become something of a manifesto for the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes opens the essay with lamenting observation of Countee Cullen (though he identifies him only as a promising young poet) to the effect that “he wanted to be known not as a Negro poet, but simply a poet” (Leach 36). Hughes saw in this statement a desire to be white and a fear of his own racial identity that was not unique to Cullen. He further says, “No great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.” (Hughes, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*)

Hughes is always the product of the race, the moment, and the milieu. Hughes disapproves the self-hate attitude in the essay with “I am a Negro and beautiful”. He asserts that the middle class black artist has been cut off from authentic working class culture and can only become a great artist by embracing black working class culture and overcoming the desire to be white. Hughes concludes the essay that “We younger Negro artist who create now intend to express our individual dark skinned selves without fear or shame... we build our temples for tomorrow strong as we know how and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.” A black artist must find the beauty of black culture in himself.

The Harlem Renaissance rather than being a political movement was a philosophical and aesthetic movement. Alaine Locke believed that Harlem Renaissance would become a platform for culture reciprocity between the Negroes and Whites. The first lady Laura Bush recited a Hughes's poem at a 2002 White House event, describing the Renaissance as follows:

The Harlem Renaissance brought great change to American letters and it broadened the influence of literature and social commentary. The legacy of Harlem Renaissance spans decade and generations. We recognize and appreciate it today in our society and in works of contemporary writers (Willis, Laura Bush likes Langston Hughes).

For Negro Americans, Harlem Renaissance was a new age with its liberating and merry go lucky temper. In a very short span of time many young Negro writers became famous, the movement incorporated all musicians, artists, scholars, critics, politicians, poets, novelists and dramatists. They all contributed a lot to reveal and dig out the true character, spirit, feeling and attitude of the blacks. Some critics viewed that Harlem Renaissance was primarily a literary reawakening. This view really curtails the scope and worth of the movement. In fact, Harlem Renaissance spared no corner of the black societies with its innumerable faces.

Hughes began his poetic career with the burden of tragic past and a responsibility to the future generations. The year after his graduation from high school in 1920, Hughes had his first real publication in 'The Crisis', the official journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) published his famous poem “Negroes Speaks of the Rivers” (Hughes, *The*

Collected Poems 23) was Hughes's first great poem. The poem was written a year earlier, on the train crossing to Mississippi, this short lyric proudly affirms the mystical unity of all persons of African descent, regardless of when or where they happen to live (Magill 413). The whole poem is worth quoting:

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older  
                  than the flow of human blood in human veins  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.  
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the Pyramids above it  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New  
                  Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset  
I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The poem tells the proud story of the race, from earliest times to the present, identifying the Negro as important in the history of civilization. The Negro like the majestic rivers has a deep and significant place in world culture: and the poem is a hymn to the beauty and endurance of the race. The first person speaker here 'I' refers not only the poet but to his entire black community. He identifies with and, in effect becomes when the speaker avers that his "soul has grown like the rivers" he assumes the voice of the entire African race throughout history and slowly all his anxiety dissolves into a superior power of the beauty and historicity of the Black Race.

The mythical unity between his soul and unending rivers generates a sense of pride in the poet. The poem is not only significant from an autobiographical and psychological point of view but the line "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young" is quite suggestive and acquaints us with the actual history of blacks. It describes the American Negroes had seen the rise and fall of various civilization from earliest times, seen the beauty and death, changes of world over thousands of years and this maintains the hope that they "will survive even this America" (Jemie 103). Langston Hughes underlines the necessity of freedom as one of major themes in his poetry. He defines the pain of all Afro-Americans in his famous poem "The White Ones" (Hughes, The Collected Poem 37). The persona in the poem is a Negro, is craving for freedom and making a complaint before the mighty whites. A reader, even with the least sensitivity can easily realize the pathetic condition of the persona.

I do not hate you,  
For your faces are beautiful, too.  
I do not hate you,  
Your faces are whirling lights of loveliness and splendor, too  
Yet why do you torture me,

O, White strong ones,  
Why do you torture me?

The lines are not an outburst of poet's personal pain but depict the fate of all the Negroes in America. Although the persona is an integral part of this land, he feels alienated and tormented due to the inhuman treatment at the hands of the whites. He is deprived of all sort of freedom social, political or biological. Although America was originally conceived as a land of equality and equal opportunity, the miserable condition of the Blacks defies this dream. The poem leaves a big question mark on the democratic ideals of America.

Hughes had a very deep understanding of the music of Blues, i.e. the ultimate Afro-American art. The Blacks have poured all their concerns and worries into this sort of music. Music accompanied these little fellows from slavery to freedom. Hughes's famous collection of poems "The Weary Blues" was published in 1926. In these poems he tried to catch the pulse of the Blues. These poems were praised for their realism, spontaneity and efforts to relax the beating heart. The music of the poems is life affirming and the Blues purge off the depression and it is enough for Langston Hughes as well as the black masses "to keep them living and struggling" (Jemie 38) through such brief respites. "The Weary Blues" (Hughes, *The Collected Poems* 50) the opening poem with the same title shows despaired feelings of the pianist and also reflects in objects around him:

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool  
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.  
Sweet Blues!  
Coming from a black man's soul.  
O Blues!  
In deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan –

Hughes presents the higher kind of turbulence of emotions in a work of art. The song somewhere hints the bad shape of things for the Blacks and the contradictory shifts of mood from life to death. But the "thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor" (50) his foot affirms the reserve of strength that lie somewhere in his body and soul. The entire inner personality of the persona is captured with simplicity through music. Hughes's black protagonists express more clearly their 'blues' and their hopes in relation to the problem of unemployment and class exploitation. For example in "Out of Work" (Hughes, *The Collected Poems* 217) Hughes's persona laments over his class problems in blues form:

I walked de streets till  
De shoes wore off my feet  
I done walked de streets till  
De shoes wore off my feet  
Been lookin' for a job  
So's that I could eat.



To Hughes, black music at its best was the infallible metronome of racial grace: “like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day-night, day-night, day forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its rooted power” (Wordworks 340). Hughes always defined himself primarily as a social poet, writing to interpret and comment upon the Negro life. Hughes showed his full social concern for the suffering of blacks in his volume “Fine Clothes to the Jew” (1927). He declared himself independent of the whites and used his poetry for racial expression of the oppressed. He drew the material of his poetry from the life that he experienced around him and gave a vent to his feelings, understanding and reflection in his later collections, “Shakespeare in Harlem” (1942) and “Montage of a Dream Deferred” (1951).

The decade of 1960's was a period of name, fame and recognition from Langston Hughes. He had emerged as a universal figure, as a poet of the Negroes and oppressed and recognized as the poet laureate of Black America. In 1963, Hughes was awarded Honorary Doctor of Letters from Howard University and in 1964 from Western Reserve University. Poetry writing was something natural with Hughes, whenever he felt unhappy he wrote poems. In his autobiography 'The Big Sea' Hughes discloses, “My best poems were all written when I felt worst, when I was happy, I didn't write anything” (54). Langston Hughes writes, “Feeling bad had its good side too. It meant he wrote poems. It made the misery more bearable if he could compress his feeling into the shape of a poem” (Meltzer 107).

Hughes's poetry was also marked by some traits of modernism. His poetry is always experimental and he clearly modeled some of his poems on modernist montage. “Like other modernists he used montage to represent the modern experience of social fragmentation while simultaneously recomposing the image fragments in a meaningful way” (Haralson 313). As a multi-talented and multifarious poet Hughes's work speaks to many different interests both within and outside academia, from Modernism to Civil Rights. To date, no other black American poet has garnered as much critical acclaim as Hughes, whose life long concern for social justice will continue to attract ever more reader of his poetry.

Hughes presented himself before the world as a poet, playwright, novelist, social activist and freedom fighter. In May 1967, this 'Messiah' of Black went to hospital for check-up but it leads him to a dream world where all are equal, none is black or white, everyone is free. On May 22, 1967 the world paid him a warm send-off and 'Dear Lovely Death' took him into its lap. Langston Hughes kept growing mature year by year till his death in 1967. During the span of his forty six year career (1921-1967) he published some sixteen books of poems, two novels, three collections of short stories, twenty plays, four volumes of documentary, three history books and two autobiographies. All his work was very much 'a literature of necessity', literature that is concerned with the black struggle. His respect for it was never stiff or cold. His poetry is “both surface-simple and deep, both lucid and profound” (Cerrito & Mauro 65)

Langston Hughes addressed his poetry to the people, specifically to black people. During the 1920's when most American poets were turning inward, writing obscure and esoteric poems, Hughes was turning outward, using language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar to anyone who had the ability simply to read. He has been unlike most White poets other than Walt Whitman, Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg, a poet of the people. “Throughout his career he was aware of injustice and oppression and used his poetry as a means of opposing or mitigating them” (Cerrito & Mauro 64). Hughes always felt the pain of the Negro race, sting of suppression, discrimination and segregation in his poetry and voiced against it. He is one of those poets who voiced freely and directly his ambivalent

feelings about white culture in America. Anyone can hear the voice for freedom in his poetry. On the surface his poetry may look simple, but at bottom there is a strong desire to be free.

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