

GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE WORKS OF LANGSTON HUGHES

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ABSTRACT

Even though Langston Hughes and Mahatma Gandhi worked in altogether different scenarios and with an antagonistic cultural yet there are stark similarities in Hughes philosophy with the Gandhian concepts. Gandhi and Langston Hughes are distinctly apart, one a strong political leader and other a strong preacher and a reformer. But their concern was the same. They both wanted to uplift the subalterns and thus both have a touch of universality and transcendence in their works and philosophy. Their struggle for unity and reconciliation, as well as the battle to find the identity of the subalterns is highest merging point of their philosophy.

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“I can't breathe!” were the last words of George Floyd, a black man who was mercilessly killed by a white policeman who knelt on his neck for more than ten minutes and which triggered worldwide protests against racism, discrimination and brutality against the blacks and reminded us the dreadful past the oppressed and second grade citizens in America and India have fought for. It also brings to the fore the significance of philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi who always stood for the oppressed class and one who always rejected discrimination on the basis of skin color, religion, creed and nationality.

Although Langston Hughes and Mahatma Gandhi worked in altogether different scenarios and with an antagonistic cultural yet there are stark similarities in Hughes philosophy with the Gandhian concepts. Gandhi and Langston Hughes are distinctly apart, one a strong political leader and other a strong preacher and a reformer. But their concern was the same. They both wanted to uplift the subalterns and thus both have a touch of universality and transcendence in their works and philosophy. Their struggle for unity and reconciliation, as well as the battle to find the identity of the subalterns is highest merging point of their philosophy.

The fact that the African Americans were denied continually of what they consider their legitimate aspirations kept on reverberating in their mind and disturbed them all the time. This becomes a convincing reason of the protest that the American subalterns (negroes) raised in their day to day life against the injustice and atrocities inflicted on them in different forms. Langston Hughes, a poet spokesperson of his people, carries this protest in his writing in different forms in different phases of his literary career. His corpus of writing is rooted in necessity, argues Jemie, and much of its “living substance is made of folk material, folk forms, folk characters and folk

speech, and most of it is related in an organic, inseparable way to the black struggle” (Jemie 76). He wants his people eventually to enjoy the same rights, opportunities and privileges that were vouchsafed to all other Americans, on the same terms as were advocated by Mahatma Gandhi.

In his first important poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Langston Hughes traces the historical contribution of his community in the making of world civilization. First published in *Crisis* in June 1921, a year after it was composed, the poem celebrates the tolerance of the negro during different phases of world history. Commenting upon the genesis of the poem, Charlemae H. Rollins suggests:

He thought of the Ohio, which Eliza crossed to escape the bloodhounds in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; the Nile, where the Egyptians princes found the baby Moses, who was to become the leader and emancipator of his people; the Euphrates, where a dark-skinned people watched the stars and invented a way to keep exact records by their light; and the Congo, flowing through the green jungles of Africa and into his memory and his blood. (Rollins 18)

The African's continuous plight first in the form of slavery and then in the form of racism has made him not only somber but taught him the power of tolerance that has created a niche for him in various civilizations he has contributed in. Here tolerance is a potent virtue so often lauded by the 'Father of India'. The poet also says:

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 pyramids about it.
I heard that 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. (Hughes 23)

The free form and the easy, simple language shows the influence of his ideal Carl Sandburg, but the subject matter and the emotional thrust are distinctively Hughes' own. The poem celebrates the negro, his pride in his race, and his benefaction during each phase of civilizations all over the world and creates an aura of his stamina and strength. The motive force behind the poem is the idea that African blood was African whether living in Africa or America.

The celebration of pride and tolerance of his people by the poet also highlights his unhappiness over the undue exploitation of the Africans by the selfish whites all over the world. This historical plight of the negroes is also highlighted in “Aunt Sue's Stories,” where the female speaker portrays the inhuman treatment given to the black Americans by the racist whites:

Black slaves

Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice... (Rampersad 23)

The dark-faced child listens to the splendid stories of Aunt Sue that are real-based on her experiences which prepares him to meet all the affronts that life has for him. Aunt Sue becomes a symbol of tolerance and persistence here and Hughes' presentation of the life of a black American in the United States exhibits suppressed anger and protest of the exploited subaltern masses. "To Gandhi, all war was wrong, and suddenly it 'came to him like a flash' to appeal to the British to adopt the method of non-violence" and Hughes also wanted to protest without a drop of blood being shed, be it of a white. This can also be witnessed in "Mother to Son" where Hughes has used the metaphor of life as a journey:

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare. (Rampersad 30)

The mother's journey symbolizes the onerous globetrotting of the entire negro race. The expedition for the whites has always been easy but for the African Americans, the road has been dusty, dark and blood-stained. This, however, also symbolizes the grit, stamina and endurance of the people that were maltreated because of their colour and racial features.

Despite the odds that life in a racist society inflicted on her, the negro mother kept climbing the ladder of life. She faced all the brutalities boldly and inspires his son not to turn his back to life. She is an icon that represents the pride and consistency in her life which makes one wonder over her grit and stamina. Here, pride inevitably wrestles with pathos at the same time power and clarity of image suffer in the uncertainty. This "uncertainty," nonetheless, is to be understood as part of the folk-wisdom that the poet tries to imbibe here. Hughes' depiction of the pride of the African American and his endurance makes him a true representative voice of his people and an ardent follower of negritude, like Gandhi who also found the strong Indian values of its entire religious people to be of paramount importance in getting any kind of victory.

Langston Hughes exhibits in his poetry all these aspects associated with negritude (although the concept came later) and becomes a true representative voice of the subalterns and his people. He eulogizes his colour and takes pride in being a black. He sings of the endurance that the black community has shown over the centuries. He also carries Marxist ideas that are hidden in his poems of 1920s but finds eloquent expression in the 1930s which makes him one of the 'most

eloquent American poets to have sung about the wounds caused by injustice.' "Negro," for instance, reveals how the poet has exposed the atrocities on the blacks during different phases of history:

I am a Negro:
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of my Africa.
I've been a slave:
 Cesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
 I brushed the boots of Washington.
I've been a worker:
 Under my hand the pyramids arose.
 I made mortar for the Woolworth Buildings.
I've been a singer:
 All the way from Africa to Georgia
 I carried my sorrow songs.
 I made ragtime.
I've been a victim:
 The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
 They lynch me still in Mississippi. (Rampersad 24)

A conscious reader can see how the black speaker draws his historical plight in these lines. One can also notice that the poet is more concerned about the ignition of feelings of dissatisfaction and anxiety that lead to bitterness for the racial bigotry. This bitterness is the concealed anger and protest that the poetry of this phase inherits. Gandhism also went through a similar phase of bitterness first and non-cooperation next.

Langston Hughes sees that the whites were blind toward the negroes and wouldn't give them a place they deserve. The capitalistic system, the poet argues, was also against the oppressed for it failed to provide them security against injustice. He, as a result, sees law as a blind goddess unable to see and judge judiciously. In "Justice," first published in *Amsterdam News* on April 25, 1923, the poet writes:

That justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are wise.
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes. (Rampersad 31)

This poem opens our eyes toward the blind law that has shut its eyes towards the suffering negro. The American negro, nevertheless, is not unaware of this travesty of situation which makes him wise. The equivocal poise that the poetic persona assumes here frees him to share the fate of his community. He joins his people and becomes a voice of affirmation of the collective identity of the subalterns, like Gandhi.

During 1920s, Hughes does not altogether forget the discriminating present that has degraded the African Americans. There is due recognition of the racial injustice prevalent in

America during this phase that creates vacuity in the soul of the American negro. This racial injustice was more common and had a brutal shape in the southern parts of America where, even after emancipation, negroes were still lynched if they protested against slavery and other dehumanizing pressures. "The South," for instance, highlights this cruel aspect of southern America:

The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth.
The sunny-faced South,
 Beast-strong,
 Idiot-brained.
The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
For a Negro's bones...
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
 Passionate, cruel,
 Honey-lipped syphilitic—
That is the South. (Rampersad 26-27)

The repulsive image created in these lines evokes terror and fills the African Americans with anxiety of their existence. This threatening reality of the "lazy, laughing" South has sucked the negroes' blood with its "sunny-faced" mouth. The poem also reminds one of the 'South African incident' where Gandhi was also shabbily treated when he boarded a train just because 'he' was multicoloured and hence inferior to the white race. The suffering negro adds:

And I, who am black, would love her
But she spits in my face.
And I, who am black,
Would give her many rare gifts
But she turns her back upon me.
 So now I seek the North—
 The cold-faced North,
 For she, they say,
 Is a kinder mistress,
And in her house my children
May escape the spell of the South. (Rampersad 27)

The poem describes the brutal reality of the South that forced the black Americans to ponder over leaving it for a more harmonious place in the North. This, however, was not enough because the North was also "cold-faced," though less cruel towards the negroes. This description of torturous South is an attempt to affirm the African-American identity in an atmosphere of danger and threat. There is repressed anger here that is mingled with depiction of racial discrimination and the unhappy stance of the black Americans.

This affirmation of African-American identity has yet another dimension that relates to the pondering over the pathetic present and looking for a more secure place to live in. Hughes' poem "Shadows" depicts the negro's disenchantment over the dream land because of his oppressed life. The poet says:

We run,
We cannot stand these shadows!
Give us the sun.
We were not made
For shade,
For heavy shade,
And narrow space of stifling air
That these white things have made....
We must break through these shadows,
We must find the sun. (Rampersad 34)

A close look at the poem shows that the poetic persona feels suffocated in the "narrow space of stifling air" that the "white things" have given him. This forces him to leave everything behind to find the sun of his life that could provide him light and make his life worth living. The persona, nevertheless, cannot be separated from the rest of his people who also share the same feeling of segregation, discrimination and injustice in a society mired in deceit and corruption. A more conscious reader, however, can also see hidden anger and resentment here that may help them to "break through [the] shadows" of racial bigotry. Gandhi also espoused a theory of self-sufficiency and simplicity that would focus on meeting the material needs of its citizenry prior to generating wealth and industrializing.

Hughes' everlasting concern for his people keeps on pricking his soul and incited in him creative energy to raise voice against all types of discrimination prevalent against the black American. The tone, now, is not angry or violent but passionate with due recognition of the fact that they cannot live as a separate ethnicity in American pluralist set-up. That is why, perhaps, in "The White Ones" Hughes says:

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? (Rampersad 37)

I shall raise my hand
And break the heads of you
Who starve me.

I shall raise my hand
And smash the spines of you
Who shoot me. (Rampersad 174)

The poetic voice—the voice of all the subalterns and exploited humanity—directs his rage towards the oppressors. He is prepared to snatch the guns of the capitalists and direct towards them to avenge his mistreatment. He declares:

I, silently,
And without a single learned word
Shall begin the slaughter
That will end my hunger
And your bullets
And the gas of capitalism
And make the world
My own.
When that is done,
I shall find words to speak.
Wait ! (Rampersad 174)

The speaker has become radical and is mentally prepared to shake the roots of Capitalism so that Socialism can be achieved. Gandhi wanted Socialism on an agrarian basis. Hughes' political commitment of a radical socialist finds air, as he is assertive here to decisively claim the rights due to all oppressed people. The poem shows in a clear and vivid form the characteristic feature of Hughes' poetry of 1930s that is full of anger, resentment and protest as a consequence of which he emerged as one of the most acclaimed writers of the radical Left and probably this phase differentiates him from Gandhi a bit.

Hughes, despite some negative reviews of his poems of this radical phase, kept pace with the on-going inclination toward Socialism. He composed poems in the revolutionary vein and became the poet of the subalterns. Most sensational of these radical poems is "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." that first appeared in *Daily Worker* on April 2, 1934. The poem advocates the ideology of Socialism:

Put one more s in the U.S.A.
To make it Soviet.
One more s in the U.S.A.
Oh, we'll live to see it yet.
When the land belongs to the farmers
And the factories to the working men --
The U.S.A. when we take control
Will be the U.S.S.A. then (Rampersad 176)

The poetic speaker ardently wishes to replace Capitalism in favour of Socialism so that the oppressed and marginalized could be recognized as a part of America. This, the poet suggests, can only be done through collective efforts from all the subalterns. They should take charge of

everything, bring down the selfish capitalists and:

Hail Communistic land.
So stand up in battle and wave our flag in high,
And shout out fellow workers
Our new slogan in the sky :
Put one more s in the U.S.A.
But we can't join hands together
So long as whites are lynching black,
So black and white in one union fight
And get on the right track. (Rampersad 177)

This explosive poem made Langston Hughes the champion of the leftist cause in its most adventurous and desperate form pushing the cause of racial discrimination into the background "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." is a call for unification of commoners regardless of their colour, features and origin. Langston Hughes saw political issues and reforms in moral terms and assumed a high moral tone. Poems like "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." established his reputation as a black leader sympathetic to the leftist cause. Quite understandably Langston Hughes was criticized as a tireless and violent advocator for Soviet rule, for communism, in this country. But then, under the inspiration of Gandhi between the 1920s and 1940s, the civil disobedience campaign was also advanced by the Indian National Congress.

Hughes' next important poem "Let America Be America Again" deals with returning to the principles of the American Dream devoid of racism, exploitation of the commoners and absence of their maltreatment, the ideas propagated in the autobiography of Gandhi as well. The poem is "sometimes awkward and wooden," writes Arnold Rampersad" but still a noble anthem for a nation in depression" (371) The poem attempts to create an ideal America:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me).
Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme.
That any man be crushed by one above.
(It never was America to me)
O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe. (Rampersad 189-190)

The struggle that Hughes encountered in finding his own cultural identity as a multiracial

man with multiracial influences is reflected in his works, yet there are stark similarities in his philosophy with the Gandhian concepts.

In his poetry, Hughes is searching for a balance between the white in his life and the black. Gandhi wanted this balance between dignity of the 'wheatish Indians' and the cruelty of the 'white' Britishers. Hughes' poetry and his life are usually viewed as being exemplarily African American, but Hughes is much more than this. He is very proud of his African-American heritage, but he does not deny that he has white ancestors and white cultural influence. Gandhi also is full of pride of the Indian tradition and values, yet is never shy to imbibe whatever good is there in the Christian or the 'white' culture. Hughes uses his poetry as a way to further explore his personality and his identity and so is the case in the writings of the Mahatma.

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