

“THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVER”: AN INSIGHTFUL READING

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Abstract

Even though Langston Hughes never visited India, Hughes had much to offer India and rest of the world in terms of shaping a new global awareness. He shared aesthetic goals relevant to the issues of equality and differences, Civil Rights and power relations of the world. Decades before the advent of cultural studies in academic discourses and the rise of postcolonial and transnational approaches, Hughes had anticipated their goals with great clarity and worked in astute and effective ways to raise the consciousness of his readers. The present poem is graphic representation of his active global consciousness and deeper level of insight into the geographical locales of India. He was fascinated to the beauties and glamour of the continent. The sights and sounds of the rivers are the perpetual fund of inspiration.

Key Words: Aesthetic, Traveller, Transnational, Dreams etc.

Langston Hughes, one of the leaders of early nineteenth century Harlem Renaissance, pushed the ‘black experience’ beyond segregation and discrimination – from the back of the bus to the front of anthologies. His poems are enjoyed in classrooms throughout the century. His literary works helped shape American literature and politics. Hughes, like other active in the Harlem Renaissance, had a strong sense of racial pride. Through his poetry, novels, plays, essays and children’s books, he promoted equality, condemned racism and injustice and celebrated African American culture, humour and spirituality. Hughes identified as 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 strength, resiliency, courage and humour he wanted to record as a part of general American experience.

His poetry and fiction portrayed the lives of 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. He sought to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind. He confronted racial stereotypes, protested social condition and expanded African American’s image of itself, ‘a

people's poet'', who sought to reeducate both audience and artists by lifting the theory of the black aesthetic into reality.

Hughes stressed racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self – hate. His thought united people of African descent and Africa across the globe to encourage pride in their diverse black folk culture and black aesthetics. Hughes was one of the few prominent black writers to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration of black artists. His African American racial consciousness and cultural nationalism influenced many foreign black writers. A radical black self-examination was emphasized in the face of European nationalism. 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. Langston Hughes was, in his later years, deemed the 'Poet Laureate of the Negro Race' a title he encouraged. Hughes meant to represent the race in his writing and he was, perhaps, the most original African American poets.

His art was firmly rooted in race, pride and racial feelings even as he cherished his freedom as an artist. One of Hughes's poetic innovations was to draw on the rhythms of black musical traditions such as jazz and blues, but in "The Negro Speaks of Indian Rivers" it's heritage of Negro spirituals which is recalled by the poem's majestic imagery and sonorous repetitions. Written when Hughes was only seventeen as he travelled by train across the Mississippi, the poem is a beautiful statement of strength in the history of black people, which Hughes imagines stretching as far as ancient Egypt and further into Africa and cradle of civilization. The poem returns at the end of America in a moment of optimistic alchemy when he sees the 'muddy bosom' of the Mississippi "turn all golden in the sunset."

First published in *The Crisis* in 1921, "The Negro Speaks of Indian Rivers" became Hughes's signature poem. It was collected in his first book of poetry *The Weary Blues* (1926). Having recently graduated from high school, he was on a train heading to Mexico city. Hughes says that he was crossing the Mississippi just outside of St. Louis when inspiration struck:

I've known rivers :

I've known rivers ancient as world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like 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 Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy

Bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I' have known rivers :

Ancient , dusky rivers :

My soul has grown deep like rivers(32)

The poem is the clear appreciation of Indian rivers. Euphrates fascinates the mood and sensibility of the poet. The poet has sound knowledge on Indian rivers. India has ancient civilization so also rivers. While Hughes would one day travel widely, at the moment of its composition, it was the landscape of the Midwest that he knew best. Yet surprisingly, this poem appears spoken by someone whose knowledge is as ancient as the rivers of which he speaks. The diction of the poem is simple and unaffected either by dialect or rhetorical excess yet its eloquence is like the best of the black spirituals.

The four rivers referenced in the poem reside in three different continents. Each empties into a different body of water and each has a clear, historical and symbolic association for most readers. The Euphrates which begins in Eastern Turkey and follows through Syria and Iraq, and eventually into the Persian Gulf, is the longest river in western Asia. The earliest references to the Euphrates are dated around 3500 BCE, near the very beginning of civilization, or, as Hughes's poem says 'when dawns were young'. The Euphrates may be the oldest river, but the Congo is the deepest, making its way through 11 African countries emptying into Atlantic Ocean. Hughes presents the positive effect of both of these rivers on poem's speaker. In the case of the Congo, it is the sound of this deep river that ushers in sleep.

The Nile and Mississippi are strongly associated with slavery and the related issues of labor, persecution and politics that Hughes conjures up. As the narrator of the poem single-handedly raises the Pyramids above the Nile (which runs from Uganda into the Mediterranean Sea), he both invokes and erases 1000 slavery in Egypt. Whereas the line about the Nile is peopled by one person (who stands in for many), the line about the Mississippi allows us to see slaves en masse.

On the one hand, the progression from the Euphrates to the Mississippi tells an all-too-natural history (from birth to death, from an unpeopled world to a peopled one, from sun rising to the sun setting). In doing so, it tracks the movement from innocence to tragedy, from water thought to be divine to water that contains the blood of slaves. Although the Euphrates and the Mississippi come first and last, they both represent the fall of certain kinds of empires. In fact, what Hughes tells us about these rivers collectively, -that they are old- may be just as important as what he tells us about their individual identities.

While rivers are often thought to mark boundaries, they also make movement possible. Because the stories that these rivers do not move in one clear direction, Hughes shows us that the history of the world's people does not flow in one direction either. Stories move forward and then wrap back around on themselves. And when this happens, their essence, their moral content and their potential symbolism can be hard to locate.

People thought of Hughes as the poet of social progress but the poems contained in *The Weary Blues* identified him with other ambitions, namely, the desire to give voice to the rhythms and songs of African American community. Within five short years, 'The Negro

'Speaks of Rivers' went from being the first and wholly unexpected poem by a young stranger, to being one of many poems by a man to whom the African-American community looked for representation and guidance. In this way, the 1926 appearance of 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' works to prove that one can not step into the same river twice. History must flow on.

Throughout Langston Hughes' poems, the theme of roots is prominent and this theme gives rise to the ultimate meaning of the poem, even though the word 'roots' itself is not used in the text. The textual details of the poem invoke strong imagery related to veins, rivers, and the roots of trees and give the reader a sense of the timelessness of these objects. Furthermore, through his use of languages and images, Langston Hughes is able to create two meanings for the theme of roots since on the one hand they refer to the deep roots like trees. Through these images and details, the reader begins to understand the complexity of the poem and it is clear that it addresses themes that are much larger than simply rivers or human veins—it is a statement on the whole of African American history as it has flourished along rivers, which gave life and allowed 'human veins' and firm historical roots.

In this short stanza, the speaker in the poem by Langston Hughes states that he has "known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins." From this early point in the poem, images of canals of veins that run throughout the human body as well as similar images of rivers that wind around and are shaped like veins form our understanding that this poem is about more than blood or water, it is about roots and circuits. Like veins or rivers, roots run deep and twist irregularly through the medium in which they are planted. The ancient rivers the speaker talks of are like blood in the veins or the roots under trees because they provide substance and can give and support life. This is later supported when the speaker discusses early civilization that thrived off the river system. Thus the theme of 'roots' has dual meanings.

'My soul has grown deep like rivers.' This stand-alone line prefaces the issues that will be discussed in the following lines and makes the reader see that rivers are not like the long probing roots of a tree or human veins, but rivers are similar to the soul and like Hughes' quest for identity, never ending. When the speaker says that his soul is connection with the earth, he thrives and can understand. It is also significant that he says his soul has "grown" deep like the rivers since the idea that it "grows" further emphasizes the organic nature of knowledge and one's soul. Like tree roots that extend far into the earth, the speaker is "nourished" by roots, both in physical terms as well as in the metaphorical sense.

The third section changes the tone of the poem since it reverts to the first-person perspective. Although the reader knows it is impossible for one person to have lived in so many places and time periods at once, it is understood that the 'I' being used is meant to represent hundreds of thousands of voices from the past to the present. The speaker says, "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young/ I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled it me to sleep."

‘‘ The Negro Speaks of Rivers’’ expresses the great history of African Americans. The poem gives the reader a deeper insight into the battles of identity between African Americans and their surrounding society. The relationship of ancient rivers and African Americans’ experience with life defines the hidden symbolism within the poem. The importance of the poem’s structure provides solid for African American history. Further, the concept of imagery supplies detailed pictures to grasp African Americans’ background.’ The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ formulates an extensive and distinct history for African Americans.

The diction of the poem is simple and unaffected either by dialect or rhetorical excess. Its eloquence is like that of the best of the black spirituals. In a time and place when black life is held cheap and the days of black men appeared to be numbered, the poem is majestic reminder of the strength and fullness of history, of the source of that life which transcends even ceaseless labor and burning crosses. Hughes rarely indulges in a gratuitous idealization of land of his ancestors in spite of his discomfort at not being treated in his own country as a citizen on par with any other. Incidentally, the soul of the Negro in this poem goes back to Euphrates. It goes back to pre-racial dawn and a geography far from Africa that is identified with neither blackness nor whiteness – a geography at the time of Hughes’s writing considered the cradle of all the world’s civilizations and possibly the location of the Garden of Eden. In this poem about the depth of the Negro’s souls, Hughes avoids racial essentialism while nonetheless stressing the existential racial conditions of black and modern identity.

Every element in the poem combines to suggest that when the Negro Speaks of rivers, it is the accumulated wisdom of the sage. The function of a sage is to impart the sometimes secret but long accumulated history of a people to its younger members so that they might make the lessons of past active in the future. The wisdom imparted by the poem, beyond the memory of the suffering of slavery, includes a more deeply embedded memory of freedom. The poem boldly expresses the great history of African Americans. The poem gives the reader a deeper insight into the battles of identity between African American and their surrounding society.

Incidentally, Langston Hughes’ 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 is an African cosmogram titled Rivers (from ‘‘ The Negro Speaks of Rivers’’) Within the centre of cosmogram is the line : ‘ My soul has grown deep like the rivers’. Hughes’ words transcend time and are relevant for the contemporary reader. Readers are using his ideas to grapple with modern society’s challenges. The endurance, depth and contribution of Negroes or those who have been suppressed since ages, is deep like rivers. Although the issue of racism is not as severe as it was in Hughes’ era, the struggle still persists. Hughes helped the blacks confront the colour barrier and stereotypes associated with it. He was among the first of the black writers to point out that the blacks have a significant role to play in America’s rise to global

prominence. Resonating the concerns and challenges of contemporary man, the poem's message transcends the barrier of race and time.

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