



Post Slavery and the Plight of Black Americans: An Analysis of Langston Hughes' "Not without Laughter"

Christopher Ncube* and Alice Dhliwayo, PhD
Solusi University, Zimbabwe

*Corresponding Mail: chriscnubs@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper discussed the lives of black Americans in the Post Slavery period. It was believed that black Americans who were former slaves were then free from being treated brutally by the slave masters and that the whipping of the so called offenders was a thing of the past. On the contrary, Black Americans were not free to receive education, have access to legal marriages, own properties and enjoy all other benefits that an American should enjoy. Life after slavery was still difficult. The reality was that black Americans were free only in a narrow sense as they were still discriminated by the government institutions. This gave rise to activism and movements such as Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement. Great Black scholars, The Talented Tenth, such as Alice Walker, Du Bois, and Langston Hughes emerged. Not without Laughter is one of the books that Langston Hughes wrote. This paper is an analysis of civil injustices that Black Americans had to endure according to Hughes in Not without Laughter. Today, the situation has not changed much as racism is still rampant as depicted by violence still perpetrated against the Blacks. The rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement worldwide against the death of Floyd in the USA gives evidence to such. One encouraging aspect, though, is that the current President, Joe Biden is against racism as he has ordered that those that killed Floyd should face the full wrath of the law.*

Keywords: Racism, Black Americans, discrimination, plight; slavery

Introduction

When Abraham Lincoln, the then president of the United States issued a proclamation that slavery should be abolished as from the first of January 1863, people were filled with joy as slavery was an inhuman practice. The proclamation reads as follows:

That on the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any state, or designated part of a state shall then, thenceforward, and forever be free; and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act to repress such persons (Baillie, 2010).

The proclamation changed the status of people who were hitherto enslaved by the white Americans. The

abolition of slavery led 3.5 million blacks being set free. Despite the fact that slavery was abolished, the brutalities of white race prejudice continued over Black Americans. The governments of the South which was commonly referred to as Black Codes were instituted. Blacks were legalized to marry, own properties and they were able to sue in a court of law. However, still the law prohibited blacks from serving in state militias, testifying against whites and to serve as judges (Henry, 2021).

Black Americans in the South lived in desperate rural poverty; they rented land from the former slave masters. These were called sharecroppers as they paid rent in kind, by giving a portion of their crop to the land owner (Henry, 2021). The period of the reconstruction was the period after the emancipation of slaves. During this period, the congress passed and enforced laws that gave Black Americans the right to be American citizens. It was during the period of construction that saw seven hundred African American men employed in public

office (Henry, 2021). The black Americans' freedom was short-lived as Du Bois (1965, p. 48) metaphorically put it: "the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.

By the turn of the 20th century, almost all the southern states had stopped Black Americans from serving in public offices. They were also barred from voting. The South's new caste system which was based on race was thoroughly economic rather than social. Slavery had managed to boost the agricultural based economy but the civil war reversed all these agricultural gains much to the chagrin of the former slave masters (Ford & Bowman, 2017).

The former slave masters found a solution in the 13th amendment, which was an instrument that ended slavery effectively in 1865. This was through taking advantage of the provision that permitted the Whites to take black offenders for involuntary service to them as punishment for the crimes that they had committed. Ford & Bowan (2017) explain that:

Black men and sometimes women and children were arrested and convicted for crimes enumerated in the black Codes. These were state laws criminalizing petty offenses and aimed at keeping freed people tied to their former owners' plantations and farms. The most sinister crime was vagrancy-the crime of being unemployed, which brought a large fine that few blacks could afford to pay, hence they would be attached to the former slave masters.

About 20 000 former slaves who committed crimes found themselves back in the fields where they performed back breaking activities. Blackman (2013) comments that this was another form of slavery as forced labor was instituted in the name of 'punishment for the crimes committed. This was a push factor from the South. Migrations took place where an influx of Black Americans migrated to the North where there was a high demand of workers. The high demand of employment was caused by the new laws enacted that sought to reduce the influx of immigrants from Europe (Tracy, 2007). In this case, black migrants gained entry to new jobs in Northern manufacturing companies, but the problem was that discrimination was propagated as

blacks were paid less than their White counterparts who were doing similar jobs (Sacchi, 2021). The Blacks still worked as unskilled laborers. In some cases, Blacks were assigned to dangerous jobs such as cutting meat, blast furnaces and foundry departments, to mention but a few (Gross, 2010).

In the South, activists began to mushroom to speak or fight against the racial injustices that took place against the Blacks. Booker T. Washington was among persons who advocated for compromise. Discrimination was rife in the age of Jim Crow Laws (Miller, 2021). The Blacks in the South had myriads of challenges in accessing jobs and education. With the dawn of the Ku Klux Klan, the threat of retaliation was unavoidable. He argued that blacks should not seek to be equal with the whites Shultz (2007). He promoted subservience by blacks. They were to 'cast the bucket where they were.' This implied that the blacks would never be equal with the whites. He further advocated for menial jobs on the part of the black Americans (Wa Thiongo, 1981). To prove that he was serious about menial work, Booker went on to establish a school that trained people to serve the whites, even though Du Bois argued against this idea (Fox, 2010).

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement which involved the intellectuals and the resuscitation of culture by African Americans. This included music, theatre, art dance and literature (Miller, 2021). This period spanned between 1920 and 1930 and was commonly referred to as the age of the New Negro. The movement was established on the backdrop of the African Americans' quest for civil rights (Rosenblatt, 2014). Harlem was the final destination of the largest group of African American workers who migrated to the North. This was the period when writers took a pen and exposed the plight of the Negroes post slavery. Langston Hughes is one of those writers, and this paper sought to analyze the issues raised in his novel, *Not without Laughter* (Miller, 2021).

Langston Hughes (1902-1967).

James Mercer Langston Hughes was an American poet born after the abolition of slavery in America. He was a playwright, novelist, poet, columnist and a novelist. He hailed from the Southern State of Missouri and was educated at Lincoln University (Miller, 2021). It is believed that all his writings were done at one place, Lennox Street, in Harlem. He is known for his novel, *Not without Laughter*. He is also known as the best leader of the Renaissance. Baillie (2003, p. 16) maintains that:

Hughes and his contemporaries had different goals and aspirations than the black middle class. 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 within the black community based on skin color.

Thus, it is evident that he, just like all other African American writers,, wrote to depict that the United States was an unequal and inhuman society.

Analysis of Langston Hughes’ Not without Laughter (1930)

Not without Laughter is Langston Hughes’ debut novel which was published in 1930. It was Langston Hughes’ first prose work after he had published two of his verse works (Ogene, 2013). Moreover, it is a novel whose setting is Kansas City. The novel was written after the Civil War, a time when African Americans were left impoverished and had no choice but to work for the whites in order to earn a living, not as slaves but as sharecroppers (Hughes, 2008). Some opted to work as maids in white people’s homes. This paper took a thematic approach in analysing the plight of the black Americans working class in post slavery (Fargione, 2010).

Racism and Discrimination

Racism and discrimination run through the novel of Langston Hughes (Rosenblatt, 2014). Mrs Rice, Annjee’s employer mistreats her and rants at her while her son Sandy Rodgers listens and cries. This shows that to a great extent, the blacks who were serving as maids were ill-treated to a great extent. Jimboy, Sandy’s father was portrayed as having lost his job because of simply not being white. He, as a result, lost his job as a bricklayer. Another event of racism was evident when Harriet was forced to go to the back of the theatre while the whites went to watch a film. To this, Harriet said, “White folks run the world.” What happened to Harriet also happens to the protagonist of the novel when he was also told to sit at the back of the classroom while the front seats were occupied by whites. Another aspect of racism that disturbed Sandy’s emotions was that he was involved in the collection of coupons for the free children’s day party which in the end turned out to be a whites only event (Hughes, 2008).

Loss of Identity

The theme of loss of identity as a plight that the working class, that African descent in America faced, is made manifest in the character of Tempy. She was portrayed as having two identities. She identifies herself with whites and feels uncomfortable to worship in a church full of blacks. She says: “Too many low Niggers...I want to go where de best people go” (Hughes, 2008).

This shows that some black Americans were beginning to break away from their identity and culture because they wanted to associate themselves with a better group of people (Sacchi, 2021). The issue of identity bothered Sandy as he compared the lives of the three daughters of Hager. He was thrown into a dilemma. This was in line with a quandary expressed by Du Bois (1965, p. 215) when he said: “One ever feels twoness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled striving, two warring ideas in one dark body.”

Fragmented Family Unit

The plight that the African Americans faced in post slavery is that husbands did not stay with their nucleus family. Jimboy was nomadic. He moved from place to place either to look for work or for leisure. This was in line with what Du Bois (1965) observed that the absent father over-burdened the wife as she became both father and mother to the child or children (Rosenblatt, 2014). This practice was exactly what was happening during slavery where the man was separated from his family for a very long time (Ogene, 2013). The unemployment rate in Santon was reported as very low. Those who worked in Santon had to bear with low wages. Jimboy relocated to Detroit in the North where he found a job in a car assembly plant. He invited his wife over and left Hager to look after Sandy. Tempy’s husband was also like Jimboy. He was absent from home most of the time (Hughes, 2008). Such was the plight of black Americans after slavery.

The Elusive Education

Another plight that the Negroes experienced is that although they were able to attend school, there were socio-economic factors that hindered them from achieving and acquiring the education that would enable them to live normal lives Baillie, 2003). Annjee did not have the opportunity to receive education, but her sister Harriet had that exposure. She was frustrated by racism and the

discrimination prevalent in her school. She found no value in education as Hager said:

...Harriet says she aint goin' back next fall. I feels right hurt over it, but she 'clares she ain't goin' back to school. Says there ain't no use in learning books for nothin' but to work in white folks' kitchens when she's graduated (Hughes, 2008, p. 78).

Sandy was forced by economic circumstances to work in a Barber shop where he learnt to understand that Harriet, his Aunt, was a prostitute. He quitted his job in the barber shop and went to the hotel where he saw nude women. He later joined his father and mother in Detroit and served as an elevator manager. He still wanted to go back to school but he was not brave enough to leave his job.

Deplorable Working Conditions

The working conditions of black Americans were full of abuse and were deplorable (Ogene, 2003). Jimboy was engaged in a back breaking task of putting down railroad equipment and he became sick and left to recover at home. Similarly, Annjee developed pneumonia like symptoms because of walking long distances to and from work. Annjee, Sandy's mother was treated like a child by Mrs Rice. She shouted at Annjee while Sandy listened and broke down in tears. Sandy found a job at Drummer lodge and he saw that the conditions of work and the environment was conducive to him. He was abused by whites and he tossed the shoe-shine box in the air and left.

Harriet was taken advantage of at the hotel where she worked. Whites treated her as a sex object. She quitted her job because of the deplorable conditions. Her job as a waiter was also not conducive to her. This explains why she left as well.

Social Class Stratification

The entire book of Langston Hughes is about socio-economic differences. The three daughters of Hager in the names of Annjee, Temy, and Harriet provide evidences of social inequalities. Hager was a poor African American woman who is portrayed as a maid in the novel. She was failing to make ends meet. She lived in a small house. Annjee was also poor together with her husband. They were unable to provide for their only son. They failed to buy Sandy a meaningful Christmas present. At some point, Sandy was forced to wear his mother's shoes.

Sandy's father Jimboy was forced by circumstances to seek employment. What he earned was not enough to sustain his family. He turned to Blues music. The Open University writer has this to say about Blues music: "Blues emerged from the oppressed, economically disadvantaged African American communities in the rural Southern States....Blues was the means of maintaining the social identities and at times, the outpouring of emotions was done through blues" (Hughes, 2008).

Jimboy and Harriet were the two characters that were engulfed by music and dance. Seemingly, this was the copying mechanism for their failures in life. Harriet took after her brother in law and became a musician so that people would pay to watch her performance on stage. Hager thought that this kind of music was evil and she hated it when Jimboy played his guitar.

The second type of class was represented by Harriet who was depicted as one who had less respect for the whites. At the same time, she had less respect for her culture. After quitting school, she became a prostitute and harbours. Harriet represented the plight of the African American girl who had been frustrated by the system, could not find a job and could not get an education that could liberate her (Rosenblatt, 2014). So she decided to live a life of self-indulgence and became a social outcast as she was arrested for prostitution (Fargione, 2010).

Temy was a symbol of a wealthy class of African Americans. The class or the black bourgeoisie is summed up thus:

Colored people needed to encourage talent among the Black Americans so that the white race would realize that the Negroes weren't all merely guitar players and housemaids.....and the whites had the money, and if Negroes wanted any the quicker they learned to be like the whites in terms of utilizing their talents, the better. Stop being lazy, stop singing all the time, stop attending revivals, and learn to get the dollar because money buys everything, even the respect of white people (Hughes, 2008, p. 252).

This is about the then philosophy of emancipation through education and acquired good manners. Temy epitomized this type of philosophy as her house was different from Hager's in a great degree. She was fortunate to be married to her husband, a

man from the middle class. In her house, Tempy had books of Washington and Du Bois. She thought positively and inculcated in Sandy the value of education and she promised to pay for his education. Such was the plight of the African Americans that they lived in an unequal society (Rosenblatt, 2014). The lighter one's skin was the higher the level of respect.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative study. It was a review of a fiction novel by Langstone Hughe's *Not without Laughter*. The text was selected for its themes of racism and social-political and economic climate for the former Black population of the United States of America. The study sought to ascertain the level of liberty and rights attainment by Blacks then and now, and also the protracted struggle as a reflection on post colonialism in Africa today.

Results and Discussion

Post-slavery America in Hughes' days was a new form of slavery for the Blacks as segregatory laws were enacted to ensure continued economic dependency of Blacks on Whites.

African Americans were racially discriminated against by the white Americans after the abolishment of slavery. House maids were treated with contempt and disrespect by their white employers. Employment in many cases was based on the skin color, especially in the South. This explains why the black Americans started to migrate to the North.

The socio-economic situation that prevailed in the post slavery era resulted in some black Americans' loss of their cultural identities where they embraced a culture and attitude which was alien to them. Blacks began to look down upon fellows, especially those who were lucky to be economically emancipated.

The lack of employment opportunities for black Americans was a push factor that caused men to leave their wives to look for greener pastures in the North. This resulted in the fragmentation of the families as women were left to look after the children. This was the situation during slavery where men worked far away from their families.

The blacks could not receive the type of education that the whites enjoyed as the former dropped out of school due to racism and discrimination. This explains why many black Americans could not be absorbed to participate in the mainstream economy

and were only given opportunities to do menial jobs both in the South and in the North.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section presents the conclusions with corresponding recommendations of the study.

Conclusion

It is evident from the writings of Hughes (2008) that literature is indeed timeless. The issues addressed in Hughe's *Not without laughter* are still currently bedeviling Blacks in America today. Recently the world adopted the "Black Lives Matter" slogan that was instigated by the killing of Floyd, a black American by White Policemen where one of them put his knee on Floyd's neck. Despite the strides of civilization and the distance of America from the slavery era, it is clear from news headlines and continued rights movements in that country that racial issues raised by Hughes in 1930 in *without Laughter* are still current in that same society.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the following:

Blacks in America should not be discriminated against. They should not be subjected to abuse in the hands of the whites that they work for. An America that gives job opportunities to all, regardless of skin color, would be an ideal parameter for employing people.

The blacks in America should be encouraged to find their roots and avoid despising their own people just because they are lower than them in the economic sense.

America has to offer descent jobs to blacks as well so that the Black Americans may stop leaving their wives and mothers in search for a better life as this will continue to fragment the African American families while the whites maintain the value of being together as a nucleus family.

Education should be accessible to all classes of society. Discrimination against other races should also be alleviated so as to give all races a chance to attain classical education that would economically emancipate them.

References

- Baillie, J. (2003) *Contesting ideologies: deconstructing racism in African-American fiction, women: a cultural review*, 14:1. 20-37, DOI: 10.1080/0957404032000081683

- Blackman, D. (2013). Slavery By Another Name in e.m.wikipedia.org accessed 20June 2021.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1965). The Souls of Black Folks in Three Negro Classics. With introduction by John Hope Franklin. New York. The Heast Corporation. www.palgrav e.com/gp/book/9 783319428925
- Fargione, D. (2010). Black African American literature. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ujah/article/view/95396>.
- Ford, K.K. and Bowman, B. (2017). Exploiting Black labour after the abolition of slavery. Massachusetts. Amherst.
- Fox, E. (2010). Slavery in White and Black Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders. New York Cambridge University Press. www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature
- Gross, J.A. (2010). Slavery and Abolition. *A Journal of Slave and Post Slave Studies. California* 12(3). 12 -20 [www.palgrave .com/gp /book/9783319428925](http://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319428925).
- Henry, S. (2021). *The impact of racism on African American families*. Khan Academy. www.khanacademy.org.
- Hughes, L. (2008). *Not Without Laughter*. New York. Dover Print. www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/10-black-authors-to-read.
- Miller, B. (2021) *Don Made us Leave our homes*. jstor,.org/stable.
- Ogene, M. S. (2013). Black American literature and the problem of racism, slavery and oppression in the post slavery era: a reappraisal of dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*. [https://www.ajol.info /index.php/ujah/article/view/95396](https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ujah/article/view/95396) *Unizik journal of Arts and Humanities* 14(1)46 -55
- Rosenblatt, P.C. (2014). *The Impact of racism on African American families: literature as social science*. [https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereview ofbook s/2014/04/18/book-review-the-impact-of-racism/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/04/18/book-review-the-impact-of-racism/).
- Sacchi, M. (2021). *The Politics of identification in post emancipation martinique* New York. Macmillan.
- Shultz, E. (2007). Natural and unnatural consequences in Not Without Laughter. Columbia. University of Missouri Press.<http://www.missouri.co.cl>
- Tracy, S.C. (2007). Langstone Hughes and Aunt Hager's Children Blues. Columbia. University of Missouri Press. <http://www.missouri.co.cl>
- Wa Thiongo N. (1981). Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature. Nairobi. Heinemann