

RESEARCH ARTICLE



WOMEN PORTRAYALS IN FINE CLOTHES TO THE JEW

SWARNA SRI YADADA

MA, M Phil, PGDL, UGC NET & AP SET

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam-530003, India.



Abstract

One of the heroes of the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes. He gave voice to African American women's plight in America. His poems are written in free verse and so they reach the masses easily. *Fine Clothes to the Jew* is one of the beautiful collections of poems that deal with men and women, their jobs, hopes, troubles, racism, and religion. The women's lives are portrayed lifelike in his poems. The article will analyse how he portrays the women characters and his mission in doing it.

Key Words: African American poetry, Harlem, African American women, blues and jazz.

SWARNA SRI YADADA

Introduction

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is known for his colourful verses on various topics deeply steeped in the distinctive aspects of African American life with musical and blues rhythms. His collections of poetry include *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *One Way Ticket* (1949), *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), *Ask your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961) and *the Panther and the Lash* (1967) exemplified his remarkable fidelity to the literary vocation. The significant themes in Langston Hughes's work emerge from his personal life, travels, involvement in radical and protest movements, and interest in Africa, America and the Caribbean. His cultural heritage was a vivacious one. His poetic work revolves around racism, but he is not a racist. He always opts to speak to all Americans, especially on the issues of social, economic, and political justice. During Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes achieved eminence and respectability for his ability to express African American experience in his works. Hughes was the most influential and resourceful twentieth-century African American writer. He believes that American Blacks who have grown up in America are no more Africans but are Americans. They have the right to

exercise freedom in America as the Whites do. So, in his verse, he focuses on the deteriorated lives and livelihoods of the Negro masses in the urban backdrop of America. He aims to make people aware of the seamy sides of their lives.

Especially in his second collection of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Hughes presents a realistic depiction of Harlem life and the problems are faced by African Americans, especially elevator operators, porters, roustabouts, cabaret dancers, singers, job searchers, prostitutes and ordinary people walking down the street. He strives hard to draw out their conditions, emotions, feelings, hardships, etcetera. It is a more impersonal and innovative presentation of the Metropolis Black community in America. His voice sets the background for male and female characters in this fine collection. This poetry collection is a platform where readers can grasp an accurate social picture. The shown characters pour out their experiences, tales of their lives, thoughts, sensations etc., individually. His work also mirrors the gender racial conditions, harsh working conditions, and sociological conditions.

Hughes's writing is a broad spectrum of black women's amiability, strength, beauty, vulnerabilities, victimisation, insight, creative talent and sensuality. In other words, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* is a commensurate subject of the multilayer texture of black women's lives in American metropolis in the 1920s. It brings the readers to "the idea of Langston Hughes as a black male feminist." (Steven 132) Hughes never portrays women negatively though he talks about women of loose character or unrestrained nature. He targets the conditions which make women exist in such appalling conditions. The best examples of this category are "Gypsy Man," "Ballad of Gin Mary," "Ruby Brown", and "Red Silk Stockings."

In "Gypsy Man", a black woman pours out her life experiences. She is lonely as her man possesses the traits of a gypsy and therefore fails to quench her heart's thirst. He never tries to give her his company. So, she tries to adopt her man's nature—"wandering." She is in search of the right kind of man. She finds a yellow papa (Mulatto in origin). She gives him all her possessions—heart and money which she has earned. Unfortunately, she has not been given anything by him. So, ultimately, she notices the fact. The poem is quoted from the collection edited by Rampersad:

Love, Oh, love is
Such a strange disease.
Love, Oh, love is
Such a strange disease.
When it hurts yo' heart you
Sho can't find no ease. (78)

This poem delineates a variety of important issues— how the family fabric is attenuated by the negligence of a man in the black society, and of how a black woman is drifted towards prostitution or extramarital relationships in quest of love or to move away from loneliness, and of how a woman is exploited emotionally and financially.

In "Ballad of Gin Mary," Mary Jane is friendless, wholly addicted to gin, and on the cover, time taken to court for alcoholism. Judge Pierce looks at her since she is familiar with the court scene. She is jailed for eighteen months and does not bother about imprisonment. Her extreme worry is the deprivation of her tenure in jail. She had adopted this habit to alleviate her deserted life.

In "Ruby Brown," a beautiful black youth feels that prostitution is the better opportunity that can bring her recognition and money. She does not find this benefit in any other domestic job. Fulfilling

the physical needs of white men is an easier way to make money for black girls than any other means. They are even ready to be away from their folk. In this way, their promising future is indirectly the bud or crushed under the whites' sensuality. The black youth are attracted to prostitution for its availing opportunities, but they are not aware of imperceptible problems which occur in the latter part of their lives. This realisation has been highlighted in the poem "A Ruined Gal." It depicts the onerous demands of a black prostitute after her youth. Realisation dawned on her that the wrongs committed in her youth deprived her of even becoming a bride. She is left companionless for the rest of her life.

Many African American women are discouraged when their men leave them. They feel depressed and try to end their lives. Only a few have enough courage to lead their lives and to, somehow or the other, divert their minds. Hughes depicts this issue through the different perceptions of women in many portrayals of feeble and strong-minded women.

A couple of women in verse reflect their association with "Misery" and "Suicide. They are deceived and left out by their men. In the first case, the black girl wants to come out of her misery boldly by paying her whole attention to hear blues—"Play de blues for me. / Play de blues for me / No other music / 'Ll ease ma misery. //'" (76) She believes that only the blues has the elixir power to soothe her wounded heart. And there is a hope to come out of her misery from the routine. Whereas, In the second case, the woman decides to end desperately. She is in search searching for the better means or devices to die or bring tranquillity by it.

In "Evil woman," the male lover declares that he will kill his "Good gal" the next time as she makes him "sore." He says that though he treats her kindly, she does not treat him well. Instead, she quarrels with him almost every night. He calls her a 'blue gummed woman' from the South. He says he will send her back or use her head for "a carpet tack."

Here Hughes lets the black man speak of his hostile attitude towards his woman. Perhaps, she quarrels with him for his maltreatment or the sense of emancipation from his boorish male supremacy. "And her dark skin and southern training have made her strong intolerant of maltreatment." (Steven 129) Throughout his poetry, statements of insinuation have been made. Unless the reader delves deeper or knows the background of Afro-Americans in the Harlem Renaissance, he cannot comprehend

Hughes's implied sense or his profound ideas and sarcasm.

In the poem "Bad Man," a man suffers from imposed badness. He carries the burden of imposed badness and a sense of relief from this sort of pain, liquor along with him wherever he goes. He beats his women and is unaware of the reasons for his actions. He does not want to get rid of such notions or impressions of others. And he never expects better living conditions as he is already accustomed to them. He wants to suffer in this way forever.

His frustration or some other feeling perhaps compels him to behave so. The deeds of society victimise women. They are discriminated against or maltreated with double fold—race-wise and gender-wise. White society mistreats black men and women. Black men treat women consciously or unconsciously so bad with frustration.

In "Beale Street Love," Clorinda wants to accept her man's cruelty in the name of love. In her life, love is—

Love

Is a brown man's fist

With hard knuckles

Crushing the lips,

Blackening the eyes, (97)

This kind of harassment or brutality is not allowed by Cora in the poem named "Cora." She shuts and locks her heart because she is hurt by her man that morning. She does not want to be belittled in the name of love or even to search for another man's love. The readers can find the evolution of women psychologically. In the first case, the woman of loyal nature is presented, but in the second case, the woman of mental maturity is depicted.

In "Lament over Love," a frustrated-love victimised woman wishes that her child should not get such a problem—

I hope ma chile'll

Never love a man.

I say I hope ma chile'll

Never love a man.

Cause love can hurt you

Mo'n anything else can. (109)

Though she is aware of her being cheated by her lover, she likes to float in his memories. She

does not try to give him up in her thoughts. She believes one's happiness lies in love. Love is a kind of obsession to her. In her case, love is— Love is like whiskey, / love is like red, red wine. /....If you wants to be happy / You go to love all de time. //” (109) Her thoughts concerning love haunt her wherever she goes— perhaps it is a river, or it is a tower as tall as a tree. She only thinks of him. Her ultimate decision is to “fall” her “fool-self”.

A large proportion of this collection is about black males' mistreatment or exploitation of black women who have settled in different occupations, including homemakers. Hughes portrays women as love-seekers, amiable characters, self-sacrificing women, and women of forgiving nature who endure men's weaknesses. The black males beat and drag their counterparts down the streets, shattering black women emotionally and financially, and men's preference for light-skinned women etc.

In "Bound No'th Bluea," a Northern American black woman who is a gregarious kind likes to share her encumbered heart with somebody. She feels that love is a better substitute for eschewing loneliness. Nothing is found in front of her except a long road in the North. She walks on it continuously, which stands for her life's journey. She desires to meet a good pal and hates to be lonely and sad. But, she is futile in her attempt. She does not find any such destination in her life except disenchantment. This poem tells us how lonely one in industrial North America is even though people surround one. Modernity separates one from another. The people who are longing for family bonds or friendship bonds appear to be foolish. The following paradoxical lines support the essence of the poem:

Love is a protection against loneliness; but in love, as in other life experiences, things are not always what they seem. Things sometimes start out good, end up bad. Treachery in love and friendship sometimes forces one into self-protective... (Onwucheka 12)

It is proved in the case of women from the poems "Lament over Love," "Listen Here Blues," and "Cora." A woman who can not make herself come out of love wishes her child not to fall in it. She strongly believes that when he or she falls in love, it causes one to feel hurt. Another woman who is a victim of love and addiction warns the youth to be cautious of dangers to them. Cora is another black girl who does not want to humiliate herself by falling in love with another man, so she makes her heart impermissible in seeking or making love. These women strongly defend themselves against love as they are victimised in the name of love.

In "Gal's Cry for a Dying Lover," a black girl is lamenting a lynching lover who treats her kind though she is a "Black an' ugly." She prays for God's mercy not to take her kind man's life when she hears bad omens like "de owl a hootin'" and "Hound dawg's barkin'."

"Song for a Dark Girl" describes a black woman's lamentation over the loss of her lynched lover. She does not blame the white society, but she seeks justice from "the white Lord Jesus." She has lost her beloved with this racial violence of lynching. It haunts her throughout her life—"Way Down South in Dixie/ (Bruised body high in air)" and "Love is a naked shadow/ On a gnarled and naked tree." (107) "Young Gal's Blues" is a fine blend of a girl's practical bent of mind and mechanical attitude to life. It emerges out of her grief. She wants to accompany her dead friend, Cora Lee, to the graveyard because one day she will die, and somebody will walk behind her. She comprehends that death is the inevitable occurrence of death in one's life. Her perception is quite different from others as they usually participate in the funeral rites concerning the dead person.

She wants to visit her old Aunt Clew because she is also growing older and will expect somebody's visit at the later stages of her life. Her failure of love makes her think so desperately and makes her day-to-day activities of life mechanical. The sense of loss in love makes her feel about the death of life and old age. She questions what a young girl can do when love is gone. The days seem like lonely and cold. She feels love is an eventual step to living happily in one's youth. So, she craves love—"Keep on a-lovin' me, daddy, / Cause I don't want to be blue. //" (111) Black women's lives revolve around love. They try to find happiness, life and enjoyment in love. They are deeply hurt when they are deprived of it. It is one of the serious issues many writers have neglected in Harlem literature. But Hughes speaks of every issue which affects the black woman directly or indirectly.

In "Listen Here Blues," an experienced woman addresses the young girls as "sweet girls" and "good girls" and asks them to away from gin and whiskey, which makes them lose their virtue or chastity or virginity or innocence. She used to be a good child, but this liquor habit makes her "everybody's fool." These habits prompt them to go to men. Perhaps they bring misery in the name of love or some other thing. Here she declares that the men cause women's sad state. This kind of thought comes over the minds of black women as they experience cheating, brutality, insults and all kinds of suffering from men.

Male egoistic sense is vividly found in the poem "Hard Daddy." So, she wishes to have wings like the eagle and scratch his two eyes. It has an autobiographical note—Hughes encountered racial rejection from his father. He regretted having such feelings and had even separated from him. Psychologically, this incident affected and disturbed him for a while. But, he emerged from it and proved himself to be a renowned Negro artist and a racial mountain throughout his writings.

In "Baby," Hughes portrays a cautious mother who warns her child, Albert, not to play on the road since it is unsafe due to plying which run over him. This poem represents the tender and protective hearts of black mothers. This verse has a significant symbolic note—black people may be trampled under the advanced and materialistic white nation. So, the African American sagacious soul warns her youth to be aware of that and not lead their lives in the arena of the white folk.

In "Minnie Sings Her Blues," a black girl's reminiscence about her celebrations of love at the cabaret speaks of her blissful mind. It is the place where she and her man leave their troubles at the door. They dance with each other to jazz music. She proudly says that no other girl would have a chance to dance with him when she cuddles up to him. But now, she comes to reality and pours her sad heart through the "blues" music. In time, she deserted her man, and so, she explains to herself that she is not loved by him and decides that her ultimate step is to die—"If he didn't love me/ I'd go away/ An' dig me a grave this very day. //" (101)

Black women's superstitious notions are found in the poems like "Gal's Cry for Dying Lover" and "Bad Luck Card." In the former one, the owl's hooting and dog's barking bring to a black girl's mind that somebody especially close to her is about to die. In the later poem, a black girl who her lover rejects associates her bad luck with the gypsy man's fortune-telling. He shows her a bad luck card and says he would have killed himself if he were in her place. She bluntly believes in it and imagines that she is such an unfortunate girl.

In "Dressed Up", a black girl's inferiority complex is shown vividly. She wore clean clothes, a fine hat and new shoes, yet she may not be loved or looked at by anyone. She is dissatisfied with her skin colour, which is the reason for her desolation in love.

Some black women grab even the sordid aspect of their men as pleasant memories. Love dominates them. For example, the woman in "Ma

Man” celebrates her happiness with her man as follows: “Eagle-rockin’, / Daddy, eagle-rock with me. / Honey baby, / Eagle-rockish as I kin be! /” (114) Instead, she regrets that she loves his vulnerabilities as much as she loves his strengths. She says that his grave look and harsh deeds (“electric shocking eyes” and “he shocks me”), gloomy nature and alcoholic habit are as sweet as his gift of playing the banjo. It is a beautiful thing to discuss that many women before the twentieth century had the quality of accepting their men wholeheartedly with their strengths and vulnerabilities. These African American women are not exceptional cases. However, modernity affects the minds of many women on the European and Asian continents since they look for better persons to be their partners. They are intolerable of their men’s exploitation or fallibilities, but this change does not occur among the black women of America. They are the perfect models for amiability and fidelity.

“Closing Time” is a poem about a drowned black young girl. The poet evokes our attention by saying she remains “blue-white.” Indirectly he speaks of her lifelessness or death. The hubbub of taxi drivers and divers and their terse responses in that scenario create suspense, but the narrator is clever enough to say, “The river and the moon hold the memories.” He does not reveal the reasons for her death. Society shows no sign of sympathy towards her end. The formal funeral process is people’s ultimate goal to calm the situation.

A black girl’s obsession with death is notable in the poem “Mammy.” It signifies end to her. She is awaiting her mammy, i.e. death. She asks the one who takes such a decision to meet death, to speak “softly” and “slowly.” She compares death with mammy as the mother gives peace to her turbulent heart or mother stands for solace and friendliness. This poem reminds us of Emily Dickinson’s fascination with death as it was her friend, lover, provider of immortality etc. We are not aware of the girl’s reasons for awaiting death. Perhaps, she calls death mammy to keep the facts and her suffering secret.

The poems “Closing Time” and “Mammy” show us black women’s disgust towards existence. The former ends her life without speaking of her problems, and the latter waits for her doom day. They are reluctant to speak of their difficulties but think death is the ultimate solution to their troubles.

Conclusion

The anthology analysis has found that Hughes does not evaluate what is good and bad in women’s lives. He elevates what they are; how are their living conditions, how do their psychological

phenomena work in the course of their misery, and what are the aspects affect them the most through their tales. He speaks of their emotions. Often, he is one among them to talk about their problems. He views their issues from a humanitarian point of view. He condemns the worst situation indirectly by making people think of them. Sometimes, he probes the minds of his protagonists by discussing every aspect of their lives and the other times; he leaves it to the readers to interpret the implicit meaning of his verse to extract the truth of their lives. His poetry gives a more extensive scope to understand the lives of black women. Many of the tales witness the cause of their suffering. Society, as well as its men, is the reason for their endless suffering.

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