

نظرية فانون للبشرة السوداء والأقنعة البيضاء

في شعر لانجستون هيوز

أ.م.حيدر جبر محسن

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية - كلية التربية

جامعة الكوفة العراق

Fanon's Theory of Black Skin and White Masks in Langston Hughes's Poetry

Haider Jabr Mihsin

Department of English – Faculty of Education

University of Kufa, Iraq.

Email: Hayderj.mohsin@uokufa.edu.iq
Haideralkuzaiv@gmail.com

Abstract

Langston Hughes is regarded as one of the most renowned African-American poets whose poetry is teemed with such themes as his refusal of the racial inequality. This research intends to analyze his poetry from a postcolonial approach and to do so, the viewpoints of Frantz Fanon will be applied. Fanon's theories play a major part in a better comprehension of novels, plays, and poems which turn around the subject of the colonized and the colonizers. It is found that African-American people like Hughes had to encounter a lot of challenging experiences due to living in a world that used to be mostly under the control of white people. This authority empowered the white society to impose a racial image on black people, the image which is proven to have its roots in colonialization. Therefore, it is not surprising how the black identity was enforced on African-American people by the society in which they were living. This issue discloses the fact that the color of skin and race restricted their social identity which was totally trivial in itself and led to such problems as alienation and psychological opposition.

Key Terms: alienation, Frantz Fanon, identity, Langston Hughes, psychological opposition.

المخلص

يعتبر لانجستون هيوز أحد أشهر الشعراء الأمريكيين الأفارقة الذين يعج شعركم بموضوعات مثل رفضه لعدم المساواة العرقية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل شعره من منظور ما بعد الاستعمار ، وللقيام بذلك ، سيتم تطبيق وجهات نظر فرانتز فانون. تلعب نظريات فانون دورًا رئيسيًا في فهم أفضل للروايات والمسرحيات والقصائد التي تدور حول موضوع المستعمر والمستعمر. لقد وجد أن الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي مثل هيوز واجهوا الكثير من التجارب الصعبة بسبب العيش في عالم كان في الغالب تحت سيطرة الأشخاص البيض. مكنت هذه السلطة المجتمع الأبيض من فرض صورة عرقية على السود ، الصورة التي ثبت أن لها جذورها في الاستعمار. لذلك ، ليس من المستغرب كيف تم فرض الهوية السوداء على الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي من قبل المجتمع الذي كانوا يعيشون فيه. يكشف هذا الموضوع حقيقة أن لون الجلد والعرق حد من هويتهم الاجتماعية التي كانت تافهة تمامًا في حد ذاتها وأدت إلى مشاكل مثل الاغتراب والمعارضة النفسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاغتراب ، فرانتز فانون ، الهوية ، لانجستون هيوز ، معارضة نفسية

Background of the Study

Postcolonialism is a significant literary approach and analyzes the effects of colonization; thus, it is getting more and more applicable in literature. As a matter of fact, postcolonialism is all about the way through which cultures and societies are influenced by colonization. There are lots of distinguished postcolonial intellectuals like Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) whose theories play an imperative role in a better comprehension of novels, plays, and poems which turn around this subject.

Fanon explains how a colonized subject has to signify the stereotype of a white person in order to be valued and approved of by Europeans (Rayan 2012:117-118). He has also emphasized the multilayered association between imperialism and identity as an essential theme in postcolonial writings. Imperialism has in fact affected many social structures and events through the history such as gender equality, culture, and identity.

Fanon (2001) has argued that for colonizers, a colonized country indicates “the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals- in short, the negro country” (170). Nevertheless, he claimed that the colonized societies should not be ashamed of their past, because it is full of pride, glory, and importance (169).

Fanon’s theories have inspired many dominant postcolonial scholars as well. For example, Edward Said has benefitted from his outlooks regarding “binaries” (‘othering’) to show that a lifelong practice of false and idealized images performed as an oblique reasoning for Europe and the USA’s colonial and imperial wishes.

Homi Bhabha has also used Fanon’s viewpoints in developing his concepts of mimicry and hybridity in order to challenge the colonial construction of binary oppositions (center/margin, civilized/savage, enlightened/ignorant), meaning that cultures interconnect, defy, and change each other in a much more multifarious way than binary oppositions allow (McEwan 2018:76-79).

Statement of the Problem

McLeod (2000) remarks that at the turn of the twentieth century the British Empire colonized a huge area of the world, such as some parts of Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, and Ireland (7). Colonization has had such a remarkable influence that even now many writers and poets show their preoccupation with it and its side effects. The reason is because of the matter of an independent identity as an essential necessity that would be deprived of many human beings by colonizers.

One of these poets is Langston Hughes. James Mercer Langston Hughes (1901–1967) was an American poet, activist, novelist, dramatist, and journalist. This American poet is well-known as a frontrunner of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance signifies an intellectual and ethnic restoration of African-American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theater and politics in Harlem, Manhattan, New York City, covering the 1920s and 1930s.

In the realm of literature, this movement let the African-Americans use art in order to demonstrate their request for equivalence. Hughes excellently wrote about the era that “the Negro was in vogue”, which was later rephrased as “when Harlem was in vogue” (Francis 2002:28). He explained his motivation in writing poetry as it follows, “I only really feel like writing when I am unhappy, bored or else have something I need very much to say, or that I feel so strongly about I cannot hold it

back” (Hughes et al. 2001:237). Thus, it can be inferred that his poetry is a reflection of his personal life.

Up to now, the poetry of Langston Hughes has been the subject of so many studies and papers. For example, Patterson’s “Jazz, Realism, and the Modernist Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes” (2000) seeks to demonstrate how modernist experimentations in some poems of Hughes are in harmony with his previous efforts at lyric realism. Patterson has concentrated on two chief views. The first is that Hughes’s poems contest the critical division between “realism” and the “avant-garde” and the second is that Hughes’s realist attitude to the lyric proposes a new standpoint regarding some dominant trends in “transatlantic” modernism.

In another article entitled “Religion in the Poetry of Langston Hughes”, Culp (1987) argues that as a “folklorist” Hughes attempted to seize the spirit of every facet of black culture and its religion played an important role in this respect. In fact, religious sensation has been continuously inter-reliant with racial feeling in his poetry. He would consider religion in the larger context of black culture by showing it as a foundation of power for the repressed (240).

“Historical Allusions as Stylistic Strategy in the Poetry of Langston Hughes” (2016) by Eyang discusses that Hughes’ poetry meant to describe black people’s existential problems, wishes, and concerns; this is why his ground-breaking literary involvement is obviously cultivated by historical allusions. Moreover, in *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes* (2004), a comprehensive assortment of critics has been gathered in order to create an interdisciplinary approach to the significant historical and cultural features reproduced in the diversity of genres in which Hughes was involved.

In spite of countless articles and books which have analyzed Langston Hughes’ poetry, there remains a gap concerning the examination of his poems through the viewpoints of Frantz Fanon. The significance of choosing this theorist’s theories as the current study’s main methodology is that they probe into such issues as suppression, coercion, confrontation, and race.

On Frantz Fanon

Black Skin, White Masks (1952) is an important book by Fanon in which he refers to his own experiences through presenting a historical examination of the effects of racism on human beings’ consciousness as the consequence of colonization. It can be stated that *Black Skin, White Masks* analyzes the copious ways through which identity, mainly Blackness, is formed. Fanon assumed that whites will always enforce a feeling of humility on black people, and by doing so, they make the black people stuck in a minor position inside a colonial hierarchy.

The Wretched of the Earth (1963) is one of the most substantial works by Fanon in which he has condemned the subject of nationalism, and through examinations of nationalism, he has discussed the individual and societal mental health, and the way using language is practiced in order to cultivate imperialist individuality. This book also comprises an essay as “On National Culture”. In this essay, Fanon has written about how a national culture will ascend among the formerly and still-colonized countries of Africa. Fanon has acknowledged that a national culture should be shaped based on the material clash of people against colonial authority.

In the closing sections of the essay, Fanon has commented that founding a national culture is not an aim in itself, but a “stage” to a larger international unity.

The struggle for national culture makes a discontinuity from the lesser position that was imposed on the nation by colonization, which in turn leads to a national realization. He has stated that this national realization which is the consequence of the struggle started by the people, exemplifies the highest system of national culture (1963:91-111).

In her article as “National Liberation, Consciousness, Freedom and Frantz Fanon” (1992:427), Caludia Wright has chiefly focused on such vital aspects of Fanon’s attitude as self-consciousness and the liberty of the individual through the national consciousness and the national liberation struggle in relationship with social revolution, and the autonomy and development of the country in the route of decolonization. In fact, Wright has stated that all three of these features of his outlook are essentially linked to his dissertation on decolonization, nationalism, and the problem of freedom.

Green-Simms has also indicated in “Just to See: Fanon, National Consciousness, and the Indiscreet Look in Post-Third Cinema” (2011) that in spite of the viewpoint of lots of postcolonial theorists that “the nation-state is on its last legs”, the probability of national consciousness, as Fanon declared, has not totally given way to the imagined problems. Fanon has described a kind of national consciousness that can be perfectly national, and therefore, “oppositional” only by satisfying the profits of those who have been “cast aside by the national bourgeoisie” (203-223).

On Langston Hughes

Taylor’s “*Ain’t You Heard?*”: *The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes* (2009) is an attempt to define how Hughes could demonstrate the musical expressions of jazz in his writings, especially in his collection of jazz poetry, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Hence, Taylor seeks to show how just from the very beginning of the collection, Hughes depended on the numerous practices of jazz, such as boogie-woogie and bebop both rhetorically and thematically.

The Collected Works of Langston Hughes (2001) which is extremely helpful in studying this famous poet’s poems contains the thorough texts of four books of poetry by Hughes, including his first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926), and his second, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), in addition to his other poems which were printed throughout and after the Harlem Renaissance.

Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942-62 (1995) is another significant book about Hughes. According to this book, Langston Hughes has been referred to as the “Dean of Black Letters” and the “poet low-rate of Harlem.” Also, he was a writer for the celebrated African-American newspaper the *Chicago Defender* in which he reflected the desires and misery of black people for twenty years. This book is in fact the first gathering of Hughes’ true-life journalistic writings.

Miller’s *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes* (1989) discusses Hughes’ life and art in order to widen the readers’ horizon regarding this poet’s influence on American letters. Besides, this book can be viewed as one of the principal studies which has benefitted from current approaches of literary analysis, including formalist, structuralist, and semiotic criticism, to the analysis of the works of a black American poet.

Methodology

Over the recent years, postcolonial researches have achieved a noteworthy status as an academic field and also have been viewed as one of the leading methodologies of literary criticism. Boehmer (1995) has defined postcolonial literature as follows:

“Postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization — the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial literature, therefore, is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire. Especially in its early stages it can also be a nationalist writing. Building on this, postcoloniality is defined as that condition in which the colonized seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical subjects.” (3)

This research uses Fanon’s theories and predominantly his *Black Skin, White Masks* in which Fanon has debated the ways through which a black or any person who is not white is referred to and socially recognized by the white based on their race or skin color. What is stated in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) portrays the thought-provoking experiences undertaken by Fanon himself as a black man who is living in a world managed and ruled by white people. This issue empowers the white community to impose a racial image on black people (Fanon 2008:84). This image which is made by the white man’s eyes (Ibid:83) has its roots in colonialization. In fact, this problem is not only about the black people, and embraces any non-white colonized subject.

Discussion

Black Skin and White Masks

The white gaze indicates hatred of the black subject, and, so it is totally biased. Even if the black subject tries to show advancement, this effort becomes demolished by the white gaze (Ibid:87). Sithole (2016) declared that:

“Fanon clearly shows how the White gaze objectified him, and how that reminded him of his Blackness. This even led Fanon to claim to be human and to be excluded from the existential plain and being disfigured as a subject and what was thrown back at him as being an object, and he found himself in the midst of other objects. This not only means that Fanon was the human among those objects, but he was an object and was identical to those objects. The White gaze is not only the look; it is the crushing weight unto Blackness. For Fanon to be reminded of his Blackness is the very fact of reminding Blackness of its place in the anti-Black world, and that place means being expelled.” (30)

In his poetry, Langston Hughes depicts the oppressed black people who are supposed to be inferior human beings in the white society due to their black skin. Thus, sometimes they have to wear white masks and hide their black skin by imitating the white people. Hughes has always encouraged black people to be proud of their race and origin. Thus, he wants them to stop imitating. According to Sanders and Johnston (2002:297), Hughes would always emphasize a racial realization and national patriotism without any feeling of self-hatred. His viewpoints fortified self-importance in his poetry. Hughes was in fact one of the few important black poets who supported racial realization as a foundation of provocation for African-American poets.

This is why Hughes wanted young black poets to be impartial about their race; in other words, he wanted them not to disdain or run away from it. In the following poem, he talks about the racial discrimination and how he is separated from the white. However, this discernment does not make him run away and hide his origin. In other words, he gets stronger and fights more for equality. This fight never stops until the white understands how beautiful he is; then, they will be ashamed of their actions:

“I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.
Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.” (I, too, sing America, 1994:46)

Some other poems which revolve around the same issue include “Negro”, “My People”, “Color”, and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In all of them, Hughes has required the black to be proud of their origins and race and stop acting like the white. Thus, he would always motivate his people to respect themselves and not to be disappointed by bad treatments or judgments.

Racism and Psychological Opposition

Freedom and consciousness are the chief themes of Fanon’s work. Associated with the relationship between politics and psychology, Fanon stated that decolonization will free the colonized from manipulation. Besides, his mind will be free. A substantial theme in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) is the different systems of consciousness or self-awareness which is the outcome of freedom and individuality (72). Fanon as one of the most recognized scholars regarding the study of colonialism and decolonization believed that decolonization is basically a violent process to attain self-determination, as the link between the colonizer and the colonized is a binary of opposites (75).

Langston Hughes has also paid particular attention to freedom and consciousness in his poetry. His preoccupation with racism and its damaging effects on African-American people’s mentality functions as a point which arouses their awareness. He believed that racial discernment allowed the white to treat the black less kindly than other people in comparable circumstances owing to their race, color, ancestry, and origin. Regarding the role of African-American artists, Hughes once said:

“We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”
(as cited in Napier 2000:30)

For instance in “My People,” Hughes declares that like many African-American people, he is proud of his race and this is why he refers to them as “my people”. Hughes compares the beauty of his people with the beauty of stars, night, and the sun. By doing so, he means to say that no matter what the skin color is, it is only the soul that matters. And this is why African-American people's beauty will never vanish or end,

“The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.
The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people
Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.”

Like any other African-American person, Hughes was also the subject of inequality, oppression, and separation. The imageries that we notice in his poetry are the result of what happened in his real life. He recounts how he along with other Negroes did not have the permission to go to some specific public places just because of their race which made them be classified as inferior to the white people. He (1993) narrates one of these occurrences in his memoirs:

“Once I was late for an evening engagement because, at a river crossing where the bridge was under repair, a ferry was being used. But all the Negro cars on the road had to wait until all the white cars in line, no matter how far back, had gotten on the boat. The ferry captain would fill his boat up with white automobiles and leave the Negro cars standing there. By the time the boat crossed the river and came back, more white drivers had gathered. The ferry master would again motion the whites onto the boat ahead of the Negroes.” (82)

As an African-American literary figure, Hughes seemed to be constantly suffering from the misery that his community had to encounter. He has a poem entitled “Aunt Sue's Stories” in which he has written about the people whose race caused them to be enslaved by the white people. These people had to work in very pitiful situations like in the hot sun or dewy night as if they were not human beings:

“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.” (Aunt Sue's stories, 1994:23).

Of course, these poems are just a few examples because racism is one of the most substantial themes in almost all poems of Langston Hughes which depicted the lives of the working-class black people in America. Concerning his main goal he

stated that, “My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind” (Sanders and Johnston. 2002:418).

Alienation and Loss of Identity

Langston Hughes was an African-American man whose poetry mostly revolves around the wounds that are the result of prejudice and inequality (Ibid:3). Alienation and loss of identity are amongst the most significant wounds that can be noticed in his poetry. However, this alienation has several aspects. For Fanon, colonialism could result in diverse kinds of alienation. One of the worst types is the psychological alienation. According to Fanon (1963):

“Madness is one of the means man has of losing his freedom. And I can say, on the basis of what I have been able to observe, from this point of vantage that the degree of alienation of the inhabitants of this country appears to me frightening. If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization.” (52-54)

Another sort of alienation is the socio-economic alienation. Fanon supposed that a colonial community is based on class which accordingly brings about racial discernments. In fact, there is an association between skin color and class. Consequently, the privileged classes are white Europeans whereas the underprivileged who are both communally and economically relegated are the native people. Thus, social prosperity depends extremely on the skin color.

Fanon (1963) specified that “In the colonies the economic substructure is also the superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich”. (31) Ultimately it should be stated that colonized people all suffer from cultural alienation because colonialism harms, alters, and reduces local cultures so much that the native people find their own cultures inconsequential compared with the cultural authority of the colonizers. Fanon (1963) mentioned that:

“Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it”. (Ibid:169)

All these three kinds of alienation are observed in Hughes’ poems. As an example, I can refer to “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” which Hughes wrote when he was seventeen and while having a voyage on the Mississippi River to meet his father in Mexico. In this poem, Hughes has used the rivers as an image to discuss his life and African-American people’s experiences. Dworkin (2012) has referred to this poem as “an iconic representative of Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance” (634).

In this poem, Hughes says that the black identity has become much deeper through the history due to all its sufferings and alienation. The poem accordingly proposes that the black identity is unremitting, and fights against the ferocity and dislocation that are happening as the result of slavery and colonialization. William Hogan as a researcher remarks that this poem “recognizes the need for a new kind of rootedness, one that embraced a history of migration and resettlement” (as cited in Bloom 2008:188). Hogan has also stated that by uniting “communities of color across both space and time”, Hughes is establishing “a theory of racial community” which uses immigration and transformation as sources of power (Ibid:187–188).

Some other poems in which alienation, loss of identity, and racial injustice are noticeable include “Mother to Son” in which a mother talks about the numerous fluctuations she has gone through owing to the color of her skin, and “On the Road” in which Hughes portrays racism as being closely associated with religious insincerity. Still, this black poet believes that the racial disparity in America will come to an end and this is the reason why African-American communities have to fight against such problems as alienation.

Conclusion

So far, This research discussed the poetry of Langston Hughes from the postcolonial viewpoints of the theorist Frantz Fanon. Thus, the researcher attempted to explain the way colonization would affect the African-American people’s identity. It was argued that Hughes aimed to underscore the inevitability of evolving a new identity. Hughes’ poetry was selected since it is about the legacies of colonialization, and shows that “in the white man’s world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema”. By analyzing Hughes’ poetry, it was also found that his poems represent his pursuit for an independent identity which can stimulate national consciousness.

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