

Questioning the basic Tenets of the American Constitution relating to Justice and the Rights of Citizens in Langston Hughes's *Let America Be America Again* and *Freedom's Plow*

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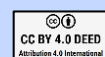
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ABSTRACT

This article is aimed at demonstrating how the Constitution of the United States has failed to safeguard and protect the basic and inalienable rights of the American citizen, the African American in particular. It also analyzes and interprets the dreams of the American citizens through the perspective of Hughes in his poems. Indeed, at the elaboration and the implementation of the Constitution of the United States with its additional amendments in the 18th century, one of the basic tenets was justice and the protection of all the American citizens regardless of race and gender; however, in the American societies of the 20th century, the inalienable rights of some Americans, mainly Blacks were not granted or protected. Theoretically, critical race theory is used to analyze and interpret the data of the study. The qualitative method is employed in the process of collecting the study's data. The results of the study have shown that the inalienable rights of the African Americans advocated by the Constitution of the United States and its related amendments were not reflected in society. Indeed, despite their citizenship, their inalienable civil rights were not fully protected, as the majority of them lived on the margins of society. In addition, they were prevented from attending high-profile schools and exercising some occupations reserved for the Whites. The results finally reveal that the dream of the ordinary African Americans was the restoration and the realization of the human rights principles inscribed in the Constitution of the United States through its additional amendments. This would guarantee justice and equal rights for all American nationals regardless of their gender and skin color.

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1. Introduction

Let America Be America Again and *Freedom's Plow* are poems published by a well-known African American writer, Langston Hughes, respectively in 1938 and 1943. These poems tackle the realities of American societies since the elaboration of the American Constitution up to modern times. In fact, since the implementation of the American Constitution and its additional amendments in the 18th through the 19th centuries, which are supposed to be the guardians of equal rights and justice among the American

citizens regardless of their race or gender, the recent reality of the American societies of the 20th century seems to be a contradiction as the advocated tenets related to civil rights and justice were still problematic.

The primary objective of this article is therefore to demonstrate that the American Constitution, along with the 27 additional amendments, has failed so far to guarantee justice and the rights of all American citizens, mainly for African Americans. On the other hand, the study attempts to analyze, through Hughes's poems, the longing dreams of the ordinary American citizen, the black man in particular. The article is divided into three main sections. The first section examines the related literature review. The second one accounts for the research methodology. Finally, the study presents the main findings and discussion. At that level, the study shows the stance of the American Constitution concerning the rights of the people and justice. Then it displays the realities of American society from the point of view of Langston Hughes. Lastly, it scrutinizes the dream of the American citizens according to Hughes through his poems.

2. Literature Review

The present section reviews some previous scholarly works in relation to Langston Hughes's poems to show the relevance of this research study. That is, it attempts to review and critique some of the opinions of other scholars and researchers on Hughes's poems, especially those that tackle the issues of race, justice, and freedom.

In an article titled "The Poet as Teacher: The Didactic Element in Langston Hughes's Black Poetry" (2015), Dr. Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein has demonstrated that a poet is a person who must live within his time for his people; therefore, Hughes became the voice of black Americans during the 1920s who were suffering from racial segregation. She claimed that most of the poems written by Hughes tackle racial themes, exploring the different aspects of the black American experience. She also revealed that the poet had made the black Americans his major subject, using his poetry as an instrument for self-discovery, cultural change, and specifically black uplift. In this regard, the researcher reveals as follows:

He assumes multiple voices and employs a number of technical devices to teach the black masses to take pride in their heritage and struggle for a better future. In some of his poems, Hughes councils white America to give the darker brothers the freedom, justice and opportunity they deserve as an integral part of the American society (El-Din Hassanein, 2015, p.429).

In the excerpt, Dr. El-Din Hassanein acknowledges that the main concern of the poet was to promote black heritage and encourage them to struggle for a better future, denied to them in American society.

Although Dr. Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein has shown that Hughes' poems castigate the racial injustice facing black Americans on the one hand, and serve as didactic lessons, intended to galvanize Blacks to struggle for a better life, he failed to interrogate the American Constitution, which is the guardian supposed to safeguard the rights of all American citizens.

In another article, titled "Racial Discrimination- a Study of Langston Hughes' Poems" (2018), Jyoti Yadav and Virender Kumar Gill have presented the experience of Langston Hughes through the realm of racial disgrace to recognition in the American white dominant society. They demonstrated that in the whole poetry of Hughes, the

main aspect that recurs is the challenges and humiliation he faced due to his blackness and his struggle for self-recognition. In relation to that, the two researchers postulate the following:

The feelings of racial humiliation, struggle for self-recognition, and discrimination land the poet in a world of double consciousness in which the poet always hangs in doubt whether he thinks himself an American or an Outsider. The attitude of the white forces the poet to feel that he is not a native of America but an alien. It results that the poet suffers from what Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish Philosopher termed as Existentialism which emphasizes on individual existence, freedom, choice and decision. It is completely based on the human existence. After passing through a number of difficulties during his life time, the poet does not lose hope. He remains optimistic and tried to recognize himself in the white society (p.78).

It means that throughout the poetry of Hughes, he is in search of self-recognition as his fellow African Americans were cornered on the margins of society, but the poet did not give up until he achieved his self-recognition in American society.

However, throughout their article, Jyoti Yadav and Virender Kumar Gill failed to demonstrate that the American Constitution, which is the regulatory body charged with monitoring the safeguarding of the rights of all American citizens, is largely accountable for the ordeals of African Americans.

In light of the gap noticed in the previously reviewed works, the paper under study aims to question the basic principles of the American Constitution relating to justice and the human rights of American citizens through the poems of Langston Hughes.

3. Methodology

This methodological section accounts for how this research study was conducted. It determines the data collection procedures, the kind of research design, and the instrument employed in the study. It also shows how the data collected is analyzed and interpreted.

The instruments used to collect data in the current research are documents. It means that this study is based on the use of written and published texts only, especially the selected poems. A pure qualitative method is also employed in the investigation, and all the data of the study are collected through the act of reading documents. The research design employed in the current study is the content analysis because the study explores, analyses, and explains Hughes' poems in order to show how the poet castigates the inaction of the American Constitution to protect the human rights of the African Americans. In the theoretical framework, the Critical Race Theory is employed to guide and ease the analyses and the interpretations of the study's data. This theoretical approach permits us to analyze the systemic racial inequities and their ramifications experienced by marginalized African Americans through Hughes' poetry.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section specifically presents, discusses, and interprets the main findings of the study as they are unveiled from the selected poems. In other words, the study's main findings are discussed and interpreted in consistency with the research objective.

4.1. American Constitution on Justice and the rights of citizens

Since the ratification of the American Constitution in 1787, one of the basic tenets has been the rights of the people. As a matter of fact, after the adoption of the US Constitution, the main concern of the American population had been the omission of articles related to the rights of American citizens. Therefore, in 1789, the Congress had proposed to add the Bills Rights — ten additional amendments that took into account the gaps of the Constitution. The Bill of Rights listed correctly the rights of American citizens. Besides, before the ratification of the US Constitution, the document of the *Declaration of Independence* also supported the unalienable rights of the American colonists to affirm their independence from the reign of Great Britain. It is in that context that, during the second Continental Congress on the 4th July 1776, the document of the *Declaration of Independence* was adopted to claim the following assertion in relation to the human rights of Americans:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it (p.1).

Through this passage of the Declaration of Independence, it can be read that one of the driving factors of the American Revolution was the British authorities' hampering of the rights of the American colonists. Because their inalienable human rights were hindered, the American revolutionaries decided to fight the British army to give back the full rights to their population. In the passage, it is scrutinized that the human rights issue has been one of the main causes of the Revolutionary War in the Declaration of Independence document, the first document underlying the foundation of the American nation.

In addition, the Constitution of the United States is made up of 7 articles and 27 additional amendments. In Article 4, section 2, it is written as follows: "The Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the several States." This excerpt also demonstrates that the protection of the rights of all American citizens is written in the Constitution of the United States. It does not make any difference whether a citizen is black, white, male, or female. The statement postulates equal treatment for each American.

Alongside the seven articles of the American Constitution as evoked earlier, the 27 amendments were adopted in order to fill the gaps left by the Constitution. The first ten amendments are based exclusively on the rights of individuals.

4.2. Castigating the Realities of American society in Hughes's poems

In the two selected poems, namely "Let America be America again", and "Freedom's Plow", Hughes gives his impression about the situation of justice and the rights of the American citizens. That is, despite laws of the Constitution, there was a

structural racism in American society where whiteness was considered as the perfection and blackness as a disgrace or rejection. Hughes castigates the paradox underlying the infringement of the freedom of some American citizens, although it is clearly imbued in the Constitution that all American citizens are equal and should enjoy similar privileges under the law.

In "Let America be America again", Hughes has questioned the validity of the section of the American Constitution and its additional amendments, which advocate and grant equal rights to each American citizen regardless of race or gender. The very title of this poem is a question, as it requires that America become America again. That is, for the poet, America is not what it had to be because the founding principles of the American nation are not respected in society, as it does not reflect the realities of American society. In relation to that, he reminisces about the pioneers of the American nation who came into America in the hope of making it a place where they could dwell peacefully in total freedom. Thus, he writes: "Let it be the pioneer on the plain Seeking a home where he himself is free. (America never was America to me.)" (Hughes, 2012, p.64). This extract of the poem "Let America be America again" is an appeal to all the American people, particularly the white segregationists, to make of the American nation what the founding fathers had wished for. The poet affirms in the passage that America has never been America to him. He means the foregoing because he, as a black American, and by extension, African Americans in general, were marginalized and segregated by the American institutions, although they were officially recognized as citizens. Racism and anti-black movements were blossoming all over America. When American colonies were being founded, the pioneers did not put any racial restrictions on adventurers, but some white people of post slavery America, nostalgic for slavery, have instated racial division just to satisfy their ego.

Besides, the poet has also presented America as a nation of injustice where black people, as well as poor Whites, are all the victims of the economic system of the United States. He particularly castigates the oppression inflicted on the less privileged American dwellers by the privileged ones for the sake of race. In doing so, he upholds the following statement: "I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart, I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars. I am the red man driven from the land, I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek-And finding only the same old stupid plan Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak" (Hughes, 2012, p.64). The foregoing excerpt shows that the poet wants to pose himself as a defender of all the oppressed Americans, including the poor white Americans. He reveals in the passage that the poor whites are fooled by the system, which has created different types of Americans. The first category of that division is the white Americans, who are also classified into two blocks - the bourgeois and the poor Americans. The second category is the African Americans who have been subjugated since the period of slavery and are still carrying its consequences. Then there are the immigrants who came to the United States in the hope of finding a better life. In fact, the above extract demonstrates that America is a society where black Americans are victimized and marginalized, on the one hand; it is also a society where injustice reigns among the white communities themselves, on the other hand. Therefore, even the immigrants seeking better living conditions were also trapped in the system.

To further elucidate the foregoing viewpoints on American societies, especially the victimization of the African Americans, Hughes recalls the sad history of people of African descent from the slavery period up to the mid-twentieth century. In this regard, he asserts as follows:

“I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean-
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years (Hughes, 2012, p.65).

In the above lines, Hughes assigned himself the right to speak on behalf of all the oppressed people of the United States. He chastises the conditions of farmers who are exploited; the poor workers who are also exploited in the factories to enrich the bourgeois class; and the Negroes who, since the early days of slavery in America, have been subjugated and marginalized. The same passage implies that the American policymakers and segregationists had betrayed the pioneers' dream about America and its citizens because the pioneers had prophesied that America should be the land of liberty and justice for all American people.

Likewise, in *Freedom's Plow*, Hughes has castigated the situation of the African Americans in America through several lines. However, in this poem, the poet appears as a conciliator due to the choice of his less chastising words. He particularly chooses to teach the readers, especially the white Americans, about the founding principles of the United States and the contribution of all Americans from all walks of life in the construction and development of the American nation. In relation to those foregoing ideas, Hughes argues as follows:

Down into the earth went the plow
In the free hands and the slave hands,
In indentured hands and adventurous hands,
Turning the rich soil went the plow in many hands
That planted and harvested the food that fed
And the cotton that clothed America.
Clang against the trees went the ax into many hands
That hewed and shaped the rooftops of America.
Splash into the rivers and the seas went the boat-hulls
That moved and transported America.
Crack went the whips that drove the horses
Across the plains of America.
Free hands and slave hands,
Indentured hands, adventurous hands,
White hands and black hands
Held the plow handles,
Ax handles, hammer handles,
Launched the boats and whipped the horses
That fed and housed and moved America.
Thus, together through labor,
All these hands made America (Hughes, 2012, p.45).

The passage demonstrates that the American nation was made by the effort of all Americans, starting with the pilgrims and the adventurers from all over Europe who

settled in America, the indentured servants, and the enslaved Africans who were brought to America to work on plantations. The poet insists that the combination of the efforts of all the aforementioned people has blatantly contributed to the making of America. However, the same passage implicitly implies that the merit of all American citizens should be recognized, and any citizen should benefit from the same rights and opportunities as advocated by the American founding principles.

In light of the preceding idea, Hughes covertly reveals that there is still injustice in American society. In schools, Hospitals, hotels..., Blacks and Whites were not equal. With this regard, he recalls in like manner:

A long time ago, but not too long ago, a man said:
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL
ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR
WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS
AMONG THESE LIFE, LIBERTY
AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.
His name was Jefferson. There were slaves then,
But in their hearts, the slaves believed him, too,
And silently took for granted
That what he said was also meant for them" (Hughes, 2012, p.46).

In this assertion, Hughes recalls the passage of the Declaration of Independence pronounced by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, which emphasized the unalienable rights of the people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This recollection from the poet was meant to castigate in some way the injustice and the denial of the rights of the black Americans under the pretext of their skin color. Through the same extract, the poet teaches the reader a sense of accountability as far as the respect for the American founding texts or principles is concerned.

Similarly, Hughes went on to recall the declaration of another American figure, namely Abraham Lincoln, that tells off the segregationists' attitude towards Blacks, mainly their willingness to subdue the offspring of former slaves despite the end of slavery several decades ago. Thus, he puts:

But not so long ago at that, Lincoln said:
NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH
TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN
WITHOUT THAT OTHER'S CONSENT.
There were slaves then, too,
But in their hearts the slaves knew
What he said must be meant for every human being- (Hughes, 2012, p.46).

In the extract, Hughes reminds the reader of Abraham Lincoln's declaration during the period of the American Civil War in relation to the rights of the enslaved Blacks who are created on the same footing as their white masters. It means that slaves as human beings should not be subjected to any domination or forced to do anything without their authorization. The mention of this declaration by the poet is meant to emphasize the importance of granting the same rights and opportunities to all citizens without any consideration, be it racial or sexual. All in all, the poet has used his poems to castigate the segregation used against people of African origins.

4.3. The dream of the ordinary American according to Hughes

After presenting and rebuking the social realities marked by premeditated actions undertaken to marginalize Blacks, Hughes expresses through the two poems the dream of the ordinary American citizen, which reflects the dream of the American pioneers. As discussed in the above section, although American citizens were granted the same rights and opportunities by the laws of the Constitution, some of them (Blacks) still faced several obstacles in American society. It is in this relation that Hughes has displayed the longing dream of the American citizens in general and that of the black Americans in particular.

In "Let America be America again", Hughes has revived the longing dreams of the discriminated African Americans, one century after the official end of slavery. In this dynamic way, the poet argues that the false or hypocritical official statement, which implies that all American citizens are equal and enjoy the same privileges and opportunities under the Constitution, does not reflect reality. Indeed, despite their status as free Americans, African Americans were still longing for the materialization or the fulfillment of the American dream. That dream stipulates equal opportunity for all Americans, and any American is supposed to make it from rags to riches. However, Hughes makes it clear in his poem that a dream is still not a reality for people of African origins. Therefore, he appeals to the American people, mainly the policymakers, to reconsider the unjust situation that prevails in American society. In this relation, Hughes writes as follows:

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.
(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free")
(p.64).

This extract from Hughes is a plea for a change in America. The poet wants America to be a dreamland where freedom and equal opportunity, as professed by the pioneers and embedded in the Constitution of the United States, are reflected in real life. However, the writer acknowledges that, by experience, America had never been a dreamland where freedom and equal opportunity blossom.

Besides, Hughes compares his dream and, by extension, the dream of African Americans in general with that of the old world. In doing so, the poet wanted to recommend that the basic dream underlying the foundation of America be revived. In relation to the foregoing, he ascertains as follows:

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World, while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become (Hughes, 2012, p.65).

In the extract, the poet emphasizes the expected dream of African Americans by self-styling himself as a black man representing his fellow Blacks, as the one who dreamt

the basic dream resulted in the making of America. In a word, the passage implies that white Americans as well as black ones have the merit of claiming the authorship of the nationhood of America. Thus, whether you are black or white, any American citizen should be granted the same opportunity as far as human rights and equal opportunity are concerned.

On the other hand, in *Freedom's Plow*, Hughes repeats that dreaming for a better life and equal opportunity is not the right of the white Americans only, but the black Americans as well. Given that both Whites and Blacks enjoyed the same citizenship rights before the Constitution and that the United States is the legacy of both races, they should therefore bear the same dream for the prosperity and the stability of their nation. In this relation, he writes:

Thus, the dream becomes not one man's dream alone,
But a community dream.
Not my dream alone, but our dream.
Not my world alone,
But your world and my world,
Belonging to all the hands who build (Hughes, 2012, p.44).

The excerpt just emphasizes the necessity of viewing the dream as a collective one rather than an individual. It means that American citizens, regardless of their race, should think and wish for the collective good, which is a guarantee for America's future success or prosperity. As a human being, no one should be prevented from having a dream: a dream of liberty and success. However, the poet has implicitly castigated the constitution of the United States and the document of the Declaration of Independence, which advocates that all American citizens are equal before the law and each American possesses the unalienable right to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." His castigation of the latter is motivated by the fact that in American society, black Americans were prevented from fulfilling their unalienable dreams as American citizens.

In light of the previous thought, Hughes remembers Frederick Douglass, who had been a slave like many other black men, but he had a dream, which was freedom. He upholds:

Then a man said:
BETTER TO DIE FREE THAN TO LIVE SLAVES
He was a colored man who had been a slave
But had run away to freedom.
And the slaves knew
What Frederick Douglass said was true (Hughes, 2012, p.46).

It means that Douglass was ready to die for freedom rather than remain a slave. The passage evidences that the dream of liberty had always been vital in the lives of black Americans. It is because of the foregoing situation that Douglass had challenged one of his masters who, according to his testimony, constantly inflicted severe pain on him with a whip in total denial of the ex-slave's humanity and unalienable rights. As a matter of fact, his determination and desire to defend his humanity and show that he had a dream like any human being pushed him to oppose stiff resistance to his oppressors. This idea is illustrated in the following assertion:

As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback (Douglass, 1845, pp.61-62).

It implies that black people, in the image of Douglass, were ready to do anything to express their humanity. As discussed previously, the dream is an unalienable right and principle that all human beings aspire to. If an obstacle arises in front of your dream, your instinct will drive you to seek ways to mend or to overcome that obstacle. Hence, the reaction of Douglass in the above illustrative extract epitomizes the mentioned instinctive reaction to obstacles.

5. Conclusion

In sum, America is a nation that possesses one of the oldest and most enduring constitutions since the advent of democracy. The US Constitution and its additional amendments were adopted to regulate any issue related to America, its citizens, and their human rights. However, it has been demonstrated through Langston Hughes's *Let America Be America Again* and *Freedom's Plow* that some laws in the US Constitution and the 27th Amendment are not reflected in American society. The study has shown that the basic human rights of some Americans, African Americans in particular, are not respected about three hundred years later since the enforcement of the American Constitution. It has been verified that the making of America a great nation was the result of the efforts of all American citizens, from the pioneers of the early British American colonies to black slaves up to the present day white and black Americans. Therefore, the poet has tried to raise the awareness of the American people in general that some American citizens should stop looking down on other American citizens under the pretext that they were racially different. It means that regardless of skin color, each human being is endowed with a heart, so dreaming of prosperity and equal opportunity is a normal thing. It is on these notes that Hughes attempts to interrogate the American Constitution in the hope of enticing the American decision makers to take action towards resolving the prevailing injustice situation.

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