

Langston Hughes' 'The Big Sea': A Critical Study

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Langston Hughes, a poet, dramatist, fiction writer and journalist, was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri as the second child of Carrie Mercer Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes. His parents were of mixed-race origin, a combination of African American, European American and Native American blood. The first part of his autobiography, **The Big Sea** (1940), deals with the experiences of a Black boy in the suppressive White world and his constant struggle to defeat the circumstances to keep his 'self' intact.

A close and critical analysis of Hughes' autobiography brings out the fact that it is heart-rending records of unending struggle of the 'self' of its author against the brutal socio-cultural and political milieu of his time. During the course of his development, the psycho-social self of the author was cornered by a number of impediments created by this milieu, and to protect itself from those forces, the 'self' was required to employ various means of protest. Accordingly, the autobiography of Langston Hughes unfailingly voice all these content aspects of protest and also the strategies employed by him to defeat various social, religious and political institutions of the Whites. It is shocking to see that these institutions not only deprived the autobiographer of each and every opportunity needed for his development but also refused to accept even the very existence of his 'self'. That is why all African American writers, including Langston Hughes have written about all these atrocities in their autobiographies. Of course, such incidents do not find place in traditional autobiography as they are considered to be 'unworthy of literary attention' and also 'inappropriate to the good taste', and therefore, having no literary merit. But the African American writers had nothing else to write about as their lives were crammed only with the sufferings imposed upon them by the White American social structure. Therefore, they have expressed their genuine experiences without any reticence thereby creating a new set of aesthetic norms which govern their autobiographies.

An intensive study of Hughes' autobiography shows that the struggle of existence for the 'self' of the narrator begins from his own family. It is believed that home is a place where one gets mental solace, a sense of protection from the external forces, much-needed love and care from other members of the family, a kind of mental, physical and social security which is indispensable for the smooth, positive and all-round development of the younger members of the family. But it seems that the familial atmosphere of Langston was least conducive for the proper development of his personality. While speaking about his family, Langston Hughes writes:

"I was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, but grew mostly in Lawrence, Kansas. My grandmother raised me until I was twelve years old. Sometimes I was with my mother, but not often. My father and mother were separated."¹

As his parents were separated when he was a little child, naturally Langston lacked the much-needed mental support and filial affection from them. This resulted in a very loose familial bond between him and his parents. Like all other neighbouring children of his age, Langston expected love and care from his parents. But his misfortune forced him to live with his maternal grandmother, while his mother travelled from one place to another looking for better jobs, and his father lived far away in Mexico.

Langston was a young boy of twelve years when his grandmother passed away. Being rendered lonely and helpless, he came to live with his mother who, even now, failed to look after

him properly due to financial crunch. All the time she used to change her job with better financial prospects. But her constant migration from one place to another exercised very unfavourable impact on the sensitive psyche of Langston. He was compelled to endure the burden of loneliness and sorrows without any emotional support from his mother. There was nobody to listen to his rightful demands as a child. His broken family had shattered all the hopes and aspirations of his individual 'self' to lead a reasonably good life.

Meanwhile his mother got married again to Homer Clark, a cook by profession, with the hope that it will change the familial condition, but in vain. With the assistance of his mother supplemented by the odd jobs he did during the vacations, Langston somehow managed to graduate from grammar school in Lincoln, Illinois. He had nourished an ambition of getting higher education. But he had realized that the poverty at home will not allow him to achieve his goal. Even it was shocking experience for him that his mother did not want him to go to college. On the contrary, she wanted him to take a job and help her in running the home. While referring to his mother's apathy towards his education, Langston writes:

"I didn't want to return to Mexico, but I had a feeling I'd never get any further education if I didn't, since my mother wanted me to go to work and be, as she put it, "of some use to her." She demanded to know how I would look going off to college and she there working like a dog!"²

In such unfavourable familial circumstances how can a young and sensitive boy like Langston think of going ahead of others? So he decided to take his father's help who lived in Mexico. However, after reaching Mexico, he understood the real nature of his father. Actually, it was because of his father's over-ambition and greed for material success that the dream of happy family had shattered. Langston's mother had tried to patch up with her husband, but all her attempts were frustrated as he refused to return from Mexico and get settled with his family in their native land.

Langston recounts that his father was a typical Negro who hated not only the other Negroes but also himself 'for being a Negro'. Though he owned a large house and farm in Mexico, he was not ready to spend much either for himself or for Langston. His regular meagre diet consisted only of beef and beans. He did not allow Langston to live according to his likes and dislikes. On the contrary, he forced him to learn book-keeping which Langston abhorred. 'Hurry up' was the favourite catchphrase with his father. In reality, Langston had come to his father expecting to go to college with his support. But his father wanted Langston to help him in his business. Such a life with his father made Langston feel frustrated. He thought that there was no hope for him to develop his own 'self' in a constructive manner. This attack on the development of his self, left Langston emotionally paralyzed and carried him on the verge of committing suicide. He writes:

"Now, at seventeen, I began to be very sorry for myself, in a strange land ...I was lonesome. I began to wish I had never been born - not under such circumstances... One day, when there was no one in the house but me, I put the pistol to my head and held it there, loaded, a long time, and wondered if I would be any happier if I were to pull the trigger."³

Such serious thoughts about committing suicide in the mind of a seventeen year old boy certainly throw a flood of light on the serious recklessness on the part of his parents in bringing up their child properly.

Though his father did not treat him well, Langston lived with him hoping that some day he would help him to attain the education of his own choice. But his father would not budge. He

wanted Langston to study in Europe, whereas Langston insisted to study in America. Finally, his father gave in and Langston was admitted to Columbia. He was very happy to come to New York as it gave him opportunity to visit Harlem. But he did not like Columbia. He hated the cold atmosphere of the campus. He was unwelcome guest for both the teachers and the students there. So he did everything except the studies. Actually, he did not want his father to interfere with his life. But his father kept on writing him, asking every minute details of the money he had spent. It made Langston to dislike his father more and more. Finally, his dislike took a form of subtle hatred for his father. He wanted to tell his father that he wished to live a life of his own. This constant conflict with his father resulted in intense mental trauma for Langston. So, that year in Columbia, Langston finished:

“without honors. I had no intention of going further at Columbia, anyhow. I felt that I would never turn out to be what my father expected me to be in return for the amount he invested. So I wrote him and told him I was going to quit college and go to work on my own, and that he needn't send me any more money.”⁴

This incident reflects Langston's rebellious spirit that wanted to grow as per its own principles.

After leaving Columbia, Langston started to apply for job. He was ready to take any kind of job like office boy, clerk, waiter and bus boy. But his restless spirit, coupled with his colour and the racist attitude of America used to come in his way of getting a job. He had a wanderer's spirit. He never liked to stay at one place for longer period of time. During one of such wanderings, he visited Paris. The times were very difficult for a Negro with no specific skill. There was a scarcity of jobs. He was virtually starving. So he wrote a letter to his mother asking for money. But she did not help him even during such a hard time. On the contrary, she scolded him for wandering aimlessly all over the world. In her letter, she asked:

“what was I doing way over there in France? Why didn't I stay home like decent folks, get a job, and go to work and help her - instead of gallivanting all over the world as a sailor, and writing from Paris for money?”⁵

Such an attitude of his mother towards Langston illustrates what kind of familial life he had at home. Actually, when he had come back from his trip to Africa, he had brought a monkey as a gift for his younger brother (for whom he spent quite a big amount of money he had saved on his job) and also helped his mother with whatever money he had been left with. But now he could not get any financial or emotional support from his mother. Of course, she was worried about job and money all the time. No doubt, she herself was going through a crucial phase of her life, but as a mother, she should have done whatever little she could for her son.

In another incident, too, Langston mentions how his mother did not care for him. During his wanderings, Langston had been to Italy and there somebody picked his pocket and all his money and passport had gone. He tried to get help from the American Consul. However, the officer dismissed him saying he had no funds to help the people like him. He was forced to stay there until he was hired as a workaway without pay on a ship. After getting home, Langston first worked at a wet wash laundry and then as a bus boy. By this time, he had published some of his poems in magazines and people had started to recognize him as a poet. In the laundry, he felt humiliated when the customers stared at him. It created a terrible mental strain and he decided to have rest for some days. But his mother did not take proper care of her fatigued son. On the other hand, she told him that he would not get anything to eat. Langston writes:

“my mother said she was tired of working, too, and I could either get up from there and go back to work, or I would not eat! But I was really tired, so I stayed right on in bed and rested and read - and got hungry. My mother refused to feed me on the food she prepared for my little brother when she got home from work. And I didn’t blame her, if she didn’t want to feed me.”⁶

Engulfed by such familial situation, Langston could not really understand the complexities of his relation with either his father or his mother. As a young boy, he wanted to lead his life with absolute freedom. His free spirit did not want to be controlled by anybody. As a result of his broken family, he was compelled to live with his grandmother. Though she looked after him properly, after her death, there remained a huge emotional void that came in the way of his proper personality development. The atmosphere in and around the home was vicious, trying to imprison the spirit of growing Langston. But Langston was not made of such stuff as to be deterred by any recurring adverse situations and environment. He protested strongly against all those who and which dared to come in the way of his search of identity. While focusing on this aspect of Langston’s personality, G. Casey Cassidy observes:

“The Big Sea opens with Langston throwing all the books that he had read at Columbia, and then some, over the rail of the S.S. Malone as far as he could as if he was shedding the shackles of conventional learning. This symbolic gesture represented everything that was unpleasant in his life - the memory of his father, the poverty of his mother, the fear of not finding work, and the problems of color prejudices. At that very moment on the open deck, just “Beyond Sandy Hook,” Langston became a man, ready to search for his true identity.”⁷

As is discussed above, Langston was victimized by the members of his family owing to various issues related to family backgrounds like financial crunch, lack of understanding between husband and wife and sometimes between parents and children. In addition to this, the psycho-social self of Langston Hughes is further traumatized by the members of his own African American community. In fact, it was ironical to have such impediments in the path of his self-development in the form of his own community. This mental and physical trauma has forced Hughes to voice his anguish against his own people through his autobiography. His autobiography makes one aware of the positive as well as negative roles played by the Black community in the development of Langston’s ‘self’.

Langston Hughes lived and grew amid his community and therefore, he has expressed his close affinity and the sense of brotherhood for his community. But Langston Hughes was more at home with the working class people of his community than the so-called high class people. As he himself belonged to the category of lower class Negroes, he felt relieved in their company. These Negroes were ordinary people who worked with their hands and had no false idea about family tree. They were never worried about the dark or the light colour of one’s skin. They loved the simplicities of their lives like playing the blues, eating watermelons and fish sandwiches and laughing loudly. Though these were ordinary things, they taught them to live their lives to the fullest. The company of such happy people taught Langston to look at his own life positively. It further motivated him to keep on going:

“like the songs they sang on Seventh Street - gay songs, because you had to be gay or die; sad songs, because you couldn’t help being sad sometimes. But gay or sad, you kept on living and you kept on going.

Their songs - those of Seventh Street - had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going.”⁸

This acceptance of both gay as well as sad incidents of life with equal ease is the best philosophy of life. Langston was happy to know this great secret of life and was grateful to the common people of his community for teaching it to him. That is why there were feelings of love and brotherhood in his heart for the common Black people.

But with the passage of time, Langston realized that sometimes the Blacks themselves used to exploit the members of their own community. Langston particularly is grieved to note the snobbishness of his people who shamefully practiced the distinction based on different shades of colour. When one thinks about such disgusting behaviour of the Blacks, one realizes that it was the consequence of their false belief of colour superiority forcefully instilled in their minds by the dominant Whites. Langston Hughes was greatly surprised and felt shocked when he saw that many people of his community with social status were ashamed of being Black. He writes:

“Yet, dark as he was, George always referred to himself as *brownskin*, and it was not until years later, when a dark-skinned minister in New Jersey denounced me to his congregation for using the word *black* to describe him in a newspaper article, that I realized that most dark Negroes in America do not like the word *black* at all. They prefer to be referred to as *brownskin*, or at the most as *dark-brownskin* – no matter how dark they really are.”⁹

It means the Blacks themselves had deemed their black colour to be a thing of disgrace for them. This practice started with the highly educated and reputed Blacks further percolated down to the common Black people. Being light-skinned became a matter of social prestige for the Negroes. It is perturbing to see two entirely opposite types of people living in Black community. On the one side, there were people like Langston Hughes who were emotionally hurt when the native Africans called him ‘white’ because of his light colour, and on the other, there were also some dark-skinned Black men who used to powder their faces to make them white, which was the most shameful thing to do for any member of Black community.

The White terror had become an alarming monster that rejected all the rightful hopes and aspirations of the Black children to have a natural and positive growth. Consequently, these children suffered many mental traumas during the course of the development of their self, making them detrimental in their personal, familial and social environment. That is why, as a means of his protest against the mainstream aesthetics, Langston Hughes has narrated a number of incidents in his autobiography focusing upon his victimization at the hands of White terror. In one of such incidents, Langston is seen severely beaten up by a group of White boys for his going far into the White neighbourhood which was strictly forbidden for Black children. Somehow, he managed to escape from the brutes and return home with ‘both eyes blacked and a swollen jaw’.

It is observed that the Whites had their peculiar ‘sixth sense’ of recognizing the Black person, though he might be very light in complexion. During their lives as slaves, Black women were subjected to sexual assault by their White masters resulting in the birth of mixed-blood children. Today, there have been some Blacks who are almost as light in colour as the Whites. Yet, the Whites easily recognize them. Langston Hughes remembers how once when he was sitting in a restaurant:

“a white man came in and took the seat just across the table from mine. Shortly, I noticed him staring at me intently, as if trying to puzzle out

something. He stared at me a long time. Then, suddenly, with a loud cry, the white man jumped up and shouted: "You're a nigger, ain't you?"¹⁰ When the White man came in and sat at his table, Langston had realized that if he recognized him to be a Negro, it would put him in great trouble. It seems that the peculiar Southern accent of their speech supplemented by the slightly different physical features and the unknown fear of the presence of their oppressor used to help the Whites to recognize the Black person.

All the time it was not possible for young Negro children to keep themselves away from the Whites as they were required to work for their livelihood. While working in various establishments, they usually came across the Whites and their atrocities. Most of the times, the Blacks were forced to work extra hours for a meagre salary. But as they had no any other option, they had to suffer silently. Langston narrates an incident of his working as a delivery boy. During this job, one night he worked overtime, and so the next morning, he reported late at his workplace. But his boss asked him to come after lunch. When he tried:

"to explain that the night before had been my late night, and that I had worked four or five hours overtime, but he cut me off to order me brusquely to take the whole morning off – because he would take a morning out of my pay, anyhow!"¹¹

As Langston needed the job, he could not complain against the injustice. This economic exploitation was a common occurrence in the lives of Negroes. Just for few dollars, they were made to work in worst working conditions for the whole week under the strict vigilance of White bosses.

Langston Hughes' reaction to his continuous oppression from his childhood to early youth is neither violent nor tactfully guised under irony, humour or sarcasm. He had almost silently borne all that befell him in the White racist world. However, when he took a job as a sailor on S.S. Malone, he threw all his books into the sea and for the first time in his life, he felt relieved from the horrible pressures of unwelcome happenings. By his seemingly melodramatic act of throwing away the books into the sea, it seems that Langston wishes to suggest his sense of freedom in a symbolic manner. The knowledge which he had got from the books he had read either at Columbia or elsewhere, he thought, was useless for him as it failed to give him the right of living like a human being. On the contrary, those books propagated false concepts of White superiority because of which his life had become a kind of dungeon. Now as a young boy of twenty-one, he did not want to continue the same slavish life. And this is the reason why he broke all the shackles of unpleasant and miserable life by symbolically throwing away his books. But it is to be noted here that for the time being, though Langston felt that he can escape the tyrannies of White terror by going on sea, he was at fault because, even there, the Whites and their terror mechanism were fully operational.

Such powerful effects of the poisonous attitudes of Whites on the psyche of African American children created various psychological disorders amongst them. It is shocking that this attitude of the Whites towards the Blacks was completely unaccounted for as it was based on their ill-supported prejudice that tarnished their minds and so, they never thought Blacks to be human beings at all and can have all the human qualities like them.

As the White terror accompanied the Blacks everywhere, their annoyed souls tried to get some solace in the company of God and His religion. Most of them believed that there exists an all powerful God and to redeem themselves, they have to obey His commands. Out of the fear and respect for God, the poor, suffering Negroes used to visit the church for religious meetings.

Langston Hughes speaks about his personal experience with the God when he recounts that during a revival, along with many other children he waited for Jesus to come and save him. One by one all the children were saved except Langston who was:

“left alone on the mourners’ bench. My aunt came and knelt at my knees and cried, while prayers and songs swirled all around me in the little church. The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting – but he didn’t come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing!”¹²

Finally, when Langston realized that God is not coming and as it was getting too late, he lied. But that night he cried not because the God did not come to him but because he had deceived everybody in the church, including his aunt. And so, he could not sleep until late at night. This sleeplessness and cries of a little child show the evil effects of false religious beliefs on his tender mind.

Instead of giving importance to the development of life enhancing skills, the White educational system and its supporters used to care more for imbibing White values among the learners. They used to give partial treatment to the Black students. Even in Negro schools, the light-coloured students were always given extra concessions by the teachers. The smartness of a Black student had nothing to do with his educational career. He was always neglected by the teachers. Even the quality of education was below the expected standards, and so, it was deemed useless in getting job. Education, it seems, was used as a propaganda machinery to propagate the White values and White ways of life.

The teachers used to treat their students with utmost indifference. Even in the schools and colleges, run especially for Negro students, the faculty rarely kept intimate relationship with the students. Even there were some Negro institutes, like Lincoln, where the entire faculty and trustees were Whites. The course structure and syllabi of Lincoln were formulated so shrewdly that even the most of the Negro students supported the view that there should not be any Negro on the faculty.

But even though the established social and political structure had succeeded in creating a number of traumatic situations in their lives, the Blacks had not given up their battle. All the time they were preparing themselves to fight against their enemy by acquiring new techniques. It is seen that during the period of slavery, the Blacks used to revolt against their master either by refusing to eat or work or by meeting force with force or by running away from them. But with the passing of time, the Blacks are seen using other more ingenious and so more effective techniques of expressing their protest. One of these techniques is to make the world aware of the unfavorable conditions of their lives through their literary works.

The autobiography of Langston Hughes demonstrates that he had realized the power and value of written words and so had made deliberate efforts to master the art of writing. But it should also be taken into consideration that the path of Negro writer was never smooth. As he was trying to enter into the area which was strictly cordoned off and meant only for the Whites, it is natural that there were numerous tiers of obstacles in his way, which he had to overcome before getting into the mainstream of creative works.

It was so because the publishing houses were mostly run by the Whites and were governed by the rules and policies of the government. If needed, even they were provided financial support through various government controlled agencies. So naturally, these publishing houses were bound to follow the policies of government. And as the African American writers

speak against the government and its agencies through their literature, the established publishers intended to abstain them from taking up any written assignments. These publishers used to further discourage the Black writers by denying them opportunity to get their works published.

The tragedy of Black writers was that the obstacles in their career were created by not only the White people but also the publishing houses which were exclusively run by the Negro people. Many of the struggling Negro writers used to visit Negro publishing houses with the hope of getting an opportunity to publish their works; but very few of them were lucky enough to get encouragement and moral support from these publishers. This was so, probably, because these Black publishers did not want to lose the good-will of the Whites and their government.

This kind of discouragement and disinterest was the usual experience with many Black writers during the initial years of their writing careers. It is observed that even after the opposition of the established press, if any Black writer succeeded in publishing his work, the mainstream critics used to discourage him by writing adverse critical reviews of his work. Langston Hughes writes how the efforts of some of the struggling Negro writers in running a magazine were thrashed not only by the Whites but also by his own people. While speaking about the reviews of this magazine, Langston says:

“None of the older Negro intellectuals would have anything to do with *Fire*. Dr. DuBois in the *Crisis* roasted it. The Negro press called it all sorts of bad names...Rean Graves... began his review by saying: “I have just tossed the first issue of *Fire* into the fire.” Commenting upon several of our contributors, he said: “Aaron Douglas...is permitted to spoil three perfectly good pages and a cover with his pen and ink hudge pudge. Countee Cullen ...tries his best to obscure the thought in superfluous sentences. Langston Hughes displays his usual ability to say nothing in many words.”¹³

Langston Hughes was not the only Negro writer to have such experience of the apathy of the established Black and White writers. In fact, most of the Black autobiographies are replete with the incidents depicting the unsympathetic and cynical attitudes of the mainstream critics and the publishing houses towards the literary works of the Black writers.

It seems the White-governed publishing houses had a hidden agenda of not allowing their victims to be aware of the power of words. They knew it well that ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’ and so they did not want the Blacks to understand and use that power of pen against them. They were afraid that once the Blacks realized the charismatic spell of words, it would be impossible to control them. And so Langston’s every effort towards expressing himself was discouraged by them. In some cases, it is noticed that Negroes were helped by the Whites to write out their minds. But it should not be misunderstood that this act of Whites was intended to encourage the Negroes. On the contrary, these so-called philanthropists wanted the Negro writers to write about only those issues which were approved and appreciated by the Whites. Negro writers were provided necessary support only if they would write to please the Whites and conform to their dictates. But if these writers tried to be faithful to their own inner self, they were severely condemned by their patrons.

In his autobiography, Langston Hughes writes about one of such White patroness who tried to dictate terms for his writing. It was all right with her until Langston wrote according to her wishes. But once he wrote a poem of his own choice, which brought their relation to an abrupt end. While commenting on the attitude of his patroness and its terrible effect on the sensitive psyche of Langston, Harold R. Isaacs says:

“Hughes had got himself a patron, a rich old lady who lived on Park Avenue. She fed him well, sent him around town in her chauffeured limousine, and generally made his life comfortable and pleasant so that he could write “beautiful things.” But one day he wrote a crude and angry poem contrasting the lushness of the newly opened Waldorf Astoria with the toil and growing deprivation outside. His benefactor did not like it at all. She wanted him to write out of his simple primitive soul, and poor Hughes did not know how... His parting from his patron threw Hughes into the second great emotional crisis of his life. As he had in Mexico in the crisis of his hatred for his father, he now again, fell violently ill. It was a complicated shame and anger he felt, and an even more complicated loss.”¹⁴

Langston’s patron expected him to be primitive and all the time write as per the primitive intuition. But as Langston was born and brought up in America, he had closely experienced Negro life in White America. So it was but natural for him to write about those experiences in his work. However, the Whites expected that the Blacks should only write about their good experiences following the traditional literary principles. It means the Negroes were allowed to write on only those subjects which were considered to be appropriate by the Whites. Langston Hughes’ experience was very much common in those days. Those were the days of Harlem and Chicago renaissance. As the Whites had started to show interest in Black music and Black culture, the Negro was in vogue. The Negro writers and artists were encouraged to express in terms of their art and culture. However, the interesting thing was that the White artists practicing Negro art or writing about Negroes were commercially more successful than the Negro artists themselves. But this interaction was strictly confined to art and culture. Any attempt to cross the colourline on the part of Negroes was sternly opposed.

But with the passing of time, African American writers including Langston Hughes became aware of the shrewd politics of the Whites in forcing them to follow the principles of mainstream literature, which had no any relevance with the real life experiences of Negroes. And so, Langston Hughes followed his own path, giving expression to the naked realities of his life without thinking of what the Whites or the upper class Negroes, who had unfortunately developed the liking for White ways of life and their literature, will feel after reading their works. He believed that authentic representation of Negro life in literature will help him to get culturally free from the age-old shackles of mainstream literature and its hollow principles.

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