

The Sense of Humanity and the Quest for Social Horizontality in Hughes' I, Too

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ملخص

تعد معرفة النفس في ظل نظام تعسفي عملية معقدة إذ يتأرجح الإنسان بين ثنائية الأنا و الغير. كما يولد انتهاك المجتمع لحقوق المضطهدين المدنية و الاجتماعية و حتى الانسانية أسئلة ملحة في أنفسهم لا يمكن الإجابة عنها الا إذا تأسست مكانة الأنا بالنسبة للغير. و عليه فإن مقاومة الاضطهاد تصبح حاجة شديدة مطلوبة بذلك الوسائل المناسبة لها. لجأ الأفارقة الأمريكيون كمضطهدون إلى الخطاب الأدبي كوسيلة لمقاومة الممارسات و الإيديولوجيات التعسفية التي يمارسها ضدهم المجتمع الأمريكي الأبيض. و يسعى هذا المقال لمناقشة الطرق التي قاوم من خلالها لانغستون هيوز الاضطهاد من خلال كتابته الأدبية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخطاب، القمع، الذات الذاتي، المتوقع الذاتي، المقاومة

Résumé

Il est, par fois, difficile et même plus complexe de définir le sens du *soi* dans une société régnée par un régime oppressif, là où l'homme se trouve dans une position dialectique du *soi* et de *l'autre*. Toutes les considérations sociales et civiles niées et tous les droits humains questionnés ne peuvent être reconsidérés que lorsque le sens et la position du *soi vis-à-vis* le sens et la position de *l'autre* soient mis en relief. La résistance à l'oppression devient une nécessité majeure, qui demande, éventuellement, une forme de présentation et /ou représentation adéquate. En n'ayant pas accès aux formes institutionnelles de discours, les auteurs Américains d'origines Africaines trouvèrent dans discours littéraire le moyen le plus adéquat d'exprimer les désarrois ainsi que le rejet de l'idéologie oppressive et les pratiques de l'autre (l'homme blanc).

Cet article traite la façon dont Langston Hughes, par le biais du discours littéraire, résiste l'oppression.

Mots clés : Discours, oppression, Soi-réel, soi- Attendu, résistance.

Abstract

Establishing a sense of the self in an oppressive regime is a complex process where one swings between the dichotomy of the self versus the other. The social denial of the oppressed subject of all his civic, social, and even human rights begets exigent questions which cannot be answered unless the sense and position of the self *vis-à-vis* the sense and position of the other are established. Resisting oppression, ergo, becomes an insistent need, which requires an adequate medium. Having no access to institutional forms of discourse, African-American writers resorted to literary discourse to express resistance of oppressive ideologies and practices acted upon them by the white community. This paper, hence will discuss the ways in which Langston Hughes resists oppression through the medium of literary discourse.

Key Words: Discourse, oppression, real-self, expected-self, resisting oppression

Introduction

Opressers enact, (re)produce and reinforce social inequality and injustice in all its forms through the medium of discourse. Equally, the oppressed express resistance of oppression and social inequality through the very same medium. Although African American writers were denied access to the public institutional forms of discourse, they thrived to voice their concerns and resistance of oppression by the whites through their literary production. Their underlying ideologies about their humanness and Americanness are encoded in their writings. In their attempt to redeem their image and defend their identity, African American writers maneuver their discourse to bespeak their grievances and depict their austere situation. It is necessary to unveil how discursive ideologies and world views and representations are expressed through literary discourse.

1. Verticality of the Social Structure

Oppressed people are usually thought of as a minority. A minority is usually understood as a group of people who are numerically few compared to a larger group which is mostly opposed to. Yet, it is preponderant to mention that the term minority is treated neither mathematically nor statistically but rather sociologically. Thus, a sociological minority is a group of people, be it of a small or large number, which is different from the supposed to be superior majority in terms of ethnicity, race and political, economic or religious belongings. Marger pinpoints that a mathematical minority and a sociological one are absolutely not the same (1985). Friere (1970) explains that these minorities are, therefore, thought of as inferior, and the oppressors dehumanize the oppressed due to these differences. He adds that:

The oppressed subject is seen to be deprived of all privileges and rights that the oppressor has by means of the social structure. Within this structure, the oppressor is put at the top of the social pyramid while the oppressed is put at its bottom. This social order begets death, poverty, despair; therefore, it is unjust. While this classification grants the former a full human living, it compels the latter a feeling of known incompleteness (Ibid: 2).

2. Literary Discourse as a Medium of Resistance

Once a minority group is oppressed and dehumanized, it is put at the margin of the human constellation. Once this category of people is marginalized, they look for alternative ways to regain their state of being human and to be put on the same equal footing as their oppressors. As a result, some among them start raising questions which gravitate around their status and identity.

Realizing one's differences does not forcibly mean accepting or rejecting the other. One may conform to the other's prescribed identity standards or reject them through preserving one's real self-identity. In either case, the position of the oppressed subject translates his nagging quest for self-recognition as an equal individual.

The quest for self-identity urges the oppressed to look for urgent solutions for their plight and identity crisis, which are crucial issues. They found literature as an adequate medium through which and whereby they can express their grievances and make their voice overtly heard. Many researchers have dealt with this issue. For instance, Mohammed Seghir Halimi stresses that "The African social reality as well as the social consciousness have pushed complains asides, and urged the African intelligentsia to think in terms of literary production" (2014: 02). This is, undoubtedly, why Langston Hughes is considered among those who endeavored to exteriorize their pain through the celebration of their racial identity.

3. Celebrating Blackness: Questioning the Other's Calumny in Hughes' *I, too*

Black or white? Black and white? What to be? What am I? Questions as such fling the individual into an identity crisis where one cannot know their status and value in the society. Hughes accounts for the role of the elites among the blacks, who had to submit to the prescribed image to simply feel as American and human as the white. In his article *The New Negro and The Racial Mountain* (1926), Hughes says that:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. (Robert G. O' Meally, 1998: 421)

Conversely to the young poet's desire, Hughes believes clinging to ones' real-self is the key to greatness. Celebrating black identity is noticed in Hughes' poems and writings. The speaker in Hughes' *I, too* (2012) is a proud and confident black American who shows no shame or fear of being so. Individuality and the recognition of himself are declared from the very title. The use of the first person singular is not haphazard; it accentuates the speaker's awareness of his distinctness. The "I" in the poem instills in the reader's mind that the black can speak for himself and does not need a spokesperson on his behalf.

The poem opens with: "I, too sing America". Now that his distinctness is accentuated, the speaker aspires to sing America. In other words, no matter how physically different he is, he still belongs to the larger American constellation. To wit, being a black does not make him any less American.

After ensuring his distinctness and Americanness, the speaker describes himself as the "darker brother":

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 (2012)

The despotic brotherhood relationship depicted in this stanza echoes prophet Joseph's story with his brothers. The experience of the black in America and Joseph's experience with his brothers are semantically linked. The story of the black carries religious semantic connotations in that Joseph was betrayed by his half-brothers and the black is also betrayed and ill-treated by his white brothers and neighbor who could be seen as half-brothers, too. This religious allusion reveals the sense of the speaker's social concession which is similar to Joseph's. In the same token, while the black could consider the American society an enemy, he considers it a family. This family comprises the darker brother who is different but not alien, not inferior and not in any way less human than others.

Albeit the ill-treatments and the betrayal, the prophet Joseph was merciful because of his sense of concession. Similarly, the black accepts the other despite the latter's attitude and behavior towards him. By dint of the black's reaction to the other's aberrant attitude his consciousness of his state of being a human is revealed, for humanity preaches tolerance and mercy. Consequently, it is presumed that tolerance can also be a weapon to fight against oppression. It is even recommended in the different religions; for instance, vengeance -as counterpart to tolerance- is prohibited in The Bible in many verses as in:

Whoever exacts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord, who keeps strict account of sin. Pardon your neighbor any wrongs done to you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven. If anyone nurses anger against another, can one then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for someone like oneself, can one then plead for one's own sins? – (Ecclesiasticus / Sirach 28:1-4)

One is, therefore, required not to hold grudge against those who wronged him. When one meets evil with evil, the situation may be more complicated with mutual hatred which can result in worse consequences. Yet, one is asked to meet evil with good. Saint Paul emphasizes the paramount importance of meeting evil with good in the New Testament:

Never pay back evil with evil, but bear in mind the ideals that all regard with respect. As much as possible, and to the utmost of your ability, be at peace with everyone. Never try to get revenge: leave that, my dear friends, to the Retribution. As scripture says: Vengeance is mine -- I will pay them back, the Lord promises. And more: If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat; if thirsty, something to drink. By this, you will be heaping red-hot coals on his head. Do not be mastered by evil, but master evil with good. – Romans 12:17-21

As far as Islam is concerned, one finds a considerable number of Quran verses in which social concession and tolerance are recommended as a medium to pay the other's ill-treatment. Repelling evil with good results in intimating the relationship between the self and the other. Inasmuch as one is mis-received and ill-treated, his good conduct towards his enemy will make the other reconsider his reception, the enemies might become intimate friends as The Lord states in the Holy Quran:

Good and evil are not equal. Repel evil with good, and the person who was your enemy becomes like an intimate friend. Fussilat (Detailed): 34.a

Once more the implied concept of social concession is not haphazard. Through his tolerating self, the speaker foregrounds that his different skin pigmentation does not necessitate an overt vulgar discrimination for men have no control over their physical appearance; it is, thence, absolutely unfair to judge someone on the basis of his/her skin color. It breeds the feeling of powerlessness, self versus other conflicts, unquenched curiosity about one's individual and common identity, dangling being, and even pretended indifference. Morrison posits that "Perhaps the feeling is indifference, mild annoyance, but it may hurt. It may even be that some of us know what is it like to be an actually hated for thing we have no control over and cannot change" (1970: ix)

In spite of all the attempts to integrate in the American white society, the speaker is eventually sent to eat in the kitchen for he cannot be with the company as he can only be their servant. The vertical structure of the society does not allow even the so-called brothers to be around one table. Any attempt to integrate in the American society is hindered with the argument that the African brother, if ever he had been considered one, is darker. Though seemingly the color is nothing but an uncontrolled inherited gene, the other, the white society, still considers it an axiom that a darker brother cannot be human and particularly an American human being. The least of the repercussions of being black- and not being a pure white- is to be hated, even worse to know that you are actually hated.

All these data, accompanied with the stock of experience the reader has, fuels and directs the reader's expectations about what comes next. In actual fact, the beginning of a text including its title together with the reader's profile from which he cannot uproot himself create the reader's horizon of expectation. Upon reading the first two stanzas, the reader, consequently, expects the speaker to subjugate his real-self to *otherization* in a search of attaining to the prescribed expected self. It is also plausible that the reader raises the expectation that he might abandon his attempts to integration. Surprisingly, the speaker insists on integrating as a black not as a white and not as half-black since he is only darker in color Hughes closes his poem in an even more hopeful tone that one day the white community would reconsider and revalorize the African-American's beauty, status, worth, Americanness and most importantly humanness:

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America

Subsequently, the expectations that he might fall in the trap of internalized oppression are disconfirmed by the end of the poem. Internalized oppression is defined by Pheterson as: [...] the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society. Internalized oppression is likely to consist of self-hatred, self concealment, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive. Internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed groups. (1986: 146)

Hughes' poem, however, does not infuse the feeling of internalized oppression or powerlessness. On the contrary, it incites his people to believe that their strength is in their past and the first step towards their recognition is to hold tight to their real-self disregarding their trials to attain to the idealized-self .

3. The Algerian Reader's Reception of the Discourse of The oppressed

What a reader has as background knowledge of the world in his reservoir and the structure of this knowledge are called schema (Bartlett 1932; Adams & Collins 1979; Rumelhart 1980). The schema contributes in the reader's comprehension of a text as Anderson et al 1977 (in Carrell, Devine, Eskey 1988: 76) posit: "...every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well". That is why the interpretation is an interactive process which combines "...textual information with the information the reader brings to the text" (Widdowson in Grabe, 1988:56). Also Wallace (1992 :32) contends that: "...the first part of a text activates a schema...which is either confirmed or disconfirmed by what follows".

Accordingly, reading a literary text, hence a literary discourse, is a creative process which involves the interaction between the text and the reader's stock of experience (Selden 1997:56). The stock of experience refers to the reader's prior experience with other texts. To wit, it is developed through reading .i.e. the more one reads, the larger his stock of experience grows. Both the schemata and the stock of experience contribute in building the *horizon of expectations*. The latter denotes the set of expectations a text provokes in the reader's mind. Holub defines the term as: "an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a system of references or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text" (1984:59).

Crafting on that, Jauss elucidates how the reader constructs the horizon of expectations upon reading a literary text:

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, bring the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the “middle and end,” which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text.(1982:23)

Along the same vein, the Algerian reader’s schemata which record a colonial experience, even if not directly affected by the experience, he has witnessed its aftermath. *Ergo*, the Algerian reader’s profile and the black American’s intersect at being both undergoers of oppression. Besides the experience of oppression, the two have in common the fighting spirit. Algerians got their independence after a 132-year- colonial experience. All along this considerable period, Algerians had not submitted to the French colonizer- at least the majority had not; neither had they lost hope and stopped fighting for their liberty.

Any reader of any text can be in either a centripetal or a centrifugal position towards the situation and experience transmitted. One has to know why a difference between a reader’s centrifugal view and his centripetal one is important to understand the world. Paul Ricoeur explains this very difference with reference to the relationship between the real reader and the narrator. Because having a centrifugal view, the reader is implying himself. Ricoeur says:

La théorie de la lecture nous en averti: la stratégie de persuasion fomentée par le narrateur vise à imposer au lecteur une vision du monde qui n’est jamais éthiquement neutre, mais qui plutôt induit implicitement ou explicitement une nouvelle évaluation du monde et du lecteur lui-même (Michaël Foëssel 2007 : 235)

Since the reader is an Algerian and the narrator provide a vision of an oppressed individual in an oppressed world, the former would process the discourse of the oppressed not only as a neutral real reader but as an implied reader; he refers to his background as a subject who experienced oppression before. This reader can put himself, therefore, in the place of the other oppressed individuals and identifying himself to them. This narrative identity becomes a common identity. Thus the positions (*centripetal* and/or a *centrifugal positions*) the Algerian reader can be in are synonymously accounted for in this context.

It is, however, fundamental to know what if there is a difference between the positions. Having a *centrifugal* position provides the Algerian reader with a subjective psychological stance rekindling and provoking by that his *sympathy* which might be dormant with the speaker because he is already aware of the effects of oppression, which he had been immediately experienced or had been prone to its repercussions. However, if in a centrifugal position, he is likely to develop *empathy*. Empathy is different from sympathy in a sense that one can visualize himself in the position of the other and is able to feel what the other goes through. Put differently, the reader's schemata allow him to ‘put himself in the other’s shoes’, as it were. In both cases, “ Le sujet apparaît alors constitué à la fois comme lecteur et comme scripteur de sa propre ” (Marcel Proust, 1954 : 1033)

Conclusion

This article discusses the ways in which the oppressed subject uses literary discourse as an outlet to voice their urgent needs and ceaseless quest for redeeming their tarnished image. The abiding desire for establishing a balance between their real-self and the expected and idealized-self continues to provoke inner conflicts where one is stumbling between the choices, if ever they were choices, of preserving one's real identity or melting into the other's identity. Hughes, in his tough journey towards establishing a sense of the self, uses literary discourse to call for substituting the vertical social structure with a horizontal one. Oppression is whether consciously or unconsciously enacted, produced and reproduced every day through discourse, on the one hand. On the other hand, discourse, as a human social behavior, stands as a medium to resist and reject oppressive practices in a sense that world representations and view are encoded through discourse.

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