

RACIAL DISPARITIES, QUEST FOR FREEDOM AND LIBERTY AS DEPICTED IN SOME SELECTED POEMS OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR, LANGSTON HUGHES AND MAYA ANGELOU.

Sènanckpon Raoul AHOANGANSI

Université d'Abomey-calavi / Bénin

peacemakersouls@yaboo.fr

Laboratoire du Groupe de Recherches sur l'Afrique et la Diaspora (GRAD)

Abstract

During the making of the American republic, the national character enrolled a series of socio-cultural and political hardships among which the remarkable issue of race. The affirmation of cultural identities faced the challenge of racism and disparities it generates: Black Americans as the spare goat. Meant to instill their marks in the distinguishing traits of 'that nation of everyone', some black American writers duly make their voices heard in different periods of time but toward the same goal, through literary productions. With content analysis as a scientific approach, this article resolves to scrutinize at depths some poems of black American writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Maya Angelou (1928-2014) in order to shed light on how racism, the fight for freedom and liberty have been apprehended by Black Americans for their own national take-off.

Key words: *national character, racism, poets, freedom, nation.*

Résumé

Pendant la construction de la République américaine, le caractère national américaine a subi une série de difficultés socio-culturelles politiques au nombre desquelles le problème. L'affirmation des identités culturelles a fait face au défi du racisme et les disparités qu'il génère : les noirs américains représentant la bête à abattre. Déterminés à imprimer leurs marques au sein des traits caractéristiques de 'cette nation de tout le monde', certains écrivains noirs se sont fait entendre à de différentes périodes de temps mais visant le même objectif à travers des œuvres littéraires. En me basant sur l'analyse du contenu comme approche scientifique, cet article se résout à étudier certains poèmes d'écrivains noirs américains tels que Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) , Langston Hughes (1902-1967) et Maya Angelou (1928-2014) au vu d'élucider comment le racisme et la lutte pour la liberté ont été appréhendées par les noirs américains pour leur propre essor national.

Mots clés : *caractère national , racisme , poète , liberté , nation.*

Introduction

For centuries and till the present time, the issue of race and its related hardships within the American society, have always forged indiscernible consequences in all domains and in every step in the whole life of Americans. Although slavery was abolished more than century ago, it is a common issue to see people especially those of color, not enjoying full rights as human beings and citizens of the United States of America: a land of everyone. The fight for total freedom and equality sums up just to a sparkle in the darkness a radical change or a fleeting hope long waited for. Undaunted by all the events, some African American writers, activists fought and are still fighting to denounce, fight to reach a state of effective state of freedom and equality in that land of own making.

Developing a special focus on three different African American poets, contents of their genuine literary productions are deeply analyzed with specific regards to race and its detrimental manifestations. One of them Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) belongs to the era early after the Emancipation Proclamation, the second one Langston Hughes (1902-1967) belongs to the Negro Renaissance era 1920-1930 and the last one, Maya Angelou (1928-2014). was a modern poet although both Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes belong to the Civil rights movement era too. Though they developed different views on race issues and the quest for freedom and equality because diversely influenced by their corresponding eras, their common objectives were to expose what was going wrong and to find ways to reach a state of total freedom and equality in every domain in the United States of America. In a comparative framework, this research paper will emphasize on time impact of the authors' varied approaches and assess on how far the issue of race has evolved with indelible effects on institutions, economy, culture and other fields of socio-economic life of Americans.

1- Paul Laurence Dunbar and racism as portrayed in some of his works.

1.1. Apprehending lynching as a consequence of racism.

Laurence minces no word to denounce societal plagues as essentially related to the whole American society. His poem "The Haunted Oak," reveals something of his belief that lynching is a horrible crime,

motivated by prejudiced and resentful Southern whites incited to violent action, and predicated upon a system of false and twisted education. Yet, Paul Laurence Dunbar's attitude toward lynching stems from his intense dislike of violation regarding human life. The poem in question tackles the issue of injustice that African-Americans faced with the lynch mobs, who killed innocent people with the intention of suppressing civil rights activists. It purposes to protest against, and to portray the suffering of innocent African-Americans.

In some useful details, "The Haunted Oak", recalls the lynching of " a guiltless victim" (line 8), and the circumstances surrounding the execution. The poetry protests against, and engenders anger about the plight suffered by innocent African Americans, many of whom were lynched without reliable reasons for such treatments, while countless others were persecuted. Although the poem does not directly state that the "guiltless victim" is an American of African descents, it appears as an evident case since it is suggested by the facts that his "curiously equipped" (line 50) executioners wearing "mask(s) of black... (and) white" (lines 45 and 46) sound suspiciously like Ku Klux Klan members. As usual, people didn't generally care for the innocence of Black people in those days. Laurence, as a professional black literary man among whites, undoubtedly felt the need to protest the common misconception of white supremacy: an abominably popular notion in his time. Genuine enough, he forwards its primary message, a protest about racism, skillfully enhanced in a number of ways, involving manifold elements of the poem, its wording, its craftsmanship, and manifold literary devices. The predominant feeling in "The Haunted Oak" is sorrow, a result of the abundance of melancholy concepts presented in it, chiefly racism and the "guiltless victim's pains", as well as the harsh and harmful language used throughout the poem. Additionally, the tone of the poem is quite distrustful, with its narrator, questioning while commonly accepted, though mildly troubling events must take place, moaning "why does the dog howl all night?" (Line 15) and "why does the night wind wail?" (Line 16) , and ruins the day when an innocent man was lynched upon it, confessing that it feels "burned with dread....dried and dead". The sorrowful tone of the poem serves to enhance the reader's outrage at the unjust treatment of the protagonist, and consequently to forward the poem's message. In his poem entitled "The Lynching Song", Langston

Hughes showcased the obvious fact that only African Americans were lynched and he depicted the pains they faced and the injustice this raised.

1.2 Visible or invisible and the quest for Freedom

The poem "We Wear the Mask" deals intrinsically with racism that African Americans faced throughout that time. Dunbar wrote this poem, denouncing racism and pains and sufferings that he and others felt every single day. In his shoes, Langston Hughes uses a specific vocabulary, informal language, and specific structure to depict pains and sufferings slaves felt and Americans of African origin have limitlessly submitted to. Grasping the scope of the vast majority of people concerned with such a plague, Dunbar's use of the word "we". The poem starts with Dunbar speaking for the entire Black community. He expresses his anger of having to hide his emotions. When African Americans are being lynched and discriminated, they were forced to accept it and mask their true emotions with a smile. They could not show how they truly felt, the White man wouldn't care and might punish them for trying to show their inner feelings. The fourth line of the Poem 'We Wear the Mask' explains, "That African Americans were not allowed to speak out their ideas. They were invisible like the narrator of "The Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison narrates it.

"With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
and mouth myriad subtleties".

The tone of the poem is a combination of anger, sorrow, and despair with repetition of 'We wear the Mask' in every stanza of the poem, being the title indeed. When huge emotions melt with sufferings and racial hardships, freedom is absolutely needed. The poem "Sympathy" stands one of the most famous statements about racism from its author, Paul Laurence Dunbar. The central metaphor of the caged bird in "Sympathy," with the bird forced to perform within confinement is the clear expression about slavery African Americans endured in the United States for two and a half centuries. Though Paul Laurence Dunbar lived after the Emancipation Proclamation, the legacy of slavery continued through various social, legal, and psychological constraints. He was denied white collar or journalistic work because of his race, forced to work in the confinement of an elevator and the barred library stacks.

These conditions did inspire him positively in his fierce fight against racism and its manifestations in all forms.

A bird is a frequent poetic symbol for freedom since it can fly the way it wants. It is in many respects a common symbol in poetry for the poet. The yearning of the bird for its freedom in "Sympathy" is graphically portrayed when the bird sees the landscape outside. It hears other birds singing and the wind and river rushing and responds by beating its wings against the cage, trying to get out. The urge for freedom is so compelling that the bird endures pain again and again trying to fly, only to be beaten back. By presenting the contrast between the cage and the spring day, it is plain to notice that a cage is a cruel perversion of confined life. Whether meaning a literal cage, as slavery, or a psychological confinement, as Paul Laurence Dunbar and many black artists have felt, the poet protests that it is wrong to prevent the potential of any living being from flourishing. In this poem, the bird, and by implication the speaker is denied what is natural, a life entitled right. The speaker has sympathy for the bird, so the poem is perceived from the point of view of the one without freedom. Other Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems on the theme of freedom include "Emancipation" , "Ode to Ethiopia" , "Justice", "Differences" , "Lincoln" and others written in the same endeavor and inflexible commitment.

Familiar religious spirituals as "Get on Board, Little Children" and "Go Down, Moses," were a way to talk about freedom and slavery in Biblical terms or to warn about an impending escape attempt. The song "Oh, Freedom" is another that was sung at secret meetings on the plantations. The fact that these protests were coded indicates something important about early African American literature. The African Americans were not free to express their true mind. They had to hide their feelings and emotions in order not to suffer from anger and sorrow. Paul Laurence Dunbar used most of his poems to value the African American culture, to protest against racial oppression and inequality in different ways and he took advantage of the situation to win recognition from both Blacks and Whites.

2-Langston Hughes's poetry: Racial segregations and calls for equality.

2.1 Racial segregation: about discontentment and disappointment.

On his journey to Mexico, Langston Hughes would compose one of his greatest poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" The idea for the poem came to him while he looked Out the window when the train crossed the Mississippi and he began thinking of that river and its being linked to slavery. The poem also invokes the legend that Abraham Lincoln witnessed a slave auction in New Orleans as a young man and resolved at that moment to overthrow slavery. The other rivers in the poem, such as the Congo and the Nile, do have connotations of slavery and exploitation by colonial powers but, rivers like the Mississippi, are described in positive images. The speaker has bathed in the Euphrates, been lulled to sleep by the Congo, and seen the glory of a sunset on the Mississippi. The rivers are comforting, maternal presences, and the poem evokes a history of suffering, endurance, survival, and achievement.

The poem has showed Langston Hughes's embrace of pride and identification with the black race. He speaks in that poem not as Langston Hughes but as "The Negro." He embraces what his father rejected and disparaged, and now he would have to ask his father to support him in his endeavors. If he could not do anything to end the suffering he saw in Africa, he could at least write about it. In the "The White Ones" , Hughes indicts the whites for torturing the people of Africa. In "Dream Variations" he took a more symbolic approach in these words:

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day-is done.
Then rest at cool evening
 Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
 Dark like me
That is my dream!

The speaker yearns to escape the "white day" and celebrates the night as "Dark like me" or "Black like me," reaffirming that identity with the African people that the Kru tribesman dismissed. In "Brothers," L. Hughes asserts the relationship between all dark-skinned people whether they are West Indians, African Americans, or Africans. He also expresses his frustration and bitterness in poems like "Long View: Negro "Sweet Words on Race", and "Go Slow".

"Let America be America Again" is the expression of discontentment and disappointment of the poet and the minorities that were stated in the passages of the poems: African-American, Indian, immigrants, and even the poor while "I, Too, Sing America" specifically talks about a black slave who was discriminated against and driven off to eat in the kitchen in humiliation (because during those days, those who ate in the kitchen are just slaves and animals. In "Let America be America Again" the author criticizes the state of America. He saw that something was off with America. it's not the real America everyone has been dreaming of, it is not the Promised Land that filled with freedom in the air, and equality of every human being. Hughes saw that equality was just for the majority while the minority could not enjoy it. This echoes the title of Maya Angelou's "These Yet To Be United States".

In 'I, Too, Sing America.', someone is acknowledging himself as the people of America. He sings America anthem, and think of himself as American, but however, we can read a satirical expression in the title of "I, Too, Sing America.' The poem tells us about a black slave in his master's house. He thinks he is not really different from the white man. In fact, he calls himself 'darker brother' (meaning they are all equal except for their skin color which is different) but ironically he could not eat in the same place as they (the Caucasians) would. In a situation like this, one tends to assume that the man who is oppressed will live a miserable life, but in this poem, it is the opposite. The man laughs at his life as a slave, and it flogged him to vow that he will grow strong, and one day he will be the one who will eat on the table and no one will dare to order him to eat in the kitchen.

2.2 Total Freedom and way to equality of Race.

Racism based on skin color can be seen in Langston Hughes' poem "As I Grew Older", published in 1925. It starts off pretty negative as Hughes describes the fact that the wall stands in the way to his dream forcing

him therefore to give up. In the first stanza, Langston represents the birth of a goal to achieve and as the poem progresses, Hughes portrays how the dream begins to diminish behind the wall of adulthood as he grew older. When he says:

It was a long time ago.
I have almost forgotten my dream.
But it was there then,
In front of me, bright like a sun,
My dream.

The poet shows that when still a youngster, he believed his dreams possible to be achieved because he didn't know much about the consequences related to being Black in an environment ruled by Whites who believe and promote their superiority. When we get to the second stanza, he portrays his dream as fading away not because he wanted that to happen but because the White man tried to make him forget it. He accordingly says:

And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly
Slowly
Between me and my dream.
Rose slowly, slowly
Dimming, hiding,
The light of my dream.
Rose until it touched the sky
The wall.

He shows how the influence of Race can shadow a dream from a Black. He continues:

Shadow
I am Black.

It could be realized in the poem that he didn't let that happen. Although the wall keeps him from reaching his goal, Langston Hughes shows through this poem that it is still possible to achieve a dream if one fights for his rights. Known to be a very active activist of civil rights he shows

that with unity and enough determination, the dream is still possible as he tenuously mentions:

My hands,
My dark hands!
Break through the wall
Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night.
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams of sun!

He calls on the equality of Race, he calls on unity for the fulfillment of the African American's dream. The poet used the same poem to depict how, being black with a dream can be a difficult existence in a world where you're judged inferior and incapable because you have a dark skin color. He portrays the possibility to make the dream come true when Blacks stand to fight in one accord for racial equality. In his poem "Democracy", Langston Hughes depicts his own strong will for Freedom. He shows how Freedom and Equality are bound together. He clearly states that one cannot achieve total freedom when their inequality still has a place:

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand,
On my feet.
And own the land.

The poet shows that all human beings are equal and must therefore be entitled to the same rights. The use of the term "Fellow" shows that whether you are Black or White, Asian or Indian, we are all one with no major difference. "Fellow" in the poem refers to "White". In "Democracy", he says that now is the time, not tomorrow, now is the time for Freedom and not in the future. He says consequently declares:

I do not need my Freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

He refuses to deliberately live in the hope that one day, things will turn out right and he will reach total freedom. He is an American too so he

deserves the same treatment like his white fellow. As the poem progresses, in the last stanza, he says:

I live here too.
I want Freedom.
Just as you.

3- Maya Angelou: Race and the Quest for Freedom and Equality

3.1 About the quest for freedom and equality.

In a series of literary productions Maya Angelou made her voice heard about socio-cultural and even political topics of great interests of his era. In the 'Caged Bird', she considers the conditions of the free bird and the 'caged bird'. Actually, this contrast between the birds enables her to express her own emotions about freedom and isolation. The poem is quite symbolic so there are various hidden messages she tries to convey about her feelings mostly indirectly. Written in 1983 as part of her book "Shaker, Why don't you Sing?", the poem is a Metaphor illustrating the differences between African Americans and Whites during the civil rights era. It expresses how she feels about the discrimination she faced during this era. The caged bird represents African Americans fighting for equality during the civil rights movement. In the first stanza Maya Angelou breathes life into her description of the free bird' by using verbs like leaps', floats, dips. The 'free bird' is a symbol of freedom and those well-chosen verbs are especially meaningful because they contain joy and energy. This is a hint for us to discover how Maya Angelou feels about freedom as well:

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

In the second and third stanzas, she goes on to describe the 'caged bird' by using words like "bars of rage', 'grave', 'fearful', 'shadow'. These ominous words are references to isolation and they are disturbing compared to freedom. This method of contrast that she uses throughout

the poem is powerful to highlight the comfort of freedom and how the poet achieves a better understanding of the ease of freedom by comparing it with something worse.

Maya Angelou also uses irony to be cleverer and effective but less direct in conveying her feelings. This sentence is ironic as the caged bird is the one singing not the free bird as we expect. However, the words 'fearful' and 'trill' makes us realize that actually it is not a happy tune but a desperate cry for freedom. This relief enables us to reach to more depth and appreciate freedom. Another device Maya Angelou uses to emphasize the beauty of freedom is by repetition. The fact that the third stanza is repeated at the end is for emphasis because it reflects the two birds that are different. 'For the caged bird sings of freedom is he last line of the poem and it delivers a very important message to the reader. The caged bird wants to be like the free bird. This tells us that we should be aware and thankful for the freedom we have and basically this line sums up the whole poem. Maya Angelou depicted Freedom as the most important quest in this poem. The caged bird is a call, a will to enjoy freedom. The Caged bird was the reflection of the black people longing for freedom.

In her works, Maya Angelou would underscore the injustice of racism and how to fight it. She uses the metaphor of the caged bird to express the call for total freedom and Equality:

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Throughout "Equality", there are clear themes of discrimination, which line up with Angelou's public contributions towards the fight for civil rights. The title gives off the first message of equality, maybe not just equality to African Americans but also to all kinds of equality, such as gender, race, height, weight and age. Equality is also shown with the use

of repetition of the line "equality and I will be free". The pronouns "I/we" represent African Americans and "You" is so sharply believed to be white authority. This line means that once she/ African Americans become equal to the rest of the world white people, they will finally be free of judgment and discrimination. She portrays the issues as follows:

Take the blinders from your vision,
Take the padding from your ears,
And confess you've heard me crying,
And admit you've seen my tears.

In "Equality" Maya Angelou tries to address the importance of equality and freedom without segregation, discrimination and racism. This poem also reveals an aspect of the invisibility African Americans were subjects to. The white man chooses deliberately not to see them as human beings , treating them alike:

You declare you see me dimly
through a glass which will not shine,
though I stand before you boldly,
trim in rank and marking time.

She shows that African Americans are not and would never be invisible even if the White man chooses not to see them. She shows that African Americans are proud people with valuable cultures and civilizations. They are making history though the white man might think that they do not exist or whatever.

3.2 Overcoming oppression and call for unity of human race.

In her Poem "Human Family", Maya Angelou tries to convey a very important and universal message. Here, she states that despite our differences, in spite of the fact that human beings belong to different countries, cultures, races and other minor differences, there is one thing above all that is the simple but strong fact that they are all humans:

I note the obvious differences
Between each sort and type,
But we are more alike, my friends,
Than we are unlike.
We are more alike, my friends,
Than we are unlike.

This is a common ground to every Man. Maya Angelou shows that being Human and One" is the most important aspect of life to take into account at the end of the day. She showed that all humans are equal and therefore , they should be judged on the basis of the same standards with no discrimination or segregation or any types of racial intolerance.

The acceptance of the world as a family by everyone regardless of their races and differences will bring about justice, fairness and more importantly equality and freedom. This will enable everyone to achieve absolute freedom: the main key to real happiness. Maya Angelou used this poem to portray how united the world is supposed to be. She believed we are one people, although we have some minor differences which should not be let to destroy the universal bond. This poem may sound more universal still, it is the result of her experiences as an African American who grew up in a country where segregation and other racial oppressions prevail.

In her poem "Still I rise", Maya Angelou demonstrates how to overcome prejudice and injustice. This piece of poetry is a reminder of the abuse of power by the white man, by those men who believe they could oppress the African American people. "Still, I rise" is a clear message of hope to the oppressed people. It empowers and encourages them. The poem shows them that no matter the circumstance, the oppression, the injustice, they must hold on to the hope that there will be a better future, the hope that they will overcome adversity. They will rise, yes they will rise.

The use of "You" in the poem is Maya Angelou's way to address the oppressor. Stanza 6 brings the oppressive issue to a climax so to speak. Three lines begin with 'You', the speaker choosing particularly active verbs: shoot, cut, kill to emphasize the aggression. But all to no avail for the oppressed will still rise, this time like air, an element which you cannot shoot, cut or kill . The use of "Laugh" in stanza 5 portrays the power, the courage and the character of the African American people in front of adversity. She believes that it is her duty to remain strong in order to pay tribute the ancestors. The poem aims at pricking the oppressor 's conscience, to remind him of past wrongs and present realities as such:

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

The concept of hope in this poem is so meaningful and quite illustrative of her dream. Maya Angelou shows that the African American doesn't give in to tortures. Though the past is full of terrible memories, full of pains, things will be better. She continues:

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

The repetition of "I rise" at the end shows the power to overcome oppression no matter the circumstance. This is a powerful and universal message although the poem was basically written in the context of civil rights movement. Even though Maya Angelou belongs to the civil rights movement era, she could write about the past oppressions in a very imaginary way. Her struggle is mostly focused on equality, freedom and hope. She had a more global view in her works.

Conclusion

The study of these three timelines (1872-1906), (1902-1967) and (1928-2014) regarding respectively Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, shows us that Racism has evolved throughout time and as time goes by. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) in his era, the early after the abolition of slavery faced hard constraints to write about racism. He found himself in a tricky situation wherein he would play a double game to please both Whites and Blacks. But as time passes, from Langston Hughes (1902-1967) to Maya Angelou (1928-2014) , things have changed another way run. Both Maya Angelou and her good friend and mentor Langston Hughes were influenced by Paul Laurence's

endeavors in literary productions and issues he dutifully tackles. They definitely learned from the latter one and continued the fight for the improvement of the Black community's life in the USA. Their views on racism, freedom and equality had a lot to do with their timelines. They did not always see things the same way nevertheless the goal was quite the same. They all depicted racism as it vividly occurred and responsibly fought out for freedom and equality.

Though we still face police brutality and violence on African Americans in the USA, it is fair to showcase the remarkable change that has occurred throughout time with the three African American poets due to their genuine audacities. Whether aversive, economic, cultural or institutional, racism in the United States of America faded to less than what he had been, late in the past. Americans from African origin enjoyed better civil life with the 'caged bird' that can at last fly in the same sky with the 'then free bird'. Unity around human race and the American nation inspired Americans from every corner of the globe, making the New World a home to make the dream become true for the best interests of everyone. Black American poetries did play significant part in building consciousness about that scourge of racism and its related fallouts which jeopardize socio-cultural and political relationships among Americans.

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