

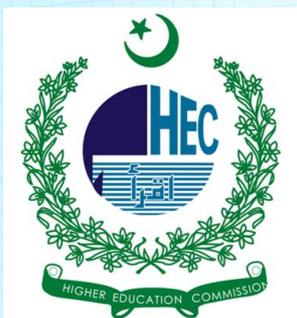
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**Afro-American Quest of Existence to Essence: Semiotic
Interpretation of Langston Hughes Poetry**



¹Dr. Hina Naz

¹Lecturer, Department of English, Sardar Bahadur Khan
Women's University, Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan.

Email: hina.naz@sbkwu.edu.pk



Abstract

Langston Hughes, one of the pioneers of Harlem Renaissance, through his poetry awoke his nation to fight with the circumstances, to claim their lost identity and to trace their old civilization. He made them realize their mode of being and search for the sublime objective of life. The present study aimed to analyze how Langston Hughes's poetry highlights the quest of Afro-American from existence to essence with its unique connection to semiotics. Sartre's theory of Existentialism is combined with Saussure model of semiotics through the method of theoretical triangulation to observe the journey of Afro-Americans from Existence to essence in semiotic manner. Qualitative mode of inquiry was applied to find out the answers to the research questions. Textual analysis proved that Langston Hughes poetry exhibits that he was aware of use of semiotics to express his existentialist philosophy. The study is significant in a sense that it investigates Black's problem of being from the level of existence to essence which passes through the stages of freedom of choice and responsibility from semiotic perspective.

Keywords: Existentialism, Semiotics, Langston Hughes, Black civilization, Sartre's Existentialism

Introduction

The concept of new Negro was raised by the New Negro Movement. This movement echoed the philosophy that now a fresh and different representation is required for the Blacks. The representation of the New Negro is in complete contrast to that of the Old Negro, who was observed to be passive, meek, immoral and ignorant. Alain Locke (2003) in his work *The New Negro Anthology* aims "to document the New Negro culturally and socially, to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America" (p. 233).

The era of Renaissance started in Harlem which aimed at flowering the culture of African Americans. The contribution of youth to Harlem Renaissance gave a daring fresh voice to Blacks. The Harlem Renaissance altered the whole scenario which was prevalent in early 20th century that no culture or history were supposed to be associated with Blacks (Johnson, 1983).

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Literature and poetry were the major components of Harlem Renaissance. Several negro writers, especially the young generation took pride in their history and civilization. They identified their heritage as old as humanity itself. Among young poets of the age was Langston Hughes. He at the age of 19 made great contribution to Harlem Literature. He made his community and the whole world realize their existence. His poetry broke away with the traditional belief about negro civilization. He explored his cultural identity and was pride of his race. Through his works he broke the strict racial borders in the time of hostility and segregation (Wood, 2014).

Langston Hughes raised the consciousness of Blacks towards their existence. Harlem Renaissance along with Hughes poetry became the source of Negro's awakening for their self-realization. The present study aims to trace the existentialist philosophy of Langston Hughes through the selected poems. Hughes seems to be the big advocate of existentialism. He preached and practiced the philosophy through his writings. Since his writings focus on the Black existence and the problems of their being.

Existentialism is one of the philosophies which mostly influenced the continent of Europe during the 1930s. The philosophy tries to explain the existence of humans with emphasizing its problematic and concert Nature. Abbagnano (2019) posits that Existentialism focuses on the individual existence and problem of existence i.e. mode of being. which investigate the meanings of being. It is about individual's decision making and commitment towards the decision. Human existence has been defined in terms of their relationship with things and other human beings.

In the context of Hughes works, existentialism for him is to make his community and others to be conscious of Black existence, to find out the meanings of their being. He is observed to be very committed to the decision that he has taken i.e. to represent the new identity of Negroes. Through simple short poems, they professed the strong and ancient history of Black civilization.

The present research also tries to identify Hughes' unique display of existentialist elements through semiotics. Saussure, father of Semiotics, presented the structure of semiotics (1983). According to him the model has two elements: signified and signifier. The sign is taken as the signifier which can be everything which stimulates sensual tissues and signified is referred to the conception specified by

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signifier.

The main concern of the study is to explore the existentialist elements in Langston Hughes selected poems via the lens of Semiotics. Saussure's Semiotics model (1983) along with Sartre's existentialist ideology i.e. Existence precedes essence, provides theoretical background of the study. The poems are analyzed through a qualitative method to locate the themes of existentialism along with semiotics.

Statement of the Problem

It had been a general observation that Langston Hughes takes a nationalistic attitude, but he is hardly studied in the relation of existentialist philosophy via science of symbols and signs. The current study explores in what way the mode of being reflected through semiotics by Hughes. It tries to locate the travel of black community from existence to essence with deep connection to semiotics.

Significance of the Study

The present research is significant in a sense that it investigates Black's problem of being from the level of existence to essence which passes through the stages of freedom of choice and responsibility from semiotic perspective. It presents a deep analysis of the black's representation of existence in the selected poems of Langston Hughes.

The research will benefit literary scholars and linguists to do research in the same way on the work of their choice by exploring existentialism through semiotics. The method of triangulation which the study adopts will be helpful for the student to unify two or more theories to evaluate literary works.

Research Objectives

The objectives which are set for the study are:

1. To examine Langston Hughes' poems as a journey of African American from existence to essence.
2. To determine the function of semiotics in the depiction of existentialism in the selected work of Langston Hughes.

Research Questions

1. How poems of Langston Hughes are a journey of Africans Americans from existence to essence?
2. How do the selected poems of Langston Hughes depict existentialism through

semiotics?

Literature Review

The following section of the present study is literature review in the subsections of Existentialism and Semiotics so that a gap can be identified which the present study will fill.

Existentialism

Existentialism is one of the philosophies which mostly influenced the continent of Europe during the 1930s. The philosophy tries to explain the existence of humans by emphasizing its problematic and concert Nature. Abbagnano (2019) posits that Existentialism focuses on the individual existence and problem of existence i.e. mode of being which investigate the meanings of being. It is about individual's decision making and commitment towards the decision. Human existence has been defined in terms of their relationship with things and other human beings.

Roubiczek (2009) says that it started as a complaint against irrationality of pure thinking, a logic which is not logical thought, but it is about the essential effort of being. The key concept of Existentialism is the word Existence. The use of this word in this theory is very special. The word *Existence* is the key concept in Existentialism. It refers particularly to the existence of humans. It is a common belief that only material or physical things exist. This belief is supported by existentialists, since they consider man as an existent because of his concert and physical individuality. They add to the philosophy that existent is one who is conscious of his being, of his existence. Hence, Raosaheb (2016) concludes that it is man alone who exists. His beliefs that Kierkegaard was also of the view that existentialism is about man's discovery to himself, about self-realization, about the achievement of self – assurance.

Rogers and Thompson (2012) postulate that Existentialism is about the know-how of existing as a human being. It explores how an individual engages himself with the realm of his surroundings and his dealing of life on two levels: the discovery of an individual himself and his persistent craving to go beyond himself, and to plan and shape his future.

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The movement officially started after the Second World War, however Socrates, Pascal and St. Augustine are thought to be ancient existentialist thinkers, because man remained the center of their philosophy (Nimali, 2017). Man exist first, means that he first meets himself, outpour himself in the realm of the world and finally delineates himself. He will become how he forms himself. (Sartre, 1975).

Semiotics

Amongst numerous blessings of Allah Almighty, one is the communication skill human beings are bestowed with. Through words, expressions and gestures they convey their feelings and thoughts. The process of communication is done with the help of signs, senses and gestures. The fact which distinguishes living beings with non-livings is their inherent capability of understanding the sign system, it is known as semiotics (Sebeok, 2001).

It is believed by most of the writers that semiotics study signs (Berger, 2010; Eco, 1976; Suhor, 1991). According to Saussure (1983) signs play significant role in our social life and semiotics examines the roles played by the signs. Semiotics also determines the nature of signs, functions of the signs and examine the rules according to which signs function. Eco (1976) elaborate the definition and function of signs by stating that semiotics study everything that might be taken as a sign which signifies something other than its literal meanings. Signs can take the form of sounds, images, objects, gestures and words. Claims Culler (1989) that everything is a sign in this universe.

Conceptually, the foremost factor of semiotics is the identification of sign which embodies somewhat different than it is; however theoretically sign is a figure that can be drawn, spoken or a written word. Signs can be denoted to any specific traditional concept related to material objects. Berger (2010) beliefs that signifier can be an object and signified is the socially constructed sense attached to the signified. While Sebeok (2001) supported similar faith regarding sign by declaring that sign can be a measurable character that is imagined or made, and incorporates happenings and reactions, and called it a referent. He argues that in one's life several tasks are accomplished by signs and they create ease for one's communication.

Some scholars such as Suhor (1991) and Arensberg (1984) approve that the study of semiotics has influenced other disciplines like anthropology, linguistics, sociology,

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philosophy and literary criticism, due to its imperialistic nature. Morris (1938) fortified the belief of scholars by stating that signs have vastly been measured from several viewpoints. Anthropologists and sociologists, biologists and psychologists, logicians, philosophers and linguists work together like a military force, to conduct research for the manifestation of signs.

Such as in the field of literature, Piaget (1997) did the semiotic study on the novels of Eliot, Ruskin, Thackeray and Collins, on the role of precious gems. He believed that in their novels, Signs are associated with jewelry. Victorian literature is rich in displaying the significance that is attached to Victorian culture over the period. They convey certain meanings and messages. The novelists of Victorian age associate conflicting and powerful meanings with the signs presented by jewelry. When gems are united with semiotics, the significance can be determined in the context provided by culture. The study concluded that Victorian establishes the interconnection between jewelry and semiotics.

In the connection of the present study, literature review has enabled the researcher to gain comprehensive understanding of the theories of existentialism and semiotics. On the other side it has also straightened the path for the conduction of the present study by identifying a gap in the sense that when the work of Langston Hughes is analyzed in the light of the two theories, it will be a unique attempt of its kind. It will create a novelty in existing literary research by the unification of the two theories to the semiotic study of the poetry of Langston Hughes with special connection to the struggle of Afro-Americans' existence to essence.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature; data is analyzed through textual interpretation. The method of theoretical triangulation is applied to find out the answer to question set for the study. The theory of existentialism is unified with the theory of semiotics to increase the validity of the research.

Sartre's Theory of Existentialism

Sartre possess a prominent position by introducing his existentialist idea that "Existence precedes essence". The very idea became the first principle of existentialist philosophy. Man exist first, means that he first comes across himself, gushes himself up in his surroundings and finally describes himself. He will become

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how he forms himself (Sartre, 1975). The man has to travel from his existence towards his essence. But during this voyage of self-search, one must pass through certain stages. First, when one becomes conscious of his existence he has to choose between good and evil, he must be responsible for his choice and actions, he has to remain committed, only then he would be able to give meaning and purpose to his life

In this sense existence comes before essence. Existence shapes our essence and it is not essence which shapes our existence. There are no predefined structures into which one fits. Therefore, what one is defined by the way one lives his life. (Sartre, J. P., & Mairat, P. 1975)

EXISTENCE + FREEDOM OF CHOICE + RESPONSIBILITY = ESSENCE

Sartre in his work *The Nausea* (1938) talks about the endless struggle of exploited human to articulate his worth or essence through his freedom and responsibility of his action from his existence (Chaudhury, 2013). To have an essence man first must exist.

Theory of Semiotics

The second theory applied on the present research is the theory of semiotics proposed by Saussure (1983). According to him two elements are all that comprise the study of signs. They are Signified and the Signifier. The signifier is the structure in which a sign appears in the structure of signifier and the perception, idea and illustration is the signified. Gestures, objects, images, sounds and words become signs in the study of semiotics. Culler fortifies the very statement when he asserts that in the universe all the objects are signs (1989). The said study inquires the function of signs to determine the quest of Afro-American existence to essence in Langston Hughes poetry.

Discussion

The following selection analyzed the text of Hughes poems to achieve the objectives and answers of the questions set for the said study. The first poem under discussion is “Dreams”.

Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams.
For if dreams go,

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Life is a barren field

Covered with snow.

(Hughes, 1926)

Hold fast to dreams, here Hughes talks about dreams, most of his poems revolve around the theme of dreams. Here, it is observed that Hughes moves towards the step of realizing his existence, which is done by accepting the presence of dream. For an object a dream does not matter, but for a being which exists a dream does matter, then in the second step as proposed by Sartre is the freedom of choice, which is exerted by Hughes, by narrating that how life without dreams can be useless, so he further moves to the step of responsibility by preaching the society in general and the African Americans in particular that they must hold fast to dreams to pursue their dreams. The final step is to attain the essence if one chooses to hold his dream i.e. freedom in the context of African Americans, remained committed and persistently keep holding the dream by struggling to make his dream come true, he will certainly move to the final stage that is his essence. In the case of African Americans, the final stage of essence is their freedom, new identity. Thus, their actions will make them what they are. Imagery of a battlefield, commando addresses his army to be well prepared and equipped with weapons to wage a war for justice. Langston Hughes is like a commando who advises his community to be well equipped with the weapon that is to hold fast to their dreams to wage a war against injustice, oppression, subjugation etc. Frozen with snow. Oxymoron, life and barren, birds broken wings if we see semiotically the poet is trying to imply that if dreams are absent then life is barren and bird is without wings, these oxymora, placed together highlight the signs that absence of existence is actually the absence of essence. If hold fast is seen semiotically, it is a phrase used usually in holy scriptures where human beings are told to act in a certain manner, here also Hughes being the responsible one and realizing his existence preceding to essence, preaches his community to not let go of their dreams.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

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Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(Hughes, 1951)

The opening of the poem implies that the speaker is very well acquainted with his existence, and is pretty much aware of his wishes, future aims and desire in the form of his dreams. Having dreams and desires and having them fulfilled is not only a surety of one's existence but also shows one's determination to accomplish the essence. When Sartrean hero chooses for himself, he becomes responsible for the consequences.

If the poem is interpreted in the backdrop of Harlem Renaissance, this is the time when Afro-Americans have gone through the initial stages of existentialism they have found themselves existing (as plants and animals don't have dreams, this a trait of an existent to have dreams,) as per freedom of choice they have selected to pursue their dreams. They have reached the third stage by being responsible for what they have chosen (which is the fulfillment of their dream). The story of existence doesn't end here; the poet tells the world that if any obstacles come their way to essence, something terrible may happen. The tone of the poem is of warning.

Langston Hughes plays with signs and symbols to communicate his thoughts. Semiotically the poem plays a double role. On the one hand it addresses poet's Black community to be well equipped to achieve their goal (have equal rights and status in society as other races have, without any more delay). On the other hand, it warns the white community to be prepared for consequences if they turn a deaf ear to the dreams of Blacks. The poem is a vehicle to spread poet's message around. Semiotics offer a policy of disguised questions forms to communicate the feelings of anger, anxiety and despair.

There is a great semiotic significance of the title of the poem. Dream Deferred semiotic reference of volcano. As volcano silently keeps on accumulating explosive gases for a long time and suddenly explodes causing great calamity, so if dream is

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ignored for a period, it can have a sudden explosion one day and will cause a disaster.

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I've been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark

Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now—

For I've still goin', honey,

I've still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

(Hughes, 1922)

This poem sketches a complete picture of one's travel from existence to essence. The speaker, who is mother seems to advise her child how to achieve the aim of life fulfilled. On the basis of her own experiences, she has come to the conclusion that if one is steadfast in the quest for goals, no matter what hurdles may come his way, he will achieve his goals. After combating several hardships and reaching destiny gives a certain sense of achievement and pride.

The poem if analyzed in Afro-American's context, the black mother speaks to her beloved son about the sufferings she had to go through to find her essence of being. Words like splinter, torn up and places with no carpets on the floor and bare suggest that the path which mother had to tread with was utterly deprived, full of

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challenges. The mother's existent spirit never retreated. She kept going, no matter what the situation was. So, the child must learn to move on, going on, climb on and never turn back and never seize the efforts to get to the destination.

If the poem is looked at from existentialist perspective, it provides the detail of existentialist struggle. As Sartre proposed that existence precedes essence, one becomes conscious of his existence i.e. the first stage towards essence (mother seems to be fully aware of it and even makes her son realize his being different from that of animals and plants), the second stage is that of Freedom of choice (mother has passed through this stage also by choosing to get her identity known), the third stage is that of being responsible and committed to what one chooses (in the case of mother, she is firmly committed to her choice, she has faced the challenges and has remained determined towards her goal), the final stage is of getting essence (the mother is almost there). The poem has double action to show the working of existentialism through semiotics. Mother, semiotically representing past, has shown to have experience of going through from existence to essence. Whereas the son, semiotically representing future, is getting the lesson from his experienced mother of what are the steps from existence to essence and how to cross these stages. Mother is the semiotic representation of Blacks' Past, and the son is semiotic representation of Black's future. Mission has to be transferred from one generation to another.

Findings and Conclusion

After the analysis of the selected poems of Langston Hughes, it has been found that in some of the poems the poet and his community either seem to have passed through all the steps/stages of existence proposed by Sartre or are very close to gaining the essence of existence.

The study concludes that Langston Hughes poems are not only embedded with existentialist philosophy of existence preceding essence, but the very philosophy is transported to the readers through the medium of semiotics. Langston Hughes was a great existentialist philosopher and possessed the traits of semioticians. He was extremely aware of Afro-American's oppression at that time, since he himself was the part of them. It is his lived experience which is reflected through his poetry. Langston Hughes works became the mouthpiece of the quest of Afro-American from existence to essence in a semiotic display of his art. Semiotics doubles the flavor of his poetry,

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strengthen his philosophy of existences and quickens the impact of his art.

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