

EXPLOITATION OF THE BLACKS AND THEIR SELF ASSERTION IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S "SLAVE ON THE BLOCK"

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Abstract

The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theatre, politics and scholarship centred in Harlem, America. It set in Manhattan, New York during the 1920's and 1930's. Many African American writers flourished during the period as the interest of the public heightened to know about the literary productions of them. The writer Langston Hughes was emerged as one of the leading lights of Harlem Renaissance. This study aims at an analysis of the short story "Slave on the Block" of Langston Hughes so as to bring out his treatment of the exploitation of the Blacks by the White artist couple Michael and Anne and the self assertion them. They showcase the artistic ability of their servants Emma, Luther and Mattie. The story was set in 1930's, the turbulent period of history of the U.S.A. The couple have provided a place to their servant Luther to sleep in the basement by the furnace in the house. Blacks are denied permission to visit speakeasies, night clubs and dance halls. The couple call their servant Luther abusively jungle and darker than dark hall. Anne is the painter and Michael is the musician and they want to make use of the delightful simplicity of the Blacks. Emma, the old Black woman is more slavish and she is ready to do anything for her masters. After her death, her nephew Luther and Mattie have joined the family as servants. They are more assertive than Emma. Michael being the composer utilizes the songs of the Black folks of the South and copies them in his performances. He encourages his servant Luther to sing such songs more. Anne, the artist uses Luther as a model to draw pictures of slave. At times, she has made Luther naked to draw her pictures. It reveals the insensitivity of the White woman. The couple want to mint money by making use of the Blacks. They are not genuine in helping the poor Blacks and their sole aim is to capitalize the artistic aspects of the Blacks. Before Luther comes to the house of the couple, he has shined the shoes and earned money. Unfortunately, he is fired from the job by his Greek proprietor for denying the half of the tips received by him. It reveals the exploitation of the labour of the Black person. Mattie is in love with Luther and both gradually have gained confidence to assert themselves. Though the White couple display themselves as liberals, they could not tolerate the self-assertion of their Black servants. It is obviously exposed when Mrs. Carraway, the mother of Michael, the mannish lady has imposed her domination on the Black servants. The assertive Luther retorts that he never likes the poor Whites. Mattie also joins hands with him and they walk out of the house of the artistic couple. It shows their self-assertion and individuality. Langston Hughes brings out adeptly the dominant attitude of the Whites and the newly found spirit of liberation of the Blacks in this story.

Key Words: Race, Exploitation, Slavery, Dark, Self Assertion, Jungle, Independence, and Inhumanity.

The purpose of Literature has to inculcate the moral and ethical ideas to people to lead their life in a perfect way. Langston Hughes author has delineated the exploitation of Black folks in his short story "Slave on the Block." He has portrayed an ebony Luther boy who is abused by the White couple Annie and Michael. Michael and Anne Carraway belong to the superior White community and they exploit the innocent Blacks for their art forms. They do not indulge

themselves in the social works and never do philanthropic deeds, but they are showy. Langston Hughes writes:

They were people who went in for Negroes- Michael and Anne- the Carraways.

But not in the social service, philanthropic sort of way, no. They saw no use in helping a race that was already too charming and naive and lovely for words... They went in for the Art of Negroes... They never tried to influence that art, they only bought it and raved over it, and copied it. (32)

They want to exploit the art forms of the Blacks. Michael Carraway is the Musician and Anne is the Painter. Both of them copy the art forms of the Blacks. They acquaint with many Negroes but somehow the Negroes do not like them very much. Probably their true colour may be revealed soon to them. They try to make Black friends for their art business purpose. The dark friends always look at them with suspicion and they are not ready to be friendly with them. They go to speakeasies and night clubs as well as dance halls but Blacks are not allowed in these places and they cannot enjoy freedom in their life. There are many restrictions for the Black folks to move into the public places. They face racial discrimination and they suffer prejudice at the hands of Whites. Their Black servant maid Emma has worked for them for a long time and she died of illness. They appoint an ebony boy Luther to take care of garden and Mattie, the Black servant maid in her forty to take care of their household.

Anne and Michael plan to conduct “concert exhibition” a combination of music and painting. Langston Hughes writes:

“For Anne thought in terms of pictures: she was a painter. And Michael thought in terms of music: he was a composer for the piano. And they had a most wonderful idea of painting pictures and composing music that went together and then having a joint concert exhibition as they would call it. Her pictures and his music” (33).

They would like to mint money by exploiting the art forms of Blacks. Anne has painted their maid Emma six times. On his part, Michael has composed several themes based on the spirituals and Louis Armstrong’s Jazz. They find Luther, the ebony boy as their source now. He comes to their house for claiming the properties which are belonged to his aunt. He is ordered to sit inside their house especially in the dark hall. They could hardly see him and make an abusive statement “it being dark in the hall and he being dark” (33). The author has clearly shown the racial prejudices which happened against the Black folks in American society. Luther is viewed as the coloured boy and inferior one. They enquire about Luther who is the nephew of Emma, their dead maid. They would like to make use of the innocent boy. Anne wants to make use of him as model for her painting: “you know, I think I’d like to paint you” (34). Michael also commends her idea by saying that Luther is a “so utterly Negro” (34) and he will serve her purpose.

The couple has appointed Luther as a gardener though there is no proper one in their home. It is only under the disguise of the gardener, they want to make use of the boy as a model for the art of Anne and Michael too likes to make use of the Black boy’s songs in his composition.

They exploit the poor Black boy for their artistic purposes and they mint money. It shows their real nature to the world. The boy Luther has worked for a Greek in Elizabeth and he has shone shoes. But the Greek has fired him due to his refusal to pay half of his tips to the proprietor. Luther says: "I never heard of a job where I had to pay the boss, instead of the boss paying me" (34). It shows clearly that the Black folks are vulnerable and they are easily exploited by their masters. Their employers use the cheap labour of the Blacks and they become rich. The Blacks are exploited by the Whites and their labour is not duly respected and recognized.

Both Mattie and Luther work hard in the household of Anne and Michael. They work tirelessly and Mattie says: "Come on, let's go. Working for White folks all day, I'm tired" (35). It shows clearly that the Black labourers are exploited by the White masters. They do not give proper rest, food and shelter to them. They are made to sleep in the basement. The uncomfortable working condition makes the poor boy Luther to sleep at the time of drawing by Anne. He dozes almost as soon as Anne sits him down to pose. Hence she eventually decides to paint Luther asleep. She wants to exploit him even at this state. She calls her picture, "The Sleeping Negro." Not only that but also she wants to draw the nude picture of the Black boy, a slave picture, "The Boy on the Block." She wants to bring out sorrow of his people and she desires to paint him as a slave about to be sold. She wants to bring soul to her picture hence she makes him naked and draws picture. She exclaims on seeing the boy's naked posture and cooperation: "It's too marvellous" (36).

It shows the callous and money minded attitude of Anne and Michael. Their only aim is to mint money by exploiting the Blacks. To his part Michael asks Luther to sing songs. He wants to explore the songs and music forms of the Blacks and he decides to use them in his concert. Both Anne and Michael allow Luther to neglect the garden altogether. At the same time, they would like to exploit the boy for their artistic vigours to mint money. Michael asks the boy to sing a song that could reflect the sad plight of the Blacks in American society.

The boy Luther sings:

Dear ma, I'm in hard luck;

Three days since I et

And the stamp on this letter's

Gwine to put me in debt. (34)

It displays the agony of the poor Blacks in America. Luther and Mattie soon develop love in them. Michael finds them in the same bed one day and Anne condones them: "It's so simple and natural for Negroes to make love" (37). Whites never appreciate and respect the relationship of the Blacks. They always ill-treat them and look down upon them. In spite of the help and tireless service rendered by the boy and Mattie, Michael does not like them. He says: "He was getting a little bored with the same Negro always in the way" (37).

It obviously displays the cruel attitude of the Whites towards the Blacks. Michael allows Luther to stay in the house primarily for his songs and music. In the same way, Anne retains him for her artistic needs ie. Model. Both Luther and Mattie become a good pair though there

is huge difference in their age. They quite frankly live with one another now. The couple do not take their relationship seriously. Anne and Michael concern only for their respective arts. They would like to explore and exploit the “delightful simplicities of Negroes” (37).

Mattie gives money Luther to buy his clothes. On the other hand, Anne asks the boy to remove his dress to draw naked pictures of him to mint money. Luther is really dressing awfully well. When Anne asks him to act as a nude model for her final stages of painting, Luther comes down to remove his dress by singing the lines:

“Before I'd be a slave
I'd be buried in ma grave
And go home to my Jesus
And be free” (38).

The song presents the pain experienced by the Blacks in American society. Blacks are inhumanely treated by Whites and they record their agony in the songs, poetry and other art forms. When Michael's mother Mrs. Carraway, the mannish old lady arrives to the house, the situation is drastically changed. She does not like the familiar Blacks. When Luther asks the duration about her period of stay in the house, she retorts angrily. Langston Hughes writes:

“Oh, good morning,” said Luther.”
How long are you goona stay in this house?
“I never liked familiar Negroes,” said Mrs. Carraway, over her nose glasses.
Huh! Said Luther.” That's too bad!
I never liked poor White folks” (38)

Luther gets a new spirit in retorting to the insulting White lady. It shows his self-assertion to the readers. No longer has he hesitated to be a slave in the household and he finds a new vigour in retaliating the insult of the old White lady. Langston Hughes continues to writes:

Mrs. Carraway screamed, a short, loud, dignified scream. Michael came running in bathrobe and pajamas. Mrs. Carraway grew tall. There was a scene. Luther talked. Michael talked. Anne appeared.

“Never, never, never,” said Mrs. Carraway, “have I suffered such impudence from servants and a nigger servant- in my own son's house.”

“Mother, mother, mother,” said Michael. “Be calm,
I'll discharge him.” He turned on the nonchalant Luther. “Go! He said, pointing toward the door! Go! go! (39)

Luther is asked to leave the house in spite of Anne's appeal to finish her painting. Luther is least bothered about his discharge and he leaves the house. Mattie too joins hands with Luther by saying:

“We've stood enough foolery from you White folks!

Yes, we'll go. Come on, Luther” (39).

It obviously shows the self-assertion of the Blacks. Mattie asks the employers to pay them the balance and both are ready to leave the house. They leave with good bye to their employers. From the analysis of the short story, the reader could understand how the Blacks are ill-treated and exploited by the Whites in the American society. Both Michael and Anne make use of Emma, Mattie and Luther for their respective art forms music and painting. They exploit the boy Luther as a model for naked painting and mint money. Finally, the Blacks servants leave their house after the quarrel with Mrs. Carraway. They are ready to work somewhere else and they want to lead a dignified life. It shows their self-assertion and it is well brought out by Langston Hughes.

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