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Africanizing Jesus Christ: Langston Hughes's "Angels Wings" and "Christ in Alabama" and Countee Cullen's "Christ Recrucified"

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Abstract---Among the various moments African Americans underwent for their freedom and equality, Harlem Renaissance plays an important role. It is an intellectual and cultural revival of black arts and literature centered in Harlem, Manhattan, during 1920s. It is recorded that first ship with twenty captives from Africa crossed middle passage and reached Port Comfort, Virginia in 1619, ushering the era of slavery in New England. The shady history of three hundred years covers several chapters of excruciating pains and innumerable sufferings of black slaves in the fields. To supply therapeutic comfort to the suffering black community and to make the white readers understand the pain of black people, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, made an attempt to Africanize Jesus Christ in their sonnets. This research article attempts to explicate how Jesus Christ is Africanized in various levels in the three poems *viz.* Langston Hughes's "Angels Wings" and "Christ in Alabama" and Countee Cullen's "Christ Recrucified."

Keywords---Harlem Renaissance, Jesus Christ, Africanization.

The Colour and the race of Jesus Christ have been a debate over centuries, and various critics have made attempts to depict Jesus Christ based on various genealogical, historical, and theological evidences. For a period, African American slaves also used the image of Jesus Christ to record and voice out their sorrows and sufferings. This article aims at explicating Langston Hughes's "**Angels Wings**" and "**Christ in Alabama**" and Countee Cullen's "**Christ Recrucified**" to demonstrate how Jesus Christ is Africanized in African American Literature.

Tracing the history of Africans, it is recorded that the first ship with twenty captives from West Africa landed at Port Comfort, Virginia in 1619, ushering in the era of slavery in America. Expansion of European colonies in New England needed more strong hands to work in their fields, and to meet the demand people were hunted down in the wilds of Africa and brought as slaves to the fields of America. A period of three centuries contains several chapters of excruciating pains and innumerable sufferings of Africans in America. They were forced to learn a new language, skills, and culture, and to follow a new religion and new God. Thus they were forcefully up-rooted, de-rooted and re-rooted physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

Though there were many adaptations and adoptions Africans made in the new land, literature was adopted with a specific purpose to critique and set a discourse in the form of African American literature. Literature was produced by the writers of African descent beginning with late eighteenth-century writer Phillis Wheatley. It primarily recorded the memories of people who escaped slavery. Later a new genre called slave narrative was introduced which included accounts of life under slavery and the path of justice and redemption to freedom. In the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance a new generation of African American writers like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen made attempts to Africanize Jesus Christ. The primary reason seems to make the white readers understand the pain of black people. As they were born and brought up in America and followed Christianity from their childhood, they had little knowledge either about their religion or god.

Africanization of Jesus Christ occurs at three levels. At the first level a black person is compared to Christ in Langston Hughes's "Angels Wings." At the second level the death of a black person owing to an act of lynching is paralleled with the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Countee Cullen's "Christ Recrucified." Finally Jesus Christ is considered a black person and identified with the blacks, in Langston Hughes's "Christ in Alabama."

Hughes in his "Angels Wings" depicts Christ as an Angel with white wings to give a historical association. He describes the wings of an angel as "white as snow," and it is made a refrain in his sonnet. Though he glorifies the angel's wings as white he also talks about his wings as coloured to convey the rude reality of blacks in America in the following lines when he says his wings are not as white as an angel's wings, rather it is coloured.

But I drug ma wings
In the dirty mire.
O, I drug ma wings
All through the Fire.
But the angels wings is white as snow, (6 - 10)

According to colour psychology, white colour represents purity and innocence and so does the character of white people and white God. The metaphor Snow stands for their tenderness and adds goodness to the white community. This sonnet also talks about the wings of black people as wings in the dirty mire. Hughes argues that blacks too have wings and it is coloured due to the toiling in the

fields. Sufferings were expressed with more intensity through the metaphor “fire.” Fire symbolizes the hardships they underwent for centuries. Blacks were not considered humans, but they were dehumanized and considered sub-humans in the white dominated society. In comparing the wings of black and white a sense of equality prevails since both seem to have wings. The sense of equality brings Christ to the platform of black people in the poem, though in reality, the uplift of black people is restricted consistently and constantly.

During the era of slavery, lynching was a common practice in America. A report on “Thirty Years of Lynching” was published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1919 to create awareness about the ill effects of lynching.

Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes are not the first poets to compare the crucifixion with lynching. During the 1920s the fundamentalists and modernists started interpreting Jesus Christ’s atonement to help the oppressed psyche of the black community.

Christ’s crucifixion was equated with lynching in an analysis of the atonement, which was an act of mob spirit and mob action. The death of Christ is considered to have demonstrated the supreme sacrifice made for mankind. W.E.B. DuBois in one of his poems “The Prayers of God,” makes a reflection on judgment scene in Mathew 25 and equated crucifixion with lynching. And says, Thou? / Thee? / I Lynched Thee?

This conversation is made to happen between a white person and God. To the question made by white “When did I lynch you, lord?” the God answers that until you lynch the least of niggers, you lynch me. DuBois wanted the God to support the suffering blacks. This practice is to make the white readers understand the pain of black people.

Countee Cullen africanizes Christ through his long narrative poem called “The Black Christ” in which he talks about a boy called Jim who has grown into manhood, proud and handsome. Countee Cullen narrates Jim’s temptation to reject the faith in the face of injustice and Jim was lynched for his love and murder. The poem tends to depict his death as both crucifixion and resurrection. The poem is narrated by Jim’s brother, perhaps Cullen himself, as his brother has been the victim of lynching. Being a narrator Cullen acknowledges that Jesus Christ and Jim belong to the same clan.

At the second level of comparison, the death of a black person is compared to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Countee Cullen in his sonnet “Christ Recrucified” says that the South is crucifying Christ again. The entire shady history of the blacks in the south are exquisitely expressed by the poet through the title. The poem reflects on the historical conditions of 1920s. The northern states flourished with industries and democracy, whereas the agricultural southern states remained suppliers of raw materials. The southern states wanted the slaves to work in their fields and voted against for the abolition of slavery. The poet sensibly records the black history of the south as,

The south is Crucifying Christ again
 By all the laws of ancient rote and rule
 The ribald cries of “save yourself” and “fool”
 Din in his ears; (1-4)

The continued practice of lynching is cleverly described as the repeated crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the South. In the first line, the violence of crucifixion is represented in the hard and alliterated “k” sound as “crucifying Christ.” The ancient laws of slavery are still practiced to lynch black people to keep them under abject control. The low vowels of the second line indicate the pathetic lowness of black life which continued without any hope of promise and progress in the land of prosperity. The mindset and rules have not changed for centuries and this is one of the reasons to Africanize Jesus Christ to make white people see the blacks with pity and compassion at least as humans. “The ribald cries” are the cries of black people towards the people who were about to be lynched and Christ who was about to be crucified. Though the hue and cry is useless at the time of lynching and crucifixion, the hope for a better tomorrow remained the same in both the cases. Even though the crying voice of “save yourself” and “fool” reaches the ears of Christ, a crown designed for the Christ as a reward for his sacrifice is made of thorns, and it was implanted in his head forcefully.

The thorns grope for his brain,
 And where they bite, swift springing rivers stain
 His gaudy, purple robe of ridicule
 With sullen red; and acid wine to cool
 His thirst is thrust at him, with lurking pain (4-8)

The thorns in the crown search and reach his brain directly, and they cause the flow of blood like a spring of a river, the pain is immeasurable with bloody description. The outfit is drawn with a royal image, “His gaudy, purple robe” the royalty is evident with the description of purple colour in his robe, in the ancient method purple color dye is made out of sea snails and so the cost is unreachable by the lay people and can be afforded only by royal families, so the color “purple” was always associated with their economical status in the society, next word “ridicule” being a mockery at the image of royalty. There is a change in the whole image of Christ, on one point he is described with royal robe and on the next word the image is brought down as clown.

In this sonnet “Christ Recrucified” it seems he finds a solution to his unquenchable thirst, he says his thirst is quenchable “And where they bite, / swift springing rivers stain / With sullen red; and acid wine to cool / His thirst (5,6,8).” The octave ends with the reason for his pain, his thirst for freedom and equality in the life of black people which is the reason behind all the pain they undergo “His thirst is thrust at him with lurking pain.” With the “lurking pain” octave ends and Volta occurs next to it. The sufferings that Christ has undergone in the octave are reasoned out in the sestet. The first half of the sestet gives out the reason and the second half gives out the solution to the suffering.

All the pains and springing strain of blood is because of Christ’s black colour, for that sin, no blamelessness could be atoned as he says,

Christ's awful wrong is that he's dark of hue,
 The sin for which no blamelessness atones;
 But lest the sameness of the cross should tire,
 They kill him now with famished tongues of fire,
 And while he burns, Goodmen, and women, too,
 Shout, battling for black and brittle bones. (9 -14)

Christ is the son of the God and the second person in the Holy Trinity and is considered to be an image of purity. His salvation of humankind is adopted and rewritten for the salvation of the black community. The reason for which Christ was crucified is his dark colour and so the sin of black people. The poet in an agonized mood identifies himself and his community with the great sufferer.

Lynching was not concealed to blacks, white people apart from settlers were also lynched, the report of NAACP says thirty three percentages of people who were lynched is white. Niccola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were Italian immigrants and they were controversially accused for murdering a guard and paymaster and as a punishment they were hanged in Boston, and Cullen expressed his disagreement with the judgment and capital punishment for both whites and blacks, the early cry for this obscene violence of lynching turned Cullen from Pagan self to Christian self. In the second half of this stanza, Cullen opines that Christ was crucified not with the nails in his palm but He was killed by them with the famished tongues of fire. Black people were treated not as humans, and were seen as lowly nonentity. As the Blacks were lambasted for centuries, Cullen says that they were also routed through that tongue of fire with which they are killing Christ now. Centuries of violence mortified their souls and bodies. The poet finds solace in religion as a devout pilgrim by identifying the trials and tribulations of the blacks with the sufferings of Christ.

A protest was made out of the death of black Christ, being a Christian-self, Cullen provokes both the white and black readers to fight for the freedom of black people with more intensity. In thirteenth line "And while he burns", makes the crucifixion alive in the minds of readers. Hughes, instead of writing it in past tense the whole sonnet is written in the present tense to make the readers feel the pain of Christ and black people. In the last line, he says that the bones of Christ are black and brittle. The poet concludes the poem with the intent to Africanize Christ by saying that the bones of Christ are black and brittle. The brittleness of Jesus Christ and black people is exposed, the almighty Christ could not restrict people from sinning but he sacrifice himself for the sins of people whereas the black people could not save their community but to lose their lives for the sins of white community. They both are hard and strong physically but their soul is broken.

The final level of comparison to Africanize Christ is achieved through the sonnet "Christ in Alabama" of Langston Hughes. This poem talks about the identity of Christ and draws a parallel point with the sufferings of black people. The comparison depicts black men are beaten, black women are voiceless and white as omnipotent. The sonnet is divided into three Tercets and one Quintain at the end.

Christ is a nigger,
 Beaten and black:
 Oh, bare your back!

Mary is his mother:
 Mammy of the south,
 Silence your mouth.

God is his Father:
 White Master above
 Grant him your love. (1 -9)

The first line gives a hard impact on the Africanization of Jesus Christ as the poet perceives Christ as a black by saying, "Christ is a nigger". The usage of words is harsh as the black people were ill-treated in the society for several decades. The first line of each tercet rhymes the same and the second and third lines of each tercet rhyme the same.

The first tercet is dedicated to the males of the black community. Hughes states the situation as "beaten and black / oh, bare your back." The poet hints at how the blacks were punished unreasonably without proper trial. The same tercet also provides hope to the black people that Jesus Christ has also suffered the lashes on his back for the sins of humankind. With the lashes on their back, they are also sons of God. On someday, Christ will appear to redeem the black community from slavery.

The second tercet deals with the mother of black and the mother of Christ. Hughes calls Mary the Black Madonna and talks about her hardship in the region of the south. Christ's mother had no voice when Christ was crucified and so the mothers of slaves have no voice over the hardship their children undergo in the fields. Africanizing mother of Christ adds more darkness to the color of Christ.

The parallel description continues in the third tercet, where both black and Christ have the same superior "white". Hugh considers that God is the white master above Christ, and the usage of the word "grant" gives a pleasing tone. Most of the children in slavery are born to white masters and they were never considered their heirs or children of their own. All they wanted from the white master above is respect and love.

The final quintain sums up all the points given in the above tercet

Most holy bastard
 Of the bleeding mouth,
 Nigger Christ
 On the cross
 Of the South. (5 - 10)

Most of the women in the slavery are raped by white masters and the children became bastards. A child with unknown fathers toiled in the fields for years. Hughes equates it with the Virgin Mary and the birth of Christ where the father is

God, the white masters above all, and Christ's hardships he undergone for his different faith.

"Bleeding mouth" represents the pain of males in slavery. The cross symbolizes the punishment Christ has undergone for the sin of mankind, and the south is repeated in the last line to indicate the sufferings of slavery in the southern part of America. "The Nigger Christ" adds blackness to the colour of Christ to help the black community. It supplies therapeutic comfort and appears to be a substitute gratification for the poet and the black community.

Africanizing Christ is an attempt made to smooth the pain of black community and to make the white readers understand the pains of black people. Life of black people always ends with the hope of a better tomorrow, these sonnets gives them the hope of Christ's atonement to the suffering black people.

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