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# **Gynocentrism in Langston Hughes selected poetic works**

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Abstract. Gynocentrism exclusive focuses on women both as theory and practice. Anything can be considered gynocentric when it is concerned exclusively with a female point of view. The works of Langston Hughes, which reflect the intersection of races and genders in the lives of blacks, are studied. His contributions take multiple forms including poetry, short stories, dramas and novels which are about black women's love, nature, romantic dilemmas, mother – daughter relationships, friendship, and silences. The authors analyze how gender in a special way colors female identity in Hughes' works. He expresses interdependence of genders and racial identities in his representations of black women and hence can be dubbed as gender racial. His writings are in a gender racial style, highlighting and intertwining gender and racial identities. Hughes' overcomes gender and racial stereotypes with open discussions on contentious themes. It is concluded that Hughes creates an alternative to repressive social realities by combining challenges with sensual visions.

Keywords: Langston Hughes, genderracial, gynocentrism, black women, identities, poetry

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## Гиноцентризм в избранных поэтических произведениях Лэнгстона Хьюза

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Аннотация. Гиноцентризм исключительно фокусируется на женщинах как в теории, так и на практике. Гиноцентрическим можно считать все, что касается исключительно женской точки зрения. Исследуются работы Лэнгстона Хьюза, в которых отражается

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пересечение рас и полов в жизни чернокожих. Его вклад принимает различные формы, включая поэзию, рассказы, драмы и романы о любви чернокожих женщин, природе, романтических дилеммах, отношениях матери и дочери, дружбе и молчании. Анализируется, как пол особенным образом окрашивает женскую идентичность в произведениях Хьюза. В своем представлении о чернокожих женщинах он рассматривает взаимозависимость полов и расовой идентичности и, следовательно, его взгляд может быть назван гендерно-расовым. Произведения, написанные в гендерно-расовом стиле, подчеркивают и переплетают гендерную и расовую идентичность. Хьюз преодолевает гендерные и расовые стереотипы с помощью открытых дискуссий на спорные темы. Делается вывод, что Хьюз создает альтернативу репрессивным социальным реалиям, сочетая вызовы с чувственными видениями.

Ключевые слова: Лэнгстон Хьюз, гендерная раса, гиноцентризм, чернокожие женщины, идентичности, поэзия

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#### Introduction

The 1902 born, renowned Afro-American poet, Langston Hughes was from Missouri. His parents divorced resulting in his father's migration to Mexico. Following his high school graduation, his father paid for him to attend Columbia University in New York. Hughes liked writing even from his early school years, where in the seventh grade, he was named as the class poet. His writing included poems, short stories, dramas and novels.

Hughes was pre-dominantly a poet. Hughes' acceptance to the exclusive Ivy league institution in upper Manhattan as a "coloured" student was exceptional. Hughes' inspirations for writing undoubtedly stemmed at this institution during Jim Crow era. Langston Hughes poems examine intersections of races and genders in the lives of Black women, challenging binary identity conceptions and investigating social transformations. His works cover women's love, nature, romantic dilemmas, mother-daughter relationships, friendships, and silence.

Hughes discusses Black male and female identities while addressing experiences. He writes in a gender racial style, highlighting the intertwining of genders and racial identities. When a young Negro remarked he did not wish to be Negro poet:

A disappointed Langston said: "I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then, that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet" (692). Hughes believed identities are inextricably linked to artistic expressions. His works were bolstered by lyrical visions that pervaded the minds of people of all backgrounds. His imagery may be distressing at times, but also reassure sadness and joy that were strongly linked Black identities and was a poet who listened to the voices of all. This paper explores Gynocentrism found in his poems.

### Discussion

### Gynocentrism

In his poem Mother to Son, he represents black womanish power through the mother. The lyrics addressed by the black mother, is a share of her experiences to her son. She advises him on handling hurdles in life. In spite of being in a bad shape financially, she attempts to impart values and self-assurances in her son. The mother does cry for being victimized, but instead reinforces on her accomplishments in: "Life... but all the time; I'se been a-climbin' on" (Hughes 2-8). Her words express triumphs over incompetence and failures and Langston's views about black women. He saw them as formidable forces to be handled and powerful humans who were capable of conquering life's challenges. Hughes specifically portrays black women as tough with implausible power that assists them in their life achievements. Throughout the poem, Hughes uses analogies to portray their resolve and power. The narrator uses metaphors to represent both happiness and terrible moments of her life. The poet stresses on the hardships women face through the narrator's struggles: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair; it's had tacks in it; and splinters; and board torn up; and places with no carpet on the floor-bare" (Hughes 2-8). The lines told to a son for inspiring him express the poem's topic and reflects mother's everyday efforts.

People need to heed to black women according to the poet, and her son listens what his mother says. In spite of her life's problems, the narrator confides with sincerity and confidence to make her son tough and strong like her. Her voice is powerful and captivating and her arguments are brief. After informing her kid about her own life experiences, she remarks: "So boy, don't you turn back / don't you set down on the steps / cause you discover it's kinder hard / don't you tumble now" (14–19). The poet visualizes black mothers as strong, tough and powerful women and puts his views across subtly in the mother's narrations.

Langston's views on marriages can be seen in his *Widow Woman* where he highlights significant aspects of marriages love in women. The poem conveys intense love of women for their husbands in the lines: "*If I live to be a thousand/I'll never dry these tears*" (17–18).

An utterly grieved widow, mourns her husband's death with a true heart and vows to continue for the rest of her life. Langston exaggerates for emphasizing woman's intense love for husbands which resound in the imagery. The poet adds a mournful tone to the narrator when she recollects the funeral: "When they put you in de ground and / they throw dirt in your face" (Hughes 7-8). Her declaration that she does not want another man in her life forbids other men from nearing her. "I don't want nobody else and / don't nobody else want me" (Hughes 19–20). In short, Langston in the poem shows respect to marital love of women for their husbands while they lived (Hughes, Rampersad, 2002, p. 109). The poet also highlights male dominations in married lives. Generally, husbands are in-charge of families and they not only dominate, but also exert their immense powers violently which impact women. Langston writes: "You was a mighty lover and you ruled me many years" (13-14). The poet in these lines very delicately implies that husbands relinquish their powers only when they breathe their last. The poet appears to favour masculine dominations as female repressions are in line with notions of male dominance in marriages.

Women are naturally subdued since their husbands exercise complete authority over them. The word "ruled" is a strong emphasis of domination and husband's authority, though the narrator appreciates her husband's love making. Langston in *Widow Woman* portrays the beauties as well as difficulties in marriages. Woman may adore their husbands, but despise the way they are treated. The poet concludes with the notion of freedom, a particularly contentious or perplexing feature since it is unexpected. Throughout the poem, the narrator's speech conveys that she was pleased under her husband's reign, but the poet startles readers through the narrator when she emphasizes the potentials of independence: *"Yet you never can tell when a woman like me is free!" (23–24).* 

The poet reveals new aspects of women in these lines by implying that the narrator has found her voice and can speak for herself though a freedom gained only after her husband's death. While she mourns for her husband's loss, internally she harbours forbidden hopes of freedom. The poem is an invitation to readers for reconsidering events from whole new perspectives. The narrator very clear in her thoughts swears she would not go for other men as she does not want to jeopardize her newfound independence by falling into another man's dominations.

Mothers can inspire their daughters based on their own personal experiences. Langston's *Mama and Daughter* are poetic version of the conversations between black mothers and their adolescent daughters who start feeling the emotions of love for the first time. Hughes blends youth and love in the poem. Though ideas look misaligned, a feeling of shared experiences can be found in the talks between the mother and daughter.

The daughter asks her mother to dust off her coat before going to meet the boy she likes: "Mama, please brush off my coat / I'm going down the street / where's you going, daughter? To see my sugar-sweet" (1–4). Langston ascertains relationships between youth and love or youthful love. The mother's bad experiences with youthful love help her comprehend young love's appeal without participating in it in the poem. The poem makes one realize that love can be understood and appreciated only by those who are young and naïve. Realizations occur in humans only when the young grow and love isn't always as lively as young people believe it to be. Love can also be marked by stormy events. Langston uses the poem to address major issues of the society where young individuals of all cultures romanticize love without knowing that they need to persist through adversities in love.

The poet draws a cautionary tone to youngsters where the young are typically ignorant about love while their elders might have experienced both good and bad. He emphasizes on desertions that occur in love when the mother uses her personal interactions her husband to try and influence her daughter when she expresses her first love. A cynical mother reacts: "Daughter, once upon a time / let me brush the hem / your, father, yes he was the one! I felt like that about him / But many a long year ago / he up and went his way" (9–14). The poem also highlights males abandoning women, a globally widespread issue. Single moms are very common in the current world as many males desert their families. Hughes poem specifically highlights this aspect of society. Mother expresses her beloved's abandonment through her speeches: "I hope that wild young son-of-a-gun, rots in hell today" (15–16).

The poet uses the mother to indicate the incident that left her with resentment and bitterness and she transmits her inner feeling unintentionally to her daughter.

The poet illustrates the characters of mother-daughter connections (Bloom, 2002, p. 78) as they have open connections and mothers influence daughters while addressing sensitive issues. This is illustrated by the daughter's eagerness to tell her mother about her adored lover: *"He is that young man, mama; I can't get off my mind" (7–8)*. Langston's daughters, instead of seeing young men in secrecy inform their mothers of their plans and even request mothers for assistance in getting prepared.

The relationships between mothers and daughters are always tightly bound. Mothers relate their own stories and experiences when they were young to their daughters. Langston encourages this openness, as seen by the overall pleasantness of the dialogues in the poem. The mother not only expresses herself but also subtly warns her daughter about love. Hughes demonstrates the power of black women that could influence youngsters. The mother in the poem neither punishes nor prevents her daughter from seeing her lover, on the contrary, she aids her daughter in her preparations to visit her lover, but cautions her about love.

Mother's approach towards treating her daughter is great, and she backs it up with personal narrative about her husband and an explanation on how her father abandoned her when she was a child: *"He was young yesterday" (18)*. The poem centers around mother's bond with daughters and attempts to highlight relationships between mothers and daughters which determine women's degrees of influences in life. The poem expresses youthful love and abandonments that occur in women which forces mothers to educate their daughters to be cautious in love with men.

Through *Only Woman Blues*, Hughes tells the story of black women who are completely devoted to their husbands in spite of being abused frequently by them. The poem written from the angle of men for women describes how men are unable to resist women's charm. The poem stresses on the power dynamics that occur in loving relationships between men and women. The underlying aspect is the inability of men to take abuses from women. The poem repeatedly points out the power that women wield over men in love relationships. The narrator, a man, can't believe he's in love with a woman who subordinates him: *"She could make me holler like a sissie / bark like a dog" (7–8)*. His disbelief contributes to the comedy of events, but the poet portrays the environment with respect. It encourages the reader to respect women characters while also criticizing the toxicities they bring into relationships.

Langston underlines power wielded by black women which they can exercise when they wish and also glorifies their beauty (Kutzinski, 2012, p. 56). The woman being gorgeous gets away for an extended period of time with illtreatments of her partner. The narrator expresses exaltations on seeing the astonishing beauty: "She had long black hair / big black eyes / glory! Hallelujah! / Forgive them lies!" (13–18).

Women who are physically very attractive and beautiful get nearly excused or pardoned even in misbehaviourss: "she was de meanest woman / I ever did see / but she's de only / woman that could mistreat me" (1-6). The poem lacks male dominances and shows women as having an upper hand in relationships. Men lose their authority in relationships which makes them resistive in longer durations. The fact that a woman controls him becomes unbearable to the narrator who does

not like being mistreated and contrary to women's routine oppressions. The poet portrays the ability or willingness to quit harmful relationships despite love or affection between genders. One undeniable element in the poem is that the author portrays women as dominating and cruel which is particularly odd and done on purpose to show women strength in a world where they are frequently oppressed.

The narrator takes too long a time to build courage and fortitude and end the relationship. He gets prepared to let her go when she decides to leave him. The poet points out that both men and women can escape from their surrounding unfavorable situations: "When she left / I said, go, hot damn! You de last and only / woman's gonna mistreat me" (21–24). Hughes depicts a situation in which the lady is dominating and the male is subservient. Despite his dissatisfaction with her upper handedness, he is unable to abandon her. Though he swears he will allow other women to mistreat him, he continues to allow his beloved to mistreat him.

The Negro Mother, one of Langston Hughes' most powerful poems and inspires multitude of feelings in people of black descent. The narrator recollects her experiences as a slave. The poet utilizes women's voice to describe persecutions, fortitudes, and perseverance as enslaved persons from Africa, as well as yearnings for freedom of descendants. The poem highlights the main issue of enslavements of blacks. The narrator relates her servitude with her ancestress, speaking figuratively of the experiences of enslaved Africans: "I am the child they stole from the sand / three hundred years ago in Africa's land" (7–8). The first act of oppression for the narrator was her forced abduction to a distant land where she served as a slave for Whites: "I am the one who labored as a slave / beaten and mistreated for the work… no safety, no love, no respect was I due" (13–16). Slavery's harshness is plainly expressed in the woman's voice and words. To her, it was a place that arbitrarily divided families. The narrator's voice has strength because she portrays the horrors of slavery in a way that readers can comprehend and empathize.

Slavery and black people's resistance is also highlighted in the poem. Prior to the institution of slavery, blacks were free men and women who had their spirits broken by shifting from complete freedom to enslavement.

Hughes, on the other hand, demonstrates courage and perseverance through the narrator amidst brutal slavery: "Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears / but I kept trudging on through the lonely years / sometimes, the road was hot with sun; but I had to keep on till my work was on; I had to keep on! No stopping for me" (25–29). Hughes, in the poem, stresses on hope (Hughes, Rampersad, 2002, p. 23). Hope is central to narrations, and guides her tone throughout the poem. Even though the woman describes tyranny, she is not dejected. She quickly returns to optimistic views though she experiences sorrow: "I am the dark girl who crossed the wide sea / carrying in my body the seed of the free" (9–10). She feels her wards should lead better lives than what she he had lived. Despite her problems, the woman remains optimistic about the future: "I nourished the dream that nothing could smother" (31). Her inner ache for freedom can be evidenced all through the verses. Enslaved people have only one thing in mind, to be set free. The narrator dreams of getting liberated along with her people: "Stand like free men supporting my trust / believe in the right, let none push you back" (42–43).

In many ways, the poem elicits multiple contradictory emotions. Though the reader aligns with the narrator for future generations, they are forced to accept equally the sadness of current scenarios, since the narrator is a slave with very little prospects of being liberated. Langston also portrays the future and people who will live to see it: "Now through my children, young and free / I realize the blessings denied to me" (21–22). The lady reminds her grandchildren of their great lineage in order to instill in them of fortitude and endurance and the drive to survive that their forefathers possessed over years: "For I will be with you till no white brother / dares keep down the children of the Negro mother" (51–52). This poem encompasses one of Hughes' most dramatic endings, as he deals with the terrible themes of slavery. The narrator, an enslaved lady, addresses her offspring, asking them to remember and be inspired by their ancestors. Her aim is for her children to find and never lose their independence.

Economic hardships were common throughout the Great Depression. As a result, many individuals suffered terribly throughout the twentieth century which is imaged by Hughes in *Madam's Past History*. The poem describes the challenges of black women during the Great Depression. The poet utilizes narrator's voice to emphasize on sufferings and hardships of black business women and overcoming them amidst The Great Depression. The narrator recounts her experiences in doing business and being a black. Prior to the Great Depression, the main woman ran a hair salon, which was greatly hit by the depression: "*I had a / hair-dressing parlour / before; the depression put / the prices lower*" (5–9).

Due to the poor situation of the economy, she loses her business as a black woman. She is experiencing her first financial hardship. Undaunted, she builds another firm, a barbecue stand, which she also loses: "*Then I had / barbecue stand / till I got mixed up / with a no-good man*" (10–13). Madam's economic troubles are described by the poet in flat, impersonal tones; they are statements of facts for black women of the  $20^{th}$  century's during the Great Depression. Madam's perseverance and fortitude are visible in her voice and style of speaking, despite her difficulties as a business woman. Hughes illustrates women as strong through the narrator who has overcome adversity as a black woman and a business woman. As she recounts her experiences, sadness is prevalent and she attempts to cope as best she can. Her voice is forceful and leaves readers with mixed senses of adoration and puzzlement. Even in the midst of the despair, the narrator is unfazed by her fruitless tries to regain her footing.

In the poem, the author underlines the connections between systems and black businesswomen. Madam is a black business woman who has had to deal with the consequences of the Great Depression. She seeks Works Progress Administration (WPA), founded by President Roosevelt's government, for help. The machinery of the Government had a lack of concern and more specifically towards Blacks. Madam's knocks for help to WPA were declined due to her insurance: "Cause I had a insurance; the WPA; said, we can't use you; wealthy that way" (15–18).

In spite of her several attempts to get out of her problems during depression and she is refused help under some pretext or the other though the organization was supposed to assist citizens (Opdycke, 2016, p. 98) and created to aid those who were struggling and needed help during a difficult economic era. Though Alberta suffered economically, WPA's refusals were based on her sign of health, her insurance, a symbol of affluence. Alberta's two business failures were not enough to move the WPA towards her, a Black. The poet highlights how systems regularly ignored concerns of blacks. Furthermore, the poem's undercurrent is one of self-respect and dignity. To the poet Madame was unflappable and austere: "I said / don't worry 'bout me / just like the song / You WPA folks take care of yourself / and I'll get along" (19–23). Alberta addresses the audience in the beginning as Madam, a sign of respect. Even after losing her businesses, she expects others to recognize her as a businesswoman: "The Madam stands for business; I'm smart that way" (3–4). Indeed, the slump depletes her financial resources to a point where she no longer owns any viable businesses. She, on the other hand, considers herself to be self-respecting and refuses to be called as such: "I do cooking / day's work, too / Alberta K. Johnson / Madam to you" (24–27).

Though she cooks and does daily chores for her living, she insists on being called as Madam. The pride in the woman is not wrong as she rises to a certain social level with sheer hard work and in spite of her racial origins. She is determined to keep up her self-made status despite severe economic conditions. She strongly believes that depression is temporary and her former status as a successful entrepreneur will return. Her desire to be called as Madam indicates her own sense of self-worth as a competent lady.

### Conclusion

Langston Hughes' poetry effectively reflects American black women's hopes. Jim Crow in the south was still in existence when Hughes wrote his poetry. Northern Afro-Americans faced discriminations in housing and academics. Hughes wrote his poems at a time when many blacks who had directly experienced slavery were alive. South Americans enslaved and exploited Afro-Americans for almost three centuries.

After the Civil War ended and America was reconstructed, Afro-Americans still faced legal inequalities. Governments in the south created legislations classifying African-Americans as second-class citizens, denying them access to schools, not allowing them to vote, and forcing them to rely on separate resources. The goal was to establish a racial hierarchy that favored whites over African-Americans.

Discrimination was met with resistance by Afro-Americans. Booker T. Washington argued that hard labor and entrepreneurships were the best ways for Afro-Americans to achieve economic independence. W.E.B. Dubois believed that striving for political and cultural equality was the only way for Afro-Americans to achieve total dignity. Women and men both played critical roles in the Deep South's fight against entrenched racism. Langston Hughes' poetry reflects Afro-American women's dignity and independence, which contributed towards the elimination of racism in Deep South.

Continued efforts of women like Rosa Parks who campaigned for equality demonstrated Afro-American women's strengths throughout the history of America. Langston Hughes was a key part of Harlem Renaissance. Through his poetry, he showed Afro-Americans living in a discriminative society. In the United States, Harlem Renaissance was an important cultural and artistic movement for obtaining blacks freedom. Hughes' writing spans the whole spectrum of human experiences, from the mundane to the extraordinary and personal to political. An artist's task, according to Hughes, is to accentuate and cover all facets of existence. Giving Afro-Americans who faced racial and gender discriminations a voice. Langston Hughes seemed to be motivated to portray not just himself, but also women as individuals. His photographs depict them as people who are attempting to make the best decision out of the few possibilities available to them.

Despite her low speech and likely life of poverty, he manages to depict African American women as a positive and active idea of femininity by focusing on the poor and displaces and utilizing grittier vocabulary, typically in black dialect. Hughes exposes the rest of society the level of prejudice that black American women suffered by utilizing obscene pictures and occasionally obscene words. Hughes echoed his world ambitions via the awareness and revival of female back consciousness. Hughes advocated an ideology in which women were lauded as taking charge of their destiny despite having racial and gender limits by portraying them as more complicated, more human, and less as symbols of sexuality. He did not portray black femininity as attractive, but he did portray them as powerful. Hughes stated, at a period when racism and segregation were rampant, that African American women were not only remarkable, but also human and needed to be respected for what they were.

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