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Images Of Blackness In The Poetry Of Langston Hughes And LeRoi Jones:

An Analytical Study Of Their Poetry

Abstract of a Ph.D Dissertation

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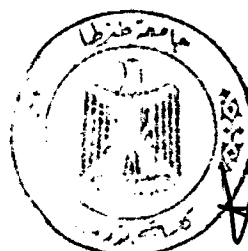
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the soul of my father who passed away several months before its completion. He was always my spiritual guide and was my wonderful model of kindness and tolerance. Really, his absence is immensely felt. May his soul rest in peace and Allah have mercy on him.

“ For all is dark where thou art not.”

Tennyson. In Memoriam.

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Images of Blackness in The Poetry of Langston Hughes and
LeRoi Jones: An Analytical Study of Their Poetry

Preface

Black Americans have discovered that, for centuries, the images that blacks have had of themselves generally governed their attitudes toward the Self and the Other as well as their concept of identity. Hitherto, the whites, they felt, have managed to project their negative images of blackness on blacks themselves as a means of humiliating, insulting, and enslaving them. This has formed, moreover, the foundation of the superiority/ inferiority, or Master/ Slave relationships governing both factions. Thus, blacks have experienced their existence primarily in terms of a negative-mirror image of the white world view. Accordingly, New Negro literature beginning with the early decades of the twentieth century has been obsessed since then with a strong tendency to recreate positive self-images; an exploration of blackness from within.. In this context, self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-respect, it is presumed, are fruits of the black artist's ability to positively represent himself rather than being represented by the oppressive Other. In so doing, to counteract the white racist images and the black negative self-concept, blacks must take the position of black narcissism, the position that black people love themselves; that in spite of conscious efforts to cause self-hatred by the European oppressor, black artists could make black people feel good about themselves. The work of the black artist is in this case cut for himself: the vast task is cultural and historical reclamation that can lead outsiders to an appreciation of his blackness.

The significance of Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) and LeRoi Jones (1934 -), in this connection, is that the images of blackness informing a great portion of their poetry give insights into the inner world of black-Americans as seen and felt from within; it is both a self-introspection and a self-revelation. Their poetry may be considered, therefore, to be a reflection of the rebellion against the conservative within and the conservative without; a rebellion on the streets and a rebellion in the thoroughfares of the mind. The creative works of the two poets aim mainly at defining the self-image of the Negro in America and re-evaluating the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual values of the black experience. Both are revelations, in addition, of the new tendency among black Americans to revolt against ancient approaches to blackness and turning to the rebuilding of self-myths and self-definitions. Equally significant, both Hughes and Jones are closely related to blacks' new tendency to achieve a degree of subjective truth. They came to an understanding that the world is an estranged and untrue world so long as man does not destroy its dead objectivity and recognize himself and his own life behind the preconceived fixed forms of things and laws. So, when man finally wins this self-consciousness, he is on his way not to the truth of himself but also of this world. This will help the Negro to put this truth into action and make the world what is essentially is; namely, the fulfillment of man's self-consciousness.

Hughes's images of blackness are dealt with from the standpoint of a poet who is regarded to be himself an artist writing about the Negro race and its images only because that was the group with which he was most familiar. In addition, in his quest for identity in terms of the representation of blackness, Hughes's poetry is presumed to reflect a continuing tension among the three alternatives facing Afro-Americans: integration, separation, or black nationalism, and radicalism. His approach, after all, remains objective: he is neither obsessed with nor prejudiced against the Other; at the same time, he is not entangled in chauvinistic attitudes. His theory and practice, accordingly, has always been to portray the ugliness as readily as the beauty of black life, the detestable as well as the admirable.

Jones's representations of blackness, in contrast, marks the black mainstream since the nineteen sixties onwards. He approaches blackness and its images from the standpoint of the spokesman of a whole race. Thus, his outlook represents the tendency of a group of black intellectuals and writers to reject the Other as a means of changing images of blackness infiltrated into his literature. The thematic and artistic development of Jones's poetry is, in fact, the outcome of such a revolutionary attitude. It can be divided, accordingly, into the pre- and post-*Dead Lecturer* poetry. The former reveals Jones's tendency to suppress his bourgeois self and to solve the conflict that took the shape of self-hatred. Artistically, it reveals the traditional artistic modes he inherited from Western modes of expression. In the Post-*Dead Lecturer* period, Jones's poetry is revolutionary and seeking to raise race. It is a poetry of the black aesthetic that aims at raising black consciousness, destroying Western stereotypical images coined by the Other, and rebuilding positive black images. Artistically, it is a poetry seeking new forms derived from black modes of expression as alternatives to white ones: a poetry of the street language and the Jazz aesthetic.

The purpose of this comparative study, accordingly, is to compare and contrast the poetry of Hughes and Jones with the object of presenting images of blackness as represented by two slightly different types of black American writers supposedly motivated by somewhat different personal, psychological, political, and cultural influences. In order to achieve this purpose, it was thought best to divide the work into four chapters and a conclusion.

The first chapter is intended to be introductory. It is to present an overview of the age-long misrepresentations and dehumanizations of images of blackness as a means of justifying Western policies against blacks and their heritage in general. Followed will be a comparison and a contrast of the literary attitudes of Hughes and Jones as demonstrations of the continuities and developments of Afro-American responses to Western attitudes toward blackness and its images. This chapter is intended, therefore, to pinpoint the background against which both Hughes and Jones developed their own aesthetics. Understandably, an examination of the relationship of the two poets provides a capsule opposition of two

theories of black art and reveals implicit as well as an explicit commentary on the relationship between the poetry of black experience which flourished during the Harlem Renaissance and that of the Black Aesthetic characterizing the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. This, it is hoped, may give insights into the inner world of black America as seen and felt from within.

The objective of the second chapter is to compare and contrast the efforts of Hughes and Jones to delve deep into the hidden recesses of the black "Veil" as a spring-board to liberate blacks from the shackles of white negative images. In fact, it is suggested that the poetry of the two poets is informed in its idealization and celebration of the elements of blackness by an appeal as well as a contribution to negritude. The two poets' conceptions of their skin-colour, the value of black culture, and their stances from Africa are to be emphasized in terms of each poet's predilections and aspirations. Whereas Hughes is a clear incarnation of the ideals and aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance, Jones is a clear demonstration of, and himself motivating, the aspirations and orientations of the Black Power Movement.

Since the Negroes in America have merely experienced their existence in terms of a negative mirror-image of the white world view, the images which Western culture generally managed to deposit and circulate taught them nothing but to despise themselves as blacks. The significance of Hughes and Jones, accordingly, is that their poetry reflects this emerging concern among black intellectuals for presenting a more positive and human image of the Negro race in general; that is, an endeavour to spotlight the Negro inner beauty and soul power. As such, the purpose of the third chapter is to compare and contrast the representation of the Negro in the poetry of Hughes and Jones with the object of revealing the divergence and convergence in their outlooks as a consequence of the changes and developments that characterized the cultural, social, and political perspectives of their times respectively. This, it is hoped, may shed light into the creative achievements of the two twentieth-century Negro Renaissances and, hence, the two poets' attractions to and repellations from the Other's attitudes and influences.

As for the artistry of Hughes and Jones, it is expected that the discussion will try to point out the two poets' convergence on and divergence from Western and afro-American literary traditions. In fact, emerging new attitudes toward black culture as well as toward establishing a feeling of "difference" in new black writings urged black writers in general to define their stance from the literary traditions of both black and white. Chapter four sets out, in this respect, to present a comparison and a contrast of the poetics and artistry of Hughes and Jones in their pursuits to give shape to their visions of blackness. The poetics informing

their visions of blackness, admittedly, coloured their art greatly. It is, likewise, an attempt to deal with the different technical elements in their relation to images of blackness.

It is hoped that this study may give insights into the transforming and transformed psychology that characterize modern black American mind and mood. The comparison between both Hughes and Jones is mainly informed by the likelihood that each differs in most of the meaningful terms in which one might choose to think of them: politically, morally, psychologically, and historically; each is actually aware in his own way of the condition of the black man in America; each is sensitive to the racial situation. Nonetheless, their responses to their observations and experiences are specifically individual, and the practicality of their responses is a measure of their individuality.

It is worth mentioning that whereas Hughes is characterized with a singlemindedness throughout his life and art, Jones is the most difficult to manipulate among modern black American writers. Unfortunately, there exists no comprehensive study of the literary efforts of Jones in particular. What writing there is about him and his works consists mainly of isolated articles and review of his individual works. The articles purporting to examine or explicate, say, his poetry are limited in scope. In short, writing about Jones and his literary works is fragmentary and incomplete. This posed the major difficulty for the researcher since Jones has his own uses of the language, and his art and thought are usually too changing to be hardly consistent. A final note is that the study refers throughout the text to LeRoi Jones as Jones rather than Amiri Baraka since this is the name by which he is mostly known and since this allows for consistency. However, in order to avoid confusion the footnotes and bibliography refer to each title by the name under which it was originally published – For example, LeRoi Jones, *Dead Lecturer*, but Amiri Baraka, *Black Magic*.

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Chapter One

**Black Versus White: An Introduction to the Comparison
Between Hughes and Jones**