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Langston Hughes Poem “Let America Be America Again” Seen from
Post-Colonialism Theory

THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

This study discusses how Langston Hughes’ Poem entitled “Let America Be America Again” is seen from Post – colonialism theory, particularly paying attention to the Spivak theory about marginalized and dominant as quoted from Stephen Morton book. Spivak describes the marginalized are the new immigrant, the working class, women, and the postcolonial subject and the dominant is western. The primary data for this study are taken from Literary Theory: An Anthology and Key Concepts In Post-Colonial Studies, while the secondary data is taken from An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory and Critical Theory Today. In “Let America be America Again”, Langston Hughes also describes the dominant is American people, and immigrant, red man, Negro are the marginalized. Langston Hughes was African America writer, who wrote a lot about marginalization. In the other side, United States of America is a multicultural country where its population is composed of many ethnicities and various historical backgrounds. But, in Hughes’ poem, he describes what is happening in America; there is marginalization. One research question asked is: Why did the writer express himself as poor white, fooled, pushed apart, (or as a low society people)? The aim of this study is to interpret the poem with intent to show how the writer represents marginalized people.

Key words: Langston Hughes, America, Post-colonialism, Multicultural

Introduction

Indonesia and America are known as multicultural nations, nations that have more than one tribe, religion, culture, and language. Apart from that, Indonesia also has many immigrants. Multicultural can make dissension and also it can create a unity. For instance: West Borneo has many ethnicities living there such as Chinese, Dayak, Melayu, and Madura (before 1999). They live side by side and when one of them celebrates the Ethnic’s day like, they visit each other and even participate in it. Take an example when Chinese people celebrate their Lunar New Year; other ethnics come to their house and celebrate with them. It happens also when Dayak people celebrate ‘Naik Dango’ party Chinese and Melayu people come to the traditional house, and sit together. This harmony and the unity changed dramatically when there was violence in 1999, where Dayak and Melayu people unite to expel Madura people just because of a trivial matter.
Central issues in multiculturalism are closely related to the emergence of wider and complex society. On the one hand, the emergence of multiculturalism issue can bring better condition in prevailing equality, equity and also struggle for freedom in many factors. On the other hand, multiculturalism also brings challenges in many aspects of social life, such as every person has an ethnic origin (equality), every culture earns respect (dignity), and cultural pluralism needs official support (community).

Langston Hughes’ life, although he was an American, he could not get his rights as stated in the Declaration of United States Independence; Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. In the poem entitled, “Let America Be America Again,” Hughes represents himself as the marginalized people, such as black people, the immigrants, poor farmers, bondsman, etc. This poem is also discussing about Langston Hughes, someone who feels that America does not live up to what it should be.

This poem does not represent the point of view of one particular group. It depicts that there are many people who have come to America with hopes and dreams and they are being let down. Langston is also saying that there is an economic disparity between the marginalized people and white people. The essence of the poem is the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, because there is no equal treatment and opportunity.

Analyzing the poem, I learn that the writer is describing himself as a low-class person and he also not considering as an American. On line 6 Hughes talks about the dream of the ‘dreamers’ and on line 65 he wrote about who are living or who are the owner of America land: the poor man’s, Indian’s, Negro’s, and himself. The aim of this study is to interpret the poem with intent to show how the writer represents himself and the marginalized people, such as poor white, Negro, Red man, and immigrant (the 8th stanza). The poem that Hughes wrote, which covers many things, makes the writer of this study propose one question: Why does the speaker expressed himself as marginalized people?
In order to find out satisfactory result of analyzing the poem, the writer uses a qualitative research by applying library study. According to Punch, qualitative research is concerned with collecting and analyzing information in as many forms, chiefly non-numeric, as possible. It tends to focus on exploring, in as much detail as possible (3).

The research methodology that the writer used in this study is poem analysis. The writer will start with close reading of the poem. Next is classifying the stanzas into groups, then analyzing the stanza by applying the theory, and the last is interpreting the stanzas.

This poem discusses how marginalized people should be treated, and after analyzing the poem, hopefully readers will grow in their empathy and know better how to treat the marginalized people; unite them and make them an asset. By reading the poem and the result of this study, readers are expected to be aware about the multicultural which will promote unity and humanity in one place.

1. **Theoretical Discussion**

   1.1. Post - Colonialism:

   In this section, the writer aims to draw some of the debates about the nature of post-colonialism, and some of the criticism discussing about the theory.

   Post-colonialism deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. Before discussing about what post-colonialism is, it is better if we start with discussing what colonialism is.

   Ania Loomba explains “Colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people’s land goods” (1101). Colonialism in this sense is not merely the expansion of various European powers into Asia, Africa or the Americas from the
sixteenth century onwards; but also how European treats people they colonized and the affects after the colonization, which has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history”.

Loomba is also said, modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods, and wealth from the countries that it conquered – it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between the colonized and colonizers. This flow worked in both directions – slaves and indentured labor as well as raw materials were transported to manufacture goods in the metropolis, or in other locations for metropolitan consumption, but the colonies also provided captive markets for European goods (1101).

Thus slaves were moved from Africa to the Americas, and in the West Indian plantations they produced sugar for the consumption in Europe, and raw cotton was moved from India to be manufactured into fiber in England and then sold back to India whose own cloth production suffered as a result. In whichever direction human beings and materials travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called ‘mother country’ (1101).

Colonization time slowly started to get resistance, Childs and Williams stated, the dismantling of structures of colonial control, beginning in earnest in the late 1950s and reaching its high point in the 1960s, constituted a remarkable historical moment, as country after country gained independence from the colonizing powers (1). The dismantling of colonial control marked by the independence of Ghana, on March 6th, 1957; Ghana became the first black Africa country to get independence (http://news.bbc.co.uk).
As expressed in the beginning of the theory, ‘Post-colonialism’ deals with the effect of colonization. The term Post-colonialism was originally derived from orientalism. Orientalism was first defined by Edward Said, who was also the originator of the term Post-colonialism. Orientalism is the term used by Edward Said for the assessment of the attitudes and perspectives of Western scholars or Orientalists to legitimize colonial aggression against intellectually marginalized and dominated Eastern peoples (Khan). Orientalism itself is a discourse that raised the issues of power, knowledge, representation and various other Postcolonial issues. Post-colonialism, however, is more applicable to other colonial discourse, a theory which analyses the discourse of colonialism and colonialisation; which demonstrates the way in which the theory points out the deep ambivalence of as well as the way in which the criticism constructs both colonising and colonized subjects (Ashcroft 15).

Orientalism is more likely to compare the dominant group somewhere in the West and the marginalized group somewhere in the East (Spivak 1), while Post-colonialism is broader than that being concerned with how marginalization can happen in the West itself, not always outside the West.

Related to Professor Maggie Humm in her book entitled The Dictionary of Feminist Theory explained, the prefix ‘post’ describes cultures after independence but a post-colonial can be both a migrant ‘ethnic minority’ as well as a national citizen (214). Humm also stated, other key features of postcolonial theory are: a hybrid mixture of histories, languages and issues, both indigenous and Western; a questioning of European discourse – its universalism and its genres; and a struggle between place and displacement and language (2).
In addition to that, “Another leading contemporary intellectual such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, Spivak has challenged the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism and academic philosophy by focusing on the cultural texts of those people who are often marginalized by dominant western culture: the new immigrant, the working class, women and the postcolonial subject” (Stephen Morton 1).

By championing the voices and texts of such minority groups, Spivak has also challenged some of the dominant ideas of the contemporary era. Such ideas include, for example, the notion that the western world is more civilized, democratic and developed than the non-western world, or that the present, postcolonial era is more modern and progressive than the earlier historical period of European colonialism in the nineteenth century (1).

Indeed, for Spivak the effects of European colonialism did not simply vanish as many former European colonies achieved national independence in the second half of the twentieth century (p.1). In The Post-Colonial Critic, Spivak identifies herself as a postcolonial intellectual caught between the socialist ideals of the national independence movement in India and the legacy of a colonial education system (69).

In conclusion, the intention of this research is to analyze the colonized people, the oppressed ones, who are dehumanized in the Langston Hughes’ poem entitled “Let America be America Again”. Hughes describes the ‘poor’ white, Negro, Red Man, and immigrant as the colonized people. In Postcolonial study, we learn about the colonized peoples as any population that has been subjected to the political domination of another population. Ex: Africans Americans, aboriginal Australians, formerly colonized population of Indian.

1.2. Multicultural:
America is one of the countries that have many immigrants and also a multicultural country. America should be open minds and thoughts to respond to the multicultural. It is important for Americans and citizens of other countries of the world to remain open to each other. Central issues in multiculturalism are closely related to the emergence of wider and complex society. The emergence of multiculturalism issue can bring better condition in prevailing equality, equity and also struggle for freedom in many factors. On the other hand, multiculturalism brings challenges in many aspects of social life.

In the book entitled *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, the writer, Bhikhu Parekh, said, “As a nation of immigrants, the United States has long insisted on the swift assimilation of aliens into the language and culture. The idea of single American identity and culture that constituted the core of Americanism or American creed, the country offered a great asylum for diverse peoples but has not always been a great refuge for diverse cultures which at best have been kept marginal to the mainstream. In 1960s, the black struggle in the United States took a cultural turn as an affirmation of their distinct ethnic identity, partly in the hope that this would counter the educational underachievement and low self-esteem of their children, and partly build a political and ideological basis in their struggle against white racism” (5).

Discussing multiculturalism is directly related to complex problems in multidimensional spheres of society. According to Parekh multicultural and multiculturalism and the movement associated with them first appeared in countries which found themselves faced with distinct cultural groups. A multicultural society, then, is one that includes two or more cultural communities (2).

Multiculturalism is not about difference and identity per se but about those who are embedded in and sustained by culture; that is, a body of beliefs and practices in
terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organize their individual and collective lives. Warner and Berlant argue “Multiculturalism promised to make a political culture open and responsible, not only to diverse viewpoints, but also to the conflicts that liberal procedures normally screen out. Multicultural identities are being conceived as genetic and iconizing sources of ethnicity, of political validity, and of authenticity” (107).

From the above, multiculturalism refers to shaping the mindset of understanding each other. Respect is the key point for opening one of another mind and realizing that right or wrong, sameness or difference, ideal or not is real in society. The respect that we built not only for us but also them (others) which are clearly different culture, religion, politics, socioeconomic and lifestyle. Multiculturalism also means seeing world history and contemporary social life from the perspective of the radical equality of peoples in status, intelligence, and rights.
Let America Be America Again by Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.
Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home--
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay--
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again--
The land that never has been yet--
And yet must be--the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME--
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath--
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain--
All, all the stretch of these great green states--
And make America again!

2. Discussion

James Mercer Langston Hughes, the first African American author, was born on February 1, 1902 to Carrie Langston Hughes and James Nathaniel Hughes in Joplin, Missouri (Dickinson: 6). As a descendant of mixed-blood person (half African-American), Hughes earned critical attention for his portrayal of realistic black characters and he became one of the dominant voices speaking out on issues concerning black culture (http://www.kansasheritage.org).

One of his work is entitled “Let America be America Again”, was written in 1938, a time in history when many Americans, white and black felt the devastation of the Great Depression. Unemployment, poverty, plummeting farm incomes, and lack of economic growth affected much of the population (http://www.english.illinois.edu). When he wrote the poem, in my perspective he wants to criticize the Americans who become colonizers. If we look back to United States in the Declaration of Independence, the citizens’ rights already stated in there.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” – United States the Declaration of Independence.

Regarding to the Declaration of Independence, a book entitled *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States* explains “All men are created equal and there are certain unalienable rights that governments should never violate. These rights include
the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (1)”. America got the Independence in 1776, but years after the Independence there are still many marginalized people. From this problem Hughes started to write a lot of poem about marginalized people, one of them entitled “Let America be America Again”. What is already stated in the Declaration of Independence is only a common declaration that is not obeyed by the colonizers; the colonialism and marginalization happens, even until now.

In the opening of Hughes poem readers can find the words “Let America be America again” and Hughes closed his poem using “And make America again”. Those two lines indicate that Hughes mentions there were a lot of problems that made America not become the America like what the citizens hope. There were colonialism, slavery, and social inequality.

As one of American people, Hughes also felt the America never be the America like what he expected. In line 5, 10, and 15 Hughes really emphasized that America was never be the America for him. These three lines explained Hughes’ emotion and what he felt. By these three lines we can see that Hughes not only write the poem to describe the marginalized people, but he also describes his feeling about the America.

In this poem the poet placed himself not as a person of a group, but he speaks for many who aren’t included in America’s reality; he represents the voice of voiceless people. In line 65, Hughes explains the America land is for the poor man, Negro, Indian (Red Man), and himself. The anaphor in line 65 with line 19, show us that he speaks not only for him, but also for his community. The poor whites, African Americans or Negro, American Indians (Red Man), immigrants are all groups who’ve been left out (stanza 8); when the Liberty means nothing for a group of people who come from ‘low’ class.

Hughes also emphasized the struggle of minorities, including the “poor white”, who suffered economic hardship. In line 19th, Hughes insinuated the ‘white’ people, which is fooled
and pushed apart. There are several gaps in colonization time, as Hughes describes in his poem between the *black* and *white*.

Despite the fact that Langston was an educated man, he had his education until college in one of the famous university, Columbia University. He was moved by the situation in his surroundings about the marginalized people. In my perspective, the marginalization happened also due to the education problem, as Hughes wrote in his poem “I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart” (line 19).

Hughes uses ‘poor white’ here to describe how the marginalization at that time not only happened to Negro people, *Red* man, and immigrant; but also against the white people who categorized as uneducated people. If we look back to the stanza, Hughes describes the white people as a poor man, fooled, and pushed apart. Although the white people who categorized as American is also treated same with the other colonized people, because at that colonial time happened not only against Negro, *Red* man, immigrant, but also uneducated people. The line where Hughes criticized the ‘white’ people, also has a literary meaning to invite people to be aware how important it is to be educated people. The ‘white’ people in the line is described as a poor, fooled, and pushed apart; in the other hand if people are having enough education at least the people will not easy to fooled.

In his poem Hughes made repetitions using Negro; Hughes describes himself as Negro who has slavery’s scars and became a servant. In line 20, Hughes is telling his identity by saying he is a Negro. By saying he is a Negro; he reflects himself and his people community. He describes that the skin color of African American people is black and their origin is Africa. In line 33, Hughes describes the history of African American people who have become a slave.

Hughes in these two lines (20 and 33) describes himself and his community is Negro who became a slave and also a servant to the colonizer at the colonization time. This case shows
there is a social inequality between the colonizer and the Negro. In these lines, Hughes wants to show that what is stated by *The Constitution of the United States* was deviated.

3. Conclusion

Langston Hughes was the first African American author, he wrote a lot about marginalized people. One of his famous poems is entitled “Let America be America Again”. The poem is written in 1938 a time in history when many Americans, white and black felt the devastation of the Great Depression. Unemployment, poverty, plummeting farm incomes, and lack of economic growth affected much of the population ([http://www.english.illinois.edu](http://www.english.illinois.edu)).

This poem is not only to describe himself, but Hughes also represents the marginalized people such as white poor, Negro, *Red* man, and immigrant; he is voiced for voiceless people at that time. He explains his feeling about the America which never be America, a country which is far from the citizens expected. There is slavery, marginalization, colonization, social inequality. But, according to *The Constitution of the United States* which tells us about all men are created equal and there are certain unalienable rights that governments should never violate. These rights include the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Using Postcolonial perspective in discussing this poem will show us marginalization happened in Hughes era. The Negro, *Red* man, immigrant, and also ‘white’ people are the marginalized people. ‘White’ people are also marginalized at that time, the uneducated ‘white’ people. If the ‘white’ people are uneducated, they were poor, fooled and pushed apart. Hughes indirectly criticizes the people to be aware of how important it is to be educated people. If you got the education you can change your life; you will not be poor, fooled, and pushed apart. That is one of the messages what Hughes tried to deliver.
Another colonized community that Hughes brought in his poem was Red man and immigrant. Red man here is describing the Indian people (line 65). As we know, America is one of the countries that have many immigrants and has a many tribes, and known as multicultural country. In this context, America should open minds and thoughts toward the multicultural that they have. It is important for Americans and citizens of other countries of the world to remain to open to each other.

In the opening of Hughes poem readers can find the words “Let America be America again” and Hughes close his poem using “And make America again”. These tell us what is expected by Hughes. He wanted America be America again where all people get their rights. In his poem, Hughes describes the situation what he felt at that time. America is far away from what are the citizens expected.

Finally, the purpose of this study is for the sake of future research. Post-colonialism theory is a developing theory; this paper is intended to contribute to that development. This research is necessary because of the intellectual needs that are changing and developing, especially in this twenty-first century, where education systems are wider and more diverse and theories from the 1960’s are not so suitable anymore. As for future research suggestion a Marxist theory can be used as a tool to examine “Let America Be America Again”. It is particularly suggested to use Marxist theory to examine the class status there based on the money and poverty, because in the poem Hughes mention the “poor” white as mention in line 19. Using Marxist theory the problems that can be discussed is also about the power of rich people and how the poor is marginalized.

For the final word, hopefully this research moves the readers to think more critically toward literary works, increase their awareness of the marginalized people, create better understanding about our society and later readers will grow their empathy and know better how
to treat the marginalized people. By reading the poem and the result of this study, readers are expected to be aware about the multicultural.
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