

The Symbolic Expression of Black American In Langston Hughes' Poem "Freedom's Plow"

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Abstract. Langston Hughes is a black American poet who strived to express the experiences of Black in the United States. One of his poem is *Freedom Plow* which utilized through lots symbols that referred to the problem of discrimination and the vision of American as a nation. This study is aimed to analyze the expression of Black American expression in *Freedom's Plow* poem. This study used semiotics approach in analyzing research data by adopting model proposed by C.S Pierce. There are three types of signs based on the relationship between the sign and the signified, namely; Icons, Index, and symbols. Based on the semiotics frameworks, this study found that Langston Hughes harnesses the signs to express (1) preserverance of black to get freedom, (2) exposing the contradiction of American democracy, and (3) the expression of togetherness and unity

Keywords: Expression, Democracy, Semiotic, Black American, Langston Hughes

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INTRODUCTION

Semiotics approach have been a pivotal topic which has been conducted by many researchers (Hidayati, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2018; Lenninger, 2018; Chen, 2019; Kurniawan & Susanto, 2018). Based on the studies, it can be concluded that there are various object which can be studied using semiotics approach like women portrayal in indonesian folklores, formation process of korean folk-belief, visual metaphor, Dreaming in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classics, and other objects. This study conducted symbolic expression of black american. The previous studies conducting black american object had been conducted by Quimby et all (2018), Black et all. (2015), Muhammad (2016), Leonard (2016), Mereish et all (2016). The studies conducting black american using various approaches and perspectives.

Enslavement or slavery of black people is considered as one of the black spots in the history of America instead of Indian Genosida and Vietnam war. Berlin (2003) states that black slavery has emerged a metaphor for the most extreme cases, such as exploitation, otherness, and even social death. The slavery had been uprooting not only physical but also cultural of the black as the slave, as well as it has brought in long term periods of the society into stereotypes and discrimination.

The fact of black enslavement asserted America as the state of democracy remains paradox (Bellah, 1985). In the political sphere, the institution of slavery has been a paradox dealing with the bases of the founding of the United States. In the primordial myth of the history of the United States of America, it is stated that “..first, society was composed of free and equal individual and that democracy was away for free individuals to live together in equality; second, society should preserve the value of individualism” (Adi, 2003: 451). However, if looking back the history of black experience in the United States, it is attested that America is applying ‘double standard’ as it is established as a state (Bellah, 1985: 30), or it also called ‘the country of paradox’ (Hasday, 2007: 5). America in one side built the foundation of its country based on the principle of democracy and equality, but it raised a prejudice and discrimination within the society in the other side. This is why, the controversy of American Democracy echoed in the reality of America.

Langston Hughes is one of the black poets that lot of his works are voicing the black experience in the United States. One of his poems that symbolically expressing the black voice due to the paradox of American democracy is *Freedom Plow* which is published in 1943. This time of publication is dealing with the spirit of the struggle for equality and heading to the declaration of Human Rights Movement. *Freedom plow* is composed by taking the words of American important figures; Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass, and some historical facts to reveal the experience of black in the United states. Through the set of symbols, *Freedom’s Plow* depicted the contradiction of American life especially for those who considered as ‘other’ and try to pursue the American Dream as others. The otherness of black in the United States has been subordinated them from their status as citizens. The skin color, cultural attributes, and history of their arrival in the United States have been putting them aside and arising discrimination in their life. Based on the above exposition of the problem, this writing is going to investigate the symbolic expression of black American appeared in the Langston Hughes’s poem *Freedom Plow*.

RESEARCH METHOD

The semiotics approach is used as the framework to dig up the symbolic meaning of the poem. Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. This study comprehends that social and cultural phenomenon are basically the association of sign system. It investigates systems, rules, and conventions which enable the signs to be interpreted and found the meaning (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2018; Barnham, 2019; Märtsin, 2018).

There are three types of signs based on the relationship between the sign and the signified. They are (1). Icons, which are signs that are inherently (closely related) have in common with the designated meaning. For example, photos with

people photographed, or maps with their geographical area; (2) Index, which is a sign that contains a causal relationship (causing an event) with what is signified. For example, smoke indicates the presence of fire, or clouds indicate rain; (3) Symbols, which are signs that have a meaningful relationship with those indicated as arbitrators, in accordance with the convention (based on mutual agreement by symbol users or agreed upon) a particular social environment (Angelici, 2019).

This is a qualitative study that approaching data qualitatively and interpretatively. In qualitative analysis, the researchers are placed as subjects in interpreting data. In the interpretation process, the researchers follow the semiotic perspective as the theoretical approach of this study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Freedom Plow* poem through semiotic approach found three expressions of black people in the United States that uttered symbolically. The first is the expression of preserverance and resilient to pursue freedom, the second is the expression of inconsistency of American democracy, and the third is the expression of unity.

The expression of Preserverance to pursue Freedom

Freedom Plow is a poem which composed in the form of a hymn to cry to freedom. The words "Keep your hand on the plow. Hold on" (lines 117-118-190) are become a metaphor for perseverance in the struggle for true freedom. Freedom has been a major goal of human life to living in this world, including black people who were oppressed in the United States. Hughes as the writer quotes the words of Thomas Jefferson (line 96), Abraham Lincoln (line 101), and Frederick Douglass (line 105) as the soul of the poem to represent the preverance to get freedom as the path to reach equality.

The expression of preserverance to get freedom in this poem, Hughes pictures the types of people and their struggle for freedom in the United States. The free hands is illustrated seek for a greater freedom, indentured hands is trying to find their freedom, and slave is guarding their hearts the seed of freedom, as expressed in lines 37-48 bellow:

*In little bands together,
Heart reaching out to heart,
Hand reaching out to hand,
They began to build our land.
Some were free hands
Seeking a greater freedom,
Some were indentured hands
Hoping to find their freedom,*

*Some were slave hands
Guarding in their hearts the seed of freedom,
But the word was there always:
Freedom.*

The free hands is identified for those whites who deserved freedom, indentured hands is to those poor whites or other European who are working with payment, and the slave is for blacks. The quote insisted that the poem be read as an attempt to create a narrative worth living for. It can be analyzed through the illustration of the people and the status types in the United States. Their efforts are to create a worth living. The most importantly is the poem also speaks of the black slaves that were brought to America as partaking in the project of creating a land of freedom. Though blacks were not free, they held the seed of freedom in their heart. Hughes asserts a mood of urgency throughout the poem, telling his fellow blacks to never give up and claims that there will undoubtedly be democracy of free men in the near future. This narrative is become the index to connect to the history available to the descendants of black slaves in the United States.

In *Freedom's Plow*, Hughes harnesses many poetic devices. One of them is by using the repetition of words to insist the significance of the poem. In lines 115 – 121, Hughes writes:

*The slaves made up a song:
Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!
That song meant just what it said: Hold On!
Freedom will come!
Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!
Out of war it came, bloody and terrible!
But it came!*

The repetition of the words, “Keep your hand on the plow” is to signify the importance of perseverance in the fight towards freedom. “Hold On” means wait, wait for the right time by keeping try to reach it with effort. It symbolized the optimistic view of black to get a better life. Octavia (1998) states that for many of Langston Hughes' poems used the diction, as well as the imagery and the figures of speech to express the optimistic view for black life in the United States. War, bloody and terrible are the symbols of challenges and struggle to reach the freedom and worth life.

Hughes also utilizes allusion when referencing the Declaration of Independence in his poem, speaking of how during the time, these words were directed to the principle of the founding fathers of the United States, that freedom is proposed as

unalienable right for all human in the United States and the world. Hughes writes in lines 91-95:

ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL
 ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR
 WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS
 AMONG THESE LIFE, LIBERTY
 AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The capitalized letter of the above quote signified not only the point of the excerpt of the Declaration of the American Independence but also the significance of the words. That is America as the land that guaranteed the people's freedom. Liberty has been the symbol of an embryo of the birth of the American democracy. Liberty is the keyword to compose of free and equal individual and that democracy was away for free individuals to live together in equality (Adi, 2003) as one of the dreams that pursued by Americans. It is asserted by Hughes in lines 126-132 that:

*“Out of the darkest days for people and a nation,
 We know now how it came out.
 There was light when the battle clouds rolled away.
 There was a great wooded land,
 And men united as a nation,
 America is a dream.*

From the quote, it can be seen that Hughes uses imagery to evoke a sense of hope and warmth. The image of American as “a great wooded land” gives a hope and warmth for people to living. “Wooded land” in many literature of American frontiers symbolized America as virgin land (Smith, 1950). The land when the American frontiers putting their dream to live prosperously and freely. The Quote also juxtaposes the very themes of darkness and light in the battle for freedom. Darkness is instead of evoking a situation to be fought, it also signifies the lack of equality and liberty that the blacks have perceived. Meanwhile, light is demanding and hopeful for a better future as shown throughout the poem as Hughes states to hold on and persevere. It can be assumed that Hughes' perspective of the equality movement is very motivational in this poems and that Hughes desires for freedom and equality for everyone.

The expression of American Democracy vs Black Discrimination

Freedom Plow adopts alot of symbols to display the Amerian democracy. The excerpt of American Independence Declaration, liberty, land of hope, and pursuit of happiness are some of the symbols. It is not only to legitimage the American Democracy but also to subvert it by showing the fact of black slavery in the United

States. *Freedom Plow* tried to reveal the contradiction of American Democracy and attested that America is the country of paradox (Ryan, 2008: 9; Hasday, 2007: 5). America, in one side, built the foundation of the country based on the principle of democracy and social equality, but it is creating discrimination and prejudice in its social life in other side. This fact bears the controversy of the American democracy.

The symbol of American democracy in *Freedom Plow* could be seen through three figures of democracy; Jefferson, Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass. Both Jefferson and Lincoln are the former presidents of the United States who fight for equality for their citizens. Jefferson is wellknown as the the founding father of American democracy and his statement about the equality declared in American independence charter. Hughes quotes Jefferson statement in lines 90-100 that:

A long time ago, but not too long ago, a man said:

ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL-
ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR
WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS-
AMONG THESE LIFE, LIBERTY
AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.

*His name was Jefferson. There were slaves then,
But in their hearts the slaves believed him, too,
And silently took for granted
That what he said was also meant for them.*

Jefferson's statement as the father of American democracy was used as a benchmark for Hughes to criticize the realization of democracy in America. Hughes collapsed Jefferson's view with the fact that slavery had arisen on American soil. Jefferson is the president of the United States and is white. He is as white man voiced democracy itself, but the reality they neglected it. Nonetheless, Hughes continued to instill optimism while believing that Jefferson's words could be the starting point for demanding justice in the United States. The second statement is supported by Lincoln's view which also strikes the idea of freedom as a symbol of the realization of democracy and slavery of black people. On lines 100-108, Hughes wrote that:

*It was a long time ago,
But not so long ago at that, Lincoln said:
NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH,
TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN,
WITHOUT THAT OTHER'S CONSENT,
There were slaves then, too,*

*But in their hearts the slaves knew,
What he said must be meant for every human being-
Else it had no meaning for anyone.*

Lincoln is also a former President of the United States. He is famous for his idea of abolishing slavery throughout the American soil. The idea also triggered a split in the country and a civil war was erupted in 1861-1865 (Catton, 1978; Ryan, 2008). Lincoln is not only known as the president of the United States, but has also become the liberation icon of black people. By taking Lincoln as a slave liberation icon, Hughes reveals the slavery of black which put them into stereotype and discriminations. It was then become an index for black efforts to achieve freedom and equality in the US. Hughes also quoted Frederick Douglass's views in his poetry. Frederick Douglass was a black person who became a figure of liberation of black people (Ryan, 2008). He was famous for his protests in several famous writings and became a symbol of the struggle of black people. It has also become a struggle icon of blacks in achieving liberation. At lines 109-115, Hughes writes:

*Then a man said:
BETTER TO DIE FREE
THAN TO LIVE SLAVES
He was a colored man who had been a slave
But had run away to freedom.
And the slaves knew
What Frederick Douglass said was true.*

The quote "Better to die free, than to live slaves" is a slogan built by black people in fighting for their freedom in the United States. The slogan is an index taken from Frederick Douglass's own expression in fighting for his freedom in an American democratic country. The brute treatment in the slavery era has triggered a movement within black people to fight for their freedom in the United States. This expression is used as a motto for blacks to exist in the United States. Hughes then built an index by presenting historical facts about John Brown as one example of the contradiction of American democracy. John Brown is well known in American history as a victim of racism and strengthened the problem in applying democracy in America. In lines 106-114, Hughes wrote that:

*With John Brown at Harper's Ferry, Negroes died
John Brown was hung
Before the Civil War, days were dark,
And nobody knew for sure*

*When freedom would triumph
 'Or if it would,' thought some
 But others new it had to triumph
 In those dark days of slavery
 Guarding in their hearts the seed of freedom*

The historical facts presented in the quotes above drove the efforts of black Americans to solidify their steps and determination to achieve freedom. 'Seed' literally means a flowering plant's unit of reproduction, capable of developing into another such plant. So, blacks should reproduce the spirit of freedom in their hearts as long as they live as slaves in the United States. The contradiction of American democracy was then presented by Hughes by bringing together the three views of American democratic figures; Jefferson, Lincoln, and Douglass. Hughes confronted the question of who carried these ideas while at the same time answering that none other than American society itself. Lines 157-167 presents this.

*Into the warp and woof of America:
 ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.
 NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH
 TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN
 WITHOUT HIS CONSENT
 BETTER DIE FREE,
 THAN TO LIVE SLAVES.
 Who said those things? Americans!
 Who owns those words? America!
 Who is America? You, me!
 We are America!*

The reconciling of the three views of American figures, and complemented by the questions about who they are, is the affirmation of the contradiction of American democracy. They have carried the idea of equality but they have not been able to make it happen in society. In the words "We are America! Hughes emphasized the answer to the creation of contradictions and victims of this paradoxical democracy.

The Expression of Togetherness and Unity

Freedom Plow commenced its lines by depicting the land of America in the first immigration era. Hughes introduced the situation of America in the first time in the first stanza of the poem. People emigrated to the America to start a new life with nothing and it needed spirit and effort to do it. In lines 1-8, Hughes expresses that:

When a man starts out with nothing,
 When a man starts out with his hands
 Empty, but clean,
 When a man starts to build a world,
 He starts first with himself
 And the faith that is in his heart-
 The strength there,
 The will there to build.

Based on the quotes, it can be noticed that the author tries to remind the American about the principle of immigration to the land of America. America is a dream of people to live peacefully and freely. McLemore (1983) and Kennedy (2011) stated that America is a nation with a mixture of immigrants from different nations around the world. It is a country that has a tremendous magnet for almost all nations in the world. Noted since 1607, various nations and ethnic groups in the world, in waves, immigrated to the United States and settled in. Their arrival marked by a variety of reasons, ranging from fleeing persecution under the guise of religion, searching for political freedom, improving economic status, and seeking a brighter future that could not be found in their home country. Many of the immigrants in the United States managed to get what they wants, that is, what was later known as the *American Dream* (Cullen, 2011).

The words “a man start without nothing.... and empty but clean” in the first and third lines signified that America is a new born people on a new land. From early in its history, America is well known as a place for new beginning, a new Eden, and american is called new Adam. Both of these aspects of the collective self-images have contributed to the way they think about their relationship to torture and atrocity (Strassfeld, 2006).

As a new beginning and a new man, America needed to build with togetherness and unity. Hughes in *Freedom Plow* brigdes the principle of the american past as the new beginning with togetherness that should be built by the American today. The words “America is a dream (line,132) is the core of the purpose of Americans immigration. So, Hughes’ poem *Freedom’s Plow* is actually to tip off togetherness and unity to reach the ambition.

Hughes pointed in the poem that America was built as a whole – not of only Whites and nor Blacks. The title, *Freedom’s Plow*, signifies this very central theme of wholeness and also displays a setting in which Americans are plowing into the earth to create the very America. In line 146, Hughes writes “You are a man. Together we are building our land”, it is trying to unite those who built America. Hughes administers a tone of great will and determination, as he wrote in line 178-187:

A long time ago,
 An enslaved people heading toward freedom
 Made up a song:
 Keep your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!
 Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.
 From that a seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.
 That tree is for everybody.
 For all America, for all the world.
 May its branches spread and shelter grow
 Until all races and all peoples know its shade.
 KEEP YOUR HAND ON THE PLOW! HOLD ON!

Hughes asserts a mood of urgency throughout the poem, telling his fellow Blacks to never give up and claims that there will undoubtedly be democracy of free men in the near future. Through black experience in the slavery, black can spur the spirit of struggle to exist in America. The struggle of black people to achieve freedom is not really for their own sake, but it can be a passion for everyone in America, as well as the world community. The quote "Until all races and all peoples know its shade" (line 186) is an affirmation of the struggle for freedom for togetherness and unity of all the people of the world, or at least can be an inspiration for all races on earth to unite and struggle against oppression.

CONCLUSION

This study may conclude that the symbolic expression of black American in Langston Hughes' poem "freedom plow" is dealt with the goal of human living in the world by connecting the experience of black people as oppressed people in America and America as the land of hope. By presenting signs in the form of icons, indices, and symbols that refer to the experience of blacks and Americans, Hughes intended to emphasize the relentless struggle for a decent life as the people who deserve it. In this poem, Hughes continues to breathe passion for struggle and the preserverance of black to get freedom. Although America is seen as a state of paradox in carrying out the principles of its country, but the embryo of democracy can be a foothold to fight for that freedom. Hughes also expressed a high sense of optimism for black people and other American communities to build togetherness and unity as American citizens, so that each of the diverse backgrounds could contribute and integrate in American society to realize American land as a land of hope as what they pursue in the American Dream.

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