



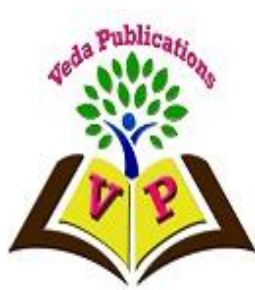
HUGHES'S NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER: A SAGA OF MOTHERHOOD, RACISM, AND GENDER SUBJUGATION

Rajendra Prasad Bhatt

(Research scholar, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal.)

[doi:10.333329/joell.7.4.7](https://doi.org/10.333329/joell.7.4.7)


ABSTRACT



This paper attempts to explore the issues of motherhood, racism, and gender oppression in Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930). It examines black people's struggle in American society to overcome racial and gender discrimination. To highlight the problems and issues of black American life, Hughes demonstrates a long series of struggle that the blacks face against the exploitative tendencies of the whites. Emphasis is put on motherhood ideology of black people, which is constructed by social norms. Based on Hughes' personal experience and observations, *Not Without Laughter* reflects the role of socio-cultural stereotypes that define the boundary of black people. Through the depiction of the extreme poverty of rural Kansas, Hughes narrates an account of racial violence against blacks. Applying the narrative inquiry approach, this paper concentrates on black American life to demonstrate the cases of racism and gender subjugation. The conflict between the black and the white communities, the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites, and the violence and bloodshed within the black communities have been the dominant themes in Hughes' works. This paper claims that Hughes' narrative opposes racist and sexist ideology in all ramifications to overcome the self-pride and self-identity of black race. The pursuit of identity is a continuous process where the potential aspects of the present and the past, of the individual and society, play a vital role.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Racism, Oppression, Subjugation, Violence*

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article Copyright© 2020VEDAPublications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License 

**INTRODUCTION**

Hughes' first novel *Not Without Laughter* portrays African American life in Kansas. It focuses on the effects of racism on the rural community. The novel centers around Sandy Rogers, an African American youth. Living in poverty like conditions in rural Kansas, Sandy is raised by his grandmother, Aunt Hager, a strong and courageous matriarch. Sandy experiences the African American struggle of inequality through instances of poverty and racial aggression. The narrative focuses on Sandy's awakening to the sad and the beautiful realities of black life in Kansas. Issues of motherhood, racism, and gender oppression are at the heart of the novel. The narrative concentrates upon the social construction of motherhood in African American society by showing women's roles and effects upon Sandy's life. Aunt Hager, Annjee, Aunt Tempy, and Harriet are the catalysts to Sandy's growth via education and work.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Aunt Hager, the central maternal figure, is an ordinary black woman in her seventies. She lives in the segregated town of Stanton, Kansas, with her two daughters Annjee and Harriet and her grandson, Sandy. Aunt Hager lives in a mixed working class community where whites peacefully cohabit with black people. She loves her family and works hard to earn a living. After the death of her husband Pa Williams, she performs as the financial pillar of the household. As a strong woman, she works hard to fulfill the basic needs of her family. Hager takes in laundry to feed her family as she describes her struggle in the narrative:

Fo' nigh on forty years, ever sence Cudge an' me come here from Montgomery. An' I been washin' fo' white folks ever' week de Lawd sent sence I been here, too. Bought this house washin', and made as many payments myself as Cudge come near; an' raised ma chillens washin'; an' when Cudge taken sick an' laid on his back for mo'n a year, I taken care o' him washin'; an' when he died, paid de funeralbill washin', cause' he ain't belonged to no lodge. Sent Tempy

through de high school and edicated Annjee till she marry that onery pup of a Jimboy, an' Harriett till she left home. Yes, sir. Washin', an' here I is with me arms still in the tub!
(104)

Hager, a complex and multidimensional character bears the features of a perfect mammy. She works hard for the better prospects of her children. A washerwoman in her late sixties, Hager is an overweight black woman with a kerchief on the head. She always wears a clean apron and loves watermelon. Like the stereotypical mammy as well, this head of family is an extremely devout and pious woman. She works hard to earn for her living.

She lives in a mixed community and works for white folks. She maintains good relation with people who live in neighborhood. Aunt Hager serves the whole Stanton community. Whenever she sees any problem in the neighborhood, she instantly moves for help. She believes that it is her responsibility to help the needy ones. The stormy evening when young Sandy feels alone and asks a neighborhood woman whereabouts of his grandmother, calming down Sandy she answers, "Your grandmother's good to have around when folks are sick and grieving" (24). The omniscient narrator reinforces the lady's depiction of Aunt Hager as a generous and available woman who helps the distressed and sick neighbors. Expressing Aunt Hager's liberal outlook and altruistic attitude, the narrative reveals:

All the neighborhood, white and colored, called his grandmother when something happened. She was a good nurse, they said, and sick folks liked her around. Aunt Hager always came when they called, too, bringing maybe a little soup that she had made or a jelly. Sometimes they paid her and sometimes they didn't. (25)

Because she helps people in a disinterested way and expects no retribution, her neighbors expect her presence at every occasion. Everyone likes Aunt Hager in the neighborhood because she is a good nurse and takes care of the sick people well. When they hear the news of her demise, people, regardless



of race, flood the house with gifts and contributions to manifest their appreciation of her loving and generous actions towards the community of Stanton.

Aunt Hager performs as a perfect guide and guardian and plays a crucial role in the life of the main protagonist, Sandy Williams. She brings up Sandy and guides him throughout his unstable years of adolescence. As she says, "Wash yo' face good sir, put on yo' clean waist, an' polish yo' shoes," Aunt Hager said bright and early, "'cause I don't want none o' them white teachers sayin' I sends you to school dirty as a 'cuse to put you back in de fourth grade. You hear me, sir!" (96). She teaches him important values such as industry, fear of God, honesty, cleanliness, work ethics, and love. Regarding Hager's influence on Sandy, Rich argues that mothers have a powerful influence over their children's behavior. In her book *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* she writes, "Mothers have as powerful an influence over the welfare of future generation, as all other earthly causes combined" (44). Rich's words are relevant to internalize mother's influence over her children's behavior. Aunt Hager guides her daughters and grandson the way to a brighter future. Using rhetorical tools similar to the ones of Booker T. Washington and through transmission of memory, Aunt Hager nurtures her grandson's development, in a period of intense racism, depression and disillusionment of the African Americans. Hager is aware that the only way out is to get a decent education that would enable her children to get out of the whirlwinds of minor and poorly paid jobs.

Hager believes that training and education play an important role to achieve success in life. For this reason, she tries her best to keep Annjee and Harriet in school. She also places high hopes in Sandy, her little grandson, whom she wants to make a race hero such as Frederick Douglass, Du Bois and Washington. Expressing her hopeful desire for her grandson's future, she says:

But they's one mo' got through school yet, an' that's ma little Sandy. If de Lawd lets me live, I's gwine make a edicated man out o' him. He's gwine be another Booker T. Washington. . . . I ain't never raised no boy

o' ma own yet, so I wants this one o' Annjee's to 'mount to something. I wants him to know all they is to know, so' he can help this black race o' our'n to come up and see de light and take they places in de world. I wants him to be a Fred Douglass leadin' de people, that's what, an' not following in de tracks of his good-for-nothin' pappy, worthless an' wanderin' like Jimbo is. (104)

In above mentioned lines, the writer gives reference of key African-American figures Du Bois and Washington. Aunt Hager wants to educate her grandson Sandy and make him understand the world. She knows if he gets educated, he can help the black race and lead them to freedom and prosperity. She believes that education is the only tool that can make him a popular figure like Du Bois and Washington.

Aunt Hager and Aunt Tempy prioritize education for Sandy. Though they adopt different ideologies, both of them promote Sandy's quest for education. Aunt Hager has a deep faith in the Washington formula that stresses vocational education whereas Aunt Tempy believes in Du Bois and his teachings of a classical education. When Sandy grows up, he accepts both the Washington's and Du Bois' ideologies. He compromises between the two and forms a new belief and applies both the teachings.

As a courageous woman, Aunt Hager transmits memory using the African oral tradition and perfects Sandy's education through stories. She tells him stories of slavery-time, myths, folk-tales like the ones of Rabbit and the Tar baby. She also unfolds the descriptions about great historical events such as the civil war, Abraham Lincoln's freedom or visions of the Lord. As the narrative reveals, "Through the long summer evenings they sat together on the front porch and she told her grandchild stories. . . . Slavery time stories, myths,, folk tales like the Rabbit and the Tar Baby, the war, Abe Lincoln, freedom; visions of the Lord; years of faith and labor . . ." (129). Hager's stories convey lessons of life for Sandy.

Aunt Hager plays the role of a perfect advisor and role model for her daughters. She keeps



her daughters under control and leads them in a better path. When Harriet informs her mother of her intention to work in a hotel, Hager replies, "You ain't gonna work in no hotel. You hear me! They's dives o' sin, that's what they is, an' a child o' mine ain't goin' in one. If you was a boy, I wouldn't let you go, much less a girl! They ain't nothin' but strum-pets works in hotels" (42). Hager understands that both the hotel and the dance hall are sites of sexual license. Such destinations are utterly more inclined to convey a loose attitude towards sex. Aunt Hager does not give her permission to work at the hotel because she knows that black women are sexually abused in such destinations.

Despite the destructive and hate breeding atmosphere of racism that prevails in Stanton school and in the society at large, Aunt Hager teaches Sandy to judge people not by the color of their skin but rather by the content of their characters because there are good and bad people in all races. As she says, "White folks is white folks, an' colored folks is colored, an' neither one of 'em is bad as t' other make out" (129). Emphasizing the importance of stories in Sandy's development, critic Andy Oler in his work "Their Song Filled the Whole Night: *Not Without Laughter*, Hinterlands, Jazz and Rural Modernity" describes that "throughout the novel, Sandy's coming of age has been nurtured through the front-porch storytelling of his family and the rest of Stanton's African- American community" (94). Oler believes that stories told by his grandmother and the African American community of Stanton play a dynamic role in Sandy's life. They provide him proper guidance and lead him to prosperity.

Sandy memorizes most of Hager's teachings and acquires many lessons. He is aware of his grandmother's struggle, including perseverance, cleanliness, and hard work, which can be seen very clearly through his activities and behaviors. Sandy's awareness of the importance of education is illustrated through the insights into his thoughts. The narrative illustrates the impact of Hager's words on Sandy's behavior. In response to Hager's question the narrator reveals the young man's response as, "Sandy did hear her, and eh knew what she meant. She meant a Booker T. Washington, or Frederick

Douglass, or like Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who did poetry-writing" (175). Later in the narrative, the narrator also exhibits the great influence of the grandmother's teachings on Sandy's character.

Like his grandmother, Sandy likes to clean things by making them beautiful and shine. When Aunt Hager does not have anything to wash, she keeps herself busy in household activities. Sometimes she cleans the house, clears the dust, polishes the range, or scrubs the kitchen floor until it is white enough. As narrated, "He liked to clean things, to make them beautiful, to make them shine, Aunt Hager did, too. When she wasn't washing clothes, she was always cleaning something about the house, dusting, polishing the range, or scrubbing the kitchen floor until it was white enough to eat from" (148). To Hager, a clean thing is beautiful. Like Hager, Sandy accepts the same notion and keeps himself busy with household activities. The narrative tells that, "clean thing is also to Sandy, proud every evening of his six unblemished brass spittoons" (148). Aunt Hager gives Sandy's life a new direction, drive and motivation. Sandy has heard so much from his grandmother that he must become a fine ambitious man. Working as a bellboy in Drummer's Hotel, he compassionately thinks about his old, overworked and affectionate grandmother, when he wonders about his future. The narrative tells, Sandy "wondered how people got to be great . . . He wondered how people made themselves great" (150-151). Sandy contemplates over the matter deeply.

Aunt Hager continues to shape and determine the course of Sandy's life even after her death. Years after her death, his grandmother's words keep on inspiring him. Sandy remembers her words when he lives with his mother in a little rented room in Chicago. He makes a promise to himself that he won't disappoint her. As the narrator tells, "an' I won't disappoint you! Sandy said that hot Chicago summer, just as though Hager were still there planning for him" (202). When Hager dies, Tempy takes the overall responsibility of Sandy.

Hughes presents the mature lady with great values that elevate her status. Through her exemplary behavior, industriousness, deep faith in



God, high morals and perfect vision, Hager stands as a role model and assertive mother figure for the young Sandy. Regarding Hager's influence on community, Matthew Mosley in his dissertation "The Feminine Representation of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*" explains that "Hager's occupation fills a need in the local community and establishes her economic value. Her occupation also intertwines two notions of Washington's ideology, cleanliness and industry" (12). Mosley says that since she came to Stanton with her husband Cudge forty years ago, she has been working hard to accomplish the needs of her family and she transmits this industriousness to her grandson. Her occupation intertwines cleanliness and industry, the two notions of Washington's ideology. Hager's occupation also suggests the limited opportunities black women possess in a racist society.

Through the description of black American life the novel reflects the deep injustice involved in how whites treat blacks in American society. Hughes aims to show that racism is deeply rooted across the United States. The narrative draws Hager's love of the Christ and Christian behavior through her characterization. Hager refuses to let hatred enter her heart. Despite class and race subjugation, she asks her family to love white people because not all white people are bad. Hager maintains a loving and tolerant attitude towards all people. She advises, "White people maybe mistreats you an' hates you, but when you hates em back, you's de one what's hurted, cause hate makes yo' heart ugly-that's all it does . . . There ain't no room in de world fo' hate, white folks hatin' niggers an' niggers hatin' white folks" (132). Hager wants to create a harmonious relationship with her community. Reflecting Aunt Hager's attitude to white community, John P. Shields in his work "Never cross the divide: Reconstructing Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*" points out that "religion, especially as experienced by Aunt Hager, provides a source of catharsis, a release for pent up anger. Its hope comes in the form of a promised after life where skin color will not be held against anyone and all will be equal before God" (603). Shields' words are significant to understand

Aunt Hager's faith to religion. Hager loves to maintain peace and harmony in the society she lives.

Hager can be said to be contented and submissive towards the racist system. During her stay as a slave in the master's house, she becomes so close and affectionate towards her mistress. She lives with her through the Civil War, assisting her when her husband dies in the war. Due to her deep faith in religion, she does not battle against the prevailing racist order. Shields writes that Aunt Hager's acceptance and submission to the racist and capitalistic system reflects through her tolerance. Jimboy opposes Aunt Hager's attitude to white race and denounces the racist order which has been prevailing in America. Responding to Aunt Hager's warning that the Lord hears him, Jimboy expresses his view about racist attitude of white people with frustration:

I don't care if He does hear me, mama! You and Anjee are too easy. You just take whatever white folks give you- coon to your face, and nigger behind your backs—and don't say nothing. You run to some white person's back door for every job you get, and then they pay you one dollar for five dollars' worth of work, and fire you whenever they get ready. (66).

Jimboy feels uneasy due to racism. He denounces racist order. Whenever Aunt Hager expresses her optimistic views, it does not bring any vigor in him. He thinks that Aunt Hager and Anjee are submissive women, who never raise their voice against racial oppression. The most significant lesson that Jimboy instills in him is that honesty remains above all else, adding that white people often get their money by lying and that it is better to be poor.

Sandy's mother mostly stays outdoors because she works for a white family. In the community of Stanton the poor African Americans live in wooden shacks, while the prosperous whites, such as Mrs. Rice lives in a comfortable mansion. As the narrative reveals, Mrs. Rice resides in "the long residential street, with its large houses sitting in green shady lawns far back from the sidewalk" (57). There exists racial inequality among the population,



which is revealed through the social relationships. Sandy's mother Annjee works as a maid in the household of Mrs. Rice. She declares that "white folks sure is a case! . . . So spoiled with colored folks waiting on 'em all their days! Don't know what they'll do in heaven, 'cause I'm gonna sit down up there myself" (58). Her statement indicates that whites perceive blacks as their inferior servants.

When Sandy goes to his mother's workplace to help her, he sees the pathetic situation of his mother at white family's kitchen. As he explains, "Annjee was standing over the hot stove seasoning something in a saucepan, beads of perspiration on her dark face, and large damp spots under the arms of her dress" (57). Sandy comes face-to-face with the verbal abuse his mother experiences daily at the hands of Mrs Rice. As narrated, "'Annjee,' the mistress said sharply. 'I wish you wouldn't put quite so much onion in your sauce for the steak. I've mentioned it to you several times before'" (59). Sandy becomes upset to see his hard working mother in a white household and white landlady's treatment to her. Regarding whites' treatment to blacks, West argues that poverty and selflessness of black population always creates problems for them. As he writes in his book *Race matters*, "The fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self love" (63). West's idea is useful to understand the living condition of poor blacks in America. Due to poor economic condition and loyalty in nature blacks face a lot of problem. Black women like Annjee, who work as a house maid at white households, are ill treated because of their poverty and submissiveness.

At school Sandy does not get proper treatment. He is segregated from other students because he belongs to black race. Black students face a lot of problems at school. They are ill-treated by white students. Even the teachers in the class keep black children in a separate row. As he describes, "'Albert Zwick,' she said and the last white child sat down in his place. 'Now,' said the teacher, 'you three colored children take the seats behind Albert. You girls take the first two, and you,' pointing to Sandy, 'take the last one'" (97). The author stresses the importance of education among African Americans,

as it is their gateway to a better life. But the treatments black students get at school are not good. It shows that the racial oppression exists at every nook and cranny of American society. Sandy's experiences in school and work places make him realize the cruelty of racial discrimination. He says, "Being colored is like being born in the basement of life, with the door to the light locked and barred—and the white folks live upstairs" (46).

Free Children's Day Party at school is another event that disturbs the mentality of the young boy Sandy. It is the event which most powerfully highlights the racial disparity. To promote the opening of the town's new amusement park at springtime, the Daily Reader has distributed coupons for children with which they could get "free admittance to the park, free popcorn, free lemonade, and one ride on each of the amusement attractions" (140). However, black children, such as Sandy and Willie-Mae do not get admission in the park, because "this party's for white kids" (141). This event demonstrates the complexity of race relation.

The writer also depicts the difficulties of obtaining work for blacks through the depiction of Rogers' family. Sandy's father Jimboy, a vagabond is a blues man. Due to his joblessness, he spends most of his time travelling with his guitar. He involves himself in some seasonal activities to earn for living. In the narrative music is used to tie into the African cultural heritage of song and dance. Regarding the importance of blues in blacks' life, Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought* argues, "Blues was not just entertainment- it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on social fabric of working class black life in America" (105). Collins' words are relevant because in the narrative music reflects the feelings of working class black life in America. Jimboy stays away from home as Sandy grows up. As a talented singer and guitar player, he sings verses from blues songs he has heard on his many travels, and some Christian Hymns to please Hager. The blues accompanied with dance reflect natural expressions of the black folks. The adherence of Jimboy and Harriett towards African American culture becomes clear in their love for blues, jazz and dancing.



In this novel the writer presents a portrait of the artist as a bluesman. Through the character of Jimboy, who never loses his capacity to dream or to transcend his pain through the making of music, Hughes demonstrates his understanding of the complexities of the experience of black Americans. To most Americans, Jimboy, a blues performer, is a failure, a nonproductive member of society. Jimboy's guitar is a symbol of black people's ability to use the gift of music for entertainment and expression. Concerning the value of music and education for blacks, David Chinit in his work "Rejuvenation through Joy: Langston Hughes, Primitivism, and Jazz" writes, "Harriett and Sandy embody Hughes's hope for the African-American future: equality and integration with-out loss of racial identity" (68). Chinit believes that Harriett and Sandy represent African American future because they promote African American cultural values through their art and education.

The narrative depicts the issue of gender oppression paralleling through the reflection of women's predicaments. Aunt Hager, an ordinary woman, remains feminine despite her masculine roles. The writer realistically represents Hager with her limits and shortcomings. He completely revises her through direct and indirect characterization. The writer assigns the elderly lady with the features of ancestor who possesses the stereotypes of southern black woman. Hughes confers Aunt Hager's vocal power to revise the negative perception of the black woman in the novel. Through her stories and harmonious manner of living with whites, she pours anti-racist ideals in her grandson mind. Expressing her anti-racist views, she says:

The young ones what's coming up now, they calls us ole fogies and handkerchief heads, and white folks' niggers cause we don't get mad an' rar' up in arms like they does cause things is kinder hard, but honey, when you gets old you now they ain't no sense in getting' mad an' souring yo' soul with hatin' peoples. White folks is white folks, an' coloured is colored, an' neither one of t'em is bad as t'other make out. For mighty nigh seventy years I been knowin' both of em, an'

I ain't never had no room in ma heart to have neither white nor colored. When you starts hatin' people, you gets uglier than they is – an' I ain't never had no time for ugliness, cause that's where de devil comes in- in ugliness! (129-130).

Aunt Hager deconstructs the myth of the contented mammy built around the black woman who is criticized for loving the white race more than her own and being contented. Hager corrects misinterpretation of black women as mammies, handkerchief heads, white folks' niggers. Grounding her position on religious teachings, she explains that hatred creates destruction and it makes the hater worst than the oppressor. For Hager, there is a great misunderstanding between members of the white and black race and neither one is as bad as the other one thinks. Hager refuses to be trapped in the destructive compartments of a system that breeds hatred.

Most women characters in the novel are bound to domestic work under a white family, except Sandy's Aunt Tempy. Due to her conversion to white American culture, she is financially secure and distinct from other women. It demonstrates that African Americans must transform their cultural identity and remove all that is "Negro" within themselves, if they want to get prosperity. Hughes depicts the search for wealth as battle for the African American soul.

CONCLUSION

In this way, Hughes represents black people and their struggle for survival in a racist society. He shows how the notion of motherhood is constructed in African American society during the phase of the Harlem Renaissance. Hager, an old black woman and prominent mother figure, lives inside a social boundary. She works hard and sacrifices her whole life for the better future of her children. The socio-cultural norms remind her that it is her responsibility to be submissive to the white community and to provide a better life to her children. As an assertive mother figure, she fulfills the demand of her children by working from early the morning till late at night. She helps the whole community of Stanton by



devoting herself for the welfare of her community and children.

WORKS CITED

- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.
- Hughes, Langston. *Not Without Laughter*. Macmillan Publishing, 1969.
- Mosley, Matthew. *The Feminine Representation of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in Langston Hughes' Not Without Laughter*. Diss. University of New Orleans, 2010.
- Oler, Andy. "Their Song Filled the Whole Night: *Not Without Laughter*, Hinterlands Jazz, and Rural Modernity." *College Literature*, vol. 41, no.4, Fall 2014, pp. 94-110.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1976.
- Shields, John P. "'Never Cross the Divide': Reconstructing Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*." *African American Review*, vol. 28, no. 4, Winter 1994, pp. 601-613. <https://www.istor.org/stable/3042226>.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. Beacon Press, 1993.
-