

Dismantling the History of Slavery and Colonization in the Poetry of Mohamed Al-Fayturi and Langston Hughes

by

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Abstract

In his attempt to challenge colonial hegemony and promote the colonized sense of identity, the African poet, Mohamed Al-Fayturi is engaged in an intercultural dialogue with his master, the African American poet, Langston Hughes, in order to reconstruct a history devastated by slavery and imperialism. Rooted in a revolutionary basis, the mutual dialogue between the two poets aims to dismantle colonial narratives about Africa and the black people by revising history and rewriting the story of slavery and colonization from the viewpoint of the colonized and the oppressed. Carrying the scars of enslavement and hegemony, Langston Hughes and Mohamed Al-Fayturi poetically engage the history of racism and colonization linking the African literary tradition with its counterpart in the United States.

Introduction

In "The Politics of Post Coloniality", Aijaz Ahmad celebrates the efforts to designate the contemporary literature of Africa as post-colonial and thus , to make it available for being read according to the protocols that metropolitan criticism has developed for reading what it calls minority literature (Ahmad 1997: 282). Integral to Ahmad's thesis is an attempt to find common grounds between post-colonial and minority literatures which could be pursued in the black poetry tradition in Africa and the United States. While the painful ordeal of slavery and colonization turned the black people of Africa into a nation of exiles and outcasts, the same experience brings about enormous consequences which bind the black people together triggering literary interaction between black writers from different parts of the world.

In his attempt to challenge colonial hegemony and promote the colonized sense of identity, the Sudanese/African poet, Mohamed Al-Fayturi¹ is engaged in an intercultural dialogue with his master, the African American poet Langston Hughes², in order to reconstruct a history devastated by slavery and imperialism. Rooted in a revolutionary basis, the mutual dialogue between them aims to dismantle colonial narratives about Africa and the black people by revising history and rewriting the story of racism and slavery from the viewpoint of the colonized and the oppressed. Carrying the scars of enslavement and hegemony, Langston Hughes and Mohamed Al-Fayturi poetically engage the history of racism and colonization linking the African literary tradition with its counterpart in the United States.

In the beginning of his career, Hughes not only writes folklore poetry but also embodies the emerging spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. In his poetry, he expresses the rising black consciousness and racial pride dismantling narratives of submission integral to African-American literature in the era of enslavement. Undermining the traditional image of what blacks were forced to think of themselves along three hundred years of oppression, Hughes's Harlem Renaissance poetry not only condemns white oppression but also refutes the oppressor's narratives of inferiority which aimed to banish the black people outside human history. Through intensive poetic utterances, Hughes, like Al-Fayturi, turns colonial cultural mythology upside down celebrating Africa as the land of civilizations and the birthplace of his ancestors. Therefore, in the post Harlem Renaissance era and due to Marxist influence; Hughes's poetry is transformed into a dynamics of resistance confronting the damaging consequences of local policies of racism.

Like his master, Langston Hughes, who was attracted to Marxism in the thirties, Al-Fayturi found in Socialist Realism an appropriate means of poetic expression during the era of de-colonization. Both poets did not officially join political parties, however, they found in the Marxist/Socialist ideology a broader horizon for black struggle against white oppression. Dudley Randall points out that many black writers found in the Marxist ideology an alternative to the white capitalist system integrated in exploitation and racism. Randall argues:

Even if black writers did not join the Communist Party they were sympathetic toward it and its policy of non-discrimination. Black writers did not give up their struggle for Negro rights but regarded it as part of the struggle for the rights of man everywhere (Randall 1973: 36).

After the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes abandoned the popular trends of his poetry and moved toward a Marxist art prioritizing social and political narratives which reflect the interests of his people. Exploring ethnic issues from a class struggle perspective, Hughes, in the post Harlem Renaissance era, substitutes the folklore poetry of the 1920's with a poetics of protest and confrontation preaching revolution against policies of racism in the United States.

Unlike Al-Fayturi who remains faithful to the black/African cause, putting race and color in the center of his poetic universe, Hughes deals with the suffering of the black people not in terms of black/white conflict but as part of the struggle of the proletariat against the ruling capitalist minority. Hughes's ideological shift, from the folklore poetry of the Harlem Renaissance to the revolutionary poetry of the 1930's, is emphasized in his poem "White Man" where the racial conflict between blacks and whites is replaced with the class struggle of the majority against economic exploitation and capitalism:

Sure, I know you,
you're a White Man.
I'm a Negro.
You take all the best jobs
and leave us the garbage cans to empty and
the halls to clean.
You have a good time in a big house at
Palm Beach
and rent us the black alleys
and the dirty slums.
You enjoy Rome-
and take Ethiopia.
White Man ! White Man !
Let Louis Armstrong play it-
and you copyright it
and make the money.
You're the smart guy, White Man !
You got everything !
But now,
I hear your name ain't really White Man !
I hear it's something
Marx wrote down
fifty years ago
that rich people don't like to spell.
Is that true, White Man?
Is your name in a book
called the Communist Manifesto?
Is your name spelled?
C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T?
Are you always a White Man?
Huh? (cited in Baraka 1984: 162).

In his revolutionary phase, Hughes's blues poems, associated with the Harlem Renaissance, are transformed into a poetics of protest reflecting the "proletarian threats" which make "the blood run to fists that must be increasingly, militantly clenched to fight the brazen terror" and pave the way for "the marching power of the proletarian future" (Gibson 1970: 142). Due to the tragic developments on the social and political paradigms in the United States, Hughes argues that after the Harlem Renaissance era, it is difficult to write poetry about nature and love. Instead, the committed black poet should write about revolution because "something has got to change in America and change soon. We must help that change to come" (Good Morning Revolution 1973: 139). Hughes also warns blacks and all the oppressed people in America and the Third World of the tragic consequences of ignoring struggle and revolution against capitalist hegemony. In "Memo to Non-White people" he says:

They will let you have babies
to..... use your kids as labor boys
for army, air force, or uranium mine.
they will gleefully let you
kill your damn self any way you choose
with liquor, drugs, or whatever.
It's the same from Cairo to Chicago,
Cape Town to the Caribbean
I'm sorry but it is
the same (Good Morning Revolution 1973: 14).

Denouncing the systematic exploitation of the poor classes by the capitalist minority, Hughes calls for violent confrontations with the forces of tyranny identifying himself with the oppressed people of the world:

Great Mob that knows no fear-
come here !
and raise your hand
against this man
of iron and steel and gold
who's bought and sold
you
for the last thousand years.
Come here,
great Mob
and tear him limb from limb,
split his golden throat
great mob that knows no fear (G.M. Revolution 1973:6).

Addressing the aspirations of the oppressed people all over the world, Hughes's poetry reflects Ernest Fischer's idea about socialist literature. Ernest Fischer argues that "socialist art and literature as a whole imply the artist's or writer's fundamental agreement with the aims of the working class and the emerging socialist world" (Fischer 1963: 108). As a supporter of the poor classes in their struggle against forces of exploitation and hegemony, Hughes expresses his alignment to the socialist ideals integrating his poetry in the dialectical relationship between oppression and revolution, slavery and freedom.

The Cross-Cultural Dialogue Between Hughes and Al-Fayturi

The international reputation of Hughes and the universal nature of his poetry inspired not only African poets such as Al-Fayturi, who came under the influence of Hughes, but also other great poets from different cultures. For example, Eliose Spicer compares Hughes's depiction of the Afro-American ghetto to the image of the Havana ghetto "**barrio**" in the poetry of the great Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén affirming that Hughes's blues poetry and Guillén's folklore poems are rooted in rhythm patterns integral to ancestral Africa. In addition to similarities in narrative patterns, states Spicer, "**son**", a Cuban dance, "was to Guillén what the blues was to Hughes" (Spicer 1984: 9). Therefore, "the memories of Havana are exchanged with the memories of Harlem" in the poetry of these two great poets (Kaup 2000: 108), and in the same vein Melvin Dixon in "Rivers Remembering their Source: Comparative Studies in Black Literary History – Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain and Negritude" compares Hughes with the Caribbean poet, Jaques Roumain arguing that both of them are influenced by the Afro-American folklore tradition. Dixon points out that in the poetry of Hughes and Roumain "black America is a metaphor for the reinvention of the African self through a language that is the danced speech of its people" (cited in Gohar 2001: 8).

Likewise, in the poetry of Hughes and Al-Fayturi, black America exists as a recurring motif and an extended metaphor reflecting the attitudes of the poets toward major issues such as racism and oppression. Further, Al-Fayturi and Hughes reconstruct the experience of Africans and black Americans through a poetics of anger challenging all forms of oppression and exploitation inflicted upon black people in Africa, America and all over the world. In their attempts to confront the totalizing and hegemonic powers, which aim to erase the identity of their people, Al-Fayturi and Hughes explore areas of overlap drama between the painful experience of Afro-Americans and the catastrophic history of black Africans. In his poem "*Ghabatu Maut/Forest of Death*", from his volume *Ashiq min Efriqya / Lover from Africa*, Al-Fayturi denounces the history of American slavery and its tragic consequences on black Americans.

Using New York as a symbolic location of the black/white conflict in the New World, he addresses the big city in a tone of lamentation:

Alas! New York
my veins are full of sorrows
and my eyes turn into a cloud
as I move on your soil
New York
you are not my motherland
you have a heart of stone
which is not my heart
Africa is my land
the poor Negroes are my people³ (*Diwan Al-Fayturi /Complete Works, Vol. I* 1979: 441).

In the above-cited poem, Al-Fayturi underlines the sacrifices offered by black Americans who actively participated in the establishment and building of the great American civilization. Addressing the city of New York as a symbol of modern America, Al-Fayturi identifies himself as an African: “Africa is my land/the poor Negroes are my people” denouncing New York as a city with “a heart of stone”. He blames the city because it does not give the Negroes their rights as American citizens:

The Negroes who built a bridge made
of their bones in order to convey
civilization into the American land
the Negroes who are lost in
your streets
even their bitter laughter
turns into horror and fear
Alas! New York
the Negroes who suffer
in your fearful streets
in your ancient churches
will surely forgive you and
forget that you are a killer
a seductive lady handicapped
by fetters and chains (*Complete Works, Vol. I* 1979: 442).

In spite of his dedication to Africa, Al-Fayturi, like many African and African American poets, expresses an ambivalent attitude toward the American civilization epitomized by the city of New York. He argues that blacks have been persecuted since they came to the New World, however, they are not able to be separated from America:

O New York
whatever you have done to them
and whatever they have done to you
their souls will run toward you
they will bury their faces
in your arms shedding their tears
on your breast
because you are a mother
and a killer of prophets
a forest of death (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 443.).

Being aware of the catastrophic history of people from African origins, in the New World, Al-Fayturi aesthetically articulates his sympathy toward them. Therefore, in “The Incident”, the poet denounces the lynching of the Negroes during the slave era in America:

While the clowns were bursting into laughter
the corpse was dangling
like a windless flag
from the gallows
the sun is white-haired in the sky (Jayyusi 1987: 221).

In Aghani Efriqya / African Songs, Al-Fayturi denounces white racism lamenting the black experience of slavery in the American South:

we desperately walked on thorns
with our bare feet
we spent our nights starving
humiliated in the plantations of misery
we stood in defiance challenging
the wicked race
we removed the stigma of slavery

after ages of suffering
after our executioner filled
his cups with our blood
after our executioner cut off our heads
and used them as bricks for his palaces
the earth is flowing with our moans,
with our lamentations and wounds (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 74).

Al-Fayturi's preceding argument is an explicit manifestation of what he calls the suffering of the African American in "the plantations of misery". Regardless of the painful experience of enslavement, states the poet, African Americans were able to liberate themselves from the chains of racism.

Like Hughes, Al-Fayturi supports the struggle of the poor identifying himself with the victims of slavery and colonization in Africa and calling for rebellion and revolution, thus challenging the policy of fear which is the core of colonial hegemony, Al-Fayturi revolts against the oppressive and inhuman culture perpetuated by the British colonizers in Africa. In "Ughnia Ela Al-Sudan / A Song for Sudan", Al-Fayturi uses Sudan as an emblem of the struggle of the black people of Africa against colonization, oppression and slavery. He describes Africa under colonization as

the virgin continent
the land of the sun
the forgotten continent
and lost facts
the land of prophecies
the land of funerals
the land of the humiliated
under the colonizer's whips (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 351).

In Al-Fayturi's poem, Africa is also described as the habitation of "the naked victims" who live as exiles and outcasts in their own land. In spite of the hardships and brutalities associated with colonization and slavery, Al-Fayturi is optimistic about the future of Africa. He predicts that the leaders of the anti-imperialist movements in Africa "the African giants" will break their chains and liberate their oppressed people. In Uthkurini ya Efriqya / Remember Me Africa, Al-Fayturi says:

I can see you
my beloved African people
I can see you regardless of vast deserts
I can see your uprising
my people do not surrender to oppression
my people, like the Nile,
are in a state of flood
sweeping away the invaders (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 260).

In the preceding lines , Al-Fayturi gives expression to his attitude toward the African revolutionary movements incorporating river imagery which is an echo of Hughes's famous poem, " The Negro Speaks of Rivers".

While Al-Fayturi focuses the issue of revolution against colonization in Africa , Hughes utilizes his poetry to explore the impact of policies of racism and segregation on the black people in America. In other words, Hughes devotes his talent to what Nancy McGhee in "Langston Hughes: Poet in the Folk Manner" calls "the Afro-American condition" (cited in Gohar 2001: 24) by being closely "associated with and writing for the Negro people" (Kaiser 1969: 41). In his poetry, along four decades, and in opposition of the white world, Hughes exploits the rich heritage of the black people reflecting their suffering and deferred dreams interpreting their thoughts and traditions in addition to

their struggle for political freedom and economic well-being. He wanted to do this using their own forms for expression: their language, humor music, and folk verse (Jemie 1976: 1).

For instance, in Fine Clothes to the Jew, Hughes explores the intensity of urban life of simple black people living in Harlem and Chicago's South side in the 1920's: "My people, dish-washers/Elevator boys/ladies' maids/crap shooters/cooks/and band-men in circuses/ dream singers all/my people" (Hughes 1927: 77). This image of black life disappears in the 1930's to be replaced by another image categorized by tragic possibilities. Therefore, Hughes's poetry which celebrates the Harlem Renaissance undergoes a radical change by the end of the 1920's. In his autobiography, The Big Sea, Hughes laments the end of the Harlem Renaissance and expresses his suffering during the Depression era: "The generous 1920's were over, and my twenties almost over, I had four-hundred dollars and a gold medal" (Hughes 1940: 335).

Describing the racial situation in the United States during the depression era, Otey Scruggs points out:

Hatred of blacks and economic fears became more acute when more blacks began arriving in Northern cities as part of the movement by the first post slavery generation out of the Southern fields. The growing antagonism in the North toward blacks did not, to be sure, take the form of disfranchisement and all inclusive legal segregation but it did express itself in race riots and more rigid neighborhood separation (Scruggs 1971: 85-86).

Embodying the spirit of the depression era, Hughes in “Out of Work” deals with the problem of black unemployment. The black speaker in the poem has walked the streets looking for a job until his shoes were off his feet. The federal agency of the depression years failed to find work for him because he has to stay in town for a year and a day in order to apply for work. Hughes’s speaker sarcastically replies:

A year and a day, Lawd,
in this big lonesome town!
a year and a day in this
great big lonesome town!
I might starve for a year but
that extra day would get me down (Shakespeare in Harlem 1942: 40).

The misery of the black people in America during the 1930’s resulting from economic problems and the continuation of racist policies in the North are also depicted in a poem sequence called “Montage of a Dream Deferred”. The poem vividly views the frustrated dreams of the black people in Harlem and other urban ghettos in the North. Utilizing the montage technique, Hughes effectively portrays the wasteland/ghetto where blacks live telescoping black life into one day and one night. The poet uses a motion picture technique juxtaposing diverse locations and disparate scenes of suffering in order to provide readers with a panoramic view of black life in America. The poem projects a miserable image of Harlem, different from the Harlem of the 1920’s, with its busy nightlife and sparkling lights. Harlem, the home of black refugees coming from the South, which is a symbol and a microcosm of the black experience in the North, is subjected to the poverty of the 1930’s.

In "Parade", the opening section of the poem sequence, "Montage", Hughes describes thousands of black children starving to death in the streets of Harlem. Unlike "white kids", they are deprived of life necessities and they are not allowed even to dream. Viewing the frustrated dreams of his people, Hughes utters a cry of anger and threat:

What happened to a dream differed?
does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
or fester like a sore
and then run?
does it stink like rotten meat?
or crust and sugar over-
like a syrupy sweet?
may be it just sags
like a heavy load
or does it explode? (Selected Poems 1974: 268).

The poem focuses on images of deterioration, drying, rotting, festering, souring and loss of natural features. The black American is cut off from his African roots to be abandoned in the American wilderness where he rots and fades like a raisin lying neglected in the scorching sun. The allusion to rotten meat is a signifier of black lynching in the American South where black bodies are left on the trees to rot. The reference to the spoiled candy symbolizes the false promises of assimilation and equality given by the white society to blacks to keep them submissive. The emphasis on the deferred dream motif is an indication of the institutional limitations to black ambitions and a manifestation of the tragic consequences of economic problems on the life of black people. In Hughes's poem, the deferred dreams of the 1930's are also opposed to the high promises of the Harlem Renaissance. The deferred dream motif by the end of the poem gives way to a threatening note which indicates that blacks who have been dehumanized in America may explode, a premise which would lead to more complications. The significant ending of the poem is a manifestation of the existence of a black revolutionary potential that may be transformed into violent revolution defending the rights of the black people.

Like Al-Fayturi, Hughes believes that black/African culture survives through the centuries as an underlying core that constantly threatens to rise to the surface in protest against oppression. This potential of explosion and its ramifications has transformed blackness into a powerful mechanism of revolution during slavery in Southern Plantations, in Harlem, during the 1920's, and in Africa during the era of colonization. In the South, blacks were forced to bury their dreams but in Harlem they insist on fulfilling them regardless of all the obstacles created by the oppressor: "Above me/only the thick wall/only the shadow/my hands/my dark hands/break through the wall/find my dreams" (Selected Poems 1974: 11). In his poetry, Hughes also attempts to uproot the racial stereotypical images about the black people, perpetuated by the American culture industry by emphasizing the image of the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance. The revolutionary Negro of Hughes's poetry is determined to fulfill his dream of freedom and equality: "In some lands/Dark nights/And cold steel/prevail/But the dream/will come back / And the song/ break/ its jail" (The Panther 1967: 63). In Hughes's poetry, the New Negro is not deceived anymore by the false promises of American freedom and democracy:

I read in the paper about the
freedom train.
I heard on the radio about the
freedom train.
I seen folks talkin' about the
freedom train.
Lord, I been a-waitin' for the
freedom train.
down South in Dixie only train I see's
got a Jim Crow car set aside for me (Selected Poems 1974: 276).

The Jim Crow laws of the South, according to Hughes's poem, reappear in the North but in different forms. In "Ballad of the Landlord", Hughes depicts a vivid image of the relationship between black tenants and white landlords in Harlem. Blacks confront the difficult circumstances of living in the dirty slums of the city in addition to the indifference of the white landlords who are not willing to improve the conditions of their houses. The poor black people of the city who are not able to pay the rents become the victims of a conspiracy between the landlords, the police, the judge and the media:

Police! Police!
come and get this man!
he's trying to ruin the government
and overturn the land!
copper's whistle!
parole bell!
arrest.
Precinct Station.
Iron cell.
headlines in press:
man threatens landlord
tenant held no bail
Judge gives Negro 90 days in county jail (Selected Poems 1974: 239).

In his poetry, Hughes also reveals the intimidation of blacks at the hands of the white police forces: "Motorcycle cops/white/will speed it/out of sight/if they can/solid black/can't be right/Marching-marching/marching (Selected 1974: 222). Hughes's poetry also uncovers the brutality not only of the police but also of the white American movie industry in Hollywood, which ignores the humanity of black people by deploying racist images about black history and culture. Hughes categorizes white movies as a "crocodile art" evoking "crocodile tears" to deceive the audience. In American movies, the black people are viewed as racial stereotypes and objects of ridicule to satisfy white fantasies of supremacy and superiority. Because "Hollywood laughs at me" refusing to delineate the vicious aspects of white racism, Hughes laughs back "at the crocodile tears/ of crocodile art/ that you know/ in your heart/ is crocodile laughs" (Selected 1974: 230). In addition to the abandonment of the humanity of the black people, America has robbed them of their ancestral heritage distorting the blues and transforming them into a white man's art:

You've taken my blues and gone-
you sing'em on Broadway
and you mixed'em up with symphonies
and you fixed'em
so they don't sound like me.
yep, you done taken my blues and gone (Selected Poems 1974: 190).

Like Hughes Al-Fayturi was interested in African American musical heritage. In a poem entitled "To Paul Robeson, the Singer", Al-Fayturi reveals admiration for Paul Robeson, the African American singer, who was brutalized by the American police apparatus due to his revolutionary doctrine. Depicting Robeson as a mythic hero and a victim of racist policies, Al-Fayturi explains the reasons for the campaign against him: "when you sing/they hide their daggers in their faces/and their hair grows grey/ when you sing their grudge grows/ and the city of New York feels humiliated and angry" (Complete Works, Vol I 1979: 324). Using the city of New York as a symbol of the growing racism against black people in the post WWII era, Al-Fayturi addresses Robeson:

Your songs strip the city of its masks
of its perfumes and lipsticks
when you sing, the night of New York
hovers over the extending horizon
your songs are a witness
of the rebirth of the black people (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 324).

Dealing with the songs of Paul Robeson as testimonies of pain at a time of crisis, Al-Fayturi hails the Afro-American singer who transforms his songs into an instrument of struggle for freedom and equality. As a weapon of revolution challenging the oppressor, Robeson's songs participated in the awakening of black consciousness and ethnic pride. In an era of resistance and protest, Robeson's songs play a significant role infusing new spirit in an oppressed people, therefore,

the dead bodies of the living
and the cellars of the dead
the angry and sad heads of the defeated generation
are rolling down the road
are climbing the trees of the forests
in order to regain the dream of the land
the wounded land, the land of the catastrophe (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 325).

Integrating Robeson's songs into the black history of pain and catastrophe in the American Diaspora, Al-Fayturi describes them as "rivers of sadness and sorrows of the poor black people in America/who are buried under its buildings/killed by its blades" (326). Robeson's songs, according to Al-Fayturi, are not accepted by the advocates of apartheid and racism in America because they speak about:

Negroes dying in the ships which were drowned
in the American seas, in the American harbors
the Negroes, the coffee shop clowns
with painted faces, the dark colors
in the portraits of the artists, the Negroes
who are the bricks of the mines in America
where its seasonal smoke burn their flesh (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 326).

In spite of glorifying Paul Robeson as a national hero, Al-Fayturi blames him for appealing to the white mainstream: “Why do you sing for your executioner? Why do you ask him for forgiveness” after he had planted “a dragger in your heart, in the depths of your soul” (327). Al-Fayturi addresses Paul Robeson advising him to continue his struggle against the forces of hegemony in the United States. In his address to Robeson, Al-Fayturi denounces the assimilation policy which aims to marginalize black culture, pointing out that in order to be integrated into a racist society African Americans have to deny their black culture and sever relationships with their own people. In Hughes's words, they have to "glorify their assassins/cut off the breasts of their mothers/and play with the bones of their fathers" (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 327). Al-Fayturi reminds Paul Robeson of the crimes committed against the black people in America: “The black child was killed / his blind grandmother was also killed / but the words she whispers into his ears every evening are still living” (327). Al-Fayturi concludes his poem to Paul Robeson with the words of the African American grandmother: “My children, you should sing in time of misery / you should keep singing when you confront sorrows sadness / and beware of giving up your black skins” (328).

Besides his admiration of Robeson's career, Al-Fayturi glorifies major African figures who are engaged in reforming society and reconstructing African history. He vehemently insists on the natural right of revolution against those who showed contempt for the African people disparaging their intelligence and potential. Capturing the history of revolution in Africa, Al-Fayturi wrote many poems about important political figures such as Patrice Lumumba, Nelson Mandela and Senghor. Celebrating African and Latin American revolutionaries who challenged the devastating impact of imperialism, Al-Fayturi urges Third World leaders to repel the forces which attempt to exploit their nations. Calling for the establishment of systematic strategies of resistance against imperialism, Al-Fayturi, in a poem entitled “Nkrumah”, hails the ex-leader of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, as a national hero who participated in the liberation not only of his country but also of other African nations:

Your face shines
in the light of all revolutions
the image of Ghana
and free Congo
O Nkrumah
your face awakens in me
ancient feelings of pride and glory
your face carries the smell
of my homeland across the forests of Africa (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 355).

In the same poem, Al-Fayturi recalls the painful memories of a continent devastated by slavery and colonialism:

I see the African land, mountains,
fountains, clouds and waterfalls
overwhelmed with tears
I see my naked people
abandoned on the roads
O Nkrumah
you are a banner of freedom
hovering over great Africa (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 357).

In "Lumumba, the Sun and the Assassins", Al-Fayturi endows the African revolutionary, Patrice Lumumba, with heroic proportions considering him a symbol of struggle against European colonization:

O Lumumba
you are the golden sword of our land,
directed toward the heads of our executioners
O Lumumba
be a flame in our wounds
paint the flags of revolution with our blood
fix the flags of freedom in our soil (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 345)

Unlike the alien colonizers who are viewed as strangers and intruders, Lumumba is depicted as an epic hero who has his roots deeply planted in African soil:

O Lumumba
the black hero with naked feet
running on the banks of the Congo
when you run, all the trees of the African forests
follow your steps
when you run, all the waves of the Congo rivers
follow your naked feet (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 346).

Al-Fayturi addresses the black African leader urging him to lead the revolution of the oppressed people of Africa until their dreams are fulfilled. The poet tells Lumumba that the black people of Africa are ready to sacrifice their souls and blood for the sake of their countries:

Kindle the sun of freedom
with our eyelashes
wash our foreheads
with the blood of our tragedies
carve our names in the book of history (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 348).

Viewing Lumumba as a savior, Al-Fayturi warns the African warrior of the tragic consequences in case the revolution fails to achieve the African dream: "If your sun is extinguished/there is no other sun that can burn the hands of the tyrants" (347). However, Al-Fayturi predicts the tragic destiny of Lumumba who was inevitably betrayed by the allies of imperialism:

The cries of the oppressed
are filling the land with anger
"the traitors will be defeated"
those who betray the cause of the people
are not our heroes
those who burn the banners of freedom
who blocked the way of liberation
who kissed the feet of tyrants
and assassins
are not our heroes (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 348).

By the end of the poem , Al-Fayturi points out that Lumumba will be immortalized as a national hero denouncing the traitors and the inheritors of the imperialistic legacy who betrayed him:

O Lumumba
you are the hero of the people
even if they put the chains in your hands
even if they crucify revolution on your lips
even if you become their prisoner
even if they murder you
with the daggers of the traitors
you will live in the eyes
of your people (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 349).

Explicitly, the glorification of Lumumba is reflection of Al-Fayturi's commitment to the cause of the African people. Discussing Al-Fayturi's revolutionary poetry, Abdul-Fattah Al-Shatti points out that "since his youth, the poet has expressed his anger against colonizers and tyrants turning his poetry into a revolutionary dynamics defending Africa and the black people who were brutalized by the white invaders" (Al-Shatti 2001:7). In "Stanleyville" Al-Fayturi denounces the atrocities committed against the people of the Congo Republic at the hands of western colonizers who profaned the sanctity of the African land slaughtering its leaders:

The Bible is trodden
under Fascist feet
O Stanleyville
you confronted the Fascist flood
you challenged the ships of the colonizers
while Lumumba was dying
between your arms (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 263).

Using Stanleyville, the capital city of the Congo Republic , as a symbol of revolution against European aggression, the poet glorifies those who confronted the brutalities of the colonizers. Further, Al-Fayturi in "To Nelson Mandela" [a poem from his volume, Yâti Al-Âshiqøn Elayki / The Lovers Are Coming to You] reveals his admiration of the heroic history of the Southern African leader:

O icon of the Southern autumn
you are the splendid image
of sacrifice and martyrdom
you are born out of death
you are a field of stars
on the wall of death
you are a banner of thunder
a storm of singing
crushing the necks
of your oppressors
convicting your jailors
putting them in the prison of history
while you are still a prisoner
Mandela
Mandela (The Lovers 1992: 38).

The afore-mentioned lines are revelations of Al-Fayturi's ideological commitment to the cause of the South African people fighting for independence and freedom. In spite of his Arabic/Islamic education, Al-Fayturi calls himself an African Negro devoting his poetry and dramatic works to explore the pains of the black people in Africa and all over the world. Advocating Socialist Realism, Al-Fayturi's poetry is transformed into a weapon against all forms of tyranny and oppression particularly colonization and slavery. Considering Algeria as part and parcel of the African continent, Al-Fayturi expresses solidarity with the struggle of the Algerian people against French colonization in the post WWII era. In a poem entitled "To Ben Bella and His Comrades", Al-Fayturi expresses his support to the Algerian leader Ahmed Ben Bella who leads the Algerian revolution against French occupation and brutality. Addressing Ben Bella as a hero, Al-Fayturi says: "I am proud of you / because I am African/ And the Algeria of Ben Bella is African too" (359). Al-Fayturi also shows respect to Ben Bella who challenged the war machine of the French empire: "You have built a pyramid of freedom / with the bones of the Algerian martyrs / with the bones of a million victims / you carved the story of the victorious generation / on the rocks" (Volume I 1979: 358). Affirming the great sacrifices offered by the Algerian people, the poet refers to the Arab cultural tradition which describes Algeria as "the land of the million martyrs" because of the enormous numbers of people who died during the war with the French occupation forces. The reference to "the bones of a million victims" is obviously an allusion to the brutality of the French colonizers and the ferocity of the Algerian revolutionaries. By the end of the poem, Al-Fayturi expresses respect for what he calls "the generation of the glory":

The generation who was not horrified
by the era of western curse
the era of western sorrows
O Ben Bella
your flames will lighten
the road of freedom (Complete Works, Vol. I 1979: 359)

While Al-Fayturi uses revolutionary rhetoric to articulate his attitudes toward the African liberation movements, Hughes incorporates black forms to reflect the African American experience in the United States. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, Hughes states that “most of my poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know” (cited in Gohar 2001: 89). Hughes’s argument is underlined by George Kent who affirms Hughes’s utilization of black folk tradition and cultural sources as a basis for his poetry. Kent points out:

The folk forms and cultural responses were themselves definitions of black life created by blacks on the bloody and pine-scented Southern soil and upon the blackboard jungle of urban streets, tenement buildings, store-front churches, and dim-lit bars (Kent 1972: 53).

Regardless of integrating revolutionary discourses in his poetry, Al-Fayturi, like Hughes, was interested in the cultural/folklore traditions of the black people. Such cultural heritage, on both sides, enhances the ethnic pride of the two poets providing them with a revolutionary spirit which is seen in their poetry. For example, Al-Fayturi was influenced by the popular biography of Antara Ibn Shaddad, Al-Absi, the black pre-Islamic folklore hero⁴ who lived in tribal Arabia and suffered from slavery. Antara’s epic biography which has become part of the Arabic folklore heritage provides a source of inspiration for Al-Fayturi. Revealing sympathy toward Antara as a black revolutionary figure, victimized by slavery, Al-Fayturi emerges as a defender of the black race in Africa and the Arab world. In addition to his interest in Antara, Al-Fayturi incorporates in his poetry the epic and folkloric history of Abu Zaid Al-Helali Salama, the black warrior of Southern Arabia who conquered North Africa. As a mythic folklore hero, Abu Zaid, like Antara, haunts the imagination of Al-Fayturi particularly because of his blackness, his military contributions and nobility with his enemies. Al-Fayturi was also interested in the poetry of Khalil Gibran, the Christian Arab poet who sympathized with the poor, the outcasts and the slaves.

In this context , Munif Mousa, in his introduction to Al-Fayturi's anthology, points out that Al-Fayturi's protest poetry was mostly influenced by the folk tales narrated by his grandmother, Zahra, an ex-slave, about her suffering. According to Mousa, the tales of Zahra, "about Africa and slavery have left a tremendous impact upon the poet's imagination and psyche" (Volume II 1979: 13). Therefore, in his poetry, Al-Fayturi, brings to the forefront the issue of struggle against tyranny and slavery illuminating the dialectics between oppression and race. Like Al-Fayturi, Hughes came under the influence of the folklore traditions of his people particularly the tales narrated by his grandmother. He admits in his autobiography, The Big Sea that

through my grandmother's stories always life moved, moved heroically toward and end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother's stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying. When my grandmother died, I didn't cry, either. Something about my grandmother's stories (without her ever having said so) taught me the uselessness of crying about anything (Big Sea 1940: 10).

In a related context, James Emanuel points out that Hughes was influenced by the folk tales told by "aunties and mummies" in the plantation and "accounts of folk sermons chanted by plantation exhorters' self-appointed old-time preachers" (Emanuel 1973: 42).

In his autobiography, Hughes also illustrates that he was greatly influenced by the folk stories, he heard not only from his grandmother but also from his female mentor, Marry McLeod Bethune as well as other stories originating in black folk heritage. In "Aunt Sue's Stories", Hughes's female narrator gives an account of stories of black suffering and misery: "Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories" told to "a brown-faced child" about "black slaves working in the hot sun/singing serious songs on the banks of a mighty river" (Selected 1974: 6). In "The Negro Mother", the poet exploits the black tradition of story-telling to illuminate the painful experience of slavery in the American South. In the poem, the female persona addresses her audience of black children saying:

Children I come back today
to tell you a story of the long dark way
that I had to climb, that I had to know
in order that the race might live and grow.
look at my face – dark as the night –
yet shining like the sun with love's true light.
I am the child they stole from the sand
three hundred years ago in Africa's land.
I am the dark girl who crossed the wide sea

carrying in my body the seed of the free.
I am the woman who labored as a slave,
beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave –
children sold away from me, husband sold, too.
No safety, no love, no respect was I due.
three hundred years in the deepest South (Selected 1974: 288).

Fulfilled through the struggle of her free children who refuse to surrender to the white oppressor, she says: “Now, through my children, I’m reaching the goal”. Then the mother moves apart from her own monologue recalling personal memories: “I couldn’t read then. I couldn’t write / Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears / But I kept trudging on through the lonely years” (289).

Apparently, the mother figure in the poem merges with her children to guarantee continued racial success but she warns them of the barriers in front of them which “still bar you the way”. In the final section of the poem, the emphasis is shifted from the mother to the children who must continue the scared struggle for freedom: “But march ever forward, breaking down bars / Look ever upward at the sun and the stars”. By the end of the poem there is a reference to the “stairs” image as a metaphor of ascent. This metaphor becomes significant within the historical context of the poem as it emphasizes the necessity of black superiority: “Impel you forever up the great stairs - / For I will be with you till no white brother / Dares keep down the children of the Negro mother” (89). In “The Negro Mother”, Hughes visualizes an image of black suffering in America which lasted for three hundred years. During that time, according to the poet, slavery forged the “dream like steel” in the mothers’ soul; consequently, the dream encouraged her to go through a valley “filled with tears” and a road “hot with sun”. Hughes emphasizes that, though the Negro mother has been humiliated, abandoned and subjugated, slavery did not break her soul. In this context, he underlines the insistence of black people on achieving their dream of freedom and justice.

Hughes's protest poem , "The Negro Mother" , is an indication that the poet came under the influence of the black oral tradition originating in Africa and traveling with African slaves to the American South. Thus, Hughes expresses hostility toward the South as a location of black enslavement particularly in his poetry after the Harlem Renaissance a period followed by waves of racism and oppression of African Americans:

The end of the Harlem Renaissance saw an increase in racial violence and economic hardship for the black masses in America. The beatings, lynching and daily humiliation of segregation which African Americans suffered in the South and elsewhere outraged Hughes. As a member of the African American community, Hughes accepted the responsibility to speak out against these injustices in his writing and to fight them in his daily life, at whatever cost to his own personal welfare (DeSantis 1993: 31).

The depiction of the American South as a place of suffering and humiliation for the black people is echoed in Hughes's poetry which visualizes a horrible and striking image about this place: "The lazy, laughing South/with blood on its mouth/ the sunny-faced South/Beast-strong" (Selected 1974: 173). The bestial aspect of the South is emphasized through its image as a beast of prey. The South is also viewed as an infectious whore: "Beautiful, like a woman / seductive as a dark-eyed whore / passionate, cruel / Honey-lipped, syphilitic-/that is the South" (173). The preceding lines are inspired by the experience of the black people in the South where they were lynched on false assumptions of sexual harassment and rape of white women: "And I, who am black, would love her / But she spits in my face". In the South, the black males are the victims of interracial relationships and false accusations which lead to the murder and burning of blacks: "Scratching in the dead fire's ashes / For a Negro's bones". Furthermore, in "Silhouette", Hughes's black persona refers to the rape and lynchings psychosis which haunts the Southern community drawing attention to the perverted sexual mythology of White America which ignores the humanity of the black people. In his address to a white lady from the South, the black persona says:

Southern gentle lady,
do not swoon.
they've just hung a black man
in the dark of the moon.
they've hung a black man
to a roadside tree
in the dark of the moon
for the world to see
how Dixie protects
its white womanhood.
Southern gentle lady,
be good!
be good! (Selected 1974: 171).

In the same context, Amiri Baraka in: Home: Social Essays, recalls one of the lynching incidents which happened in the American South:

When I was about nine, my grandmother told me a story about Alabama. She said that one time these white men had taken this young boy, about seventeen or so, and cut his "privates" off, and then my grandmother said "they stuffed 'um in his mouth". And some men, she said, grabbed her and made her watch. The boy who was murdered was a "rapist" (Baraka 1966: 230).

In the light of the preceding argument, Hughes's lynch poems could be considered as historical documents and testimonies of the atrocities committed against black people in the South. In "The Bitter River", Hughes views the tragedy of two black young men lynched in Mississippi in the early forties. The poem visualizes the lynch phenomenon as a river of bitterness overflowing through the South where blacks are forced to drink: "I'm tired of the bitter river / Tired of the bars" (Jim Crow's Last Stand 1942: 13). The lynching rituals in Hughes's poems are underlined as indications of the brutality of man to man. In "Lynching Song", the poet depicts the horrible moment of killing the black victim:

Pull at the rope! Oh!
pull it high!
let the white folks live
and the black boy die.
pull it, boys,
with a bloody cry
as the black boy spins
and the white folks die (A New Song 1939: 30).

In his poetry, Hughes denounces the racist practices which took place in the South clarifying that lynching is not only used as a punishment for male blacks accused of sexual harassment of white women but also as retaliation ritual against those who seek freedom: "Last week they lynched a colored boy. / They hung him to a tree / That colored by ain't said a thing / but 'we all should be free" (Selected 1974: 162). Moreover, the speaker in "Ku Klux" says that whites will lynch him because he rejects their claims of racial superiority: "They hit me in the head / and knocked me down / a cracker said, 'Nigger' / look me in the face - / and tell me you believe in / the great white race" (Shakespeare 1942: 82). The poem reveals that blacks are lynched because they are weak and powerless having none but God to protect them from the oppression of the white man. The female persona, in "Song for a Dark Girl" also complains that whites have lynched her lover in the streets of a Southern city. She bitterly cries:

Way Down South in Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
they hung my black young lover
to a cross road tree.
Way Down South in Dixie
(Bruised body high in air)
I asked the white Lord Jesus
what was the use of prayer.
Way Down South in Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
love is a naked shadow
on a gnarled and naked tree. (Fine Clothes 1927: 75).

Lynching was not the only racist practice used by whites in the South to keep the black people subjugated and oppressed. But there were other forms of torture and oppression which were pursued on daily basis reflecting the brutality and racist mentality of the oppressor. Therefore, Hughes denounces all forms of racial segregation which ignore the feelings of the black people: "Down South where I come from / white and colored / can't sit side by side. / Down South on the train / there's a Jim Crow car / on the bus we're put in the back" (Selected 1973: 149). In "Not a Movie" Hughes condemns the racist practices of the Ku Klux men in the South: "Because he tried to vote", they "whipped his head with clubs / and he crawled on his knees to his house / and he got the midnight train / and he crossed that Dixie line" (Selected 1974: 231) escaping to the North. In addition to physical torture, Hughes, in "Sharecroppers", reveals how blacks are economically exploited by a racist white system in the South where they are driven to the cotton fields like herds of cattle. He laments the poverty of blacks while criticizing the opportunism of the rich white people who suck the blood of the poor blacks: "the cotton's picked / and the work is done / Boss man takes the money / and we get non / leaves us hungry, ragged / as we were before" (Shakespeare 1972: 77).

In the South, Negroes are not only tortured in the fields but they also suffer from humiliation and violence at the hands of the white police. Hughes records this experience in "Ku Klux":

They took me out
to some lonesome place.
they said, "Do you believe
In the great white race?"
I said, "Mister,
to tell you the truth,

I'd believe in anything
If you'd just turn me loose".
the white man said, "Boy,
can it be
you're a-standin' there
A-sassin' me?"
they hit me in the head
and knocked me down.
And then they kicked me
on the ground.
A klansman said, "Nigger,
look me in the face –
and tell me you believe in
the great white race". (Selected 1974: 163).

The black victim, in the poem, is fully aware that anything he says will be used against him. Consequently, he mocks the white police saying he is ready to believe in anything if they just turn him loose. The poem captures the racist history of the South spotlighting the physical violence by which the white man enforced his myth of superiority over blacks.

While the victim in "Ku Klux" attempts to challenge his oppressors who force him to confess his devotion to the "white race", the black victim in "Third Degree" is subjected to brutality and extreme physical violence:

Hit me! Jab me!
make me say I did it.
Blood on my sport shirt
and my tan suede shoes.
Faces like jack-o-lanterns
in gray slouch hats.
Slug me! Beat me!
scream jumps out
like blow-torch.
Three kicks between the legs
that kill the kids
I'd make tomorrow.
Bars and floor skyrocket
and burst like Roman candles.
When you throw
cold water on me,
I'll sign the
paper (One Way Ticket 1949: 130).

The poem indicates that the white police brutalized the black victim forcing him to admit a crime he did not commit "Make me say I did it / Blood on my sport shirt". The drama of the poem takes place inside the victim's mind who internally suffers from white blows, therefore, he watches physical objects blur and merge. The intensity of pain is suggested through fire images: "blowtorch", "skyrocket", and "candles". The police aggression against the black victim is actuated by the myths breeding white sexual paranoia: "Three kicks between the legs / That kill the kids", an indication that violence is obviously directed toward the black male's genitals. In the South, lynch mobs usually destroy the genitals of blacks and Southern sheriffs attack them with electric cattle prods not only during slavery era but also in the 1950's and 1960's.

Conclusion

As voices from the African Diaspora, Al-Fayturi and Hughes struggle to capture the history of slavery and colonization from the perspective of the oppressed and humiliated constructing a poetic mechanism capable of subverting hostile colonial narratives. Devoting their poetic talents to reshape black history, Al-Fayturi and Hughes are engaged in a mutual dialogue dismantling racist discourses about Africa and the black people. As a reflection of the agonies born out of the painful black experience of slavery and colonization, the poetry of Al-Fayturi and Hughes is a cry of anger against racism and colonization. In their attempt to restore Africa as a remedy for the wounds of identity and a refuge for those who are lost in exile and Diaspora, the two poets confront narratives of distortion which aim to banish Africa outside human history. As a reflection of the subtle interaction between revolution and the constructs of racism and slavery, the poetry of Al-Fayturi and Hughes attempts to draw attention to the catastrophic history of black people in Africa and the United States. Challenging racism and oppression by bringing to the foreground narratives of humiliation and violence against their people, the two poets aim to reconstruct history and rewrite the story of slavery and colonization from the perspective of the colonized, the oppressed and the humiliated. Regardless of calling for revolution and counter violence against oppression, the poetry of Al-Fayturi and Hughes is distinguished by a quest for a better world where people are able learn from the painful experiences of the past.

Notes

¹Al-Fayturi was born in 1930's, in a village called Al-Jiniya, located in Western Sudan near the borders with Chad and Libya. His father descended from a Libyan family who escaped to Sudan after the Fascist occupation of Libya prior to the First World War. His mother was the daughter of a rich slave-trader from a famous Arabian tribe. His grandmother, Zahra, was a black slave who gained her freedom after marrying his grandfather, the Arabian slave trader. During the Second World War, Al-Fayturi's family moved from Sudan to Egypt where they stayed in the city of Alexandria. Living in Alexandria in the 1940's, Al-Fayturi witnessed with pain the humiliation of the black people recruited from Sudan and other African countries and forced to tackle insulting jobs and work as servants for the European soldiers during war. This experience intensifies Al-Fayturi's identity crisis and enhances his ethnic consciousness as black and African. In spite of living in different Arab countries, Al-Fayturi does not consider himself as an Arab but as a black African poet who is committed to defend the rights of the black people all over the world. As a young poet, Al-Fayturi came under the influence of Afro-American writers particularly Langston Hughes and Richard Wright in addition to other African and Caribbean scholars and poets. Due to his pioneering works, critics consider Al-Fayturi as the first poet who sings for Africa and the black people in Arabic. He wrote many poetic collections dealing with the painful experience of black people in Africa and Diaspora such as "*Aghani Efriqya / African Songs*". *Diwan Al-Fayturi / The Complete Poetic Works, Volume I*. Beirut: Dar Alawda, 1979. PP. 55-209, and "*Ashiq min Efriqya / Lover From Africa*". *Diwan Al-Fayturi / The Complete Poetic Works, Volume I*. Beirut: Dar Alawda, 1979. PP. 333-445 as well as *Ahzan Efriqya / African Sorrows* and *Uthkurini ya Efriqya / Remember Me Africa*.

²Al-Fayturi came under the influence of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright in addition to other black scholars and writers from Africa and the Caribbean. In his comprehensive study, *Al-Adab Al-Efriqi / African Literature*, Kuwait: Alam Almârefa, 1993, Ali Shalash traces the literary dialogues between black African writers and their counterparts in Diaspora. Further, Abdul Fattah Al-Shatti in his book on Mohamed Al-Fayturi explores the impact of Hughes on the Arab African poet.

³All translations from Arabic prose and poetry are done by the writer unless names of other translators are mentioned in the text and the works cited.

⁴Antara, the black son of a noble tribesman from Arabia and a slave woman, was subjugated to different forms of humiliation including the betrayal of his father who denies his paternity and considers him as a slave living in his household. As a young man, Antara was famous for his poetic talent and war adventures. He was a talented poet who composed famous epics dealing with tribal life. He was also a great warrior who defended his tribe against the invasions of the enemies. Due to his kindness and heroism, Abla, the most beautiful girl of the noble tribe of Abs, fell in love with him in spite of being a black slave. The love story between Antara and Abla created tribal tensions because marriages between slaves and free women were forbidden in pre-Islamic Arabia. Antara's suffering and internal conflict were settled only when he was liberated from slavery. Antara became a free man when his father acknowledged him as his legitimate son expressing his deep regrets for abandoning him as a child and a young man. The reconciliation between son and father paved the way for the marriage of Antara and Abla, his beloved, for whom he wrote his love epics. The story of Antara raises the issue of the nature of slavery in the Arab World and the Middle East. In this context it is relevant to argue that slavery in the Arab world during the pre-Islamic era was different from slavery in the west or the Americas or elsewhere because slaves were dealt with as servants or housemaids, however they were denied most of their rights including citizenship. The tribal system in Arabia offered them some rights given to free people but they were considered as inferior. Islam puts an end to slavery and many of Prophet Mohamed's close friends were slaves, brought from Africa prior to Islam. However, prisoners of war who were captured in battles between the Muslim people and the invading armies during the early Islamic era were considered as slaves / concubines regardless of their color and origin. In spite of considering slavery as a religious taboo, and a sacrilegious crime sufficient to get its advocate out of the Islamic doctrine, slavery continued to take different forms in the Arab world particularly in Arabia until the middle of the twentieth century.

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