

The Theme of Humanitarianism as Portrayed in Langston Hughes' Poetry

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Abstract

This study focuses on the theme of humanitarianism as portrayed in Hughes' poetry. One key objective of this study is to find out to what extent Hughes deals with the theme of humanitarianism in his poetry. Also, to shed lights on the theme of humanitarianism as human value and to compare the western concept of humanitarianism with the Islamic one and reach some conclusions. The study follows the descriptive, analytic and comparative approach to discuss and rationally analyze five selected poems of Hughes with special reference to the theme of humanitarianism that is depicted in them. In accordance, a number of findings have been obtained: many types of humanitarianism such as reducing the human suffering, protection of human rights, including, right of life, security, freedom, equality, justice and peace have been portrayed in Langston Hughes poetry. In addition, values of impartiality and neutrality which represent the central point of humanitarianism are also portrayed. Also, it can be said that conducting comparative studies is one important means for cultural understanding between different peoples, and can be used as an effective means for the exchange of ideas, values, experiences and yet draw the nations closer to each other; hence contributing to the spread of understanding and peace between peoples. Moreover, despite the existence of some differences in some points, specifications and concepts, nonetheless, the theme of humanitarianism is found as a key value in both American and Islamic traditions; although the difference of cultures, including religions. Lastly, it can be said that due to the findings of the study, we could argue that, the humanitarianism cannot be separated from human rights.

Keywords: humanitarianism, suffering, dignity, poetry

1. Background

Langston Hughes (February 1, 1901 – May 22, 1967) is an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist from Joplin, Missouri. He was a committed poet who focuses on social themes. Hughes was recognized as an important literary figure during the 1920s which faced flowering of African American artistic movement that focused on black life and culture. As Rampersad (2006, 379) thinks, Hughes is regarded as one of the most key and influential poets of the 20th century for using black music and vernacular speech and focusing on Negro poetry and folklore. He is deeply concerned with many humanitarian themes, including African American issues such as dignity, racism, self-realization, aspiration and freedom.

Also, Hughes is considered as a corner stone of American Negro poetry. As made obvious by Knopf (1994), Hughes is the beloved poet and laureate author to many readers of African descent because of his loyalty to African American culture and his calling for social and political justice. Andrews (1997) believes that Hughes was both nationalist and cosmopolitan writer who distinguished himself by profound love of humanity, specially black Americans.

2. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

- 1-To find out to what extent Hughes portrays the theme of humanitarianism or human issues in his poetry.
- 2-To shed lights to the theme of humanitarianism as one of human values and to compare the western concept of humanitarianism with the Islamic one to reach to some conclusions.

3. Significance of the Study

This study is significant in such ways: first, it tackles with one of the most important human, social and religious themes which is the value of humanitarianism. Second, nowadays humanitarianism is highly needed, because the

present world is full of political crises and economic disparities, that cause plenty of humanitarian problems and sufferings in different parts of the world. For example, in South Sudan, Sudan and Somalia the spread of civil wars forced thousands of the citizens to leave their homes and to internally displace or to return to neighboring countries as refugees. Of course, in their new places the IDPs and refugees face different types of humanitarian suffering and problems. Also, in some other countries such as Syria, Yemen and Myanmar the crises began as civil wars caused by the political conflicts between different parts of one country, but after a while the crises in these countries turned to international crises due to the interference of other countries. Yet, one of the results is the spread of humanitarian suffering, i.e. thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees in neighboring countries facing different sorts of crises. In accordance, it can be said that this issue needs to be addressed by all means and mediums, including literature. Third, Langston Hughes is regarded as one of outstanding modern American Negro poets. In addition, Hughes is a committed poet who focuses on social themes and issues in America and the world over.

In this concern, Volberg (2007) made obvious that since the end of the Cold War, an increasing occurrence of natural and human-caused disasters, including armed conflicts, has become a central issue for the international community: "These humanitarian emergencies have led to an extensive loss of life, damage to property, and the long-term destruction of the environment" (Volberg 2007,10). He stresses that many times disasters have forced countries to postpone national development programs and exasperated already difficult social, economic and environmental conditions, particularly in human settlements.

The above-mentioned paragraph clearly stresses the significance of the theme of humanitarianism for the man-kind or human beings.

4. Literature Review

4.1 The Concept of Humanitarianism

According to Hornby (2015) humanitarianism is the beliefs and practices of people who are concerned with reducing suffering and improving the conditions that people live in. Also, Richard et al (2008) believe that humanitarian sentiments have motivated a variety of manifestations of pity, from nineteenth-century movements to end slavery to the creation of modern international humanitarian law. They contend that humanitarianism is clearly political, and that it is also an ethos embedded in civil society, one that drives secular and religious social and cultural movements, not just legal and political institutions.

In this concern, Darcy (2004) says that traditional humanitarianism is based on a belief in a universal duty to act in the face of human suffering and that it derived from a sense of compassion and common humanity: "The principle of impartiality is central, but stress is also put on neutrality and independence" (Darcy 2004,10). In addition, Darcy links humanitarianism and human rights stressing that both concern with protecting people from the threat of violence against civilians; forced displacement and some other forms of coercion like child recruitment; and deprivation of the means of subsistence, including destruction of crops and water sources, or denying access to relief.

Moreover, Gatrell (2017) stresses that humanitarianism includes feeding the hungry, caring for children and prisoners, and facilitating the resettlement of the needy displaced peoples. This is in addition to reducing the human suffering as general, protecting the war victims and protection of their human rights.

Poverty, hunger, peace and security are linked in many ways with stability of people and yet with the value of humanitarianism. In this sense, Hyder (2007) believes that removing poverty removes a long-term risk to political and economic stability of the states. But he stresses that this is different from stating that the poor are dangerous (it cannot be said that poor people are always dangerous or that rich people are not dangerous), or adopting that as a basis of action. The reason for assisting the poor and the vulnerable derives from humanitarian concerns, not security concerns. i.e. individuals, governments and international humanitarian organizations assist the poor and needy people in general, for they are human beings and not because they are a source of danger to their communities. In addition, in an Islamic teachings, some types of assistances are religious duties such as (Zakat). According to Hyder (2007) humanitarian assistance is not simply an end in itself but a means to achieve other, more distant and uncertain goals. I.e. relief is viewed as providing the basis for human security, for ensuring progress towards development, and eventually for conflict prevention.

Considering the value of humanitarianism from an Islamic perspective, the word charity despite seems close to the term humanitarianism, nonetheless, there are some small differences. In this consideration, Hyder (2007) made obvious that traditional Muslim concepts of charity (zakat, sadaqa and waqf) and the contemporary idea of humanitarian assistance are not identical. There is a very large literature on Islamic giving covering the concepts of zakat, sadaqa and waqf (Encyclopedia of Islam). Zakat is obligatory and payable only to Muslim beneficiaries who

are specified in the Qur'an (Sura 9, verse 60), and whose status has been much discussed by Muslim jurists. Zakat therefore, does not really qualify as being the equivalent of humanitarian aid in modern terms. Hyder (2007) moreover, thinks that Sadaqa, especially one particular kind designated as sadaqat al-tatawwu' (alms of spontaneity) is voluntary and can be given to Muslim and non-Muslim alike without further specification of their status or need. This type of sadaqa is therefore, more akin to humanitarian aid in modern terms. Hyder (2007) in addition, states that the term waqf does not come into the picture because it involves endowment of property and the establishment of foundations, and there is no evidence of wakf (a type of charity in Islam) income from property endowments going as a voluntary contribution to international agencies.

As Hyder (2007) contends, the interface between the Muslim concepts of sadaqa, zakat, waqf and humanitarian assistance remains largely unexplored. Hyder believes that whatever the points of difference, they seem to have little impact on humanitarian operations in Muslim countries. Of course, there are some reasons behind this idea: the economies of most of the western countries that deliver humanitarian aids are stronger than the economies of many Islamic countries. Yet, the spread of crises in some Islamic countries weakens their economies. In addition, some types of Islamic assistances such as (Zakat) is given to the needy people after the property (wealth) of individuals reaches a certain amount. i.e. it has some conditions.

4.2 Humanitarianism in American Literature

To introduce the foundation of American literature, Pearson (2000) says that it was an oddly assorted group that established the foundations of American literature: the native Americans with their oral traditions, the puritans with their religion, theological studies, histories... to provide spiritual insight and instruction and the southern planters with their busy social lives focusing on their practical nature. Pearson (2000,7) made obvious that for a long time, native American literature was viewed mainly as folklore. He believes that the consequence was that song lyrics, hero tales, migration legends and accounts of the creation were studied more for their content than for their literary qualities.

Humanitarianism is one of the key themes of American literature as general. Baym (2003, 50) stresses that the American writer is a human being before he is an American, and that he/she writes out of his/her congenial temperament. Baym believes that American literature was profoundly influenced by ideals and practices developed in democratic living and humanitarianism: "It has been, on the whole, an optimistic literature... they desire a literature in the service of democracy" (Baym 2003, 50).

Baym further contends that since the 1890s, American writers of the realistic tradition have been trying to tell the story of the human consequences of the advance of American civilization (2003, 265). According to him, realistic American writers were all concerned with the same theme of self-development, of awareness, the conditions of life and the ideals of success in America: "other themes are struggle for place, money, social position, national unity and affirmation of democracy" (Baym 2003, 268-269). In additions, he also believes that literature is not in itself a means of solving problems, and that they can be solved only by social and political action and that a realistic literature can and should serve as a means of helping people discover more about themselves and about the conditions of life around these people.

5. Method of the Study

Generally, this study uses the descriptive approach to describe the theme of humanitarianism in some of Langston Hughes poems. The sample of the study represents five poems written by Hughes, namely: Message to the President, Words like Freedom, Democracy, Sharecropper and I, Too. The researcher will try to literarily and rationally analyze the above mentioned theme in Hughes' poetry represented in above mentioned poems. In addition, the study will try to compare the theme of humanitarianism in Hughes' poetry with the same value in Islam to reach to some conclusions.

6. Analysis of Humanitarianism in Hughe'S Poems

In this section, the five selected poems of Hughes are discussed and literarily and rationally analyzed focusing on the theme of humanitarianism. Also, it will be compared with the Islamic humanitarian teachings and values to reach to some similarities and differences that lead to some conclusions.

As is well-known, one important side of humanitarianism is reducing human suffering. Yet, this term includes many human values such as: feeding the hungry people, caring for children, resettlement of displaced peoples, charity work and respecting the human dignity. Hughes underlines the issue of human suffering in a number of his poems. In his poetry Hughes continuously sheds light to the human issues and suffering. One example is what he stated in his poem "Sharecroppers":

Just a herd of Negroes
 Driven to the field,
 Plowing, Planting, hoeing,
 To make the cotton yield.

When the cotton is picked
 And the work is done,
 Boss man takes the money
 And we get none.

Leaves us hungry, ragged
 As we were before,
 (in Ibrahim 1999,18)

In the above lines, it is clear that Hughes obviously uses his poem to call for reducing the suffering of American Negroes. He firmly sheds lights to inhumane treatment against the sharecroppers. The American Negroes, as he justifies above, suffered from hunger and discrimination, in addition to physical suffering due to inhuman treatment by their boss man. Although the share croppers are responsible for seasonal farm work, nevertheless, they have neither decent wages nor any job security.

To compare the above value of humanitarianism to Islamic traditions, it can be said that reducing human suffering is a key value in Islamic teachings and norms. It can be discerned from the following verses: “So let them worship (Allah) the Lord of this House (the kabah in Makkah).(He) Who has fed them against hunger, and has made them safe from fear” Surah 106, Quraish: 3-4, part (Juz) 30. (Al-Hilali et al 1998,852). Also, Islam urges the believers to respect human dignity: “And indeed We have honoured the Children of Adam, and We have carried them on land and sea, and have provided them with Al-Tayyibat (lawful good things), and have preferred them above many of those whom We have created with a marked preferment” Surah 17, Al-Isra: 70, part (Juz) 15. (Al-Hilali et al 1998,378).

Returning to Hughes’ poems, one important type of humanitarianism is the protection of human rights, including, right of life, security, freedom, equality, justice and living in peace. This type of humanitarianism is highlighted in many instances in Hughes’ poems. It is obviously justified in the poem “ Democracy”:

Democracy will not come
 Today, this year
 Nor ever Through compromise and fear
 I am tired of hearing people say
 Let things take their course
 Tomorrow is another day.
 I do not need my freedom when I’m dead
 I cannot live on tomorrow’s bread.

Freedom
 Is strong seed
 Planted
 In a great need.
 I live here, too.
 I want freedom
 Just as you.

(in Borinsky 201,87-88)

In this poem, Hughes uses his poetic voice to strongly protest against the absence of their freedom. He made obvious that the black citizens in America waited so long for their freedom to be granted by the Whites. But, the black citizens discovered at the end that they have waited for nothing. "I do not need my freedom when I'm dead, I cannot live on tomorrow's bread". These lines explain Hughes and his people's urgent need to test the taste of freedom in their life time.

Hughes also stresses the same value of humanitarianism and freedom especially to his people the black Americans in his poem "Words like Freedom":

There are words like Freedom
Sweet and wonderful to say.
On my heart strings freedom sings
All day every day.

There are words like Liberty
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I know
You would know why
(in Knopf 1994,269).

In addition, the same value of humanitarianism represented in equality and justice is also expressed in Hughes' poem "I Too":

I, Too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
(in Knopf 1994,46)

Hughes here stresses and defends human rights like equality, and justice and fights the idea of discrimination against the African American people of his time. Hughes calls the American people to treat the black Americans as equal to all American citizens without any discrimination. This can be regarded as one important part of humanitarianism.

Islamic norms and teachings accord much importance to the values connected with human rights and humanitarianism as general. The following verses stress this theme: "Verily, Allah commands that you should render back the trusts to those to whom they are due; and that when you judge between men, you judge with justice. Verily, how excellent is the teaching which He (Allah) gives you! Truly, Allah is Ever All-Hearer, All-Seer. Surah 4, An-Nisa:58, part (Juz)5. (Al-Hilali et al 1998,118). The above verse obviously calls for justice between people. Also, equality is of great importance in the Holy Scriptures, including Islam. The Holy Qur'an comprises many verses that call for equality: "O mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa (i.e. he is one of the Muttaqun (the pious.). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware." Surah 49, Al-Hujurat: 13, part (Juz) 26. (Al-Hilali et al 1998,700).

In addition, the core of humanitarianism is the principle of impartiality and neutrality. Hughes in his poems conveys this essential side of humanitarianism. One example is what Hughes states in his poem "Message to the President":

I hear you talking about freedom
For the Finn,
The Jew,

And the Czechoslovak
But you never seem to mention
Us folks who're black!
We're all Americans, Mr. President,
And I have had enough
Of putting up with this
Jim Crow stuff.
I want the self-same rights
Other American have today.
(Knopf 1994, 590)

In the above poem, Hughes represents a true voice of black American underdogs. He uses his poetry as a tribune to struggle for black Americans' rights through calling the president to be impartial and neutral in dealing with the American citizens. Hughes is fighting for the welfare of black people in America and to finalize the social injustice and exploitation.

Comparing these values to Islamic teachings, it can be said that the impartiality and neutrality are key values in Islam. They're exemplified in many instances in the Holy Qur'an: "And if two parties or groups among the believers fall to fighting, then make peace between them both. But if one of them outrages against the other, then fight you (all) against the one that which outrages till it complies with the Command of Allah. Then if it complies, then make reconciliation between them justly, and be equitable. Verily! Allah loves those who are the equitable." Surah 49, Al-Hujurat:9, part (Juz) 26. (Al-Hilali et al 1998,699). The above-mentioned verse not only focuses on impartiality and neutrality but also states many other values such as peace, justice, and equality that are related to the theme of humanitarianism.

7. Conclusion

One key objective of this study is to find out to what extent Hughes deals with the theme of humanitarianism or human issues in his poetry. Also, another important objective of this study is to shed lights to the theme of humanitarianism as one of human values and to compare the western concept of Humanitarianism with Islamic one to reach to some conclusions.

Due to the analysis of the sample of the study, a number of findings have been obtained as follow:

Many types of humanitarianism such as reducing the human suffering, protection of human rights, including, right of life, security, freedom, equality, justice and peace have been reflected in Langston Hughes poetry. Other types of humanitarianism that have been portrayed in Hughes' poetry are values of impartiality and neutrality which represent the central point of humanitarianism.

Also, after the employment of a literary analysis in dealing with the theme of Humanitarianism that is projected in Hughes' poems, some other implications and connotations can be stated: humanitarianism and human rights cannot be separated; both are concerned with protecting people from the threat of violence against civilians; forced displacement and some other forms of coercion like child recruitment, and deprivation of the means of subsistence, including destruction of crops and water sources, or denying access to relief.

In addition, although the existence of some differences in some points, specifications and concepts, nonetheless, the theme of humanitarianism is a key value in both American and Islamic traditions; despite the difference of cultures, including religions.

Moreover, it can be said that conducting comparative studies is one important means for cultural understanding between different peoples, and can be used as an effective means for the exchange of ideas, values, experiences and yet draw the nations closer to each other; hence contributing to the spread of understanding and peace between peoples.

Based on what has been concluded; the researcher recommends the following: individuals, countries, national, regional and international organizations need to cooperate for the spread of the culture of the wider humanitarianism, especially in those parts of the world that turned by wars. Hence, contributing in the spread of human security and stability.

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